

Let History Judge

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A sceptic according to Collingwood, does not budge, while a critic will travel with you. Few would care to criticize the conduct of say the German attack on Soviet Union but would prefer to remain skeptical, finding the whole project ill-advised not to say reprehensible from the start. A real critic would agree with the goals, but would offer detailed criticism of each step taken, and how those compromised the ultimate end. Likewise, many people are skeptics when it comes to Stalin and Communism. The whole project of the Russian Revolution being a mistake from beginning to end and there is hence little interest to look at matters into more detail. It is like a logical argument, if the first basic premisses are flawed, what point is there really in following the tortuous route that follows? Medvedev's indictment of the Stalinist epoch is not an indictment against Communism and the Bolshevik revolution. On the contrary, he finds the epoch not an inevitable development, as outsiders might view it, but as a betrayal of that very revolution. His book was not well-received in Soviet Union at the time¹ but was the more appreciated outside, giving grist to many a mill. The book serves as a well needed corrective to the popular biography of Stalin penned by Isaac Deutscher. While Deutscher and Medvedev run on parallel tracks during the 20's, their ultimate assessments diverge as to the 30's and 40's. Deutscher makes no beans about the repressive nature of Stalin's regime, yet he finds that the achievements Stalin nevertheless managed to make, such as the rapid industrialization of the backward Russian lands, and its resistance and eventual destruction of Nazi invaders, more than compensating for it. So thus in the end his biography ends on a jarring note of an almost eulogy; Medvedev is much more censorious. While both writers make relative light of Stalin's attacks on the agrarian population, although both point out his hypocrisy, Medvedev spends much more time on the repression of the 30's, making out the horrors in far more graphic detail than Deutscher cares to do. The war Stalin waged against the able (and not so able) cadres of socialist builders, actually slowed down the economic development. While Deutscher hails Stalin as a symbolic leader against German aggression, and hence installing courage and fortitude among the masses, Medvedev dwells more on the actual incompetence of Stalin as a commander. Both agree that the time bought by Stalin in 1939 was more effectively used by the German Wehrmacht than the Russian Red Army, while they in principle condone the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, as Stalin had little choice. According to Medvedev it was only a miracle really that saved Stalin from defeat. He had more or less totally incapacitated the army by having most of the able officer corps purged, and he remained in denial until the very end about German invasion, in spite of insistent intelligence to the contrary². When it came he retreated into drunkenness, fearing for his

¹ Written between 62-68, it was not allowed to be published at the time, except as dissident literature in the West, and thus unwittingly giving anti-socialist additional fodder against the system.

² Even the German ambassador to Moscow tried to warn him. One should also note that Stalin during

life and for being toppled. His performance at the war was mediocre, and had it not been for abler men, a total catastrophe would not have been averted. So the basic question that Medvedev's account poses is why the Soviet Union in spite of this true wrecking and contra-revolutionary activity of its supreme leader, was able to lumber along and survive.

Medvedev is a committed Socialist, his whole indictment is, as initially noted, written out of that perspective. He uses a vocabulary which without making him wince, speaks about the dictatorship of the proletariat and the class of the petty-bourgeois, as a term of unreflected abuse. The Bolshevik overthrow of the Tsarist regime was an act of true Heroism, and the figure of Lenin hovers like an angel over the scene. Lenin was everything Stalin was not. Benevolent, wise, tolerant, intelligent without being sly, a profound and original thinker, impressively educated and last but not least a superb stylist.

Communism provides, as even a committed adversary such as Karl Popper concedes, a powerful moral force. Popper credits Karl Marx of having revived Christianity, sunk in complacency, by re-invigorating it with moral indignation and outrage. To compare Marxism with religion, specifically presenting it as a secular form of Christianity, with all the frills of superstition shorn off, is not a particularly original idea, it has been proposed over and over again. Yet, even the hackneyed saying has its truth, in fact often by virtue of being hackneyed. I believe that the religious element in Marxism is crucial to understanding it, and in particular to point out its crucial role in the repression that would follow. Now to compare Marxism with Religion is not necessarily the same thing as to dismiss it as mistaken and old-fashioned, it can also be seen as a strength, actually as a rehabilitation of religion itself³ The message of Communism, with its emphasis on the down-trodden and the appeal to retributive justice, as well as its fundamentally internationalist character, has of course had far greater potential to impact minds, even, not to say, in particular, sophisticated ones; than the crude messages delivered by fascist movements, which nevertheless shared many of the mass-oriented features of Communism itself⁴. Thus someone like Medvedev has through his childhood and youth, which coincided with some of the worst repressions of the Stalinist period, deeply imbibed him. It would be callous and to miss the point, to attribute this to relentless propaganda.

During the thirties Stalin committed many atrocities, but the most well-known and to most of us the most disturbing were the show-trials of fellow party members. It was that which made of many Communists in the thirties renegades, and it was this which provided Arthur Koestler with his venom, as expressed in 'Darkness at Noon'⁵. Now the revolutionary bunch were a hardened lot. First they had been hardened by Tsarist oppression, which however, as we will have occasion to return to, strikes us now as almost idyllic; then more significantly by the desperate Civil War. It is rumored that Trotsky, the

the two years the pact was in effect, was very conscientious about not provoking Hitler. Part of this might have been fear, but it is hard not to suspect a certain amount of sympathy for a fellow dictator,

³ The oft Marxian quote 'Religion is the opium of the people' has often been misunderstood out of its proper context.

⁴ It would be naive to try and deny the inspiration someone like Hitler must have received from the mass-movement.

⁵ The book is always referred to by the title of its English translation, although it was originally written in German, with the title 'Sonnenfinsternis' (Solar eclipse)

head of the Red Army, had officers shot, if their troops did not perform up to par, as well as having the ranks decimated in the old Roman tradition. There is probably no reason to doubt this, war brutalizes, and such brutalization must have provided an incentive for future repression, just as it has in the past. Still, Stalin seems to have advanced the methods of repression to new heights, or maybe rather depressed them into new depths. Why should we be so indignant about him repressing people, who might have done the same to him, had they only had the opportunity? The relationship between oppressor and victim is not symmetric, although both need the other. A victim, the underdog, invariably elicits our spontaneous sympathy; for it to work otherwise we need a lot of preparatory education⁶. What struck outsiders most during the open trials, were to the grueling lengths the accused testified to their crimes, and their willingness to abuse themselves in front of their tormentors. There is one thing to kill someone, but to make him in addition welcome it, borders on the truly perverse. What makes the victims turn into accomplices to the crimes of their own oppressors? The Jews who may have gone to their executions like docile sheep, at least did not sing the sincere praise of Hitler doing so⁷. Several explanations have been given to their complicity⁸. Being drugged is one obvious such, being intimidated by torture is another; a more fanciful one is that the whole thing was a sham from beginning to end, the actual accused had been replaced by doubles. Such explanations are devised in order to ease our discomfort, there might be actually more sinister ones. Could it be that a shared ideology made the charades possible? No man can rise to power and hold that power based solely on appeal to his own infallibility backed up by necessary force, there must be a strong element of volition when it comes to submission, to make it sincere and effective. By appealing to some generally hold moral precepts, the violation of which would be unthinkable, the victims become their own oppressors, just like a building marked for demolition, is brought down not by excessive amounts of explosives, but with only a few of those strategically placed, to let its mass alone added by gravity, lead to its collapse. And indeed it was a wide-spread assumption that the accused were indeed guilty of which charged. That notions as 'enemies of the people' actually had some clear and definite meaning. But as we know, the charges themselves were mostly without basis, although of course there were some divine justice in having the very perpetrators of those criminal proceedings themselves falling into the pits they had been so assiduously digging. Yet, the epithet 'divine' seems rather misapplied in the context, satanic justice would be more appropriate.

The terror against the elite of the Party involved only a few dozen people. But those people were not faceless, there is enough documentation to make them people of flesh

⁶ And even that is not always enough. How informed we may have been of the misdeeds by a Saddam Hussein, how many of us did not nevertheless feel a certain sympathy for him, when he was captured, and even more so when he faced his own death by hanging, with dignity. Was it not a shame to have killed him?

⁷ At least not that I know. Maybe that added touch may have greatly appealed to him.

⁸ In his biography of Stalin, Deutscher points out that the tradition of public confessions, were introduced already in the internal party strife in the 20's. A man who had denounced himself and been forgiven and brought back into the fold of the party, were after that harmless, his fangs having been removed. At the time liquidation was not yet an option, as a further capping off of the process.

and blood, flesh and blood that furthermore were torn from their frames. Abominable as physical torture is, it is also pointless when there is nothing to extract⁹. But even worse than physical torture is the mental. In fact the goal of physical torture is to produce mental anguish. As long as you think it is ultimately good for you, you can accept a high degree of physical discomfort, but as soon as you become aware that it is to hurt you, a much lower degree is sufficient to pain you. Also, the torture applied was not limited to the physical, often threats were made to the life of those close to the victims. And, as noted initially, a shared ideology, whether by lip and heart, tended to make hostages of the accused.

But what was even worse, was the open flaunting of truth and justice. Those notions are very much related in the human psyche. To lie, whether or not it is of importance, is an affront. The same with openly unjust behavior, even if it involves trifles¹⁰. The proper conduct of a court is a basis for any civil society. To parody it, is even worse than dispensing of it altogether. In fact if Stalin had selected his victims randomly, as he seems to have done, although that is misleading as we will see, and had them shot without this charade of justice, it would have been far easier to accept. In fact this is what happens in war. innocent people are killed all the time, just for being at a wrong place at the wrong time. This we seem to accept. War means giving up the ordinary rules of society, and with the tacit understanding that anything goes as long as it is in accordance with the laws of nature. Thus, it appears easy to forgive Trotsky for his excesses, after all it was war, and in war everything that abets victory is not only forgiven but condoned.

Now a few dozen people is not very much compared to the number of casualties of a war. Still the repression went very deep into Soviet Society, and the charades at the top were reproduced at all levels. Repression is fractal, each part recapitulates the whole. It was this repression perpetrated at all levels, which made Soviet society into a horror¹¹. It was this repression that in addition to summary executions, made a large section of it into inmates of camps. Archival evidence will allow one eventually to more or less fully map the extent of this atrocity against its own people. Speaking about enemies of the people. It is true that the tsarist regime exercised repression against its own society, that secret police were rampant, and enemies of the state were executed, or sent into Siberian exile. Often there were, unless the case of Stalinist terror, some good reason for that. People like Lenin and Stalin were after all openly plotting against the State. But the camps to which people were sent seem idyllic compared to those that the Soviet authorities provided. Revolutionaries could go there to rest and educate themselves, and when they got bored they usually could without too much trouble escape. The Soviet GULAG was very different, and should be compared not to the extermination camps of the Nazis, but their work camps, the object of which was to extract as much work out of their inmates as possible as slave labour. Even the notorious device 'Arbeit macht Frei' at Auschwitz had

⁹ This obvious truth has repeatedly been observed throughout history, yet its denial persists into this day, as the recent antics of the past American administration testifies to, tacitly sanctified by the present.

¹⁰ One is reminded by the short story 'Michael Kohlhaas' by Kleist

¹¹ Medvedev remarks that through the NKVD (the precursor to KGB) more Communists were killed within two years than had been suffered through years of underground activity, revolutions and Civil War. He is talking about 4-5 millions of political victims, half a million of which were shot.

its Soviet counterpart¹².

Why did Stalin do this? Medvedev rejects the easy explanation that Stalin was paranoid, that he acted out of irrational fear. He might have been moved to do that later in his reign, but not then when he was at the height of his power, when he prided himself on his iron-nerves. Stalin was very rational. He saw to it that no one who could threaten his dominant position could get away with it. Thus the speculation that Kirolov, whose murder was the start of the repression, was actually the handiwork of Stalin himself. Stalin did not play a very prominent role, in fact he was never present at the proceedings, he kept himself aloof. Hence the illusion that he was above the whole thing, along with the assumption that would the matter only be brought to his attention, he would set things right, was maintained. The repression costly as it was fortified his position of power. He also cynically calculated that the political class was expandable. Many people were killed or put out of action, but he figured that there would always be people who could take their place, and indeed with the great population of Russia, he was right. Hence he was much more reluctant to attack the scientific elite, although no one was to feel being beyond his touch in Soviet Society. Distinguished scientists were killed and many more fell out of favor and were branded as enemies of the people, but of course with such curses being so liberally bestowed they lost some part of their sting, but were spared and later rehabilitated¹³. Soviet science, especially in physics and mathematics thrived, although of course in spite of repression, not because of it¹⁴. Also, because of Stalin's weakness for film, many directors were spared. In short, Stalin was rational and responsible, thus he did not commit mistakes, he committed crimes.

So far we have completely ignored another aspect of Stalinist terror, one which until recently has been given little attention. Deutscher touches upon it almost not at all, while Medvedev treats it in more detail, but not at all with the same attention as the repression. The reason for that is obvious, apart from the fact that archival evidence may not have been so prevalent at the time, it is far more faceless. Unknown people dying from famines, constitute not so much human tragedy as statistics. Those belonged to an anonymous section of society, part of that large mass, whose dictatorship the revolution had been made in order to bring about. The casualties of forceful extraction were far more than those suffered by political repression. We are supposedly talking about millions, but as anonymous as victims of famines in India¹⁵.

How come this ravished population was able to withstand the German onslaught? The casualties suffered by the war in fact did overshadow those suffered by the repression, although it might be easier to accept death at the hands of your enemies in war time, than

¹² 'Labor is a matter of honor, valor and heroism' to be found on the gates of camps in the Kolyma region

¹³ The author refers in particular to the mathematicians Kolmogorov and Sobolev.

¹⁴ Russia was quite advanced when it came to radar in the mid 30's, but the leading scientist N.Smirnov and his associates were arrested. Radar defenses against German aircraft were not employed until the end of 1941, bought from the States.

¹⁵ The British was supposedly responsible for a famine in Bengal in the 40's, during which literally millions of people famished and subsequently vanished, yet no one would dream about equating it with the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis. Shit happens.

at the hand of your saviour in peace time. The first makes sense, the other is an affront to all sense. Once again the vastness of the Russian territory, as well as its resources of humans eventually tipped the balance. The campaign of Napoleon was limited in time, space, and destruction, while that of Hitler knew no such bounds. It devastated large parts of the country (but did not penetrate into Siberia, nor to the northern parts of European Russia), killed an incredible amount of people, most of them civilians, and kept on at least for two years, the German army not broken by the first winter. But the country prevailed, it was able to produce enough fighting material to eventually overcome the Germans, and the people were fired, not so much perhaps by sentiments of fighting for Socialism as for their own Fatherland. Much of Socialist propaganda was toned down in favor of nationalistic. The Orthodox church was having a renaissance. In a way, one may be tempted to see the war as a fire that exterminated the plague of repression; but of course this is totally false. After the war, repression continued, now based on a far more compliant cadre of party members. Not out of the old Bolshevik school, but one being motivated by a much more careeristic attitude, very much isolated from the masses, who provided their reason for existing. The new party members were bureaucratic¹⁶ and badly educated, with only a schematic understanding of Marxism, thus becoming dogmatic, While the old Bolsheviks were well-educated¹⁷, the new often boasted of their ignorance and lack of education. It was a time of stultification and petrification, only to run its course until Stalin exhausted gave his last sigh.

Given the violent history of the Soviet Union with its original backward status, it is hardly a surprise that you find it at the end of the century still in many ways a backward country of poverty and misery in spite of great natural resources. There is no reason to look for explanations such as a faulty economic system, it was not socialism per se, which was responsible, in war time even capitalist economies turn to central planning. In fact the rallying cry marshaling the arguments of Medvedev is that without Stalin, Russia would not be as economically backward as it now is. A more humane agricultural policy based on material incentives for the farmers, and not pursuing a suppression of the Kulaks, would have been much more effective, being able to feed the growing cities. The New Economic Policy of Lenin was to have socialist enterprises in peaceful competition with private ones, with the conviction that the former would prove their superiority. A more benign policy against the farmers were effected initially, by the approval of Stalin, who later made a 'volte-en-face'. Also the repression did discourage managerial expertise and many competent people vanished, or were severely curtailed in their work. There was always people to replace them, but the process made industrialization slow down. Still there was a lot of potential for growth, having less to do with socialism, than the country itself. Although the first Five year plane was a disaster, the second performed comparatively well, even in 1937 there was a record harvest, of which Stalin took a lot of credit for. Similarly the Red Army was in disarray after the purges, and once again it was physical inertia that carried the day. Had the Red Army been put to par, for one thing the Germans may have been less inclined on their military adventure, and if not, they would have been beaten at an earlier stage, and the Soviet Union may have been instrumental in not only making

¹⁶ According to the author, Lenin warned as much against bureaucrats as against the petty-bourgeois.

¹⁷ Medvedev refers to them after their seizure of power as the most educated government in Europe

socialist republics of their immediate neighbors, but also of France, which, according to Medvedev, would have been ripe for a socialist revolution. The ineptness of Stalin bungled golden opportunities. Stalin was at heart not a communist, Medvedev argues, but should be seen as the petty-bourgeois he really was.

Stalinism was supposedly repudiated at the XXth Congress in 1956 by Khrushchev, a former henchman. Yet only the most glaring signs of the cult of his personality were attended to. He was removed from the Mausoleum, statues were taken down, and cities named in his honor renamed. Yet, there has never been a real confrontation of the Soviet system with its Stalinist past. Thus it still is allowed to exert a nostalgic influence even on post-Communist society. Supposedly a large part of the population is still considering Stalin a hero. It might be tempting to blame this on the backwardness of the population, when the real reason is a refusal to acknowledge the full extent of his crimes. Unlike the case of Germany there has not been a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. As noted initially Medvedev was not able to publish the book in his homeland, Stalin still being too much a part of the Russian sense as a nation. Who knows, as historical figures tend to become fictional characters, when sufficient time has elapsed; Stalin may still be ensconced as a patriotic icon, a formal symbol of Russian nationhood, despite his crimes. Once a person has left history and entered fiction, all such associations become meaningless, just as meaningless they were to his contemporaries, who saw him as the figure head of a cult.

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