

## Book Reviews

*The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, by Stephane Courtois, Nicolas Werth, Jenn-Louis Panne, Andezej Paczkowski, Karel Bartosek, Jean-Louis Margolin; translation by Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer. Harvard University Press, 1999.

If someone were to ask “What are the ten most important books to have on your bookshelf?” a strong argument could be made that this book must be included on the list—high praise, indeed. It merits so preeminent a position for a number of reasons.

One, of course, is that the twentieth century can hardly be understood without a detailed realization of the brutalities of Communism in all its manifestations, worldwide. Those enormities rank among the central facts of the century and yet are little known.

Such a background is needed, too, if world opinion is ever to move away from the double standard that has long considered Nazism an unmitigated evil but that has granted considerable leniency, often even indulgence or preference, to Marxism-Leninism. Many of the events of the past century, large and small, are understood only in the most warped fashion because of that moral, ideological skewing.

There is also a less abstract, more humanly personal, reason: that the 85 to 100 million victims as estimated in this book cry out to scholars to be noticed. These are victims whose lives have vanished in much the same way as one “unperson” after another was airbrushed out of old Bolshevik photographs. There are even now few dramas, documentaries, museums, “survivors’ testimonies,” war crimes trials, or other acknowledgments that these tens of millions were once living, breathing human beings. When their lives ended, they fell off into a memory hole; and even the most elementary respect for human life requires that they not stay there permanently.

*The Black Book of Communism* states its purpose as being

...to paint a true picture of all the criminal aspects of the Communist world, from individual assassinations to mass murder.

It devotes more than 200 of its 856 pages to the Soviet Union, about which it gives an indispensable history; but there is in turn a detailed chronicling of events in Spain, Poland, Central and Southeastern Europe, China, North Korea, Laos, Cambodia, Latin America, Africa and Afghanistan. It centers on the atrocities and does not aspire to be a complete history of the Communist regimes or movements in those places (for example, its account of the Civil War in Russia after the Bolshevik coup omits any mention of Trotsky’s role commanding battlefields from his train or of the intervention of foreign troops).

Such a book is of value only if it is the work of credible scholars. That requirement is well-satisfied here. The authors are primarily French historians and specialists in Communism, although Andrzej Paczkowski is Polish and Karel Bartosek a Czech. They are all connected with the Centre d'Etude d'Histoire et de Sociologie du Communisme and its review, *Communisme*. We are told in the foreword that "these researchers are former Communists or close fellow-travelers" (which itself has pluses and minuses, but will certainly add to their credibility among those who share the general assumption that intellect and objective scholarship come only from the Left). There is much internal evidence in the book of its objectivity, such as when it cites the varying estimates of the Soviet deportation of Poles without attempting to insist on one at the exclusion of the others.

The work is informed by the information now available through the archives that have been made public in the formerly Communist world. The records of the Gulag administration are now open, as are the Czech archives and those of the Stasi in the former East Germany. There will be more research to do in the future, since several important archives remain closed, such as the Russian Presidential archive, the Soviet foreign intelligence archive, and the Chinese and Vietnamese archives. Many of the documents are still classified about the repression of the Poles, and very little has been revealed about North Korea or about the vast death camps in western China.

This reviewer experienced two phases in his reading of the *Black Book*. The first 500 pages held him spellbound, despite their horrific subject matter; but then the continual accounts of executions, purges, politically induced famines, tortures and rapes necessarily became wearisome, and he began to see the book more as an invaluable resource than as something to be devoured from front to back in a continuous reading. To say this is not to criticize the book, which had serious work to do, but is rather a commentary on the grisly subject matter.

We might hope that the study of Communism's atrocities will not become set in cement, where certain totals become articles of faith. Consistently with the soundest intellectual tradition, there will be room for long-continued scholarship, necessarily with revised estimates. At present, there are wide variations in the estimates made. For example, the totals for those starved to death as a matter of state policy during Mao's Great Leap Forward (1959-1961) run from as "low" as 20 million to as high as 43 million; and the estimates of those killed during China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) vary from a "mere" 400,000 to as many as three million. Estimates of the number of deaths under Pol Pot in Cambodia are from 750,000 to 3.8 million. More exact detail is known about the Soviet Union, and we are told that there were from 10,000 to 15,000 summary executions in simply the two months of September and October, 1918, and that during the fourteen months of the Great Terror in 1937 and 1938, 1.8 million people were arrested, with 690,000 killed. I cite these figures only as illustration, since the *Black Book* contains countless others.

The worldwide scope of this study is relevant to some important intellectual

issues, and undermines some of the sophistries about Communism.

There are those, for example, who have argued that Communism was not a coherent entity, and that the word is just a term of convenience to lump together a number of disparate movements. The fact, however, that terror-for-terror's-sake as a tool of social manipulation has been central to virtually all Communist regimes is too much a coincidence to be ignored. In addition to generalized terror, certain features have been recurrent: one-party systems, the centralization of economic planning, accelerated industrialization, the collectivization of agriculture, and anti-religious militancy. These things arose out of shared ideology and the ongoing efforts of the Comintern, the Cominform, the Soviet Union, Red China, Castro's Cuba, and others.

Some adherents to *Realpolitik* such as de Gaulle have argued that Communist movements were really just disguised nationalism. This, too, is a reductionism, since it brushes aside too lightly the common features. If Communism were simply nationalism, why would the USSR have trained the MPLA's cadres in Angola; or Castro have provided guerrilla schools for them, as well as tens of thousands of his own soldiers? Why would the Sendero Luminoso ("Shining Path") in Peru have sought to emulate Stalin, the Chinese Gang of Four, and Cambodia's Pol Pot?

In addition, the *Black Book* continues the process of refuting the premise, prominently advanced by Khrushchev, that Communism in Soviet Russia started out benignly, but turned vicious with Stalin. Lenin, we are reminded, put into place all of the apparatus of the terror-state. It helps to read Lenin's 1918 telegram in which he ordered the hanging of one hundred kulaks:

I mean hang publicly, so that people see it. . . . Do all this so that for miles around people see it, understand it, tremble.

The authors don't comment on it, but one fact that is mentioned alters the impression I had long held of Bukharin. I had thought that he was one Bolshevik, at least, who wanted Communism "with a human face." A few years ago, an academic colleague of mine, an American "academic Marxist," relished Bukharin for precisely this reason. It hardly comports with this when we are told that

Bukharin, after the execution of his old Party comrades Zinoviev and Kamenev, publicly declared: "I am so happy that they have been shot like dogs."

There is much to be learned from the *Black Book*'s many details. It is interesting, for example, how many aspects of later leftist revolutionary activity echoed early Communist experience. We remember the American New Left's call "not to trust anybody over thirty." There is resonance, then, when we are told that Nechaev, the blood-thirsty forerunner of Lenin, "proposed the extermination of all Russians over twenty-five years old." We know, too, that China had "Red Guards" during the Cultural Revolution. It adds light to know that groups of armed workers in Russia in 1917 were also called "Red Guards." I had thought that the

personality-denying process of public criticism, self-accusation, confession and mass cruelty were somewhat distinctively Chinese; but in fact these same ingredients appear as part of “reeducation” in Communist Romania.

Dadaistic ridiculousness was a successful comic technique of the American New Left, especially with Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman. The Left has employed Dadaism many times, but I hadn’t known of its use in Romania:

Some of the reeducators played the part of choirboys; others masqueraded as priests. Turcanu’s liturgy was extremely pornographic. . . . The Virgin Mary was called “the Great Whore,” and Jesus “the cunt who died on the cross.” One seminarian undergoing reeducation and playing the role of a priest had to undress completely and was then wrapped in a robe stained with excrement. Around his neck was hung a phallus made of bread and soap . . .

Rubin and Hoffman weren’t original geniuses of street theater, just leftists in a long-established mold.

To mention just some of what the book tells us runs the risk of trivializing the vastness of its account. It is a bit like focusing on a shrub or a canyon or two while driving past the enormous mesas of Utah or New Mexico. The many details are themselves full of significance, each deserving much more elaboration in separate works, but the chronicle as a whole is just as indispensable.

—Dwight D. Murphrey