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Book Review: *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*

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thy industrial culture. It occurs to me that the sweet despair I comfortably enjoy might itself be an industrial artifact. That is possible. But maybe these comforts are anesthetic, numbing one’s animal nature, making subjectivity abstract, cerebral. Maybe my internal life is not nearly as intense as that of a primitive hunter-gatherer. That too is possible, and maybe the avatars of reason will explain why one possibility is more probable than the other.

ANTHONY PARISE


Over the past two decades, students of Soviet history have watched with fascination as two interpretations emerged and diverged in an effort to discover the truth about the great Communist experiment in the Soviet Union. There has been agreement on such issues as the failure to alter human nature and to direct a monolithic world conspiracy from the Kremlin. What has divided the interpretations has been the question of the meaning of the course of events as they have proceeded since 1917. One “team” of historians has been united by the idea that Soviet history has been a militant variation on the great theme of modernization. Another has seen it as the disastrous consequence of modern ideology.

The “A Team,” clearly the sentimental favorite of academia, featured powerful scholars such as Sheila Fitzpatrick, Moshe Lewin, J. Arch Getty, and Jerry Hough, all masters of social science wizardry. Under their skilled hands what common sense had seen as a cautionary tale of ideological folly and sinister pathology was transmogrified into the story of a painful but necessary march into the modern age of urbanization, industrialization, and equality. Boiled down, the A Team arguments came to this: the Soviet people had been through hell all right, but at least it had been progressive hell, and by the 1980s the country exhibited most of the primary indices of a modernized society.

While grateful for the data generated by social science methodology, the “B Team,” remained faithful to the traditional analytic and narrative discipline. Richard Pipes, Richard Pipes, and Robert Service, among others, wrote that the Soviets in the 1970s and 1980s were a backward and struggling society. To put it in uniquely Western terms, history is the story of the rise and misfortune of the West from ideological folly like agent provocateurs, stacks, spies, and the greatest modernidealist, a political, and ideological force is a deformity of the West.

Although the author has praised the efforts of the B Team, he has had to conclude that they have had more certainty than the A Team. He has been doggedly firm on the certainty of his position. However, the 1970s, 1980s, and through 1990 have brought a reevaluation. Such reevaluation is necessary, and for a truth to be known, it is necessary to see what is. The B Team was not a dream team as they were dotted with those who had been in camps with people who were part of the population. The truth of the matter is turning was necessary, and the oppressed looks to the future that is out of the past. The dream was the modernization of the B Team leader, Central...
and narrative approach of the historical discipline. Names like Leonard Shapiro, Richard Pipes, and Adam Ulam spring to mind, but none has been more prominent than Robert Conquest. Though they differ on many points, in general, B Team historians have shown a willingness to see the Soviets in the context of their own culture and history rather than as manifestations of presumably universal (but probably uniquely Western) laws and trends. Soviet history is that of a peasant empire captured and misruled by a ruling class descended from ideological fanatics and their gangster-like agents, and despite forests of smoke stacks, space launches and the world's greatest military establishment, the Communist experiment has ended in economic, political, and moral ruin. The final product is a deformed caricature of the modern West.

Although they have often longed to enjoy the authority of modern science, historians have had to recognize that their discipline has been denied the kind of empirical certainty claimed by the scientific method. However, in the Soviet Union, from 1986 through 1989, the gods came as close as they ever have to running a historical experiment. Suddenly the clouds cleared away, and for a time glasnost permitted the world to see what Communism had wrought. It was not a pretty picture. A vast rustbelt dotted with mass graves and old slave-labor camps was the setting for a disoriented population stampeding this way and that, turning without fail to ancient and suppressed loyalties in an effort to find ways out of the mess. Hardly the picture of a modernized society, and just about what the B Team led us to expect.

Central to the B Team interpretation has been Robert Conquest's history of Stalin's purges of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. The only comprehensive study of its subject, it was written two decades ago from readily-available published sources, including official Soviet documents (always suspect) and the highly-colored accounts of survivors and defectors. Does the new data of the glasnost years compel a revision? A new version of The Great Terror, subtitled "A Reassessment," is the author's own answer.

The Reassessment has about one third more references than the original, thereby indicating the new volume of material incorporated into the text. There is an entirely new chapter on the "Cultural Front" and the old chapter about the "Nation in Torment" has been pluralized to embrace the restless republics. There is an epilogue ominously titled "The Terror Today." Compared to the original editions, the new book is much more informative and useful. The horrifying statistics which were a major feature of the work have been updated according to the latest evidence. Conquest's estimates have proved to be remarkably accurate, in error, as he imagined, only on the low side.

It may be that at long last general academic assumptions about Soviet history will change. The old view has a long pedigree. For example, in the 1930s Sidney and Beatrice Webb assured Professor Tcher-nyavin that he was mistaken in thinking that he had survived a slave-labor camp because slave labor could not profit the Soviet State, and therefore slave labor could not exist in a rationalized, planned economy. Such well-intentioned skepticism flourished even after Khrushchev's revelations in 1956. Though praised by the critics in the mid-1960s, the first edition of The Great Terror had surpris-
ingly little effect on an academic consensus that veered off in the direction of the above mentioned panglossian sociological interpretations based on the indices of modernization.

Now that the serried ranks of witnesses have stepped forth, the memoirs have been published, and the mass graves have been opened, Conquest's interpretation has gained new force. In characteristic B Team fashion, it emphasizes the terror implicit in the Communist program from the outset, the peculiar nature of the historical circumstances, and the character of Stalin and his associates. How has this been received among the living victims of Soviet Communism? When Conquest recently visited Moscow, he was lionized by the new intellectuals and carried off in triumph to deliver an extemporaneous university lecture.

In one or two details the original The Great Terror is better than the Reassessment. For example, the author has removed from the preface his comments on the profound philosophic issues raised by his researches. This is a loss, because it made clear to the reader the strength of a historical method which did not seek to delete the moral content of the sources in the name of some sort of abstract social science. And Conquest no longer apologizes for harboring "the prejudices...of most civilized men." But perhaps the human cost of Soviet Communism, now obvious to all, has rendered apologies of this sort unnecessary.

EDWARD COLE


For hundreds of years visitors to Russia have returned home with tales both wondrous and bizarre. However diverse the accounts, they all dwell on the curiosities of life in Rus', Muscovy, Russia, or the Soviet Union. Most often travelers stress the negative aspects of the country, for these unfortunately tend to dominate. Such an atmosphere has produced within Russia a long tradition of fine social satire, most of which official censorship quickly suppressed. In the mid-eighteenth century, Alexander Sumarokov wrote a satirical song, "Chorus to a Topsy-Turvy World," in which a bird who has flown abroad returns to Russia to tell of strange lands where people are moral, straightforward, rational, honest, pious, discreet, educated, respectful, industrious; where "drunken men do not roam the streets" (Segel, The Literature of Eighteenth-Century Russia, I, 246).

A century later the greatest of Russia's "civic" poets, Nikolai Nekrasov, explored the sufferings of the Russians, especially the peasants with what one critic calls "social compassion" (Mirsky, A History of Russian Literature, 229). In order to settle an argument among themselves, several peasants wander around the country asking people of various classes the question of Nekrasov's masterpiece, Who is happy in Russia? They are "told tales of extraordinary moral achievements, heroism, and crime and the poem ends on a note of joyful confidence in the future of the people with the help of the new democratic intelligentsia" (Mirsky, 231).

Mirsky's description of Nekrasov's poem could also apply to Francine du Plessix Gray's excellent endeavor to expose the glasnost, perestroika, and democratic aspirations of the Soviet Union, as follows the travels from the Great Russian Empire to the current short-lived version of the Soviet Union. Gray's book is a volume which is short-lived to the latest version of the world.

Like most Russian grandmothers, du Plessix Gray's maternal grandmother lived a magical childhood in the old Russian Union, where a woman's role was to stay at home, raise children, wash clothes, cook, and create. Almost no one reads this book as the latest version of world history.

But like most Russian grandmothers, the writer's own Russian grandmother, the great-grandmother wonderful, magical childhood of the world, was not so far behind. It was in the 1980s when the writer, having grown up under the Communist regime, decided to find out what the rest of the world was doing. "We" women were so used to staying at home that the writer had to move; she moved to stay at home in the world. Almost no one reads this book as the latest version of world history.

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