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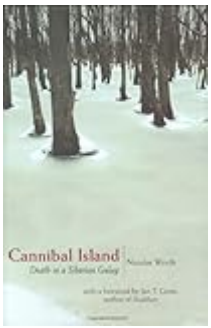

Nicolas Werth. *Cannibal Island: Death in a Siberian Gulag.* Human Rights and Crimes against Humanity Series. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. xxi + 248 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-13083-5.

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Utopian Dreams and Decivilization in Stalin's Siberia

The history of Stalinist repression has long captured the interest of scholars and the general public alike, resulting in countless books and articles on the topic. Nicolas Werth's *Cannibal Island*, an expanded version of one of the most vivid accounts of communist inhumanity from *The Black Book of Communism*, which Werth coauthored, constitutes a valuable recent addition to this literature.[1] In this short monograph, which focuses on the particularly deadly Nazino affair of 1933, Werth reveals the horror of artificial famine; forced collectivization; dekulakization; unfounded arrests caused by massive, indiscriminate police roundups; transit camps; and the "special settlements" of western Siberia. Suitable for both specialists and the educated public alike, *Cannibal Island* stands as testament to the lethal failures of the early Stalinist system.

The overarching storyline of *Cannibal Island* is a grand project undertaken by the Soviet leadership to send hundreds of thousands of people, including dÃ©classÃ© elements rounded up in Moscow and Leningrad for violating the new internal passport regime, convicts released from prison to reduce overcrowding, kulaks who had escaped the previous round of dekulakization, and other socially undesirable elements, as special settlers to western Siberia. Local Siberian leaders, already overwhelmed with the massive number of deportees sent there during previous years, protested the continued population of their land with deportees from European Russia. Understandably, they sought to prevent the region from becoming a sort of social trash can for the whole Soviet Union, protesting they would not be able to feed, house, or employ another massive influx of settlers. Ultimately, their pleas helped lower the deportation plan from one million persons to five hundred thousand (which was subsequently reduced even further), but in return, the central planning agencies slashed the accompanying amount of money and other resources allotted to help establish the settlers, and delivered them several months after the deportees arrived. As Werth astutely points out, neither central nor local officials knew what to do with the country's social undesirables, but since Moscow ultimately imposed its will on the provinces, western Siberia ended up powerless to stop the flow of deportees. As secret police head Genrikh Iagoda reported to Stalin, "we will certainly not find any

place in the country more suitable for these people" than northwestern Siberia (p. 107). This one statement exposes the very essence of the Gulag system as the means for ensuring the isolation of Soviet society from its misfits and malcontents.[2]

Of the masses of social undesirables sent beyond the Urals in 1933, Werth focuses primarily on the 6,200 or so virtually left to fend for themselves on a remote island in the Ob River near the village of Nazino. Who were these unfortunate souls so swiftly sent to colonize the uninhabited wilds of Siberia? According to the personnel files dug up by Werth, this group included, among countless others, a party member found on the street without her party card, a documented worker buying cigarettes without his passport, a number of invalids, a 103-year-old man, a pregnant wife of a naval officer who had her passport in hand at the time of arrest, and a 12-year-old girl waiting in a train station while her mother purchased bread. Indeed, the Nazino settlers represented a broad cross section of urban society that included not only socially undesirable criminals and vagrants but also ordinary children, workers, and pensioners, none of whom had the skills requisite for creating a new agricultural settlement in western Siberia. Yet they were all packed unceremoniously on railway cars and deported as special settlers, denied a date in court and even a chance to contact family members or friends during their brief stay in jail. Those who survived the trip to the Tomsk Transit Camp were then swiftly sent off to the various sites chosen as special settlements. Weak from the five-day journey downstream from the transit camp, during which they received virtually no food, the settlers were given only flour to mix with river water once they arrived and quickly succumbed to the resulting malnutrition and dysentery. Insufficient clothing and a complete lack of shelter further contributed to their plight. The few petty officials and guards assigned to the settlement acted as tyrants in the near anarchical conditions of the island, extorting meager food rations and clothing from the settlers, beating some without cause, and shooting others for sport. With no other food supplies on the island, a few of the helpless settlers began first devouring the increasing number of corpses, then murdering their fellow settlers so as to consume their flesh and internal organs. Werth's sources illustrate these events in chilling, grotesque detail, leaving little room for the imagination. Not surprisingly, local officials first dismissed reports of cannibalism at the settlement, then explained it not as a product of acute hunger, but as a result of degenerate individuals, "cannibals by habit" (p. 140). Due to disease, starvation, and brutality, both from their overseers and their fellow prisoners, as many as two-thirds of the special settlers at Nazino died in a matter of weeks before the remainder were relocated to other, only slightly more hospitable, sites in the area. A commission sent to investigate the Nazino affair concluded that local officials were to blame for the deaths of thousands of people, subjecting several to expulsion from the party, arrest, and up to three years in prison.

The most important lesson gained from reading *Cannibal Island*, one which Werth drives home on nearly every page, is the ultimate futility and failure of planning in the Soviet Union. Although this conclusion has been reached by countless others, Werth better than others demonstrates the human toll that resulted specifically from the inability on the part of Soviet administrators to conceive, coordinate, and execute feasible plans without changing them on a weekly or even daily basis. He highlights the speed with which the repressive organs of the Soviet Union conceived and carried out the deportation plan of 1933, the inevitable disorganization that resulted, and the disastrous consequences that followed. As an internal Gulag memo correctly pointed out, "all the operations must be perfectly coordinated in order to avoid bottlenecks" (p. 87). In industrial settings, bottlenecks translated into massive waste in terms of spoiled goods and idle labor, but in the Gulag such bottlenecks easily translated into human casualties. Thus, the Nazino settlers were sent from the Tomsk Transit Camp down the Ob River without clothes, food, or supplies, in part due to supply bottlenecks that prevented their proper equipping. But even avoiding bottlenecks could lead to a loss of human life. Indeed, the Nazino deportation was sent off in a hurried fashion without supplies so that the Tomsk Transit Camp did not itself turn into a bottleneck in the flow of human capital from west to east.

Werth concludes that the Soviet Union's "omnipresent, invasive number culture" (p. 173), fueled by faith in science and progress, led to utopian dreams, but a dystopian reality. But more than disastrous economic and demographic results, Werth argues, Stalinism, in its desperate struggle for instant progress, produced "a whole nest of archaisms," in the social sphere as well. This antimodern, decivilizing trend of Stalinism is evident in the callousness and even violence of human relations, which transformed the deportees "into animals" (p. 180). But it also found expression in the host of heartless officials and guards who accepted extraordinary mortality rates as part of the grand state building process or actively raised the body count by simply shooting unco-

operative deportees on sight. Werth expresses little sympathy for the perpetrators of the crimes recorded in his book, a position which places him at odds with others, including many memoirists of Stalinist repression, who take a more apologetic approach.[3]

In the chronological chapters that precede his discussion of the Nazino affair, Werth provides a wealth of background information on the police actions of the Soviet state, including collectivization, dekulakization, forced grain requisitioning, and the passportization of urban society, all of which sets the deportation of 1933 and its disastrous results against a background of incompetent state violence. But the author also exposes the violence and primitiveness of Siberian society in general during this period, "where everyone was armed, where human life had scarcely any value, and where humans rather than animals were sometimes hunted" (p. 178). Drawing on the classic Weberian definition of the state, Werth therefore concludes that Soviet power was, in fact, weak in Asiatic Russia. Though this seems counterintuitive given the heavy-handed state actions displayed in the 1930s, the implicit argument seems to be that the state was strong enough to impose its grandiose plans on the region but not strong enough to execute them properly.

In the epilogue, Werth attempts to contextualize the Nazino disaster as part of the Great Terror and the broader Gulag system. In the context of the Great Terror he finds that the 1933 deportation represented a successive step in the "campaigns and police practices that had been undertaken for years and had become increasingly radical" leading up to 1937 (p. 190). This echoes the argument of Paul Hagenloh that the Terror constituted in large part "the culmination of a decade-long radicalization of policing practice against 'recidivist' criminals, social marginals, and all manner of lower-class individuals."[4] In the context of the Gulag system, the author finds that the Nazino affair in particular resulted in a virtual moratorium on special settlements and a corresponding preference for forced labor camps. Unfortunately, however, the author fails to mention that as brutal as the Gulag was in the 1930s, the Nazino affair should not be considered representative of the Gulag experience; rather, it illuminates the extreme end of a range of possibilities in the Soviet system of criminal justice that was admittedly neither just nor concerned solely with criminals. First, Gulag inmates placed in prisons and corrective labor colonies generally fared better than those sent to corrective labor camps and special settlements. Even among the latter, the disastrous Nazino settlement can in no way be considered typical. Second, noted Gulag historian Oleg V. Khlevniuk has recently found that the year 1933 constituted an anomaly for the Soviet penal system in the early- to mid-1930s, largely due to the famine that produced instances of starvation and cannibalism similar to those found at Nazino in many "free" settlements of Ukraine and southern Russia. With that exception, he argues that prisoners in general from 1930 to 1936 "were relatively well-off and free" compared with those who experienced greatly increased and systematized brutality during the height of the Great Terror in 1937-1938 and widespread starvation during World War II.[5]

The sources used for *Cannibal Island* are impressive in many respects, two of which especially stand out. First, the author makes unprecedented use of documents from the central FSB [Federal Security Service] archive, the virtually inaccessible domain housing the documents of the Soviet secret police. These documents bring a depth to the story that would be impossible to achieve relying only on published sources and the more accessible archives of Russia. Second, in his detailed analysis of transit records, Werth exposes how Gulag mortality records during the 1930s were almost certainly understated. Entire trainloads of prisoners arrived at the Tomsk Transit Camp without documents and without even a list of names; those nameless souls who perished en route continued nameless and uncounted in death. The possibility for this inconsistency has been previously noted by other scholars, but Werth meticulously demonstrates that this actually occurred, that it was widespread, and that the numbers involved were, in fact, significant.

But although *Cannibal Island* tells an important and engaging story painfully recreated from bureaucratic documents and memoir accounts, it largely ignores the voluminous secondary literature on the internal passport regime, the police force, collectivization, dekulakization, special settlements, the Gulag in general, Soviet economic planning, and so forth. There is no discussion of the lively historiography of these subjects, and references to key works are sparse at best. This is in part due to a broader intended audience than a traditional historical monograph, but Werth could have included more historiographical information in his endnotes for scholarly consumption while leaving the text unencumbered for the reading public.

In his use of sources within the text, Werth relies on frequent and extensive quotations from both memoirs and official documentation, adhering steadfastly to the principle of letting the sources speak for themselves. With such a gruesome tale to tell this seems an appro-

priate strategy, though in parts it is perhaps overdone. He also attempts to preserve the language used by victims and victimizers alike by sprinkling his own prose with words from previously cited passages; this borders on the ridiculous, however, when such common words as "seed stocks," "theory," "congestion," and others are inexplicably preserved in quotations. Furthermore, in only two instances does he give the original Russian version of these key terms preserved in quotation marks in his text. On a more minor note, the list of abbreviations is missing a few entries (NEP, Siblag), and the editors permitted several typographical errors in the endnotes.

While some stories of terror from the Soviet Gulag eventually proved false, notably the sinking of the ship *Dzhurma* with thousands of prisoners bound for Kolyma, many others since the opening of the Soviet archives have been further illuminated with archival documentation.[6] *Cannibal Island* falls squarely within this second category. As Werth masterfully weaves his tale of utopianism and cannibalism, the reader is confronted with endless examples of hopelessly optimistic settlement plans, contradictory instructions, manipulated numbers, scant coordination among interested organizations, a stark shortfall in promised resources, ad hoc decision making, and poor execution of orders, which produced exasperated officials up and down the Soviet hierarchy and dead bodies up and down the Ob River. In short, this remarkable case study of dysfunction and terror makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of Stalinism.

Notes

[1]. StÃ©phane Courtois, Nicolas Werth, Jean-Louis PannÃ©, and Andrzej Paczkowski, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 150-155. *Cannibal Island* was originally published as *L'Ãle aux cannibals 1933, une deportation-abandon en SibÃ©rie* (Paris: Perrin, 2006).

[2]. For a more recent discussion of this topic, see Kate Brown, "Out of Solitary Confinement: The History of the Gulag," *Kritika* 8, no. 1 (winter 2007): 67-103.

[3]. Eugenia Ginzburg, for example, famously declared that the "systematic corruption of people's souls by means of the Great Lie, which resembled nothing ever known before, had resulted in thousands and thousands of ordinary people being caught up in the charade. Well then, were we to revenge ourselves on all of them?" Eugenia Ginzburg, *Within the Whirlwind*, trans. Ian Boland (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 381.

[4]. Paul Hagenloh, " 'Socially Harmful Elements' and the Great Terror," in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (London: Routledge, 2000), 286. This reference is unfortunately omitted in *Cannibal Island.*

[5]. Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror*, trans. Vadim A. Staklo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

[6]. The tale of the *Dzhurma* getting stuck in pack ice in the Arctic Ocean from 1933 to 1934, resulting in the death of up to twelve thousand prisoners, was first reported by Dallin and Nicolaevsky and has been repeated ever since as a prime example of the terrible death toll taken by the Stalinist gulag. David Y. Dallin and Boris I. Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), 129. It has since been found false by amateur historian Martin Bollinger, who found that the *Dzhurma* did not enter the gulag service until 1935 and that no gulag ships in the 1930s braved the eastern Arctic seas. Martin J. Bollinger, *Stalin's Slave Ships: Kolyma, the Gulag Fleet, and the Role of the West* (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 68-69.

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