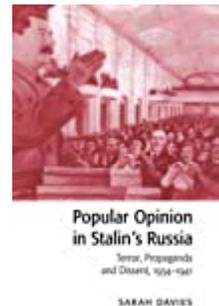




Sarah Davies. *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent 1934-1941.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xix + 236 pp. \$44.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-56676-6; \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-56214-0.



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Ordinary People and the Regime

Secret police and party reports from the Soviet Union of the thirties seem to have something fascinating for historians. The letters “NKVD” or “OGPU” appearing on archival files still anticipate sensational revelations and insights fundamentally correcting our prevailing views. Often enough, after a first feverish glimpse into the files, top-secret documents, which had been hidden for sixty years, turn out to contain banalities. Nevertheless, there can be exciting information, too. Let’s have a look at what Sarah Davies could extract from NKVD sources about popular opinion in Stalin’s Russia.

Davies’ book, based on her Oxford doctoral dissertation (1994), focuses on a formative period of Soviet history. The years 1934-41 witnessed both the Great Retreat from the cultural revolution to tradition and stability and the Great Terror, beginning after the murder of Kirov in December 1934. The study seeks to find out how ordinary people responded to the Great Retreat and the Terror. What was the effect of propaganda and repression? Were people keeping silent or was there any significant dissonant popular opinion in Stalin’s Russia?

Investigation of such questions has been restricted

by a lack of sources. Until a few years ago scholars could consult only memoirs, travel accounts, the emigre Menshevik journal *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik*, the Smolensk archive, and interviews with emigrants. The proponents of the totalitarian model had stressed propaganda and coercion and implied that the masses were either brain-washed into conformity or were silent opponents of the regime. By contrast, some revisionists attempted to demonstrate the existence of a social basis of support for Stalin. Robert Thurston in his recent study even goes so far to believe that most ordinary people did not feel terrorized, that they exercised freedom of speech and enjoyed the right to criticize and complain [1].

Davies wants to reevaluate the question of popular opinion to get away from the totalitarian insistence on the atomized, voiceless masses, without moving to the other extreme of painting a picture of satisfied and contented workers and peasants. She argues that there was a wide range of heterogeneous positions along the continuum from active consent to active resistance or dissent. There were few absolute conformists and dissenters. In practice, people’s views were far more ambivalent and

contradictory.

In contrast to Stephen Kotkin, who claims that the vast majority of people adopted the Bolshevik discourse and found their identity in the Stalinist “civilization,” Davies argues that ordinary people were adept at in seeking out alternative sources of information and continued to draw on a variety of rival discourses, including those of nationalism, anti-Semitism, and populism [2]. The main goal of Davies’ book is to illuminate the hitherto neglected body of dissonant opinion which distorted, subverted, rejected, or provided an alternative to the official discourse. She wants to recover the thoughts and values, hopes and beliefs of “ordinary people.”

The book is structured thematically and, within its chapters, chronologically. Part I focuses on economic and social questions: What did peasants think about the kolkhoz? What did workers think about the economy and labor policy, wages and prices, the poor supply of food and consumer goods, Stakhanovism and labor decrees? What was the popular opinion about the situation of women, family policy and education, religion and the nationalities question? Part II considers politics and examines opinions about international relations, the constitution of 1936 and elections, and the Great Terror. Special emphasis is given to the problem of social identities (“us” and “them”) during the terror. Part III concentrates on the leader cult.

Davies found her sources in central and local archives, predominantly from the former party archive of St. Petersburg (TsGAIPD). Among the documents cited are citizens’ letters, memoirs, diaries, newspaper articles, and reports prepared by party agitators on the feedback they obtained from their audiences. The main sources are summaries produced by the NKVD, party, and Komsomol information departments on popular responses to particular events or policies (*svodki*). Party and NKVD informants noted down conversations, rumors, jokes, and other evidence of the popular mood which were compiled into summaries. These summaries were classified top secret and addressed only to few recipients.

Davies is well aware of the problems that arise from such sources and discusses them thoroughly: Party, and particularly NKVD informants, wrote their reports under pressure from above to exercise vigilance and expose enemies. We know that they often invented anti-Soviet remarks, reported unverified denunciations, or gave genuine expressions of discontent a more counter-revolutionary gloss. What we do not know is to which degree they manipulated the opinions reported and to

which degree these opinions really existed.

However, comparing reports from Leningrad and Novosibirsk, Davies found that there were certain consistent traits of popular opinion, certain discourses which seem to have existed independently of the fantasies of those responsible for the reports. Distortion occurred rather in the manner in which material was selected and analyzed. The selection of material was influenced by considerations of what informants and compilers of reports imagined their superiors wanted to read.

Party reports differed from those of the NKVD in that they included many positive comments, because party officials tended to present their organization as functioning well. NKVD was concerned primarily with detecting “enemies.” No statistics were provided so it is almost impossible to establish how widely these opinions were in fact articulated. All party and NKVD reports begin with the standard formula that “the majority of the people” had reacted “in a healthy way.” However, alongside this there are certain cases of backward/negative/unhealthy/anti-Soviet/counter-revolutionary statements (p. 11).“

Given this dilemma, Davies avoids quantitative conclusions about the extent of dissenting opinion and focuses instead on typical and recurring themes, indicating whenever an opinion was particularly common or particularly unusual. However, she has to concede that here caution must be exercised, too: e.g. the large number of reports of negative comments in relation to the labor decree of 1940 could be indicative either of widespread complaint, or simply of a more thorough reporting campaign. Comparing the results of Davies’ book with those of a recent Russian study on popular opinion and thoughts in the first postwar years, based on similar sources, suggests that lining out typical opinions and themes seems more promising if adopted to a longer period [3].

Analyzing the *svodki* and to some extent comparing them with other sources (memoirs, diaries, newspapers), Davies presents a colored picture of various manifestations of popular opinions. One learns that people criticized the poor supply of food and consumer goods, that many workers were hostile to their Stakhanovist colleagues, and that many peasants hated the kolkhoz system. Among the documents cited are impressive letters to the party secretary of Leningrad, in which disappointed workers complained about the high prices for food comparing the cost of living with that in 1913. Others committed suicide, leaving behind notes confessing their distress at being considered criminals for arriving a few minutes late for work. The terror of 1937 enabled

people to satisfy their appetite for revenge against at least some of those in power. For a while the regime's image of the enemy and that constructed by the people partially coincided. Discontent reached a peak in 1940/41, after the labor decree of 26 June, 1940. This included open political speeches, the spread of rumors, and calls for strikes. NKVD reported on leaflets titled "Down with the government of oppression, poverty and prisons." Mass riots seemed to be near in the months before the German invasion.

Davies comes to the conclusion that the Stalinist propaganda machine, being far from omnipotent, failed to extinguish an autonomous current of popular opinion. Whole regions and social groups remained excluded from its influence at various times. The propaganda had to compete with a remarkably efficient unofficial parallel network of information and ideas. Religious and nationalist discourse continued to be employed and gender stereotypes persisted. Alternative political ideas—including those associated with the populists, Lenin, the Workers' Opposition, fascism, and czarism—also remained in circulation.

Although Davies stresses that popular opinion was very heterogeneous, she points out certain common currents: frequent complaints aimed at costs and availability of food and consumer goods and the belief that "everything is going backwards." There was an evident feeling of polarization between "us" (the people) and "them" (the new elite). Attitudes towards the state were contradictory: People seemed to expect to receive state benefits, free education, and medicine, but they objected to paying taxes and to compulsory state loans. Peasants hated the kolkhoz system and the state's interference in agriculture. Attitudes towards Stalin and other leaders were also ambivalent: for some they were father-defenders; for others, objects of abuse.

It is a remarkable conclusion that there was in principle a congruence between popular values and the goals the regime pursued. Conflicts emerged as a rule when the regime failed to implement its own values. This and other results resemble those of the Harvard Interview Project conducted after the Second World War amongst Soviet refugees [4].

Davies emphasizes that the dissonant views expressed in the 1930s cannot be equated with opposition or non-conformity. This would be to repeat the errors of the regime which classified the most trivial criticism as an anti-Soviet subversive act. By relating an anti-Stalin joke, an individual was not necessarily rejecting the So-

viet system or Stalin. A critic of one policy could also be an enthusiast of another. Elements of consent and dissent, conformity and resistance, could coexist within the same individual. People moved freely between the two worlds of official culture and a "shadow culture." This shadow culture evidently flourished in the USSR, even during the worst moments of Stalinism. In the long run, it contributed towards the frailty of the Soviet system and later played some role in the decline of the USSR.

These are convincing results which enlarge our knowledge of Soviet society and fit the behavior patterns of partial passive resistance and adaptation described in recent studies by Hoffmann, Filtzer, Straus and others [5]. But they cannot fully satisfy our desire to understand Stalinism. Davies does not put her study in a theoretical concept of Stalinism. She describes the subjects of complaints, rumors, and jokes, and to some extent states what was typical and common, but this rather helps us to explain the final conquest over the Soviet system than the functioning of the Stalinist society.

What Davies describes as common tendencies of popular opinion may be at least in part transferred to any society. In democratic countries, too, people do not like to pay taxes, but expect from the state that it provides education and health services. They express anger about the rise of prices and bottlenecks of supply, make a difference between "us little people" and "them on the top." They tell jokes about their leaders and nevertheless might vote for them in elections. That is all neither surprising nor characteristic for the Soviet Union under Stalin. Characteristic for the Stalinist society is rather the fact that these expressions of discontent were limited to the private sphere, factory meetings, or written complaints, that there were no demonstrations, large strikes or mass protests. On the contrary, on the official festive days hundreds of thousands participated in the jubilant parades organized by the party.

The key to an understanding of Stalinism lies not in the description of expressions of dissent, but in the answer to the question of why widespread discontent did not result in effective mass protest. There are various possible answers: First, as Davies writes, many people were unhappy only in part but not with the system as a whole; second, discontent may not have been as widespread as it seems from the NKVD sources; third, the fear of repression and pressure by fellow citizens devoted to the regime played a more important role than post-totalitarian research is willingly to concede.

The crucial question on the extent of discontent and

dissent must remain open. The sources do not allow the author to quantify for how many people the various opinions were typical. Ex post facto opinion research unfortunately has insurmountable limits. The *svodki* of party and NKVD report single cases of all sorts, but they do not give valid information about the mood of the people as a whole. NKVD informants did not organize an opinion poll, but reported only singular expressions of opinion, whereby it remains unknown, for whom and for how many people they were representative. Maybe in this respect the long-known memoirs and travel accounts are more revealing sources.

Davies is conscious of the limits of her study and calls it herself "preliminary." In her outlook, she formulates questions going beyond her own investigation: How far did the regime take account of and respond to popular opinion? Was the terror itself not, at least in part, the desperate response of a leadership aware of grassroots discontent? Davies herself undertakes only some attempts in this direction: In 1935 the propaganda apparatus reacted to the discontent of workers (rise of food prices after the end of rationing cards) in the way that many critical letters were published in newspapers, but only those not mentioning politically sensitive questions as low wages and hunger. When in 1937 the tide of popular opinion turned against the regime because of continued economic failure, the policy directed popular hostilities away from "Soviet power" and towards individuals, who were purged. On the other hand, despite continued complaints, prices of food and consumer goods were raised several times between 1934 and 1941. These are inter-

esting details, but for further investigations there still remains much to do.

Notes

[1]. Robert W. Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941* (New Haven: 1996).

[2]. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: 1995).

[3]. E. Iu. Zubkova, "Mir mnenii sovetskogo che-loveka. 1945-1948 gody. Po materialam TsK VKP(b)." *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, 1998, no. 3, pp. 25-39.

[4]. Alex Inkeles and Raymond Bauer, *The Soviet Citizen: Daily Life in a Totalitarian Society* (New York: 1959).

[5]. David L. Hoffmann, *Peasant Metropolis: Migration to Moscow and the Politics of Social Identity, 1929-1941* (Ithaca, NY: 1994) Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization: The Formation of Modern Soviet Production Relations, 1928-1941* (London: 1986) Kenneth M. Straus, "The Transformation of the Soviet Working Class, 1929-1935. The Regime in Search of a New Social Stability", Ph Diss. Pennsylvania State University, 1990; Kenneth M. Straus, *Factory and Community in Stalin's Russia: The Making of an Industrial Working Class* (Pittsburgh: 1997).

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