



**James Harris.** *The Anatomy of Terror: Political Violence Under Stalin.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 352 S. ISBN 978-0-19-965566-3.

**James Ryan.** *Lenin's Terror: The ideological origins of early Soviet state violence.* London: Routledge, 2012. XI, 272 S. ISBN 978-0-415-67396-9; ISBN 978-0-203-11576-3.

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## **Sammelrez: Political Violence under Lenin and Stalin**

A century after the Russian Revolution, the origins, scope and impact of Bolshevik violence are still an object of academic investigation and subject of vivid discussion. "The anatomy of terror" is the product of a 2010 conference dedicated to the "Great Terror" of the 1930s. This volume, which sets out to represent "most recent fundamental research", was motivated by the archival revelations since 1990 of the role of "mass operations" and by the fact that "the largest number of victims of the repressions of 1936-1938 were not former oppositionists or party officials, but ordinary workers and peasants" (p. 3). The editor does not mention that relevant research on the topic has been carried out by a DFG-funded project of the Ruhr-Universität Bochum (directed by Rolf Binner, Marc Junge and Bernd Bonwetsch), numerous participants of which had systematically collected archival information in regional archives of several former Soviet republics and whose publications have been used by the volume's contributors. There is now a German edition available: Rolf Binner / Bernd Bonwetsch / Marc Junge (Hrsg.), *Massenmord und Lagerhaft. Die andere Geschichte des Großen Terrors*, Berlin 2009. Dies. (Hrsg.), *Stalinismus in der sowjetischen Provinz 1937-1938. Die Massenaktion aufgrund des operativen Befehls Nr. 00447*, Berlin 2010. Readers best start with the papers by Stephen Wheatcroft and Melanie Ilic who discuss statistical data on the terror victims (which they compiled from recent Russian publications). This may

help to follow the subsequent discussions.

Several authors focus on the psychology of Stalin and his comrades. James Harris and Matthew Lenoe suggest that Stalin's fears were not entirely paranoiac: Western hostility towards Soviet Russia was real, and Kirov was murdered for reasons that Stalin knew hardly better than we do today. According to Edward Rees, the dictator was a "high-functioning psychopath" whose "delusional, narcissistic and sadistic" character fully revealed itself during the Terror (pp. 58, 63). As for the Cheka officials, Iain Lauchlan asserts that their "highest authority was Marxism-Leninism, not rationalism" (p. 19). David Brandenberger shows that official Soviet explanations for the Great Terror fundamentally changed several times within a couple of months. William Chase and Wendy Goldman reveal how official propaganda created a witch-hunting atmosphere on the local (factory) level, where denunciations from rank and file party members often led to arrest. David Hoffman calls mass operations an example of "excisionary violence" which aim "not just to contain perceived threats but to effect a social transformation" (p. 98). Hoffman consequently argues that, "modern forms of social knowledge" were a "necessary precondition" (p. 104) to Stalinist mass murder. David Shearer, in contrast, insists that "twenty years of Stalin's militarized socialism [â] resulted in social chaos, not in a carefully engineered society, if not in a "feudalized

corporate stateâ (p. 119). David Priestland distinguishes between terror against new elites, against old elites and neo-traditionalâ terror against (new) marginals. Paul Hagenloh and Gabor Rittersporn place Stalinist mass operationsâ of 1937â38 within the context of Soviet penal policy. Since the end of the Civil War, they argue, ordinaryâ prosecution authorities and secret police had been rivals for prerogatives and competences, and the ultimate victory of the latter was in no way predetermined. While prosecution authorities and the police were generally more inclined to stick to legal principles, they did not abstain from mass repression. Already during the 1920s, the police began to cleanseâ urban areas of large numbers of people categorized by some administrative criteria as dangerous elementsâ.

Most contributors are convinced that Stalinâs regime did not seriously consider its victims to be political conspiratorsâ, terroristsâ or foreign spiesâ (even if it convicted them for these very crimes) but incarcerated or killed them simply because they were perceived as harmfulâ or dangerous elementsâ. As a consequence, the articles revolve around the idea that the terror was not so much a strike against political enemies, but should rather be conceived as a policy of social engineeringâ, an attempt to cleanseâ the brave new socialist world from all elementsâ whose appearance did not fit in: priests, beggars, unemployed, former elites, or petty criminals. The volume thus highlights an important dilemma in historiography, as described by the editor: having reached consensus about the hard factsâ [chronology of relevant decisions, text of directives (signed by Stalinâs hand), administrative procedure, participating institutions, and number of victims], controversies continue to revolve around one simple question: why? Why did Stalin orchestrate mass repression on such a colossal scale?â (p. 1).

This question, however, could be reformulated more precisely as a call for a narrative that tells the history of the mass operations from the point of view of the decision-makers of various levels: How did Soviet leaders justify mass-killing? What was their original intention, if we assume that killing, to most sane people, is hardly ever a goal in itself? Who among Soviet rulers did actually believe in the conspiracy theories?

The volume leaves the impression that it is still difficult though certainly not impossible to develop historiographical approaches which would result in better answers than we have to date.

How does one explain, for example, the refusal of the

regime to clearly articulate its aims? If it aimed to eradicate crime for once and everâ, by killing petty criminals, why didnât it bluntly say so? On the other hand, if the regime did want to deliberately conceal its true agenda from the public, could this imply that official hysteria with terrorist conspirators was artificially staged as a cover-up?

Historians should neglect neither questions of ideological consistency and sincerity nor the public sphere and media coverage. Can we localize, for example, a line between conscious disinformation and sincere self-explanation? Several contributors pose the question of whether the concept of terrorâ is applicable to the 1937 mass killings at all, given that they were kept in secret and not meant to intimidate society. David Shearer draws attention to a January 1933 speech where Stalin announced a new phase of class war â a war against criminals and social deviantsâ (p. 112). It would be intriguing to know whether this speech (which Shearer quotes from archival sources) had ever been published or became part of any Stalinist propaganda campaign.

According to Getty, it was not the great dictator but his satraps who pressed for mass operationsâ not so much because they were afraid of terrorists or spies, but to get rid of people who might cause trouble. Adopting this view, one might ask whether officials remained silent about their true motives because they were well aware that cleansing the realm by mass killingâ was irreconcilable with official Soviet legal and ethical standards which, while impossible to be abrogated, could very well be circumvented. If that was indeed the case, then we should not call them social engineersâ, for that notion per definition implies an attempt to justify measures by explicit argument of (purported) science. On the other hand, Getty offers no sufficient explanation why local authorities so desperately wanted to get rid of their victims at all.

Statistical data tells another story which historians should not lose out of sight: a large part of 1937â38 victims consisted of former peopleâ whom the regime had identified as unforgiving enemiesâ as early as 1918: priests, officials, policemen, army officers, businessmen, all sort of (formerly) wealthy people including so-called kulaksâ. Hardly any of the contributors, however, raises the question whether the 1937 Great Terrorâ could not be seen as the final part of a long-term anti-bourgeois genocide that had started with the Red Terrorâ of the Civil War. Even Hoffman, whose concept of excisionary violenceâ might well apply here, seems more interested

in late Tsarist wartime practice than in Red Terror precedence. Until now, historiography does not offer explanation of the regime's effort to kill even well-integrated former people [for example, Countess Dora Leuchtenberg who had worked as a humble clerk in Leningrad's Public library for many years, until she was shot in 1937 (p. 322)].

The Red Terror of the Civil war period is a topic that had been neglected for a long time. One of the rare exceptions is the second book under review here, James Ryan: *Lenin's Terror*. The ideological origins of early Soviet state violence. Ryan's conclusion can be summarized as follows: "Lenin was an uncompromising politician" with "brutal traits" but he lacked "pathological cruelty" (p. 6). Lenin sincerely believed that Revolution would lead mankind to salvation. Revolutionary violence was "not desirable in itself" (p. 60), but a means to "end all violence" (p. 46).

That sounds like conventional wisdom. When the present reviewer closed Ryan's book, however, he was less convinced of this assertion than he had been before. It is difficult to understand why the author decided to focus entirely on Lenin's ideological views on violence, as opposed to the realities of Red Terror on the ground (p. 2). In theory, Lenin proved that the Bolshevik party was entitled (if not obliged) to start the October revolution in an agrarian country and that "proletarian dictatorship" had the right to defend itself against a counter-revolution by any means. This ideology admittedly lacked originality and essentially reposed on the age-old "just war" doctrine. And yes, Lenin did make an effort to verbally distance himself several times from the position (brought forward by some of the more radical Cheka officials) that the "bourgeoisie" should be annihilated physically (p. 116).

Since the summer of 1918, however, a wide gap emerged between "political violence" as justified by Lenin's theory, and the "Red Terror" as practiced by Lenin's comrades. In many cases Lenin supported most brutal measures (like hostage-taking, mass killings, and public executions) which by far exceeded everything that could, by any reasonable criteria, be justified as "self-defence" necessary to "save the Revolution". Ryan's narrative remains silent about the well-known fact that

Lenin's push for violence stirred strident resistance among local Soviets and party committees who did not deem excessive terror necessary. See e.g. Michael Melancon, *Revolutionary Culture in the Early Soviet Republic: Communist Executive Committees versus the Cheka*. Fall 1918, in: *Jahrbuch der Geschichte Osteuropas* 57 (2009), pp. 122. Ryan does not suppress, however, any facts of Bolshevik atrocities, compiling them faithfully from the literature. He even concedes that the Red Terror sometimes marched towards genocide. But he does not offer any consistent explanation. If neither Lenin's well-known ideology nor his personal character bear the responsibility for excessive violence, who is, then, to blame? Instead of an answer, readers will find plenty of evidence for the author's inconclusive line of argument: "Lenin was not a 'legal nihilist' his point was that the organs of dictatorship should not be artificially curbed by legal norms" (pp. 122, 124). Such reasoning is typical for the book as a whole: the Red Terror was an expression of Lenin's violent attitude, and at the same time it was not.

The present reviewer assumes that Lenin was a grandmaster of political tactics (who knew when it was time to move "two steps forward" or "one step back") and a mediocre theoretician at the same time. A study that focuses "solely on ideology" is ill-conceived from the beginning. It is disappointing to find that a book that claims to put things within "the wider context of a violent world" misses this very opportunity: Ryan makes no attempt to compare the Red Terror with the White Terror, or to analyze how Churchill, MacKinley, Denikin, Bethmann-Hollweg, and other contemporary non-Bolshevik rulers justified their respective use of violence during war and post-war.

Both publications under review leave the impression that historiography on Bolshevik violence is sensitive to the fact that Bolshevik world views and attitudes, while being highly ideological, cannot be equated with (revolutionary) Marxism, Marxism-Leninism or any other book ideology. Meanwhile, the reader can also conclude that historians who see Terror as a "reaction to circumstances" still grapple with the task of describing Soviet society and the regime's perception of society without mistaking the latter for the former.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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