



James Harris. *The Great Fear: Stalin's Terror of the 1930s.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. X, 205 S. \$50.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-19-969576-8.



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J. Harris: Stalin's Terror

At the very beginning of his book, Harris fortunately contradicts the popular prejudice that Stalin's Great Terror was in some way necessary to stabilise the regime or helped to improve its efficiency: "This episode of extraordinary political violence was wholly destructive, not merely in terms of incalculable human cost, but also in terms of the interests of the Soviet leaders, principally Joseph Stalin, who directed and managed it" (p. 2). This assumption sounds plausible at least for undeniable economic reasons: the workforce of the killed was no longer at the regime's disposal.

All the more pressing is the question as to why terror triumphed. In contrast to prevailing views, Harris insists that Stalin was neither a cynical manipulator who misused the secret police as a means to aggrandize his power, nor "paranoid, at least [not] in the sense of a clinical condition" (pp. 32, 187). But what was he then? Harris is adamant that the Great Terror was provoked by some "great fear", an emotion that was genuinely felt by Stalin and other politburo members. They "received a steady stream of disturbing reports of international alliances of capitalist powers bent on invading the USSR;

'bourgeois' engineers, [!] wealthy peasants, [!] army officers, former oppositionists, and many others working to undermine Soviet power from within" (p. 5). Harris asserts that Stalin, who was "coldly rational in the way" he "processed such information" (p. 32), finally sincerely believed it to be true "and saw mass violence as a proper, if not the only tool to avert that danger. To their tragic misfortune, the Bolsheviks lacked "an adequate system for judging the evidence of conspiracy and identifying its limits" (p. 172). If their conclusions (belief in conspiracies) and reactions (mass terror) were completely disproportionate, they had however been the result of some sort of reason, which must not be confounded with "paranoia": "Explanations of this mass murder focusing on his personal psychopathology are inadequate and unhelpful" (p. 187). If this apodictic argumentation is not contradictory in itself, it is treading a very thin line. Harris maintains that Stalin and his comrades, while being certifiable sane persons, were notoriously "disposed to disregard [!] counter-evidence" (p. 40). "It was entirely characteristic of Stalin to rely on his 'revolutionary instincts' rather than on strong material evidence, to identify the enemies of the regime" (p. 94). But isn't that a

perfect description of a paranoid mind?

In any case, this book lacks consistency. For example, Harris himself still uses the term "mass murder" instead of "judicial error", which seems to exclude that Stalin and his executioners may have sincerely believed in the guilt of those whom they condemned to death (p. 187). It does not help that Harris tries to insert a third instance "the system". According to this feature of his narrative, Stalin was not only the demiurge but also the victim of a Soviet "misconceived information-gathering system" (i.e. the secret police), "that delivered a hugely detailed, nuanced, compelling and substantially erroneous image of the enemy" (p. 186). This machine rather than its constructor was the escalating factor that triggered fear and violence, leaving Dr. Frankenstein in the role of a confused bystander: "It was in Stalin's power to initiate and intensify or to retain and stop campaigns of political violence, but he never recognized the fundamental flaws in the system of information gathering and analysis" (p. 188). Many will dispute that assertion, and so does Harris himself, conceding in the very next sentence, that Stalin "knew that radically simplified legal procedures and reliance on confession obtained under torture contributed to a situation in which very large numbers of innocent people were caught up in state repression." (ibid.). Read that twice: Stalin knew that a "very large number" of innocent victims, were produced by his "system" whose "flaws" he otherwise "never recognized". What did it mean, "to recognize flaws"? Moreover, if Stalin was so aware that the system was flawed, why did he push it into motion in the first place? According to Harris, he did so because he "tended to consider that as a necessary cost in the defence of the revolution" (ibid.). There we go, doesn't that imply that Stalin was rather unwilling than incapable to ascertain the truth about his victims and their alleged crimes?

There are many other assertions in this book that seem highly disputable (e.g. that the Secretariat of the party "never became a source of personalistic control of the party apparatus", or that Stalin "could not simply remove his opponents and appoint his allies", in the party during the 1920s (pp. 58-59, 73). It is however, difficult to discuss them in detail, if only for the reason they are followed by some other appraisals which seem to state the contrary - e.g. that "almost a third of [party] appointees were fired within a year" (p. 65), that groups "labelled as 'oppositionist', were easy to identify and eliminate", or that Stalin's draft was supported by 99% of the delegates at the 1927 party congress (p. 77).

What is, after all, the aim of such an inconsistent nar-

rative? This reviewer cannot help suspecting it essentially to be meant as an attempt to ascribe Stalin's decisions some psychological plausibility "to convince modern readers that other reasonable persons in his place might have done the same. There is a strong tendency to shift responsibility from natural persons to anonymous circumstances, processes and "systems". Sometimes, Harris' explanations stroll on the very edge of embarrassment. For example, when Stalin's political strength is mentioned as one of the factors that triggered his fear. The clearer it had become to everybody, "that to express doubts about the party line would not further a career in the party", the lesser "Stalin could be certain how many leading officials supported him only because they were afraid to speak out" (p. 77). Stalin's crushing victory over Trotsky and Bukharin gave him, paradoxically, "reason to worry that his position was not yet secure" (p. 79). Given that "few of the [five years] plan targets could be achieved", Stalin may have asked himself, "Who was [he] not "privately" a "Right deviationist"?" (p. 78). It is disturbing that Harris, when he (most plausibly) ascribes such reactions to Stalin, doesn't qualify them as strong evidence of the latter's narcissist or paranoid personality, but rather as valuable reasons to plead mitigating circumstances.

At the same time, this book lacks a genuine investigation of all the factors that may have influenced Stalin's (and the "system's") capacity to "evaluate information" more precisely. There is no debate of the core question: why counter-evidence was disregarded? Harris leaves out such matters as the case of Ordzhonikidze (who challenged Stalin's belief in conspiracies) On Ordzhonikidze: Oleg Khlevniuk, *In Stalin's Shadow. The Career of Sergo Ordzhonikidze*, Armonk, NY 1995. , the role of Vyshinsky and the Soviet judiciary system in general (not at all ignorant of traditional "due process" standards) On legal standards: Peter Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin*, Cambridge 1996. , very legal justifications for the victim's rehabilitation under Khrushchev, or Stalin's baffling belief in the trustworthiness of Hitler.

The core contention of this book - that Stalin sincerely believed in his victim's guilt - seems to be based on a hermetic argument. At one occasion, Harris states that there was "no evidence to suggest that Stalin dictated the confessions [of the show trials] defendants" as part of a [he] plan to eliminate his [he] rivals" (p. 145). But what if there was unquestionable archival evidence discovered that Stalin himself wrote Radek's confessions from the first line to the last? Even then, Harris could still insist that Stalin "invented his story of Radek's treason only because he had reason to believe it was true".

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