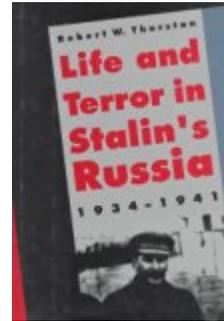


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Thurston. *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996. xxi + 296 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-06401-8.

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## Stalin's Willing Executioners

Robert Thurston has been accused of whitewashing the bloody record of Joseph Stalin. He has been called a bad historian, if not an immoral person. This is not a surprise, considering the violent controversies surrounding Stalin's legacy. Thurston's book, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia*, is an ambitious and forceful attack on descriptions of the Soviet 1930s as totalitarian. In particular, Thurston denies that the Great Terror of 1937-1938 was a deliberate system of random violence by the state against society, designed to gain cooperation through fear. If this were true, he asks, why do many former Soviet citizens revere Stalin's memory? Thurston grapples with the important question of complicity, of "why, between 1935 and 1939, so many people supported violence by the state and even participated in it willingly" (p. xvii). Thurston argues that many Soviet citizens voluntarily cooperated with the regime, and, as a result, they accepted the show trials and the mass arrests of 1937-1938 as necessary to defend it.

His revisionism is not new. Thurston cites other scholars who estimate that "fewer than 2.5 million people were arrested on all charges in 1937-38" (p. 63) and that the main targets were elites—Communists, intellectuals and office-holders—rather than the population at large. He agrees with J. Arch Getty and Gabor Rittersporn that Stalin's fears of oppositionist conspiracies were not groundless, and he cites Peter Solomon's contention that a regularized justice system was growing alongside the sphere of police terror during the 1930s. Indeed, as Thurston points out, already in the 1950s scholars such as Merle Fainsod had already acknowledged that

"Stalin's power was far from complete" and that the Party was not monolithic (p. xx). Indeed, in attacking one aspect of the theoretical model of totalitarianism, Thurston may be setting up a straw man. But he addresses important questions, approaches them in a systematic way, and brings up interesting information from a wide variety of sources old and new.

Like Getty, Thurston poses a different trajectory for the 1930s than do scholars of the totalitarian school. He views the years 1934-36 not as the beginning of a calculated progression toward mass arrests and show trials engineered by Stalin, but as a time when "progress was being made toward a fairer, more consistent, and less political application of the law. Unfortunately," he continues, "this trend quickly broke down." Thurston argues that "the road from Kirov's murder (in 1934) to the mass arrests of 1937 was long and full of twists and turns...the Terror had a dynamic and almost a will of its own" (p. 22).

The bad reactions to Thurston's book may have been aggravated by the first chapter, which makes grand and rather disjointed assertions. But after reading the whole book, this reader admires his ambitious sweep, covering almost a decade and encompassing political, social and military history. Thurston probes the minds of key actors up and down the social ladder, from Stalin at the time of his wife's suicide in 1932, to Central Committee delegates at tension-filled meetings in 1936 and 1937, workers at production meetings, intellectuals facing arrest, and Soviet soldiers braving the Blitzkrieg.

The title of one chapter, "Fear and Belief in the Great Terror," points to a central theme of the book. According to Thurston, Stalin believed in and feared conspiracies, for he had evidence of contacts between the exiled Trotsky and oppositionists within the country, as well as of conspiracies in the military and NKVD (police) (pp. 25, 34, 50-53). Stalin's well-grounded fear, combined with the trauma of his wife's suicide in 1932, the shock of the Kirov murder in 1934, and the discovery of a conspiracy in the NKVD in late 1935 (pp. 19, 23, 25), caused him to lash out at perceived and possible enemies, eventually through mass arrests and show trials of 1937-38. His comrades in the Central Committee came to share in the same beliefs and fears (pp. 31, 39). For their part, secret police functionaries also "tortured and shot largely because they felt they had to get to the bottom of a huge conspiracy that threatened the nation" (p. 90). On the receiving end, intellectuals and others vulnerable to arrest also believed in the system, and most believed that the arrests of possible conspirators were necessary, even if their own arrests were a mistake. Finally, argues Thurston, the mass of workers had faith in the regime which gave them opportunities to move out of the village and to have a voice in production decisions and in criticizing their bosses (p. 192).

Thus, Thurston avers, it was not necessary to use terror to gain cooperation, nor did the regime exercise rigid and total control over the population; citizens had some room to criticize aspects of the system. Indeed, even if it had intended to impose order through terror, the regime failed miserably: low officials spent more time covering their rears than doing good work, people resisted being promoted to vulnerable positions of responsibility in the first place, and, as Thurston sums it up, "The Terror was not a logical system, and it did not systematically produce desirable behavior from the standpoint of the regime. 'Order through Terror' is probably a contradiction in terms anywhere; it certainly was in the USSR" (p. 159).

His final chapter extends the argument for public support of the system by looking at the actions of soldiers and civilians during World War II. Most of the Soviet population, he says, stood up bravely to defend the country against the Germans. The mass surrenders and retreats at the beginning of the war—usually cited as evidence of hatred for Stalinism—can be explained by initial panic and disorganization, says Thurston. Even those who greeted the invaders with bread and salt, he says, were mostly the aggrieved inhabitants of the newly incorporated Baltic and Polish territories.

If the Terror was not a deliberate central policy aimed at order through terror, neither were the mass arrests of 1937-1938 a deliberate economic policy to gain unpaid convict labor, says Thurston. It was economically dysfunctional to waste labor power by shooting and starving labor camp inmates and by assigning delicate intellectuals to heavy labor (p. 101-4). One wonders why it would be necessary to use this resource efficiently if convicts were plentiful.

Thurston also disputes the interpretation of the Terror as a generational phenomenon, representing the aspirations of a young cohort of Soviet-born citizens to gain educations and jobs by ousting Old Bolsheviks. For, as Thurston points out, many victims of firing and arrests were young themselves; many Old Bolsheviks who had retired from important offices were not bothered; and many young people shrank from promotion to vulnerable positions of responsibility (p. 146).

Chapter Three, on the secret police, provides a case study of Thurston's methodology and approach. Examining the backgrounds of NKVD officers, he attempts to deduce their mindset. Comparing them with other police such as the Stasi in East Germany, Thurston cites Harvard Project interviewees who said secret informers were not ubiquitous and that the NKVD could not force them to become agents (p. 76). Not only understaffed but also inefficient and disorganized, Thurston's NKVD officials were "more nervous and more likely to react badly when pressed to find enemies" (p. 77). Ill educated, coarsened by the constant turnover in the judiciary, and influenced by Marxist doctrine emphasizing class struggle, they saw the Stalin regime and its policies as legitimate (pp. 67-8). He acknowledges that some knew they were arresting innocent people to fill quotas (p. 80) and that some wrote out confessions for accused people. "Concocted crimes, however, do not necessarily mean that it is the policy of central authorities to manufacture cases." After all, he argues, the Stasi and today's Iraqi police also carried out the practice (p. 81).

Besides, "the police often believed they were pursuing real enemies," argues Thurston, citing emigre memoirs and patterns of police practice. One NKVD officer, for example, after beating fifty-two suspects for four months, finally realized all the suspects were innocent. The officer remarked, "to find a gram of gold, it's necessary to sift tons of sand" (p. 83). Thurston interprets this to mean the officer thought that real enemies existed, that beating was an acceptable means of identifying them, and that he needed real evidence to support his case. "His

purpose was to uncover crimes, not to terrorize.”

Thurston’s sources comprise a wide range of documents, including Party and government archives, the press, and memoirs; he combines thorough knowledge of sources long available in the West, such as the Smolensk Archive and emigre memoirs, with broad reading of documents that have become available since glasnost. He relies heavily on one of the oldest but oft-neglected sources on Stalinism: the Harvard Project interviews of post-WWII Soviet refugees in Germany. Though naturally anti-Soviet, the interviewees gave a complex picture of life under Stalin. In addition, he uses shadowy documents from emigre collections, such as an “unconfirmed report” in the Hoover Institution’s Nicolaevsky Archive attributed to a self-described NKVD agent named A.F. Almazov (p. 34).

Though the variety of his materials should offset the biases likely in a narrower source base, some of the Soviet sources he uses are problematic. For example, Thurston cites Party reports on worker complaints and managers’ violations (pp. 170-194). These are clearly based on complaints or petitions, which were often compiled into *svodki* or “digests” of incidents put together by local Party or police officials on the request of their superiors, on topics that were part of current campaigns, such as “violations of socialist legality” in 1935-1936 or “terrorist attacks” in 1930. In using *svodki* and complaints alike, it is necessary to remember that only certain of these documents got selected for investigation or compilation. Research on rural society has shown that the complaints from below often turned out to be weapons in factional struggles over control of local positions of authority. Even if the original statements, actions or complaints reflected what ordinary citizens thought, only certain ones were deemed worthy of enshrining in official documents. In a recent analysis of these “digests,” Peter Holquist has argued that they show more about the government officials who collected, categorized and interpreted the incidents than they do about the population.

Sources like these may be misleading Thurston on the question of how much initiative in these times came from above and how much from below. Thurston rightly argues that workers had certain leverage because they were in high demand (p. 169). His argument that some workers were able to criticize their managers and protest about their conditions also rings true. However, his statement that Stakhanovites (outstanding workers) were able to initiate criticism from below is problematic (pp. 176-78). As one example, he analyzes a statement made at

a conference by one Stakhanovite. The man explained that he had barely had enough money to buy basic food-stuffs, “but now, I think, it will be necessary to improve the food, and I’ll be able to get new clothes, and even to furnish the apartment better.” In this statement, according to Thurston, the man “took the opportunity to address the national leadership and the country about the plight of workers” (p. 176). However, the man was referring only to his own situation, not to that of all workers. A more likely explanation is that the Stakhanovite was coached to make this statement in order to highlight the potential rewards for individual achievement and to goad the manufacturers of consumer goods in satisfying the rising “cultural needs” of this new elite. That is, the worker was probably speaking in what Sheila Fitzpatrick called “Potemkin language” to propagandize state-sponsored campaigns of “culturedness.” In general, the encouragement of complaints from below was just part of the campaigns initiated from above. On the other hand, such campaigns do represent a response to popular discontent, and Thurston’s is one attempt to understand the intimate linkage between state and society, initiatives from above and from below (p. xix).

The strengths of this book include its longish time span, its ambitious scope, multidisciplinary approach and wide variety of sources, and its frequently repeated and explicit central arguments. Thurston shows the complex circumstances that combined to produce the Terror; for example, the NKVD’s “hunt for enemies occurred in a context of energetic encouragement from above and denunciations from below,” and “Some of the homicidal situation in the gulag was not the result of a calculated policy but arose from the immense distances, the poor transportation system, and the inevitable graft that plagues most prison networks and that was endemic in Soviet life anyway” (p. 99). Another good point is that Thurston acknowledges and grapples with alternative explanations. For example, he turns to psychological literature to address whether those memoirists who said they did not fear the regime until they were arrested may have been repressing the fear (pp. 158-9). He brings up and refutes the idea that Marshal Tukhachevsky’s arrest was based on information forged by the Germans (pp. 53-55).

He also acknowledges facts that do not fit his argument and that are better explained by other interpretations. Why, for example, when interrogating Konstantin Shtepa, did the police show no interest in previous interrogations of him (p. 86)? Why did they not pursue people who had moved from one region to another? Why did they investigate people who had been newly pro-

moted to jobs and had not had time to get into trouble (pp. 70ff., 190)? Thurston chalks some of these up to chaotic record-keeping. While this may be true, the incidents can be better explained by scapegoatism, “overinsurance,” and local politics. In 1935 and 1938, judges and police were punished for overzealous arrests in previous years (pp. 11, 115). While Thurston sees this as a sign of increased respect for legality and citizens’ rights, it seems more likely that Stalin was making low-level officials the scapegoats for his own disastrous policies, just as in his famous article “Dizzy with Success” in 1930 he had blamed regional officials for excesses during collectivization. The justification given for the backlash in 1938, that “enemies of the people and foreign spies had penetrated the security police and the judicial system” (p. 115), shows the continued use of the rhetoric of sabotage rather than a new respect for legal rights.

Another phenomenon to which Thurston gives insufficient weight is that of “overinsurance” (pp. 109, 111) or covering one’s rear. One example is the emigre former engineer who recalled that he had escaped arrest because he had reported ahead of time on the defects of a certain project. He explained, “This is the usual path of the Soviet specialist. He covers himself with official notes” (p. 84). This “overinsurance” would explain the “curious” fact that NKVD officials showed no interest in findings of previous investigations of a suspect and did not actively pursue someone who moved out of their region. Overburdened investigators, knowing that they could be punished either for laxity during the height of a campaign or for overzealousness afterwards, would naturally tend to ignore information that could complicate their task. Similarly, it is likely that police officials exceeded arrest quotas and carried out long interrogation sessions mainly to show the requisite amount of zeal at the proper time.

Another phenomenon that helps explain popular complicity in the Terror is that of local politics competition among various factions to monopolize key positions. In the collective farms of the Smolensk region, factions used complaints and denunciations as weapons in attempts to undercut rivals. This would help explain Thurston’s observation that often the police conducted investigations of newly promoted people who had not had time to get into trouble (pp. 7ff, 190), for new incumbents would not have had the time to develop support networks to ward off attacks. Local politics also explains why retired people, even former tsarist officers and Old

Bolsheviks, were not hounded by the police; they were simply not occupying jobs worth coveting and nobody had an incentive to denounce them. The clustering of arrests in certain regions, workplaces and family groups (p. 79) could reflect the attempt of a victorious faction to eliminate all members of rival networks.

Related to this is are the corruption, nepotism, patronage and mutual coverups that have been explored more fully by J. Arch Getty, Gabor Rittersporn, this reviewer, and others, and vividly shown in a recently published memoir. These relationships may have lent credence to fears of conspiracy, especially in a society accustomed to conspiratorial thinking.

Another explanatory factor that Thurston ignores, one which would cast light on the problem of “from above” and “from below,” is the role of the press. Surely the high Party leadership dictated to the press and used the headlines to create moods and to signal new policies. But Thurston seems to think that central policies can only be found in explicit state or Party resolutions. In one case where district police “took their behavioral cues not from any internal NKVD or party directives but from the press,” Thurston remarks that “So far, the central leadership had not arranged a concerted drive to produce terror” (p. 50). Isn’t the orchestration of press reports a concerted drive?

This book tightly focused and lacking a bibliography—will appeal more to specialists than to students or general readers. Chris Ward’s *Stalin’s Russia*, a useful reference work on Stalin’s time, can be helpful in putting arguments like Thurston’s into perspective.

While one may criticize Thurston’s interpretation, one must commend this attempt to account for the agonizing paradoxes of the Stalinist state, one which was building a legal structure yet tortured and executed innocent citizens, and which offered opportunities to poor people while denying them political representation. Thurston hammers home an important point: that state and society were intimately linked and that an “unholy interaction” between them aggravated the “spate of violence” that was the Great Terror.

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