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Lewis Siegelbaum, Andrei Sokolov. *Stalinism as a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. xvii + 460 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08480-1.

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Stalinism in Its Own Words

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This book allows those people who lived through the turbulent decade of the 1930s to speak for themselves. Most of the documents are written either by ordinary citizens or about them. After reading Stephen Kotkin's *Stalinism as a Civilization* and Sheila Fitzpatrick's *Everyday Stalinism*, one should not be surprised to see yet another attempt to take a look at the life of ordinary citizens during these extraordinary times.[1] With their circumspect commentary, Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov do a superb job of carefully leading the reader from document to document and not stealing the limelight from the voices of the past.

The documents are diverse. Formal reports, memoranda, and speeches present an authoritative point of view (or sometimes a lack of the latter and, thus, complete confusion). But it is the letters of ordinary citizens that comprise the most interesting and important part of this "narrative in documents." Letters to newspapers and to official organs, as well as personal letters to Stalin, Krupskaia and Kalinin, capture some very special moments in the lives of Soviet citizens: a moment during which they interact with the system. Each letter, whether it is a cry for help or a denunciation of a neighbour, can be seen as a manifestation of one particular process: the germination of a Stalinist psyche, one in which the political and the personal became closely intertwined.

In the editors' view, the average Soviet citizen wanted to break his ties with the past in order to become purely Soviet. This leads the argument to the major controversial point of Stalinist studies–the problem of the Great Terror. It is this urge to become purely Soviet amidst the vestiges of the cursed past that reveals "the popular dimension of the terror" (p. 23). So the question for the editors is not why and how the terror was organized, but why it was supported and embraced by the masses so actively. At the same time, newly discovered documents presented here clarify the problem of resistance to the Soviet state. The tension between popular support for the new society and popular resistance to it provides a counterpoint for the whole book. The tension was so acute because the society itself was not yet defined; it was in the process of formation. This is why the development of the argument is twofold: logical and chronological (following the process of the formation of this new society and observing its "childhood illnesses").

The starting point of the narrative is 1929, when the full-scale collectivization of agriculture was initiated. Siegelbaum and Sokolov comment on the rhetoric and connotations of major government policies such as the "socialist offensive on all fronts." This warlike lexicon was easily absorbed by the masses. The government proclaimed the creation of several fronts for its "socialist offensive" (Industrialization Front, Collectivization Front, Tractor Front, Ideological Front, Cultural Front, etc.). Addressing the First Congress of Shock Brigades, a representative of the workers of The Proletariat's Victory textile factory warned: "Working in the foremost lines of the economic battlefront, one must not forget that we find ourselves amid the fiercest class struggle" (p. 32).

In this first chapter, as well as in the rest of the book, the juxtaposition of bombastic official slogans with reports and letters describing the reality is striking. The documents clearly demonstrate the defeats that were suffered in almost every newly proclaimed battlefront. A young Leningrad worker, who arrived at the famous shock construction site in Magnitogorsk, writes to his uncle: "There is such a mess here that you wouldn't be able to make head or tail of it. Our big shots here are nothing but bureaucrats, there's complete confusion, you can't find anything anywhere" (p. 35). Several letters indicate that workers cannot fulfill their quotas for one simple reason: they are hungry (pp. 38-41).

As for the Collectivization Front, letters demonstrate either peasant opposition to the *kolkhoz* movement or their fear and apathy. Again, warlike rhetoric seems

appropriate: failures are often blamed on "class enemies." From the report on collectivization in Belorussia, we learn about the backgrounds of several *kolkhoz* chairmen: one is a former gangster and horse thief, another a Red Army deserter and a smuggler, the third is the son of an Old Believer priest, the fourth a former *kulak* (pp. 55-56). But the picture that emerges from other letters and from the continuation of this report is much more complicated: drunkenness and chaos reign in the *kolkhozy*, whether their leaders are communists or former kulaks; at the same time, extremely high taxes are forcing independent peasants to join the *kolkhoz* movement. The peasants echo the workers: they, too, are hungry and destitute.

One can clearly see how this warlike rhetoric, misery, and confusion caused the birth of the idea of the Great Purge. In a letter from Middle Volga Krai we read: "We poor peasants haven't retreated from our post but have fought to the last drop. We finally took power into our own hands, as expected of us we switched to normal work, but then, however, the tsarist hangers-on saw at once what the deal was" (p. 73). The author of this letter proposes to purge everyone "in the place where he was born and where he grew up or where everyone knows him" (p.73). For this narrator, the great purge seems to be the only sensible solution. We also learn how severe the People's Courts were, even in the early thirties: for stealing a rooster, a sixty-five year-old woman was sentenced to three years' exile; the sentence for selling a half-liter of water as vodka was two years in prison (p.91).

But one of the most ominous and terrifying reports from this chapter does not speak at all about human suffering, although it does sound like a description of a rehearsal for the Great Terror. The people did not suffer in this purge; the libraries did. In a confidential memorandum, N. Maltsev, a member of the TsKK (Central Control Commission), tells the story of the book purge in the libraries. According to him, in some cases 80 to 90 percent of the books were withdrawn. The list of the "withdrawn authors" contains some of the best-known names in world literature: Turgenev, Tolstoy, Goncharov, Dickens, Hugo, even Marx and Lenin. The books were removed en masse without any consultations. Maltsev's perceptive interpretation of this purge sounds like a blueprint for many upcoming campaigns: "in view of the difficulty of this undertaking, and the risks involved, the matter was allowed to take its own course, whatever happened would happen, and responsibility could be placed on those who actually carried out the work" (p.78).

The second chapter, "Cadres Decide Everything!" begins cheerfully. G. M. Krzhizhanovsky, chairman of Gosplan, describes the acclamation that his speech on the Five-Year Plan received. The speech ended with "thunderous applause," the "singing of the "Internationale" and "even instances of hysterics" (p. 103). It was the new leaders, the so-called promotees (*vydvizhentsy*), who emerged during the years of the First Five-Year Plan and who were to comprise the new nomenclature, since Stalin did not trust the old one. In 1929, the party decided to purge itself and the state apparatus. Examples and results of the purge are discussed in many reports and letters presented in this chapter. An "old specialist," M. Matiukhin, writes to M. I. Kalinin: "There's no end to denunciations. You literally can't spit anywhere without hitting some revolting denouncer or liar in the puss… The less gifted a bastard, the meaner his slander" (p. 125). Of course, those "bastards" used the purge in order to improve their position in a new society.

The next chapter reflects people's reaction to the new Soviet Constitution proposed in 1936. The nationwide discussion of the Constitution lasted five months and "left… a vast trail of documents." These documents show how democracy was feigned in this nationwide campaign: in some places people were forced or tricked into "working on the Constitution" (pp. 164-5). The editors emphasize the difference between published and archival materials. The published ones, usually appearing with some bombastic headline such as "We Are the Luckiest People in the World," were written by the workers and then "carefully chosen and edited." The unpublished ones (the majority that comes to light only now) arrived from the countryside and usually contained a negative assessment of the Bolshevik experiment.

In this chapter we find several letters that seem important but somewhat downplayed by the narrators of the commentary, the letters of happy people. An old worker, Berman, wrote: "I don't remember any youth in my past, I didn't have any. Youth came at an advanced age. I am young because only in 1934 did I graduate from a technicum, I am young because one of my sons is a professor, another is the director of the enterprise, the third is a mining engineer and the fourth is a student at a transport institute. I am young because it is a joy to live in our country" (p. 174). A seventy-year old peasant Postnikov is happy because for the first time in his life he owns a piglet, which he received as a bonus for honest labor. He also won the first prize in the rayon competition as a singer. Now he is going to the krai competition and dreaming of seeing "all these cars and buildings."

These letters provide illustrations of Zinoviev's argument that Stalinist society embodied popular ideals, but the editors dismiss them by noting how relative their notions of "happiness" are: "the more people have suffered… the lower their standard of 'happiness' has been" (p. 174). It is hard to accept this commentary. What is it to peasant Postnikov if his piglet does not count for much in our contemporary scales of happiness? His heart is still full of joy when he sees this little creature. We cannot simply dismiss the happiness of the Soviet people by deeming it low. On the contrary, it is happiness and enthusiasm, not only fear and terror that we need to fathom and explain when we approach the Stalinist "way of life."

One can easily discern indications of this enthusiasm in many other letters, even the letters of complaint. For example, in 1940, I. Kotov, a sailor, wrote a personal letter to Stalin about the inspection on his ship that was to ensure "constant combat readiness." Kotov complained that the inspectors took away all books, pictures, and postcards deemed unnecessary. What was the object, so dear to the sailor, that its loss prompted him to write to Stalin himself? He states, "I had a postcard of Sergei Mironovich [Kirov] among Young Pioneers, I've had it for a long time since I was a Pioneer and I saw Sergei Mironovich a few times, but they are not allowing me to keep it" (p. 275). The editors present this letter as an illustration of the pre-war "nerve-racking atmosphere," but one can also interpret it as an indication of the appearance of a new generation imbued with Stalinist values and ideals.

The last chapter of the book, "Happy Childhoods," is the study of this new "revolutionary" generation, the children and youth who were born between 1915 and 1924. This chapter falls outside of the well-organized chronological movement of the narration, but, the editors contend, it is a necessary tribute to the generation, which was born with and moulded by the revolution only to perish later in the battles of the Second World War. In a collection like this, one or two sentences can reveal the image of this whole generation, inspired by the warlike rhetoric, devoted to Stalin, and often deceived by the grown-ups. Here is such a sentence from the letter that Vania Korolyov of Orel Oblast wrote to the *Krest'ianskaia Gazeta* in 1939: "Thank you to Comrade Stalin for our happy schooling I would write more but I have no paper" (p. 419).

Many children addressed their letters to M. I. Kalinin or N. K. Krupskaia. They took that precious piece of paper and started: "Dear grandfather Kalinin," or "To uncle Kalinin," or just "Hello, uncle Misha." Each letter signified utter neediness but also naive and sincere belief that "dear uncle Misha" or "dear Nadezhda Konstantinovna" will help. Quite often children believed in vain. But the existence of this belief is what is important. Apparently, presenting Stalin as the 'father-figure' of the Soviet people, we simplify relations in the Soviet family of the 1930s. There were other 'relatives' like "uncle Misha" and "dear Nadezhda Konstantinovna," who clearly was the 'mother figure.' One poor girl who wanted to study and "bring benefit to the state," wrote: "Oh dear N. K. please show concern for me I will be grateful to you till I die give me *maternal* help" (p. 411, my italics).

Of course, children's letters are the most heart breaking. But almost each single document in this narrative presents a fascinating story. Life in the countryside receives especially scrupulous and detailed treatment in the fourth and fifth chapters, "Love and Plenty" and "Bolshevik Order on the Kolkhoz." Again, the stream of complaints is juxtaposed with newspaper headlines such as "Growing Stronger Every Day" or "Hauling Manure onto the Fields is the Best Present for the Eighteenth Party Congress" (p. 290).

Assembling all these documents, the editors managed to show the multidimensionality of the Stalinist "way of life." Pompous official rhetoric, angered or puzzled reports, as well as letters with complaints, denunciations and requests help us comprehend the process that Soviet propaganda used to call "formation of the new Soviet man." The book could be used in teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses. The documents are invaluable for understanding of social history of the Stalinist society. The narrative is engaging: it will induce interest and lively discussions in a class of any level.

Notes.

[1]. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism, Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*(New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

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