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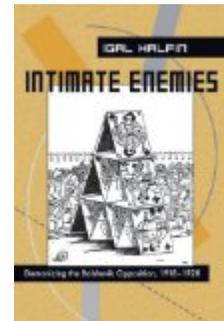
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Igal Halfin. *Intimate Enemies: Demonizing the Bolshevik Opposition, 1918-1928*. Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007. 432 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8229-5952-6.

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Published on H-Genocide (March, 2010)

Commissioned by Elisa G. von Joeden-Forgey



The Politics of Othering: Discourse, Demonization, and the Soviet Subject

The methods of the “cultural turn”—despite valuable work being done in the field—remain an underutilized resource in the field of genocide studies. This trend is regrettable, given the many productive possibilities such an approach could open up in relation to the discursive aspects of such vitally important subjects as ideology, nationalism, and perpetrator subjectivity. Igal Halfin’s book provides a significant example of the way such a project can be undertaken. In doing so, it demonstrates the usefulness which Soviet history can have for scholars of genocide, and it does so outside of the strictly historic-political models which have hitherto been most in evidence at this junction of research. *Intimate Enemies* (no relation to Ashis Nandy’s similarly titled work) proves a valuable resource in demonstrating the way in which close textual work with archival material, combined with careful cultural analysis, can give important insights into historical processes of delegitimization, demonization, and oppression. In taking this culturalist approach, and in focussing on what others have termed “Soviet subjectivity,” Halfin pursues a trend in Soviet studies which has been underway since the mid-1990s, associated with scholars including Stephen Kotkin, Jochen Hellbeck and Berthold Unfried.[1]

How does Halfin, as a historian, go about his task? Using as source material documentation from the minutes of Moscow Party congresses and from debates and character judgments which took place at institutes of higher learning in Petrograd-Leningrad and Siberia,

Halfin presents a series of detailed “microstudies.” These illustrate, in the period preceding and leading to the Stalinist era, the end of a time of relative openness within the Bolshevik Party, and the emergence of a demonizing discourse of “opposition” and “oppositionism” along with a set of discursive tools of judgment—judgment which would have increasingly harsh consequences for those unfortunate persons found wanting.[2] This material is tendered as evidence for a thesis that the Bolsheviks employed a “hermeneutics of the soul” (p. 19). The term “hermeneutics” can be rather slippery; here, we understand it as employed, not by Halfin himself as part of his own project, but by his Communist subjects, in terms of the existence of a system of interpretation of texts which is employed to reveal something about the “soul.” According to Halfin, this process of the determination of political identity (which would decide one’s fate for better or worse) through the public construction of subjectivity was rooted in autobiographical construction and confession, in a way which paralleled Christian narratives of sin and redemption. Extending the Christian metaphor, Halfin argues for the emergence, among the Bolshevik majoritarians, of a view of the “opposition” effecting a “Black Mass,” that is, a blasphemous, inverted parody of Communist action and organization (pp. 22-23). Here, then, we have the “demonization” of the book’s subtitle—though a definition of this term (in relationship to others such as “delegitimization” and “dehumanization”) would have been useful. The Christian symbolic model is an ongoing theme in Halfin’s work.[3] Particularly famil-

iar for scholars of genocide studies is the concept that, as opposed to external adversaries, internal oppositionists were all the more dangerous inasmuch as they were agents of corruption who were not easily recognizable (p. 18)—the “intimate enemies” of the title.

Halfin’s Foucauldian project is to reject a reading in which sociopolitical context is used to determine the “real” meaning of utterances. Rather, he argues, his aim is to “transcend ... reductive understandings of language” in order to show not what discourse conceals—that is, to impose a present sensibility on the historical record under the false pretence of objectivity—but to remain at the level of discourse itself in order to show “how it operates and with what consequences” (p. 30). Foucault himself did comment on the Soviet regime (although the question has been mooted as to whether his theory and methods are appropriate to apply to Soviet Russia), but this issue is not made a part of Halfin’s analysis.[4] Rather, he applies a Foucauldian model of discourse to argue that, in the broad sense, language is a “constitutive force” which “brings society into being” (p. 28)—and that in the Bolshevik milieu, so deeply and overtly steeped in ideology, linguistic discourse was the indispensable precursor to action. Thus, struggles were fought directly through language (p. 86). The institutions which waged these conflicts should then be understood as “embodied discursive formations” (p. 211). Halfin’s stance is laudable inasmuch as it clearly identifies the dangers of subjective interpretation, and not only points out, but demonstrates, a fact which is often underemphasized—that language is not a reflection, but a practice with consequences. Nevertheless, such a reading has its own pitfalls, not all of which are successfully avoided. In particular, the metaphorical framework that Halfin applies is somewhat at odds with his stated approach to the material—of which more later.

How does this project relate to genocide studies as a field of research? In this area, the perceived relevance of Soviet Russia and the Soviet Union has most often been in relation to the *Holodomor* (Ukrainian famine) of the 1930s, to the mass deportations of ethnic and national groups, or in political theories such as that of R. J. Rummel (as well as others such as Michael Mann), which relate particular political systems to the occurrence of genocide (or Rummel’s “democide”).[5] Comparative surveys such as those of Eric D. Weitz and Benjamin A. Valentino have also considered the Soviet Union within a framework of genocide research.[6] Nonetheless, for the most part, in contrast to the “nationalities” question the murderous purges of the 1930s have not been so widely

considered relevant in the context of strictly genocide-focused analysis, given that the victims were selected on “political” grounds (an aspect which, in itself, has raised a third relevant area for the field, concerned with the involvement of the Soviet Union in the drafting of the U.N. Genocide Convention).[7]

Intimate Enemies, however, suggests for the genocide scholar that these are not the only areas of productive research in the field of Soviet studies. In tracing the way in which a system of public discourse which was relatively fluid and open to contestation became one which identified an essentialized Other, an enemy to be pitilessly excluded from the ranks of the in-group, Halfin provides a blueprint which is not only useful in analysis of the process by which specific groups became victims to processes of destruction, but which also might fruitfully be applied to many genocidal situations. While, in the period Halfin discusses, expulsion from the party was the usual result of identification as an “oppositionist” (although imprisonment or exile was also a possibility), the shadow of the Terror hangs over the events, and Halfin mentions repeatedly that most of those who were identified in this period as oppositionists, even if rehabilitated, would not survive the later purges. The scholar of genocide studies will see much that is familiar in this emerging category of “oppositionists” and the way in which they are represented as threatening enemies. Given the Communist connection, the obvious comparison is with the Cambodian genocide under the Khmer Rouge—the revolution which turns upon itself in a state of growing paranoia, and, in particular, the practice of lengthy autobiographical confessions as a prelude to exile or execution. One might also think of Ethiopia during the rule of the Derg, as well as the obverse discourse occurring in Indonesian mass killings taking place under the aegis of anticommunism.

In employing Christianity as a master metaphor, Halfin neglects literature that has shown the rich meanings embedded in a discourse of purity and cleanliness set in opposition to dirt and contamination—and the exercise of boundary demarcation in which that which is internal must be homogenous, where homogeneity is associated with purity—which are often in evidence in the text he presents.[8] A particularly apt comparison (though by no means the sole case where such rhetoric has been deployed) would be Nazi discourse depicting assimilated Jews as more rather than less pernicious, because of their very invisibility and the way in which their putative destructive practices could thus be presented under deceptive auspices. A point of contrast with

such cases, however, is found in the implication drawn by Halfin that, early in the period he discusses, medical terminology applied to “oppositionism” meant that it was seen as curable, whereas in the later period a structurally Manichaean Christian framework made “oppositionists” irredeemable (pp. 22, 32). A shift, he argues, took place in the perceived location of oppositionism and of interrogation, from body, to soul. Strong evidence, however, is not presented for this thought-provoking contention. I have argued elsewhere that in general the medical model has an implication of the necessary destruction of the alien “infection,” and indeed Halfin mentions more than once the employment of the Russian maxim, “only the grave can cure the hunchback”—whereas a Christian narrative might seem to provide at least the possibility of a return to the flock.[9] This reveals the way in which a cross-disciplinary (or rather, “cross-thematic”) approach could provide a fruitful avenue for further pursuit of these themes.

In a more general sense, Halfin’s elaborately detailed microstudies provide, in themselves, a highly valuable resource both for scholars of Soviet history, and, in a broader application, as an exemplary exercise in close discursive analysis. However, the theoretical framework which he employs is somewhat underdeveloped, predominantly constituting short digressions within much longer sections concentrating on the more traditional task of the historian—the presentation and synthesis of archival material. As a result, the material he presents does not always demonstrate the claims that he makes for it. The master metaphor of Christianity—and, in particular, of political consciousness as a “soul”—with which Halfin decodes his texts does not, for the most part, appear overtly in the texts themselves, giving cause to wonder about the usefulness and applicability of this heuristic device. In earlier work, Halfin has sometimes referred to the hermeneutics of the *self*, and the question of self versus soul is a telling one.[10] A stronger case for the appropriateness of this metaphor as an accurate historiographical tool might involve a discursive tracing of the linkages between Soviet discourse and that of pre-Communist and Communist-era Russian Christianity.[11] On this note, while recognizing the constraints of length and of intended audience, the reader without a background in early-twentieth-century Russian discourse might sometimes feel a little lost *in media res*—for example, Halfin demonstrates convincingly that it was not the ideological or linguistic definition of the singular revolutionary path which was contested, but the question of who embodied that path and who did not. This being the case, however,

one wonders how that initial state of affairs came about. But a larger problem with Halfin’s metaphorical framework lies in the fact that to undertake such a reading—that is, an interpretation of texts through a metaphorical lens which is not broadly apparent in the texts themselves—undercuts Halfin’s stated aim of allowing the texts to speak for themselves in demonstrating the processes by which the Bolsheviks constructed subjectivity and identity.

On the question of interpretation, particularly from the lens of genocide scholarship concerning the ethics of the representation of historical subjects, a problem can be identified regarding the agency of people who were victims of oppression (and later, killing). Halfin argues that we must let the texts speak for themselves—that we should not consider that the accused cynically manipulated language in order to save their skins, but rather presume that they had internalized their narratives, that the agency which they employed to construct selves was limited by the boundaries of the universe of Soviet discourse. Ultimately, Halfin maintains, the “real” self is unreachable, and both the subject’s self-understanding, and self-representation, are constituted within discursive limitations. These are important points which have often been neglected, but difficulties arise, for example, when we are told that, in this period, “power primarily operated not from an exterior source against the [subject]’s will, but inculcated the notions of individuality and autonomy and shaped interrogatees as freely confessing subjects” (p. 286). As that passage demonstrates, this method of approach may end up as a denial of subjective agency, by allowing the language of ideology—which subjects had little choice but to employ, whether they internally identified with it or not—to define subjects as historical objects, just as it did under the coercive regime of surveillance which forms Halfin’s realm of inquiry.[12] While Halfin indeed demonstrates that subjects were capable of *disrupting* the accepted discourse, to use this as evidence for the fact that the contest taking place was a contest primarily over discourse with outcomes *determined* by discourse negates the fact that the successful employment of disruptive strategies did not mitigate action taken toward the subject—that is, purging from the party (pp. 304-311).

Furthermore, given that the period in which these inquiries took place was no more than eleven years from the Communist accession to power, it is difficult to imagine that the discourse of Communist ideology was the sole model available to these subjects as a constitutive framework of identity. This issue might have been taken into consideration as a question in itself—that is, how, un-

der what conditions, and over what period of time, does a particular discourse come to a hegemonic position, and to what extent of totality? In other words, the question of *causality* (though obviously vexed and hence necessitating lengthy discussion) is one which might have been mentioned more explicitly. This is a question which is all too relevant for genocide studies with regard to ideological discourse. While Halfin states that he is concerned with “how” and “what,” not “why” (p. 29), in the task that he sets himself of constructing an argument as a framework for textual study rather than attempting solely historical reportage, the last question may be unavoidable. A final critical point is that the book would have benefited from a more thorough index, and closer typological editing.

Despite the cavils mentioned above—which provide invitations to productive dialogue—the genocide scholar can learn much from *Intimate Enemies*, in terms both of method and of content. The work provides valuable insights in tracing the development of Othering discourse and vocabulary which may result in, or contribute to, murderous exclusion. These are relevant both to the inception of the Terror, and to the paranoid mood which led to the ethnic cleansing and genocide of Soviet “nationalities.” Even more important, the combination of a cultural-discursive methodology with close reading of textual documentation refutes the common criticism that the cultural turn is inherently light on, or divorced from, the hard slog of empirical research; and it also provides a demonstration of the productive possibilities of such an approach, giving inspiration for genocide scholars to apply this method to their own material.

Notes

[1]. On the “Soviet subject” see A. Krylova, “The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 1 (2000): 140-144; M. Edele, “Soviet Society, Social Structure, and Everyday Life: Major Frameworks Reconsidered,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8, no. 2 (2007): 364-369.

[2]. The project of the conscious construction of the “new Soviet man” is obviously a related issue, but one which does not need lengthy discussion here inasmuch as it does not form a major theme of Halfin’s work.

[3]. See for example I. Halfin, *From Darkness To Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

[4]. For exploration of this subject see J. Plamper, “Foucault’s Gulag,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3, no. 2 (2002): 255–280.

[5]. For an overview of national deportations in relation to genocide, see J. O. Pohl, “Stalin’s genocide against the ‘Repressed Peoples,’” *Journal of Genocide Research* 2, no. 2 (2000): 267–293. Rummel’s work is related to the “democratic peace theory debate.” See for example his 1994 work *Death By Government* (Edison, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004). For Michael Mann see *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[6]. E. D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); B. A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, New York, 2005).

[7]. It should be acknowledged here that questions of “political” and “national” “cleansing” were by no means entirely separate, either in text or in policy. For a discussion of Raphael Lemkin’s views on “Soviet terror” in relation to genocide and to the ratification of the convention, see A. Weiss-Wendt, “Hostage of Politics: Raphael Lemkin on ‘Soviet Genocide,’” *Journal of Genocide Research* 7, no. 4 (2005): 551-559.

[8]. The classic work on this subject remains Mary Douglas’s 1966 work *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[9]. R. Savage, “‘Disease Incarnate’: Biopolitical Discourse and Genocidal Dehumanisation in the Age of Modernity,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 20, no. 3 (2007): 404-440.

[10]. I. Halfin, “The Demonization of the Opposition: Stalinist Memory and the ‘Communist Archive’ at Leningrad Communist University,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 2, no. 1 (2001): 46.

[11]. This criticism has already been raised in regard to Halfin’s *From Darkness To Light*: see A. Etkind, “Soviet Subjectivity: Torture for the Sake of Salvation?” review essay, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 1 (2005): 171-186.

[12]. For others making a similar critique see Etkind, “Soviet Subjectivity,” 177-180; and Krylova, “The Tenacious Liberal Subject,” 142.

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Citation: Rowan Savage. Review of Halfin, Igal, *Intimate Enemies: Demonizing the Bolshevik Opposition, 1918-1928*. H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. March, 2010.

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