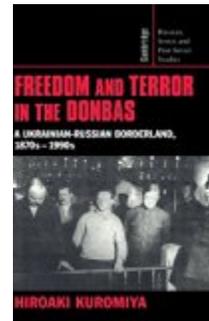


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Hiroaki Kuromiya. *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian- Russian Borderland, 1870s-1990s*. New York, and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xiv + 357 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-62238-7.

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Wild Wild Steppe

Hiroaki Kuromiya's *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas* joins a number of works examining the history of the Soviet Union from a regional, rather than a national, perspective.[1] As an industrialized region, an ethnic borderland, and an area rich in political myth and symbolism, the Donets Basin offers many fruitful topics for investigation.[2] Using the Donbas as a regional case-study, Kuromiya concentrates on the interaction of several primary themes in a specific geopolitical context: the influence of the Donbas's reputation for freedom and brutality on the thoughts and actions of inhabitants and outsiders alike, the everpresent (and evolving) existence of "enemies", and the social and political tensions embedded in an ethnic borderland. Integral to Kuromiya's analysis is his comparison of the Donbas's frontier nature to the human mind because "the powers that be could not fully control" either one. This juxtaposition in the Donbas of freedom on the one hand, and the application of terror to suppress that freedom on the other "suggests a new way of studying Stalin's terror", thus revealing the book's primary focus (p. 9).

Kuromiya employs a large number of sources including newspapers, documents from both central and regional archives, interviews, and NKVD reports. These last are at once the most interesting and problematic of sources. Kuromiya does not accept them at face value, arguing persuasively that in the Stalinist world few people would openly say what they actually thought (p. 241). He states that in specific individual cases the remarks attributed to the repressed were fabricated, but neverthe-

less expressed accurately the general sentiments of the population. This methodology allows for the use of these documents in a more nuanced manner than simply accepting them at face value or discounting them as complete fabrications, although it still leaves reader in the unsettling, if unavoidable position of not being sure which incidents were real, and which were not.[3]

Kuromiya convincingly argues that only by understanding the violent, brutal, and anarchic pre-Soviet history of the region can the experience of the Donbas under Stalin (and today) be understood. The first chapter describes social and working conditions in the region from the 1870s up to the Second World War, illuminating the poverty, despair, and violence that comprised daily life. Chapter Two covers political development in the Donbas up to 1914, detailing the rise of worker militancy against employers and managers, a feature which continues to the present day. The next several chapters represent the core of the study, with individual chapters on the Revolution and Civil War, the NEP, the famine of 1932-33, the Great Terror, and the War. The chapter on the Revolution and the Civil War indicates that the Donbas workers did not support any group unconditionally, but fought from the outset to protect their freedoms and rights from any outside interlopers, be they Whites or Reds. During the NEP, Bolshevik and worker interests sometimes merged in their mutual suspicion of the "bourgeois specialists"; workers, however, increasingly viewed the Bolsheviks as a new oppressing elite, while the Bolsheviks regarded the workers' continued defense of their perceived rights and

independence with growing alarm.

The famine of 1932-33 marked a decisive turn in the Donbas and the Soviet Union as a whole, constituting “a grave political crisis” which “posed a domestic challenge to Stalin and his policy”, laying “the foundations for the Great Terror” (pp. 174-175). The Great Terror itself revealed both the vast scope and limits of Stalin’s power in that he unleashed the terror in order to destroy “enemies” whom he could neither precisely define nor identify, thus resulting in mass repression. The chapter on the Second World War suggests that the German occupation of the region allowed for the existence of political alternatives to Soviet Communism, and forced residents to support, openly or tacitly, the Nazis, Soviets, or Ukrainian nationalists. Ironically, the occupation also forced Stalin to ease repression after the war since “it was not possible to terrorize the tens of millions who had been exposed to political alternatives during the war” (p.295). This theme dominates the final chapter, a somewhat cursory discussion of the postwar de-Stalinization in the Donbas, and which brings the story to the 1990s.

Overall, Kuromiya’s chronological approach succeeds in illuminating the interaction of the book’s main themes over time. While at times repetitive, it underscores the persistence of particular elements of political and social life in the Donbas, especially regarding labor-management relations, and ethnic strife and anti-Semitism, despite supposed changes in governing and social systems. It also illustrates the importance of the national political context in shaping regional events while showing how the area’s character remained partially autonomous.

Kuromiya’s main contention is that the Donbas, a la Benedict Anderson, is an imagined community whose defining features “embodies the characteristics of the wild field—freedom, militancy, violence, terror, independence” (p.12). These features took on mythic attributes during the course of Russian/Ukrainian history, and did not fade away with the arrival of industrialization and modernization, but “[i]f anything, ‘modernity’ seems to have recreated these very characteristics of the steppe frontiers in the Donbas.” (p.12) This notion of continuity is contained in the symbolic importance of the Donbas as a place of freedom and refuge, much like Siberia or the American “Wild West”. Those seeking freedom included workers, migrant peasant laborers, escaped criminals, and later, during Stalin’s time, dekulakized peasants, more migrant workers, fleeing Ukrainian nationalists, and other “enemies of the people.” Although the

frontier of the steppe and the American West were ultimately closed, in both Russo-Ukrainian and American societies the persistence of the myth endured, affecting the behaviors and identities of their inhabitants.

In the case of the Donbas, Kuromiya asserts the endurance of the myth and of the imagined community had important ramifications in the Stalin era. “The ‘wildness’ of the southern steppe land in general, and the Donbas in particular, in its modern incarnation, was a creation of the imagination of contemporaries. What is more, in many respects the modern political history of the Donbas did embody this imagined wildness” (p. 33). Even state officials possessed this mental image of the region, which encouraged them to rely on physical repression to govern and control.

Although “freedom from” was especially valued by those who sought refuge in the Donbas, they found little escape from oppression. The result was an enduring and often violent conflict between the *nizy* (loosely defined as manual workers and peasants) and the *verkhi* (initially bourgeois employers and their managers, and tsarist officials, later Communist officials and industrial managers). The tsarist state followed the first such fugitives, the Cossacks, and eventually incorporated them into state service. Industrialization in the 1870s brought more economic exploitation by factory owners and managers. The tendency towards confrontation was evident in the late Imperial period, when Donbas workers and employers engaged in a series of violent struggles with one another. In 1917, there was no “honeymoon” between labor and management, as there was in Moscow and Petrograd; instead Donbas workers sought immediate satisfaction for their pent-up grievances. The White and Red terrors of the Civil War contributed to the deaths of tens of thousands. Anti-Jewish pogroms, always a feature on the Donbas landscape, greatly intensified in this period.

In the Soviet era, beginning with the NEP, the Bolsheviks gradually replaced the so-called “bourgeois specialists” in the workers’ eyes as the new exploiting elite. Stalin’s combined revolutions of industrialization and collectivization, and especially the resulting famine, raised the level of violence and brutality in the region. The savagery continued during the Great Terror, when Kuromiya estimates that “the Donbas accounted for up one-third of the executed in Ukraine” even though only 16 percent of Ukrainians lived in the region (pp. 245-246).

On its own, the seemingly perpetual clash between *nizy* and *verkhi* was bad enough, but the mass politiciza-

tion of the Soviet period, and Stalin's determination to root out all opposition intensified the bloodshed even further. Initially, in the 1920s, official enemies were usually defined in class terms, the most obvious threats allegedly coming from "bourgeois specialists", manifested in the show trials conducted at Kadiivka and Katerynoslav in 1924, and the Shakhty trial of 1928. Donbas workers approved of this classification as it enabled them to settle old scores against their long-time exploiters. Ominously, however, the prosecution of "wreckers" and "saboteurs", categories which did not require any class affiliation but could also apply to workers, increased as the decade wore on.

As indicated above, Kuromiya argues that collectivization and the ensuing famine, were watershed events in the definition of and hunt for enemies. The mass repression of the kulaks in particular, and the peasantry as a whole, widened considerably the range of potential enemies. Moreover, Stalin's perception that many in the Party's opposed his policies led him to include party members on a mass scale for the first time in the ranks of potential enemies. In the Donbas, these suspicions fueled already existing worker and peasant grievances against the new *verkhi*, the party cadres. Concurrent with the famine, the GPU unleashed itself against Ukrainian organizations as part of the assault on *korenizatsiia*, and against other Soviet minorities such as the Germans and the Greeks.

It should be noted that Kuromiya does not engage in the debate over whether the famine was a deliberate act of genocide against the Ukrainian people, a curious omission given the region's position as an ethnic borderland. Ethnic conflict and anti-Semitism were also pervasive among the workers and peasants themselves, regardless of the state's actions. Thus strife in the Donbas was evident at multiple levels: between the laboring classes and the Party, and along ethnic and even economic lines. All of these antagonisms would come together during the Great Terror.

Kuromiya states that Stalin initiated the Terror largely because of the leadership's inability to measure the public's mood in the absence of free speech, elections or polls. Rather than permit the risk of allowing some "enemies" to operate freely, Stalin chose to destroy anyone who potentially threatened the state. The elimination of an essentialist "class" basis for opposition that had evolved during the NEP and especially during Stalin's revolution from above meant that the list of potential enemies was now huge. Consequently, party members,

managers, engineers, people with non-Bolshevik political backgrounds, *intelligenty*, clergy, certain ethnic minorities (in the Donbas this meant Germans, Greeks, and Balts) all found themselves suspect. Even workers and peasants were also frequently caught in the NKVD's net.

While he argues that the purges were orchestrated by Stalin, Kuromiya adds that the bitterness felt by the *nizy* towards the *verkhi* also contributed greatly to the blood-letting, as the past effects of the Civil War, the NEP and especially the famine led to much hostility towards the regime and its officials. Although the Donbas suffered severely, the Terror there was alleviated by several elements. The region continued its historic role of providing safety for fugitives as many suspected "enemies" disappeared in the migrant—and to officials—largely anonymous workforce. Moreover, since the Donbas's industries were essential to the economy and the national security, the leadership took some pains to lessen its already sufficiently bloody impact.

There is much to be said for Kuromiya's conceptualization of the Donbas as constituting an "imagined community" with its own particular values and myths. It helps explain how a region's society can retain particular characteristics, and influence the perceptions and behaviors of historical actors. Yet at times, Kuromiya seems to attribute too much uniformity and power to this notion. For example, while at one point he argues that the *nizy* vision of the imagined community was more inclusive than either the class-based messianism of Marxism or the freedom supposedly embodied in the American West, Kuromiya's own evidence indicates that even long-term residents might not be included by others as a part of this community (pp. 64-65). Jews, for instance, were the targets of numerous, bloody pogroms throughout the modern history of the Donbas. Even today, a particularly nasty anti-Semitism remains in the region.

Russians, Ukrainians, and other ethnic groups also fought with one another, regarding the others as aliens. As Kuromiya points out, the *narod* was hardly an undifferentiated mass, but itself was fraught with conflict, all of which fragmented this "imagined community" (pp. 198-199). Kuromiya's explanation that even if the Donbas's reality did not live up to its reputation, its symbolism remained, just as the United States remains a symbol for justice and equality even amidst the realities of racism and rampant crime, is not entirely satisfactory on this point (p. 336).

More discussion is also needed to explain how the myth of the "free steppe" was maintained in the minds

of Soviet citizens, particularly during the 1930s and after. Kuromiya provides little documentary or cultural evidence to support the assertion that Donbas residents retained their unique identity or community vision. While this is admittedly the hardest evidence to obtain, it is nevertheless necessary given the importance of this theme to the study as a whole.

These criticisms aside, Kuromiya has written a valuable work, whose implications and significance extend beyond the Donbas itself. By situating his regional history within the context of the national history of the Soviet Union, Kuromiya illuminates the ways in which the Donbas followed and differed from the national experience. It also has much potential as a text for the classroom. The material itself is extremely interesting, and, perhaps more importantly, it demonstrates how a regional perspective can look quite different from one centered in Moscow or Leningrad. *Freedom and Terror* is a rich and wide-ranging social history of this critical and turbulent region and time.

Notes:

[1]. For some recent examples see, William Chase, *Workers, Society, and the Soviet State: Labor and Life in Moscow, 1918-1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987) David Hoffman, *Peasant Metropolis: Social Identities in Moscow, 1929-1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University

Press, 1994), Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

[2]. Other works on the Donets Basin include Theodore H. Friedgut, *Iuzkova and Revolution*, vol. 1, *Life and Work in Russia's Donbas, 1869-1924*, and vol 2, *Politics and Revolution in Russia's Donbas, 1869-1924* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989-1994); Susan P. McCaffray, *The Politics of Industrialization in Tsarist Russia: The Association of Southern Coal and Steel Producers, 1874-1914* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996); Lewis Siegelbaum and Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Workers of the Donbas Speak: Survival and Identity in the New Ukraine, 1989-1992* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1995); Charters Wynn, *Workers, Strikes, and Pogroms: The Donbas-Dnepr Bend in Late Imperial Russia, 1870-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[3]. For another discussion on the challenges of using NKVD reports, see Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941* (New York, and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997), especially pp. 9-17.

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