

# In the House of the Hanged Man

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Stephan Courtois' *The Black Book of Communism* has generated a major debate in most countries, leading to acrimonious exchanges in the French National Assembly when Pierre Jospin unconvincingly tried to defend his Left Wing coalition against charges that his partners included apologists for mass murder. In this article a leading Polish intellectual (with extensive experience of living under a Marxist dictatorship) looks at some of the merits/demerits of the first audit of global left wing criminality, while arguing for a discriminating re-moralisation of 'social science' approaches to these 'subjects'. This article also suggests that before we get too excited about either global warming or the rights and wrongs of the World Trade Organisation, we might dwell a little more on the ideology which murdered 100 million people.

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'In the house of the hanged man you don't talk about the rope because, when retired, his hangman moved in there' was Erich Fried's (an Austrian poet close to the Left) succinct description of the post-totalitarian world.<sup>1</sup> He most probably had Nazism in mind. However, his words equally suit the situation after the collapse of Communism. Of course, nobody should confuse the roles of hangmen, their children, accomplices, friends or admirers, but one cannot help wondering at the veil of fog drawn over Communism and its legacies. Fried's diagnosis explains many of the reactions to 'The Black Book of Communism', both in the post-Communist countries and in the West.

'The Black Book' has come as no surprise to those who knew anything about Communist reality. The death count of 100 million victims<sup>2</sup> could have been presented earlier, while analyses of Communist crimes in the light of the definition of genocide and crimes against peace and against humanity were already published in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.<sup>3</sup> After all, even in the 1970s Alexander Solzhenitsyn sold a million copies of his 'Gulag Archipelago'. Nevertheless all these publications were like stones thrown into water leaving only slight ripples on the surface of a general acceptance of Communism as a legitimate system and ideology. 'Intellectual correctness' preferred complaints about 'American imperialism'.

Finally such people have been relieved to discover that Solzhenitsyn was only a Russian nationalist chauvinist.

Regardless of the rich documentation assembled in 'The Black Book of Communism', it is perhaps equally important that the volume was edited by its former French adherents. Nevertheless, it should be noted that they still apply mostly political criteria to the phenomenon of Communism. 'The privilege of speaking the truth must not be left to the increasingly noisy Right. Communist crimes should be analysed and condemned in the name of democratic values and not for the sake of nationalist or even fascist ideology', writes Stephane Courtois in his introduction. There are serious doubts whether the Right is actually 'noisier' than the Left. Skinheads and neo-fascists rarely bother with communism, they prefer to attack foreigners. 'Democratic values' sound nice but not sufficient as a foundation for an even-handed treatment of Communism. On this level condemnation of Communism will always remain just another political polemic. It is regrettable that the editors of 'The Black Book' almost ignore moral criteria of judgement. Courtois refers to an 'unwritten rule governing human society', that is the principle 'Thou shalt not kill'. Has he not noticed that this principle was written down, along with nine others, about three thousand years ago?<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Courtois did not spare the readers an egregious comparison of Communism with the Inquisition; ignoring the different motives, scale and nature of their activities.

Political relativism is most evident in Pierre Rigoulot's essay on North Korea in which he drops the following clanger: 'It would be hard – he argues – to blame Communism for all the victims as one cannot exclude that nationalist leaders could be equally brutal'.<sup>5</sup> It is also difficult to find 'extreme moralism' in the Khmer Rouge atrocities as seen by Jean-Louis Margolin. Is it in the remark by one of their leaders that 'we prefer to kill ten friends than to leave one enemy alive'?<sup>6</sup> Latin American, African and Asiatic Communisms are generally the weakest points of 'The Black Book'. It originated in the intellectual climate of France after the collapse of Soviet Union and its empire. It was an atmosphere sympathetic to those who lost their 'temple of faith'.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately 'The Black Book' has not changed much in the general debate on Communism in which everybody claims that 'we are good and they are bad' and which still waits to be referred to universal moral criteria. Comparison of the number of victims of Rightist and Leftist totalitarian systems of the twentieth

century may be important. But I would support what Maciej Rybiński recently said: ‘lives of those murdered for the sake of progress are of no less value than lives of those killed for the sake of reaction’.<sup>8</sup>

The European Left has, so far, shown little sign of revising its assessment of Communism. In France a ‘Black Book of Capitalism’ was compiled to neutralise the bad aftertaste left by the ‘Black Book’. Does this mean that everything will remain as it was before? Will the ‘Auschwitz lies’ be punished, while admirers of Stalin, Mao, Brezhnev and Castro will wear a halo of consistent defenders of a lost but ‘just’ cause? Courtois explains the stubborn attachment of many western Leftists to Communism. In fact, the ‘progressives’ of the twentieth-century still cannot dethrone the myth of revolution. Important as was the Soviet contribution to the victory over the Third Reich and an evolutionary collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and its satellite countries, is it enough to silence honest reflection on the immeasurable sufferings caused by Communists?

Meanwhile monstrous banalities are being repeated concerning the system that wanted to make people happy through violence and which destroyed itself just because of its attachment to naked force, represented in government, economic policies, and international relations. Should we forget the facts?

In the fall of 1966 [remembers a witness of the Chinese Cultural Revolution] I was on a train on a revolutionary linkup and I saw some other Red Guards accuse an old lady. She was very old and very frail. The Red Guards accused her of being a capitalist. Then they started beating her. They beat her to death. At the next train stop they just put her body on the platform and told someone at the station that she was a capitalist. Then they got back on the train to continue their revolutionary linkup.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, one may say the Red Guards were not alienated but what could they say the moment they were turned into victims themselves?

French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin said not long ago that ‘Communism never raised a hand against freedom’.<sup>10</sup> Has he never heard of the NKVD or KGB? Let us add this scene to those many others described in ‘The Black Book’. In the late 1930s the heads of ‘Dalstroy’, Karp Pavlov and Nikolai Garanin, shot 40,000 prisoners in the Kolyma mining camps who were accused of ‘sabotage’ and other fabricated crimes. Garanin used to order those who ‘refused’ to go to work into a row. They were mostly sick or *dokhodiagas* who

could hardly stand on their feet. Furious Garanin walked along the line and shot people. Two guards followed him and loaded guns for him.<sup>11</sup> They did not raise a hand against freedom? Maybe Jospin does not know what the Communists did in Tibet? There are histories of mutilations and dismemberments, severed genitals and gouged-out eyes. It was in Tibet where crucifixions were recorded and boiling water was poured on victims to extract confession. It was here that monks were forced to copulate with nuns.<sup>12</sup> And what about the Khmer Rouge? Did they too not raise a hand against freedom? Or those members of the French Communist Party who served as guards in Viet Minh camps during the war in Indochina interrogating their captured compatriots, that is French soldiers?<sup>13</sup>

Defenders of Communism frequently admit that revolution has indeed brought a lot of suffering and mistakes, but then argue that they could be justified by a wonderful idea of 'social justice'. First, it is very doubtful whether 'social justice' can really be implemented by violation of regular justice. Second, was the idea behind the activities of the Russian Cheka really so wonderful? In March 1918 Lenin received the following account of these activities: 'In this organisation, corrupt with crime, violence and lawlessness, dominated by scoundrels and criminals, people armed to the teeth kill everybody whom they do not like'. Lenin responded willingly: 'it is necessary to stimulate the momentum of terror (...) and make it massive'. He also added on an emotional note: 'beat the enemy's pate to death'. Equally personal was the attitude of Stalin and his accomplices to the 'enemy'. In the years 1937–38 they personally signed 44,000 death sentences.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps a more clinical and 'professional' attitude was taken by Professor Grigori Maironovski, head of a special toxicological section of the Soviet Interior Ministry, who murdered 'enemies of the people' selected by the authorities by means of sophisticated poisons, whose effects were analogous to heart attacks or other apparent natural causes. Can defenders of Communism claim that 'social justice' justified the death of the Greek-Catholic Bishop Fedor Romzha who was killed in this manner?<sup>15</sup>

Defenders of Communism claim that revolutionary terror has always been blind and that, contrary to Nazism, Communism did not target particular groups of people. This is another deception. The Bolsheviks did not just kill individuals. They denied civil rights and murdered whole categories of them: the 'bourgeois', 'kulaks',

'enemies of people' and other groups defined by the Communist Party bureaucracy. Were the Bolsheviks more or less accurate in these definitions than the Nazis? Neither precision nor inaccuracy is a virtue in this case. One of the groups killed by the Communists were the clergy. While the authors of 'The Black Book' mention numerous cases of murdering priests in the Soviet Union, China and Kampuchea, little mention is made of Republican Spain. Nevertheless, during the Spanish Civil War about 6,800 priests and nuns (12 per cent of their total number) were killed by Stalinists, Trotskyites and anarchists.<sup>16</sup>

A hostile attitude towards religion and the clergy has been a permanent feature of Communism. It may be illustrated by a story recorded by Valentin Moroz. One of his fellow camp inmates, an Ossetian, was a thief. But in the camp he became a Jehovah's Witness and stopped stealing. The guards might well have had grounds to be pleased. They were not. On the contrary, they harassed him even more. 'What do you want of me', complained the poor Ossetian, 'I do not steal and do no harm to anybody. It is not forbidden to believe in God!' The guards explained that it would have been better if he stayed a thief.<sup>17</sup> Communism was hostile to Catholicism, Islam and Buddhism alike. In the Romanian prison of Pitesti Communist functionaries entertained themselves with a pornographic 'Black Mass'. In Mongolia the Communists forced the Lamas to violate their vows and in 1937 they started a mass extermination of the monks. Thousands of Lamas were among the roughly 100,000 people killed by the Mongolian communists in the 1930s. Chubsugul is to Mongolians what Katyn is for the Poles. In 1991 graves of thousands of Lamas were discovered at this small lake close to the town of Moron. This has not stopped former Mongolian Communists from then usurping the Lamas former role. In 1993 a Polish journalist Piotr Bikont met an old Mongolian woman who came to the temple of Gandan because she could not pray in her home town, not because local authorities would prevent her from it. On the contrary: the former first secretary of the party undertook duties of the main local Lama.<sup>18</sup>

Communism claimed to be the realisation of 'historical justice'. Considering the Marxist understanding of justice as a historically changing part of the 'superstructure' and the Marxist materialist mechanics of the world, it is really difficult to guess what kind of justice it might have been. It seems that the Communists treated as 'just' activities corresponding with the 'objective historical

development' but such a notion of justice is not moral but elementary, as rain, snow or physical strength. Thence it was one step to a new edition of 'the rule of jungle'. Should we then wonder that Chinese Communists forced children to serve out the rest of the prison sentences of their parents who had died in gaol? Or that they treated being born to a 'bourgeois' family a sin beyond redemption?<sup>19</sup>

Courtois is right to stress that few of the Bolshevik leaders were acquainted with real battlefields. Most of them administered the revolutionary terror from behind their desks. Lenin, Stalin, Mao and others were direct heirs of the nineteenth-century tradition of 'class hatred' and contempt for the individual. In their own words, their 'humanistic' social experiment frequently boiled down to destruction of 'mad dogs', 'dirty swine', 'lice', 'vultures', 'scorpions', 'harmful insects' and 'vampires'.<sup>20</sup> Had they been zoologists, many people could have survived, but by these terms they meant human beings.

According to Lucien Seve, 'the revolutionary goal is even more alive today than ever, since capitalism is indefensible and breaks down everywhere'.<sup>21</sup> This is very strange. What has broken down today is rather the remnants of Communist idealism. For instance, after a failed rising in 1989 the Communist Party of Burma was officially dissolved in 1990, but many of its former members continued underground activities under Pheug Kya-shin, the former head of its military section. Along with his troops he is still active in the borderland of Burma and Laos where he controls opium crops and drug traffic into Indochina. Burmese 'Communists' are still shielded by the Chinese security services and the military. Drugs are traded for guns that should secure the 'victory of the Burmese and Thai people'.<sup>22</sup> The question arises: what does this have to do with capitalism?

Communist 'idealism' in Poland faded away even earlier. As late as October 1983 General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the architect of the Polish martial law, warned that the party leadership would not agree to 'a creeping re-privatisation' and substitution of 'socialist ideas' by a 'petty bourgeois mentality'.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, even before they had to share power in 1989, many senior Communist officials entered joint ventures with foreign investors and took part in numerous forms of a 'creeping privatisation'. They were the first to take benefit from the legalisation of private entrepreneurship and freedom of foreign exchange in 1989. In the blink of an eye, leaders of the 'workers' vanguard' became card-carrying capitalists. It was a bizarre end to an ideology that claimed to change class relations forever. Was it for the

sake of this pitiful denouement that about one hundred million people perished?

I fully agree with Andrzej Paczkowski who concluded that the Communists in Poland were always oppressive and lawless since they did not respect even those laws created by themselves, and that in the years 1944–56 Polish Communism was even ‘criminal’.<sup>24</sup> Considering the old saying that Poland was ‘the most joyful barracks in the socialist camp’, what should be said about other countries?

Communism has been a unique experience in human history, not only because it used terror and propaganda but also because the latter forced people to call it democracy and scientific, or to believe that the whole system signified progress and happiness. During the construction of a new Tower of Babel, after 1945 not only in the Soviet Union but also in the so-called ‘people’s democracies’, languages have been mixed up again. An allegedly higher stage of democracy was invented and called ‘socialist democracy’ that actually did not resemble democracy at all. ‘Patriotism’ was used to describe serving foreign powers. ‘Science’ meant *a priori* ideological judgements and propaganda simplifications. The semantic Tower of Babel collapsed, but its survivors still have problems in calling things by their proper names, some because they cannot overcome old habits, others because they cannot escape using words whose meaning was twisted.

According to Friedrich Engels, socialism, or its higher Communist stage, would have meant ‘humanity’s leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom’.<sup>25</sup> In practice it was the reverse. Achieving a high degree of synthesis, Michael Novak wrote:

Communism set out to destroy the human soul (...) it destroyed enterprise, investment, innovation, even the ability to distinguish between profit and loss. It wounded the habits of honesty and trust, self-reliance and fidelity to one’s word. More deeply still, it dulled the most distinctive human mark: the soul’s primordial endowment of creativity, its sense of personal responsibility, its knowledge of itself as a *subject*.<sup>26</sup>

Clouds of lies and hypocrisy surrounding Communism have not been dispersed. They are still supplied from old and new sources. ‘The Black Book of Communism’ deserves attention as a serious attempt to clear the post-Communist atmosphere. In the world in which it is claimed that everybody has the right to his own truth, it

is, nevertheless, hard to believe that this breeze will be effective.

Thence future generations may wonder what Anna Akhmatova had in mind by writing:<sup>27</sup>

In this house, how terrible a life we lived –  
 Neither the fireplace and its patriarchal shine  
 Nor the cradle of my infant  
 Nor that we were both young  
 And filled with ideas  
 Could reduce the chilling fear ...

#### NOTES

1. Erich Fried, 'Kwestia taktu' [The Question of Tact], *Literatura na świecie* 12/68 (1976), p.236.
2. Stephane Courtois, Nicolas Werth, Jean Louis Panne, Andrzej Paczkowski, Karel Bartosek and Jean Louis Margolin, *Czarna księga komunizmu* [The Black Book of Communism] (Warsaw: Prószyński i Ska, 1999), p.26 nn.
3. After a number of first hand accounts from the Soviet 'paradise' such as Duchess of Atholl, *Conscription of a People* (New York and London: P. Allan, 1931); *Red Goals* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1935); Vladimir Tchernavin, *I Speak for the Silent Prisoners of the Soviets* (Boston: Ralph T. Hale, 1935); George Kitchin, *Prisoner of the OGPU* (New York: Green & Co., 1935); Ivan Solonevich, *The Soviet Paradise Lost* (New York: The Paisley Press, 1938); Lilian Mowrer, *Arrest and Exile* (New York: W. Morris & Co., 1941). One of the first analysis of the Soviet system was: Silvester Mora [Kazimierz Zamorski] and Peter Zwierniak [Stanisław Starzewski], *La justice sovietique* (Rome: Magi Spinetti, 1945). It was followed by David J. Dallin and Boris I. Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labour in Soviet Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947); Stanisław Swianiewicz, *Forced Labour and Economic Development* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror* (London: Macmillan, 1968) and lots of others.
4. *Czarna księga komunizmu* [The Black Book of Communism] (note 2), p.49.
5. *Ibid.* p.516.
6. *Ibid.* pp.572 and 585.
7. 'Kamień rzucony w kałużę' [A Stone Thrown into a Pool], *Rzeczpospolita* 22/23 (May 1999).
8. Maciej Rybiński, 'Postępowcy' [Progressives], *Rzeczpospolita* 9/10 (Jan. 1998).
9. Anne F. Thurston, *Enemies of the People. The Ordeal of Intellectuals in China's Great Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p.134.
10. *Czarna księga komunizmu* [The Black Book of Communism] (note 2), p.9.
11. Roj Miedwiediew, *Pod osąd historii* [Let History Judge] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Bellona, 1990), Vol. I, pp.500–501.
12. Thurston (note 9), pp.135–6.
13. M.F. Etchegoin, 'Obóz 113' [Camp No 113], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 9 April 1991.
14. *Czarna księga komunizmu* [The Black Book of Communism] (note 2), pp.111, 83, 130 and 184.
15. Paweł Sudopłatow, *Wspomnienia niewygodnego świadka* [Special Tasks. The Memoirs of an Unwanted Witness – a Soviet Spymaster] (Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Bellona, 1999), p.238.



16. Estimate by Antonio Montero Moreno according to: Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, *Zagrabiona pamięć: wojna w Hiszpanii 1936–39* [The Stolen Memory: Civil War in Spain 1936–39] (Warszawa: Biblioteka Frondy, 1995), p.49.
17. In Iwan Koszeliweć (ed.), *Ukraina 1956–1968* [Ukraine 1956–1968] (Warszawa: ‘Słowo’, no date), pp.239–40.
18. Piotr Bikont, ‘20 tysięcy kilometrów koleją transsyberyjską’ [20 Thousand Kilometres on the Trans-siberian Railway] *Magazyn Gazety Wyborczej* (25 June 1993), p.15.
19. *Czarna księga komunizmu* [The Black Book of Communism] (note 2), pp.497–8.
20. *Ibid.* p.687 and 701.
21. Marek Gładysz, ‘Uczniowie Robespierre’a’ [Students of Robespierre], *Życie* 19 May 1998.
22. *Spotkania*, 29 IV-5 V 1993 r., s. 31; Richard S. Ehrlich, ‘Starczy dla wszystkich’ [Will Be Enough for Everybody] *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 8 April 1993.
23. *Trybuna Ludu*, 30 X-1 November 1982.
24. *Czarna księga komunizmu* [The Black Book of Communism] (note 2), p.366.
25. Friedrich Engels, *Anty-Duebring* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1947), pp.420–21.
26. Michael Novak, ‘The Godlessness that Failed’, *First Things* (June/July 2000), p.35.
27. Anna Achmatowa, ‘Północne elegie. Trzecia’ [Northern Elegies. Three], *Literatura na świecie* 4/72 (1977), pp.231–2 (author’s translation).