

Book Reviews

J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, eds., *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–1939*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. 635 pp. \$35.00.

Reviewed by Gabriel Schoenfeld, Commentary magazine

In the 1930s the Soviet Communist Party turned on its own membership with savage ferocity. In the period known as the Great Terror, huge numbers of people were swept up into the night and tortured into making false confessions to preposterous charges. They were then shot or imprisoned for many years in camps in the frozen tundra. Why did this happen? Even now, more than six decades later, there are no easy answers. The origins of the Great Terror remain one of the most controversial questions in the historiography of the Soviet period.

In recent years, however, our understanding of this and other aspects of the Soviet past has been advanced considerably by the steady flow of once highly secret documents from the archives of the now defunct USSR. A growing number of these documents have been translated into English and published in the West, where they have become an invaluable resource, accessible to anyone interested in some of the most important episodes of contemporary history. A pioneer in this process has been the Annals of Communism series sponsored by Yale University Press, which has already published a number of remarkably informative volumes. The latest installment in the series, however, has become a source of controversy. In selecting an editor for this collection of documents on the origins of the Stalinist terror, the publishing house chose a scholar who has established himself as one of the more extreme voices in the ongoing debate.

In an earlier book, *The Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), J. Arch Getty challenged advocates of the “totalitarian” school who saw the terror of the 1930s as an instrument by which Josif Stalin first consolidated power and then exercised total mastery of the Communist Party and Soviet society at large. Against this view, Getty argued that the mass arrests and murders of the decade were, in the first place, not as numerous as the theorists and historians of the totalitarian school had presumed. The number of Stalin’s victims, he said, lay not in the millions, as scholars like Robert Conquest had maintained, but in the “thousands.” In the second place, according to Getty, the limited terror that did occur was less a product of Stalin’s will than of the doings of wayward

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underlings and the various pressures inside the “chaotic, irregular, and confused” administrative apparatus over which the Soviet dictator presided as a kind of moderator.

It is not hard to see why publication of *The Origins* caused a considerable stir in Sovietological circles and beyond. As more than a few observers have noted, the view of the Stalin era espoused by Getty proceeded in striking parallel to the theses advanced by various revisionist historians of the Third Reich, most notably the Holocaust denier David Irving. Both traveled a considerable distance toward minimizing the numbers of victims of, respectively, the Soviet and Nazi dictators, and both went an equally great distance to exculpate the top leaders of responsibility for their crimes. Indeed, in *The Origins*, Getty drew the comparison himself, if only to defend himself preemptively against the charge of being a Gulag denier.

In the *Road to Terror*, Getty has been compelled by the newly available evidence to alter his position considerably. Yet he does so without acknowledging precisely how far he has moved, while at the same time continuing to hurl darts at those of his critics whose perception of historical reality was far less clouded than his own. On the question of the number who perished in the purges, Getty has revised his own earlier death count sharply upward, and acknowledges a total toll of “nearly 1.5 million deaths directly due to repression in the 1930’s” (p. 591). The number Getty now proffers is still highly conjectural—and the best that he can say for the new data is that “there are good reasons for assuming that they are not wildly wrong” (p. 593). But Getty provides no explanation for his astonishingly low estimate of 1985, noting only “[t]hat both sides [in the debate] have accused the other of sloppy or incompetent scholarship, and [that] the conversation has often been marked by an unseemly harsh tone” (p. 589).

In his discussion of Stalin’s responsibility, Getty has also shifted gears. Stalin, he now acknowledges, “played the leading role in the terror” (p. xiii). But this hardly means, Getty continues, that *The Origins* was entirely wrong and its critics entirely right: The Soviet leader, he writes,

seems to have been neither the bureaucratic moderator that I suggested nor the careful planner that others claimed. . . . [T]here were too many twists and turns, too many false starts and subsequent embarrassing backtrackings to support the idea that the terror was the culmination of a well-prepared and long-standing master design. (p. xiii)

But in insisting that Stalin never operated according to a “master design,” Getty is flailing at a straw man; the theorists of totalitarianism never assumed anything of the sort, and it did not require the opening of Soviet archives to make clear that the terror of the 1930s did not unfold according to what Getty calls a “single plan.” It is also hardly the case, as Getty states here, that in his own writings and those of his fellow revisionists, “Stalin’s guilt for the terror was never in question” (p. xiii). It most certainly *was* in question. “Stalin was not guilty of mass first-degree murder” was the verdict rendered as recently as four years ago by one of Getty’s colleagues, Robert W. Thurston in *Life and Terror in Stalin’s Russia, 1934–1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 227.

What accounts for the gross distortions of Soviet history on offer in recent years from revisionist historians like Thurston and Getty? In *Road to Terror*, Getty offers a clue to his own past thinking: “The notion that we have clung to for so long,” he writes, “that there must have been ‘liberal’ or ‘decent’ Bolsheviks who tried to stop Stalin’s plan for terror—is no longer tenable” (p. xiv). Indeed, it was never tenable, and the spectacle of scholars combing the Soviet past for the purpose of locating “liberal” or “decent” Bolsheviks tells us a great deal about the political currents that have swept American Sovietology over the past few decades.

Although this collection illuminates the inner workings of the Soviet system during one of its most baffling periods, a good number of the documents it contains have clearly been selected more to aid Getty’s apologetics for his own indefensible past stances than for any other purpose. Yale University Press’s distinguished *Annals of Communism* series has not, in this case, been well served.

