

**Review: James Harris, *The Great Fear: Stalin's Terror of the 1930s*,
OUP, Oxford, UK, 2016**

Pages: 205

It's Communism, Stupid!

An excellent study of an unpublicised event on the Communist West; Communist Dictator Stalin doing what all Communists have ever done – kill his enemies and strike terror into survivors (a death toll of ~300,000 from 1937-38).

The author traces the history of the peasant class and agrarian Russia back to the tenth century, making a strong case that the land's rulers have always employed terror tactics to a degree. It was only with the advent of industrialisation though that it could be carried out at scale.

The Red versus White civil war is shown to be a complex affair with both sides committing atrocities, but it is clear the common people were 100% pragmatists and certainly had no understanding of Marxist philosophy. In this they were deceived by Communists, who once in power confiscated their prized private property and cast them as enemies of the state ('kulaks'). These were slated either for execution or exile to a Gulag.

Stalin the man is not probed deeply, only his shrewd strategies of maintaining power by command and control.

Introduction (pp. 1-14)

In 1956, Nikita Krushchev blamed historic violence on Stalin's 'Cult of Personality', which made it clear there would be no ramifications for anyone else.

Stalin was 'Master of the House'.

Slavs are first mentioned in the Byzantium Empire as Viking slaves.

In the 980s, Prince Vladimir became ruler of Rus.

Genghis Khan invaded 1237-41 and enslaved the land for 250 years as tributaries.

From 1389 to 1589 the Muscovites reigned as “Tsars”.

Ivan IV was called the ‘Terrible’.

The flat Eurasian plain lacks natural defences; Russia’s thousands of miles of border are impossible to police.

Stalin: “We are 50-100 years behind the advanced countries.”

In 1897 Russia had 125M people, including 22M Ukrainian ‘little Russians’.

Tsar Alexander’s industrialisation policy brought millions of peasants to the cities which rent the country’s social fabric. Humiliating defeats to Japan in 1904 caused his support to plummet.

In March 1917, the International Women’s Day protest set off the Revolution.

I) Fear and Violence (pp. 15-35)

The Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd in November 1917. After a week of street fighting they had taken Moscow. Both these early wins were just the beginning of three years’ civil war.

Leon Trostsky: “We shall not enter the kingdom of socialism in white gloves on a polished floor.”

The Communist’s decisive battles took place in 1919.

Both sides conscripted at gunpoint, shot deserters, executed POWs and stole peasant land and food.

The Whites lacked vision since they were only perceived as interested in establishing the old failed order benefiting the elite.

Cheka began as the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Struggle against Counter-Revolution and Sabotage.

Cheka: “Seek out, arrest and shoot immediately those whom you deem to present a threat to the regime.”

The Bolsheviks surrendered Ukraine, Poland, Finland and the Baltic region in order to placate foreign powers.

The Reds implemented conscription between 18-40.

The Whites were more concerned with soldier loyalty.

The enemy was everywhere for both sides since no one could be trusted.

The peasants only ever wanted to be left alone on their land which the Bolsheviks had promised them.

“On the surface, the new regime was worse than the one it replaced.” [p25]

In 1918 the Reds closed journals and newspapers.

The Cheka would “arrest first and ask questions later”.

Most industrialists had already left at the beginning of the revolution.

“Cheka leader, November 1918; ‘We are not waging war on individual persons. We are exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class’ many thousands of the Russian middle class were murdered ... Peasants who resisted the seizure of grain were shot on the spot. ... the Cossacks ... perceived to be irretrievably hostile ... Hundreds of thousands were killed or deported.” [p29]

The Communists learnt from the Paris Commune in 1871 and the 1905 First Russian Revolution that when in power, ruthless violence can keep you there.

Gulag exiles can be traced back to Ivan the Terrible.

By the mid-1930s, Stalin is claimed to have perceived Civil War was eminent.

III) Peace and Insecurity (pp. 36-55)

By 1920s the Reds were in an unassailable position.

They had implemented an economic policy of 'War Communism' which failed miserably as not enough grain from the countryside was arriving in urban centres. In its place Stalin created the New Economic Plan.

The Communists saw the Russian Orthodox Church as an anti-Soviet entity.

III) The Uncertain Dictatorship Works (pp. 56-79)

Stalin used his position as General Secretary to control appointments and build a 'circular flow of power' vesting in himself. he was obsessed with the double-dealing *dvurushnik*.

Rapid bureaucratic expansion in the 1920s had created a shortage of cadres with suitable administration skills.

Stalin: "Democracy is not something appropriate to all times and places ... [it] demands a certain minimum of culture ... from the members of (party) cells ... we need to retreat from it ... It is not the (Secretariat) ... that is to blame, but ... the conditions in which we live ...

If we were to permit the existence of group struggle, we would destroy the party ... In the current conditions of capital encirclement, we need ... a party of steel ... capable of leading the workers into a decisive struggle." [p70]

Secretaries kept detailed voting records to identify then neutralise any opposition movements. To join such a movement was political suicide.

Stalin's vision was, "socialism in one country". He believed importing machinery from dangerous capitalist countries would keep Russia in a poor and weak agrarian state

IV) The Great Break (pp. 80-100)

The Communists believed that by ending the chaos of capitalist markets they could realise the colossal potential of socialist state planning.

Soviet collectives were created by force and were poorly organised. This destroyed the historic peasant tradition of self-administration; many sabotaged equipment and slaughtered animals rather than hand them over. This enraged Stalin who began his dekulakisation program.

The 1932-3 real wage was half the 1928 level.

V) Relaxation? (pp. 101-120)

Stalin blamed economic failures on anti-Soviets, indiscipline, weakness and incompetence of officials.

In December 1931, it was rumoured Japan would annex the Soviet Far East and Western Siberia.

Stalin maintained power by creating hundreds of little dictatorships loyal to him.

Stalin's purges were directed at: class-aliens; the duplicitous; undisciplined; and those who stole public property.

VI) Tensions Mount (pp. 121-140)

On 9/10/1934, French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou and King Alexander of Yugoslavia were assassinated in Croatia, thought to be done by the Nazis to provoke war.

In December 1932, the Soviets had begun to issue internal passports to curb peasant migration during the famine.

VII) The Perfect Storm (pp. 141-180)

The Franco-Soviet Mutual Assistance Pact of May 1935 sought to contain Germany.

In February 1935, the Soviets purged all émigrés.

Communist officials would blame shift to subordinates due to impossible Five-Year Plan targets, citing 'saboteurs' and 'wreckers' as causes. Deceit and corruption therefore became commonplace.

Stalin was in favour of a two-check system on managers: one from above (ultimately himself), the other below (voting party members).

British appeasement towards Germany was tempered by the hope aggression was only directed towards the east.

According to NKVD statistics, Stalin killed 247,157 under the national and 00447 operations.

Conclusion (pp. 181-188)

The Bolsheviks were inured to human cost.

Epilogue (pp. 188-78)

The Navi-Soviet pact was signed 23/8/1939.