The spectre returns! - A political evaluation of Schwarzbuch des Kommunismus [The Black Book of Communism]

Ulrich Rippert
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At the beginning of May Schwarzbuch des Kommunismus* *[The Black Book of Communism] appeared in German.*

Half a year earlier, the original French edition, Livre noir du communisme*, unleashed a vigorous debate and a flood of reviews. Spread across nearly one thousand pages, the authors have assembled every accusation ever made against socialism or communism. The German edition was expanded with an extra chapter dealing with 'The political crimes of the GDR [German Democratic Republic]'.*

The introduction written by Stéphane Courtois, a former Maoist, adds up all of the dead killed 'in the name of communism.' In this way, he arbitrarily throws together completely different historical phenomena such as the civil war of 1918-21, the forced collectivisation and the Great Terror in the Soviet Union, the rule of Mao in China and Pol Pot in Cambodia, the military government of Ethiopia as well as various Latin American political movements, from the Sandinistas in Nicaragua to the 'Shining Path' in Peru.

The figure of 100 million dead he arrives at is then juxtaposed to the numbers of victims of fascism, calculated much less rigorously to give a figure of 25 million. His conclusion is that communism was just as bad as fascism, if not worse.

As a serious historical work the book is totally worthless. It superficially disregards the different class foundations, programmes and social interests of a whole number of movements which are simply described as 'communist.'

We intend to illuminate many aspects of the reactionary and anti-Marxist statements made by the book's authors and refute them.

The following commentary assesses the political worthiness of the book.

One hundred and fifty years after the publication of the Communist Manifesto, the debate about communism has begun again. It opens with an extensive indictment--how could it be otherwise in a society deeply divided and careering towards the edge of an abyss: once and for all an end should be made to communism's call for equality, justice and a free society.

The parlous state of society today and the coming social storm so provoke Stéphane Courtois and the other authors and champions of the indictment, that they feel compelled to comb the century's mountain of corpses for material to hurl against communism and socialism.

The preface and epilogue written by Courtois are really a damming indictment of him as a historian. If one applies his standard, then the crimes which were committed in the name of Christianity--from the Crusades to the Inquisition and up to the 'Rattenlinie' (the escape route organised by the Catholic Church from Germany to Latin America for prosecuted Nazi henchmen)--were even more monstrous. By this token, the preacher from Nazareth 2,000 years ago created mankind's biggest terrorist organisation.

As a politician, Courtois speaks for a definite social layer. The ageing ex-radicals of the 1968 generation are preparing to take over the running of a society which is now in far worse shape than at the time of the mass student protests of their youth.

All that is left from the radicalism of these radicals of yesteryear is their radical defence of existing social relations, including mass unemployment, social polarisation and the destruction of democratic rights.

The evolution of someone like Courtois has many facets.

A psychologist would show that the young student, plagued by self-doubt, distributed Mao's *Little Red Book* and threw Molotov cocktails at police stations in order to win recognition from his fellow students, at a time when it was considered chic to be radical. Thirty years later, it is this same urge for recognition which makes him a provocative anti-communist, when it is fashionable to pronounce the 'death of communism'.

A sociologist would explain that the radical youth protests of the 1960s were directed against the wealth of a society from which the students were largely excluded. Three decades later, the former demonstrators have become inheritors. Today, more than two-thirds of society's wealth lies in their hands. Their determination to defend the system is far greater than their earlier protests against its darker side.

A Marxist, however, must make clear that the shrill anti-communism of these 50-year-olds is closely related to their

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numbing praise for Stalinism as 20-year-old students.

What attracted Courtois and his likes to the dull, fatuous phrases of Mao's *Little Red Book*? They thought of changing society, not by the independent action of workers but against them. They sought the transformation of society from above, by means of a dictatorial regime, in which the students--as in Mao's Cultural Revolution--should play a key role. Even at that time it was known that Stalinism and its Maoist variant were dictatorial regimes which brutally oppressed any independent movement of the working class, and committed the most terrible crimes in the name of socialism.

Courtois shamelessly demonstrates that he has learnt nothing more about this question over the past 30 years. His Stalinist/Maoist anti-Marxism has merely become hysterical bourgeois anti-communism.

The Black Book of Communism tries to revive the biggest lie of this century: Stalinism equals communism. But conditions to do this are becoming increasingly unfavourable. The source of this falsification, the Stalinist regimes of the Soviet Union and its satellite states, has disappeared. Many archives have been opened. New documents revealing the real role of the Stalinist terror come to light daily.

The Russian historian Vadim Rogovin has just published the sixth volume of an extensive history of the Left Opposition. Basing himself on a multitude of documents, he proves that the terrible oppression and destruction carried out by the Stalinist regime was aimed, above all, at the left, socialist opposition.

The Stalinist terror did not dishonour the Russian Revolution, as it was the product of reaction. Stalinism did not discredit socialism or communism, it was directed against them.

Sixty years ago at the Moscow Trials, when many of the most outstanding leaders of the revolution were condemned on the basis of false charges and then executed, several democratic governments sent their own observers to the trials. The German writer Lion Feuchtwanger and the theoretician Ernst Bloch supported Stalin's show trials, as well as the British King's Counsel and member of the conservative Tory Party D.N. Pritt. The French writer Romain Rolland and the French League for the Rights of Man also supported Stalin and sanitised the trials in the interests of a Franco-Soviet pact. Even then a patriotic end justified any means.

However, at the same time, the socialist Left Opposition under the leadership of Leon Trotsky declared that the Moscow trials were both an integral part and the high point of the Stalinist terror. They demonstrated that the monstrous extent of Stalinist oppression was in inverse proportion to the progress of the revolution. In October 1917 Russia had taken a terrific leap forward in history. But the defeats suffered by workers in several countries isolated the revolution and strengthened reaction. The barbarism of old Russian society exacted a terrible revenge, in the form of the Stalinist dictatorship.

Trotsky wrote his pamphlet *Their Morals and Ours* in 1938. It was directed against the fathers of today's philistines, who depicted the Stalinist terror as the result and logical consequence of Bolshevism: 'The October Revolution abolished privileges, waged war against social inequality, replaced the bureaucracy with self-government of the toilers, abolished secret diplomacy, strove to render all social relationships completely transparent. Stalinism re-established the most offensive forms of privileges, imbued inequality with a provocative character, strangled mass self-activity under police absolutism, transformed administration into a monopoly of the Kremlin oligarchy and regenerated the fetishism of power in forms that absolute monarchy dared not dream of.... Verily boundless intellectual and moral obtuseness is required to identify the reactionary police morality of Stalinism with the revolutionary morality of the Bolsheviks' (*Their Morals and Ours*, New Park, pp. 22-23).

Could anyone put it better?

Then and now, historians refuse to face up to historical facts. They place the violence of liberation on the same level as the violence of oppression, and counterpose it to the abstract concept of 'democracy'. But bourgeois democracy also has its own history. It was not only during the initial years of Thermidor and Bonapartism after the French Revolution that violence ruled and bloodshed was commonplace. Democratic governments have ruthlessly disregarded the will of the majority of the population, organised wars and civil wars, and certain dictators used parliament as a stepping stone to power.

The abstract phrase 'democracy' is used to defend a society governed by naked social and political violence. However, anger is seeping from every pore of this society and opposition is growing.

Even if the discussion about communism starts backwards--with slanders and accusations--it has begun and has deep social roots. However much mindless historians may repeat the same old fairy tales and accuse the communists of Stalinism's crimes, historical truth will not be suppressed any longer. And such truth is the greatest source of strength for the revival of the revolutionary workers' movement.

But a word to the prosecution: The very fact that you declare the spectre dead, means that it lives. Your anti-communism frightens no one and only exposes yourselves. You merely confirm what the Trotskyists have always said, Stalinism is counter-revolutionary through and through!

**Schwarzbuch des Kommunismus: Unterdrückung, Verbrechen und Terror*, [The Black Book of Communism: Repression, Criminality and Terror], Stéphan Courtois (ed.), Piper Verlag, Munich, 1998.

Also in German and French

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