

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### Degradation & disgrace

by [Stephen Schwartz](#)

On *The Forsaken: An American Tragedy in Stalin's Russia* by Tim Tzouliadis.

*Tim Tzouliadis* *The Forsaken: An American Tragedy in Stalin's Russia.*  
Penguin, 436 pages, \$29.95

The ferocious repression carried out in Stalinist Russia remains, one may argue, unique in history. The comparable mass murders in Communist China during the so-called Cultural Revolution may have exceeded Stalin's massacres in numbers—which remain unclear—and the Cambodian horrors perpetrated by Pol Pot were equally evil. Yet each of the latter atrocities, while almost inconceivably immoral, was comprehensible according to institutional and other social rivalries within the respective regimes. Mao, with his cadres in the Chinese army, sought to obliterate the “intellectuals” who made up most of the Communist Party, and Cambodian fanatics wiped out alleged pro-Vietnamese Communists, on the way to a demented utopian vision. Other Communist regimes liquidated all those they considered potential foes. As for Hitler and the Holocaust, nothing about their racism, militarism, or other pathologies evades explanation, nor do the similar cases in the Balkans or Rwanda. But aside from the early bloodletting of 1934, the Nazi party never carried out the systematic and repeated purges within its own ranks that were seen in Soviet Russia.

In *The Forsaken*, Tim Tzouliadis, a British filmmaker of Greek background, has provided an indispensable contribution to the record of the Soviet terror. Further, he has researched a neglected and shocking aspect of Joseph Stalin's house of horrors: the imprisonment and murder of American citizens, mainly acolytes of the regime and its ideology, caught on Russian territory and, scandalously, abandoned by the U.S. diplomatic authorities that should have sought to protect them.

As here described, some Americans who ended up in the Gulag went to Russia seeking economic security during the Depression of the 1930s. With disastrous unemployment in America, and claims that Stalin was creating a socialist state, one hundred thousand Americans applied for jobs in the USSR during the first two-thirds of 1931. Ranging professionally from barbers to aviators to dentists, they competed for only 6,000 positions, but 10,000 were hired and transported across the Atlantic. The great Russian experimental novelist Boris Pilnyak, himself destined for execution not long afterward, wrote in 1935 of the arrival in Moscow of a gold miner Pilnyak had met three years before, while traveling in Arizona. Many of the economic migrants to Soviet Russia dragged their children with them, and in this book, as the inevitable martyrdom approaches, the fate of these young people, also swept into the Gulag, is deeply distressing.

From the beginning of this frightful narrative, the diabolical serpent is present in the form of the pro-Soviet Western publicist. While Americans were lured to torment and death under Communism,

George Bernard Shaw, one of Stalin's most abject sycophants, was busy spreading the lies that the Bolsheviks were correct in their contempt for the West and that the Moscow dictatorship was established "exactly as Washington and Jefferson and Hamilton and Franklin and Tom Paine had established the United States." The hallucinating Shaw exceeded even himself, as quoted by Tzouliadis, in alleging that a statue had been raised to Washington in Saint Petersburg (temporarily renamed Leningrad), and predicting that a similar monument to Lenin would soon be placed in Washington. Neither assertion would prove accurate, but Shaw was idolized by the international public, and his nonsense was swallowed by many people.

Once the purge apparatus intruded in the lives of Americans in Russia, the enthusiasm that had drawn so many of them there dictated their fate. As Tzouliadis writes, "Sympathy for the Soviet Union was no guarantee of safety; instead it attracted suspicion." And here the fundamental mystery of the Communist experience is clearly visible: one cannot imagine a Nazi arrested by the German authorities for excessive loyalty, yet that was the destiny of most of the victims of the Stalin purge. The more one believed in the lie, the more susceptible one was to destruction; and thus the more the essential untruth of the Communist promise was increased. When Communism was an object of benevolent sympathy among Western liberals, the common-sense observation that the Soviet "idea" was opposed to human nature was derided as unsophisticated. But the further one reads in the literature of Sovietism the clearer it seems that it embodied some real perversion of human instinct. With the concept of a compulsory social experiment accepted as legitimate, all presumption of logic, to say nothing of ethics, was rendered irrelevant.

Tzouliadis refers, sometimes incompletely, to many cases already well documented, such as that of Ruth Boerger, an American Communist married to a Soviet spy who had adopted the alias Adolph Rubens. Rubens was called back to Moscow and arrested, and Boerger, who accompanied him, was then jailed. Although Ruth Boerger was interviewed in Moscow by the U.S. diplomat Loy Henderson, no attempt was made to save her. Tzouliadis enumerates the main names on the roll of dishonor, comprising those Western diplomats and journalists who aided the Stalin machine in its Satanic work—from Shaw to the infamous *New York Times* scribbler Walter Duranty to Franklin Roosevelt's despicable ambassador to Russia, Joseph Davies—all of whom share some guilt for the crimes described here.

Curiously, the more time passes since the end of Muscovite Communism, and the more we know about the facts of its state violence, the less we may really understand about its motivation. We could ascribe it, as in other Communist dictatorships, to the fundamental need of the Stalinist bureaucracy to maintain their power. Still, along with the peasants (so-called "kulaks") and others punished for their purported class advantages, and the Ukrainians, Caucasian Muslims, Soviet Germans, and other targets of Kremlin-directed, Nazi-style attempted genocide, nearly the whole Communist Party and secret police, individually and in groups, were deprived of authority and sacrificed to Stalin's killing machine. Indeed, in the 1937 slaughter of the officer corps of the Red Army, recognized throughout the world for their military talent, Stalin did something unknown in any other era or place: he deeply undermined his country's defense in the midst of the worst threat Russia had ever encountered.

The extraordinary psychosis manifested in this single act supports the simplest explanation for Stalin's butchery—the dictator was a homicidal paranoid, propelled to rule over a primitive culture based on compulsion. Russian nineteenth-century liberals and twentieth-century dissident Bolsheviks had both warned that the country could produce such a dictator: Genghis Khan in the age of the telegraph, as evoked by Aleksandr Herzen (1812–1870), or riding in an imported American limousine, a century later.

A better, sociological elucidation has long been offered. This holds that the disparity between the promise of liberation and prosperity offered by the Communist state, and between the reality of

brutalization and impoverishment suffered by the majority of Bolshevism's subjects, made popular disaffection a perpetual, if insubstantial, threat. This disaffection supposedly justified preventive action and reinforcement of collective fear. The contradiction between Communist fantasies and Soviet realities permeates Tzouliadis' wide-ranging account of degradation and disgrace. Such analysis may explain the lack, in Nazi totalitarianism, of the institutionalized purge. While Hitlerism openly promoted cruelty and destruction, and exalted the status of its elite, the Soviet Union presented itself as a bulwark of human solidarity and culture.

For those who believed that Russian Communism stood for "people's freedom," allegedly derived from the Enlightenment, the reality of absolute subordination imposed within the ranks of the Communist Party and among those it controlled—either as apparently voluntary adherents in the West or as mere captives in the East—had varied effects. Some who perceived the authoritarianism of the Communist hierarchy sought to join it, rejoicing in an opportunity to vent their sadistic tendencies; some reacted by submission, even a deranged enthusiasm; others fled Communist organizations and territories as quickly as they could and a minority embarked on the path of active anti-Communist dissidence or combat. By contrast, few recruited to Nazism underwent such convulsions of conscience.

At the same time, and in a seeming paradox, resistance to hideous excesses by dictatorial rulers was more common in the Nazi dominions than in the Soviet empire. Sometimes out of personal opportunism, but often because of religious principle, numerous Germans and other Nazi subjects risked and even sacrificed their lives to save Jews and other designated scapegoats of the state. But in the dolorous chronicles of the Russian Gulag, we find almost no examples of action by party members of any rank to save the arrested or condemned. There were no Soviet peers of the Nazi Oskar Schindler, who, as portrayed in the eponymous 1993 film by Steven Spielberg, at least protected Jews in the ostensible interest of his business, or of the military plotters led by Claus von Stauffenberg, who attempted to kill Hitler and end the Second World War. Certain Nazis found there was a line of inhuman conduct they could not cross, but no such restraint existed for Communists, who considered themselves representatives of a new humanity, above any ordinary (and especially religious) standard of morality.

Tzouliadis's work occasionally overreaches, and also reveals either unfamiliarity with basic sources or carelessness. For example, it is irksome to find him thanking and citing the American journalist Alan Cullison, who has done irreplaceable work in this field, but repeatedly misspelling his name as "Cullinson." Nevertheless, since the increasing distance in time from the Soviet epoch has fostered indifference and ignorance no less than a deepening of the Russian enigma, this book should be read as widely as possible.

**Stephen Schwartz's** new book, *The Other Islam*, is forthcoming from Doubleday.

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