Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda, and Dissent, 1934-1941 by Sarah Davies
Review by: Stephen Kotkin

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the case’ (p. 248). Those who were aware of Soviet secret diplomacy, namely the Beijing government, on the other hand, were constrained from making it public not just to ‘save face’ but more importantly because, in the age-old Chinese ‘tradition’ of ‘using barbarians to govern barbarians’, they utilised the myth of Soviet benevolence to acquire concessions from European powers and the United States.

If all this begins to sound familiar, it is because Elleman casts his findings in the Manichean mould of an earlier US Cold War scholarship in which benevolent Westerners faced a conspiratorial Soviet Union, with the Chinese playing the parts either of dolts who were easily duped by Soviet designs or wily Orientals playing barbarians against one another. Sure enough, the Open Door policy here appears as nothing more than an effort to preserve China’s territorial integrity until it would be ready to take its place among civilised nations, against a Soviet Union guided by nothing more than the expansionist legacy of its tsarist predecessors. Chinese governments, all the way to the Guomindang in 1945, appear as misguided players in the game of secret diplomacy who did not know their own best interests, but were caught ever more inextricably in the Soviet trap as they sought to utilise the myth of Soviet benevolence against their real friends. The Chinese Revolution (mainly but not just the Communist Revolution) is reduced to a ‘proxy war’ (p. 172) between Soviet imperialists and Western powers.

Whatever the ideological motivations underlying these arguments, Elleman sustains them by keeping his vision focused firmly on the texts of secret protocols, while ignoring the evidence of everyday politics in China. With or without the help of the knowledge of secret protocols, Chinese were quite aware of the ambivalence of Soviet policies in China, which not only were an issue in the Guomindang suppression of Communists in the late 1920s (and thereafter) but even divided the Communist Party. No evidence of secret protocols was necessary for Chinese to see that Soviet representatives in China were ensconced in earlier tsarist consulates. Such knowledge did not prevent Chinese governments from continuing to make deals with the Soviet Union, or Chinese revolutionaries from pursuing communism, which require more complex explanations. And it does not take a Chinese ‘tradition’ to explain the use of one power against another in achieving national goals, unless of course one adds the magic words ‘face’ and ‘barbarian’, which remind us immediately that we are back in the Orient.

Had Elleman been more cognisant of the explanatory limitations of his evidence, he might have avoided the extravagant claims he makes for it. As it is, what the study has to offer by way of new evidence is marred by the interpretive strategy the author has chosen, which represents little more than a throwback to an earlier era of ideologically-driven scholarship on modern China.


PERSUADED BY THE HISTORIOGRAPHY whereby scholars seek instances of the Soviet state’s endless bungling and then adduce such instances to vanquish the idea of total control? We now have a new, albeit complementary, revisionist mode: if you can find complaints uttered by people while standing in long queues, frustrations expressed over strong-armed subscriptions to state loans, and negative remarks about Stalin, then you have overturned the notion of total passivity. ‘Were ordinary people’, asks Sarah Davies, ‘reduced … to either regurgitating the official discourse or keeping their silence?’ (p. 5). ‘No’, she writes, the Stalinist propaganda machine was ‘far from omnipotent’; the cultural hegemony of the regime was ‘far from all-embracing’ (p. 183). One can almost hear the crackling as straw men are engulfed in flames.
What a pity, for Davies is one of the first historians to explore extensively an important new kind of document—the summaries on popular mood prepared by the NKVD and party. Fearlessly, she states that the new sources *ipso facto* undermine all previous analyses of popular moods, including this reviewer’s (pp. 6–7). Her book, dedicated to ‘all those who spoke out’, promises much and, partly in spite of itself, delivers a great deal.

Davies acknowledges that the mood reports are highly formulaic. She writes that ‘it is hard to know whether party, and particularly NKVD informants, ... invented or distorted negative comments in their reports’ (p. 11). She notes that both reporters and their sources had particular concerns ‘dictated by regime priorities’ (p. 13), so that, for example, there is ‘an abundance of comment on purely political issues’, whereas ‘private concerns ... are hardly represented at all’ (p. 14). She makes clear that the NKVD existed to monitor enemies, which it had no trouble amassing, while party committees reported an overwhelmingly positive mood in the locales under their supervision. It *almost* seems as if Davies understands that the mood summaries express the play of bureaucratic interests, the mentality of recorders, the bustle of toadies, and, most conspicuously, the deepest fears, even paranoia, of the authorities. Brushing aside these moments of complexity, however, she argues that the summaries contain accurate records of ordinary people’s true feelings. She cites the summaries’ correspondence to materials in *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik*, and points out that the secret reports also echo what can sometimes be found in the official Soviet media of the Stalin period (p. 12). Such argumentation may appear to contradict her claims that the new sources automatically subvert previous analyses of popular moods and that she has exposed heretofore unknown hostility. Be that as it may, having vouched despite her own apparent objections for the accuracy of the mood summaries, she then attributes near universality to the grumbling they contain. Invoking Ian Kershaw, who asserted that the reported hostility in Gestapo dispatches was just the tip of the iceberg, Davies suggests that the same might well have been the case in Stalin’s USSR (p. 17). It might be true of the Soviet case even if Kershaw is wrong about Germany.

Were Davies interested simply in asserting the existence of dissatisfaction, whatever its parameters, there would be little to engage in her book. But she transforms the undeniable discontent in prewar Soviet society into ‘dissent’ and the articulation of ‘alternative’ viewpoints. We are told that ‘ordinary people were adept at defeating the censor’—defeating?—and that they used ‘alternative’ sources of information and ideas (p. 7). What sources? From where? It seems that anything recorded in the mood reports becomes by definition dissent and an alternative. Take the question of nationalism. After showing that at least a few people were reported to have thought Stalin was Jewish and bemoaned the lack of pro-Russian sentiment in Soviet propaganda, she writes that ‘the language of nationalism thus served as a potent weapon for attacking the state’ (p. 9). No doubt NKVD operatives assumed that thinking Stalin was Jewish constituted an ‘attack’ on the state, but should we follow their approach? Why are nationalism, anti-Semitism, and populism automatically ‘rival discourses’ and not somehow compatible with official thinking? What, in any case, is the official thinking? Davies never explicitly sets out what was deemed acceptable, and when, and how.

Frustrating as this book’s argument can be, it contains within it an entirely different one. Readers must bear with Davies as she purports to reveal workers’ attitudes on price rises and shortages—what might they have been!—or discloses that there was widespread criticism of taxes, and that peasants were not happy with the servitude of the kolkhozy. In the book’s best sections she demonstrates that the peasants complained about the ineffectualness of Soviet decrees, *urging implementation*, while workers employed the language of exploitation (on the model of the official critique of capitalism) to press the authorities to *live up to their incessant promises*. The disappointment, in other words, indicates some level of expectation, certainly an element of savvy, and maybe even belief. Indeed, by the time Davies has elucidated the popular appreciation that seemed to flow from access to education and upward social mobility, as well
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as the tenacious strain of anti-private property egalitarianism, the monograph begins to get intriguing. Of course, to accept these points it would be necessary to turn her thesis about dissonant voices and alternatives on its head. This is precisely what Davies does. She writes that truly courageous acts of outspokenness, when individuals knew they risked arrest, were ‘clearly isolated’ (p. 112). True, people gossiped about the wives of Kremlin leaders, named their horses after vozhdii, and told nasty jokes, but she argues that such ‘inversion merely bolstered the status quo, because it implied a recognition that there was a fundamental order to be reversed [privately and symbolically]’ (p. 182). In fact, when people told jokes, they were ‘not necessarily rejecting the Soviet system or socialism or Stalin’ (p. 186). Davies concludes her own counterargument by noting that elements of circumscribed dissent could coexist with broad consent, and that people shifted back and forth between the official and the unofficial—interpretations that seem, to this particular reviewer, uncannily familiar.

Remarkably, Davies has managed to illustrate how deeply the ‘official’ thinking pervaded ordinary people’s minds, and how much overlap there was between the voiced aspirations of the state and those of ordinary people. Yet she seems not to realise her accomplishment. She does not quite know what to make of her finding, for example, that the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 elicited shock and confusion. I would suggest that people would scarcely have been shocked unless they viewed the USSR as socialist and a bulwark against fascism. Similarly, she observes, again without recognising the implications, that ‘the external relations of the USSR with other powers were at the centre of everyday interest’ (p. 93). Could it be that the state succeeded, through massive coverage, in convincing people of the plausible conception that the world was divided into two camps, capitalism and socialism, and that however many problems socialism might have, it was still better than economic depression and militarism? To put the matter another way, did the people living in the USSR during the 1930s have the mental equipment—the sources of information as well as the categories of thought—for positing an alternative to Soviet socialism (as opposed to this or that official, this or that policy)? Yes, some could imagine the deceased Lenin as an ‘alternative’ to Stalin, but could they envision something other than a choice between Soviet socialism and capitalism in the image in which it was then known? Could Orwell have been right, in Animal Farm (1945), when he suggested that people criticised aspects of socialism but always shrank, when pressed, from advocating a return to Mr. Jones? Davies remains far from posing, let alone answering, such questions.

Perhaps Davies’ most compelling point is that ‘the propaganda itself stimulated popular criticism of the real nature of the regime’ (p. 106). She neglects to clarify, however, either the ‘real’ nature of the regime or what people understood it to be. In one place she observes that ‘some people, including those basically loyal to the regime, took Soviet “democracy” at face value’ (p. 112), and in another, that people saw Hitler as representing ‘dynamism, economic success, authoritarianism, anti-Semitism, expansionism—all policies which found adherents in Russia’ (p. 96). So, what did they want: ‘democracy’ or authoritarianism? Both, apparently, and that may be more or less what they got. Barrington Moore, whom Davies might have called upon, designated the coincidence of a strong hand with forms of people’s power the USSR’s ‘curious amalgam’ of police terror and grass-roots activism.1 For whom is it ‘curious’? What did inhabitants of the USSR think of the widely adopted practice of sending letters to the authorities and of the ponderous state’s tendency in many cases to respond? Did the people view the surveillance as an expression of the state’s insatiable desire for control? In people’s minds what was the relationship among the terms Bolshevik, communist, socialism, soviet power and Soviet? The same questions could be asked of those in charge of the state at all levels, including the Politburo.

Passing over the tensions she herself has uncovered, Davies does nonetheless grasp that the USSR’s political system had at its heart Stalin and the cult, whose analysis occupies almost one-third of her book. On this most important of problems, however, she has little of
importance to say, until the very end. Commenting on the recorded criticisms of the cult, she notes that ‘the majority of people do not seem to have had a clear vision of an alternative type of leadership’, while ‘even people who were capable of imagining different models of leadership often simply chose those which were essentially authoritarian and which they represented in the language of the cult’ (p. 182). The reader is tempted to conclude: ‘So much for alternatives’. Yet the important point is that to imagine a ‘virtuous’ or ‘people’s’ authoritarianism entailed employing a moral language that the regime had legitimised, making much work for itself. Dictatorship, like relentless propagandising, is not easy, especially when accompanied by the rhetoric of democracy, formal elections and mass participation. Socialist democracy may seem like a canard, and no doubt for a significant part of the Soviet population it was, but for many people and even for the regime, socialist democracy involved an array of practices and institutions, and may even have made some sense to them.

Davies concludes her study on what she initially calls ‘dissonant popular opinion in Stalin’s Russia’ (p. 5) by underscoring ‘the power of the hegemonic discourse to constrain opinion’. She adding immediately that ‘this discourse was not solely a product of the ruling elite’ (p. 182). Here we have belatedly reached the crux of the matter. People’s participation in the articulation of a ‘hegemonic discourse’ ought to have been her point of departure. Then, rather than asserting the infinite pliability of language (p. 7) or contradicting herself with talk of ‘an autonomous current of popular opinion’ (p. 183), she would have had to come to grips with the categories of thought and ways of thinking available to the inhabitants of the interwar USSR. Instead, Davies has illustrated the truism that NKVD mood reports are no less challenging for historians than published sources. Her text suffers from inconsistencies beyond the ones cited above (such as the affirmation, then denial of a Great Retreat [pp. 7, 73]). Her engagement with the historiography—e.g. as Sheila Fitzpatrick has shown, Soviet flags were red, etc. … comes across as insufficiently analytical.

Princeton University

STEPHEN KOTKIN


ROBERT CONQUEST POPULARISED THE TERM ‘Great Terror’ for the purges of the 1930s. Michael Parrish has carried the story forwards into the period after the end of the ‘Ezhovshchina’. It is perhaps best to get the negative criticism out of the way before moving on to the virtues of this important book. This volume would have benefited greatly from some more specialist editorial input. For an expensive monograph it has a large number of typographical errors, mainly, but not exclusively, of Russian proper names. Perhaps the most persistent is the rendering of the name of S. D. Ignat’ev, the last head of the MGB, who in most instances, including the index, although long and useful, is only a list of proper names. Perhaps the most persistent is the rendering of the input. For an expensive monograph it has a large number of typographical errors, mainly, but