

History

EVERYDAY STALINISM: *Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times—* *Soviet Russia in the 1930s.*

By Sheila Fitzpatrick. Univ. of Chicago Press. 288 pp. \$27.50

Communism is too dull, the humorist Fran Lebowitz once remarked, and fascism is too interesting. But it was the gray Soviet communists who made the most spectacular break with the past, founding a regime that lasted nearly three-quarters of a century, three generations, holding together the last of the multina-



tional empires into the 1990s. No state, no matter how ruthless or tyrannical, could manage such longevity without popular support or at least complicity. In *Everyday Stalinism*, Fitzpatrick, a professor of modern Russian history at the University of Chicago, examines how ordinary people came to terms with the Stalinist system at its sinister peak in the 1930s.

While citizens faced ubiquitous hardships and constraints, a utopian official culture flourished. Propaganda trumpeted the vast public works projects under construction and the plans for dramatically rebuilding Moscow itself. Palaces of labor and culture arose in the cities. Heroes emerged, too, men and women who dramatically exceeded their production targets. The regime even announced that notorious criminals, such as the sleeping-car robber Count Kostia, had spontaneously decided to turn themselves in and go straight. And Stalinism bred its own peculiar form of consumer society, with advertising intended not to

promote the sale of goods (which were unavailable anyway), but to educate the popular taste for a future era of abundance—including varieties of cheese and the indispensable condiment, ketchup.

The Great Purges that began in 1937 were inaugurated from above, but citizens' resentment and anger (sometimes laced with anti-Semitism) at the privileged few who enjoyed the fruits of the Soviet utopia lent a surprising popular appeal to everything from shop-floor scapegoating to show trials. And terror fed on itself as anxious men and women made pre-emptive denunciations of their own. A regime that began as the embodiment of science and rational planning, Fitzpatrick observes shrewdly, ended up treating its elites with such caprice that managers (as well as writers) were driven to fearless rule breaking and risk taking. The high expectations and inadequate allocations of Stalin's plans rewarded masters of stratagems and workarounds and paradoxically doomed the overcautious.

The author's rich materials challenge readers to build their own model of Stalin's people, their complicity and resistance. For citizens tapping through its dark labyrinth, communism also could be too interesting.

—Edward Tenner

THE PASSING OF AN ILLUSION: *The Idea of Communism in the* *Twentieth Century.*

By François Furet. Trans. by Deborah Furet. Univ. of Chicago Press. 596 pp. \$35

Illusions die hard, and nowhere harder than among intellectuals. In the *New York Review of Books* earlier this year, 19 scholars chastised Sam Tanenhaus for having offhandedly observed that the revisionist case—that America was to blame for the Cold War—had collapsed along with the Soviet Union. Tanenhaus, they said, was engaging in unseemly "triumphalism." In truth, he had

confined himself to dismissing the flapdoodle peddled for the past few decades by many of those revisionist scholar-polemicists. But what if he *had* expressed satisfaction over the demise of the Soviet state? Doesn't the fall of one of the most villainous regimes in history provide some cause for celebration?

As the Tanenhaus contretemps attests, communism attracted many enthusiasts and apologists among Western intellectuals. *The Passing of An Illusion* traces the origins of this appeal. Furet (who died in 1997) comes to the task with firsthand experience: he himself was a communist from 1949 to 1956. His own intellectual odyssey anticipated the shift that took place in France two decades later, as the elite repudiated communism after the mid-1970s publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*.

Communism from the outset exerted an idealistic appeal as a challenge to capitalism. What greatly strengthened that appeal, the author contends, was the appearance of fascism in Germany and Italy. In his most controversial argument, he maintains that communism and Nazism were kissing cousins, both derived from the hatred of the bourgeoisie that developed in the 19th century. "The bourgeoisie incarnated capitalism, the forerunner (for Lenin) of Fascism and imperialism and (for Hitler) of Communism, which were the origins, respectively, of all they hated."

Nothing enrages the Left, American and European, more than likening communism to Nazism. Obviously, there is the crucial difference that Hitler launched a racial war against the Jews, while Stalin carried out indiscriminate purges and uprooted entire peoples. But Furet rightly notes that the similarities between these two evil, totalitarian regimes cannot be overlooked. Communism in Europe was made more acceptable by the antifascist struggle against Germany. "The reason the anti-Fascist idea made such waves in postwar Europe after losing its point of application," Furet brilliantly observes, "was that it prolonged the terrible experience of World War II by labeling and giving a meaning to human suffering." By putting themselves (eventually) on the right side of history during the war, in other words, the communists could claim the banner of justice and righteousness for years to come.

As the Soviet system degenerated into the torpor of Brezhnevism, American scholars began to argue that communism could have taken a milder third way. Worthy principles, in this view, had been botched in the application. Gorbachev's reforms did seem to point the way to a kinder, gentler communism, but the collapse of the Soviet Union put an end to such speculation. "Communism," Furet observes, "is completely contained within its past." There are few better starting points to understanding that past than this study.

—Jacob Heilbrunn

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