

The Storm over *The Black Book*

Communism had horrific consequences in the 20th century, but many intellectuals are still reluctant to face up to them.

by Andrzej Paczkowski

On November 7, 1997, in Paris, a book was published that was substantial in every sense. *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* contained almost 900 pages, weighed about two pounds, and was very expensive.

By the end of 1997, it had sold more than 100,000 copies in France, and by the spring of 1998, about 150,000. That May, the first translations of the book appeared—in Italy and Germany—and they were also successful. To date, the book has had editions in Spain, Portugal, Brazil, Sweden, Bosnia, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Holland, Russia, Lithuania, Turkey, England, and America, and it is expected to appear in Ukraine, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. The total number of copies sold now exceeds 800,000.

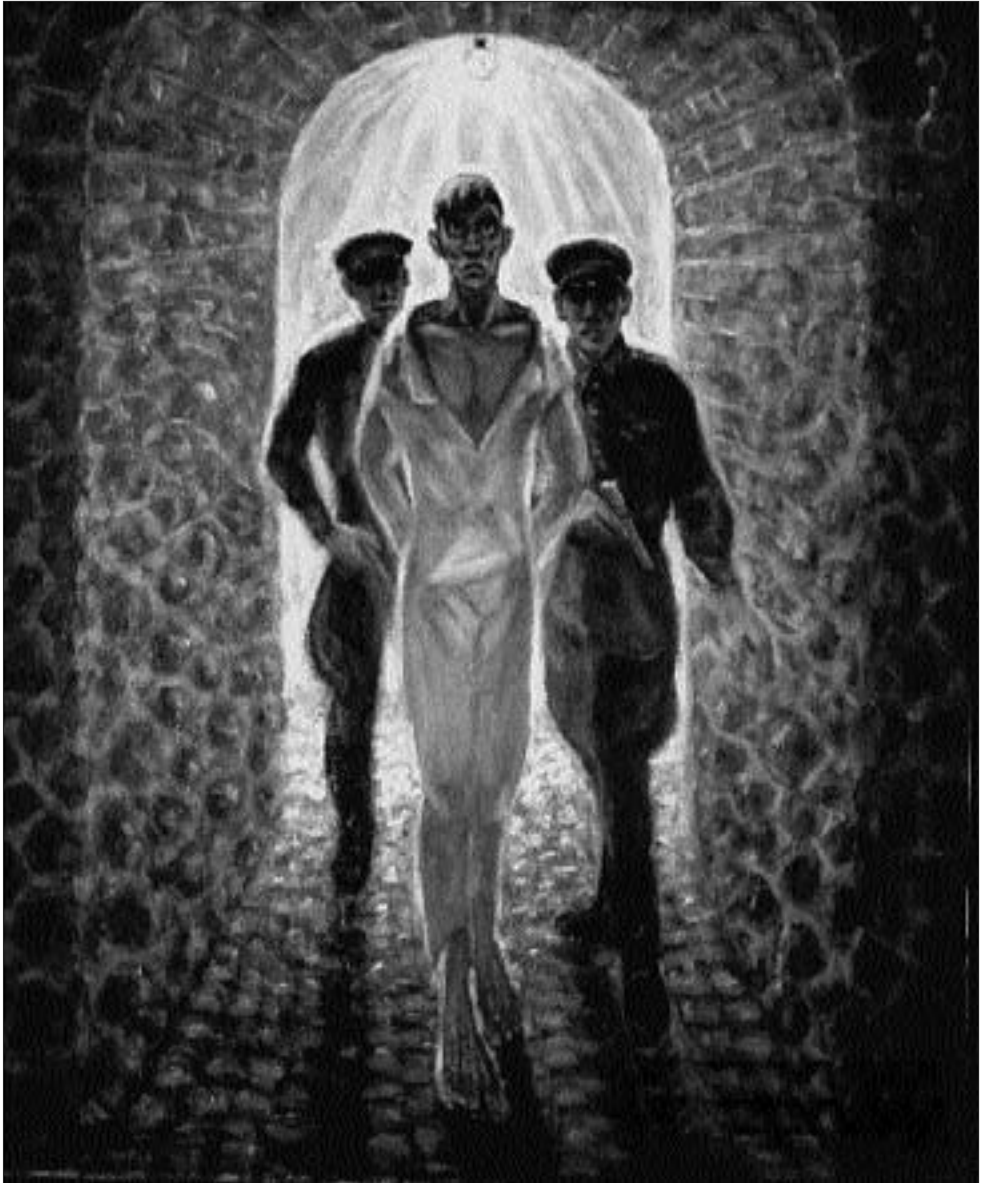
Why has *The Black Book of Communism*—a sober work of history and not the sort of sensational volume that might win easy popularity—found a universal audience, far beyond the community of professional historians?

The book owed its initial popularity to a political incident. Soon after its publication in France, a member of a center-right party asked the Socialist prime minister, Lionel Jospin, in the National Assembly to justify the presence in his cabinet of Communist ministers. Arguing

that communism is a “criminal ideology,” the objecting member cited *The Black Book*. Jospin responded that there had been a Liberation coalition between Gaullists and Communists and that he was “proud” to govern with Communists too. He then praised the Russian Revolution, the 80th anniversary of which had recently been observed. That prompted certain members of the non-Gaullist Right to walk out of the National Assembly. Television cameras recorded the whole incident, and it was shown to the public. The next day, people could not wait to flock to the bookstores.

The Black Book of Communism was not only bought, it was read (and is read still), and it won widespread media attention around the world. Among the American publications that wrote about it were the *Washington Post*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *New Republic*, the *National Interest*, and the *New Criterion*. What’s more, it provoked a great and heated debate among historians, political scientists, and intellectuals. On the first anniversary of its publication, a book titled *Le pavé dans l’histoire* (The cobblestone thrown into history) described that debate in France, and a book with the provocative title *Der rote Holocaust* (The red holocaust) appeared shortly thereafter in Germany.

The Black Book had become a social, political, and intellectual event across



In the NKVD's Dungeon, by Nikolai Getman. The artist, once a prisoner in the Gulag, imagines the scene when his brother was taken to his death by the Soviet secret police.

Europe and in the United States, and the phenomenon merits attention.

Let me begin by describing *The Black Book*. As Martin Malia, an eminent historian of Russia and the Soviet Union, writes in his foreword to the American edition, which was published in 1999, "*The Black Book* offers us the first attempt to determine, overall, the actual magnitude of what occurred, by systematically detailing Leninism's 'crimes, terror, and repression' from Russia in 1917 to Afghanistan in 1989. This factual approach

puts communism in what is, after all, its basic human perspective. For it was in truth a 'tragedy of planetary dimensions' (in the French publisher's characterization), with a grand total of victims variously estimated by contributors to the volume at between 85 million and 100 million." In one sense, then, the book is a tally of the dead.

Eleven scholars, a number of them former Communists and fellow travelers, contributed to the volume. The various international editions of *The Black Book* also include forewords (or afterwords) by local specialists, as the

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American edition, for example, has the foreword by Malia. To some editions, appendixes were added. The German *Black Book*, for example, has almost 100 pages analyzing the East German system of terror and the Stasi—the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Ministry for State Security).

The work proper opens with a 30-page introduction, “The Crimes of Communism,” in which the main editor, Stéphane Courtois, a director of research at the National Center for Scientific Research, in Nanterre, and editor of the review *Communisme*, compares communism with other 20th-century criminal regimes, particularly Nazism. This introduction, and Courtois’s 30-page conclusion to the book, titled simply “Why?,” provoked the greatest controversy. Apart from the introduction and the various forewords and appendixes, *The Black Book* has five principal parts.

The first, and longest, “A State against Its People: Violence, Repression, and Terror in the Soviet Union,” is by Nicolas Werth, a specialist at the Institute for Contemporary History, in Paris. Werth covers the period from the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 to the death of Stalin in 1953 and its immediate aftermath. Criticized for stopping at that point, he responded that there was insufficient documentation to go further.

The second part, “World Revolution, Civil War, and Terror,” by Courtois, Jean-Louis Panné, a specialist on international communism, and Rémi Kauffer, a specialist on the history of terrorism and clandestine operations, examines the role of the Soviet Comintern (especially during the Spanish Civil War) as an exporter of communist revolution, along with the activities of non-ruling communist parties, such as those in France, Greece, and Italy.

Karel Bartošek, a Czech historian at the Institute for Contemporary History, and I wrote the third part, “The Other Europe: Victim of Communism.” In it, we describe the situation in central and southeastern Europe. We devote a separate chapter to Poland, and we discuss Stalin’s repressions in the 1930s and during World War II. But we are particularly concerned with the postwar era.

The fourth part, “Communism in Asia: Between Reeducation and Massacre,” by Jean-Louis Margolin, a lecturer at the University of Provence, and Pierre Rigoulot, a researcher at the Institute for Social History, in Paris, focuses principally on China, but with consideration as well of developments in North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge.

The fifth part of the book, “The Third World,” by Pascal Fontaine, a journalist, Yves Santamaria, a historian, and Sylvain Boulouque, a researcher at the University of Paris, Nanterre, deals with communist regimes in Latin America, Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique, and Afghanistan.

The Black Book also contains several excerpts from recently declassified documents and from the memoirs of victims, and dozens of photographs, dating from the time of the Russian civil war and the famines in Russia to the 1995 trial of the Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng.

So why all the controversy?

The problem, I believe, is not that the cobblestone was hurled at history or the practice of historiography, but that it was thrown into a large lake of leftist stereotypes. The consequences rippled inexorably outward because that cobblestone scored a direct hit on the social and historical sensibilities of individuals in a number of intellectual and political circles. They found it extremely painful to have to confront not only the collapse of communism as a state system but, in many countries, its easy transformation—by the likes of Gennady Zhiuganov in Russia and Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia—into national Bolshevism and xenophobia.

The Italian writer Ignazio Silone once wrote, “Revolutions, like trees, should be judged by their fruit.” Many intellectuals tried (and continue to try) to judge the communist revolution not by its reality but by their illusions. “As Courtois points out,” writes Alan Ryan in his *New York Times* review of *The Black Book*, “the observation that you can’t make an omelet without broken eggs may be true, but it was long ago destroyed as a justification of the Soviet tyranny by the fact that we

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had all seen the broken eggs but nobody had ever seen the omelet.”

The justifications of communism are psychologically motivated and deeply rooted. It is never easy to bid farewell to the hopes and dreams of one’s youth, especially after one has defended them courageously over many years against strong opposition. I believe that the historian Jeffrey Herf, writing in the *Washington Post*, is correct to observe, “In Western academia, scholars who chose to focus on the crimes of communism were and remain a minority and face the career-blocking danger of being labeled as right-wingers.” It is as if, by definition, anticommunists cannot speak the truth—and, indeed, are against the truth.

Let me say something here about the different reception accorded *The Black Book* in various countries, depending on their political and intellectual beliefs and traditions. In western European countries with a strong communist presence, like France and Italy, *The Black Book* has been the subject of intense debate, and the arguments have been largely political. That has been the case in Germany as well, a country without a significant communist party but with an influential Left—and with an interest in communism arising naturally from the experience of East Germany. Thanks to those countries, the book has been a great commercial success.

As I mentioned earlier, *The Black Book* has also been published in almost all the previously communist countries in Europe. Some readers in those countries are simply indifferent to the book, because they believe that the personal experience of communism many of them have had is more significant than the most accurate description of the experience. In Poland, which I know best, the audience for the book seems to be composed principally of two groups: young people (students, for example) and very old men and women, former prisoners or “siberians,” who were deported in the time of war. Perhaps the same holds true in other postcommunist countries.

The “Euro-Atlantic” countries, such as Great Britain and the United States, form a third readership bloc. In those countries, professionals are the audience for the book, and the debate is markedly less heated. In America, especially, communism was viewed as a

state—a rival, hostile superpower. So when the Soviet Union dissolved, and China opened itself to profound change, communism was thought to have sunk largely into history. That lessened the impact of the book in the United States. But in much of the rest of the world, *The Black Book* inflicted many wounds.

After Courtois’s introduction, Nicolas Werth’s chapter flings the first cobblestone at history. It’s the assertion that the terror, the mass blind terror, was proclaimed at the very beginning of communist rule—and announced even before the revolution. In September 1917, some weeks before taking power, Felix Dzerzhinsky—the sword of the revolution, the man with the clean hands and the warm heart—wrote of the need to change the structure of the classes “by extermination of the enemies of the labor class.” Five years later, Nikolai Bukharin, who is often presented as a Bolshevik liberal, said, “The party must liquidate all exploiters with all means that the proletariat has at its disposal.” He spoke those words after the civil war, the regime’s consolidation, the White Guard’s flight abroad, and the Soviet Union’s official recognition by Poland and Germany. When he spoke, the revolution was no longer under attack; it could claim no mitigating circumstances. Citing such sentiments, Courtois coined the term “politicide,” on the analogy of “genocide,” in his introduction to *The Black Book*. Politicide is a crucial concept in his thesis about the crimes of communism and their extent and persistence.

Werth’s conclusions were obviously anti-Leninist, and as such they challenged the old—and broadly accepted—thesis that “errors and distortions” were introduced into communism only by Stalin. If the sanctified (by the Western Left) Lenin and his followers in fact planned the politicide—and we have a lot of evidence that they did—we are led to ask a question of Marx and Engels, the grandfathers of communism: is terror inherent in Marxist ideology as such?

A second, and heavier, stone figures explicitly in Courtois’s introduction and conclusion and implicitly throughout the entire *Black Book*. Sooner or later, but sooner rather than later, the communists introduced a phase of mass terror wherever they took power. The par-

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ticular geographic location (Czechoslovakia, Germany, or Hungary; China, North Korea, or Cambodia) and the particular religious or cultural tradition of the location (Orthodox in Russia and Romania, Catholic in Poland and Cuba, Buddhist or Confucian in Asia) made no difference. Wherever, whenever communists took control, a phase of mass terror followed. In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev sharply condemned the atrocities of Stalin's years, and the terror ceased—or was diminished—in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. But it showed the old intensity thereafter in China, Cuba, North Korea, and—a special case—Cambodia. Wherever, whenever such Marxist regimes came to power, they introduced terror, fear, and a total control of social and personal life. We are led once again to

ask the somber question: is terror an inherent part of the ideology?

The third stone is weightier still. It is the comparison made between the two cruelest regimes of the 20th century, communism and Nazism. Only Courtois addresses this issue, because all the other sections of *The Black Book* are, in effect, narrowly focused monographs, which do not pretend to offer overarching explanations.

The dispute is over the nature of the two murderous ideologies. Can we apply the same standard of judgment to, on the one hand, an ideology that was destructive at its core, that openly planned genocide, and that had an agenda of aggression against all neighboring (and not just neighboring) states, and, on the other hand, an ideology that seemed clearly



A totalitarian face-off at the 1937 Exposition Internationale: the eagle atop the Nazi pavilion (left) confronts the gigantic images of workers atop the Soviet pavilion (right).

the opposite, that was based on the secular desire of humanity to achieve equality and social justice, and that promised a great leap forward into freedom?

It is indeed a good question, but an inappropriate one, I think, to ask of *The Black Book of Communism*, which is not about communism as an ideology or even about communism as a state-building phenomenon. Moreover, the question is hardly new. Two eminent intellectuals, Marcel Mauss and Elie Halevy, were perhaps the first to attempt the comparison, in the 1930s, and they had a long line of successors—most notably, Hannah Arendt, Raymond Aron, and François Furet.

The question has large philosophical implications, and it should be discussed in the framework of the debate on totalitarianism. I

do not want to involve myself here in that passionate discussion, except to say that asking the question seems to me entirely justified, and that any apology for communism cannot ignore it. Let me cite only two short comments—by Kenneth Minogue, writing in the *National Interest* in 1999—relevant to the debate about totalitarianism: “The essence of totalitarianism is the project of transforming human life by making people . . . conform to some single overriding idea,” and “What makes Marx central to the totalitarian project is his clear recognition that it was incompatible with the . . . idea of the individual as a unique soul or self capable of bearing rights.” It is odd to observe many intellectuals and politicians defending the right of individuals to be different even as they also defend the utopian notion of a perfect society. And it is no less odd when the particular utopia is 150 years old.

The range of *The Black Book* is limited, for it considers only one aspect of com-

munism. But when we speak about the mechanisms and tools of the terror, or when we conduct research on the role of the terror in social life, we surely have a right to compare things that, if not homogeneous, are too analogous for their many similarities to be ignored. Of course, there are also many differences between Nazism and communism, and one of them, I believe, is especially significant and puzzling. The Nazi terror, after the early years, was directed almost exclusively against those made out to be “foreigners”—Jews, Slavs, and other *Untermenschen*. The communist terror, by contrast, was directed principally against “its own”—in Werth’s words, “the state against its people.” Russian Communists most often tortured other Russians; Poles, other Poles; Khmers, other Khmers. One may well ask: Which of the two courses of action was worse? Which was the more unexpected and the more irrational?

Some critics contend that *The Black Book* is the fruit of a political agenda, which automatically calls into question its validity as a work of history. Those same leftist critics argue that, “at a time when one can hear in the streets of our cities the clatter of the boots of Le Pen’s militiamen, *The Black Book of Communism* offers them support”—and they repeat the old slogan: “No enemy on the left!” The words are evidence that the critics have a political agenda of their own.

The fourth stone is perhaps the heaviest of all, and it has stirred the most fervent controversy. Believing that the politicide in the Soviet Union was planned as part of the communist takeover and consolidation of power, and that the genocide of a “class” may well be tantamount to the genocide of a “race,” Courtois wrote the following: “The deliberate starvation of a child of a Ukrainian kulak [peasant] as a result of the famine caused by Stalin’s regime ‘is equal to’ the starvation of a Jewish child in the Warsaw ghetto as a result of the famine caused by the Nazi regime.”

For writing that, Courtois was accused of anti-Semitism and of denying the uniqueness of the Holocaust. But Courtois did not invent that particular comparison between communism and Nazism. To defend himself, he cited the great Russian-Jewish writer Vasily Grossman, who wrote many years ago: “To



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massacre them [the kulaks], it was necessary to proclaim that kulaks are not human beings, just as the Germans proclaimed that Jews are not human beings.” What’s more, Grossman wrote, the killing of the kulaks’ children “is exactly how the Nazis put the Jewish children into the Nazi gas chambers: ‘You are not allowed to live, you are all Jews!’” No one dares call Grossman an anti-Semite. Why, then, attach that label to Courtois?

Grossman’s support was an insufficient defense for Courtois, and the temperature of the debate reached the boiling point. The notorious single sentence of Courtois—or rather, of Grossman—was seized on as reason to reject all of *The Black Book*, and to call it a crudely anticommunist, anti-Semitic work.

The observation by Courtois that proved so wounding has its roots deep in his tendency to stress the moral aspect of human actions. Peter Rutland has written that many of the questions that arise in the course of *The Black Book* “cannot be answered within Courtois’ moralistic model of an Evil Idea triggering an apparatus of repression.” I agree that excessive moralizing makes objective analysis of the past difficult—and perhaps impossible. On the other hand, writing history without a moral sense, or without a clear system of values, yields no more than a simple chronological record of the events and leads to relativism about the significance of the facts and about the past in general. Courtois’s critics certainly bring a moral sense to their consideration of the Holocaust.

The *Black Book* has weaknesses. The overall format of the sections is not uniform. Some chapters have footnotes and a bibliography; others do not. There are significant omissions: East Germany, Yugoslavia, and Albania, for example, are not considered. Moreover, the objectivity of some of the data is open to question: the authors of the sections on China, Korea, and Cuba clearly draw on information gathered from the memory of witnesses, from the communist-censored press, and from the rarely precise observations of foreign visitors—whereas other sections draw on the far-more-reliable kinds of information available in official archives.

Some critics complained that Courtois was “hunting” for the highest possible number of victims, which led him, as J. Arch Getty wrote

in the *Atlantic Monthly*, to include “every possible death just to run up the score.” To an extent, the charge is valid. Courtois and other contributors to the volume equate the people shot, hanged, or killed in prisons or the camps with those who were victims of calculated political famines (in the Chinese and Soviet cases), or who otherwise starved for lack of food or died for lack of drugs. In his criticism, Getty went so far as to write the following of Stalin’s camps: “Rations and medical care were substandard, but were often not dramatically better elsewhere in Stalin’s Soviet Union and were not designed to hasten the inmates’ deaths, although they certainly did so.” That seems to me no less an instance of denial than what in Poland is called the “Katyn lie”—the denial of the reality of the Katyn massacre in World War II.

The problem is deciding not just how to classify the forms of persecution but how to count the victims—and that, you’ll forgive me for saying coldly, is a practical problem, involving the methodology and techniques of historical research. But what can we do? Give up, simply because the numbers cannot be absolutely precise? All the figures for China and North Korea, for example—and even for Cambodia, about which we know more—are mere approximations. Margolin calculates the number of victims in China at between 40 and 60 million. An opposing estimation puts the number at—bagatelle!—20 million. Perhaps it’s significant that most of the dead were the victims of famine, and perhaps one may call those victims “indirect fatalities,” or say, as Getty does, that their deaths were caused by “stupidity and incompetence” and not deliberately. But I doubt that it mattered to the starving whether their agony was a consequence of stupidity or of deliberation.

I believe that *The Black Book of Communism* has had at least two profoundly positive effects. It has stirred a deep and important debate about the implementation of totalitarian ideologies, and it has given the world an exhaustive balance sheet about one aspect of the worldwide phenomenon of communism. Henceforth, historians cannot overlook that balance sheet. The information in *The Black Book* is indispensable to a proper evaluation of the history of the 20th century. □