

On Thurston's View of Stalin's Terror & State Terrorism in General

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Thurston's View of Stalin's Terror

Stalin's Terror as portrayed by Thurston provides an important example in support of our argument that the power even of "absolute" dictator's is in reality far from absolute, so it is worthwhile to point out that, for our purposes, Thurston's revisionist portrayal of the Terror is not seriously inconsistent with the traditional view of Stalin as the "mastermind of a plot to subdue the party and the nation."¹

We will take Ulam's biography of Stalin to represent the traditional view, but first we have to note three points: (i) Much of what Ulam says about Stalin's motives and intentions can be discounted as rank speculation. Ulam repeatedly indulges in "mind-reading;" without offering any supporting evidence, he tries to tell us what was going on in Stalin's head.² In some passages Ulam's book even reads like a novel.³ (ii) Thurston's statement that Stalin "did not plan the Terror" has to be understood to mean only that Stalin did not plan the Terror as it actually developed; Thurston nowhere demonstrates that Stalin could not have planned to initiate a terror campaign of some kind. (iii) When Thurston says that the effects of the Terror were largely confined to the elite,⁴ the term "elite" has to be understood to include all those who worked with their heads rather than their hands and whose work required a good deal of education or special training.⁵

Now, when Ulam insists that Stalin was "in the main, firmly in control of the purge,"⁶ what can he mean? Well, he writes that Yezhov (head of the NKVD,⁷ later known as the KGB) "took no important step without obtaining Stalin's sanction. The lists of important people to be shot or otherwise repressed were sent to Stalin by the Commissar for his approval. During the period 1937-39, 383 such lists were submitted to Stalin ...,"⁸ If we make the modest assumption that the lists contained on average about

¹ See Thurston, p. 17.

² Ulam, e.g., last paragraph on p.311 through first five lines on p.312; first complete paragraph on p. 529; pp. 534-35.

³ Ibid., e.g., last six lines on p. 272 through first two lines on p. 274; last six lines on p. 534 through p. 535.

⁴ Thurston, pp. 144-150.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 148 ("People with more education were certainly more likely than others to be arrested."); 149 (evidence that any engineer ran a high risk of being arrested). Fischer, e.g., pp. 149-151, 163, 201, 205, 222, 228-29. Fischer, p. 150, adds that "even factory workers" might be arrested. This is consistent with Thurston, p. 193: "Occasionally [workers] went... into the gulag or to their deaths."

⁶ Ulam, p. 445.

⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 419-420.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 444.

ten names, then Stalin during the given period would have had to decide the fates of approximately 3,800 people. Could Stalin of his own personal knowledge have been sufficiently familiar with the histories of 3,800 individuals to decide their respective fates rationally? It seems doubtful. More likely Stalin would have had to rely in the majority of cases on information appended to the lists by the NKVD. Thus it would have been really the NKVD, or Yezhov personally, who decided the fates of the listed individuals by choosing the information to be provided to Stalin. Even if we suppose that the lists contained an average of 500 names and make the wildly improbable assumption that Stalin had enough independent knowledge of each of the listed individuals to decide his or her fate rationally, still the lists accounted for only about 190 thousand individuals. But millions were executed;⁹ what about all the others? Clearly Stalin was in control of only a fraction—probably only a minute fraction—of all the executions that were carried out. Even among that tiny fraction, Ulam admits that there “were excesses and mistakes... even from [Stalin’s] point of view—people whom he would have preserved had he known the full circumstances; in some cases his subordinates were settling personal scores”¹⁰ Among the vast majority of the executed or imprisoned individuals—those whose fates were not decided by Stalin personally—there must have been a far larger proportion who were the victims of “excesses,” “mistakes,” or personal grudges. How could it have been otherwise, when people were being executed literally by the millions?

So again we have to ask, what can Ulam mean when he says that Stalin was “firmly in control of the purge”? Does he mean merely that Stalin intended indiscriminate and apparently senseless executions to take place on a massive scale? Ulam seems to say exactly that.¹¹ Yet Ulam himself also suggests a different hypothesis: “in 1936 [Stalin] may have desired to strike out just the leader’s of potential treason: those few thousand Party officials who in the past had been connected with his rivals. But the mechanics of terror ... soon acquired its own momentum.”¹²

Even if Stalin did intend the purge to be indiscriminate and massive in scale, Ulam shows how Stalin was manipulated by his subordinates, who “discovered” new plots and treason in order to “demonstrate their zeal and loyalty.”¹³ There was a certain degree of antagonism between the army and the NKVD, as a result of which the NKVD manipulated Stalin into extending the purge to the army.¹⁴ “There can be no doubt,” says Ulam, that Stalin “came to believe in the essential veracity of the fantastic tales of treason and sabotage woven by his servants”¹⁵ Ulam farther writes that Stalins

⁹ Millions were executed even in Thurston’s view; “traditional” estimates of the number executed were much higher. See Thurston, pp. xvii, 139-140.

¹⁰ Ulam, p. 444.

¹¹ Ibid., pp.399,438.

¹² Ibid., p. 408.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 395-98. See also p. 488 (Stalin manipulated by Beria).

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 451-52.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.412.

“feelings must have been those of what might be called controlled panic,” and he refers to “Stalin’s thrashing about amidst his terrible and contradictory fear’s... .”¹⁶ Does Ulam have a firm factual basis for these inferences about Stalin’s beliefs, feelings, and fears, or is he merely indulging in “mind-reading”? If he is indulging in mind-reading, then his reading of Stalin’s mind agrees very well with Thurston’s reading of it. So it is difficult to find any major contradiction¹⁷ between Thurston’s view of Stalin’s Terror and the traditional view as represented by Ulam. The difference between the two seems to be largely a matter of rhetoric.

Ulam provides further evidence that Stalin did not have the Terror under rational control: In 1938-39 Stalin himself concluded that the Terror had gotten out of hand, and he tried to “reassure the ‘little people’ ... that while severe measures would continue to be applied against bigwigs, indiscriminate terror as far as the masses were concerned was a thing of the past.”¹⁸ During World War II no terror would have been necessary, because the struggle against a fearsome external enemy united all Russians behind their Leader. But when Stalin resumed the practice of terror after the war he did so on a much smaller scale,¹⁹ presumably because he “did not want and could not afford a repetition” of the “chaos ... of 1937-39.”²⁰ True, Ulam suggests that during the last year of his life Stalin may have been planning to resume terror on a mass basis,²¹ but only in desperation, because he feared that in old age he was losing his grip on power.²²

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 457. See also p. 477 (referring to Stalin’s “panic that had unleashed terror...”).

¹⁷ Meaning a major contradiction for our purposes, bearing in mind that our purpose here is not to estimate the number of victims of the Terror or anything of that sort, but only to determine whether Stalin was able to keep the Terror under rational control.

¹⁸ Ulam, pp. 474-76, 487-88; specifically p. 476.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 643, 674.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 727.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 737-38.

²² See *ibid.*, pp. 724-739.

State Terrorism in General

A proper discussion of state terrorism in general would be beyond the scope of this book, but I do want to address briefly Thurston's claim that a "system of terror as described by theorists and other scholars has probably never existed."¹ Thurston does not clearly explain why he thinks that Stalin's "Terror" fails to qualify as a "system of terror," but probably he has in mind his own argument that "extensive fear did not exist in the USSR at any time in the late 1930s. ... The sense that anyone could be next, the underpinning of theories on systems of terror, rarely appears."² Thurston must mean that "extensive fear," etc. did not exist throughout the general population. He could hardly deny that among the high elite—the class of upper-level officials who for the most part were exterminated by Stalin³ — there had to be "extensive fear" and a "sense that anyone could be next."

Thurston very likely is right in maintaining that "extensive fear" did not permeate the population as a whole. Fischer's account—based on personal experience—of life under Stalin suggests that the working class was largely immune from terror.⁴ But this by no means disqualifies Stalin's system as a system of terror. Such a system does not have to be applied to an entire population; it can be limited to some segment of the population.⁵ However, during the late 1930s under Stalin it appears that the terrorized segment included not only the high elite, but also the elite in the broader sense described in Part A of this appendix, item (iii).⁶

Thurston tries to dismiss E.V. Walter's study of the system of terror practiced by the Zulu emperor Shaka (also spelled Chaka) by suggesting that the British witnesses on whose accounts Walter relied "may not have been in a position to understand what they saw."⁷ But "Thurston's suggestion is not credible. Walter's conclusions are supported by the accounts of several British observers,⁸ the best of whom, H.F. Fynn, acquired "a thorough knowledge of Zulu language and customs,"⁹ and the violent events described

¹ Thurston, p. 232.

² Ibid., p. 159. It's hard to reconcile this with Thurston's own statement that an "atmosphere of panic had set in..." *ibid.*, p. 90.

³ For the extermination of most of the high elite, see Ulam, e.g., pp. 430-31, 438, 441, 447-48, 489. Thurston does not deny the occurrence of this bloodbath among the high elite.

⁴ See Fischer, pp. 151-52, 163-65, 208-09.

⁵ See Walter, pp. 6-7.

⁶ See Note 5, above.

⁷ Thurston, pp. 232-33.

⁸ Walter, p. 128.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

were of such a nature that their basic import could hardly be misunderstood, even if there were nuances that the observers overlooked.

The Argentine caudillo Juan Facundo Quiroga and his (so to speak) successor Juan Manuel de Rosas both made use of clearly-defined systems of terror.¹⁰ Other examples could no doubt be identified—very likely in imperial China, for instance,¹¹ or among 20th-century Latin American dictators—though Thurston is probably right in stating that the “model does not fit Nazi Germany,”¹² and Sarmiento discounts the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution.¹³ I would like to suggest, however, that the reign of Henry VIII in England could very possibly be considered terroristic. Certainly Henry’s system was haphazard and of low intensity compared with that of Stalin, Shaka, Facundo Quiroga or Rosas, and the terrorized class—that of the courtiers—comprised only a very small fraction of the general population. But arguably the essential elements of a system of terror were there:

- The king consciously used fear as an instrument of governance: “He ruled on the precept that fear engenders obedience.”¹⁴
- Arrests and executions, often of completely innocent persons, tended to be irrational and unpredictable, and sometimes resulted from the whisperings of informers or slanderers seeking to eliminate their rivals or take revenge on their enemies.¹⁵
- Consequently there was “extensive fear,”¹⁶ a “sense that anyone could be next.”¹⁷
- Innocent victims about to be executed at the king’s order often abased themselves, declaring their loyalty to and love for the tyrant who was murdering them.¹⁸

¹⁰ See the works of Sarmiento and of John Lynch that appear in our List of Works Cited; also Ternavasio, pp. 66-73; Gonzalez Bernaldo, pp. 199-204.

¹¹ Mote, pp. 572-582. Ebrey, pp. 192-93.

¹² Thurston, p. 232. The Nazis no doubt used terroristic methods in the concentration camps and in occupied countries, but terror does not seem to have been used in governing Germany itself, at least not before July 20, 1944. It’s not even clear that the Nazi regime qualifies as fully totalitarian, given that the German press preserved some degree of independence, Rothfels, p. 49, Skidelsky, p. 254, and the Nazis sometimes tolerated behavior that under Stalin would have meant swift and certain death. E.g., the authorities did not intervene when the Bishop of Munster publicly preached against the “criminal methods” of the Nazi regime, Rothfels, pp. 58-59. Needless to say, the foregoing remarks are not intended in any way to minimize the extraordinary viciousness of the Nazis.

¹³ Sarmiento, p. 261.

¹⁴ Weir, p. 430.

¹⁵ E.g., Fraser, pp. 295, 323-24, 336, 342, 392; Weir, pp. 356-57, 368-69, 373, 426-27, 430, 441, 488-89.

¹⁶ E.g., Fraser, pp. 272, 389, 393; Weir, pp. 430, 482, 484.

¹⁷ Weir, p. 371.

¹⁸ E.g., Fraser, pp. 249-253, 255, 257, 353.

- As a “legitimate” sovereign, Henry VIII possessed a ready-made “cult of personality,”¹⁹ but he calculatedly intensified the cult.²⁰ As with the cults of Stalin and Rosas, Henry’s cult of personality relied in part on ubiquitous images of himself.²¹
- Despite his cruelty and injustice, Henry VIII was vastly admired, perhaps worshipped, even by some (or most?) members of the terrorized class.²²

¹⁹ Weir, pp. 21-22.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 348.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 349-350, 410,473.

²² Ibid., pp. 427, 494-95. NEB (2003), Vol. 29, “United Kingdom,” p. 51 (“the French ambassador announced that [Henry VIII] was... an idol to be worshiped...”).

A critique of his ideas & actions.



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