

A Century of State Murder? Death and Policy in Twentieth-Century Russia

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Michael Ellman

This book is about four episodes of excess mortality in Russia/the USSR: 1914-22, 1931-38, 1941-45, and the 1990s. The book is aimed at the general reader, although it may be of most use to older schoolchildren and students on many courses. It may also be useful to pro-Soviet readers (who seem to be an important part of the intended readership) because of its combination of historical facts with left-wing political sympathies. The authors have a good knowledge of the literature on the subjects they treat, and the book contains a large number of important facts and helpful references. Positive features of the text are its sympathy for the poor and oppressed who constituted the vast majority of the victims of premature death, and its stress on the sociology of mortality.

Unfortunately the book contains a number of errors or one-sided formulations. For example, the 1916 uprising was not in Turkmenistan (p. 45) but in Turkestan. The criticism by the UNDP of the results of transition is not an 'admission' (p. 4) by the supporters of transition orthodoxy, but simply one aspect of the long-standing conflict between the specialised agencies of the UN and the Bretton Woods Institutions about economic policy. Chapter 2 is entitled 'The revolt against class society 1890-1928' despite the fact that before 1905 Russia was an estate society, not a class-based one. The table on page 59 refers to the USSR, not to Russia. The description of the Kazakhs in the early 1930s as (p. 71) 'nomadic peasants' is a strange one. Nomads and peasants are different categories. The Poles deported in 1936-37 (p.77) were deported from the western regions, not 'eastern'. The figure given on page 79 of 300,000 Poles who died in deportation in September-October 1939 seems exaggerated. After all, according to page 167 of the Russian

book cited by the authors as one of their two sources for this information, approximately 390,000 Polish citizens were released from various Soviet places of detention in 1941-42. If they were released in 1941-42 they could not have died in September-October 1939. It is also not true (p. 92) that of the deported Soviet peoples only the Chechen and Inguish were allowed back to their traditional homelands; the Kalmyks were as well, as were the Karachai and Balkar peoples. In 2004 to read about the 'decisive failure' (p. 132) of the post-Soviet Russian reforms is more than a trifle strange. Russia is now in its sixth year of sustained high economic growth combined with falling and relatively low inflation, relatively low debts and rising foreign exchange reserves. It is very doubtful whether nomenklatura privileges would have satisfied (p. 208) the directors of large Western corporations: the latter are much greedier.

The strangest feature of the book is the relative attention Haynes and Husan pay these catastrophes. The worst of them – the Soviet-German war – gets only five pages (pp. 80-84). The second worst (1914-22) gets fourteen pages (pp. 43-57). The least important (the Yeltsin-Putin era) merits 83 pages (pp. 119-201). The reason for this disproportionate attention seems to be political – the wish to draw attention to the waste of life in 'liberal' post-Soviet Russia. Yet, from the point of view of human life, the proportions chosen are entirely inappropriate. The main demographic catastrophe in modern Russia was in 1941-45, and the second worst was in 1914-22. The authors' treatment of the nineteen-nineties as analogous to the three previous demographic crises is at the least quantitatively misleading; the number of victims of the former is much smaller than that of even the least of the latter (1931-38).

As far as 1914-22 and 1931-38 are concerned, an important issue is periodization. Most authors writing about excess mortality in the initial Soviet period focus on 1918-22. This makes sense in comparison with the other European countries involved in World War I. All of them suffered huge casualties in 1914-17, but only in Russia did the situation worsen in 1918-22. However, Haynes and Husan want to play down the role of the Bolsheviks in causing excess deaths and therefore prefer to include 1914-17. It is of course true that the war began the brutalising process that culminated in civil war and famine; probably without the war the huge excess mortality of 1918-22 would not have occurred.

As for the nineteen-thirties, most authors separate out the famine of 1931-34 and the repression of 1937-38 as separate episodes, and this is undoubtedly correct as far as historical detail is concerned. However, for Haynes and Husan, they are both just aspects of one inhumane Stalinist policy. The reader interested in the Soviet famine of the early 1930s and prepared to read a long book would be better advised to read the recent monograph of R. W. Davies and Stephen G. Wheatcroft (*The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia. Volume 5: The Years of Hunger. Soviet Agriculture 1931-1933* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003) However, the brief treatment (pp 71-3) by Haynes and Husan is quite sensible and is knowledgeable about serious interpretations. As far as the nineteen-nineties are concerned, a valuable aspect of the treatment in this book is the combination of a discussion of the high level of 'normal' mortality in Russia with estimates of mortality in the two Chechen wars and also a discussion of the sad situation in Russian prisons.

One possible disadvantage of the use of this book in British educational institutions is that it may contribute to an 'orientalist' approach to Russia, something to which the authors are opposed. If British history were treated this way it too would seem barbaric (for example, the confinement of civilians in concentration camps in the Boer war, mass deaths in World War I, the Black and Tans, the Amritsar massacre, terror bombing of German cities in World War II, indifference to the 1943 Bengal famine, numerous post-1945 colonial and semi-colonial wars, persistent inequalities in mortality, poor prison conditions and relatively high incarceration rates). Hence many Russians will find the book one-sided.

The authors' approach to the history of the USSR derives from the inner-party polemics of the nineteen-twenties and -thirties and is surely no longer credible. They write very positively about the Bolshevik revolution, which unfortunately subsequently 'degenerated' (p. 58) Naturally, in their account, the Bolshevik slogan of turning the imperialist war into a civil war, the Bolshevik dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the Bolshevik attitude to opposition, the Bolshevik treatment of the Kronstadt uprising, of peasant uprisings, of the Tambov uprising, and of the Cossacks, the 1922 trial of the leaders of the Socialist Revolutionary party, etc all remain unmentioned. In their account of the civil war, as in Soviet accounts, the Bolsheviks'

opponents are white generals and foreign powers, with no mention of the opposition of workers, peasants, the Mensheviks, the Socialist Revolutionaries, and national movements in Ukraine, Georgia and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the book's stress on the role of the state in generating excess mortality is valuable, and one which contrasts favourably with many documents of UN agencies and of writers such as Amartya Sen. This emphasis is justified and important – and not only for Russia/USSR.

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