

Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*. Penguin: London, 2008. xxxviii +738 pp. £12.99.

Inevitably, comparisons have been drawn between this book and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's even bigger opus *The Gulag Archipelago*. While acknowledging his debt to the recently-deceased Russian author, Figes sets out to fill in the gaps left in Solzhenitsyn's work by telling the story of the private life of families left behind by victims of the Soviet labour camps. Like Solzhenitsyn this is achieved by means of commendable research and in painstaking detail, making each work a truly indispensable, worthy and historical document in its own right. However, both left me equally numb and bereft of spirit: the relentlessness of page after page of examples of man's inhumanity to man, in each case, made for an exceptionally difficult and uncomfortable read, emotionally as well as physically. One yearns for a redemptive figure, but all one gets after more than six hundred pages of almost unmitigated horror is a typical victim, Iraida Favisovich, whose parents were both sent to the Gulag in 1939 when she was four years old, declaring in 2003 that 'life was better under Stalin' (p.644)! Thus, although the text contains salutary tales aplenty in terms of personal fortitude, patience and endurance, it offers little to lift the spirits in terms of the 'right' of the individual against the 'might' of the state. In short, strong medicine indeed that ought to do the reader some good, but which hardly can be said to be pleasurable.

The Whisperers in the title refers to two groups of people in Stalinist society: those who were so afraid of being overheard and denounced to the authorities that they could converse only in whispers, and those informers who 'whispered' to those same authorities incriminating evidence against their neighbours, workmates and, most chillingly, immediate family. The first group, it is claimed, covers some 25 million people between the years of 1928 and 1953 (p. xxxi), while at the height of the Great Terror (1937–8) 'millions of people were reporting on their colleagues, friends and neighbours' (p.258). Apart from a few interviews of mainly unrepentant ex-informers towards the end, this book is concerned primarily with the former group.

The gap between these two groups, however, is filled by the unlikely person of Soviet author Konstantin Simonov, who from his introduction as 'a child of 1917' early on (p.56) to the valedictory note on his death in 1979 identifying him as 'Stalin's favourite writer' towards the end (p. 629) 'stands at the centre of this book' (p.56). Simonov turns out to be an appropriate centrepiece for this harrowing tale in

Central and Eastern European Review

that he turns out to embody many of the contradictory qualities of Stalinist society: enormous physical bravery and almost total absence of civic courage; good looks, a love of the good life and star status mixed with a cruel disregard of duty towards his family and his fellow writers; an ability to survive at all costs culminating, incongruously, in the following candid deathbed confession: ‘to be honest about those times, it is not only Stalin that you cannot forgive, but you yourself. It is not that you did something bad—maybe you did nothing wrong, at least on the face of it—but that you became accustomed to evil’ (p.266).

Simonov narrowly avoided falling into either group of ‘whisperers’, refusing to become an informer in 1937 (p.267) and being the object of a whispering campaign in 1952, when it was rumoured that he was a Jew (p.520). However, in order to survive, Simonov in 1937 was obliged to launch a ‘vitriolic condemnation of his friend and fellow writer Yevgeny Dolmatovsky’ (p.269) and was probably saved from falling victim to Stalin’s ‘anti-Jewish’ purge only by the death of the dictator in March 1953 (p.521). In between, Simonov behaved atrociously to his wife Zhenia and son Aleksei, whose family suffered terribly during the Stalin years, shamelessly courted the glamorous film star Valentina Serova (see picture on p.375), yet courageously covered every frontline battle in which Soviet troops were involved, including that at Stalingrad, on which he based his best-selling book of 1944 *Days and Nights* (p.419).

These unusual juxtapositions in Simonov’s life led his ultimate success. A poem written privately for Serova ‘Wait for Me’ (pp. 396–7) was published and broadcast in late 1941 and instantly became THE favourite poem of the Soviet frontline forces, catapulting Simonov not only into the elevated status of the soldiers’ laureate, but also into the arms of a hitherto reluctant Serova. Perversely, however, it was the actions (or lack thereof) of people like Simonov that allowed Stalinism to flourish. As Figs notes: ‘people like Simonov had a choice. They could have followed a career path that skirted the pitfalls of political responsibility, as millions of others did, albeit at the cost of losing out on privileges and material rewards.’ (p.502). Another of his fellow writers, Aleksandr Borshchagovsky, who was betrayed by Simonov in 1949, wrote:

‘The phenomenon of 1949, and not only of that year, is not explained by fear...’, but by, ‘the servility of officious hangers-on, who had so little courage and morality that

they were unable even to stand up to the semi-official directives of the lowest bureaucrats.’ (ibid)

Figes, over generously perhaps in the circumstances, appears to be more impressed by Simonov’s civic stand at the end than that of fellow ‘Stalinist’ writer Aleksandr Fadeyev. The alcoholic Fadeyev shot himself in 1956, following Khrushchev’s ‘Secret Speech’, but not before writing:

‘I see no possibility of living any longer, because the cause of (Soviet) art, to which I gave my life, has been destroyed by the arrogant and ignorant leadership of the Party...Our best writers have been exterminated or died before their time because of the criminal connivance of those in power...As a writer, my own life has lost all sense, and with it its joy, with a sense of liberation from this vile existence, where the soul is crushed by malice, lies and slander, that I depart this life.’

Needless to say, this note remained hidden in the Party archives until 1990, by which time Gorbachev was well into his own de-Stalinisation campaign.

Among the more poignant results of the opening up of the KGB archives in the early 1990s was that some children of Stalin’s victims, for example Elizaveta Delibash (p.355), received their first and only pictures of their parents, in this case of her mother who had been shot in 1937.

This illustrates that, although key points of Soviet history during the Stalinist period are touched upon, and Simonov’s story is the one told in most detail, this book is first and foremost dedicated to the millions of ordinary families that fell victim to repression; a tragedy which by no means relented even during the Soviet people’s finest hour—The Great Patriotic War of 1941–45. It did, however, provide some blessed relief, for it would appear that the sheer scale of the horror endured by virtually the entire Soviet population during this period (for example, we are told that ‘only 3 per cent of the male cohort of soldiers born in 1923 survived until 1945’ (p.417), manages to relegate even the evil excesses of the Stalinist regime to a secondary level.

If the pre-war period had witnessed isolated acts of moral courage, usually by older female teachers protecting the children of the repressed (p.296), the war provided many more saviours in the shape of front line comrades and commanders. Figes writes that, for the troops: faced with the real horrors of the war, the potential

Central and Eastern European Review

terror of the secret police ‘somehow seemed less threatening’ (p.435). By the same token, the post-war period provided a few heroes (notably Lev Netto, who led the strike in the labour camps following Beria’s amnesty of May 1953, p.532), but little sense of restorative justice for the millions of victims. Small wonder that successive post-communist regimes in Russia, while nowhere near approaching the excesses of Stalin, still appear unwilling or unable to crack the ice ceiling that separates the rulers from the ruled, but both willing and able to crack down on those taking a moral stance on human rights (including the Memorial organisation, upon whose archives much of this book was based).

I managed to ask Orlando Figes, when he was visiting the North of England last year, to which generation of Russians this book was aimed, the victims, their children or grandchildren. Unequivocally, he responded that it was for the generation of youngsters in Russia today. Therein lies the rub. To what extent youngsters with no direct knowledge of the Soviet (let alone Stalinist) system will be able to relate to the harrowing tales revealed in this book is a moot question. Whether the Twitter generation would be willing to tackle a book of this length and density one must also doubt. After all, Stalin’s persisting popularity notwithstanding, hardly anyone in Russia, as Figes himself admits (p.629), reads Simonov nowadays.

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