MICHAEL GIFFIN
What Russia Chooses to Forget

It Was a Long Time Ago, and It Never Happened Anyway: Russia and the Communist Past
by David Satter

Buried in an endnote to It Was a Long Time Ago, and It Never Happened Anyway, David Satter offers the following statistics on state-sponsored terror between 1917 and 1953:

The scale of murder in the Soviet Union was so immense that estimating the number of victims with any degree of accuracy is difficult if not impossible. Figures cited in recently available archival materials are often in conflict with demographic data which places death tolls considerably higher. In this book, I accept 20 million as the number of direct victims of the Soviet regime. This figure includes only those put to death by the regime or who had died as a direct result of its repressive policies. It does not include the millions who died in wars, epidemics, and famines that were predictable consequences of Bolshevik policies but not entirely the result of them. The figure of 20 million includes a minimum of 200,000 victims of the Red Terror (1918–22); 11 million victims of famine and dekulakization in the 1930s; 700,000 persons who were executed during the Great Terror (1937–38); 400,000 additional execution victims between 1929 and 1953; 1.6 million persons who died in forced population transfers; and a minimum of 2.7 million persons who died in Gulag camps, labour colonies, and special settlements. To the resulting figure of 16.6 million should be added persons who died in prisons, 975,000 Gulag prisoners released during the war to punitive battalions, where they faced almost certain death, the victims of partisan warfare in Ukraine and the Baltic republics after the war, and Gulag prisoners freed so that their deaths would not count in the mortality totals for the labour camps, as well as other categories of victims across the length and breadth of a vast country.

These already staggering estimates don’t include the 4 million killed during the Civil War and the 5 million who died in the 1921–23 famine.

The question is: How should Russia remember this enormous state-sponsored suffering? According to opinion polls, in 1998 19 per cent of Russians approved of Stalin’s methods. This rose to 53 per cent in 2003, and that percentage hadn’t changed in 2008. So, clearly, while Germany has come to terms with the twentieth century and ensured—as much as any nation can—that the dark aspects of its past will never be repeated, the same cannot be said of Russia. The state has no interest in collective guilt. There’s no national museum or monument to the victims of state-sponsored terror. If the state remains silent on calls to build one, Satter believes this is because, in Russia, “the individual is seen by the state as a means to an end, and a genuine moral framework for political life does not exist”.

Of course, no Westerner should make this kind of judgment lightly, as it presumes our belief in our rights—rather than our responsibilities—isn’t used as a means to promote our own ends, and it assumes the framework of our own political life is genuinely moral. Before he passes judgment, though, Satter takes us on an uncomfortable journey into the Russian psyche and the factors preventing it from changing. His underlying assumption is that the dark aspects of communism can return in another disguise, as a side-effect of the nation’s current leadership style. For example, Putin gave a speech in 2008 in which he said:

maintaining the governance of a vast territory, preserving a unique commonwealth of peoples while occupying a major place in world affairs calls … for enormous sacrifices and privations on the part of our people. Such has been Russia’s thousand-year history. Such is the way in which it has retained its place as a mighty nation. We do not have the right to forget this.

Satter interprets Putin’s speech thus: The Russian people should support the regime’s ambitions until the end of time. If those ambitions can only be achieved through re-writing the past, so be it.

The end of communism opened a new era in Russian history. In January 1992 “young reformers” were charged with transforming the nation. Russians whose world had already been turned upside down by perestroika and the disintegration of the USSR were now subjected to unregulated capitalism. When prices were freed, hyperinflation wiped out their life savings. Without the social guarantees of the communist system, they were left
to fend for themselves and became fixated on the moment. Everyone seemed to be carrying a gun, including the local bandits and the security guards who appeared everywhere. Also, soldiers and police charged with guarding the nation’s weapons preferred to sell them.

Russians were accustomed to trusting the media because, under the Soviets, the full authority of the government had stood behind it. Now advertisements appeared for mysterious investment funds which offered to help individuals overcome the effects of inflation; funds that disappeared as soon as a few thousand people invested in them. Advertisements on message boards offered care for the old and sick living alone in return for rights to their apartment once they died; the bodies of those who agreed were later found in forests and garbage dumps. The social hierarchy was turned upside down. Those once the most despised—criminals, speculators and black marketeers—were now the new elite.

Marx wrote that the period of “primitive capital accumulation” in a capitalist society is always accompanied by crime: a lesson fully absorbed by Russia’s new entrepreneurs. Everyone borrowed to buy cheap assets; many forgot to pay their benefactors, leading to a wave of contract killings. A nation that had given its soul to communism was now confronted with the rule of thieves. Many Russians became convinced there was nothing left to believe in; the only thing that mattered was the rule of force. In Russia, any need or desire to come to terms with the past competes with more pragmatic needs and desires.

Yeltsin came to power as the result of a peaceful anti-communist revolution and as president he encouraged a rejection of the Soviet past. This changed under Putin, who promotes the idea that the purpose of Russian history is to create a strong state regardless of ideology. This is now promulgated as the official view. Recent textbooks have been rewritten to offer a more favourable assessment of Soviet history, including the rehabilitation of Stalin, and this revisionism is part of a broader plan. The Russian media, once again state-controlled, has become anti-Western and promotes the view that Russian media, once again state-controlled, has become anti-Western and promotes the view that

In the last years of his life, Solzhenitsyn, who did more than anyone to call attention to communism’s crimes, supported Putin’s rule. He believed Putin was Russia’s saviour, who had inherited a ransacked and bewildered nation, with a poor and demoralised people, and started a “slow and gradual restoration”. While Solzhenitsyn’s views took some by surprise, Satter says he was simply being true to his long-held belief in moderate authoritarian rule as a way of preserving the nation’s health. Solzhenitsyn described Sakharov’s human rights ideology as a form of anarchism: “One ought to have the whole picture in view,” he wrote, “including each person’s duties and the rights of the state.” Insofar as rights are inherent to the individual rather than the state, Satter finds Solzhenitsyn’s reference to the rights of the state perplexing, as the state has rights in relation to other states, but in relation to its citizens it has duties. By rights of the state Satter believes Solzhenitsyn meant the prerogative of the state to ignore the rights of its citizens in pursuing its “saving mission”.

The notion of the Russian state having a saving mission isn’t new. It evolved after the fall of Byzantium, which left Russia as the only nation professing Orthodoxy; believing it had become the Third Rome; the foremost protector of genuine Christianity in a profane world. As the Russian state steadily subordinated the church to the status of a department within its bureaucracy, the Tsar was increasingly infused with a mystical semi-divine authority and the state gradually became the vehicle through which Russia brought to the rest of the world “the revelation that had been granted to her alone”. Belief in this saving mission is an intellectual tendency shared by Russia’s greatest thinkers, authors and poets; even those who were most critical of the condition of the Russian people; those who were most inclined to condemn the burden of the nation’s past. Satter believes this tendency is part of a psychological phenomenon which

Great Terror of 1937–38 should not be forgotten, he admits, but other nations have done more horrible things: “At least we didn’t use nuclear arms against a civilian population,” he said, reminding Russians of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, “and we have never dumped chemicals on thousands of kilometres of land” as US forces did in Vietnam. “We should not allow anyone to force a feeling of guilt upon us,” he concluded. “Let them think about themselves.” Anti-Western rhetoric is strong in Russia. In particular, demonising the USA is a smokescreen that allows Russia to avoid discussing itself, or its tense relationship with former allies, such as Ukraine and Estonia.
prevents Russians from coming to terms with their past. After all, if Russia has a special God-given role, by definition the state cannot be guilty of Soviet crimes.

When it came to assessing Soviet crimes, Solzhenitsyn was concerned with the collective guilt of ethnic groups rather than individual responsibility. He called for repentance but tried to absolve ethnic Russians of guilt, arguing they were mainly victims. In his tendentious historical essay *Two Hundred Years Together*, which he said was intended to give an objective account of Russian–Jewish relations, he attempts to weigh the guilt of two ethnic groups, Russians and Jews, with the emphasis of guilt on the latter. He believed the Jews have the most to repent. While acknowledging there were injustices against the Jews in Tsarist Russia, he argues the support they gave to Bolshevism was disproportionate and constituted a burden of Jewish guilt towards Russians. He quotes Nazhivin’s recollections of the government in the early years of Soviet rule: “Everywhere there were Latvians, Latvians, Latvians and Jews, Jews, Jews. I was never an anti-Semite, but here the quantity of them struck my eyes and all at a very early age.”

As Russian anti-Semitism is well-known, Solzhenitsyn’s sentiments shouldn’t surprise us. What is surprising is that his sentiments were expressed in the twenty-first century, since Russia claims to be part of the advanced and modern world. Inasmuch as communism was about the conflict between classes, not ethnicities, and was explicitly internationalist, Satter wonders how the ethnicity of communists was relevant to events in Russia and suggests this attempt to treat ethnic Russians as less responsible than other ethnic groups has the effect—whether intended or not—of minimising the significance of their crimes. In the Soviet Union crimes were committed by every ethnicity for ideological rather than national reasons. The question of respective guilt for specific ethnicities is therefore deeply irrelevant and avoids the question of the responsibility of the Soviet Union as a whole. Putin also downplays Russian responsibility for Soviet crimes and criticises external attempts to provoke “unjustified remorse”. Solzhenitsyn agreed with Putin’s sentiments, saying, “Unremitting reproaches from outside are counterproductive.”

This penetrating and disturbing book is the fruit of Satter’s many years of slog, as Moscow correspondent for the *Financial Times* and investigative journalist for the *Wall Street Journal*. As genealogy is a powerful expression of personal identity, the power of Satter’s book is the way he narrates the deeply disturbing stories of thousands of Russians who are still desperately trying to discover what happened to their close relatives who disappeared; relatives who suffered and died as a result of state-sponsored terror. He reminds us that much if not most Soviet history was a calculated, cold-blooded slaughter on a scale Westerners find hard to imagine. He carefully describes how ordinary Russians are making seemingly endless forensic discoveries of mass graves, none of which are officially commemorated. Although, to be fair, the Russian state isn’t preventing individuals from discovering these mass graves; it simply doesn’t want to formally acknowledge them. Why? It’s too preoccupied with reinventing the narrative of its greatness.


Michael Wilding

**A Small Town in the Depression**

*Well Anyway*

by Dal Stivens, introduction by Harry Heseltine

Arcadia, 2012, xxvi + 97 pages, $34.95

Dal Stivens (1912–97) was an extraordinarily versatile writer. His first published book, *The Tramp and Other Stories*, was a collection of short stories set in the depression years. Published in England by Macmillan in 1936, it received enthusiastic reviews from H.E. Bates and Edwin Muir. Stivens went on to develop the spare, laconic style of these realist stories as the medium for more playful themes, and over the years he produced a host of delightful and imaginative yarns, tall stories and fantasies, as well as a succession of novels. But his first completed novel, *Well Anyway*, written in the mid to late 1930s, remained unpublished until now.

It is an accomplished and powerful work, in no way to be categorised as juvenilia. Set in an Australian country town, it vividly captures the depression years. Unemployment, poverty and homelessness are all part of the context and background, but there is no preaching or propagandising, no intrusive agenda.

There is no narrative voice. Instead Stivens adopted the technique used by William Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*. Each character is presented through his or her own point of view, sometimes in observation, sometimes in reflection, sometimes