



Moscow, 1937

Karl Schlögel

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Moscow, 1937: the soviet metropolis at the zenith of Stalin's dictatorship. A society utterly wrecked by a hurricane of violence. In this compelling book, the renowned historian Karl Schlogel reconstructs with meticulous care the process through which, month by month, the terrorism of a state-of-emergency regime spiraled into the 'Great Terror' during which 1 1/2 million human beings lost their lives within a single year. He revisits the sites of show trials and executions and, by also consulting numerous sources from the time, he provides a masterful panorama of these key events in Russian history. He shows how, in the shadow of the reign of terror, the regime around Stalin also aimed to construct a new society. Based on countless documents, Schlogel's historical masterpiece vividly presents an age in which the boundaries separating the dream and the terror dissolve, and enables us to experience the fear that was felt by people subjected to totalitarian rule. This rich and absorbing account of the Soviet purges will be essential reading for all students of Russia and for any readers interested in one of the most dramatic and disturbing events of modern history.

Moscow, 1937 Details

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From Reader Review Moscow, 1937 for online ebook

Willy Marz Thiessam says

Karl Schlögel is to be commended for what is a very readable and well written book generally. The book outlines the critical year of 1937 in which many Soviet people died in a political purge orchestrated and directed by the centre of power in Moscow.

Using atmosphere, dodgy statistics, innuendo and endless repetition the likes of Stalin and the public prosecutor Andrey Vyshinsky got rid of thousands of people that were suspected of disloyalty to the state.

Why? Because they knew a war would break out and the Soviet State was not built on the loving kindness of its neighbours. It sought out weak points in loyalty to the leadership. This is not unlike the internal security of the UK or the USA which similarly investigated, harassed, tortured, incarcerated and killed those it saw as disloyal to its leadership. Unlike the UK and USA, the Soviet Union was subject to many external hostile governments threatening to destroy it for the entire history of its existence.

The difference between most people in the West (including Schlögel) and the Russian people today is a simple one. It is a question of perspective and degree. Using atmosphere, dodgy statistics, innuendo and endless repetition Schlögel builds an argument that 1.5 million people were killed in the Soviet Union, and specifically 700 thousand in this purge. Elsewhere he references other erroneous statistics, never proved, of tens of millions dying in famines. Not only are the numbers inflated and extrapolated from small samplings of data and prejudiced witness anecdotes they also presume aims beyond those of the Soviet leadership itself. It narrowly targeted people in power, to remove their independence and enforce loyalty to the authority of Stalin.

That said Schlögel does something quite useful. He does show the remarkable advances that the Soviet Union had made by this point. Its industrial capacity well outlined in the book had reached a level that will astound any reader. Schlögel does not shy away also from the outstanding cultural achievements. Schlögel further gives a wide variety of contemporary interpretations of the purge such as from the insightful and accomplished writer Feuchtwanger.

Schlögel is not any ordinary Anti-Soviet pro-USA flunkey. He gives a pretty good story, a lot of facts and details about the period, and his book is well worth the read, just ignore more imaginative bits. There was no need to inflate the deaths, he could have aimed lower to what we know and can establish. Outlining the areas we don't know would also have been very helpful, and would have given us a better understanding than making claims out of nothing.

Giovanna says

L'universo dei libri è un sistema organizzato, in cui un testo richiama l'altro. Capita così di trovare continui legami e richiami tra i libri che si leggono. Questa volta, intrapresa la lettura di *Novantatré* di Victor Hugo, ispirato ai fatti del Terrore che seguirono la Rivoluzione francese, mi trovo tra le mani un saggio che cerca di dare un quadro esaurente di un altro Terrore seguito a una rivoluzione: il Terrore staliniano del 1937. Tanto il romanzo di Hugo quanto il saggio di Schlögel si concentrano su un anno preciso: il titolo *Novantatré* indica proprio l'anno 1793; il sottotitolo al saggio di Schlögel è "Mosca 1937". Si tratta di anni in cui

particolari regimi hanno dato sfogo a tutta la violenza di cui erano capaci.

Prima di parlare del sottotitolo, e quindi della Mosca del '37 che è l'argomento del saggio, è interessante soffermarsi sul titolo: *L'utopia e il terrore* (Terror und Traum, terrore e sogno, nell'originale tedesco). Schrödgel fa notare già nel titolo il legame indissolubile che esiste tra il tentativo di piegare la realtà secondo un disegno preciso e gli atti di violenza: negare la realtà o volerla corrispondente ai propri desideri genera sempre violenza (lo ha insegnato Raskol'nikov, e non a caso Dostoevskij subì un deciso ostracismo in epoca sovietica). Nella recensione a *Vita e destino*, che a ben vedere tratta lo stesso problema, ricordavo O'Brian che in 1984 afferma: "libertà è la libertà di dire che due più due fa quattro"; negata la realtà, al contrario, la libertà non esiste, e si cade nel terrore.

Schrödgel analizza tutte le forme di questo terrore, tutti gli ambiti in cui vi si è fatto ricorso nella Mosca del '37: si parla del partito, ma anche della vita quotidiana: lo sport, la musica, la letteratura (Puškin in particolare), la creazione di infrastrutture ecc ecc... Le azioni della polizia politica vengono spiegate anche alla luce del contesto in cui il Terrore ha avuto luogo: la violenza non si è sviluppata nel vuoto, ma nel contesto delle crescenti tensioni internazionali con l'attesa di una guerra imminente, del ventesimo anniversario della Rivoluzione, e in seguito alla promulgazione della Costituzione staliniana nel 1936, che indicava elezioni "libere, universali e segrete" per l'anno successivo, dando per scontato l'avvenuto superamento della società divisa in classi. Dal momento che la società era ancora diversificata, era necessario agli occhi del potere eliminare tutte quelle componenti che la rendevano tale:

"La messa in scena delle elezioni libere, universali e segrete e la purga della società erano due facce della stessa medaglia, del processo finalizzato a compiere l'unità del popolo sovietico."

A questo mira anche il realismo socialista che si impone in questi stessi anni: non a ritrarre la realtà, ma a rappresentare la realtà come dovrebbe essere, e come sarà con l'affermazione del sistema comunista. Chi nega questa "realtà futura" è un nemico, chi viene incolpato, spesso a torto, per il malfunzionamento di qualunque ingranaggio dello stato diventa un sabotatore che ostacola la costruzione di una società sovietica perfetta. L'uomo nuovo, l'uomo sovietico, deve essere conforme a un'idea precisa di cittadino. La cosa ancora più terribile è che spesso neanche questo bastava, dal momento che per ogni regione si erano fissate quote di persone da eliminare, e bastava trovarsi al posto sbagliato nel momento sbagliato per finire nella lista.

Quest'atmosfera di terrore è restituita con grande precisione da Schrödgel: anche gli argomenti più conosciuti vengono approfonditi, documentati e messi in relazione tra loro. Quello che invece non mi è piaciuto, e che si deve in parte alla versione originale del saggio e in parte alla traduzione italiana, è la sciatteria nella traslitterazione delle parole e dei nomi russi. Nella maggior parte dei casi si seguono le regole di pronuncia del tedesco invece delle regole di traslitterazione standard; in più, capita che lo stesso nome venga riportato secondo due diverse traslitterazioni (per esempio *avtozavodCij* e *avtozavodSij*, entrambe traslitterazioni sbagliate di *avtozavodcy*)... è un peccato che un lavoro tanto meticoloso sia fiaccato da trascuratezze del genere.

E. says

A fascinating book, unlike anything I've ever read before. Set in Moscow during the terror of the purges and the show trials, Schlogel does not give you a play-by-play history of those events. Rather, he wants to give

you a comprehensive picture of the city during this tumultuous time--a time when the Soviet Union seemed on the verge of fulfilling the socialist dream and dream and terror co-existed strangely.

Schlogel covers major events of the year, such as the Pushkin festival, film openings, parades, and government meetings. He discusses various aspects of the city's cultural and economic life -- the film industry, the leading architects, prominent aviators, workers in the automobile plants, census takers, and athletes. He discusses, in detail, the Soviet pavilion at an international exhibition in Paris. He presents the analyses of foreigners traveling to Moscow and the journals of the American ambassador. You read about city parks, the ballet, novels, the opening of the Moscow-Volga canal. There is even a chapter on the phone book, and it is not boring.

And mixed within these chapters about the wide range of life in this city, you learn about disappearances, trials, and executions. Near the end is a chapter on the shooting range which served as the main execution site and mass graveyard, only uncovered fully after the collapse of the USSR.

One symbol he keeps returning to is the Palace of the Soviets, a building under construction in that year, which was to be the largest building in the world. It was a tower, topped with a monumental stainless steel statue of Lenin. It was to be in the heart of Moscow, on the site of the demolished Cathedral of Christ the Savior. It was to be a testament to the achievements of the socialist state (and there were real achievements, including the fastest ever move of a major population into literacy). But it was never built.

There is almost no analysis as to why thousands of people, including prominent leaders in the party, were killed. No attempt at explaining why. No attempt at analyzing Stalin, who dominates the book, but only as a character on the periphery; he is never brought under the lens.

The book is big and dense and suffers from being translated from the original German. But if you are into history and at all concerned about how a state can turn on its ideals and go horribly wrong, then you might be interested in *Moscow, 1937*.

Olaf says

Schlögel’s Buch hat mich über mehrere Monate begleitet. Da die einzelnen Kapitel als Referenzpunkt zwar das Jahr 1937 haben, ansonsten aber durchaus als eigenständige Skizzen gelesen werden können, ist es unproblematisch, das Buch ein paar Wochen liegenzulassen und dann weiter zu lesen.

Schlögel ist es gelungen, ein gelehrtes Buch zu schreiben, in einer sehr gut lesbaren, nicht wissenschaftlichen, sondern prosaischen, manchmal sogar poetischen Sprache, ein Großessay sozusagen.

Beeindruckend sind diese Skizzen, in denen ein Schlüsseljahr der Sowjetgeschichte - und wie *Schlögel* immer wieder betont und es auch zeigen kann: der europäischen Geschichte - in allen Facetten dargestellt wird. Das Jahr 1937 wird verortet im Zusammenhang der Zeitgeschichte. Es verliert dadurch nichts an seiner Monstrosität, aber das Handeln der sowjetischen Führung wird verständlicher.

Ein überaus faszinierendes Buch, das ich jedem empfehlen kann, der sich mit der Geschichte des Totalitarismus auseinandersetzen möchte und der Interesse hat, den gewaltigen Umbruch zu verstehen, in dem sich die Sowjetunion Mitte der dreißiger Jahre befand. Interessant erscheint mir dabei, dass diese Umbruchssituation in vielerlei Hinsichten auch für andere ähnliche totalitäre Momente, z.B. die chinesische Geschichte der 50er bis 70er Jahre erhellende Parallelen bereithält (*Schlögel* selbst zieht diese Parallelen

nicht).

Nate Briggs says

A very rewarding book - if you're very interested in Stalinism. Solzhenitsyn also covers this material a bit more dramatically - but Schlogel is interested in giving you a 360 degree picture of the culture and the atmosphere of the time. It's a long read, so you do need a burning interest in the topic.

Hadrian says

The year 1937 was declared the 'Year of the Child'. A chapter of this book is devoted to the production of children's media, with advertising campaigns, children's books, adventure film, and toys. This is supplemented by the diary of an adolescent girl, Nina Kosterina, who dreams of adolescent love and a bright future. Then her family is disappeared, likely shot in the woods outside Moscow or frozen in Siberia, one by one, and she dies in the German invasion four years later.

This emotional whiplash contained within the book's original German subtitle - *Terror und Traum* - Dream and Terror. It weaves together the two strands of academic history on the Soviet Union in the 1930s - on the one hand, the foundations of a new industrial communal civilization based on the apparently limitless capacity for humans to better themselves, with electrification, public works, education, statistical analysis, and transportation- and on the other hand, the largest 'peacetime' killing of civilians in human history. The death toll was not quite as high as first estimated by Robert Conquest in 1968, but archival research has revealed its nature - death by quota, with exact numbers in the thousands of prisoners to be imprisoned and shot, with specific ethnicities and social classes tallied in the butcher's bill - Operational Order No. 447.

Schlogel's book is an attempt to hold together these two narratives of Soviet history - he calls it a 'stereoscopic' view, and uses the example of the witches' flight by broomstick over the city of Moscow in The Master and Margarita. Moscow 1937 is the 'nodal point' for artistic experimentation, utopian social planning, the introduction of an imitation consumer society, the demolition of the cathedral of Christ the Savior for The Palace of the Soviets that was never built, and instead a swimming pool was placed there. Endless parades, showcasing the new members of Soviet society, exhibitions, meetings. It was an organizational point for global struggle - see the intervention in the Spanish Civil War and the grand pavilions in the Paris World's Fair - as members of foreign communist parties in Moscow vanished. It was, as Platonov said, a 'Foundation Pit'.

Explaining part of this narrative structure comes from the organization of the Communist Party and its ideological dreams - terror from above was supported by terror and spite from below. Lower-ranking and ambitious party members were promised housing, employment, education and a good future - and if that didn't work out, you can report your boss for 'sabotage' and have him shot. Yet the party also took great pains to separate these two narratives - terror and dream - where only a small group of people carried out hundreds of executions, and the rest could get away with holding galas at the Bolshoi Theatre.

The achievement of this syncretic history is removing the death toll from the abstract, attempting to understand the psychological viewpoint of all those who lived through it, by repeating all of their names, as Akhmatova pleaded, as the whole nation careens over a cliff. What did all this lead up to? It was interrupted

by war, and then it only resembled anything like a peace in the 1950s. All this, for what?

Jonathan says

I was genuinely sorry to finish this book. Professor Schlogel has written a vast tapestry-like description of life in all its aspects in Moscow during the great Terror. We see the city from almost every angle: from the cultural salons, the hotel dining rooms to the inmates of the gulag adjacent to the city where inmates were building the Moscow-Volga canal under the most brutal of conditions. There are the lives of the political and cultural elite, and there are the workers of the Stalin Automobile Factory, whose conditions are so primitive that some of them sleep beneath their factory machines at night for lack of other accommodations. And hanging above them all, the constant threat of arrest and murder at the hands of the NKVD, who killed around a million people and imprisoned another 3-4 million during these years, the vast majority of whom, it needs to be said, were guilty of absolutely nothing. Why was this monstrous crime carried out? To create fear? To find those "guilty" of sabotage in a society that barely functioned, but where it was unthinkable to blame the system, so somebody had to be "wrecking?" To make sure that, in a country surrounded by "capitalist enemies" that no one could form a 5th column? Maybe all of the above. Schlogel had erected a minor monument to those who were lost with this beautifully-written tour-de-force of how Moscow was and was changing in this era of revolutionary violence of almost unthinkable scope.

Gaylord Dold says

Schloegel, Karl. Moscow 1937, Polity Press, New York, 2013, Trans by Rodney Livingstone (653pp.\$35)

In the year of the Great Terror, a brilliant piece of reportage about America appeared in the Soviet Union and became in its time one of the most widely read bits of travel journalism, popular with everyone in Russia. The political newspaper Pravda commissioned two journalists, Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov, to travel in the United States and write an account of the country.

Called "Little Golden America", the resulting book was an unambiguous hymn of praise to America, with which the Soviet Union had a complex relationship---both countries curiously counterposed as God's gift to mankind, and both threatened by Fascism.

The authors met with Franklin Roosevelt, saw the electric chair at Sing Sing prison in New York, explored General Motors and met with countless Americans in different walks of life, from black singers and dancers in the South to hobos, working stiffs and religious leaders. Everywhere they went, the two journalists reported Americans' intense interest in the Soviet project. After all, both countries had a dream.

The story of "Little Golden America" and its journalist authors is just one of many panoramic views of "total history" brought forth in Karl Schloegel's revolutionary, majestic and groundbreaking new work, "Moscow 1937". Compelling in every way (save perhaps in some of its stumbling translations from the German), the book startles the mind and stirs the imagination in the way that only poetry and music can sometimes do.

Take, for example, Schloegel's brilliant analysis of the 1936 Moscow Directory (a kind of sophisticated phone book, cultural repository and government handbook), which brims with the names and addresses of people and things that were soon to disappear into the maw of the Great Terror, a situation that "encapsulates

a moment in time in which the accusers and the accused, the perpetrators and the victims, the executioners and the executed of the morrow still sit side by side.”

Or, on the macabre side, consider Schloegel’s inventory of the luxuries in the apartment of executed NKVD (Secret Police) head Genrikh Yagoda: 1,229 bottles of wine, mainly imported vintages from 1897, 1900 and 1902; 3,915 pornographic photos and films; and 11,057 imported cigarettes, including Egyptian and Turkish ones.

This great panorama of Moscow during 1937 (with views of 1936 and ’38) marries sweep with depth, analyzing (with photos) Moscow’s gigantic railroad yards; its massive construction projects, which mirrored those of Hausmann in 19th century Paris; and its efforts to turn rivers around, dig canals, destroy churches, mosques, and “old Moscow’s” many convoluted squares in favor of rationality and power.

Schloegel takes us inside the Census of 1937 to uncover its sinister purposes and goals (its bureaucrats were all executed), the great Pushkin Jubilee celebrations of February 937, the Party Plenum meetings, U.S.S.R. Pavilion at the International Exhibition of that same year, Soviet Deco architecture and the grand masked balls given by the NKVD in honor of its own activities.

Included in the book are unparalleled views of Soviet high society, the opening of the Moscow-Volga Canal (its engineers were all executed later), Soviet polar exploration and flight, and drama in the theater-mad city, all against the backdrop of fear, paranoia, denunciation, mass arrests, suicides and executions.

Schloegel’s sources come as an almost complete surprise. For example, he analyzes the tenant records of the famous “House on the Embankment”, a luxury apartment wehre in a single year its nearly 2,500 residents (most of them government officials or part big-wigs) almost entirely disappeared: imprisoned, executed or driven to suicide. Likewise, Scloegel analyzes the glittering salons of the N KVD, where Shostakovich and Babel hobnobbed with brutal murderers, and its nearly limitless maze of offices, garages, shooting ranges, isolation cells, interrogation chambers and main prison, Lubyanka.

Like the Christian enterprise, the Communist enterprise sought to transform the natural world and its human inhabitants, the latter in service to a dream that became a terror. Like other transformative books of its kind (DeVoto’s “Year of Decision, 1846” or Braudel’s “The Mediterranean in the Age of Phillip II”), “Moscow 937 radicalizes and transforms our view of reality. Along with its fabulous maps and photographs, it is an instant classic.

Keith says

When contemplating cities conducive to *flâneries* and urban wandering, Moscow isn't the first place we generally think of, beset as it is with vast traffic-crammed *bulvars*, myriad underpasses and overwhelming, sprawling size. Nevertheless, Schloegel manages to bring the underside of the place vividly to life by turning our attention to subjects the casual traveller would usually ignore.

In the prologue, he describes the lack of perspective, the stereotypical viewpoints and the hackneyed representations that cities like Moscow are subject to. His approach is to choose different reference points and plumb these to arrive at another, more personal reading of the city.

One such reference point is the role of the bookshop in Moscow; from this we see the way that the book as an object has here taken on an entirely different symbolic value to that which it holds elsewhere. Moscow,

where *samizdat* was the only method of circulating many texts, is going to be radically different to a city where readers didn't have recourse to this subterfuge - one of many examples in the book of things that lend the Russian capital its distinctive dimension.

Schlögel values the myth and symbolism of the city as much as the bricks and mortar or the city's historical 'facts'. In many ways this book owes much to New History and writers like Pierre Nora who take historical subjects and mine them for their mythologies and subjective readings down the years rather than seeking out the usual objective truths. Schlögel makes of Moscow one of Nora's archetypal *lieux de mémoire*.

A great companion to take on a future Moscow trip.

Alberto says

Retrato exhaustivo del Moscú de 1937: La historia social, la vida cotidiana, las purgas, la deformación de las leyes, corrupción judicial, encarcelamientos masivos... Totalitarismo en suma. Una obra monumental sobre un trágico periodo histórico.

Julia says

Ich habe an diesem Buch tatsächlich ein halbes Jahr gelesen – allerdings immer wieder mit Unterbrechungen, und für ein Sachbuch von über 700 Seiten ist das gar nicht mal sooo schlecht.

Das Ganze ist ein gründlicher Rundumschlag über sämtliche Aspekte der russischen und sowjetischen Geschichte. Das Jahr 1937 steht hier auf der einen Seite für den Großen Terror, während dem zahlreiche Menschen den "Säuberungen" zum Opfer fielen, auf der anderen Seite zeigt ein Blick auf dieses Jahr ein Land auf dem Sprung: An allen Ecken und Enden wird gebaut, sei es im Wortsinne auf den unzähligen Baustellen in der Hauptstadt, sei es im übertragenen Sinne an der neuen Gesellschaft. So ist es auch sehr spannend, was Schlögel alles aufgetan hat – auf den ersten Blick wirken die Kapitel zu Erschießungen, zum sowjetischen Pavillon bei der Weltausstellung, zur Warenwelt und zu den Schauprozessen willkürlich und irgendwie unzusammenhängend. Wenn man aber ein bisschen mehr liest, entdeckt man die Zusammenhänge und sieht, wie diese offensichtlich gegensätzlichen Tendenzen zu diesem Zeitpunkt an diesem Ort tatsächlich zusammenliefen und – auf eine seltsame Weise – auch zusammenpassten.

Ich mag mir gar nicht vorstellen, wie viel Arbeit in diesem Buch stecken mag – manchmal wird man fast von der Detailfülle erschlagen. Deswegen habe ich zwischendurch auch mal wochenlang nicht darin gelesen, dann mal wieder nur ein Kapitel, oft aber auch mehrere Kapitel am Stück. Manches interessierte mich mehr, manches weniger – das lässt sich aber wohl kaum vermeiden und manche Kapitel habe ich entsprechend auch nur überflogen.

Es ist allerdings kein Buch für Einsteiger in die Thematik, dazu werden zu viele Namen und Fakten als bekannt vorausgesetzt. Und wahrscheinlich will man sich ja sowieso erstmal einen Überblick verschaffen und nicht derart in die Details gehen, wie das hier der Fall ist. Das ist auch die einzige Einschränkung, ansonsten ist dieses Buch auf jeden Fall lesenswert!

Thore Husfeldt says

(English summary below.)

Karl Schlägels *Terror und Traum* präsentiert dreiunddreissig Aspekte Moskaus im ätzenden Wahnsinn des stalinistischen Terrors 1937. Einige Kapitel sind mit Alltäglichem beschäftigt, Schlängestehen, Warenangebot, Radio, Jazz, Vergnügungsparks. Andere beleuchten Struktur und Diskurs des kulturellen und politischen Systems: ein Architektenkongress, Moskaubilder in Bulgakovs Roman oder ausländischen Reportagen, der sowjetische Pavillon auf der Pariser Weltausstellung. Manches regt mich zum kopfschüttelnden Schmunzeln an, anderem – wie den Kapiteln über Schauprozesse und Hinrichtungen – kann ich nur mit Entgeisterung begegnen.

Was mich verblüfft, ist die kolossale intellektuelle Disziplin und Kompetenz eines Systems, dass sich gleichzeitig in selbstgewählter Paranoia auffrisst. Kapitel 7, zum Beispiel, von der Volkszählung am 6. Januar 1937. Die gesamte Bevölkerung eines Riesenlandes, das 11 Zeitzonen berührt, unzählige Ethnizitäten beherbergt, und erst vor Kurzem aus Analphabetismus in die Moderne gerissen worden ist, wird an einem Tag erfasst. Dazu sind vorweg Informationskampagnen in die Wege geleitet worden, 17000 Instrukteure haben eine Million Volkszähler ausgebildet, ein überarbeitetes Lexikon mit 14000 verzeichneten Berufen wird veröffentlicht (“Zauberer” und “Zuhälter” gibt es in der Sowjetunion von 1937 nicht mehr). Das Zählen findet auf Skripten statt, in mehreren Sprachen, in Moskauer Wohnungen, in der Eisenbahn. Dank für meine Begriffe unglaublicher organisatorischer Kompetenz klappt alles. Das Resultat? 162 003 225 Bürger. Das passt der Parteiführung nicht; die Einwohnerzahl entspricht nicht den optimistischen Prognosen Stalins zum Bevölkerungswachstum der UdSSR, wo von 170 Millionen die Rede war. (Ein großer Teil der fehlenden Millionen sitzt entweder irgendwo im Gulag oder ist “dank” Planwirtschaft 1933 elend verhungert, vornehmlich in der Ukraine und Kasachstan.) Logik des Regimes: Das Resultat der Volkszählung wird nie veröffentlicht, die verantwortlichen Statistiker werden als Staatsfeinde hingerichtet. So blendet sich das Reich, entledigt sich groteskerweise genau der Kompetenz und des Datenmaterials, die für die Durchführung einer Planwirtschaft so dringend nötig wären.

Jedes Kapitel erzählt also im Grunde die gleiche Geschichte eines Systems im absurden Taumel von Selbstvernichtung und Paranoia anhand von lauter kleinen Details. Dreiunddreissig Facetten in denen sich die gleiche Szenerie spiegelt. Vielleicht lässt sich die Monstrosität des Ganzen durch die oft banalen Details des Kleinen am ehesten nahebringen. Die Form trägt natürlich auch zur Lesbarkeit des im Grunde schweren Stoffes bei. Die Kapitel sind von einander unabhängig, das Buch lässt sich also ablegen, oder rückwärts lesen. Ich habe mich jedoch artig von Buchdeckel zu Buchdeckel durchgeflügt. Den Buchdeckel ziert übrigens der nie fertiggestellte Palast der Sowjet. Auch eine tolle Geschichte.

Karl Schlägels *Moscow, 1937* (German title *Terror and Dream*) presents thirty-three aspects of caustic madness during the Stalinist terror of 1937. Some chapters are concerned with aspects of day-to-day life: queuing, available products, radio, jazz, amusement parks. Others focus on the structure and discourse of the cultural and political system: a congress of architects, images of Moscow in Bulgakov's novel and foreign reports, the Soviet pavilion at the Paris world exhibition. Some chapters are amusingly grotesque, others – such as the chapters on show trials and executions – ghastly.

What amazes me is the colossal intellectual discipline and competence of a system that simultaneously devours itself in self-imposed paranoia. Chapter 7, for example, on the census of 6 January 1937. On a single day, the census was to record the entire population of a giant country spanning 11 time zones and was home to countless ethnicities. A nation that had been pulled out of illiteracy in the Modernity only recently. The preparations had included huge information campaigns, 17,000 instructors had trained a million census takers, a revised lexicon enumerated 14,000 official professions ("sorcerer" and "pimp" no longer exists in the Soviet Union of 1937.). People were counted on skis, in several languages, in Moscow apartments, and on the train. I am baffled by the organisational talent that made this work. The result? 162,003,225 citizens. That did not please the Party leadership, as the population did not match Stalin's optimistic forecasts of a population of 170 million. (A large part of the missing millions was in some Gulag or had starved miserably 1933, mostly in the Ukraine and Kazakhstan.) The regime's conclusion is logical: the results of the census were never published, the responsible statistician were executed as enemies of the state. Grotesquely, the regime rids itself of precisely the expertise and the data material that would be so desperately needed for the implementation of a planned economy.

Each of the thirty-three chapter basically tells the same meta-story of a system in absurd frenzy of self-destruction and paranoia; thirty-three facets reflecting the same scene. Perhaps the monstrosity of the whole can only be grasped through the mundane details of the parts. Given the very heavy subject matter, the book is quite accessible. The chapters are largely independent, so the book can be put down for a period, or read backwards. However, I dutifully plowed through it from cover to cover. By the way, the cover is festooned with the uncompleted Palace of the Soviets. Another a great story.

I've read this book in my native German, but an English translation exists.

Dainius Jocas says

Pats sau pavydžiu, kad perskai?iau ši? knyg?.

Nors niekada Maskvoje ir nebuvau, ta?iau Maskva 1937-aisiais man tiek pat vaizdinga, kaip ir mano paties prisiminimai iš ?vairi? kelioni?. Knygoje labai tiksliai perteikiami vaizdai, pvz. paskutinis skyrius apie Taryb? r?m? statyb? projekt? - pirma aprašyt? Kristaus Išganytojo soboras, jo istorija, sprogdinimo darbai, tada aprašyta grandiozini? plan? Taryb? r?mams k?rimo istorija, ir tos istorijos atomazga - Kristaus Išganytojo soboras atstatytas 1995-2000 metais.

Kalbant apie istorinius reikalus, tai ši knyga nušviet? ketvirtojo dešimtme?io teroro ?vykius kiek kitokioje šviesoje negu buvau ?prat?s t? teror? matyti. Sensacingiausias atradimas buvo tas, kad sovietai vykd? savo žmoni? teror?, ne tod?l, kad jie buvo žiaur?s ir labai stipr?s, bet d?l to, kad jie buvo žiaur?s ir silpni. Teroras tur?jo veikti, kaip liaud? suvienijanti j?ga, nes, pasirodo, valdžia kitos j?gos ir netur?jo liaudies suvienijimui...

Kitas svarbus knygos aspektas tai yra svajon?s. Svojon?s buvo Maskvos varomoji j?ga aprašomu laikotarpiu. Taryb? valdžiai prijau?iantys svajojo apie tobulos visuomen?s suk?rim?, svajojo apie grandioziniu projektus, e.g. Taryb? r?mai, Maskvos pavertimas "Penki? j?r? miestu" ... Kaimie?iai atvyk? ? miest? svajojo apie šviesesn? rytoj? kai jie gal?s ramiai gyventi nejausdami nepritekli?. Jie atvyk? ? miest? tiesiog rinkdavosi prie gamykl? ir fabrik? vart? ir ?ia iškart b?davo ?darbinami. Nors tas darbas buvo ir kraupiai sunkus, ir miegoti tek? tiesiog po tomis pa?iomis stakl?mis prie kuri? vis? dien? dirbta, bet tai buvo vienintelis kelias ?

geresn? gyvenim?, tod?l entuziasmo buv? daug. Sportininkai, lak?nai, keliautojai, atrad?jai svajojo pasiekti visus pasaulio rekordus savo Taryb? šaliai. Visi tur?jo utopini? vil?i?.

Apibendrinant, knyga tikrai verta d?mesio. Net jei istorija ir n?ra m?gstamiausia tema, tai knyg? galima skaityti ir kaip grožin? veikal?. Nes vien jau pirmame skyriuje kalbant apie Michailo Bulgakovo "Meistr? ir Margarit?", buvo suformuota mintis, kad tais laikais Maskvos d?jos iai ne?tik?tini dalykai.

David says

This is a dystopia. Life in Moscow in 1937 is a place where you could be hailed as a hero in the spring and executed as a traitor in the fall. One image that sticks in my mind is that of vodka being served by the pailful to the executioners to help them deaden themselves to the overwhelming numbers of people they had to execute every day.

Dominic Basulto says

For anyone who has ever lived or visited in Moscow, this is a must-read. The book - described as a "dazzling 650-page feat of historical reconstruction" by The Atlantic - captures in gripping detail every facet of Moscow life in the year 1937, which turns out to be the most momentous year ever in the history of the Russian capital. It's 1937, 20 years after the revolution, and the country is just about to experience the peak of Stalin's Great Terror. Everyday life is like a scene out of Bulgakov's "Master and Margarita" (a whole explanation of which occupies the first chapter of the book), in which Moscow's citizens are at a loss to explain the absurdity, terror and irrationality of events. People disappearing overnight, never to be heard from again. Former Communist legends like Bukharin being exposed and denounced as traitors in massive show trials. And all the while, the jazz plays on, explorers are headed to the North Pole, parades are being held regularly in Red Square and grandiose plans are being made to create the future Soviet city. Fittingly, the book ends with a description of the "Foundation Pit" (the inspiration for Andrei Platonov's work of the same name) - a huge hole in the center of the city near the Kremlin where a famous cathedral had been detonated a few years earlier by the Communists to make way for the Palace of the Soviets, which never ended up being built after the Germans invaded in 1938.
