



The Unquiet Ghost: Russians Remember Stalin

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Although some twenty million people died during Stalin's reign of terror, only with the advent of glasnost did Russians begin to confront their memories of that time. In 1991, Adam Hochschild spent nearly six months in Russia talking to gulag survivors, retired concentration camp guards, and countless others. The result is a riveting evocation of a country still haunted by the ghost of Stalin.

The Unquiet Ghost: Russians Remember Stalin Details

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From Reader Review The Unquiet Ghost: Russians Remember Stalin for online ebook

Tariq Mahmood says

The great Soviet gulag system, its victims and its enforcers were the same people, of the same belief, which is what makes this book so riveting. Adam has tackled the complex and deeply moving set of events as a travelogue, giving a deep insight into the Russian psychology. Adam juxtaposes real stories with numbers of killed and killed with great effect. His analogy of the Russian denial and our own present day denial with the looming environmental fiasco are most potent.

How should the Russians deal with this deeply engrained denial? For the misrepresentation of history by the elder generation destroys their credibility with the young generation making teaching history a major challenge. One way to approach this task would be to focus on the ideas instead of the names of the people attested to these ideas, which would encourage the students to think outside the box of denial.

Tamsin Ramone says

Adam Hochschild's writing abilities are unsurpassed. The manner in which he handles this sensitive topic is well researched, informative, interesting and respectful. Hochschild hasn't found it necessary to embellish on the terribly sad stories he has been told and as such you get a very clear picture of how Russians remember Stalin, the great purge and the times and silences surrounding the life and death of this dictator. Even after speaking to people who worked as guards, or relatives of guards, Hochschild still respects the situation they found themselves in, how their actions were truly barbaric, and the life they are trying to consolidate in the wake of this barbarism.

If you have any interest in Russian history, in Stalin, communism, or just how a situation can snowball until the occupants are truly stuck, I highly recommend this book. It's a true work of literary genius.

After reading Bury The Chains by Adam Hochschild my sisters and mum all found the need to write to Hochschild and commend him on a brilliant novel. As brilliant as I found BTC (and I did find it brilliant!) it is this book that inspires me to write to him as he put himself into the research. He lived in Moscow, met and interviewed many people who spent time in gulags across the country, spent time inside the KGB agency and even went to Kolyma (an infamous gulag).

All this commitment to delivering an unbiased version of the horrors of Stalin's USSR deserved recognition. Even if it's just from little Ol' me.

Mary Abad says

I'm a huge fan of history and I understand that it is highly suggested to acknowledge how the author depicts a part of history (watching out for biases etc). Adam does a phenomenal job by representing Stalin's history (and the history he left) through the memories stained in the minds of many Russian citizens, including members from the KGB. The different stories from the different people affected in the reign of Stalin were compelling and honest and Adam writes their history as though he lived it. For me, this book was like

finding torn pages from a history book, unravelling stories I have never heard before.

Sooz says

i enjoyed this book so much, because it didn't just explore the horrid things that had occurred during the Stalin years -though there was enough of that to get a REALLY clear idea of what had happened - but it also explores the years immediately after.... the years before glasnost. if Stalin's great purge was Russia's apocalypse, the post-apocalypse was the great silence that followed it. AND i really like the study Hochschild makes of the phenomenon and his reluctance to blame, as if he wrote it hoping we could actually learn something about ourselves. here are some of my favourite quotes ... this one about opening the records from that time: 'not for vengeance. How could Russia ever stage a Nuremberg Trials ... when those complicit in the gulag included practically the whole country - one part denouncing, one part judging, a third shooting people, a fourth guarding the camps. It wouldn't stand to reason to try to find out who are more guilty it would trigger the same conflict all over again ..'

this one on the question everyone asks ... how could the Russians have gone along with it: 'the most absurd statements, the most implausible lies begin to take effect if repeated day in day out. arrests and accusations on such a scale CANNOT be arbitrariness ... once an apparatus is in motion, it is bound to gather momentum and its progress cannot be controlled. Vigilance! Are you blind? Can't you see the enemy? Vigilance became a matter of competition. Haven't you discovered an enemy yet? You mean to say your organization is the ONLY one without an enemy? How strange. How suspect.'

and this one: 'God merely decrees the future ... the tsar can remake the past.'

and more about how it could have happened: 'Soviet communism from the beginning was, psychologically, a religious culture. Just as the Great Purge was Inquisitorial in its fervor, so rehabilitation, and posthumous restoration of Party membership, have offered a kind of sainthood to martyres.

and: 'The closest parallel to the Purge is the great witch craze of early modern Europe. There too, the victims were accused of possessing powers, and there too, the whole epidemic is still difficult to understand. ... Belief in a devil can be as attractive as belief in a god.

Hochschild goes on to explain the political and social conditions that spawned both the witch hunts and later the Russian purge and how those conditions lead to an irrepressible NEED for a scapegoat. Hochschild does a great job of creating a very clear and detailed picture that tries to encourage healing and unity rather than further scapegoating ... as evident by this last quote:

'perhaps some people are born saints and some devils, but most of us are somewhere in between, influenced, in the end, by what the people around us are doing.'

Jan Peczkis says

The Especial Horrors of the Gulag in Kolyma. And Not Only the Remains of Jewish Dead Are

Disrespected!

Nowadays, in common Holocaust materials, Poles are blamed for looting the cremains of Jews and of insufficiently respecting the sites of Jewish dead in Poland. However, grave robbery is as old as human history, and disrespect to the dead is likewise.

For example, author Hochschild describes how the remains of Soviet dead can be treated. He writes, "There are so many bones still lying about, said one account I read, that today in the summer Kolyma children use human skulls to gather blueberries.(p. xxv). We never hear about THAT.

KOLYMA: MUCH LIKE A NAZI GERMAN DEATH CAMP--ONLY SLOWER DEATHS

The gold-mining camps in Kolyma had an annual death rate of 20%. (pp. xxiv). Historians' estimates, of the total death toll at Kolyma alone range from 250,000 to over 1,000,000. (p. 237).

Some parts of Kolyma rivalled the death rate of the Nazi German death camps. Hochschild compared the fate of prisoners, depending exactly upon where they were sent, to the decisions made by Mengele at Auschwitz. He asks, "Or to a place like Camp Expeditiiony, near the Arctic Circle, where from one group of six hundred prisoners sent there in 1939, one hundred survived the first winter, and only one was still alive six years later?"

Jenny says

I found this book thought provoking and I liked that the author set out to answer specific questions, such as where do you draw the line between persecutor and persecuted, and how can power and atrocity, on such large scale like this, evolve in the first place? I learned a lot and I think the book contains important lessons for the future.

Sarah says

My good, this book is impressive. The very fact and scope of it- that the author traveled to Russia in 1991 and managed to interview a vast array of individuals about the legacy of Stalin's brutal regime- blows me away. I was particularly entranced by his interview with Vladimir Glebov, son of Lev Kaminev (one of the original Politburo members later executed under Stalin), but there wasn't a single wasted interview in the book.

And much like his later book King Leopold's Ghost, Hochschild reflects on the darkest parts of humanity, and does not flinch while bearing witness. You would think a book about a subject this dark would be almost too hard to read, but he brings such a sense of humanity to every moment, it allows the reader to look into and consider that void without drowning in it.

Debbie Morrison says

An exceptionally well-written book about Stalin's rule that left a country's people devastated—millions dead

due to Stalin's repressive regime fueled by his paranoia and drive for power. I chose this book as I wanted to learn more about Russia's history—what happened after the revolution in 1917. I recently read Richard Pipes "Russia Under the Old Regime"; it covered Russia's history up to the fall of the Tsar in 1917. Though a dense read, it was a good precursor to "The Unquiet Ghost".

Through the stories Hochschild shares of his travels throughout Russia in 1991 where he interviews family members of those killed in Gulags, Gulag survivors, government officials and other Russians with stories to tell, the reader learns of the devastating consequences of Stalin's regime. I agree with other reviews that Hochschild's writing is exceptional, he writes with sensitivity, thoroughness and sometimes humor without the melodrama. The story of Russia is sad; when reading of the repression, the fear that people have (and perhaps still do) lived with, it makes one appreciate living in a place that embodies democracy.

Hochschild includes excerpts from poems and letters of survivors and family members, and from well-known Russian authors. They reveal pain, fear and loneliness. The words below are from author Victor Serge, Russian revolutionary and author.

*If we roused the peoples and made the continent quake,
...Began to make everything anew with these dirty old stone,
These tired hands, and the meager souls that were left us,
It was not in order to haggle with you now
Sad revolution, our mother, our child, our flesh,
Our decapitated dawn, our night with its stars askew...*

—Page 143

Ryan says

A tough book to read, not because it isn't good - its as good as Hochschild's others - but because the story isn't over. There is a sense of beginning and end with WWI and even the Congo atrocities - clearly the events affect today, but they are generally considered part of the past. The Purge lives on in survivors, in the education system, in pretty much every part of Russian life. Hochschild could not be a detached observer, telling a story and providing analysis - the open wounds were everywhere, perhaps because there was no clear bad guy. As he points out, the Russians did this to themselves - not an external invading power - and the Revolution had been greeted with such hope for good and positive change. I think the toughest story to read was of meeting a woman whose father was in charge of sending thousands to their deaths. She clearly adored her father, and her stories of him were quite sweet, but she knew and was still dealing with knowing that he was responsible for all those deaths.

Excellent, but tough and painful to read.

coneC says

Adam Hochschild spent 6 months in Russia in 1991 and interviewed Russians who were grappling with their memories of the Stalin Era. He was lucky to visit Russia at a very opportune moment. Former gulag camps were available to visitors, plenty of people who lived in the Stalin era were still alive, and mass graves had

recently been opened. Through his talks with perpetrators and surviving victims, Hochschild explores the extent to which Stalin's legacy still casts a shadow over Russia. His book is organized into five major sections, which we will briefly discuss the contents of. There are several criticisms of the book to address, but most of the issues in his book fall under his writing style and use of sources.

From the very beginning of the book, Hochschild forms very ambitious assumptions that draw from just a few spoken words which he applies facile psychologizing to. In the introduction, he discusses an early encounter he had with a Russian at the beginning of his travels. A few Americans that he was with were recalling in a jovial manner arrests that were made during protests decades earlier, and a Russian rebuked them for talking so lightly about imprisonment. The way he approaches this very quick incident is repeated throughout the book. From one comment the man made, Hochschild "guessed this man must have had someone from his family...sent to prison or shot during Stalin's time. He still could not talk about it openly, however, especially with a group of foreigners...". The issue with writing style here is very plain to see - Hochschild admits that he has no idea why the man made such a comment, so he surmises that the man must have had a family member who was killed or sent to prison. It is fair for him to make this assumption, but he takes it even further. He states that the man was incapable of talking about "it", and finally he weaves in highly illustrative and metaphorical language talk to further his reflection on the minuscule moment.

A notion that Hochschild tries to push is that we can better understand our own capacity for destruction and cruelty through examining the Great Purge and its aftermath. Very similar notions have been offered by genocide scholars, such as Christopher Browning or James Waller. I think it is quite possible that Hochschild may have even synthesized some of Browning's arguments, given that Browning's famous book on the Nazi police battalion came out two years before Hochschild's book did. Another reason to believe that Hochschild may have drawn from Browning's book is that he spent two pages discussing Robert Jay Lifton's book on Nazi doctors. Lifton is a widely received genocide scholar, so we know that Hochschild has at least been inspired by genocide scholars. His reference to Lifton was unsurprising, because Hochschild did not resist drawing comparisons between the Soviet Union under Stalin and Nazi Germany throughout the entirety of the book. This is a major flaw in his work. Even if we embrace the higher end of the death counts or totalitarian understanding of Stalin, the comparisons to Nazi Germany and Hitler are superficial. Between the two regimes, there are clear and undeniable distinctions. The extent to which Hochschild connects the two regimes results in a normalizing of Nazi Germany or other genocidal regimes. In studying genocide, we are presented with plenty of grey area. What Hochschild does is create an even broader scope of grey area, merely because he defaults to this easy retreat so many times in his book. We should appreciate some of his efforts to spot similarities, but not entirely. For example, in the final chapter of the last section of the book, Hochschild discusses the connection his interviewee, Biryukov, has to Kolyma and the public square in Magadan specifically. The public square of Magadan was once surrounded by the administration of the Kolyma camps, NKVD offices, a prison, courts and an interrogation center. Hochschild notes that "more human misery was directly administered from this square than from anywhere else on earth, except possibly the arrivals platform at Auschwitz, where Dr. Mengele decided who would live and who would die."

Structural and spatial observations are usually very profitable for substantiating our understanding of the repressive apparatuses of authoritarian systems. Though Hochschild created an easily understandable analogy, we can still spot a major difference and we can see it embodied in one person: Dr. Mengele.

As previously mentioned, the book is split into five major sections. Each section deals with a period of his traveling Russia and is titled after the region he was in. Throughout the book, Hochschild indicates either where he was, where he was going, or the particular building or outdoor location that his conversations took place in. This repetitive description turns the book into a journal, and it is quite easy to perceive much of the points he makes about his conversations as matters of his opinion. This, in some ways, detracts from his efforts to dispel ignorance as to how the Great Purge could have happened, or why so many kept quiet about their experiences in the Gulag. Hochschild tells us in the preface that he had not set out to grapple with how evil the actions under Stalin were, but the lines of thought necessary to even allow such atrocities. Perhaps the most lucid and coherent answer Hochschild gives can be found in Chapter 8, "The Stalin in Us". Midway

through this chapter, he starts to offer us certain “habits of thinking that dominated Russia” which he identified through research and through his experiences with Russians. Of these habits of thinking, he says the most obvious one is the Russian tradition of absolute power at the top and passive obedience beneath it. He also goes on to explain Russia’s tendency toward creeds which claim to deliver from suffering, Russians’ tendencies toward scapegoating, and the immense pressure for everyone to join in the scapegoating. None of these points are poor ones. On the contrary, they are all viable and worth investigating. What he wants us to see, is that the utopian dream of socialism in the Soviet Union was implemented in ways that both exacerbated pre-existing predispositions and also devastated many. A culture was formed where deviation, even verbalized discussion, was forbidden. He says rather eloquently, “In a society that demanded group condemnations, many rushed to condemn before even being asked.”

Adam Hochschild certainly cites valuable sources in his book, such as writings from Solzhenitsyn and poems from survivors. The most common source he has is direct quotations from the people he happened to brush shoulders with. Memoirs and books which share the stories of victims and perpetrators are undoubtedly important. This is because we hear from the very mouths of those who experienced the extraordinary times under discussion. The problem we run into with Hochschild’s book is that Hochschild has ten or twenty sentences to say for every one sentence an interviewee says. We get the impression that after Hochschild formed the beliefs behind his claims given in the chapter “The Stalin in Us”, he then took the liberty of applying those claims to the words of the people he quotes. Aside from that, he took far too much liberty in constructing characters out of the people. Early in the book Hochschild tells us of his talks with Shuv, an elderly retired mechanical engineer. Just based off the pace at which Shuv spoke, Hochschild says that Shuv spoke “with the anxious methodicalness of an elderly person afraid that he might forget something”. It’s almost degrading for Hochschild to make points like this about the people he includes in his book. His dubious assumption about the pace of Shuv’s speaking points toward where Hochschild came up short in answering the main questions of his book. Hochschild dedicates the second chapter in the book to memory, and the amazing resilience human memory can have through decades. Oddly enough, Hochschild mentions Primo Levi and how Primo Levi never had his identification tattoo removed. I say this is odd because Primo Levi says in his book about Holocaust survivors, *The Drowned and the Saved*, that memory is extremely contingent and unreliable. Levi asks “How much of the concentration camp world is dead will not return, like slavery and the dueling code?”. To paraphrase Levi: The anxiety that such unconscionable realities can arouse in people are often deformed in the individual’s mental discourse and replaced with a personal, falsified and convenient reality. I will not say that this take on memory is necessarily and entirely correct, but I do think it is worth considering. We also know that most of the people Hochschild presents to us were quite old. If Hochschild thinks that Shuv was struggling with his memory, then the majority of his book does not serve to convince us of his answers.

Marik Casmon says

This book, copyrighted in 1994, is a kind of political travelogue. Its objective, shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, was to take advantage of the thawing of the flow of information in those days. Specifically, the author took his family to live in Russia and while there, he examined the effect of Stalin’s policies on the Russian people, including everyone from gulag prisoners to guards to those who remained neither. It is fairly well-written, but its greatest virtue is its anecdotes from people who lived in Stalinist Russia. “Anecdotes” is, of course, a deceptively mild use of diction, for they were split between one kind of horror story and another. There were people who suffered through horrible times and were willing to talk about them and there were their contemporaries who suffered through the same times but tried oh-so-hard to deny what had happened. Any reader interested in extreme human experiences and/or political extremism would enjoy this book, I would think.

What is also interesting to me is that the 30s spawned two of the greatest political monsters of many centuries (not that they don't have rivals). I think it's more than the economic circumstances of the time, but I'm not sure what more. Cultural explanations abound--the Russian history of submission to authority, the powerful German resentment at the Versailles Treaty and its racism--but the 30s seemed to go far beyond such mundane explanations in the horrors they created and then sustained.

David Groves says

Books that arise from oral history are often riveting, and since this one covers one of the most riveting and dramatic periods in world history, it is engrossing. The stories that the author tells have the ring of truth about them, featuring unexpected twists, unlikely victims, even more unlikely survivors, and double-reverse endings. More than one story left me with moist eyes, covering the breadth and depth of emotions and ambitions that make up a life. The author is a fine writer with good, straight prose, however, much of it feels like he didn't put a final polish on it. Still, with all the astonishing moments in it--it's filled to overflowing with such moments--it is still an extraordinary book. As a liberal, it changed the way that I think about Russia, the Soviet Union, and communism.

Sarah says

A must read for anyone interested in social-political tragedies and the human dynamics that generate neighbourly betrayal, mass atrocities, and other social horrors. Not a light-hearted read, but a very important one.

Richp says

This is an account of what happened. It has both an historic overview and individual stories of victims and their survivors. It also devoted space the deep questions of how and why this happened, especially how so many, almost everyone, either did nothing or cooperated. His attempts to answer these questions are better than most others I have read.

Rothschild is about 75 to and apparently still active. He has written a number of books about similarly disturbing subjects. I wonder if he will produce a comparison study of these atrocities, or if he has and I am not aware of it?

ratherread says

This is not my usual genre of books to read. After reading the fabulous epic "The Bronze Horseman" trilogy, I wanted to read more about Stalin-era Russia.

This is a great book. During Stalin's reign of terror (1924-1953), he was responsible for the mass murder of 20+ million of his own citizens, either by execution or by working them to death as slaves in his many gulags (forced labor prisons). Not until almost 40 years after Stalin's death and the end of the Cold War (1989), did "The Great Silence" about what Stalin had done to his country end. In 1991, Adam Hochschild,

an American journalist traveled for 6 months throughout Russia and interviewed prison survivors, retired gulag guards/officers, secret police officers (NKVD / KGB), and family members of the dead and missing. He was also able to visit gulag sites and even spent the night in one of Stalin's many luxury vacation homes, where he interviewed one of Stalin's retired housekeepers. Given the age of the people interviewed (50 to 90 years old), this was indeed a very rare opportunity.

This book reads like a novel. I found the stories mesmerizing and the people he interviewed fascinating. Out of empathy and respect, Adam does not go into detail about tortures. I agree with "The New York Times Book Review": "The characters and dramatic situations Mr. Hochschild encounters are nothing short of magnificent."
