SOVIET TERROR, AMERICAN AMNESIA

There has been a striking asymmetry between the American responses to the two great mass murders of our century, the Nazi and the Soviet. Why?

PAUL HOLLANDER

It has been customary in our times to make reference to the Holocaust whenever we wish to allude to some unrivaled evil. The Holocaust became the undisputed reference point for self-evident evil, and for good reason. By the same token, words like “Nazi,” “Auschwitz,” “Storm Troopers,” and “Gestapo” are reflexively appended to political or social phenomena we wish to discredit conclusively.

It rarely happens that self-evident evil is denoted by reference to the mass murders committed in the Soviet Union under Stalin. Words like “Soviet,” “Soviet Communist,” “Kolyma,” or “KGB” are rarely used to discredit political movements and practices. It is doubtful that one in a thousand Americans knows what Kolyma was, or would recognize the name of a single Soviet concentration camp. It is just as unlikely that one in a thousand Americans has heard the names of Beria, Serov, Yagoda, or Yezhov, who used to be in charge of the Soviet mass murders.

Indeed, as Soviet mass graves have been discovered, one after another, in the last few years, the American media have greeted the discoveries with remarkable equanimity. One alone, in Kuropati, near Minsk, was estimated by Soviet sources to contain over a quarter-million remains; Bykovnia, near Kiev, a similar number, killed during the 1930s. No Russian reporters or officials appeared on our television screens to comment on these discoveries, and no American television correspondents reported breathlessly from the scene. We were also spared the reflections of academic specialists regarding the significance of these findings for a reassessment of the Soviet mass murders.

It is not my purpose to dispute the uniqueness of the Holocaust. The question here raised is why, in comparison to the intensity of the moral outrage evoked by the Holocaust, the Soviet mass murders have stimulated so little moral energy.

Genocide or Mass Murder?

It is tempting to suggest that the differences between the character and procedures of the Nazi and Soviet mass murders account for the different moral responses to these slaughters.

In Nazi Germany the state set up highly efficient extermination plants (gas chambers, crematoria) with no less a goal than the total elimination of the Jewish population of Europe, perhaps some day of the whole world. It was a carefully planned, highly organized operation that had spectacular results: the killing of six million Jews and smaller numbers of other “undesirables.”

These mass murders gave rise to the term “Holocaust” and popularized the concept of “genocide”—so much so that since the 1960s it has been applied with diminishing discrimination to far lesser outrages, such as the “cultural genocide” of some minority underrepresented in institutions of higher education, or policies of proposing birth control to unwed mothers. Radical feminists called pornography “genocide”; for some “experts” of the “recovery movement,” childhood is a “holocaust”; the homosexual organization Act-Up asserted that “Dinkins’s policy is genocidal.”

The Soviet mass murders were in significant ways different from the Nazi ones. There was no plan corresponding to the “final solution” (the killing of a group of people in order to purify the world of evil); no partic-
ular ethnic group was singled out for total elimination; indeed, the victims came from every social stratum and ethnic group of Soviet society. There were no extermination camps using modern technology and machinery. The victims were killed in relatively old-fashioned and inefficient ways: either shot or allowed to die of starvation, cold, and disease in what the Soviet authorities called “corrective labor camps.” (According to Mikhail Heller and Aleksandr Nekrich, two Russian émigré historians, “it was Lenin and Trotsky who were the first Europeans to use the term ‘concentration camp’” as early as 1918.)

On the other hand the total number of the Soviets’ victims was far greater than the Nazis’, if we add in those who were victims of politically induced famine and deportations. According to General Volkogonov, head of the parliamentary commission on rehabilitation, “from 1929 to 1953 . . . 21.5 million people were repressed. Of these a third were shot, the rest sentenced to imprisonment where many also died.” These figures did not include famine victims and deported ethnic groups.

A large portion of the Soviet victims, some might argue, were not actually killed, they just could not survive the harsh living conditions in the camps, including the bad weather, not subject to human control. These living conditions, some might further contend, resulted less from ill will or deliberate policy than from overall backwardness, slowness, and even the needs of the economy. After all, slave labor was badly needed to carry out the great projects of the early five-year plans, and if mortality rates were high, these regrettable sacrifices were exacted to accomplish worthy objectives. There was one striking expression of a matchless cynicism the two camp systems had in common. At the entrance to the Nazi camps were signs reading “Arbeit macht frei” (Labor liberates), while over the gates of Kolyma there was the inscription “Labor is a matter of honor, courage, and heroism.”

Doubting the Soviet Record

A NOOTHER possibility is that it was the relative paucity of information about the Soviet mass murders that explains the different moral reactions. While in the post-Stalin era the quantitative dimensions of Soviet mass murders began to emerge, they remained an abstraction for the public at large, even for the well educated. As Arthur Koestler noted half a century ago: “Statistics don’t bleed; it is the detail that counts.” And when gradu-
But these works attracted little public attention and sparked little moral outrage; it is this tepid reaction that invites further inquiry.

The controversy that surrounded Viktor Kravchenko is a case in point. The flower of the French intelligentsia vilified Kravchenko (a Soviet defector and author of two important books) in the late 1940s and ridiculed his allegations about Soviet camps. The attitude of the Left in the United States was no more charitable. A reporter for The Nation sneered in 1949: “The man [Kravchenko] is very cheap . . . What he lacks is distinction and culture . . . he is also a very poor propaganda agent. He commits mistakes by exposing his hand at points where the game demands that he hide it.”

At the time of his defection (in 1944) Time magazine had written: “Editorial comment [on him] was minimum and cautious. Most U.S. editors, mindful of the delicacy of U.S.-Soviet relations . . . and of the 26-year-old difficulty in getting at truth in any item dealing with Russia, did not want to stick out their necks.”

More recently Noam Chomsky expressed (also in The Nation) grave doubts about the credibility of Cambodian refugees and their accounts of the massacres perpetrated by the Pol Pot regime.

It must also be recalled that after World War II over two million Soviet refugees in Western Europe (prisoners of war and slave laborers taken by the Germans) were forcibly repatriated with the assistance of British and American troops—an event that failed to generate widespread moral outrage at the time.

The collapse of the Soviet Union created a new situation. It has now become possible to construct a visual (as well as historical-statistical) record of its dark deeds, to visit former camps and newly discovered mass graves, to interview survivors and relatives of victims. While there have been a few reports, American journalists have not been flocking to the sites of Soviet mass murders; camera crews have not been recording the remains of the Gulag Archipelago. (Rare exceptions include a 1989 60 Minutes segment about the “last political prisoners” in the Perm 35 camp; a segment on Kuropati mass graves in the PBS program “Inside Gorbatchev’s Russia,” produced by Hedrick Smith; a March 1990 National Geographic article entitled “Last Days of the Gulag?” and a March 1993 New York Times Magazine article on the discovery of skeletons in Kolinpashevo, Siberia.)

There have been no television documentaries of the Gulag, not on public television, CNN, or the networks. Russian television programs about these mass murders have not been shown on American television. No Hollywood movie has attempted to show any aspect of Soviet repression and terror, with the partial exception of Dr. Zhivago. (There was one English film based on Solzhenitsyn’s One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, and an American cable TV film in 1985 entitled Gulag that was more of a spy thriller.) There have been no conferences or symposia comparing the Nazi extermination camps to the Gulag Archipelago; no inquiry into the applicability of the “obedience to authority” theory of mass murders (devised by Stanley Milgram to explain Nazi murderousness).

It is not unreasonable to believe that the same political predispositions which in recent times expressed themselves in ridiculing the idea that the Soviet Union was an evil empire played a part in the neglect of the topic of the Soviet mass murders.

No Moral Equivalence

Those left-of-center on the political spectrum and most deeply estranged from American society seemed to have had the greatest difficulty expressing moral indignation about the Soviet atrocities—even when their existence was no longer in doubt.

If there ever was a book one would have expected to delve into the moral dimensions of the Soviet mass murders, it was Sanctions for Evil: Sources of Social Destructiveness, a collection of 18 essays by American social scientists published in 1971. The dust-jacket made clear, however, that the moral concerns of the editors and contributors would not extend to the outrages perpetrated by the Soviet Union and other Communist systems: “My Lai. Biafra. Detroit riots. Hiroshima. Dachau. Lynchings. Indian massacres. Salem witch hunts. Spanish Inquisition. Dynastic wars. The crusades. The inventory is endless.”

The endless inventory had no room for the victims of the Soviet Purges and labor camps. The only reference in the entire book to Communism or Communists was as victims of persecution in the United States; fear of Communism was a pathology of American society. There was also a vigorous defense of the exclusion of those on the Left from the famous study of the authoritarian personality.

In 1969 Michael Parenti, a political scientist and relentless critic of American society, had this to say about Soviet camps:

For many years anti-Communist writers claimed that at any one time, anywhere from 15 to 25 million Soviet citizens were suffering the horrors of slave labor camps . . . By such statistics, the sum total of people incarcerated . . . over a 25-year period would have consisted of an astonishing proportion of the Soviet population; the support and supervision of labor camps would have been Russia’s single largest enterprise. That the USSR could have maintained this kind of prison population is, to say the least, highly questionable.

Another illustration of these attitudes has been the fate of a remarkable document published in English in 1980, The First Guidebook to Prisons and Concentration Camps of the Soviet Union. It was put together by Avraam Shifrin, a former inmate of these camps. This massive and meticulous work provided information about two thousand penal institutions, complete with maps, charts, and even some photographs; it also included a list of 41 “death camps,” “where prisoners, forced to work under dangerous, unhealthy conditions for the So-
viet war machine, face virtually certain death." The book was barely noticed; its author did not appear on talk shows, and it received a total of two short reviews in the United States in publications few people read.

A memorable example of the mindset here examined was reflected in a 1987 public-television program entitled "The Faces of the Enemy," produced by Sam Keen, better known as the author of Fire in the Belly, a popular male consciousness-raising book. The program was designed to explore the links between dehumanization, political propaganda, and extremism, yet made virtually no reference to such phenomena when manifested by Communist movements or systems. (I wrote to Mr. Keen pointing out the one-sidedness of the program but got no reply.) While the atrocities associated with Nazis, right-wingers, and U.S. policy in Vietnam were well covered, there was no reference to Stalin, Mao, the Cultural Revolution, or Pol Pot.

This historic amnesia and asymmetry is also apparent in high-school textbooks in social studies and contemporary history, which rarely make reference to the Soviet (or other Communist) mass murders alongside the Nazi ones. Teaching at a large public university for a quarter-century I have yet to encounter a student who was aware of the Soviet mass murders before entering the university; the majority graduate without learning of such matters.

It should be noted that while social scientists in general paid little attention to the Soviet mass murders, there were important exceptions, notably Irving Louis Horowitz, author of Taking Lives: Genocide and State Power (1982), and Terence Des Pres, author of The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps (1976). Both examined comparatively the Nazi and Soviet mass murders and concentration camps.

But as the so-called revisionists (their common denominator was a rejection of the totalitarian model and a less critical view of the Soviet system) became more prominent in Soviet studies during the 1970s and '80s new attempts were made to minimize the Soviet mass murders. Best known for these efforts has been Professor J. Arch Getty, who sought to bring new perspectives...

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In Memory

At long last there will be some official American recognition of the victims of Communism. The U.S. Congress has passed, and President Clinton has signed, a public law authorizing an international memorial—for which a private organization, the Victims of Communism Memorial Fund, is raising money—to be constructed at "an appropriate location within the boundaries of the District of Columbia," i.e., on the Mall, where millions of tourists and every American President can see it.

In their deliberate mass murder of civilians, the Communists are the blood-stained world champions. According to conservative estimates, more than 100 million people have been murdered by the Communist rulers of the Soviet Union, China, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Eastern Europe since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The killing continues in countries like China today.

A few dedicated scholars, starting with Robert Conquest, have written about the Communist holocaust. Conquest's The Great Terror, published in 1968, was the first work to suggest the magnitude of Stalin's murders. Later, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn carefully detailed the operation of the Soviet Union's slave-labor camps in The Gulag Archipelago. Now R. J. Rummel, in his epic work-in-progress on what he calls democide (the killing of peoples), suggests that even these works may have underestimated the magnitude of this holocaust.

Drawing upon sources ranging from Conquest to Solzhenitsyn and using a conservative mathematical formula, Rummel calculates that approximately 61.9 million people were murdered by the Communist government of the Soviet Union in the seven decades between 1917 and 1987. This mass killing included the wholesale murder of several hundred thousand Don Cossacks in 1919, the starving to death of about 5 million Ukrainian peasants in 1932-33, the extermination of perhaps 6.5 million kulaks (well-off peasants) from 1930 to 1937, the execution of 1 million Party members in the Great Terror of 1937-38, and the massacre of all Trotskyists in the Gulag.

Attempting to explain how Lenin and Stalin could knowingly command the death of millions, Solzhenitsyn wrote: "Ideology—that is what gives evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others' eyes, so that he won't hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors."

An image that came to Conquest's mind when thinking of Stalin was Goya's Saturn Devouring his Children. But Stalin was Saturn magnified one million times, for the Soviet dictator devoured men, women and children, the equivalent of entire nations. Milovan Djilas said bluntly: "All in all, Stalin was a monster."

But his crimes against humanity were almost equalized by those of another monster, the Great Helmsman of China, Mao Tse-tung. Rummel estimates that from 1949 through 1987, the Chinese Communists killed 38.7 million Chinese, Tibetans, and other minorities. Communist democide has been four times more deadly for the Chinese people than all the wars and rebellions of this century in which China has been involved, including the Boxer Rebellion and the Sino-Japanese, Korean, and Civil Wars.

For Chinese Communists, the enemy was the landlord, the wealthy...
to the Purges, treating them largely as an administrative procedure whereby certain Party members are periodically expelled. He also sought to discredit the accounts of the surviving Soviet camp inmates. More recently Professor Getty in a journal article arrived at higher estimates of the number of victims but in another recent publication, edited by Professors Getty and Roberta Manning (Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives, 1993), there is a renewed effort to keep the numbers down. More interesting, however, from the standpoint of the moral response to such matters, is the interpretation of the outrages acknowledged. The pursuit of detachment brings back a remark Czeslaw Milosz made in his Captive Mind forty years ago:

From the moment we acknowledge historical necessity to be something in the nature of a plague, we shall stop shedding tears over the fate of the victims. A plague or an earthquake does not usually provoke indignation. One admits they are catastrophes, folds the morning paper, and continues eating breakfast.

What one finds in the new analysis, if not exactly an evocation of "historical necessity," is certainly akin to a plague or earthquake. Getty and his colleagues are anxious to diminish both Stalin's personal responsibility and that of the political system he created; they consider it a mistake to seek "the origins of Stalinist terror in the person of the deranged dictator, the 'administrative system' of the time, or the very nature of Leninism." What then are we left with?

We are left with an explanation of these events which denudes them of a moral focus or definition. Getty and William Chase wrote:

When the terror erupted in 1936–37, it quickly went out of control, chaotically reflecting personal hatreds [that is, at the local level—P.H.] and propelling itself with fear. Explanations of the terror . . . should be supplemented by approaches that account for lack of coordination, local confusion, and personal conflicts.

"Uncoordinated" terror reduces the responsibility of the political system—as do "local confusion" and

peasant, the middle class, all to be exterminated or "won over." They set out to transform the most populous nation in the world into a Communist society, regardless of the cost.

Mao revealed in the blood-letting, once boasting: "What's so unusual about Emperor Shih Huang of the Chin Dynasty? He had buried alive 460 scholars only, but we have buried alive 46,000 scholars."

IT IS understandable that Communists would be still as a grave about their blood-stained history, but what excuse do liberals offer for their silence?

Lincoln Steffens laid down the liberal dictum decades ago when he declared: "Treason to the Tsar wasn't a sin; treason to Communism is."

Whether or not most American intellectuals would express that credo so openly, they clearly live by it. There was, for example, Professor Paul Samuelson's confident assertion in 1976 that it was "a vulgar mistake to think that most people in Eastern Europe are miserable." There was Professor Jerry Hough's argument that Brezhnev's regime was a modern pluralist state much like our own. Hough is most (in)famous for insisting in print and on television that the number of victims of Stalin's purges was really rather low: "A figure in the low hundreds of thousands seems much more probable than one in the high hundreds of thousands, and even tens of thousands is quite conceivable, maybe even probable."

There was John Kenneth Galbraith, the man of a thousand opinions, who wrote in 1984, just a few months before Mikhail Gorbachev proclaimed an economic crisis: "That the Soviet system has made great material progress . . . is evident both from the statistics and from the general urban scene. . . . One sees it in the appearance of solid well-being of the people on the streets. . . . Partly the Russian system succeeds because, in contrast with the Western industrial economies, it makes full use of its manpower."

For the Princeton Sovietologist Stephen F. Cohen, the critical issue of the 1980s was not the invasion of Afghanistan, or the aiming of SS-18s and SS-20s at Europe, or the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate, but the necessity of accepting Moscow's proper place in the world community. He denied the Soviet Union was a "closed" society (Andrei Sakharov was apparently a figment of the CIA's imagination). In fact, Cohen claimed that the post-Stalin leadership enjoyed a high level of popular support because it had made good on basic promises like comprehensive welfare protection and improved living standards for each succeeding generation.

Such staggering statements continue to be made. In 1992, Sovietologist Robert W. Thurston roundly criticized a brochure that the Library of Congress published about a Soviet exhibit because it "highlighted only the repressive nature of the Soviet regime, ignoring its positive [though flawed] accomplishments." "Nothing appeared," he complained, "on the growth of education, upward social mobility, increased availability of medical care, urbanization or anything that might be considered positive." There was indeed considerable "upward social mobility" in the Soviet Union, as Arnold Beichman has noted, after Stalin executed several thousand marshals, generals, and other officers in the 1930s. In allowing lieutenants to become colonels and captains to become generals, Stalin gave new meaning to the term meritocracy.

But being liberal means never having to say you're sorry, and one wonders whether, for these people, the Victims of Communism monument will be any more visible than the victims it memorializes.

—Lee Edwards
“personal conflicts.” Earlier in the same volume Getty and Manning also suggest (as they refer to the writing of Gabor Ritterspom, another of the revisionists) that

Stalin . . . Ezhov [chief of the NKVD] and highly placed NKVD operatives sincerely believed [my emphasis] that the nation was riddled with plots and conspiracies . . . He [Ritterspom] intimates that this response was rooted in traditional rural beliefs that the machinations of evil spirits accounted for commonplace misfortunes . . . Ritterspom’s work suggests that the elements of pre-revolutionary rural culture helped fuel Stalinist persecutions, under the impact of . . . scarcity . . . and leaders who shared, politicized and used such traditional beliefs.

What Getty and his colleagues here suggest is that conspiratorial fantasies sincerely entertained help to explain the terror and possibly also its spontaneous, uncoordinated aspects. (The Nazis too sincerely believed in conspiracies, and especially the Jewish world conspiracy, which in no way undermined their ability to devise efficient ways to get rid of the Jews, nor was the outside world inclined to diminish their responsibility on account of these delusions.) In turn, the non- or pre-Soviet factors—the “pre-revolutionary rural culture” and “traditional rural beliefs”—are enlisted to further dilute the responsibility of the Soviet system.

Elsewhere in the volume Roberta Manning wrote:

In the late 1930s, reformist efforts gave way to terror under the impact of the desperate conditions of the times. Political, social and economic tensions, aggravated by the onset of German expansionism, the sudden escalation of ongoing border conflicts with the Japanese in Manchuria, the 1936 crop failure, and national decisions to prosecute former members of defunct opposition movements created a tense political climate.

When all is said and done “the new perspectives on Stalinist terror” proffer an exceedingly wide range of factors and explanations, all of which appear independent of human political will. It is an approach that relieves the commentator from facing questions of moral responsibility or experiencing a sense of outrage.

The moral sensibility here discussed has not been limited to Americans. A small empirical study of my own (reported in my book Anti-Americanism, 1992) revealed a similar pattern among a group of Canadian academics. When asked (in a mail questionnaire) to list the most shocking historical events in this century, in the first instance 52 per cent chose the Holocaust while virtually nobody mentioned any Soviet outrage. In the second instance 15 per cent made reference to Stalin’s Purges. Further light was shed on these attitudes when, in response to the question whom they considered the least admirable political leaders in this century, Reagan was nominated in the first instance by 29 per cent, Stalin by 8.5 per cent.

Another telling illustration is the widespread ridicule President Reagan was subjected to for referring to the Soviet Union as “the evil empire.” So self-evidently wrongheaded was this attribution that no one bothered to explain why exactly it was so laughable.

The unpopularity of Solzhenitsyn among American liberals and left-of-center intelligentsia is yet another reflection of this mindset. His unhesitating association of the Soviet system with evil, his fiery anti-Communism and determination to give it a moral dimension, did not go down well. It was admissible to express regret or sorrow over the Soviet mass murders, but moral outrage was overdoing it. He also committed the unforgivable offense, Tom Wolfe noted, of suggesting that not only Stalinism and Leninism, but Marxism and the pursuit of Marxist socialism led to the camps. Joseph Brodsky thought that Solzhenitsyn’s unpopularity had to do with the “disturbing evidence” he presented which threatened the “mental fence that was constructed especially by the Western Left” around the topic of Soviet atrocities.

There is one notable similarity between responses to the Holocaust and the Soviet mass murders: in both instances there have been efforts to dispute the magnitude of the killings. However, Holocaust revisionists have been regarded as cranks and frauds. By contrast Professor Getty and his colleagues, although criticized by some, were hardly read out of the scholarly community. Purge revisionism has been more acceptable than Holocaust revisionism.

At a time when at last the Soviet Union joined Nazi Germany among the great defunct tyrannies of modern history and perpetrators of mass murder unrivalled in scale, there is new relevance to the question why the revulsion occasioned by the outrages of the Soviet system has been more muted than the corresponding sentiments stimulated by the Nazi misdeeds, especially at a time when new evidence of every kind (from mass graves to archives) has become available.

The Sources of Moral Obtuseness

SINCE public awareness of world events is largely the creation of the mass media, it is important to reiterate that media coverage of Soviet mass murders was largely non-existent while they were committed and sparse in the subsequent decades.

It should also be pointed out that not all Soviet mass murders were committed in the distant past. Spectacular mass murders of civilians were carried out by Soviet forces in Afghanistan under Brezhnev in the 1980s. They too received perfunctory coverage in the media, although it was occasionally noted that the civilians killed numbered in the millions.

If by now it has been established that atrocities of the Soviet system neither deeply penetrated popular and scholarly awareness (except that of a handful of specialists) nor stimulated moral responses comparable to those evoked by the Nazi ones, it remains to attempt to explain this phenomenon.

One explanation may be found in the longstanding, indeed chronic, Western ignorance and misperception of the Soviet system produced by attitudes ranging from
outright affection to benefit of the doubt. It is no longer in dispute that many Americans, and many highly distinguished ones among them, completely misread the nature of the Soviet system through much of its existence and especially during its most murderous decades. What is less widely recognized is how long these wrongheaded assessments persisted and how they might have influenced the moral responses, past and current, to the Soviet mass murders.

The roots of present-day attitudes reach back to the 1930s. In those years, when influential opinion-makers were impressed by the Soviet Union, either they found it inconceivable that such an admirable system could commit mass murder, or they wrote the atrocities off as the reasonable costs of the noble experiment.

Upton Sinclair wrote in 1938 about the collectivization and resultant famines:

They drove rich peasants off the land and sent them to work in lumber camps and on railroads. Maybe it cost a million lives—maybe . . . five million—but you cannot think intelligently about it unless you ask yourself how many millions it might have cost if the changes had not been made. . . . There has never been in human history great social change without killing.

In the mid 1940s it appeared to Jerome Davis, who was a professor at Yale Divinity School, that during the Purges

only a tiny percentage of the population was involved and the same years which saw the treason trials saw some of the greatest triumphs of Soviet planning. While the screws tightened on a tiny minority, the majority of Soviet people were enjoying greater prosperity.

In 1953, seeking to justify violence associated with the Purges, Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy, two American academic Marxists, asked:

Is violence used to perpetuate a state of affairs in which violence is inevitable, or . . . [is] it used in the interests of creating a truly human society from which it will be possible at long last to banish violence altogether?

This was a rationalization the Nazis could also have gladly endorsed; after all, once they purified the world of Jews there was not going to be any further need for violence.

Thus to the extent that the Soviet mass murders and political violence were confronted by those on the Left, and especially the far Left, they were morally neutralized by the time-honored device of viewing them as regrettable means to glorious ends. Legitimizers of Soviet violence were interested only in the ends and knew little of the means, nor were they anxious to learn about them. Sartre provided the most ambitious (and morally repellent) rationalization for this position:

Like it or not, the construction of socialism is privileged in that to understand it one must espouse its movement and adopt its goals; in a word, we judge what it does in the name of what it seeks and its means in the light of its ends . . .

Even more remarkable, in the 1930s the Soviet prison camps were often viewed as humane institutions of character reform rather than places of slow extermination. According to Anna Louise Strong, they were “remaking criminals.” Professor Gillin, a leading authority on penology and former president of the American Sociological Society, averred that “the system is devised to correct the offender and return him to society.” Ella Winter was delighted to learn that criminals were not treated as outcasts. Harold Laski (the hundredth anniversary of his birth recently celebrated) had no doubt about the superiority of the Soviet penal system over its Western counterparts. He was also struck “by the excellent relations between the prisoners and the warders . . .” (Reference to any such foolishness was missing from the article in the December 1993 New Republic entitled “Our Harold,” written by his biographer.) The Webbs found the prisons “as free from physical cruelty as any prison in any country is ever likely to be.” Maurice Hindus, the veteran reporter on Soviet affairs, concluded that “Vindictiveness, punishment, torture, severity, humiliation have no place in this system.” Mr. and Mrs. Corliss Lamont spoke to prisoners who informed them that they did not feel as if they were in prison, and the Lamonts had no difficulty believing this. This was in the 1930s. A decade later Henry Wallace and Owen Lattimore still found much to praise in the notorious prison camps of the Soviet Far East.

During World War II, the wartime camaraderie precluded inquiry into the Soviet outrages. During the classic Cold War years there was a greater readiness to criticize the the Soviet system, but the immediacy of the massive, well-documented evil of the Holocaust
helped to blot out concern with possible Soviet equivalents.

At the end of the 1940s McCarthyism arose and strongly reinforced the attitudes here examined. Ironically, Senator McCarthy achieved exactly the opposite of what he had intended: he succeeded in discrediting, for decades to come, opposition to Communist movements and systems.

In his book-length critique of anti-Communism Parenti linked it to

patriotic hooliganism, collective self-delusion, the propagation of political orthodoxy, the imprisonment of dissenters, and the emergence of a gargantuan military establishment... Abroad anti-Communism has brought us armament races, nuclear terror, the strengthening of oppressive autocracies... the death and maiming of American boys and the slaughter of far-off unoffending peoples.... [it] brought us grief and shame.

After McCarthy a vocal anti-Communist stand became an embarrassment (“witch hunt,” or “Red baiting”), an attitude disdained by self-respecting liberal intellectuals, journalists, and even politicians.

From the 1960s until the rise of Gorbachev in 1985 it was the dread of nuclear war that exerted the major influence on Western perceptions of the Soviet Union. The peace movement successfully promoted the belief that questioning the moral record of the Soviet system would undermine peace. Instead we were urged to focus on matters which our two countries have in common, as for example the love of children and the goodness of ordinary people. Since trust was so ardently sought, it was worse than impolite to seek to unearth Soviet policies of the past (and some of the present) which would have given pause to those in pursuit of good relations.

An 1983 account by a member of an American peace delegation to the Soviet Union was typical: “... what we lacked in knowledge we made up in enthusiasm and we shared a... faith that women of our two countries were probably more alike than different.” It was further argued that “people who cultivate wheat can’t possibly want war.” Norman Mailer ably summed up these feelings: “We live with the scenario that Russia is an evil force. Now, the world is on the edge of destroying itself. Can we afford abhorrence any longer?” Two prominent peace activists, Drs. Chivian and Mack, even found that Soviet concealment of the Chernobyl disaster was owing to the laudable “tendency on the part of the Soviet leadership to downplay catastrophes and instead offer reassurance to the Soviet people so as to prevent emotional distress.” They averred that such practices were beneficial for mental health.

Such attitudes were not limited to peace activists and intellectuals. A Yankelovich survey in 1984 found that younger and better educated Americans were more willing to give the Soviet Union the benefit of the doubt and had more trusting attitudes; their majority believed that “we would be better off if we stopped treating the Soviets as enemies and tried to hammer out our differences in a live-and-let-live spirit.”

Whatever the merit of these attitudes for preventing nuclear war, they were not apt to create an atmosphere in which Soviet mass murders could be critically examined and evaluated, comparatively or otherwise.

The peace activists were motivated not only by the fear of nuclear war. There was cross-fertilization between the peace movement and what came to be called the adversary culture. Highly critical of U.S. foreign policy and of traditional American social/cultural values, these movements were disinclined to be critical of any political system which was also critical of their own. Suffused with an acute awareness of the ills of their own country, they were doubtful that any other system could exceed its evils.

It was under these conditions that the concept of moral equivalence between the United States and the Soviet Union emerged. Sam Keen wrote:

In the current USSR-U.S. conflict, we require each other as group transference targets.... We see the Soviets as making the individual a mere means to the goals of the state. They see us as sanctifying the greed of powerful individuals at the cost of community, and allowing the profit of the few at the expense of the many. And so long as we trade insults, we are both saved from the embarrassing task of looking at the serious faults and cruelties of our own systems.

Characteristic of this mindset were the contentions of Richard Barnet in what I once called the definitive handbook on moral equivalence, The Giants, published in 1977. He suggested, among many other parallels, that “both societies were suffering a crisis of legitimacy,” that “the madness of one bureaucracy sustains the other,” and that “each [country] is a prisoner of a sixty-year-old obsession.” Marshall Shulman, the well-known Sovietologist and former high-ranking State Department advisor, began a major article in Foreign Affairs in 1987 with what became a standard incantation:

Both the Soviet Union and the United States [my emphasis] have been so constrained by parochial domestic interests and weighted down by outworn ideologies that they have been unable to summon up a competent and enlightened management of their affairs... proportionate to their respective and common problems.

The images of moral equivalence also deeply penetrated popular culture. Le Carré portrayed the espionage establishments of both the United States and the Soviet Union as corrupt, the Americans often markedly more so, “idiots and/or fascistic puritans... objects of authorial loathing” as Walter Laqueur recently observed. James Bond movies made sure that the bad guys were rarely actual KGB agents but rather renegades of some kind, or merchants of death (power-hungry capitalists), or deranged fanatics of no discernible political affiliation giving trouble to both superpowers.

There is no doubt that the deeply felt belief in the moral (or immoral) equivalence of the United States and USSR was in large measure responsible for a cli-
mate in which it was not easy to publicly discuss or evaluate the historic moral outrages of the Soviet system.

It should also be noted that until its actual collapse there was hope (in the West) that the Soviet system could be reformed. The USSR survived much longer than Nazi Germany, and that in itself seemed to prove something. The reforms that followed the death of Stalin, and later Gorbachev's rise to power, provided something of an implicit retroactive justification for the horrors of the earlier era. Could the great sacrifices have been for nothing?

Gorbachev created high expectations of both reform and institutional continuity, so much so that the historian Moshe Levin envisioned (in 1988) a rejuvenated Party and union of states:

For the party is the main stabilizer of the political system and few groups would back measures likely to erode the integrity of the entire union or the centralized state. The party . . . is the only institution that can preside over the overhaul of the system without endangering the polity itself in the process.

There was new hope, among some American intellectuals, that at long last under Gorbachev socialism with a human face might arise at the birthplace of the deformed system.

**Anti-Anti-Communism**

At the heart of these asymmetries two principal strands converge. There are on the one hand the remnants of an old pro-socialist idealism that cannot bring itself to believe the worst about a system which at one time was reputed to be the builder of socialism; it is galling for critics of capitalism to rank its arch-enemy as a moral rival of Nazi Germany.

What makes this residual affinity especially compelling as an incentive to ignore or minimize the crimes of the Soviet system is its distinguished lineage, which includes so many eminent American intellectuals and public figures from the 1930s until the Gorbachev era. No list of similar length and distinction could be compiled of American conservatives expressing admiration for Nazism, sympathy for which was largely confined to fringe elements in American politics and public life. And if a recent PBS documentary (America and the Holocaust) sought to establish American moral failure regarding assistance to the victims of the Holocaust, there is room for a similar searching look at American attitudes and policies regarding some of the victims of Stalin (in particular the Soviet refugees repatriated to the Soviet Union after World War II) and at the moral restraints which grew out of the wartime cooperation, as well as from illusions regarding the nature of the Soviet system.

The second strand is the hardy heritage of McCarthyism: its unintended discrediting of anti-Communism which gave rise to anti-anti-Communism, a mindset strengthened by the rejection of Western values that emerged in the 1960s.

In the anti-anti-Communist position two contradictory attitudes came together: on the one hand, it was perfunctorily acknowledged that Communist systems (or some of them) were bad, but asserted that this did not justify dwelling on their shortcomings; on the other hand, anti-Communist attitudes were denounced as an obsession, a fantasy, a phobia, a pathology, and a metaphor for everything that was wrong with American society. Once the criticism of and concern with Communism was deemed an aberration, little room was left for freely expressing moral indignation over its misdeeds, including the mass murders of Stalin.

As long as the attitudes here described persist—and especially the sentiment that the evils of American society outweigh all others and disqualify its members from passing judgment on the moral outrages committed by Communist governments—there will be little incentive to confront and reassess the moral implications of the Soviet mass murders.

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