

THE BLACK BOOK OF COMMUNISM

CRIMES TERROR REPRESSION

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The Black Book of Communism

Foreword: The Uses of Atrocity

Martin Malia

Communism has been the great story of the twentieth century. Bursting into history from the most unlikely corner of Europe amid the trauma of World War I, in the wake of the cataclysm of 1939–1945 it made a great leap westward to the middle of Germany and an even greater one eastward to the China Seas. With this feat, the apogee of its fortunes, it had come to rule a third of mankind and seemed poised to advance indefinitely. For seven decades it haunted world politics, polarizing opinion between those who saw it as the socialist end of history and those who considered it history's most total tyranny.

One might therefore expect that a priority of modern historians would be to explain why Communism's power grew for so long only to collapse like a house of cards. Yet surprisingly, more than eighty years after 1917, probing examination of the Big Questions raised by the Marxist-Leninist phenomenon has hardly begun. Can *The Black Book of Communism*, recently a sensation in France and much of Europe, provide the salutary shock that will make a difference?

Because a serious historiography was precluded in Soviet Russia by the regime's mandatory ideology, scholarly investigation of Communism has until recently fallen disproportionately to Westerners. And though these outside observers could not entirely escape the ideological magnetic field emanating

from their subject, in the half-century after World War II they indeed accomplished an impressive amount.¹ Even so, a basic problem remains: the conceptual poverty of the Western empirical effort.

This poverty flows from the premise that Communism can be understood, in an aseptic and value-free mode, as the pure product of social process. Accordingly, researchers have endlessly insisted that the October Revolution was a workers' revolt and not a Party coup d'état, when it was obviously the latter riding piggyback on the former. Besides, the central issue in Communist history is not the Party's ephemeral worker "base"; it is what the intelligentsia victors of October later did with their permanent coup d'état, and so far this has scarcely been explored.

More exactly, the matter has been obscured by two fantasies holding out the promise of a better Soviet socialism than the one the Bolsheviks actually built. The first is the "Bukharin alternative" to Stalin, a thesis that purports to offer a nonviolent, market road to socialism—that is, Marx's *integral* socialism, which necessitates the full suppression of private property, profit, and the market.² The second fantasy purports to find the impetus behind Stalin's "revolution from above" of 1929–1933 in a "cultural revolution" from below by Party activists and workers against the "bourgeois" specialists dear to Bukharin, a revolution ultimately leading to massive upward mobility from the factory bench.³

With such fables now consigned to what Trotsky called "the ash heap of history," perhaps a moral, rather than a social, approach to the Communist phenomenon can yield a truer understanding—for the much-investigated Soviet social process claimed victims on a scale that has never aroused a scholarly curiosity at all proportionate to the magnitude of the disaster. *The Black Book* offers us the first attempt to determine, overall, the actual magnitude of what occurred, by systematically detailing Leninism's "crimes, terror, and repression" from Russia in 1917 to Afghanistan in 1989.

This factual approach puts Communism in what is, after all, its basic human perspective. For it was in truth a "tragedy of planetary dimensions" (in the French publisher's characterization), with a grand total of victims variously estimated by contributors to the volume at between 85 million and 100 million. Either way, the Communist record offers the most colossal case of political carnage in history. And when this fact began to sink in with the French public, an apparently dry academic work became a publishing sensation, the focus of impassioned political and intellectual debate.

The shocking dimensions of the Communist tragedy, however, are hardly news to any serious student of twentieth-century history, at least when the different Leninist regimes are taken individually. The real news is that at this late date the truth should come as such a shock to the public at large. To be sure, each major episode of the tragedy—Stalin's Gulag, Mao Zedong's Great

Leap Forward and his Cultural Revolution, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge—had its moment of notoriety. But these horrors soon faded away into "history"; nor did anyone trouble to add up the total and set it before the public. The surprising size of this total, then, partly explains the shock the volume provoked.

The full power of the shock, however, was delivered by the unavoidable comparison of this sum with that for Nazism, which at an estimated 25 million turns out to be distinctly less murderous than Communism. And the volume's editor, Stéphane Courtois, rather than let the figures speak for themselves, spelled out the comparison, thereby making the volume a firebrand. Arguing from the fact that some Nuremberg jurisprudence has been incorporated into French law (to accommodate such cases as that of Maurice Papon, a former minister of Giscard d'Estaing tried in 1997–98 for complicity in deporting Jews while a local official of Vichy), Courtois explicitly equated the "class genocide" of Communism with the "race genocide" of Nazism, and categorized both as "crimes against humanity." What is more, he raised the question of the "complicity" with Communist crime of the legions of Western apologists for Stalin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, and indeed Pol Pot who, even when they "abandoned their idols of yesteryear, did so discreetly and in silence."

These issues have a special resonance in France. Since the 1930s, the left has been able to come to power only as a popular front of Socialists and Communists (whether under Léon Blum or François Mitterrand), a tandem in which the democratic partner was always compromised by its ally's allegiance to totalitarian Moscow. Conversely, since 1940 the right has been tainted by Vichy's links with Nazism (the subtext of the Papon affair). In such a historical context, "knowing the truth about the U.S.S.R." has never been an academic matter.

Furthermore, it happens that at the time the volume appeared the Socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin stood in need of Communist votes to assemble a parliamentary majority. Orators of the right, therefore, citing *The Black Book*, rose in the National Assembly to attack his government for harboring allies with an unrepented "criminal past." Jospin countered by recalling the Liberation coalition between Gaullists and Communists (which was fair game), only the better to conclude that he was "proud" to govern with them too (which was a gaffe, for at the Liberation the Gulag was not yet known). Nor was this just a hasty choice of words; in the eyes of the left that he leads, the Communists, despite their past errors, belong to the camp of democratic progress, whereas the right is open to suspicion of softness toward the National Front of the "fascist" Jean-Marie Le Pen (after all, the conservatives had once rallied to Vichy). The incident ended with the non-Gaullist right walking out of the chamber, while the Gaullists remained awkwardly in place. Thereupon the debate spread to television and the press.

Indeed, the debate divides the book's own authors. All are research schol-

ars associated with the Centre d'Etude d'Histoire et de Sociologie du Communisme and its review, *Communisme*. Founded by the pioneer of academic Communist studies, the late Annie Kriegel, its mission is to exploit our new access to Soviet archives in conjunction with younger Russian historians. Equally to the point, these researchers are former Communists or close fellow-travelers; and it is over the assessment of their common past that they divide. Thus, once *The Black Book* raised the foreseeable political storm, Courtois's two key collaborators—Nicolas Werth for Russia, and Jean-Louis Margolin for China—publicly dissociated themselves from his bolder conclusions.

So let us begin with the debate, which is hardly specific to France. It breaks out wherever the question of the moral equivalence of our century's two totalitarianisms is raised, indeed whenever the very concept of "totalitarianism" is invoked. For Nazism's unique status as "absolute evil" is now so entrenched that any comparison with it easily appears suspect.

Of the several reasons for this assessment of Nazism, the most obvious is that the Western democracies fought World War II in a kind of global "popular front" against "fascism." Moreover, whereas the Nazis occupied most of Europe, the Communists during the Cold War menaced only from afar. Thus, although the stakes for democracy in the new conflict were as high as in its hot predecessor, the stress of waging it was significantly lower; and it ended with the last general secretary of the "evil empire," Mikhail Gorbachev, in the comradely embrace of the ultimate cold warrior, President Ronald Reagan. Communism's fall, therefore, brought with it no Nuremberg trial, and hence no de-Communization to solemnly put Leninism beyond the pale of civilization; and of course there still exist Communist regimes in international good standing.

Another reason for our dual perception is that defeat cut down Nazism in the prime of its iniquity, thereby eternally fixing its full horror in the world's memory. By contrast, Communism, at the peak of *its* iniquity, was rewarded with an epic victory—and thereby gained a half-century in which to lose its dynamism, to half-repent of Stalin, and even, in the case of some unsuccessful leaders (such as Czechoslovakia's Alexander Dubček in 1968), to attempt giving the system a "human face." As a result of these contrasting endings of the two totalitarianisms all Nazism's secrets were bared fifty years ago, whereas we are only beginning to explore Soviet archives, and those of East Asia and Cuba remain sealed.

The effect of this unequal access to information was magnified by more subjective considerations. Nazism seemed all the more monstrous to Westerners for having arisen in the heart of civilized Europe, in the homeland of Luther, Kant, Goethe, Beethoven, and indeed Marx. Communism, by contrast,

appeared as less of a historical aberration in the Russian borderland of Europe—almost “Asia” after all—where, despite Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, civilization had never taken deep root.

The ultimate distinguishing characteristic of Nazism, of course, is the Holocaust, considered as the historically unique crime of seeking the extermination of an entire people, a crime for which the term “genocide” was coined around the time of Nuremberg. And therewith the Jewish people acquired the solemn obligation to keep the memory of its martyrs alive in the conscience of the world. Even so, general awareness of the Final Solution was slow to emerge, in fact coming only in the 1970s and 1980s—the very years when Communism was gradually mellowing. So between these contrasting circumstances, by the time of Communism’s fall the liberal world had had fifty years to settle into a double standard regarding its two late adversaries.

Accordingly, Hitler and Nazism are now a constant presence in Western print and on Western television, whereas Stalin and Communism materialize only sporadically. The status of ex-Communist carries with it no stigma, even when unaccompanied by any expression of regret; past contact with Nazism, however, no matter how marginal or remote, confers an indelible stain. Thus Martin Heidegger and Paul de Man have been enduringly compromised and the substance of their thought tainted. By contrast, Louis Aragon, for years under Stalin the editor of the French Communist Party’s literary magazine, in 1996 was published among the classics of the *Pléiade*; the press was lyrical in praise of his art, while virtually mute about his politics. (*The Black Book* reproduces a 1931 poem to the KGB’s predecessor, the GPU.) Likewise, the Stalinist poet and Nobel laureate, Pablo Neruda, in the same year was sentimentalized, together with his cause, by an acclaimed film, *Il postino*—even though in 1939 as a Chilean diplomat in Spain he acted as a de facto agent of the Comintern, and in 1953 mourned Stalin with a fulsome ode. And this list of unparallel lives could be extended indefinitely.

Even more skewed is the situation in the East. No Gulag camps have been turned into museums to commemorate their inmates; all were bulldozed into the ground during Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization. The only memorial to Stalin’s victims is a modest stone brought to Moscow from the Arctic camp of Solovki and placed in Lubyanka Square (though well off to the side), where the KGB’s former headquarters still stands. Nor are there any regular visitors to this lonely slab (one must cross a stream of traffic to reach it) and no more than an occasional wilted bouquet. By contrast, Lenin’s statue still dominates most city centers, and his mummy reposes honorably in its Mausoleum.

Throughout the former Communist world, moreover, virtually none of its responsible officials has been put on trial or punished. Indeed, everywhere Communist parties, though usually under new names, compete in politics.

Thus, in Poland, Aleksander Kwasniewski, onetime member of General Jaruzelski's government, in 1996 won the presidency against the symbol of resistance to Communism, Lech Wałęsa (admittedly an inept campaigner). Gulya Horn, the prime minister of Hungary from 1994 to 1998, was a member of the country's last Communist government, and a member of the militia that helped suppress the 1956 revolt alongside the Soviet army. In neighboring Austria, by contrast, former president Kurt Waldheim was ostracized worldwide once his Nazi past was uncovered. Granted, card-carrying Western literati and latter-day Eastern *apparatchiki* never served as executioners for Stalin. Even so, does the present silence about their past mean that Communism was all *that* less bad than Nazism?

The debate around *The Black Book* can help frame an answer. On the one side, commentators in the liberal *Le Monde* argue that it is illegitimate to speak of a single Communist movement from Phnom Penh to Paris. Rather, the rampage of the Khmer Rouge is like the ethnic massacres of third-world Rwanda; or the "rural" Communism of Asia is radically different from the "urban" Communism of Europe; or Asian Communism is really only anticolonial nationalism. The subtext of such Eurocentric condescension is that conflating sociologically diverse movements is merely a stratagem to obtain a higher body count against Communism, and thus against all the left. In answer, commentators in the conservative *Le Figaro*, spurning reductionist sociology as a device to exculpate Communism, reply that Marxist-Leninist regimes are cast in the same ideological and organizational mold throughout the world. And this pertinent point also has its admonitory subtext: that socialists of whatever stripe cannot be trusted to resist their ever-present demons on the far left (those popular fronts were no accident after all).

Yet if we let the divided contributors to *The Black Book* arbitrate the dispute, we find no disagreement in this matter: the Leninist matrix indeed served for all the once "fraternal" parties. To be sure, the model was applied differently in different cultural settings. As Margolin points out, the chief agent of repression in Russia was a specially created political police, the Cheka-GPU-NKVD-KGB, while in China it was the People's Liberation Army, and in Cambodia it was gun-toting adolescents from the countryside: thus popular ideological mobilization went deeper in Asia than in Russia. Still, everywhere the aim was to repress "enemies of the people"—"like noxious insects," as Lenin said early on, thus inaugurating Communism's "animalization" of its adversaries. Moreover, the line of inheritance from Stalin, to Mao, to Ho, to Kim Il Sung, to Pol Pot was quite clear, with each new leader receiving both material aid and ideological inspiration from his predecessor. And, to come full circle, Pol Pot first learned his Marxism in Paris in 1952 (when such philoso-

phers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty were explaining how terror could be the midwife of “humanism”).⁴ So if the debate remains on the level of the quantitative atrocity, the double standard collapses, and Communism appears as the more criminal totalitarianism.

But if the debate is shifted to qualitative crime, this outcome is easily reversed. And here the decisive factor is, again, the Holocaust as the confirmation of Nazism’s uniquely evil nature. Indeed, this standard has become so universal that other persecuted groups, from Armenians to the native peoples of both Americas, have appropriated (with varying degrees of plausibility) the term “genocide” to characterize their own experience. Not surprisingly, many of these implicit comparisons to the Holocaust have been rejected as illegitimate, even slanderous. And in fact one overexcited op-ed piece in *Le Monde*, from a respected researcher, denounced Courtois’s introduction as antisemitic.

Yet there are other, less emotionally charged arguments for assigning a significant distinctiveness to Nazi terror. The criminal law everywhere distinguishes degrees of murder, according to the motivation, the cruelty of the means employed, and so on. Thus, Raymond Aron long ago, and François Furet recently, though both unequivocal about the evil of Communism, distinguished between extermination practiced to achieve a political objective, no matter how perverse, and extermination as an end in itself.⁵ And in this perspective, Communism once again comes off as less evil than Nazism.

This plausible distinction, however, can easily be turned on its head. In particular, Eastern European dissidents have argued that mass murder in the name of a noble ideal is *more* perverse than it is in the name of a base one.⁶ The Nazis, after all, never pretended to be virtuous. The Communists, by contrast, trumpeting their humanism, hoodwinked millions around the globe for decades, and so got away with murder on the ultimate scale. The Nazis, moreover, killed off their victims without ideological ceremony; the Communists, by contrast, usually compelled their prey to confess their “guilt” in signed depositions thereby acknowledging the Party line’s political “correctness.” Nazism, finally, was a unique case (Mussolini’s Facism was not really competitive), and it developed no worldwide clientle. By contrast, Communism’s universalism permitted it to metastasize worldwide.

A final position, forcefully expressed by Alain Besançon, is that murder is murder whatever the ideological motivation; and this is undeniably true for the equally dead victims of both Nazism and Communism.⁷ Such absolute equivalence is also expressed in Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*: both systems massacred their victims not for what they *did* (such as resisting the regime) but for who they *were*, whether Jews or kulaks. In this perspective, the distinction made by some, that the term petit-bourgeois “kulak” is more elastic

and hence less lethal than biological “Jew,” is invalidated: the social and the racial categories are equally pseudoscientific.

Yet none of these qualitative arguments can be “clinched”—unlike an empirically established victim count. And since there can be no consensus regarding degrees of political “evil,” some researchers would claim that all value judgments merely express the ideological preferences of their authors.

Such “Positivist” social scientists, therefore, have averred that moral questions are irrelevant to understanding the past. An example is a recent volume devoted to political denunciation in modern Europe.⁸ The introduction presents some fascinating facts: in 1939 the Gestapo employed 7,500 people in contrast to the NKVD’s 366,000 (including Gulag personnel); and the Communist Party made denunciation an obligation, whereas the Nazi Party did not. But no conclusions are drawn from these contrasts. Instead we are told that under both regimes the population was given to denunciation as “an *everyday* practice,” and for reasons of self-advancement more than for reasons of ideology. We are told further that denunciation was endemic in prerevolutionary rural Russia, and that it flourished under the French Jacobins and the English Puritans, the Spanish Inquisition and American McCarthyism. And in fact all the “witch crazes” enumerated in the introduction did have some traits in common.

The rub is, however, that this perspective reduces politics and ideology everywhere to anthropology. And with this accomplished, the editors blandly assure us that, contrary to Hannah Arendt, the “Nazi/Soviet similarities” are insufficient to make denunciation “a specifically ‘totalitarian’ phenomenon.” What is more, the difference between Nazi/Communist systems and Western ones is “not qualitative but quantitative.” By implication, therefore, singling out Communist and Nazi terror in order to equate them becomes Cold War slander—the ideological subtext, as it happens, of twenty-five years of “revisionist,” social-reductionist Sovietology.

By the same token, this fact-for-fact’s-sake approach suggests that there is nothing specifically Communist about Communist terror—and, it would seem, nothing particularly Nazi about Nazi terror either. So the bloody Soviet experiment is banalized in one great gray anthropological blur; and the Soviet Union is transmogrified into just another country in just another age, neither more nor less evil than any other regime going. But this is obviously nonsense. Hence we are back with the problem of moral judgment, which is inseparable from any real understanding of the past—indeed, inseparable from being human.

In the twentieth century, however, morality is not primarily a matter of eternal verities or transcendental imperatives. It is above all a matter of political allegiances. That is, it is a matter of left versus right, roughly defined as the

priority of compassionate egalitarianism for the one, and as the primacy of prudential order for the other. Yet since neither principle can be applied absolutely without destroying society, the modern world lives in perpetual tension between the irresistible pressure for equality and the functional necessity of hierarchy.

It is this syndrome that gives the permanent qualitative advantage to Communism over Nazism in any evaluation of their quantitative atrocities. For the Communist project, in origin, claimed commitment to universalistic and egalitarian goals, whereas the Nazi project offered only unabashed national egoism. Small matter, then, that their practices were comparable; their moral auras were antithetical, and it is the latter feature that counts in Western, domestic politics. And so we arrive at the fulcrum of the debate: A moral man can have “no enemies to the left,” a perspective in which undue insistence on Communist crime only “plays into the hands of the right”—if, indeed, any anticommunism is not simply a mask for antiliberalism.

In this spirit, *Le Monde*’s editorialist deemed *The Black Book* inopportune because equating Communism with Nazism removed the “last barriers to legitimating the extreme right,” that is, Le Pen. It is true that Le Pen’s party and similar hate-mongering, xenophobic movements elsewhere in Europe represent an alarming new phenomenon that properly concerns all liberal democrats. But it in no way follows that Communism’s criminal past should be ignored or minimized. Such an argument is only a variant, in new historical circumstances, of Sartre’s celebrated sophism that one should keep silent about Soviet camps “pour ne pas désespérer Billancourt” (in order not to throw the auto workers of Billancourt into despair). To which his onetime colleague, Albert Camus, long ago replied that the truth is the truth, and denying it mocks the causes both of humanity and of morality.⁹

In fact, the persistence of such sophistry is precisely why *The Black Book* is so opportune. What, therefore, do its provocative pages contain? Without pretension to originality, it presents a balance sheet of our current knowledge of Communism’s human costs, archivally based where possible and elsewhere drawing on the best available secondary evidence, and with due allowance for the difficulties of quantification. Yet the very sobriety of this inventory is what gives the book its power; and indeed, as we are led from country to country and from horror to horror, the cumulative impact is overwhelming.

At the same time, the book quietly advances a number of important analytical points. The first is that Communist regimes did not just commit criminal acts (all states do so on occasion); they were criminal enterprises in their very essence: on principle, so to speak, they all ruled lawlessly, by violence, and without regard for human life. Werth’s section on the Soviet Union is thus

titled “A State against Its People” and takes us methodically through the successive cycles of terror, from Great October in 1917 to Stalin’s death in 1953. By way of comparison, he notes that between 1825 and 1917 tsarism carried out 6,321 political executions (most of them during the revolution of 1905–1907), whereas in two months of official “Red Terror” in the fall of 1918 Bolshevism achieved some 15,000. And so on for a third of a century; for example, 6 million deaths during the collectivization famine of 1932–33, 720,000 executions during the Great Purge, 7 million people entering the Gulag (where huge numbers died) in the years 1934–1941, and 2,750,000 still there at Stalin’s death. True, these aggregates represent different modes of state violence, not all of them immediately lethal; but all betoken terror as a routine means of government.

And the less familiar figures in Margolin’s chapter on China’s “Long March into Night” are even more staggering: at a minimum, 10 million “direct victims”; probably 20 million deaths out of the multitudes that passed through China’s “hidden Gulag,” the *laogai*; more than 20 million deaths from the “political famine” of the Great Leap Forward of 1959–1961, the largest famine in history. Finally, in Pol Pot’s aping of Mao’s Great Leap, around one Cambodian in seven perished, the highest proportion of the population in any Communist country.

The book’s second point is that there never was a benign, initial phase of Communism before some mythical “wrong turn” threw it off track. From the start Lenin expected, indeed wanted, civil war to crush all “class enemies”; and this war, principally against the peasants, continued with only short pauses until 1953. So much for the fable of “good Lenin/bad Stalin.” (And if anyone doubts that it is still necessary to make this case, the answer may be found, for example, in the maudlin article “Lenin” in the current edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.) Still another point is of a “technical” nature: the use of famine to break peasant resistance to regime economic “plans.” And ever since Solzhenitsyn, such “pharaonic” methods have been contrasted with the technologically advanced Nazi gas chamber.

A more basic point is that Red terror cannot be explained as the prolongation of prerevolutionary political cultures. Communist repression did not originate from above, in traditional autocracies; nor was it simply an intensification of violent folk practices from below—whether the peasant anarchism of Russia, or the cyclical millenarian revolts of China, or the exacerbated nationalism of Cambodia, although all these traditions were exploited by the new regime. Nor does the source of Communist practices reside in the violence of the two world wars, important though this brutal conditioning was. Rather, in each case, mass violence against the population was a deliberate policy of the new revolutionary order; and its scope and inhumanity far exceeded anything in the national past.

A final point, insisted on by Courtois yet clear also in his colleagues' accounts, is that Communism's recourse to "permanent civil war" rested on the "scientific" Marxist belief in class struggle as the "violent midwife of history," in Marx's famous metaphor. Similarly, Courtois adds, Nazi violence was founded on a scientific social Darwinism promising national regeneration through racial struggle.

This valid emphasis on ideology as the wellspring of Communist mass murder reaches its apogee in Margolin's depiction of escalating radicalism as the revolution moved East. Stalin, of course, had already begun the escalation by presenting himself as the "Lenin of today" and his first Five-Year Plan as a second October. Then, in 1953, four years after Mao came to power, his heirs ended mass terror: it had simply become too costly to their now superpuissant regime. To the Chinese comrades, however, Moscow's moderation amounted to "betrayal" of the world revolution just as it was taking off in Asia. Consequently, in 1959–1961 Mao was goaded to surpass his Soviet mentors by a "Great Leap Forward" beyond mere socialism, Moscow style, to full Communism as Marx had imagined it in the *Communist Manifesto* and the *Critique of the Gotha Program*. And in 1966–1976, by directing the anarchy of the Cultural Revolution against his own Party, he proceeded to outdo Stalin's Great Purge of *his* Party in 1937–1939. But the most demented spinoff of this whole tradition was Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge of 1975–1979; for this rampage against urban, "bourgeois" civilization expressed nothing less than an ambition to propel tiny Cambodia beyond Mao's "achievements" into the front rank of world revolution.

Yet the long-term inefficiency of such "progress" eventually led Mao's heirs, in their turn, to "betray" the Marxist-Leninist impetus by halting mass terror and turning halfway to the market. Thereby, after 1979, Deng Xiaoping ended worldwide the perverse Prometheanism launched in October 1917. Thus the Communist trajectory, as *The Black Book* traces it from Petrograd to the China Seas, inevitably suggests that ideology, not social process, fueled the movement's meteoric rise, and that ideology's practical failure produced its precipitate fall.

This transnational perspective goes far toward answering the great question posed by Communist history: namely, why did a doctrine premised on proletarian revolution in industrial societies come to power *only* in predominantly agrarian ones, by Marxist definition those least prepared for "socialism"? But socialist revolution for Marx was not just a matter of economic development; it was at bottom an eschatological "leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom." Since such quasi-miraculous transformation has the strongest allure for those who have the greatest lag to overcome, it is hardly surprising that Marxism's line of march turned out to lead ever farther into the politically and economically backward East. Only by taking account of this

paradoxical eastward escalation through increasingly extravagant “leaps” can we build a real historiography of the great twentieth-century story that was Communism.

And this brings us back to the vexed—and vexing—question raised by Stéphane Courtois in *The Black Book*: What of the moral equivalence of Communism with Nazism? After fifty years of debate, it is clear that no matter what the hard facts are, degrees of totalitarian evil will be measured as much in terms of present politics as in terms of past realities. So we will always encounter a double standard as long as there exist a left and a right—which will be a very long time indeed. No matter how thoroughly the Communist failure may come to be documented (and new research makes it look worse every day), we will always have reactions such as that of a Moscow correspondent for a major Western paper, who, after the fall, could still privately salute the Russian people with: “Thanks for having tried!”; and there will always be kindred spirits to dismiss *The Black Book*, a priori, as “right-wing anti-Communist rhetoric.” For more mundane observers, however, it is at last becoming clear that our current qualitative judgments are scandalously out of line with the century’s real balance sheet of political crime.

And this very absurdity perhaps brings us to a turning point. Ten years ago, the authors of *The Black Book* would have refused to believe what they now write. And exploration of the Soviet archives—and eventually those of East Asia—will continue to redress the balance. This comes at a time, moreover, when historical writing is turning increasingly to retrospective affirmative action, to fulfilling our “duty of remembrance” to all the oppressed of the past—indeed, when governments and churches formally apologize for their historic sins. Surely, then, the Party of humanity can spare a little compassion for the victims of the inhumanity so long meted out by so many of its own partisans.

Even so, such an effort at retrospective justice will always encounter one intractable obstacle. Any realistic accounting of Communist crime would effectively shut the door on Utopia; and too many good souls in this unjust world cannot abandon hope for an absolute end to inequality (and some less good souls will always offer them “rational” curative nostrums). And so, all comrade-questers after historical truth should gird their loins for a very Long March indeed before Communism is accorded its fair share of absolute evil.

The Black Book of Communism