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of the paper or handwriting is exemplary. There are cases, however, where this reader wonders whether he oversteps his evidence and argument. The case of the Gorodovenko brothers (pp. 95–98) is one example. Here the absence of physical evidence in the dossier is crucial to determining if the confession was real. Kuromiya occasionally interprets the absence of evidence as an indicator of coercion, prisoner resistance, or the falseness of a confession. Whatever our desire to read into the absence of evidence, the absence of evidence is just that. While most of his subjects were clearly innocent, there are times when this reader asked, just when was a confession an indication of illegal activity? To believe that all of the victims of the mass repression were innocent is as risky as believing that all were guilty.

Kuromiya argues that “no one heeded legal procedures” (pp. 211–12); no sane person can argue with the spirit of his statement. Yet many cases in the book raise questions about why the NKVD had some prisoners confront their accusers, why the NKVD sent staff to villages in search of evidence, why the repressors adhered to the forms of legality. This book seeks to give voice to the dead, but it evokes a welter of questions about the NKVD interrogators, why they pursued certain lines of questioning, their adherence to the form, but not the spirit, of legal norms, and why they preserved all these records. This is not the purpose of Kuromiya’s book. Yet it is a topic worthy of investigation, but only by one who will approach the evidence with the critical eye and care of Kuromiya.

Whatever questions the book evokes among readers, by its focus, critical treatment of evidence, and use of primary sources from several countries, it marks a new frontier in research on the mass repression.

William J. Chase, University of Pittsburgh


In their book, J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov describe the rise of Nikolai Yezhov, the organizer of the Soviet Union’s Great Terror of 1937–38, leading to the arrest of more than 1.5 million people, almost half of whom were shot. As the authors of several important works on Stalinism and the terror, Getty and Naumov are extremely well equipped for the task. Basing themselves on the essential sources, they have produced an excellent case study of the party personnel system. Here Yezhov felt like a fish in water. In a meteoric career he became the party’s leading expert in personnel selection, according to the authors, ending up as the most powerful man in the USSR after Stalin. With their emphasis on the system’s patron-client character, one would expect them finding Yezhov’s career having been patronized from above, but this is not the case. According to them, he was brought along neither by Stalin, certainly not before the early 1930s, nor by any other Bolshevik dignitary. He “pulled himself up the ladder by means of his own considerable abilities and by mastering the Stalinist ‘rules of the game.’” (p. xx).

Although this sounds rather convincing, some twists in Yezhov’s career hardly fit into this story of achievement. His beginning as secretary of the Mari province was only a limited success, the authors admit. Appointed in February 1922, he quit already in October of the same year, to take an extended “vacation” until March 1923; deservedly or not, the report of his Mari job was quite critical. About the only thing we know regarding his next post in Semipalatinsk is that before a year had passed he sought to have himself called back to Moscow, in vain for the moment. His big jump started only in 1927. During the last phase of his career, with his chronic drinking and scheming behind Stalin’s back, Yezhov seemed to have finally lost sight of the “Stalinist rules of the game.”

Getty and Naumov’s emphasis is on Yezhov’s environment rather than his personality. They leave out sources with personal details that N. Petrov and this reviewer discussed in their Yezhov
biography, and criticize us for doing so. As a matter of fact, Getty and Naumov themselves use interrogations where it suits them, for example, in the Leonid Nikolaev case.

Although they are mainly concerned with Yezhov’s career before he became NKVD chief, the authors pay attention to his relationship with Stalin and the question of responsibility for the terror. Was Yezhov merely Stalin’s obedient robot? One has to agree with them that there is more to say than that. There was certainly space for maneuver. Their version of how Yezhov “actively manipulated” Stalin, however, remains highly speculative.

Polemicizing with us, Getty and Naumov deem it implausible to see Yezhov as simply a bad person in a bad system. One has to consider the cultural and historical context from which he emerged, they say. He was a radicalized worker, a product of the harsh times of Revolution and Civil War, quite representative of his generation. With their siege mentality of “us” versus “them,” it was impossible for Yezhov’s generation to see opposition in terms other than treason and conspiracy. Yezhov sincerely believed that what he did had to be done. This is part of the explanation, undoubtedly, but not every member of Yezhov’s generation killed a million people. Of course, Getty and Naumov do not claim that Yezhov was the opposite of bad, they think it analytically uninteresting to just condemn him. That would make the historian’s job rather tedious indeed. But it is hard to agree with their other argument. Does one “impose our own liberal ideas of good and evil, right or wrong” (p. 222) if one does not leave “our standards of morality” (p. 221) out of judgment? Did Yezhov’s and Stalin’s victims have no similar ideas of good and evil, right or wrong?

Marc Jansen, University of Amsterdam


When Arthur Koestler published Darkness at Noon, a study of the Moscow show trials and the process by which its chief defendants were forced into making false confessions, he claimed his protagonist, Nikolai Salmanovich Rubashov, was an amalgam of more than one figure. His most obvious model, however, was Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin, one of the youngest of the so-called Old Bolsheviks and famously praised by V. I. Lenin as a “favorite” of the party. Bukharin was arrested in February 1937 on charges of plotting to destroy the Soviet state and spent the next year, until his execution on March 15, 1938, in solitary confinement. In his introduction to this volume, Bukharin’s biographer, Stephen F. Cohen, points out that Koestler wrongly portrayed Bukharin as ultimately repentant for past opposition and willingly confessing in a “last service to Stalinism” (p. xiii). Bukharin did not, in fact, fully confess to the charges against him, and his statements in the trial reveal a defiance, tempered by the hopelessness of his position, to the end. Nevertheless, Koestler was right to imagine Bukharin spending much of his final year contemplating the future of socialism. This book is one of the products of that effort.

Granted paper and pencils and access to some of his books, Bukharin produced four manuscripts during his confinement—three prose works and one collection of poems. Of the former, Philosophical Arabesques (2005) and How It All Began (1998) have been published in English. The current book is actually the second part of a larger study, the first section of which Bukharin had written in the year before his arrest and which was lost or destroyed after its confiscation. Translator George Shriver and literary scholar Boris Frezinsky have done an admirable job of providing readers with context for the work, piecing together references in this text to the lost section and a speech he gave in Paris in April 1936 to the Association for the Study of Soviet Culture (included as an appendix) to reveal Bukharin’s preoccupation with the dangers of fascism. Socialism and Its Culture must be understood in this light.