

REVIEW ARTICLE

COMMUNISM'S POSTHUMOUS TRIAL

THE BLACK BOOK OF COMMUNISM: CRIMES, TERROR, REPRESSION. By Stéphane Courtois *et al.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999. Pp. xx, 858.

THE PASSING OF AN ILLUSION: THE IDEA OF COMMUNISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. By François Furet. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Pp. xiii, 596.

THE BURDEN OF RESPONSIBILITY: BLUM, CAMUS, ARON, AND THE FRENCH TWENTIETH CENTURY. By Tony Judt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Pp. viii, 196.

LE SIÈCLE DES COMMUNISMES. By Michel Dreyfus *et al.* Paris: Editions de l'atelier/Editions ouvrières, 2000. Pp. 543.

During the darkest days of the Cold War a book appeared that attacked Communism in a strikingly ambitious way. Albert Camus's *L'Homme révolté* (*The Rebel*) was a work of philosophy, historical interpretation, and political and literary theory, and in it Camus seemed to rival the ambitions of his then-friend, Jean-Paul Sartre. Camus began by focusing on a unique feature of the twentieth century, systematic mass murder, and wondered how it could be justified. But his broad concern, embracing much of the century's bloody history and virtually all major societies, gave way without warning to a narrower one: dissecting the worldview behind Communism. Focusing on the revolutionary who was willing to murder to create a world without suffering, Camus commended a humbler and self-limiting model to the Left, that of the rebel.

When the book was published in October 1951, it was immediately attacked on a number of fronts. But Camus, former editorialist for *Combat*, and adept in controversy, aggressively defended his arguments and his anti-Communism over the next few months. In April, 1952, Sartre's *Les Temps modernes* published a hostile twenty-page review not by Sartre, but by his young collaborator on the journal, Francis Jeanson. The Camus-Sartre friendship, already fading, received its decisive blow. Camus replied angrily and self-righteously in August, breaking with his friend for publishing what he saw as a willfully unfair misreading of his book. This was followed by Sartre's violent reply and an even longer article by Jeanson. The controversy filled nearly seventy dense pages in an argument over revolution, history, Communism, and bad faith.

All Paris seemed riveted on the conflict. Lengthy excerpts were reprinted in Camus's old newspaper as well as the weekly *L'Observateur* (forerunner of today's *Le Nouvel Observateur*), and virtually the entire press covered the event. *Les Temps modernes* sold out its print run, reprinted, and was sold out again. The

weeklies commented on the controversy, followed by articles in leading monthlies. As Raymond Aron said, the debate between Sartre and Camus over supporting or opposing Communism “immediately assumed the character of a national dispute.”¹

Although Camus has been dead for over forty years, Sartre for over twenty, and Soviet Communism for a decade, the national dispute has not yet ended. It continues in books, journals, and newspapers, where the several authors of *Le Livre noir du communisme* and others have revived it by conducting Communism's posthumous trial. The charge: Communism was a criminal system. The most hotly contested statement: Communism was as murderous as Nazism. *The Black Book's* introduction explains that the book will use the model of the Nuremberg Trials, accusing Communism of crimes against humanity and genocide, both to show “the true significance of crime in the Communist system”² and to construct a memorial to “the innocent and anonymous victims of a juggernaut that has systematically sought to erase even their memory.”³

The prosecution forms a coherent group: quoting one another, introducing one another's books, and writing publicity statements for one another's dust-jackets. It extends well beyond France. Martin Malia, critic of revisionist historians who have stopped seeing the Soviet Union as totalitarian, introduces the English translation of *The Black Book* with a withering attack on all who refuse to put morality first in discussing the Soviet Union. Tony Judt, author of *Past Imperfect*, an attack on French pro-Communist intellectuals after World War II and now of a work praising the courage of anti-Communists Léon Blum, Albert Camus, and Raymond Aron, comments glowingly on the jacket of the English version of Furet's *Le Passé d'une illusion: essai sur l'idée communiste au XXe siècle* (*The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*), whose author's words of praise appear in turn on the back cover of *The Black Book*.

The prosecutors are historians seeking to transform the way their colleagues think about Communism, but their real audience and intention reach far beyond the academy. In Paris their efforts have received wide coverage: *Google* shows over 4,000 references to *The Black Book* in English and French. The 800-page volume was a huge commercial success in France, selling over 200,000 copies there and over 700,000 worldwide. Upon the book's publication in the United States in 1999, *The New Republic* devoted one of its longest reviews in memory to an approving summary of its “utterly convincing” argument.⁴ In France, a deputy from the Right created a storm in the National Assembly in 1997 by accusing the three Communist ministers of complicity with Communism's crimes and asking for their resignation. Their presence in the cabinet had to be defended by then-Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, who declared he was “proud” to have them.

1. Raymond, Aron, {au: need citation details here}.

2. Stéphane Courtois, Introduction, *The Black Book of Communism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 19.

3. *Ibid.*, 20.

4. Michael Scammell, “The Price of an Idea,” *The New Republic* (December 20, 1999), {pp.??}

The intensity of the continuing controversy suggests that we may not see it resolved anytime soon. Comparisons with Nazism, central for one side of this discussion, cannot but inflame the other. Accusations of bad faith, denial, and dishonesty flow off the pen easily, especially when it becomes clear that intellectual positions cannot be separated from political positions. But this was always true concerning capitalism and Communism and concerning the Cold War, just as it is true of virtually all important historical discussions. The point is that even scholars on opposite sides of such questions, writing from deep commitments, nevertheless operate according to, and are subject to, common standards of argument and evidence. In other words, it has always been true that the major obstacle to historical understanding is not commitment, but distortion.⁵

Nevertheless, the authors of the *The Black Book* were sufficiently nervous about how they would be perceived politically that Stéphane Courtois's introduction states their intention to judge Communism not from the right, but "from the standpoint of democratic values."⁶ Courtois points out that many of the book's authors "still remain closely wedded to the left"⁷ and are involved in reassessing Communism from this perspective. Furet too was a former Communist. Insisting that "the idea of *another* society has become almost impossible to conceive of," he was still aware that many felt "the need for a world beyond the bourgeoisie and beyond Capital, and world in which a genuine human community can flourish."⁸ In fact one reviewer took him to task for his sharply critical depiction of the bourgeoisie and for a conclusion that speaks of the inevitability of radical movements taking seriously capitalist society's promise of equality—even while Furet dismissed as illusory any possibility that they might succeed.⁹

Published in 1995 and translated in 1999, Furet's book was in some sense the guiding work of the whole enterprise. Upon Furet's death in 1997, Tony Judt paid extended tribute to him, who was to have written *The Black Book's* introduction. Although a self-described "newcomer to twentieth-century history,"¹⁰ France's leading historian of the French Revolution sought to analyze the illusory idea of Communism, whose reality is ostensibly being depicted by Courtois and his colleagues. Furet's guiding question is: How is it that Communism, despite its similarities with Nazism, its sheer horror, and its massive failures, exerted for so long such a powerful attraction on so many of the brightest and best minds of the

5. This writer's own commitments are a matter of public record, and I can hardly claim to be above the fray. Specifically, in 1987, I continued to hope for a Soviet Solidarity movement which, basing itself on unfulfilled promises of the Bolshevik Revolution inscribed in Soviet ideology, would overthrow the Communist bureaucracy and create a democratic socialist society. See my *Sartre's Second Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

6. Courtois, *The Black Book*, 30.

7. *Ibid.*

8. François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 502.

9. Alexander Dallin, review of *The Passing of an Illusion, The New Leader* (June 14-28, 1999), {pp.??}

10. Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion*, xiii.

world? This was of course Camus's question (as well as Raymond Aron's in *The Opium of the Intellectuals*), but unlike them Furet was approaching it as a historian, bringing to his work the constraints and expectations of a historical retrospective and a specific professional culture.

Without acknowledging Camus or Aron, Furet's argument paralleled theirs: the root of the illusion was Communism's sense of being the *next stage* of history, a society *beyond* democratic capitalism and coming about with historical inevitability. The belief became a moving force, motivating and justifying Communists and their practices: "This illusion did not 'accompany' Communist history; it made it."¹¹ Yet, as Furet surveyed the wreckage of what he calls Communism's long detour from democratic capitalism, he saw nothing further from the truth than its claim to historical necessity. Remarkably, compared with Napoleon, who "founded a state that would last for centuries," the Bolshevik Revolution ended up by leaving "nothing behind, neither principles, nor laws, nor institutions, nor even a history."¹² Yet for much of its existence it exerted a powerful pull on intellectuals, especially in Western Europe. How? Why? *The Passing of an Illusion* sets as its task to closely study the illusions generated by each of these phases of Communist history, including thinkers and writers captivated by them.

How was it possible for over one quarter of the French electorate to support a party intimately linked with the well-known brutality of Soviet Communism? How did this Soviet Union become invested with the hopes of so many of the most radical and generous spirits of mid-century France, including half of French workers? Especially when, as Furet points out, some of its most prominent features closely resembled Nazi Germany: more than a tyranny, it was thoroughly dominated by the will of the Party and especially its leader, right down to its language, thoughts, and values—so that the word "totalitarian" was coined to describe such new twentieth-century phenomena. Like Nazi Germany, its ruler was regarded as virtually god-like, whose every word became law.

Despite the wide publicity about its negative features, it was possible for so many, Communists and sympathizers, to sing the praises of Stalin's Soviet Union because of its sheer existence as a successful revolution, because of the ideology and deceptive cause of anti-Fascism, and then because of the victory over Nazism. Anti-fascism is a key: for ten years its mouthpieces had uncritically portrayed the Soviet Union as *another kind* of democratic society.¹³ After all, the West had political democracy, and the USSR was allegedly creating democracy of a different kind, economic and social.¹⁴ Defeating absolute evil in a Manichean war, allied with "other" democracies, the Soviet Union now falsely but successfully wrapped itself in the democratic mantle.

11. *Ibid.*, ix.

12. *Ibid.*, viii.

13. *Ibid.*, chapter eight.

14. Furet misses this, as if the primary concerns of all who joined the Party should have been the most negative side of what was happening in the Soviet Union. He immediately dismisses those who subscribe(d) to the critique of bourgeois society with intelligence and good faith as being under the spell of the "illusion" he is dissecting.

For much of this narrative the prosecutor's and historian's stances do not conflict: Furet is unearthing and reconstructing little-known aspects of the history, and his account throws light on, if not the culpability of pro-Communist intellectuals, certainly some of the reasons for their complicity in a horrendous history. Yet like a prosecutor who does not seek to tell the whole story, including contradictory trends and exonerating details, Furet's goal is to *make a case*. He does so by ignoring the wider picture. In stressing the ugly features of Soviet life portrayed by Gide and Koestler, Furet avoids their connection with what was taking place in the wider world. The thirty years after the beginning of World War I saw unthinkable techniques of warfare and unimaginable destruction, successful and defeated revolutions, the overthrow of the old order in Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, and Russia, a Great Depression, major social change almost everywhere, and now the vicious battle against Nazism and the Japanese Empire, accompanied by nearly apocalyptic devastation as well as further political and social transformation. Stalin's crude Marxism said that it was necessary to break eggs in order to make an omelet, but didn't this mirror the tough-minded realism that had emerged *on all sides* since 1914? Marxism found a wide audience for its declaration that violence is the midwife of history, and also that the socio-economic base determines the superstructure, and so forced industrialization seemed to be a plausible first step towards a democratic socialist society. Who could insist, in such a violent and ugly world, that progress in Europe's most backward country could be sweet and reasonable? Indeed, for many of the tough-minded, the very brutality of Russian Communism guaranteed how serious it was about creating a new society.¹⁵ Moreover, it had real achievements to its credit. Mass literacy, the rapid expansion of higher education, culture, science, technology, and production—these positive features were undeniable, even if its negative ones were no less real. To many, therefore, it was plausible to think that, having socialized production, the Soviet Union was on the road to being the first society beyond capitalism. Defeating Nazi Germany proved this new society's military power, successful transformation, and sheer will to survive.

But even these observations, responding to Furet's emphasis on the Soviet Union, still ignore what was happening closer to home among French leftists. Russia mattered less than France. The Soviet Union formed a distant horizon but was not the core of the matter. To support the French working class meant doing so through the French Communist Party. For intellectuals and workers alike, France's largest party, the PCF—whatever its affiliations elsewhere and whatever troubling traits it might have—was not only the leading force of the Resistance but above all the party of the working class. Sartre would remember wanting “to fight on the side of the working class” and thus being drawn to Marxism “as the moon draws the tides”¹⁶—this despite his own frequent critical observations about its disturbing features.

15. Edgar Morin, *Autocritique* (Paris: R. Julliard, 1959).

16. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method* (New York: Knopf, 1963), 20, 21.

Postwar Soviet Communism was not only morally enhanced in the eyes of its partisans by its revolutionary changes and victory over Nazism, but also because it was the workers' ally in the domestic conflict with capitalism. As this struggle became one with the Cold War, it was reflected in the USSR's intensified conflict with the capitalist countries. Many of those in France who most hated the evils of capitalism were prepared to ignore and forgive a lot both about the Party and the Soviet Union. They understood that, like Hitler, many of the voices attacking Communism most fiercely had their own agenda: to support the status quo in France and to protect a world system that meant poverty and unemployment, colonialism and war. In the climate of struggle, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty asked in 1947 in *Humanism and Terror*, wasn't anti-Communism a way of avoiding talk about capitalism? No wonder partisans of Communism were willing to tolerate, rationalize, or even deny many of its most terrible features—yes, even going so far as believing that its worst traits were images concocted by the other side.¹⁷

Thus, along with neglecting the local context, Furet also ignored a second decisive fact: Communism was locked in struggle with capitalism for much of its lifetime. In the Cold War, both sides refused to see faults, repressed, exaggerated, and lied. Capitalism's strengths were ignored by the left, as were Communism's weaknesses. The evils of colonialism, the inequalities of capitalism, the limits of bourgeois democracy were all ignored by anti-Communists. Each side presented the other with its mirror-image. Furet acknowledged in general that bourgeois society has negative features, and that this has moved and moves people towards radical alternatives; but he failed to see how the Manichean situation to which both sides contributed generated blindness and bad faith *on both sides*.

The Passing of an Illusion had the makings of a major study. What it needed was less hindsight and more insight into why intelligent and committed people like the young François Furet became Communists. And it needed a serious look at Communism's accomplishments, rather than a dismissive wave of the hand. To call something an illusion, after all, simultaneously invalidates the reality of the object being considered, rejects the views of those who believe(d) it, and seeks to explain their false perceptions. There is something coldly objectivist and falsely rigorous about his account, never quite achieving its goal to capture Communism's inspirational power. After all, it was the most coherent, forceful, secular cause of the modern world. If its ending *proves* that those believing in it were misguided, mightn't this retrospective certainty be merely the opposite error of those for whom its sheer existence proved that it was right? Having originated in and having never renounced its roots in an emancipatory movement, having significant accomplishments, for years Communism's ugliness could be

17. This is not to deny the existence of an anti-Stalinist left—Trotskyists and libertarian socialists—whose hostility to capitalism was in no way tempered by their hostility to what they saw as the perversion of socialism. They were a minor political current but had intellectual influence.

explained away as an inevitable aspect of any massive progressive societal transformation—as Rubashov did in Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*. It is as if, still chiding himself and others who once fell under its spell, Furet was unable to cross over into appreciating positive reasons for, or the historical context of, his one-time commitment.

The point is that, like Camus’s *The Rebel*, *The Passing of an Illusion* itself becomes ideological in dissecting the ideology of those who came under the spell of Communism. A self-critical and honest study by a former Communist, one writing after its fall and fully contextualizing Communism’s powerful pull, would have made a major historical contribution to understanding the twentieth century. In 1952 Camus, writing in the midst of the Cold War, may not have been able to free himself from its undertow, but why not Furet, writing in the 1990s?

Furet was an anti-Communist engaged in one of the Cold War’s mopping-up operations. So is Tony Judt. His *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron, and the French Twentieth Century* completes his assessment of French intellectuals during the Cold War which began in 1992 with *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals 1944–1956*. In a project focused more narrowly than Furet’s, on French intellectuals after the Liberation—with the exception of Judt’s discussion of Léon Blum—Judt shares Furet’s conception of Soviet Communism as an “illusion.” Readers of the first book will be familiar with the story’s first half: pro-Communist intellectuals, the naive, the fashionable, and the conformist, embraced the Soviet Union and justified, or denied, its crimes. Their gullibility about History with a capital H, their willful blindness and bad faith, their selective outrage and moral numbness, led them to become guilty of the rankest intellectual irresponsibility. The story’s second half focuses on three rare men who were responsible: Blum, Camus, and Aron. Their rejection of, and honesty about, Communism is only one aspect of each man’s characteristic intellectual, political, and personal integrity. Each one swam against the mainstream and, although reviled at important times of his life, left a testament that contrasts strikingly with the fellow-travelers.

Readers of both books may delight in, or be appalled by, Judt’s harsh and moralizing tone. He inveighs against the search for a “balance” which would insist on seeing good on both sides, or which would weigh faults against faults. He dismisses in advance objections to his accounts for their lack of balance and his refusal of neutrality. The problem is not his partisanship, but rather that Judt moves unswervingly towards, and then across, the line separating scholarship from ideology. After his fiery attack on pro-Communist intellectuals, he pays homage to the few who stood up for reason, morality, and reality. And so he completes an account of Cold War French intellectual life that is no less and no more than a story of bad guys and good guys.

Paradoxically, some of the strongest parts of *Past Imperfect* are the sections in which Judt critically described the pro-Communist sympathy of those around the journals *Esprit*, *Les Temps modernes*, and *L’Observateur*. There, in forcefully

written and tightly linked chapters, Judt connected several individuals' activity during the Resistance and their attitudes towards the Purge and appropriate forms of justice after the Liberation. Then he showed how their pro-Communism came to fruition in embracing "the blind force of history," forgiving or denying Soviet crimes including Stalin's anti-Semitism, as well as in their thoughtless anti-Americanism, capped by a systematic recourse to double standards and bad faith—all in the name of human liberation and supporting French workers. In this tour-de-force Judt depicted a step-by-step descent into intellectual, political, and moral mendacity by the pro-Communist intellectual. *The Burden of Responsibility* is as approving of its heroes as the first book was hostile to its villains. Judt is all sympathy towards one side as he was all vitriol towards the other. The problem is the *all*. It simply fails to fit the reality. The binaries through which Judt grasps political reality tend to structure, rather than to be drawn from, the evidence: bad faith versus good faith, conformism versus going it alone, dishonesty versus honesty. The story is shaped, and distorted, by being told in terms of expedience versus morality, consistency versus double standards. In the end, for all his determination to illuminate by judging, Judt's snideness, harshness, and anger towards the one side, alternating with a stance of tribute towards his heroes that makes even their weaknesses into strengths, wind up making a case rather than telling a story. By shaping the history according to his Cold-War categories Judt undermines its credibility, failing to tell it convincingly, and, to use one of his favorite terms, responsibly. His two books claiming to be history end up as exercises in score-settling.

This can best be seen by returning to Sartre and Camus to see how Judt treats the two, the first in *Past Imperfect* and the second in *The Burden of Responsibility*. As I have suggested, the one can do no right and the other no wrong. Judt's Sartre had a "psychic longing" that led him to "respect for authority" and "admiration for violence," along with a "tendency to prostration in the face of the heroic masses"¹⁸—false in the first instance and exaggerated into distortion in the second and third. Sartre was indifferent to the Other's reasoning, this because of his "existentialist metaphysics"¹⁹ in which "we only exist in the eyes of others"²⁰—a patent misreading of Sartre's philosophy, as is: "We are never intrinsically good or bad, innocent or guilty, but only to the extent that others think us so." Judt notes that Sartre's "career advanced apace" during the Occupation,²¹ but does not mention that Camus profited even more than Sartre from the war. Sartrean freedom and engagement are "morally neutral to Sartre"—false, and a travesty of how Sartre connected philosophy and politics. And equally false: "Sartre's philosophy denies the existence of universal standards of moral measurement."²² Finally, without even so much as a glance at his major works from the 1950s

18. Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals 1944–1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 50.

19. *Ibid.*, 54.

20. *Ibid.*, 81.

21. *Ibid.*, 55.

22. *Ibid.*, 84.

through the 1970s, Sartrean existentialism and Marxism “were logically incompatible.”²³

Judt’s depiction of Sartre’s slavish relationship to the Soviet Union, heavily dependent on distortion and sarcasm, ignores everything Sartre did before 1952 and after 1956, including his well-documented criticisms of Stalinist Marxism in 1944 and 1946, criticisms of the Communist Party’s functioning in 1947 and 1948, Sartre’s spectacular portrayal of Party leadership murdering one of their own in *Dirty Hands* (its 1948 premiere was picketed by the Communists), as well as his praise for Tito’s Yugoslavia during the break with Stalin and Sartre’s effort to create a non-Communist and neutralist movement in 1948–1949. Indeed Judt mentions, with praise, that Camus came out against the Soviet labor camps in 1948—without noticing that this article appeared in the newspaper of Sartre’s organization, or that a year later Sartre signed the article on the Soviet labor camps by Merleau-Ponty, fellow editor of *Les Temps modernes*.

But Sartre can do no right—*Les Temps modernes* published Claude Lefort’s powerful contemporary critiques of Stalinism, but perhaps at the journal “no one read—or in any case understood or cared—what anyone else was saying.”²⁴ Judt is simply not interested in Sartre, neither his works nor his development; only his flaws and errors are read with any interest. In this sense *Past Imperfect* transformed its subjects—not only Sartre but Emmanuel Mounier, Jean-Louis Domenach, Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, and Claude Bourdet, into *targets* in a narrative moving from the general to the particular, the syndrome to its representatives. Individuals are cited to buttress a case, to illustrate the pathology—but never studied for themselves.

In *The Burden of Responsibility* the opposite is true. The stories of Blum, Camus, and Aron are each told individually and in great detail, from the inside. Judt is sensitive to his heroes’ situations and conflicts—often wonderfully so. He is interested in them as people. He captures brilliantly the sense of Camus and Aron swimming against the mainstream, how they came to their lonely but honorable conclusions, how they stuck by them in the face of abuse, and what it cost them to do so. But this affection has its problems. As in his writing about Sartre, Judt invents and erases, disregards and misuses his sources, to such an extent that he gives us a caricature, an invented Camus. Camus is, very simply, too good. His loss of grace over the years and his well-known self-righteousness led biographer Herbert Lottman to wonder whether success spoiled Albert Camus. His high-flown and often vapid moralizing earned him the nickname “St.-Juste.” He came more and more to seem above the world, and his commitment to the working class came to matter less and less as his real political passion slowly matured: his hatred of Communism.

One of Judt’s most revealing flip-flops from his Sartre to his Camus is that he now takes Camus almost wholly at face value. In his journals and to his close friends the man of integrity again and again presented himself as the sole honor-

23. *Ibid.*, 83.

24. *Ibid.*, 146.

able man fighting for survival amidst malign forces. His sense of victimization intensified after publishing *The Rebel*, to reach its climax after Sartre's attack a year later. And he also voiced his desire to escape political involvement, claiming to stay with politics only from a sense of responsibility. "Camus was an unpolitical man."²⁵ Out of place amidst Parisian elitism and viciousness, victim, apolitical: this is Camus as he saw himself, and it is Judt's Camus. In an almost wholly uncritical account, Judt ignores Camus's aggressive political instincts, his insistence on having the last word. We would be shocked to learn that this Camus had been France's leading editorialist in the year after the Liberation, taking strong and controversial positions on all kinds of questions, responding to critics left and right. It is as if the publication of *The Rebel* had not been followed by a year-long campaign by Camus to dispose of critical reviews—a year after the Sartre/Camus break he published a book presenting his side of the controversies, including his reply to Sartre. And then as he began to intervene politically again in 1955 Camus attacked *L'Observateur*, Jean-Marie Domenach, radical intellectuals generally—and Sartre. Camus was nobody's victim.

His dilemma over Algeria was not, as Judt would have it, the sole honorable course for a man of integrity. Here Camus's most serious weaknesses are remade into strengths. Judt totally ignores his inability to really *see* colonialism, the moral, political, and intellectual paralysis to which he succumbed because the world did not fit his neocolonialist fantasy. For Judt he was out of touch after war broke out in 1954 not, as in Albert Memmi's telling formulation, because he was the "colonizer of good will," unable to choose between his principles and his people, but because he was "somehow innocent and increasingly poorly informed."²⁶ Camus was silent because "in the Algerian case there was no longer any truth, just feelings."²⁷ And so Judt praises his greatest failure: "Intellectual responsibility consisted not in taking a position but refusing one where it did not exist."²⁸ A position *did* exist—whether formulated by Aron in its realist version or Sartre in its revolutionary one: Algerian national self-determination. Those who blinded themselves to it only made a possible *pie-d-noir* Gotterdammerung inevitable.

Ironically enough, Judt makes it seem as if Camus was mistaken in only one area: in seeking for so long to balance his growing insight into Communism with his earlier commitment to the Left. Judt criticizes Camus for what he regards as Camus's residual but dwindling anti-Western and anti-capitalist attitudes. Thus according to Judt's remarkable literary criticism, Clamence's guilt in *The Fall* reveals Camus's guilt for not having been anti-Communist *enough*, for having compromised with the truth for so long. For Judt, Camus's great insight, after all, was that "the problem of totalitarian violence was *the* moral and political dilemma of our age."²⁹

25. Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron, and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 104.

26. *Ibid.*, 118.

27. *Ibid.*, 120.

28. *Ibid.*, 121.

29. *Ibid.*, 96.

Contrary to Judt, the real Camus remained a man of the Left who opposed Communism without ever capitulating completely to the either/or logic which Judt seeks to impose on him. Camus never let himself be wholly drawn into the pro-Western camp. Unlike Raymond Aron, he never became a Cold Warrior. However inchoately, Camus remained aware that “totalitarian violence” was not the only issue of the time. Awareness of what was happening in Algeria troubled him deeply, but he could not squarely face the persistence of colonialism and racism in his homeland. In 1950s France he found it increasingly difficult to remain, except in theory, a partisan of the working class. He was one of the first to understand the threat of nuclear war. Acknowledging that *all* of these issues were central to the life and times of Sartre and Camus recasts the story from a simple anti-Communist morality play. Among other things, it raises Sartre’s stock and lowers Camus’s. It makes them *both* flawed heroes, both first-class moralists who failed to be consistent. It makes them, contrary to Judt, concrete individuals who responded differently—each man reacted brilliantly to some of the challenges he faced and poorly to others.

This is the direction that might be taken by an account of Sartre/Camus and the Cold War which sought to avoid a double standard.³⁰ But Judt does not give each side of the story its due. Instead, his scholarship becomes a mirror-image of the ideological histories he despises.³¹

It is appropriate, then, that a glowing quotation from Judt graces the dust-jacket of *The Black Book*. Its authors’ goal, after all, is to make a case for what Judt calls “the criminal nature of Communism.”³² The system as such, and not Stalin or Mao or Pol Pot, was guilty of murder, terror, and repression, guilty of crimes against humanity. Within this prosecutorial purpose lies a political one. The several authors’ broadest purpose is no less than to deprive not only Communism but any future revolutionary political projects of legitimacy. In the words of Martin Malia’s foreword to the English edition of *The Black Book*, their goal is to “effectively shut the door on Utopia.”³³

Achieving such goals depends on the book’s concrete studies. Accordingly, the heart of *The Black Book* lies in its specific accounts of Communism’s crimes. Nicolas Werth begins with what itself could have been published as a separate

30. For an alternative account see my “Sartre vs Camus Fifty Years On: How the Cold War Destroyed a Friendship,” *Times Literary Supplement* (September 27, 2002), {pp.?.}. My own full-length effort to navigate this terrain will be published as *Camus/Sartre: The Biography of a Relationship*. {au: when and by whom?}

31. To his great credit, Judt has recently written about that most Manichean of current conflicts, between Israelis and Palestinians, in a way that seeks to give both sides their due. In discussing the rights and wrongs of this situation he has indeed stressed the importance of seeing actions in context and refused to make either side’s perspective the moral/political norm (see “The Road to Nowhere,” *New York Review of Books* [May 8, 2002], {pp.?.}; “The Road to Nowhere”: An Exchange,” *New York Review of Books* [July 18, 2002], {pp.?.}). While this conflict is structurally different than the Cold War, Judt the French intellectual historian has much to learn from the moral and intellectual strength of his analysis of the path to peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

32. Judt, *The Black Book of Communism*, dust jacket.

33. Martin Malia, “Foreword: The Uses of Atrocity,” *The Black Book of Communism*, xx.

volume, a 235-page study entitled "A State against Its People." Based on original sources, it is a detailed examination of the waves of Communist violence in the Soviet Union from the coup d'état that brought the Bolsheviks to power in 1917 to the ossifying Soviet regime's use of psychiatric confinement against dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s. Werth's major conclusion is that these "cycles of violence became the norm in the U.S.S.R."³⁴

Using the newly opened archives for his inventory, Werth presents both details and numbers: 10,000 to 15,000 executed during the first wave of Red Terror in 1918; tens of thousands summarily shot during the Civil War; 1,803,392 peasants deported during forced collectivization in 1930–1931 with approximately 300,000 of these dying in the process; six million dead of hunger during the famine that followed; a massive campaign against "socially alien elements" and criminals beginning in 1928 including civil servants, small property-owners, and churches; 680,000 shot during the Great Terror of 1937–1938; 400,000 deaths among the 7,000,000 people who entered the forced-labor camps between 1934 and 1940; an increase in labor-camp population to 1,930,000 by early 1941; the deportation of over a million Chechens, Anguish, Kalmyks, Crimean Tatars, and Volga Germans during the war; a total population in prisons, temporary wartime resettlement camps, and work camps of nearly 5,500,000 in 1945.

Practiced eyes will notice a remarkable fact about Werth's history: he revises most earlier estimates considerably downward. Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror* had concluded with an estimate of twenty million deaths resulting from Stalin's rule, including the famine; Werth gives us considerably fewer.³⁵ He is concerned, fortunately, neither to minimize nor to maximize numbers, but to accurately determine what happened. To this effect he looks closely at whatever will help—censuses, court records, sentences imposed and carried out. In the end it is undeniable that the deaths attributable to Soviet Communism, even excluding the Civil War and the Great Famine, approach the numbers of Jews murdered by Nazi Germany. Polemics aside, this is a staggering fact. Confirming it is the major contribution of "A State against Its People," and *The Black Book*.

But what makes these deaths in fact attributable to Communism rather, say, than to Stalin himself, or to other specific features of Russian, Soviet, or twentieth-century history? Werth focuses on the "classic question" of the continuity of Leninist and Stalinist terror. He does not see Stalinism as a new departure from, but a continuation of, a system and an outlook formulated by Lenin himself. During the respite between 1923 and 1928 Bolshevik Manicheanism did not soften, nor did its violent language, and the wartime secret police apparatus only grew stronger and more permanent. Its basis was an attitude of constant Civil War. From its beginning to its end, and not only during Stalin's rule, terror occupied "a central place" in the country's history.³⁶

Werth's is by far the most substantial piece of scholarship of *The Black Book*. Next is the work of Jean-Louis Margolin, who contributes three chapters, on

34. Nicolas Werth, "A State against Its People," *The Black Book of Communism*, 262.

35. See my *The Dialectics of Disaster* (London, 1984), 69–70.

36. *Ibid.*, 267.

Vietnam, China, and Cambodia. The one on Vietnam is slight, sketching patterns of Communist violence without placing them in the context of the thirty-year war against first Japanese, then French, then American occupiers. Margolin ignores hundreds of thousands (estimates run as high as 3,000,000) deaths attributable to the United States, depriving his account of credibility—unless the Vietnamese Communists should be considered to blame for their war of resistance against foreign occupation!

Margolin's lengthy studies of China and Cambodia equally ignore the context in which violence occurred. Yet Margolin's account of the far less well-known history of Communist violence in China is at least thorough. Here is his summary of the accusation:

Even if one excludes the civil war, the regime must be held accountable for a huge number of deaths. Although the estimates are quite speculative, it is clear that there were between 6 million and 10 million deaths as a direct result of the Communist actions, including hundreds of thousands of Tibetans. In addition tens of millions of "counter revolutionaries" passed long periods of their lives inside the prison system, with perhaps 20 million dying there. To that total should be added the staggering number of deaths during the ill-named Great Leap Forwards—estimates range from 20 million to 43 million dead for the years 1959-61—all victims of a famine caused by the misguided projects of a single man, Mao Zedong, and his criminal obstinacy in refusing to admit his mistake and to allow measures to be taken to rectify the disastrous effects.³⁷

But Margolin does little to explore why this horrendous toll is attributable to Communism rather than, say, to Mao himself, or to specific features of the Chinese situation. Only in his study of Cambodia does Margolin pose this question, and this chapter rises above the rest of *The Black Book* for its analytical effort to grasp the dynamics of the holocaust wrought by Khmer Communism. In a penetrating discussion very much unlike his chapters on Vietnam and China, Margolin seeks not merely to detail horrors nor to blame their perpetrators, but rather to understand what happened in Cambodia. He begins this analysis by rejecting the argument that "the violence of the Khmer Rouge, however terrible it was, was only the reaction of a people driven mad by the original sin of American bombing."³⁸ In other words, he takes the Khmer Rouge as historical actors, and seeks the dynamics behind their acts. They are not seen as an intrinsically evil movement, but rather as people acting in, and responding to, a historical situation. Although Margolin's discussion can be faulted for paying little attention to the specific conflicts which shaped the Party, its military, and their project of transformation, it focuses brilliantly on the enormous contradiction between the Khmer Rouge's hold over state power and their ability to accomplish anything meaningful with this power. Although ignoring the immediate context of the American war in Vietnam, Margolin sets the Khmer Rouge in the broad context of the decline of Communism at the beginning of the last quarter

37. Jean-Louis Margolin, "China: A Long March into the Night," *The Black Book of Communism*, 463-464.

38. Margolin, "Cambodia: The Country of Disconcerting Crimes," *The Black Book of Communism*, 590.

of the century. Thus he casts the Cambodian genocide as a catastrophe which stems from the intersection of, and tension between, the Khmer Rouge's impotence and their power.³⁹ In exploring this Margolin rises strikingly above the book's prosecutorial mode, but then capitulates to *The Black Book's* main theme: "The crimes of the Khmer Rouge should be judged rigorously and objectively so that the Cambodian experience can be compared to the other great horrors of the century, and its proper weight assigned in the history of Communism."⁴⁰

After all, the point of the book is to carry out Communism's trial, and the metaphor holds, except for a brief moment or two such as Margolin's reflection on "the weight of reality" affecting the Khmer Rouge. In a trial—which is after all an adversarial proceeding—prosecutors allow no extenuating circumstances, exclude provocations and other motivations of the accused, and paint the defendant's actions as darkly as possible. They stress the strongest negative evidence, indeed, dwell upon it. This is why tallying numbers of corpses is so important: an irrefutable basis for judgment.

But this is also why so much of the book seems off-center. In an adversarial proceeding that rigorously excludes whatever else was happening throughout the twentieth century, our authors singlemindedly want to count the bodies attributable to the Communists. This is inevitably one-sided. It avoids setting the contexts and other causes of the violence it so chillingly describes, and it makes up its rules as it goes along. A trial at least provides several elements missing from *The Black Book*: a procedure to ensure that the appropriate defendant is accused; the judge's control over the proceedings to ensure fairness and attention to proper procedures; defense counsel to assure that the defendant is fully and fairly represented; and a jury to sift through the evidence in relation to the charges. In addition, the book's prosecutorial cast results in some simply appalling accounts—such as about Cuba, for example, which contains nothing on the American role in shaping events there during the past 100 years, including the pitched U. S. hostility to the Cuban Revolution before Castro aligned himself with the Communist Party and the Soviet Union and American efforts to choke Cuba ever since.

As prosecutors Courtois and his colleagues try to show that not only in the Soviet Union, but everywhere it touched, Communism was a single, coherent, worldwide enterprise: *all* of its manifestations breathed the same Manichean spirit, were organized in the same malevolent way, and produced more or less the same criminal results—in Spain, in Eastern Europe, in Asia, not to mention Latin America and Africa. But this approach not only imposes a straitjacket on highly diverse subject-matter—non-Communists like the Nicaraguan Sandinistas are painted with the same colors as the Bolsheviks—but ignores essential topics in order to shape a highly skewed narrative. For example, Yves Santamaria seeks to attribute *both* sides' violence in Angola's endless civil war to Communism inas-

39. See my *The Dialectics of Disaster*.

40. Margolin, "Cambodia," *The Black Book of Communism*, 633.

much as leaders of UNITA and the MPLA were once nominally Marxist—while ignoring the American and South African contribution to that country’s destruction. Once again, fighting against American intervention deserves being placed in the dock, but not that intervention itself.

There were, after all, two sides in the Cold War, and only those who blame Communism for existing can attribute *all* of its violence to one side. In fact the section on Africa is presented through such ideologically distorted lenses that the South African Communist Party’s essential role in peacefully ending apartheid (and its continuing participation in the ANC government) goes completely unnoticed. Angola, Ethiopia, and Mozambique are the sole countries examined. Indeed, the “sunset clause” which broke the deadlock between the National Party and the ANC (by allowing Afrikaner civil servants to retain their positions until retirement) was a major contribution to a peaceful transition; it was devised by Joe Slovo, the head of the SACP. Such facts have no room in the case being mounted by the authors of *The Black Book*.

But most of these problems pale in significance compared with the book’s opening and closing chapters, which caused enormous controversy and even occasioned a break among *The Black Book*’s authors. In the introduction Courtois presents the following “rough approximation” of the toll of Communism:

U. S. S. R.: 20 million deaths
 China: 65 million deaths
 Vietnam: 1 million deaths
 North Korea: 2 million deaths
 Cambodia: 2 million deaths
 Eastern Europe: 1 million deaths
 Latin America: 150,000 deaths
 Africa: 1.7 million deaths
 Afghanistan: 1.5 million deaths
 The international Communist movement and Communist parties not in power:
 about 10,000 deaths⁴¹

Courtois’s figures for the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and Latin America go far beyond the estimates of the authors themselves, as does Courtois’s final body count. He stresses that

the intransigent facts demonstrate that Communist regimes have victimized approximately 100 million people in contrast to the approximately 25 million victims of the Nazis. This clear record should provide at least some basis for assessing the similarity between the Nazi regime, which since 1945 has been considered the most viciously criminal regime of [the] century, and, by the Communist system, which as late as 1991 had preserved its international legitimacy unimpaired and which even today, is still in power in certain countries and continues to protect its supporters the world over.⁴²

In this connection Courtois parallels the Nazis’ racial totalitarianism with the Communists’ determination “to exterminate not merely individuals or opposing

41. Courtois, “Introduction,” *The Black Book of Communism*, 4.

42. *Ibid.*, 15.

groups but entire segments of society on a massive scale for their political and ideological beliefs.”⁴³ But this is not all. Courtois finds it remarkable that so much has been written about the Nazi crimes, especially against the Jews, while a “deafening silence” reigns in the “academic world regarding the Communist catastrophe.” Preoccupation with the Holocaust, he suggests, took up the space within which Communism might have been denounced.

Courtois begins his concluding chapter by asking: “Why did modern Communism, when it appeared in 1917, almost immediately turn into a system of bloody dictatorship and into a criminal regime?” His answer is to explore the “genetic code of Communism,” its reliance on terror, as originated “in Moscow in 1917” and then applied, with variations, elsewhere.⁴⁴ Accordingly, Courtois reprises Werth’s study, both with a bit more reflectiveness about underlying causes, and by recasting Werth’s argument for a continuity of Bolshevik violence from Lenin to Stalin into a lockstep derivation of the second from the first. “Stalin merely improved on [Lenin’s formula of show-trials] and made it a permanent feature of his apparatus of repression. . . .”⁴⁵

Courtois acknowledges the revolutionary, Russian, and World War contexts of violence, but asserts that “they do not explain the Bolsheviks’ propensity for extreme violence,” which Lenin initiated “despite the absence of any genuine manifestation of overt opposition from other parties and social movements.”⁴⁶ Why this resort to terror? Because of “Leninist ideology and the utopian will to apply to society a doctrine totally out of step with reality.”⁴⁷ In other words, Leninism led inexorably to Stalinism, and both were characterized by the “activist subjectivism” which sought to transform a reality enormously distant from anything described or anticipated by Marx. But specifically what explains the resort to massive violence? It was “the messianic dimension of the Marxist project to reunify humanity via the proletariat.”⁴⁸ This led to rhetoric and action that demonized individuals and social groups, and which Courtois takes pains to parallel with Nazism. Both systems denied the humanity of those they opposed, casting them as animals—or worse, as insects—before murdering them. And so Courtois concludes by pushing this line of reasoning to its famous conclusion:

Critics have often tried to make a distinction between Nazism and Communism by arguing that the Nazi project had a particular aim, which was nationalist and racist in the extreme, whereas Lenin’s project was universal. This is entirely wrong. In both theory and practice, Lenin and his successors excluded from humanity all capitalists, the bourgeoisie, counter-revolutionaries, and others, turning them into absolute enemies in their sociological and political discourse. Kautsky noted as early as 1918 that these terms were entirely elastic, allowing those in power to exclude whomever they wanted from humanity whenever they so wished. These were the terms that led directly to crimes against humanity.⁴⁹

43. *Ibid.*, 17.

44. Courtois, “Conclusion: Why?” *The Black Book of Communism*, 754.

45. *Ibid.*, 746.

46. *Ibid.*, 735.

47. *Ibid.*, 737.

48. *Ibid.*, 747.

49. *Ibid.*, 753.

We may readily dismiss certain arguments of Courtois's introduction and conclusion. For example, his complaint about Communism not receiving as much negative attention as the Holocaust is not only inaccurate, but bizarre, because the crimes of Communism have been widely and often wildly publicized by its enemies from the beginning, while before 1980 very little was said about the Holocaust.⁵⁰ And his one-sentence derivation of Stalin from Lenin, to say the least, requires serious analysis and argument, as does his no less fleeting explanation of the disasters of Communism being rooted in the "messianic dimension" of Marxism. But two other theses created considerable consternation and have come to be associated with *The Black Book*: the figure of 100 million deaths and the parallel with Nazism. They became central in the debate that followed.

The book's release had been timed to coincide with the eightieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, as a kind of nail in the coffin of Communism. As soon as it appeared, controversy erupted. The authors responsible for over half of the book and its only original studies, on the Soviet Union and Cambodia, publicly denounced Courtois for his "obsession to come up with one hundred million deaths." In articles and interviews Werth and Margolin pointed out how, in the service of this goal, Courtois distorted and exaggerated: Werth's total, including the Civil War and the famine of 1932–1933 had been five million less than Courtois's "mythical number,"⁵¹ while Margolin denied having spoken of the Vietnamese Communists being responsible for one million deaths.⁵² Interviewed in *Le Monde*, Margolin likened Courtois's effort to "militant political activity, indeed, that of a prosecutor amassing charges in the service of a cause, that of a global condemnation of the Communist phenomenon as an essentially criminal phenomenon."⁵³ Both rejected the comparison between Communism and Nazism: Margolin pointed out that Communism called for human liberation, while Nazism "is a racist doctrine which casts the majority of people into the shadows,"⁵⁴ and Werth noted that "extermination camps did not exist in the Soviet Union."⁵⁵

Writing together in *Le Monde*, Werth and Margolin reiterated these disagreements and also rejected Courtois's assertion that the crimes of Communism were rooted in its ideology. They further pointed out that each of his disputed claims was not a reasoned conclusion but rather an assertion not borne out by the book's concrete studies. Nor was Communism everywhere and always as bloody as its worst episodes: Cuba and Nicaragua were not marked by such crimes, for example, and most victims died during ten years of Soviet rule and fifteen under Mao, the bulk of these in famines.⁵⁶

50. This issue was highlighted in one of the most thoughtful reviews of *The Black Book*, by Anson Rabinbach, *Dissent* (Fall, 1998), {pp.?.}

51. Nicolas Werth, "Vrais et faux enjeux du *Livre noir*," *Le Monde* (November 27, 1997), 15.

52. Ariane Chemin, "Les divisions d'une équipe d'historiens du communisme," *Le Monde* (October 31, 1997), accessed online at <http://www.lemonde.fr/>.

53. Jean-Louis Margolin, "Historien, militant politique ou procureur?" *Le Monde* (November 9, 1997), accessed online at <http://www.lemonde.fr/>.

54. Chemin, "Les divisions d'une équipe d'historiens du communisme."

55. Nicolas Werth, cited in *ibid*.

56. Jean-Louis Margolin and Nicolas Werth, "Communisme: retour à l'histoire," *Le Monde* (November 14, 1997), accessed online at <http://www.lemonde.fr/>.

As we have already seen, this was only part of the storm provoked by *The Black Book*, which continued for months in the French media. *Le Monde* lists well over three hundred references to *The Black Book*, *Libération* over seventy, *Le Figaro* nearly fifty. Supported and attacked, Courtois and his colleagues were above all accused of ideologically motivated distortion of the historical record. Accordingly, it was to be expected that sooner or later a rival team of researchers would rise to the occasion and prepare an extended scholarly reply. In October, 2000, *Le Siècle des communismes* appeared. Another massive work (this one over 500 pages), it was produced by an international team of twenty-three scholars under the leadership of a group that includes an early critic of *The Black Book*, Michel Dreyfus.

Part of its argument lies in its title: to assert that there were a plurality of Communisms means denying the existence of a single coherent Communist system which had a specific "nature." According to Furet, its positive features were an illusion, and according to Courtois its leaders caused "the Communist catastrophe" by implementing an ideology rooted in Lenin and ultimately Marx. On the contrary, "The Communist parties in power do not take their legitimacy from the same history nor are confronted by the same challenges."⁵⁷ The authors set out, then, to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of phenomena oversimplified by Furet and *The Black Book*. In so doing they resist Courtois's balance-sheet as being far too narrow, focusing as it does on a single aspect of Communism, its death-toll. Moreover, they accuse Furet and the *Black Book*'s authors of grinding an ideological axe rather than being genuinely scholarly. As Bruno Groppo and Bernard Pudal argue, their stance—resting heavily on the Cold War concept of "totalitarianism" rather the actual social histories of Communist societies—reflects the ideological struggle against "what they consider as a monstrosity or a dangerous and murderous illusion."⁵⁸ As such it presents a grand narrative of the Soviet Union, above all focusing on its crimes, explaining these by recourse to ideology and political leadership, and ignoring the approaches that give a deeper sense of historical life. Serge Wolikow describes this as a caricature of real history, employing a monocausal explanation which by "assimilating for example the Communist movement to a simple subversive enterprise, simplifies the phenomenon and prohibits one from understanding its impact and amplitude."⁵⁹

In an opening section whose several chapters sketch the history of various interpretations of Communism, *Le Siècle des communismes* reveals a totally different tone than *The Black Book*. Combative but respectful towards Furet and the authors of *The Black Book*, its authors seek to be neither prosecutorial nor political. They argue the primacy of a scholarly rather than a moral approach, seeking above all to *understand* history rather than draw lessons from it. In describing the Bolshevik Revolution's sense of itself, Claudio Sergio Ingerflom argues

57. Bernard Pudal, Michel Dreyfus, Bruno Groppo, *et al.*, Introduction, *Le Siècle des communismes* (Paris: Editions de l'atelier/Editions ouvrières, 2000), 10.

58. Groppo and Pedal, "Une Réalité multiple et controversée," *Le Siècle*, 19.

59. Serge Wolikow, "Les Interpretations du mouvement communiste international," *Le Siècle*, 90.

that its leaders shared the myth of “1917, year zero” which was later adopted by their enemies and is repeated in *The Black Book*. Indeed, in his *Thinking about the French Revolution*, Furet warned against this illusion but then fell victim to it in *The Passing of an Illusion*:⁶⁰ the myth that the Revolution constituted a radical rupture with the past and introduced entirely new policies and a decisively new approach to a range of issues.

In contrast, *Le Siècle des communismes* gives close analyses of both the historical context of Bolshevism and its continuity with the Russian past. Spying on citizens, forced deportations, concentration camps, using violence as a way of acting on society, massive state intervention in daily life—“these methods were already largely used before October, 1917.”⁶¹ What marked the Bolsheviks was the willingness to use these means after the war’s end, to achieve new objectives, which resulted in their becoming a permanent feature of the new state. They stemmed not from Marxist ideology or the drive to create a Utopia, but in fact emerged in the crucible of the World War and the Civil War, as well as from the Manichean and aggressive nature of the movement that rose to power in and through these conflicts.

Specific conditions in Russia and, as discussed later by Roland Lew, in China played a major role in generating Soviet and Chinese Communist violence. In general, “the history of Communism is inseparable from the existence of the violence which made its debut in 1914 and continues into our own times.”⁶² Specifically, the violence of Bolshevism must be understood by being placed in the context not of an illusory world of a Russia ripe for modernity and democratic capitalism but in the actual context of an archaic universe of despotism and crude religiosity.⁶³ “Lacking the counterweight of a democratic tradition,” the Soviet Union emerged from the Civil War as a militarized party-state atop an exhausted peasantry thrown back on its traditional values. The Bolsheviks’ own democratic tradition had largely been destroyed by the Civil War. “Rather than seeing in the Bolshevik Party a *deus ex machina* deliberately organizing violence, it is fitting to measure the state in which it found Russian society in 1917 and then after the Civil War.”⁶⁴ As far as the violence of Chinese Communism is concerned, it took shape in the midst of a profound structural strain. “To Westernize in order to remain Chinese; to modernize in order to contain the West; this is the tension which ran through the century preceding the coming to power of the Communists and which, on many sides, characterizes the contradictions nearly a half-century of ‘Communist’ power.”⁶⁵

In a brilliant brief description of the problems of the Soviet Communist Party, Gabriel Rittersporn, following his colleagues, takes issue with the notion of

60. Claudio Sergio Ingerflom, Introduction, “De la Russie à l’URSS,” *Le Siècle*, 114-115.

61. Peter Holquist, “La Question de la violence,” *Le Siècle*, 137.

62. Wolikow, Introduction, “Le Communisme dans l’histoire politique du XXe siècle,” *Le Siècle*, 487.

63. *Ibid.*, 489-490.

64. *Ibid.*, 492.

65. Roland Lew, “Le Communisme chinois,” *Le Siècle*, 236.

“totalitarianism” as an explanation for Soviet society. Rather, the Party relied on archaic structures to move Soviet society forward, in ways that had to contest these very structures. The Party’s reliance on force and centralized control could not create the rapid growth it demanded, leading to an impasse in which it itself was both the whip driving the society forward and the brake hindering motion. The problem was not totalitarianism at all but a *failure* of control: the Party’s projects were blocked by Soviet society itself. In short, turning to the phenomenon of terror, Rittersporn discusses how the new elite’s mystified version of Soviet Marxism, in which classes, property, and domination had all been “abolished,” along with their own self-interest, deprived them of being able to see the cul de sac in which they were trapped. Thus terror became a natural recourse for a Party-state so remote from its proclaimed goals that only infernal enemies could explain its failings: turncoats, saboteurs, foreign agents.⁶⁶ This is what is missed, as Lynne Viola points out, by the “moral history” of a Courtois or a Furet. Their approach distorts, avoids, and misunderstands the foundations of Soviet society and the inescapable contradiction that matured a generation after Stalin’s death: its industrial and military infrastructure would not “allow the country to keep its status of superpower beyond the last decades of the twentieth century.”⁶⁷

Thus does *Le Siècle des communismes* argue for, and begin to demonstrate, a fuller comprehension of Soviet Communism than allowed by Furet’s and *The Black Book*’s prosecutorial stance. And there is no doubt that its approach is intellectually richer, more sophisticated, and more nuanced than those committed to passing judgment on Communism; *Le Siècle des communismes* has no such moral or political ambition. Indeed, its main goal is historiographical—to argue for a many-faceted approach to history as opposed to *The Black Book*’s single focus on the criminality of Communism.

Yet despite their professed concern for a plurality of Communisms, *Le Siècle*’s authors are primarily interested in the Soviet Union—Cambodia, for example, receives ten short paragraphs, and Rey’s intriguing account of China confines itself to sketching the context in which violence occurred without dwelling on the violence itself. Are there commonalities between the various Communist societies? If Courtois asserted this sweepingly and without evidence, the contrary argument for diversity can only go so far without itself needing to be demonstrated by comparative studies of the several Communisms. During the tempest of 1997 Werth had answered the criticisms of a future contributor to *Le Siècle*, Alain Blum:

Doesn’t there well and truly exist a common soil, a hard core constituted by political practices based, in all countries calling themselves Communist, on larger and terrible repressive sequences, indeed massively criminal at certain moments, on the exclusion of entire social categories, on “a culture of civil war,” on the central idea of the “intensification of the class struggle” insofar as the ideal goal grows closer, on a certain number of modernizing myths leading to extreme violence against an “old world” to be destroyed (includ-

66. Gabriel Rittersporn, “Article title,” *Le Siècle*, p. nos.

67. Lynne Viola, “Les Paysans de 1917 à nos jours,” *Le Siècle*, 171.

ing in Pol Pot's Cambodia, which Alain Blum rejects abusively on this last point, in China)?⁶⁸

Werth admitted to Blum that a "true comparative reflection between the diverse Communist experiences . . . should have been at the heart of"⁶⁹ *The Black Book*. Likewise, it also should have been at the heart of *Le Siècle des communismes*. But despite the argument, the fact is that neither side in the debate undertakes the necessary comparative studies.

A second key issue in evaluating *Le Siècle* involves the place of moral judgment in studying history. Does a moral perspective necessarily lead to the "negation of history" denounced by Blum?⁷⁰ The book's authors make it seem that after we have explained the various roots, contexts, and sources of violence, a moral approach is no longer relevant, or is perhaps a partisan carryover from the Cold War. Yet it is possible for the authors of *Le Siècle* to do justice to contexts and complexities and *still* focus on Communism's evils and why they took place. One has the feeling that the authors of *Le Siècle des communismes* lose sight of the horrors at the heart of this whole process of reconsideration, as if dwelling on their scope, or seeing them as matters of human intention and decision, can only revive Cold War recriminations. But exploring the complex web of conditions leading to violence does not annul the fact: in at least three Communist societies containing important common structures and outlooks, leaders decided to murder millions of people. Shouldn't a nuanced and complex history be possible that does fuller justice to these disasters in Cambodia, China, and the Soviet Union, one that looks for their sources, including in possible parallels among the three enterprises? As Werth argued in his article justifying the project of *The Black Book* even after dissenting from Courtois's distortions, Communist systems and their repressive practices demand understanding. "Beyond differences, made evident and underlined by the writers, the similarities in the mode of functioning of power between countries with cultural substrata as distant as China and the U.S.S.R. challenge the historian about the reality of the object 'Communist system.'"⁷¹

Many readers will certainly find *Le Siècle des communismes* a welcome relief after the aberrations of *The Black Book of Communism*. To understand, not to judge, to see complexities and not force the facts, to look for contexts rather than seeing events by themselves: certainly many will be more comfortable with this approach. But *Le Siècle des communismes* verges on the opposite weakness of *The Black Book*, Judt's studies, and *The Passing of an Illusion*. If these are undermined by a one-sided concern with making a case, the other tends to obscure the issue, Communism's violence, under its concern for *avoiding* making a case and for showing the phenomena of Communisms in all their complexity. But in so

68. Werth, "Vrais et faux enjeux du *Livre noir*."

69. *Ibid.*

70. Alain Blum, "Historien et communisme: condamner ou comprendre," *Le Monde* (November 18, 1997), accessed online at <http://www.lemonde.fr/>.

71. Werth, "Vrais et faux enjeux du *Livre noir*."

doing the authors have largely separated themselves from any critical stance save towards Furet and *The Black Book*. Accordingly those who believe judgment to be inseparable from understanding—and this author is one of them—may become impatient. Not for Judt's, Furet's, and Courtois's distortions and axe-grinding, but for their determination to connect history and morality. For their understanding that "Communism," after all complexities and nuances are taken into account, nevertheless stood for a coherent project that demands critical understanding. And, after we pay due respect to all of the pressures and forces that incline humans towards this or that act, it would be sheer evasion to reject the prosecutors' insistence on placing human intention and decision back into history.

The problem remains: how to fully face and discuss the evils of Communism, as well as come to terms with those who denied them? If we are determined to fully explore Communism's cost, and its illusions, and to properly frame the question of historical judgment, scholars no matter how partisan should at least be aware that a very different case can and should be made, for a "Black Book of Capitalism." Indeed, *Le Livre noir du capitalisme*, written by a third team, was published virtually unnoticed in 1998.⁷² Harkening back to colonial voyages and slavery but focusing on the twentieth century, it presents a tally far higher than that of Communism. The book's analyses pass by way of World War I; the Armenian genocide; World War II; famines in China, India, and Indochina between 1900 and 1945; the French and US Indochina wars; the French war in Algeria; the Indonesian massacre of 1965; and the genocide in Rwanda; as well as wars throughout Africa and the former Yugoslavia. Since 1900, consulting only widely available sources, the authors detail well over one hundred million deaths in wars, mass murders, and famines attributable to the capitalist system.

Aside from the specific issues implied by these analyses, which demand to be discussed and evaluated for themselves but which lie outside the purview of this article, *Le Livre noir du capitalisme* raises at least three questions that may help us reach some conclusions about the controversy over Communism. First, are all the murders described in this book due to the capitalist economic and social system? Some readers will be tempted to ascribe some of the mass killings as due to various ethnic and religious hostilities, indeed, to nationalisms, and thus as having nothing at all to do with capitalism as such. They might be equally tempted to ascribe famines as not directly due to the economic order but, say, to natural conditions or weaknesses of human planning and will. And what about the murderous potential of modern technology, or the state system? This is a serious point for further discussion. Researchers must not cast wholesale blame at the accused social system for all the carnage occurring within it, and avoiding this elision entails resolving structural as well as theoretical issues. Above all, we must ask, what are the causes, what are the links?

72. Jean Suret-Canale, *Le Livre noir du capitalisme* (Paris: Le Temps des cerises, 1998).

But this is just the point. The issue is exactly the same under Communism. Were Stalin's murders really caused by Communism, or a brutal tyrant? The same is true for Mao. If we seek to avoid double standards, we must not accept systemic ascriptions, in this case connections with capitalism, unless they are carefully established. This means doing the same when discussing Communism.

Second, if objective historical judgments are to be made, no contemporary societies can escape critical evaluation. A single set of standards must be applied to all. As Herbert Marcuse said, every society can be judged in relation to how well it utilizes its own capacities to pacify human existence. This entails considering how much historically unnecessary misery is caused by a given social, economic, and political system. Scholars are entitled to take sides, but they might at least consider each society in its own context and in terms of its own potentialities. Judgment is possible, but it is always contextual and specific. We have seen Werth and Margolin say that most Soviet and Chinese deaths took place during the most intense periods of social transformation, most of these during famines. How do we avoid smug and self-serving judgments about those societies being transformed by angels?

And finally, we must face the paradox that *both* Black Books include the six million deaths in the Russian Civil War, each attributing the slaughter to the *other* side! Making claims about the evils of either side in the war between Communism and capitalism calls for appropriate critical analyses not only of both sides, but also of the war between them. One of the inevitable contexts for the crimes of Communism—not to excuse, not to justify, nor in the arbitrary pursuit of a balance of blame—is the crimes of capitalism. And vice-versa. For moral as well as historical reasons, and because we live in the victorious society, we must see the reciprocal effects of each system's violence on the other. Taking this into account—as do none of the current post-mortems—situates both sides in their life-and-death conflict and necessarily extends any moral retrospective to include both sides.

From 1917 to 1991 one of the great stories of the twentieth century was the struggle between Communism and capitalism. Locked in a Manichean embrace, partisans of both sides stressed only their side's good, the other side's evil. The left made much of systemic structural violence, including poverty amid plenty, colonialism, and the heritage of racism, as well as the genocide of native peoples and the mechanized murder of modern warfare. The right dwelled on the horrors of Communism. In the climate of total ideological war, before "peaceful coexistence" was even thinkable, each side avoided admitting its own evils—except as already in the past, or as attributable to the other side, or as "necessary," or as shortcomings remediable within the "democratic" or "socialist" framework.

The point is not simply the psychological and political one that conflict creates a natural tendency to self-justification as well as selective moral bookkeeping. Yes, during the Cold War both sides' faults were kept from the other side, who certainly used them as a weapon whenever they could. But just as Communist violence cannot be fully understood without being placed in the context of what

the left saw as bourgeois violence, from Verdun to Hiroshima, so Communist moral blindness can only with great distortion be treated all by itself, lifted from the life-and-death struggle with bourgeois society and capitalism's own historical crimes. It is artificial to demand symmetry between the two, but it is no less myopic to ignore capitalism's evils in discussing Communism's. As much as anything it was the total war between the two systems that shaped either side's responses—the downright lying, the one-sidedness, the moral blindness, the selective amnesia.

As the books prosecuting Communism demonstrate, such problems are very much with us. An alternate post-Communist possibility would be a deeply critical examination of the Cold War's vanquished in light of a critical attitude towards its victors, remembering all the while that since 1917 each has formed the context for the other. This might be accompanied by a deep questioning of the Manicheism that dominated political and intellectual life on all sides for at least a generation.

I am advocating, then, a post-Cold-War approach to Communism that critically seeks to understand the defeated system and its horrors, but without giving a pass to the winners. Yes, it is better that Communism no longer rules Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, but let us not avoid noticing not only that tens of millions disagree, even today, but also that the winner of the Cold War has its own crimes to answer for. Are we living in the only credible social system? Is this the ultimate human reality, as Francis Fukuyama has famously argued? Do all of its evils result from defective policies and bad leaders, or are at least some due to the nature of the system itself? Morally and analytically, if not politically, we might listen to the fantasy of the young German radicals who, at the fall of the Berlin Wall, shouted, "One down, one to go." Acknowledging the evils of *both* systems might help us to better orient ourselves. The 1997 brouhaha over *Le Livre noir du communisme* at least posed the possibility of a unself-righteous and non-propagandistic perspective towards Communism, one which might combine a critical stance, a self-critical spirit, and a genuine effort to give the facts their due. An adequate moral history of Communism is still worth writing, and still to be written.

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