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Debate

Introductory Remarks

Europe-Asia Studies has received three replies to Vincent Barnett's Discussion Article 'Understanding Stalinism—The "Orwellian Discrepancy" and the "Rational Choice Dictator"', published in volume 58, number 3 this year. In the interests of scholarly debate we are publishing the replies in this section.

Understanding Stalinism—A Reply

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VINCENT BARNETT'S RECENT ARTICLE ON 'UNDERSTANDING STALINISM' examines 'the logical bases of the arguments ... that compares Soviet and Nazi totalitarianism' (Barnett 2006, pp. 457–466). He analyses 'the comparative differences in numbers of people that were murdered by the Stalin and Hitler regimes' and he makes arguments concerning the morality of these systems based upon this analysis. In so doing he introduces a concept which he calls '"the Orwellian discrepancy" between Marxist ideals and Soviet reality', and draws a distinction that he claims is being made between 'murder' and 'execution'. He argues against the argument made by E. H. Carr (which he mistakenly attributes to R. W. Davies) that circumstance was 'far more important than personality' in explaining Stalinism.[1] He argues against Mark Harrison's description of Stalin as a 'rational choice' dictator, and against my use of the term 'Team Stalin' to describe the Stalin group at a certain time. In comparison Barnett appears to have a highly simplified static and mechanical understanding of historical dynamics which emphasises the equal importance of personality and circumstance at all times, and which reaffirms what he describes as 'the importance of understanding human belief and intellectual factors'. For Barnett this essentially means accepting

I am grateful for advice and comments from my colleagues R. W. Davies, D. Christian, M. Harrison and C. Sowerwine.

[1]R. W. Davies explains below that this is an incorrect attribution and that Davies was actually referring to E. H. Carr and not Stalin at this point.

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that one cannot understand Stalinism, because Stalin's actions were ultimately irrational.[2]

Barnett begins by claiming that 'in a 1996 article Stephen Wheatcroft took the view that the victims of Stalin's purges and the labour camp system were neither morally nor numerically equivalent to the victims of Hitler's attempt at racial genocide'. He went on to say that 'Wheatcroft wanted to make a clear moral distinction between the mass deaths associated with the Soviet policies of forced industrialisation and forced collectivisation, and Hitler's policy of eliminating the Jewish people as a race'. He adds: 'Wheatcroft even went as far as to characterise Hitler's policy of racial genocide as "murder", against Stalin's policy of mass political culling that was merely "execution", clearly implying some sort of moral distinction' (Barnett 2006, p. 458).

This is simply wrong. The main point of my 1996 article was not to make easy overall moral judgments about the Nazis and the Soviets in general, but to try to look at the terror, repression and mass killing in a more objective manner. I wanted to unpack these terms of their different components and then to analyse their specifics to provide a basis for further serious work.[3] Instead of using general words like 'terror', 'repression', and even 'holocaust' and '*Gulag*' I proposed talking directly about specific things, about killings, exile, imprisonment, and about sentences to these punishments. I argued that in the past it had often been presumed that sentences to the camps or *Gulag* were the cause of most direct deaths, and that the *Gulag* was more or less comparable with Auschwitz, the symbol of the German extermination policies.[4] I pointed out that we now know a lot more about the category of sentences to execution, and that they were as large as 1 million, and included many deaths, which for various reasons (including conscious disinformation) had earlier been attributed to the *Gulag*. The main objective of the *Gulag* was not to kill people, but to use their labour. The main objective of execution was to kill people. In direct terms the Soviet

[2]He uses the term 'pseudo-rational choice rationality' to describe the model for Stalin's government (Barnett 2006, p. 464).

[3]My article begins by asking whether it is possible to understand repression and mass killing or whether we should abandon any attempt to look at such heavily morally charged topics. I stated my belief that historians have an obligation to try to understand how such events could occur. I noted that there were two aspects to these problems. One was the personal aspect, which could be analysed in terms of morality and personal motivation: 'Hitler was clearly anti-Semitic and we could attempt to ask why; Stalin was clearly impatient of groups that got in the way of his ideas of what needed to be done, and we could look at what motivated him and fed his paranoia'. But I went on to say that I was interested in this problem from another point of view: 'What was it that empowered this anti-Semitism and impatient revolutionary paranoia to an extent that they resulted in mass repression and mass killings on the scale that they did?' In my article I wanted to make it clear that I was interested in social and social scientific comparisons and not in individual and moralistic comparisons: 'Where this article approaches the question of comparisons of causation, it is in this second sense'. I went on to explain the main purpose of the article: 'But of fundamental importance for this is an improved understanding of the scale and the nature of the repression and mass killings that were a part of Stalin's Russia and of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. This article is primarily concerned with providing a better basis for such an understanding. Historians have already written too much on this topic without such a basis of understanding' (Wheatcroft 1996, p. 1319).

[4]Of course we also now know that Auschwitz was not exclusively an extermination camp, and that for a while part of it (Birkenau) was also a severe regime labour camp, with the results of labour rather than extermination being the main objective.

analogue of German extermination camps were sentences to execution, and not sentences to the *Gulag*. This was all clearly laid out in my 1996 article, and further developed in my 2002 chapter (Wheatcroft 2002).

Barnett is wrong to claim that in 1996 I used moral categories to describe Hitler's policy as murder and Stalin's as execution, and he is wrong to say that I changed my mind in 2002 when I began talking about different types of 'mass killing' rather than just 'executions'. In 1996 I stated quite clearly that I preferred using the term 'mass killing' for both Germany and the Soviet Union for action which in an operational or procedural sense was directed towards mass killing. The words mass killing were included in the title of the 1996 article and were used throughout the article. I did, however, distinguish between purposive killings and deaths from neglect, which I do think is a real difference, both for the perpetrator, and for the way that this phenomenon could be analysed. I readily admit that for the object of this policy, death is still death, but the distinction between the two concepts should make a difference as to how others understand the problem. Barnett is opposed to my attempts to look at this problem from an objective point of view and he seems to think that it is impossible to distinguish between purposive killing and deaths from neglect simply because individuals could lie when they declared their motivation. Of course it is no surprise to any of us that people sometimes do not tell the truth and that criminals intent on murder might well attempt to present the situation as though the murders that they were planning were only accidents, but that does not mean that the distinction is not worth making. It is an error (historical delusion) to presume that all action is determined by attempts to influence our assessments of the problem. Both the Soviet and Nazi regimes were quite confident in what they were doing. Neither anticipated being held accountable for their action by future historians; and both were quite capable of killing people outright when they wanted to do so. Both of them actually did kill people directly (in Nazi extermination camps, and in Soviet death sentences) so why do we need to confuse matters in the way in which Barnett is doing?

I want to try to objectivise matters and to unpack the unhelpful composite terms that are often used to describe them. Barnett appears intent on reintroducing the moral aspect and on talking in generalities. I think that the work that my colleagues and I are doing is helping us to understand what is happening. Barnett is sending us back to the misty and confused days when moral outrage got in the way of understanding. In my 1996 article I did distinguish between the purposive deaths caused by Hitler and those caused by Stalin and I did claim that the process under Hitler fitted more clearly the category of 'murder', while that under Stalin fitted more closely the category of 'execution'. But I did not argue this from a moral point of view, regarding the motivation of Hitler or Stalin. The reason why I said this was because of the processes that were being used to produce these killings.

Under Hitler people were rounded up because they were Jewish and were then transported to extermination sites and exterminated without any individual investigations of their cases and without any attempts to establish personal guilt in terms of alleged criminal or anti-state action. This was a form of mass killing which in terms of the process used should be classified as mass murder. Under Stalin the 680,000 individuals who were sentenced to be shot in 1937–38 were all treated as if they had been individually investigated by the investigative organs who claimed to

establish evidence of crimes.[5] These investigated individuals were then supposedly individually sentenced and then executed. The system was highly corrupt, and if one was inclined to make moral judgments one might well be inclined to say that this kind of quasi-judicial system was of a moral equivalence to murder (or probably even worse). I, however, am not assessing this from a moral point of view, but from a procedural point of view. This form of mass killing was part of a system related to investigation by a state organ and sentence by a state organ, and it therefore fits more closely the category 'execution'. I repeat I am using these words in a procedural sense and not in a moralistic sense.

Barnett states that

> Wheatcroft appeared not to realise that Nazi ideology provided reasons for the elimination of Jews and communists ... Wheatcroft's underlying assumption was perhaps that we should allow Stalin some license for his erroneous reasons for ordering mass executions in the USSR, but not acknowledge at all that Hitler believed in his own (totally unwarranted) reasons for racial genocide (Barnett 2006, p. 460).

But this misses the point which is concerned with the process that was used. From that point of view it did not matter what the Nazis and Soviets believed; what was important was how they acted and whether there was an attempt to investigate the individual cases, and to establish a personal link between the actions of the individuals that led to a process that could be called a trial and a sentence. Most of the Soviet killings in the terror went through a process that included some form of investigation, and something which was presented as a trial, and I have therefore described the result as 'execution' instead of murder. In many of these cases the agencies which were involved in these investigations, trials and executions were the security organs and not the judicial organs, so we describe these as extra-judicial executions, but their form is still different from shootings or gassings which took place on groups selected for ethnic or other reasons without any attempts to undertake individual investigations or trials. The latter should be classified as murders, or mass murders.

Let me repeat: within the group of mass killings we can separate out those conducted without any pretensions at individual investigation or trial from those which resulted from some form of judicial and quasi-judicial investigative and sentencing processes. The conventions that we use are to call the former murder and the latter executions. These are procedural (operational) and not moral differences. Murder (without investigation and trial) is morally reprehensible, but so are certain types of extra-judicial processes in which the investigators make unsubstantiable claims, where no defence is allowed, and where sentences are based upon these unsubstantiated charges without the right of the accused to defend themselves.

Both the Nazis and the Bolsheviks carried out mass killings, but the pattern and form of these killings differed, and if we seriously want to analyse them, and why they

[5]The reason why we have these figures at all is because these were the cases recorded by the statistical department of the investigative organs. The cases that were mass operations and did not pass through the investigative organs were not recorded in these data. It should be pointed out that at the height of the *Yezhovshchina* the level of individual investigation actually carried out by these organs was often minimal, especially when they began using the album method.

occurred we ought to study them in detail regarding the different forms that were used, instead of talking in generalities. Most Soviet killings were extra-judicial executions, although we now know that there were some killings and other punishments resulting from mass operations, which did not involve any individual investigations or trials, and which consequently come closer to the category of Nazi operations. These were the mass operations in which individuals were arrested and sentenced without individual investigation, trial and sentencing.[6] This is the case for the exiling of category 2 and 3 kulaks in the mass kulak operations of 1930–31, and it is the case for many wartime operations, including the execution of 25,000 Poles in 1940, some of whom were later found in Katyn. But it does not apply to the category 1 kulaks (those who were executed) who had to be individually investigated, even though this was by an extra-judicial *troika*. And it does not apply to most of the people killed in the *Yezhovshchina*: the 680,000 people executed by the security forces in 1937–38, who all underwent individual investigations and sentences, even though many were of the most rudimentary type, involving the so-called album method of confirmation.[7] These were executions, even though extra-judicial ones, which in moral terms were arguably very similar to murder, but in procedural/operational terms there was a difference.

Barnett uses a profoundly subjectivist argument to deny that this difference has any relevance. He asks 'does it make sense to consider a victim of Stalin's purges thinking to themselves in the afterlife: thank goodness I was only hounded, interrogated, tortured and then executed; those poor Jews who were murdered in Germany!' (Barnett 2006, p. 460). Barnett's question ends characteristically with an exclamation mark and not a question mark. He is not asking a question, but making a statement for effect (and emotion). If he were asking the question, then the answer would be simply: no. It does not make sense to consider it like that. If you are trying to understand what happened you need to look at the question differently and you need to drain it of all of this moralistic weight.

Barnett offers another argument against what he calls the moral non-equivalence position, and that is again an argument steeped in subjectivity: 'Consider which enemy you would prefer to face: one that explains his or her ideology "honestly" in its own terms, or one who consistently lays down a fog of moral-sounding rhetoric in order to cover up their actual base actions' (Barnett 2006, p. 460). Barnett is providing the reader with an example in which he has already made a moral judgment but wishes to present the case as though no moral judgments had been made. Would you prefer truth or deception? Good or evil? Unfortunately the question is often more difficult than this. And those who wish to be moral crusaders are often not the best judges of what is good or evil, 'base' or 'honest'. For Barnett these appear to be totally obvious

[6]I should point out that 'mass operations' is a term that is often used in different ways. Large scale operations are often described as 'mass' just because they are large scale. But there is another, more specific, operational meaning: a mass operation is one in which the subjects are determined fairly arbitrarily as a group, without attempts at individual investigation. This is the sense in which Soviet legal experts tended to use the term.

[7]In fact, as will be explained elsewhere, we know about this figure, because the data that we have are specifically from the investigative agencies. It was only those cases that were subject to individual investigation through the investigative organs that are included in the famous Pavlov series of figures (see Wheatcroft 2002, pp. 112–146).

qualities, but that is probably because he is making no pretence at objectivity, and is perfectly clear from the beginning as to what side he is on. Barnett's argument is circular. He is condemning evil people's action as evil, because he knows that their action is evil, because he knows that they are evil people.

Barnett then goes on to argue that some people (is he still talking about Davies and Wheatcroft and gang?) prefer Stalin to Hitler because Stalin sided with the Allies during WWII. He then informs us that Stalin's decision was not based on moral reasons 'but for purely practical and survival reasons' (Barnett 2006, p. 460). Of course ultimately most decisions will be influenced by such factors, just as the decision of the allies to side with Stalin was equally 'practical'.[8]

Barnett concludes the first section of his paper by stating that he is not opposed to historical investigations into the exact number of people killed, which he tells us he thinks is 'a worthwhile pursuit in itself', but what he objects to is using such investigations to suggest that one dictator was 'less morally' reprehensible than another, or to validate illegitimate distinctions between 'murder' and 'execution' in a tyrannical context. As a researcher who has attempted to improve our understanding of the scale of repression, I am pleased to hear that Barnett thinks that this is a worthwhile pursuit. But as an author who has gone out of his way not to cast moral judgments about any dictator on the basis of these data, I find Barnett's whole argument to be misdirected. He begins by introducing a moral component in his argument; then he projects this moralistic interpretation onto others; and then he denounces them for their moralistic interpretations. Barnett seems to be very confused in his own understanding and in the understanding of others, and he appears to want to project his confusion onto people who do have a clear understanding of what they are doing.

The second section of Barnett's article is entitled 'The rational choice dictator' and appears to be directed mainly against my colleague Mark Harrison, who no doubt will defend himself. But I cannot refrain from expressing a slight irritation at Barnett's preaching of the need to be careful in understanding the meaning of understanding so that it does not slide into some hidden sympathies. This is followed by an injunction to me not to attack straw men and instead to study my own work more. I am grateful for that advice, but I disagree as to who is attacking straw men and who is allowing his arguments to slide.

Barnett objects to my expression of the term 'Team Stalin' to describe the form of collegial oligarchic relationships that I claim existed at a certain time within the Stalinist leadership (Wheatcroft 2004, pp. 79–107). Curiously Barnett both uses the term as well as criticises me for putting the term into use.[9] Barnett wishes to defend the concept of totalitarianism and argues that I am making unfair attacks on it.

[8]R. W. Davies has pointed out that Stalin's attitude for most of the 1930s indicated that he would have preferred a closer relationship with the West. It could be argued that his decision to sign the pact with Hitler was for purely practical and survival reasons, in the way that he envisaged the situation in 1939, and that the reversal of that decision in 1941 was clearly practical, but brought the USSR back onto a track that was more consistent with their overall outlook.

[9]The term does appear to have been fairly infectious. After using the term in an earlier version of my article which was presented at a conference of the European University Institute in Florence in 2002, the term was quickly picked up by other conference members, who have not necessarily acknowledged where they got it from.

> Wheatcroft's characterisation of the earlier totalitarian approach as modelling the Soviet system as a 'lone dictator reserving for himself jealously all decision-making functions' is a straw man eating a red herring (Wheatcroft, 2004, pp. 101–102). Totalitarian corporatism is that system that has been invaluably documented in detail by Davies, Wheatcroft, Harrison and their colleagues (Barnett 2006, p. 465).

This is a case of Barnett both having his herring and eating it. The object of my article was to draw attention to the changes that came about in the Stalinist leadership group over time, and how there had been an attempt to project the final tyrannical dictatorship model onto the whole history of these relationships. I do think that it is appropriate to see Stalin as a lone dictator reserving for himself jealously all decision-making functions in his later years. And this is a kind of description that was commonly used by others.[10] I did not use the concept of 'totalitarianism' in that chapter, because I generally find it not useful. It gives people who want to talk about totalitarianism a hook so I normally prefer not to mention it. But some herring loving fishermen don't need a hook.

Overall, Barnett does not provide us with any improvements in the philosophical basis of understandings of Stalinism. He wishes to revive old views on totalitarianism, combine them with the new fascination for subjectivity and conclude that we cannot go further than to admit that we are dealing with irrationality. Although he expresses a respect for empirical research, he fails to demonstrate any regard for it. Barnett's understanding of what others have argued is clearly very faulty, however his article does give us the opportunity to clarify certain of these issues, which may be of value to others. But if I may repeat a statement from my earlier article: my work is 'primarily concerned with providing a better basis for such an understanding [of the scale and nature of the repression and mass killings that were a part of Stalin's Russia and of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s]. Historians have already written too much on this topic without such a basis of understanding' (Wheatcroft 1996, p. 1319).

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[10]In fact when I wrote it I was undoubtedly thinking of Urban's description of Stalin as 'the single-minded usurper of all decision-making' in his conversation with Bazhanov (Urban 1982, p. 8) which I cited at the time. I simply toned it down a bit.