

Review: Soviet Families' Inner Lives

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Orlando Figes. *The Whisperers. Private Life in Stalin's Russia*. [New York:] Penguin, 2008 [2007]. ISBN 978-0-141-01351-0.

How did Stalin's terror shape "the inner world of ordinary Soviet citizens" (xxix)? To answer this question, the British historian Orlando Figes organized a team of researchers who interviewed Russians about life since the Revolution. They also collected their personal documents and created several archives and a website (<http://www.orlandofiges.com>), which serve as extensions of Figes's book. The "moral sphere of the family" (xxx) is the focus of Figes's 700-page-narrative. In this sweeping exploration, he masterfully handles a massive number of sources as he constructs a complex history of myriad psychic, emotional, intellectual, social, and cultural changes over the course of nearly a century. The thrust of this compelling and often tragic story of families' everyday lives in Stalinist Russia derives from hundreds of testimonies that have survived through letters, photographs, diaries, memoirs, oral histories, and many other personal or so-called ego-documents. The result is a history of Soviet society's mentalité in the *longue durée*.

Figes's story moves chronologically from 1917 to 2006 and focuses on the years under Stalin from ca. 1928 to his death in 1953 and the first three years of its aftermath until Khrushchev's 'secret speech' (1956). After the October Revolution, Lenin's Bolsheviks raised a generation of children, Figes calls them the "Children of 1917," in a spirit of communism that replaced the family with the party in order to create a "collective personality" (4). They strove to build a society free of family, which was dismissed as a bourgeois institution of oppression. Gradually, the private sphere was dismantled, be it through collective forms of living and a "system of mutual surveillance and denunciation" (35) or through self-discipline. While some people overcame their traditional peasant or bourgeois forms of living and thinking, others lived double lives, outwardly conforming to Party demands while secretly holding on to their old values and beliefs. Although not new to Russian life, whispering entered society as a form of communication - to survive or to betray. A *shepchushchii* "whispers out of fear of being overheard," a *sheptun* "whispers behind people's backs to the authorities" (xxxii). During Stalin's reign, "the whole of Soviet society was made up of whisperers of one sort or another" (xxxii) and frequently a whisperer was both a *shepchushchii* and a *sheptun*.

The years 1928-1930 saw the massive collectivization of the peasantry. It was "the great break" or "the great turning point in Soviet history [because it]

destroyed a way of life that had developed over many centuries” (81). In story after story, Figes documents how envy and greed led village drunks and teenage boys to join the Komsomol (the Communist Party’s youth organization) and denounce the “rich” peasants of the village - whose sole possession might have been a bed - as “kulaks.” Kulaks were then deported to labour camps or fled to other towns or into the cities. Private documents show both kulaks’ experiences and their denouncers’ motivations. This balanced view - analyzing events from the perspectives of all people involved and yet maintaining a clear sympathy for the victims of Soviet Communism - is characteristic of the whole book and one of its many strengths.

Many kulak children, like the children from bourgeois and noble families, concealed their social origins, their “spoilt biography,” and strove to become good Soviet citizens and party members. They often “ended up as ardent Stalinists” (143). In the 1930s, state policies lost much of their communal zeal and instead turned to create a strictly disciplined and hierarchical society in which material deprivation combined with a complete loss of privacy and the emergence of a steady fear of being betrayed, denounced, and arrested. Bleak as this picture of Stalinist society is, Figes nevertheless shows its diverse facets, explaining on the basis of diaries, letters, and oral histories that children nevertheless had happy childhoods and that Party members believed in the Party to such a degree that they saw even their own arrest as a necessary sacrifice for the greater good.

Aleksandr Tvardovsky, for example, denounced his parents and brothers as kulaks, which led to their deportation to labour camps. In several later meetings with his father and one of his brothers, Ivan, he again betrayed them. Ivan explained his brother’s motives. “I felt sorry for my brother. Whether I liked it or not, I had to recognize that he was a sincere member of the Komsomol and had been so since the 1920s. I now think that Aleksandr saw the revolutionary violence that swept away our parents, brothers and sisters, although unjust and mistaken, as a kind of test, to see if he could prove himself as a true member of the Komsomol. [...] This was his logic: if you support collectivization, that means you support the liquidation of the kulaks as a class, and you do not have the moral right to ask for an exception for your own father. It is possible that in his heart Aleksandr mourned for his family, but it was just one of many kulak families” (135-6).

Stalinist society left little room for human agency and then only in the most basic form of physical survival, opportunism, deceit, betrayal, denunciation but also courage in taking risks to help and save others. This was a society that was utterly devoid of any privacy. It was a massive social Panopticum.¹ Reading about living space in Soviet cities is like reading George Orwell’s *1984*, except that Big Brother’s telescreens and hidden microphones are replaced by dozens of neighbours’ eyes and ears. The paper thin walls between the rooms that families

occupied in big apartment blocks (with shared kitchens and bathrooms for dozens of people) allowed for easy eavesdropping, forcing inhabitants to whisper and allowing informers to whisper behind their backs. Much conflict arose from envy, often voiced through whispered accusations. Communal apartment living created “a new type of Soviet personality” that stressed collective values and habits. There is a great tension evident in people’s memories between the invasive surveillance and an appreciation, even enjoyment, of communal living and cooperative values. At times, Figes hesitates to believe such positive memories, discounting them as nostalgia; there is certainly room for further research and analysis both of the experiences and the memories.

Soviet citizens protested such living conditions, but they were a minority. Figes instead turns his attention to the millions who bought into the system, who truly believed in a Communist utopia to such a degree that they were willing to make substantial sacrifices. Figes’s approach here should encourage oral historians to focus more often on finding out why people bought into systems rather than to concentrate all of our energy on discovering the often limited agency people had in protesting such systems. Oral history is particularly well suited for such investigations. Indeed, important projects in the 1970s and 1980s in Germany and Italy focused on exactly these questions: why had the left working-class bought into Nazi and fascist ideology in the 1930s?²

The years of “The Great Fear” (1937-8) saw the arrest of at least 1.3 million “for crimes against the state.” The Great Terror, as this period came to be known in Soviet history, was “a calculated policy of mass murder” (234). Rather than persecuting kulaks and other people with a “spoiled biography,” the Bolsheviks turned on themselves. The higher up in the Party hierarchy, the more likely one was to be arrested. Because the arrests appeared to be random (and often were), everyone lived in fear of his or her own arrest. The individual experiences Figes reconstructs for the years 1937-41 are breathtakingly painful. Again, they are not simplistic black-and-white stories of good and evil. Although people now lived in constant fear of being denounced, many continued to believe that in their case it was just a mistake and they would soon be returned to their families. Their spouses and children, however, were filled with doubts. Often, they believed the Party propaganda that their beloved husband, wife, father, or mother was indeed an “enemy of the people.”

A new wave of whispering swept the country; even more topics, places, and partners for conversation became taboo. Families and society as a whole became even more silent. Now, they whispered not only in the presence of the state, as they had learned during the 1920s, or in the presence of neighbours and friends, as they had learned in the early 1930s. Now they whispered in the presence of their closest family. “With the end of genuine communication, mistrust spread throughout society” (255). Everyone suspected everyone of being

a spy or “enemy of the people.” Indeed, both voluntary and forced “[i]nformers were everywhere” (258). Many of those put in Gulag camps “continued to believe in the Party as the source of all justice.” They also “continued to believe in the existence of ‘enemies of the people’” and that they were not one of them (272, 275).

In order to protect their children, imprisoned parents told their children to renounce them. Liza (last name not known) was imprisoned in 1937. One day, she received a letter from her fifteen-year-old daughter, Zoia, who asked her mother “whether you are guilty or not.” In case she was not guilty, Zoia would not join the Komsomol. “But if you are guilty, then I won’t write to you any more, because I love our Soviet government and I hate its enemies and I will hate you if you are one of them. Mama, tell me the truth.” Liza ended her four-page letter to her daughter with the words, in capital letters: “ZOIA, YOU ARE RIGHT. I AM GUILTY. JOIN THE KOMSOMOL. THIS IS THE LAST TIME I AM GOING TO WRITE TO YOU. BE HAPPY, YOU AND LIALIA. MOTHER.” According to a report from Olga Adamova-Sliuzberg, Liza’s friend in prison, “Liza showed the correspondence to Olga, and then banged her head on the table. Choking on tears, she said: ‘It is better she hates me. How would she live without the Komsomol - an alien? She would hate the Soviet power. It is better she hates me.’ From that day, recalls Olga, Liza ‘never said a word about her daughters and did not receive any more letters.’” (302–3).

Those who were not imprisoned but saw friends and relatives vanishing believed that they must have been “enemies of the people.” Or they simply looked away. “People dealt with their doubts [about the Party] by suppressing them, or by finding ways to rationalize them so as to preserve the basic structures of their Communist belief. They did not do this consciously and generally only became aware of their behaviour years later” (277). “The Great Terror,” Figes concludes, “undermined the trust that held together families” (300).

Most often, Figes situates individual experiences in larger contexts. He is also not afraid to draw bold conclusions. But sometimes he tends to let the evidence ‘speak for itself,’ and then one wants Figes to step out from the role of the chronicler and into that of the historian. Reading the memoir entries of a young mother imprisoned in a labour camp describing how she witnessed the slow killing of her own infant daughter and that of countless other infants (362-5), I want to know something about the nurses who committed these crimes and the conditions of camp life that made them perpetrate such acts of brutality. Instead, this episode is followed by less brutal and eventually ‘happier’ stories.

The ‘Great Patriotic War’ that killed some 26 million and left many more invalid, homeless and starving, came - and this is somewhat counter-intuitive - as a respite from Stalin’s terror and a resurgence of old values. Exasperated by the chaos and bureaucracy’s incompetence in the early war years, people’s whispers

about the state became increasingly louder. Figes shows not only soldiers' battlefield experiences, but also the experiences of families broken up by the war through relocation, evacuation, and deportation as well as the hardships experienced in Gulags and the "labour army" of forced labourers (many of them ethnic minorities rounded up and put to work under prison-like conditions (423-31)). These experiences of discrimination, Figes argues, should lay to rest the "Soviet myth of wartime national unity" (419). National unity was also not a motivation for soldiers to fight fiercely. Next to coercion, patriotism, and hatred of the enemy, "perhaps the most important element in the soldiers' determination to fight was the cult of sacrifice. The Soviet people went to war with the psychology of the 1930s. Having lived in a state of constant revolutionary struggle, where they were always being called upon to sacrifice themselves for the greater cause, they were ready for war" (415-16).

Towards the end of the war, the Soviet grip on society relaxed and people felt a sense of freedom they had not felt in a very long time. For the young generation that had never known anything but Stalinism, hearing other people openly criticize the regime without fear of denunciation or imprisonment was eye-opening. Soviet citizens would later remember the war years nostalgically as the best years in their lives. One wonders whether Figes, although remarking on this nostalgia several times, falls prey to it himself when he argues that "the new freedom of expression" (437) resulted in "a new political community" (439) and "a renewed civic spirit and sense of nationhood" at the heart of which lay "a fundamental change of values" (440). Whether the change was as dramatic as he claims or not, a sobering-up and disillusionment took hold soon after the war as families tried, often in vain, to reunite, and as Soviet citizens realized that their hopes for more democracy would not be fulfilled. The postwar poverty led to countless strikes and protests (458). Stalin clamped down immediately and expanded the Gulag system, turning it into an integral part of the economy.

After the war, the communist zeal of the 1920s and 1930s vanished from Soviet society. A new professional middle-class developed that simply played the part. "Through these ordinary Stalinists, the millions of technocrats and petty functionaries who did its bidding, the regime was routinized, its practices bureaucratized" (472). Nevertheless, to make a career in the 1950s people still had to hide their "spoilt biographies." i.e. the fact that their parents had been kulaks or arrested as "enemies of the people". By the end of the 1940s, Soviet society had turned to whispering once again. In addition, a large-scale anti-Semitic campaign was launched against tens of thousands of Soviet Jews.

When Stalin died in 1953, Soviet citizens reacted with a mixture of deep sadness, disorientation, and fear of the unknown that lay before them. The Gulag inmates cheered and, when their hopes of being released were dashed, demonstrated in the tens of thousands. Many were released, about one million.

Families were reunited and slowly healed the wounds of separation, mistrust, and betrayal. "The family emerged from the years of terror as the one stable institution in a society where virtually all the traditional mainstays of human existence - the neighbourhood community, the village and the church - had been weakened or destroyed. For many people the family represented the only relationships they could trust, the only place they felt a sense of belonging, and they went to extraordinary lengths to reunited with relatives" (541-2). In light of the painful experiences Figes presents, this assertion seems overly optimistic.

Reunifications were often painful. People had become estranged, after years and decades of separation. Those who had survived the camps were broken, both mentally and physically. The camp returnees did not talk about their experiences: silence replaced whispering. There was seldom a happy end to family reunification and if there was, it involved great struggle. Instead, returnees established networks of friends who had been at the same camps. Many returnees had to do this, because they had no family left or the state prevented them from moving to the cities where relatives lived. For most, reintegration was difficult because housing was scarce and employers and other members of society stigmatized and discriminated against former Gulag inmates.

Stalin's reign ended not with his death but only three years later when Khrushchev denounced Stalin. Only the urban intelligentsia, however, used the "Khrushchev thaw" to openly discuss the regime. "[F]or the mass of the Soviet population," Figes writes, "who remained confused and ignorant about the forces that had shaped their lives, stoicism and silence were more common ways of dealing with the past" (599). Many children and grandchildren therefore did not find out the truth about their parents' and grandparents' imprisonment or deaths until the 1980s and 1990s, when people finally began to talk more openly. Some people found out only when interviewed for this book (604).

The Stalinized whisperer-consciousness was transferred to the next generations and it lives on in today's Russia. Many Gulag inmates whom Figes interviewed never told their children, but through their silences, gestures, and in other ways transmitted their traumatic memories. Perpetrators, on the other hand, from Party officials to camp guards, expressed no remorse in the interviews. Even two decades after the end of the Soviet Union, Russian society has not found constructive ways of dealing with its Stalinist past - under Putin, this is unlikely to change.

The Whisperers is a massive book with an at times overwhelming amount of detail. This is necessary, because it is a story about hundreds of millions of people during a time span of half a century. The countless psychological wounds Stalinism inflicted on individuals are recounted in testimony after testimony. They add up, by their sheer number, to the failure of a social experiment on a monumental scale. But it is also the individual stories that are at times

overwhelming. Figes writes with sympathy for the victims of Stalinism and with empathy for the perpetrators. He accomplishes this mostly by blurring the boundaries between these two categories and, at times, by not employing them at all. He describes what people did, and did to each other, and then lets them explain their own and each others' motives.

This is a narrative and documentary history, traditional in its approach, an approach that is not interested in viewing sources in any complicated way. This is perfectly legitimate, but the author's disinterest in the nature of the sources is at times frustrating when the reader is given no clue whether a quote is from a diary, a letter, or an interview.³ In his last chapter, Figes eventually discusses the nature of his sources. He shows how people's memories of the Gulag were profoundly shaped by popular published memoirs, how traumatic experiences fragmented memories, and how memory intermingled with myth to create stories people had not lived through but could live with now. Both in his introduction and his concluding thoughts on memory, Figes clearly deems oral history more reliable than Soviet-era diaries, letters, and memoirs, because it allows for cross-examination (xxxv, 636). It would be desirable if this complication of sources could have been integrated into the narrative as a whole rather than added simply at its end, but this would be an unreasonable demand. The story is overwhelmingly complex as it is told, and this would have added yet another layer of meaning.

The *Whisperers* is a sad story. Below the brutality, idiocy, stupidity, cruelty, opportunism, fanaticism, opportunism, optimism, delusion and even below the deepest depths of despair recounted in the hundreds of individual stories is a sadness, a sadness for a loss so immense that it is hardly comprehensible. There is also a sense of wonder that people could ever persevere and survive to tell their stories. The children's stories are the saddest of all and yet they also offer the greatest hope, because many of the children - those who were not killed or traumatized - found ways to cope with the unbearable conditions and even to see light in the darkest shadows of Stalin's empire. But it is the many wounds and scars that are made visible through the testimonies.

This book, then, is not just a book. As a project that includes also a website and several archives, it is a model history. More than that, however, it is - reminiscent both of Alessandro Portelli's naming of names in *The Order Has Been Carried Out* and the plates of names of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. - a memorial that puts names, faces, and stories to Stalin's countless victims. It helps us understand *and* remember.

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995)

² Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); *ibid.*, "Italian Working Class Culture between the Wars: Consensus to Fascism and Work Ideology," *International Journal of Oral*

History 1/1 (1980): 4–27; Lutz Niethammer et al. (eds.), *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930-1960*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Dietz, 1983).

³ The very first footnote of the book is “MSP, f. 3, op. 14, d. 2, l. 31; d.3, ll. 18–19.” I have no doubt that if I visited the Archive of the Memorial Society St. Petersburg (MSP), I would find exactly the source this note refers to. But as a reader, I want to know what kind of a source this is - an interview, a diary, a letter? - and who created it when and where. In this case, even a search of the online archives did not get me anywhere.