

## Review

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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.

*The Whisperers* is the third non-fictional epic account of Russian history written by the English historian, Orlando Figes. Like the other two, *The Whisperers* is carefully researched, well-crafted, and engrossing. Given the drama and importance of the subject matter - human rights abuses in the Soviet Union - the present volume outstrips his earlier accounts of the Russian Revolution and modern Russian culture.<sup>1</sup> Despite this book's substantial virtues, there is more to be said on the subject and this review will concentrate on the book's shortcomings rather than on its strengths, but readers should take this as discussion and not as negativity. *The Whisperers* is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand Soviet and post-Soviet history.

The overwhelming strength of *The Whisperers* is the avalanche of evidence describing what happens to individuals, families, and society as a whole when government declares war on its own people and co-opts assistants from the general population. The Stalinist state was a Leviathan, to borrow the title of Thomas Hobbes' seventeenth century book of social philosophy. Hobbes wrote *Leviathan* in the wake of the English Civil War in order to urge the creation of an all-powerful state that would ensure justice and prevent civil disorder, little dreaming that a Soviet Leviathan would create repression and disorder. Three centuries after Hobbes, George Orwell came closer to the mark with his fictional portrait of oppression in *1984*, whose title simply rearranged the numbers of the year in which he finished his manuscript – 1948. Post-war Stalinist oppression was at its height, but Orwell placed Soviet society in an English setting because he saw totalitarian traits in capitalism as well as in the Communist world.

Figes worked closely with the Russian Memorial Society, *Pamiat'* (translated, "memory") to collect and preserve the stories of these terrible times. This vast archive of personal testimony fleshes out the well-known story of Soviet oppression and provides many fresh details. As with other great tragedies in history, the fundamental story of oppression is simple but each individual case is different and deserves to be known. Readers will be deeply moved by the tragic stories recounted here.

Nevertheless, *The Whisperers* has its limitations, some of which are indicated below under the headings of "Private Life;" "Did Russians feel

oppressed?"; "Russia and the Soviet Union;" "The Problem of Oral History;" and "Minor Errors."

## 1. Private Life

Many aspects of private life are ignored or treated cursorily in *The Whisperers* despite its evocative subtitle, "Private Life in Stalin's Russia." The book concentrates on the private lives of Stalin's victims, and says little about *Everyday Stalinism*, to borrow the title of Sheila Fitzpatrick's brilliant analysis of housing, shopping, social relations, and other issues.<sup>2</sup> Fitzpatrick explores at length the mentality that developed as many Soviet citizens saw society progressing from year to year and genuinely expected "Palaces on Monday," or continued progress. Particularly fascinating are the personal networks that sprang up to get around the economy of scarcity by giving access to goods and services. Figs also omits the special stores, restaurants, hospitals, and vacations resorts that were calibrated to one's social and political position and which determined how ordinary people managed everyday life. Reading *The Whisperers*, one would never know that successful Soviets such as office managers, factory directors, and senior scientists listened to local jazz bands in hotel dining rooms and that military officers were ordered to take dancing lessons in the mid-1930s. Monied or not, everyone went to the movies to see Soviet musical comedies as well as films that boasted of communism's achievements.

These everyday matters pale in significance to the poverty of the early 1930s, the great 1933 Famine, the Purges, and the Gulags, but they help explain why many Soviets came to terms with what was wrong in Soviet life.

## 2. Did Russians feel oppressed?

A great mystery about Stalinism is why most Soviets accepted it despite their sufferings. Many actually became willing participants in the system of Stalinist oppression.

Evidence suggests that few Russians understood their oppression as some other nationalities did. Balts (Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians) never internalized Stalinism after the Soviet Union forcibly annexed their republics in 1944. Similarly, Poles and other East Europeans rarely cooperated sincerely when their states were forced into the Soviet Bloc at the same time.

Fear of denunciation and isolation from independent viewpoints were important reasons that Russians often accepted the Soviet system but historical reasons were also significant. Anticipating Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* by more than 600 years, a twelfth century history compiled by Kievan monks, reported that

the northern Russian city of Novgorod invited a “Varangian” (Viking) named Rurik to “come rule over us because there is no order here” in 860 A.D. Since that time, Russians have generally supported strong rulers who, it is thought, maintained civil order, economic progress, and national security. In contrast, weak rulers are thought to allow Russian oligarchs to exploit both the Russian state and Russian society. Weak rulers are also seen as allowing foreigners take over by conquest or economic penetration. Strong rulers included Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Catharine the Great as well as Lenin, Stalin, and, perhaps, Vladimir Putin.

Stalin, in particular, seemed to fulfill the promise of the Revolution by putting the country on a crash course of industrialization and modernization regardless of the cost to society. This policy proved its worth by winning World War II while, in contrast, the weakened Tsarist regime lost World War I. Western readers should remember that Soviet armies expelled the Germans and their allies from Soviet soil before D-Day, when American-British-Canadian forces landed in Normandy, France. Communist dictators after Stalin such as Khrushchev and Brezhnev made the Soviet Union into a superpower with intercontinental missiles and space satellites, and achieved parity with the United States. Many twenty-first century Russians still take pride in these achievements and support Vladimir Putin, whose government is widely thought to have rebuilt Russian prosperity and put foreign-backed capitalists under control after communism’s collapse made Russia dependent on Western good will and advice. Westerners celebrate *Perestroika*, *Glasnost*, and the fall of communism for ending the Cold War and clearing the way for democracy in the former Soviet Union. However, to many Russians they mean poverty, exploitation, and declining international prestige.

Figes correctly reports that communists often believed sincerely in what they were doing but he fails to acknowledge that most ordinary Russians also thought that Stalinism worked; that is, it created a modern, powerful, and disciplined state. On the individual level, Stalinist industrialization and urbanization created great opportunities for millions of Soviet citizens to get better education and better jobs. Many Soviets grew up in peasant villages without running water or paved roads, and rose to become skilled tradespeople, white collar workers, factory directors, and government officials.

Relatively few Soviet citizens doubted the legitimacy of their society until well after Stalin’s death. Gorbachev’s reform efforts in 1985-1991 caused many Soviets to reassess how the Soviet Union operated and reconsider their own families’ histories, creating the stories told in this book.

### 3. Russia and the Soviet Union

Throughout his study, Figes blurs the definition of who is Russian, who is Soviet, and who belongs to another nationality. "Russians" comprised barely half of the Soviet population. The other half was made up of other East Slavs (Ukrainians and Belarussians), the remaining European nationalities (Poles, Jews, and others), Moslems (Kazakhs and Uzbeks in Central Asia, for example), and aboriginal groups in Siberia (such as the Chukchi). The Russian Republic, one of the seventeen republics (or provinces) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was itself multinational even though the ethnic Russians made up a strong majority. Many non-Russian individuals considered themselves Russians at some times and adhered to their other identities at others.

Figes obviously could not do everything but he should have explained why he restricted his story (mostly) to Russians and what difference it made. It probably accounts for Figes's brief report on the great 1933 Famine which killed between 4.6 and 8.5 million Soviets (Figes's figures). "The worst affected areas," Figes reports, "were in the Ukraine and Kazakhstan" (98), not in Russia proper.

### 4. The Problem of Oral History

It was only after 1985 that many Russians came to realize that injustices were the rule and not the exception in the Soviet state and came to see themselves as oppressed rather than the victims of misfortune. (There is no way to verify most of the book's tragic stories but there is no reason to doubt them, either. They are entirely typical of the era.) In presenting first-hand accounts of Stalinist oppression, *The Whisperers* presents the Russian re-thinking of their situation but fails to provide an accurate account of the Russian (and Soviet) mentality in the Stalinist period.

Figes's final chapter, "Memory" (597-656) describes the gradual return of memory to Russian society. In this chapter, Figes shows acute awareness of the limitations of memory, including suppressed memory and transference (victims adopting literary accounts, from Solzhenitsyn for example, as their own). And yet it is not clear how Figes corrected for such problems in preparing his own accounts for publication. Practitioners of oral history might have wished for a more self-reflective accounting of Figes's own project

### 5. Minor Errors

In a work of this scope, minor errors and omissions are bound to creep in. For example, Alexander Tvardovsky is justly criticized for abandoning his "kulak"

family and making a successful literary career (591). His role in de-Stalinization, is barely mentioned (591) and his greatest achievement, publishing Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, is overlooked. To give another example, Figes reports that "13,000 Polish POWs and 7,000 other prisoners were shot by the NKVD in the Katyn Forest near Smolensk" early in World War II (373). In fact, 4,500 Poles were shot at Katyn, while the rest were killed in other locations throughout the Soviet Union. Such errors are relatively minor in this context, however.

To summarize what has been presented above, *The Whisperers* is a valuable and readable account of the private life of Stalin's victims and their families based on a monumental collection of oral histories as well as written sources. It helps us go beneath the surface of Stalinist public repression to help us understand that tragic era. The book does not present a full picture of Soviet life, however. It neglects aspects of private life, fails to explain why many Russians supported Stalin and some support his legacy today, and obscures the relationship between Russia and other parts of the Soviet Union. Despite these limitations, *The Whisperers* is a significant addition to the literature on oral literature and Soviet history.

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<sup>1</sup> *A People's Tragedy: A History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1997); *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Picador, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).