

# Personal tragedies under Stalin

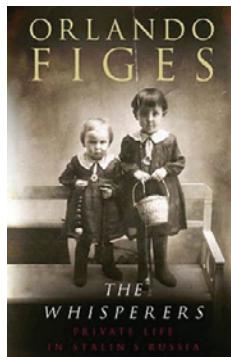
Chris Berg reviews  
*The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*  
by Orlando Figes  
(Metropolitan Books, 2008, 740 pages)

**I**t has taken historians in both Russia and the West a long time to get their minds around Stalinism. Anne Applebaum's 2003 *Gulag: A History* went a long way to shedding some of the misconceptions about the Stalinist system of repression—most obviously on the left, where the history of the gulag has been shamefully minimised. In *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*, Orlando Figes steps into the lives of individuals and families to expose the personal tragedies which are hidden behind the statistics behind Stalinist repression.

The tragedy of the individual under a dictatorship has been a common theme in the history of 20th century totalitarianism for more than fifty years. But as Figes points out in his introduction, our understanding of the individual in Stalin's Russia has been shaped by the outpouring of memoirs by émigrés and intellectuals who have been eager to represent their deep yearning for liberty—and the resilience of individualism—under totalitarianism. Autobiographies like Victor Kravchenko's *I Chose Freedom* contained many revelations but were extremely atypical of the average Russian. Yet, for lack of better alternatives, during the Cold War the West treated high-profile intellectuals like Kravchenko or Solzhenitsyn as 'the authentic voice' of repressed individuals under communism.

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This has been compounded by a historiographical fashion to focus on resistance to authority, however isolated and atypical. Since the opening up of many Soviet archives post-1991, historians treating the era have enthusiastically depicted the Stalinist period as a continuous duel between repressors and dissenters, seizing upon the examples of defiance against Soviet rule or stubbornly brave individuals. Certainly this approach is an improvement on Cold War era historical investigation—when the academic focus was on either Politburo politicking or the broad sociological studies of the Soviet 'masses'—but it has had the effect of understating the

total-ness of Stalinist totalitarianism.

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That choice, and the dual way of life it created—between the fear of arrest and mutual denunciation—is the source of *The Whisperers'* title.

There are two words for 'whisper' in Russian. *Shepchushchii* means whispering out of fear of being heard. As many urban Russians lived in communal apartments—either buildings specially designed for collective living, or in large houses confiscated from their owners and subdivided into cramped living quarters—there was an ever-present fear of being overheard saying critical things about the Soviet regime. And the word *shestun* refers to whispering or informing to the authorities. In the cramped communal apartment, which often housed dozens of residents, it was easy for petty grudges to escalate into letters to a local party chief.

To tell his stories of private life under Stalin, Figes has amassed an impressive amount of unpublished memoirs and archival evidence. But the true star of *The Whisperers* is the enormous amount of oral testimony he was able to accumulate—more than one thousand individuals who lived under Stalin were interviewed.

And it is all the more important because this is a generation rapidly disappearing. Figes notes that almost six per cent of the total sample died before the book was published.

In *The Whisperers*, the dominant unit is the family. Idealistic Bolshevik activists envisioned the 1917 seizure of power as a revolution in not just economic and political terms, but as a revolution in family relations as well. As Maxim Gorky wrote, 'the new structure of political life demands from us a new

structure of the soul'. While ideologists maintained that Soviet children were to be raised collectively, rather than in the now outdated family unit, the less appealing flip side of this was that it gave dedicated Bolshevik parents almost carte blanche to ignore their children. If it takes a village, then parents are almost redundant.

One of the most striking illustrations of Soviet life is the Figes' discussion of the communal living arrangements and how they were so central to the communist experience. Our modern image of the Soviet Union may be those lifeless identical and symmetrical apartment complexes rising up out of the Russia flats. But in the Stalinist period, Russian accommodation was forged out of the existing, prerevolutionary housing stock. In the mid-1930s, three-quarters of the population of Leningrad and Moscow were living communally in former apartments—dozens of families squeezed into single dwellings, whole families living in single rooms.

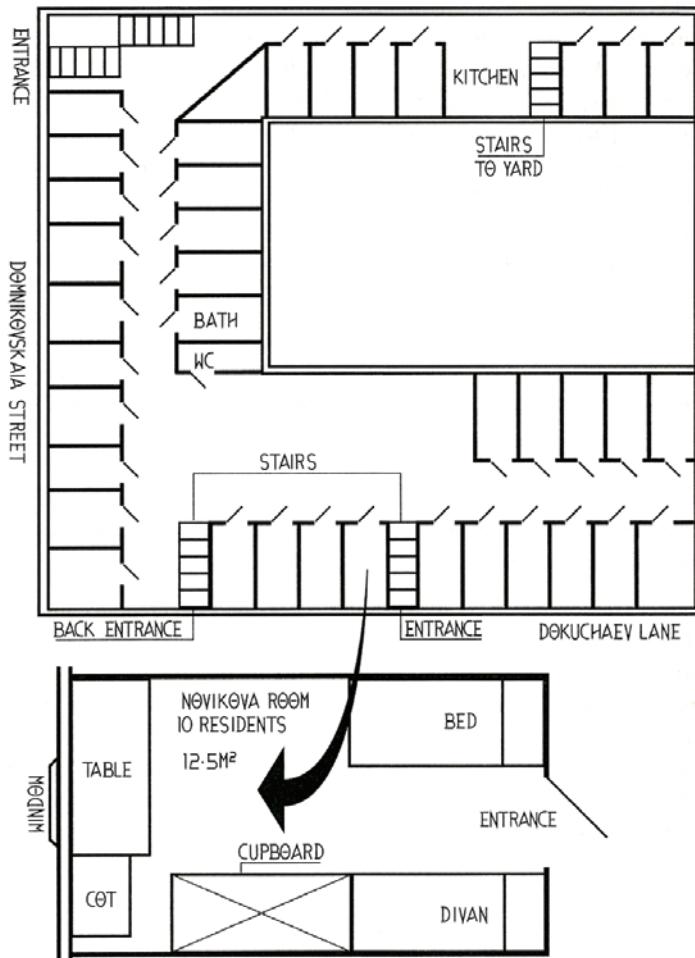
One typical arrangement described by Figes consisted of an apartment revamped to consist of thirty-six rooms, each housing an extended family in a space of 12.5 square metres. In one of those rooms, a former inhabitant related,

There was a table in the room, on which my grandmother slept. My brother, who was six, slept in a cot underneath the table. My parents slept in the bed by the door. My other grandmother slept on the divan. My aunt slept on a feather mattress on the floor with her cousin on one side, while my sister (who was then aged sixteen), my cousin (ten), and I (eleven) somehow squeezed in between them—I don't remember how. We children loved sleeping on the floor: we could slide our bodies underneath our parents' bed and have a lot of fun. I don't imagine that it was fun for the adults.

Kitchens, laundry facilities and bathrooms could be shared or allocated by individual families depending on the layout of the apartment but would always be utilised as more places to sleep. These communal living arrangements were originally just to resolve a housing crisis created by the rapid industrialisation of the soviet economy (and the rural refugees created by collectivisation) but they quickly embedded themselves in the Soviet surveillance apparatus.

With 30 or more families living virtually on top of each other and with often paper-thin walls, denunciations—justified or not—could be easily borne out of petty domestic disputes.

### Communal apartment, Moscow, 1930-64



Source: Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, p178

Work provided little relief. One factory manager, in a letter to the Soviet president, described the perverse outcome of the Soviet bureaucratic system:

The problem with Soviet power is the fact that it gives rise to the vilest type of official—one that scrupulously carries out the general designs of the supreme authority... This official never tells the truth, because he doesn't want to distress the leadership. He gloats about famine and pestilence in the district or ward controlled by his rival. He won't lift a finger to protect a neighbour... All I see around me is loathsome politicizing, dirty tricks and people being destroyed for slips of the tongue. There's no end to the denunciations. You can't spit without hitting some revolting denouncer or liar. What have we come to? It's impossible to breathe. The less gifted a bastard, the meaner his slander. Of course, the purge of your party is none of my business, but I think that as a result of it, decent elements still remaining will be cleaned out.

The most harrowing sections of the book when Figes looks at what he describes as 'the great break', when the semi-liberal period of the New



Meeting of the elected management committee of the "New Life" collective farm, 1935  
Office of War Information. Overseas Picture Division. Washington Division.

Economic Plan gave way to Stalinist five year plans, collectivisation and rapid coerced industrialisation.

*The Whisperers* reads at times like a catalogue of family tragedy, as the voluntary ideological family breakdown common in the first few years of the Soviet Union, quickly gives way into the now-familiar Stalinist pattern of arrest, imprisonment, release and rearrest.

While not for the most part an interpretative history, *The Whisperers* is not totally disengaged from contemporary historiographical debates. Figes disputes Robert Conquest's characterisation of the famine of 1932-33 as a 'deliberately inflicted... massacre of men, women and children.' As Figes argues, while the policy of collectivisation was undoubtedly the culprit of rural Russian suffering in this period, the scale of the famine itself took the Moscow government by surprise, and

it had no reserves of grain ready to account for the shortfall.

But whether famine was a weapon of terror or just its consequence is surely beside the point. If we cannot go so far to describe this period as a genocidal 'terror-famine' as some historians have done, we can still agree that genocide did occur against the 'kulak' population. It was a deliberate policy of genocide which brought about the famines of the 1930s, even if the linkage between famine and genocide was not as deliberate as Conquest makes out.

Figes quotes one Komsomol activist describing the kulaks as 'bloodsuckers' and 'parasites': 'We were trained to see the Kulaks, not as human beings, but as vermin, lice, which had to be destroyed'. Ten million kulaks were expelled from their home between 1929 and 1932. And this figure obscures the countless individual horrors which accompanied collectivisation.

*The Whisperers* is not a book of macro-level statistics, but of intimate family and personal histories. And at that level, terror and collectivisation were nearly indistinguishable from thuggery and murder. One focus of Figes' narrative is the Golovin family from Obukhovo, a small town about 400 kilometers east of Leningrad. The local Komsomol were little more than a dozen violent teenagers armed with pistols, and the Golovins, having been branded as kulaks, were at their mercy. Ivan Golovin, visiting the family from a neighbouring town, was shot in the head when obviously drunk Komsomol activists started firing at the Golovin house during dinner. In a later confrontation on the family doorstep, the Komsomol ring leader yelled at Nikolai Golovin, 'I shall shoot you, just as I murdered your brother, and no one shall punish me'. Nikolai escaped from that heated exchange without being

shot, but he was soon after denounced by the young activists, arrested, and sent to a White Sea Gulag. The farms of Obukhovo were collectivised a few weeks later.

One important conclusion of *The Whisperers* is just how large the Second World War looms in the Russian memory. As Figes writes, for all the excesses, hardships and moral atrocities of the Stalinist years, for a certain generation the war was the defining event of their lives.

It was a time of comradeship, of shared responsibilities and suffering, when ‘people became better human beings’ because they had to help and trust one another; a time when their lives had greater purpose and meaning because, it seemed to them, their individual contributions to the war campaign had made a difference to the destiny of the nation. These veterans recalled the war as a period of great collective achievement, when people like themselves made enormous sacrifices for victory...

But for the regime, the memory of the war years was a double edged sword—on the one hand, Figes writes, ‘the commemoration of the Great Patriotic War served as a reminder of the success of the Soviet system’, but on the other hand, the war was a period of de facto de-Stalinisation, as the instruments of repression took a secondary role compared to the war effort.

By the 1960s, Victory Day was a tightly controlled state celebration of the war effort, carefully integrated in the government’s propaganda narrative. But to a large extent the memory of the Soviet war effort defined the attitude of many Russians towards their Stalinist past. This attitude was complemented by a tacit silence about what Vladimir Putin has coyly described as ‘some problematic pages’ of Russian history.

Figes is one of the strongest historians of the Soviet Union and the Russian psyche. His book on the Russian Revolution, *A People’s Tragedy* anticipated his *Whisperers* methodology



Gulag prisoners at work, 1936

by telling the story of the revolution through a series of tightly examined interconnected individual narratives. Both *A People’s Tragedy* and his cultural history of Russia, *Natasha’s Dance* won Figes a truckload of awards, and it is easy to understand why—Figes presents his often highly specific and interwoven material in a uniquely engaging fashion. While his earlier books are powerful and compelling, *The Whisperers* is undoubtedly his largest achievement. Bringing together so many personal narratives, Figes is able to illuminate aspects of life under the Soviet regime which other historians, relying on more scattered testimony and the inherent biases of official archives, have not.

In the final pages of *The Whisperers*, Figes quotes a former prison guard who through a mixture of half-baked ideology and hard-learnt realism justified his own position in the Stalinist system:

What is Soviet power, I ask you? It is an organ of coercion! Understand? Say, for example, we are sitting here and talking, and two policemen knock at the door: ‘Come with us!’ they say.

And that’s it! That’s Soviet power! They can take you away and put you in prison—for nothing. And whether you’re an enemy or not, you won’t persuade anybody of your innocence. That’s how it is. I get orders to guard prisoners. Should I believe these orders or should I believe you? When you kill a pig you don’t feel sorry for it when it squeals. And even if I did feel sorry for somebody, how could I help them?... In the camp I guarded mothers with sick children. They cried and cried. But what could I do? They were being punished for their husbands. But that was not my business. I had my work to do.

The tragedy of Stalinism was that these sorts of justifications were common. We might describe it as ‘Stalin’s’ Russia, but the totalitarianism of the early Soviet Union came from below, as individuals were forced to slot themselves into the system: to whisper, or be whispered about.

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