

Adler, Nanci: *Keeping Faith with the Party. Communist Believers Return from the Gulag*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2012. ISBN: 978-0-253-22379-1; 256 S.

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The question of what moved many Soviet Communists to rationalize their own victimization at the hands of the regime that they had been supporting has often tantalized students of Stalinism. Already during the contrite self-incriminations of prominent defendants at the Moscow show trials of the late 1930s, critical observers contemplated the possibility of a peculiar nexus between terror and ideological commitment.¹ Most of these high-profile Communist terror victims could never be questioned afterwards because of their prompt execution. Later testimonies from the camps, however, revealed that there, too, numerous incarcerated former Party members refused to break with their political and ideological beliefs despite the sufferings and injustices inflicted on them.

Nanci Adler encountered this puzzling phenomenon when working on „The Gulag Survivor“, her pioneering study of returnees from the Stalinist camps.² In „Keeping Faith with the Party“ she has now undertaken a separate investigation into the forms, reasons, and ramifications of the enduring loyalty of many Communist terror victims, relying on interviews and memoirs of several dozen former „political“ prisoners. While her main concern is the intellectual and psychological mind-set of these individuals, Adler also seeks to contribute to our understanding of how and why the Soviet system succeeded in engendering in its followers beliefs and loyalties that survived even the most adverse conditions.

In her analysis of the narratives that her subjects produced, Adler fruitfully draws on other scholars' reflections on Soviet Communism's hold on the minds of its subjects, as well as on various sociological and psychological theories and studies. Her main explanatory frame follows the well-established interpretation of Soviet Communism as a belief system akin to a religion. If Bolshevism

was based on non-falsifiable beliefs, Adler argues, it stands to reason that no concrete evidence, not even if it concerned the personal fates of its adherents, would have jeopardized it. This view is supported by stories wherein the individual's commitment to the Party and its cause remained virtually insulated from the experience of victimization. One such example is N.S. Kuznetsov, who not only spent a decade in prison and the camps after a conviction on fabricated charges, but also lost his wife and contact to their children during this time. Despite these blows, Kuznetsov continued to view his ties with the Party as the paramount determinants of his existence, considering as a second birth his initial admission to the Party, and as yet another (re-)birth his reinstatement after Stalin's death (p. 34–36).

In other victims, however, the tensions between their fundamental beliefs in the Party's rightness and their experience of unjust punishment and suffering caused painful rifts that could not easily be mended. Here Adler relies on the theory of cognitive dissonance, according to which the human mind, confronted with irreconcilable perceptions of reality, tends to modify, suppress, or otherwise neutralize the most problematic experiences. In the case of Communist terror victims this could mean explaining away one's own arrest and conviction as a mistake of limited significance in comparison with the great cause of building Socialism. Another possibility was to wrap these disturbing experiences into the larger historical logic or 'truth.' Explanations of this kind – encapsulated, for instance, in the formula that „violence was cruel but, all things considered, necessary“ (p. 53) – were also abetted by the widely propagated myths of the Party's achievements, especially the victory in the „Great Patriotic War,“ which not only affirmed the Soviet system's rightness, but also eclipsed the significance of the fate of any single Soviet citizen.

Adler is cautious, and sometimes even tentative, when weighing the suitability of one or more of her explanatory models for a particular case. Yet one common theme runs through virtually all the different stories that she has

¹ Artur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, London 1940.

² Nanci Adler, *The Gulag Survivor: Beyond the Soviet System*, New Brunswick 2002.

assembled: the attempt to preserve, or restore, meaning. For many Communists, being persecuted by the Party and the system to which they had dedicated their lives meant having the ground pulled out from under them. Grasping the existential dimension of this experience helps understand why many Communist survivors sought to preserve their belief system, rather than discarding it. Like people trapped in an abusive relationship, many Communist victims of Stalin's terror had great difficulties to imagine for themselves any place or value outside their commitment to the Party and its cause. Painful though it was to suffer abuse, rejection, and unjust punishment at the hands of the Soviet system, for them, turning away from Soviet Communism seemed inconceivable, because this was „the only world in which [they] had ever found meaning — or ever would“ (p. 83).

At the same time, their dependency had a practical dimension. Inside the camps as well as after their release, repression victims permanently found themselves under the authority of the party state. Adler is aware of this factor and its presumable role: „When choice and volition are illusions,“ she writes, „psychological explanations“ may not even be necessary to account for the failure of Communist victims to dissociate themselves from the Soviet system and its institutions (p. 63).

In both practical and ideological respect, however, the Party's own stance towards its troublesome past was of critical importance. Khrushchev's 1956 denunciation of unjustified persecutions of Party members during the Great Terror, the release of almost all remaining political prisoners, and the „rehabilitation“ of many „repressed“ Communists allowed Communist terror victims (or their relatives) for the first time to challenge the legitimacy of their verdicts. Yet while the occurrence of mistakes was now admitted, responsibility was strictly limited to Stalin and the temporary corruption of leadership for which he was blamed. The Party as such was scrupulously and effectively shielded against any fundamental criticism, let alone indictment. Consequently, instead of being asked for forgiveness, survivors were at best given the opportunity to re-enlist in the Party and its mission.

Nonetheless, many Communist terror victims not only embraced this limited offer of redress, but also took it as vindication of the steadfastness of their beliefs, proving thus that returning into the arms of the Party that afforded them with „safety, community, and meaning“ (p. 163) was far more important to them than reckoning and compensation. And while the partial scuttling of the policies of „rehabilitation“ and the creeping symbolic re-Stalinization during the Brezhnev years turned some „loyal victims“ into „loyal oppositionists,“ the desire to come to terms with the experience of repression through resuming the relationship with the Party persisted in many until the Gorbachev period: During Glasnost', just when millions of Soviet citizens grew increasingly disenchanted with the Soviet system and the Communist Party, tens of thousands of repression victims once again pursued and achieved their reinstatement in the Party (p. 143).

Like comparable studies of the inner struggles of Soviet subjects³, Adler's insightful analyses of the views and attitudes of Communist camp survivors not just demonstrate, but help to understand the profound effects of Soviet ideology on those who had adopted it. They underscore that a central source of the Soviet system's power, stability, and tenacity lay in the immaterial promise inherent in this ideology – the promise of answers to individuals' quest for meaning and purpose. Hence „loyal victims“' inhibition to confront the Soviet system for the suffering it had inflicted on them, because such accusations would inevitably have punctured their own hopes and aspirations.

Adler concludes by asking how the leaden legacies of Stalinism, violence, and injustice could be overcome in post-Soviet states and societies. Her cogent, if not new suggestions of educational programs or truth commissions, however, presuppose stepping out of the individual and collective entanglement with the Soviet past and prioritizing the humanitarian dimension of Stalinist crimes. Yet as Adler herself knows as well as anyone, in today's Russia this view is promoted primarily by embattled and harassed non-state ac-

³Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin*, Cambridge (MA) 2009.

tors like „Memorial.“ With a state that continues to favor and disseminate sanitized narratives about its past, there seems to be little prospect that hopes about a true break with it will come to fruition.

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