

Foreword

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This book presents a global comparison of the Russian and Chinese revolutions. Numerous studies compare—or more frequently oppose—a given aspect of the two revolutions, but Lucien Bianco's work stands out for providing an overall view and a synthesis. The author analyzes the nature of the two revolutions, their different origins and initial aims, the convergences in their trajectories, and their consequences. The question is not which of the two revolutions best applied (or most deformed and betrayed) ideological dogma, but rather to compare the reasons they were launched and the phases in their development, as well as to assess their consequences. More broadly, the aim is to consider the role of the two revolutions in the history of the twentieth century and their positive or negative contributions to the progress of human society. That historical and humanistic approach may surprise English-speaking readers, who are more used to monographic or theoretical studies. They may wonder if this is the result of some Gallic claim to universality, which, on occasion, can lead to superficial overviews. They may rest assured! No study is more solidly rooted in facts, or deals more closely with reality, than this one. It is an exploit that transports the reader from in-depth analyses to vast perspectives, made possible only by the author's excellence.

A former student at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris (a higher education establishment that has trained the intellectual elite of France for decades), Bianco received a solid classical education and hesitated for some time on whether to become an historian or a philosopher. He finally opted for history but never lost his love of philosophy, and he has succeeded in

reconciling specific in-depth research with a truly philosophical approach to history.

Of course not every aspect of the exposition in this book derives from the author's own fundamental research. Nevertheless, the sixty years that Bianco has devoted to studying modern China have turned the indefatigable reader into an extremely well-informed one, with the ability to integrate knowledge drawn from the common fund of modern Sinology and to "acclimatize" it, as it were in his own argumentation. He has thus benefitted from the major advances in Chinese historiography, both in China and in the West, since the 1978 reforms partially opened up the archives, in addition to the proliferation of personal accounts.

Bianco is less familiar with Russia since he does not speak Russian, but he has devoted many years to reading translations of documents published in Moscow as well as studies of the Russian revolution by Western scholars. Paradoxically, since the historiographic documentation on the Russian revolution is far more prolific than that on the Chinese one, the author has more information on Russia than on China in some chapters (for instance the one on the gulag and *laogai* camps). When doing the spadework for what was, for him, a new historical field, Bianco acquired an expertise that has readily been recognized by Sovietologists. He was therefore able to dispense with requesting assistance from colleagues when dealing with the Russian aspect of his comparison, thereby avoiding the danger that so often occurs in collective works, of parallel developments being poorly or badly linked together. Having a common problematic structure throughout the entire work confers a unity on it and provides a dynamic. The quality of *Stalin and Mao* also lies in the author's own independent spirit, guided as he is by the results of his research, which opposes ideological fashions and political pressures with the "resistance of facts" (Lenin). We should bear in mind that Bianco was one of the first people to denounce the Maoist deception and the illusions of those who, in the 1960s and 1970s, had transferred their dashed hopes in the Soviet Union onto China. Based on the personal reflections of a highly cultivated historian with an impressive range of knowledge and sound judgment, the book invites the reader to challenge many accepted truths.

Stalin and Mao presents a vast panorama of two revolutions in different time periods: the triumph of Bolshevism and then Stalinism (1917–1953), which preceded that of Maoism (1949–1976) by some thirty

years and paved the way for it. The book's principal argument is made clear by the epigraph, devoted to the repetition of a tragic event. Indeed, the author claims that the Chinese revolution was largely inspired by the Russian precedent, which implies the repetition of an offense or a crime. The author claims that, far from being original, the Chinese revolution was very largely inspired by the Russian precedent and succeeded in reproducing both its errors and its failures in economic modernization and social justice. Nine substantial chapters illustrate that thesis.

The brilliant opening chapter, titled "The Laggards," compares the original situations in both countries, characterized by economic backwardness and "otherness" in relation to the West (both being far more pronounced in China than in Russia) with nationalism prevailing in China, whereas in Russia there was far greater concern with social issues with dreams of a universal project and a new humanity. Last, there was the determining role of foreign wars in the successful obtainment of power (World War I in the case of Russia, and the 1937 Japanese invasion for China). This close comparison is carried out subject by subject in a penetrating and masterful synthesis.

After two chapters, one devoted to "Catching Up," mainly in economic terms, which was a priority for both regimes; and the other on "Politics," which reveals a ties to a "shared Leninist matrix" (chapter 3) we broach one of the highlights of the work and certainly the most original one, with chapters 4 ("The Peasants") and 5 ("Famines"). For Bianco, whose principal research for half a century has been devoted to rural issues, the peasantry in both revolutions proved to be a challenge that neither was able to meet, and that failure weighed heavily on their outcomes. For the Russian revolutionaries, the peasant issue was always a cursed one. The forced collectivization policy and dekulakization resulted in the Great Famine of 1932–1933, with the stagnation of agricultural production and the peasantry being sidelined, sacrificed on the altar of industrialization and urbanization.

Even though the Chinese leaders had closer ties with the rural world, their agrarian policy was as detrimental to the peasantry as that of their Soviet predecessors. After 1949 the Party confiscated and redistributed land belonging to the rich peasants, but two or three years later it launched into forced collectivization. In China, as in the Soviet Union, the priority went to industrial development financed by the agricultural surplus—to the detriment of the peasants who were transformed into veritable "slaves of primitive accumulation". Bianco goes on to demolish the myth that Mao's

revolution was a peasant revolution. The Chinese peasants were mobilized in the context of the anti-imperialist movement and contributed to the Communists' rise to power, but they never played a leadership role or even an independent one in the revolutionary struggles. Nor was improving their lot a priority for the new regime once it was established. The 1958 Great Leap Forward was lauded by Maoist propaganda as a manifestation of the "Chinese way" and the achievement of a Communist utopia, but in reality it was nothing more than radicalized collectivization taken to its apogee, and was a direct cause of the famine that ensued.

The Russian famine of 1931–1933 left between six and seven million dead, while the one that accompanied and followed the Great Leap Forward resulted in between twenty and forty million victims. While Bianco does not neglect the importance of structural factors such as the vulnerability of agriculture in both countries to the vagaries of the weather, or the difficulty in managing the demographic transition, he makes clear that the agrarian policy implemented by the revolutionary governments in power was the primary cause of the famine in both cases. He also sheds light on Stalin's personal responsibility, since he used the war he waged against the peasantry to get rid of all forms of opposition, and also Mao's, carried away as he was by his utopic vision and his pride.

Chapter 6 demonstrates that bureaucracy and the "new class" that emerged in both regimes had very similar sociological foundations and behaviors. They exploited their privileges and practiced corruption. Only the dictators' attitudes to them differed: quiet acceptance in Stalin's case, for he appreciated the docility and social conservatism of those he had promoted, and in Mao's case the repeated attacks on the new bourgeoisie with criticisms of their "working style," although he rapidly handed power back to them after the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution.

In the cultural domain, broached in chapter 7, Soviet Russia and Maoist China were equally subject to the reign of socialist realism imposed by watchdogs, who were quick to censure and repress. Yet the Soviet intelligentsia reacted far more critically to that than their Chinese counterparts, whose response was more muted.

Lastly, chapter 8 provides a comparative study of the labor camps: the Soviet gulag and the Chinese *laogai*, the former serving as a model for the latter. In China the special emphasis on the prisoners' spiritual transformation and thought reform made the cruelty of *laogai* more insidious, but no less brutal, than that of the gulag.

The book concludes with a somewhat provocative comparison between the two “monsters,” Stalin and Mao. Both were molded in the same system that turned them into dictators, but their personalities led to variations in the way they ruled. Stalin, the realist, coldly and methodically eradicated all his opponents, real or potential. Mao Zedong’s cruelty was more detached. He was also less able, and doubtless less keen, to steer his country toward the economic development that had been the original objective of the revolution he had led.

This book is not only scholarly but extremely vivid. Readers familiar with Bianco’s work will recognize his brisk, elegant, yet familiar style. Above all, they will find a deep sense of humanity. The many descriptions and anecdotes with which he illustrates the main body of the work succeed in bringing it to life. He shows a genuine interest in individual destinies and the fates of victims. He does not allow himself to get carried away by his emotions but feels—and makes us feel—the intensity of the personal dramas that are played out behind the cold statistics.

There is no doubt that this work will mark an epoch in twentieth-century historiography. Though Bianco refuses to let ideology become a hostage to history, he does not adhere to the fragmentary, pointillist approach so often present in contemporary historical research. He dares to return to the big picture and the major issues that faced the preceding generations, and returns to them with an open mind, armed only with his profound knowledge of the facts. That pragmatic approach cannot be qualified as scientific. As a politically committed historian, Bianco feels free to make value judgments and his conclusions will not fail to ruffle a few feathers. No, he claims, the Chinese Way was not an original one—contrary to what is claimed by those partisans who made up for their disappointment in Communism by finding refuge in Maoism. The regime founded by Mao Zedong resembled the Soviet regime “like a brother,” albeit not a twin. The Chinese revolution was merely a repeat offense, a repetition of the error and crime that was the Russian revolution. Neither revolution attained its proclaimed objective of social justice. As to economic modernization, Stalin achieved it only “conservatively,” although it made greater advances in Russia than in China, but both countries continued to lag behind the West in full economic growth. Those negative judgments will shock a nostalgic few, but they will be left with little more than their faith in the Great Helmsman and the Little Red Book with which to counter it.

On a more serious note, some historians will be surprised by the author's extreme caution with regard to ideology and may wonder if he has not underestimated the role it played. Indeed, no chapter is devoted to the subject, which is a bit of a paradox given the role of ideology in the establishment and governance of both Communist regimes. That caution is probably most perceptible in the final chapter and Bianco's portrayal of Mao Zedong. True, the author admits that, unlike the Stalinist Great Terror, which was an enterprise of "social engineering" that exposed the motives of tyranny, the Maoist Cultural Revolution is debatable where ideas are concerned, and may have been the stuff of dreams for some. Unlike Stalin, Mao Zedong's sole objective was not just to preserve his power; he also wanted to preserve the revolution. Nevertheless the comparison as a whole and the enumeration of the many resemblances between the two "movements" tend to reduce the scope of the utopic Maoist vision. Mao Zedong mainly appears as a selfish, manipulating monster. Clearly Bianco does not share the indulgence of those who, while stating that Mao's utopic fervor is no excuse for his tyranny, nevertheless cloak it in a mantle of humanity and idealism.

Throughout *Stalin and Mao* Bianco denounces the illusion created by propaganda and refuses to substitute reality with dogmatism, or reason with belief. He even goes further and concludes from the failure of the two great twentieth-century revolutions, that there is an inevitable proximity between revolution and tyranny, stressing the unsuspected and almost insurmountable difficulties facing any revolution intent on curing humanity's ills. That skepticism should invigorate us rather than discourage us. In our "post-truth" society, in which the most outrageous lies are accepted in the name of pragmatism and efficiency rather than in the name of some radiant future, this book reminds us that "if we are not serious about facts and what's true and what's not, if we can't discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems" (Barack Obama). As difficult as truth may be to define and establish, truth alone will prevent us from returning to the totalitarianism of the past century.