

Moscow 1937

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In the Soviet Union, and to this day in its former member states, ‘1937’ functions as a ‘code word for one of the greatest historical catastrophes of the twentieth century’ (p. 1); indeed, in the years that followed, contemporaries did not speak of a ‘Great Terror’ – the term we use now – but often just of ‘1937’. Although Moscow was in many ways at the centre of the wave of 1.5 million arrests and 700,000 executions, this was not everything that happened at this time. Moscow 1937 was not only a place of death; it was also a ‘gigantic construction site’, as Schlögel emphasises in chapter two, and this remains the central contrast which chases the reader through the pages of this book.

Moscow 1937, first published in German in 2008, offers a large, cumulative, composite panorama of life in the capital during this tumultuous year. Ranging from the Soviet presence at the Paris Exhibition to the labour camps of the Moscow-Volga Canal; from the Central Committee Plenum to the Gorky Park of Rest and Relaxation; from the cinema screens of ‘Soviet Hollywood’ to the execution cellars of the NKVD, Schlögel aims to create a ‘history of simultaneity’ (perhaps more clearly, if crudely, translated as ‘a history of one-moment-ness’). The impressive ambition, largely successful, is to recreate contemporary experiences, which means taking into account the many events and points of reference that appear in retrospect to have had little in common, but were in fact experienced synchronically by Soviet citizens.

In part, this is topographically determined: ‘A history that is tied to a particular time or space implicitly acknowledges the synchronicity of the non-synchronous, the coexistence and co-presence of the disparate. The location guarantees complexity’ (p. 3). Moscow is Schlögel’s focus – the centre of power, but also the centre of culture. Indeed, by focusing on Moscow explicitly, Schlögel implicitly challenges the extrapolations of other historians, whose work speaks of ‘the USSR’ or ‘Russia’, while principally relying upon materials drawn from the capital. This is an interesting challenge to the historian’s selectivity when choosing what to include or to consider representative, while leaving much that does not fit on the cutting-room floor. The map of Moscow decorating the endplates picks out the locations of events crucial to the text, highlighting their physical proximity and thereby a connectedness that can so often escape even those familiar with the city under examination. The effect can be striking, with individual moments of collocation bringing home the point more effectively than merely stating that one event happened in the shadow of another – consider, for example, that the cultural extravaganza of the Pushkin centenary celebrations (11

February 1937) took place in the very same building as the infamous show trial of Piatakov and others, the final sentences of which had been announced less than two weeks previously (p. 144).

The book is in general sensitive to issues of space, both physical and conceptualised. The significance of aviation successes and celebrity status of pilots was intimately entangled with the sense that the vast distances of the former Russian Empire were rapidly shrinking, and the Soviet Union thus becoming a more genuinely unified state. The belief that ‘the periphery had [now] been firmly and permanently tied to the centre’ (p. 310) was to prove hopelessly optimistic (there are numerous studies on the complexities and contradictions of centre-periphery relations across the Soviet period), but new technology had certainly brought the periphery into a closer orbit.

Schlögel notes, too, that in order to better understand the 1930s, we might do well to examine ‘the non-places of those years – the stations, black markets, queues, shacks and hostels...’ (p. 9), that is, the locations and spaces defined more by the comings, goings, needs and personalities of ordinary people rather than by the state. This is a welcome and a wise suggestion, and something which has begun to be studied more thoroughly for the postwar, late-Stalin period.⁽¹⁾ Schlögel does not keep very consistently to this principle, however; he even suggests of Red Square that ‘Whoever could analyse this concentrated space would possess a miniature history of Moscow in 1937’ (p. 208). Yet this was an explicitly official space where ordinary citizens appeared only to perform various rituals. Whatever they might think or share between each other while in the crowds there (something Alexei Yurchak has examined with regard to the late Soviet period) ⁽²⁾, the interpersonal world of the Soviet citizen cannot be found in this ‘microcosm’. Indeed, in *Moscow 1937* we spend far more time at official occasions or in the midst of Soviet newspapers than in any ‘non-place’, so this ambition seems largely unfulfilled.

Schlögel also calls for an integration of different historiographical approaches: History ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ are in practice inseparably connected and should not be kept artificially discrete. Likewise, he rightly argues, there is no single ‘answer’ or even single investigatory approach which can ‘explain’ the system at large (pp. 7–8). Such points may seem self-evident to many readers, but in a historiography of politically-charged cleavages and approaches demarcated by animosity as well as by principle, an integrative rather than totalising approach is, in fact, a relatively new innovation in the field of Soviet History.⁽³⁾ Even today, there remains a tendency for new analytical emphases to be presented as totalising paradigm shifts, so Schlögel’s striving for integration is to be welcomed.

Indeed, integration is at the very heart of this work. The book’s original German title is *Terror and Dream* (‘*Terror und Traum*’), with *Moscow 1937* merely the subtitle. Its omission in the English version is ill-advised, for this evocative title is the key to what Schlögel is trying to achieve: the recreation of the innumerable moments at which both the violence and fear of mass arrests and repressions intersected and mingled with the utopian, primary-coloured visions of the future unfolding before contemporaries’ eyes. This is perhaps most vividly encapsulated when considering 1937 as a ‘Year of Adventures’, in which Soviet aviators and explorers broke world records and conquered the North Pole. As Schlögel puts it, this was ‘a year of pioneers and lonely heroes on frontiers that the twentieth century was setting out to expand’ (pp. 294–5), and not only in Russia. Still, ‘Nowhere perhaps was the yearning and the readiness to overcome the inertia of space and time in one fell swoop greater than in Russia’. Nevertheless, all this adventure and excitement was simultaneous with ‘an orgy of killing’ (p. 295). As this last hints, in addition to juxtaposing particular topics, Schlögel also employs the effective technique of ending numerous chapters with, essentially, a list of obituaries, as various characters who appeared in that chapter were later arrested and/or killed. This is presented not in a hand-wringing or a grisly manner, but with a coldness of delivery simulating the ubiquity and conveyer-like nature of the repressive measures at their height which proves far more impactful as a result.

This technique is used on the grander scale of the book itself. It is only after some 470 pages of panoramic views, in which arrest and murder are never absent but always peripheral, that the spotlight is suddenly shone directly upon the mass arrests and executions, a moment which arrives if not unexpectedly, then still

with the power to shock. Here the cumulative effect of Schlögel's work to describe so much of life *aside* from the violence of the 'Terror' serves to render the latter more real and immediate than even scholars of this period might expect. 30 pages of unrelenting data follow, the same style used to evoke the 'dream' now calmly detailing the 'terror'. Although focused on one place of execution – the Butovskii shooting-range – this chapter also provides a good summary of what we know about the 'Great Terror' and how we came to know it; as such, it makes an excellent overview chapter for students. Indeed, this is an epithet that could be applied to many of the book's vignette-like chapters, and although the intention is for the whole to produce a cumulative effect, the true strength of *Moscow 1937* may lie in its accessible, fragmentary chapter structure.

Away from the Butovskii shooting-range, 1937 marked the 20th anniversary of the October Revolution, which was supposed to be celebrated with great pomp in all spheres of life. However, attempts to celebrate the achievements of the two decades since October 1917 were frequently thwarted by the rapidly but incoherently changing Party Line – the portrayal of dreams and achievements could all too easily turn into the stuff of nightmares. For example, an exhibition planned in 1935 to celebrate 'The Industry of Socialism', scheduled to open in late 1937, was repeatedly delayed as sometimes fatal debates over 'formalism' made it nigh-on impossible for artists to know what they were allowed to create; further delays came in darkly ironic form, as an exhibit on the 'triumph of electrification' suffered electrical faults, and the November 1937 opening was abruptly interrupted for 14 months because the exhibition contained Soviet heroes and personalities who had just been purged and turned into 'non-persons' (pp. 237–8).

The surprising closeness of American-Soviet relations is highlighted towards the end of the book, with chapters demonstrating the cultural and industrial links between them, from jazz to car production, cinema to, provocatively, the notion that both USA and USSR were both at this time the revolutionary new kids on the block in an ailing old Europe. As Schlögel puts it, both powers 'entered' Europe in 1917, and

both had appeared armed with revolutionary programmes: President Wilson with his Fourteen-Point Programme for eliminating secret diplomacy and what was in effect a revolutionary policy for intervening democratically in the affairs of foreign states, Lenin with his declaration of war on the old European powers, a revolutionary defeatism and internationalism that refused to recognize national frontiers. Lenin and Wilson – in the eyes of Old Europe these were figures who embodied upheaval, revolution and the rise of non-European powers in world politics (p. 458).

Here and elsewhere, Schlögel keeps the Soviet Union firmly embedded in its international context, and convincingly demonstrates that, although extreme in many ways, it was not a historical aberration *tout court*. Indeed, modernising Moscow was not a straightforwardly Bolshevik pursuit at all: many of the schemes pursued, including the iconic Soviet metro system, were projects already in development prior to 1917. What *was* distinctly Soviet, though, was the centralised, coordinated, full-steam-ahead approach (pp. 36-7). Strangely, though, the Metro itself – Moscow's jewel in the crown – is largely absent in this book. This was one of the Soviet regime's foremost propaganda spaces, where the dreams of the future were simultaneously pictured and were in a sense actualised by the very grandeur of the architecture itself: these people's 'palaces' were astonishing in their aesthetics and their luxury, yet were utilitarian and open to all – the idealised Soviet world in microcosm. The Metro's near-total absence in *Moscow 1937* is remarkable, especially as the literature on it has grown significantly in recent years (4) and Schlögel himself is an aesthetically sensitive writer, as he demonstrates elsewhere in this book.

Moscow 1937 is richly textured, with much space given to the quotation of particular sources. But although Schlögel is aware of and defends his use of very extensive and frequent quotation (p. 9), there are times when this volume seems to be more sourcebook than monograph. This reaches an extreme when we are presented with pages of very short biographies of repressed Soviet geologists (pp. 263–6); there are plentiful books available listing the names and short biographical sketches of repressed peoples, and there seems little gained by copying out a few pages here. Here and elsewhere, more Schlögel and less secondary material

would have been preferable, especially when the lengthy quotations are merely extracts from other historians' work and not even primary sources (e.g. pp. 429–32). Indeed, where synthesis ends and Schlögel's own interpretations begin is often impossible to gauge. For example, from the introduction onwards he emphasises the parallel development of mass arrests/shootings and the build-up to the Supreme Soviet elections, but does not explicitly acknowledge that this coexistence (and sometimes complex interplay) of terror and democracy is a thesis also advanced by Wendy Goldman in a recent monograph – a publication of which Schlögel is clearly aware as he cites it several times for points of fact.⁽⁵⁾

Schlögel's treatment of the Spanish Civil War highlights the most significant problem with *Moscow 1937*, namely the tendency to infer popular opinion from Soviet newspaper reports or officially-organised demonstrations. Because the newspapers emphasised that ordinary workers had started collections for the Spanish republicans, gathering donations from their own wages, he sees in this popular support more genuine than 'mere expressions of solidarity' (p. 98), and presents these as spontaneous popular initiatives. In reality, these collections were organised by dutiful Party people and then enforced upon workers who were coerced into signing away yet another portion of their meagre wages, in addition to the interminable demands to subscribe to state loans. Many resented this, as Party and NKVD reports noted, but while Schlögel could well argue that others (whether in equal or greater numbers) supported these donations, he cannot do so effectively by citing only official representations of that support in the press. Indeed, although *Moscow 1937* offers an enormous range of perspectives, at the same time it could be charged with favouring the obvious sources.

What is absent in this expansive work of synthesis are actual Soviet citizens. Although Schlögel sets out to integrate the 'from above' and 'from below' perspectives, we almost never hear ordinary people's voices – instead, we are shown only the world with which they were presented in the newspapers, public events, and other cultural products. Newspaper reports detailing enthusiastic demonstrations of loyalty are hardly representative, and nor are the diaries of foreign visitors or repressed intellectuals, yet these are the principal sources of 'reaction' to events cited, with attendant generalisations about the 'popular response'. For instance, despite the enormity of the Pushkin jubilee, which produced vast quantities of Pushkin memorabilia and new editions of his works (p. 146), even if many people bought these often tacky items, we have little sense of how they understood such purchases: support for an official event, or, I think more likely, a welcome return of an author considered, despite Soviet attempts to rebrand him, as pre-revolutionary, and who might well be read and thought of as an outlet for citizens dissatisfied by the Soviet present.

The only alternative voices here, as elsewhere in the book, are those of intellectuals, writers, and others who leave abundant written sources behind. For all Mikhail Bulgakov's or Andrei Platonov's reflections on the real significance (or not) of Pushkin as a revolutionary figure (pp. 151–2), it would be useful to know that at the same time people could use Pushkin's jubilee to poke fun at the Stalin Cult: a joke circulated in which the design of a statue to Pushkin becomes, through successive revisions, a colossal statue of Stalin holding a tiny volume of Pushkin's poetry.⁽⁶⁾ This skewing of sources holds true across the book, which causes an imbalance in perspective impossible to ignore, and makes the end result in this respect surprisingly old-fashioned, 'top-down' history. Given its aspirations to novelty of perspective and approach, this is a significant flaw. These are difficult issues to address, of course, but Schlögel also neglects to raise them. What's missing, in short, is a third element in his schema of 'terror and dream', namely the experience between those two poles which characterised the daily experience of the majority of Soviet citizens: 'the quotidian'. Despite its bulk, *Moscow 1937* is in this sense distinctly incomplete.

It is also worth noting some problems with this English edition. The translator is a Germanist with no background in Russian or Soviet History, and this often shows; the untranslated use of German terms is particularly unhelpful (e.g. '*Gesamtkunstwerk*' ('total work of art'/'synthesis of arts'); '*zugzwang*' ('caught in a bind')); Russian terms with standard English translations in the historiography also inconsistently appear in unfamiliar form. Bibliographic entries have not been updated and mirror the German edition, favouring German-language versions of Russian texts widely available in English (as well as sporadic German transliteration of Russian names: e.g. Khlevniuk sometimes becomes Chlewnjuk). Here and in the main text

there are numerous transliteration inconsistencies, even on the same page. Indeed, it seems that quotations have not been translated into English from the original Russian, but simply from Schlögel's German, which will inevitably have impacted negatively on their accuracy. Self-evidently, such criticisms relate to the publisher, and not to Schlögel himself.

Intended as a panorama of Moscow's 1937, this book inevitably contains much that we have already seen; nevertheless, by piecing together the various 'sightlines' (p. 9), we do gain new appreciation of certain elements of the familiar scenery. *Moscow 1937* skips like a stone across the water: we rarely go beneath the surface level, but the trajectory of travel is undeniably compelling. Ultimately, *Moscow 1937* provides a rich and textured sourcebook which can be drawn upon by scholars, students, and interested readers alike; it represents a synthesis which few could bring together as coherently as does Schlögel. It is also a highly accessible and thought-provoking introduction to the period for the general reader. Although it does not notably advance our understanding or challenge existing interpretations, it does prompt scholars to reconsider how they approach both the study and the representation of a particular moment in time.

Notes

1. cf. *Na 'kraiu' sovetskogo obshchestva: Sotsial'nye marginaly kak ob"ekt gosudarstvennoi politiki, 1945-1960-e gg*, ed. E.Iu. Zubkova and T.Iu. Zhukova (Moscow, 2010), esp. Introduction.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until it Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford, 2006).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. On these cleavages and the possibilities for integration, see Mark Edele, 'Soviet society, social structure, and everyday life. Major frameworks reconsidered', *Kritika*, 8 (2007), 349–73.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. e.g. Dietmar Neutatz, *Die Moskauer Metro: von den ersten Plänen bis zur Baustelle des Stalinismus (1897–1935)* (Cologne, 2001); Josette Bouvard, *Le Métro de Moscou: La construction d'un mythe soviétique* (Paris, 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression* (Cambridge, 2007). Schlögel cites Goldman several times in chapter 28.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Aleksandra Arkhipova and Mikhail Mel'nichenko, *Anekdoty o Staline: Teksty, kommentarii, issledovaniia* (Moscow, 2010), pp. 184–8.[Back to \(6\)](#)

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