

The New Civilisation? Understanding Stalin's Soviet Union 1929-1941

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Author: Paul Flowers

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This is a very carefully researched and well-written account of reactions within Britain to the Soviet Union during the industrialisation and forced collectivisation programmes of the 1930s. It brings to light much new material, and should be a valuable contribution both to the origin of Soviet studies in Britain and to the political nature of British intellectual assumptions in the face of what appeared to many as the final collapse of capitalism.

Dr Flowers writes with a sense of urgency and direct interest which makes a refreshing contrast to the languid wit and detachment which often surrounds intellectual history. His commitment is openly Marxist, a courageous stance in the academic world during the last 20 years, but that commitment is generally unobtrusive in a study which avoids crude rhetoric and polemic, and avoids the simple 'Stalin-or-Trotsky' alternatives usually attributed to Marxist writers on the USSR. He draws on an impressive range of references, and demonstrates a thorough acquaintance with authorities such as Paul Hollander and Abbot Gleason. Most importantly, he refuses to be hypnotised by the deification (or demonization) of Stalin and the USSR; he recognises that, while moral outrage is understandable, it is no substitute for a cool analysis.

An important aspect of this book is its attempt to classify the broad and varied contemporary literature on the USSR in a comprehensible manner, something regarded as impossible by Walter Laqueur in *The Fate of the Revolution* back in 1967.⁽¹⁾ Dr Flowers distinguishes a critical if inchoate third group, a 'centre ground' distinct from apologists and enemies, and in his organisation of their arguments he is able to demonstrate a multiplicity of approaches and motivations among observers and political activists. In doing so, he valuably extends our knowledge of the variety of reactions to the USSR.

The author draws on serious articles and commentaries in journals and magazines, but decides not to use journalistic responses and internal government material. This is a pity, as it detracts from the comprehensiveness of the book, although readers are directed to relevant analysis of these latter sources, such as Steffanie Nanson's thesis on Fleet Street and the USSR in the 1930s.⁽²⁾ Fortunately, he makes sensible exceptions in practice, quoting *The Economist* and *Spectator* when required. In order to stress that British opinion was never completely insular, he includes a large number of non-British writers and

commentators, especially in his 'centre ground' (p. 19). The lack of proficient British observers, and the absence of a knowledge of Russian, meant that the passionate interest aroused within Britain by the fate of the Soviet Union was expressed in a variety of sources, non-British as much as British, and the pages of the *Slavonic and East European Review* drew on all sources to present to interested British readers. This does not lead him to underestimate the quality of British observers of all political hues – he argues that the commentary of writers such as E. H. Carr and Margaret Miller, who had never visited Russia, was often as good as that of the old 'Russia hands' such as Sir Bernard Pares, despite the latter's direct experience. In spite of the disadvantages they faced, the author successfully demonstrates that the writers of this period were able to produce material which has stood the test of time.

Dr Flewers organises his work in a chronological framework of three time-periods, determined by the development of the USSR: the 1929–34 period when Stalin's policy of industrialisation and collectivisation began, a time when the survival of the USSR was in question amidst the social tension and economic uncertainty caused by the expropriation of peasant property, the Five Year Plan of breakneck industrial transformation and an isolationist Soviet foreign policy; the 1934–9 period when British intellectuals had to deal with the mass purges of internal dissent and a Soviet foreign policy of alliance with Western democracies in the face of Nazi and Fascist aggression; and the 1939–41 period as the USSR's pact with Hitler and (to the author) the crucial war with Finland alienated the sympathy of Labour and the British intelligentsia. The book is thus carefully contextualised, allowing us to understand the reactions of the wide variety of responses to be documented.

Within this chronological approach a number of key themes emerge. There are the obvious ones – the Terror, the pretensions to democracy and to a respect for human rights and a foreign policy which swung from Popular Front to alliance with Hitler. There are also some interesting observations on the reaction to Soviet policies on the family and education. However, the most fascinating theme concerns reactions to the whole question of state planning.

The theme of the Terror and the lax reactions to the mass killings and flagrant denial of human rights by British observers has been much visited, but remains important nonetheless. The embarrassing adulation of Stalin and the Soviet regime from the growing number of fellow-travellers like Stephen Spender is matched by the shocking remark of Richard Terrell that he had no objection to seeing thousands of summary executions of oppositionists (p. 116), while George Bernard Shaw applauded 'the extermination of whole races and classes' and the 'the political necessity of killing people' (pp. 116, 95). However, while Dr Flewers counterbalances this unabashed support for murder with the more hostile reactions of the Labour Party and Leonard Woolf (pp. 151–2), he also shows a 'centre ground' through less-noticed reactions: Harold Laski and Kingsley Martin equivocated between believing the accusations made in the show trials on the one hand and, on the other, worrying about the lack of free expression and the low level of rights in the USSR; Wickham Steed felt there might be a 'substratum of truth' in the accusations; Seton Watson and Margaret Cole thought the defendants could easily have been trying to kill Stalin and that Trotsky might have been plotting with Germany and Japan to return to power at the expense of ceding territory to them (pp. 148–9).

The Terror is intertwined with a second theme, the attitude of the British intelligentsia to rights and democracy, as proclaimed in the 1936 Soviet constitution (just as the Terror was moving towards mass purges and show trials). There is the spine-chilling comment from the British Stalinist Pat Sloan justifying the shootings as an expression of a democratic desire not to hear the defence of those accused and the sad example of Lion Feuchtwanger, an exiled German radical playwright with direct experience of Hitler's repression, who argued that the trials were necessary because 'the establishment of socialism would never have been possible with an unrestricted right of abuse' (pp. 130–1). This dangerously lax attitude to rights is contrasted to the rejection, by Attlee, historian G. P. Gooch and others (p. 129), of Soviet pretensions to civil liberties as covering ruthless repression. There are surprising supporters of the 1936 constitution – John Middleton Murry's belief that autocratic socialism was a definite advance on simple autocracy being echoed by the US sociologist Bertram Maxwell, with his reassuring view that the Russians weren't used to liberty

and liked autocracy (pp. 129–30).

A third theme is that of the USSR's foreign policy. The 'third' period of Soviet hostility to social democracy, caused by the failure of the United Front in Britain and China, isn't really examined, though the withdrawal of the Comintern from an aggressive interventionism in Western affairs is documented from a variety of sources (pp. 101–2). The main interest is inevitably in the Popular Front period, when British opinion was divided on whether the USSR was a threat or a stabilising power. The tensions and conflicts over Soviet involvement in Spanish Civil War are rightly given a central place, but it seems unfair to say that *The Spectator* and *The Economist* endorsed Stalinism when they supported the crushing of POUM (p. 257, n. 324); they had made their opposition to anarchism and social revolution quite plain, and approval of the crushing of those genuinely revolutionary forces by the communists was hardly an endorsement of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, the politics of those who opposed the USSR (Roman Catholics and pro-Franco Britons) is not given adequate attention.

The author argues that it was the Finnish war, more even than the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, which was decisive in destroying the support for the USSR given by the British Left and intelligentsia (pp. 179–182). His analysis of the reactions to the war is interesting and extensive, but to isolate the war as an event which alienated British Labour underestimates the opposition of the Labour party to Soviet totalitarianism throughout the 1930s. Labour's condemnation of the war was strong, but no stronger than their consistently hostile attitude to Communism. In *Democracy versus Dictatorship* in 1933 (3), the National Council of Labour had equated Nazi and Communist totalitarianism in a document which was endorsed by Labour's annual conference that year, and the Labour leadership demonstrated a thorough opposition to United Front and Popular Front strategies throughout the decade, disaffiliating the Socialist League in 1937 and expelling Cripps and Bevan in 1939. Ernest Bevin of the powerful Transport and General Workers' Union fought a bitter battle against Communists in the London bus unions, while the TUC conflict with Communists in Trades Councils was merciless. While the Labour leadership admired state planning in the USSR, it was unremittingly hostile to the lack of democracy there. Moreover, admiration for state planning in Mussolini's Italy was also expressed by Hugh Dalton (4), while the US New Deal evoked a much more wholehearted response from Labour because it combined public works and state intervention with a political democracy. The anger over Finland was quickly forgotten after the German invasion of Russia, and Soviet resistance in that war created a genuine fount of goodwill among many British workers and intellectuals; the Soviet takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948 had a more lasting impact on the Labour Left.

An unusual theme is looked at, all too briefly. The feminist measures taken by Alexandra Kollontai and concerns with pedagogy in the early years of the Revolution had disappeared by the 1930s, and the author notes that the new Soviet stress on traditional morality in education and the family pleased conservatives such as Arnold Lunn while worrying radical philosopher C. E. M. Joad (p. 127). There is a fascinating discussion about the divisions within British feminism caused by the Soviet ban on abortion in 1936. Beatrice King, a fellow-traveller, accepted the ban, while the Abortion Law Reform Association was angry enough to accuse the Soviet government of failing to treat women as responsible judges of their own fate (p. 127).

The most fascinating theme, however, is that of the nature and impact of state planning on British thinking, and not just on the Left. Dr Flowers fails to be easily stereotyped into the normal (tiresome) alternatives of Stalinism or the varieties of Trotskyism; instead he takes into account the argument made by Hillel Ticktin (5) that the command economy was actually unplanned and chaotic.

In the 1929–34 period, the reactions to the destruction of the legal market in the USSR by the Five-Year Plans and forced collectivisation are examined with great care. This means that the conflicting interpretations of the anti-socialist Arthur Shadwell (who believed that the new policy was doomed to an early failure) and the uncritical admiration of R. Palme Dutt and Emile Burns of the British Communist Party are enriched by the less partisan comments of Maurice Hindus, who saw the ability to train and organise engineers as critical for success and was worried by the violent and inhumane treatment handed out

to the peasantry. The author looks not just at the partisans and enemies of industrial planning, but also at the first-hand comments of US engineers actually involved in the industrialisation, such as Walter Rukheyser, and of US journalists such as H. R. Knickerbocker and Ellery Walter, whose reports of the poor management and weed-ridden machinery of the new collective farmers belied the uncritical reports of happy farm workers enjoying modern conditions made by Joan Beauchamp for the *Labour Monthly*. The question of product quality was raised by a critical German observer, Heinrich Poppelmann, while the British engineer Allan Monkhouse was worried about the harm to industrial efficiency caused by the overtly politicised atmosphere (p. 89). The British famer, John Morgan, who was dismayed at the condition of Soviet agriculture, with its low grain yield, weed-infested cereal fields and lack of tractors, is contrasted with John Hoyland's choice remark that Soviet citizens starved physically, but did not starve morally because they had willed their own privations (pp. 90, 91–2). A variety of commentators – British economist Margaret Miller, Menshevik exile Aaron Yurgov, US commentator Isaac Don Levine – are used to point to the unplanned nature of these 'plans', originating as they did in emergency *ad hoc* response to commands from above caused by shortages of grain and manufactured goods. Dr Flewers shows that there was enough information amidst the partisan fantasy to make a considered appraisal of the regime and its policies, if people wanted to use it.

Once the existence of the USSR could be taken as more assured after 1934, the author points to a change in attitude to planning. He notes the sense of much of the British left such as Herbert Morrison and Hugh Dalton (pp. 86–7) that the triumph of Soviet planning demonstrated the superiority of socialism, but he also points to the critical accounts of British engineers such as John Littlepage, Fred Beale and Peter Francis (pp. 140, 152–3) in assessing the 'Stakhanovite' movement. Their concerns with industrial efficiency led them to note the shortage of adequate skills displayed by technicians and the clumsy attitude which harmed sophisticated machinery. On agriculture, the author brings out the technical problems of the new collective farms through his use of Russian exiles and US commentators such as Ivan Solonovich, Nicholas de Basily and W. H. Chamberlin (p. 142). The evidence, clearly available to anyone who wished to look, led many to point out in those early days that there was no genuine plan at all, merely target-setting. Michael Polanyi as well as US commentators like Eugene Lyons and Leonard Hubbard (p. 143) stood out against the faith in socialist planning to point to the heresy that the Emperor lacked clothes – that the command economy was characterised by the *absence* of any coordinated plan.

However, the definition of a 'centre ground' (p. 19), distinct from the apologists and enemies, suffers from being too inchoate. Apart from a shared critical attitude to the USSR, this centre ground is in danger of becoming a bag into which too much is stuffed by bringing together Sir Bernard Pares, Harold Macmillan and Robert Boothby, Leon Trotsky and Boris Souvarine. A variety of writers ranging from the British philosopher John MacMurray through the Russian mystic Nikolai Berdyaev and German Marxist Arthur Rosenberg to the US journalist H. R. Knickerbocker are mobilised to present an intellectual debate about the nature of Communism, but the sheer variety of opinions tends to obscure clarity at times. Dr Flewers needs to delineate this 'centre ground' much more carefully, sifting the observers to differentiate corporatist planners like Macmillan and Boothby from Labour corporatists like Dalton, and then from more friendly critics such as Cole, and then again from left-wing critics of Soviet planning like Trotsky and Serge. He goes some way towards his important goal of classifying a multiplicity of opinions (p. 19), but he needs to go much further.

Moreover, his use of non-British writers is problematic. He rightly argues that British opinion cannot be isolated from non-British writers (p. 16), but his failure to make a clearly defined criterion of selection leads him to present a wide array of observers such as Kautsky and Rosenberg, Kerensky and Trotsky, Souvarine and Barbusse, along with a host of lesser-known émigré writers and US diplomats and observers. Meanwhile, influential writers such as Max Schachtman, Simone Weil and Andrés Bello are ignored on the whole, despite the importance of critical socialist thought in the USA, France and Spain during the period. No reason is given for choosing some and not others. His second argument for rejecting a purely British focus because it would lead to 'a thin brew' (p. 15) is a weak one, especially when the reactions of Maxton and Brockway, Cripps and Aldred to the USSR are not fully taken into account. This criticism is partly mitigated by the author's argument that such a large array of observers demonstrates that the necessary

information on the Soviet economy was available at the time.

Finally, an eclectic approach is taken to previous interpretations of the fellow-travellers' adulation of the USSR in which the author combines arguments about the heirs of the Enlightenment with those concerning the last gasp of romanticism and an attraction to authority (pp. 49–52) which glosses over a serious analysis. As an example, the criticism that the Webbs' concern about the lack of intellectual freedom in the USSR 'had little to do with intellectual freedom and much more to do with freedom for the intellectual' (p. 120) seems an odd one to me; perhaps he should have said 'middle-class intellectual', which would have been a clearer point yet still demanded more explanation. However, in a valuable prelude to the main history, the author notes a growing convergence of progressive and conservative writers, as Leftists moved in the 1920s towards the traditional conservative belief that the Russian mass was unruly and needed strong leadership (pp. 39–40), as a symptom of elitism. Gollancz's rejection of Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (6) for the Left Book Club was a deliberate refusal to offer the Left and liberals in Britain a libertarian critique of Stalinism in power and practice. Fear of Nazism was undoubtedly important in reinforcing the attitude which led to this decision, but the elitism of the British liberal intelligentsia, which had long seen itself as a 'benevolent' guardian of the public interest, played an important role in selecting the terms of debate. In failing to explore this elitism, Dr Flowers has missed the chance to demonstrate that this censorship was not peculiar to the 1930s but an aspect of that informal and flexible but restrictive control of debate exercised to this day by one of the elites which shape the parameters of public opinion in Britain.

Nevertheless, *The New Civilisation?* is highly recommended as a valuable addition to the literature on Soviet Studies and the reactions of British intellectuals and commentators.

Notes

1. Walter Laqueur, *The Fate of the Revolution* (London, 1967).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Steffanie J. Nanson, *The British Press and the U.S.S.R., 1930–41*. (University of St Andrews, unpublished PhD thesis, 1997).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. National Council of Labour, *Democracy versus Dictatorship* (London, 1933).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Hugh Dalton, *Unbalanced Budgets* (London, 1934).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Hillel Ticktin, *Origins of the Crisis of the USSR* (Armon, NY, 1992).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London, 1938).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/3784>