

**Andrej Kotljarchuk and Olle Sundström (eds):** *Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Stalin's Soviet Union: New Dimensions of Research*. Huddinge: Södertörns Academic Studies 72, 2017

*Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Stalin's Soviet Union* is the result of international collaboration between scholars from history, cultural studies, ethnology, and anthropology. The book's interdisciplinary and theme-centred (as opposed to project-centred) composition brings advantages, such as a broader scope of topics, a multidimensionality of research questions, and a variety of chosen approaches. The book consists of an introduction and ten chapters, divided into three parts. The first unites three chapters under the title 'National Operations of the NKVD. A General Approach'. The other parts present case studies on 'Ethnic Minorities in the Great Terror' (three chapters) and 'Religious Minorities under Soviet Repression' (four chapters). A comparison of the book's name with the titles of its parts suggests that the former is considerably wider than its contents. The book focuses on the repressions (mostly of the 1920s and 1930s) and the Great Terror, with a special interest in ethnic groups. Religious groups (or minorities) receive somewhat less attention, although the third part of the book, which focuses on religious minorities, is the longest.

At the beginning of the introduction the editors step into the debate

about the Great Terror and critique its depiction by Robert Conquest (*The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, 1971[1968]), arguing that it misses both ethnic and religious dimensions. Both Andrej Kotljarchuk and Olle Sundström are historians interested in ethnic and religious minorities in the Soviet Union, and in this volume they particularly focus on the repressions. More specifically, Sundström has been studying shamanism, and contributes a chapter on 'Repression of Shamans and Shamanism in Khabarovsk Krai: 1920s to the early 1950s', co-authored with Tatiana Bulgakova. Kotljarchuk, in turn, has analysed the role of state propaganda in the 'national operations' of the Great Terror.

Although the book's title is somewhat misleading, it does shed light on the repressions under Stalin, viewed through the prisms of ethnicity, nationality, and religiosity, but it does not cover other aspects of minorities in the Stalin era. Thanks to the great number of previous studies the international scientific community is already familiar with the book's topics. To name a few: Valery Tishkov's study on ethnic and nationalist conflicts in Soviet times (*Essays on the Theory and Policy of Ethnicity in Russia*, 1997); Terry Martin's thorough analyses of the ethnic cleansings (or purges) ('The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing', 1998) and Soviet 'primordial ethnicity' ('Modernization or Neotraditionalism? Ascribed Nationality and Soviet Primordialism', 2000); Wendy Goodman's depiction of the

political manipulations under Stalin used to justify mass repressions (*Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression*, 2007); and Oleg Khlevnyuk's investigations of Stalin's dictatorship and the Great Terror (*Politbiuro: Mekhanizmy politicheskoi vlasti v 1930-e gody*, 1996; *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*, 2015). Alongside this volume's contributions, the studies mentioned use archive materials released in the nineties and provide valuable background for further research. Unfortunately, however, these works are largely ignored by the authors of *Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Stalin's Soviet Union*.

What then are the new dimensions *Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Stalin's Soviet Union* offers to the broad scope of research on the Great Terror, Stalin's governmentality, and the issues of ethnic/religious groups in the USSR? In the first part Hiroaki Kuromiya addresses two under studied issues, which he finds relevant and inadequately presented by other historians of the Great Terror: international espionage and counter-espionage; and political provocation by the Soviet authorities. Kuromiya suggests the Great Terror was a means of 'total counter-espionage', and enemies (of the people) were artificially created by means of political provocation. It is unclear who the historians with whom Kuromiya is arguing are, but his message is directed at 'Russian historians' who 'seek to justify the Great Terror by attacking foreign intelligence services'. In the second

chapter Andrey Savin questions the ethnification of Stalinism and tests a hypothesis arguing for the prioritisation of biological and racial over social aspects in Stalinist policy. The conclusions sound vague, because the ethnification trend is 'extremely inconsistent' and mixed with victimisation on other bases (social, class, political, etc.). The author acknowledges the need to distinguish between repressions for ethnic and other reasons but does not suggest how to do this or whether it is even possible. Terry Martin's study 'The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing' (1998), for example, demonstrates that this is unlikely, because 'not everyone arrested in the Polish operation was a Pole, nor were all arrested Poles included in the Polish operation' (Martin 1998, 856). Moreover, Martin mentions the case of the Kharbintsy, which is not a national group, but has been included in the national operations of the NKVD in 1938 to show that the boundaries of ethnic/national identities were blurred. Savin, in turn, excludes the case of the Kharbintsy (which he spells 'Harbinites'), perhaps to escape this ambiguity. The third chapter, by Victor Doenninghaus, describes the national operations against 'nations of Western "bourgeois-fascist" states' in numbers and concludes that nationality was not the main criterion for repression, but rather such factors as birth, living abroad, or having any other ties with foreign countries seen as hostile. This chapter confirms the impossibility of a clear division be-

tween reasons for victimisation and the complexity of the very notion of ethnicity in the context of the study.

*Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Stalin's Soviet Union* claims to take a micro-historical approach, and the three chapters of its second part implement this. This section is opened by Kotljarchuk's investigation of 'the local press in the Swedish and Finnish minority areas' and aims to show how state propaganda worked. Kotljarchuk concludes with the intriguing thesis that the Soviet propaganda campaign was an early example of fake news, 'creating reality out of nothing'. The next chapter explains the complex relationships between different nationalities in Soviet Georgia during the Terror. Using a vast quantity of statistics, Marc Junge and Daniel Mueller question the explanations for repressions via the 'ethnification of perception' or xenophobia, instead arguing for a 'combination of feared, potential or real political, social and territorial competition inside Georgia'. In other words, they again prove the impossibility of considering national operations as pure genocide. In the sixth chapter Eva Toulouze examines 'the systematic attacks against ethnicity' that preceded the Great Terror in the Volga Region. The chapter discusses 'the fate' of several ethnic groups, paying particular attention to Finno-Ugric intellectuals. This is a good illustrative study of non-exceptional cases, but the conclusions drawn sound too strong. Toulouze ends by blaming Great Russian chauvinism for

the oppressions of other ethnicities, which (in the view of the Bolsheviks) should always be subordinate to and controlled by Russians.

Finally, the third part of the book deals with religious groups. Oksana Beznosova traces the oppression of Evangelicals in Soviet Ukraine between 1928 and 1939. Religious groups like this are rarely contextualised within the Soviet anti-religious policy and are not specifically discussed. However, the study reconstructs the situation around one religious minority in detail. The next chapter, co-authored by Eva Toulouze, Laur Vallikivi, and Art Leete, on the Sovietisation of the indigenous people of the North, is somehow out of place. Among the social, cultural, economic, and political aspects of the tensions between the enforced Soviet regime and local cultures it fails to properly discuss religion, which is confusing. The last two chapters are devoted to Shamanism. First, Tatiana Bulgakova and Olle Sundström explain how Shamans became the target of repression and how this was enacted during the extended period between the 1920s and 1950s. The chapter is based on empirical data, archive material, and a great deal of previous research. Various types of repressive actions against Shamans are raised, both direct, such as arrests and legislation marginalising Shamans, and more importantly, indirect, such as anti-Shamanic propaganda, modern medicine, and education. This study paints a full picture of how the Soviet authorities dealt with otherness

incarnated, for example, in Shamanism. In this sense this is not a story about a religious minority as such, but about the elimination of features alien to the general ideology of communism. Yana Ivashchenko continues with the question 'Where Have the Amur Region's Shamans Gone?'. Field study materials from 2000 to 2012 are used, but ultimately the author presents a rather narrow investigation, based mainly on one interview. Briefly answering the research questions set at the beginning, she concludes that Shamanism has vanished not because of direct repressive actions but because it has become unpopular and lacking in prestige. Nevertheless, there is evidence that Shamanism remains a cultural constant for indigenous people. The Soviet state and authorities are notably absent from the chapter's narrative, which, with other studies of the people of the North (see, for example, Ssorin-Chaikov's work 'The Social Life of the State in Subarctic Siberia', 2003 and 'Soviet Debris: Failure and the Poetics of Unfinished Construction in Northern Siberia', 2016) outlines the fact that even under Stalin distant non-urban areas and their inhabitants may have remained almost untouched by his governmentality.

*Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Stalin's Soviet Union* is hardly conceived as a concordant joint work, but each contribution makes the somewhat broadly studied phenomenon of the Great Terror a little more interesting for scholars in research

fields other than Soviet history. The book also contains some good illustrations – some of them quite rare.

**Polina Vrublevskaya**  
Åbo Akademi University

POLINA VRUBLEVSKAYA is a PhD student in comparative religion at Åbo Akademi University and a research fellow in the sociology of religion at St Tikhon's Orthodox University.