



Inside story

Don't. Be. Silly.

In extracts from his new book published in the Guardian, Martin Amis accused the British left - including his closest friend - of overlooking the crimes of Stalin's Russia. In an open letter, that friend Christopher Hitchens gives his side of the story

Christopher Hitchens
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Dearest Martin,

You know how it is with kind friends. If a disobliging word is published about one, in, let's say, the letters column of the Sheep-Shearer's Gazette in the south island of New Zealand, they will take infinite pains to get word of it to you by fax or email. So I have lately been reading bushels of stuff about myself, generated by reviews of your book on Stalinism. I wince on my own behalf a good deal as I wade through, but I don't forget to wince for you as well. Hardened as I am to hostile or philistine reviews, I can still imagine that you must be at least disappointed by the treatment you have been getting. And in a way it must be worse than all that journo-sludge concerning your teeth or your divorce, because the subject that's being slighted here is the grave and momentous one of the victims of "Koba".

My sympathy is tinged with annoyance, all the same. What did you imagine would happen if you elected to write on such a Himalayan topic, and then pygmified it by addressing so much of it to me? If you remember, I did try to warn you about this over a year ago. I find myself embarrassed almost every day at the thought of an actual gulag survivor reading this, or even reading about it, and finding his or her experience reduced to a sub-Leavisite boys' tiff, gleefully interpreted as literary fratricide by hacks who couldn't care a hoot for the real subject.

As it happens, I think that there are passages of really magnificent endeavour in your book, but anyone who wants to know where and how I differ on the history and the analysis can direct their jolly search engines to my mega-review in the AtlanticMonthly [www.theatlantic.com].

I also thought it would be churlish to pass up the "open letter" invitation that you extend in your sarcastically headed "Comrade Hitchens" chapter. Aside from the distressing matter of proportion that I just mentioned, and the question of your sources and interpretations, there also remains our political disagreement. In what you claim to recall of my views, and of the views of James Fenton, there is an unpardonable assumption that the left of 68 was not only morally null about Stalin, but also frivolous and selfish. I am not going to let this pass. I've lived to see the brave and serious and self-sacrificing war-resisters of the Vietnam era written off as draft-dodgers and privileged sissies, which is to say that I've seen a huge lie become widely accepted. You help circulate part of this lie yourself, when you echo the fantastic assertion, originally fabricated by paranoid reactionaries, that American soldiers returned from Vietnam to face "execration". And here is how you perform your duty to memory, about events with which you did have a nodding acquaintance:

"In my first year at Oxford (autumn 1968) I attended a demonstration against the resuppression of Czechoslovakia. Some 60 or 70 souls were present. We heard speeches. The mood was sorrowful, decent. Compare this to the wildly peergroup-competitive but definitely unfakable emotings and self-lacerations of the crowds outside the American embassy in Grosvenor Square, where they gathered in their tens of thousands."

I wince again at the sly way you contrast your own sorrowful decency to the unseemly saturnalia of the time, but as you perfectly well know I was one of the organisers of that event in Oxford, and James Fenton was there too

(in a crowd, incidentally, that contained many more "souls" than you say). The group of which I was then a member, the International Socialists, organised pro-Czech events around the country and even managed to fling leaflets in Russian on to the decks of Soviet merchant vessels in British ports. I was actually in Cuba on the day of the invasion, and managed to distribute some "anti-Soviet" materials on the streets of Havana. I'm reasonably proud of that, though if you had asked me at the time, I'd have been proudest of having hosted Dr Eduardo Mondlane, the founder of Frelimo, at a reception in my tiny college room. He was murdered shortly afterwards by the Portuguese secret police, but he's still remembered as the gentle and highly civilised father of Mozambican independence and the impetus given to revolution in southern Africa that year has now resulted, at some remove, in the triumph of Nelson Mandela.

How you know about Grosvenor Square I can't imagine: I'm willing to testify that there was some "emoting" all right, and that there could well have been more - the My Lai massacre had occurred only the day before, though we didn't quite realise it. The "lacerations", though, were supplied - as in Chicago and Paris and elsewhere - by the forces of law and order.

You say sneeringly that the "New Left" of the 60s represented "revolution as play" and that its "death throes" took the form of "vanguard terrorism". The atom of truth in this - or the grain of received wisdom - doesn't excuse you. That year, the unstoppable fusion of the American civil rights movement with the largest-ever citizen movement against a war - a war of atrocity and aggression about which we now know that everything we even suspected was true - brought about the legal emancipation of black America, and compelled the warmakers to begin their retreat. Not bad. Not bad at all - even if there were a few hippies and druggies and freaks involved here and there (though I can't resist adding that there wasn't much hedonism on the battlefields of Mozambique). If I am embarrassed to recall anything about my politics at that time - and I'll admit to the odd wince - it is chiefly because I wish I had done very much more than I did.

What else was happening that year? Well, the West German comrades - led by a young Rudi Dutschke who had escaped from East Berlin - launched a critical movement that broke the shady silence of the post-Third Reich consensus. In France, the 10-year period of one-man rule was abruptly and, yes, if you insist, joyously terminated. Much of southern and Nato Europe was under military dictatorship at the time: I still see old friends from Spain and Portugal and Greece whose activities in those days meant the breaking-open of prison states only a short while later.

Most interesting of all, in my memory, was the direct confrontation this involved with Stalin's heirs. Our faction at any rate was in close touch with student and worker groups in Poland and Czechoslovakia, where open rebellion against the sclerotic Warsaw pact regimes was breaking out. The regimes themselves seemed to get the point. Moscow directly ordered the French Communist party to help put down the rebellion against De Gaulle, and Brezhnev both sought and received Lyndon Johnson's advance assurance that a Red Army invasion of Prague would be considered an "internal affair".

For a short, exhilarating while, it seemed that the permafrost could be melted from below. And this idea did not experience any "death throes". It became subterranean, and re-emerged in 1989. Of the dissident heroes of that later revolution, I can think of several who I first met on or around the barricades of 1968. And many of them also did tremendous work in helping to save the people of Bosnia a few years further on.

Not long ago, I took part in quite a serious discussion, initiated by the man who had served the longest term of imprisonment in communist Yugoslavia, about naming a street in the Kosovo capital of Pristina after Leon Trotsky. (You make rather a boast of not having read the Old Man, but his book of reportage on the 1912 Balkan wars is one of the finest polemics ever composed, not to say one of the most prescient.)

Some exemplary people and causes, in other words, could not be said to be quite decided on the lethal question of bolshevism: the only revolution that had ever defeated its enemies. That there was an element of power-worship here I'm quite prepared to concede, and those involved, including myself, are obliged to subject themselves to self-criticism. But your attempted syllogism invites a direct comparison with Hitlerism, and levels the suggestion of moral equivalence to the Nazis at, say, the many "hard left" types who worked for Dr Martin Luther King. My provisional critique of this ahistorical reasoning would fit into three short italicised sentences. Don't. Be. Silly.

I see from some of the more vulgar and stupid responses to your book that the spectre of Trotskyism once again

stalks the land and I think I am in a strong position to promise you that all such talk is idle. It's over. But how would you know that? You report on how you took the pedantic trouble to ask me - should it be Trotskyist or Trotskyite? And you add that I told you several times that only Stalinists or ignorant people say the latter. And then you go and call the POUM - George Orwell's party - "Trotskyite".

By the way, that's a factual error as well as an aesthetic one, and I wish it was the only such. A poor return for my labours, I must say. I am glad I didn't try to tell you any more about Rosa Luxemburg, who was probably more of a historical heroine to us, not least because her warnings about Leninism had been the earliest, not to say the most lucid and courageous. But then one had to face the argument that if she and her comrades had been more ruthless and more Leninist, the militarist German right might have been crushed in 1919 instead of, with infinitely more suffering and woe, in 1945. This is and was a deeply serious and troubling question (though I must say that its least serious consequence is that you have pissed me off by making light of it).

You demand that people - you prefer the term "intellectuals" - give an account of their attitude to the Stalin terror. Irritatingly phrased though your demand may be, I say without any reservation that you are absolutely right to make it. A huge number of liberals and conservatives and social democrats, as well as communists, made a shabby pact with "Koba", or succumbed to the fascinations of his power. Winston Churchill told Stalin's ambassador to London, before the war, that he had quite warmed to the old bastard after the Moscow Trials, which had at least put down the cosmopolitan revolutionaries who Churchill most hated. TS Eliot returned the manuscript of *Animal Farm* to George Orwell, well knowing that his refusal might condemn it to non-publication, because he objected to its "Trotskyite" tone. (You can read all about this illuminating episode in my little book on Orwell.) I think we can say fairly that the names of Churchill and Eliot are still highly regarded in conservative political and cultural circles. You have a certain reputation for handling irony and paradox. How could you miss an opportunity like this, and sound off like a Telegraph editorialist instead, hugging the shore and staying with the script?

However, while all of those and many other dirty compromises were being made, the *Bulletin of the Left Opposition* was publishing exactly the details, of famine and murder and deportation and misery, that now shock you so much. I evidently wasted my breath in telling you this, but there exists a historical tradition of Marxist writers - Victor Serge, CLR James, Boris Souvarine and others - who exposed and opposed Stalin while never ceasing to fight against empire and fascism and exploitation. If the moral and historical audit is to be properly drawn up, then I would unhesitatingly propose the members of this derided, defeated diaspora, whose closest British analogue and ally was Orwell, as the ones who come best out of the several hells of the last century. A pity that you felt them beneath your notice.

Your letter to me is addressed from what sounds like a pretty cushy spot in Uruguay, where you sometimes repair. You make it appear idyllic - "a place of thousand-mile beaches". As you have probably heard, it has been calculated that during the 1970s, one tenth of the Uruguayan population was forced into exile, while one in every 50 of the remainder was processed through the military and police prison system and that in those prisons new heights of innovation - especially but by no means exclusively in psychological torture - were attained. (Behaviourism was involved; detainees were forced to watch Charlie Chaplin movies and punished if they laughed.) You can look it up in Lawrence Weschler's harrowing book, *A Miracle, a Universe: Settling Accounts With Torturers.*) Quite an impressive number of Uruguayans are still looking for members of their families.

The Uruguayan oligarchy was probably smart in making few claims for itself while it was doing this. It certainly didn't announce that it was trying to bring about a workers' paradise. The mere boast that it was doing it in order to ward off communism was enough to keep the weapons and "advisers" coming from my home town of Washington DC, and to procure an uncritical silence from most western "intellectuals".

You scorn the sinister illusion of human perfectibility, as well you may. But - though I don't criticise you for idealising Uruguay as a counter revolutionary tourist - I do earnestly hint to you that there may yet be more scope for radical human improvement. And by the way, and since you linger too long on the subject of mirth, you say that nobody laughed at Hitler. Well, the fellow traveller Charlie Chaplin seems to have contrived it.

This whole exchange between us comes at an unsettling time for me, because I think that a huge section of the "left" has fatally condemned itself by flirting with, or actually succumbing to, a creepy concept of "moral equivalence" between the United States and its (actually our) enemies - whether Christian Orthodox thugs in the Balkans or Islamic fascists in Afghanistan or national socialists in Mesopotamia. Talk about wincing - I can

scarcely bear to read the drivel and bad faith that is now emitted by some of my former comrades. However, and though I am now without allegiances, I still choose to regard the term "comrade" as a title of honour, and one which betrays itself rather than fulfils itself in such negations. It was always a sorrow to me - I can tell you this now - that my dearest friend showed no real interest in such apparent metaphysics, and I'm sorry all over again that you have written on the subject in such a way as to give pleasure to those who don't love you, as I do.

Fraternally, then, Christopher

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