
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor:

Through his scholarship, Ronald Suny has greatly enhanced our understanding of Russian and Soviet history.

It therefore pains me to write that his review of *Revisioning Stalin and Stalinism: Complexities, Contradictions, and Controversies*, edited by James Ryan and Susan Grant, in the July 2022 volume of *The Russian Review* should trouble readers of the *Review* as much as it did me.

In the fourth paragraph of his review, Suny includes a gratuitous attack on the administration of George W. Bush, which he says was comparable to Stalinism in its resort to torture, which he suggests is indicative of the larger moral depravity of the United States itself: “any country that resorts to torture ... fatally taints its claim to be a model of the social and political organization of human life.”

If in fact Suny is referring to the waterboarding of suspected Muslim terrorists, readers should know that this is included in the training of American naval pilots, and while frightening, inflicts no permanent damage.

But whether waterboarding is a form of torture is irrelevant to Suny’s using the issue to score a cheap shot at a president he dislikes. This goes well beyond the bounds of a book reviewer’s prerogatives. What its relevance is to *Revisioning Stalin and Stalinism* escapes me. In fact in all my years reading *The Russian Review*, I have never encountered such a blatant abuse of a book reviewer’s prerogatives.

No less disturbing is the last paragraph of Suny’s review, in which he condemns President Trump for his “infamous statement” that there were “very fine people on both sides” at Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017, in which White Nationalists and Neo-Nazis protested the intended removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. I read the paragraph several times in the hope of perceiving its relevance to *Revisioning Stalin and Stalinism*. All I could glean is that Trump’s statement is like Averell Harriman’s on Stalin in the early 1940s—which Suny cites in the preceding sentence—that even the most evil people have “a good side” that historians, in their penchant for oversimplification, often ignore.

In reality Trump later qualified the moral equivalence he initially drew by stating that “[he] was not talking about the neo-Nazis and the White Nationalists, [who] should be condemned totally.”

But even if Suny’s rendition of Trump’s rhetoric were entirely accurate, its inclusion would still be extraneous to the larger point Suny makes at the end of his review that “the most egregious fault in historical writing ... is not errors of fact but rather in what is left out.” Citing Harriman to make this point was sufficient. Citing Trump was merely an excuse for bashing him. By doing so, Suny abused his responsibilities as a reviewer.

My criticism of Suny has nothing to do with his politics. Any reviewer for *The Russian Review* as hostile to the Obama and Biden Administrations as Suny is to Bush’s and Trump’s who similarly used a book review as a convenient vehicle for condemning their real or imagined failures, shortcomings, or crimes would be just as deserving of criticism.

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Professor Suny responds:

How bizarre it is to have to respond to a review of a review of a book by someone other than the author or editor of that book! The very same day that I received a grateful email from one of the editors of the book under review—in which he wrote, “What an immensely thoughtful and generous assessment!”—I was sent a commentary on the review by an agitated reader. Apparently, some references to U.S. presidents in my review pained him, and he felt compelled to police the conventions of academic reviewing.

Besides evaluating this important book, the major point of my review was to emphasize that the “most egregious fault in historical writing, so evident in Soviet historiography and much Western reporting on Russia, is not errors of fact but what has been left out, the inconvenient and anomalous details that would belie facile ideological or simply comforting conclusions.” Often in my teaching I deploy examples from contemporary American experience to relate historical points to a student audience. In the same spirit I mentioned my own impressions as they arose reading the book. Here is what the reviewer of the review considered “a gratuitous attack on the administration of George W. Bush,” where he claims that I argued (I did not) that it “was comparable to Stalinism.” My more general point was that “As an American who lived through the George W. Bush years, I believe that any country that resorts to torture and employs it in its ‘legal’ system soils itself and fatally taints its claims to be a model for the social and political organization of human life.”

The reviewer of the review goes on, in my mind incredibly, to excuse waterboarding, which he contends should not be conflated with torture. My reference to Bush, therefore, is “a blatant abuse of a book reviewer’s prerogatives.”

My other “abuse” was this comment about U.S. wartime ambassador to Moscow Averell Harriman’s statement that while he knew of “the ghastly cruelties of his wholesale liquidations,” he saw Stalin’s “other side as well.” I wrote: “Though Harriman’s statement is unfortunately reminiscent of Donald Trump’s infamous statement that there were ‘very fine people on both sides’ when White supremacists marched with Tiki torches in Charlottesville, historians believe that they have an obligation to tell the whole story without apologetics.” The reviewer of the review then goes on to repeat Trump’s later (I would say disingenuous) qualification “of the moral equivalence he initially drew” by stating that White Supremacists and neo-Nazis should be “condemned totally.” My citing of Trump in the opinion of the reviewer of the review “was merely an excuse for bashing him.” In fact, it referred to my argument that in writing history what is left out is even more of a problem than errors of fact.

Debate and discussion among historians are essential to the development of historical knowledge, but facile accusations of a scholar’s use of contemporary examples do not advance our understanding. The reviewer of the review claims his criticism has nothing to do with my politics. Would that it were possible to excise politics from historical writing or present-day commentary. It would be wise to heed what a great philosopher (and historian) once advised: “the educator must himself [or herself] be educated.” No matter how objective and neutral historians honestly attempt to be, as seen in both my review and the reviewer of the review’s pained response, none of us live and learn outside the worlds we inhabit.

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