

Baberowski, Jörg: *Verbrannte Erde. Stalins Herrschaft der Gewalt*. München: C.H. Beck Verlag 2012. ISBN: 978-3-406-63254-9; 606 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Norman Naimark, History Department, Stanford University

Jörg Baberowski begins his new study with a thoughtful and unusual introduction that explains why he wrote two books on the subject of Stalin's terror and mass repressions, *Verbrannte Erde* and the fairly recent *Der Rote Terror*.<sup>1</sup> In revising his previous book for the English translation, Baberowski tells us, he could barely reread his own words. Most fundamentally, he disagreed with the way he framed the question of Stalinist violence, while his own further reading and research, including substantial work in the Russian archives and published document collections, had added dimensions to his thinking that could not be incorporated within the old framework. So he started from scratch and he wrote a new book. There is, in fact, good reason to think about *Verbrannte Erde* as distinct from *Der Rote Terror*. The new book is more than twice as long; the sources are even more impressive; and the literature on Stalin, which Baberowski assiduously reads, has grown by leaps and bounds since 2003. Baberowski's feel for the violence and for its causes and reverberations, already remarkable in the earlier volume, has clearly deepened and become more sophisticated.<sup>2</sup> The reader's consciousness is even more deeply seared by the terrifying violence of the Stalinist 1930s than in the earlier volume.

At the same time, *Verbrannte Erde* is vintage Baberowski. He is a magnificent writer, who is able to communicate his engagement and knowledge of the horrific subject matter by expertly guiding his readers through the haunted house of Stalin's terror. His sentences are short, empirically grounded, but contain shocking emotional content. One characteristic example will have to do: „In Moscow in 1938," Baberowski writes, „invalids, amputees, the blind and those suffering from tuberculosis were killed, in Leningrad the deaf mutes were murdered. Just in February and March 1938, the NKVD executioners in Moscow killed 1.160 handicapped people."

(p. 333) Even familiar subjects are enlightened by Baberowski's terse, inventive prose. He chooses quotes with great care. The historiography is there, but never gets in the way of the narrative flow.

So what is the difference in Baberowski's own point of view that drove him to write a new book? He now believes that the way to understand the extreme violence of the 1930s is to focus on the psychopathology of Stalin himself and the dynamics of violence under his bloodthirsty rule, rather than on the structural demands of Soviet modernization, what James C. Scott would call „high modernization" or Zygmunt Baumann „the gardening state": the need for transparency, conformity, order, discipline, and the removal of ambiguity and idiosyncratic elements from society. Moreover, ideology, plays an even more limited role than it did in *Der Rote Terror*. „The communist experiment," he writes (correctly, in my view), "[...] gave its leaders the justification for the murder of enemies and outsiders. But it did not prescribe mass murder." (p. 10) „Ideas themselves do not kill", even if they helped to justify the slaughter (p. 11, 16). Baberowski insists that the violence itself, even if justified by modernist visions, stemmed from pre-modern sources and that the combination of inquisitorial methods and senseless mass executions should not be thought of as modern. If Stalin was in some fashion the return of Genghis Khan, as Bukharin once noted, he also built on Lenin's legacy and the violence inherent in Bolshevism. In *Der Rote Terror*, Baberowski underlined the importance of the political dynamics of Bolshevism in determining the Stalinist violence of the 1930s. In *Verbrannte Erde*, he shifts the emphasis more to a combination of Russia's backwardness and the unmitigated insistence on being at war, which allowed the Bolsheviks and Stalin to declare a „state of emergency," suspending whatever notions of „bourgeois" morality and judicial rights that still existed in Russia. But these are background factors; „The key to the explanation for the excessive violence," Baberowski

<sup>1</sup> Jörg Baberowski, *Der Rote Terror. Die Geschichte des Stalinismus*, München 2003.

<sup>2</sup> See my view of *Der Rote Terror* in *The Russian Review*, vol. 64, no. 1 (January 2005), pp. 154–156.

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writes, "[...] is Stalin himself." (p. 30)

From the early 1930s until his death, Stalin is mafia boss and instigator of mass murder. In Baberowski's view, he feasts on violence as an end in and of itself. He could justify it by the need to discipline and terrorize the population. Killing was necessary for ruling, for achieving the kind of absolute power that could never be achieved in the way the psychopathic dictator demanded it; thus the killing had to continue. Stalin's lieutenants shared his taste for violence. They had no moral scruples whatsoever and shared his youthful background that was full of rough and tumble revolutionary fisticuffs, bloody confrontations, and physical intimidation. Surrounded by ostensible enemies and driven by paranoid insecurity, they willingly mowed down the men and women who in any sense stood in their way. Violence was understood as part and parcel of ruling; no one in the leadership even bothered to justify it. They were like a „gang of thieves," Baberowski writes, with their own code of honor (p. 312). One could counter that mafia bosses were at least loyal to their own respective „families" and protected their interests, while gangs of thieves, though keeping close watch on their members, did not routinely eliminate their own. In the case of Stalinist violence, the dictator exempted, every perpetrator could become the victim. The population itself succumbed to a combination of threats, intimidation, violence, and the need to survive. Baberowski quotes Valerii Frid to explain the psychology of the victims: „We were all like rabbits, who accepted the right of the snake to swallow us." (p. 215)

I have a couple of small quibbles with Baberowski's treatment of the bookends of his study, his view of Imperial Russia and his evaluation of Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956. These are important to the extent that Baberowski's overall understanding of Stalin and of his violence relate to both. In my view, Imperial Russia should not be viewed in retrospect as a lost cause for reform or as an impossibly divided society, where the masses were as threatening to the intelligentsia and state bureaucracy as Baberowski (and some pre-revolutionary Russian intellectuals) suggest. To assert that „Russia was not a place where

liberalism could prosper" is both hyperbolic and cannot be proven (p. 41). I also do not believe that Khrushchev denounced Stalin's crimes primarily out of „moral grounds" or because they would be revealed at some point in any case (and he certainly did not enumerate them all „by name") (p. 499). In his magisterial biography of Khrushchev, William Taubman paints a much more complicated picture of Khrushchev's motives, which included political, psychological, and personal issues. Taubman notes that „Khrushchev's account of his motives [in his memoirs, which Baberowski cites] contains the same mix of deception and self-deception that mars his recollections of the thirties."<sup>3</sup>

There is little methodologically or historiographically new for specialists in Baberowski's *Verbrannte Erde*. There will no doubt be those reviewers who will complain about the lack of a „structural" explanation for Stalin's mass killings and the absence of causal links of Stalin's violence to the political, economic, and even social challenges faced by the Bolsheviks from the time of the revolution through the Second World War. Others will ask for more consideration of the security threats to the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 1940s, justifying the mania to seize alleged spies and fifth columnists. After all, many well informed Russians believe, like Molotov did in the 1950s, that Stalin was preparing for the war by consolidating his dictatorship and eliminating potential enemies. (There are a good number of Western historians who also support this argument.) My view, however, is that Baberowski has captured the essence of the „Stalin question," and that is the man himself and the killing system that he wrought. *Verbrannte Erde's* significance is in intelligently exploring this problem and its psychological dimensions, and in contributing a highly readable narrative jam-packed full of interesting, important, and horrifying details that illustrate the diverse character and nuanced aspects of the killing. The numbers of lives lost and damaged, often beyond repair, are a part of the story, certainly. But in this case, the devil – literally – is in the details. And the

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<sup>3</sup> William Taubman, *Khrushchev. The Man and his Era*, New York 2003, pp. 274–276.

individual stories that Baberowski tells us – of bullying and threats, of interrogations and denunciations, of fierce beatings and psychological intimidation, of torture and maiming, of a shot in the back of the head and of mass executions, of starvation and cannibalism, of fear, terror, and groveling – add up to much more than the sum of the details. The photographs in the book are also terrifying. One in particular will stay with me for a very long time: the arrest photos of a young married Russian couple, Varvara Petrovna Presnova and Nikolai Petrovich Presnov, before their hanging: their knitted brows, pained expressions, and haunted eyes reflected the travails of tens of millions of Soviet citizens of every class and nationality, of every station in life, age, gender, and political proclivity (or not.) That Baberowski has told their stories and told them extremely well is the lasting contribution of his book.

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