

Thierry WOLTON, *Une Histoire Mondiale du Communisme. Les Bourreaux, Essai d'investigation historique. Tome 1. D'une main de fer. Les bourreaux*, Editions Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1128 pages, 2015.

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Thierry Wolton is a controversial character in French historiography. This aspect is due to a specificity of the French elitist mentality. Up to this day, only the academic degree of a person lends credibility to the intellectual in the public sphere. While across the Ocean the issue of academic background is more relaxed, France is still dominated by a mentality of *being-a-specialist-only-in-one's-own-graduating-field*. Therefore, Thierry Wolton, who wrote an extensive analysis about the history of communism in Eastern Europe, has little credibility, even though his volumes are very well documented and perhaps even unique researches.

Born in 1951, Thiery Wolton's main profession is journalism, currently writing in *Libération*, *Le Point* or *Radio France Internationale*. However, he is better known in the French intellectual milieu for his complete analysis of the consequences of applied Communist principles throughout the whole 20th century. He started publishing his two volumes in 2015 at the famous publishing house Editions Grasset, and the third part will be published in 2017. Thierry Wolton divided his analysis in an elegant triad. In his first volume, he deals with the oppressors (*Les Bourreaux*), while in his second book he presents the victims (*Les Victimes*). The third part, to be published in 2017, will deal with the collaborators of the system (*Les Complices*).

In other words, his works deal mainly with the history of the communist countries and the French politics. The first historical work that stirred strong

controversy was *Le KGB en France*, published by Wolton in 1986. The historical essay *Le Grand Recrutement* touched upon another delicate subject: the relationship between Henri Robinson and several French politicians from the 1940s. His historical lecture was quite controversial because he unveiled certain delicate affairs. Famous historians like Annie Kriegel and François Furet came in his defense following the debate (Péan 655-657). However, he was strongly attacked due to a pretended claimed absence of history knowledge.

One may ask himself who are the detractors; but the issue is too complicated to only name a few intellectuals. In fact, when dealing with Communist studies, French historiography always witnessed a strong battle between two main academic currents: *the revisionists* and *the totalitarians*. In a few words, due to limited access to URSS archives until the 1990s, historians only speculated on the mechanisms of the Communist system (Werth 1999). *The totalitarian school* invoked figures like Alain Besançon (1977), François Furet and Martin Malia (1995), while the *revisionists*, like Sheila Fitzpatrick and John Arch Getty, who were influenced by Marxists, wanted to show a world less 'dichotomic' view of the world. Moreover, France had strong communist affinities (in certain periods, like 1968-1971, even Maoists) due to the influence of highly respected intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre or Simone de Beauvoir.

In this context, the reception of Thierry Wolton's work was highly controversial. His starting point was a global understanding of the Communist phenomena. Even though long before Thierry Wolton's work other important writings tried to explain this global phenomenon, they only touched essential topics. For instance, the highly acclaimed *Le Livre Noir du Communisme* only dealt with the repressive part of the Communist system. From the philosophical point of view, the links between Marxism and Communism were deeply explained by Leszek Kolakowski in the 1970s in the essential three volumes book called *The Main Currents of Marxism*.

The starting quote («*D'une main de fer, nous conduirons l'humanité vers le bonheur* » (Wolton, 2015, 5) - reflects a paradox upon which the whole argument of the book will be developed: the tension between the ideals of the ideology and the actual ways means of achieving them. According to Thierry Wolton, the visible difference emerged from the first days of the Russian Revolution. In his the first part

of his work, called *Le mythe de la Révolution*, he explains how the October Revolution was constructed as a myth through various forms. Wolton argues, taking into consideration other historical works (Ozouf 432-434), that in the European culture we witness “an eternal retour” of the French Revolution theme. Taking this argument further, the French author explains how the Russians borrowed many aspects: *anticlericalism, regicide, the supreme, Leviathan-like state and the constant decimation of those who have a different opinion* (Wolton, 2015, 107-180). In other words, before Stalin's crimes from the 1930s, a strong mechanism of repression developed. From the first days of the Civil War, concentration camps emerged.

In the second part of the first volume, Thierry Wolton explains how the socialist doctrine of the socialist in a country appeared (219). After the First World War and in the early 1920s, there were real possibilities of spreading the Communist ideology throughout the whole Europe: Hungary and Germany (219-224). After the failure of ‘sharing’ the Communist ideology in other countries, Stalin decided to insist on developing the Marxist principles only in URSS (185-219).

More than just trying to explain the main directions, Thierry Wolton also offers a pertinent understanding about the background games for power. For instance, he goes beyond the methods of the *totalitarian historical school* when he explains how Iossif Djougachvili achieved power. The totalitarian school was not particularly interested in the power games. What is more, in order to explain this issue he analyses a controversial document- the Testament of Lenin. This official paper caused many problems for Stalin because Lenin did not want him as his successor (246-248). The whole affair is explained in depth by the historian in the chapter called *L'irrésistible ascension de Iossif Djougachvili* (231-261).

Once in the position of leader of the Soviet Union, Stalin was strongly interested in enforcing his power. At the beginning of his career he appeared as a moderate faction between Bukharin and Trotsky (252). Thierry Wolton sums up the main methods used by Stalin in order to gain power: *repression, charisma, extraordinary working power and the use of the local Georgian faction to support his ascension*. These aspects had been clarified in exhaustive works like Robert Conquest's *Stalin* (1999) or Simon Sebag's Montefiore's *Stalin: The Court Red Tsar* (2003). However,

there is a delicate point regarding the links between the personality of Stalin and the great events of the era. Given all this, Thierry Wolton is highly conscious about the risks of making sensationalist interpretations and explains with caution the influence of the personal life of the dictator upon politics.

In other words, the reader may be surprised that Stalin did not have a personal life during his leadership period. What is more, after the death of his second wife, Nadejda, he decided to dedicate himself only to the Communist cause (Sebag 341). Following the arguments of another important historian writing on the Russian history, Orlando Figues (1996), Wolton explains through a metaphor the issue of Iakov Djougashvili, the son of Stalin who died in an imprisonment camp. Neglecting his own son reflects *the sacrifice of an entire generation*: those born in the 1910s or early 1920s witnessed the traumas of Second World War, or as it still remembered today in Russia, The Great Patriotic War.

From an ideological point of view, Stalin creates an interesting shift between Marxist-Leninist principles and nationalism. In 1930s, he realizes the limits of Marxist-Leninist ideology and the need for a surrogate (« *plus l'expérience socialiste s'érode, minée par l'épreuve de la réalité, plus le nationalisme aura tendance de se substituer à elle* » Wolton 352). This is the starting point for an ideological hybrid called national-communism, which will be exported throughout the whole Eastern Europe after the Second World War (Tismaneanu 2003). Thierry Wolton considers that this was the starting point for the unusual alliance between Germany and CCCP at the beginning of the Second World War. To the common ideological aspects (anti-capitalism, nationalism) the geopolitical common interests between Hitler and Stalin were added. This aspect is clarified in the seventh chapter of the second part, called *Rouges et Bruns [Reds and Browns]*. We should also add that Thierry Wolton was also previously interested in explaining the similarities between the Reds (Communists) and the Browns (the Nazis). He developed the subject in a previous book, called *Rouge Brun, Le Mal du Siècle* (1999). Therefore, the chapter from *Une Histoire Mondiale du Communisme* is only a shortened form only of the greater discussion.

The third part of the book explains how Communism was imposed through the whole world after the Second World War. Following Martin Malia's argument,

Wolton states that the best promoter for Communism in *Mitteleuropa* was actually Hitler himself. After the Second World War, the Red Army used the argument of being the liberators from the Fascist domination. As such, Stalin used all his diplomatic resources in order to control the Eastern European territories. He used the colonial interests of Winston Churchill to his own advantage (Wolton 450). This is the explanation provided by Thierry Wolton regarding the recognition of the power of the CCCP in Eastern Europe by the Allies. Therefore, the support towards the local Communist parties was already prepared by Moscow from 1940s (Wolton 1999 470). Furthermore, the French author explains the mechanism of seizing the power in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Eastern Germany, by pinpointing the particularity particularities of each country. Moreover, he anticipates the theme of the next chapter (*L'empire désuni*)[*The Dissolved Empire*] by explaining the birth of the conflict between Yugoslavia and CCCP (Wolton, 1999, 522-524).

As Wolton states, the Moscow's world domination of the Communism movement by Moscow lasted only a few years. Other centers of power emerged: China and Yugoslavia. In this chapter, the author moves with high ability between *macro-history* (the explanation of the framework of the Cold War) and *micro-history* (the increasing paranoia of Stalin and the reaction of his close group- Beria, Mikoian, Molotov and Malenkov). After the death of Stalin, Khrushchev obtained the power, arrested his enemies (Beria), and accused, behind closed doors, the crimes done by Stalin. However, Wolton explains very accurately why the de-stalinisation is actually a return to Leninism (Wolton 722-723). This reform was felt in the whole Communist bloc. In 1956, revolts began in Eastern Germany, Hungary, and Poland (Wolton 723-745). The Soviet model was rejected by the Eastern European countries from the Eastern Europe. Hybridizations between nationalism and communism started to be more and more often found, starting from the late 1950s in countries like Romania or the German Democratic Republic. Unfortunately, Wolton does not insist very much on the 1960-1990s period in Eastern Europe in the first volume. Rather, his interest is focused on what he calls "*the Asian apotheosis*". The roots of essential events like *The Red Khmer Revolution*, *The Cultural Revolution* and *the Vietnam War* are

deeply explained explored in depth in extensive chapters. Still, the issue will be explained in the third volume, called *Les Complices*, which will be published in 2017.

The second volume deals with the victims of this ideology, pinpointing interesting themes like the experiments on prisoners, organ traffics trafficking in the Goulag, the psychological weapons, and the privileges of the nomenklatura. In the end, he explains the emergence of alternative voices, samizdat and dissident intellectuals. He shows how the *Homo Communistus* was formed created and, by using Dante's metaphor of Dante, he describes the circles of Communist Inferno.

To conclude, this author may offer a deep perspective on the Communist phenomenon, with strong academic arguments, both derived from primary sources (archives, testimonies) and from second sources (as indicated by the richness of his references). His thesis is that the Soviet pattern was expanded, with some variations, in the whole world. *Une Histoire mondiale du Communisme* unveils the roots of Communism, the context(s) which made possible the application of this philosophy (China and Russia) and, moreover, why this ideology was so appealing. Except for the Eastern Europe, Communism was highly appealing because it answered to a critical demand: the abolition of social inequality (Wolton 1114) . Whether it is about Tsarist Russia, Imperial China and Ethiopia or colonial powers, the ideology came as a surrogate, as an opium for the elites, as stated half of a century before by Raymond Aron (1955).

To this we may add the fact that during his youth, Thierry Wolton was one of the few journalists who had access to CCCP and at the same time could take interviews of influential dissidents, like Adam Michnik, Vaclav Havel and Andrei Sakharov, as he states in the Le Point interview. However, the main lack of the work of Wolton is that he uses mainly French or French translated references in order to support his arguments. This is a strong downside because, in contrast, strong schools developed in the Anglo-Saxon space are producing essential works in this field.