

# Marcin Czyżniewski

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"Utopia u władzy. Historia Związku Sowieckiego", Vol. 1: "Od narodzin do wielkości", Vol. 2: "Od potęgi do upadku", Michał Heller, Aleksander Niekricz, Warszawa 2016 : [recenzja]

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Historia i Polityka nr 18 (25), 89-92

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2016

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**Michał Heller, Aleksander Niekricz, *Utopia u władzy. Historia Związku Sowieckiego, Vol. 1: Od narodzin do wielkości, Warszawa 2016, pp. 535; Vol. 2: Od potęgi do upadku, Warszawa 2016, pp. 723***

**I**t is difficult to understand why we had to wait for the first official Polish edition of *Utopia in Power* for so long. The book, originally published in French and Russian in 1982, is known to Polish readers through more than 20 independent and emigration editions, today difficult to reach because many copies, printed on bad paper, scattered with time. I read this book for the first time as a barely readable copy of a copy of one of the underground edition, when we were preparing for an exam in the History of the Twentieth Century. We immediately understood the importance of this book, although many facts disclosed by Heller and Nekrich were then commonly known. That is great that I can put on my shelf a good Polish edition now, not only because it recalls academic period in my life, but because *Utopia...* is still one of the most important and necessary books to learn about and – equally important – to understand the Soviet Union and Russia. It is worth noting that the first Polish official edition of *Utopia...* is

translated by Andrzej Mietkowski, who prepared this translation for the first time for the Polonia Publishing House in London as soon as it appeared in the original. Mietkowski could personally confront his efforts with Mikhail Heller, who was his neighbor in Paris.

Heller and Nekrich did not try to maintain scientific objectivity. They present their assessment of the facts openly and clearly, calling the Soviet Union the most inhumane system in the history. They do not nuance, do not look for excuses, do not show different points of view. This book was published in the West in the late Brezhnev era, not only as a textbook of unknown history, but as a loud warning against the Soviet Union and against mechanisms that can work in other places in the world quite well.

The case when the historical synthesis of epochs or states brings some exciting discoveries happens extremely rare. The overview books are good space for polemics, revision of the facts, or a way of paying

more attention to the events and characters marginalized already. Here it is different, as the Heller and Nekrich's book reveals many unknown or silenced facts. It must be emphasized that these were not only deeply hidden facts known to several people, written in inaccessible documents. These were the facts that the Russians did not want to remember, they knew these facts, from their own experience or hearsays, but they wanted to forget about them. The truth is not always a liberation, it is often a great and painful burden. The Russians know very well that sometimes it is better to see nothing, hear nothing, and, what perhaps is most important, to be quiet. However, the authors of *Utopia...* had no doubt that the truth is necessary for the Russians, and for the world.

In their book, Heller and Nekrich attempted to estimate the number of victims of Soviet terror, slave laborers and GULAGs' prisoners, proving that – in spite of the Soviet propaganda – it was North who embarked on the war in Korea. Especially they devoted a lot of space to the Katyń massacre. They were among the first who proved, without a doubt, that Russians were guilty of the murder of thousands of Polish officers. Especially shocking to the reader from the beginning of the 1980s were these fragments of *Utopia...* which described the cooperation between the USSR and the Third Reich and the mutual influence of Soviet communism and German national fascism. Heller and Nekrich follow, with passion of detectives, obvious similarities of the two systems and the coincidence of their decisions and actions. In Poland, with the experience of WWII, it was well known and obvious, but only *Utopia...* showed the true dimension of this mutual fascination. In the West, not to mention the Soviet Union itself, the im-

age of the USSR as the Hitler's victim is still widespread.

Describing the reality of the Soviet Union and analyzing the working of the system which was his base, Heller and Nekrich, sometimes literally and directly, raise the questions "how was it possible?", and "who was to blame?". The answer is not always possible to give – not because they could not find it, but because the Soviet system has surpassed the possibilities of human perception and imagination, even those accustomed to the atrocities of the twentieth century.

*Utopia...* contains many facts that were unknown when the book was published for the first time, and many cutting-edge reflections that are valid even today. But we must remember that the Authors wrote the book on emigration in the late 1970s and early 1980s and they had no access to the secret files that were available, partially and for a short period of time, just several years later. Moreover, we can find in the Bibliography a lot of items that were the basis of the official Soviet history literature. There are also writings of Lenin, Stalin, Marx and Engels. But Heller and Nekrich were able to read them differently, decipher and interpret them anew. Two independent historians could find in the commonly available sources something that the official *hagiographs* could not notice.

*Utopia in Power* begins at the moment when the World War I broke out. Not because it had to start at some point, but because – as claimed by Heller and Nekrich – this was the real beginning of Bolshevik Russia. The first sentence of the book is: "The October Revolution is a child of World War I" (Vol. I, p. 25). This is one of the most acute and daring opinion in this book: the Soviet Union is not a con-

continuation of the history of Russia, with its social, cultural, economic and political circumstances, on the contrary, it is a “fatal breaking up in Russian history”. This reflection brings us to very serious consequences. The opinion, widespread in the West in the second half of the twentieth century, that Bolshevism is a continuation of traditions, habits and relationships characteristic only for tsarist Russia, reassured the public, showed the Soviet system as an endemic creature. Heller and Niekricz wanted, by rejecting this view, to demolish this western calm, and warn the world that what happened in Russia after 1917 could happen anywhere and at any time as well.

Covered utopia appears in the book almost immediately – Heller and Niekricz see it as the nature of the system, a condition that allowed it to continue, but also the cause of its birth. “Bolshevism won easily, because it proposed utopia: everything for everyone at once”, they write (Vol. I, p. 79). For the Bolsheviks did not matter that some promises were contrary to their program, e.g., the division of the landlords’ land, which the peasants demanded. Besides, Heller and Niekricz refute the myth that the Bolsheviks fought for power with a clear, orderly and consistent ideological system, internally coherent vision – “For Lenin, there was no doctrines, but only one idea, the idea of power”, the Authors write (Vol. I, p. 49). According to Heller and Niekricz, immediately after the revolution Lenin knew that the public promises have no chance for realization, and the reality does not match the fantasies. He was indeed surprised by the pace of events in Russia after the February Revolution – *Utopia...* presents the Bolshevik revolution as a series of random, spontaneous events, it was not consistently planned and carried out.

The history of the Soviet Union presented in the *Utopia...* is not only a story of terror. Vision of a society broken by terror would be too simple for the Authors, so they effectively seek other means that allowed the Bolsheviks to create their system. For this, the Authors are looking for the guilty abroad, they show how lost was the West in reaction to the Bolshevik coup. Since the 1940s western governments build its policy towards the Soviet Union on the cold calculation of their interests, but in the early years of the communist system they were simply confused, they did not know how to treat the Soviet state, and how to respond to events that were happening there.

Terror has been presented in the pages of *Utopia...*, of course. The Authors describe in detail the forms and – as soon as they can – estimate the scope of terror. Terror has brought incalculable loss, but Heller and Niekricz recognize that it was not an act of madness. Lenin, and especially Stalin, agreed to the extermination of their own citizens without hesitation, saw it not only as way to fight with opponents, but a way to build the society and the Party as obedient and faithful army, some kind of Order. We need to assess the repression in the era of Khrushchev and Brezhnev right in this context – both could use gentler methods not because they were better people, but because Stalin’s terror had reached its goal: destroyed the opposition, changed the composition of society, created a state based on fear.

Heller and Niekricz devoted much attention to succession after Lenin. They recall the facts, known today quite well, indicating that Lenin feared of taking the helm of power by Stalin and warned his comrades against this. However, the Authors of *Utopia...* proved that Stalin was

the leader of the Soviet Union not by chance, or by intrigues, contrary to the intentions of the Leader of the Revolution, but he really was “the legitimate and the only descendant of Lenin” (Vol. I, p. 244). It was Lenin who consciously and systematically created Stalin as a new leader of Bolsheviks’ state, even if he was trying to disinherit his progeny in the end of his life.

As mentioned before, in the time of the first edition of *Utopia...*, particularly interesting for Western readers was the issue of cooperation between the Soviet Union and the Third Reich. Since then, this issue has been described in detail, but it is still worth exploring opinions and assessment presented by Heller and Nekrich. They firmly rejected the idea that the Soviet-German agreements signed in 1939 were necessary for Stalin for strategic reasons, because they gave him time to prepare for war. These agreements, Heller and Nekrich argued, only worsened strategic position of the Soviet Union, leading almost to its collapse. Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Treaty on boundaries formed Soviet-German border, measuring more than 3,000 km, and made that a potential aggressor became a direct neighbor of the Soviet Union. Heller and Nekrich believe that the Soviet Union was saved only by the surface area. They recall that the area of Soviet land occupied by the German army in the first weeks of war was comparable with the surface of Western Europe under German occupation. “If the USSR was the size of France or Germany, the mistakes of the party and political leadership would led the country to a total disaster”, they write (Vol. II, p. 215). From the perspective of the strategic mistake of Stalin, per-

petrated in 1939, Heller and Nekrich look at its European policy after the World War II. They argued that the Soviet conquest in Central Europe was not only a political project, the stage of the export of revolution to the West, but a strategic attempt to create a *cordon sanitaire*, the space between the Soviet Union and a strong neighbor, in the event of another war. Soviet foreign policy is the subject of numerous interpretations of the authors of *Utopia...* All the leaders of the Soviet Union sought to ensure that the internal relations keep stillness, be full of stagnation, rightly fearing that any changes will be dangerous for the system. They were looking for the energy needed for the existence of each country and society in international actions. Foreign policy was a substitute for inner activity, just as important, as it helped to unite society around common threats from outside – it reminds us of the modern strategy of Putin’s Russia.

Appalling picture of the Soviet system, presented from the first page to the last, ends with a horribly dismal conclusion: seven decades of Soviet dictatorship, terror and destruction did not bring any achievement, did not improve the situation of Russian society. As well as tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union could not resolve any significant problems, could not fight poverty, could not feed people, could not abolish exploitation, could not solve the problems of nationalities, and the class system turned on caste hierarchy. In this context, the sacrifice of millions of people seems particularly pointless, and the book of Heller and Nekrich becomes a description of the terrifying experiment and, hopefully, a shocking warning.