Depending on Execution

by Theodore Dalrymple (November 2015)

‘Depend upon it, Sir,’ said Doctor Johnson, ‘when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.’ Actually, it concentrates more than just his mind: it concentrates his character, especially if he is innocent, as the vast majority of people executed in the twentieth century were.

Recently I went to an exhibition in Paris on the history of the forensic uses of photography. It was not a very thorough or comprehensive exhibition, and it jumped from one theme to another without clear indication as to why these themes rather than others had been selected for display. But pedants will always lament what is missing from an anthology more than they will appreciate positively what it contains. Is life itself a glass half-full or half-empty?

Among the exhibits were photographs – mug-shots, really – of men and women about to be executed in the Great Terror in the Soviet Union in the years 1937 and 1938. They were projected in succession on to a blank white wall, with their names, dates of birth, nationality, level of education and occupation, the ‘crimes’ of which they had been found guilty, the date of their condemnation to death, the date of their execution, and the date of their ‘rehabilitation,’ that is to say the legal recognition of their innocence up to 50 years later. About one per cent of the adult population of the Soviet Union was killed in the Terror, and nearly twenty per cent of Polish residents. (About fifteen per cent of the victims of the Terror, therefore, were Polish.)

The full-face photographs of the victims were often taken only a day or two before their subjects were to be executed, in most cases by gunshot, though in some places axes were used to save on bullets and on others trucks or vans were adapted for gassing purposes. Current estimates of the numbers killed in total are about 750,000.

The photographs show men and women facing certain death, not from disease but at the hands of executioners. They, the victims-to-be, are looking into the abyss in more concentrated fashion than almost any other group of people who, until that time, had ever lived. Even Nazism could not yet compete in the scale of

Soviet communism's abyssal evil; later, during their invasion of the Soviet Union, and with an hypocrisy or cynicism scarcely ever equalled in history, the Nazis uncovered and used for propaganda purposes the mass graves dug during the Great Terror, as if their invasion had been a philanthropic exercise to liberate the Soviet people from their executioners.

Photograph after photograph was projected onto the wall; and even before visitors to the exhibition knew what or who the subjects were, they found themselves almost mesmerised, unable to move away. Without the slightest artistic intention, indeed with the very negation of an artistic intent, these photographs were of an intensity which was quite unmistakable. Every person, whether illiterate peasant or professor, was profoundly individual, his or her character concentrated in facial expression, the very certainty of losing their lives acting as an affirmation on their faces of the value of their lives, of the fathomless injustice about to be done them. Did they know or faintly hope that their last picture would act as a message in a bottle?

The visitors to the exhibition stayed to watch scores of the photos, as if to move on were an insult to the memory of their subjects. Having seen (I estimate) forty, I did in fact move away, but felt guilty for having done so. The trivial consideration of a train to catch – how deeply we are immersed in the minutiae of our own lives! – overcame my reluctance to go before the sequence of photos had come to an end and started again.

What a strange, contradictory, frightening creature is Man, though! The official purpose of these photographs was to ensure that the executioners shot the right person. This punctilio was in complete contradiction, of course, to all that had gone before. Everyone involved in the Great Terror knew that the arrest, trial and sentence were based upon lies from beginning to end, and that, in the moral sense, there was no 'right' person to execute: each condemned was innocent, at least of whatever he was charged with, if not in the sense of never having done anything wrong. All the prisoners of a certain category were to be killed sooner or later, so it hardly mattered whether the name on the warrant corresponded to the person killed. But the human mind is a wonderful and subtle instrument, capable of fixing itself happily on some trifling detail while ignoring the essential. I suppose this is the way in which we avoid being overwhelmed by the essential.

Leaving the exhibition, I bought an astonishing book called *La Grande Terreur en URSS 1937 – 1938* (The Great Terror in the USSR 1937 -1938) by a Polish photographer called Tomasz Kizny. It contains not only many photos of the victims, but his own photos of locations of the mass graves of the Terror, now forests or built-over urban spaces or normal cemeteries constructed over mass graves. Interspersed with the photos are essays on and testimonies about the Terror, for example extracts from the diary of Emilia Korzeniowska who, unlike her two husbands, survived it and died, aged 87, in 1993.

Her first husband, Wincenty Kerzeniowska, from whom she was divorced, was a mining engineer who worked in Moscow, who was arrested on 21 September, 1937, tried and condemned to death on 19 October and executed on 21 October. Her second husband Tomasz Rozalski, a long-time Polish communist who emigrated to Canada after being arrested several times by the Polish police, from which (having been a member of the Canadian Communist Party) he emigrated to Russia after two years of unemployment, was arrested on the night of 9 September, 1937, sentenced to death on 1 December, 1937, photographed on 6 December and executed, aged 35, either by shooting or by gas, on 10 December, 1937, one of 474 persons executed at the same time.

A year after her second husband's arrest, she wrote an account in her diary. They came for him at night, of course, as they always did, and she, bravely in the circumstances, told them that they did dirty work, arresting innocents like her husband: to which one of them memorably replied, 'It's all the same to us, it's what we're paid to do.' The pain of the following words is all too obvious:

> Tomy [Tomasz] took his things and left. I ran after him, I saw him cross the courtyard between soldiers, one in front and one behind, him in the middle with his head bent. He took his place in a civilian car and the left. A year has already gone by. I have not heard from him since. A man has disappeared without trace. Where is he, what has become of him? I know nothing.
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> Is he still alive, is he already dead? Was it more difficult for me then or now, knowing nothing? At the time, there was still hope that everything would be explained, that Tomy would return and I would manage to survive with the children. Now I have no more hope, there is nothing in front of me except darkness and, what's worse, I feel bad in myself, my health has

> deteriorated. I am sometimes so tired that I wish everything would simply end, by death, by being arrested, anything…

In fact she survived another fifty-five years, becoming a cleaning lady to several members of the Soviet cultural elite; but could there ever have been a day of that more than half century when her heart was not seized by the pain, the bitterness of the complete injustice, of her loss, for which Tomy's 'rehabilitation' in 1957 must have been scant compensation? Tomy, a handsome fair-haired man who, unlike the majority of the victims of the Terror, looked younger than his age, paid a heavy price for his ideals and illusions which enticed him to leave Canada; his farewell, described simply by his wife, is unforgettable:

> Tomy began to make his farewells, he embraced Tomek and Czesiek [the children], he came towards me, I remember that he hugged me close, that I clung to him strongly, but this did not last for more than a second because he also lifted my hands from his shoulders… We never said another word to each other.

Scenes such as this were enacted hundreds of thousands of times, but one needs a particular story to grasp the enormity of it, for as Stalin himself said, one death is a tragedy and a million is a statistic.

Revolutions usually devour their own children (the American was exceptional in its failure to do so), and no revolution was more avid for the flesh of its originators than the Russian. Among the latter was Vladimir Antonov-Ovsienko, the leader of the assault on the Winter Palace in 1917. The letter his wife wrote to him after both (unknown to each other) had been arrested is deeply moving on the one hand and an astonishing testimony to the blindness of the faith revolutionaries can have in their own worldview on the other. He was in Moscow at the time, she was in Sukhumi in the Crimea taking a rest-cure. On 16 October, 1937, twenty years after her husband's famous exploit, four days after his arrest and three days after hers, she wrote a letter to him from prison which was never sent and was found fifty-two years later in the archives of the NKVD-KGB:

> My dearest love, I do not know whether this letter will ever reach you, but I sense that I am writing to you for the last time. You remember we had

> spoken and concluded that, here in Russia, they don't arrest people without reason, without their having committed a crime. If they arrested a man it meant that they had evidence against him. Obviously, there is something against me, but I don't know what. All I know you know also, that our life was inseparable and harmonious.

The blindness and the love are inextricably mixed:

> Whatever happens to me, I will always bless the day that we met. I have lived in the reflection of your light and I am proud of it. During the three days that I have been here I have examined and relived my entire life as if in the hour of my death. I haven't found anything (apart from the things that distinguish Man from the angels) that could make me believe that I ever have acted in a criminal manner towards human beings. You know very well that from the day I became your wife, I consecrated my life to you, and that during all those years I was happy. I thought exactly like you, and does there exist a man more devoted than you to our Party and our Fatherland? … But the fact that I am here shows that I have committed a crime, probably something of which I am not aware myself. I am writing as in the hour of my death. Believe me, I have done nothing intentionally. Believe me, my love.

Could any letter better express how it is that good people – for one feels the goodness of the writer – can attach themselves to evil causes and be blinded by them?

Her last letter to him two days later is almost unbearably moving, as someone once described Kathleen Ferrier's performance of *Der Abschied* (The Farewell), the last movement of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, recorded when she knew that she herself was dying:

> I kiss your hands, I love you to my last breath. Forgive me, my sun, forgive me for my whole life. I am not guilty of anything. When trees are cut down the chips fly, and apparently I am one of the chips. Why did I leave [Moscow for Sukhumi]? Why did I not stay with you? It would have been two weeks more [together]. Forgive me, my darling. Oh, to know that you forgive and believe me!

Those were her last written words to him, words that he never of course

received; they were both condemned to death nearly four months later, on 8 February, 1938 and she was executed the same day, he two days afterwards.

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