Empire of Evil—A Powerful New Documentary from Bill Whittle About the Russian Revolution

By Bruce Bawer

There's a reason why the History Channel is often, with dark whimsy, referred to as the Hitler Channel. As I scrolled through the online TV Guide recently to check out the channel's scheduled programming for the next few days, I discovered shows entitled The Nazis' Secret Bases, Secrets of the Nazi War Machine, and Hitler's Celebrations of Hate – not to mention several programs about D-Day and the ensuing "battles for Europe" between the Western Allies and the Nazis.

There was nothing remotely touching on the Soviet Union.

This is very much par for the course. Similarly, it's no surprise that while a great many major feature films have been made about Nazi Germany, among them The Pianist, Downfall,

Sophie’s Choice, Schindler’s List, Valkyrie, and Shoah, there’s only a scattering of lesser-known Hollywood pictures about the Soviet Union — notably, the obscure Gulag movie Escape from Sobibor and the TV biopic Stalin starring Robert Duvall.

Why this dramatic disparity? Because the people who write and produce feature films for the major studios, or documentaries for clients like the History Channel, have an entirely appropriate contempt for Hitler and everything he stood for. But the Russian Revolution? Lenin? Many of them — whose knowledge of history tends to have been shaped by left-wing university professors — have something of a soft spot for the people who overthrew the Romanovs. After all, the czars were pretty monstrous — most of them, anyway.

So it is that all too many people who want to make powerful films about history are happy to return yet again to the worst horrors of Nazism, but Soviet Communism? The most famous single movie about that topic is Reds, whose protagonist, the American journalist John Reed (Warren Beatty), was an eager fan of, and participant in, the Russian Revolution. Yes, the film ultimately acknowledges, sort of, that the revolution turned out not to be everything that Reed thought it was — but along the way to that conclusion we’re given a hell of a lot of stirring, heroic images of Lenin and company doing their thing.

Given the almost total failure of the History Channel to provide the kind of content about Soviet Communism that it constantly serves up about Nazism, the eight-episode documentary An Empire of Terror, is an exceedingly welcome corrective — and an absolutely terrific one. Written and narrated by Bill Whittle, and beautifully produced by Daily Wire+, it’s comprehensive, fast-moving, and horrifically graphic.

It can seem obscene to compare the regime of one mass-

murdering tyrant with that of another. But Whittle reminds us that while Hitler wiped out millions of Jews, gypsies, Poles, and others, there were plenty of people living in Nazi Germany who had little to fear from him. Unlike Lenin and Stalin, he didn't make a habit of randomly wiping out high-ranking members of his government, or slaughtering whole segments of the (non-Jewish) German population, or of turning one group of (non-Jewish) Germans against each other in order to stir up savage warfare.

Then there's this: if you go to Germany today, you'll keep running across memorials to the people murdered by the Nazis (and, later, by the East German Communists). Not in Russia. Whittle takes us to buildings in the very heart of Moscow where countless enemies of the state were murdered, one of which now houses a high-end jeweler. There's nothing whatsoever to inform passersby of the gruesome history of these places. Whittle also points out that the world's first death camp – run by the USSR – predated Auschwitz by years.

He doesn't start with the Communists. He goes back to the czarist era, a time, mostly, of endless, irrational violence beyond description. Yes, all countries have their unpleasant periods. Beginning in 1789, France underwent decades of violent revolution and the devastating Napoleonic Wars. Germany experienced the relatively brief but savage nightmare of Nazism, and America had its bloody four-year Civil War. But to watch this series is to be reminded that when it comes to a history of constant, mind-blowing violence, every other Western country takes a back seat to Russia.

That history goes back a long way and it's never really stopped. The czars persecuted the peasants. The Bolsheviks victimized the kulaks. And so on. One wave of cruelty succeeded another. No one was spared – not women, not children. And the abuse took a variety of horrific forms, many of them beyond the reach of the ordinary Western imagination. There were indescribable varieties of torture, executions that

were committed in such massive numbers and with such rapidity that the killers were at a loss as to what to do with all the corpses.

But the focus of An Empire of Terror is on the closing days of the czarist era, the Russian Revolutions of February and October 1917, and the early years of what came to be known as the Soviet Union.

The first revolution provided a moment of hope. Alexander Kerensky, the man who ran the country after the removal of the Romanovs, was a remarkably decent character, genuinely devoted to the rights and welfare of his people. He was immensely popular. But he had a tragic flaw – vanity. It proved self-destructive. He moved into the czar's palace in Saint Petersburg, renamed Petrograd, and even had a notorious photograph taken of himself at the czar's desk. In short, he began to act a bit like a czar himself.

Kerensky's installation hardly brought peace to Russia. There was still chaos in the streets. Some agitators on the political right were determined to restore the Romanovs, and Kerensky viewed them as a serious threat to his power. What he didn't realize was that the real danger was the Bolsheviks. Lenin had been hiding out abroad for many years, but Kerensky, foolishly believing that he was too extreme to appeal to the masses, gave him permission to return to Russia.

What Kerensky didn't realize was that Bolsheviks were being heavily funded by the German Empire. The Great War was on, and Germany wanted Lenin to take power so that he could pull Russia out of the conflict. It was Germany that paid the bills for the Bolshevik newspaper, Pravda, which was widely distributed and which stirred up Bolshevik sympathies among literate Russians.

As it happens, Lenin ended up overthrowing Kerensky easily. Lenin's forces were poorly trained and organized, but

Kerensky's were even worse. So low-key was the takeover that virtually nobody in Petrograd even knew that a revolution was underway in their midst. As Whittle puts it, no more than ten thousand people – a tiny fraction of the number of people in Petrograd that evening, many of them dining out or attending the theater – were involved in what would later be portrayed by the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, in his film October, as a monumental struggle.

It all happened in the course of a few hours. And it was a tragedy not just for Russia but for the twentieth-century world. Had Kerensky remained in power, Russia would have headed down an entirely different road. It would likely have experienced Western-style freedom and economic development. There would have been no collective farming, no Holodomor, no show trials, no Cold War.

Lenin and his October revolutionaries wasted no time carrying out their policies. They brutalized the nobles. They shot 200 striking metal workers to death. They crammed thousands of supposedly "rich" families – in fact, the people in question were just somewhat better off than most Russians, but hardly prosperous by even the Western standards of the time – into tiny, unheated apartments until they froze to death. Four to five million individuals were exterminated for the crime of being just a tad more prosperous than average. Red Army soldiers were allowed to rape these people's daughters; Whittle tells horrific tales of sanctioned child rape.

Some well-off Russians – such as most of Vladimir Nabokov's family – left Russia before they could be murdered. But millions stayed. Why? For the same reason that so many Jews, in the 1930s, would remain in Germany until it was too late to escape. As Whittle puts it, they "died of wishful thinking": they simply couldn't believe in "the strength of the Bolshevik regime" and fully expected it to expire very quickly.

It's interesting, by the way, to learn about Kerensky's after-

story – he ended up in the US, spent some time at the Hoover Institution, and died at the age of 89 in a New York hospital, listening to the Beatles on the radio. He survived nearly everyone he had once known in Russia, most of whom had long since been brutally executed by the Communists.

Which of course was the essence of the Communist program: to kill, to crush, to eliminate. To destroy as much as possible, to exacerbate all social divisions, to intensify envy and entitlement and the love of chaos. The famous writer Maxim Gorky had been an anti-czarist revolutionary, but like many other intellectuals he recognized Lenin and his crew as an insane and terrifying force.

He wasn't alone. Winston Churchill, as he later did with Hitler, instantly saw Lenin for what he was, calling him, in 1920, the leader of "a revolutionary and terrible sect of fanatics" who had plunged Russia into "terrible misery" and "barbarism." Bolshevism, pronounced Churchill, "is not a policy, it is a disease." Lloyd George, who at that point was prime minister of Britain and could easily have deposed Lenin and saved the world from Communism, was unfortunately not as perceptive about him as Churchill was.

Lenin had been an unsuccessful lawyer, and he proved to be a clueless administrator. He didn't grasp that illiterate peasants weren't knowledgeable enough to run the agricultural estates they took over from their former masters. Or that workers, put in charge of a factory, could manage it from Day One. But none of this mattered to Lenin, so long as he was able to hang on to power. The high-flown rhetoric about "the revolution" and "the people" was always a lie. The Bolshevik revolution was never about the well-being of ordinary Russians but about the maintenance of Lenin's authority.

After vanquishing Kerensky, Lenin faced the challenge of another branch of Communists, the Mensheviks. To help bring them down, Lenin's colleague, Leon Trotsky, hired former

Czarist officers to lead some of his troops – and, in a typically charming Bolshevik touch, ensured their loyalty by holding their families hostage. Once Lenin wiped out the Mensheviks, he turned his sights on the so-called kulaks – namely, "wealthy peasants," which in that era meant families who might own "a cow or two." Lenin savaged them relentlessly, calling them "bloodsuckers" and "vampires" and encouraging other peasants to wreak havoc upon them. A great deal of cannibalism and other forms of brutality ensued. Clergy were executed in massive numbers. Innocent citizens were subjected to insanely imaginative forms of torture, some of them involving worms and starving rats.

Meanwhile Lenin's agricultural policies led to mass starvation. Lenin demonized the U.S., but in response to the famine in Russia the U.S. government established the American Relief Administration, led by future President Herbert Hoover, which spent enormous sums to relieve Russian hunger. And how did the Communists respond? They kept the American food from their people, and instead sold it abroad in order to get their hands on hard currency – the ruble being worthless on the international market.

Eventually the famine got so bad that Lenin briefly permitted a free market to flourish. As a result, the economy boomed overnight. The people suddenly thrived. Emma Goldman, the ardent Communist writer and activist (she's the one who was portrayed by Maureen Stapleton in Reds as a homey, down-to-earth idealist), was shocked to see with her own eyes that a free market could make such a positive difference. But soon enough Lenin shut it all down, and that was that.

At least a couple of generations of young Americans have been taught their modern history out of books like Howard Zinn's A People's History of the United States, which paint America in the worst light possible while routinely whitewashing Soviet Communism and depicting Lenin, in particular, as a hero. (As a rule, all the bad stuff, to the extent that it's acknowledged

at all, is attributed to Stalin.) Every American who's been raised on such propaganda should watch Empire of Terror. When it's over, they'll be ashamed of their ignorance – and infuriated at the teachers who so outrageously misled them.

Whittle closes this dark but illuminating series with an anecdote about his Russian-born wife, Natasha. When she first came to America, he says, she was impressed beyond belief – not by the supermarkets or Manhattan skyscrapers or the gorgeous beaches of southern California, but by the simple friendliness of Americans, strangers who would strike up conversations at grocery stores and show her pictures of their children. The whole thing was alien to her. And, as Whittle says, there was one reason for that: "Her country went through hell, and mine didn't."

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