

Michael Haynes and Romy Husan, *A Century of State Murder: Death and Policy in Twentieth Century Russia*, London, Pluto Press, 2003. Pp. xv + 265. Tables. Figures. Notes. Index. ISBN 07453 19319 (hardback) and 07453 19300 (paperback).

Haynes and Husan have written a book with strengths and weaknesses that are both considerable. On the positive side it has a profoundly interesting subject, death in twentieth century Russia, on which it is genuinely informative. But the book is spoiled by gaps, biases, and bad arguments.

The book is about the responsibility of government and policy for the level and social skewness of mortality. The authors paint a picture of Russia's demographic history that is well informed, drawing on a wide range of authoritative source materials. They usefully accompany the statistical material with anecdote, social observation, and literary allusion. They analyse the main episodes of 'abnormal' mortality: the famines (1891/92, 1921/22, 1932/33, and 1946/47), the wars (World War I, the Russian Civil War, World War II, and the Afghan and Chechen wars), the Red and White terrors and Stalin's terror, and the mortality crisis of transition. They distinguish clearly between deaths that arose from the homicidal intent of the rulers and those that might have resulted from their carelessness. They go on to analyse trends in 'normal' mortality; they suggest that normal mortality in any society is a social, not natural outcome for which ruling elites bear responsibility. Death is unequal when society is unequal. Endowments, institutions, and policies regularly select some to die while others live. Under different institutions and allocations others would take their place. The authors conclude that all states based on a class society kill people, some more than others.

The book is organized on the lines of a political history, so consecutive chapters deal with Russia and the Soviet Union before Stalin, under Stalin, and after Stalin, under Gorbachev, and after Gorbachev. This reflects the book's lengthy agenda: demography is the pretext and politics is the text. A book organized on the lines of a demographic narrative would look quite different. A first chapter might cover the century from 1870 to the 1960s over which 'normal' life expectancy in the years unaffected by war, famine, or terror rose from 27 years to nearly 70. The remarkable thing emerging from this chapter would be what little difference the social system apparently made to the steady progress. Several large text boxes would be devoted to the terrible catastrophes that interrupted the general improvement from time to time; these would be noted both for their severity and the speed with which they were overcome. A second chapter would be devoted to the quarter century from the 1960s to 1990 in which progress towards longer life was halted. The mystery was that economic development abruptly ceased to bring the expected gains in vital statistics, and the chapter might juggle competing hypotheses inconclusively: was the health/income relationship broken because the reported economic gains were illusory, or because they were offset by some systemic failure of health services or the health environment? A third chapter would deal with the adverse trends associated with transition, especially the mortality peak of the mid-1990s, but the chapter would also note that it is fertility collapse more than mortality increase that has sent Russia's population into secular decline. This is not, however, the book that Haynes and Husan have written.

The authors' politicized agenda is reflected in a number of features. They appear to have unlimited faith in the potential for government action to overcome inequality and save life through 'strong welfare policies' (p. 19). Without this confidence they could hardly allocate moral blame so freely for the failures of successive Russian regimes to eliminate social differences. But history surely demonstrates that when a government takes on additional powers to control the distribution of incomes and to equalise the conditions of life of its citizens it also expands its capacity to abuse its powers. A net benefit to the poor, and even to 'society as a whole', is certainly possible as long as measures to promote equity do not greatly blunt incentives or rely

on confiscation, so that the capacity for abuse rises only slowly. Beyond a point, however, these cease to be the case. When the powers of the government to intervene become disproportionate, policies that appear to be directed towards welfare improvement may turn out to have an opportunity cost in freedom as well as in resources; the lives of the poor may not be saved after all, and sometimes more lives may be lost as a result. This is nowhere more evident than in the history of Russia.

The authors are at pains to stress that capitalism is no better than Soviet pseudo-socialism; in the cold war, they recall, ‘you had to be either for Washington or for Moscow. Today the similarities look clearer’ (p. 96). This view does not have much to recommend itself if we compare the longevity records of the OECD countries with those of the former Soviet bloc. It is true that many old people in the west face an insecure old age, but perhaps this is better than dying at or before retirement. It is not clear how Haynes and Husan would explain the readiness of the ruling elites of western Europe or the United States to put up with a growing overhang of people who have passed their use-by date. At an early stage they propose that it depends on the degree of pluralism and democracy in society (p. 19); this suggests that the rulers put up with it because society made them, which does not seem a bad thing. But on that basis it is hard to explain why Stalin presided over such a rapid improvement in longevity, or why the improvement came to an end in the 1960s as Soviet society became somewhat more open. As for the improvement itself the authors attribute it to rising incomes and antibiotics (p. 99), but this is *ex post* argumentation, and it is not explained why the Soviet rulers generously allowed the population to benefit in these ways. In short, the authors have a model that does not fit the facts well, and has to be saved by bringing in extraneous factors.

Haynes and Hasan underplay the contribution that economic analysis can make to demography. They note (p. 18) that the relationship between income and mortality is strong within and between countries, and that strong economic growth contributed to the dramatic reduction in Soviet death rates achieved by the 1960s (p. 99). But they dismiss the role of the high accumulation policies that sacrificed consumption in the early years while raising it later. ‘Economists’, they maintain, ‘can even play around with “models” that predict the gain that will be available. But the payoff never really came’ (p. 63). This conclusion flies in the face of the consensus among economists that, given the Soviet economy’s poor performance in innovation, accumulation was the *only* thing that made its growth possible. The authors also charge that modern economics has avoided investigating the dependence of mortality on socioeconomic status ‘to keep things separate and avoid embarrassing links’(p. 25). This claim, shocking if it were true, is based on ignorance. A search of the on-line working paper collection of the U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research, a sure leading indicator of trends in the profession, using ‘inequality’ and ‘mortality’ as keywords, reveals nine papers by 15 authors over the last five years. A wider search using the EconLit database finds 82 articles and papers over the same period. Some of this research, for example by Angus Deayton, directly contradicts the authors’ assertions, such as the claim that mortality differences between societies can be significantly explained by different degrees of income inequality within societies (p. 20).

The book has some minor mistakes or flaws. World War II is credited, confusingly, with ‘43 million wartime deaths including 27 million excess deaths’ (p. xiii). Annual demographic time series are compiled carefully from 1870 to 2001, but 1959 to 1988 are missing. The series from 1870 to 1958 are dispersed among several tables and there is no summary; this makes the longer-term trends hard to identify. The claims that the post-Soviet regime in Russia has replaced ‘plan Stalinism’ with ‘market Stalinism’ (p. 179) and that it has come full circle to an undefined ‘original point’ of departure (p. 202) are purely polemical.

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