

## *The Possessed*

**Victims of Politics: The State of Human Rights**, by Kurt Glaser and Stefan T. Possony, *New York: Columbia University Press, 1979. xxiv + 614 pp.*

*Victims of Politics* should be required reading for all those incurable optimists who believe in the basic goodness of man, and who assert that the enlightenment of the present age has led the world to shed the barbarisms of the past. This heavily documented volume by Kurt Glaser and Stefan Possony is a lengthy catalogue of the ways in which human beings have persecuted one another throughout the world in recent decades. Among the various brutalities which have been examined by the authors are such practices as genocide, torture, slavery, forced labor, forced migrations, brainwashing, and a variety of harsh forms of racial, ethnic, and sexual discrimination.

What the authors have found is original sin. The reality of evil is grimly apparent in the findings of this book, which is a disheartening look at the human condition. The reader who already understood human weakness and sinfulness before availing himself of the documentation in this study is not so much likely to feel satisfaction at finding his opinions confirmed as he is likely to be depressed at perceiving the depth and the extent of human perfidy in the world we live in. The reader may easily be reminded of the outrage felt by F. M. Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor when, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, he expresses his eloquent protest against the widespread evil and suffering he has witnessed in the world around him.

The tone and the character of *Victims of Politics* are far different from those of the Grand Inquisitor's diatribe. This book is written almost completely in the clinical language of the social scientists, perhaps too much so. In fact, Glaser and Possony have generally presented this often shocking material in dispassionate language, no

easy task considering the nature of the subject matter. Although their detached rhetoric is too much the result of the authors' use of social science jargon, this detachment is more of an asset than a liability since it makes the indictments of various regimes more credible than those condemnations written by less restrained critics. Thus, even though *Victims of Politics* differs from *The Gulag Archipelago* in many ways, Glaser's and Possony's work resembles Solzhenitsyn's in one important respect at least: their calm presentation of a hair-raising subject matter tends to make their findings eminently believable.

This volume does not, however, by any means confine itself to analysis of Soviet, or even Communist, repression. The various depravities covered in the book are discussed not only in connection with Communist countries but also with numerous other nations around the world. In attempting to determine the extent of world-wide repression, the authors have examined their source material carefully and have not been inclined to demonstrate their impartiality by denouncing all countries as equally imperfect. The authors do not mind saying, for instance, that China "during 27 years of Mao Tse-tung's rule violated human rights more massively than any other country." Similarly, although the authors cite blood-curdling statistics and anecdotes in connection with autocratic regimes throughout the world, they present their most profoundly horrifying material in their analysis of communist totalitarianism. The estimates of man-made deaths from 1927 to 1970 in the Soviet Union alone range from 35 to 45 million people, and the toll of Chinese Communism seems to be somewhere in the range from 34 to 64 million fatalities. Sadly enough, the authors have noted that these figures are conservative. Difficult as it is to believe, the actual figures may be double the estimates. On the other hand, the well-publicized casualty figures of the Jewish holocaust under Hitler have been revised downwards by the authors (still to

more than 4 million) on the basis of work done by other researchers, although this revised estimate does not appear to include the non-Jewish casualties of Hitler's Germany. Even so, the final world-wide totals are truly shocking: in a grim chapter entitled "The Body Count," the authors observe that it is "entirely possible, even probable, that deliberate crimes against humanity cost the lives of substantially more than 100 million" people in the twentieth century.

The authors' distaste for totalitarianism is apparent, but they can hardly be accused of being soft on right-wing dictatorships. Although these authoritarian regimes differ from totalitarian ones to a great degree—the body count does not approach that of large communist countries—some of the most terrifying and gruesome descriptions of cruelty and torture are mentioned in connection with various Third World regimes, particularly in South America. On occasion the authors lapse from their clinical vocabulary and vividly describe some particular instances of brutality (often based on eye-witness accounts), and the effect is truly sobering.

By comparison, the United States rates as a rather tame place. Although it has often been fashionable in recent decades to manifest feelings of guilt about America's failings, the reader will feel that the extent of injustice and cruelty to be found in America ranks as insignificant compared to the miseries found in a host of other countries. Alongside genocides, torture, slave labor camps, and other abominations which are frequently found elsewhere, the racial and sexual discriminations mentioned in connection with the United States pale by comparison.

*Victims of Politics* is a useful reference. It is filled with factual material, including statistics, names, dates, locations, eye-witness descriptions of human brutality, and an assorted collection of data not likely to be familiar to many readers. In addition to an extensive bibliography of 30 pages and three helpful indexes, the book is fully documented, especially considering that much of the material is of a nature

most nations would want to keep secret.

The controversial nature of some of the findings of the book is rendered even more controversial by the fact that there is no widespread agreement on the nature of human rights. Probably the biggest weakness of the work is its casual use of the term "rights." The book could use an opening chapter which discusses natural law and natural right in sound philosophical terms. But sound discussion of natural right is not often found in the twentieth century, and the authors have apparently chosen to forego any attempt at philosophical inquiry in this work. Instead they have chosen to work through the general framework and particular listing of human rights to be found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights put forward by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948. While no doubt formulated with the best of intentions, this document is much too broad and general to warrant serious consideration as either political theory or sound law. For instance, one of the Declaration's many provisions asserts "the right to an adequate standard of living." Despite the handicap of working with such a loose conception of rights, and despite the fact that they often engage in some loose talk about rights themselves, Glaser and Possony nonetheless still generally manage to make their points clearly.

Overall, the book is a rather grim assessment of what the authors call "the Human Condition." In the conclusion, Glaser and Possony observe that "Even though we like to think of the 'normal' condition of humankind as one of accommodation if not love, the fact remains that most of human history is a chronicle of struggle, conflict, and killing." If this assessment seems to be a little one-sided, it must be conceded that the authors have documented their point thoroughly. Further documentation may also easily be found in our own times, and in this respect the book's appearance is very timely. If we are tempted to persuade ourselves that the world has progressed to the point where we

have put the Stalins and the Hitlers and the Maos behind us, we need only to remember Cambodia's nightmare and the Boat People to conclude that man's inhumanity to man remains a part of the human condition. And if we are inclined to believe that the world would be a fine place if only the United States would refrain from the exercise of power, we should reflect that the Alarics of our day are even more tyrannical than those of the past, and some day Rome will not stand in their way.

Reviewed by MICHAEL BORDELON