

The Black Book of Communism Is a Shoddy Work of History

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The Black Book of Communism has been hugely influential and sold millions of copies since its publication in 1997. Yet some of the dramatic claims made by its editor, Stéphane Courtois, were even rejected by his own contributors when the book came out.

Whenever the history of twentieth-century communism is discussed, it will not be long before you find a particular figure cited with absolute certainty. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* on the centenary of the October Revolution, David Satter informed its readers that communism was “the greatest catastrophe in human history,” having been responsible for one hundred million deaths.

The British Conservative politician Daniel Hannan had a similar message as he prepared for “the most monstrous of centenaries.” According to Hannan, communism was far worse than slavery or Nazism: “The Atlantic slave trade killed perhaps 10 million people, the Nazis 17 million — but the Communists killed 100 million.” The Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, which runs a museum in Washington, carries the following message on its website: “Communism Killed Over 100 Million: We’re telling their stories.”

These claims ultimately rest upon a highly influential collection of essays titled *The Black Book of Communism* that was put together under the direction of French academic Stéphane Courtois. Originally published in French, the *Black Book* has been translated into multiple languages. Yet far from representing the established consensus among historians, the claims that Courtois made in the book’s introduction were not even accepted by all of his own contributors, some of whom were harshly critical of their editor after seeing the final product.

Despite the criticisms directed at the *Black Book* by many historians, the work is still often presented as a definitive account of the experience of communism, and its arguments have also influenced many people indirectly, even if they have never heard of Courtois or his book. A closer look at the way in which the *Black Book* was produced and the flaws that scholars have identified in its approach to twentieth-century history is very much in order.

Origins of the *Black Book*

In the mid-1990s, the French publisher and editor Charles Ronsac began to gather around him a group of politically engaged intellectuals for his new project. Ronsac, who was politically active in the Trotskyist movement of the 1930s under the name Charles Rosen, was a close friend of Boris Souvarine, a founder of the French Communist Party (PCF) who was expelled from the party for his sympathies with Leon Trotsky's Left Opposition.

The people gathered for this project also had experience in various currents of the communist movement. The book's future editor in chief, Courtois, had been a Maoist in the late 1960s, while Jean-Louis Margolin had been a Trotskyist. Karel Bartošek was a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and one of its most serious young historians, but after the Soviet invasion in 1968 he was arrested, persecuted, and eventually forced to leave the country.

Despite the criticisms directed at the *Black Book* by many historians, the work is still often presented as a definitive account of the experience of communism. Jean-Louis Panné belonged to various social movements of the New Left in the 1970s and dealt with the thought of Rosa Luxemburg. Pierre Rigoulot, another Maoist, visited China at the time of Mao Zedong's rule as a member of a French delegation, and worked with the magazine *Les Tempes modernes*, which was run by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

Taking such biographies into account, the crew that was assembled could have easily been put together at another time, for the filming of a French New Wave film or a documentary about May 1968 in France. However, this was the '90s, not the '60s, and all of those involved were already very much former communists. Some still considered themselves left-wing, while others did not.

In any case, Ronsac's idea was to write a "Black Book of Communism," a massive compendium of crimes and deaths committed in the name of communism and under self-styled communist regimes in the twentieth century. The choice of the title was not accidental: it consciously referred to *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry*, written by Soviet writers Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman at the end of World War II to document the Holocaust.

Cold Warriors

To understand the context of the creation of *The Black Book of Communism*, we must take into account another common denominator of its authors. In addition to the fact that most of them were former communists, they were also mostly collaborators of the Paris-based Institute for Social History (Institut d'histoire sociale).

The founder of that institute, in 1935, was Souvarine, and it served as an archive of Trotsky and the Trotskyist movement. In 1940, after the occupation of France, the Nazis destroyed the archive, and Souvarine was arrested. After the war, Souvarine abandoned his heterodox communist views and became an active anti-communist.

The new political positioning breathed new life into his institute. In 1954, the renewed Institute for Social History and Sovietology was created with financial support from [Georges Albertini](#), a former socialist who had become a Nazi collaborator and antisemite during World War II and recruited French volunteers to fight against the USSR on the eastern front.

From the very beginning, the institute became an outpost of Cold War propaganda, part of the cultural war between the two blocs. Still under Souvarine's leadership, it forged links with the neofascist organization Occident and the CIA-funded anti-communist union Force Ouvrière, and became a place of employment for former far-right activists.

After Souvarine retired in 1976, the institute was taken over by figures previously associated with the neofascist group Ordre Nouveau. During the 1980s, after the institute fell into financial difficulties, it was rescued by Jacques Chirac, then mayor of Paris, since local authorities in France are generally responsible for the financial maintenance of research institutes. From 1984, the institute was aided by the newly founded National Endowment for Democracy, a nonprofit organization charged with promoting US foreign policy interests.

Most of the future collaborators on *The Black Book of Communism* were formed intellectually in this milieu. The researcher Roger F. S. Kaplan explicitly credited the institute with involvement in the creation of the book. Pierre Rigoulet was an associate of the institute and editor of their journal *Les Cahiers d'histoire sociale*. [Jean-Louis Panné](#) worked as its librarian and personal assistant to the retired Souvarine from 1979 to 1984.

The initiator of the whole project, [Ronsac](#), was never formally connected with the institute, but he knew its collaborators through Souvarine. Therefore, he connected them with

Courtois, whose books he had previously published. Courtois included with him in the project the editorial staff of his scientific journal *Communisme*, which included Nicolas Werth, Sylvain Boulouque, and Bartošek.

Moral Equivalence

This ambitious 850-page book was scheduled for publication on November 7, 1997, the eightieth anniversary of the October Revolution. The foreword was to be written by François Furet, another famous ex-communist, known for his criticism of revolutionary politics in his books on the French Revolution. However, Furet died suddenly on July 12 and was unable to complete the manuscript of the introductory text.

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Courtois, as editor, asked the publisher to delay publication for six months so he could find a new author. The publisher refused, so Courtois had to write the introduction himself. His central hypothesis was simple: Communism was responsible for the deaths of one hundred million people in the twentieth century, it was ethically equivalent to Nazism, and it had been the “deadliest” ideology in human history.

Some of the coauthors of the book were enraged by the preface Courtois had composed. Werth, who independently wrote nearly a third of the book, and Margolin, the author of over 160 pages on communism in East Asia, tried to retract their contributions altogether. They gave up only because their lawyers told them it was impossible. However, they immediately distanced themselves in public from both Courtois and the book.

First, they accused the editor of being obsessed with arriving at a round figure of one hundred million dead that was factually incorrect. They pointed out that Courtois arbitrarily made up the figures of twenty million dead in the USSR and a million dead in Vietnam on his own, which neither of them had cited in their own chapters in the book. Werth was categorical in his condemnation of his editor’s attempt to equate Communism and Nazism: “Death camps did not exist in the Soviet Union.”

Bartošek soon spoke out, and he also distanced himself from the conclusions of Courtois. Both Bartošek and Werth resigned from the editorial office of *Communisme*. Thus, three of the four main authors of *The Black Book of Communism*, who between them wrote more than half of the book, publicly distanced themselves from the final version before it even came out.

A Flawed Indictment

After the book appeared in print, the criticisms only intensified and multiplied. They ranged from methodological objections to pointing out ridiculous, amateurish mistakes. Pascal Fontaine, author of the section on “totalitarianism” in Cuba, implied that Che Guevara was Cuban, when in fact he was Argentinian. Werth, although he was critical of Courtois and his equating of Communism and Nazism, nevertheless justified the behavior of those Russians who collaborated with the Nazis on the grounds that they had done it for the sake of “liberation from Bolshevism.”

After the book appeared in print, the criticisms only intensified and multiplied. They ranged from methodological objections to pointing out ridiculous, amateurish mistakes. As the historian Ronald Aronson pointed out, even if Margolin did not cite the figure of one million victims of Vietnamese Communism invented by Courtois in the introduction, at no point in his chapter on Communism in Asia did he mention that the US intervention in Vietnam had cost, according to some estimates, up to three million lives. Ronald G. Suny further emphasized that numbering the victims of Nazism at twenty-five million, as Courtois had done, serves to indirectly absolve Hitler and Nazism of responsibility for World War II, which on its own claimed between forty and sixty million lives.

The historian J. Arch Getty, one of the most authoritative researchers of Joseph Stalin’s purges, insisted that deaths from starvation could not be counted as “crimes of communism” in the same way as mass executions, as Courtois sought to do:

The overwhelming weight of opinion among scholars working in the new archives (including Courtois’s co-editor Werth) is that the terrible famine of the 1930s was the result of Stalinist bungling and rigidity rather than some genocidal plan. Are deaths from a famine caused by the stupidity and incompetence of the regime (such deaths account for more than half of Courtois’s 100 million) to be equated with the deliberate gassing of Jews?

Courtois’s arithmetic is too simple. A huge number of the fatalities attributed here to Communist regimes fall into a kind of catch-all category called “excess deaths”: premature demises, over and above the expected mortality rate of the population, that resulted directly or indirectly from government policy. Those executed, exiled to Siberia, or forced into gulag camps where nutrition and living conditions were poor could fall into this category. But so could many others, and “excess deaths” are not the same as intentional deaths.

A group of historians led by Claude Pénnetier and Serge Wolikow criticized the fact that the book flattened out a complex phenomenon with many different manifestations, leaving the

impression that there was no difference between, say, the rule of János Kádár in Hungary and that of Pol Pot in Cambodia, let alone between much closer, yet still very different communist regimes such as those of Yugoslavia and Romania.

As Adam Shatz noted, for all its moral fervor, the *Black Book* was perfectly willing to deny or downplay crimes if they were committed in the name of anticommunism:

The book's treatment of communism in Latin America is so one-sided that it might as well be plucked from a US State Department report. We are given the total count of war victims in Sandinista Nicaragua, but we are not told that most of those deaths were caused by the US-funded contras, referred to here as the "anti-Sandinista resistance."

A Political Exercise

Despite having been thoroughly discredited by academics — an act in which even some of the authors of the book themselves participated — *The Black Book of Communism* sold millions of copies and has been translated into at least thirty languages. In contrast, a polemical response titled [*Le siècle des communismes*](#) (*The Century of Communism*), published in 2000, has still not yet been translated into English, let alone other languages. This is in spite of the fact that the book lists among its contributors renowned scholars such as Michaël Lowy, Lewis Siegelbaum, and Brigitte Studer.

Despite having been thoroughly discredited by academics, *The Black Book of Communism* sold millions of copies and has been translated into at least thirty languages. In the French context, the publication of *The Black Book* was, above all, an attack on the PCF and its legacy. In the autumn of 1997, just as *The Black Book* was being published, the French Communists formed a coalition government with the Socialist Party and the Greens that had the Socialist leader Lionel Jospin as prime minister. Within a week of the book's publication, figures from the right-wing parliamentary opposition cited the book as they attacked the Socialists, asking how Jospin's party could ally with people who advocated for "murderous regimes." The prime minister gave the following response:

Even though it did not distance itself soon enough from Stalinism, the Communist Party has learned the lessons of history, it is represented in my government, and I am proud of this. The French Communist Party formed part of the cartel of the left in the Popular Front, in the Resistance, in the tripartite Government formed in 1945 and it has never tried to restrict freedom.

Such arguments were deemed irrelevant by Jospin's critics, for whom communism had been branded as a criminal ideology by "experts" who had given their viewpoint scientific integrity.

This approach proved to be extremely useful for ruling classes around the world, who often offered financial and media support to promote *The Black Book of Communism*. The German and Estonian translations, for example, included prefaces by Joachim Gauck and Lennart Meri, the presidents of Germany and Estonia at the time. In Russia, after the appearance of the official edition with a preface by Mikhail Gorbachev's close associate Aleksandr Yakovlev, there was also a special edition made available, in a print run of one hundred thousand copies, by the Union of Right Forces of Boris Nemtsov, Anatoly Chubais, and Yegor Gaidar.

The book was distributed free of charge at schools and in the streets. The Union of Right Forces was essentially a political party of millionaires, run by the architects of the privatization program in Russia under Boris Yeltsin. According to data from the US National Institutes of Health, free-market "shock therapy" claimed between two and a half and three million lives in the 90s, showing that privatization can be just as deadly as the collectivization of agriculture. The book subsequently gained traction in Ukraine, where it provided ideological support for the "decommunization" process, in which Courtois himself took part.

It would be unfair, however, to attribute the book's success solely to a concentrated propaganda campaign by states and right-wing political organizations. The *Black Book of Communism* provided an easy-to-remember number (one hundred million), a superficial equation (Nazism = Communism), and a semblance of academic rigor and objectivity that was ideal for everything from bar-room discussions to political attacks in parliaments.

Repeating a few basic bombastic postulates, without going into the details of the book or its scientific validity, is enough to pass as an argument. Although in scholarly circles you will rarely find the *Black Book* cited in the footnotes, the specter of that book has been haunting politicians identified with the Left for the past twenty-five years. Therein lies the nature of the book's victory and the key to its enduring popularity.

<https://jacobin.com/2025/01/black-book-communism-courtois-history>