Introduction

Stalin: What Does the Name Stand for?

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The present issue of "Crisis and Critique" is devoted to a very peculiar question "Stalin: What does the name stand for?" This question is formally peculiar because it openly and unambiguously mimics the title of one of Alain Badiou's books, namely of his notorious "The Meaning of Sarkozy"[1], whose original title in was French "*De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom*?" – which might literally be translated as: Of what is Sarkozy the name?, or: What does this name stand for? What is thus the motivation to gather today, and under the present condition, thinkers of different nationalities, different theoretical backgrounds and from different disciplines to contribute to an exclusive issue on Stalin under such a title?

An immediate reaction, maybe a rather common one, to the title of the present issue might be: We all know what the name of Stalin stands for. It stands for one of the most horrific and violent phases within the history of exploring and putting to work an at least allegedly emancipatory politics. Politically, it stands for the explosion of state terror, for mass murder, crimes that still seem to go well beyond belief, and for the moment (of truth?) where an (allegedly) emancipatory collective political project (communism, as conceived by Lenin) turns and perverts its self-declared universalist dimension into a cruel universalism of violence, paranoia and executions, where the only thing that is structurally shared by anyone – with the exception of one, that is: Stalin – is that he or she might for no reasons at all be deported, sentenced to death, sent to Gulag, or something brutally alike. This moment is precisely the moment that Slavoj Žižek justifiably referred to as the moment when the Communist Party of the Soviet Union committed suicide.[2] In this sense, content-wise the title of the present issue is peculiar. Because from such a – today common sense and commonsensical – perspective, Stalin is a tyrant, a totalitarian tyrant and one of the greatest criminals of all time. But if one, and there is no question that this is true, states that the Stalinist state was a tyrannical and terrorist state what remains unthought, and what is peculiarly left aside, is the very reason for this very constitution. To put this in very simple terms: Why did the Stalinist state of terror evolve? Why did it constitute itself as it did? Was it a contingent and arbitrary deviation, or a structurally necessary outcome?

As long as these questions are not answered, in one way or the other, what the name "Stalin" stands for remains obscure. So obscure that one can seemingly pair Stalin and Hitler and add potentially a great number of other terrorist tyrants to the list, which for – again – obscure reasons were able to charm the people into their own catastrophe. Yet, if it remains obscure how Stalin(ism) became what it was – and

1   Badiou 2010.

2   Žižek 2002, p.88-140

also as what it is conceived today –, it is hard not only to comprehend where the terrorist dimension of the Stalinist state sprang from, but even more so: to properly criticize it. For, was it really, as is so often and frequently assumed and claimed, an expression of a pathologically paranoid individual (which obviously is a quite simplifying and, in a bad sense, psychologizing explanation)? Aside from the many problems that such a pathologization of one individual comes with (and there are obviously more than a lot), its result is even more problematic. For it mostly, if not always, generates a situation in which the analysis of a political disaster is avoided and is replaced by an unexplained explainer: individual pathologization. One thereby pretends to speak about politics and political problems without ever speaking about politics and political problems. And even worse. If what happened is so difficult to cognize and grasp that one pathological individual culprit becomes the symbolic embodiment of what one seeks to avoid to think (a true political disaster), this always leads to a situation where not only is political analysis evacuated from the picture, but even worse one is left with a situation that defies rational explanation. One abbreviated way of putting it would be: "Stalin" exceeds comprehensibility, "Stalin" exceeds thought and reason. But if this were the case, the name "Stalin" and what it stands for would not only be incomprehensible, it would name a fundamental failure of rational access, a limit of thought as it were.[3]

The present issue of "Crisis and Critique" starts from the assumption that it is crucial not to grant all too swiftly that some 'things' and events just (abstractly) escape the grasp of reason and thought. Rather it affirms the very capacity of (rationalist) thought and assumes that there is always also a rationality of the irrational. One can think that which *seems* to defy reason, without in any manner justifying it. This is why the present issue of "Crisis and Critique" does in no way, and to no degree defend "Stalin" or Stalin, neither do we engage in and propagate a simple and also abstract defense of Stalinism, which, as we would contend, is impossible anyhow. But, we unrestrictedly want to affirm the need for and the necessity of concrete analyses of the very rationality of that which is often deemed to be and maybe is, for different *reasons* though, fundamentally irrational. We assume that this can help to clarify not only an important and at the same time disastrous period within the history of emancipatory politics, but it can also strengthen the grasp of the contemporary situation we are in, including its own ways and rationale of representing the unthinkable evils that "Stalin" stands for. This is, according to us, of utmost importance, since it has always been in the periods in which rather conservative, reactionary or, more technically put: counter-revolutionary parties, elements and tendencies became

a determining force that the prior (rather) revolutionary periods were invalidated and condemned, and part of this condemnation was to render unintelligible what is condemned in the act of condemning it – and this is a crucial operation for ensuring the very abolishment of any possible resurgence of the condemned.

Alain Badiou has called this very operation a Thermidorian one[4] – as it historically emerged as a reaction to the proceedings of the French Revolution – and has recently noted in a different context that "one should not forget that during one century, until in the 20th century the historical school of Mathiez and his successors appeared, Robespierre was considered as is today Stalin. In both cases, what we have is that subjective operators of the revolution are rendered unintelligible by means of the form of a pathology of History, which removes of them entirely any figure of political rationality."[5] Without endorsing any similarity between Robespierre and Stalin, there is, obviously, a formal similarity concerning the situation of analyses of what went wrong.

The present issue of "Crisis and Critique" gathers a collection of thinkers that, from a variety of perspectives and theoretical convictions, do not shy away from and courageously confront the unintelligibility that contemporary thought still faces under the name "Stalin," such that it might become finally thinkable and accessible, what it stood, stands and will stand for.

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4   Badiou 2012, pp- 124-140.

5   Badiou 2011.

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3   Weirdly, this is what the early Frankfurt School with regard to the Nazi regime always feared but at the same time came always very close to nonetheless involuntarily endorsing.