

# Party men

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Theodore Odrach

WAVE OF TERROR

Translated by Erma Odrach

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Theodore Odrach's novel *Wave of Terror* (newly translated by his daughter Erma Odrach) belongs to a subgenre of twentieth-century fiction: novels of Stalin. Stalin may not make a personal appearance, but his image appears with increasing frequency over the course of the book, which describes the arrival, in a small town in Ukraine, of the Soviet political apparatus – with attendant black farce and grinding horror. And the state Stalin built, whose qualities are precisely black farce and horror, is as much the subject of the novel as the sufferings of its hero, the schoolteacher Ivan Kulik.

*Wave of Terror* has a simple, tightly wound plot. It opens in the village of Hlaby, with Kulik staring out into a leaden winter vista and reflecting that "there is no more hope". There follow, in short order, the visit of two moronic state apparatchiks, Leyzerov and Kovzalo, a mismanaged Party meeting, full of bumbling oratory and barely veiled menace, a disastrous redistribution of the local boyar's property, Kulik's frustrated attempts to win the heart of the arrogant, naive Marusia, the rise to power of Dounia, a former fishmonger (and the simultaneous lover of the two Party men who lecture Kulik

on his place in the new state), and the arrival of Sobakin, a brutal officer of the NKVD, Stalin's feared internal security service. Sobakin attempts to rape Marusia and fails; Kulik spends an evening comforting her; Sobakin, sensing a rival, has Kulik brought before an interrogator, who does him no harm but tries to press him into service as an informer. The book ends with Kulik scrambling through the woods in the first days of spring, a fugitive with a renewed sense of purpose and hope. "He believed his life was not over" runs the book's final sentence. And indeed it was not: *Wave of Terror* is modelled closely on Odrach's own experiences as a schoolteacher, fugitive and exile.

Autobiographical novels, particularly those that describe hellish political sufferings, often rely for effect more on their power as testimony than their achievements as litera-

ture. Odrach's prose, however, is ingenuous and lucid – it deals with the soul-destroying and the comical with a similar detachment and confidence. And it brings to mind Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, another oblique indictment of Stalin, which shows how easily the human mind can adapt to the most extreme circumstances. As well as a constant, agonized frustration with the state's absurd demand that the children of Hlaby, all native Ukrainian speakers, be instructed in Belorussian, Kulik has to bear a growing fear of informers, and a series of capricious rejections from Marusia.

It is not surprising that a novel so concerned with oppression and escape would be defined primarily by a meticulous, crushing plot and distilled, stripped-down prose. But there are moments when Odrach's direct concern with the Soviet state seems to waver. On his way to a tryst with Dounia, Leyzerov, the Party man, attempts to shoot a peacock with his service revolver, crying out "I got you, you bourgeois bastard! I won!", then falling into the icy river. Kulik appoints as head boy his class's most vicious youngster, who reforms with Dostoevskian speed. These absurd and human events, from outside the political scope of the novel, give it a rich atmosphere, and show that Theodore Odrach is that rare thing, a political novelist who is also an artist of the first rank.

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