

## The Objectives of the Great Terror, 1937–1938

*Oleg Khlevnyuk*

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### Editor's Introduction

The aspect of Stalinism that has attracted more attention than any other is the Great Terror – one of the most deadly and bizarre episodes in all human history. In the late 1930s, millions of innocent people, including many high ranking Communist Party members, were imprisoned or shot by the Soviet secret police. The Great Terror is the term given to this massive use of state violence which included both the Great Purges of Party members and wide-ranging arrests and executions of average Soviet citizens. Many historians have sought to explain why the terror took place. While no one denies Stalin's involvement in the terror, scholars attribute varying degrees of responsibility to him. Some scholars believe that Stalin masterminded all aspects of the terror and was personally responsible for the murder of millions of people. Other scholars, while not exonerating Stalin, stress systemic or political factors that caused or at least fueled the terror.

The totalitarian model presented terror as an integral part of the Soviet system. One totalitarian theorist even postulated that purging was a permanent and necessary component of Soviet totalitarianism – a hypothesis proven wrong when bloody purges ceased after Stalin's death.<sup>1</sup> Radical revisionists have also looked beyond Stalin to explain why the Great Terror

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<sup>1</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Permanent Purge: Politics in Soviet Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956). Some historians of the totalitarian school nonetheless stress Stalin's role; see Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York, 1990).

occurred. J. Arch Getty, for example, argues that the Great Purges were not a planned, coherent policy controlled by Stalin, but rather an extreme form of political infighting within the Party. What began as an attempt by Stalin and other leaders to consolidate control over local Party organizations spun out of control after rank-and-file Communists were encouraged to denounce their local bosses and Party members began to settle scores with one another. Getty and another revisionist, Gabor Rittersporn, also stress the extreme social tensions within the country and widespread fear of conspiracies and foreign spies to explain how the purges turned deadly.<sup>2</sup>

Oleg Khlevnyuk's pioneering research in the former Communist Party archives has shed a great deal of light on Stalin's use of terror. In the following selection, Khlevnyuk cites previously classified documents of the Politburo (the Communist Party's supreme council) to argue that the Great Terror was clearly orchestrated from the top. The Politburo in fact sent quotas for arrests and executions to the NKVD (the Soviet secret police), which carried out the terror. These quotas were directed at specific groups within the population – expelled Party members, former opposition party members, certain national minorities, former kulaks, criminals, and other “anti-Soviet elements.” Both the Great Purges within the Party and the Great Terror overall, then, were centrally controlled efforts to eliminate purported enemies of the ruling Politburo. Khlevnyuk acknowledges that local authorities in some cases over-fulfilled their quotas, but he maintains that it would be wrong to attribute the terror to local initiative, given that the Politburo ceaselessly demanded increased “struggle with the enemy.”

In addition to demonstrating that the terror was controlled from the center, Khlevnyuk presents evidence that it was directed by Stalin himself. Stalin was the author of many of the Politburo directives on the terror, and he personally approved lists of individuals and groups to be arrested and executed. Khlevnyuk also assesses Stalin's objectives in carrying out the Great Terror. While not dismissing the possibility that Stalin's paranoia or vindictiveness contributed to the terror, Khlevnyuk makes the case that Stalin launched the terror to eliminate any potential opposition in the event of war. By examining the particular groups targeted by the terror, he concludes that Stalin and his inner circle sought to remove all strata of the population that were hostile or potentially hostile to them. Stalin

<sup>2</sup> J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (New York, 1985); Gabor T. Rittersporn, *Stalinist Simplifications and Soviet Complications: Social Tensions and Political Conflicts in the U.S.S.R., 1933–1953* (Chur, NY, 1991); and “The Omnipresent Conspiracy: On Soviet Imagery of Politics and Social Relations in the 1930s,” in Nick Lampert and Rittersporn, eds., *Stalinism: Its Nature and Aftermath: Essays in Honour of Moshe Lewin* (Armonk, NY, 1991).

considered these targeted groups a potential “fifth column” of internal opposition in the event of war with a foreign country. Viacheslav Molotov, one of Stalin's closest supporters within the Politburo, made this very argument late in his life when he recalled the Great Terror; he maintained that it was absolutely necessary to eliminate anyone who could not be counted on to support the Soviet government, especially given the growing threat of fascism and likelihood of war.

Ever since the October Revolution in 1917, the foreign threat had loomed large in the minds of Communist leaders. During the Civil War which followed the Revolution, several foreign countries, including the United States, Britain, France and Japan, had sent troops to intervene on the side of anti-Communist forces. This foreign intervention confirmed the Communists' fears that the capitalist countries were eager to overthrow and eliminate the fledgling Soviet state. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the threat posed by “capitalist encirclement” weighed on Communist leaders, including Stalin himself who continually warned of both internal and external enemies. This threat became much more concrete with the rising international tensions of the late 1930s. Hitler, who came to power in Germany in 1933, made no secret of the fact that he planned military aggression to expand eastward. His military build-up and belligerent moves in the second half of the 1930s made this threat more imminent. At the same time, Japan was engaged in its own military aggression in Manchuria and increasingly threatened Soviet territory as well.

At the time of the Great Terror, then, the foreign threat and likelihood of war were very tangible to Communist leaders. They could not help but think of the possible consequences for themselves in the event of war. Khlevnyuk cites the classic Stalin biography by Isaac Deutscher, who imagines a conversation between Stalin and the ghost of Nicholas II, the Russian tsar overthrown by the 1917 Revolution.<sup>3</sup> The Revolution had been precipitated by the horrendous military losses suffered by the tsarist army during the First World War. Military defeats had discredited the tsar and emboldened his opponents, among them the Bolsheviks (Communists) who ultimately came to power and who executed the tsar and his family during the Civil War. In the event of another great war, Stalin too had to worry about internal challenges to his leadership. Eliminating potential opponents within the Party and the population as a whole served as a preemptive strike against any such opposition.

Khlevnyuk is not seeking to justify the use of terror through his explanation of Stalin's motives. By killing millions of people, including many high-ranking Party officials and army officers, Stalin greatly weakened the country on the eve of the Second World War, and hence undermined the

<sup>3</sup> Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography*, 2nd edn. (New York, 1966).

ability of his regime to withstand the Nazi invasion. Nonetheless, the foreign threat in the late 1930s was genuine, and it provided an impetus for dealing with internal enemies, real or imagined. That Stalin chose the Great Terror as his method for dealing with enemies remains a matter for historical and moral judgment. But Khlevnyuk makes a strong case that Stalin's motives for using terror went beyond any personal vendettas or paranoia.

It is possible to see the foreign threat as a cause for all of Stalinism, not just the Great Terror. Given Russia's crushing defeat in the First World War, and the extreme international tensions of the interwar period, some scholars have argued that Stalinism was necessary to prepare the country militarily. At the time of the First World War, Russia was far less industrialized than western European countries, Germany in particular, and its weaknesses in industry and transportation contributed greatly to its military defeats. Following the Revolution, all Communist leaders and many non-Communist engineers and technical specialists agreed that the Soviet Union needed to industrialize quickly. The precise pace of industrialization and the means by which to achieve it remained topics of debate, but when Stalin launched his highly coercive collectivization and industrialization campaigns at the end of the 1920s, he received the support of most Party members. One historian, Theodore von Laue, has in fact argued that Stalinism was a logical if horrific response to the intense foreign threat of the interwar period and the need to industrialize at any cost.<sup>4</sup>

As with the Great Terror, the causes of Stalin's forced collectivization and industrialization drives remain important topics for historians to discuss. To point out the foreign threat does not necessarily negate the importance of Communist ideology or Stalin's personal predilections. Still, it is important to consider the foreign threat as one factor that, either by itself or in conjunction with other factors, caused Stalinism. Khlevnyuk's pioneering research on the Great Terror provides important evidence for making this historical judgment.

## The Objectives of the Great Terror, 1937–1938

*Oleg Khlevnyuk*

The mass repression in the Soviet Union in 1937–8, variously referred to as the Great Terror or the 'Ezhovshchina', has produced a volume of monographs, articles and memoirs, which have examined the phenomena from a diversity of viewpoints.<sup>1</sup> However, many of the circumstances surrounding this tragedy remain obscure. In particular there is little information concerning the mechanism whereby the repression was organised and carried out. Most of the NKVD's documents for this period remain in the KGB's archives and are not available for researchers. In the still closed Presidential archives there is a large volume of material concerning the activities of the Politburo and Stalin in 1937–8. In republican, provincial and local archives there is a wealth of material on how central directives were implemented in the localities.

The detailed study of these problems will require much time and effort by historians. That work has only just started. The lack of information and insufficient research mean that many questions cannot yet be fully answered. Some of the most intriguing questions concern the relationship between centralism and 'local initiative' in the events of 1937–8. More work is needed to determine the system whereby the victims of repression were selected, the objectives of the purgers, as well as the question of the actual number of the victims who were repressed.

In the present article, which draws on new documents including those from the Politburo's special files (*osobyie papki*), an attempt is made to present in general outline the mechanism of repression in 1937–8, and on this basis to determine what were the objectives of the organisers of the terror.

Almost all historians are agreed in fixing the commencement of the new stage of Stalinist repression at the end of the summer–beginning

This chapter was originally translated by E. A. Rees.

<sup>1</sup> See for example R. A. Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* (New York, 1971); R. Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York, 1990); J. A. Getty, *The Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (New York, 1985); G. T. Rittersporn, *Stalinist Simplifications and Soviet Complications: Social Tensions and Political Conflicts in the USSR, 1933–1953* (Philadelphia, 1991); J. A. Getty and R. T. Manning (eds), *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Theodore von Laue, *Why Lenin? Why Stalin? Why Gorbachev? The Rise and Fall of the Soviet System* (New York, 1993); von Laue, "Stalin in Focus," *Slavic Review*, vol. 42, no. 3 (1983).

of the autumn of 1936. In June Stalin instructed the NKVD to organise a new political trial of Trotskyists and Zinovievists.<sup>2</sup> On 29 June the Central Committee of the CPSU dispatched to the localities a secret letter concerning 'the terrorist activities of the Trotskyist-Zinovievist counterrevolutionary bloc',<sup>3</sup> on the basis of which many former oppositionists were repressed. In August in Moscow there took place the trial of the so-called 'anti-Soviet joint Trotskyist-Zinovievist centre'. All 16 of the accused, including L. B. Kamenev and G. E. Zinoviev, were shot. In the country there followed a wave of new arrests.

On 26 September on Stalin's insistence the Politburo removed G. G. Yagoda from the post of People's Commissar of Internal Affairs (NKVD USSR) and appointed in his place N. I. Ezhov, who for several years, at Stalin's behest, had exercised a supervisory role over the NKVD. On 29 September Stalin signed the Politburo decree, 'Concerning the counterrevolutionary Trotskyist-Zinovievist elements'.<sup>4</sup> The decree in effect demanded the total destruction of former oppositionists.

In the following few months mass arrests were carried out in the economic, state and party institutions. In January 1937 there took place the second great Moscow trial of the so-called 'Parallel Anti-Soviet Trotskyist Centre'.

The first results of the purge were reviewed by the Central Committee plenum of February-March 1937. On the eve of the plenum the Sector of Leading Party Organs of the Central Committee, headed by G. M. Malenkov, compiled inventories (*spravki*) of nomenklatura officials of various departments. The *spravki* comprised several lists. In the first were listed the names of leading officials, who had already been dismissed from their posts, expelled from the party and arrested. In the remaining lists were given the names of other officials who had not yet been arrested but who had committed various 'sins': who had participated in the different oppositions, who 'had deviated', who had in the past been members of other parties etc.<sup>5</sup> The majority of those named in these lists were soon to be repressed.

The *spravka* which Malenkov prepared for Stalin and dated 15 February 1937 noted the great number of former party members in the USSR. (Many of the facts and theses from the *spravka* were noted by Stalin in his speeches to the February-March plenum.) Malenkov wrote:

It should be noted in particular that at the present time in the country there number over 1,500,000 former members and candidate members

<sup>2</sup> *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, 1989, no. 8, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100-15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 9, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> *RTsKhIDNI*, 17/71/43, 44, 45, 46 etc.

of the party, who have been expelled and mechanically dismissed at various times from 1922 onwards. In many enterprises there are concentrated a significant number of former communists, with the result that sometimes they exceed the numerical composition of the party organisations which work in these enterprises'.

For example at the Kolomenskiy locomotive building works, the *spravka* noted, compared to 1,408 communists there were 2,000 former party members; at the Krasnoe Sormovo works there were 2,200 members and 550 former members, at the Moscow Ball Bearing Works 1,084 members and 452 former members, etc.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the participants at the February-March plenum spoke of the presence in the country of a great number of 'anti-Soviet elements', and 'offenders'. The secretary of the West Siberia kraikom R. I. Eikhe reported that in 11 years from 1926 to 1937 in the krai 93,000 individuals were expelled from the party whilst in the krai party organisation at the beginning of 1937 there were 44,000 communists. 'Amongst those expelled', Eikhe declared, 'there are no small number of direct enemies of the party. They were in the party, they acquired certain political habits and will attempt to utilise this against us.' In the krai, Eikhe continued, there lived also a great number of exiles, former kulaks. Amongst these there remained 'a not insignificant group of inveterate enemies, who will attempt by all means to continue the struggle'.<sup>7</sup> The secretary of the party organisation of Turkmeniya, Popok, also spoke of the evident danger which was posed by former kulaks who had returned from imprisonment and exile: The great number of kulaks who passed through Solovki and other camps and now as 'honourable' toilers return home, demand allotment of their land, making all kinds of demands, going to the kolkhoz and demanding admission to the kolkhoz.<sup>8</sup> At the plenum others emphasised the fact of the existence of millions of believers in the country with many priests who retained no small influence.<sup>9</sup> The necessity of continuing the struggle with enemies was indicated by the main reports to the plenum from Stalin, Molotov and Ezhov.

In the months following the February-March plenum the policy of unmasking and arresting former oppositionists continued. On 23 May 1937 the Politburo sanctioned the expulsion from Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev to the 'non-industrial regions of the Union' of all those expelled from the party for membership of the various oppositions together with

<sup>6</sup> *RTsKhIDNI*, 17/2/773, 115.

<sup>7</sup> *Voprosy Istorii*, 1993, no. 6, pp. 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 5, pp. 4-5, 14-15; no. 6, pp. 8, 21-2.

those accused of 'anti-Soviet manifestations (the dissemination of hostile views in lectures and in the press)'. Those expelled also included the families of those sentenced to be shot for political crimes, and those sentenced to imprisonment for five years and upwards. On 8 June the Politburo sanctioned the expulsion from the Azov-Black Sea krai to Kazakhstan of the families of 'arrested Trotskyists and rightists'.<sup>10</sup> In March-June 1937 there continued the arrest of party and state leaders at various levels. Mass arrests now began in earnest in the leadership of the Red Army.

Up until the middle of 1937, therefore, the main blow of repression was directed against members of the party, mainly those who had in their time participated in the oppositions or who had shown some kind of dissent with Stalinist policies. Repression began also in the organs of power: inside the NKVD many of Yagoda's people were arrested, in the army cases were fabricated against a number of senior military officers. The new stage in the purge was heralded by the decision of the Politburo of 28 June 1937, 'Concerning the uncovering in West Siberia of a counter-revolutionary insurrectionary organisation amongst exiled kulaks'. The resolution ordered the shooting of all 'activists of the insurrectionary organisation'. To speed up the investigation of their cases a troika was established comprising the head of the NKVD of Western Siberia (Mironov), the procurator of the krai (Barkov) and the party secretary of the krai (Eikhe).<sup>11</sup>

Within a few days the practice of establishing troiki was extended to the whole country. On 2 July 1937 a Politburo resolution 'Concerning anti-Soviet elements' sanctioned the carrying out of operations which became a pivot of the mass repression of 1937-8. By a resolution of the Politburo the following telegram was sent to the secretaries of the oblast committees, krai committees and the Central Committees of national communist parties:

It is noted that the majority of former kulaks and criminals, who were exiled, at one time from various oblasts to the northern and Siberian regions and then with the completion of the sentences of exile have returned to their oblasti - are the main instigators of all kinds of anti-Soviet and diversionary crimes.

The Central Committee ordered the secretaries of oblasti and krai organisations and all oblast, krai and republican representatives of the NKVD to take account of all kulaks and criminals who returned to their areas of domicile so that the most hostile of them should be immediately

<sup>10</sup> *Protokoly zasedanii Politbyuro, osobaya papka.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

arrested and shot. These cases were to be handled administratively through the troiki, whilst the remainder, the less active but still hostile elements, were to be resettled and sent to the regions designated by the NKVD.

The Central Committee required the local authorities within five days to present to the Central Committee the composition of the troiki, and the number to be shot as well as the number to be exiled.<sup>12</sup>

In the following weeks lists of the troiki and information concerning the number of 'anti-Soviet elements' were received from the localities, and on this basis orders were prepared within the NKVD for the implementation of the operation. On 30 July Ezhov's deputy in the NKVD, M. P. Frinovskii, who had been assigned responsibility for implementing this action, sent to the Politburo for its approval the NKVD's operational order NOO447, 'Concerning the operation for repressing former kulaks, criminals and other anti-Soviet elements'. The order fixed the beginning of the operation, depending on region, from 5-15 August; it was to be completed in four months' time.

Above all the order laid down 'the contingents to be subject to repression'. In reality it included all who in whatever degree had struggled against Soviet power or had been victims of former repressions: kulaks, those released from or who had fled from exile, former members of disbanded parties (SRs, Georgian Mensheviks, Mussavats, Dashnaks etc.), former White Guards, surviving tsarist officials, those arrested, charged with terror and spying-diversionary activities, political prisoners, those held in labour camps etc. On one of the later places in this list were included criminals.

All those to be repressed, in accordance with this order, were divided into two categories: first those subject to immediate arrest and shooting; second those subject to imprisonment in labour camps or prison for periods from 8 to 10 years. All oblasti, kraia and republics in the order were assigned quotas (*limity*) for those to be repressed for each of the two categories (on the basis of information concerning the number of 'anti-Soviet elements', which the local authorities had sent to Moscow). A total of 259,450 individuals were to be arrested, of these 72,950 were to be shot (including 10,000 in the camps). These figures were deliberately incomplete since the quotas omitted a number of regions of the country. The order gave local leaders the right to request from Moscow additional quotas for repression. Moreover, to those imprisoned in camps or in exile might be added the families of the repressed.

Troiki were established in the republics, kraia and oblasti to decide the fate of those arrested. As a rule they included the narkom or adminis-

<sup>12</sup> *Trud*, 4 June, 1992, p. 1.

trative head of the NKVD, the secretary of the corresponding party organisation and the procurator of the republic, krai or oblast. The troiki were accorded extraordinary powers, to pass sentences (including shootings) and issue orders for their implementation without any check. On 31 July this order of the NKVD was approved by the Politburo.<sup>13</sup>

From the end of August the Central Committee received from local leaders requests to increase the quotas for repression. From 27 August to 15 December the Politburo sanctioned increasing the quotas for various regions for the first category by almost 22,500 and for the second category by 16,800 individuals.<sup>14</sup>

Besides the general operation to liquidate 'anti-Soviet elements' there were organised several special actions. On 20 July 1937 the Politburo ordered the NKVD to arrest all Germans, who were working in defence factories and to deport some of them abroad. On 9 August the Politburo confirmed the order of the NKVD USSR 'Concerning the liquidation of the Polish diversionist group and organisation POV' (Polish Organisation of Military Personnel). On 19 September the Politburo approved the NKVD order 'Concerning measures in connection with the terrorist diversionary and spying activities of Japanese agents of the so-called Harbintsy' (former workers of the Chinese Eastern Railway, who had been resettled in the USSR following the sale of the Chinese Eastern Railway to Japan in 1935).<sup>15</sup>

In the second half of 1937 there was carried out also the mass expulsion from frontier regions of 'unreliable elements'. The largest expulsion was the deportation from the Far Eastern krai of the entire Korean population to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan which was implemented on the basis of the Central Committee – Sovnarkom resolution of 21 August 1937 with the stated aim of 'suppressing penetration by Japanese espionage in the Far Eastern krai'.<sup>16</sup>

An important component part of the mechanism of mass repression was the conducting of numerous trials both in the capital and in the localities. As distinct from the secret courts and the absolutely secret sessions of the troiki open trials fulfilled an important propaganda role. Therefore sanction for the conducting of the main trials was given directly by the Politburo. It also as a rule determined in advance the sentence, most commonly shooting. The Politburo was especially active in

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> *Protokoly zasedanii Politbyuro, osobaya papka*. See also *Moskovskie novosti*, 21 June 1992, pp. 18–19.

<sup>15</sup> *Protokoly zasedanii Politbyuro, osobaya papka*. On the fate of the Harbintsy see: A. Sutorin, *Delo kraevogo masshtaba* (Khabarovsk, 1991) pp. 195–213.

<sup>16</sup> See *Belaya kniga o deportatsii koreiskogo naseleniya Rossii v 30–40-kh godakh* (M., 1992) tom. 1.

the second half of 1937 in sanctioning the organisation of these trials. From 8 August to 17 December 1937 the Politburo approved the conducting of about 40 trials in various regions of the country.<sup>17</sup>

At the beginning of 1938 signals were issued from Moscow, which it seemed, indicated a cessation of the purge. On 9 January the Politburo ruled as incorrect the dismissal from work of relatives of individuals, arrested for counterrevolutionary crimes, only on the grounds of their being relatives, and charged the USSR's Procurator, A. Ya. Vyshinskii to give corresponding instructions to the organs of the procuracy.<sup>18</sup> On 19 January the press published the resolution of the Central Committee, 'Concerning the mistakes of party organisations in the expulsion of communists from the party, of the formal-bureaucratic attitude to appeals of those expelled from the CPSU and of measures for correcting these deficiencies', which demanded greater attention to the fate of party members. Certain token measures in connection with these resolutions was undertaken by the leadership of the USSR's Procuracy and by Narkomyust.<sup>19</sup>

The true meaning of these political manoeuvres still remains obscure. Certain indications concerning the preparation of the campaign allow us to assert that the operation against the 'anti-Soviet elements', as noted above, was to be completed in four months, i.e. by November–December 1937 (depending on region). It is possible, that having this circumstance in mind Stalin was prepared at the beginning of 1938 to terminate the purge and that he wished to give a clear signal to this effect to the January plenum of the Central Committee. In support of such a proposition might be cited the fact that the announcement of the 'relaxation' at the beginning of 1939 at the XVIII party congress was also carried through on the basis of the slogan for a more attentive attitude to the fate of communists. The report on this question at the January plenum and at the XVIII party congress were both made by G. M. Malenkov.

<sup>17</sup> It is difficult to give precise figures for the number of trials sanctioned by the Politburo since in a number of cases the resolution does not give a precise figure. For example on 14 November 1937 the Politburo instructed the Archangel obkom to conduct two or three cases of 'wreckers in the timber industry'. From the decisions of the Politburo it is also not always clear whether they had in mind an open trial. For example on 15 November the Politburo charged the Novosibirsk obkom that 'those apprehended concerning the explosion at Prokop'evsk should be brought before the court and shot, the shooting to be publicised in the Novosibirsk press' (*Protokoly zasedanii Politbyuro, osobaya papka*).

<sup>18</sup> RTsKhIDNI, 17/3/994, 56. This resolution was formulated as a resolution of Sovnarkom USSR of 10 January 1938 (GARF, 5446/57/53, 27).

<sup>19</sup> P. H. Solomon Jr., 'Soviet Criminal Justice and the Great Terror', *Slavic Review*, vol. 46, no. 3, 1987, pp. 405–6.



Whatever the truth of this argument the resolution of the January plenum of 1938 remained no more than a political declaration. The purge could not be completed in four months. On 31 January 1938 the Politburo adopted the proposal of the NKVD USSR 'Concerning the confirmation of additional numbers of those subject to repression of former kulaks, criminals and active anti-Soviet elements'. By 15 March (in the Far East by 1st April) it was prescribed, within the operation for eliminating 'anti-Soviet elements', to repress an additional 57,200 individuals, of whom 48,000 were to be shot. Correspondingly the powers of the troiki, who were to carry out this work, were extended.<sup>20</sup> Also on 31 January the Politburo authorised the NKVD to extend until 15 April the operation for destroying the so-called 'counterrevolutionary nationalist contingent-Poles, Letts, Germans, Estonians, Finns, Greeks, Iranians, Harbinty, Chinese and Romanians'. Furthermore, the Politburo charged the NKVD that it should complete by 15 April analogous operations and destroy (*pogromit'*) the cadres of Bulgarians and Macedonians, both those of foreign origin and those who were citizens of the USSR.<sup>21</sup>

After confirming these new quotas for repression the history of the previous year was repeated: local leaders began to request increasing the quotas and extending the duration of the operation. From 1 February to 29 August 1939 the Politburo approved additions to the January quotas for those to be repressed by about 90,000 people.<sup>22</sup> And this meant also in fact approving the breaching of the April deadline on the duration of the operation.

In 1938 the campaign of political trials was continued. For the year as a whole the Politburo sanctioned the conducting of about 30 trials, of which seven were in January 1938.

Only in the autumn of 1938 was the terror reined in. The examination of cases by the troiki was forbidden by the directive of Sovnarkom-Central Committee of 15 November 1938.<sup>23</sup> The joint Sovnarkom-Central Committee resolution of 17 November 1938 forbade the carrying out of 'mass operations for arrest and exile'.<sup>24</sup> On 24 November Ezhov was released from his post as narkom of the NKVD. The great terror was brought to an end.

This brief enumeration, which does not cover all the actions, that comprised what is known as the great terror, allows us to make some observations.

<sup>20</sup> *Moskovskie novosti*, 21 June 1992, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Protokoly zasedanii Politbyuro, osobaya papka*. It is not possible to determine precisely what proportion of these were subject to be shot, since in many cases the Politburo confirmed general figures for the first and second category.

<sup>23</sup> For the text of this directive see *Moskovskie novosti*, 21 June 1992, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, 1992, no. 1, pp. 125-8.

The mass repression of 1937-8 was unquestionably an action directed from the centre; which was planned and administered from Moscow. The Politburo gave orders for the carrying out of the various operations, it approved the operational orders of the NKVD, it sanctioned the organisation of the most important trials. The question of the activities and reorganisations of the NKVD, and the appointment of the responsible officials of this commissariat, occupied in 1937-8, to judge from the protocols, the leading place in the Politburo's work.

The activity of the troiki, as already noted, was regulated by means of quotas on the numbers to be incarcerated in camps and those to be shot. Sentences imposed on a significant proportion of those tried by the Military Collegium of the USSR's Supreme Court, the military tribunals and other 'judicial bodies' were in fact determined in advance by the Politburo's Commission for Legal Matters and confirmed by the Politburo. In this period the Commission for Legal Matters presented its protocols for the approval of the Politburo once a month on average. The texts of these protocols remain unavailable. But evidently they include the 383 lists 'of many thousands of party, soviet, Komsomol, military and economic workers' which, as N. S. Khrushchev revealed at the XX party congress, Ezhov sent to Stalin to be approved.<sup>25</sup> (Ezhov was included in the composition of the Politburo Commission on Legal Matters on 23 January 1937<sup>26</sup> and evidently during the repression played a leading part in it). An example of one of these lists was given in the speech by the deputy chairman of the Committee of Party Control Z. T. Serdyuk at the XXII party congress in October 1961:

Comrade Stalin,

I send for your approval four lists of individuals which are to be sent to the Court of the Military Collegium.

1. List 1 (general)
2. List 2 (former military officials)
3. List 3 (former workers of the NKVD)
4. List 4 (wives of enemies of the people)

I request that you sanction that they all be sentenced to the first category.

Ezhov.<sup>27</sup>

In spite of the fact that the majority of directives concerning the terror were formulated as decisions of the Politburo their true author,

<sup>25</sup> *Reabilitatsiya. Politicheskie protsessy 30-50 kh. godov.* (M., 1991) p. 39.

<sup>26</sup> *Protokoly zasedanii Politbyuro, osobaya papka*.

<sup>27</sup> *XXII s"ezd Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soyuza; Stenograficheskii otchet*, t. III (M., 1962) p. 152.

judging from the existing documents, was Stalin. The Politburo itself in the years of the terror evidently met irregularly. On 14 April 1937 there was adopted the resolution 'with the aim of preparing for the Politburo and in case of especial urgency – also for the resolution of questions of a secret character . . . to create attached to the Politburo of the CC CPSU a permanent commission comprising of comrades Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov, Kaganovich, L., and Ezhov'.<sup>28</sup> The inclusion in this group of Ezhov (who, incidentally, became only a candidate member of the Politburo several months later) testifies to the fact that this simplified procedure was designed primarily to examine questions relating to the NKVD's activity. This was so in practice. Several resolutions, judging by all the evidence, Stalin adopted in fact on his own. The directives of the Central Committee to the localities about the arrests and organisation of trials bore Stalin's signature.<sup>29</sup> In a number of cases Stalin dispatched telegrams with instructions from himself in person. For example on 27 August 1937 in reply to a request from the secretary of the Western obkom of the party, Korotchenko, concerning a trial of 'wreckers active in agriculture in Andreevskii raion' Stalin telegraphed: 'I advise you to sentence the wreckers of Andreevskii raion to be shot, and the shootings to be publicised in the local press.' A similar telegram from Stalin personally the same day was sent to Krasnoyarsk obkom.<sup>30</sup> With a great measure of confidence it is possible to assert that when the documents from the Presidential archive are available, much more evidence will be revealed concerning Stalin's leading role in the organisation of the terror.

The centralised initiation and direction of the terror as a whole does not mean that there were no elements of a spontaneous character. Indeed they existed in all such actions – during the course of collectivisation, and forcible grain requisitioning in 1932–3, in the so-called struggle against 'terrorism' following the murder of Kirov etc. In official language these phenomena were referred to as 'excesses' (*peregib*) or as breaches of socialist legality. To the 'excesses' of the mass repression of 1937–8 it is possible to adduce the high number of deaths during interrogation or the exceeding by local organs of the quotas for arrests and shootings established by Moscow etc. For example, according to incomplete information, the troika of the NKVD of Turkmeniia from August 1937 to September 1938 tried 13,259 individuals although they had a limit of only 6,277.<sup>31</sup> This fact of exceeding the quota by more than double, and also the murder of prisoners under investigation, which was

<sup>28</sup> RTsKhIDNI, 17/3/986, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Tsentr khraneniia sovremennoi dokumentatsii, 89/48/2, 3, 7, 9, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 20.

<sup>30</sup> *Izvestiia*, 10 June 1992, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> *Protokoly zasedanii Sekretariata Tsk VKP (b) osobaya papka*.

concealed by the local organs and not given in accounts, must be taken into consideration in assessing the total number of those repressed.

However, as a whole such spontaneity or initiative by local authorities was planned, deriving from the nature of the orders which were issued by the centre, from the constant demands of Moscow to 'strengthen the struggle with the enemy', from the assignment to the NKVD of the primary task of ruthlessly implementing and breaking all minor attempts to oppose the terror. Up to a certain point the leadership of the country in fact encouraged breaches of their own directives, untying the NKVD's hand, although it was fully cognisant of the fact that the terror went beyond the limits established by the 'control figures'.

As the mass terror of 1937–8 was an action which was directed from the centre, it is logical to ask what aims did it serve for the organisers of the repression and in particular for Stalin. This problem has been repeatedly examined in the literature. Historians have directed attention to such facts as the elimination of a significant proportion of those communists with pre-revolutionary party service, the growing threat of a new war, the replacement of the ruling elite, the unstable state of Stalin's own psychology etc. What we know today regarding the mechanisms of the 'Great Terror' allows us to assert that the main aim of the mass repression of 1937–8 was the removal of all strata of the population, which in the opinion of the country's leaders were hostile or potentially hostile.

The purge at the end of the 1930s was carried out in accordance with the policy of repression implemented in earlier years. The actions that followed one another – expulsions from the party and the arrest of oppositionists, collectivisation and 'dekulakisation', the struggle with 'sabotage of grain requisitioning' and 'theft of socialist property', arrests and exile after the murder of Kirov, mass expulsions from the party and arrests in the course of the exchange of party documents etc. – affected many millions of people. By the middle of the 1930s in the country, as already noted, there were 1.5 million former party members, millions of prisoners in the labour camps and in the so called labour settlements. There were also millions of people who were free but who at various times had been brought to legal account etc. A great problem for the government was the return from exile of 'kulaks' who by the middle of the 1930s were being released and under the new Constitution had their rights restored. Thus the number of those with a grudge (*obizhennyi*) and thus under suspicion (together with their families) included a significant proportion of the country's population. In the conditions of a threat of a new war many of them were considered as a potential 'fifth column'. Amongst those who fell under the constant suspicion of the



Kremlin leadership were the immigrants, representatives of national minorities, many of whom had certain contacts with their co-nationals who lived abroad.

With certain of the formerly repressed individuals the government attempted reconciliation. The resolution of TsIK and Sovnarkom USSR of 16 January 1936 for example foresaw lighter punishments or early release of some of those sentenced by the notorious law of 7 August 1932 concerning the safeguarding of socialist property.<sup>32</sup> The narkom of Justice Krylenko and chairman of the Supreme Court of the RSFSR Bulat, informed M. I. Kalinin, chairman of TsIK USSR, that in implementing this resolution by July 1936 (the resolution foresaw the work would be completed in six months) more than 115,000 cases were to be reexamined. Almost 49,000 of those imprisoned had their sentences cut and about 38,000 were released. This aroused amongst several hundred of prisoners the expectation of being granted a full amnesty.<sup>33</sup>

A still larger action of a similar kind occurred when the mass repression was in full swing. On 23 October 1937 the Politburo charged the USSR's Procuracy and Narkomyust to carry out for the whole union and autonomous republics, kraia and oblasti a check on criminal cases, which involved those who had held positions in the village soviets, kolkhozy, MTS, as well as village and kolkhoz activists. They were to check all cases beginning from 1934. At the same time the Politburo undertook to drop cases and free from punishment those kolkhozniki accused of minor offenses (property, administrative infringements etc.).<sup>34</sup> This action continued for more than two years.<sup>35</sup> The examination of criminal cases involved 1.5 million people. By 10 March 1940 were delivered *spravki* concerning the quashing of convictions on almost 450,000 people and releasing from prison almost 30,000. The cases against 128,000 people were closed, whilst 25,000 had their punishments reduced.<sup>36</sup>

On 22 October 1938 Sovnarkom USSR adopted a resolution which authorised the granting of passports to the children of those in special labour settlements and in exile on attaining 16 years of age 'on the general basis and not to place in their way obstacles to go to education

<sup>32</sup> Approved by the Politburo on 15 January 1936 (RTsKhIDNI, 17/3/974, 174).

<sup>33</sup> RTsKhIDNI, 78/7/207, 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> *Protokoly zasedanii Politbyuro, osobaya papka.*

<sup>35</sup> On 27 July 1939 Sovnarkom USSR adopted a resolution 'Concerning the reexamination of cases of individuals from the kolkhozy and village aktiv, judged in 1934-1937', which recognised the unsatisfactory course of presenting evidence for gaining convictions and demanded the completion of this work in its entirety for the whole country by 1 November 1939 (GARE, 17/57/60, 1).

<sup>36</sup> GARE, 5446/30/277, 24-8.

or to work', although it preserved restrictions on departure to so called 'regime localities'. Before the war about 100,000 people were released from exile by this resolution.<sup>37</sup>

However, the Stalinist leadership always considered terror as its main method of struggle with a potential 'fifth column'. The cruel repression of 1937-8 was above all determined by biographical particulars. The basis for shooting or dispatch to the camps might be an unsuitable pre-revolutionary past, participation in the civil war on the side of the Bolsheviks' enemies, membership of other political parties or oppositionist groups within the CPSU, previous convictions, membership of 'suspect' nationalities (Germans, Poles, Koreans etc.), finally family connections and association with representatives of the enumerated categories. Corresponding accounting of all these contingents of the population through the years was done by the NKVD and the party organs. Following orders from Moscow to the localities the lists were compiled and on this basis arrests were carried out.

Already in the order of the NKVD N00447 'Concerning the operation for the repression of former kulaks, criminals and active anti-Soviet elements' the organs of the NKVD were instructed to investigate 'all criminal contacts of those arrested'. As revealed by numerous memoirs and documents the fulfilment of this task was one of the main objectives of the NKVD's staff. Adopting torture, they fabricated numerous cases of 'counterrevolutionary organisations', in which were numbered the friends, co-workers and relatives of those arrested. On this basis new arrests were carried out. The repression was thus extended to those strata of the population which formally were not subject to the purge. Some of those judged in the purge by biographical data were rehabilitated at the end of 1938-9.

It was by these crude means that the repression was carried out amongst members of the party and leading workers both in the centre and in the localities. At first those arrested were those who in their time had participated in oppositions or had some 'political deviation' (the lists of such workers, compiled on the basis of the study of archival material, was in the hands of the NKVD). Then on the basis of their testimony, obtained in many cases by torture and duress, new arrests were carried out. For 1936 alone 134,000 people were expelled from the party, in 1937 more than 117,000 and in 1938 more than 90,000.<sup>38</sup> Some of them were reinstated. However, many were arrested after their expulsion. As a result of the purge of the party the composition of the ruling

<sup>37</sup> V. N. Zemskov, 'Kulatskaya ssylka v 30-e gody', *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya*, 1991, no. 10, p. 19-20.

<sup>38</sup> RTsKhIDNI, 17/117/873, 23.

elite changed substantially. At the beginning of 1939 the Sector of Leading Party Organs accounted 32,899 leading workers, which were included in the nomenklatura of the Central Committee (narkoms of the USSR and RSFSR, their deputies, heads of chief administrations and obedinenie of the commissariats and their deputies, administrators of trusts and their deputies, directors and chief engineers of many industrial enterprises, directors of MTS and sovkhozy, heads of the political departments (*politotdely*) of the sovkhozy, directors of higher educational institutions and scientific-research institutes, chairmen of oblast and krai ispolkoms, heads and deputy heads of departments of ispolkoms, heads of railway lines and construction projects etc.). Of these 43 per cent were promoted to work in 1937–8. Still more significant was the replacement of the leading party workers. Of 333 secretaries of obkoms, kraikoms and Central Committees of national communist parties who were working at the beginning of 1939 194 were promoted in 1937–8; of 10,902 secretaries of raikoms, gorkoms and okrugsoms of the party 6,909 were appointed to their posts in 1937–8.<sup>39</sup> The changes in the apparat took place through the advancement of young officials and workers.

Not all by any means of the leaders who were repressed suffered for 'political unreliability' (past political sins or close contact with former oppositionists). As with other strata of the population there were amongst the leading workers who suffered many who had an unblemished biography. Researchers have repeatedly noted that with the help of the terror the Stalinist leadership resolved a real existing problem of replacing the older cadres with younger and more educated people.<sup>40</sup> For Stalin such a cadres revolution also had political significance. On the one hand, the promotees, younger cadres advanced as a consequence of the repression, were more amenable to the *vozhd'* than the old guard. On the other hand it was possible to place all responsibility for former lawlessness, economic errors, the difficulties of life of ordinary Soviet people on the repressed leaders.

Those leaders who were repressed did indeed bear their share of responsibility for what had taken place in the country. The dictatorship created the conditions which allowed incredible abuses of power to occur, and many officials took full advantage of this. Having previously encouraged the tyranny of local leaders, the Moscow *vozhd'* in the years of terror turned against these leaders and actively demonstrated his resolution to 'defend' the people from bureaucrats and enemies. For example on 14 May 1937 the Politburo examined the question of the

<sup>39</sup> RTsKhIDNI, 477/1/41, 62–83; 477/1/51, 153–4.

<sup>40</sup> S. Fitzpatrick, 'Stalin and the Making of a New Elite' in S. Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, 1992) pp. 149–82.

cases of assaults on kolkhozniki in various raions of Kursk oblast and adopted a proposal submitted by Vyshinskii

on the adoption by the courts in cases of assaults on kolkhozniki and their public humiliation, of deprivation of freedom as a means of punishment, reviewing sentences that imposed insufficiently harsh punishments in these cases. To publish in the local press sentences for the most important cases, connected with assaults on kolkhozniki and their public humiliation.<sup>41</sup>

On 10 June 1937 the Politburo examined the cases of a number of officials of Shiryayevskii raion in Odessa oblast who were accused of humiliating kolkhozniki. The Procurator of the USSR was charged to send investigators to Shiryayevskii raion to examine the most important cases and to complete the investigation in ten days time. The matter was heard by the Ukrainian Supreme Court in open session in the locality. The sentences were published in the press, both local and central.<sup>42</sup> A specially secret point of this resolution envisaged the sentencing of all the guilty in the case to loss of liberty from 3 to 10 years imprisonment.<sup>43</sup> This policy appears to have been applied widely. In numerous open trials which were carried out in all regions of the country, those judged – mainly local leaders – were most often accused of abuse of power and coercion. The victims of their oppression – ordinary citizens – often gave evidence in the courts. The reports of such 'show-trials' were carried in the press.<sup>44</sup>

This policy it seems bore fruit. In the memoirs of a peasant woman from Novosibirsk oblast, M.D. Mal'tseva, who herself was subject to 'dekulakisation' and exile, she recounts the period of mass repression of the 1930s:

People suffered so much in that time, but one never heard people criticising Stalin; only the local leaders were blamed; only they were criticised. Because of them we all suffered, and how many people died because of them is unknown. I don't know, perhaps I am wrong, but I say that in 1938 many were taken, perhaps because they heeded our tears, since there were good reasons to take them, that's what I think.<sup>45</sup>

Similar opinions, it seems, were widespread.

<sup>41</sup> RTsKhIDNI, 17/3/987, 229.

<sup>42</sup> RTsKhIDNI, 17/3/987, 492.

<sup>43</sup> *Protokoly zasedanii Politbyuro, osobaya papka*.

<sup>44</sup> S. Fitzpatrick, 'How the Mice Buried the Cat: Scenes from the Great Purges of 1937 in the Russian Provinces', *The Russian Review*, vol. 52, July 1993, pp. 299–320.

<sup>45</sup> *Vozvrashchenie pamyati. Istoriko-publitsisticheskii al'manakh* (Novosibirsk, 1991) pp. 209–10.

With the aim of discovering the reasons for the instigation of the mass repression of 1937–8 it is necessary to take into account the following circumstance. Terror and force were one of the basic methods for creating the Stalinist system. In this or that measure with their help were resolved practically all social-economic and political problems – the securing of social stability, raising industrial production, ensuring Stalin's personal power etc. These and other factors at each stage underwrote the existence of state terror and mass repression. However each of the terror campaigns in turn raised the level of coercion higher, since so to speak the 'usual level' had its concrete reason. For example the mass exile of peasants at the beginning of the 1930s served the purpose of collectivising the countryside. The terror at the end of 1932–3 was a means of escaping from the sharp social-economic and political crisis which developed between the first and second Five-Year Plans. The mass repression of 1937–8 also had its direct causes, as noted above.

In the mind of the Stalinist leadership this was precisely a purge of society, an attempt by one blow to rid themselves of all those who in this or that measure had been subject to coercion in the preceding years or had fallen under suspicion on some other count. This operation was conceived as a means of eliminating a potential 'fifth column' in a period when the threat of war was increasing, and also as a means of disposing of loyal cadres who for various reasons were no longer needed by Stalin.

This view of the purges as a means of eliminating a potential 'fifth column' is not new. The argument was forcefully advanced by the American ambassador in Moscow in the 1930s, Joseph E. Davies.<sup>46</sup> Trotsky, whose writings Stalin avidly read, repeatedly warned of the danger of a prolonged war (whether in the case of victory or defeat), in the absence of a revolutionary upsurge in the west, leading to a capitalist restoration, 'a bourgeois Bonapartist counter-revolution' in the USSR.<sup>47</sup> Isaac Deutscher in his classic biography of Stalin gives an imag-

<sup>46</sup> Joseph E. Davies, *Mission to Moscow* (London, 1942).

<sup>47</sup> L. D. Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (London, 1967) p. 229. Trotsky quoted the following passage from *The Fourth International and War*, published in 1935: 'Under the influence of the critical need of the state for articles of prime necessity, the individualistic tendencies of the peasant economy will receive a considerable reinforcement, and the centrifugal forces within the collective farms will increase with every month... In the heated atmosphere of war, we may expect... the attracting of foreign allied capital, a breach in the monopoly of foreign trade, a weakening of state control of the trusts, a sharpening of competition between the trusts, conflicts between the trusts and the workers, etc... In other words, in the case of a long war, if the world proletariat is passive, the inner social contradictions of the Soviet Union not only might, but must lead to a bourgeois Bonapartist counterrevolution.'

inary conversation between Stalin and the ghost of Nicholas II where the relationship between war and regime stability is discussed.<sup>48</sup>

It might be noted further that this was indeed the whole thrust of Stalin's two reports to the Central Committee plenum in February–March 1937, as well as the reports of Molotov, Ezhov, Kaganovich and others. The revelations from the archives now strongly reinforce that view. It is supported by evidence from the directives of the highest leadership of the country concerning the implementation of the purge in 1937–8, by the way these actions were understood by contemporaries, and by the explanations given later by Stalin's own colleagues.<sup>49</sup>

Writing his final, agonized letter to Stalin in December 1937, appealing for his life to be spared, emphasising his loyalty and respect for Stalin personally, Bukharin noted the 'great and courageous idea of a general purge', associated with war preparations and paradoxically the transition to democracy, heralded by the Stalin Constitution. The purge, he noted, directed at the guilty, those under suspicion and those who might waver, should ensure a 'full guarantee' for the leadership in the event of an emergency.<sup>50</sup>

The most explicit statements in support of this view were uttered by Molotov in the 1970s, when he declared:

1937 was necessary. If you take into account that after the revolution we chopped right and left, achieved victory, but the survivals of enemies of various tendencies remained and in the face of the growing threat of fascist aggression they might unite. We were driven in 1937 by the consideration that in the time of war we would not have a fifth column...

And there suffered not only the clear Rightists, not to speak of the Trotskyists, but there suffered also many who vacillated, those who did not firmly follow the line and in whom there was no confidence that at a critical moment they would not desert and become, so to speak, part of the 'fifth column'.

Stalin, in my opinion, pursued an absolutely correct line: so what if one or two extra heads were chopped off (*puskai lishnyaya golova sletit*), there would be no vacillation in the time of war and after the war.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> I. Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography* (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 373–4.

<sup>49</sup> M. Sholokhov for example wrote in 16 February 1938 to Stalin: 'Cases of apprehension as part of the purge of the rear need also to be rechecked. Those apprehended include not only active Whiteguardists, emigres, executioners in a word those whom it is necessary to apprehend, but under this rubrik have been taken away also true Soviet people' (*Istochnik*, 1993, no. 4, p. 18).

<sup>50</sup> *Istochnik*, 1993, no. 0, p. 23.

<sup>51</sup> *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym. Iz dnevnikov F. Chueva* (M., 1991), pp. 390, 391, 416. See also the memoirs of G. Dimitrov in *Sovershenno sekretno*, no. 12, 1990, pp. 18–20.

The complex relationship between war and revolution, which had almost seen the tsarist regime toppled in 1905 and which finally brought its demise in 1917, was a relationship of which Stalin was acutely aware. The lesson of history had to be learnt lest history repeat itself.

#### Further Reading: The Great Terror

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## The Welfare State