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State Terror: Stalin 1930–1938

by Michele Roberts

(History 1820)

Stalin. In Western Europe and North America, the name has become synonymous with terror, cruelty and brutality. Dismissed as an inconsequential, uneducated, lout by his intelligentsia contemporaries within the Bolshevik Revolutionary Party, Stalin was, in reality, the right hand of Lenin from the early days of the party until the death of Lenin in 1924. Prior to taking power, Lenin made use of Stalin as a personal bodyguard, as an enforcer, and as a financier in charge of planning and staging bank robberies and thefts for the party.¹ Edvard Radzinsky, in *Stalin*, states that during the early phase of his revolutionary career, Koba, as Stalin was then known within the revolutionary circle, was an ineffective speaker, with a muffled voice, slow speech, and a Georgian accent who felt sure of himself only at liberty, and in the conspiratorial shadows.² It was during this time that Stalin began to hone his skills as a terrorist, his capacity to terrorize and to perfect his techniques as a leader and manipulator of his comrades.

The preference to remain in the shadows provided Stalin with opportunities to clandestinely observe his comrades and thereby determine their respective strengths and weaknesses for later exploitation. By analyzing individual egos, Stalin was able to determine how to best utilize the weaknesses of an individual to either coerce cooperation from the individual or provoke a confrontation, which would allow the individual to self-destruct. By remaining silent and in the background, Stalin made use of the arrogance of the intellectuals with whom he was surrounded by setting them against each other until he could determine which viewpoint was most likely to prevail. Only then, with the intent to sway the thoughts and decisions of Lenin, would Stalin make his presentation for a specific point of view. Thus, Stalin, through shrewd observation of the behavior of his comrades, sought to appear to Lenin to be presenting the collective thought of the majority. While Lenin was probably aware of this tactic, he nevertheless appointed Stalin to numerous high level Party posts providing Stalin with the means to consolidate his power base long before the death of Lenin provided the opportunity for actual seizure of power by Stalin.³ At the time of the death of Lenin, Stalin controlled the entire central Party machine and the local Party committees, and the Party controlled the country.⁴ Those who had dismissed the extremely crafty and devious Stalin as inconsequential paid dearly for their errors in assessing his talents and skills as he carefully and skillfully removed each of them, disgraced as “enemies of the people,” from power and influence, sending many of them to immediate execution.⁵

Robert Conquest provides a preliminary assessment of the underlying principle of terror as instituted by Stalin in *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, stating that the Terror implemented by Stalin begins to show a more rational pattern if it is considered as a statistical matter or a mass phenomenon rather than in terms of individuals. Conquest puts forth that Stalin may have argued that the effect of terror is produced when a given proportion of a group has been seized and shot. Which members of the group have been selected as victims is immaterial, particularly if most or all of those selected are innocent, for, by the use of this terror technique, the remainder of the group will be cowed into uncomplaining obedience.⁶

Paul R. Gregory takes this assertion to mathematical proof in *Terror By Quota* by using historical documentation of the numbers of arrests, executions, and internments including length of sentence, as percentages of the total population. Gregory tests this statistical data using the standard economic model of a society being able to produce only specific amounts of commodities to maintain

a perfectly balanced economy, and shows that Stalin used only the ideal amount of Terror necessary to produce the desired compliance of the remainder of the population.⁷ The number of arrests, executions and internments varied in both count and distribution, within the specific months and years, according to the goal to be obtained and the amount of perceived resistance to the process and desired result.⁸

Gregory defines three major episodes of mass repressions beginning with “dekulakization” between 1930 and 1932, expanding to national operations within 1937, and developing into mass operations between 1937 and 1938. Gregory states that Soviet official state security statistics show that between the years of 1930 to 1932 and 1937 to 1938, the state executed 715,272 people and extrajudicial tribunals imprisoned 928,892 people. These figures equate to 1.5 percent of the total adult population of the time.⁹ According to Gregory, during fifteen months of 1937 - 1938 the various sections of purges instituted by Stalin netted 1.5 million victims,¹⁰ most of whom were innocent. Gregory also states that the lack of concern about innocent victims was one of the great continuities of the Bolshevik repression policy.¹¹ The random nature of these arrests, internments, and executions instilled the fear of being the next victim throughout the entire population.

Two days after the assignation of Kirov, on December 1, 1934, the great innovation of the Terror was created in a decree issued by Stalin. This decree, which substituted confessions for evidence, was instituted in order to accelerate the repression cycle.¹² These confessions, those that were published, and those which were publicized by word of mouth, served to reinforce the concept of the guilt of those accused within the conscience mind of the general population. Because the accused had seemingly admitted to their own guilt, most of the population had little difficulty accepting the idea that these individuals were indeed guilty as charged.¹³

The propaganda, issued by Stalin through the Secret Police, of having intercepted “an enemy of the people” prior to the commission of an act against the state was sufficient to prevent public outrage.¹⁴ The issued propaganda nearly always stated that the arrests were made with the assistance of some “vigilant” citizen and the diligence of the Secret Police. Within a short length of time, people began to doubt the loyalty of their neighbors, friends and even family. Any incautious comment or negative word created even more doubt and distrust in the mind of the individual who heard it. The fear of being accused of conspiracy by having heard the comment caused the individual to whom the comment was made duly to report the statement to the Secret Police, leading to the arrest of the individual who made the statement, as well as friends and family of the individual.¹⁵

The concept of guilt by association, that one could be arrested and executed simply for hearing, for being related to an accused individual, or for merely knowing the accused, created intense distrust of others and destroyed any cohesion within society as a whole, making the probability of a real conspiracy virtually nonexistent. The destruction of trust and family cohesion prevented any concept of personal security or the comfort provided by group interaction, and strived to cause the individual citizen to rely solely upon the State for all human needs. For those who were reluctant, those who appeared to be reluctant, or those who were accused of being reluctant, to conform to this ideal of complete reliance, a prison sentence promised forced compliance or a bullet ended the reluctance. Which of these solutions was employed was determined and carried out by local NKVD officers based upon official minimum quotas issued by Stalin.¹⁶

The rapid influx of peasants into the cities created massive food and housing shortages resulting in living spaces as small as one square meter per person in some cities.¹⁷ The denunciation of a neighbor could result in the doubling in size of the living quarters of the “vigilant” citizen. The authorities had not yet determined an effective method of tracking available living space and therefore would have probably assumed that their records were wrong if the space appeared to be occupied. Any meal or food ration coupons left behind by the unfortunate accused could also easily be appropriated by the “vigilant” citizen. In the countryside, where forced collectivization and “dekulakization” had already created much turmoil, disruption and destruction of the traditional way

of life, the formerly less affluent peasants were afforded the opportunity to be rid of those neighbors whom they disliked or those who had previously treated them badly by simply denouncing those individuals and their families. By making it possible for the average citizen to improve their own condition by denouncing another, Stalin made the entire population of the country willingly complicit in the application of mass Terror. The increase in “vigilance” by the individual citizen was necessary so that Stalin could facilitate the overall goal of obtaining absolute power. This increase in “vigilance” by the individual citizen was, therefore, strongly encouraged and rewarded by Stalin. At the same time, a “lack of vigilance” could be used as the excuse to repress members of the population.

The peasantry was already in the midst of famine created by peasants having slaughtered their animals rather than handing them over to the collectives, and several years of complete government appropriation of all grain and foodstuffs in the countryside.¹⁸ The poor harvests, which followed these events, caused food shortages in the cities to become acute.¹⁹ Seeking to smooth over the frustrations of the hungry masses, Stalin began to alter the target of the evolving terror, focusing upon the middle and upper echelon of the various ministries involved in food production, food distribution, and those in charge of industrial production of the machinery necessary for the distribution process.²⁰

These individuals were accused of allowing intentional sabotage, called “wrecking,” or of allowing their factories and distribution systems to be infiltrated by counter-revolutionary groups. Some were accused of actually being part of or leading these counter-revolutionary groups and of plotting the “wrecking” themselves. At factories, meetings were called which included the full complement of employees. An official of the NKVD or the local Party Chairman would denounce the selected manager in the presence of this group, explain that the individual had been arrested, detail the crimes committed, and encourage the employees to call for the execution of the manager as an “enemy of the people” and a traitor.²¹ The unfortunate individual would then be removed for immediate execution, or dragged off to prison where a signature upon a prewritten confession would be obtained by whatever means were necessary. In cases where the true target was someone other than the individual who had been arrested, these prewritten confessions provided the necessary implications and links between individuals to facilitate the arrest and removal of whomever Stalin had determined to liquidate.²²

Those whose confessions were only required to implicate another individual were generally executed, or in some cases, dispatched to the Gulag, soon after the confessions were obtained. Those whose testimony would be required for a public trial remained imprisoned, though in relative comfort, as long as they continued to abide by the confession that they had signed. One example of this process was the treatment of Zinoviev and Kamenev. Following the murder of Kirov, these two Leningrad Party officials were dutifully implicated by the murderer, Nikolaev, as having inspired his actions. Nikolaev, having served his purpose, was then quickly executed. Zinoviev and Kamenev were soon arrested and imprisoned by the Secret Police. Both initially denied any knowledge or connection to the murder, however, according to Radzinsky, in January 1935, the two were brought before Stalin, who convinced them that they should confess. They were evidently promised only prison sentences rather than execution in return for these confessions.²³ On January 16, 1935, Zinoviev was given a ten-year prison sentence and Kamenev a five-year prison sentence.²⁴

In the summer of 1936, Stalin was made aware that Trotsky had been keeping contact from abroad with clandestine groups of supporters and that these groups had been negotiating with supporters of Bukharin, Kamenev and Zinoviev. Stalin quickly organized a public trial of Kamenev and Zinoviev using new charges of Anti-Soviet conspiracy. The defendants were privately threatened with the death sentence unless they “confessed” to having set up an Anti-Soviet Trotskyist-Zinovievite Center that organized assassinations. Supposedly, Stalin was next on their list after Kirov. Kamenev and Zinoviev duly confessed, and Stalin duly broke his promise. The court

condemned them to death and the sentence was carried out early the next morning.²⁵

Nikolai Bukharin, who was once described by Lenin as “the favorite of the Party,”²⁶ was also implicated in the supposed conspiracy described within the confessions of Zinoviev and Kamenev. Stalin, however, sensed that the mood of the Politburo had not yet been properly adjusted to pursue liquidation of Bukharin at the time, and recommended “further investigation” of his complicity in the matter. Bukharin was to keep his freedom for a while longer as the apparatus built up the anti-Bukharin mood of the population and the Politburo. This method also allowed Stalin to observe the mental and emotional collapse of Bukharin as the “investigation” destroyed his life.

Bukharin was arrested in February 1937, and languished in prison for months while insisting that he was innocent of all charges. Shortly after the arrest and execution of a number of high-ranking military officers, Bukharin at last began to confess. Bukharin was convicted and sentenced to death in a public show-trial in which he too seemingly confessed to all of the charges against him.²⁷ The introduction to the English language edition of the memoir of Anna Larina, the widow of Nikolai Bukharin, *This I Cannot Forget*, is a short essay titled *Introduction: The Afterlife of Nikolai Bukharin* authored by historian Stephen F. Cohen. Cohen suggests that Bukharin and many others agreed to participate in the charade of confession and trial in the hope of preventing the executions of wives, children and members of extended family.²⁸ In addition, Cohen states that Bukharin knew that he could not escape execution, but wished to go on trial before the higher court of history and the “future generation” whom he had discussed with his wife. Cohen puts forth that Bukharin was intent upon turning his last public appearance into a countertrial to defend his reputation and that of Bolshevism in any way that he could.²⁹ Nikolai Bukharin was executed on March 15, 1938 and his wife Anna Larina, who had been sent into exile shortly after his arrest, was rearrested and sent to the Gulag. Their young son was placed in orphanages and foster homes until the boy was located and rescued by family members untouched by the arrest of Bukharin.

Originally sentenced in absentia to five years in exile after the arrest of Bukharin, Anna Larina was arrested three months later and held in the Astrakhan jail until the decision sentencing her to eight years in a prison camp arrived. After completion of this term, another decision arrived at the camp, which sentenced her to an additional five years of administrative exile in Novosibirsk oblast and later to additional term of ten years. This last term of ten years was interrupted by the death of Stalin, which resulted in her release.³⁰

During her term of imprisonment, Anna was told that she had been sentenced to death and was led down the road to a ravine where the sentence was to be carried out. This was a transparent threat designed to evoke her cooperation in implicating others.³¹ Later that month, the real execution order arrived, and she was led down the same road, towards the same ravine, only to be given a reprieve at the last moment.³² In total, Anna Larina spent over twenty years in various forms of imprisonment for the crime of having been married to Nikolai Bukharin. In her memoir, Anna relates the circumstances of being informed of the execution of Bukharin, explaining that the news was delivered by an announcement to all of the camp inmates through the reading of the statement published in the Soviet newspaper *Pravda*. She goes on to say that several days later, while she was internally mourning the loss of her husband, one of her fellow inmates reproached her for moping, telling her that history would vindicate Bukharin, while history would not even be aware of the executions of husbands of the other convicts.³³

Stalin had total control of Soviet communications and had developed an intricately intermeshed collection of state security organs, which all operated in secret, yet none of these organizations was sufficiently close to the dictator to be certain that it was not itself under surveillance by some other body of custodians yet more clandestine. This system of surveillance, and the fear of surveillance, allowed Stalin to dominate Soviet society in general and the Party apparatus in particular.³⁴ Where Lenin had forbidden “factionalism” within the Party, he had still allowed some discussion so long as the Party presented a united front to the population.³⁵ Stalin

forbade any opposing opinion within the Party or within the general population. Anyone foolish enough to misjudge what the “Boss” wanted them to think or say would find themselves in prison, in the Gulag camps, or stepping to execution. When Stalin decided to expel the wife of Molotov from the Party ranks and send her off to exile in 1949, Molotov abstained from the original vote in favor of doing this.³⁶ He recanted his abstention several days in a letter to Stalin because he was fully aware that this lack of cooperation in the voting process had put his life at risk.

The total control of the communications systems allowed Stalin to control the thoughts of the mass population simply by telling them only what he wanted them to know. The public believed what they were told when they read in *Pravda* that Zinoviev and Kamenev were responsible for the murder of Kirov. The population did not have access to any information from outside the Soviet Union, and most had never been anywhere outside of the Soviet Union, so when told that their society was much better off than any other country, they believed it. The people believed Stalin when he told them that they were better off than they had been five years earlier, even though they were now starving, and perhaps living in a hallway under a staircase. The people were told that their lives would improve, and when their lives did not improve, they believed that the designated scapegoats were truly guilty of the charges leveled against them.

Stalin was a devious and crafty mass murderer, responsible for the deaths of millions of Soviet citizens. There is no evidence that Stalin was ever influenced by considerations of morality or of loyalty to his associates in any phase of his rise to Totalitarian Power.³⁷ The loyalty shown toward Stalin by his associates was rewarded with a bullet as soon as he no longer had use for them. Stalin placed no value upon any human life other than his own, treating friends, enemies, family and the general population as mere tools for his own advancement and as machinery within the Soviet state. Stalin seized power with the vision of making the Soviet Union a shining example of communism in a single country and of making the Soviet Union a world power and allowed nothing and no one to block the path to the realization of this goal.³⁸ Stalin propelled the agrarian, loosely affiliated Russian Empire which with he began into the modern, industrialized, Twentieth Century world in just a little more than five years. This rapid industrialization cost millions of lives through mass repressions and executions, and through industrial accidents caused by excessive haste and poor planning, but it placed the Soviet Union in a position to hold Nazi Germany at bay until the allied nations could mount a second front during World War II.

Stalin was successful in his use of mass Terror to achieve his goal of making the Soviet Union a world power because the people of the Soviet Union allowed themselves to be made complicit in the application of Terror. Random arrests in the middle of the night, disappearances and executions instilled the fear of being seen speaking to or standing near any other individual, and made the individual citizen absolutely blind to any activity by the NKVD. Guilt by association led to the arrests and executions of all living generations of close and extended family of many who were arrested, particularly if the individual had specifically displeased Stalin. Yagoda, head of the NKVD had displeased Stalin by not being as ruthless as Stalin wished during the repression of the Old Bolsheviks. Yagoda and all of his known living relatives were rounded up and executed during the purges of 1937-1938.³⁹

Outside the boundaries of the former Soviet Union, Stalin is usually considered a bloodthirsty mass murderer and terrorist monster. Inside the former Soviet Union, Stalin is alternately seen as a monster and revered as a great leader. The definition of Terror and Terrorism, it seems, depends on the viewpoint of the individual considering the concepts.

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- ² *Ibid.*, 48.
- ³ Robert Service, *A History of Twentieth-Century Russia*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 196.
- ⁴ Edvard Radzinsky, *Stalin*, Translated by H. T. Willetts, (New York: Anchor Books, 1997), 203.
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- ⁶ Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 67.
- ⁷ Paul R. Gregory, *Terror By Quota*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 281.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 167.
- ¹¹ Paul R. Gregory, *Terror By Quota*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 268.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 203.

- ¹³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 195.
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