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Afraid of Their Shadows: The Bolshevik Recourse to Terror, 1932–1938

Political terror has long been a basic part of our understanding of the Stalinist system. First appearing in the earliest days of the Soviet regime, it reached unimaginable heights in the 1930s. Historians and political scientists have long speculated on the causes of (or reasons for) the “Great Terror” or “Great Purges” of that decade. Explanations have been extremely varied, ranging from the systemic needs of a “totalitarian” regime to the inherent evils of communism to the megalomaniac needs of an absolutist Stalin. More recently, a variety of other factors have been brought into the academic conversation. Social historians have wondered about social and status conflicts (workers vs. foremen, rank and file party members vs. the party nomenklatura), structural/institutional conflicts (party vs. police, police vs. military), mentalities, and changing social roles in the “quicksand society” of the 1930s¹.

The opening of central archives of the Communist Party in Moscow offers the opportunity to investigate the high-level political component of the terror phenomenon². We now have a huge number of memoranda, stenographic records, protocols, and other Central Committee and Politburo documents that can shed a great deal of light on the internal workings of the top-level party leadership. These party documents, most of which were prepared for internal rather than public consumption, can help illustrate the mentality and self-representation of the Bolshevik leadership, as well as its understanding and construction of reality. The self-image and view of the world of those making key political decisions, including those relating to terror, would appear to be relevant areas of inquiry.

In general, the leading explanations of the Bolshevik (or Stalinist) recourse to terror have fallen into two major categories, which we might label the totalitarian

¹ See *J. Arch Getty, Roberta T. Manning* (eds.), *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives* (New York 1993). The “quicksand society” is *Moshe Lewin's*, *The Making of the Soviet System* (New York 1985) 221, term to describe the chaotic social dislocations and changes associated with collectivization and the first Five Year Plan.

² The main source base used here consists of archives of the Politburo and Central Committee collected in RTsKhIDNI (Rossiskii tsentr khraneniia i izucheniiia dokumentov noveisheii istorii, formerly the Central Party Archive).

and absolutist explanations. According to the totalitarian theory, terror was used both to demonstrate an already accomplished totalitarianism and to forward the goal of "atomizing" society by destroying all competing institutions, forms or organization, and even social links outside the regime. In its final stages, totalitarian terror is said to be random by its very nature in support of the totalitarian goals of sponsoring fear and uncertainty³.

The absolutist group of explanations focuses on the person of I. V. Stalin and his drive for absolute power. In this view, Stalin sought to make himself an absolute ruler by decimating, terrorizing, and thus emasculating all competing institutions and persons who might somehow challenge his authority. Within this general approach, scholars have differed on the nature and impetus of Stalin's drive. Some, like Robert Conquest have found roots for Stalin's terror in the very nature of communism, coupled with a dictator's megalomaniac drives. Some have seen Stalin as the true heir to a Lenin who believed in dictatorship and terror. Others have stressed the differences between Lenin and a more brutal, coarse, and nationalistic Stalin. All explanations in this school agree on the undeniable quest for power by the General Secretary⁴.

The "absolutist" views have difficulty dealing with a variety of questions. Granting that the unfolding terror was the result of Stalin's megalomania or psychological needs, we would not have explained how he was able to carry out such sinister plans without a great deal of help. My reading of all the Central Committee plena from the 1930s, along with other documents, has convinced me that the usual explanations (that Stalin secured cooperation from his senior officials through fear, cunning, intimidation, blackmail and by forcing them to become accomplices) are inadequate. Instead, there seems to have been a broad elite consensus at various stages on the need for repression of particular groups. In fact, at several key junctures Central Committee advocated repressive measures that defied and went beyond those prescribed by Stalin's closest henchmen⁵.

The "totalitarian" view also fails to distinguish between the subjective and the objective elements of explanation. Again, we can grant that the objective effects of the regime's policy were the atomization of society, the penetration by the party of all spheres of activity, and the elimination of any non-party organizations from political parties to stamp collecting societies. But at this point we would not have dealt with the subjective element. Why did they presumably seek to invade all spheres of life, control speech and thought, and figuratively to compromise or co-

³ *Hannah Arendt*, *Totalitarianism* (Part III) (New York 1968) 119–155.

⁴ See *Robert Conquest*, *The Great Terror* (New York 1973); *Robert C. Tucker*, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above* (New York 1990).

⁵ In various Central Committee discussions of the fates of Enukidze, Bukharin, and Iagoda, members proposed punitive measures that exceeded those proposed by Stalin. In Enukidze's case, they were accepted; in the second two instances they were rejected. On Enukidze, see RTsIKhDNI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 547, l. 69 and d. 544, l. 22. On Bukharin: *Izvestia TsK KPSS*, no 5, 1989, 76 and RTsIKhDNI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 577, ll. 30–33. On Iagoda: *Voprosy istorii*, no. 2 (1995) 21.

opt the stamp collectors? Simple defense of power does not satisfy as an explanation. The survival of their regime could not reasonably be seen to depend on arresting people for jokes or outlawing the Esperanto society. The subjective motivations of the rulers need further explanation: "why did they do it?"

Independent of the "totalitarian" or "absolutist" schools, our understanding of the terror is based on two general assumptions. First, whether its author was a person or a system, terror originated from a position of self-conscious strength and power. The regime's monopoly on force, the sheer scale of the terror and the apparent grim, mechanical efficiency of the secret police strongly suggest the overwhelming power of the regime. Our literature is dominated by images of the unstoppable "terror machine" as a kind of monstrous and omnipotent juggernaut.

The second assumption is that terror was used in an instrumental sense, as a tool to achieve some personal or systemic goal. The regime or the dictator are seen as initiators of terror to create some new situation, whether an atomized society, an obedient bureaucracy, a personal dictatorship, or all of these. Implicit in these assumptions is the notion that there were choices and that terror was an option, consciously selected from among others, with specific purposes in mind. These quite plausible assumptions have governed and channeled our specialized research on Stalinism and the terror. Because of them, our research agenda has been relatively straightforward: to discern the purposes and goals behind a proactive initiation of the terror.

There can be little doubt that both of these assumptions are valid to some extent. Yet we again face problems of distinguishing between the objective and the subjective, this time at the level of interpreting phenomena. Objectively, the general scale of the terror is more or less clear: it was a matter of millions of victims⁶. Proceeding from this, we seek to understand the nature of the phenomenon and the motivations that might have inspired it. At this point, however, we touch the sphere of the subjective: What does it mean to say that the "regime" inflicted terror from a position of "power" and "strength"? From the vantage point of the victim, or that of observers who naturally sympathise with the victim, the objective reality seems clear: to civilians killed by an artillery barrage, the force seems huge and overwhelming. Yet the interpretation of power might be quite different from the subjective vantage of those firing the shots. To them, the nature of the persons targeted might seem quite different; they are perceived as invisible, evil, monstrous, and threatening, and the power and efficacy of the armaments might seem dubious or even weak. On the simplest plane of analysis, there is no difference: people are killed by a terrible, apparently mechanical process. But for an understanding of the event as phenomenon, the subjective perceptions of those administering terror are also important.

⁶ See J. Arch Getty, Gábor T. Rittersporn, Viktor N. Zemskov, Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Prewar Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence, in: *American Historical Review* 98, 4 (Oct. 1993) 1017–1049.

Limiting our analysis to discerning the purposes and goals behind a proactive terror has restricted our efforts to enumerating possible motives. Thus we might well add to the list of terror's goals the desire to destroy all vestiges of capitalism, to eradicate potential fifth columns, and a host of others. On this level, the analytical task is simply to choose the most plausible motivations.

This article suggests another line of analysis. We propose to use newly-available party texts to explore the Stalinist leadership's construction of reality, its self-representation and understanding. In addition to, or in place of, the question, "Why did he [they] do it?" we shall look at "What did they think they were doing?" We have a vast literature on the subjective constructions of the victims. It is now possible, carefully and within some obvious limits, to examine subjectivity on the part of those authorizing the terror. To date, studies of the terror, when they have dealt with the motives of those carrying out terror, have regarded them as "natural-born killers", simply evil men, or people who were afraid of Stalin. Without replacing those characterizations, this paper will suggest that they were also, collectively, frightened little men terrified of their surroundings. And most of them were more afraid of political and social groups below them than of authorities on high.

The analysis takes as its points of departure several well-known observations in the existing literature. First is Robert Tucker's excursion into psychohistory, in which he posited Stalin's personal insecurities as contributing factors to his launching of the terror. Second is Leon Trotsky's assertion that Stalin was the product and representative of the nomenklatura, and not vice-versa. This new class of officials was constituted as a "bureaucratic corporation" with social and group interests of their own. Combining Trotsky's and Tucker's approaches suggests the possibility that *group* psychology and *collective* elite self-representations may be appropriate subjects for analysis. Third is Gábor Rittersporn's notion of how in the 1930s political and social relations, the malfunctioning of government, and the activities of official cadres increasingly came to be understood, both in the elite and in society, as involving "omnipresent conspiracies" and subversion by dark forces⁷.

We will advance the suggestion that from the point of view of the leading stratum, the nomenklatura, terror was regarded as defensive, not proactive, and that *in part* it resulted from a complex of perceptions that fall into the categories of anxiety and fear. Fear is not a new component of Stalinist studies. To parody Trotsky, the population was afraid of the party, the party was afraid of the Central Committee, the Central Committee was afraid of the Politburo, and the Politburo was afraid of Stalin. However, we shall see that fear also ran in the opposite direc-

⁷ Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary* (New York 1973) especially ch. 12; Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (New York 1972) 86–93; Gábor T. Rittersporn, *The Omnipresent Conspiracy: On Soviet Imagery of Politics and Social Relations in the 1930s*, in: Getty, *Manning*, *Stalinist Terror*, 99–115.

tion: the party feared society, the Central Committee feared the party, the Politburo feared the Central Committee, and Stalin feared the Politburo.

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The regime as a whole was chronically anxious about a multitude of political threats and, like those who suffer from chronic anxiety, seems to have been unable to evaluate them rationally, to distinguish between greater and lesser dangers, or to respond to them in balanced ways. Instead, as we shall see, they sought to respond to all perceived threats great and small, and indeed to try to micromanage their entire political environment.

As their anxiety grew in the 1930s, so did their exaggeration of dangers and their inability to sort out the minor from the major threats. At the same time, they more and more recognized how weak was their control and influence in society at large, a society that in their view was populated by a multitude of devils who were out to get them but were difficult to identify precisely. Increasingly frustrated with this situation and unable to manage their environment, they responded with the political equivalent of a psychotic break. Like the maniacally depressed person who has lost control of his environment – as he defines it – and climbs a tower with a rifle, or a postal employee who enters his workplace with a machine gun, they began shooting wildly. Although it would be dangerous to stress psychiatric parallels too far, or to apply psychology too forcefully to entire groups, the “mass operations” of 1937 and 1938, which accounted for the overwhelming majority of terror victims, somehow resemble today’s fear- and anxiety-based explosions of multiple murder.

Before looking at the evidence, a multitude of caveats are in order. First, as with all original documents, we must be careful in examining these texts. Every document is written by someone with a purpose that might not be immediately apparent. There could be a variety of calculations behind the language. Second, we do not intend here a true psycho-historical approach using clinical tools. Rather we seek to reconstruct the world view and self-conceptions that leading Bolsheviks seem to have shared in the 1930s in an attempt to explain their actions. Third, on the surface it should not be too surprising that those who launched a terror would publicly characterize the operation as a defensive one. Hitler, in his public statements about Jews, always cast them in the role of the aggressor, the conspirator, the danger. But the documents examined here were never meant for public consumption. They represent the closed discussions and deliberations of the nomenclatura, the members of the ruling insiders’ club and therefore better reflect the private attitudes and world-views of that group.

Finally, should one discover that the Bolshevik recourse to terror involved fear and anxiety, the awful results of that terror remain unchanged. We intend to pose no “insanity defense” for the Stalinists. But if we are interested in the “why” surrounding the terror (or that part of it sponsored from above) it is relevant to in-

quire into the leadership's construction of reality and its self-representation within it.

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Looking back on the early years of the Soviet regime, it is not difficult to see many of the first repressive policies of the Bolsheviks as responses to insecurity and fear. During and after the Civil War, they saw real enemies everywhere and, as Lenin frankly admitted, peasant uprisings and the Kronstadt uprising were evidence of Bolshevik isolation and "failure to convince the country". Outlawing other political parties and attempting to ban factions within their own party surely were signs of weakness more than self-confident strength. Restricting the franchise, rigging elections, and Bolshevization of the soviets also point to insecurity and a fear of losing control. Monopoly control over the press and denial of the right of others to organize politically fall into the same category, as do censorship and party direction of the trade unions. Finally, Lenin's party generation even distrusted the state bureaucracy that they had taken over. The creation of a parallel and predominant party hierarchy with a secret police, unrestricted by law and directly controlled by the Politburo, rather than the cabinet, complete the picture of a shaky clique afraid to relinquish the smallest iota of power to anyone else.

These early measures were spawned and conditioned by the perilous and terrifying experience of the Civil War. One of the first instances of mass terror – indiscriminate shootings of peasants in order to open railroad lines for food trains – clearly reflected panic, desperation, and an implicit recognition that the regime could not even ensure transportation by routine means. It is also relevant to note that these dictatorial methods were implemented as corporate decisions of the party leadership long before Stalin's rise to power. The messianic aspect of Bolshevism went along with the panic and fear inspired by the Civil War. Just as the economic policy of War Communism was an improvisation more than a plan, the resort to terror at the same time had its origins more in fear than in proactive plan.

It is beyond our scope here to discuss the social and political upheaval of the period of forced collectivization at the beginning of the 1930s. The destruction of the kulaks and the subsequent campaign to collectivize agriculture (and it was more a matter of guerrilla campaign from above than of organized military offensive) plunged the country into chaos, violence, and mass starvation.

The regime began to emerge from this nightmare in 1932 when, although starvation still stalked the country, the victory of its "General Line" seemed assured. But, as when they had emerged from the Civil War, the party leadership continued to be fearful and apprehensive about any and all opposition to their policies. This time, however, as we shall see, the level of their fear and insecurity was greater than ever. We begin our examination with a few specific fears that plagued the party leadership. Then, we will conclude with the eruption of mass terror in 1937–38.

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Even though they had a monopoly over the press, the Stalinists feared the power of the pen. As former revolutionaries who had used propaganda to come to power, they understood the dangers of the printed word. The attentive efforts and technical workings of Bolshevik censors to control the production of texts have been well-documented⁸. What has been perhaps less well-known is the extent to which the very top leadership occupied itself with literary questions. Typewritten pamphlets by student groups attracted the attention of the Politburo and found their way into their files⁹. The Politburo reviewed individual books and decided on their removal from libraries. Lists of such books were prepared on official orders of the Politburo¹⁰.

The writings of famous party figures were scrutinized carefully as matters of high political policy, and failure to comply with the needs of the leadership increasingly led to censure and threats of repression. As late as 1932, the finer points of the history of the Russian Revolution were regarded as sensitive political topics, even in the writings of long-defeated politicians who posed no threat to the leadership. In 1932, the Orgburo reprimanded A. S. Shliapnikov for errors in his literary history of 1917 (he had missed some fine theoretical points about hegemony of the proletariat in 1917), demanding a public retraction and threatening to expel him from the party¹¹. Similarly, a special Politburo decision of February 1934, moved by Stalin personally, ordered „Comrades Stetskii and Radek to submit not later than the end of February their article for the first volume of the “History of the Civil War”, warning them that failure to fulfill this order in the term specified will result in “repression [of them]”¹². Even Stalin favorite L. P. Beria was reprimanded by the Politburo in 1935 for reprinting some of Stalin’s obscure articles from 1905–1910 in Georgia without high-level permission¹³.

Yet the Stalinist leadership feared texts above and beyond such relatively well-known attempts to produce, censor and control the publication of party history. Some texts inspired positive hysteria both in the Politburo and the broader nomenklatura class. One such text with a rather remarkable history is the so-called Riutin Platform.

M. N. Riutin, a district party secretary in the Moscow party organization in the 1920s, had supported Bukharin’s challenge to collectivization and had been stripped of his party offices and expelled from the party in 1930 „for propagandizing right-opportunist views”¹⁴. Riutin remained in contact with fellow opponents

⁸ See *Merle Fainsod, Smolensk Under Soviet Rule* (Cambridge Ma. 1958) chapter 19: “Censorship – A Documented Record.”

⁹ RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 120, d. 272, ll. 10–16.

¹⁰ RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 965, ll. 30, 63–64. See also high-level concern with libraries in GARF, f. 5446, op. 22a, d. 339, ll. 5–12.

¹¹ RTsKhIDNI f. 17, op. 3, d. 874, l. 15.

¹² RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 939, l. 1.

¹³ RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 970, l. 50.

¹⁴ For information on Riutin, see *Boris A. Starkov, Martem’ian Riutin: Na koleni ne vstanu*

inside the party, and in March of 1932, a secret meeting of his group produced "Stalin and the Crisis of the Proletarian Dictatorship", better known as the "Riutin Platform". This 194-page typewritten manifesto of the "Union of Marxist-Leninists" was a direct and trenchant critique of virtually all of Stalin's policies, his methods of rule and his personality.

The Stalin regime reacted to the document with panic. Its call to "destroy Stalin's dictatorship" was taken as a call for armed revolt. Arrests of Union members began as early as September, 1932. The entire editorial board, plus Riutin, was arrested in the fall of 1932; all were expelled from the party and convicted for membership in a "counterrevolutionary organization". Riutin himself was sentenced to 10 years in prison. There are unconfirmed rumors that in the Politburo at the time, Stalin unsuccessfully demanded the death penalty for those connected with the Riutin Platform, but was blocked by a majority of that body.¹⁵

So frantic was the regime to bury the Riutin Platform that it has proved impossible to find an original copy in any Russian archive. The text recently published in Russia is taken from a typescript copy made by the secret police in 1932.

... What is the essence of unscrupulous political intrigue? It is when a person espouses one set of convictions concerning an issue one day and (either under the same circumstances and conditions or under changed ones that nevertheless do not in reality justify change of political conduct – in the interest of a particular person or a clique) espouses exactly opposite convictions the next day. Today he [Stalin] will try to prove one thing and tomorrow – under similar circumstances and on a similar issue – he'll try to prove something else. All the while, the unscrupulous political intriguer considers himself consistent and right in the one case no less than in the other.

... To place the name of Stalin alongside the names of Marx, Engels and Lenin means to mock at Marx, Engels and Lenin. It means to mock at the proletariat. It means to lose all shame, to overstep all bounds of baseness. To place the name of Lenin alongside the name of Stalin is like placing Mt. Elbrus alongside a heap of dung. To place the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin alongside the "works" of Stalin is like placing the music of such great composers as Beethoven, Mozart, Wagner and others alongside the music of a street organ-grinder¹⁶.

The Riutin Platform became an obsession with the Stalinist ruling group. At the end of 1932, many of the former leaders of opposition movements, including G. E. Zinoviev, L. B. Kamenev, Karl Radek, and others were summoned to party disciplinary bodies and interrogated about their possible connection to the group. Some were expelled from the party simply for knowing of the existence of the

(Moscow 1992). See also *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, No. 6 (1989) 103–115 and No. 3 (1990) 150–162.

¹⁵ This story originates with Boris Nicolaevsky's "Letter of an Old Bolshevik" supposedly based on testimony from N. I. Bukharin. Recently, Bukharin's widow has denied that Bukharin knew anything about discussions in the Politburo, pointing out that at that time Bukharin was "isolated" from the Politburo and knew nothing of its deliberations, having broken off even personal relations with its members. See *Anna Larina*, *Nezabyvaemoe* (Moscow 1989) 263.

¹⁶ I. V. Kurilova, N. N. Mikhailov, V. P. Naumov (eds.), *Reabilitatsiia: Politicheskie protsessy 30–50-ch godov* (Moscow 1991) 334–443.

Riutin Platform, whether they had read it or not. Indeed, even knowing about it and not reporting that knowledge to the party leadership was a crime.

In virtually all inquisitions of former oppositionists from 1933 to 1939, this “terrorist document” would be used as evidence connecting Stalin’s opponents to various treasonable conspiracies. In early 1933, M. S. Shkiriakov accused rightists Rykov and Tomsy of not fighting hard enough against the Platform.

When the Riutin case was under investigation, you too got indirectly involved, Comrades Tomsy and Rykov. And what did you say about this, how did you distance yourself from this venture? Did you come forward actively in connection with this? ... You should have come forward not at this Plenum but much earlier against this counter-revolutionary group, which carried on its work of wrecking¹⁷.

In December, 1936, Ezhov accused Bukharin of having inspired the Riutin Platform through conversations with various oppositionists. Bukharin furiously denied the accusation.

Ezhov: Now I will speak about Bukharin and Rykov. [movement in the hall] ... I would like, Comrades, to conclude about the political motivations and about the platform which the Trotskyist-Zinoviev bandits put forth. I only want to give a characterization of how basely they lied to the Party about the absence of any platform, how unfortunately several of us gave in to their lies and believed them, and how they were really unprincipled. I want to read to you more fully from the testimony ... This Sosnovskii, speaking about Bukharin, gave the following testimony: ‘Bukharin told me that we are accepting the Riutin Platform, which from the first to last word ...

Bukharin: ... I never had a single conversation with Sosnovskii about politics and never spoke about the Riutin Platform. I personally never read the Riutin Platform, because the only time it was shown to me was on Stalin’s orders. I never saw it and [before that] was never informed of it.¹⁸

Yet again, at the February 1937 plenum of the Central Committee, Bukharin and Rykov were accused. This time, Ezhov claimed that Bukharin “commissioned” the Platform. Other speakers said that, at a minimum, the two knew of it and failed to immediately report it to the leadership. In the 1930s, this constituted a political crime no less severe than actually having written the text.

Postyshev: Let me pose to him the following question: When Rykov, together with unknown members of the CC of the trade unions, heard the reading of the Riutin platform, did he tell you about it?

Bukharin: No, he didn’t tell me about it.

Voice: You’re lying!¹⁹

The Riutin document even followed Bukharin to his death. In his last letter to Stalin from prison, Bukharin wrote:

Reviewing everything in my mind – insofar as I can – I can only add the following observations to what I have already said at the [February 1937] Plenum: ... Aikhenva’l’d told me in passing, post factum [sic!] as we walked on the street about the conference which I

¹⁷ RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 511, l. 174, 175.

¹⁸ RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 575, ll. 49–50, 59, 72.

¹⁹ Voprosy istorii, no. 2, 1993, 7, 20–21.

knew nothing about (nor did I know anything about the Riutin platform) ('the gang has met, and a report was read') – or something of the sort. And, yes, I concealed this fact, feeling pity for the 'gang'.²⁰

Why did this document inspire such panic and such a strong repressive response in the highest levels of the party leadership for several years? After all, such a reaction to a document that few people knew about and even fewer had seen and that was never published, seems disproportionate.

Most obviously, it attacked Stalin personally. The document called him a sophist, an unscrupulous political intrigant, an anti-Leninist, and a dictator. His theoretical writings were compared to a "heap of dung" and the "music of a street organ-grinder"; his policies which were called "crimes" were said to have caused massive impoverishment while "killing the cause of socialism." The language was bitter, combative and insulting, and the Stalinists responded with anger and indignation. Even to suggest removing Stalin was a serious crime. M. F. Shkiryatov told the Central Committee in January, 1933:

Shkiryatov: Regarding the leader of our Party, Comrade Stalin – what means did they employ in their struggle against Comrade Stalin? ... they said that they were prepared to remove Comrade Stalin ... But we know what a discussion about 'dismissing' the leader of the Party could mean. We hold Congresses, we hold Plenum sessions, but, as you can see, there is no mention here of 'dismissal' at a Congress. Instead, discussions are carried on about 'dismissal' in other ways ... We, on the other hand, consider, that all of these words – 'change' [smenit'], 'dismiss' [snyat'], 'remove' [ubrat']- are one and the same thing, that there is no difference whatsoever between them. In our opinion it all amounts to violent dismissal ...²¹

Stalin's personal wrath is understandable. But what about the others? Did members of the Central Committee join in the attack on the Platform out of toadying to Stalin or simple fear of him? Certainly fear of the dictator must have played a role in the strident speeches of Central Committee members by 1937. But in 1932 and 1933, they had little real reason personally to fear Stalin's anger. Until 1937, senior officials who had never flirted with the opposition were not targets; they were members of the "we" that persecuted the "them", and when one reads the texts of their speeches, their zeal against the Trotskyists and Bukharinists seems genuine, often going beyond the punitive measures proposed by the Stalin group.

When the Riutin Platform attacked Stalin, it was also attacking the ruling nomenklatura establishment that had taken shape since the 1920s. The upper nomenklatura was composed of several different strata with different interests. It included members and staffs of the Politburo and Central Committee, First Secretaries of provincial party committees, and their full-time paid officials and organizers. But although these various groups had differing parochial interests (that sometimes conflicted with those of other nomenklatura groups) they shared a group identity as "insiders". They were the ones with power, great or small,

²⁰ Istochnik, 1993/0, 23–25.

²¹ RTsIKhDNI f. 17, op. 2, d. 511, ll. 168–178.

whose membership in the ruling caste distinguished them from the multitudinous “outsiders”.

Stalin was simultaneously creator, product and symbol of the *nomenklatura*. As chief of Central Committee personnel, he controlled the most important appointments. But, as Trotsky noted, he was also a product of the new official stratum. They supported him as much as he supported them. He was the symbol of party unity, common purpose, and unerring political guidance that the *nomenklatura* wished to project to the public. Stalin’s cult helped to cloak their privileges, authoritarian rule and mistakes behind a banner of wise leadership and teaching. Note the language used by Stalinists A. I. Akukov and Ian Rudzutak:

Akulov: ... Stalin’s policy is our policy, the policy of our entire Party. It is the policy of the proletarian revolution, it is the policy not only of the proletarian revolution in our country but of the proletarian revolution in the world. That’s what Stalin’s policy is all about. And these gentlemen will never succeed in separating us from our leader [vozhd’].²² Rudzutak: ... [Oppositionists say] that the majority of the CC disagree with Stalin’s policy, that they vote for it because they fear voting against it. Comrades, can one utter a greater slander against the members of the CC, against the old Bolsheviks, the majority of whom served years at hard labor? These, the finest people of the Party, did not fear many years in prison and in exile, and now these revolutionaries, who devote themselves to the victory of the Revolution, these old revolutionary warriors are afraid to vote against Comrade Stalin? ... You are slandering the members of the Party, you are slandering the members of the CC, and you are also slandering Comrade Stalin. We, as members of the CC, vote for Stalin because he is ours (applause).²³

Note that Rudzutak and Akukov had drawn a distinction between “we” and “Comrade Stalin”, “[you] will never succeed in separating us from our leader”, “We, as members of the CC, vote for Stalin because he is ours”, “That is why we are with him ...” (emphases added). For this “us”, the upper *nomenklatura*, Stalin was, among other things, symbol and linchpin. To remove him was to remove them. In return, by the way, Stalin later returned the compliment to “them”, the members of the *nomenklatura* who had supported him:

[T]he main thing is the middle cadres: party, economic, military. They choose the leader, they explain positions to the masses, they enable the success of things ... Why did we win over Trotsky and the others? Everybody knows that Trotsky, after Lenin, was the most popular in our country. Bukharin, Zinoviev, Rykov, Tomsky were popular. We were little known: I, Molotov, Voroshilov, Kalinin ... But the middle cadres supported us, explained our positions to the masses. But Trotsky did not pay these cadres any attention.²⁴

The final passage of the Riutin Platform quoted above made the point explicitly from the opposition point of view. The real danger of the Riutin Platform was its threat to the corporate interests of the current elite:

²² RTsIKhDNI f. 17, op. 2, d. 511, ll. 205–214.

²³ RTsIKhDNI f. 17, op. 2, d. 511, ll. 12–22.

²⁴ From the diary of Comintern leader Georgi Dmitrov, entry of 7 November 1937. The diary is still in a closed section of RTsIKhDNI. I am grateful to Professor F. I. Firsov for making his transcriptions available to me.

... At present, one can no longer consider the top leadership of the Party as people who are simply mistaken but subjectively sincere in believing in their rightness. Such a view is childish and naive ... The entire top leadership of the Party leadership, beginning with Stalin and ending with the secretaries of the provincial [oblast] committees are, on the whole, fully aware that they are breaking with Leninism, that they are perpetrating violence against both the Party and non-Party masses, that they are killing the cause of socialism. However, they have become so tangled up, have brought about such a situation, have reached such a dead-end, such a vicious circle, that they themselves are incapable of breaking out of it ... The mistakes of Stalin and his clique have turned into crimes ... In the struggle to destroy Stalin's dictatorship, we must in the main rely not on the old leaders but on new forces. These forces exist, these forces will quickly grow. New leaders will inevitably arise, new organizers of the masses, new authorities.²⁵

The Riutin Platform was thus calling for political agitation among the masses and the rank and file of the party against the ruling group. The Platform was interpreted by the upper nomenklatura as a call for violent revolution against the ruling group, not only against its leader. After the Riutin incident, the ruling stratum reacted more and more sharply to any criticism of Stalin, not only or always because they feared him (although events would show that they should have) but because they needed him to stay in power. In this sense, Stalin's interests and those of the nomenklatura coincided.

Beyond insulting Stalin, the Platform could not have come at a more dangerous time for the party leadership *as a whole*. The industrialization drive of the first Five Year Plan had not brought economic stability, and although growth was impressive so was the chaos and upheaval caused by mass urbanization, clogged transport and falling real wages. The situation in the countryside was even more dangerous. Collectivization and peasant resistance had led to the famine of 1932; eventually millions of "unnatural deaths" from starvation and repression would be recorded.

On lower levels of the party, many in the field charged with implementation began to waver in 1932 and 1933. Reluctant to consign local populations to mass death, many local party officials refused to push relentlessly forward and actually argued with the center about the high grain collection targets. The country was falling apart and there were cracks in the ruling group's chain of command. In such conditions, any dissident group emerging within the besieged party was bound to provoke panic and anger from a leadership that worshipped party unity and discipline.

The Riutin Platform thus threatened to carry the party leadership struggle outside the bounds of the ruling elite, the nomenklatura. The Trotskyist opposition of the mid-20s had attempted to do this as well by organizing public demonstrations and by agitating the rank and file of the party. The response of the leadership at that time, which included not only the Stalinists but also the Bukharinists and indeed the vast majority of the party elite, had been swift and severe: expulsion from the party and even arrest. Although leaders might fight among themselves behind closed doors, any attempt to carry the struggle to the party rank and file or to the

²⁵ Kurilova, Mikhailov, Naumov, Reabilitatsiia, 440–443.

public was far too dangerous. Mass politics, or a split between wavering lower cadres and the top leadership, could not be tolerated. After the dangerous experience with the Trotskyist opposition, the elite at all levels understood the dangers posed by a politicization of the masses on terms other than those prescribed by the elite.

It was this understanding and elite solidarity that had prevented the rightist (Bukharinist) opposition from lobbying outside the ruling stratum. As loyal members of the *nomenklatura*, they were keenly aware that the risks were too high, especially in an unstable social and political situation where the party did not command the loyalty of a majority of the country's population. Accordingly, the sanctions taken against the defeated rightists had been much lighter than those earlier inflicted on the Trotskyists. Although some of the rightists were expelled from the party and its leaders lost their highest positions, Bukharin and his fellow leaders remained in the Central Committee until 1937. They had, after all, played according to the terms of the elite's unwritten agreement not to carry the struggle outside the *nomenklatura*, not to permit a mass politics²⁶.

In 1933, Bukharin had himself accepted the notion of a new, dangerous situation in which no dissent could be tolerated. Speaking about another splinter group, Bukharin made an elliptical reference to the "wavering" lower party cadres,

Comrades, with regard to Aleksandr Petrovich Smirnov's group, it seems to me that no Party member can be of two minds about it: if it is necessary for us, on the whole, to indignantly repudiate a group of this sort, then it should especially – twice and thrice – be repudiated *now* [emphasis added], and severe punishment should be meted out ... There are a great many difficulties ...²⁷

Although the Riutin Platform originated in the right wing of the Bolshevik party, its specific criticisms of the Stalinist regime were in the early 1930s shared by the more leftist Leon Trotsky²⁸. In early 1933, Trotsky wrote a secret letter to the Politburo. Speaking as one *nomenklatura* member to another, he issued the ultimate threat: if the Stalinists refused to deal with him, he would feel free to agitate for his views among rank and file party members²⁹. Like the Riutinists, Trotsky's threat promised to take the political struggle outside the elite and thereby strike at the heart of the *nomenklatura*. He actually formed an underground "bloc" in the USSR and cultivated the "lower workers"³⁰ in the party as supporters against the

²⁶ Even as late as March, 1937, in condemning Bukharin the Central Committee (and Stalin personally) drew a distinction between his sins and the much graver crimes of Trotsky. RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 577, l. 4; Voprosy istorii, no. 1, 1994, 12–13.

²⁷ RTsKhIDNI f. 17, op. 2, d. 511, ll. 215–220.

²⁸ For Trotsky's analysis of the Stalin regime see *Robert H. McNeal*, Trotskyist Interpretations of Stalinism, in: *Robert C. Tucker* (ed.), *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation* (New York 1977) 30–52.

²⁹ Houghton Library, Harvard University, Trotsky Papers, T-3522.

³⁰ Trotsky Papers, 4782.

top leadership³¹. It is not a coincidence that in 1936 when Stalin and the party leadership found out that Trotsky's threats had taken organizational form, they launched the murderous and hysterical attack on Trotskyism.

Despite the formulaic nature of our texts, they symbolize something real in the nomenklatura: a palpable fear of any split or grassroots organizing against them that could lead to their overthrow. They knew perfectly well that if Stalin fell, they would fall with him. In the crisis atmosphere of the times, which was perceived as a continuation of the "new situation" following the Riutin affair, there was strong incentive in the party to close ranks against the perceived threat. Stalin's paranoia was also theirs.

The nomenklatura was Stalin's team and he was their front man. The groups behind Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Trotsky were part of "the other". The destruction of the opposition was the final neutralization of the "other team", the alternative party nomenklatura that had in its day staked a claim to party and state leadership. If they won, however unlikely that might seem, the current team would be replaced in quick order. Although there seemed little chance that Zinoviev or Trotsky would return to power in the mid-1930s, the possibility always existed. Lenin's ascension to power in 1917 must have seemed at least as far-fetched in 1915, before that wartime crisis. The opposition, therefore, represented a continuing threat to the corporate interests of the Stalinist nomenklatura that outweighed any nostalgia it may have felt for its former Old Bolshevik oppositionist comrades-in-arms. It was not very hard for the current serving party leadership to support the physical decimation of the left opposition out of political and corporate self-interest.

The road to terror was paved by an amazing group consensus within the nomenklatura, bordering on paranoia, on the need to tighten controls and generally to "circle the wagons" against a variety of real and imagined threats from the peasantry, the former opposition, rank and file members and even from their own ranks. This exaggeration of party discipline would eventually reach the point during the full-blown terror of 1937 where members of the Central Committee would literally vote themselves into prison, one after another.

Upon motions to expel a member of the Central Committee, all members and candidates unanimously voted yes; there was almost never any dissent in 1937 and 1938³². There were no dissidents, no argument; nomenklatura discipline overrode all other considerations. Piatakov voted to expel Sokol'nikov, then was himself expelled. I. P. Zhukov voted to expel Piatakov, then was himself expelled a few

³¹ For the documents from Trotsky's archive on these maneuvers, see *J. Arch Getty, Trotsky in Exile. The Founding of the Fourth International*, in: *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 38, no. 1 (Jan. 1986) 24–35.

³² An exception was Lenin's widow Krupskaya, who on occasion distinguished herself in the voting lists by voting "agreed" to the expulsion motion, rather than the more positive "yes" [za]. For an example, see RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 2 d. 614, l. 214ob.

months later³³. Even Ordzhonikidze, who privately complained about Piatakov's detention, voted "in full agreement" for Piatakov's expulsion and consequent arrest. Regardless of his doubts, in nomenklatura solidarity he later defended the notion of Piatakov's guilt even to his deputies at Heavy Industry who knew both him and Piatakov well³⁴. Such was party discipline among the elite. Democratic centralism was the vehicle for transforming the nomenklatura's fears into its suicide. At the height of the 1937 hysteria, the political paranoia of the top leadership went beyond fear of specific deeds, or even presumed deeds, and into the realm of what *might* happen in the future. In a perfect admission of that paranoia, Molotov later said,

1937 was necessary ... We were obligated in 1937 that in time of war there [would] be no fifth column. Really among Bolsheviks there were and are those who are good and faithful when everything is good, when the country and the party are not in danger. But if anything happens, they shiver and desert ... It is doubtful that these people were spies, but they were connected with spies, and the main thing is that in the decisive moment there was no relying on them ... [Was Tukhachevskii anti-Soviet?] Hard to say. But that he was unreliable is beyond question.³⁵

* * *

The regime in the 1930s was also apprehensive about personal meetings and conversations, not only among former oppositionists, but even among members of the Central Committee itself. More and more often, party leaders spoke and wrote about the "new situation" confronting the party in the 1930s. That new situation meant the political crisis atmosphere following the storm of collectivization, the rise of fascism, and the appearance in the party of particularly threatening opposition groups (the Riutinists and a revival of the Trotskyists).

In the new situation, certain types of meetings and conversations acquired special political meanings that would have been inconceivable before collectivization. As A. P. Smirnov said of his *sub rosa* conversations with discontented party members (which conversations he steadfastly maintained were innocent): "One must not discuss anything behind the Party's back. In view of our present situation, this is a political act, and a political act behind the Party's back is manifestly an anti-Party action, which could only be committed by people who have lost all connection with the Party. It's absolutely clear."³⁶ That is, regardless of the actual nature of the conversation, the crime was to have it with certain persons in the first place.

Other conversations between former oppositionists which resulted in no concrete action but which apparently did have a political character became crimes because "they promoted the creation of an atmosphere" harmful to the party. In fact,

³³ For examples of these successive ballots, see RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 573, l. 23, 26, 35, 36.

³⁴ RTsKhIDNI, f. 85, op. 29, d. 156, ll. 5–12.

³⁵ *Chuev*, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym* (Moscow 1991) 390, 413, 432.

³⁶ RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 511, l. 138.

by the end of 1936, the understanding was that former members of the opposition should have no personal contact with one another at all, because such contact inevitably threatened the regime. As former Right Opposition leader Rykov said in 1936,

I must note that any meeting is an attempt to form a group. I told Tomsy this and Tomsy agreed with me. Think about it: it is clear that if we were to discuss political questions, to talk about political themes, it is clear that one way or another it would be a continuation of the old [oppositionist] grouping. It's absolutely clear. So that is why we stopped all these conversations ...³⁷ [Kamenov] said to me „Let's gather together the old Bolsheviks and clarify the disagreements among ourselves. I said to him “You are talking nonsense”.³⁸

Although meetings between former contenders for power might indeed seem threatening (if not criminal) this regime was worried about even the smallest political or pseudo-political groups whose activities, by any stretch of the imagination, posed no threat to the regime. In September, 1933, a group of students in Samara tried to travel abroad using “false documents”. By the time the police and party leaders had analyzed the event, it was transformed into a “counter-revolutionary organization under the name of ‘The Peoples’ Communist Party’”. In the new paranoid view of the leadership, attempts by students to travel abroad became “attempts at establishing contact with White Guard-Fascist organizations in Germany for the purpose of coordinating counter-revolutionary operations”. Such youthful conversations and clumsy attempts at unauthorized travel would have completely escaped the attention of most governments, but in this case the incident was discussed at the very highest levels³⁹.

Similarly, in Krasnodar in late 1933, the police uncovered “a counter-revolutionary, anti-Party, ‘Rightist-Leftist’ organization headed by ,a group of Bolshevik-Leninists’”.

In order to expand its organizational operations, the „group“ had worked out a draft of a [political] „platform“. Attempts to discover this draft have been unsuccessful... The platform, according to testimony of members of the group, contained the assertion that the Five-Year Plan has not been fulfilled in four years and that industrial production ought to be carried on at cautious and feasible annual tempos... The group's fundamental aim is to actively struggle against the present leadership of the CC⁴⁰.

In this case, a negligible “group” whose platform could not even be produced was brought to the attention of the highest Moscow authorities. Moreover, all of the alleged ideological deviations attributed to these “Bolshevik-Leninists” had in fact been admitted publicly or privately in Central Committee plena before that time.

³⁷ Rykov's speech to the December 1936 plenum of the Central Committee. RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 575, ll. 100–102.

³⁸ From Kaganovich's speech to the December 1936 Central Committee plenum. RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 575, l. 161.

³⁹ RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 120, d. 106, ll. 55–56ob.

⁴⁰ RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 120, d. 106, ll. 56–59.

The worry, from the regime's point of view, was not so much the political content of the "group" but its very existence.

* * *

For the Stalinists in the 1930s, almost everything carried a threatening political content. Even suicide, which might represent the self-destruction of opponents was seen as a political blow against the party. As Stalin mused in 1936,

... But a person arrives at suicide because he is afraid that everything will be revealed and he does not want to witness his own public disgrace. Like Furer and Lominadze ... and Khandzhan and Skrypnik and Tomsky ...⁴¹ There you have one of the last sharp and easiest means that, before death, leaving this world, one can for the last time spit on the party, betray the party⁴².

Two months later, on the eve of the February, 1937 Central Committee plenum, Bukharin had protested the accusations against him by announcing that he was going on a hunger strike. Members of the Central Committee reacted with anger and indignation at this "blow against the party".

... Bukharin: I won't shoot myself because then people will say that I killed myself so as to harm the Party. But if I die, as it were, from an illness, then what will you lose by it? (Laughter. Voices: Blackmailer!)

Voroshilov: You scoundrel! Keep your trap shut! How vile! How dare you speak like that!

... Bukharin: It's easy for you to talk about me. What will you lose, after all? Look, if I am a saboteur, a son-of-a-bitch, then why spare me? I make no claims to anything. I am just describing what's on my mind, what I am going through. If this in any way entails any political damage, however minute, then, no question about it, I'll do whatever you say.⁴³

It is an unusual regime that feared the suicide of its political opponents⁴⁴. During the 1930s, however, suicides of rank and file party members and even ordinary citizens attracted the attention of the top leadership. Such events, even if they involved the most minor party members, were routinely investigated by the Special Political Department of the NKVD⁴⁵.

* * *

What kind of person – or regime – is afraid of humor and jokes? In the 1930s, the Bolshevik leadership feared anecdotes and careless speech. In 1930, even so serious a matter as Bukharin's political recantation before the Central Committee had

⁴¹ Other well-known party leaders who had killed themselves.

⁴² RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 576, ll. 67–70.

⁴³ Voprosy istorii, no. 4–5, 1992, 24, 32–34.

⁴⁴ Indeed, the most "famous" suicide of the 1930s, that of Sergo Ordzhonikidze, posed special problems for the regime. Unlike others, his suicide was never characterized as political betrayal and was hidden by the regime. His death was publicly announced as heart failure and Nikita Khrushchev, a member of the Politburo, did not learn the truth about Ordzhonikidze's death for many years.

⁴⁵ For examples, see RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 120, d. 183, l. 166; d. 181, ll. 102–105, and Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 9415, op. 5, d. 487, ll. 90–91.

been an occasion for mutual laughter (even about the opposition's fate) and for puns about stones, bricks, and Kamenev's name.

Bukharin: ... the leadership of the party was absolutely correct to crush the most dangerous right deviation within our party.

Voroshilov: And their bearers.

Bukharin: If the discussion is about their physical destruction, then I present myself to those comrades having this or that level of physical bloodthirstiness. (Laughter) ... The well-known lack of coordination that existed between construction materials and the construction industry, which also stands now at the center of attention ...

Kaganovich: Bricks.⁴⁶

Bukharin: Comrade Kaganovich says 'bricks'. If you want to force me to be witty, then I would remind you of one couplet that was in its time published in the *Russkie vedomosti* of blessed memory: 'they beat me, whipped me with three knouts and four weights. To me, an urchin, it was nothing; they did not beat me with bricks'... (laughter in the entire hall)

Kaganovich: Who, may I ask, is the urchin here and who the person wielding a stone?

Bukharin: Oh, how witty you are! Obviously, it was I who was struck and beaten with a stone. And now not a single member of the Plenum – I dare say – thinks that I am concealing some sort of a 'stone' of resentment, not even the stone-faced Kamenev.⁴⁷

Kaganovich: It is in vain that you think so. You must convince us.

Bukharin: Comrades, I am trying hard to convince you.

Kaganovich: Let's see how you shall convince us.

Bukharin: Of course, let's. You have acknowledged my statement as satisfactory, and whoever has doubts about it is guilty, to a certain extent, of being a left deviationist. (Laughter)...⁴⁸

Less than three years later, however, the mood had changed. Jokes had no place in party discourse any more. In his speech to the Central Committee plenum of January, 1933, M. F. Shkiryatov said,

Shkiryatov: ... What are jokes? Joking against the party is the same as agitation against the party. Which of us Bolsheviks does not know how in the old days we fought against Tsarism, how we told certain jokes in order to undermine the authority of the existing system? We know that all fractional groups always employ such despicable and harmful agitation. It [joking] is also a sharp weapon against the Central Committee.⁴⁹

At moments of perceived crisis for the party leadership, persecution of incautious speech increased dramatically, as the following table shows. Anecdotes and the like had not been sources for official obsession in the 1920s. As the table shows, the onset of collectivization, its height, the period following Kirov's assassination, and the terrible year 1937 each saw dramatic increases in persecution. Most of these arrests for "anti-Soviet agitation" were for jokes, songs, poems and even conversations that in any other political system would have been innocent and

⁴⁶ Bukharin had warned against trying to build socialism with "future bricks".

⁴⁷ Two puns are involved here: 1) a pun on Kamenev's name: *kamen'* means "stone" and 2) the expression: *Derzhat' kamen' za pazukhoi*, that is, "to nurse a grievance, to harbor a grudge".

⁴⁸ Bukharin's speech to the Central Committee, 19 December 1930, was at times a humorous colloquy with the audience. RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 453, ll. 53–61, 70–74, 77–78, 87–92.

⁴⁹ RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 511, l. 172, 177.

ignored. In the Soviet 1930s, however, they were „sharp weapons“ against the party. The regime’s agents carefully recorded all such jokes, poems, and the like and these were matters for attention and concern by the country’s highest political circles⁵⁰.

Arrests for “anti-Soviet agitation”

1921–30 incl.*	56 718
1931	100 963
1932	23 484
1933	32 370
1934	16 788
1935	43 686
1936	32 110
1937	234 301
1938	57 366
1939	

* There were no arrests for anti-Soviet agitation in 1924–28 or in 1930.

Source: Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF) fond 9401, op. 1, d. 4157, ll. 201–205.

* * *

The upper party leadership did not only fear jokes, groups, documents, groups of heretics, and potential treason. Evidence is strong that they feared developments in society that they could not control, and that they reacted hysterically with a blind terror against masses of presumed opponents without even being able to identify them precisely.

In 1936, the USSR had adopted a new constitution that envisioned the election of a new legislature, the Supreme Soviet. In June, 1937, the Central Committee prescribed electoral procedures that envisioned enfranchising the entire adult population, including groups like former White officers, tsarist policemen, kulaks in a system of secret-ballot elections. During 1937, local party leaders complained to Moscow that the proposed Supreme Soviet elections were giving new hope and life to various anti-Bolshevik “class enemies” who sought to use the electoral campaign to organize legally⁵¹.

At that precise moment, based on the “discovery of counterrevolutionary insurrectionist organizations among exiled kulaks in Western Siberia”, the Politburo authorized the formation of extra-judicial troikas to mete out summary punishment⁵². These tribunals had existed during the Civil War to provide drumhead justice to enemies of the regime on an expedited basis without usual judicial procedure. They had been revived during collectivization to deal out mass sentences

⁵⁰ RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 120, d. 70, l. 58.

⁵¹ See J. Arch Getty, *State and Society Under Stalin: Constitutions and Elections in the 1930s*, in: *Slavic Review* 50, 1 (Spring 1991) 18–36.

⁵² Tsentral'noe khraneniie sovremennoi dokumentatsii (TsKhSD), f. 89, op. 43, d. 48, l. 1.

of exile or death to opponents of the collective farms⁵³. Their re-establishment in 1937 reflected what the regime feared to be a dangerous crisis in the countryside.

Over the next two weeks, troikas were quickly established in provinces and territories across the USSR⁵⁴. On a province by province basis, their compositions were individually approved by the Politburo, to whom the troikas reported the numbers sentenced to execution or imprisonment⁵⁵. In 1937, the troikas would hand down 688,000 sentences, 87% of all criminal sentences in the USSR; the figure for 1938 was 75%. According to official figures released by the Russian government in 1995, of the 681,692 people sentenced to be shot in 1937–38, 92.6% were sentenced by troikas⁵⁶.

A Politburo document in the summer of 1937 prescribed the summary execution of more than 55,000 people who had committed no capital crime and were to be “swiftly” judged by extra-legal organs without benefit of counsel or even formal charge. Their “trials” were to be purely formal; these victims were “after consideration of their case by the troikas, to be shot.”

Almost anyone could fall under one of the categories of victims: those committing “anti-Soviet activities”, those in camps and prisons carrying out “sabotage”, criminals, people whose cases were “not yet considered by the judicial organs”, family members “capable of active anti-Soviet actions”. Round-number quotas were established by oblast’, with victims to be chosen by local party, police, and judicial officials according to their own lights. This “mass operation”, which would be extended into the next year, represented a reversion to the hysterical methods of the Civil War, when groups of hostages were taken and shot prophylactically or in blind retaliation. The new Red Terror of 1937, like its predecessor, reflected a deep-seated insecurity and fear of enemies on the part of the regime as well as an inability to say exactly who was the enemy. The targets were diffuse indeed:

... former kulaks ... church officials and sectarians who had been formerly put down, former active participants of anti-Soviet armed campaigns ... cadres of anti-Soviet political parties (SR’s, Georgian Mensheviks, Dashnaks, Mussavatists, Ittihadists, etc.) ... cadres of former active members of bandit uprisings, Whites, members of punitive expeditions, repatriates ... criminal ... horse and cattle thieves, recidivist thieves, robbers ... and so on ...
[!]⁵⁷

Stalin and his associates knew there was opposition to the regime, and feared it. Unable concretely to identify or specify it, they decided to lash out brutally and wholesale. Hostile forces were “infiltrating”, “sabotaging”, “undermining”, and were responsible for “every kind” of crime. In this sense, the new Red Terror of 1937 was an admission of the regime’s inability efficiently or predictably to govern

⁵³ RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 14, ll. 17, 19, 48.

⁵⁴ TsKhSD, f. 89, op. 43, d. 41, ll. 3–4.

⁵⁵ See, for example, TsKhSD, f. 89, op. 73, d. 49, ll. 1–2.

⁵⁶ *Vestnik Arkhiva Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii*: I.1995, *Istochnik*, no. 1, 1995, 120. See also Getty, *Rittersporn*, *Zemskov*, *Victims of the Soviet Penal System*, 1017–1049.

⁵⁷ *Trud*, no. 88, June 4, 1992, 1.

the countryside, or even to control it with anything other than periodic bursts of unfocused violence.

a) To the first category belong all the most active of the above-mentioned elements. They are subject to immediate arrest and, after consideration of their case by the troikas, to be shot.

b) To the second category belong all the remaining less active but nonetheless hostile elements. They are subject to arrest and to confinement in concentration camps for a term ranging from 8 to 10 years, while the most vicious and socially dangerous among them are subject to confinement for similar terms in prisons as determined by the troikas ... the following number of persons subject to punitive measures is hereby established:

	First Category	Second Category	Total
Azerbaijan SSR	1,500	3,750	5,250
Armenian SSR	500	1,000	1,500
Belorussian SSR	2,000	10,000	12,000
Georgian SSR	2,000	3,000	5,000
Kirghiz SSR	250	500	750
...			

Investigation shall be conducted into the case of each person or group of persons arrested. The investigation shall be carried out in a swift and simplified manner... Thoroughgoing measures are to be taken during the organization and implementation of the operations in order to prevent persons subject to punitive measures from going underground, in order to prevent their escape from their places of residence and especially beyond the border, in order to prevent their forming groups of bandits and robbers, and to prevent any excesses.[!] Any attempts to commit counter-revolutionary actions are to be brought to light promptly and quickly nipped in the bud...

Secretary of the CC.⁵⁸

* * *

Stalinist policies and reactions in the 1930s indicate more fear than confidence. What kind of regime is afraid of drunken conversations, jokes, and even suicides not only among members of its elite but among harmless citizens? What sort of government must fear vague and Talmudic references in histories written by its own leaders? How stable is a political system that must create special penal bodies to judge capital offenses that are not even crimes in the criminal code? What can one say about the stability and self-confidence of a regime that investigates and arrests pathetic groups of marginal students in small towns? What kind of elite launches bloody terror against itself from fear of what some of its member might do in the future? The Stalinist regime was unable to distinguish between big and little threats, unable to evaluate their relative danger. Because of this, they struck with equal ferocity at real political opponents, minor pedestrian signs of criticism, and at potential signs of such. This government and its leaders were afraid of their own shadows and of anything that might challenge their political monopoly and privilege.

⁵⁸ Trud, no. 88, June 4, 1992, 1, 4.

In their time, the Tsars had also feared meetings, organizations, jokes, and documents. But the imperial government never really feared for its very survival, and it did not constantly fear potential treason from its own officials. The Stalinists, on the other hand, seem by comparison to show signs of hysteria. After their own Civil War experience and that of a recent titanic national crisis, they were riven with anxiety. They were unlike their Tsarist predecessors in two additional ways. First, they seemed less able to classify, order, and manage the perceived threats. Second, while the Tsars seem to have thought that they controlled Russia, the Stalinists realized how little real day to day influence they had out in the countryside. These two differences would be powerful factors leading to the outbreak of mass terror in 1937.

At the same time, in another signification of severe anxiety, Stalinist fear was not accompanied by self-doubt about their policies or means. Their 19th-century rationalist faith in scientific solutions to human problems combined with their understanding of Marx's stages of historical development to convince them they were on the right track. For them, it was genuinely impossible to imagine that their policies were wrong. Their conviction was no doubt strengthened (consciously or subconsciously) by the recognition that their personal positions and collective fortunes were tied to those policies.

So, when things went wrong, when disasters occurred, it was necessary to find answers and solutions that avoided self-questioning. The most available explanation for problems, and one with resonance in Russian culture, was that frightening yet vague dark forces were at work to sabotage the effort. Schooled in the brutal Civil War of 1918–21, when there were real conspiracies, Stalinist leaders and followers found it easy to believe that enemies of various kinds were responsible for every problem. Of course, for the top leaders, there was a convenient element of scapegoating in blaming everything on "alien enemy forces". At the same time, reading the transcripts of closed party meetings, Central Committee sessions, and even personal letters among the senior leaders gives the strong impression that it was more than scapegoating. To a significant extent, they seemed to have genuinely believed in the existence of myriad conspiracies and believed that they were a real threat to the regime. From peasant to Politburo member, the discourse about evil conspirators reflected a historically-conditioned construction of reality⁵⁹.

This was not a strong or solidly-based regime. Its fear of everything from elite platforms to gossiping students was conditioned by a silent recognition that their control was in fact weakly based in the country. Their recourse to spasmodic mass violence against vague targets, rather than ordered administration, was another proof of fear disguised by brute force. This fragility was combined with a lack of self-doubt, a belief in conspiracies, a traditional intolerance of opposition, and a conditioned recourse to violence to produce a specific construction of reality.

⁵⁹ See *Gábor T. Rittersporn, The Omnipresent Conspiracy: On Soviet Imagery of Politics and Social Relations in the 1930s*, in: *Getty, Manning, Stalinist Terror*, 99–115.

Understanding of this mentality does not of course lessen or change the objective results of the terror. But as a phenomenon, as an event, the terror must also be understood in its subjective dimension. Rather than totalitarian giants, larger than life in their evil, these were frightened little men with big weapons. Because of this and because they had constructed a universe in which they were surrounded by dark, hostile, dangerous and hidden forces, they were all the more dangerous.

