Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin's Russia

INTRODUCTION

"... how thin the line between high principles and blinkered intolerance, how relative all human systems and ideologies, and how absolute the tortures which human beings inflict on one another."

– Eugenia Ginzburg, Communist Party member, arrested 1937[1]

Beginning in the summer of 1936, workplaces and institutions throughout the Soviet Union were gripped by a rising fever of denunciation. From the shop floors of the factories to the private chambers of the highest ruling bodies, Soviet citizens actively hunted for internal enemies among their coworkers, fellow students, comrades, and colleagues. After the murder of S. M. Kirov, head of the Leningrad party organization, in December 1934, the leaders of the Communist Party had accused former oppositionists of engaging in terrorist conspiracies and begun to target them for arrest. Over the next two years, the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) arrested a wide range of people, including former leftists and rightists, industrial managers, military leaders, cultural figures, party and union officials, and entire social and national

1 Eugenia Semenovna Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), p. 113.

groups that were deemed to be potentially disloyal. The campaign against terrorists, spies, and industrial saboteurs attracted broad and eager popular participation. The Party, the unions, and other mass organizations urged their members to search out hidden enemies among their social and professional contacts, in their apartment buildings, on collective farms, and even within their own families. The hunt resulted in a flood of denunciations, imprisonments, and executions.

I. V. Stalin and members of the Politburo, convinced that foreign and domestic enemies posed a threat to the Soviet state, initiated, encouraged, and ultimately halted the hunt for enemies. Yet once the hunt began, following several highly publicized propaganda campaigns, it developed a powerful dynamic of its own. Popular belief and fear intermingled to create a toxic atmosphere. As ordinary people answered the call for vigilance, increasing numbers of their fellow citizens fell victim to NKVD arrests. In the factories, the hunt for enemies intensified in tandem with arrests: as more people were denounced by others, arrests multiplied. Family members, coworkers, mentors, and bosses disappeared into prison. Speakers at mass meetings and writers for factory and national newspapers railed against the spies and terrorists who threatened the country.

Factory employees seemed willing enough to accept this message so long as the arrests did not affect anyone they knew personally. When the NKVD arrested their relatives, comrades, or coworkers, they were deeply shocked. Was it possible that these intimates and acquaintances were really hidden enemies? Amid the nationwide fury over terrorists and spies, citizens were isolated and shamed by the arrests of friends and family members. Many who had initially been persuaded by the state's claim that terrorists were operating inside industrial, military, and state institutions began to grasp that *everyone* was subject to arrest. This internal shift, from belief in

the state's campaign to fear of becoming its target, became evident in people's outward behavior. The growing dread of personal vulnerability produced a pervasive mistrust of others. People developed twisted, often aggressive strategies for self-protection. The poisonous atmosphere seeped into even the closest and most private of human relationships. No one in the Soviet Union remained unaffected or unmarked by the political culture of these years. What began as a state-sponsored war on terrorism had grown into a full-blown terror.

This book explores the transformation of the political culture based on a unique body of sources in the Central Archive of Social Political History of Moscow: the stenographic reports of Communist Party meetings held in five Moscow factories between 1934 and 1939. Paired with daily factory newspapers, these reports enable us to reconstruct in detail what happened in the factories, to plot the spread of terror through the actions of specific individuals, and to piece together who did what to whom. The factories involved, representing both heavy and light industry, were Dinamo, which made electric locomotives and machines; Serp i Molot, a steel plant; Trekhgornaia Manufaktura, a textile factory; Krasnyi Proletarii, a machine fabricator; and Likerno-Vodochnyi Zavod, a distillery.[2] The stenographic reports, verbatim transcripts of party meetings, permit us to witness how the terror unfolded on the local level – to eavesdrop, so to speak, on closed meetings held more than seventy years ago.[3] They allow us to track party members and other factory employees over time, to learn about their backgrounds and secrets,

2 The state considered Dinamo, Serp i Molot, and Krasnyi Proletarii to be "leading" factories of special importance to the industrialization effort. See *Istoriia rabochikh Moskvy 1917–45 gg.* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo 'Nauka,' 1983), p. 425.

3 A stenographer, present at the meetings of the party committees and primary party organizations, produced a verbatim transcription. This practice dated back to the 1920s. See Igal Halfin, *Intimate Enemies: Demonizing the Bolshevik Opposition, 1918–1928* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), p. 29.

to observe their interactions with their coworkers – in sum, to watch a grand drama unfold in intimate human terms. Unlike memoirs of the terror, which reconstruct the past from the remembered experience of a lone individual, most often a victim, the stenographic reports follow victims, participants, and perpetrators as they act in real or present time. Unlike diaries, they show multiple perspectives uninflected by a single subjectivity. Additional archival and published sources on national, regional, and city events enable us to place the microenvironments of the factories within a larger political context and to trace the dynamic interplay between orders from above and events and responses from below. This book can be read independently or as a companion volume to my *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). Whereas that work focused on industrial tensions, power struggles in the unions, and workers' responses, this one explores personal relationships and individual behavior within a pervasive political culture of "enemy hunting."

The study of individual behavior within the world of the factories raises intriguing questions about mass participation in the terror. Many historians have argued that the terror was strictly a top-down affair, launched and managed by Stalin with the aim of eliminating any threat, whether potential or real, to his personal power over the Party and the state. This view has proponents on both the right and the left wings of the political spectrum. On the right, it first found expression in the Cold War notion of "totalitarianism," describing the system of total political control that allegedly characterized both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.[4] On the left, historians

4 The adjective *totalitarian* made its first appearance in the 1920s in reference to Italian fascism, was next used in the late 1940s to describe German fascism, and then gained broad popularity during the Cold War. Focusing on the political system and eschewing class analysis, adherents of the concept offered little

sympathetic to socialism, including but not limited to Trotskyists, tended to emphasize Stalin's obsession with purging oppositionists who provided an alternative, democratic path to socialism that challenged his power.[5] More recently, scholars focusing on state power within a wider, pan-European perspective have revived the totalitarian framework based on archival materials that revealed Stalin's significant role in the terror and the Politburo's orders for mass arrests of specific social and national groups. According to this view, repression was a form of violent social engineering, aimed at eliminating those individuals and groups that did not fit into an ideologically determined socialist community.[6]

to distinguish fascism from socialism. See Michael Geyer, "Introduction: After Totalitarianism – Stalinism and Nazism Compared," in Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1–37; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968); Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994); Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia: 1917–1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Stéphane Courtois, Nicolas Werth, Jean-Louis Panné, Andrzej Paczkowski, Karel Bartosek, and Jean-Louis Margolin, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

5 Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin, *Stalin's Terror of 1937–1938: Political Genocide in the USSR* (Oak Park, Mich.: Mehring Books, 2009).

6 Amir Weiner, ed., *Landscaping the Human Garden: Twentieth-Century Population Management in a Comparative Framework* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003); Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870s–1990s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and *The Voices of the Dead: Stalin's Great Terror in the 1930s* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007); Peter Holquist, "'Information Is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work': Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Perspective," *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 69, no. 3 (1997), pp. 415–50; David Hoffman, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003); Hoffman and Yanni Kotsonis,

Other historians, more concerned with social, institutional, and economic history, reject the primacy of a monolithic ideology and instead depict a dynamic of power marked by vacillation, bureaucratic infighting, differences of opinion, and popular participation. In place of Stalin's personal drive for "totalizing power," they emphasize the influence of uncertainty, confusion, and a welter of social tensions in exacerbating the terror. Centering their research on conflicts within industrial enterprises, scientific institutions, collective farms, military units, and party organizations, these writers suggest that numerous other factors may have contributed to Stalin's excisionary violence.[7] Several historians link the terror to the broader

eds., *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926–1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Golfo Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926–1936* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003).

7 These include William J. Chase, *Enemies within the Gates?: The Comintern and the Stalinist Repression, 1934–1939* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001); Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Workers against Bosses: The Impact of the Great Purges on Labor-Management Relations," in Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class and Identity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 311–40; Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Getty, "State and Society under Stalin: Constitutions and Elections in the 1930s," *Slavic Review*, vol. 50, no. 1 (1991); Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–1939* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999); Getty and Roberta T. Manning, eds., *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Manning, "Government in the Soviet Countryside in the Stalinist Thirties: The Case of Belyi Raion in 1937," *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 301 (1984); E. A. Rees, ed., *Centre-Local Relations in the Stalinist State, 1928–1941* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Gábor Rittersporn, *Stalinist Simplifications and Soviet Complications: Social Tensions and Political Conflicts in the USSR, 1933–1953* (Reading, U.K.: Harwood, 1991); Asif Siddiqi, "The Rockets' Red Glare: Technology, Conflict, and Terror in the Soviet Union," *Technology and Culture*, vol. 44, no. 3 (July 2003);

social history of the 1930s, and the state's struggle with entrenched social, class, and regional interests.[8] New work has also set the terror in the context of a longer history of Soviet policing of various social groups, beginning with the deportation, arrest, and execution of kulaks and other rural, allegedly antistate groups during the collectivization drive of 1929–30. After the introduction of internal passports in 1932, police conducted mass sweeps of urban areas to round up dispossessed, criminal, and marginal populations that were then sentenced through boards (*troiki*) established outside the official judicial system. The mass arrests, absence of specific charges, and extrajudicial sentencing provided a template for the subsequent arrests of targeted social and national groups in 1937–38.[9] A very few historians have trained their gaze on the individual. Relying on diaries, interviews, and other sources, they have explored the "Soviet self" and the extent to which Soviet citizens internalized

Peter H. Solomon Jr., *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert W. Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934–1941* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996); Thurston, "Reassessing the History of Soviet Workers: Opportunities to Criticize and Participate in Decision-Making," in Stephen White, ed., *New Directions in Soviet History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

8 Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); James R. Harris, *The Great Urals: Regionalism and the Evolution of the Soviet System* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999); David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization: Ideas, Power and Terror in Inter-War Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

9 Lynne Viola, V. P. Danilov, N. A. Ivnitskii, and Denis Kozlov, *The War against the Peasantry, 1927–1930: The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005); Viola, *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Viola, "The Role of the OGPU in Dekulakization, Mass Deportations, and Special Resettlement in 1930," *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 1406 (January 2000). On the history of Soviet policing, see Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police;* David R. Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924–1953* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009).

the views of their leaders and the ideals of the new socialist society.[10]

These innovative studies, looking at a range of contributing factors from Politburo orders to social and institutional tensions to personal subjectivities, have yet to be synthesized into a new paradigm. New findings have provoked fresh debates over the reasons for the terror, the actual decision-making process, and the specific identities of the victims. Some historians now maintain that the threat of war provided the main impetus for the elimination of potentially disloyal groups, seemingly justifying a prophylactic purge of a possible "fifth column."[11] Others counter that the terror in fact predated Hitler's takeover of Eastern Europe, and that no significant international events correlated either with the terror's onset or with its end.[12] Still other historians emphasize domestic factors, most particularly the pressure imposed by regional party leaders to purge their areas in preparation for upcoming multicandidate, secret-ballot elections

10 Anna Krylova, "The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Winter 2000; Natalia Korenevskaya, Veronique Garros, and Thomas Lahusen, eds., *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930's* (New York: New Press, 1995); Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Halfin, *Intimate Enemies;* Halfin, *Stalinist Confessions: Messianism and Terror at the Leningrad Communist University* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

11 This idea was first advanced by V. M. Molotov in *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics, Conversations with Felix Chuev* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993). See also Oleg Khlevniuk, "The Objectives of the Great Terror, 1937–38," in Julian Cooper, Maureen Perrie, and E. A. Rees, eds., *Soviet History, 1917–53: Essays in Honour of R. W. Davies* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 172–74; Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism*, pp. 314–15.

12 Marc Junge and Bernd Bonwetsch, "'Everywhere, Nothing but Enemies': The 'War Threat' and the Great Murder of the Little People in the Soviet Union 1937 to 1938," unpublished paper presented to the Terror Conference, University of Leeds, Leeds, U.K., August 2010.

to the soviets. Historians also differ over the degree of strategizing involved: some contend that the mass operations were planned in advance, while others hold that they were carried out only in response to petitions from regional party leaders.[13] Finally, historians also disagree about the terror's victims. Some now assert that the majority of them were not the managerial elites, party members, and former oppositionists who figured so prominently in earlier accounts, but rather dispossessed and criminal elements and targeted national groups. They posit that the terror was the culmination of policing campaigns against nonpolitical, marginal populations. Others still insist on the primacy of politics. The debate is further complicated by the fact that individual victims often did not even fit into the category under which they were arrested, and many had multiple identities that could not be represented by a single label. In the national operations, for example, some of the targeted immigrant groups contained a high percentage of Communists and socialists. Although these individuals were arrested as part of national groups, their elimination had an enormous political impact on the international Communist movement. Historians are still striving to understand the connections among the successive waves of violence and the relative importance of policing techniques, politics, social instability, and international events in launching and shaping the terror. And they still differ widely over even the most basic questions regarding the motivations of the leadership, the role of mass participation, and the dynamics of power.

13 Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism*, pp. 322–34; Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police*, pp. 232–51; J. Arch Getty, "State and Society under Stalin: Constitutions and Elections in the 1930s," *Slavic Review*, vol. 50, no. 1 (1991); Getty, "'Excesses Are Not Permitted': Mass Terror and Stalinist Governance in the Late 1930s," *Russian Review*, vol. 61 (January 2002), pp. 113–38.