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# *Introduction*

How do we recover the thoughts and values, hopes and beliefs of 'ordinary people'? So often their voices have been silenced by the rich and powerful. In Stalin's Russia, this process of silencing was particularly insidious. Not only were people literally silenced – shot, or incarcerated in concentration camps for expressing unorthodox views – but also the entire Soviet media eliminated virtually all reference to heretical opinion. Dissonant voices were written out of history by the Stalinist scriptwriters – but not forever. In letters and top secret documents, hidden in the archives, these voices were preserved. The aim of this book is simple: to 'release' them, and allow them to speak for themselves as far as possible. However, inevitably the selection and organisation of the material will have left its mark. What follows is just one of many possible interpretations that could, and should, be undertaken.

This book focuses on popular opinion during a formative and momentous period of Soviet history. The years 1934–41 witnessed both the 'Great Retreat' and the 'Great Terror'.[1] The term 'Great Retreat', coined by the sociologist Timasheff, symbolises the repudiation of many of the values and aspirations of the Russian Revolution of October 1917. In the words of Stalin's arch-enemy, Trotsky, the Revolution had been 'betrayed', and had given way to a 'Soviet Thermidor'.[2] The Russian Revolution, carried out under the banner of socialism and the liberation of the working class, was followed by a bloody civil war, portrayed as a class struggle of the poor and exploited against the rich capitalists. During the war, the Bolshevik Party established a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and introduced 'war communism', a series of measures including the nationalisation of industry, a grain monopoly, the abolition of free trade, and rationing. The Bolsheviks won the civil war, but, in the face of mounting social disaffection, were forced to abandon war



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communism in 1921 and introduce the New Economic Policy (NEP). Free trade was reintroduced, and only heavy industry, banking, and foreign trade remained under state control.

The economy, shattered by war and revolution, began slowly to recover. However, NEP society was riddled with contradictions. A 'bourgeois' stratum flourished, epitomised by the petty capitalist 'nepmen' who flaunted their wealth in nightclubs and restaurants. With the growth of the party and state apparatus, it seemed to many, including Trotsky and the opposition which crystallised around him, as if the country was being run by a new 'bureaucracy'. Relations between the party and the proletarians it claimed to represent were strained, and unemployment continued to blight workers' lives. The peasants, meanwhile, were being encouraged by Bukharin to 'get rich'. Their reluctance to supply the towns with grain precipitated an economic crisis which heralded the end of NEP.

NEP was both economically unviable and ideologically unacceptable to the leadership. In 1928, Stalin, who had secured power following the death of Lenin after outmanoeuvring his rivals Trotsky, Kamenev, and Zinoviev, launched a new 'revolution from above' in many ways as far-reaching as that of 1917. It entailed unprecedentedly rapid industrialisation carried out according to 'five-year plans', the first of which operated from 1928 until the end of 1932. New factories and even cities sprang up, the industrial workforce doubled, and the bureaucracy expanded. The collectivisation of agriculture was initiated in 1929, with peasants forced to join *kolkhozy* en masse. Millions of peasants were shot or resettled in Siberia for resisting the policy. The massive opposition to collectivisation by so-called kulaks led to a partial retreat, and complete collectivisation was not accomplished until the eve of the 'Great Patriotic War' (1941–5). The period 1929–32 also experienced Cultural Revolution – utopianism, social and cultural experimentation on a grand scale, and a class war against those of non-proletarian origins. The result of all these measures was not utopia, however, but social and economic turmoil and the famine of 1932–3 which claimed the lives of millions.

In 1933–4, a new course was adopted. Stability, rather than revolution, was the watchword. More realistic targets were set for the second five-year plan, and concessions were made to the peasants. The emphasis on class war was moderated in favour of propaganda and policies promoting the unity of the 'whole people'. Proletarian dictatorship was replaced by a Constitution which guaranteed

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everyone over eighteen the right to vote in secret elections for a Supreme Soviet, including those previously disenfranchised because of their social origins. Hierarchical rather than egalitarian values were actively encouraged through the promotion of Stakhanovite workers and other heroes. Specialists were now rewarded rather than persecuted. A new elite emerged, and a new ethos of consumerism. Religion was tolerated (within limits), stable family values were encouraged, and education, law, and the arts reverted to tradition. The Cultural Revolution was definitely over, and with it the privileges of workers, who were now expected to tolerate working practices in some ways reminiscent of those under capitalism. At the same time, in the international arena, the USSR sought alliances with capitalist states, and in 1939 went so far as to sign a non-aggression pact with fascist Germany.

Yet this partial retreat to conservatism and tradition was accompanied by a new 'revolution', in the form of the Great Terror, which had the effect of bringing down many of the elite and creating a climate of acute instability. Its origins lay in the still unexplained murder of Leningrad party boss, Kirov, on 1 December 1934. The murder was officially attributed to Stalin's old opponents, Kamenev and Zinoviev, and was used by Stalin to launch a crackdown in early 1935 on thousands of former 'oppositionists' and 'class enemies', particularly in Leningrad. In mid-1936, terror struck again. Kamenev and Zinoviev were sentenced to execution in the first of many show trials in which prominent party figures were accused of spying and wrecking. For a number of reasons the terror escalated into what has become known as the *ezhovshchina*, after Ezhov, the head of the NKVD, who organised the terror against millions of innocent citizens in 1937–8.[3]

This dramatic tale is well known. What has been unclear until now and what this study seeks to address is the way in which 'ordinary people' responded to the Great Retreat and Great Terror. The focus is deliberately upon the views of subordinate groups in general, rather than one particular social category, because the opinions expressed cannot be clearly attributed to precisely defined groups. In any case, the a priori categorisation of social groups reveals more about the assumptions of scholars than it does about the identities and ideas of those alleged to constitute them. The determinist notions that skilled workers automatically possess a revolutionary

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class consciousness, that peasants are naturally backward and petty-bourgeois, and that white-collar workers have different interests to blue-collar workers are all too redolent of Bolshevik ideology. In reality, peasants, workers, *sluzhashchie*, and low-level party members often spoke a similar language, albeit with different degrees of competence. Clearly their concerns were not always identical, and this work reflects such differences with separate sections devoted to the particular interests of peasants, workers, or women. Even confining the study to subordinate groups is somewhat artificial and presupposes a rigid dichotomy between those with power and those without. In this period of social flux and purging, those at the top could easily end up at the bottom, and vice versa, and *some* views expressed by members of the elite may not have differed much from those of the 'lower classes'.

An analysis of popular opinion in this period must take into account the role of propaganda and coercion in Soviet society. This was a period of unprecedentedly intense and uniform propaganda, and of censorship taken to absurd degrees. The propaganda pervaded every sphere of public communication, including the media, the arts, and education. Its main messages, intoned with monotonous regularity, proclaimed that life in the Soviet Union was unequivocally rosy in contrast to the pitiful existence of workers living under capitalism, that in the USSR the whole people allegedly enjoyed satisfying jobs and high living standards, endorsed the policies of the party and Stalin to whom they were devoted, and believed in socialism with a Stalinist face. The standard formula accompanying the newspaper publicity for a policy or event proclaimed that 'all the workers of Leningrad/Moscow/the USSR (or wherever) greeted the decision/policy/verdict with pleasure/approval/satisfaction'. The heavily censored media were forbidden to publish material about real feelings at the grassroots. In 1927 the censor classified information on the 'political mood [*politicheskie nastroeniia*]' alongside news about strikes, demonstrations, disorder, and similar manifestations of discontent as information which could not be printed lest it damaged the 'political-economic interests of the USSR'.[4] Unacceptable views were referred to only occasionally and obliquely in public as 'the survivals of capitalism in the consciousness of the people', 'the psychology of the petty proprietor', 'petty-bourgeois feelings', and 'outbursts [*vylazki*] of the class enemy'.

As well as propaganda and censorship, the regime also relied on

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repression to block alternative ideas. People were charged with the crime of 'anti-Soviet agitation' (the notorious article 58.10) for expressing opinions which seemed to the authorities to be aimed at 'the overthrow, subversion, or weakening of' Soviet power.[5] This was an elastic definition and the numbers of those sentenced under article 58.10 fluctuated considerably. In lenient periods, the numbers were relatively small, but during collectivisation and the terror of 1936–8 many thousands of people were sentenced.[6] During the terror, convictions were even possible for statements such as 'The loan is voluntary. I don't want to subscribe 150 r., only 100', or 'in Greece there are many types of fruit, and in the USSR few'.[7] At the peak of the terror, thought crime became institutionalised when a statement such as 'I wish Stalin was dead' was deemed to be equivalent to actually committing a terrorist act, and was supposed to be prosecuted accordingly.[8]

So what was the effect of these measures? Were ordinary people reduced through a combination of repression and propaganda into either regurgitating the official discourse, or keeping their silence? Or was there any significant dissonant popular opinion in Stalin's Russia?

Although historians have broached this question, they have been stymied until recently by a lack of sources.[9] Most investigations have focused on the views of the intelligentsia, since the sources are richer for this group. The debate has centred on the sometimes unproductive wrangle between adherents of the 'totalitarian' model of Soviet society and so-called revisionists, a debate which has dominated the field to such an extent that other perspectives have been rather marginalised.

There is no need to rehearse in detail the arguments of both sides, except in so far as they touch on the question of popular opinion.[10] Proponents of the 'totalitarian' model *tend* to ignore society,[11] which they regard as being atomised and under the absolute control of the Soviet state. They stress the latter's use of propaganda and coercion, and imply that the 'masses' were either brain-washed into conformity or were silent but implacable opponents of the regime. By contrast, revisionists portray society as an active and autonomous force, not merely an adjunct of the state. In their concern to overturn the 'totalitarian' orthodoxy about the terrorised, disaffected, and zombie-like masses, some revisionists attempt to demonstrate the existence of a social basis of support for Stalin amongst, for example,

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upwardly mobile cadres (*vydvizhentsy*), Komsomol members, and Stakhanovites, all of whom, it is suggested, actively endorsed the regime.[12] Although this interpretation provides a refreshing alternative to the totalitarian perspective, it is sometimes taken to extremes. For example, one historian argues that most ordinary people did not feel terrorised in this period except at the worst moments of 1937, that they exercised the freedom of speech (within limits), and enjoyed the right to criticise and complain. He concludes that many workers were probably loyal to the regime.[13]

While it seems appropriate to jettison the stereotype of the 'terrorised masses', claims about workers' loyalty appear less well founded. Just because workers did not feel terrorised, and continued to criticise managers and so on, it does not follow that they were always satisfied with the Soviet regime or its policies. Indeed, the large amount of criticising and complaining going on might imply quite the contrary. Recent research on both workers and peasants indicates that they did indeed feel oppressed and adopted many tactics of passive resistance.[14]

Evidently it is time to reevaluate the whole question of popular opinion, to get away from the totalitarian insistence on the atomised, voiceless masses, without moving to the other extreme of painting a socialist realist picture of satisfied and contented workers and peasants singing in unison 'life has become better, life has become merrier'. Clearly along the continuum from active consent to active resistance/dissent were a range of heterogeneous positions. There were few absolute 'conformists' and 'dissenters'. In practice, people's views were far more ambivalent and contradictory: opposition to one policy or facet of the regime was quite compatible with support of others, a tendency which has been noted by historians of other authoritarian societies. Detlev Peukert shows that in Nazi Germany 'diverse forms of criticism and "grumbling" were quite capable of existing side by side with partial recognition of the regime or at least with passive acceptance of authority', while Luisa Passerini's oral history also highlights the ambivalence of popular attitudes in Fascist Italy.[15]

In his recent important work on the new Soviet city of Magnitogorsk in the 1930s, Stephen Kotkin rejects the totalitarian/revisionist, opposition/support dichotomy, and is aware of the tactical use of language by ordinary citizens. However, he is inclined to take propaganda at its face value, overemphasising the popular tendency

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to 'speak Bolshevik' (i.e. to use the official language).[16] He denies that a Great Retreat occurred and makes the provocative claim that 'To the vast majority of those who lived it, and even to most of its enemies, Stalinism, far from being a partial retreat let alone a throwback to the Russian past, remained forward-looking and progressive throughout.'[17] He also asserts that:

> Even the truest of true believers appears to have had regular bouts with private doubt. But few could imagine alternatives. Nor was anyone encouraged to do so. Sealed borders and censorship did their part.[18]

In the only significant study of Soviet propaganda, Peter Kenez argues in a similar vein that the regime

> succeeded in preventing the formation and articulation of alternative points of view. The Soviet people ultimately came not so much to believe the Bolsheviks' world view as to take it for granted. Nobody remained to point out the contradictions and even inanity in the regime's slogans.[19]

These conclusions are undermined by the new sources, which reveal that, on the contrary, ordinary people were adept at defeating the censor, seeking out alternative sources of information and ideas in the form of rumours, personal letters, leaflets (*listovki*), and inscriptions (*nadpisi*).[20] They also continued to draw on a variety of rival discourses, including those of nationalism, anti-semitism, and populism, which proved tenacious despite concerted attempts to eradicate them.

Moreover, the official language was used and understood in a far from passive way. As Voloshinov points out, language is inherently flexible and can become an arena in which social conflicts are played out over the meaning of signs: 'every living ideological sign is double-headed like Janus. Every living abuse may become praise, every living truth inevitably will sound like the greatest lie to many others.'[21] This 'janus-headed' character of signs prevented the Stalinist regime from imposing one monolithic interpretation of reality.

This seems to be the point Bakhtin was trying to convey in the late 1930s in his work on Rabelais, which represents, in the view of Clark and Holquist, 'Bakhtin's most comprehensive critique to date of Stalinist culture'.[22] Whether or not Bakhtin deliberately set out to describe his own culture in an aesopian way, some features of this work ostensibly about medieval France do illuminate similar processes underway in Soviet Russia. He describes a society in which the

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hegemonic class maintains its dominance partly through its ideological diktat. Official culture is characterised by its attempt to present only one 'natural' interpretation of reality. It projects seriousness, retrospectivity, immutability, eternity. It is also associated with fear and violence. However, the monopoly of the official culture of the medieval world is undermined by a second culture of laughter, typified by the carnival. During carnival, official symbols are invested with new meaning, for 'the second life, second world of popular culture is constructed to a certain extent as a parody on the usual ... life, like a "world inside out"'. Its role lies in the desacralisation of all that represented by the hegemonic culture. It breaks all the taboos, mocks the sacred, reverses the hierarchy. It represents equality, utopia, and freedom from fear.[23] So too, in Stalinist Russia, the official discourse, characterised by gravity, a sense of its own permanence and so on, was subjected to carnivalisation in the form of jokes and songs which 'deconstructed' the hierarchies and assumptions implicit in the official discourse, reversing the traditional topography, bringing high down to low and vice versa, emphasising the physical side of life, and using profanities.

This is just one example of the various ways in which the official discourse became a tool in the hands of subordinate groups who reappropriated it for their own purposes. Likewise, officially hallowed words, such as 'revolution' and 'the people [*narod*]' were reclaimed for the expression of dissent. So, while the regime employed *narod* to denote the 'whole people', and thereby to imply unity, dissenters used it in a divisive way to signify the powerless *nizy* (lower classes).

Citizens also couched illegitimate or subversive requests and complaints in terms of the official discourse, protecting themselves by invoking their Constitutional rights, Stalin's words, the working class, and other officially cherished notions. Rigby refers to this practice in his analysis of a 'shadow culture' in the USSR. He argues that 'political hypocrisy' was a 'time-bomb' with a self-fulfilling potential. The collapse of the Soviet regime was facilitated by the existence of an official rhetoric about democracy, rights, and so forth which could be used by those seeking real democracy.[24]

It is not my aim to give the erroneous impression that the official language was always used with purely subversive or cynical intent. There were undoubtedly true believers and fanatics, as chapter 10 will show. It is also likely that some of the less committed sometimes

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'welcomed the policies', 'condemned the enemies', or said whatever they were alleged to be saying in newspaper articles reporting so-called 'popular reactions' to various measures. However, 'popular opinion' in this sense is not the main subject of this book. Rather, the objective is to illuminate the hitherto neglected body of dissonant opinion which distorted, subverted, rejected, or provided an alternative to the official discourse.

It is difficult to generalise about the content of this popular opinion, to make categorical assertions about a hypothetical 'Russian popular political culture'. Often the values expressed seem to contradict each other, refusing to fit conveniently into boxes labelled socialist, anarchist, conservative, liberal, or whatever. However, certain themes do feature prominently. Hostility towards officialdom and antipathy towards 'the state' were often expressed. Conversely, there was also a widespread contrary opinion that the state should provide for and look after the people. A paternalist style of leadership was valued highly. Materialism and egalitarianism pervaded many popular statements. 'Socialism' seems to have been favoured and 'class' feelings were very pronounced. Social conservatism was widespread. Politics and the law were treated in various ways: although many were indifferent to them, others took them more seriously. Above all, popular opinion was heterogeneous. People's attitudes depended as much upon the nature of particular policies or issues as upon any coherent worldview. For this reason, and because the sources lend themselves to this treatment, this book is structured thematically. Part I focuses on economic and social questions. Part II considers politics, including international relations, and various aspects of the terror. Part III concentrates on the leader cult. Before we proceed any further, at this stage it is worth examining the sources for the study and considering how these may have affected the representation of popular opinion.

## SOURCES

The evidence for this study includes citizens' letters, memoirs, diaries, and newspaper reports. Reports prepared by party agitators on the feedback they obtained from their audiences have also been used. However, the main sources are summaries produced by the NKVD and party (and Komsomol) information departments on popular responses to particular events or policies (*svodki/spetssoobshcheniia o*

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*nastroenii*). As this is a large body of untapped and valuable material, it deserves particular attention.

The party, through the various incarnations of its Information Department, and the secret police, through its Secret-Political Department, had been involved in the surveillance of popular opinion since the revolution (and, in the party's case, even before that).[25] The party Information Department was responsible for coordinating the exchange of information between centre and periphery on a variety of subjects, including information on the popular mood.[26] According to a directive of 1934, each PPO was supposed to have a party informant (*informator*), who was required to be politically literate and authoritative, and to have experience of political work with the masses. His job was to analyse both positive and negative aspects of grassroots party organisations in a clear, self-critical, profound, and objective fashion. He was also to be aware of the general mood of workers and to pay particular attention to characteristic events of the day (accidents and stoppages, interruptions to services, various types of feelings). The job entailed maintaining close links with the party secretary, being present at meetings, and liaising with grassroots activists and editors of local newspapers in order to maximise the possibility of obtaining what was described as 'objective' information.[27] This was the theory. In practice, information work was not always accorded a high priority, even in the powerful Leningrad party organisation, although there were some improvements after the Kirov murder, when additional informants were appointed. Even so, in 1939 it transpired that certain PPOs lacked any informants. If the party information system sometimes functioned moderately efficiently in the factories of Leningrad, it was far less effective in the countryside and amongst the intelligentsia.[28] By contrast, the NKVD was able to monitor a far broader range of social groups through its network of paid and unpaid secret agents (*seksoty*).[29]

Party and NKVD informants noted down conversations, rumours, jokes, and other evidence of the popular mood which were compiled into *svodki* (summaries). In the case of the party, the data was sent to the *raikom*, which summarised it for the *obkom*. The Information Department of the *obkom* then compiled a summary on the basis of all the *raikom* reports. Both party and NKVD summaries were classified 'top secret' and addressed to about two to six recipients. For example, Leningrad NKVD reports were usually sent to the first

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