PART I

Introduction and Theory

1 | *Introduction*

> The proletariat ... must temporarily make use of the instruments, resources and methods of state power against the exploiters.
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> Vladimir Lenin (1917), *The State and Revolution*, Chapter IV

Autocrats delegate the elimination of political opposition to coercive agents. In doing so, they enter a Faustian pact. Secret police are vital for enforcing social order and safeguarding autocrats' power. But they also pose an inherent threat to their masters. Take Vladimir Lenin, for example, ideological grandfather of Central and Eastern Europe's communist dictators. As leader of the Bolsheviks, he called for "the cruelest revolutionary terror" against the enemies of their regime.[1] These enemies were not in short supply. In 1917, Russia was the most backward of the warring European empires. Its tiny urban working class was politically divided, and the socialist zeal of its millions of peasants was questionable. Strikes, sabotage, and a civil war would all batter the Bolsheviks' fragile authority. Even the Marxist theory underpinning the movement did not predict its success under such conditions.

Lenin's answer to social disorder and regime instability was coercion. Less than two months after the October Revolution, he tasked Felix Dzerzhinsky with the creation of an agency to combat opposition to his infant regime. Dzerzhinsky, a Polish-Lithuanian Marxist who had himself suffered at the hands of the Tsar's political police, became notorious as the architect of the *Cheka*, the first Soviet secret police force – in his famous words, "the sword and shield of the revolution."[2] Headquartered on Moscow's Lubyanka Square with offices across the

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[1] Quoted in Dallin and Breslauer (1970, 13).
[2] The Cheka's full name was the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage. Its colloquial name derived from its abbreviated Russian title, VChK (Leggett, 1981, Sukalo, 2021).

country, the Cheka acquired wide-ranging powers to investigate, arrest, interrogate, try, and execute its masters' suspected opponents. In 1918, the agency embarked on a campaign of indiscriminate, gratuitous violence. The Red Terror claimed thousands of victims, from state functionaries suspected of counterrevolution to landowners or middle-class families summarily executed as "enemies of the people." For many Bolsheviks, especially Lenin, the Cheka was indispensable. The secret police subjugated political opposition and consolidated their regime from its beginnings.

After the Second World War, communist governments used Soviet-style secret police agencies to repress their opponents across Central and Eastern Europe. Lenin's Cheka was only the first of many. It was also an archetype of coercive institutions that lie at the center of all dictatorships, not only communist regimes. Violence is not the only tool by which dictators seek to remain in power. They have recourse to diverse mechanisms of rule including various institutional structures of cooptation and control, and the strategic distribution of patronage and economic rents. Nonetheless, violence is the ultimate arbiter of power in autocracies. The agents who wield that power naturally play a central role in authoritarian rule.

While indispensable, coercive agents are inherently threatening to dictators, who must devise means to control them. Under Lenin's successor Josef Stalin, the secret police came to occupy an even more powerful position in Soviet politics and society. The Cheka became the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, or NKVD.[3] This was the agency behind the wanton Great Terror of 1936–1938. During those grim years, the secret police eliminated all opposition to Stalin, first from the ranks of the Communist Party – including the agency itself – and later the entire Soviet Union. The NKVD organized humiliating show trials and executions of leading figures in the Politburo and military. It liquidated the majority of the Communist Party membership and terrorized the entire Soviet population with arbitrary mass arrests, imprisonment, and murder. Twice, the leadership of the NKVD was purged. Stalin eliminated his once-trusted lieutenants as he came

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[3] The agency's full name was Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Dyel (Werth, 2009).

to dread their power at the top of the secret police. Fear, coercion, and violence emanating from the NKVD underlay the Stalinist brand of uncontested personal dictatorship. Stalinist politics and repression dominated the Soviet Union for almost thirty years and were imposed on Central and Eastern Europe after the Red Army's victory over Nazi Germany in 1945.

Stalin's dismissals of his highest-ranking secret police chiefs illustrate the fundamental problem of authoritarian rule: constructing and controlling the secret police. Genrikh Yagoda, NKVD chief from 1934, dutifully staged show trials and executions of Stalin's elite rivals – his long-standing Bolshevik party comrades. Nonetheless, Yagoda and his agency had sufficient authority and autonomy for the dictator to doubt their absolute loyalty. Yagoda was replaced and executed in preparation for the impending Great Terror in 1936. His successor, Nikolai Yezhov, was a still-more committed Stalinist henchman. He purged Yagoda's NKVD officer corps and led the agency through the untold horrors of the Terror. Yet he too fell under suspicion of insubordination by Stalin, who claimed he planned to assassinate him. In 1938, Yezhov was replaced by his ambitious deputy Lavrentii Beria. This notorious figure was relatively untainted by the violence of the preceding years. Just as importantly, Beria had been working conscientiously to undermine his former boss from within his own agency. As the successive liquidations of his loyal lieutenants vividly illustrate, even Stalin struggled to resolve the perennial question, "who will guard the guardians?"[4]

Today, the scale of atrocities committed by authoritarian coercive institutions rarely approaches that of the Soviet regime. Nonetheless, these agencies remain central to authoritarian politics. Famously, Russian President Vladimir Putin was a career officer of the Soviet State Security Committee (Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti, KGB), the direct successor to Beria's NKVD. Putin was serving in a KGB office in Dresden, East Germany, when that Soviet-allied regime collapsed in 1989. He also briefly directed the Federal Security Service (FSB), the KGB's successor institution in post-Soviet Russia, from 1998 to 1999.

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[4] Conquest (1985, 1990). The original use of "who will guard the guardians?" is attributed to Juvenal's *Satire* VI.

Russia's once-formidable Soviet security agencies fragmented and at-rophied during the 1990s. Since transitioning from the former Cheka headquarters on Lubyanka Square to the Kremlin in 1999, Putin has overseen their rejuvenation. The FSB and other institutions are now significantly better resourced. They work to protect Putin's regime not only by combating terrorism and foreign espionage, but by harassing dissidents and government critics, and restricting the activities of journalists, opposition parties, and civil society organizations.[5]

Coercive institutions' role in authoritarian politics endures. So does dictators' fundamental problem of monitoring and controlling their activities. In China, one prominent domestic security agency – the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) – was originally modeled on Stalin's NKVD. The Chinese communist secret police even constructed their first prisons following Soviet experts' designs. The MPS enjoyed growing resources and authority through the 1990s and early 2000s. It gained favor as the Chinese Communist Party responded to the Tianmen Square uprising in 1989 and the simultaneous fall of allied governments in communist Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. This trend was particularly pronounced under the oversight of Zhou Yongkang, Chair of the Party's political-legal committee (PLC) from 2007 to 2012 and one of China's most powerful figures. However, Xi Jinping ousted Zhou and significantly reformed China's security institutions after his ascent to General Secretary in 2012. The PLC chief was implicated in a broader corruption scandal, stripped of his party positions and arrested. Xi curtailed the power of Zhou's former fiefdom by replacing the PLC with a new National Security Commission under his own leadership. These personnel changes and institutional reforms were widely interpreted as Xi's method for establishing his personal authority over China's powerful internal security apparatus.[6] As the clash between Xi Jinping and Zhou Yongkang illustrates, all dictators face the problem of controlling individuals and institutions tasked with coercion, even the leaders of the most institutionalized and durable regimes.

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[5] See, for example, Waller (2004), Soldatov and Borogan (2010), and Galeotti (2016).

[6] Guo (2012), Wang (2014a, b), Wang and Minzer (2015), Lampton (2015), Greitens (2017).

1.1 The Puzzle: Variation in Coercive Capacity in Communist Central and Eastern Europe

This book engages a compelling and vexing empirical puzzle: Why did the size and activities of security agencies vary so dramatically – both within countries and through time – under the communist dictatorships of Cold War Central and Eastern Europe? Explaining this variation sheds new light on the perennial problem of constructing and controlling coercive institutions under authoritarian rule.

The world of authoritarian governments is diverse. But the state socialist regimes that ruled Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania from 1945 to 1989 were very similar. Their elites were all firmly committed to the same revolutionary, anti-capitalist Marxist-Leninist ideology. In every country, a single communist party held a monopoly over both political and economic power, including a centrally planned economy. In classic totalitarian fashion, state and party institutions were fused, with the latter dominating the former. All of these regimes were characterized by a high degree of state capacity, or ability to penetrate, control, and shape society. And they were interdependent in the same geographic and geopolitical context. They were established under the tutelage of the Soviet Union in the wake of the Second World War, integrated into the Warsaw Pact military alliance in 1955, and subject to significant Soviet influence until 1989.[7]

These regimes also shared the core pillar of social order and political stability that is the focus of this book: their coercive institutions. I define coercive institutions as agencies responsible for domestic *repression*, or violence against challengers to the regime; and *security intelligence*, the gathering of information about these challengers.[8] The socialist dictatorships of Central and Eastern Europe all relied on

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[7] See, for example, Arendt (1966), Naimark and Gibianskii (1997), and Bunce (1999, 20–25).

[8] Goldstein (1978, xxvii), Gill (1994, 6). The terminology of coercive institutions follows Davenport, Johnston, and Mueller (2005, vii–xli), Art (2016, 353), and Chestnut Greitens (2016, 12). However, other authors use the terms *secret police* (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1965, 175), *violence specialists* (North, Wallis, and Weingast, 2009, 18), *security apparatus* (Hassan, 2017, 382), and *security services* or *repressive apparatus* (Svolik, 2012a). I do not use the term *intelligence organization* (Boraz, 2006) because although the agencies that I study here did engage in foreign espionage and

Table 1.1 *State security institutions in socialist Central and Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*

Country	Colloquial name	Formal institution
East Germany	Stasi (MfS)	Ministry for State Security (1950–53, 1955–89); State Secretariat for State Security (1953–55)
Romania	Securitate	Ministry of Interior (1945–52, 1957–89); Ministry of State Security (1952–57)
Bulgaria	Durzhavna Sigurnost (DS)	Ministry of Interior (1946–65, 1968–89); Committee for State Security (1965–68)
Czechoslovakia	Státní Bezpečnost (StB)	Ministry of Interior (1946–89); Ministry of National Security (1950–53)
Poland	Służba Bezpieczeństwa, Bezpieka	Ministry of Public Security (1945–54); Committee of Public Security (1954–56); Ministry of Interior (1956–89)
Hungary		Ministry of Interior (1946–48, 1953–89); State Security Authority (1948–53)

state security agencies modeled on Soviet institutions to carry out these tasks.[9] I list the colloquial names and formal institutional designations of these agencies in Table 1.1. In Poland, the Bezpieka was constructed by Red Army officers in the final months of the Second World War. In

counterintelligence, not all domestic coercive agencies do, and I am primarily interested in authoritarian regimes' domestic coercive activities.

[9] The relevant coercive agencies in the Soviet Union were the People's Commisariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD), 1934–46; People's Commisariat for State Security (NKGB), 1943–46; Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), 1946–54; Ministry of State Security (MGB), 1946–53; Committee for State Security (KGB), 1954–91. See (Hilger, 2009, 44–80).

the rest of the region, agencies were put in place by local communists under the close supervision of the Soviets. All of these security forces carried out the tasks of political policing including surveillance, arrest, interrogation, torture, imprisonment, and – particularly during the early postwar period – murder of regime opponents.[10]

The secret police did not work alone in communist Central and Eastern Europe. These regimes experienced periodic outbreaks of severe social unrest and violent mass opposition – most notably in 1953, when unrest was widespread, and in Poland during the 1970s and 1980s. During such episodes, the secret police were assisted in repression by the armed forces. The Peoples' Armies of Central and Eastern Europe were capable, constructed under Soviet supervision to follow the model of the Red Army, and under relatively strict Soviet control through the institutions of the Warsaw Pact. However, they were organized to fight a war against North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces, not detect and repress political opposition. More worryingly for ruling parties, the loyalty of army conscripts was suspect. Repeatedly – in East Germany in 1953 and in Hungary in 1956 – communist elites turned to Soviet military units to suppress mass opposition, fearing their own forces would refuse to complete the task. In Poland, a similar policy was seriously considered in 1980–1981. The secret police were the most effective and politically reliable coercive institutions at the disposal of the ruling socialist regimes. For this reason, they were their predominant instrument of repression during the Cold War.[11]

The communist secret police agencies' similarities went beyond their activities, which are unfortunately all too familiar to observers of authoritarian politics around the world. Due to their shared Soviet inheritance, their institutional structures were also almost identical. These were unitary coercive agencies. Each regime relied predominantly on a single repressive institution for the vast majority of their period in power. They combined the tasks of domestic repression, foreign espionage, and counterespionage under one roof. They served as

[10] It is the use of these measures in the name of a specific individual, party or movement, rather than the state, which distinguishes authoritarian coercive institutions from their counterparts under democracy. See, for example, Marx (1988), della Porta and Reiter (1998), and Gill (1994, 48–90).

[11] Adelman (1982), Kramer (1984), Barany (1993).

one-stop shops for combating threats to ruling communist parties, whether from dissident intellectuals or foreign intelligence agencies such as the West German Federal Intelligence Service (Bundesnachrich-tendienst, BND) or the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Their internal architectures were based around directorates devoted to specific tasks, following the model of Soviet agencies such as the KGB. Within each secret police agency, there were directorates responsible for counterespionage, or combating infiltration by foreign intelligence agencies; political surveillance, targeting domestic opponents; and technical tasks such as encryption and record-keeping.[12] All these agencies' organizational structures were also very similar. Their specialized directorates existed at the center, in the agency headquarters in the capital and were replicated in offices across the country so that each resembled a miniature version of headquarters. And these were not exclusive organizations. They recruited staff and informants from a relatively broad swathe of the population – with the important exception of Jews and other ethnic minorities during some periods. They sought to penetrate deeply into all segments of society to detect and repress opponents to the ruling Communist parties.[13]

Despite these wide-ranging similarities in regime and coercive agency structures, the size and capabilities of these agencies varied dramatically across cases and through time. This divergence is puzzling, especially because the extent of variation before 1953 was very limited.[14] Data on officer and secret informant numbers demonstrate that the death of Soviet leader Josef Stalin that year was a major turning point in the development of coercive institutions across the Soviet empire in Central and Eastern Europe. Consider Figure 1.1, which shows the number of secret police officers employed by each of the six coercive agencies in the region at three points in time: Shortly before Stalin's death on March 5, 1953; after the conclusion of the post-Stalinist upheavals across the region, in 1960; and at the fall of the regimes, in

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[12] For more details, see Tables 3.2 and 8.1.
[13] Kamiński, Persak, and Gieseke (2009). The discussion of organizational fragmentation and exclusivity is due to Chestnut Greitens (2016).
[14] This is not to say that there was no variation at all across the secret police agencies before 1953. As Pucci (2020) very ably demonstrates, the agencies were far from identical. Nonetheless, compared with *after* Stalin's death, a relatively uniform regime of repression was imposed by all governments in the region before 1953.
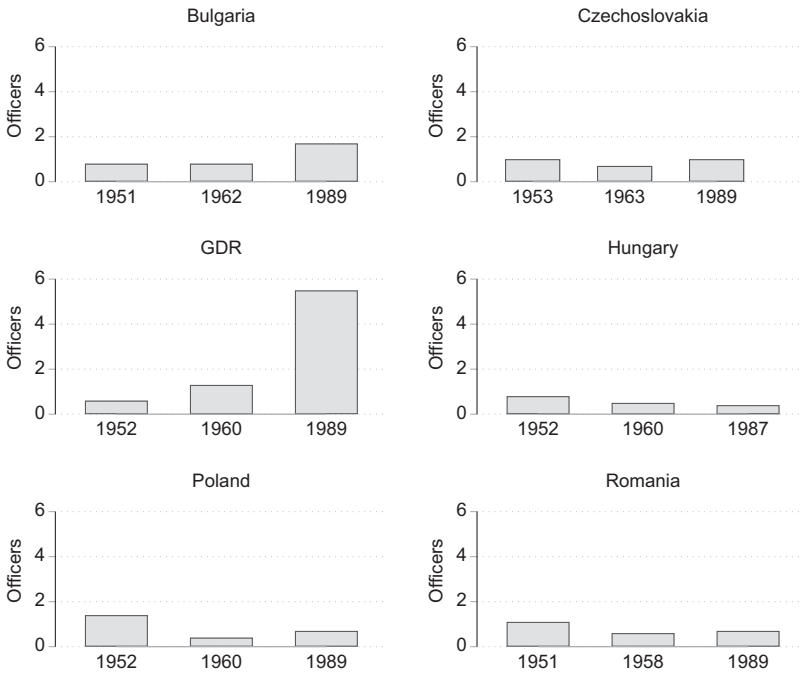
Figure 1.1 Officer numbers in coercive institutions per thousand citizens, 1951–1989

1989.[15] In the early 1950s, before Stalin's death, the agencies employed very similar numbers of personnel. Figures varied from a minimum of 0.6 officers per thousand citizens in the German Democratic Republic, where the Ministry for State Security or Stasi had only been established as an independent institution in 1950, to a maximum of 1.4 in Poland, where the Bezpieka had been under the control of the notoriously violent former Soviet secret policeman, Stanisław Radkiewicz, since 1945. The other four agencies were of a very similar size.

The post-Stalinist upheaval began immediately after the dictator's death in 1953. It lasted until Soviet military intervention ended the Hungarian revolution in 1956. Significant mass unrest gripped almost every country in the region and led to leadership transitions within

[15] Due to limitations in coverage, I cannot always show figures for the same year for every case. For details on measurement and sources of the data shown in this section, see Chapter 8 and Appendix C.