

# 1937: Stalin's Year of Terror By Vadim Z. Rogovin – Introduction

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*Once upon a time, unintentionally,  
And probably hazarding a guess,  
Hegel called the historian a prophet  
Predicting in reverse.*

B. Pasternak

After Khrushchev's report at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, which rocked the whole world, the most consistent defenders of socialism felt that this official exposé of the great terror of 1936–38 would be the beginning of extensive work devoted to reexamining the essence of Stalinism and overcoming it completely in all the socialist countries and within the Communist Parties. Pointing out the enormous complexity of this task, Bertolt Brecht wrote: "The liquidation of Stalinism can take place only if the party mobilizes the wisdom of the masses on a gigantic scale. Such a mobilization lies along the road to communism." [1]

Analogous thoughts were expressed by the German Communist poet, Johannes Becher, who noted that the tragic content of the Stalinist epoch was incomparable with the tragedy of any preceding epoch. "This tragedy," he wrote, "can be overcome only when it is acknowledged as such, and when the forces chosen to overcome it are equal to its tragic nature." Herein lies the guarantee that "the system of socialism on a world scale will not cease to develop." Becher correctly noted that "the sense of tragedy can only be fully passed on by those people who participated in it, tried to fight it, and who suffered through the entire tragedy from within, i.e., by those who were socialists and who remained socialists forever." [2]

Alas, by the time of the Twentieth Congress, the people who were capable of effectively fighting against Stalinism and who retained genuine communist convictions had almost ceased to exist in the Soviet Union and in the foreign Communist Parties: the overwhelming majority of them had been exterminated in the ruthless purges. Almost all of the leaders of the CPSU and other Communist Parties were in one way or another tainted by participating in the Stalinist crimes, or at least in their ideological justification and preparation; their thinking was deeply scarred by the metastases of Stalinism. This couldn't help but affect the content of Khrushchev's report, which in essence was directed not against Stalinism, but only against the most monstrous crimes committed by Stalin. The main conception of the report was contained in assertions according to which Stalin until 1934 "actively fought for Leninism, against the opponents and distorters of Lenin's teachings." He led the "fight against those who tried to divert the country from the only correct, Leninist path,—against Trotskyists, Zinovievists, rightists and bourgeois nationalists." It was only after Kirov's murder, Khrushchev declared, that Stalin "increasingly abused power and began to victimize prominent members of the party and state, applying terrorist methods against honest Soviet people." [3]

Moreover, Khrushchev claimed that, in unleashing massive state terror, Stalin was guided by defending "the interests of the working class, the interests of the laboring people, the interests of the victory of socialism and communism. It cannot be said that these were actions of a bully. He

felt that he had to do this in the interests of the party and the workers, in the interests of defending the gains of the revolution. Herein lies the real tragedy!" [4] From these words one must conclude that the Stalinist terror was a tragedy not for the Soviet people and the Bolshevik Party, but a tragedy ... for Stalin himself. This idea was even more clearly expressed in the resolution from the Central Committee of the CPSU on 30 June 1956, "On Overcoming the Personality Cult and its Consequences," in which it was openly stated that "Stalin's tragedy" consisted in applying illegal and "unworthy methods." [5]

This false version, which bored into the consciousness of the Soviet people during the years of "the thaw," was renounced by Khrushchev only in his memoirs at the end of the 1960s, where he repeatedly returned to an assessment of Stalin. Here he called Stalin a murderer who had performed "criminal acts which are punished in any state except for those which are not guided by any laws." [6] Khrushchev correctly referred to the "rather wooden logic" of those who feel that Stalin committed his evil deeds "not for personal gains, but out of concern for his people. What savagery! Out of concern for the people to kill its best sons." [7] Here we might add that Khrushchev's judgments about "savagery" and "wooden logic" could well be applied to several of his own statements in his report at the Twentieth Congress and in a number of subsequent speeches which "softened" the sharper passages of this report.

In the chapter of his memoirs called "My Reflections on Stalin," Khrushchev adopted a fundamentally different approach than in his earlier official speeches in evaluating the reasons for the "great purge" and Stalin's "uprooting" of the bearers of oppositional moods in the party and in the country. "After destroying the outstanding core of people who had been tempered in the tsarist underground under Lenin's leadership," he wrote, "there then followed the wanton extermination of leading party, soviet, state, academic and military cadres, as well as millions of rank-and-file people whose way of life and whose thoughts Stalin didn't like.... Some of them, of course, had stopped supporting him when they saw where he was taking us. Stalin understood that there was a large group of people opposed to him. Opposition moods, however, still do not mean anti-Soviet, anti-Marxist or anti-Party moods." [8] Thus Khrushchev, who thought deeply about the material produced by investigations into Stalin's crimes, arrived at two important conclusions: (1) The inner-party oppositions were by no means some kind of mortal evil (which the Soviet people were taught for several decades); (2) The anti-Stalinist opposition forces in the 1930s were rather numerous.

In drawing close to an adequate understanding of the political meaning of the Great Purges, Khrushchev explained it by referring to Stalin's break with the fundamentals of Marxist theory and Bolshevik political practice. He openly stated that the terror was unleashed by Stalin "in order to preclude the possibility of any people or groups appearing in the party who wanted to return the party to Lenin's inner-party democracy, and to redirect the nation toward a democratic social structure.... Stalin said that the people are manure, an amorphous mass which will follow a strong leader. And so he demonstrated such strength, destroying everything

which might contribute to a true understanding of events or to sound reasoning which would have contradicted his point of view. Herein lies the tragedy of the USSR." [9] Here, for the first time, Khrushchev called the Great Terror a tragedy not for Stalin, but for the nation and its people.

It was very difficult for Khrushchev to part with Stalinist mythology. The difficulty can be seen even on the pages of his memoirs, where he repeated certain fictions contained earlier in his report to the Twentieth Party Congress. As before, he called Stalin's activity "positive in the sense that he remained a Marxist in his basic approach to history; he was a man devoted to the Marxist idea." Having poorly mastered Marxist theory, Khrushchev decided to introduce only hypothetically the "Trotskyist" thesis: "Perhaps Stalin had degenerated and was acting as a whole against the ideas of socialism, and for this reason killed its adherents?"—only to decisively reject the very possibility of raising such a question: "Absolutely not. Stalin remained faithful in principle to the ideas of socialism." [10] As a result, Khrushchev was simply incapable of drawing the balance of his own evaluations, remaining prisoner of a purely psychological, if not clinical, explanation of Stalin's terrorist actions: "Could these be the actions of a genuine Marxist? These are the deeds of a despot or a sick man.... There can be no justification for such actions.... On the other hand, Stalin remained a Marxist in principle (but not in concrete deeds). And, if one excludes his pathological suspiciousness, cruelty, and treachery, then he assessed the situation soberly and correctly." [11] This is how the Stalinist past continued to weigh upon the most active initiator and executor of destalinization. Is it any wonder that after the Brezhnev and Suslov leadership had forbidden for many years any mention of the theme of Stalinism, and after the chaos of "Perestroika" in "investigating" our historical past, that it was precisely these ideas expounded by Khrushchev (and by Stalinists in general) that were taken in the former republics of the Soviet Union during the 1990s as armament by many parties and groupings calling themselves "Communist"?

The version that Stalin's mistrustfulness, "evolving into a persecution complex," served as the main cause of the Great Purges, was repeated in historical works during the second half of the 1950s and first half of the 1960s.[12]

Explaining the "Yezhov period" by Stalin's personal pathological traits was characteristic even of several insightful experts on Soviet history from the milieu of Western Sovietologists and the first Russian emigration. This version was discussed in detail in letters between the former Mensheviks N. Valentinov and B. Nikolaevsky. The discussion of this topic unfolded in correspondence in 1954–1956, when it became obvious that state terror and mass persecutions on the basis of false accusations were by no means a necessary and inevitable attribute of the "Communist system." Literally in the days following Stalin's death, his successors put a halt to a new wave of terror which threatened to surpass even the terror of the 1930s in its scope. A month later, they declared that the "Doctors' Plot"—one of Stalin's last crimes—was a frame-up. Then it came to light that Stalin's successors had begun to free and rehabilitate those unjustly convicted in the previous years and decades. Under these conditions, Valentinov tried to convince Nikolaevsky that the "Yezhov period" was wholly a product of Stalin's paranoia, i.e., of a chronic mental illness expressed in the pursuit of maniacal obsessions. In support of this thesis, Valentinov referred to evidence supposedly originating from V. I. Mezhlauk, a member of the Central Committee, who allegedly transmitted a message abroad, through his brother who had traveled in 1937 to an international exhibition in Paris. The message dealt with Stalin's illness (paranoia), "with a mass of important details." [13]

In answering Valentinov, Nikolaevsky agreed that in the last years of his life Stalin "lost the sense of moderation and, from the 'brilliant man who measured things out in doses,' as Bukharin had called him, he turned into a man who had lost his grasp of reality." Nikolaevsky objected only to

attempts "to extend this line into the past in order to explain the 'Yezhov period,' which was a criminal, but carefully calculated and correctly (from his standpoint) measured act of destroying his opponents, who otherwise would have gotten rid of him." [14]

In order to support his version of resistance to Stalinism within the Bolshevik milieu, Nikolaevsky referred either to insignificant facts (Bukharin's appointment in 1934 as editor of *Izvestiia* and his propaganda of a course toward "proletarian humanism"), or to information of a clearly apocryphal nature ("beginning in 1932, Stalin did not have a majority in the Politburo or Central Committee Plenums"). However, Nikolaevsky's idea that "the entire 'Yezhov period' was a diabolically calculated game, a crime, but not madness," [15] is profoundly justified. In developing this idea, Nikolaevsky noted: "To people like Mezhlauk, it seemed that the purge was completely senseless and that Stalin had gone mad. In actuality, Stalin was not mad, and he conducted a precisely determined line. He arrived at the conclusion about the need to destroy the layer of old Bolsheviks not later than the summer of 1934, and then he began to prepare this operation." [16]

Nikolaevsky wrote that he would agree to acknowledge Stalin a paranoiac if the latter had acted against his own interests. At first glance, such a contradiction did actually exist. On the eve of a war that was relentlessly approaching, Stalin destroyed not only the overwhelming majority of party and governmental leaders, thousands of leaders of enterprises, engineers and scientists working on defense, but also almost the entire commanding personnel of the army, people who were needed for defending the country against foreign invasion. However, a deeper analysis shows that the Great Purges fully corresponded to the task of preserving Stalin's unlimited control over the party, the nation, and the international communist movement. As Nikolaevsky correctly noted, Stalin carried out "a criminal policy, but the only one which would insure the continuation of his dictatorship. His actions were determined by this policy. He launched the terror not because he was mad like Caligula, but because he had made it a factor of his active sociology.... He killed millions and, in particular, exterminated the entire layer of old Bolsheviks because he understood that this layer was opposed to his 'communism'.... Stalin destroyed the Central Committee of the Seventeenth Congress and the members of this congress not because he was insane, but because he had guessed the plans of his opponents.... Khrushchev now wants to declare him insane because it would be more favorable to attribute everything to the insanity of one man than to acknowledge his own participation in the criminal activities of this gang." [17]

Of special interest in Nikolaevsky's arguments are his thoughts about the differences between Stalin's mental state at the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1950s. Stalin's persecution complex and other pathological symptoms during the last years of his life have been described not only by Khrushchev, but by people who were the closest to Stalin and who were by no means inclined to discredit him. In no uncertain terms Molotov declared to the writer F. Chuyev that "in the last period, he [Stalin] had a persecution complex." [18] "He did not enjoy his harvest," wrote S. Alliluyeva. "He was spiritually empty, had forgotten all human affections, and was tormented by a fear which in the last years turned into a genuine persecution complex—in the end, his strong nerves finally cracked." [19]

In sharp contrast, in 1937 Stalin held the entire grandiose mechanism of state terror under his unwavering and effective control. Without weakening or losing this control for even a minute, he displayed in his actions not the nervousness and alarm of a paranoiac, but, on the contrary, a surprising, almost superhuman self-control and the most refined calculation. "During the 1930s, he conducted the 'Yezhov' operation very precisely (from his point of view), since he prepared everything and seized his enemies unawares; they didn't understand him," Nikolaevsky noted correctly. "Even many of his supporters didn't understand him."

[20]

The mystery of the Great Terror has also sparked the intense interest of many prominent people who stood far from politics. In the novel *Doctor Zhivago*, Boris Pasternak used his hero to express the following thoughts: "I think that collectivization was a mistaken and unsuccessful measure, but it was impossible to admit the mistake. In order to hide the failure, it was necessary to use all means of terror to make people forget how to think and to force them to see what didn't exist, or to prove the opposite of what was obvious. Hence the unbridled cruelty of the Yezhov period, the declaration of a constitution never intended to be applied, and the introduction of elections not based on elective principles." [21]

These statements display what is at first glance an unusual resemblance to the ideas of Trotsky, who repeatedly pointed to the connection between the Great Terror and the mass discontent which had arisen in the country as a result of forced collectivization. He also stressed the camouflaging of the barbaric purges with the liberal decorum of "Stalin's most democratic constitution in the world," which served as a disguise and performed purely propagandistic functions.

Pasternak's explanation of the tragedy during the "Yezhov period" also displays unmistakable proximity to Lenin's prognoses made in 1921. In referring to the alternatives Soviet Russia faced at that time, Lenin saw two outcomes from the contradictions which had accumulated by then: "ten to twenty years of correct relations with the peasantry and victory is guaranteed on a world scale (even given delays in the proletarian revolutions which are growing), or else twenty to forty years of torment from White-Guard terror. Aut-Aut. Tertium non datur [Either/or. A third is not given]." [22]

Because it was not able to secure correct relations with the peasantry, and turned, in search of a way out, to forced collectivization, the Stalinist clique provoked the most acute economic and political crisis from 1928–1933. Instead of demonstrating the power associated with setting an example as the first country in the world to take the path of socialism, an example which Lenin felt would be one of the main conditions for the upsurge of the world revolution, the Soviet Union set a negative example in the economic, social, political and intellectual spheres—showing a sharp fall in agricultural productivity and commodity production, the growth of poverty and inequality, the consolidation of a totalitarian regime and the stifling of dissident thought, criticism and ideological inquiry. All of these factors, along with the incorrect policies of the Stalinized Comintern, served as a brake on the socialist revolutions in other lands—just at the historical moment when, as a result of the all-embracing worldwide crisis of the capitalist system, the most propitious conditions in all history arose for the upsurge of the revolutionary workers' movement.

What was essentially a White-Guard terror fit approximately within the chronological framework suggested by Lenin—twenty-five years (1928–1953). However this terror, which destroyed many more communists than even the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy, was realized in a specific political form which had not been foreseen by Marxists: it unfolded from within the Bolshevik Party, in its name and under the direction of its leaders.

To the extent that the party was purged of genuine opposition elements, the thrust of the terror was then directed at that part of the bureaucracy which had helped Stalin rise to the summit of power. Trotsky explained the social meaning of this stage of the Great Purges in the following way: "The ruling stratum is expelling from its midst all those who remind it of the revolutionary past, of the principles of socialism, of liberty, equality and fraternity, of the unresolved problems of the world revolution.... In this sense, the purges increase the uniformity of the ruling stratum and seemingly strengthen Stalin's position." [23] The brutal purging of foreign elements from the ruling stratum, i.e., of those people whose consciousness still retained a fidelity to the traditions of Bolshevism, had as its consequence an ever-increasing breach between the bureaucracy and

the masses, as well as an ever-increasing decline of the intellectual and moral level of party members, military leaders, scholars, and so forth. "All the advanced and creative elements who are genuinely devoted to the interests of the economy, to the people's education or defense, are inevitably coming into a collision with the ruling oligarchy," Trotsky wrote. "That's the way it was in its time under tsarism; that's what is happening now, at an incomparably faster rate, under Stalin's regime. The economy, cultural life and the army need innovators, builders, creators; the Kremlin needs faithful executors, reliable and ruthless agents. These human types—agent and creator—are irreconcilably hostile to each other." [24]

Such a shift in social types during the course of the Great Purges of 1936–1938 was noted even by anticommunist writers who were able to observe the consequences of Stalin's "cadre revolution." Thus, M. Voslensky, a former Soviet apparatchik who fled to the West and became a specialist on problems of the Soviet elite, stressed that in the process of the Great Purges "those who were inevitably cast aside and who perished in the bitter struggle were those who still believed in the correctness of Marxism and in the construction of communist society; in the ruling layer of society the communists by conviction were replaced by communists in name." For the apparatchiks coming to power in 1937 and later years, "the question of the correctness of Marxism ... was of little interest, and they replaced a belief in such correctness with Marxist phraseology and quotations. In reality, despite their loud affirmations that communism was the radiant future for all mankind, Stalin's protégés who had climbed their way to high posts least of all would want to create a society where not in words, but in deeds, everyone worked according to his abilities and received according to his needs." [25]

In the next generation, this social milieu inexorably fostered and promoted people who at the appropriate moment turned into open renegades from communism—Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Yakovlev, as well as the majority of presidents of the new states which have been formed on the ruins of the Soviet Union.

The political meaning and political results of the Great Purges had already been adequately understood by the more serious Western analysts by the end of the 1930s. In a report of the British Royal Institute of Foreign Relations, published in March 1939, it states: "The inner development of Russia is headed toward the formation of a 'bourgeoisie' of directors and officials who have enough privileges to be greatly satisfied with the status quo.... In the various purges one can discern a device through which all are exterminated who wish to change the current state of affairs. Such an interpretation lends weight to the view that the revolutionary period in Russia has come to an end, and that henceforth the rulers will try only to maintain those benefits which the revolution has granted them." [26] In many ways these words explain the reasons for the tenacity of the Stalinist and post-Stalinist regimes over the course of fifty years after the Great Purges, which bled the country dry and deprived it of the gigantic intellectual potential which had accumulated over many years.

In light of all that has been said, it is easy to determine the true value of the ideological manipulations of today's "democrats" who call Bolsheviks or Leninists anyone who at any time occupied a leading post in the ruling party of the USSR—right up to Brezhnev, Chernenko and Gorbachev. Indulgence is shown only to those party bosses who have burned everything they worshiped in the past, and have begun to worship everything that they once burned, i.e., zoological anticommunism.

In the Soviet Union the topic of the Great Terror was forbidden as an area of research that was the least bit objective right up until the end of the 1980s. The absence of Marxist works on these problems, as well as on the problem of Stalinism in general, finally led to the fulfillment of the prognosis outlined by J. Becher in the 1950s: the inability to give a Marxist explanation of the acute problems in recent history will foster

attempts to use the exposure of Stalin in order to "strike a blow against the new social structure and even liquidate it gradually, in pieces." [27] That, essentially, is what happened at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, when these attempts were crowned with complete success.

While in official Soviet scholarship these themes were taboo, they were thoroughly worked over—in their own way—by Western Sovietologists and Russian dissidents. With any of these authors, it is not difficult to find many factual errors, inexact formulations, juggling of facts and outright distortions. This can be explained on the whole by two reasons. The first is the limited nature of the historical sources which these authors had at their disposal. Thus, the basic research for R. Conquest's *Great Terror* consists of an analysis of Soviet newspapers and other official publications, to which are added references to the memoir accounts of several people who managed to escape from the USSR. The second reason is that the majority of Sovietologists and dissidents served a definite social and political purpose—they used this enormous historical tragedy to show that its fatal premise was the "utopian" communist idea and revolutionary practice of Bolshevism. This prompted the researchers concerned to ignore those historical sources which contradict their conceptual schemes and paradigms. Not one of the anticommunists who analyzed the Moscow Trials of 1936–1938 bothered to turn to the "testimony" of the man who was the main accused in all these trials, even though he wasn't sitting in the courtroom. Thus, A. Solzhenitsyn's book, *Gulag Archipelago*, contains no references whatsoever to Trotsky's works. Solzhenitsyn's work, much like the more objective works of R. Medvedev, belong to the genre which the West calls "oral history," i.e., research which is based almost exclusively on eyewitness accounts of participants in the events being described. Moreover, using the circumstance that the memoirs from prisoners in Stalin's camps which had been given to him to read had never been published, Solzhenitsyn took plenty of license in outlining their contents and interpreting them.

Besides the myths circulated by open anticommunists, there are myths which issue from the camp of the so-called "national-patriots." They amount to a rejection of the October Revolution and Bolshevism, coupled with admiration for Stalin and the justification of his terrorist actions. This kind of "world outlook," which was widely disseminated on the pages of the Soviet press during the years of "perestroika" and the Yeltsin regime, developed in certain circles among the Soviet intelligentsia around the end of the 1960s. S. Semanov's article, "On Relative and Eternal Values," published in 1970 in the journal *Molodaia gvardiia* [Young Guard], became a kind of ideological manifesto for this tendency. Its author, who was still unable to openly declare his fidelity to the ideals of "autocracy, orthodoxy and nationalism" (considered by the "national-patriots" to be "eternal" and "truly Russian" values), limited himself to comparing the "nihilistic" 1920s to the "patriotic" 1930s.

"Today it is clear," wrote Semanov, "that in the struggle against destructive and nihilistic forces, a major turning point came in the middle of the 1930s. How many derogatory words were later hurled at this historical epoch!... It seems to me that we have not yet recognized the full significance of the gigantic changes which occurred at this time. These changes exerted an extremely beneficial influence on the development of our culture." Without a shade of restraint, Semanov declared that "precisely after the adoption of our Constitution, which legally reinforced the enormous social shifts taking place in our nation and society, Soviet citizens enjoyed general equality before the law. And this was our gigantic achievement.... All honest workers in our country henceforth and for all time became united together into a single, monolithic whole." [28]

Semanov's article advanced "the most important evaluative criterion with regard to the social phenomena now occurring." This criterion, in the opinion of its author, was the following: "Does a given phenomenon assist in strengthening our state or not?" [29]

The ideology based on this "evaluative criterion" was widely

disseminated during the years of "perestroika" and "reforms" on the pages of *Nash sovremennik* [Our Contemporary], *Moskva* [Moscow] and *Molodaia gvardiia* [Young Guard], journals whose authors began to call themselves "gosudarstvenniki" [statists]. Their historical and polemical articles organically joined together a hatred for Bolshevism and the glorification of Stalin. As it developed further, this system of views organically flowed into the ideology of the national bourgeoisie which counterposed itself to the comprador bourgeoisie and its political representatives. The battle between these two factions of the nascent Russian bourgeoisie during the 1990s shoved all other ideological tendencies into the background.

Semanov, as well as today's members of the "irreconcilable opposition" who have carried on his ideological tradition a quarter of a century later, correctly pinpointed the social, political and ideological turning point in the development of Soviet society. However, their assessment of this turning point was quite specific in nature. According to the logic of Semanov's article, the first "happy" year in Soviet history was 1937, when "Soviet citizens enjoyed general equality before the law," and along with this "equality," all society was consolidated "into a single monolithic whole." However, at that time such "equality" could be observed only in the Gulag, where, in A. Tvardovsky's words:

*And behind one side of the law  
Fate made everyone equal:  
Son of kulak or narkom,  
Son of army commander or village priest.*  
[30]

If we leave aside the relatively few representatives of the "statist" tendency, then right up until the appearance of the dissident movement in the 1970s the majority of Soviet intellectuals thought that the tragedy that befell the nation and the people was what was referred to as "1937" or the "Yezhovshchina" [the Yezhov period], but by no means the October Revolution.

There was hardly anyone in the Soviet Union for whom the exposures made at the Twentieth Party Congress came as a complete revelation. Both the scale and the character of Stalin's brutality were known to millions of Soviet people. During the years of Stalinism, many of them saved themselves through self-deception, which was necessary to keep going; in their minds they built a chain of rationalizations, i.e., a justification, if not fully then partially, of Stalin's terror as something which made sense politically. In this regard we must stress that one of the goals (and therefore one of the results or consequences) of the "Yezhov period" was the destruction of the social and historical memory of the people, which is passed from generation to generation through its living bearers. A wasteland of scorched earth was formed around the murdered leaders of Bolshevism, insofar as their wives, children and closest comrades were eliminated after them. The fear evoked by the Stalinist terror left its mark on the consciousness and behavior of several generations of Soviet people; for many it eradicated the readiness, desire and ability to engage in honest ideological thought. At the same time, the executioners and informers from Stalin's time continued to thrive; they had secured their own well-being and the prosperity of their children through active participation in frame-ups, expulsions, torture, and so forth.

Meanwhile it is difficult to overemphasize the shifts in mass consciousness which were engendered by two waves of exposures of Stalinism: both during and after the Twentieth Congress, and then during and after the Twenty-second Congress. The second wave was halted by the Brezhnev-Suslov leadership soon after Khrushchev's overthrow. The last works of art, scholarly investigations and investigatory articles which were devoted to the theme of the Great Terror appeared in the USSR in 1965–1966.

The brief historical period separating the Twenty-second Congress of the CPSU from Khrushchev's removal from power witnessed the final

formation of the so-called generation of "the people of the '60s." The main spokesmen for this generation included not only Solzhenitsyn, but also a young generation of poets who recited their poems at the famous evenings held at the Polytechnical Museum. In later years, the majority of the "people of the 60s" passed through a number of stages of ideological degeneration. They reoriented in the direction of anticommunism and renounced their earlier works as the "sins of youth." This reorientation, which produced nothing but malicious and vulgar anti-Bolshevik slander, cannot, however, erase the undying significance of their early works. Here, the ideological dominant was a reassertion of their devotion to the ideas of the October Revolution and Bolshevism. It was precisely at the beginning of the '60s that A. Voznesensky wrote his poem, "Longjumeau," in which the whole text is permeated with a counterposing of Leninism to Stalinism. In addition, B. Okudzhava concluded one of his best songs with the moving lines:

*But if suddenly, sometime,  
I can't manage to protect myself—  
No matter what new battle  
may shake the earthly globe,  
I will nonetheless fall in that war,  
in that distant civil war,  
And commissars in dusty helmets  
Will bend silently over me. [31]*

In the 1960s even Solzhenitsyn wrote the anti-Stalinist, but by no means anticommunist novels, *Cancer Ward* and *The First Circle* (although it is true that the variant of the second novel published abroad differs significantly in its ideological orientation from the variant which made its rounds in Samizdat and was submitted for publication to the journal *Novyi mir*.).

Even in the best years of "the thaw," thoughtful people kept in mind the incomplete nature of the truth about Stalinism's crimes which had been allowed to be made public. In the 1950s, the author of this book had occasion to hear many times in private conversations that the full truth about the Great Terror would not become known until 100 years had passed.

To the Brezhnev clique which replaced Khrushchev, even the explanation of the Great Terror which had prevailed in the years of "the thaw" seemed dangerous. Therefore it simply placed a taboo on discussing this topic and on developing the related subjects in works of art or in historical literature.

Of course, even during the Brezhnev years (known as the "time of stagnation") witnesses of the events of the 1930s continued to write memoirs, and writers, scholars and journalists continued to write works on these themes. The wound inflicted by 1937 had healed so little, and the pain from memories about the Stalinist terror was so great, that many outstanding writers and memoirists devoted years to such works, which were written "for the desk drawer," i.e., without any hope of seeing them published in the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, by the end of the 1960s, memoirs and literary works began to circulate widely in Samizdat even though an official ban had been placed on their publication in the USSR. Then many Soviet authors began to send their works abroad to be published there.

In the official Soviet press, a return to the theme of Stalinist repressions began only in 1986. However, much as in the 1950s and 1960s, official approval of turning to this theme was hardly dictated only by a desire to restore historical truth and overcome the damage done by Stalinism. If both of the "Khrushchev" waves of exposures had been evoked largely by considerations in the struggle against the so-called "anti-Party group" of Molotov, Kaganovich and Malenkov, then the "perestroika" wave, too, was initially prompted by other conjunctural considerations: by a desire to redirect the attention of public opinion away from the obvious failures of the broadly promoted "perestroika" to the tragic events of the past, for

which the new generation of party leaders bore no responsibility.

The flood of exposures which broke out under the flag of "glasnost" [openness] was so powerful at first, that in 1987–1989, public opinion was almost completely consumed by questions of the country's history during the Stalinist years. This interest largely explains the sharp increase during those years of subscriptions and subsequently the press runs of the mass-circulation newspapers, as well as literary and political journals which tirelessly published ever newer works about Stalin's crimes.

However, very soon it became clear that the themes of the Great Terror and Stalinism were being used by many authors and organs of the press in order to compromise or discredit the idea of socialism. This anticommunist and anti-Bolshevik approach had largely been prepared by the activity of Western Sovietologists and Soviet dissidents from the 1960s through the 1980s, who had put into circulation a whole number of historical myths.

Historical myth-making has always been one of the main ideological weapons of reactionary forces. But in the modern epoch historical myths can't help but disguise themselves as science, and in search of support they are always looking for pseudoscientific arguments. At the end of the 1980s, myths created during the first decades of Soviet power were given a second life in the pages of the Soviet press. One of these myths amounted to a virtual repetition of the Stalinist version from 1936 in which the struggle of Trotsky and the "Trotskyists" against Stalinism had allegedly been determined by a naked yearning for power. According to this myth, the political doctrine of "Trotskyism" did not differ in any substantial way from the Stalinist "general line," and if the opposition had triumphed in the inner-party struggle, it would have pursued policies differing in no significant way from Stalin's.

Other myths, which originated in the works of the ideologues among the first Russian emigration and the renegades from communism in the 1920s and 1930s, were aimed at discrediting and denigrating the historical period of the Russian Revolution. In order to ideologically clear the way for the restoration of capitalism in the USSR, what was required was the destruction of a significant stratum in the consciousness of the masses; pluses had to be changed into minuses in the interpretation of the October Revolution and Civil War, events which were surrounded with an aura of grandeur and heroism in the minds of millions of Soviet citizens. It is no accident that from approximately 1990 on, the center of attention in criticizing our historical past was shifted from an exposé of the Stalinist epoch to the first years of post-October history. The most derogatory term in the works both of the "democrats" and of the "national-patriots" suddenly became the half-forgotten concept of the "Bolshevik," which can be applied correctly only to Lenin's generation of the party and to its elements who didn't degenerate in subsequent years.

In the formation of this myth, no small contribution was made by Solzhenitsyn, who claimed in his book *The Gulag Archipelago* that the "Yezhov period" was simply one of the waves of "Bolshevik terror," and that the civil war, collectivization and repressions of the postwar period were no less horrific waves of the same essential type.

But it is clear that a popular struggle against an open class enemy and well-armed conspiracies—which are inevitable in a civil war when it is hard to distinguish between the front and the rear—is something quite different from the struggle of a ruling bureaucracy against a peasantry which comprised a majority of the country's population (and precisely this kind of struggle was provoked by "rapid collectivization" and the "liquidation of the kulaks as a class"). In turn, the struggle against peasants who frequently responded to forced collectivization with armed uprisings (such uprisings never ceased during the entire period of 1928–1933) is something quite different from the extermination of unarmed people, the majority of whom were devoted to the idea and cause of socialism. And when it comes to the repressions during the last years of the war, they were directed not only at innocent people, but also against

thousands of collaborationists and participants in roving bands (strict retribution against accomplices of Hitler's forces was meted out in all the countries of Western Europe at that time which had been liberated from fascist occupation).

If the October Revolution and Civil War of 1918–1920 had achieved their goals, their victims would seem justified to any unbiased person—much like today's Americans feel that the victims lost in the revolutionary wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are justified. However, in the USSR, only a few years after the close of the civil war which had led to the victory of the Soviet regime, what began was virtually a new civil war against the peasantry, caused not so much by objective class contradictions as by the mistaken policy of the Stalinist leadership. At the same time, the ruling bureaucracy unleashed a number of small civil wars against the communist opposition, which swelled into the Great Terror of 1936–1938.

Thus in the history of Soviet society we can count not one, but at least three civil wars, which differ substantially according to their character and consequences. The civil war of 1918–1920 led the country out of a state of collapse, anarchy and chaos which had grown ever more acute after the February Revolution (this fact is acknowledged even by such opponents of the Bolsheviks as Berdyaev and Denikin). The civil war of 1928–1933 was a war which significantly weakened the USSR, although it did accomplish the "pacification" of the peasantry. The "Yezhov terror" was a preventive civil war against Bolshevik-Leninists who had fought for the preservation and strengthening of the gains of the October Revolution. This last civil war in the USSR (until the "low intensity civil war" launched by "perestroika" and continuing to this very day) resulted in more victims than the Civil War of 1918–1920 or all the Stalinist acts of repression before and after it.

Historical analogies usually help us to understand the essence of great historical events. The civil war of 1918–1920 can be compared to civil wars in other countries, especially to the civil war during the 1860s in the United States. Trotsky found so much in common between these wars that he even intended to write a book devoted to their comparison. In addition, the struggle against the rebellious peasants during the years of forced collectivization reminds us of the battle of France's revolutionary armies against the "Vendée."

But it is impossible to find analogies in previous history to the phenomenon which is referred to variously as "1937," "the Yezhov Terror," "the Great Terror" or "the Great Purges." Similar events have been observed only after the Second World War in other countries which are called socialist. This applies first of all to the purges of the ruling communist parties, incited from Moscow, which were not avoided by a single one of the "People's Democratic" countries. Secondly it applies to the so-called "Cultural Revolution" in China, which occurred without the slightest pressure on the part of the Soviet Union. The "Cultural Revolution," which, like the "Yezhov Terror," began almost twenty years after the victory of the socialist revolution, gave rise to the conception that every socialist country will inevitably pass through a period of mass state terror.

"The Great Purges" in the USSR and the "Cultural Revolution" in China differed from each other in substantial ways regarding the way the terror was carried out. In China it was presented as an outburst of the spontaneous indignation of the masses, and especially the youth, over the behavior of "those invested with power and following the capitalist road." Public mockery, beatings and other forms of violence employed against the victims of the "Cultural Revolution," including leading members of the party and state, were applied openly, before large crowds, by "Red Guards" who were allowed to do as they pleased and who became intoxicated by the power they had over helpless people. However, it would be more appropriate to compare the Red Guards to Hitler's stormtroopers than to Stalin's inquisitors who conducted their bloody affairs in

prison torture chambers.

Feeling that it was possible to implement the Great Terror by crudely victimizing "enemies of the people," Trotsky pointed out that Stalin preferred, over this "Asiatic" variant, to annihilate his victims while concealing from the people both the scale and the brutal forms of the repression being carried out. "It would require little effort for the Stalinist bureaucracy," Trotsky wrote, "to organize the wrath of the people. But it had no use for this; on the contrary, it saw in such unauthorized actions, even if they were actually ordered from above, a threat to the existing order. Beatings in prison, murders—all this the Kremlin Thermidorians could accomplish in a strictly planned fashion, through the GPU and its detachments.... This was possible due to the totalitarian character of the regime, which had at its disposal all the material means and forces of the nation." [32]

1937 determined the development of historical events for many years and decades ahead. We can call this year "historically crucial" (a justifiable epithet, although it was thoroughly vulgarized by Gorbachev, who called his confused and unsystematic actions "historically crucial" during the "perestroika" period) even more than the October Revolution. If the October Revolution had not occurred,\* socialist revolutions would have erupted somewhat later in Russia or in other, more developed, countries, due to the extremely tense contradictions of capitalism in the 1920s–1940s. In this case, the revolutionary process would have developed more auspiciously than it did in reality, insofar as the revolutionary forces would not have been fettered, demoralized and weakened by the Stalinized communist parties.

1937 became crucial in a profoundly tragic sense. It caused losses to the communist movement both in the USSR and throughout the world from which the movement has not recovered to this very day.

The tragedy of 1937 cannot be explained by the popular aphorism "every revolution devours its own children," which by no means possesses the profound meaning which is usually ascribed to it. Thus, the bourgeois revolutions in America by no means devoured their children, and they achieved the goals set by their leaders. Nor did the October Revolution and the accompanying civil war devour its children. All its organizers, with the exception of those who were killed by declared enemies, survived this heroic epoch. The destruction of the Bolshevik generation which headed the popular revolution occurred only twenty years after its triumph.

In this book I will not deal in detail with subjects which have been thoroughly examined in other works: the application of physical torture during interrogation, the general conditions of life in the Stalinist camps, and so forth. Its main attention will be focused on those aspects of the Great Terror which in many ways continue to remain enigmatic even today: How was it possible to annihilate in peacetime such an enormous number of people? Why did the ruling stratum allow itself to be almost completely exterminated in the flames of the Great Purges? Were there forces in the party who tried to prevent the terror?

In accordance with these objectives, the book will examine the period which opens with the first show trial (in August 1936) and ends with the June Plenum of the Central Committee in 1937.

It is appropriate to preface a concrete account of historical material with a concise outline of the book's conception, the correctness of which the reader will be able to verify as he thinks over and evaluates the historical facts contained within it.

The October Revolution, which was an integral part of the world socialist revolution, was such a powerful historical event that the bureaucratic reaction to it (Stalinism) also assumed grandiose proportions, demanding an accumulation of lies and repressions never before seen in history. In turn, Stalinism's desecration of the principles and ideals of the October Revolution evoked in the USSR and beyond its borders a powerful and heroic resistance on the part of political forces retaining

their belief in the Marxist theoretical doctrine and their loyalty to the revolutionary traditions of Bolshevism. To overcome this resistance required a terror which, in its scale or brutality, has no analogies in history.

The ignoring of this tragic dialectic of history leads anticommunists to an interpretation of the Great Terror as something irrational, engendered by the "Satanic" nature of the Bolsheviks who were allegedly driven by a thirst for senseless violence, including in turn their own self-annihilation.

Material from the Soviet archives which has become available in recent years (although far from all the archives are open), as well as the publication of many new memoirs, has helped the author accomplish the tasks set by this book: to investigate the mechanism of the origin and relentless spread of the Great Terror, and to discover the reasons why this mass terrorist action became not only possible but also so successful.

The author is fully aware that the goals of this research have by no means been fully accomplished. Despite the enormous and ever-increasing flood of publications containing archival material, there are significant gaps in our treatment of many events in 1937. The author did not have access to the investigatory dossiers, a careful analysis of which could untangle the Stalinist amalgams—a combination of what actually occurred with what was invented by Stalin and his inquisitors. In light of the shortage of source material, some of the author's arguments are historical hypotheses which he hopes to ground more fully in his future works. The author would be grateful to any readers who help him refine, concretize or refute these hypotheses on the basis of new ideas or material.

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Notes

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