

2025 Summer School Lecture 4 Part 1

Political genocide in the USSR (1936-1940): The Moscow Trials and the Dewey Commission

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This is the first part of the lecture “Political Genocide in the USSR (1936-1940)” delivered by Fred Williams, Katja Rippert, and Alejandro Lopez to the 2025 Summer School of the Socialist Equality Party (US) on the history of the Security and the Fourth International investigation. To supplement the reading of this part of the lecture, readers are encouraged to study Trotsky’s speech, “I Stake My Life” and Appendix II to Vadim Rogovin’s work “Stalin’s Terror of 1937-1938: Political Genocide in the USSR,” posted today on the WSWS. This volume and other works by Rogovin are available for purchase from Mehring Books.

On August 19, 1936, the first Moscow Show Trial opened, signaling the beginning of one of the most criminal frame-ups in world history. Also known as the Trial of the Sixteen, the “Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Center” lasted through August 24. At its conclusion, all sixteen defendants were sentenced to be shot, with confiscation of personal property. Beyond those at the trial, Lev Davidovich Trotsky and his son, Lev Lvovich Sedov, living in exile outside the Soviet Union, were declared *in absentia* to be “subject to immediate arrest and trial by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR,” i.e., if captured they, too, would be tried and executed in mockery of the most elementary judicial standards.

Of the 16 defendants, 11 were prominent Old Bolsheviks who had joined the party prior to 1917, organized and led the October Revolution, founded the Communist International in 1919, fought heroically in the Civil War (1918-1921), and established the Soviet Union as the world’s first workers’ state. The five other defendants were young unknowns, including at least some agents of the Soviet secret police (NKVD). Thus, an amalgam had been formed that would be followed in subsequent trials, where genuine revolutionaries sat beside virtually unknown Stalinist collaborators on the defendants’ bench.

However shocking the first Moscow Trial was, for two of its most prominent defendants, it was the culmination of earlier prosecutions. On December 1, 1934, Sergei Kirov, the Leningrad party secretary, had been assassinated by a lone gunman, Leonid Nikolaev.

Kirov’s death was followed by several trials, in which 104 White Guards, then Nikolaev and 13 others, were shot. Next, the members of a supposed “Moscow Center”, including Zinoviev, Kamenev and 17 others, were accused of striving for the restoration of capitalism and counter-revolutionary activity in general; convicted of “moral responsibility” for the Kirov assassination, they were not shot, but sentenced to long prison terms.

The subsequent Moscow Trial in 1936 was a revision and expansion of the earlier trials.

Let us briefly note the biography of some of its victims.

Grigory Zinoviev, age 53, had been a Bolshevik since 1903 and one of Lenin’s closest collaborators. He participated in the Zimmerwald and Kienthal Conferences. He was a member of the Central Committee, 1907-1927; chairman of the Petrograd Soviet after October 1917; chairman of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, 1919-1926. He participated in the Joint Opposition in 1926-1927; capitulated in 1927. Convicted on January 16, 1935, of “moral responsibility” for the murder of Kirov, he was sentenced to ten years in prison, where he remained until the 1936 trial.

Lev Kamenev, age 53, joined the Social Democratic Party in 1901. He was a Bolshevik from 1903 and worked closely with Lenin. He was member of Central Committee from April 1917 to 1927, chairman of the Moscow Soviet, 1918-1926, and member of the Joint Opposition in 1926-1927, capitulating in December 1927. Tried twice for Kirov’s murder in January and July 1935, and he was sentenced to five, and then ten years in prison.

Ivan Nikitich Smirnov, age 55, in the party since 1899; he suffered repeated arrests, imprisonment and exile under tsarism. Leading the Red Army in crushing Kolchak’s forces in Siberia during the Civil War, he was known as the “Siberian Lenin.” A member of Central Committee, he was in the Left Opposition from 1923-1929. He was arrested and imprisoned in 1933, where he remained until 1936.

Sergei Mrachkovsky, age 48, a Urals worker and Bolshevik from 1905. He had been a hero of the Civil War and was in the Left Opposition from 1923-1929. He was exiled in 1933.

Vagarshak Ter-Vaganyan, age 43, had been a Bolshevik from 1912. He was founding editor of the journal *Under the Banner of Marxism* in 1922 and wrote the first major work on Plekhanov (1924). He was in the Left Opposition from 1923-1929. Arrested and exiled until July 1936, he was added late by Stalin to the list of 16 defendants.

Grigory Yevdokimov (52), Ivan Bakaev (49), Efim Dreitser (42), Rikhard Pikel (40), Isaak Reingold (39), and Eduard Goltzman (54) also had distinguished, if less prominent, party careers.

In stark contrast to the 11 Old Bolsheviks, the prosecutor throughout the trials was Andrei Vyshinsky, aptly described by Trotsky as “a bourgeois lawyer, who called himself a Menshevik after the October Revolution and joined the Bolsheviks after their definitive victory.” Showing his deep contempt for his former and now current enemies, Vyshinsky relished the opportunity to hurl insults at the defendants, calling them “Liars and clowns, insignificant pygmies, little dogs snarling at an elephant, this is what this gang represents!” Near the end of the trial, Vyshinsky concluded his 50-page rant: “I demand that these mad dogs should be shot—every one of them!”

What were the charges at the trial? Aside from killing Kirov, the defendants were accused of attempting (but failing) to assassinate Stalin, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Zhdanov, Ordzhonikidze and several other Soviet leaders. They allegedly were working with the Nazi Gestapo to carry out these assassinations and other terrorist acts. Other charges of espionage and sabotage were also levied.

What was the evidence? Nothing except the confessions of the accused. Despite hundreds of communications described by the defendants, letters written with invisible ink and transmitted by untested conspirators from Trotsky and Sedov to their accomplices in the Soviet Union; despite meetings that occurred in non-existent places, requiring plane or train tickets, visas, etc.; not one piece of evidence was introduced at the trial. Countless assassinations failed because vehicles moved too fast, admission to meeting places was not obtained, intended victims never showed up at factories where they were to be killed. Nevertheless, Vyshinsky claimed: "knives are sharpened, revolvers are loaded, bombs are charged, false documents are written and fabricated, secret connections are established with the German political police, people are sent to their posts, they engage in revolver practice, and finally they shoot and kill... they not only talk about shooting, they shoot, shoot and kill!" **None of this happened.**

Along with live radio broadcasts and lurid accounts of the trial carried daily in every newspaper, the most popular cartoonists were mobilized to depict Trotsky and other defendants as terrorists and clear agents of the Gestapo.

Why, then, did the defendants confess? This question was raised in the minds of millions of people. Most of all, people who knew Trotsky and the other Old Bolsheviks as leaders of the October Revolution wanted to hear what Trotsky, in particular, had to say.

When the first Moscow Trial began, however, Trotsky was under house arrest in Norway. Under pressure from the Soviet Union, the Norwegian Labor Party prevented Trotsky from answering the slanders of the trial. From August through December, he was not allowed to address the public in any form under threat of deportation, including possibly to the Soviet Union where he would share the fate of the executed defendants.

Meanwhile, despite the countless falsehoods and contradictions of the trial, several journalists and political figures vouched for the legitimacy of the judicial procedures. British jurist D. N. Pritt, a recently elected Labour M.P., said: "It is futile to think that the trial was staged and the charges trumped up. The Government's case against the defendants is genuine ... held with the fullest possible degree of fairness."

New York Times reporter Walter Duranty soon suggested that if Westerners did not believe the confessions, they did not understand "the Russian soul." He later added: "Several of them [the accused] are cleverer than Mr. Vyshinsky, but it is not thought possible they can refute the painstaking case he has built against them."

US ambassador Joseph Davies defended the legitimacy of the first and all the subsequent Moscow show trials in his 1941 book, *Mission to Moscow*, which later became the basis for a film whitewashing the frameups.

According to researcher Gary Kern, the number of people who believed the veracity of the spectacle is quite large, including, besides the three mentioned above, Louis Aragon, Louis Budenz, Malcolm Cowley, Louis Fischer, Dashiell Hammett, Lillian Hellman, Langston Hughes, Corliss Lamont, Owen Lattimore, Dorothy Parker, Romain Rolland, Upton Sinclair, Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Cowley, Fischer, and Sinclair, it should be noted, later changed their views.

Many of these figures were self-styled "progressives" who were close to the Communist Party or considered themselves "friends of the USSR."

Sedov's Red Book

The best refutation of the Moscow frame-up soon appeared. Lev (Leon) Sedov, Trotsky's son, published in the *Bulletin of the Opposition* a lengthy article that was to become *The Red Book on the Moscow Trial*.

In 48 pages, Sedov meticulously examined the details of the trial and exposed them as a fraudulent attack on people who had been genuine revolutionaries, but had long since broken with the Opposition.

In discussing why Stalin needed this trial, Sedov outlined both domestic and foreign political reasons. As the Soviet bureaucracy was getting "fatter and more prosperous," it was furiously defending its privileges against the masses who had been deprived of any rights. Stalin labelled all protest as "Trotskyism," then, with the alleged Moscow murders, identified Trotskyism with terrorism. He finally was taking the road of physically exterminating all those who were actively dissatisfied, above all, the Left Oppositionists.

With regard to foreign policy, by shooting leaders of the October Revolution, Stalin was showing the bourgeoisie of the world that the revolution was finished and that he was able to reliably lead a nation-state. Prophetically, Sedov noted: "Without hesitation Stalin would make a pact even with Hitler at the expense of the German and international working class. It only depends on Hitler!" (The Stalin-Hitler Pact would in fact be signed on August 23, 1939).

Sedov carefully examined the contradictions and errors of both the Moscow trial and the preceding ones after Kirov's assassination. Upon examining the case numbers of the defendants, he noted that there were significant gaps, implying that many of those arrested had not been broken, or had died under torture. It is precisely those who were broken who were placed on trial.

One blunder on the part of the prosecutors was claiming that defendant Holtzman traveled to Copenhagen to meet Sedov in 1932 at the Hotel Bristol, which had been torn down in 1917. Many other details of supposed travels and meetings were also exposed as fraudulent.

Sedov easily refuted the charge that Trotskyists were advocating terrorism against Stalin and other Soviet leaders. Individual terror had consistently been rejected by Marxism; Trotsky and his supporters believed that only the revolutionary movement of the masses could overthrow the ruling bureaucracy.

One of the many tragic elements of the trial was carefully explained by Sedov, who knew Kamenev and Zinoviev well. The defendants had given up their right to lawyers after a "compromise" with Stalin. In exchange for their confessions, their lives would be spared and their families would not be touched. On August 24, however, as the trial ended, Kamenev and Zinoviev were taken directly from the courtroom to be shot.

As for Kamenev's family, both sons from his first marriage to Olga Davidovna Kameneva, Trotsky's sister, were executed: Aleksandr, born in 1906, was shot in 1937, and Yuri, born in 1921 was shot on 30 January 1938 when he was only 16. Olga Kameneva was executed in 1941 with 161 prisoners near Orel.

Kamenev's second wife, Tatiana Ivanovna Glebova, was shot in 1937, as was her older son Igor. Similar fates were shared by many victims of Stalin's terror.

After the trial, Sedov wrote: "People are arrested because they had a Trotskyist relative, because ten years ago they expressed some Oppositionist thought. Arrests take place in Moscow, the Ukraine, in Turkestan, everywhere. Writers, economists, journalists and military men are arrested; no one is spared." Stalin would need new trials, including leading party figures and military men. But, more centrally: *Stalin needs Trotsky's head, that's his main goal.*

Sedov concluded his analysis with unequivocal programmatic demands: The International Conference of the IVth International in July

1936—before the trial—said in its theses: “If the return of the USSR to capitalism requires a social counterrevolution, then the advance toward socialism inevitably requires a political revolution.”

“The Soviet proletariat can advance to socialism only through the rebirth and expansion of Soviet democracy, through the legalization of Soviet parties, above all, the party of revolutionary Bolshevism. But the rebirth of Soviet democracy is only possible with the overthrow of the bureaucracy. And only the forces of the revolutionary working masses can overthrow the bureaucracy!”

In December the Norwegian government boarded Trotsky and Natalia on a steamer bound for Mexico. Unlike any of the “democratic” European regimes, the Lazaro Cardenas government offered Trotsky asylum. He arrived in Mexico on January 9, 1937.

Within days after Trotsky arrived in Mexico, the second Moscow Trial opened.

The Second Moscow Trial

The Case of the “Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Center” lasted from January 23-30, 1937. Like the previous trial, the 17 defendants were an amalgam of Old Bolsheviks and relative unknowns. The most prominent were Karl Radek, Yuri Piatakov, Grigory Sokolnikov, Leonid Serebriakov, Nikolai Muralov, Mikhail Boguslavsky and Yakov Drobnius.

As with the previous trial, there was no evidence presented, only “confessions” and testimony by the defendants and other witnesses. Vyshinsky was just as abusive and hysterical as before. Some of the absurd testimony attracted world attention. Piatakov, for instance, claimed to have flown to Oslo in December 1935 to meet with Trotsky. The director of the relevant airport later confirmed that no foreign plane had landed there between September 19, 1935 and May 1, 1936. Another unexpected feature of the trial was Radek’s expansive and utterly fantastic testimony about receiving terrorist instructions directly from Trotsky that he repeatedly shared with Bukharin, who had not been indicted yet in 1937. He also casually mentioned Tukhachevsky 11 times, suggesting that a military trial would soon follow.

On January 30, the verdict against the “United Trotskyite-Zinovievite terrorist centre” was read:

In accordance with instructions received from the enemy of the people, L. Trotsky, the principal aim of the parallel anti-Soviet Trotskyite centre was to overthrow the Soviet power in the U.S.S.R. and to restore capitalism and the power of the bourgeoisie by means of wrecking, ... espionage and terrorist activities designed to undermine the economic and military power of the Soviet Union, to expedite the armed attack on the U.S.S.R., to assist foreign aggressors and to bring about the defeat of the U.S.S.R.

Trotsky had allegedly promised Nazi leader Rudolph Hess that he would cede the Ukraine to Germany. Maritime provinces would also be given to Japan. Trotsky’s agents would “organize fires and explosions at factories or factory departments and mines, organizing train wrecks and damaging rolling stock and railway track.” Four more pages of charges followed, none bearing the slightest relationship to reality.

Thirteen defendants were sentenced to be shot, Sokolnikov and Radek were sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment; Arnold and Stroilov were given 10 and eight years respectively. (It should be noted that Radek was

murdered by the NKVD in the Verkhne-Uralsk Prison on May 19, 1939. Sokolnikov was murdered in the Tobolsk prison two days later; Arnold and Stroilov were shot in September 1941 near Orel). The last lines of the verdict repeated:

Enemies of the people, Lev Davidovich Trotsky and his son, Lev Lvovich Sedov... having been convicted by the testimony of the accused... of personally directing the treacherous activities of the Trotskyite anti-Soviet Centre, in the event of their being discovered on the territory of the USSR, are liable to immediate arrest and trial by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR.

As with the first trial, more images of Trotsky as a Nazi collaborator were circulated in massive numbers. One poster by Deni, showing Trotsky leading German and Japanese militarists to destruction, was published in 150,000 copies. Others by Efimov and the three cartoonists collectively known as “Kukryniksy” shared similar themes.

The Dewey Commission

Trotsky had long been calling for an international commission to refute the lies and slanders of the frame-up trials. By February 9, 1937, the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky organized a meeting in New York that was attended by almost 7,000 people. When Trotsky attempted to call the meeting from Mexico, the phone line was cut by a Stalinist phone operator. After a lengthy delay, Trotsky’s text, however, was read to the assembled crowd by Max Shachtman.

Trotsky’s speech, published as “I Stake My Life,” is one of his finest. Noting how much Moscow feared the voice of a single man, Trotsky issued his challenge:

I am ready to appear before a public and impartial commission of inquiry with documents, facts, testimonies in my hands, and to disclose the truth to the very end. I declare: if this commission decides that I am guilty in the slightest degree of the crimes which Stalin imputes to me, I pledge in advance to place myself voluntarily in the hands of the executioners of the GPU.

Trotsky’s words foreshadowed his week-long testimony before the Dewey Commission in April 1937. On the eve of the hearings, he gave a short video address to his English-speaking audience, which can be viewed [here](#).

The Dewey Commission, formed in 1937, was chaired by the 78-year-old philosopher John Dewey. It included Otto Ruhle, Benjamin Stolberg, Alfred Rosmer, Suzanne La Follette, Carlo Tresca, and five others. Politically, none of the members of the commission were in the Trotskyist movement. A sub-committee of five members held hearings in Coyoacan, Mexico from April 10 to 17, 1937.

Trotsky provided testimony throughout the hearings in his “imperfect English.” The record of his exhaustive answers to the Moscow frame-ups fills over 600 pages in the book, *The Case of Leon Trotsky*.

Trotsky could point to the already voluminous literature that refuted the first two Moscow trials. Leon Sedov’s *Red Book* had been followed by Max Shachtman’s *Behind the Moscow Trial*, Francis Heisler’s *The First*

Two Moscow Trials, Victor Serge's *Seize Fusillés. Où Va la Révolution Russe?* [16 Who Had been Shot. Where is the Russian Revolution Headed?] and Friedrich Adler's *The Witchcraft Trial in Moscow*.

Trotsky could build on these works like no other. He provided a detailed account of his 40 years in the revolutionary movement. Moreover, he was presenting to the commission the approximately 5,000 pages of written books, articles, and letters he had written in his last period of exile.

Trotsky thoroughly reviewed his relationship, both personal and political, with the defendants at the last two trials. He addressed the charges of sabotage and individual terror. He outlined his defense of the Soviet Union, his total rejection of fascism and Japanese militarism, and then reviewed the struggle between the Left Opposition (led by himself) and the majority of the Communist Party led by Stalin.

Some of the sessions witnessed long analyses, for instance of Radek's 50-page testimony at the second trial. Trotsky also showed that the testimony presented by the *Izvestia* correspondent Vladimir Romm regarding conspiratorial meetings between Romm, Trotsky, and Radek were pure invention from beginning to end.

In the thirteenth session, Trotsky gave a masterful summary speech that lasted more than four hours. He reiterated that the two fundamental aspects of the trials, absence of evidence and the epidemic character of the confessions, couldn't help but arouse suspicion in every thinking man.

Trotsky's concluding words made an indelible impression:

The experience of my life, in which there has been no lack either of successes or of failures, has not only not destroyed my faith in the clear, bright future of mankind, but, on the contrary, has given it an indestructible temper. This faith in reason, in truth, in human solidarity, which at the age of eighteen I took with me into the workers' quarters of the provincial Russian town of Nikolaiev—this faith I have preserved fully and completely. It has become more mature, but not less ardent. In the very fact of your Commission's formation—in the fact that, at its head, is a man of unshakable moral authority, a man who by virtue of his age should have the right to remain outside of the skirmishes in the political arena—in this fact I see a new and truly magnificent reinforcement of the revolutionary optimism which constitutes the fundamental element of my life.

The Dewey Commission studied all the material and released its findings in the 400-page book, *Not Guilty*. The September 21, 1937 findings contained 23 points, some of which I abbreviate here:

(17) We find that Trotsky throughout his whole career has always been a consistent opponent of individual terror.

(18) We find that Trotsky never instructed the defendants or witnesses in the Moscow trials to engage in sabotage, wrecking, and diversion.

(19) We find that Trotsky never instructed any of the accused or witnesses in the Moscow trials to enter into agreements with foreign powers against the Soviet Union.

(20) On the basis of all the evidence we find that Trotsky never recommended, plotted, or attempted the restoration of capitalism in the U.S.S.R.

(21) We find that the Prosecutor fantastically falsified Trotsky's role before, during and after the October Revolution.

(22) We therefore find the Moscow trials to be **frame-ups**.

(23) We therefore find Trotsky and Sedov **not guilty**.

The Purge of the Red Army

The Dewey Commission hearings had barely finished when a new secret trial was held in Moscow. In May and June, Mikhail Tukhachevsky and seven other prominent generals in the Red Army were arrested and tried behind closed doors.

All were found guilty and shot in the night between June 11 and 12. In the months to follow, thousands of Red Army officers were arrested, dismissed, or executed. Alexander Barmine, a former Soviet diplomat who broke with Stalin in 1937, was close to Tukhachevsky and several other generals. He estimated that three of five Soviet marshals, 90 percent of all Red Army generals, 80 percent of Red Army colonels and 30,000 officers of lesser rank had been purged, although some were allowed to return to service during World War II.

Trotsky wrote on March 11, 1939: "Stalin exterminated the flower of the general staff. He shot, dismissed and deported about 30,000 officers—all under the same charge of being agents of Hitler."

A 1998 study by the historian Suverinov stated that of the 767 officers of the general staff who had been at their post in 1936, by the time the purges had concluded, 412 had been shot, 29 died under arrest, 3 committed suicide and only 59 returned from prison alive. The 503 victims amounted to 65.6 percent of these senior officers.

Trotsky concluded his article on "The Decapitation of the Red Army" with these words:

[Stalin] has dealt the Red Army a fearful blow. As a result of the latest judicial frame-up it has been brought lower by many heads. The morale of the army has been shaken to its very foundations. The interests of Soviet defense have been sacrificed to the interests of self-preservation of the ruling clique. After the trials of Zinoviev and Kamenev, Radek and Pyatakov, the trial of Tukhachevsky, Yakir, and the others marks the beginning of the end of the Stalinist dictatorship.

Sergei Sedov

In the interval between the purge of the generals and the beginning of the third and last show trial, Trotsky's son, who had remained in the Soviet Union when Trotsky was exiled, was arrested and shot. Sergei Sedov, the younger brother of Lev Sedov, was an engineer and scientist. He was not active politically, but was arrested in 1935 and sentenced to exile in Krasnoyarsk for not denouncing his father. He was briefly sent to Vorkuta in 1936, but then returned to Krasnoyarsk.

An absurd article in January 1937 accused Sedov of trying to poison workers at the machine-building plant where he worked. After a long "investigation," he was tried on October 29, 1937 and shot the same day. The list of people to be shot that included Sedov was signed by Stalin, Molotov and Kaganovich on October 3, 1937. We will return to these lists later.

The Third Moscow Trial

The trial of the "Anti-Soviet Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites" or the Trial of the Twenty-One, ran from March 2 to 13, 1938. Bukharin and Rykov,

included as former Right Oppositionists, were joined by Rakovsky and Krestinsky, former Left Oppositionists.

They formed Vyshinsky's bloc of "Rights and Trotskyites," charged with treason, espionage, wrecking and countless other crimes. Their goal was aiding military attacks on the USSR. The ensuing dismemberment of the country was to be accomplished with the aid of Germany and Japan.

Former head of the NKVD, Yagoda, replaced by Yezhov on September 26, 1936, was accused of murdering the writer Maksim Gorky with poison, among other crimes. Bukharin's lengthy testimony and eventual confession bewildered many observers throughout the world. The seven-page verdict claimed that Bukharin had been plotting against the Soviet government since 1918; he had tried to undermine the Brest-Litovsk Treaty and assassinate Lenin. Vyshinsky unabashedly declared that "the trial showed me quite clearly that Hitler, Trotsky and Bukharin are as one in their frenzied struggle against our country."

During the trial, cartoonist Efimov dutifully depicted Bukharin, Rykov, Chernov, and Dan eating Nazi swill with Trotsky at the "Vaterland" restaurant in Berlin, an event that obviously never could have happened.

In the end, 18 of the defendants were sentenced to be shot, with the confiscation of all their personal property. Pletnev, Rakovsky and Bessonov were to be imprisoned for 20 and 15 years respectively. All three were later shot in September 1941 in Orel.

It should be noted that, as the third show trial was taking place, hundreds of genuine Trotskyists who had never capitulated to Stalin were machine-gunned at the brickyard factory in Vorkuta, near the Arctic circle. Efim Kashketin, the notorious psychopathic head of the Ukhpechlag prison camp, oversaw the shooting of 2,508 prisoners on March 1, 1938. Not all were Trotskyists, but hundreds were, including many of the most outstanding young leaders of the Left Opposition.

The scale of the Great Terror and purges

While the Moscow trials were being held, mass arrests and executions were being carried out throughout the Soviet Union. It would later be shown that of 1,966 delegates to the Communist Party Congress in 1934, 1,108 were arrested. Of 139 members of the Central Committee, 98 were arrested. We have already cited figures for the Red Army.

The overall scale of the terror and purges is almost impossible to comprehend. Anti-communists would suggest during the Cold War that the numbers reached astronomical heights. Solzhenitsyn in the 1970s and Robert Conquest in the 1980s gave highly inflated figures. After Stalin had died in 1953, however, the surviving bureaucracy began gathering information that would later be used by Khrushchev in his secret speech in February 1956 to address many, but by no means all, of Stalin's crimes. A special commission reported that from 1935 to 1940, 1,920,635 people were arrested on charges of anti-Soviet activity, of whom 688,503 were shot.

In the 1990s, Vadim Rogovin analyzed the various accounts, arriving at these numbers:

In 1936, 1,118 people were shot on political charges. **In 1937**, the number of people shot was three hundred fifteen times (1) greater than the previous year, reaching **353,074** victims. Almost the same number were shot (**328,618** people) **in 1938**, after which this indicator sharply fell, reaching **4,201** people **for 1939 and 1940 combined**. ... The scale of state terror during the years of the Great Purge has no equal in human history.

The Goals of the Moscow Trials—Political Genocide

Rogovin in 1996 gave a succinct summary: "The main goal of the Moscow Trials was to create the conditions for politically discrediting and physically exterminating the entire communist opposition in order to behead the population, to deprive it for many years of a political avant-garde and therefore of the ability to resist the totalitarian regime."

What occurred in this preventive civil war, carried out by the bureaucracy, was a political genocide focused above all on Trotsky, his supporters, and anyone connected directly or indirectly with those who were fighting since 1933 to create the Fourth International in opposition to the Stalinist Third International.

Many of those who perished in the purges were not supporters of Trotsky; many were even fervent Stalinists. But Stalin and his murderous apparatus were casting their nets wide.

In the prisons and camps, many witnesses could testify to the difference between being convicted simply for "???" [KRD], counter-revolutionary activity, and "????" [KRTD], counter-revolutionary *Trotskyist* activity. The fate of those bearing that one additional letter "?" was much worse, as the writer Varlam Shalamov and others have noted.

When thousands of survivors were freed from the camps during Khrushchev's "Thaw" in the mid-1950s, the people who had been active Trotskyists were few and far between.

The ruthlessness of the terror

When NKVD agents showed up to arrest people and conduct searches where they lived, frightened family members often never saw their loved ones again. If later they inquired about the fate of their husband, wife or child, hoping to send a letter or parcels of food to places where they were imprisoned, they were often told: "Ten years [sentence] without right of correspondence." This laconic phrase led families to search for decades to find out what had happened. Many did not learn officially until the 1980s that, far from languishing in some prison or distant camp, their relative had been shot long ago.

The shootings were often carried out in the cellars of the NKVD prisons. The bodies were either cremated or taken to mass graves on the outskirts of cities. The ashes of the cremated victims were sometimes dumped in unmarked mass graves in such locations as the Donskoe Cemetery in Moscow. In addition, many prisoners were shot at remote locations around the city. Two infamous locations, Kommunarka and Butovo, received many of the victims of the Moscow trials. Between August 8, 1937 and October 19, 1938, the NKVD shot 20,762 people and dumped their bodies in 13 mass graves at Butovo. The youngest victim is reported to be 14 years old, and the oldest was 82. Kommunarka is estimated to contain 10,000 bodies, including Bukharin, Krestinsky, Rosengolts, Rykov, and Ikramov from the Moscow trials. Families are still trying to find where their missing relative is buried in city after city, despite persistent efforts by the Putin regime to conceal that information.

Who conducted the terror?

There are accounts that some people in the camps felt that Stalin could not know what Yagoda or Yezhov or Beria (the three successive heads of the NKVD) were doing. After Stalin died, 390 shooting lists in 11 volumes were found for 1937 and 1938 alone. The 46,255 names on these lists usually indicate people sentenced to death. The cover page of each

list is usually signed “??” by the following people: Stalin (357 times), Molotov (373), Kaganovich (188), Voroshilov (185), and Zhdanov (176). Yezhov added notes to a few.

Here are just two examples of the signed shooting lists:

The first is a list from August 10, 1937.

As can be seen, this title page is for the “Moscow Center and Moscow Region.” It is a “List of People Subject to Trial by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR.” The date is August [10] 1937. Scrawled in red pencil is I. Stalin, the way he often endorsed the killings. The initials V. M. are for Viacheslav Molotov, Kaganovich is in red pencil and K. Voroshilov is in black pencil. The one page with 26 names, all destined for the first category of punishment (the death penalty), lists Aleksandr Konstantinovich Voronsky, former Left Oppositionist and leading literary critic as number 12. Another prominent critic is Boris Guber at 16; the 22-year-old son of the famous poet Sergei Esenin, Georgii (“Yura”) Sergeevich Esenin, is at location number 23. All three were shot the same day, August 13, 1937.

A second list and cover page that exist are from the Krasnoyarsk region. Dated 3 October 1937, the page is signed by Stalin (blue), Molotov (green) and Kaganovich (blue). Sergei Sedov, Trotsky and Natalia Sedova’s son, is at number 43. We now know that he was shot on October 29, 1937. The information was kept from his parents, who were never officially informed of his death. They were under no illusions, however, as to his fate.

The NKVD apparatus that carried out these executions was itself purged in three great waves. After Yagoda was replaced by Yezhov in 1936, many of Yagoda’s closest interrogators and executioners were purged. When Yezhov was replaced by Beria on November 24, 1938, *his* men were then purged.

Yezhov himself was shot in February 1940 by one of his most prolific executioners, Vasily Blokhin (the latter executed thousands, often shooting 100-200 per day). When Beria later fell in 1953, members of his “team” were imprisoned or executed. Estimates are that 25,000 NKVD personnel fell victim to the terror that they had been carrying out.

The impact in the Soviet Union and beyond

The impact of the Stalinist terror was enormous. Every field of social, political and cultural life was impacted, including people as diverse as: astronomers, biologists, physicians, geologists, theater and film personalities, historians, philosophers, musicians, engineers, architects, linguists, literary critics, writers and poets. Countless workers, agricultural laborers, and students who were less well known were imprisoned, sent to camps or executed.

I will mention only a few prominent examples: David Riazanov, the most famous Marxist historian, former head of the Marx-Engels Institute; Nikolai Vavilov, probably the world’s greatest botanist and defender of genetics in the Soviet Union; Vsevolod Meyerhold, the great theater director; and Osip Mandelstam, leading Acmeist poet. Two additional writers who were executed are Boris Pilnyak and Isaak Babel. But this list could be extended endlessly.

During the 1990s, when some of the Soviet archives were opened, an official literary commission determined that 2,000 writers had been arrested; about 600 of them had been executed. The literary commission carefully showed that many official entries in the nine-volume *Concise Literary Encyclopedia* (1962-1978) had deliberately falsified the date of death of many writers to obscure the fact that they had perished in 1937-1938. An extensive list contains the false dates followed by the correct date of death. Aleksandr Voronsky, for instance, had been reported

as dying on October 13, 1943, whereas in fact he had been shot on August 13, 1937, six years before. Vladimir Kirillov’s false date is December 18, 1943, the true date is July 15, 1937. G. Lelevich’s false and corrected dates are October 8, 1945 and December 10, 1937 respectively. Such falsifications showed that the Soviet bureaucracy systematically concealed countless aspects of the Stalinist terror decades after it had occurred.

During and after the purges, thousands of books and journals were removed from libraries and either put in closed repositories or destroyed. Possession of such works could by itself lead to victimization. As a further relentless assault on Marxism, history was ceaselessly rewritten to eliminate all traces of the true heroes of the October Revolution.

Although Stalin once cynically said, “The son does not answer for the father,” the children and grandchildren of his victims were often arrested, sent into exile for 20 years, or executed. Three generations suffered the consequences of the Great Terror in the Soviet Union. But as subsequent lectures will show, the impact of Stalin’s terror on the Comintern and Spain, in particular, was just as devastating.



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