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The Great Terror: Violence, Ideology, And The Building Of Stalin's Soviet Empire

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**THE GREAT TERROR: VIOLENCE, IDEOLOGY, AND THE BUILDING OF
STALIN'S SOVIET EMPIRE**

by

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THESIS

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DEDICATION

TO MY MOTHER

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CHAPTER 1 “INTRODUCTION”

It was in such a context that Trotsky scorned “papist-Quaker babble about the sanctity of human life,” and Lenin approvingly quoted Machiavelli to the effect that “violence can only be met with violence.”¹

In 1937, following her unexpected arrest, Party member Eugenia Ginzburg languished in a Soviet prison. Ginzburg’s cellmate, an old peasant woman, did not understand why she had been arrested by officers of the NKVD, Stalin’s secret police. When Ginzburg asked the old woman why she was being held, the woman, more than a little perplexed, said that the officers accused her of being a “tractorist.” A *tractorist*? thought Ginzburg. “But as God’s my witness,” the woman continued, “I never went near one of those cursed things... They don’t put old women like me on tractors.” Ginzburg finally realized that the poor old woman, an illiterate peasant with absolutely no understanding of political issues, was in fact being held as a *Trotskyist*, a supporter of the opposition and therefore a counterrevolutionary enemy of the state.²

By late 1937, NKVD officers flooded the Gulag and prisons throughout the Soviet Union with Party members like Ginzburg and peasants like the unnamed old woman. They shared cells with former kulaks, priests, family members of the “socially dangerous,” and other “anti-Soviet elements.” They came from both the cities and the countryside. They came from the Baltic states, Central Asia, Siberia, and beyond. This was an all-encompassing purge, known today as the Great Terror.

The mass violence and repression that engulfed the Soviet Union in the 1930s was marked by two consecutive waves of horrific terror. The first wave washed away 40,000 Party elites and 25,000 Soviet citizens because of their family ties or friendships. These ordinary people, the

¹ Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928, Volume 1* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 312.

² Eugenia Semyonovna Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), 182.

“other” victims of the Great Terror, have been the central focus of social and cultural historians since the 1970s. The second wave, immeasurably more destructive, which included the mass operations and the national operations, consumed 625,000 people.³ By the time the terror subsided, NKVD agents had executed 690,000 men, women, and children.⁴

Those specifically targeted during the first wave of purges, the “old guard” of Party elites, included high ranking members of the Politburo, military officers, industrial managers, and former leaders of the NKVD.⁵ The purge of the old guard quickly became a public spectacle, with show trials covered across the globe by the international press. Accused of elaborate plots and conspiracies to murder Stalin and overthrow the Party, many of the founding fathers of the Bolshevik regime lost their lives in this first wave of terror. As the show trials both enthralled and horrified citizens throughout the Soviet Union, local Party leaders pleaded for vigilance, encouraging peasants and factory workers to “unmask” the enemies who sought to undermine the revolution. Fear and paranoia reigned in urban areas like Moscow and Leningrad, as workers denounced one another and families were torn apart. In contrast, the second wave was veiled in secrecy. For decades, a comprehensive picture of the mass operations and national operations remained inaccessible.⁶ These victims, generally ordinary men and women with no political ties

³ The mass operations began on 30 July, 1937, when the NKVD issued Order 00447. This order targeted former kulaks, criminals, and anti-Soviet elements. NKVD agents executed approximately 380,000 people because of Order 00447. The national operations began on 9 July, 1937, when the NKVD issued Order 00485. This order targeted Polish nationals. Similar orders followed, targeting other diaspora nationalities. NKVD agents executed approximately 245,000 people during the national operations. See chapter four for specific details on these operations.

⁴ For the number of victims, see footnote 36.

⁵ This group is collectively known as the *nomenklatura*.

⁶ For decades, the Great Terror was seen as a series of show trials and army purges that targeted Party elites. See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 107. Nikita Khrushchev’s “secret speech” in 1956, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in 1962, Robert Conquest’s *The Great Terror* in 1968, and Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* in 1973-1975 all helped Western scholars better understand the scale and scope of the violence. See Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 261.

or designs, were labeled “enemies of the people” and “anti-Soviet elements” by Stalin and his leadership group.

There is now a consensus among historians about *what* happened during the Great Terror. There is no consensus, however, regarding *how* and *why* it happened. A survey of the historiography reveals two distinct approaches to understanding the Terror. Whereas one approach argues for order and a central orchestration of events, the other focuses on chaos, contingency, and mass participation. The former is overwhelmingly practiced by political historians and the latter by social and cultural historians.

Historiography

Sheila Fitzpatrick is one of the leading scholars of the Soviet Union and Stalinism. She is also among the first to separate herself from the old paradigm of Soviet studies that focused exclusively on Stalin and ignored the lives of millions of ordinary Soviet citizens. Fitzpatrick’s bottom-up approach revealed entirely new and unexpected vistas, emphasizing the importance of social forces in trying to understand the phenomenon of Stalinism. In 1999, she published *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times, Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, arguing that numerous causes resulted in the Great Terror. It was an environment plagued with mass hysteria, where “networks and conspiracies” lurked behind every corner. Stress and strain followed from rapid industrialization and collectivization. There was extreme tension within the Party after the assassination of Leningrad Party boss Sergei Kirov, along with apprehension and anxiety regarding the possibility of a second world war.⁷ Fitzpatrick contends that it is a mistake to seek

⁷ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times, Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 192-193.

out reason and rationality, arguing that “Soviet terror was random,” and that this randomness precluded any possibility of premeditated design.⁸

Others, following Fitzpatrick’s lead, have put forth similar arguments. In *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin’s Russia*, Wendy Z. Goldman explores the behavior of ordinary people in five Moscow factories during the tumultuous episode of the Great Terror. Goldman argues that the agents of terror were not only NKVD officials, but also ordinary men and women who actively participated in generating and prolonging the violence. The NKVD officers made the arrests, but it was the people who “penned denunciations, wrote defamatory articles in the factory and wall newspapers, and accused shop heads of causing accidents.”⁹ Goldman demonstrates the absurdly circular nature of the terror – just as events affected the daily lives of people, so too did the daily lives of people affect events. Like Fitzpatrick, Goldman argues that the Great Terror was a multicausal and multilayered phenomenon. The whole of society, she argues, participated in the hunt for “masked” enemies.¹⁰ “It was a profoundly violent process,” Goldman writes, “whereby the country began to resemble a body in the throes of some terrible autoimmune disease, attacking and destroying its own organs, nervous system, flesh, and blood.”¹¹

In his analysis of the Great Terror, Stephen F. Cohen speaks of “a multiplicity of social, cultural, and political causes.”¹² Emphasizing the chaotic, elemental nature of the terror, Cohen refers to the phenomenon as “the crimson madness.” Cohen argues that criminal complicity rests not only with Stalin, the Politburo, and the NKVD, but also with Party and state officials, petty

⁸ Fitzpatrick, 192.

⁹ Wendy Z. Goldman, *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin’s Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 20.

¹⁰ See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear Off the Masks!: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹¹ Goldman, 297.

¹² Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics & History Since 1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 22.

informers, and slanderers.¹³ In Cohen's analysis, the purges were irrational, wrecking and retarding many of the achievements of 1929-1936. For Cohen, Stalinism represented a withdrawal from Leninism, "a radical departure from Bolshevik programmatic thinking."¹⁴ Stalin broke free from the ideology of Marx and Lenin, Cohen argues, creating his own path for the Soviet Union, sacrificing millions of his own citizens in the process.

Robert W. Thurston also focuses on the actions of ordinary people throughout the purges. The Terror, for Thurston, was the tragic result of mass anxiety and paranoia. He highlights "a distressing human inclination to panic and to believe in plots, which then must be crushed at the cost of violating individuals' rights."¹⁵ A fear of secret agents and spies working with foreign nations and plotting the downfall of the Soviet Union affected everyone from Stalin to the millions of ordinary citizens who participated in the process of terror. Thurston writes, "the interaction of society and a sometimes hysterical leadership produced repulsive acts in the late 1930s – though the public often considered these steps necessary to eliminate a grave threat."¹⁶ Stalin was only reacting to the madness, Thurston argues, not creating it. It was not until much later, after so many had lost their lives, that "the leadership regained some of its senses."¹⁷

This notion of chaos and reaction is echoed in much of the contemporary historiography. Some scholars, such as J. Arch Getty, argue that Stalinism was defined more by chaos and inefficiency than by lethal cunning and political savvy.¹⁸ Getty contends that Stalin had no master plan to carry out the Terror. In an interview on *Sean's Russia Blog*, Getty states that the mass

¹³ Cohen, 98.

¹⁴ Cohen, 62.

¹⁵ Robert W. Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia: 1934-1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 228.

¹⁶ Thurston, 228.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1935-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) xii.

violence of the Great Terror followed from a fearful and insecure regime. Stalin and his leadership group were “afraid of everything.”¹⁹ They suffered from an insecurity complex that forced them to resort to violence and repression. Stalin and his cronies were profoundly reactive, Getty argues, reacting to the chaos that surrounded them, to the fears that threatened to plunge them into oblivion.

What we see from these historians is a commitment to the methodologies employed by the early revisionists. The emphasis is on social forces, on randomness, chaos, and contingency. They argue for mass participation in extending and augmenting the Terror. They portray Stalin as reactive, paranoid, and impotent – lacking real power and control, forced to resort to violence and repression.²⁰ An alternative approach, practiced by many of today’s most renowned political historians who have rejected the revisionist thesis, emphasize the manifestation of political ideology. They demonstrate order, rationality, and express directives. Furthermore, they reject the notion of mass participation. Regarding Stalin, they argue that his actions were premeditated and proactive.

In *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991*, Martin Malia writes, “it takes a great ideal to produce a great crime.”²¹ For Stalin, the great ideal was socialism, and the great crime the purges of the 1930s. As Malia argues throughout his book, socialism does not designate an empirical reality, but rather an idea of a possibility, a radiant utopian future. Stalin’s vision of a socialist utopia in Russia involved a radical transformation of society, resulting in a kingdom of harmony and equality. Stalin had specific goals: to overcome military, cultural, industrial, and agricultural backwardness, and to realize Marxism by creating a nation of workers

¹⁹ J. Arch Getty interviewed on *Sean’s Russia Blog*. <www.podcasts.com> (November 15, 2016).

²⁰ This point is stressed by Getty. The theory that truly powerful regimes do not need to employ mass violence and repression, that, on the contrary, such methods are the hallmarks of impotent regimes, is eloquently put forth by Hannah Arendt in *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Inc. 1969).

²¹ Malia, 4.

rather than peasants and small businessmen. His methods for achieving these goals included rapid industrialization, collectivization, cultural revolution, and mass purges. By analyzing the effects of the Terror, Malia demonstrates purpose and design rather than chaos and randomness. As a result of the purges, the army, the Party, and industry were completely renovated and rejuvenated. 1,500,000 new “thirty-something” men and women took over key positions. These were products of the cultural revolution, pupils of dialectical materialism, and graduates of technical and engineering schools. Stalin had brought forth the “new Soviet man,” *homo sovieticus*,²² by washing away the old guard. And this was the essential reason for the purges. As Malia writes, the ultimate rationale of the Great Terror was for Stalin to give himself a new Party and a new corps of cadres in every field of national activity.²³

In 2010, Timothy Snyder published his critically acclaimed *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, arguing that the mass murders of the Great Terror were express directives and explicit policies, political in nature, with the central goal of manifesting a utopian ideology. What mattered for Stalin, above all else, was the building and defense of socialism in Russia.²⁴ The most effective and efficient way to realize the goal was the implementation of mass killing policies, eliminating from the body politic hundreds of thousands of anti-Soviet elements. These policies were “purposeful,”²⁵ and, according to the Bulgarian-French historian Tsvetan Todorov, “given the goals they set for themselves, the choices of Stalin and Hitler were, alas, rational.”²⁶ Snyder presents Stalin as a man not reacting to present dilemmas, but proactively employing policies

²² Malia, 229.

²³ Malia, 257.

²⁴ Malia, 239. See also Snyder, X.

²⁵ Snyder, 409.

²⁶ Tsvetan Todorov, quoted in Snyder, 396.

designed to manifest his ideological vision. Stalin was looking to the future, and he knew that only a radical social upheaval could secure that future.

One of the more overlooked modern Russian historians is A. L. Unger. In 1969 Unger wrote an essay entitled “Stalin’s Renewal of the Leading Stratum: A Note on the Great Purge.” Although for decades the revisionists denied the validity of such arguments, much of the contemporary historiography of politically-minded scholars builds on Unger’s work. Unger believed that the desire for modernization played the central role in the purges. As a result of the purges, Stalin’s policies created “a new leading stratum.” Educated specialists replaced nearly 60% of the Party. In “an era of rapid industrialization, requiring technically qualified and politically reliable specialist cadres,” these policies were essential for the survival of the Party.²⁷ Stalin, fearful of his nation’s ability to meet the challenges of the modern world, said his regime “proved to be unarmed and absolutely backward, scandalously backward, in the matter of providing industry with a certain minimum of experts devoted to the cause of the working class.”²⁸ Unger argues that the primary concern of Stalin and his leadership group was “to find sufficient cadres to run Soviet Russia’s expanding industrial empire and its ancillary services.”²⁹ Here again we see purpose. We see a goal and a means to achieve that goal.

In 2009, Paul Hagenloh published *Stalin’s Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926-1941*. Hagenloh argues that Stalin, mindful of potential conflicts with Germany and Japan, was concerned with numerous anti-Soviet contingents and non-Russian populations. Stalin and his advisors, led by Nikolai Ezhov, designed the mass operations and national operations

²⁷ A. L. Unger, “Stalin’s Renewal of the Leading Stratum: A Note on the Great Purge,” *Soviet Studies* 20, no.3 (1969), 321.

²⁸ Joseph Stalin, quoted in Unger, 322.

²⁹ Unger, 330.

to rid the Soviet Union of a potential social base of insurrection.³⁰ They believed they could define and shape populations by identifying undesirable cohorts and eliminating them from the body politic. Certain populations were identified as “dangerous elements.” If they had the potential to revolt, to fight alongside enemy states, or to undermine the Soviet Union from within, then they were quickly and ruthlessly repressed. One of Hagenloh’s most valuable contributions to the literature is his evaluation of the arguments for mass participation. He argues that in both rural and urban areas the mass operations and national operations were essentially police operations, that there was little reliance on denunciations and other forms of popular participation. Furthermore, Hagenloh states that the social historians who dominated the field between the 1970s and the 1990s exclusively and intentionally focused on social activism. Popular participation, Hagenloh concludes, had no influence or impact on the mass operations or national operations. These operations resulted from the express orders of Stalin and were carried out entirely by the NKVD.³¹

Oleg V. Khlevniuk wrote *Master of the House: Stalin and His Inner Circle* in 2009. Khlevniuk argues that the Great Terror was centrally orchestrated, “a series of purposeful and carefully planned centralized operations.”³² Stalin had two specific goals: destroy a potential “fifth column” and purge the leading cadres. The latter would eliminate the old guard, many of whom had been involved in opposition movements and could no longer be trusted by Stalin, and who by 1936 had lost their “revolutionary zeal.”³³ The former, the potential “fifth column,” were ordinary citizens, but they were also, in many cases, former members of parties hostile to the Bolsheviks. More importantly, after revolution, civil war, collectivization, dekulakization, and years of

³⁰ Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin’s Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926-1941* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009), 250.

³¹ See Hagenloh 260 and 416 (note 178).

³² Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Master of the House: Stalin and His Inner Circle*, translated by Nora Seligman Favorov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 167.

³³ Khlevniuk, 171.

successive Party purges, they represented the millions of people, and their families, who had been harmed in some way by the Bolsheviks. They could not be trusted if war broke out, and Stalin was convinced that a second great war was inevitable. These millions of people would turn against Stalin and the Soviet Union – they would unite to form a “fifth column.” Add to this number the millions of religious believers who could never accept Bolshevik ideology and the millions of national contingents who felt they had no place in Stalin’s Soviet Union, and the implementation of the Great Terror appears both rational and necessary. The policies and practices that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people were devised and directed by Stalin and his inner circle – Molotov, Voroshilov, Kagonovich, Zhadnov, and of course Ezhov, the “bloody dwarf” – and not the result of mass participation. As Khlevniuk writes, “theories about the elemental, spontaneous nature of the terror, about a loss of central control over the course of the mass repression, and about the role of regional leaders in initiating the terror simply are not supported by the historical record.”³⁴

The historiography demonstrates two often conflicting approaches and methodologies. One group, usually but not always made up of social and cultural historians, influenced by the revisionist movement, focusses on social forces and popular participation. In this view, the Great Terror is marked by elemental chaos and mass anxiety. The other group, generally made up of political historians, focuses on a centrally orchestrated attempt to achieve specific regime goals. Express directives were carried out, rapidly and efficiently, by NKVD officers. The Great Terror, for these historians, is defined by a monstrous reason and rationality, stressing that the regime was in complete control from beginning to end.

³⁴ Khlevniuk, xix.

Whether the Great Terror has been presented as a spontaneous response to stress and strain or as calculated program designed to rejuvenate the Party and protect the Soviet Union from potential enemies, it is important to note that, paradoxically, both sides have revealed versions of the *truth*. This strange conclusion follows from the nature of the Great Terror and the way different historians have approached it. For those who have focused on the show trials, urban reactions, media coverage, mass hysteria, and mass participation, there certainly was chaos and social activism. Nearly 25,000 people lost their lives because of a coworker's denunciation or because a family member or friend was thought to be an "enemy of the people." Party leaders encouraged participation and newspapers fueled the fires on a daily basis. The world watched as top Party members during the show trials admitted their "plots" to destroy Stalin and restore capitalism. They watched in horror and dismay as the Bolsheviks put to death 40,000 Party elites.³⁵ But this first wave represents only 9% of the total number of executions during the Great Terror. Most contemporary political historians have focused on the second wave, the mass and national operations. Some historians, such as Khlevniuk, have argued that the Great Terror actually began on 2 July 1937, a year after the first Moscow show trial. On this day the Politburo announced its resolution to repress "anti-Soviet elements." NKVD Order 00447 soon followed, and the mass operations began. During these operations, secrecy was preserved and maintained. NKVD officers, following orders that were signed by Ezhov and approved by Stalin, arrested and either executed or sent to the Gulag nearly a million people. 625,000 were executed throughout the course of the mass and national operations, an astounding 91% of total executions for the Great Terror.³⁶

³⁵ Western newspapers extensively covered the Terror. See chapter 4 for examples of some of the coverage.

³⁶ These numbers are based on the most recent research by Khlevniuk, Getty, Snyder, Hagenloh, and others. As most of their numbers vary to some degree, I use an average in my work. Hagenloh suggests that violence and terror evolved throughout the 1930s in an increasingly systematic fashion. Stephen Wheatcroft rejects this argument in "Statistics," a chapter in *The Anatomy of Terror: Political Violence under Stalin*, edited by James Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Towards a New Understanding of the Great Terror

“The Great Terror: Violence, Ideology, and the Building of Stalin’s Soviet Empire” is a study of the confluence of terror and ideology in the Soviet Union during Stalin’s rule. I argue that the intersection of ideology and circumstance, both foreign and domestic, resulted in the Great Terror. To understand the 1930s in the Soviet Union, and the phenomenon of the Great Terror in particular, it is necessary to expand one’s scale and scope, examining the global evolution of radical ideology following the First World War. By placing the Great Terror within both a global and a pan-European context, it becomes evident that rather than being a phenomenon unique to the Soviet experiment, modern states around the world employed mass violence and repression throughout the interwar period. The Great Terror can neither be disconnected from the practices of modern statecraft nor separated from other key features of Stalinism, such as collectivization, industrialization, and cultural revolution.

Stalin’s political development during the Civil War period, which mirrored the radicalization and militarization of the Bolsheviks, and which has been largely ignored by historians, is also indicative of the blood purges that would engulf the Soviet Union in the 1930s. As early as 1918, Stalin and the Bolsheviks were already using mass terror and repression, unleashing a rampage of bloody slaughter on civilian populations during the Red Terror when the Cheka executed an estimated 6,000 “enemies” within a two-month period. Stalin personally allowed hundreds of prisoners to die of starvation and ordered the executions of hundreds more in Tsaritsyn. He called for “open, mass, systematic terror against the bourgeoisie.”³⁷ Trotsky believed that Stalin was molded by his experience in the Civil War.

³⁷ Stephen Kotkin explores the impact of the Civil War period on Stalin in *Stalin*.

Much of the historiography of the Great Terror analyzes the purges in isolation, failing to connect the events of 1936-1938 to the other central “pillars” of Stalinism, and failing to place the violence and repression in larger pan-European and global context. When examined as a united revolutionary system, and not simply as an isolated aberration, a more comprehensive and nuanced picture emerges. Stalin’s ultimate goal was the building of a socialist utopia in Russia, a communist empire. To manifest this goal, he initiated four major programs of social, cultural, and political transformation – the “four pillars of Stalinism”: collectivization, industrialization, cultural revolution, and mass purges. Only by connecting the events of 1936-1938 with Stalin’s three other revolutionary programs is it possible to understand the Great Terror. And only by analyzing the impact of the mass destruction and devastation of the Great War, the perilous rise of fascism, and the threat of capitalist encirclement is it conceivable to put forth an argument with the potential to express the full range of causality.

Stalinism must be studied as a total system, and this system needs to be analyzed as a whole, not broken up into isolated programs and processes. “The Great Terror” makes no distinction between Stalin the man and Stalinism the political system. The *ideas* that Stalin expressed in his writings and speeches led to particular choices – to institute collectivization, to pursue a policy of rapid industrialization, to initiate a cultural revolution, and to support NKVD orders that resulted in the executions of hundreds of thousands of people. Over time, beginning in the 1920s, the choices made by Stalin in response to problems and challenges manifested in the political system referred to as Stalinism. This system was the ultimate realization of a synthesis of ideas and ideals, practices and policies, or more specifically, ideology.

This work advances the scholarship of modern Russian history, as well as modern European history, because it explores the Great Terror in a pan-European context. This is the only way to

reveal the essence of Stalinism – as a modern civilization, not a totalitarian dictatorship. It challenges much of the contemporary historiography, particularly the social and cultural historians who have argued for chaos, contingency, and mass popular participation. Additionally, it complements studies on both fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Most importantly, it contributes a new analysis on the connection between political ideology and state violence.

Chapter 1 analyzes Soviet ideology, clarifying distinctions between Marxism, Leninism, and Stalinism. Chapter 2 focusses on the foreign and domestic circumstances that threatened the future of the Party and the Soviet Union, examining the crisis of interwar Europe, the rise of fascist Italy, and the menace of Nazi Germany. Chapter 3, using a narrative methodology, details the events of the Great Terror. My conclusion reveals the results of the Great Terror, arguing that the creation of the Soviet Empire, which emerged as a world superpower following the Second World War, was only possible because of the choices made by Stalin and his inner circle during the 1930s. In addition to examining a wide range of secondary sources, throughout most of this study I rely on an intellectual history approach, by employing a textual analysis of primary sources.

CHAPTER 2 “SOVIET IDEOLOGY AND THE ENEMIES OF HISTORY”

History knows no scruples and no hesitation. Inert and unerring, she flows towards her goal. At every bend in her course she leaves the mud which she carries and the corpses of the drowned. History knows her way. She makes no mistakes. He who has not absolute faith in History does not belong in the Party's ranks.¹

Stepan Prokhorovich Stashchenko worked as a mechanic at the Kiev Fiber Factory in Soviet Ukraine. In Barracks 10, Room 6 of the company dormitory, Stepan lived with his wife, Aleksandra Andreevna. On the evening of 10 November 1937, NKVD officers arrived at the dormitory and arrested Stepan, charging him with the crime of “anti-Soviet agitation.” Stepan had once been a *kulak*, one of the Soviet Union’s wealthier peasants, and his crime, the interrogators told him, occurred several years earlier, long before he ever imagined that one day he would be working at a fiber factory in Kiev. When Stalin first initiated his collectivization program, disrupting the lives of millions of peasants throughout the Soviet Union, Stepan supposedly remarked, “The collective farms won’t last in any case, because the Soviet government is unstable, war is inevitable, the government will be smashed, and Germany will come to power.” He categorically denied the charge, but the arresting officers had already made up their minds, and because no material evidence was required to prove his guilt, Stepan’s fate had already been sealed. Four weeks later, on 9 December 1937, shortly before midnight, an officer took Stepan from his cell and led him to the basement of the prison where he was being held. The officer removed his pistol from its holster and fired a shot into the nape of Stepan’s neck. Once Stepan had fallen to the floor, the officer fired two more shots, making sure the prisoner was dead. Other officers then

¹ Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (New York: Scribner, 1941), 43-44.

loaded Stepan's body in the back of a truck and drove to Bykivnia, where they dumped the body into a pit with thousands of other rotting corpses.²

Esoteric Knowledge

Martin Malia wrote, "The key to understanding the Soviet phenomenon is ideology."³ From the founding of the Bolshevik Party to the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, ideology was the quintessence, the driving force, the foundation upon which generations of Communist leaders constructed the Soviet Union. Stepan's murder, like the murders of hundreds of thousands of others during the Great Terror, was the direct result of ideology intersecting with geopolitical circumstances. Driven by a will to create and defend socialism in Russia, ideology was the guiding light and inspiration for Joseph Stalin's policies and practices of the 1930s.⁴ For him, the revolution did not end when the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917; Stalin continued employing wartime measures well into the late 1930s, seeking to eliminate those he believed to be counterrevolutionaries and enemies of the state.

Scholars have stressed the importance of ideology in the historical development of modern Russia.⁵ The Bolsheviks employed considerable resources to disseminate their ideology,

² Hiroaki Kuromiya, *The Voices of the Dead: Stalin's Great Terror in the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 99-100, 20-21.

³ Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 16.

⁴ In this paper, my focus is on the Great Terror. As a result, I am dealing primarily with the connection between ideology and violence. But mass repression is only one aspect of Stalin's policies of the 1930s. As demonstrated in works such as Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization*, state building and the creation of a new type of society occupied the highest priority. The blood purges were meant to safeguard the Party's ultimate goal of building socialism in Russia. To fully understand the Great Terror, it is necessary to be mindful of this goal and the policies employed throughout the 1930s that sought to realize the utopian dream.

⁵ For political historians like Martin Malia and Richard Pipes, ideology was a primary factor. Even the revisionists, while shifting the focus from political to social and cultural forces, accept the argument that ideology played a significant role in the history of the Soviet Union.

constructing an enormous propaganda machine, with 50,000 activists by 1918 controlling newspapers, posters, films, and agitation trains.⁶ For leading Party members as well as ordinary citizens, ideology was a living force, providing meaning and purpose, directing action and influencing behavior. In the Soviet Union, individual action, or agency, was produced by and dynamically interacted with ideology.⁷ Bolshevism shrouded itself with ideology. From the revolutionary symbolism inherent in the red flag, suggesting and evoking thoughts of life-blood and heroic sacrifice, to the *sacred* texts of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin, the prevailing idea expressed was that the Party possessed a consecrated, esoteric knowledge – the scientific worldview of historical and dialectical materialism, the Marxist-Leninist ideology.⁸

I argue that ideology is the driving force of history. As an assemblage of ideas and ideals grounded in explicit practices, ideology impelled the Great Terror. I do not suggest a dichotomy between ideas and circumstances, but rather an interconnectedness and mutual inclusiveness. On its own, ideology, although potentially offensive and objectionable, is generally innocuous, but becomes a dynamic, and often deadly force when intersected with volatile geopolitical and domestic circumstances. Demanding a response, circumstances activate ideology, generating the practices and policies that ensure the realization of ideas and ideals.⁹ Circumstances also transform ideologies, as seen in the Russian Civil War, when Bolshevism transformed from a Russianized Marxism into a radicalized and militarized Leninism.¹⁰ A similar process occurred during the Great Terror, when the circumstances of the 1930s transformed Leninism into Stalinism. The vision

⁶ Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928, Volume 1* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 290-292.

⁷ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 11-13.

⁸ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times – Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 16-19.

⁹ I am using the idea of circumstances to represent the geopolitical and domestic context. This chapter deals specifically with ideology, while the following chapter on the interwar crisis focusses on circumstances.

¹⁰ This process of radicalization, which resulted from circumstances unique to Russia, is crucial for understanding the differences between Marxism and Leninism.

remained the same – the realization of a socialist society in Russia – but the circumstances necessitated dissimilar and distinct policies and practices.¹¹ From Marxism to Leninism to Stalinism, there occurred both subtle and profound changes in ideas and applications. The question, however, is not if Leninism was a departure from Marxism, or if Stalin was an aberration, but rather what were the particular circumstances that resulted in Stalinism and how did this variant of Soviet ideology contribute to the Great Terror.

“the lifeblood of revolution”

What is ideology? The meaning of the word seems to change depending on who is using it and the context in which it is being used. Despite the challenges in establishing a concise definition, it is a crucial feature of political life, allowing people to make sense of the world and enabling them to interpret facts, events, and social phenomena.¹² In its most basic sense, ideology is a set of ideas, beliefs, opinions, and values that guide public policy and organize the political community.¹³ Ideology, as a vital feature of political life and a powerful tool of political discourse, is eternally linked with politics. When seeking to establish historical causation, it is more appropriate to think in terms of political ideologies rather than exploring an *either ideology or politics* scenario.¹⁴

¹¹ Although both Lenin and Stalin used the secret police (the Cheka and the NKVD) to initiate murderous policies in the Red Terror and the Great Terror, Lenin never directed these policies at Party members. This is not to say that such actions would have repulsed Lenin, but rather that the circumstances of the early 1920s did not necessitate such actions.

¹² Michael Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2-3.

¹³ Freeden, 32.

¹⁴ This is Freeden’s approach in *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*.

One of the most significant complications for the modern Russian historian is characterizing ideology and explaining its role in Soviet history.¹⁵ Modern ideologies are “codified, disseminated, and inculcated, often on a mass scale.”¹⁶ They are “outlooks deriving from disseminated doctrine,” but when it comes to Soviet studies, ideology is often a problem and not a solution.¹⁷ This is why it is necessary to not only clarify a working definition, but also to acknowledge the complexity inherent in such a misunderstood and contested concept.

Ideology is both a vision of an ideal society and a set of methods employed to realize that vision.¹⁸ It operates within concrete historical circumstances, changing over time and space, reacting and responding in different ways.¹⁹ As expressions of both idea and application, ideologies are neither abstract conceptions nor static value systems. Ideology played a ubiquitous role in the Soviet Union, providing Soviet leaders with the vision of their ideal communist future and the practices and policies that would allow them to construct that future.

Historian Arno J. Mayer argues that ideology is “the lifeblood of revolution.”²⁰ Mayer defines ideology as a collective worldview consisting of ideas and principles, expressed in numerous forms, including written and spoken, but also through symbols and rituals.²¹ To realize these ideas and principles, action is required. Ideology is *action-oriented*, employing specific practices designed to actualize political ideals. Many scholars have defined ideology as “political theory especially designed to direct political conduct and practices.”²²

¹⁵ Michael David-Fox, “On the Primacy of Ideology: Soviet Revisionists and Holocaust Deniers (In Response to Martin Malia),” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 5, no.1 (Winter 2004), 82.

¹⁶ David-Fox, 103.

¹⁷ David-Fox, 103-105.

¹⁸ Steven A. Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 10.

¹⁹ Barnes, 10-11.

²⁰ Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 34.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Michael Freedman, “Practising Ideology and Ideological Practices,” *Political Studies* 48 (2000), 303.

The most important feature of ideology is that it is observable in concrete action and empirically evident activity.²³ Ideas are expressed in actions.²⁴ With this understanding, explorations of ideologies must be based on empirical data, because they concern concrete manifestations of political thought.²⁵ Ideology is not the obscure and nebulous ramblings of academic theorists. As the union of idea and action, thought and practice, the study of ideology is the most important method historians have for understanding the causation behind historical phenomena. One reason for this is because ideology transcends divisions between political, social, and cultural history. Ideology is the driving force behind them all, inspiring and affecting all the various levels of a society and all the systems and structures that make up that society.²⁶

This understanding of ideology, as action-oriented, is crucial for exploring Lenin, the revolutionary period, and the age of Stalin. For Lenin, theory and practice were “inextricably linked.”²⁷ The same was certainly true for Stalin, as every policy he initiated – collectivization, rapid industrialization, cultural revolution, and the Great Terror – was fundamentally grounded in his understanding of and devotion to Marxism-Leninism.

Marxism – “by means of rifles, bayonets, and cannons”

Based on my definition of ideology – an assemblage of ideas and ideals grounded in explicit practices and policies – Marxism seems more like political philosophy than ideology. In works like the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, there is a theoretical interpretation of History,

²³ Freeden, *Ideology*, 23.

²⁴ Ibid, 29.

²⁵ Ibid, 76.

²⁶ Louis Althusser referred to the ideological state apparatuses that immersed societies, including religious, legal, family, and cultural structures, along with mass media and the educational system. See Freeden, *Ideology*, 25-30.

²⁷ James Ryan, “Lenin’s The State and Revolution and Soviet State Violence: A Textual Analysis,” *Revolutionary Russia* 20, no.2 (2007), 152.

but not a set of concrete practices that would bring forth its next stage.²⁸ When Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels wrote their *Manifesto* in 1847, Russia was an agrarian society, not yet industrialized, and defined by a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional diversity. The *Manifesto* argued that History moved through stages of development, with each stage marked by opposing forces that resolved in higher states, moving humanity forward to its ultimate destiny and most advanced stage of perfection. The feudal age, for example, saw the opposing forces of masters and serfs lead to the epoch of capitalism, where the two opposing forces were the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In every stage, the driving force was class struggle – the oppressor and the oppressed, the exploiter and the exploited, locked in an epic struggle for survival. Violence and revolution often powered the transformation from one stage to the next, as the French Revolution moved History from the age of feudalism to the age of capitalism.

Marx and Engels defined the bourgeoisie as the class of modern capitalists. They were the owners of the means of production (the factories, machines, and equipment) and the employers of wage labor. Their historical purpose was to move civilization from seclusion and self-sufficiency to globalization and to subject the country to towns and cities, rescuing populations from “the idiocy of rural life.”²⁹ All nations would be forced to industrialize or face extinction at the hands of the bourgeois capitalists. Their defining characteristic was a brutal exploitation of the workers, the proletariat, the class of modern wage laborers who sold their labor in order to survive. They were nothing more than an appendage of the machine, slaves of the bourgeoisie. Their work was dull and monotonous, and their wages were unbearably low. But like the bourgeoisie, the

²⁸ Following Koestler, Arendt (in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*), and others, I am capitalizing “History” to stress its importance in Soviet ideology as a personified force with a will and *telos* all its own.

²⁹ Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1848. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

proletariat also had a historical purpose to fulfill. As urban populations grew, the proletariat would increase in number, begin to form trade unions, and eventually organize into a political party.

In time, the proletariat would violently overthrow their bourgeois oppressors, destroying all existing social conditions and moving History into its next and highest stage, socialism: “the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat.”³⁰ This was inevitable. The socialists would then abolish private property, eradicate religious practices, and bring to an end national differences and antagonisms. Civilization would become a communist utopia, where class struggle would no longer exist because there would no longer be any classes – all would be equal. This would be an age of harmony and justice.³¹

Michael Freeden, a leading authority on the subject of ideology, calls communism a “perverted offshoot of the socialist tradition.”³² Most modern Marxists make similar distinctions, separating socialist theory from the violence and brutality of Stalinism and Maoism. But many scholars and historians see the seeds of terror evident in the writings of Marx and Engels. French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote that Marxism “is a theory of violence and a justification of terror.”³³ Marx was well aware of the role violence played in all major historical changes, noting that throughout history “conquest, enslavement, murder-cum-robbery, in short *Gewalt* (force, violence) play[ed] a preeminent role.”³⁴ Marx and Engels believed that to reach and defend the next and highest stage of historical development, socialism, *Gewalt* would necessarily play a leading role. The proletariat would violently rise up against their oppressors, fulfilling the logic of History and redeeming humanity. This was the orthodoxy set down by Marx and Engels.³⁵

³⁰ Marx and Engels.

³¹ Marx and Engels.

³² Freeden, *Ideology*, 91. Freeden is referring specifically to the Soviet variant of communism.

³³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, quoted in Mayer, 111.

³⁴ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, quoted in Mayer, 77.

³⁵ Ryan, 158.

In his work *On Authority*, Engels openly advocated the use of terror. Speaking of revolution, he said, “one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets, and cannons.” And when it came to defending the revolution, “the victorious party must maintain its rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionaries.”³⁶ The historical theory of Marx and Engels, a theory advocating mass exclusion, was practically applied by Lenin and Stalin on the ground level in the Red Terror and the Great Terror. For both Lenin and Stalin, the words of Marx were clear and concise, not open to debate or interpretation: “there is only one way in which the murderous death agonies of the old society and the bloody birth throes of the new society can be shortened, simplified and concentrated, and that way is revolutionary terror.”³⁷

The socialist society described by Marx and Engels is a world peopled by a politically conscious proletariat. Other groups have no place in the socialist future; they will simply “decay and disappear.”³⁸ The peasants are not revolutionary, but rather conservative and reactionary. And as rural communities gave way to industrial cities, the class of peasants would be replaced by an army of urban workers. They would eventually disappear into the sands of time. So too would the small manufacturer, the shopkeeper, and the artisan. The most dangerous class, the *lumpenproletariat*, the “social scum” and “passively rotting mass,” would, like the others, wither away and die.³⁹ These individuals, according to Marx and Engels, were the lowest of the low, the criminals, beggars, prostitutes, and thieves. They are incapable of achieving consciousness, so they too are excluded from the next stage of History. Because religion would be abolished, the future

³⁶ Engels, *On Authority*, quoted in Ryan, 161.

³⁷ Karl Marx, “The Victory of the Counter-Revolution in Vienna,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1848. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

³⁸ Marx and Engels.

³⁹ Marx and Engels.

had no place for priests and clergy. Socialism is a world without peasants, criminals, small businessmen, and religious believers. Society is made up of educated workers, united in purpose and resolve. And there are no longer multitudes of individuals with their own cultures, beliefs, and values. Nationalities and national identities would dissolve and merge into the collective, socialist body; into a homogenous proletariat identity.

Much of this sounds like a natural and organic process, a vision of progress where certain social groups are either naturally transformed or slowly disappear over time. This is certainly a plausible argument based on a reading of the *Manifesto* alone. In this particular work, notions of direct violence are specifically focused on the bourgeoisie. But a closer reading of other works, when read alongside the *Manifesto*, suggest not a slow and natural process, but rather a passionate appeal for violence and exclusion. When Marx speaks of the death agonies of the old society, he is arguing for the elimination of all that represents the old-world order, including specific social groups that have no role to play in the new-world order. These groups will naturally vanish and decay over time, but to shorten and simplify the process, revolutionary terror is necessary.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the social groups in question – the middle class, for example, represented by shopkeepers, artisans, peasants, and small manufacturers – is conservative and not revolutionary. The lumpenproletariat is reactionary.⁴¹ As conservatives and reactionaries, these individuals present a direct threat to the proletariat. It would be a dire mistake to allow History to naturally take its course, as these groups and individuals would fight to the death, preventing the proletariat from establishing their dictatorship. As Engels cautioned, the rule of the proletariat would not

⁴⁰ See footnote 37 above.

⁴¹ Marx and Engels.

come by patiently awaiting the promised utopia; victory could only be secured by using violence and terror against reactionary forces.⁴²

Leninism – “the tribune of the people”

In 1899, fifty years after the writing of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Vladimir Lenin published “Our Programme,” his interpretation of the doctrines of Marx and Engels. Lenin, and other Marxists, believed that Marxism transformed socialism from a utopian fantasy into a pragmatic science. But Marx’s theory had only laid the foundational stone, providing the general guiding principles. It still needed to be developed and elaborated. For Lenin, class struggle meant both economic struggle against the capitalists and political struggle against the state. The task of men like Lenin, educated and socially aware, was to form a vanguard that would lead and organize the class struggle of the proletariat. The goal would be the conquest of political power by the proletariat and the creation of a socialist society.⁴³

A few years later, in 1902, Lenin wrote “What is to Be Done?” further developing his revolutionary ideas. The central problem for the proletariat was a lack of consciousness, an utter blindness of their oppression and enslavement. Consciousness, Lenin believed, must be brought to the working class from without, by a group of professional revolutionaries, the vanguard that he alluded to in “Our Programme.” Without leadership, without *the tribune of the people*, “who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression,” the workers would settle for economic concessions, never achieving the political power that was necessary to move History into its next stage of development.⁴⁴ This vanguard would unleash propaganda and agitation

⁴² See footnote 36 above.

⁴³ V.I. Lenin, “Our Programme,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1899. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

among all strata of the people, resulting in the political consciousness of the proletariat that was the prerequisite for social transformation.⁴⁵

On its own, ideology does not cause violence and terror. There has to be an intersection of ideology and circumstance, like there was in Russia in 1905 when Marxist ideology and domestic crisis collided.⁴⁶ With revolution in Russia, the horrors of Bloody Sunday, the disaster of the war with Japan, and demands across the country for social reforms, Lenin's ideas on political violence began to take shape. Lenin interpreted the crisis through a Marxist lens, with his commitment to class struggle, his belief that History progresses dialectically through revolutionary violence, and his acceptance of the legitimacy and justness of revolutionary violence.⁴⁷ Developed within the Russian context, a Russianized Marxism evolved and, once filtered through Lenin's unique personality, became a militant ideology, uncompromising on the necessity of violence in creating social and political change.⁴⁸

Consideration of the dialectical process is important for understanding the political role of violence during the Civil War period. Lenin believed, as did many Marxists of the time, that revolutionary violence would negate reactionary violence.⁴⁹ Violence, then, was both ethical and moral, because its function and purpose was to overcome violence itself. As a Marxist, Lenin was a theorist of the dialectical concept of peace through violence – a moral violent struggle against all violence for the liberation of all peoples.⁵⁰ The only way to overcome bourgeois violence, Lenin came to believe, was through revolutionary civil war.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ James Ryan, "'Revolution is War': The Development of Thought of V.I. Lenin on Violence, 1899-1907," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 89, no.2 (2011), 249, 256, 262, and 263.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 248.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 249-250.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 250.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 270.

⁵¹ Ibid, 273.

Lenin's Marxism militarized class struggle, praising civil warfare and rejecting a more compromising and gradual revolutionary path. Lenin believed, along with Marx and Marxist theoretician Karl Kautsky, that revolutionary violence had a progressive function.⁵² Only an armed insurrection could overcome the autocracy.⁵³ Social transformation demanded violence. As Lenin wrote in 1906, "We would be deceiving ourselves and the people if we concealed from the masses the necessity of a desperate bloody war of extermination."⁵⁴ With Marxism filtered through the Russian experience and Lenin's personality, a more militant and militarized ideology emerged.⁵⁵ Leninism advocated political violence as both moral and necessary, the only means of affecting social transformation. Revolutionary violence would end reactionary violence and overcome bourgeois oppression, moving society forward into the next stage of historical development.⁵⁶

Stalinism and the Enemies of History

Because Stalin's worldview so closely resembled Marx, Engels, and Lenin, the Soviet system throughout the 1930s, or Stalinism, was a continuation and culmination of Marxism-Leninism. The worldview did not change, but new circumstances – including the rise of fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Imperial Japan, along with capitalist encirclement of the Soviet Union – demanded new practices and policies. Stalinism was both an ideology and a political system, encompassing the entirety of Soviet institutions, structures, and rituals.⁵⁷ Stalin fulfilled and completed the work that Lenin began. It was Lenin, and not Stalin, who began the process of using

⁵² Ibid, 250.

⁵³ Ibid, 257. For Lenin, the autocracy is essentially synonymous with the state.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 267.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 248.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 273.

⁵⁷ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 3.

the tools intended for total war for revolutionary politics and revolutionary transformation.⁵⁸ It is important to recognize and understand the legacy of brutality that led to Stalinism. The unprecedented violence and chaos that engulfed Russia during the years of world war, civil war, and revolution, had a lasting impact on the Soviet state. As historian Peter Holquist argues when discussing the years 1914 to 1921, “many of the features we presume to be Stalinist in fact were inscribed into the Soviet system at this time.”⁵⁹

The only way to understand the fate of men like Stepan Prokhorovich Stashchenko, one of the nearly 700,000 people executed by NKVD officers during the Great Terror, is to analyze and scrutinize Soviet ideology.⁶⁰ The process involves asking who were the victims of the Great Terror and how were they portrayed and presented in the writings of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. The first wave of victims consisted primarily of Party members and military officers, the Bolshevik “old guard.” The next wave, the mass and national operations, included former kulaks, criminals, and other “anti-Soviet elements,” along with non-Russian contingents across the Soviet Union. By examining each group, it becomes evident just how essential ideology was in unleashing the mass violence and repression of the Great Terror. It also demonstrates how ideology transcends the theoretical and expresses itself in the practical, which is to say that Soviet ideology is empirically perceptible in phenomena such as the Great Terror. With every arrest and every execution, we see both the ideal and the policies employed to realize the ideal.

⁵⁸ Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 287.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 204.

⁶⁰ Soviet ideology, then, is an amalgamation of Marxism, Leninism, and Stalinism. Any analysis of the Great Terror, therefore, must look beyond Stalin and examine the ways in which Marx and Engels advocated terror and the ways in which Lenin employed terror.

“I demand that dogs gone mad should be shot”

The first wave of the Great Terror targeted the “old guard” of Bolshevik elites, military officers, the NKVD leadership core, and industrial managers. The NKVD, under the new leadership and new direction of Nikolai Ezhov, executed approximately 40,000 individuals from the old guard between 1936 and 1938. The executions followed Stalin’s address to the graduates of the Red Army Academies on 4 May 1935. Speaking of the current state of affairs in the Soviet Union, Stalin railed, “We need people who have mastered technique” and “We lack people with sufficient experience to squeeze out of this technique all that can be squeezed out of it.” For Stalin, the situation was dire: “We now have a dearth of people, of cadres, of workers capable of harnessing technique and advancing it.” He was speaking of all sectors of Soviet society – the factories, mills, collective farms, state farms, army, and transport system. “We inherited from the past a technically backward, impoverished and ruined country,” Stalin told the new graduates, “with isolated industrial oases lost in a sea of dwarf peasant farms.” The task was “to transfer this country from medieval darkness to modern industry and mechanized agriculture.” This address was not intended simply to inspire the graduates with a sense of purpose for their futures. Stalin believed war was coming and the Soviet Union was not prepared. If they did not act in the present, they would “become a stake in the game of the imperialist powers.” But, Stalin concluded, “if we have good and numerous cadres in industry, agriculture, transport, and the army – our country will be invincible.”⁶¹ The ideal, then, was to produce educated cadres who would be loyal to the Party and help Stalin continue his quest to create and defend socialism in Russia.

⁶¹ Joseph Stalin, “Address to the Graduates – Red Army Academies (In the Kremlin),” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1935. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

Stalin believed that the Soviet Union did not have the properly trained and educated cadres that were necessary to lead the country forward along its path to a radiant future. The new graduates, new products of Stalin's cultural revolution, would lead the way, helping Stalin to build and defend socialism in the Soviet Union. Through war and revolution, the old guard had fulfilled their purpose. But now they lacked the skills necessary to advance the Soviet state. Like so many others, they had no place in the future utopia. In time, History itself would wash them away – but one thing that Stalin did not have was time, with the certainty of war approaching, so he sped up the process by initiating the first wave of purges. There were certainly other factors to consider, all of which made Stalin's decision that much easier. In his address, he spoke of the opponents who wanted to retreat from industrialization and collectivization, comrades who opposed “the plan of advance.” As many historians have noted, based on Trotsky's notorious remark that “The Party is always right,” there could be no voice of dissent.⁶² The logic was simple – those who opposed the Party line were enemies of the Party, and those who were enemies of the Party were necessarily enemies of History.

During his concluding speech at the end of the first Moscow show trial in July 1936, state prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky said, “before us are criminals, dangerous, hardened, cruel and ruthless towards our people, towards our ideals, towards the leaders of our struggle, the leaders of the toilers of the whole world... I demand that dogs gone mad should be shot – every one of them!”⁶³ The accused, loyal members of the old guard for decades, confessed to absurd plots to murder Stalin and restore capitalism. Their real crime was of course Stalin's conviction that they could no longer be trusted and had nothing left to offer the Party and the Soviet Union. Their

⁶² See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 19.

⁶³ Quoted in J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *Yezhov: The Rise of Stalin's "Iron Fist"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 2.

leadership positions throughout all sectors of society needed to be filled by new, technically educated cadres. They needed to be filled by individuals loyal to Stalin's ideological vision. When Ezhov addressed the Central Committee in 1936, he said, "We shall pull up this Trotskyist-Zinovievist slime by the root and physically annihilate them."⁶⁴ In Soviet parlance, this meant anyone who opposed Stalin's path to the radiant future. Within the Party, the NKVD, and the military, there were many who, like Trotsky, saw a different path for the Soviet Union. For Stalin, this opposition was a criminal act. All critics became counterrevolutionaries.⁶⁵

"Ruthless war on the kulaks!"

In "Comrade Workers," composed in 1918, Lenin wrote about Bolshevik enemies both at home and abroad. When dealing with internal enemies, his entire focus was on the kulaks. He called them the "rabid foes of the Soviet government," "the most brutal, callous and savage exploiters," "bloodsuckers," and "vampires." He referred to them as leeches who have "sucked the blood of the working people" and who have "prepared to strangle and massacre hundreds of thousands of workers." According to Lenin, under the stress and strain of civil war, these "avaricious, bloated and bestial kulaks" would align with the landowners and foreign capitalists, seeking to restore power to the tsars, priests, and bourgeoisie. He declared that peace and compromise were impossible, that the proletariat must ruthlessly destroy the "predatory kulak." "Ruthless war on the kulaks!" Lenin pronounced, "Death to them!"⁶⁶

For Marx, wealthy peasants, or kulaks, like all peasants, would be one of the unfortunate classes that simply vanished off the face of the earth. His future socialist society consisted of

⁶⁴ Quoted in Getty and Naumov, 4.

⁶⁵ Kotkin, *Stalin*, 292.

⁶⁶ Lenin, "Comrade Workers," *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1918. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

workers, not peasants, a class that belonged only to the earlier stages of historical development. Stalin synthesizes the teachings of Marx and Lenin, believing those who had been *dekulakized*, men like Stepan Prokhorovich Stashchenko, could never play a role in the future utopia he was constructing in the Soviet Union. Once a kulak, he may have reasoned, always a kulak. Following Lenin's lead, Stalin believed these former kulaks would instantly turn traitor in the event of war. They would become spies for the enemy, doing everything in their power to restore capitalism in Russian and destroy the Party apparatus. The kulak nature was conservative and reactionary, not revolutionary. Twenty years after Lenin's "Comrade Workers," Stalin too declared ruthless war on the kulaks when he approved NKVD Order 00447, launching the mass operations.⁶⁷

Hannah Arendt said that Marx turned Hegel on his head, replacing the Hegelian dialectics of thesis and antithesis with the class categories of bourgeoisie and proletariat and the centrality of human thought with human labor.⁶⁸ Similarly, Lenin turned Marx on his head, applying conceptions of bourgeois society in an early-20th century Russia that was only partially industrialized, with over 90% of its population consisting of peasants. To correspond with the Marxist doctrines, Lenin needed a bourgeois oppressor and a proletarian oppressed. He found such distinctions by looking to Russia's peasantry. The prosperous, wealthier peasants became the bourgeoisie while the poor peasants became the exploited and enslaved workers. Those in the middle represented the petty bourgeoisie. As Aaron B. Retish writes in *Russia's Peasants in Revolution: Citizenship, Identity, and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914-1922*, "From Lenin's notions of capitalist development in the Russian countryside, Bolsheviks divided the village into three overarching typologies – poor (*bedniaki*), middle (*seredniaki*), and rich (*kulaki*) peasants –

⁶⁷ This was the second time the Party had declared war on the kulaks. The first time happened during the Red Terror of 1918.

⁶⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, (New York, Harcourt, Inc.), 13. Marx also said that he had turned Hegel on his head.

and so imposed class identities on peasants that did not exist as such before.”⁶⁹ The Bolsheviks quickly accepted these artificial divisions without question. Stalin became the guardian of the poor peasants, proclaiming, “the main forces of our revolution are the workers and the poor peasants.”⁷⁰ From the beginning, for both Lenin and Stalin, the kulaks represented the bourgeois exploiters, enemies of the state, a class that needed to be annihilated. Stalin’s collectivization initiated the process; his Great Terror completed it.

“counterrevolutionary outrage”

When discussing the *lumpenproletariat*, Marx and Engels referred to them as the “bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.”⁷¹ As a group, the *lumpenproletariat*, lacking political consciousness, void of any understanding of loyalty and allegiance, could be paid off by the foreign capitalists. They were a threat to Stalin and the Soviet Union if a second Great War should erupt. And even if there was peace, because they could never become a part of the working class, the *lumpenproletariat* needed to be eliminated from the body politic. This group was composed of habitual criminals, prostitutes, beggars, wanderers, gypsies, and anyone else believed to be incapable of positively contributing to society. In the years leading up to Stalin’s purges, authorities began expelling these groups from urban centers such as Moscow and Leningrad. In 1935, the authorities in Leningrad arrested and expelled 18,000 women accused of prostitution. Most were sent to labor camps.⁷² The habitual criminals, because of their “corrupting influence,” were also arrested and sent to labor camps. This group was classified as “repeat offenders who are

⁶⁹ Aaron B. Retish, *Russia’s Peasants in Revolution and Civil War: Citizenship, Identity, and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 189. See also Malia, 126.

⁷⁰ Stalin, “The Land to the Peasants,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1917. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

⁷¹ Marx and Engels.

⁷² Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 126.

part of the professional criminal world.”⁷³ Other anti-Soviet elements included priests and members of the clergy.

In 1937, NKVD order 00447 specifically targeted criminals, focusing on bandits, armed robbers, pocket thieves, and recidivist criminals.⁷⁴ As early as 1933, Stalin had declared theft to be a “counterrevolutionary outrage.”⁷⁵ Even stealing a loaf of bread was deemed a counterrevolutionary act against the state. NKVD officers quickly began arresting individuals in major urban areas suspected of criminal activity. At the same time, the *militiia* began to purge the railways and train stations of criminal elements, apprehending criminals and homeless children, specifically targeting those involved in theft, robbery, and hooliganism.⁷⁶

One of the problems historians face when dealing with Soviet understandings of criminality, especially when researching the 1930s, is finding historical evidence to support their arguments. Because of Stalin’s proclivity for secrecy, much of the record became a state secret, as decisions and official policies never made it past the leader and his inner circle.⁷⁷ Some of the laws from the early 1930s did become public record, such as the infamous Law of August 7, 1932, that declared state and socialist property to be “holy and inviolable.” Draconian punishments awaited those convicted of theft. Juvenile delinquency was criminalized in 1935, as was abortion in 1936. Stalin played the central role in these initiatives.⁷⁸ Clearly, a pattern was emerging. Stalin’s hardline approach to criminality reached its peak in 1937 with order 00447. With the Great Terror,

⁷³ Quoted in Fitzpatrick, 127.

⁷⁴ Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin’s Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926-1941* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009), 253.

⁷⁵ Peter H. Solomon Jr., “Soviet Criminal Justice and the Great Terror,” *Slavic Review* 46, no.3/4 (1987), 392.

⁷⁶ Hagenloh, 253.

⁷⁷ Peter H. Solomon Jr., “Understanding the History of Soviet Criminal Justice: The Contribution of Archives and Other Sources,” *The Russian Review* 74 (2015), 403.

⁷⁸ Solomon, “Understanding,” 405.

Stalin specifically targeted social marginals and former criminals, hoping to eliminate them from the Soviet Union.⁷⁹

The concern, however, for the historian of the Great Terror, is to acknowledge the complexity regarding Party ideas on criminals in the 1930s. There is a body of literature, most often associated with Gulag studies, that suggests a belief in criminal redemption and rehabilitation. At all stages of Soviet history, we see authorities resorting to both “the carrot and the stick.” We should not expect things to be different in the 1930s, even at a time of extreme social and political stress. But as Steven Barnes demonstrates, the “threshold of redeemability” was significantly higher during the Terror.⁸⁰ For those sent to the Gulag as counterrevolutionaries, the possibility of redemption essentially disappeared throughout this period. Certainly, more research needs to be done.

“enemy nations”

An idea inherent to Bolshevik thought was the belief that “non-Russians were uneducated, unenlightened, and culturally backwards.”⁸¹ Nationalities, or ethnicities, were neither essential nor eternal; they were merely manifestations of the capitalist stage of historical development.⁸² Ethnic populations would eventually shed their national identities and merge with the new Soviet order. Assimilation was certain.⁸³ Following the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917, one of the most important tasks was finding a way to affect this assimilation quickly and efficiently. Trotsky

⁷⁹ Solomon, “Understanding,” 407.

⁸⁰ Barnes, 86.

⁸¹ Retish, 228. Retish is talking about “Central figures in the national minority causes, specifically educators and the Bolshevik state.”

⁸² Joshua A. Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics, 1905-1925* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 86.

⁸³ Ibid.

believed non-Russians were wild and ignorant, incapable of discerning the Russian language and the teachings of socialism.⁸⁴ Others believed this cultural backwardness could be overcome through education, leading to successful integration into the larger polity.⁸⁵ They advocated for a state-sponsored evolutionism – to usher the nationalities “through the Marxist timeline of historical development.”⁸⁶ Clans and tribes would become nationalities, nationalities would become socialist nations, and socialist nations would become communists.⁸⁷ The smaller would merge with the larger, “eventually resulting in the consolidation of clans, tribes, and nationalities into Soviet socialist nations.”⁸⁸

But the Soviet Union rejected any model associated with imperial Russia or modern capitalist nation-states.⁸⁹ The Bolsheviks saw nations through a Marxist lens, in class terms. They equated Russia with the bourgeoisie and the national minorities with the proletariat. They saw in this equation the oppressed versus the oppressor, the exploited versus the exploiter. The Bolsheviks, firmly standing on the “correct” side of History, represented the proletariat, the exploited and oppressed. They advocated an evolutionary process of assimilation, where eventually class consciousness would triumph over national consciousness. This process would occur naturally over time as minorities, such as the Udmurt, for example, would move from a sense of Udmurt national identity, to consciousness of oppression, to a final stage of proletariat identity.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Sanborn, 87. It is interesting to note that Trotsky speaks of all non-Russians as a single entity and does not qualify with the pronoun “some.” His exact quote: the “wildness of non-Russians, ignorance of the Russian language, infectious diseases, habituation to their climate, and inertness to the teaching of socialism.”

⁸⁵ Retish, 237 and 228.

⁸⁶ Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 8.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Hirsch, 274.

⁸⁹ Terry Martin, “Borders and Ethnic Conflict: The Soviet Experiment in Ethno-Territorial Proliferation,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* (1999), 538.

⁹⁰ Aaron Retish, Lecture, “Appealing to the Masses: Nationality and Gender,” Wayne State University, April 2017.

The Bolsheviks initiated programs that were designed to support this three-step process. They provided social and cultural resources through programs known as *korenizatsiia*. Rather than using violence and repression to force assimilation, the Bolsheviks encouraged the development of national identity. They gave national minorities their own territories. They would use the local languages and dialects to disseminate socialist ideology, printing the *Communist Manifesto* in countless tongues. The goal was to move the national minorities not towards Russian culture, but towards Soviet culture.⁹¹ Stalin, as Commissar of Nationalities, believed that the granting of national territories would result in the crumbling of national identity and the awakening of class identity.⁹² But the theoretical ideal of an evolutionary process towards assimilation proved to be extremely difficult to implement on the ground level.

The dream of national evolution was seriously challenged during the Civil War. Like the revolution, this was a Great Russian affair, as many of the border nationalities never leant their support to the Bolsheviks. In Finland and the Baltic states, the “Whites” had full control. The lesson was not lost on Stalin – some nationalities, with their autonomous sentiment, could not be trusted. During the Civil War, many sided with the bourgeois governments.⁹³ Certainly they would do the same thing again if given the opportunity. By the mid-1930s, Stalin was convinced that the nationalities were essentially “enemy nations” connected to foreign states.⁹⁴ National evolution had failed. The ethnicities were incapable of assimilation. The national operations were designed to eliminate the ethnic populations who were most likely to ally themselves with the enemy. Stalin wished to destroy these contingents, a potential “fifth column,” before it had the chance to form.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Martin, 555.

⁹³ Malia, 140-141.

⁹⁴ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Perseus, 2010), 104.

The Ethics of Terror

Martin Malia has called the Soviet worldview “a totalizing ideology buttressed by terror.”⁹⁵ Violence was an essential tool for social transformation.⁹⁶ Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders were inspired by the French Revolution and the Paris Commune. In “Lesson of the Commune” Lenin wrote, “there are times when the interests of the proletariat call for ruthless extermination of its enemies.”⁹⁷ The reason the Commune failed was because the revolutionaries had failed to destroy their enemies. This was the lesson that Lenin would remember the rest of his life; a lesson that he would pass on to his Bolshevik comrades. Its practical application is seen in the Red Terror of 1918, and certainly in Stalin’s blood purges of the 1930s. When it came to warfare, Lenin believed in its absolute necessity to affect real and lasting change, writing “We fully regard civil wars, i.e., wars waged by the oppressed class against the oppressing class, slaves against slave-holders, serfs against land-owners, and wage-workers against the bourgeoisie, as legitimate, progressive and necessary.”⁹⁸ To give birth to the future, enemies of the present would have to be destroyed. This was not only necessary, it was a moral imperative because enemies of the Party were enemies of History, and the Bolsheviks were the manifestation of History’s will on earth. As the Chekists said, “history would forgive an excess of harshness but not of weakness.”⁹⁹

The idea of violence as an appropriate and necessary tool was an integral part of Soviet ideology. Disputes with Stalin over the correct path for the Soviet Union centered on various programs and processes, but even the opposition accepted and encouraged the use of violence as a means to achieving political ends. Trotsky wrote, “Arguments to the effect that all violence,

⁹⁵ Malia, 240

⁹⁶ Peter Holquist has demonstrated that this was a pan-European belief and not distinct to the Soviet Union.

⁹⁷ Lenin, “Lessons of the Commune,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1908. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

⁹⁸ Lenin, “Socialism and War,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1915. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

⁹⁹ Kotkin, *Stalin*, 294.

including revolutionary violence, is evil and that communists therefore ought not engage in the ‘glorification’ of armed struggle and the revolutionary army, amount to a philosophy worthy of Quakers and the old maids of the Salvation Army.”¹⁰⁰ Violence was compulsory to cleanse the Soviet Union of enemies, obligatory to purify the state and wash away the adversaries of socialism.

Leninism and Stalinism were both teleological ethical systems. When Western scholars apply their deontological understandings of morality to events such as the Red Terror and the Great Terror, the result is an explicit and unequivocal condemnation, usually in the form of a personal attack on either Lenin or Stalin. But just as the historian must keep in mind historical circumstances when analyzing the past, so too must he or she be mindful of different ethical systems. In the teleological system, actions have no intrinsic value or worth. The standard of right and wrong, good and evil, is the comparative consequences of the available actions. An action is good if it produces the best consequences. Moral judgements follow from the consequences of actions. What matters is the end result, not the means employed to realize that end. Nothing is more important than the goal, the *telos*. The criterion of morality lies in an abstract, nonmoral value that results from action, such as equality, justice, or welfare.¹⁰¹ This reasoning allowed both Lenin and Stalin to justify the use of mass violence and repression.

Stalin’s goal, the building and defending of socialism in Russia, a society defined by justice and equality, was the quintessential standard. The actions he took, through his leadership core and NKVD officers, may have been morally repulsive in a deontological ethical system, but in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, where society was grounded in a teleological system, these actions were largely regarded as morally necessary to defend the revolution and save the Soviet Union

¹⁰⁰ Leon Trotsky, “Introduction to the Military Writings,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1923. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

¹⁰¹ Louis J. Pojman, *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth, Second Edition* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992), 371, 531.

from internal and external enemies. Specific ethical systems, along with understandings of epistemology and political philosophy, are all aspects of modern ideologies. This is something many historians must not forget when asking the most important historical question: *Why?*

Hannah Arendt understood the primacy of ideology in the Soviet experiment, the “idea” of class struggle resolving in a socialist utopia as Stalin’s *raison d’être*. The purpose was the end goal, the *telos*. According to the ideological principles that informed Stalin’s actions as leader of the Soviet Union, the present is merely a stage of some further development. History is governed by a law of movement, a linear movement that culminates with the establishment of a socialist civilization. Terror is a tool making it possible for the force of History to move freely through mankind, unconstrained by spontaneous human action. If law is the law of movement of the *suprahuman* force of History, then the use of terror is lawful.¹⁰²

Stalin’s actions were aimed at the acceleration of the movement of History. He sacrificed the “parts” for the sake of the “whole”; eliminated individuals for the sake of the species. History was destined to move from capitalism to socialism – Stalin’s purges were designed to speed up this process by eliminating individuals and groups that could potentially slow down and hinder historical progression and social transformation.

Terror, as a tool, is only a servant of historical development. History has already pronounced the death sentence on the “dying classes,” state terror simply executes that sentence in a swifter and more efficient manner. Opposition to this process is not permitted. Elimination of the enemies of History is obligatory and compulsory. Anyone who stands in the way of the historical process is guilty. For Stalin, this meant anyone who opposed the Party, anyone who could potentially fight to restore capitalism in the Soviet Union, and anyone deemed incapable of

¹⁰² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1966). See Chapter 13, “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government.”

contributing to a socialist society. The reasoning was explicit and precise: The Party represents the logic of History; Stalin represents the Party; if you oppose Stalin, then you oppose the Party; if you oppose the Party, then you oppose the logic of History; and if you oppose the logic of History, then you are a counterrevolutionary enemy of History. In this system, a lack of fealty necessitated imprisonment or execution – the accused were not simply opposing Stalin’s will, they were opposing the logic of History.¹⁰³

In the Soviet system, not only did the end justify the means, the end was often achieved through violence.¹⁰⁴ Lenin had no scruples about using violence to achieve the end goal of socialism. Violence was, in fact, intrinsic to Lenin’s philosophy of revolution.¹⁰⁵ The same can be said for Stalin. Stalin shared Lenin’s system of teleological ethics, a system both men derived from Marx. What mattered was not the individual, but society, and “to steer this society in the necessary direction is the ultimate act of true morality for a Marxist.” In Marxist theory, human beings are nothing more than instruments of the historical process.¹⁰⁶ With the Great Terror, Stalin was attempting to move the Soviet Union in the necessary direction.

Francine Hirsch writes, “The Bolsheviks took from Karl Marx the ideas that there was a “logic” (or “telos”) to history, and that it was possible to get on the “right side” of the historical process by carefully interpreting its inner dynamics and figuring out where one stood on the timeline of development.”¹⁰⁷ Stalin’s blood purges were an attempt to put the Soviet Union on the “right side” of the historical process, to move his nation in the “correct” direction by eliminating those who could potentially undermine the revolution and return Russian to a state of Asiatic

¹⁰³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

¹⁰⁴ Ryan, “Lenin’s The State and Revolution,” 165-166.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 168.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁷ Hirsch, 6.

backwardness. The socialist project, what was hailed the “culmination of history, the telos of human development,”¹⁰⁸ entailed radical defensive measures to ensure that counterrevolutionary forces could not disrupt the process and initiate a regression in the Soviet Union. It was necessary to move forward, in the correct direction, following the logic of history.

In the Soviet Union in the 1930s, there was one end, one supreme goal: the building and defense of socialism. As Malia argues, “everything that did not contribute to achieving this goal was ipso facto a hostile element to be purged from the system.”¹⁰⁹ In a teleological ethical system, this is the moral thing to do – whatever is necessary to achieve the goal. Perhaps several hundred thousand individuals would have to die, but Soviet society and Soviet civilization would flourish. This was the logic of History, the very heart of Bolshevik ideology, expressed under Lenin in the Red Terror and under Stalin in the Great Terror.

Ideology was the guiding light and driving force behind Stalin’s terror. His concern was with the process of *becoming*, the unfolding of historical development. The Great Terror sought to cleanse the Soviet Union of those with the potential capacity to disrupt this process. It employed mass terror and repression with the goal of eliminating the enemies of History.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

In the tragedy of *Elektra*, Sophocles wrote, “The end excuses any evil.” For Stalin, inspired by Marx, Engels, and Lenin, the end was socialism in Russia. The achievement of this goal required “the most radical rupture with traditional ideas.”¹¹¹ Bourgeois conceptions of morality would only hinder the drive for revolutionary transformation. At a time of geopolitical uncertainty

¹⁰⁸ Malia, 22.

¹⁰⁹ Malia, 239.

¹¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

¹¹¹ Marx and Engels.

and domestic strain, there was a synthesis of idea and action, as Stalin and his inner circle sought to safeguard the Soviet Union and defend the revolution by eliminating both present and potential threats.¹¹² Ideology drove the Great Terror. The Party's ideal of creating a socialist civilization in Russia faced dire threats by the 1930s, both internally and externally. Stalin and his core leadership group initiated programs and policies meant to ensure that the will of History would not be hindered by reactionary forces. These forces were on the ascendant throughout the interwar period, in fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and across Eastern Europe. It was an epic struggle between the antithetical ideologies of fascism and communism – a struggle for the fate of humanity and the future of civilization. Geopolitical circumstances, both foreign and domestic, threatened to destroy the Soviet state. Stalin and his leadership group proactively responded to the threats, initiating programs designed to safeguard the revolution. And this was the essence of Soviet ideology – not only the goal of building socialism in Russia and the vision of creating a communist empire of justice, but the specific practices and policies employed to realize the goal and manifest the vision.

¹¹² Similar arguments are made with Nazi Germany. In "Nazi Ideology and Ethics," Wolfgang Bialas and Lothar Fritze write, "Among the essential elements of a system's ideology there count the moral convictions expressed by the major ideologues and leaders."

CHAPTER 3 “AFTER THE FLOOD: THE INTERWAR CRISIS AND THE RISE OF STALIN”

The element of truth behind all of this, which people are so ready to disavow, is that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and kill him.

*Sigmund Freud*¹

The Deluge

Ten million soldiers died in the First World War. Twenty million more returned home wounded or disabled. Millions of young women and children were left widowed or orphaned, cities and villages lied in ruins, and disease and starvation ravaged the lands.² Social, political, and cultural destruction quickly followed, as the war annihilated the very foundations of knowledge and understanding that had supported life in Europe for millennia, resulting in mass trauma, anxiety, and an epistemological crisis that came to define the interwar period. For those who survived the devastation, the world they knew, along with the ways in which they understood that world, had been swept away by the conflict’s hideous waves of violence and savagery. Many of the great empires had fallen, including the Russian, German, Ottoman, and Austria-Hungary empires that had exercised power and authority throughout the world for centuries.³ With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, an Islamic state based on a caliphate, shari’ah, and the

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 1930, in *The Freud Reader* edited by Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 749.

² Martin Kitchen, *Europe Between the Wars* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 55-61.

³ The Russian Empire under the Romanov dynasty lasted from 1721 to 1917.

ulama had vanished, leaving countless Muslims throughout the Middle East in a desperate state of bewilderment and confusion.⁴

In the wake of the Great War, sixty million people died from famine and disease, as tuberculosis and cholera slayed both city and country dwellers. Over fifty million more died worldwide from the Spanish Flu.⁵ The destruction was absolute. The political structures that had organized and defined European civilization collapsed. The war even weakened and debilitated the great French and British empires. It was a time of unbearable and unimaginable loss. It was also a time of economic crisis, as the Great Depression plunged millions worldwide into poverty throughout the 1930s. Many intellectuals of the period saw these years as the degeneration and disintegration of civilization, and there was an understanding, for both those on the political Left and those on the Right, that only strength and force could resolve the crisis.⁶

The war was nothing less than cataclysmic, a horrifying deluge of death and destruction that swept away tens of millions of lives and the very foundations of European civilization. In response to the extraordinary devastation, modern states around the world envisioned utopian futures, new world orders defined by either rationality and progress or power and virility. Creating a radiant future from the still smoldering rubble entailed much more than rebuilding towns and villages or restructuring economies; it meant proclaiming a new way of living, a new system of organizing society, and a new method of expressing cultural values. In this environment emerged competing and conflicting worldviews, as proponents of fascism, socialism, and democracy fought to the death trying to convince the world that their vision for the future of civilization was the one and only true path to follow. For this reason, scholars often refer to the interwar period as the “age

⁴ William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2013).

⁵ “1918 Influenza Epidemic Records,” <phmc.pa.gov> (July 8, 2017).

⁶ Kitchen, 28.

of ideology.” If the term today has become somewhat abstract and nebulous, in the interwar period ideology was the driving force of history.

The interwar period was a time of profound anxiety. There was a tremendous tension between the forces of modernity and tradition. Industrialization and urbanization left people uncertain of their place in the world. Science and progress led to war and destruction. The Existentialists questioned humanity’s faith in reason, rationality, and progress. The influential philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had seen a crisis born of modernity, and only two decades after his death that crisis began to manifest in dark and disturbing ways. Many saw in modernity evidence of the decline of European civilization. Gandhi proclaimed modern civilization to be a disease with the potential to infect and destroy the entire world, arguing that Western civilization was void of both spirituality and morality and that man was a slave to bodily comforts and material goods.⁷ In even darker and more dismal terms, Sigmund Freud argued that man’s primitive, reptilian impulses still endured after countless years of evolution. He believed that two fundamental forces remained from man’s ancestral past, influencing our actions and driving our behavior: sexuality and aggression. Contrary to Enlightenment ideals based on reason and rationality, Freud believed man’s nature was inclined towards violence and destruction. Man’s aggressive instinct, Freud proclaimed, his “instinct of death” that manifests in ferocity and brutality, is antithetical to civilization.⁸

With exhilarating visions of utopian futures, the “saviors of civilization” emerged. In Italy, Benito Mussolini enthralled the masses. In Germany, Adolf Hitler raged against the “parasites” who threatened to devour European culture. And in the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin embarked on the creation of the world’s first socialist society, initiating mass industrialization, collectivization,

⁷ See Mahatma Gandhi, *India Home Rule*, 1909.

⁸ Freud, 754-755.

and cultural revolution. It was a global phenomenon, as state leaders, scientists, artists, and scholars all sought to reveal their own unique vision of the next stage of History and proclaim the specific programs and practices that would ensure the realization of these visions.⁹

I argue that a series of potentially devastating foreign and domestic circumstances intersected with a militant ideology, resulting in the Great Terror. Domestically, living standards in the Soviet Union rapidly deteriorated in the interwar period, opposition to Stalinism steadily increased after the disastrous results of collectivization and the stress and strain of rapid industrialization, and the possible emergence of a “fifth column” all influenced and impacted Stalin’s decision to initiate the blood purges. Internationally, the rise of fascism, with its categorical insistence on radical expansionism and its explicit condemnation of socialism, posed an existential threat to the Soviet experiment. Additionally, tension in the Far East, the Spanish Civil War, and capitalist encirclement all posed extreme dangers for the future of the Soviet state. And finally, the near cataclysmic destruction of the first world war compelled Stalin, like other global leaders, including Mussolini and Hitler, to take decisive action in ensuring the safety and security of his people and the future welfare of his state. This was a battle for humanity, a momentous clash between progressive and reactionary forces that would determine the fate of human civilization. A second great war seemed inevitable.

By exploring Italy under Mussolini and Germany under Hitler, along with other examples of ideologies and practices antithetical to Soviet interests, the significance of the threat to the Soviet Union becomes evident. The interwar period saw the rise of the fanatical obsession of the leadership cult.¹⁰ No two men exemplified this cult more than Mussolini and Hitler. Expounding

⁹ I am indebted to Prasannan Parthasarathi’s argument for the centrality of context in *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). This chapter demonstrates, as Partasarathi argues, that context shapes decisions, choices, and actions.

¹⁰ Kitchen, 25.

ideologies that rejected all forms of socialism and liberalism, Italian fascism and Nazism denounced egalitarianism, praising instead the inequality of men and nations. Both ideologies were fundamentally nationalistic, imperialistic, and fixated on creating new utopian empires based on glorious and mythical pasts. The Soviet system of political governance, the predominance of Slavic ethnicities, and the rich and fertile lands of the western Soviet Union all made Stalin's communist state a target of fascist aggression.

*Italy*¹¹

In Italy, fearful that the future of Western civilization hung in the balance, the fascists advocated an ideology bent on overcoming cultural decadence and spiritual degradation.¹² Western civilization, Mussolini and his followers argued, had become corrupt and decadent following the Great War. Intervention was needed to cure the deviant impulses that plagued society and immersed it in depravity and dissolution.¹³ The ideal was ancient Rome, a glorious past when men were courageous, vigorous, and virile. Fascist ideology portrayed Mussolini as an artist, shaping and molding the population at will.¹⁴

In their first demonstration of brutality, the Italian fascists dealt with a popular uprising in Libya by targeting both combatants and civilians. Along with traditional methods of warfare, Mussolini's forces employed systematic terror. By 1932, Italian forces slaughtered an estimated 100,000 civilians. In 1935, after invading Ethiopia, the Italians bombed Red Cross hospitals and used chemical weapons on civilian populations, killing 250,000 Ethiopians. Hundreds of

¹¹ Segments of this section on Italy come from Michael Polano, "Italian Fascism and the Masculine Ideal" (Wayne State University, 2016).

¹² Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 3.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

thousands more suffered from severe illness following the chemical attacks. The assault on civilians continued during the Spanish Civil War, when Mussolini sent his troops to support Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. Italian bombers targeted Barcelona specifically because of its civilian population, killings scores of innocent men, women, and children in the process.¹⁵

Fascist ideology focused on action, the very antithesis of Enlightenment virtues such as reason and rationality. Italian fascists believed in “familial, religious, authoritarian, and legal values,” “values that have been attacked and destroyed by the encyclopedic cultural ideas of the Enlightenment.”¹⁶ Fascism essentially conceived of life in black and white terms, with no gray zones and no places for compromise. It was either a resounding *yes* or a resounding *no*: The fascists said yes to war, struggle, aggression, inequality, imperialism, nationalism, action, and virility; they said no to peace, comfort, pacifism, contemplation, egalitarianism, liberalism, and socialism.

At the core of the Italian fascist belief system was an emphasis on reality as opposed to fantasy. Although socialism claimed to be scientific, the fascists argued, it was nothing more than a delusion. The entire foundation of socialist ideology was constructed from an economic theory that completely ignored the primacy and power of human nature. This nature, as influential thinkers such as Freud and Nietzsche contended, was violent and irrational. The fascist ideologues abandoned any and all scientific constructions, focusing instead on action and emotion. As a result, a clear and distinct fascist ideology never fully developed. What did emerge was often lacking in logical validity and riddled with contradictions. But that was really the whole point – they were

¹⁵ The numbers in this paragraph come from interviews with various historians in *Italian Fascism in Color*, Documentary Film, Shanachie Entertainment Corporation, 2007.

¹⁶ Sergio Panunzio, “The Two Faces of Fascism,” in *A Primer of Italian Fascism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 91. Note the hostility towards the Enlightenment, a philosophical movement that inspired the socialists.

concerned with action, not theory. They wanted to create a new Italian empire, not construct a new philosophical system.

Although fascist ideology in Italy was firmly grounded in reality, at least according to its proponents, it still gave expression to an ideal that would help the Italian fascists achieve their ultimate goal of transcending reality, which is to say transforming Italy from its current state of relative mediocrity into a great world empire modeled on ancient Rome. Giovanni Gentile, the premier philosopher of the Italian fascist regime and minister of public instruction, wrote in 1936, “Our present ideal is to create a culture that produces men aware of this great tragedy of life: life as the struggle to make one’s way not selfishly or for oneself but for everyone. For everyone, because the life of Italy also informs the life of Europe and the rest of the world.”¹⁷ Gentile was speaking specifically of the fascist culture that would ultimately triumph over the decadence that threatened to engulf civilization.

The Italian fascists praised traditional, conservative values. Fascism promised restoration, not only of public order but also “those traditional social units that are sacred and inviolable... first and foremost among them, religion and the family.”¹⁸ The interwar culture that thrived in cities such as Paris and Berlin presaged the death and destruction of family values and traditional gender roles. Julius Evola argued that Western civilization “had carried out the most complete *perversion* of the rational order of things.”¹⁹ Modernity, for the Italian fascists, became synonymous with decadence – an inescapable decline and degradation of Western civilization.

Fascism presented itself as the heroic savior of civilization. The fascist regime in Italy espoused a reactionary ideology aimed at remolding behaviors to combat cultural decadence and

¹⁷ Giovanni Gentile, “The Ideal of Culture and Italy Today,” in *A Primer of Italian Fascism*, 265.

¹⁸ Panunzio, 93.

¹⁹ Julius Evola, “Pagan Imperialism: Fascism Before the Euro-Christian Peril,” in *A Primer of Italian Fascism*, 280.

spiritual degeneration. The fascist state, in order to save both Italy and the world from impending catastrophe, would intervene to cure “deviant and decadent impulses.”²⁰ Words such as aggression, virility, bravery, discipline, will, and power appear over and over again. These are the characteristics and attributes of the ideal fascist man and, by extension, the fascist state. These qualities had to be nurtured and developed, praised and honored as the epitome of greatness. The repetition of the language is astonishing, as is the use of antithetical sentiments such as peace and ease, representing the decadent forces of modernity. A certain pragmatism resulted in this hyper-masculine use of language. If fascism “conceives of life as a struggle,”²¹ then strength and power were necessary to overcome hardships and emerge victoriously. For Mussolini, there was no place in fascist thought and action for compassion or empathy. In a speech in Rome in 1942, Il Duce proclaimed, “War cannot be waged without hating the enemy from morning to night, in all the hours of the day and night, without spreading hatred and without making it an intrinsic part of one’s self. We must rid ourselves once and for all of false sentimentality.”²²

In “Foundations and Doctrine of Fascism,” Mussolini wrote, “Life for the fascist is a continuous, ceaseless battle that we eagerly embrace with great courage and with the requisite sense of intrepidity.”²³ Life and war were inseparable, and potent warriors were imperative if the Italian fascists wished to obliterate their adversaries and establish their empire. As they surveyed the scene in Italy and across Europe, they saw the instability of a rapidly changing society and the outright rejection of traditional principles, a pervasive decadence that undermined conservative values. And in looking at the political climate, they were horrified to see a movement to the Left that had the potential to transform the world order and establish what they considered to be a

²⁰ Ben-Ghiat, 5.

²¹ Benito Mussolini, “Foundations and Doctrine of Fascism,” in *A Primer of Italian Fascism*, 47.

²² Benito Mussolini, <ibiblio.org> (July 9, 2017).

²³ Mussolini, 63.

profoundly “unnatural” rule of impotent idealists. Mario Puccini, a renowned novelist and critic, wrote in 1926, “Other peoples have, at least for the most part, lost that sense of virile stability and that contact with reality from which, and solely from which, a lasting and deep art may be born.”²⁴

Born of war and revolution, like a deadly tsunami, a menacing red wave descended on Europe, crashing down on Hungary, Poland, Germany, and Italy. The fascist party was created to rid Italy of an ineffective Liberal democracy and the spreading socialist contagion that was becoming increasingly stronger and more virulent. The fascists would not be as indifferent as the Italian state that stood by and watched events unfold, refusing to act as the fascists and socialists engaged in bloody conflict, and neither would the throngs of Italian citizens who supported the fascist cause. The middle-class feared losing their property and privileges. Land owners feared giving up their land. The Catholic Church feared the abolishment of religion. Big business feared an end to an economic system that allowed them to flourish. And military leadership, along with a majority of World War I veterans, feared the downfall and collapse of Italy. As historian Martin Kitchen states, “The respectable classes therefore looked for protection against the red peril.”²⁵ The fascists thrived in this atmosphere of fear and panic.

The fascist “Black Shirts” attacked socialists on city streets and in country villages. They became progressively more ferocious, intensifying their brutality, destroying trade union offices, harassing, beating, and murdering anyone who supported the socialist agenda. What resulted was essentially civil war, as fascists and socialists clashed throughout Italy. People around the world, fearful of the red menace, celebrated the fascists for their courage and bravery. *The Times* newspaper in London wrote, “Fascismo has proved itself virile, well-disciplined, fearless, and

²⁴ Mario Puccini, excerpt from *Critica Fascista*, in *A Primer of Italian Fascism*, 227.

²⁵ Kitchen, 217.

ready for emergencies.”²⁶ The socialists, although passionate and determined, ultimately lacked the leadership to bring the revolution to Italy. Without a Lenin to guide them, they were crushed by the fascist onslaught.

In the dangerous and unstable world of interwar Europe, the Italian fascists resolved to manifest “strong, hard, active, solar, *Mediterranean* beings; beings made up of force and eventually *only* of force.”²⁷ Mussolini promised Italy both a renewal of ancient Roman power and a glorious Italian future. Giovanni Gentile wrote, “Sooner or later all peoples who aren’t resigned to perishing must wage war.”²⁸ The Italians did not wish to perish. As a nation, the fascists argued, they had to make a choice between impotence and power, between weakness and virility. What was needed was “a will to action, a will to greatness, and a will to power on the part of the Italian nation and civilization.”²⁹ Mussolini became the physical manifestation of this will, the heroic conqueror and lion tamer who would lead Italy to its glorious future.

Fascism in Italy arose out of this conflict between modernity and tradition. Only strength and power could destroy the forces that threatened to consume civilization. Only a courageous man of action could overcome the perils of decadence and decay and drive History forward. Fascism was a product of its time, arising “in a period of tumultuous fervor and of political passion.”³⁰ It was a dangerous time, as a new-style politics emerged based on mass participation and systematic political violence. Although the Italian fascists ultimately failed, their ideology was born of necessity as a practical solution to the chaos, trauma, and anxiety that plagued interwar Europe.

²⁶ Quoted in *Italian Fascism in Color*.

²⁷ Evola, 283.

²⁸ Gentile, 265.

²⁹ Margherita G. Sarfatti, “Art and Fascism,” in *A Primer of Italian Fascism*, 250.

³⁰ Alfredo Rocco, “The Political Doctrine of Fascism,” in *A Primer of Italian Fascism*, 103.

Mussolini's goal was to recreate modern Italy in the image of ancient Rome. The ideology he and his followers professed was profoundly aggressive and militaristic. To create the ideal, to realize their glorious future, all enemies were to be destroyed without mercy or pity. In the aftermath of the Great War, there was a desperate need to create a new type of future. Mussolini offered his vision of what that type of future should be, and the Italian fascists employed practices that they believed would destroy the "red menace" of communism and bring the vision to fruition.

*Germany*³¹

Nazi ideology was fundamentally driven by racism and expansionism. This was the foundation, and from this foundation emerged the political and nationalistic worldview that resulted in World War II. The goal of Nazism was the creation of a racial utopia, a purified *Volk* ruled and controlled by the Aryan elites.³² In order to achieve this utopia, the Nazis needed to expand their territory eastward beyond the borders of Germany *and* eliminate or enslave the inferior races that dwelled there. In its essence, Nazi ideology was based on this twofold goal of racial purity and *Lebensraum* (Hitler's concept of living space in Eastern Europe for the Germans).

The Nazi regime wanted to acquire the rich and fertile lands of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union,³³ a large geographical region that included Poland, the Baltic States, Soviet Belarus, Soviet Ukraine, and portions of western Soviet Russia.³⁴ The acquisition of this living space was essential for the Nazis, and they were willing to wage war and murder millions of people in order

³¹ Segments of this section on Germany previously appeared in Michael Polano, "Nazism's Forgotten Victims" (Wayne State University, 2015).

³² Karl Kessler, "Physicians and the Nazi Euthanasia Program," *International Journal of Mental Health* 36, no.1 (2007), 4-16.

³³ Gesine Gerhard, "Food and Genocide: Nazi Agrarian Politics in the Occupied Territories of the Soviet Union," *Contemporary European History* 18, no.1 (2009), 45-65.

³⁴ Timothy Snyder refers to this region as the *bloodlands*.

acquire it and manifest their ideal of *Lebensraum*. This desire in part followed from the German defeat in World War I and the humiliating terms of the Treaty of Versailles in which Germany lost large amounts of land to France and Poland. *Lebensraum* in many ways represented the desire to regain their losses and overcome their humiliation. But it is important to remember that it was not only about making up for past losses – Hitler had a vision for a glorious German future, and this utopia could only be realized through expansionism.

Germany wanted “to conquer, exploit and colonize the European part of the Soviet Union.”³⁵ Polish historian Czeslaw Pilichowski has argued that the Nazis wanted to “gradually denationalize and destroy the Slavic peoples, who were described as ‘inferior’ and ‘subhumans’ in Nazi racial ideology.”³⁶ Here we see the connection between the Nazi desire for geographical expansion and Nazi racial beliefs. The two cannot be separated. They work together to create a unified Nazi ideology. This becomes evident when comparing the relatively peaceful occupations in Western Europe with the violent occupations in the East. The difference was that in the East there were both millions of Jews and Slavs *and* an abundance of fertile agricultural lands. The Nazis wanted these lands *and* they wanted to either destroy or enslave the peoples living there. Eastern Europe is where Nazi conceptions of racial hygiene and *Lebensraum* converged with devastating consequences.

The Nazis appropriated conceptions of racial purity to serve and justify their vision of an Aryan utopia. According to proponents of eugenics, “the well-being and vitality of a nation depended on the genetic fitness of its members.”³⁷ Taken to its most illogical conclusions, eugenics

³⁵ Alex J. Kay, “Germany’s Staatssekretare, Mass Starvation and the Meeting of 2 May 1941,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no.4 (2006), 689.

³⁶ Quoted in John Connolly, “Nazis and Slavs: From Racial Theory to Racist Practice,” *Central European History* 32, no.1 (1999), 2.

³⁷ Kessler, 5.

argued that the Aryan race held supremacy over inferior races such as the Jews and the Slavs. For Nazi supporters, Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection was applied to mankind. Human beings were not equal, and any notion of egalitarian ethics was absurd. The weak sought to overcome the strong, to reproduce with the powerful and superior in an effort to ensure the survival of their offspring. In time, Nazi supporters and sympathizers argued, the blood of the Aryans would be mixed with the blood of non-Aryans, ending Aryan supremacy and creating a degenerate race of inferiors. The Aryans had to destroy the inferior races if they were to survive, if culture and civilization was to survive. Jews, Slavs, and Gypsies had to be eliminated because of their "alien blood."

Historian Marion A. Kaplan has written that Nazi "biological politics promised a racial cleansing and reorganization of Germany and Europe that would be implemented through large-scale eugenic schemes."³⁸ The lands of the East that the Nazis wished to conquer contained Europe's largest population of Jews and Slavs.³⁹ These inferior beings would have to be destroyed if the Nazis were to fulfill their destiny. For the Nazi regime, eugenics allowed them to clearly formulate their ultimate purpose: "Creating a unified racial community in which alien and inferior elements were eliminated and individuals renounced other ties and loyalties and were prepared to sacrifice themselves for the community would produce an irresistible instrument of expansion and conquest."⁴⁰

Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, despite its rambling and often incoherent prose, provides crucial insight into a belief system that served as a starting point for Nazi ideology. Hitler identifies

³⁸ Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 14.

³⁹ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands*.

⁴⁰ Christopher R. Browning and Lewis H. Siegelbaum, "Frameworks for Social Engineering," in *Beyond Totalitarianism* edited by Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 261.

socialism as a menace that had the potential to destroy humanity, arguing that the Jewish doctrine of Marxism rejected the aristocratic principles of Nature and the eternal privilege of power and strength. The socialist menace was an abomination of God's will, and Hitler believed it was his destiny to save humanity and civilization from this destructive force.⁴¹

Hitler's thoughts on Marxism are clearly expressed in passages where he argues that socialism was a pernicious threat to civilization, a perilous "world plague."⁴² Marxism, according to Hitler, "fans the need for social justice, somehow slumbering in every Aryan man, into hatred against those who have been better favored by fortune."⁴³ Contrary to Nazi conceptions of individual power and nobility, Marxism sought "to exclude the pre-eminence of personality in all fields of human life and replace it by the numbers of the mass."⁴⁴ The two ideological systems, Marxism and Nazism, were completely incompatible and irreconcilable. Socialism, in the hands of the Bolsheviks, was the "international serpent."⁴⁵ It was the task of the Nazis to crush this serpent and save not only Germany, but all of humanity.

Throughout *Mein Kampf*, Hitler is unequivocal on his understanding of the Soviet Union, calling the rulers of present-day Russia "common blood-stained criminals" and "the scum of humanity," who "slaughtered and wiped out thousands of her leading intellectuals in wild blood lust, and now for almost ten years have been carrying on the most cruel and tyrannical régime of all time."⁴⁶ Hitler truly believed it was his mission to prevent the Soviet Union from achieving its ultimate mission: "to impose its bloody oppression on the whole world."⁴⁷ And if there was any

⁴¹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 64-65. *Mein Kampf* was first published in 1927.

⁴² Hitler, 154.

⁴³ Hitler, 319.

⁴⁴ Hitler, 447.

⁴⁵ Hitler, 662.

⁴⁶ Hitler, 660-661.

⁴⁷ Hitler, 661.

doubt regarding Hitler's intentions, he was clear and distinct on the nature of Nazi imperialism: "We stop the endless German movement to the south and west, and turn our gaze toward the land of the east... If we speak of soil in Europe today, we can primarily have in mind only Russia and her vassal border states."⁴⁸

What began as a policy of exclusion turned into a policy of annihilation – repression led to genocide.⁴⁹ The Nazis believed the supreme Aryan race had to defend itself from the non-Aryan threat. This was a race war based on the tenets of eugenics and social Darwinism. The powerful Aryan race was destined to destroy the inferior non-Aryans. Once this was accomplished, an Aryan utopia could be created. To ensure the continued existence of this glorious utopia, the sick, the weak, and the asocial had to be eliminated as well. It became absolutely necessary to prevent them from passing on their "defective" genes.

In the Aryan utopia, a world of strength, honor, and purity, decadence and decay would cease to exist. Culture would flourish and civilization would thrive. This was the ideal, and Hitler and his followers believed it was not only possible but absolutely necessary. If they failed, the inferior races would overcome the Aryans and civilization would be destroyed.

Some scholars have pointed out that the Nazis seemed to waver in their dealings with the Slavic populations of Eastern Europe, that they were willing to work with Slavs and that they only turned to policies of murder when the Slavic populations showed signs of active resistance.⁵⁰ But these instances of apparent concessions are only further examples of the Nazi regime's willingness to do whatever was necessary to achieve their goals. They would do what they had to do in the moment, never losing sight of their ideal. These Slavs had no future in the Aryan utopia. They

⁴⁸ Hitler, 654.

⁴⁹ Nikolaus Wachsmann, "The Policy of Exclusion, 1933-1939" in *Nazi Germany* edited by Jane Caplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 143.

⁵⁰ John Connelly, "Nazis and Slavs: From Racial Theory to Racial Practice," *Central European History* 32, no.1 (1999).

would be murdered or enslaved, but never treated as equals. The Aryans and the Slavs could never coexist. As Hitler argued in *Mein Kampf*, the Slavs were an “inferior race.”⁵¹ Nazi ideology demanded progression; they would never allow for the possibility of regression.

A Global Phenomenon

In response to the red wave of socialism that descended on Europe following World War I, virulent black waves of fascism arose in Italy, Germany, Spain, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Austria, and even Japan. Supported by the industrialists, land owners, and middle-classes, fascism in its various guises quickly grew momentum and popular support. From Western Europe to Eastern Europe, and into the Far East, the fascist ideology vehemently opposed the Soviet project and precluded, at least for the time being, the possibility of a global socialist revolution.

Historians have traditionally disregarded the political violence of interwar France, treating it as a marginal phenomenon, but as new evidence continues to emerge, contemporary scholars are now beginning to believe that such violence was an essential feature of *all* European states in the interwar period, including France.⁵² By the mid-1920s, fascist-minded individuals founded several extreme right-wing paramilitary groups, known as “leagues.” In the 1930s, several hundred thousand men and women joined these groups. In response, the Left founded the anti-fascist Popular Front. Brawls were a common occurrence, as people on both sides of the political spectrum attacked one another with stones, bricks, cobbles, clubs, iron bars, and even stink bombs. The police in turn used violence to maintain public order. During a protest in Paris in 1934, the police killed thirteen rioters and injured hundreds more.⁵³

⁵¹ Adolf Hitler, 654.

⁵² Chris Millington, “Political Violence in Interwar France,” *History Compass* 10, no.3 (2012).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Romania envisioned their great future by looking to their mythical past. This idealized Romania, the *Volksgemeinschaft*, was based on a belief in the sanctity of the nation and the glorification of the Dacian Empire.⁵⁴ The Romanian national mission of rejuvenation followed from a faith in eugenics, racial anthropology, and serology. For the Romanian intelligentsia, who viewed the nation as a living organism, improving the racial qualities of the nation soon became “a totalizing nationalist ideology.”⁵⁵

In 1926, the social hygienist and eugenicist Iuliu Moldovan published *Biopolitica*. He was the first of many in Romania to link biopolitics with national politics. The ideas expressed by Moldovan and others like him around the world were officially endorsed by political regimes throughout Europe in the interwar period.⁵⁶ The adoption of principles such as ethnic reengineering and social segregation intimately linked with notions of a national rebirth leading to an ideal future. A Romanian biopolitical utopia, free of Jews, gypsies, and the dysgenic, was based on the “palingenetic myth” of rebirth. The Romanians sought a spiritual metamorphosis and a new “ethnic ontology.”⁵⁷

In Japan, liberal intellectuals railed against the proliferation of violence during the interwar years. They argued that violence was an eroding force with the power to destroy civilization. Violence represented the backward and uncivilized, the primitive and unevolved. It was disorder, the antithesis of reason. They implored the state, as representatives of order, to intervene and stop the violence.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Marius Turda, “The Nation as Object: Race, Blood, and Biopolitics in Interwar Romania,” *Slavic Review* 66, no.3 (2007).

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 428.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 414.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 433-441.

⁵⁸ Eiko Maruko Siniawer, “Liberalism Undone: Discourses on Political Violence in Interwar Japan,” *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no.4 (2011).

Despite the pleas from forward-looking liberals, radical groups emerged that were linked together by their reactionary ideology. They proclaimed reverence for the emperor and supported aggressive imperialism. On city streets, they attacked socialists and anarchists. They also attacked striking laborers. As a way to eliminate their enemies, assassinations were not uncommon. Fearful of the Bolsheviks' rise to power following the Russian Revolution, and what that could potentially mean for Japan, they devoted themselves to protecting traditional Japanese values and ways of life by embracing "the way of the warrior."⁵⁹ Violence was encouraged, and it was justified as a means of protecting their homeland and demonstrating loyalty to the imperial house. The world around them was changing rapidly. They too wanted to create a utopian future, in the image of their magnificent past, and their ideology drove them to overcome their liberal enemies and aid Japan as it embarked on a path of imperial domination.

The Soviet Union

The Party also had formidable domestic circumstances to contend with. For *Homo Sovieticus*, a new species of man that emerged in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, living conditions were unimaginable.⁶⁰ In urban areas, there was a severe housing crisis, as ten million peasants abandoned the countryside and sought work in the cities. The people were crowded into communal apartments, dormitories, and barracks. With massive shortages of primary goods, it was nearly impossible to obtain necessities such as bread, milk, and butter. Staples like salt, soap, and kerosene became luxuries. Hats and shoes were often indulgences. Urban services were nonexistent, resulting in a monstrous filth and repugnance. As an American working in the Soviet

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ This is the theme of Sheila Fitzpatrick's *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). She discusses *Homo Sovieticus* in her introduction. Martin Malia also uses the term in *The Soviet Tragedy*.

Union at this time said, “Stench, filth, dilapidation batter the sense at every turn.”⁶¹ The darkened streets were overrun with gangs of homeless children and drunken workers, and “Robberies, murders, drunken fights, and random attacks on passerby were common.”⁶²

In industrial settlements like Magnitogorsk, along with the appalling working and living conditions, there was sickness and disease. The “classrooms” where workers sought socialist enlightenment were usually decrepit barracks without heat or running water.⁶³ Most workers toiled for twelve hours each day on empty stomachs in the freezing cold. They lacked proper boots and gloves, and because supplies such as lumber and light bulbs were unavailable, workers had to navigate dizzying heights without scaffoldings and work in the dark.⁶⁴ Workers suffered horrific injuries and were forced to endure excruciating pain before finally dying in the cold and dirty hospitals where the nurses, “had become completely indifferent to the pain and suffering they saw around them.”⁶⁵

But with capitalism in crisis as a result of the Great Depression, and with fascism and Nazism on the ascendant, *Homo Sovieticus* maintained faith in the promise of a utopian future. “We’ll all have automobiles,” said one worker in Magnitogorsk. “Just wait five or ten years and we won’t need one single thing from the capitalist world,” said another.⁶⁶ Although not everyone understood the ideological nuances of Hegelian dialectics, they were building socialism, the very antithesis of capitalism, a new type of civilization and the embodiment of the Enlightenment dream.⁶⁷ In the present they would suffer, but in time, with hard work and patience, the Soviet

⁶¹ Quoted in Fitzpatrick, 51.

⁶² Fitzpatrick, 126-127.

⁶³ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁶⁴ John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia’s City of Steel* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942). A Pathfinder Book Reprint Edition.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 18.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Scott, 18 and 43.

⁶⁷ This is part of Kotkin’s argument in *Magnetic Mountain*.

Union would achieve a superior form of modernity and high international status while the people would enjoy social welfare, full employment, child care, health care, retirement pensions, free education, and the promise of advancement in the workforce.⁶⁸

In the 1930s, Stalinism was much more than a political ideology – it was an experiment in popular participation and a new way of organizing society. It was a forward-looking and progressive civilization, “a set of values, a social identity, a way of life.”⁶⁹ Settlements like Magnitogorsk were much more than worksites for men and blast furnaces; they were physical manifestations of a “grand historical endeavor”⁷⁰ that transcended the drive for rapid industrialization and encompassed everything from housing and education to styles of dress, modes of reasoning, and uses of language. Magnitogorsk was a unique and distinctive example of Stalinism, not as a totalitarian nightmare but as a rationally organized and socially transformative civilization.

It was a work in progress, and Stalin, as leader of the Soviet Union, was tasked with protecting and safeguarding the great socialist experiment. The situation was precarious. Opposition within the Party argued for abandoning Stalinism and taking a different path.⁷¹ The people still had their faith, but with such dire living conditions and the onset of ambivalence, confusion, and disappointment, it would only take a spark to ignite reactionary rebellion and engulf the revolution.⁷² The kulaks were returning to their farms, criminals were wreaking havoc in the cities, and the men who heroically defeated their foes in the Revolution and Civil War were

⁶⁸ Kotkin, 358.

⁶⁹ Kotkin, 23.

⁷⁰ Kotkin, 355.

⁷¹ Although living in exile, the voice of Trotsky still resounded with his followers. The Left and Right deviations within the Party opposed many of Stalin’s ideas and policies. See chapter four.

⁷² Kotkin discusses the ambivalence and disappointment experienced by many workers at Magnitogorsk.

growing tired and weary.⁷³ The ideal of a united proletarian identity was still only a dream, as the non-Russian nationalities throughout the Soviet Union desperately clung to their ethnic and historical roots.⁷⁴ Hundreds of thousands of Party members were nothing more than uneducated opportunists, incapable of enlightenment and unqualified to help move the Soviet Union into its next stage of development.⁷⁵ And these were only the domestic circumstances Stalin had to deal with. Beyond the Soviet borders, from East to West, Stalin was facing capitalist encirclement and fascist expansionism.⁷⁶ War was coming. To survive the onslaught and lead the Soviet Union into its radiant future, Stalin took action. By the time of the Great Terror in 1936, Soviet officials had expelled nearly one million people from the Party, the secret police had arrested and convicted hundreds of thousands, and OGPU executioners had shot tens of thousands.⁷⁷ But this was only the beginning. By the mid to late 1930s, the threat of a second great war compelled Stalin to expand his scope and intensify his methods.

Conclusion

In an essay focusing on the interwar period for *The Oxford Handbook of European History*, Paul Hagenloh argued that violence was “the natural mode of state administration at the time.”⁷⁸ Throughout the interwar period, violence begot more violence. As Hagenloh states, “The entire continent was so awash with violence in the early twentieth century – world war, civil wars, labour

⁷³ Oleg V. Khlevniuk argues one of the major reasons for the Party purges was to rid the state of men who no longer had the will and ambition to lead the Soviet Union. See *Master of the House: Stalin and His Inner Circle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁷⁴ I discuss this in more depth in the section on the non-Russian nationalities in chapter 1.

⁷⁵ This argument is expressed in both Martin Malia’s *The Soviet Tragedy* and Martin Fainsod’s *Smolensk Under Soviet Rule*.

⁷⁶ Nearly every monograph on the Great Terror considers the significance of “capitalist encirclement.”

⁷⁷ Malia and others have examined the mass repressions leading up to the Terror.

⁷⁸ Paul Hagenloh, “Discipline, Terror, and the State” in *The Oxford Handbook of European History, 1914-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 343.

camps, and mass repressions.”⁷⁹ Hagenloh identifies three central features of the interwar period: constructive projects designed to mold society into the ideological ideal, excision of those deemed unworthy from the body politic, and popular political participation. These three features were common throughout Europe and around the world, and all three features, which often overlapped in practice, involved the application of violence to various degrees. In Romania, for example, ordinary citizens participated in the political process by joining fascist groups and organizations. Some even joined fascist death squads that assassinated political enemies, eliminating those deemed unworthy of a place in their utopian future. And some of these ordinary citizens were also members of the intelligentsia that designed biopolitical projects with the aim of realizing the national mission, manifesting the ideal of a Greater Romania peopled by a race of strong and noble Romanians. The same pattern emerges in modern states around the world.

In nations as diverse as France, Italy, Germany, Romania, Japan, and the Soviet Union, despite political and ideological differences, state policies and practices were remarkably similar. All were seeking to create a new world order out of the mass destruction and devastation of World War I, and all were driven by a belief that they were tasked with saving civilization from extinction. This was the age of ideology – ideology not as an exercise in philosophical musing, but as a matter of life and death. Political violence, various forms of social engineering, and murder of one’s enemies were all employed throughout the interwar period. What separated states like the Soviet Union, Germany, and Italy was not the policies and practices employed, but rather the extension and expansion of those policies and practices. Seen from this perspective, Stalin’s Great Terror, rather than being singled out as a malevolent aberration, is placed on a continuum of modern

⁷⁹ Ibid.

statecraft that defined the interwar world. When faced with potentially catastrophic foreign and domestic circumstances, Stalin was compelled to take decisive action.

All of this leads to an important question: Why did these particular circumstances compel Stalin to initiate his blood purges? The answer takes us back to the “fifth column” theory. With growing opposition and discontent within the Soviet Union and fascism on the ascendant without, the Party was vulnerable, susceptible to attack. Speaking of the situation several decades after the fact, one of Stalin’s closest advisors, Vyacheslav Molotov said, “Nineteen thirty-seven was necessary. If you consider that after the revolution we were slashing left and right, and we were victorious, but enemies of different sorts remained, and in the face of impending fascist aggression they might unite... they would falter and switch sides... you couldn’t count on them at a time of crisis.”⁸⁰ Another member of Stalin’s inner circle, Lazar Kagonovich, said that the mass repressions were “a struggle against a ‘fifth column’ that came to power in Germany under Hitlerite fascism and was preparing war against the land of Soviets.”⁸¹

Wendy Goldman has argued that “The Soviet Union in the late 1930s was a society threatened by external enemies. Fascism was ascendant in Germany, Austria, Italy, Hungary, and Spain, and Hitler’s armies were moving east.”⁸² The belief within the Soviet Union was that fascist sympathizers had infiltrated the Party and nearly all Soviet institutions. Others, either sympathetic to fascist ideology or antagonistic to the Communist Party, were thought to be lying in wait for the opportunity to betray the Soviet Union. Collectively, these people made up the “fifth column.” With a second great war looming on the horizon, targeting them as enemies of the people was a preemptive strike.

⁸⁰ Vyacheslav Molotov, quoted in Khlevniuk, 174.

⁸¹ Lazar Kagonovich, quoted in Khlevniuk, 175.

⁸² Wendy Z. Goldman, *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin’s Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 314.

The threat was much greater than the rise of European fascism. Tensions in the Far East reached new heights in the late 1930s after Japan invaded China. Stalin quickly signed a non-aggression treaty with China, clearly aimed at Japan, and began exiling the Korean population from Far eastern territories, with the goal of “stopping the infiltration of Japanese espionage.”⁸³ Spies and potential spies were infiltrating the Soviet Union from both east and west. And Stalin, who had experienced the apocalyptic destruction of World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the Russian Civil War, along with the horrifying famines and epidemics brought on by prolonged war and conflict, was determined to prevent such devastation from consuming the Soviet Union and eradicating the revolution.

⁸³ Council of People’s Commissars and the Central Committee decree, quoted in Khlevniuk, 174.

CHAPTER 4 “THE GREAT TERROR”

Who’s going to remember all this riffraff in ten or twenty years time? No one. Who remembers now the names of the boyars Ivan the Terrible got rid of? No one.¹

“Wreckers, diversionists, spies, and killers”²

On the afternoon of August 23rd, 1936, in the October Hall of the House of Unions, all eyes were on comrade V.V. Ulrich, President of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR. Before him stood sixteen defendants, accused of conspiring with fascist and capitalist powers to assassinate Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union’s supreme leader. The prosecution had argued that these men had not only plotted to murder Stalin and other Party leaders, but also to spurn the revolution and restore capitalism in Russia.

In a world so often veiled in secrecy, this trial was highly publicized, covered by media outlets across the globe. One of the reasons for the fascination was that some of the accused were high-ranking Party members. Grigory Zinoviev was one of the founding fathers of the Soviet Union, a member of the first Politburo, and head of the Communist International. He had also been a close personal friend of Vladimir Lenin. Lev Kamenev, another member of the first Politburo, like Zinoviev, had worked closely with Lenin during the Russian Revolution and Civil War, helping to establish the Bolsheviks as undisputed masters of the new Russian state. Both men, per the prosecution, were involved in a “Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Center.”³

¹ Attributed to Stalin, in Hiroaki Kuromiya, *The Voices of the Dead: Stalin’s Great Terror in the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 5.

² From a speech Stalin gave at the March Plenum of 1937.

³ “Report on Court Proceedings: The Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Center,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1936. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

White Corinthian columns and light-blue walls adorned the October Hall. Scattered throughout, along with the thirty foreign journalists and diplomats who had been there for the past week covering this extraordinary story, sat 150 Soviet citizens, most of whom were actually NKVD clerks and officials. NKVD officers, armed with rifles and bayonets, escorted the prisoners to the dock, as Ulrich, a fat, slovenly man with a shaven head, prepared himself to read the verdict.⁴ Just past 2:30 PM, he stood to pronounce the sentence; above him, hanging from the rafters, as if to evoke moral authority over the proceedings, swayed colossal banners with the portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. All sixteen defendants were found guilty. They had “perpetrated the foul murder of Comrade S.M. Kirov” and organized terrorist groups with the goal of assassinating Stalin. Kirov’s murder was central to the case. As the Party leader in Leningrad, Kirov was a powerful and influential man. His assassination was such a shock that Stalin himself became personally involved in the investigation.⁵

As Ulrich continued, it became clear that the “evidence” proved both Zinoviev and Kamenev were following instructions from Leon Trotsky, Stalin’s bitter rival following the death of Lenin, whose ultimate goal was to destroy the Soviet Union. All sixteen men were sentenced “the supreme penalty – to be shot, and all property belonging to them to be confiscated.”⁶ When Ulrich finished reading the verdict, prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky delivered the trial’s concluding speech. “Before us are criminals,” bellowed Vyshinsky with rage and indignation, “dangerous, hardened, cruel and ruthless towards our people and towards our ideals, towards the leaders of our

⁴ Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 91-93.

⁵ Many historians have emphasized Kirov’s assassination in their analyses of the Great Terror, suggesting the event triggered the blood purges that followed. Many have also argued that Stalin used the assassination as an excuse to purge his political enemies. It is worth noting that the first Moscow show trial took place 19 months after the Kirov assassination.

⁶“Report on Court Proceedings: The Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Center.”

struggle, the leaders of the land of Soviets, the leaders of the toilers of the world!” He finished the speech with an impassioned plea for justice: “I demand that dogs gone mad should be shot!”⁷

Within days, officers of Stalin’s secret police executed all sixteen men. These officers, members of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, abbreviated NKVD, would have a central role to play in the events that would soon immerse the Soviet Union in over two years of unfathomable terror and repression. Following the executions, Nikolai Ezhov, an NKVD official who helped organize the trial, took each spent bullet, wrapped it in paper, and labeled it with every victim’s name.⁸

Zinoviev and Kamenev were the first victims. Why would they betray the Party and their own people? These men were once devoted to the Revolution; men who sacrificed so much over the years in the service of the Bolshevik cause. Why would they take part in such a hideous plot? What the foreign journalists and diplomats did not see were the days and nights leading up to their signed confessions. In dark, musty cells, as August’s sweltering summer heat intensified, agents subjected Zinoviev, who was ill at the time, to all-night interrogations. Already deprived of sleep and suffering from his illness, NKVD chief Genrikh Yagoda turned the heat on in Zinoviev’s cell. Yagoda and his agents then focused their attention on Kamenev, threatening to murder his son. Finally, when the two could no longer endure any more abuse, they agreed to confess, with the guarantee that their lives, the lives of their family members, and the lives of their supporters would be spared.⁹ More than this, even under such remarkable circumstances, a curious belief helped men like Zinoviev and Kamenev make their fateful decision to confess: “The Party is always right.”¹⁰

⁷ J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *Yezhov: The Rise of Stalin’s “Iron Fist”* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 2.

⁸ Getty and Naumov, 2.

⁹ Conquest, 87.

¹⁰ Leon Trotsky, quoted in Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 19.

Of course the guarantee meant nothing. Shortly after his own execution, Kamenev's 16-year-old son, not a defendant at the trial but accused of collaborating with the enemy, was shot in the head by NKVD officers.¹¹

By the end of 1938, NKVD agents would execute nearly 700,000 men, women, and children.¹² An estimated 300,000 more died in the Gulag camps. Were they all guilty of plotting to murder Stalin and restore capitalism in Russia by working with the fascist powers of Europe? Was Stalin a paranoid madman, finding conspiracies behind every corner, plots that threatened to pollute and corrupt the hearts and minds of loyal Soviet citizens? Who were the victims? The "Trial of the Sixteen" was only the first of three spectacular trials that captivated audiences around the world. Through these trials, Stalin laid the groundwork that allowed him to purge tens of thousands of Party members, government officials, industrial managers, and Red Army generals, admirals, commissars, and officers. This was the first wave of the Great Terror, the blood purge of the "old guard."

The Old Guard and the Hunt for Enemies of the People

Stalin was not pleased with the way the media covered the first trial. He complained to comrades Lazar Kaganovich and Vyacheslav Molotov, "Pravda failed to produce a single article that provided a Marxist explanation of the process of degradation of these scum." It was not, Stalin went on, about a struggle for political power, but "a struggle against the Soviets, a struggle against collectivization, against industrialization, a struggle, consequently, to restore capitalism in the towns and villages of the USSR." Pravda should have said, "Whoever fights against the Party and

¹¹ Getty and Naumov, 7.

¹² Sources provide slightly different numbers. For example, Wendy Goldman and Paul Hagenloh claim there were roughly 683,000 total executions, whereas Oleg Khlevniuk and Timothy Snyder claim the number is actually 681,692.

the government in the USSR stands for the defeat of socialism and the restoration of capitalism.” Anyone who opposed the Party, Stalin believed, was a counterrevolutionary enemy of the state. After all, Stalin continued, “Lenin said that if a faction or factions persist in their errors in their struggle against the Party, under the Soviet system, they will, without fail, slide down to the level of White Guardism, the defense of capitalism, a struggle against the Soviets, and must without fail, merge with the enemies of Soviet rule.”¹³ Stalin reached his conclusions on the role of opponents based on Lenin’s condemnation of factions at the Tenth Party Congress in 1921.¹⁴ The formula was clear and distinct – those who opposed the Party opposed the Soviet Union.¹⁵

The sixteen executed following the first Moscow show trial represented the “Leftist-Opposition,” those who believed Stalin was too conservative and wanted the Soviet Union to take more radical action on the world stage in its efforts to advance the cause of socialism.¹⁶ By late September 1936, Nikolai Ezhov was the new NKVD chief. Stalin believed Yagoda was incapable of rooting out the Soviet Union’s hidden enemies. Ezhov, a former factory worker, known by his friends as “Nicky the bookworm,” organized a second trial.¹⁷ Working closely with Stalin, who was undoubtedly the mastermind of the show trials and who controlled Ezhov’s every move, the NKVD chief targeted new enemies and uncovered new plots that threatened the security of the Soviet Union.¹⁸ Only a few months later, in January 1937, the second show trial began. This time the accused represented the Communist managerial elite.¹⁹ Now seventeen new defendants faced

¹³ “Stalin to Kagonovich and Molotov,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1936. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

¹⁴ Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 167.

¹⁵ Richard Pipes writes that Lenin feared allowing the opposition a voice would “dilute the movement’s revolutionary zeal as well as rob the party of its greatest asset, which was disciplined unity.” Richard Pipes, *Three “Whys” of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 78.

¹⁶ Getty and Naumov, 4.

¹⁷ Getty and Naumov, 1.

¹⁸ Nicolas Werth, “A State Against Its People: Violence, Repression, and Terror in the Soviet Union,” in *The Black Book of Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 190.

¹⁹ Fitzpatrick, 195.

Ulrich and Vyshinsky. Like the first trial, as NKVD clerks and officials filled the seats, journalists and diplomats from all over the world watched as the cameras rolled.

All seventeen confessed. Former leftist leaders Geogry Piatkov and Karl Radek were highly respected and distinguished Party members, but Ezhov, reveling in his role as savior of the people, declared, “These swine must be strangled!”²⁰ NKVD officers proceeded to shoot thirteen of the defendants. Four others, including Radek, died in the Gulag. According to newspaper reports, the Russian people, like much of the Western world, watched the trial unfold in dismay. The language was loaded – spies, wreckers, saboteurs, masked enemies. . . . Authorities urged Soviet citizens to be aware of enemies posing as socialists, pretending to be loyal Soviet citizens when in fact what they really wanted was to destroy the Party and restore capitalism in Russia. They were urged to participate in the hunt for masked enemies of the people. In urban centers like Moscow and Leningrad, fear and paranoia enveloped the factories, the universities, and even the communal apartments.²¹ No one was safe. No one could be trusted. The friendly neighbor, the hard-working employee, the smiling young man at the newsstand – they could all be spies, in the service of fascist monsters, plotting to destroy the Soviet Union and murder its leaders.

Not even the Red Army, protectors of the toilers of the earth and guardians of the people, could escape the crimson madness.²² By the time the Terror had concluded in 1938, Stalin arrested or purged up to 35,000 men from the Red Army.²³ Many were high-ranking generals and admirals, including Marshal M.N. Tukhachevsky, Deputy Commissar of Defense. NKVD agents arrested Tukhachevsky, along with seven other senior officers of the Red Army, in June 1937. Charged

²⁰ Getty and Naumov, 5.

²¹ See Fitzpatrick and Goldman.

²² Cohen uses the phrase “crimson madness” in *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics & History Since 1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

²³ Werth, 198.

with treason as spies for Germany and Japan, the officers endured several days of brutal interrogations before finally confessing. All eight were shot.²⁴

Ezhov purged the NKVD as well, arresting over 2000 former lieutenants and NKVD leaders. Accused of spying for Germany and plotting to overthrow the Soviet Union from within, most were shot.²⁵ The majority of those purged from the NKVD were Yagoda's men, who quickly fell under suspicion when Yagoda himself was arrested in March 1937. Stalin was meticulous, targeting every institution that had any impact on life in the USSR. The NKVD, the Red Army, the Party, industrial management – all were purged in a colossal coup d'état carried out by Stalin and his leadership group.²⁶ The purpose was to remove all opposition and renovate the Party.²⁷ Stalin had a plan, and the spectacle of show trials and Red Army purges was only his first step.

The third and final show trial took place in March 1938. This was the “Trial of 21,” the “Rightist-Opposition” who considered Stalin too radical. Again, many Party elites found themselves fighting for their lives. The celebrated Nikolai Bukharin, along with Aleksei Rykov, Mikhail Tomsky, and former NKVD chief Genrikh Yagoda were all accused of being “Trotskyites” and planning to murder Stalin and destroy the Soviet Union. NKVD officers threatened to murder Bukharin's wife and infant son.²⁸ Hoping to save his family, he finally confessed on March 12th. Bukharin admitted everything – the struggle against the Party and the Soviet government, the counterrevolutionary plots to betray his country, the organizing of kulak uprisings. In his own words, he was “responsible for a grave and monstrous crime against the

²⁴ Getty and Naumov, 7-8.

²⁵ Getty and Naumov, 5-6.

²⁶ Malia, 244.

²⁷ Malia, 249.

²⁸ Conquest, 364-365.

socialist fatherland and the whole international proletariat.”²⁹ He was quickly executed, along with Rykov, Tomsky, and Yagoda.³⁰

The NKVD’s chief executioner was Vasily Blokhin, who personally shot most of the high-profile defendants. Men like Zinoviev, Kamenev, Tukhachevsky, Bukharin, and Yagoda were most likely killed by Blokhin. He also murdered thousands of workers and peasants by the time his bloody and fiendish career came to an end. During the Great Terror, Blokhin commanded an execution squad in Moscow. A few years later, in 1940, at the site of the notorious Katyn massacre, Blokhin was stationed in Kalinin. Every night Blokhin shot approximately 250 men, one after another, draped in his gore splattered leather cap, apron, and long gloves.³¹

On the streets of urban centers like Leningrad and Moscow, the Terror engulfed tens of thousands of ordinary citizens. The newspapers fueled the flames. Every day stories about unmasking enemies and spies filled the papers.³² They quoted defendants from the show trials, the “wreckers” on trial for plotting to destroy the Soviet Union from within, who warned that “soon our workers will perish in the mines like rats.”³³ Soviet citizens devoted themselves to hunting for internal, masked adversaries. In the factories, workshops were held to educate workers on ways to recognize the masked enemies.³⁴ Local papers proclaimed, “The task of every honest Soviet citizen is to know how to unmask enemies in any mask, to discern and to prevent their insidious,

²⁹ “The Case of Bukharin,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1938. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

³⁰ Bukharin was according to Stephen F. Cohen, “for almost a decade the official theorist of Soviet communism” and the “main architect of its moderate domestic policies which pursued an evolutionary road to economic modernizations and socialism.” Stalin clearly believed that with the possibility of a second world war, an evolutionary path would only lead to mass destruction for the Soviet Union. To survive the coming onslaught, they needed rapid industrialization and cadres of technically educated men and women. See Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888-1938* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), xv.

³¹ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Perseus, 2010), 137.

³² Fitzpatrick, 207.

³³ Goldman, 45.

³⁴ Goldman, 58.

traitorous activities.”³⁵ The hunt for enemies, which was sparked by Party directives and mass campaigns, soon resulted in a wave of denunciations, as workers denounced factory managers, students denounced professors, and Communists denounced fellow Communists.³⁶ Millions of ordinary people, immersed in this climate of “spy mania,” actively participated in the hunt and helped sustain the political culture of mass fear and terror.³⁷ American papers, struggling to understand the chaos and confusion that seemed to be consuming the Soviet Union, spoke of the “Salem witch-hunt of Bolshevism.”³⁸

Stalin’s speech at the March Plenum in 1937 initiated the manic hunt for spies and traitors. He talked about the “incontrovertible facts” that enemies of the people played active roles in undermining the Soviet Union’s economic and administrative institutions, that they had penetrated all levels of government, including the Party itself. He condemned leading comrades who failed to recognize the wreckers and spies, arguing that their failures to protect the fatherland resulted from carelessness, complacency, and naivety. These comrades had failed to “recognize the wolves in sheep’s clothing and were unable to tear away their masks.”³⁹

During the June Plenum of the Central Committee, Ezhov announced that he had discovered a grand conspiracy, the “center of centers.” The conspiracy, Ezhov argued, which united leftists, rightists, Trotskyists, members of former socialist parties, army officers, NKVD officers, and foreign communists, had infiltrated the Red Army, military intelligence, the Comintern, the commissariats of foreign affairs, transport, and agriculture.⁴⁰ Spies were

³⁵ Goldman, 59.

³⁶ Goldman, 2 and 15; Fitzpatrick 208.

³⁷ Goldman, 16; Fitzpatrick 205.

³⁸ Joseph H. Baird, “Russian Witch Hunt,” *The Washington Post* (March 19, 1938).

³⁹ “Defects in Party Work and Measures for Eliminating Trotskyite and Other Double Dealers: Report to the Plenum of the Central Committee of the RKP(b),” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1937. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

⁴⁰ Getty and Naumov, 6.

everywhere, masked as loyal Communists, and their ultimate purpose was the destruction of the USSR.

Although the theatrics of the show trials deceived many people around the world, not all Western journalists believed the tale of internal plots and conspiracies. Some condemned the “Dictator Joseph V. Stalin” who used Soviet firing squads to eliminate his enemies.⁴¹ Some spoke of Stalin’s “oriental despotism” and the “primitive” and “malleable” Soviet people that allowed themselves to be enslaved by such a cruel tyrant.⁴² Others looked to former Russian luminaries for insight. Leon Trotsky, who had fled to Mexico, took every opportunity to deny the charges against him and denounce Stalin, maintaining that Russia had “betrayed the faith of Marx and Lenin.”⁴³ Former leader of the Provisional Government Alexander Kerensky, who achieved cult-like status following the Russian Revolution,⁴⁴ spoke of the “moral bankruptcy of Bolshevism.” He said the world needed to know that there were daily mass executions in Russia and that the charges were “frame-ups, lies and falsifications.” Stalin, through his “rule of fear and terror,” had already confined five million victims to prison and concentration camps.⁴⁵ As the West learned of Ezhov’s purge of the NKVD, stories appeared that accused the Soviet Union of being not a socialist state, but a totalitarian regime guilty of criminal tyranny. In an environment where those responsible for obtaining confessions were now confessing themselves, no one’s honor, liberty, or life was safe.⁴⁶

The purge of the old guard and the hunt for enemies of the people completely enveloped the Soviet Union for nearly two years. It presented Stalin and the Party with an opportunity to

⁴¹ “Soviet Purge Kills 800 in 14 Months,” *The Washington Post* (October 11, 1937).

⁴² Harold Denny, “Stalin’s Russia: World Enigma,” *The New York Times* (October 8, 1939).

⁴³ “Trotsky Defends Himself Against Moscow,” *The Los Angeles Times* (May 23, 1937).

⁴⁴ Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

⁴⁵ “Kerensky Asserts Stalin Is Doomed,” *The New York Times* (March 3, 1938).

⁴⁶ “Price Tag Exhibited,” *The Wall Street Journal* (June 22, 1938).

educate the people on the dangers and threats that had the potential to destroy the USSR.⁴⁷ But this first wave of mass repression and terror served another, more diabolical purpose: to divert and distract both the citizens of the Soviet Union and the rest of the world from what was really going on. In fact, the veil was not lifted until Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" in 1956, when the newly appointed leader of the USSR condemned Stalin.⁴⁸ And even then, the true extent of the blood purges remained a state secret.

Nearly a year before the conclusion of the last Moscow show trial, Stalin and Ezhov initiated the "mass operations."⁴⁹ These operations were not covered in the papers. It took several decades until the Western world even learned of their existence.⁵⁰ Even though the first wave of violence that washed over the Soviet Union led to the executions of 40,000 people, the Great Terror did not truly begin until the Politburo released its resolution "On Anti-Soviet Elements" on 2 July, 1937.⁵¹

00447 and the Kulak Operations

Andrei Grigor'evich Nademskii was an Orthodox priest at the Vydubychi-Heorhii church in Kiev. On 20 December, 1937, NKVD agents arrested Nademskii and charged him with "anti-Soviet agitation." His interrogator claimed that the priest had called the Communists barbarians and referred to the NKVD as Satan. He had also told people that when the Soviet regime fell they would be severely punished for their transgressions. When asked to confess, Nademskii replied,

⁴⁷ Malia, 266.

⁴⁸ Werth, 185.

⁴⁹ The mass operations sometimes refer to both the kulak operations (order 00447) and the national operations. Some historians reserve the term to specifically refer to the kulak operations. I use it to refer to the kulak operations, which also targeted criminals and other "anti-Soviet" elements.

⁵⁰ Malia and Werth.

⁵¹ Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Master of the House: Stalin and His Inner Circle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 180.

“I never conducted any anti-Soviet activity... I am an apolitical person and never discuss political subjects with any of my acquaintances.” Upon hearing Nademskii’s denial, the interrogator, who had been writing the confession in longhand, took out a clean sheet of paper and asked the priest, once again, to admit his guilt.

NKVD agents soon extracted the desired confession, most likely under torture. Now Nademskii said, “Yes, I am forced to confess that being oppressed by the Soviet regime, I told some individual priests and clergy about my anti-Soviet sentiments.” Two witnesses confirmed Nademskii’s guilt. Whether or not they too were forced to provide statements or had personal grudges against the priest is unknown. Either way, the NKVD officer had what he needed. Less than three weeks later, the sixty-nine-year old Nademskii was shot in the head and thrown into a mass grave in Bykivnia.⁵²

Nademskii was only one of the hundreds of thousands of men and women targeted as a result of order 00447. On 30 July, 1937, Mikhail Frinovskii, Ezhov’s personal assistant, presented Stalin with the operational order titled “Regarding Operations of Repression of Former Kulaks, Criminals, and Other Anti-Soviet Elements.” The Politburo swiftly approved the order and authorized Ezhov to proceed by sending instructions to regional NKVD and Party administrators.⁵³ Those targeted as criminals could be horse and cattle thieves, robbers who had escaped Soviet penal institutions, or anyone who had dealings with the judicial system in the past.⁵⁴ The anti-Soviet elements could be church officials, former White officers, former Socialist Revolutionaries or Mensheviks who had opposed the Bolsheviks, former tsarist officials, political prisoners being

⁵² Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Voices of the Dead: Stalin’s Great Terror in the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 78-83.

⁵³ Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin’s Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926-1941* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009), 249.

⁵⁴ Hagenloh, 249; Snyder, 82.

held in the Gulag, or anyone who the local NKVD had a file on, like Nademskii who had been arrested twice before in 1922 and 1930.⁵⁵

Ezhov directed local authorities to register criminal offenders and kulaks. He also directed them to establish local tribunals, “troikas,” comprised of regional bosses to decide who was to be sent to the Gulag and who was to be shot.⁵⁶ The troikas usually consisted of the local NKVD chief, the local procurator, and the secretary of the regional Party.⁵⁷ Order 00447 specified that each province, territory, and republic had a quota to meet. In total, the order suggested that after four months there should be 268,950 arrests and 72,950 executions.⁵⁸ Stalin and his inner circle tightly controlled the measures to achieve these goals – the Politburo issued instructions and approved NKVD orders, quotas established in Moscow governed the actions of the troikas, the Military Collegium of the USSR Supreme Court dealt with high-profile arrests, and Stalin, along with his leadership group comprised of Molotov, Vorshilov, Kagonovich, and Zhadnov, oversaw the entire process.⁵⁹

Order 00447 was carried out in secret.⁶⁰ NKVD agents tortured suspected enemies to elicit confessions, and once the confessions were secured, they used Nagan pistols to shoot their victims in the head. The methods of torture varied, but in most cases prisoners were deprived of sleep, forced to stand for endless hours, and beaten until they confessed. NKVD agents also plunged prisoners’ heads into latrines. Stalin, who was briefed by Ezhov on an ongoing basis, approved these methods.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Khlevniuk, 180.

⁵⁶ Khlevniuk, 180.

⁵⁷ Snyder, 81.

⁵⁸ Khlevniuk, 180.

⁵⁹ Khlevniuk, 185.

⁶⁰ Snyder, 83.

⁶¹ Snyder, 82-83.

NKVD officers targeted the criminal elements in urban areas, focusing on bandits, armed robbers, organized and professional criminals, and recidivists. They also sought out homeless children with histories of hooliganism.⁶² The kulaks (who had survived revolution, collectivization, famine, exile, and the Gulag) presented a more difficult problem to solve.⁶³ Collectivization and “dekulakization” affected millions of families throughout the USSR. Many of these former kulaks began returning to their native lands by the mid-1930s, hoping to recover their confiscated property and reestablish some of their former authority and influence.⁶⁴ Those who had been exiled or imprisoned began returning to the collective farms. Others headed for urban areas and began blending in with the working classes.⁶⁵ The great fear for Stalin and the Party was that these former kulaks would incite the people to rebellion.⁶⁶

All of these contingents – kulaks, criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements – represented a potential social base of insurrection.⁶⁷ In the event of another great war, this base could destroy the Soviet Union from within. The kulaks still in camps and in Siberian exile could potentially support a Japanese invasion.⁶⁸ An NKVD report in 1937 stated that these kulaks constituted “a broad base on which to build an insurgent rebellion.”⁶⁹ But an even greater threat was found to the west, in Soviet Ukraine where former kulaks could support a German invasion. This region became the major killing center, where NKVD officers executed 70,868 people in response to order 00447.⁷⁰

⁶² Hagenloh, 253.

⁶³ Snyder, 78.

⁶⁴ Khlevniuk, 176-178.

⁶⁵ Werth, 186.

⁶⁶ Snyder, 79.

⁶⁷ Hagenloh, 250.

⁶⁸ Snyder, 80.

⁶⁹ Snyder, 80.

⁷⁰ Snyder, 84.

Stalin increased local and regional quotas, far exceeding the original goals laid out by Frinovskii and Ezhov. In total, order 00447 resulted in 385,000 executions. Additionally, 316,000 more people were sent to the Gulag.⁷¹ But the Great Terror was far from over. The USSR faced other potential threats, and Stalin was determined to eliminate all possible enemies before they had the opportunity to betray the fatherland. The “National Operations” targeted ethnic contingents, leaving non-Russian nationalities across the Soviet Union vulnerable and helpless, susceptible to the blood purges that had already claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children, both the prominent and the obscure.

The National Operations

In 1936, Maria Juriewicz was a young woman living in Leningrad with her two sisters. Falling in love, she married Stanislaw Wyganowski. For reasons unknown to either the Juriewicz family or Stanislaw, NKVD officers arrested Maria in August, 1937. Stanislaw, hoping to find out why his wife had been arrested, inquired with the local authorities. But he was also arrested, and a few weeks later NKVD agents showed up at the Juriewicz family home and arrested one of Maria’s other sisters, Elzbieta. Without any explanation, without any proof of guilt, and without any form of legal proceedings, Stanislaw, Maria, and Elzbieta were all shot and buried in mass graves.

During the course of the national operations, 6,597 Soviet citizens were shot in the Leningrad region. Many, like Stanislaw, Maria, and Elzbieta, lost their lives for no reason other than their Polish ethnicity. When Ezhov reported on his progress in the operation – 23,216 arrests

⁷¹ Getty, 8.

after only twenty days – Stalin responded, “Very good! Keep on digging up and cleaning out this Polish filth.”⁷²

Even though the national operations were not talked about in the papers, people understood that something ominous was happening in their cities, towns, and villages. Individuals would simply disappear. Family members were told they had been sentenced to ten years in the Gulag with no right for correspondence.⁷³ In the early morning hours, small black vans patrolled the streets. These were the notorious Black Marias, or “black ravens.” Once they arrived at their desired destination, NKVD officers would exit the truck and knock on the door. Everyone knew what happened next: once arrested, most were never to be seen or heard from again.⁷⁴

Many were taken to buildings and led into basements where agents would torture them until they confessed to crimes such as sabotage, terrorism, or espionage. The goal of the agents was to force people to confess that there was a Polish conspiracy, a master plan to destroy the USSR. In places like Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Belarus, officers perfected the “conference method.” They would fill a basement with a large number of Poles and torture one person, forcing the others to watch. Once this victim confessed, the others were told that they had a choice – they could confess or be tortured. In these cases, most people confessed and the agents were able to secure more “evidence” in support of the Polish conspiracy theory.⁷⁵

The national operations began on 9 August, 1937, when the Politburo approved the NKVD order “On Liquidating Polish Sabotage-Espionage Groups.” This order, 00485, provided the framework for dealing with “counterrevolutionary national contingents.” The Poles were not the only targets: other orders quickly followed 00485 and identified other groups that needed to be

⁷² Snyder, 96-97.

⁷³ Snyder, 97.

⁷⁴ Snyder, 97.

⁷⁵ Snyder, 95.

repressed, including Germans, Romanians, Latvians, Estonians, Finns, Greeks, Afghans, Iranians, Chinese, Bulgarians, and Macedonians.⁷⁶ This was an unprecedented step for Stalin and his leadership group, a step that transformed and radicalized the Terror. The targets were no longer “class enemies,” such as kulaks, but national groups specifically targeted as enemies of the people.⁷⁷

Once again, the great fear for Stalin was that these groups would support the Germans or the Japanese in the event of an invasion. Their very presence was a national security threat.⁷⁸ At this point, a second world war seemed inevitable. The logic was simple – if these populations were removed, either through executions, deportations, or incarcerations, then the Germans and Japanese would find no support in the Soviet Union.⁷⁹ If they remained, they could potentially become spies and collaborators.⁸⁰ The ideal of an empire of nations had been replaced with explicitly pro-Russian sentiments and policies. By the beginning of 1938, the Russian language was made compulsory in all Soviet schools.⁸¹

Ordered to “destroy the Poles entirely,” NKVD officers used any available method to locate their targets. Some officers even searched for names that sounded Polish in the city records, found their addresses, and showed up on their doorsteps with the Black Marias.⁸² By the time the national operations concluded, nearly 240,000 people had been shot.⁸³ The USSR was supposed to be a multicultural and multiethnic state.⁸⁴ In an interview with Roy Howard in 1936, Stalin

⁷⁶ Khlevniuk, 181.

⁷⁷ Snyder, 93.

⁷⁸ Hagenloh, 2 and 227.

⁷⁹ Snyder, 106.

⁸⁰ Khlevniuk, 182.

⁸¹ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 513.

⁸² Snyder, 95.

⁸³ Again, this number varies between 240,000 and 250,000. Khlevniuk believes the actual number is 237,000.

⁸⁴ Snyder, 93.

proclaimed that in the Soviet Union there was no oppression of nationalities. He boasted about the constitution, telling Howard that “In my opinion our new Soviet constitution will be the most democratic in the world.”⁸⁵ By 1938, when the national operations finally concluded, NKVD officers executed 85,000 Poles, 47,327 people in Soviet Ukraine, 17,772 in Soviet Belarus, 16,573 in Soviet Latvia, 9,078 in Finland, and 7,998 in Soviet Estonia.⁸⁶ Countless others vanished in the Gulag, died from torture, or perished while imprisoned.⁸⁷ Over 170,000 Koreans were deported from the Far East to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.⁸⁸ Around 40,000 died following the deportation because of malnutrition, disease, and other related causes.⁸⁹ Had Stalin met his objective? Had he succeeded in eliminating a possible base of insurrection, the potential “fifth column” that could make the difference between victory and defeat in the next world war?⁹⁰ For Stalin and the Soviet Union, only time would tell.

“The Perverse Logic of Utopia”⁹¹

On 10 April, 1939, agents arrested Nikolai Ezhov, head of the Soviet Union’s secret police. He spent the next year of his life in prison where he was subjected to the same brutal interrogation techniques that he encouraged his officers to employ throughout the Great Terror. Now he too, like so many before him, confessed to a litany of absurdities: being a Polish spy, a German spy who had plotted to assassinate Stalin, a homosexual, and a Lithuanian. His father, Ezhov confessed, was not really a former factory worker, but a brothel operator. And his mother, a bar

⁸⁵ “Interview Between J. Stalin and Roy Howard,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1936. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

⁸⁶ Snyder, 99.

⁸⁷ Werth, 191.

⁸⁸ Snyder, 105; Werth, 191.

⁸⁹ J. Otto Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937-1949* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 14.

⁹⁰ Werth, 202.

⁹¹ Title of chapter in Malia.

hall dancer. At his trial, Ezhov retracted these false confessions and maintained his loyalty to the Party and, above all else, his devotion to Stalin. On 2 February, 1940, immediately following the trial, NKVD officers executed Ezhov.⁹²

The Great Terror had officially ended in August, 1938. Stalin brought in L. P. Beria to be Ezhov's deputy, and in October and November a Politburo commission began investigating NKVD "abuses." Ezhov's assistants were arrested and began testifying against their chief. Ezhov's wife committed suicide after she was accused of maintaining relationships with suspicious contacts. Soon Ezhov was arrested and Beria took over his position as head of the NKVD.⁹³

From the Kremlin in Moscow, Joseph Stalin had centrally orchestrated the Terror. From beginning to end, he maintained absolute control of the bloody repressions that took the lives of nearly 700,000 people.⁹⁴ The Terror, among other things, was an attempt to cleanse the Soviet Union of counterrevolutionary contingents. As a path to a radiant future and an all-encompassing guide to action, ideology was the driving force of Stalin's purges. The writings of Lenin and Marx, specifically Marx's and Engel's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, reveal an imperative to eliminate certain groups from the body politic in order to realize a socialist society.⁹⁵ Stalin believed it was essential to remove what he considered "socially dangerous" contingents from the Soviet Union. This is the quintessence of Soviet ideology – class warfare and the need to eliminate various classes and groups of people believed to pose a threat to socialism. This is made apparent in the very first constitution under the new Bolshevik government in 1918. There would be asylum for foreigners facing political oppression and inclusion of national minorities, but they would be deprived of their rights if those individuals or groups acted "to the detriment of the socialist

⁹² Getty and Naumov, 12-13.

⁹³ Getty and Naumov, 12.

⁹⁴ See Khlevniuk.

⁹⁵ See chapter 1 on the discussion of Marxism.

revolution.”⁹⁶ The Terror, initiated by Stalin and carried out by NKVD agents, was an effort to purify the USSR of those contingents that had the potential to undermine the revolution and destabilize the USSR. This was a “free union of free nations,” until that freedom threatened the Soviet experiment.⁹⁷

The regime applied the *counterrevolutionary* label in two distinct ways: the first, on those groups or individuals considered to pose a “potential” threat, and the second, following from Marx’s theory of historical development, on those groups or classes sentenced by History to wither and perish. These two often overlapped, as with former kulaks, for example, who were believed to both pose a potential threat to the regime and had no place in the socialist utopia. The case of the nationalities and ethnicities is somewhat unique because History did not sentence them to perish, but to assimilate and merge with proletariat identity.⁹⁸ Because this process of assimilation had failed to take place by 1937, and since Stalin had neither the time nor the patience to wait for this historical process to naturally occur, they too were deemed counterrevolutionary as a potential fifth column in the event of war. Leading up to this point, it is important to remember, both Lenin and Stalin believed the process of assimilation would occur naturally. The socialist state they had created was anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist. They wished to incorporate national identities, not oppress them and not force them to become something they were not, as Alexander III had done with his “Russification” initiatives in the late 19th century. Circumstances intersected with ideology, leading to changes in practices and policies.

⁹⁶ “1918 Constitution of the Russian Soviet Federate Socialist Republic,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1918. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1848. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

It is difficult to fathom, but when such logic was applied during the purges, men like Andrei Grigor'evich Nademskii, the Orthodox priest from Kiev who was executed in 1938, and women like Maria Juriewicz, the newlywed from Leningrad who was shot to death in 1937, were in fact counterrevolutionaries – Nademskii because he was a priest and, according to Marx, there would be no priests in the future utopia; Juriewicz because she was Polish, and again, according to Marx, national identities were supposed to merge into a single, proletariat identity. In both cases, they were not only potential threats to the revolution, but also sentenced by the supernatural force of History to wither and die.

Because Soviet ideology followed from Marxism, a theoretical political philosophy that projected and predicted future events, there was a profound emphasis placed on the process of becoming, on the notion of potentiality. Former kulaks, recidivist criminals, and nationalities were enemies because of what they might do under certain circumstances, such as the outbreak of another great war, and what they had the potential to do if given the opportunity, such as if they were given support from a foreign state opposed to the Soviet Union. Similarly, the idea of revolution was framed as a force that was in constant and continuous motion, not simply as an event that began when the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917 and concluded when they triumphed in the Civil War. The revolution was a process, a continuum, that would only conclude when socialism reigned throughout the world. Enemies sought to disrupt this process by first destroying the Party in the Soviet Union and then preventing it from spreading across Europe. For the Soviet regime, led by men like Stalin, Ezhov, Molotov, and Kagonovich, these enemy contingents had to be annihilated in order to save the revolution.

But if this true, then why not simply arrest and execute the accused? Why spend the time, and the manpower, torturing and tormenting them, forcing them to sign the most absurd

confessions? It is important to consider another important concept of Soviet ideology – the idea of developing and evolving political consciousness. This process occurred through various forms of education. The vanguard, or the Party, controlled the Soviet Union, but the millions of workers and poor peasants were destined to evolve and govern the coming utopia. Like the symbolism inherent on the Soviet flag, the Party rose above the masses of workers and poor peasants, illuminating the path and guiding the way. The forced confessions had a specific purpose: to educate and inform the populace. The lesson to be learned was that their nation was surrounded by threats to the revolution, by enemies who wished to restore capitalism and once again enslave the masses. The lesson was vigilance – traitors, spies, and wreckers were everywhere; to protect their present order and ensure their radiant future, citizens needed to be proactive defenders of the revolution.

The mass and national operations, however, present a more complex problem. There were hundreds of thousands of forced confessions that were never made public. Why? What was the purpose? Again, the answer rests on Soviet ideology. Unlike the Nazi regime who openly employed mass terror and violence in their pursuit of social transformation, the Soviet Union was predicated on the socialist ideals of rational progress and egalitarian ethics. Their rule could not *appear* to be grounded in violence and repression. As Martin Malia wrote, “It was thus necessary for the Soviets to make their ‘enemies’ confess to criminal actions and thereby recognize their elimination as just and deserved.”⁹⁹

Although the purge of the Leninist old guard and the hunt for enemies of the people was a gruesome and bloody affair that destroyed tens of thousands of families throughout the USSR, it pales in comparison, at least numerically, to the mass and national operations. Approximately

⁹⁹ Malia, 266-267.

40,000 from the old guard were shot.¹⁰⁰ NKVD agents executed between 20,000 and 25,000 more as a result of denunciations. Combined, these executions represent only 9% of the total number of victims who lost their lives in the Great Terror. Theories arguing for mass participation are not supported by the evidence. There was certainly participation in urban centers like Moscow and Leningrad, where millions of people were caught up in the madness, as both Wendy Goldman and Sheila Fitzpatrick have demonstrated, but denunciations played no part in either the national operations or the kulak operations. These operations were initiated by Stalin and carried out by the NKVD.¹⁰¹ When historians argue that the Terror actually began with the mass operations, it is because 91% of the total number of victims, some 625,000 people, were executed during this period of the purges – 385,000 from NKVD order 00447 and 240,000 from order 00485 and the national operations.¹⁰² Nearly 390,000 more were sent to the Gulag.¹⁰³ The total number of people who died in the camps is still unknown.

Years later, Vyacheslav Molotov, one of the key members of Stalin’s inner circle, talked about the blood purges. “I believe we had to pass through a period of terror,” Molotov said. “The terror cost us dearly, but without it things would have been worse. Many people who should not have been touched suffered... Stalin insisted on making doubly sure: spare no one, but guarantee absolute stability in the country for a long period of time – through the war and postwar years, which was certainly achieved.”¹⁰⁴ This pragmatic, utilitarian reasoning was employed by Lenin during the Civil War, as he used the Cheka to unleash the Red Terror, and by Stalin, nearly twenty years later, during the Great Terror. In both cases, no one was spared – and in both cases stability

¹⁰⁰ See Getty.

¹⁰¹ See Hagenloh.

¹⁰² 00447 numbers from Khlevniuk and Snyder; 00485 and national operations numbers from Khlevniuk.

¹⁰³ See Snyder.

¹⁰⁴ “Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1982. <www.marxists.org> (July 8, 2017).

followed. Of course, for Stalin, the Soviet Union would have to fight a second bloody world war before the economic, political, and social stability could be experienced.

A remarkable 70% of purge victims had some form of higher education.¹⁰⁵ Stalin wanted to eliminate all possible competing ideologies, worldviews, and nationalist movements. There could be no opposition; there could be no factions. Another important consideration, and a crucial one for Stalin, was the *type* of education. Even though a great majority of the Leninist old guard employed in the Party, the army, the Komsomol, and the factories had some higher education, their schooling had not been technical in nature. The future of the USSR, and the future of the world, Stalin believed, would be driven by technically trained cadres. By purging Soviet institutions, Stalin was able to fill the void with a new generation of technically trained men and women. As Fainsod wrote in *Smolensk Under Soviet Rule*, with rapid industrialization in the early 1930s, there was a desperate need for engineers and technicians, resulting in “an overhauling of the educational system, an emphasis on technical training, and the growth of a new Soviet-trained technical intelligentsia.”¹⁰⁶ By the late 1930s, this new Soviet intelligentsia was ready to lead and guide the USSR for the next fifty years.

Richard Pipes wrote, “It is entirely futile to seek any single explanation for major occurrences.”¹⁰⁷ To understand the Great Terror, a phenomenon defined by astonishing complexity, it is necessary to explore a multitude of interpretations. But this too needs to be questioned. Maybe the first and last place to look for an explanation is with the Party. As one of the defendants in the Moscow show trials stated, “the slightest rift with the Party, the slightest insincerity towards the Party, the slightest hesitation with regard to the leadership, with regard to

¹⁰⁵ Werth, 191.

¹⁰⁶ Merle Fainsod, *Smolensk Under Soviet Rule* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 11.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Pipes, *Three “Why’s” of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Random House Inc., 1995), 10.

the Central Committee, is enough to land you in the camp of counterrevolution.”¹⁰⁸ The Party was always right. If the Party said you were a counterrevolutionary, then you were a counterrevolutionary. The Party, represented by Stalin and his inner circle, issued orders. NKVD agents carried out the orders. There could be no debate.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Fitzpatrick, 19.

CHAPTER 5 “EPILOGUE”

*“It is through madness that the greatest good things have come to Greece,” Plato said, in concert with all ancient mankind.*¹

On 25 February, 1956, Nikita Khrushchev delivered his notorious “Secret Speech” to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. For several hours, Khrushchev railed against the former General Secretary, criticizing the celebrated Stalin for his “glaring violations of revolutionary legality.”² Khrushchev argued that Stalin was directly responsible for a brutal campaign of “mass repression and terror.”³ He accused the former Party leader of employing “mass terror against the Party cadres.”⁴ As the dismayed delegates listened to the litany of charges and accusations, Khrushchev proclaimed “that many entirely innocent persons, who in the past had defended the Party line, became victims.”⁵ Providing details as to why so many highly esteemed Party members had admitted to being spies, traitors, and wreckers, Khrushchev revealed the use of the “barbaric tortures”⁶ that were systematically employed to secure admissions of guilt. Khrushchev used the speech to personally rehabilitate many of victims of the Great Terror. But as he finished naming several of the innocent Party members who had been executed, it became clear that the most controversial victims of Stalin’s Terror would not be rehabilitated: Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Bukharin. And Khrushchev concluded his speech without placing any blame or responsibility on those members of Stalin’s inner circle who had helped him to plan and carry out

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, 1881 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 14.

² Nikita Khrushchev, “Secret Speech,” in *The Structure of Soviet History: Essays and Documents* edited by Ronald Grigor Suny (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 395.

³ Khrushchev, 396.

⁴ Khrushchev, 397.

⁵ Khrushchev, 395.

⁶ Khrushchev, 397.

the Terror: Molotov, Voroshilov, and Kagonovich.⁷ Was the speech a passionate condemnation of Stalinism? Or was it a calculated political maneuver designed to empower Khrushchev and his supporters?

By not rehabilitating men like Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Bukharin, the implication was that they were in fact “enemies of the people.” And by focusing his speech on the crimes of Stalin, on “Stalin’s despotism,”⁸ Khrushchev avoided discussing the profoundly positive effects the Stalinist system had on the Soviet Union. Through rapid industrialization, collectivization, cultural revolution, and mass purges, Stalin succeeded in building and defending socialism in Russia. From 1928 to 1940, industrialization grew at a remarkable rate of 12-14% per year, the urban population doubled, and the number of workers doubled. In the same time span, heavy industry exploded, with steel production increased fourfold, coal production increased fivefold, and the generation of electrical power increased ninefold. By the end of World War II, the Soviet Union was the second largest industrial power in the world.⁹ In analyzing the effects of the Great Terror, as a result of applying a Western, deontological perspective, historians have focused almost entirely on the tragic loss of life, largely ignoring the industrial and economic legacy of Stalinism.

After suffering early losses and defeats in the Second World War, the Soviet Union rallied to crush Nazi Germany. One of main reasons for this was that the USSR’s production of planes, tanks, and artillery far surpassed Germany’s.¹⁰ The Soviet Union emerged from the war victorious, as one of the two world superpowers. The USSR now represented the great alternative to capitalism, with its ability to withstand economic catastrophes such as the Great Depression and

⁷ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 392.

⁸ Khrushchev, 394.

⁹ The numbers and statistics in this paragraph come from John M. Thompson, *Russia and the Soviet Union: A Historical Introduction from the Kievan State to the Present* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2013), 235.

¹⁰ Martin Malia, 289.

its capacity to defeat an international menace like Nazi Germany. Communism became a global force, and the era of the Soviet empire had begun.¹¹ The USSR now controlled the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, extended the Soviet border westward into eastern Europe, regained territory, privilege, and influence in northeastern China and Korea, and reclaimed territory that had been lost to Japan.¹² In 1949, the Soviet Union, a nation that much of the Western world had for decades regarded as “backwards,” successfully tested its first nuclear device.¹³ With similar socialist regimes soon founded in China and North Korea, the Soviet Union and the Communist Party became “father of the peoples” to a third of humanity.¹⁴ And not long after Khrushchev’s speech, the Soviet Union led the way in the race to space, with the launching of Sputnik, the first satellite, in 1957, completing the first moon landing in 1959, and successfully putting the first man into space in 1961. Only twenty-five years earlier, on the eve of the Great Terror, Stalin spoke of the dire state of Soviet technology, of the USSR’s scandalous backwardness.

How could such astounding advances occur in such a short period of time? The answer, although disturbing on so many levels, is provided by examining the Great Terror. The NKVD executed nearly 700,000 people during the course of the blood purges. Several hundred thousand more died in the Gulag. The horrific violence and brutality tore apart countless families and annihilated the dreams and aspirations of innumerable Soviet citizens. We will never know how many wives became widows, how many children became orphans, and how many young men and women forfeited their youth and vitality in the abominable abyss of the Soviet Gulag. But the

¹¹ Malia, 274. See also Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1 and 395. Burbank and Cooper call the Soviet Union a “communist empire” and “an empire by communist means.”

¹² Michael H. Hunt, *The World Transformed: 1945 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 47-48.

¹³ Hunt, 53.

¹⁴ Malia, 274.

historian, tasked with the analysis of causation, must look beyond the colossal moral transgressions and try to understand how phenomena like the Great Terror affect state structures and institutions.

Socialism, as outlined by Marx and Engels, entails industrialization, urbanization, and a preponderance of workers. All this, in turn, demands technically educated cadres. Leninism, as expressed in the Tenth Party Congress, requires the elimination of all opposition – there can be no dissent, no factions within the Party. Communism necessitates a unified political body, with all members of the political community eventually identifying, through an evolutionary process, not as various ethnic or national groups, but as Communist workers. And the Soviet Union, as the very symbol of the socialist state and the realization of Marxism, needed as their impenetrable foundation an army of workers and soldiers. Stalin, as a progressive, forward-looking leader, understood that the masses of “anti-Soviet elements” – the kulaks, priests, and petty criminals – had no place in the future Soviet state. Stalinism addressed all of these issues through its revolutionary policies and programs.

A new generation of technically educated men and women replaced the old guard, building the tanks and planes that would defeat Nazi Germany and designing the rockets and satellites that would launch the Soviet Union beyond the Iron Curtain and into outer space. Ethnic populations and national contingents that had the potential to revolt against the Soviet Union were repressed, either through mass executions or mass deportations. The kulaks, with the potential to incite rebellion amongst the Soviet Union’s immense rural population were also violently repressed. When World War II broke out in 1939, and even as the USSR suffered devastating losses throughout 1940 and 1941, there was no “fifth column” to rise up against the Communist Party. For Stalin to build and defend socialism in Russia, and for the Soviet Union to become a global

superpower, the Great Terror, although morally repulsive and ethically monstrous, was an absolute necessity.

In the 1930s, a radicalized and militarized socialist ideology intersected with extremely threatening foreign and domestic circumstances. The result of this intersection was the Great Terror. The circumstances demanded a response; the ideology determined the response. To transform the USSR into a global superpower, the Soviet state employed a number of radical policies. Mass terror was one of these policies, the “crimson madness” that destroyed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens. But from this destruction emerged an immense Communist empire. The *telos* had been realized.

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ABSTRACT**THE GREAT TERROR: VIOLENCE, IDEOLOGY, AND THE BUILDING OF
STALIN'S SOVIET EMPIRE**

by

MICHAEL POLANO

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Advisor: Dr. Aaron Retish**Major:** History (Modern Europe)**Degree:** Master of Arts

“The Great Terror: Violence, Ideology, and the Building of Stalin’s Soviet Empire” is a study of the confluence of terror and ideology in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. I argue that an intersection of Soviet ideology and geopolitical circumstances caused the Great Terror. The Stalinist variant of Soviet ideology evolved from Leninism and Marxism. It consisted of both a vision of an ideal socialist society and explicit practices and policies designed to realize the vision. It was the geopolitical circumstances, both foreign and domestic, that activated this ideology, compelling Stalin and his inner circle to initiate and employ practices and policies that became increasingly radicalized and militarized throughout the 1930s.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

My first semester at Wayne State University, in the winter of 2015, I took Dr. Aaron Retish's class on the Russian Revolution. He asked us, his students, to choose a topic for our term paper before we left for Spring Break. As someone who has always had a passion for art and literature, and looking to focus on the culture of the period, I chose to write my paper on Vasily Kandinsky. I spent most of my evenings during Spring Break relaxing and watching movies. One night I decided to watch *Schindler's List*. I had seen the film years before, but thought, as an aspiring historian, that it was something I should watch a second time. As I sat motionless in the darkness of my living room, I was deeply disturbed and confounded by the horrific violence. For nearly three hours, I kept asking myself the same question over and over again: *why?* Why such repulsive acts of violence and brutality?

I sent Dr. Retish an email the following night and asked him if I could change my topic. I told him that I now wanted to write my paper on state violence and terror. I spent the next several weeks exploring the Red Terror, the first campaign of mass terror and repression under Lenin and the Bolsheviks. By the time the semester had ended, I knew I would devote myself to studying the political violence of modern Europe. For the next two years, under Dr. Retish's supervision, I wrote papers on Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and the Great Terror. From the beginning, there was something curiously fascinating about the Great Terror – the cult of Stalin, the spectacle of the show trials, the vast number of ethnic groups affected, the assault on the *kulaks* and criminals, and the secret police ominously drifting through the streets of Leningrad and Moscow in their *black ravens*. I needed to understand why Stalin had ordered his secret police to arrest and execute hundreds of thousands of his own people. *Why?* If I could answer this question, then I would be able to make some sense of the extraordinary political violence that plagues our modern world.