

YEZHOV VS. STALIN: THE CAUSES OF THE MASS REPRESSIONS OF 1937–1938 IN THE USSR

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This article outlines the causes of the mass repressions of 1937–1938 in the Soviet Union. Primary-source evidence strongly supports the hypothesis that these repressions were the result of anti-Stalin conspiracies by two groups, which overlapped somewhat: the political Opposition of supporters of Grigorii Zinoviev, of Trotskyists, of Rightists (Bukharin, Rykov, and their adherents); and of military men (Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky and others); and high-ranking Party leaders, nominally supporters of Stalin, who opposed the democratic aspects of the “Stalin” Constitution of 1936. It discusses Stalin’s struggle for democratic reform and its defeat. The prevailing “anti-Stalin paradigm” of Soviet history is exposed as the reason mainstream scholarship has failed to understand the mass repressions, misnamed “Great Terror.”

Introduction

On February 25, 1956, Nikita S. Khrushchev delivered his “Secret Speech” to the delegates at the XX Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In it, he attacked Stalin for committing a number of crimes against members of the Party. Khrushchev stated:

It was determined that of the 139 members and candidates of the party’s Central Committee who were elected at the 17th Congress, 98 persons, i.e., 70 per cent, were arrested and shot (mostly in 1937–1938)... Of 1,966 delegates with either voting or advisory rights, 1,108 persons were arrested on charges of anti-revolutionary crimes.

... Now, when the cases of some of these so-called “spies” and “saboteurs” were examined, it was found that all their cases were fabricated.

Confessions of guilt of many arrested and charged with enemy activity were gained with the help of cruel and inhuman tortures.

Khrushchev claimed that Nikolai Ezhov, the Commissar of the NKVD from August 1936 until November 1938, must have acted under Stalin’s orders.

It is clear that these matters were decided by Stalin, and that without his orders and his sanction Yezhov could not have done this. (Khrushchev 1962)

The “Great Terror”

In 1968, British writer Robert Conquest published a book titled *The Great Terror. Stalin’s Purge of the Thirties*. Conquest relied heavily on Khrushchev-era books and articles, which he cited without source criticism, as though the claims made in them were unproblematically accurate. Conquest’s book proved to be of enormous value as anticommunist propaganda. Scholars of Soviet history began to employ “the Great Terror,” as a designation for this period of Soviet history.

The Anti-Stalin Paradigm

The goal of my recent book, *Yezhov vs. Stalin*, is to identify the causes of, and properly locate the responsibility for, this mass repression. Historians of the Soviet Union have proposed several different explanations. My research concludes that all of them are fundamentally wrong. These historians have in fact not been trying to discover the causes of the mass repressions. Instead, they are groping for an explanation that fits the dominant historical framework, or paradigm, for this period. I call this the “anti-Stalin paradigm.”

The proximate origin of the anti-Stalin paradigm is the writings of Leon Trotsky. In service to his own conspiracy, Trotsky depicted Stalin as a monster. Today, we know that Trotsky lied about virtually everything that concerned Stalin and the USSR. In his “Secret Speech” Khrushchev took up a number of the same falsehoods that Trotsky had invented (Furr 2015).

At the XXII Party Congress in 1961, Khrushchev and his men accused Stalin of yet more crimes. From 1962 to 1964, Khrushchev sponsored hundreds of articles and books attacking Stalin. These were avidly repeated by Western anti-communist writers. Between 1987 and 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev sponsored yet another avalanche of anti-Stalin writings. These contributed significantly to the ideological dismantling of the Soviet Union. Today, we know that Khrushchev’s and Gorbachev’s men were lying in virtually everything they wrote about Stalin.

According to this anti-Stalin paradigm:

- Stalin was a “dictator.” Therefore, he must have initiated, or at least could have stopped, everything important that occurred. Whatever happened, happened because he wanted it, or something very like it, to happen. Stalin was always “in control.”
- The alleged conspiracies against the Stalin government were all fabrications.
- The evidence produced in the testimony at the Moscow Trials, and in the interrogations and confession statements that have gradually been published since the end of the USSR in 1991, must be fabrications too.

Most mainstream historians of the Stalin period bind themselves *a priori* to these tenets. They are not questioned, nor is there any attempt to validate them.

These strictures dictate the kinds of explanations and the types of evidence that are deemed acceptable. Their purpose is to guarantee that the only historical explanations set forth in mainstream historiography are those that make Stalin and the USSR “look bad.” They are convenient to the view of the USSR as “totalitarian,” a “dictatorship” ruled by “terror.” They reinforce the concept of this period as “the Great Terror.”

These are *disabling* assumptions. Accepting them makes it impossible to understand Soviet history of the Stalin period. But their aim was never to facilitate a truthful account of history. Rather, their purpose is to reinforce an anti-communist, virtually demonized view of Stalin and the USSR, and thereby of the world communist movement of the twentieth century.

Books about the so-called “Great Terror” continue to appear. A recent example is *The Great Fear. Stalin’s Terror of the 1930s* by British historian James Harris. Harris’s tone is moderate and, for the field of Soviet history, relatively nonjudgmental.

However, in common with all other mainstream academic historians of this period, including the Trotskyist historians, Harris ignores all the evidence that proves that the massive executions were not Stalin’s doing but the product of Ezhov’s conspiracy. Harris endorses the long-disproven story of the German plot to frame Marshal Tukhachevsky (169–170), repeats the similarly disproven tale that Kirov’s murderer “was almost certainly acting alone” and decides, in the face of all the evidence, that the fears of challenges to the Stalin government were false (186).

The keystone questions concerning the mass repressions known as the “Great Terror” are these:

1. Was Stalin responsible for the murders of hundreds of thousands of innocent persons, as is usually claimed?
2. If Stalin was *not* responsible, how were Ezhov and his men able to go on killing so many innocent people for over a year?

Two sets of events are crucial to understanding these mass repressions. The first is Stalin’s struggle for electoral democracy and its defeat. The second is the interlocking conspiracies involving supporters of Grigorii Zinoviev, of Leon Trotsky, of Nikolai Bukharin, Genrikh Iagoda, Nikolai Ezhov, and many others, called the “Rights”; and of military figures, of which the “Tukhachevsky Affair” is the best known.

Elections

During 1930s, the Stalin leadership was concerned to promote democracy in the governance of the state and to foster innerparty and trade-union democracy. In December 1936, the Extraordinary 8th Congress of Soviets approved a draft

of the new Soviet Constitution that called for secret ballot and contested elections (Zhukov 2003, 309).

Candidates were to be allowed not only from the Communist Party¹ but from other citizens' groups as well, based on residence, affiliation (such as religious groups), or workplace organizations. But this last provision was never put into effect. Contested elections were never held.

The democratic aspects of the Constitution² were inserted at Stalin's insistence. Stalin and his closest supporters fought tenaciously to keep these provisions. He, and they, yielded only when confronted by their rejection by the Party's Central Committee, and by the panic surrounding the discovery of serious conspiracies that collaborated with Japanese and German fascism to overthrow the Soviet government.

In June 1934, the Politburo assigned the task of drafting a new Constitution to Avel' Enukidze, long a leading figure in the Soviet government. Some months later, Enukidze returned with a suggestion for open, uncontested elections. Almost immediately, Stalin expressed his disagreement with Enukidze's proposal, insisting on secret elections (Zhukov 2003, 116–121).

In a dramatic interview of March 1, 1936, with American newspaper magnate Roy Howard, Stalin declared that the Soviet constitution would guarantee that all voting would be by secret ballot. Voting would be on an equal basis, with a peasant vote counting as much as that of a worker; on a territorial basis, as in the West, and direct—all Soviets would be elected by the citizens themselves.

We shall probably adopt our new constitution at the end of this year. . . . As has been announced already, according to the new constitution, the suffrage will be universal, equal, direct, and secret.

Stalin also declared that all elections would be contested. Different citizens' organizations would be able to put forth candidates to run against the Communist Party's candidates. Stalin told Howard that citizens would cross off the names of all candidates except those they wished to vote for.

Stalin also stressed the importance of contested elections in fighting bureaucracy.

You think that there will be no election contests. But there will be, and I foresee very lively election campaigns. There are not a few institutions in our country which work badly. . . . Our new electoral system will tighten up all institutions and organizations and compel them to improve their work. Universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage in the U.S.S.R. will be a whip in the hands of the population against the organs of government which work badly. In my opinion our new Soviet constitution will be the most democratic constitution in the world. (Stalin 1936a)

Stalin insisted that *lishentsy*, Soviet citizens who had been deprived of the franchise, should have it restored. These included members of former exploiting classes such as former landlords, those who had fought against the Bolsheviks during the Civil War of 1918–1921, and those convicted of certain crimes (as in

the U.S. today). Important among the *lishentsy* were the “kulaks,” former rich peasants who had been the main targets of the collectivization movement a few years earlier.

These electoral reforms would have been unnecessary unless the Stalin leadership wanted to change the manner in which the Soviet Union was governed. Stalin wanted to get the Communist Party out of the business of directly running the Soviet Union and return “all power to the Soviets,” a Bolshevik demand of 1917.

The Anti-Bureaucracy Struggle

The Stalin leadership was also concerned about the Party’s role. Stalin himself raised the fight against bureaucratism with great vigor as early as his Report to the XVII Party Congress in January 1934.

Party leaders controlled the government both by determining who entered the Soviets and by exercising various forms of oversight or review over what the government ministries did. Stalin, Molotov, and others called the new electoral system a “weapon against bureaucratization.” Speaking at the 7th Congress of Soviets on February 6, 1935, Molotov said that secret elections “will strike with great force against bureaucratic elements and provide them a useful shock” (Zhukov 2003, 124).

Government ministers and their staffs had to know something about the affairs over which they were in charge, if they were to be effective in production. This meant technical education in their fields. But Party leaders usually made their careers by advancement through Party positions alone. These Party officials exercised control, but they themselves often lacked the technical knowledge that could make them skilled at supervision.

This is, apparently, what the Stalin leadership meant by the term “bureaucratism.” Though they viewed it as a danger—as, indeed, all Marxists did—they believed it was not inevitable. Rather, they thought that it could be overcome by changing the role of the Party in socialist society. The concept of democracy that Stalin and his supporters in the Party leadership wished to inaugurate in the Soviet Union would necessarily involve a qualitative change in the societal role of the Party.

Those documents that were accessible to researchers did allow us to understand... that already by the end of the 1930s determined attempts were being undertaken to separate the Party from the state and to limit in a substantive manner the Party’s role in the life of the country. (Zhukov 2000, 8)

Article 3 of the 1936 Constitution reads “In the U.S.S.R. all power belongs to the working people of town and country as represented by the Soviets of Working People’s Deputies.” The Communist Party is mentioned only in Article 126, as “the vanguard of the working people in their struggle to strengthen and develop the socialist system and is the leading core of all organizations of

the working people, both public and state.” That is, the Party was to lead organizations, but not the legislative or executive organs of the state (Constitution 1936; Zhukov 2000, 29–30).

At the June 1937 Central Committee Plenum, Iakov A. Iakovlev, one of those who had worked on the draft of the new constitution, said that the suggestion for contested elections was made by Stalin himself. This suggestion met with widespread, albeit tacit, opposition from the regional Party leaders, the First Secretaries. After the Howard interview, there was not even nominal praise or support for Stalin’s statement about contested elections in the central newspapers—those most under the direct control of the Politburo. *Pravda* carried one article only, on March 10, 1936, and it did not mention contested elections (Zhukov 2003, 423; 210).

From this historian Iurii N. Zhukov concludes:

This could mean only one thing. Not only the ‘broad leadership’ [the regional First Secretaries], but at least a part of the Central Committee apparatus, Agitprop under Stetskii and Tal’, did not accept Stalin’s innovation, did not want to approve, even in a purely formal manner, contested elections, dangerous to many, which, as followed from those of Stalin’s words that *Pravda* did underscore, directly threatened the positions and real power of the First Secretaries — the Central Committees of the national communist parties, the regional, oblast’, city, and area committees. (Zhukov 2003, 211)

Senior Party leaders were usually veterans of the dangerous days of Tsarist times, the Revolution, the Civil War, and collectivization, when to be a communist was fraught with peril and difficulty. Many had little formal education. It appears that most of them were unwilling or unable to “remake themselves” through self-education.

All of these men were long-time supporters of Stalin’s policies. They had implemented the collectivization of the peasantry—a step essential to escape the cycle of famines—during which hundreds of thousands of kulak families had been deported. They had been in charge of crash industrialization, under necessarily severe conditions of poor housing, insufficient food and medical care, low pay and few goods to buy with it.

Now Stalin was threatening them with elections in which persons formerly deprived of the franchise because they had opposed these Soviet policies would suddenly have the right to vote restored. They feared many would vote against their candidates or indeed any Party-backed candidate.

Stalin himself put it even more strongly:

... if the people here and there elected hostile forces, this will mean that our agitational work is poorly organized, and that we have fully deserved this disgrace. (Stalin 1936b; Zhukov 2003, 293).

This was Stalin’s position. The First Secretaries opposed it. Did they consider Stalin’s proposal to be a violation of the dictatorship of the proletariat? Did

they regard it as too great a concession to capitalist concepts of democracy? Even in the most “democratic” of capitalist states avowed enemies of capitalism are not permitted to participate freely in elections unless pro-capitalist parties have overwhelming advantages. And even in those states the system itself—capitalism—is never “up for grabs.”

Conspiracy: The Bloc of Oppositionists

While the Congress, which had opened on November 25, 1936, was attending to the new Constitution the Soviet leadership was between the first two large-scale Moscow Trials. Grigorii Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev had gone on trial along with some others in August 1936. The second trial, in January 1937, involved some of the major followers of Trotsky, led by Iurii Piatakov, until recently the Deputy Commissar of Heavy Industry (Zhukov 2003, 291).

At the public Moscow trials of 1936, 1937, and 1938, the prosecution charged that a clandestine criminal bloc of the various opposition groups was formed in 1932, had murdered Kirov, and continued to conspire against the Stalin leadership. From exile Leon Trotsky vigorously denied that he and his followers had joined or ever would join such a bloc. But in 1980 Pierre Broué, at that time the most prominent Trotskyist historian in the world, discovered that this bloc did in fact exist and that Trotsky had approved it (Broué 1980).

On December 1, 1934, Sergei M. Kirov, First Secretary of the Leningrad oblast’ and city Party Committees, was murdered in Party headquarters at the Smolny Institute in Leningrad. The Stalin-led Soviet government stated that their investigation proved that the assassin, Leonid Vasil’evich Nikolaev, had acted on behalf of a secret Zinovievist group.

Trotsky claimed that Stalin was lying. Khrushchev’s and, later, Gorbachev’s men claimed that no secret Zinovievist group existed and that Nikolaev had been a lone assassin. Western anticommunist scholars either echo Khrushchev and Gorbachev or claim that Stalin had had Kirov killed. Thanks to evidence from the former Soviet archives and the Harvard Trotsky archives we now know that the Stalin-era police and prosecution were correct (Furr 2013).

At the first Moscow Trial in August 1936, Zinoviev and Kamenev confessed to collaborating in Kirov’s murder. They admitted that the goal of the bloc of oppositionists including Zinovievists, Trotskyists, and others was to seize power in the USSR by violence. Other Trotskyists confessed to plotting assassinations of Soviet leaders, including Stalin.

The defendants in the 1936 Moscow Trial had disclosed the existence of a parallel leadership for the bloc and had named Trotskyists and Rightists as participants. Trotskyists named included Karl Radek and Iurii Piatakov. Rightist leaders named included Mikhail Tomsky, Aleksei Rykov, and Nikolai Bukharin (Report of Court Proceedings, 1936).

Between September and December 1936, Radek, Piatakov, and others involved with them revealed details about Trotsky’s conspiracies with Germany, Japan, and with anti-Soviet and pro-fascist forces inside the USSR. At the

second Moscow Trial of January 1937, the defendants detailed Trotsky's plans to dismantle socialism in the USSR in exchange for German and Japanese support in seizing power. They implicated Bukharin, Rykov, and other Rightists as members of the bloc who were fully informed about Trotsky's plans (Report of Court Proceedings 1937).

The February-March 1937 Plenum of the Central Committee, the longest ever held, dragged on for two weeks. This plenum dramatized the contradictory tasks that confronted the Party leadership: the struggle against internal enemies, and the need to prepare for secret, contested elections under the new Constitution. The discovery of more groups conspiring to overthrow the Soviet government demanded police action. But to prepare for truly democratic elections to the government, and to improve innerparty democracy—a theme stressed over and over by those closest to Stalin in the Politburo—required the opposite: openness to criticism and self-criticism, and secret elections of leaders by rank-and-file Party members.

Leningrad Party leader Andrei Zhdanov spoke about the need for greater democracy in the country and in the Party, invoking the struggle against bureaucracy and the need for closer ties to the masses, both party and non-party.

The new electoral system ... will give a powerful push towards the improvement of the work of Soviet bodies, the liquidation of bureaucratic bodies, the liquidation of bureaucratic shortcomings, and deformations in the work of our Soviet organizations. And these shortcomings, as you know, are very substantial. Our Party bodies must be ready for the electoral struggle. In the elections we will have to deal with hostile agitation and hostile candidates. (Zhukov 2003, 343)

Zhdanov spoke out strongly for democracy in the Party as well.

This meant secret ballot re-election of all party organs from top to bottom, periodic reporting of party organs to their organizations, strict party discipline, and subordination of the minority to the majority, and unconditional obligatory decisions of higher bodies on all party members. He complained about co-option (appointment) to party buros rather than election, and candidates for leading positions being considered behind closed doors, 'in family order. When he called this 'familyness [*semeistvennost'*]' Stalin interjected, 'it is a deal [*sgovor*, literally, a marriage agreement]. This was a virtual declaration of war against the regional clan leaderships, and their reaction in the discussion to Zhdanov's report (which they at first unprecedentedly greeted with angry silence) showed that they were angry. (Getty 2013a, 77)

Nikolai Shvernik, representing the Stalin leadership of the Party, issued a strong call for democracy in the trade unions.

Shvernik argued that the unions, like the Party, lacked internal democracy.

"I should say here, directly and with all frankness," he explained, "that the unions are in even worse shape." With the development of new industries

during the first five-year plan, the country's 47 unions had split into 165, creating thousands of new jobs. Positions at every level were filled by appointment, rather than election. . . Shvernik concluded his speech with the suggestion that elections were needed not only in the Party, but in the unions as well. (Goldman 2007, 126)

Party Secretaries' Fear of Elections

Zhdanov's report was drowned out by discussions about "enemies." A number of First Secretaries responded with alarm that those who were, or might be expected to be, preparing most assiduously for the Soviet elections were opponents of Soviet power.

From the beginning of the discussions Stalin's fears were understandable. It seemed he had run into a deaf wall of incomprehension, of the unwillingness of the CC members, who heard in the report just what they wanted to hear, to discuss what he wanted them to discuss. Of the 24 persons who took part in the discussions, 15 spoke mainly about "enemies of the people," that is, Trotskyists. They spoke with conviction, aggressively, just as they had after the reports by Zhdanov and Molotov. They reduced all the problems to one — the necessity of searching out "enemies." And practically none of them recalled Stalin's main point — about the shortcomings in the work of Party organizations, about preparation for the elections to the Supreme Soviet. (Zhukov 2003, 357)

Most threatening for all Party officials, including First Secretaries, Stalin proposed that each of them should choose two cadre to take their places while they attended six-month political education courses. With replacement officials in their stead, Party secretaries might well have feared that they could easily be reassigned during this period, breaking the back of their "families" (officials subservient to them), a major feature of bureaucracy (Zhukov 2003, 362). This proposal of Stalin's was ignored. The courses never took place.

During the next few months, Stalin and his closest associates tried to turn the focus away from a hunt for internal enemies—the largest concern of the CC members—and back toward fighting bureaucracy in the Party and preparing for the Soviet elections. Meanwhile, "local party leaders did everything they could within the limits of party discipline (and sometimes outside it) to stall or change the elections" (Getty 2002, 126; Zhukov 2003, 367–371).

But a very ominous period loomed. In late March 1937 Genrikh Iagoda, former head of the NKVD, was arrested. In April, he began to confess to having played an important role in the secret bloc of oppositionists that had been the main target of the First and Second Moscow Trials (Genrikh Iagoda 1997).

The Politburo had planned for the Constitutional reforms to be the central agenda item at the upcoming June 1937 Plenum. But by June, the discovery of plots by the former chief of the NKVD and by top military leaders to overthrow

the government and kill its leading members had changed the political atmosphere entirely.

In a June 2 speech to the expanded session of the Military Soviet Stalin portrayed the series of recently uncovered conspiracies as limited and largely successfully dealt with. At the February-March Plenum, he and his Politburo supporters had minimized the First Secretaries' overriding concern with internal enemies. But the situation was "slowly, but decisively, getting out of his [Stalin's] control" (Stalin 1937; Zhukov 2003, Chapter 16, *passim.*; 411).

Between the end of the February-March 1937 CC Plenum on March 5, 1937, and the opening of the June CC Plenum on June 23, 1937, 18 members of the Central Committee and 20 candidate members were arrested for participation in anti-Soviet conspiracies. Their expulsions were approved at the June Plenum.

The Conspiracies Were Genuine

On June 17, 1937, just prior to the June CC plenum, Nikolai Ezhov, who had replaced Iagoda as Commissar of the NKVD, transmitted a message from S. N. Mironov, NKVD chief in Western Siberia, reporting the threat of revolts by subversives in concert with Japanese intelligence. Mironov reported that Robert I. Eikhe, Party First Secretary of Western Siberia, would request the ability to form a "troika" to deal with this threat (Furr 2016, 48; Khaustov and Samuel'son 2009, 332–333).

On June 19, 1937 Stalin received a telegram, addressed to the Soviet government, sent by Trotsky from his exile in Mexico. In it, Trotsky stated that Stalin's policies would lead "to external and internal collapse." On it Stalin signed his name and wrote: "Ugly spy! Brazen spy of Hitler!" It was also signed by Molotov, Voroshilov, Mikoian, and Zhdanov. Clearly, they all believed that Trotsky really was in contact with the Germans. Given Tukhachevsky's confession and Marshal Budennyi's comments on the Tukhachevsky trial, there can no doubt that this conspiracy did exist (Furr 2009, 15).

Anti-Soviet Conspiracies

No transcript of the June 1937 Plenum has been published. However, Iurii Zhukov quotes extensively from some archival transcript materials. We also have a "konspekt" (synopsis) of the remarks Ezhov made. It is dated June 23, which would make Ezhov's remarks the first report of the Plenum. Ezhov's report was extremely alarming. He listed a dozen active conspiracies, concluding: "the above is a list of only the most important groups" (Petrov and Iansen 2008, 293–294).

Elections

Iakovlev and Molotov criticized the failure of Party leaders to organize for independent Soviet elections. Molotov stressed the need to move even honored revolutionaries out of the way if they were unprepared for the tasks of the day. He emphasized that Soviet officials were not “second-class workers” (persons of little importance). Evidently, some Party leaders were treating them as such.

According to the surviving agenda of the CC Plenum Iakovlev spoke on June 27. He exposed and criticized the failure of First Secretaries to hold secret elections for Party posts, relying instead on appointment. He emphasized that Party members who were elected delegates to the Soviets were not to be placed under the discipline of Party groups outside the Soviets or by Party superiors and told how to vote. And Iakovlev referred in the strongest terms to the need to “recruit from the very rich reserve of new cadre to replace those who had become rotten or bureaucratized.” All these statements constituted an explicit attack on the First Secretaries (Zhukov 2003, 424–427; Zhukov 2000, 39–40, quoting from archival documents).

Perhaps most revealing is the following remark by Stalin, as quoted by Zhukov:

At the end of the discussion, when the subject was the search for a more dispassionate method of counting ballots, [Stalin] remarked that in the West, thanks to a multiparty system, this problem did not exist. Immediately thereafter he suddenly uttered a phrase that sounded very strange in a meeting of this kind: “We do not have different political parties. Fortunately or unfortunately, we have only one party.” [Zhukov’s emphasis] And then he proposed, but only as a temporary measure, to use for the purpose of dispassionate supervision of elections representatives of all existing societal organizations **except for the Bolshevik Party** . . .

The challenge to the Party autocracy had been issued. (Zhukov 2003, 430–431; Zhukov 2000, 38)

The Constitution was finally outlined and the date of the first elections was set for December 12, 1937. The Stalin leadership again urged the benefits of fighting bureaucracy and building ties to the masses. But all this followed the unprecedented expulsion from the CC of 26 members, 19 of whom were directly charged with treason and counter-revolutionary activity (Zhukov 2003, 430).

The Party was in severe crisis, and it was impossible to expect that events would unroll smoothly. It was the worst possible atmosphere during which to prepare for the adoption of democratic—secret, universal, and contested—elections.

Causes of the Repression

In common with most historians of the USSR, Iurii Zhukov largely discounts the existence of real conspiracies. He believes the NKVD’s targets

must have been *lishentsy*, the very people whose citizenship rights, including franchise, had recently been restored and whose votes potentially posed the greatest danger to the First Secretaries' continuance in power. This may indeed have been one of the motives of some of the regional Party leaders. But it should not simply be assumed, and as yet we have no evidence to support it.

Other historians claim that this mass repression was led by Stalin, who was trying to kill anybody who might be disloyal, a "Fifth Column," if the Soviet Union were invaded. Still others claim that Stalin was out to murder any and all possible rivals, or was paranoid, or simply mad. There is no evidence to support these notions.

In fact, the reason for the campaign of repression stands out clearly in the evidence we have. The subversive activities and rebellions that Mironov, Eikhe, and other regional Party leaders and NKVD men reported were a logical consequence of the conspiracies that had been gradually discovered since the assassination of Kirov over the previous 2½ years.

Before Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" few specialists in Soviet studies doubted the real existence of these conspiracies. Only the Trotskyist movement, faithful to their murdered leader, claimed that these conspiracies were fabrications by Stalin.

This changed after Khrushchev's speech. Virtually all anticommunists, as well as most communists and, of course, all Trotskyists, chose to believe Khrushchev's allegations against Stalin. It followed from what Khrushchev implied in 1956, and from what his supporters claimed at the XXII Party Congress in October, 1961, that the defendants in the Moscow Trials, plus the Tukhachevsky Affair defendants, had all been innocent victims of a frame-up. Mikhail Gorbachev's lieutenants made the same assertions. Since Khrushchev's day, the consensus among professional students of Soviet history has conformed to the Khrushchev-Gorbachev position: there were no conspiracies, all were inventions by Stalin.

This is all false. There has never been any evidence that any of these conspiracies were frame-ups or that any of the defendants were innocent. Just the opposite is the case. The evidence is overwhelming that Kirov was indeed murdered by the clandestine Zinovievist group and that Zinoviev and Kamenev were involved in the group's activities, including Kirov's murder. Trotskyists and Trotsky himself were also implicated (Furr 2013).

We have a great deal of evidence that the conspiracies alleged in all three Moscow Trials were real and that all the defendants were guilty of at least what they confessed to. In some cases, we can now prove that defendants were guilty of crimes that they did not reveal to the Prosecution. We also have a great deal of evidence on the Tukhachevsky Affair. All of it supports the hypothesis that the defendants were guilty as charged (Furr 2015). The evidence that all these conspiracies did in fact exist allows us to view the Ezhov mass repressions of July 1937 to October-November 1938 objectively and in their proper context (Furr 2015, Chapters 1–12).

Denial

Western historians of the USSR have accepted Khrushchev's supposed "revelations" as unproblematically true despite the fact that Khrushchev never gave any evidence for his charges against Stalin and in fact withheld evidence from Party researchers who asked for it.

The main evidentiary basis for Conquest and for works by Khrushchev-sponsored writers including dissidents like Roi Medvedev and Alexander Nekrich, was the Khrushchev-era "revelations." Western historians' accounts of the Stalin period continue to rely heavily on Khrushchev-era accounts.

Vladimir L. Bobrov and I have studied the tenth chapter of Stephen F. Cohen's prize-winning book *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*. Cohen traces Bukharin's life from 1930 until his trial and execution in March 1938. He relied on Khrushchev-era sources that have all proven to be lies. Through the use of primary source evidence from former Soviet archives we show that every fact-claim Cohen makes in this chapter that in any way alleges wrong-doing by Stalin is false (Furr and Bobrov 2010).

From the time of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the study of Soviet history has developed as an adjunct of political anticommunism. It has always had a dual character: that of discovering what happened, and that of defaming Stalin, the Soviet Union, and communism generally. The result is that academic historiography of the Soviet Union is rarely objective. It has "sacred cows," tenets that are never questioned. This is the "anti-Stalin paradigm." Academic historians of the USSR are pressured to conform to this paradigm, or at least not openly violate it.

Chief among the tenets of the anti-Stalin paradigm is that all the Moscow Trials, plus the Tukhachevsky Affair, were frame-ups. Today, we know that this is false. An objective study of the evidence now available from former Soviet archives, from the Trotsky archives, and elsewhere, proves that these conspiracies did indeed exist. This false paradigm deprives academic historians and their readers of the ability to understand the conspiracy trials. It robs them and us of the ability to understand the context for the Ezhov-era mass repressions.

The Threat was Real

Archival documents show that the central Party leadership, Stalin and the Politburo, were constantly receiving very credible NKVD accounts of conspiracies, including transcripts of confessions and details of investigations (Zhukov 2003, Chapter 18; Zhukov 2002a,b, 23). We also possess a number of accounts of these conspiracies from beyond the borders of the USSR (and thus beyond any power of the Soviet prosecution or NKVD to fabricate them).

NKVD Evidence of Conspiracies Sent to Stalin

On July 2, 1937, shortly after the conclusion of the plenum, the Politburo—Stalin and those closest to him—issued the decree "On anti-Soviet elements."

For the next year or more, the Stalin leadership was flooded with reports of conspiracies and revolts from all over the USSR. Many of these have been published. Undoubtedly, a great many more remain unpublished. According to V.N. Khaustov, an anti-Stalin researcher and editor of one of these collections, Stalin believed these reports (Khaustov 2004, 234–235, No. 114).³

And the most frightening thing was that Stalin made his decisions on the basis of confessions that were the result of the inventions of certain employees of the organs of state security. Stalin's reactions attest to the fact that he took these confessions completely seriously. (Khaustov 2011, 6)

Here, Khaustov admits the existence of a major conspiracy by Ezhov and concedes that Stalin was deceived by him. Stalin acted in good faith on the basis of evidence presented to him by Ezhov, much of which may, or must, have been false.

The Lists

Khrushchev:

The vicious practice was condoned of having the NKVD prepare lists of persons whose cases were under the jurisdiction of the Military Collegium and whose sentences were prepared in advance.

Yezhov would send these lists to Stalin personally for his approval of the proposed punishment. In 1937–1938, 383 such lists containing the names of many thousands of party, Soviet, Komsomol, Army and economic workers were sent to Stalin. He approved these lists.

These lists have been published on the Internet, where they are titled the “Stalin Shooting Lists.”⁴ Some writers dishonestly call them “death warrants.” Both are tendentious, inaccurate names, for these were not lists of persons “to be shot” at all.

Following Khrushchev, the anti-Stalin editors of these lists do call the lists “sentences prepared in advance.” But their own research disproves this claim. In reality, these were lists sent to Stalin and other Secretariat members for “review”—*rassmotrenie*—a word that is used many times in the introduction to the lists.⁵

The lists give the sentences that the NKVD recommended to the prosecution to seek *if* the individual were convicted—that is, the sentence the Prosecution would ask the court to apply. Many people on these lists were not convicted at all or were convicted of a lesser offense and so not shot.

The Limits

In the campaign against insurgents and conspirators the Politburo set limits on the numbers of persons the Party leaders and NKVD could execute and imprison.

Order No. 00447 established limits [*limity*] rather than quotas, maximums, not minimums. . . . As we have seen, for years Stalin had been putting limits on mass executions by provincial leaders. If the Politburo had at this moment expected or wanted an open-ended terror, there would be no reason to call them ‘limits’ at all. The word’s meaning was well known: it never meant ‘quotas’. Reflecting Stalin’s concern that locals might go out of control (or out of his control) Order No. 00447 twice warned that ‘excesses’ in local implementation of the operation were not permitted. (Getty, 2013b, 231–232)

Getty also emphasizes this fact in a recent book:

One of the mysteries of the field [of Soviet history] is how *limity* is routinely translated as “quotas.” (Getty 2013b, 340 n. 109)

One writer who constantly translates “*limity*” as “quotas” is Oleg Khlevniuk. Another is Timothy Snyder. It seems that anticommunist writers *want* Stalin to have called for “quotas” so that he appears dishonest and cruel.

Contested Elections to the Soviets are Canceled

The Central Committee Plenum of October 1937 saw the final cancelation of the plan for contested elections to the Soviets. This represented a serious defeat for Stalin and his supporters in the Politburo. A sample ballot, showing several candidates, had already been drawn up.⁶

The Soviet elections of December 1937 were implemented on the basis that the Party candidates would run on slates with 20–25 percent of nonparty candidates—an alliance of sorts, but without a contest. Originally the elections were planned without slates, with voting only for individuals—a far more democratic method in that candidates would not get votes simply by being “on the ticket” (Zhukov 2000, 41; Zhukov 2002a,b; Zhukov 2003, 443).

Iakov Iakovlev

Iakov Iakovlev had been one of those closest to Stalin in drafting the 1936 Constitution to which Stalin was so committed. Along with A. I. Stetskii and B. M. Tal’, Iakovlev was a member of the small commission that worked on the text of the constitution. The commission had presented a “rough draft” to Stalin in February 1936—the draft that Stalin referred to in his celebrated talk with Roy Howard on March 1 (Zhukov 2003, 223).

But on October 10, all the members of the Politburo and Secretariat met in Stalin’s office. The meeting ended at 10 p.m. after approving the main points of Molotov’s presentation at the opening session of the CC Plenum, to be held the next day.

The second point of Molotov’s presentation was:

Contested [literally “parallel”] candidates (not obligatory).

Contested elections were effectively ruled out, since no one expected the regional Party leaders, the First Secretaries, to permit them unless they were required to do so. Point three of Molotov's outline reads: "Non-Party members: 20–25 percent."

What happened? Zhukov concludes that there was simply no majority in the Politburo, let alone the Central Committee, in support of contested elections and a strong insistence on guaranteeing that the Party—which meant the regional Party leaders—would dominate the Soviets. Clearly, Stalin was no "dictator."⁷ He did not get what he had fought hard for.

Iakovlev's Arrest and Confession

The Saratov oblast' Party organization had distrusted Iakovlev, who had been a Trotskyist in 1923. Stalin had stood firmly by him. But on October 12, the day after the opening of the CC Plenum, Iakovlev was arrested. Two days later he confessed to having been a clandestine Trotskyist "sleeper" since 1923. An even greater shock was the fact that Iakovlev also confessed to having been recruited by a German agent who told him that they, the Germans, were in contact with Trotsky and wished to work with Iakovlev on the same terms.

Iakovlev's confession is arguably one of the most important documents from the former Soviet archives published in recent years. That no doubt explains why it is virtually never mentioned, let alone studied, by mainstream historians of the USSR. Iakovlev inculpated as conspirators a number of leading Soviet figures. In a few cases, we also have one or more confessions that confirm Iakovlev's confession.

Party and Trade Union Elections

Although contested elections were not held for the Soviets they were held for Party and trade union positions. Stalin did indeed have democratic intentions—relying on the rank-and-file to vote out local leaders, if they chose to do so, is one of the things democracy is all about. The forces that were powerful enough to defeat Stalin's struggle for democratic, contested elections to the Soviets had not been powerful enough to stop democratic elections in the Party and the trade unions. During the second half of 1937, the unprecedented democratic trade union elections were in fact conducted. But they did not happen again.

The Mass Repressions are Stopped

Accounts of the repressions of 1937–1938 by mainstream historians are useful insofar as they document how the repressions proceeded. By surveying the large number of primary sources now available these accounts show how Stalin and the top Party leadership gradually came to understand what was happening. What they had been assured was a battle against counterrevolutionary

conspiracies had in fact very often been directed against loyal Party members and completely innocent citizens.

Mainstream historians do not discuss the most important sets of documentary evidence that bear directly on the causes, course, and conclusion of the Ezhov mass repressions:

- The conspiracies that we know existed. This includes all those that were the subject of the three Moscow Trials plus the conspiracy of military commanders and other officers that is often referred to simply as the Tukhachevsky Affair. These conspiracies provided the impetus for the resolutions of early July 1937 concerning the need to use massive force.
- The investigation documents detailing the confessions of alleged conspirators and the conclusions of NKVD investigators with which Ezhov bombarded Stalin and the central Party leadership for more than a year after the June 1937 CC Plenum. Dozens of these reports, often very long and detailed, have been published. Iakov Iakovlev's confession is one of them. Only a few have been translated into English. We do not know how much more documentation Stalin received. This is probably just a fraction of it.
- The confession of Ezhov's assistant Mikhail Frinovskii and Ezhov's many confessions of 1939.⁸ These are entirely ignored. The few remarks mainstream historians make about this material shows that they prefer to "not believe" it. This is the fallacy of "begging the question," "assuming that which is to be proven." It is illegitimate for historians to ignore evidence simply because that evidence is not consistent with some preconceived paradigm of "what must have happened." These confessions dismantle the "anti-Stalin paradigm."

Mainstream scholarship ignores all the evidence that explains the reason for the mass repression of the Ezhov era. Then, these scholars declare that the reason for these repressions is a mystery. Naturally, if one decides in advance to ignore the evidence, then the events are indeed inexplicable.

November 1938: Orders to Stop all Mass Repressions

We have a little documentation about early suspicion by the Politburo against the NKVD itself.

In early 1938, the Central Committee sent Shkiriakov to Ordzhonikidze to "investigate evidence that had come through about criminal perversions during the mass operations" committed by regional NKVD organs. (Jansen and Petrov 2002, 135)

Suspicions continued to grow in the Politburo that massive, unauthorized repressions were going on. In August 1938, Ezhov's second-in-command, Mikhail Frinovskii, was replaced by Lavrentii Beria. Beria was chosen as a reliable person to keep watch over Ezhov, as Ezhov himself later stated.

By the time of the October 1937, CC Plenum Stalin and the Politburo had begun to uncover evidence of massive illegal repression. On November 15, 1938, the hearing of cases by troikas were stopped, along with military tribunals and the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court (Furr 2016, 107).

On December 8, the press announced that he [Ezhov] had been relieved of his duties as head of the NKVD “at his own request.” Four days later, the Moscow Regional Court reversed the first of many convictions of former “enemies.” The declaration noted that the Supreme Court had not only released five construction engineers but had recognized that the five had actually tried to thwart “real enemies.” (Getty, 1985, 188–189)

Ezhov’s Conspiracy Gradually Uncovered

“...legality is reintroduced under Beriia, November 1938.” (Wheatcroft 2007, 41)

Once Ezhov had resigned, to be replaced by Beria, orders were issued to immediately stop all the repressions, to repeal all the NKVD Operational Orders that enabled them, and to re-emphasize the need for oversight by the Prosecutor’s Office of all cases of arrest. Then there began a flood of reports to Beria and the central Party leadership concerning massive illegitimate repressions and shootings on the part of local NKVD groups. The central Party leadership began to investigate.

On January 29, 1939, Politburo members Beria, Andrei Andreev, and Georgii Malenkov signed a report detailing massive crimes during Ezhov’s tenure (Petrov and Iansen 2008, 359–363). This important evidence that the mass repression was Ezhov’s, not Stalin’s, doing was only published in 2008. During the next few years, further investigations and prosecutions of guilty NKVD men proceeded. According to the editors of a major document collection:

...in 1939 the NKVD arrested more than 44 thousand persons, about one-fifteenth of the number arrested in 1938. Most of these arrests were in Western Ukraine and Belorussia [as a result of the retaking of these territories from Poland in September 1939 and the arrests of Polish officials and settlers]. During the same year about 110,000 persons were freed after the review of cases of those arrested in 1937–1938. (Khaustov 2006, 564 n. 11)⁹

On October 28, 1939, a group of prosecutors wrote to Andrei Zhdanov to ask him to intercede with the Central Committee about the slowness of the NKVD in reviewing cases of persons innocently imprisoned.

It would seem that the party’s Central Committee decision of November 17, 1938, should have mobilized all attention on immediately rectifying the criminal policy of the bastard Ezhov and his criminal clique, which has literally terrorized Soviet persons, upright, dedicated citizens, old party members, and entire party organizations. (Koenker and Bachman 1997, 26–27)¹⁰

Ezhov's Confessions

Ezhov's own confessions are evidence that Stalin and the central Soviet leadership were not responsible for his massive executions. Ezhov explicitly states many times that his repressions and executions were carried out in pursuit of his own private conspiratorial goals. In his confession of August 4, 1939 Ezhov admitted: "[W]e were deceiving the government in the most blatant manner."¹¹ There is no evidence that these confessions represent anything but what Ezhov chose to say—no evidence of torture, threats, or fabrication.

Ideologically, anticommunist accounts suppress the evidence of Ezhov's conspiracy against the Soviet government. The apparent reason is the desire to falsely accuse Stalin of having ordered all the huge number of executions carried out by Ezhov.

Frinovskii's Statement

In his statement to Beria of April 11, 1939, Mikhail Frinovskii, Ezhov's second-in-command, explicitly confirms the guilt of the defendants in the Moscow Trials.¹² Frinovskii is explicit that Ezhov did not force Bukharin and others to falsely confess. Instead Ezhov asked them not to name him, Ezhov, as one of the Rightist conspirators—and Bukharin and the others did not. We have a great deal of other evidence that Bukharin was guilty. This evidence also serves as confirmation of Frinovskii's (2006) statement.

Ezhov was arrested on April 10, 1939. According to Ezhov the idea of an NKVD conspiracy was first suggested to him by German military attaché General Ernst Köstring. After the Tukhachevsky Affair trial and executions Marshal Egorov (already a conspirator) and the Germans reconsidered this original plan, which was oriented towards aiding an invasion of the USSR by Germany and/or allies. With the top figures in the military conspiracy now removed, the Germans suggested a *coup d'état* instead.

Aside from the Moscow Trials and Tukhachevsky Affair defendants, of whose guilt we can be sure, we do not know whom Ezhov specifically targeted. We would like to know how many of the Central Committee members and other well-known persons such as intellectuals and military officers of lesser rank who were tried and executed during 1937–1938 were in fact guilty; likewise, the hundreds of thousands of ordinary Soviet citizens. The main reason we do not know more about this is that no one is asking this question and doing the research. A huge number of persons have been "rehabilitated"—declared innocent. But the rehabilitation process is political and judicial, not historical. We have shown that many of the well-known figures who have been "rehabilitated" were in fact guilty, declared innocent under Khrushchev and Gorbachev out of political expediency alone (Furr 2011, Chapter 11).

At the end of Ezhov's interrogation of August 4, 1939, the interrogator raises the fact that the NKVD also controlled the GULAG, the labor camps where those not sentenced to execution were confined. Accounts of the GULAG agree

that conditions in the camps were bad during 1937–1938 and improved immediately on Beria's taking over the NKVD from Ezhov. Ezhov's account here explains this.

Evgeniia Ginzburg, who was in Iaroslavl' Prison and who saw no newspapers, said that the prisoners could tell when Ezhov fell: The draconian regime in the prisons (frequent solitary confinement and deprivation of all privileges) was relaxed one day. The timing was confirmed a few days later when Beria's name began to appear on official prison notices. (Getty, 1985, 189)

Conclusion

“Great Terror” is a misleading name, but not because no one was frightened. It is misnamed because Conquest invented the term “Great Terror” to mean “Stalin's Purge of the '30s,” and it was no such thing. The falsehood is located not in the assertion that there was terror but in the claim as to who the terrorists were. Ezhov picked a great many of his victims at random, a process that must have sparked fear. But the Soviet population was not ruled by terror and the Soviet population generally was not “terrorized.” The term “Great Terror” is false in the way in which Conquest used it, and in the way it continues to be used in the field of Soviet history.

Ezhov's mass repressions were a continuation of the conspiracies described at the three Moscow Trials and the Tukhachevsky Affair. Ezhov initiated his own NKVD conspiracy—the mass murders—after the military conspiracy had been discovered and, in the main, destroyed.

A great many innocent persons had been murdered. From 1939 into the war years Beria, as head of the NKVD, and the Soviet Procuracy reviewed hundreds of thousands of cases and released hundreds of thousands of persons whom they judged had been wrongly imprisoned.

At the same time, they continued to investigate, uncover, and punish persons who really were involved in anti-Soviet conspiracies. Real conspiracies did exist. Ezhov's and Frinovskii's confessions make it clear that not everyone repressed under Iagoda and Ezhov was innocent. Soviet émigrés like Grigory Tokaev (1956) and “Svetlanin”/Likhachev testify to the fact that some conspirators were never identified.¹³

The evidence we now have supports two hypotheses. First, that many First Secretaries and other Party leaders were involved in the Right-Trotskyist conspiracy. Second, that some of them were also directly involved with Ezhov's NKVD conspiracy. It is confirmed by the convergence of a great many individual pieces of evidence. It is also utterly incompatible with mainstream Soviet historiography, which demands that Stalin be the mass murderer and Ezhov his “loyal executioner.” For this reason, it is rejected by mainstream anticommunist Soviet historians and by Trotskyists. It does not fit the Procrustean bed of the anti-Stalin paradigm.

Grover Furr has written many books on Soviet history of the Stalin period, most recently Trotsky's "Amalgams": *Trotsky's Lies, The Moscow Trials as Evidence, The Dewey Commission. Trotsky's Conspiracies of the 1930s, Volume One* (2015) and *Yezhov vs. Stalin: The Truth about Mass Repressions and the So-Called "Great Terror" in the USSR* (2016), as well as many articles. His Home Page may be accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/grover-furr-research>. He is a Professor of Medieval Literature in the English Department at Montclair State University in New Jersey.

Notes

1. Its official name was "All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik)."
2. By "democratic" here we mean "consistent with social-democratic, that is, capitalist, notions of democracy."
3. Online at <http://www.memo.ru/history/document/pbkulaki.htm>. A slightly different translation is in Getty and Naumov, Doc. 169, 470–471.
4. <http://stalin.memo.ru/>
5. <http://stalin.memo.ru/images/intro1.htm>
6. At least one copy of such a ballot has survived in an archive. Zhukov has included a photograph of it in Inoi, 6th illustration. I have put it online at https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furr/research/sample_ballot_1937.html
7. For more on the "dictator" question see, Wheatcroft, S. G. 2007. Agency and terror: Evdokimov and mass killing in Stalin's great terror. *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 53:20–43.
8. For these texts in Russian and English see my article "The Moscow Trials and the 'Great Terror' of 1937–1938: What the Evidence Shows." At http://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furr/research/trials_ezhovshchina_update0710.html
9. Russian text online at <http://istmat.info/node/24582>. English translation at http://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furr/research/beria_andreev_malenkov012939eng.html
10. Online at https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furr/research/prosecutors_zhdanov_102839.pdf
11. English translation at <https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furr/research/ezhov080439eng.html>
12. English translation at <https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furr/research/frinovskyeng.html>
13. In the early 1980s, I tried to verify this account by writing to persons who had known Likhachev. Professor Nikolai Andreyev, of Cambridge University (now deceased), wrote me two letters telling me of his close friendship with Likhachev/Svetlanin/Frolov; of how highly he thought of his trustworthiness.

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