

# REPRESSIONS IN PEOPLE'S FATES AND IN THE FATE OF A NATION

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## “REPRESSIONS ARE NECESSARY; THE NEWSPAPER HYPE IS NOT”: EXPLAINING TERROR IN SOVIET TERMS\*

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Ever since Robert Conquest's pioneering study of Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union first appeared in 1968, the high point of state-sponsored violence in the 1930s has been commonly referred to as the “Great Terror”. The subsequent adoption of the eponymous title by scholars to describe the broader phenomenon of “state terror” in the Stalinist period is similarly now widespread within the field. This terminology is, however, highly problematic. In the language and ideology of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) terror was consistently portrayed as a *threat to*, rather than *strategy of*, the state. It formed part of a tightly controlled terminology of terror, rooted in the Party's experiences of revolution and civil war, and employed by the regime to marginalize and condemn opponents in official propaganda and private discourse. This study will address this key distinction and illuminate an important element of continuity in the tactics, ideology and self-perception of the CPSU, and its satellite parties within the Communist International, when approaching challenges to their authority (both real and imagined), whether they were of a social, political or even international flavour. Deploying a case study approach, this paper will demonstrate the extent to which “terror” and other related language offered a stable characterisation of the “enemy” throughout the interwar period.

*Keywords:* terror; Stalinism; press; propaganda; Communist International; historiography.

В 1968 г. Роберт Конквест впервые опубликовал новаторское исследование политической ситуации в Советском Союзе в период правления Иосифа Сталина. С этого момента пик государственного насилия 1930-х гг. стали

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называть «Большим террором». В последующем термин получил широкое распространение в научных кругах в связи с его использованием для описания более общего феномена государственного террора в сталинский период. Однако это определение представляется весьма проблемным. В языковых практиках и идеологии КПСС понятие «террор» использовали скорее для обозначения опасного для государства явления, чем для описания государственной политики. Все это сформировало, по крайней мере частично, жестко контролируемую терминологию, связанную с террором, берущую начало в том опыте, который партия получила в эпоху революции и Гражданской войны. Терминология террора использовалась режимом для маргинализации и осуждения оппонентов в официальной пропаганде и в частном дискурсе. Настоящее исследование затрагивает ключевую проблему различия в представлениях о направленности террора (от государства или против государства). Особое внимание уделяется связям и преемственности между тактикой, идеологией и самовосприятием КПСС и входившими в Коминтерн партиями-сателлитами в условиях реальных и мнимых социальных, политических и даже международных вызовов их господству. Исследование осуществлено с использованием методов *case study* с целью показать степень, до которой «террор» и связанные с ним понятия формируют типичные характеристики «врага» в межвоенный период.

*Ключевые слова:* террор; сталинизм; пресса; пропаганда; Коммунистический интернационал; историография.

The leaders of the Bolshevik revolution undertook a complete reordering of society – and the very make-up of the world stage – embracing violence, the oppression of personal enemies, and those of their fledgling regime, as necessary components of change. Yet it was not just during revolution and civil war that the coercive spread of Soviet power across nations was justified; throughout the opening decades of the Party's struggle to build a communist utopia, when tasked with the problem of the Soviet people, here too the sword of the proletarian dictatorship fell with self-righteous fury.

A sense of personal justification does not, however, discount the need for pragmatism. The persecution of political rivals; the forced exile of entire peoples; and the arbitrary arrest, imprisonment and execution of countless undesirable elements were all, by and large, completed without fanfare and away from public scrutiny. The regime acted with an acute concern for the control and censorship of information, of absolute secrecy typical of its entire *modus operandi*. This was a fundamental tenet of the Soviet coercive machinery, one acknowledged by those who suffered at its hands and later became among its most prominent critics [Solzhenitsyn, p. 11].

Yet even on the more public stage of show trials, the moral, judicial and ideological condemnation of their enemies – enemies *of the people* – was controlled, scripted and directed to reinforce the paternal role of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in protecting its subjects from any threats

to life, liberty and the promised land of Soviet plenty [Chase]. In this manner, the Bolsheviks aimed to limit the risk of equally moralistic condemnation being levelled against them, which, in turn, might lead to the destabilisation of a society with well-established revolutionary credentials.

Putting aside for the moment the question of whether such a strategy was at all successful in concealing the reality from audiences at home and abroad, it is enough to acknowledge that these methods and the wider mechanics of state repression still continue to impede efforts to fully understand the true extent of the regime's victims and the impact of its coercive force on society. Still, a central though often overlooked point remains. The language and terminology of terror and repression, of mass arrests and the violent subjugation of peoples, of despotic governments and bloody executioners, was a vocabulary monopolised *by* the Party and employed *against* its opponents. Indeed, the routine deployment of this language throughout the interwar period reveals that Joseph Stalin and his ruling circle approached challenges to their authority (both real and imagined) in much the same way, whether they were problems of a social, political or even international flavour. As a result, this paper will demonstrate how the public denunciation of enemies (be it individual, group, or nation) formed a key component of Soviet coercive control. Additionally, that the particular language used to characterise enemies and their activities has been overlooked by scholars, despite the breadth, depth and volume of research into the topic completed in the intervening years warrants attention, if not a critical assessment of why historians' persistent reliance on "terror" as a shorthand for the Soviet Union's own repressive activities has contributed to the obfuscation of this contemporary reality.

This fundamental strategy, the language it codified and the machinery responsible for its communication extended beyond Soviet borders and reflects the coordinated efforts of international communists loyal to Moscow to condemn its enemies and vilify any and all acts of violence – or the potential there of – against its allies among the world's proletariat and fraternal parties of the Third International. The significance of such a victim complex becomes doubly important when placed in the context of Joseph Stalin's own preoccupation with external threats to the security of the Soviet state, and how this links to the highpoints of state repression witnessed throughout his primacy [Shearer, 2018]. Without taking seriously both the fear of enemies and their public presentation over the long term, historians are in danger of continuing to overlook patterns of violence that help illuminate key methods, mechanics and motivations of state repression in Stalin's Soviet Union.

### **Terror, Repression and Violent Rhetoric**

This present study was originally developed from earlier research into the Soviet-Finnish War of 1939–1940. The strategies employed, and the language used by the CPSU to describe these events in official propaganda show a striking degree of continuity with the preceding years of Soviet

dominance. A particularly arresting aspect to emerge from this work was Moscow's desperate attempt to justify Soviet intervention in Finland by propagating the idea that "terror" and "repression" could be used against the Finnish people by the Helsinki government:

Young Finnish workers have always been a friend of the Soviet Union. No police ban, no savage repression (*nikakie svirepye repressii*), no terror (*nikakoi terror*) will be able to destroy the hearts of the Finnish youth or their love of the great socialist country...

The above quote is taken from a published letter credited to a young Finnish worker and "friend of the Soviet people", which appeared in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* – the official organ of the Communist Union of Youth (Komsomol) – shortly before the outbreak of hostilities between the USSR and Finland in November 1939 [Комсомольская правда, 1939, 24 нояб., с. 4]. The letter signalled the beginning of a concerted effort by the Soviet press to distinguish between the people and the political administration of Finland, which would later be integral to a carefully engineered image of a polarised Finnish society, perpetuated throughout the war. What is most striking, however, is the assumed persecution this young Finn anticipated from his own government in response to such a public display of support for the USSR. Indeed, whether the author of this letter was actually Finnish is irrelevant. Rather, one should see its publication as a demonstrative example of the Party's repeated publicising of the use of terror by rival regimes against their own people in the 1920s and 30s, ensuring the routine deployment of this language would once again appear during the eventual conflict with Moscow's neighbours to the north [Spencer, 2018].

Building on this research, one of the central aims of this paper is to move scholarly discussion away from a misunderstanding and misapplication of the term "terror" more broadly. The longstanding deployment of this shorthand to describe the actions – and by implication, motivation – of the Soviet state is a flawed. While it is not my intention to diminish the terrible nature of the crimes for which the Soviet regime was responsible, in seeking to properly understand both the way the regime operated and judge the impact of its actions on society, a soberer reflection on events from the perspective of the Party is necessary, as is a more systematic reflection on the output of its press and propaganda machinery throughout the interwar period. This will be achieved by focusing on three key case studies – the short lived "Red Terror" campaign witnessed during the Civil War period; the 1927 war scare; and the Moscow Show Trials of 1936–1938 – outlining trends in the presentation of enemies and the explicit language used in official publications intended for public consumption domestically and internationally. These case studies are not intended to provide an exhaustive account of prominent episodes in Soviet history. Instead, the chronological parameters of each episode will provide a window of focus for assessing to which enemies and with what language the regime sought to draw the

attention of the readers of the central and regional Soviet press. As will be seen, this often extended beyond the key protagonists at the centre of these events, and instead sought to shine a light on widespread cases of injustice and injury suffered by communists and their allies beyond Soviet borders.

### The Great Terror

First, one must acknowledge that the source of any disparity between historiographical and contemporaneous uses of the term “terror” can be largely credited to success of Robert Conquest’s, *The Great Terror*. Ever since Conquest’s pioneering study of Stalin’s Soviet Union first appeared in 1968, the high point of state-sponsored violence witnessed in the region during the 1930s has been commonly referred to as the “Great Terror”.<sup>1</sup> The adoption of the eponymous title by subsequent scholars to describe the broader phenomenon of “state terror” in the period was not, however, a development envisioned by the author, who originally opted to define the high point of repressions in the 1930s as the “Great Purge”. This is a distinct but no less problematic nomenclature given the potential overlap with the non-violent, merely politically punitive process involved in regular “purges” (*chistki*) of the party membership that took place. These periodic culls were a bureaucratic necessity for the CPSU to limit the proliferation of careerists, encourage a degree of dynamism and maintain strict discipline within its ranks [Service, 2003, p. 215]. Obviously, they could be – and were – exploited by Stalin to ensure a strengthening of his support base and the removal of opposition elements, but they did not immediately go hand in hand with arrest and execution.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, reflecting on Conquest’s work, James Harris writes: “It has been almost continuously in print for nearly forty-five years, having shaped – perhaps ‘fixed’ is a better word – the popular image of political violence under Stalin” [The Anatomy of Terror, p. 2].

Notwithstanding this apparent consensus, the accuracy of such a popular image and the use of the term “terror” to describe the activity and motivations of the Soviet regime has still produced debate among specialists. Arch Getty admits that the Great Terror is “another inexact shorthand for the disparate events of that decade”, though, like most others, falls back on “terror” as the term of choice [Getty, Naumov, 1999, p. 492]. Similarly, Sarah Davies and James Harris have more recently acknowledged the “controversy” surrounding use of “‘Terror’ or ‘Great Terror’ as a label for the political violence of 1936–1938” in the footnotes of their study, while continuing to deploy the term on the justification that it shares sufficient

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published as Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin’s Purge of the Thirties* [Conquest, 1968]. This study will hereafter reference an edition updated after the opening of archival access following the collapse of the Soviet Union [Conquest, 2008].

<sup>2</sup> For an insight into party purges at the regional level and the less violent outcome the process could have for members whose party cards were withdrawn, see: [Kang-Bohr]. Note, too, how the language of “terror” permeated the commentary of both Stalin and the Moscow leadership in their assessment of the threat of enemy activity, of these so called “anti-Soviet terror organisations”.

parallels with the similarly named phase of the French Revolution [Davies, Harris, p. 287].

One of the few scholars that explicitly avoids this terminology is David Shearer, who aptly describes the potential obfuscation of historical reality caused by this historiographical framing:

...it is a misnomer to call the mass purges that swept the Soviet Union in the late 1930s the Great Terror... The distinction is important for historical reasons of understanding motives and origins: how leaders and ordinary people understood what was happening and what they were doing or experiencing. Leaders and police officials understood of the mass operations as a cleansing, a literal purge of the body politic. They did not regard what they were doing as terror, which was the term Lenin and the Bolsheviks used, unapologetically, during the revolutionary wars of 1918–1924 [Shearer, 2009, p. 286].

Unfortunately, by now, the close association between “terror” and the Soviet Union extends to non-Soviet specialists and remains a prominent preoccupation within studies of the region’s past and the key features of Stalinism. There are still, of course, exceptions. For example, Ian Kershaw’s bold assertion of “terror” operating as the “defining characteristic of Stalin’s regime” stands in a stark contrast to the most recent scholarship from Jon Waterlow concerned with popular experiences of life (and humour) in the Soviet Union at the height of the mass repressions [Kershaw, p. 274; Waterlow, p. 11–12].

And yet, the continued and widespread use of terror as an accepted shorthand within historical scholarship on the Soviet Union remains highly problematic. Thus, regardless of any conscious recognition by historians of the controversy surrounding the term, there is an evident reluctance to move away from the traditional deployment of terror to describe the punitive actions of the Soviet regime, ultimately suggesting that an unconscious bias might be at play [Kahneman, p. 276–277; Spencer, 2020].

Conversely, until only recently has there been an attempt to understand early manifestations of “red terror” from the perspective of the Bolsheviks in the specific context of their formative experience of revolution and civil war, and as singled out by Shearer above. That is, to observe the measured justification of state violence in the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, pursuing a close study of the language employed by the leadership in its defence in the opening years of Bolshevik power [Ryan, 2012; Ryan, 2015]. Such an adjustment still requires the recognition that this justification extended to the party faithful alone. The regime was not oblivious to the need to defend against the prospect of opponents marshalling their own moral condemnation of the Soviet state. Thus, to understand the shift that took place after the solidification of Soviet control, a long-term view is vital to understanding developments in the 1920s and 1930s. Such an approach will allow this paper to trace the regime’s growing concern with the censorship and subsequent monopolisation of any language related to violent expressions

of state power. The regime's distinct vocabulary was an essential tool in the way the Party practiced power and communicated in public and private.

It is time, therefore, for historians to "speak Bolshevik" – to adopt the terms and conceptions of the time – and to understand the Party's contemporary perspective on the violence and subjugation of millions of its own citizens during its existence. In the first instance, "terror" must be identified as a term publicly and privately employed by the Party to vilify its opponents: "Fascist Terror in Spain", "Terror against the Communist Party in France", "Terror by Mannerheim's Gangs".<sup>3</sup> Stalin and his inner circle were the victims or witnesses of "terror", never the perpetrators of it. So confident were they in the stable meaning of the term as a label for the "enemy" that the regime's repeated use of this expression in 1939–1940 – alongside other violent language associated with it – was even perceived as a suitable strategy for selling the advance of Soviet forces across central and eastern Europe to their own people and audiences abroad.

### Case Study 1: The Red Terror

During the "Red Terror" of 1918, a very public campaign of state-sponsored violence was initially deemed to serve the Bolsheviks' aims. As a result, the leadership were sluggish to realise the negative impact such a strategy could have on their public standing and the security of the fledgling republic. Though the Central Committee eventually condemned the excessively violent and unrestrained calls for retribution seen from some within its membership during this punitive campaign, it was not enough to affect an immediate change [Acton, Stableford, p. 120–122]. In general, it took time for the Party to appreciate the need to distance itself from the extreme and arbitrary enforcement of revolutionary rule by its secret police force, the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission, or *Cheka*. Again, this is to stress the shift in the presentation of terror, when there was never any discernible difference between the attitudes of both Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin to the opening of "mass systematic terror against the bourgeoisie and its agents" in this early period of Soviet rule [Service, 1995, p. 39].

From its initial temporary status, the *Cheka's* role in the new Bolshevik state was quickly established, as was a parallel concern among the leadership for censorship and managing public perceptions of its activity. According to James Ryan, the *Cheka's* "continued existence was assured for the rest of the Civil War, and the party's Central Committee resolved in December [1918] that there should be no place for 'malicious criticism' of the state's organizations in the press" [Ryan, 2015, p. 16]. Lazar Kaganovich, who later occupied a prominent role within Stalin's inner circle, distinguished himself in the Civil War and was a willing participant in the Red Terror in his

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<sup>3</sup> These examples are taken from article headings that appeared in central and regional newspapers in 1939. The stories were drawn from Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS) bulletins gathered from foreign press sources and generally appeared in most newspapers on concurrent days. See, for example: *Pravda* and *Leningradskaya Pravda* (Spain) 29 July and 21 August; (France) 18 October; (Finland) 22 December 1939.

provincial capacity in Nizhny Novgorod. He provides an excellent example of a Bolshevik who understood the need to distinguish between policy and publicity, encouraging a careful separation of the Party from its punitive agents, and a censoring of their coercive activity in the press. As Arfon Rees points out, “with startling frankness [Kaganovich] stressed the party’s role was to lead, but not overtly. The party should secretly instruct the *Cheka* or the Military Tribunal to carry out arrests and executions but should not directly involve itself in these matters”. Kaganovich is quoted as insisting: “nobody must know about this; you will not see in the press accusations from the province committee of the party” [Rees, 2012, p. 24–25].

Early efforts to instil this attitude across the Party included both the public criticism of its members’ explicit calls for bloody retribution, alongside more devious efforts to transfer blame for the violence onto rival groups caught up in the fighting. The impetus for this came from the very top, with Lenin an enthusiastic proponent of the employment of such underhand tactics to deflect blame for Bolshevik atrocities onto their enemies [Service, 1995, p. 42]. It was not, however, a universally adopted approach within the Party. Leon Trotsky – that self-confident and self-promoting ideologist – was among the most enthusiastic of Bolsheviks to defend the tactic of state-sponsored terror as a justifiable necessity in the context of war and revolution [Ryan, 2012, p. 146].

Far more consistent was the leadership’s control of the central party press and the careful avoidance of overt reference to the Bolshevik’s own coercive activity in the pages of *Pravda*. The figures are in fact striking. In the immediate aftermath of the assassination of the leader of the Petrograd *Cheka*, Moisei Uritsky, and the subsequent attempt on Lenin’s life in August 1918, not a single reference to “red terror” is recorded in the pages of this key publication. The pattern continues for the rest of the year, and it is not until 1919 that the first use of the term appears in *Pravda*.<sup>4</sup>

The specific reference in this case is to events in Germany, and the “unfortunate” use of “red terror” in the face of the bourgeoisie’s initiation of civil war and first application of “the techniques of *terror* – white terror” [Правда, 1919, 19 янв., с. 1]. This attempt to justify terror in the face of enemy atrocities is not unique, nor is the tactic of drawing attention to events outside Russian borders. On 7 May 1921, *Pravda* sought to shine a light on the revolutionary struggle in Czechoslovakia. Reference was made to the decision of farm labourers to deploy red terror only in the face of white [Правда, 1921, 7 мая, с. 1].<sup>5</sup> The specific details provided are

<sup>4</sup> In total there are just 32 recorded cases of ‘red terror’ (*krasnii terror*) in *Pravda* for the years chosen for this study (1 January 1917 – 31 December 1940). The East View database allows for a keyword search of all editions within this span, and while there are instances among these early copies where the reproduction of the digital text is imperfectly rendered due to poor quality of the original newspaper (or scan thereof), the general trend is evident. This figure also stands in stark contrast to the 4 592 cases where the more general term ‘terror’ (*terror*) is recorded within the database across the same period.

<sup>5</sup> Here and elsewhere further links to the newspaper *Pravda* will be given according to the holdings of the electronic archive: [East View Information Services. *Pravda* Digital Archive (DA-PRA)].



scarce, but a pattern was already emerging of concentrating the reader's attention on violence abroad against any and all potential allies of the Soviet people, while offering scant coverage to the regime's own repressive activities. By July 1922, a further strategy of seeking to outright dismiss reports of "red terror" and an "imaginary rebellion" against Soviet power in Georgia anticipates the international communist press' repeated willingness to accuse its counterparts among the bourgeois press of perpetuating nothing but lies and fabrications about Soviet affairs [Правда, 1922, 5 июля, с. 5].

### **"Terror's useless, whatever its colour"<sup>6</sup>**

Behind the scenes, and among the party leadership, the preference for self-censorship over self-justification appears to have won out. These sentiments even took root within the *Cheka*, and continued with its successor, the OGPU. Felix Dzerzhinskii headed both organisations during this important transition. Writing in the middle of the 1920s, he admonished those who failed to recognise the value in drawing a line between sanctioned policy and public presentation in the battle for the countryside:

We see that, despite the repressions and the noise in the newspapers, the number of murders is increasing. In my opinion, the newspaper hype is unnecessary...Repressions are necessary, but neither they, nor the murders themselves need to be publicised.<sup>7</sup>

It was not Bolshevik foresight alone that facilitated this reorientation. Before the Civil War was won, the unleashing of the White's own terror campaign on the hapless population had only served to aid the Bolshevik position. The intervention of foreign powers on the White's behalf further served to alienate their disparate armies from the local population and allowed the Bolsheviks to consider their counter-revolutionary forces as a network of enemies serving the interests of powers abroad.

The Whites, like the Reds, saw the counter-productive nature of terror tactics on their hopes of ingratiating themselves to the general populace [Acton, Stableford, p. 130–131]. However, they did not share the same uniformity of purpose and message employed by the Bolsheviks, or the monopoly on public channels of communication and transport between the major urban centres under Red Army control. The term "red terror" largely disappeared from party discourse and the press; the "white guards" and their terrorising of the Soviet people never did.

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<sup>6</sup> This rather apt quotation is taken from Mikhail Bulgakov's, *The Heart of a Dog* [Bulgakov, p. 20].

<sup>7</sup> 'Letter to the Politburo about terror against village correspondents' (15 February 1925) [РГАСПИ. Ф. 76. Оп. 3. Д. 294; Архив Александра Н. Яковлева]. These comments stand in direct contrast to those made by Dzerzhinskii in 1920, regarding the deployment of violence: 'When we approach an enemy, to kill him, we kill him not because he's an evil person, but because we make use of the instrument of terror in order to create fear for others' [Ryan, 2015, p. 1].

### Case Study 2: 1927 War Scare

During the crisis of 1927, when relations between Britain and the Soviet Union were at breaking point and the struggle for primacy in the Party raged on, the press whipped up the fear of foreign intervention and plots to murder Nikolai Bukharin, Alexei Rykov and Joseph Stalin: “Is this the terror of which the White Guard newspapers now speak of so often?” [Правда, 1927, 9 июня; Brooks, p. 40]. This essential continuity in the presentation of terror as the exclusive preserve of the regime’s enemies has important implications for how we understand the further escalation of state-violence in the 1930s. The press routinely launched campaigns calling for “vigilance and ruthlessness towards the hidden enemy” throughout Stalin’s primacy [Conquest, 2008, p. 45]. Nor was the fear of foreign intervention unique to the 1930s; this fear had an enduring impact on the Bolshevik worldview from the revolutionary birth of the Soviet state and its formative experiences of civil war. Indeed, the longstanding threat of enemies within and without is encapsulated in this perpetual struggle against “White Guards” and the experiences of those immediate post-revolutionary years.

Turning to *Pravda*, we find numerous examples of the kind of familiar language being closely associated with the activity of enemies at home and abroad from May 1927 onwards.<sup>8</sup> While events in Britain were still unfolding, the same terminology of “white terror” can be found deployed within a report from Romania on the disposal of unitary trade unions published on 13 May [Правда, 1927, 13 мая, с. 2]. Similarly, alongside the restrained heading attached to reports of the English government’s discussion of the question of the USSR on 24 May, the editors opted to include reports of the “great success” of communists in recent Polish elections, as workers turned away from the Polish Socialist Party, even in the face of “unprecedented terror” (*neslikhannii terror*) [Правда, 1927, 24 мая, с. 2].

Far more illustrative of the regime’s increasing willingness to publicly link enemy activity abroad with the threat of intervention within Soviet borders followed news of the assassination of the Soviet diplomat, Pyotr Voykov, by a White Russian monarchist in Warsaw on 7 June. Eventually drawn into a conspiracy feeding on both the rupture with Britain earlier in the summer and the fresh souring of relations with Poland, *Pravda* opened its edition on 9 July with a banner heading imploring readers to be on the alert :

Following the Anglo-Soviet split – the murder of comrade Voykov.

Following the Warsaw murder – flashes of white-guard terror near Minsk and Leningrad.

Comrades! Be on the alert! [Form] denser ranks around the VKP(b)!

[Правда, 1927, 9 июля, с. 1].

<sup>8</sup> The chronological parameters of the keyword search for “terror” in this case were taken from 12 May 1927 – coinciding with the British police raid of the headquarters of the Soviet trade delegation and the All Russian Co-operative Society (ARCOS) in London – to the end of the same year (31 December 1927). In total, 264 matches for “terror” were returned.

After Moscow's subsequent break from negotiations with Warsaw towards a new non-aggression treaty, the Poles were firmly back in the enemy camp. The year would close with claims of "White Terror in Poland", attached to two brief dispatches from TASS in Warsaw, collected on page two under this provocative heading [Правда, 1927, 31 дек., с. 2]. The format would become a familiar sight for readers through the coming decade. Of course, the target of Soviet ire need not be a prominent protagonist in current diplomatic wrangles, as news of a "new wave of terror" in Italy in August 1927 reveals [Правда, 1927, 5 авг., с. 1].

Even if we allow for some variation between this earlier period and 1936–1938 in the presentation of the criminal element to the public – as the hapless victims of state repression and the crimes for which they were explicitly accused were adapted to the priorities of the Party and labels of the day – the Civil War was clearly decisive in establishing a well-developed terminology of terror. The subsequent recycling of this language in the propaganda of the Party remains an overlooked facet of continuity in how the regime presented terror and any opposition to the public, thus seeking to manage popular perceptions of its own violent and repressive tactics. It is, therefore, essential that we continue to follow this thread through to the 1930s.

### Case Study 3: The Moscow Show Trials

Throughout the next decade, Joseph Stalin insisted upon a continuation of a similar black and white, bipolar worldview, while embracing the need for proper stage-management. All information was an invaluable, potentially volatile, commodity; it had to be carefully controlled before any sanctioned view of domestic and international events (and the official response they might elicit) could be disseminated.<sup>9</sup>

Stalin's ultimate goal was to perpetuate the same degree of universalism the earlier Civil War language aspired to when portraying the actions of enemies and the events leading up to the Moscow Show Trials. He was not interested in the men involved or a simplistic tale of good versus evil. This was a struggle of opposing ideals not individuals. His venomous chastisement of *Pravda* in correspondence with Lazar Kaganovich and Vyacheslav Molotov in the autumn of 1936 captures the sense of urgency with which Stalin expected this portrayal of the "Zinovievites and Trotskyites" to be universally applied:

*Pravda* failed to produce a single article that provided a Marxist explanation of the process of degradation of these scum, their sociopolitical complexion, and their real platform. It reduced everything to the personal element, to the notion that there are evil people who want to seize power and there are good people who hold power, and fed this paltry mush to the public...As far back as the X party congress, Lenin said that if a faction or factions persist in their errors in their

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the reaction of the OGPU's successors, the NKVD, to the assassination Leningrad party leader, Sergei Kirov, in December 1934 prioritised the immediate control of all information about the murderer and a blanket ban on passing details to government institutions and the press, "especially reporters from foreign newspapers" [Lenoe, p. 273].

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. This proposition by Lenin has now been brilliantly confirmed. But Pravda, unfortunately, failed to make use of it [Davies, Khlevniuk, Rees, p. 349–350].

It would be the historical precedent set by Lenin's writings that would also be the cornerstone of attacks on members of the opposition with the accusation of employing tactics of "individual terror" against the Party, thus seeking to strike a blow on both a judicial (according to Soviet practices of law) and ideological level. This Marxist-Leninist characterisation of the enemy and its methods was something eventually codified in the pages of the Party's official history:

In a number of his writings during this period Lenin criticized the methods of political struggle employed by the principal Narodnik group, the "Narodnaya Volya", and later by the successors of the Narodniks, the Socialist-Revolutionaries – especially the tactics of individual terrorism [sic] (*individual'nogo terrora*). Lenin considered these tactics harmful to the revolutionary movement, for they substituted the struggle of individual heroes for the struggle of the masses. They signified a lack of confidence in the revolutionary movement of the people [Short Course, p. 20].<sup>10</sup>

These were enemies, therefore, of not only the state and people of the Soviet Union, but of the very ideas of Marxism-Leninism held sacrosanct by the Party.

In fact, no better illustration of the monopolisation of this term exists than the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)*, commonly referred to as the *Short Course*. The number and consistency of presentation where references to "terror" appear in this work is remarkable. However, this important feature of the text is often lost to English speaking audiences when the Russian term (*terror*) is misleadingly translated as the less evocative and more current term "terrorism".

The example of this text is particularly instructive given the recent publication of an annotated edition in English. Not only is the published text of the *Short Course* reproduced in translation, but adjustments and excisions completed by Stalin and his team of editors survive in archived manuscripts and works in progress, and further clarify the ideological and historical basis of this terminology [Brandenberger, Zelenov]. And yet, even in the example cited above, the preference remains to translate the Russian to "tactics of individual terrorism", while the extensive quotation from Lenin's writing on "terror" that was subsequently excised from the text before publication passes without comment [Ibid., p. 124].

<sup>10</sup> The original Russian can be checked against the serialised edition of the *Short Course* published in [Правда, 1938, 9—19 сент.].

It is important to stress that this terminology of terror was deeply embedded in the ideology and political self-perception of the Bolsheviks. In the officially circulated final text, an important distinction remains; the term “terror” is only permitted direct association with Soviet rule once, when referencing the brief, “retaliatory”, “Red terror”, which sought retribution for atrocities caused by the Whites during the Russian Civil War:

The Socialist-Revolutionaries, who had assassinated Comrades Uritsky and Volodarsky and had made a villainous attempt on the life of Lenin, were subjected to a Red terror in retaliation for their White terror against the Bolsheviks, and were completely routed in every important city in Central Russia [Short Course, p. 229].<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, the full text of the *Short Course* is carefully spun with examples of the Bolsheviks’ opponents – be it the misguided precursors of revolutionary Marxism (the *Narodniks* and members of “People’s Will”), the external forces of counter-revolution (White Guards and foreign interventionists), or the internal threat of saboteurs, wreckers and political opposition – conspiring to “acts of terror” against the Party and the people of the Soviet Union [Short Course, p. 10, 200, 247, 292]. In the annotated edition, the adjustments to the text reveal instances when the self-conscious deployment of the specific language of terror took place, while stressing, too, that the targets of these methods were the Soviet leadership:

Socialist-Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, Anarchists *and nationalists and so on*, supported the Whiteguard generals and the invaders, *and* hatched counter-revolutionary plots *within against* the Soviet Republic *on the imperialists’ orders and resorted to terrorism against Soviet leaders* [sic] (*organizuiut terror protiv sovetskikh deiatelei*) [Brandenberger, Zelenov, p. 448].

What this cardinal text did was not unique; rather, it represents a continuation of the same strategy employed throughout the highpoint of Soviet repressions in 1937–1938; a strategy at the heart of Stalin’s ideological worldview and persistent concern with the actions of enemies.

The condemnation of political opponents in the early 1930s and eventual trial and execution of the Rightist-Trotskyite Bloc – though only sparsely dealt with in the latter stages of the *Short Course* – mirrors the same language employed during the recorded (and publicly disseminated) transcripts of the Moscow Show Trials [Short Course, p. 325–330, 346–348]. Despite Conquest’s numerous references to the dialogue of the prosecution in his history of the Trials, he fails to notice this fundamental connection between “terror” and its exploitation by the state. What is lost in English translation becomes abundantly clear in the Russian original:

<sup>11</sup> For the original Russian, see: [Правда, 1938, 15 сент., с. 3].

The accused RYKOV explained the motives for the adoption of terrorist methods by the “bloc of Rights and Trotskyites” as follows...

*Perekhod <<pravo-trotskistkogo bloka>> k terroru obviniaemyi Rykov motiviroval sleduiushchim obrazom...*

The accused BUKHARIN, who in the course of the investigation admitted that the “bloc of Rights and Trotskyites” had already adopted terrorist methods in 1932, testified as follows:

“In 1932, too, during a meeting and conversation I had with PYATAKOV, I learnt from his of his meeting with L. SEDOV and his receipt through SEDOV of direct instructions from TROTSKY to adopt terrorist methods against leaders of the Party the State Government...”

*Obviniaemyi Bukharin, priznavshii na sledstvii, chto na put' terrora <<pravo-trotskistkii blok>> stal eshche v 1932 godu, pokazal sleduiushchee:*

*<<V tom zhe 1932 godu pri vstreche i razgovore s Piatakovym ia uznal... priamoi direktivny Trotskogo pereiti k terroru protiv rukovodstva partii i Sovetskoj vlasti...>> [People's Commissariat of Justice of the USSR, p. 21].<sup>12</sup>*

The examples above are not isolated cases. They are drawn from a single page of the published transcript that continues to be littered with references to “terror” (*terrora; k terroru*) in both the language of the prosecution and the confessions of the accused. This was no accident. With the stage carefully managed and both sides working to a stringently controlled script, it is essential that we understand the exact nature of the actors' dialogue. Though “terroristic” (*terroristicheskii*) and other related derivations from the root appear, the blunt accusation of terror remained at the centre of the defendants' supposed aims and methods.

Such a public (and widely published) condemnation of these enemies of the people can be contrasted again with the careful presentation of the regime's own repressive activity at the height of the mass operations, which exponentially extended the scope of Soviet repressions beyond those facing trial in Moscow. On 21 December 1937, with *Pravda* devoted to the celebrations of the twentieth anniversary of the NKVD, only a single, historical reference to “terror” is permitted throughout the whole six-page edition. An overt challenge is made to the bourgeois press' “[cries] about red terror and the cruelty of the Bolsheviks” and is balanced against reports of widespread celebrations of the continued efforts of the Soviet security services [Правда, 1937, 21 сент., с. 1].

The close incorporation of the institutions of press and propaganda into the regime's strategy for managing the public face of Soviet power was

<sup>12</sup> According to Conquest this third trial “brought together publicly every type of opposition, terror, sabotage, treachery and espionage, and turned them into branches of one single great conspiracy... The trial, which opened in the October Hall on 2 March 1938, had, indeed, taken over a year to prepare, but it was a production of far greater scope than the others” [Conquest, 2008, p. 341--343].

essential to its continued success in deploying this terminology of terror. Lazar Kaganovich and Nikolai Yezhov's role in organising the press' treatment of the Moscow Show Trials reveals the attention paid to domestic and foreign audiences alike. From Stalin's correspondence, we learn that the leadership maintained strict vetting of reports on the trials, while "overall supervision is to be entrusted to Comrade Yezhov" – this even before his official promotion to the head of the NKVD. Distribution of reports on the trials was to be taken care of by TASS, "which is equipped for this" [Davies, Khlevniuk, Rees, p. 325]. Where mistakes were made, or pronouncements reconsidered, checks were in place to retract with immediate effect:

During the Yezhoshchina, the only news printed about the purges came from TASS. At the big trials only TASS and Pravda journalists were present. Sometimes TASS sends foreign news on the teletype and two hours later sends instructions to pull the news out.<sup>13</sup>

Kaganovich's earlier "Machiavellianism" had clearly won out [Rees, 2012, p. 25]. It was a political philosophy equally close to Stalin's heart and ensured that the repressions of the 1930s (and beyond) were run on a strictly need to know basis [Service, 2004, p. 342–342; Rees, 2004]. This was clearly, by now, a regime that perceived the necessity of both violence *and* good public relations.

### **The War on Terror Abroad**

In David Brandenberger's assessment of the aftermath of 1937–1938, the period should be characterised as one of crisis within the propaganda machinery. The CPSU was forced, above all, to respond to the decimation of the Soviet's "useable past" in the wake of the mass repressions – a task that was by no means complete by the end of the 1930s [Brandenberger, p. 251]. While in general I agree with this interpretation, before the onset of war in Finland, the regime remained supremely confident in its relationship to violence and the language and ideology fashioned from its recent past. Thus, in the absence of individual heroes, the Kremlin was never short of villains to exploit, condemning their crimes while exonerating itself.

The strict control over access to information about the worst excesses of Soviet power gave the regime free reign to continue to exploit the terminology of terror for attacks upon domestic enemies and their rivals abroad too. A damning criticism of the abhorrent crimes of capitalist countries against their own people, particularly those under the sway of fascism, was channelled through the Communist International in April 1939:

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<sup>13</sup> These comments come from a former journalist and party member with extensive experience of the Soviet press apparatus [Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (HPSS), Schedule B, vol. 6, case 606, 13].

In the annals of the momentous victories of socialism, the people of the capitalist countries, languishing in the chains of slavery, fascist terror, and war, see the living proof of the invincible might of the working class...Boundless is the suffering imposed upon the working people of the capitalist countries [Degras, p. 435].

Despite the shift in relationship of Berlin and Moscow to one of close collaboration just four months later, the Party felt no reason to adapt this rhetorical strategy in the face of any subsequent changes in target. *Pravda* produced the same false cries of indignation during the Red Army's division and occupation of Poland with Nazi Germany in September 1939, justifying the invasion with its condemnation of the "bloody terror practiced by the Polish gentry" [Thompson, p. 392].

As outlined at the start of this essay, my previous research on the Soviet-Finnish War of 1939–1940 has demonstrated how one can continue to trace the pedantic nature of Soviet propaganda and the effort taken to present the regime's enemies in a recognisable and universal imagery of white guards and foreign interventionists during this period. Indeed, even prior to events on the Finnish front spiralling out of control of the leadership, past practice informed the Party's public relations strategy, as diplomatic efforts failed to produce the territorial concessions pressed for by Moscow. In November 1939, there remained a mark of confidence in the tried and tested language of terror where the regime's presentation of Finnish society was concerned [Spencer, 2018]. This was, of course, before Red Army forces crossed the border and learned the reality of the country's universal resolve to resist Soviet power [Rentola].

\* \* \*

Continuity in the recourse to repression of the population was a fundamental component of the Soviet state. Many of its methods – and, of course, its language – remained the same in the 1920s, 30s, and even outside its borders during the post-war reordering of the Soviet bloc by national communist parties loyal to Moscow [Stalinist Terror in Eastern Europe]. This was possible thanks to a shared commitment to absolute secrecy when carrying out any coercive activity, alongside a willingness to censor all conflicting voices, be they in print or in person.

Contemporaneous and historiographical uses of "terror" therefore stand in striking juxtaposition: the former attributing it only to enemies of the state; the latter considering it an inherent and defining characteristic of Soviet power itself. Given this fundamental divergence on such a vital issue, it seems essential to alter our use and understanding of the terminology of terror, if we are to understand either the mechanics and motivations of state repression, or indeed the public perceptions of what Stalinism as a way of life meant at the time.



The regime was not motivated by a desire to openly terrorise the population and did not seek to aggrandise the excesses of the Soviet penal system. Suspected enemies were made to disappear without fanfare or witness, removed from the public eye in a most absolute act of censorship [Conquest, 2008, p. 261]. Once excised, the regime was then acutely aware of the need to continue censoring information that might reveal the truth to the families and friends of victims [Khlevniuk, p. 329]. In this atmosphere, the unknown could still be a source of fear, of terror even, though without tangible knowledge of the exact motives and mechanics of state repression, it was less likely to incite explicit and collective resistance. After all, the Moscow Show Trials, the *Short Course*, and the persistent and pervasive propaganda of the state all emphasised that the real threat came from opposition at home and abroad. The familiar and omnipresent face of Stalin and the rest of the Party, by contrast, were responsible for protecting the population from this threat to their person, property and way of life.<sup>14</sup>

However, as far as this author is aware, notwithstanding the occasional recognition of the unsuitability of the term within scholarship of the period, this potential 'red herring' has detracted from the very real and tangible strategy deployed by the regime. A strategy aimed at either covering its own tracks, or publicly justifying the extreme methods by which it sought to defend against the threat of enemies. This is a genuine cause for concern given the length of time that research on the topic has continued, and the consistency with which this outdated and erroneous terminology has been applied. There is real need to consider whether the framing and labelling of the Stalinist repressions as "terror" actively obscured the contemporary reality and led historians to overlook sources that my own research has found in abundance.

Besides rejecting this terminology from a historiographical perspective, understanding the contemporaneous use of terror by the regime as a stable meaning for the enemy offers a long-term view of the Stalinist period. This paper has, thus, sought to echo the approach seen recently in Shearer's study of Stalin's fears of intervention and subversion of the state by those numerous enemies seen (and imagined) throughout his primacy [Shearer, 2018]. The response to that threat was consistently one of repressive force enacted against the Soviet people, but the escalation of that violence and justification of it in the eyes of the Party is another essential component of the Soviet example and requires an appreciation of the ideological and historical basis on which the leadership built their worldview.

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<sup>14</sup> Advances in the study of choice and judgement are worth acknowledging. So blind are we to influences upon our decisions that even the simple force of familiarity and other external primers – with very real parallels in the mechanics of any authoritarian state – are still under appreciated: "The evidence of priming studies suggests that reminding people of their mortality increases the appeal of authoritarian ideas, which may become reassuring in the context of the terror of death" [Kahneman, p. 56].

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