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The Great Terror and the Revolutionary Process

Stalin's terror has often been compared with Robespierre's Reign of Terror in the French Revolution. This analogy is mistaken. The two episodes bore very different relationships to their respective revolutions, governed by where each came in the course of the historical process that a revolution typically sets in motion. Robespierre's terror was a phenomenon of fanaticism, directed against anyone perceived to be an enemy of the utopian ideals of the revolution. The corresponding campaign in Russia was Lenin's Red Terror, aimed at the counterrevolutionary enemy in the Russian Civil War. Stalin's purges came at a much later stage in the revolutionary process, the era of postrevolutionary dictatorship. Postrevolutionary dictatorship was the context that made possible Stalin's despotism and his campaign of liquidation directed against the makers of the revolution itself. The terror in turn created conditions that perpetuated postrevolutionary dictatorship over a time span of two generations, with effects still felt in the weaknesses of post-Soviet Russia.

The Revolutionary Process and Postrevolutionary Dictatorship

Like the revolutionary experiences of other countries, revolution in Russia was not a momentary event but a long process, that is to say, a step-by-step development as each stage of political turmoil led to a different one. This conception of revolution as a process was formulated long ago by the American historians Lyford P. Edwards and Crane Brinton.[1] According to their scheme, an initially moderate revolution gives way to rule by extremists, often accompanied by terror and civil war, which is then followed by a relaxation, the Thermidorean reaction, so called from the events surrounding the fall of Robespierre in 1794. Thus, in Russia, the moderate February Revolution of 1917 that created the Provisional Government, the extremist October Revolution that created the Soviet government and ushered in civil war, and the retreat from extremism represented by the introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1921 (though the Soviet leadership refused to recognize that event as a »Thermidor«).

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[1] Edwards, Lyford P.: The Natural History of Revolution, Chicago 1927; Brinton, Crane: The Anatomy of Revolution, New York 1938.

To this outline a further stage in the revolutionary process needs to be added, namely postrevolutionary dictatorship. In France, postrevolutionary dictatorship was represented by the regime of Napoleon Bonaparte; hence the Marxist description of any government of this type as »Bonapartist«. In Russia the postrevolutionary dictatorship was represented by Stalin, after he assumed unchallenged power in 1928/29 following his successive victories over the Left and Right oppositions in the Communist Party. It was thus natural for Trotsky and his followers to describe Stalin's regime as »Bonapartism«.

The essence of the postrevolutionary dictatorship is the assumption of political power by a megalomaniac individual who synthesizes revolutionary rhetoric with traditional as well as revolutionary methods to address the contradictions of postrevolutionary society and to engage the nation's enemies, external or internal.

Postrevolutionary dictatorship comes in the wake of grave weakening by the revolution of both institutional and traditional restraints on government, and the man who commands the best organized instrument of power – the revolutionary army in the case of Bonaparte, the Communist Party apparatus in the case of Stalin – is able to make himself an absolute ruler.

Postrevolutionary dictatorship is closely connected with the phenomenon of totalitarianism. While much recent research has questioned just how total »totalitarianism« was, in the Soviet case as well as in the Nazi case the totalitarian system stands out for its concentration of power and for its ruthless efforts to control every aspect of society. Totalitarianism is a product of revolution in its last, postrevolutionary stage; it is, in effect, simply the postrevolutionary dictatorship with twentieth-century resources of coercion and surveillance. It was the totalitarian postrevolutionary dictatorship that made Stalinism and the terror possible, if not inevitable.

In its modern, totalitarian form, especially, a postrevolutionary dictatorship magnifies the power of the individual leader far beyond that in any traditional autocracy. Thus it introduces a special circumstance into the old debate about the role of the individual in history. The scope for the personal proclivities and decisions of an individual leader to influence the course of history depends first of all on the general circumstances of his rule, which govern what actions may be possible and what may be the results of his decisions. In a revolution, this scope depends on the stage of the process that the country has reached, determining whether moderation may be sustainable or whether extremist action will be effective. Secondly, a leader's potential influence depends on the institutional mechanism for transmitting and amplifying his will. When the stage of postrevolutionary dictatorship has been reached, both of these conditions are maximized – the country is most open to whatever choices of policy direction the leader may decide on, and the mechanism exists in the power of the dictatorial state to translate the leader's will into commands for society as a whole.

Postrevolutionary Dictatorship in Russia and the Rule of Stalin

Postrevolutionary dictatorship in Russia is synonymous with Stalinism.[2] It was initiated by Stalin after he achieved full personal dominance in 1928/29 and launched his »revolution from above«, including the Five-Year Plans of intensive industrialization, collectivization of the peasantry, and the imposition of Communist Party discipline on intellectual and cultural life. As in the aftermath of earlier revolutions, Stalin's postrevolutionary dictatorship combined revolutionary appeals with traditional methods of authority and coercion, applied to the specific Russian needs of economic development and military power.

Stalin's terror was an extreme manifestation of the arbitrary power that a postrevolutionary dictatorship can put at the disposal of the dictator. But the concept of the postrevolutionary dictatorship does not account for the particular decisions that the dictator might make or to what lengths he might go; here the factor of the individual personality becomes decisive. »When a society is so organized that the will of one man, or of a small group, is the most powerful of the political and social forces«, wrote Robert Conquest in *The Great Terror*, »any sociological interpretation of politics […] must give way […] to a more psychological style.«[3] Like any great political event under these circumstances, the terror in Russia was idiosyncratic. It was a product not only of the exaggerated personal power that postrevolutionary dictatorship conferred on the individual ruler, but of the personal passions and whims of that particular individual who ruled.

Stalin's establishment of the postrevolutionary dictatorship proceeded in two stages. The first stage, from 1929 to roughly 1932 (the years of the abbreviated First Five-Year Plan), had the appearance of a revival of the revolution, with class war against the bourgeois survivals of the NEP period. Campaigns against the kulaks in the countryside were matched by shock brigades in industry, show trials of alleged »wreckers«, and an ultra-Marxist line in cultural life. But practical difficulties, such as weak industrial discipline, famine in the countryside, and the futility of relying on propaganda to solve all problems, combined with Stalin's own instincts to precipitate a sweeping shift in the regime's social and cultural policies.

If the first phase of postrevolutionary dictatorship in Russia was ultrarevolutionary, its second phase, from 1933 onwards, had more in common with a counterrevolution. Industrial management was made tighter and more hierarchical, the principle of egalitarianism was repudiated, and collectivization was eased to allow private peasant garden plots. While cultural and intellectual life remained subject to strict dictation by the party, and Marxist language was retained

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2 This idea was originally developed in Daniels, Robert V.: Lo Stalinismo come dittatura postrivoluzionaria, in: Natoli, Aldo/Pons, Silvio (eds.): L'età dello Stalinismo, Rome 1991.

3 Conquest, Robert: The Great Terror. A Reassessment, New York/Oxford 1990, p. 54.

throughout, revolutionary content was abandoned de facto in favor of traditionalist norms (as exemplified by Socialist Realism in the arts, the revival of Russian nationalism in history and propaganda themes, and abandonment of »withering-away« goals in law, education, and family policy).[4]

Stalin's postrevolutionary dictatorship, as it was consolidated in its second phase, was much more in tune with the »plebeian« values of the masses than the previous revolutionary line had been.[5] The new standards presumably reflected the tastes and instincts of Stalinist party officials, largely recruited from those masses, and Stalin's own inclinations. With the rebuilding of hierarchical authority, patriotic images, and glorification of the leader, the mature postrevolutionary dictatorship in Russia could well be considered the functional equivalent of a monarchical restoration. All this was the setting for the Great Terror.

The Terror and the Communist Party

The terror of 1936–1938, the »Yezhovshchina« or »Yezhov business«, as it is known from the name of the head of the NKVD in those years, was directed first and foremost against the leading cadres of what was supposed to be the ruling Communist Party. One part of this purge is familiar – the »ritual of liquidation« involving the show trials and forced confessions of leaders of all the opposition groups, Left or Right, that had resisted Stalin's climb to absolute power. Along with these actions went the unannounced liquidation of leaders of the ultra-Left groups – Workers' Opposition and Democratic Centralists – of the Civil War period, along with those Trotskyists (Yevgenii Preobrazhensky and Vladimir Antonov-Ovseyenko, to mention two) who would not play their part and confess so that they could be brought to trial.

Almost unknown until Khrushchev's revelations in his secret speech of 1956 was a numerically far wider component of the anti-Communist purge that was aimed at the Stalinist party leadership itself. This secret purge, without any show trials or even public announcements, was perhaps the most bizarre aspect of the terror, directed as it was against people who had stood together with Stalin in his campaigns against the oppositions and had helped carry through collectivization and the First Five-Year Plan, in other words the people who had created the postrevolutionary dictatorship in Russia. The impact of this purge on the Communist

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[4] As argued long ago by Timasheff, Nicholas: The Great Retreat. The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia, New York 1946.

[5] On the »plebeian revolution«, see Reiman, Michal: Spontaneity and Planning in the Revolution, in: Elwood, R. Carter (ed.): Reconsiderations on the Russian Revolution, Cambridge, Mass. 1976 and idem: Ruská Revoluce [The Russian Revolution], Prague 1967.

leadership was staggering. Of the 71 members elected to the Central Committee at the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934, hailed at the time as the »Congress of Victors«, 55 did not reappear in the Central Committee elected at the Eighteenth Party Congress in 1939, after the purge. At the rank of Candidate member of the Central Committee, 60 out of 68 failed to reappear. A few of these missing names could be accounted for by natural deaths (some, such as Valerian Kuibyshev and Sergo Ordzhonikidze, under suspicious circumstances), and a few survived in obscure retirement, but the majority simply disappeared. Khrushchev explained the numbers further in his 1956 speech: Of the 139 members and candidates of the 1934 Central Committee, a total of 98 were »arrested and shot«. There were 1966 delegates at the Seventeenth Congress; 1108 of them were arrested (no figures on their fates). The higher the rank, the more severe was the purge, carrying off five of the six Candidate members of the Politburo; it even reached into the Politburo itself, to take two sitting members (S. V. Kosior and V. Y. Chubar, both caught up in the purge of alleged Ukrainian nationalism).

Along with this multitude of political purge victims, most of the ultra-Marxist intellectual leaders of the First Five-Year Plan era met the same fate. They included figures ranging from the legal theorist Ye. B. Pashukanis to the literary commissar L. L. Averbakh. The history chief M. N. Pokrovsky only escaped through his premature death in 1932, but he was nonetheless purged posthumously, so to speak, when his ultra-Marxist and anti-nationalist »school« was denounced in 1936, and his followers were liquidated physically.

One striking feature of the purge of the Stalinist party leadership, overlooked even by Khrushchev, was its generational basis. Hardly anyone of note in Soviet political life who had been born before 1900 (1897 in the military) survived the purge, with the exception of Stalin's immediate entourage in the Politburo and a few other cronies. Thus there was a sharp age cutoff in the impact of the purge, leaving virtually no one older than his mid-thirties to carry on the leadership of the Soviet state. The resulting vacuum not only permitted but demanded the rapid promotion of younger members of the nomenklatura into top-level positions. For example, Leonid Brezhnev, born in 1906, was an industrial engineer who rose to become second secretary of Dnepropetrovsk Oblast at the age of 32; Aleksei Kosygin, born in 1904, climbed even faster, from factory manager to deputy prime minister in just two years. Manfred Hildermeier observes, »Vor Kriegsausbruch hatte die Sowjetunion die jüngste Regierung der Welt.«[6]

The question of Stalin's motives in unleashing the purge of his own followers remains unresolved. It made no rational sense in either economic or security terms. It did not check the trend toward a bureaucratic social system, but only re-

[6] Hildermeier, Manfred: Geschichte der Sowjetunion 1917–1991. Entstehung und Niedergang des ersten sozialistischen Staates, München 1998, p. 468.

staffed the bureaucracy. Clearly Stalin was driven by intense personal rancor towards those former associates among Lenin's lieutenants in the Bolshevik movement who had joined any of the oppositions. His pathological hatred and persecution of Trotsky needs no elaboration. Hardly less powerful was his determination to humiliate and ultimately to liquidate all the other leading figures in Lenin's entourage – Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Rykov, and their followers.

Theoretical categories aside, Stalin's purge of the Communist Party was in the most literal sense a counterrevolution. Stalin killed more Communists than all the world's fascist dictators combined. Thus the terror, the most shocking aspect of the postrevolutionary dictatorship in its second phase, represented a key element of the restorationist trend in Soviet politics. To fit this new reality, revolutionary ideology was turned into the »false consciousness« of the postrevolutionary bureaucratic order.[7]

An intriguing psychological explanation of the age cutoff in the purge of the party has been offered by the late Professor Robert Slusser. Slusser believed that Stalin was so ashamed of his own rather modest role in the October Revolution that he determined to »destroy and silence awkward witnesses […] who failed to ›remember‹ his role as he wanted it portrayed.«[8] Apart from a small group directly under Stalin's thumb, that would include anyone of stature who had come of age politically by 1917, in other words anyone born before the cutoff year of 1900.

The Post-Terror Generation and the Era of Stagnation

As far as the Soviet leadership was concerned, the impact of the terror may well be described as a demographic catastrophe. As such, it had a profound effect on the subsequent history of Soviet politics for almost half a century.

When the terror ended, there was hardly anyone left over the age of forty to staff the Soviet state. This void in the age composition of the Soviet elite is underscored by data on Stalin's last Central Committee, elected at the Nineteenth Party Congress in 1952. Of the 125 members of this body, only 27 (mostly actual or former Politburo members, military officers, or theoreticians) had been born before 1900. Subsequently the age cohort of young Stalinist officials remained remarkably stable while, as a group, it grew old in office.[9] Normal longevity made possible this generation's long hold on power. When replacements had to be

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[7] See Daniels, Robert V.: Stalinist Ideology as False Consciousness, in: Flores, Marcello/Gori, Francesca (eds.): Il mito dell'URSS. La cultura occidentale e l'Unione Sovetica, Milan 1990.

[8] Slusser, Robert M.: Stalin in October. The Man Who Missed the Revolution, Baltimore/London 1987, p. 255.

[9] See Daniels, Robert V.: Political Processes and Generational Change, in: Brown, Archie (ed.): Pollitical Leadership in the Soviet Union, London 1989.

made, they tended to be men from the same cohort, almost as old as their predecessors. In fact, between 1952 and 1981, a span of almost three decades, the median birth year of the party elite (Central Committee, Candidate members, and Central Auditing Commission) advanced only 14 years, from 1904 to 1918.

The leadership cadre bequeathed to the country by Stalin and the terror had more than its youthfulness and longevity to define it. In the main these men came from among the »vydvizhentsy« or »promotees« analyzed by Sheila Fitzpatrick[10], recruited from worker and peasant families in the late 1920s and early 1930s and educated narrowly in technology and party agitation. They remained bearers of old Russian political culture, including authoritarianism, patriarchy, xenophobia, and anti-intellectualism.[11] Maturing in the near-wartime conditions of industrialization and collectivization, often implicated in the terror themselves, and further steeled in the Great Patriotic War, they were molded and selected as if deliberately to perpetuate Stalin's own *modus operandi*.

Comparative study of the revolutionary process suggests a final stage that would bring the era of the postrevolutionary dictatorship to a close, a revival in spirit of the early, moderate form of the revolution.[12] Yet in Russia the characteristics of the post-purge leadership cohort, combined with their youthfulness and long life-expectancy assured the perpetuation of a Stalinist approach to political life long after the tyrant himself had passed from the scene. Wielding the totalitarian power of the party apparatus and nomenklatura, they represented a solid barrier to any deep reform that might be attempted by the top leadership. Here, in demographic and cultural terms, is an explanation for the limits to Khrushchev's reforms, and for his eventual fall in 1964.

Not until the aging post-purge generation had reached the biological limits to the exercise of power, in the 1980s, did real reform of the Stalinist system become feasible. By then, unfortunately, the moderate revolutionary revival had been retarded for a generation, while Russian political life stagnated and society grew increasingly demoralized. As the fate of Gorbachev's *perestroika* showed, the prospects for a successful new beginning in Russia's historical saga were correspondingly diminished.

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10 Fitzpatrick, Sheila: Stalin and the Making of the New Elite, 1928–1939, in: Slavic Review 38 (1979), no. 3, pp. 377–402.

11 See Keenan, Edward: Muscovite Political Folkways, in: Russian Review 15 (1986), no. 2, pp. 235–267; Daniels, Robert V.: Russian Political Culture and the Postrevolutionary Impasse, in: Russian Review 16 (1987), no. 2, pp. 165–175.

12 See Daniels, Robert V.: The Revolutionary Process, the Moderate Revolutionary Revival, and Post-Communist Russia, in: Godot, Martine (ed.): De Russia et d'ailleurs. Feux croisés sur l'histoire, Paris 1995.