

## STALIN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRATIC REFORM-II

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The Stalin leadership stepped up the attack on the First Secretaries. Yakovlev criticised among others, for unjustified expulsions of Party members; Malenkov seconded his criticism of Party's indifference to rank-and-file members. This seems to have stimulated the CC members to stop witchhunt but only in order to begin defending themselves. There was still no response to Stalin's report.

In his final speech on March 5, the concluding day of the Plenum, Stalin minimised the Trotskyists, many of whom, he said, had turned towards the Party. His main theme was the need to running every aspect of the economy, to fight bureaucracy, and to raise the political level of masses. Stalin upped the ante in the criticism of the First Secretaries.

"Some comrades among us think that, if they are a Narkom (=People's Commissar), then they know in and of itself, grants very great, almost inexhaustible knowledge. Or they think: If I am a C not one by accident, then I must know everything. This is not the case." (Stalin, Zakliuchitel'

Most ominously for all Party officials, including First Secretaries, Stalin stated that cadres to take their places while they attended six-month political education courses that would replace officials in their stead, Party secretaries might well have feared that they could have to go through long period, breaking the back of their "families" (officials subservient to them).

Thurston characterises Stalin's speech as "considerably milder," stressing "the need to attention to criticism from below." Even the resolution passed on the basis of Stalin's report and dealt mainly with failings in party organizations and their leaderships. According to Zhukov resolution, not a single one of its 25 points was mainly concerned with "enemies." (Thurston, 4)

After the Plenum the First Secretaries staged a virtual rebellion. First Stalin, and then others emphasising the need to conduct secret Party elections, opposition to co-optation rather than Party democracy generally. The First Secretaries were doing things in the old way.

During the next few months Stalin and his closest associates tried to turn the focus on democracy the largest concern of the CC members —and back towards fighting bureaucracy in the Party, elections. Meanwhile, "local party leaders did everything they could within the limits of party power to stall or change the elections." (Getty, "Excesses" 126; Zhukov, Inoy 367-71)

The sudden uncovering in April, May and early June 1937 of what appeared to be a broad conspiracy caused the Stalin government to react in a panic. Genrikh Yagoda, head of the security Affairs, was arrested in late March 1937, and began to confess in April. In May and early June commanders confessed to conspiring with the German General Staff to defeat the Red Army and also to being linked to conspiracies by

political figures. (Getty, "Excesses" 115, 135; Thurston, 70, 90, 101-2; Genrikh Yagoda).

This situation was far more serious than any the Soviet government had faced before. In Moscow Trials, the government took its time to prepare the case and organise a public trial for conspiracy was handled far differently. A little more than three weeks passed from the date of arrest in late May to the trial and execution of Tukhachevsky and seven other high-ranking military officials. During that time hundreds of high-ranking military commanders were recalled to Moscow to read to officials for most of them, their superiors—and to listen to alarmed analyses by Stalin and Marshal Defense and the highest ranking military figure in the country.

At the time of the February-March Plenum neither Yagoda nor Tukhachevsky had yet been intended that the Constitution be the main agenda item, and were set on the defensive by the circumstances, ignored this topic, preferring to stress the battle against "enemies." The Politburo planned that central agenda item at the upcoming June 1937 Plenum also. But by June the situation was different, head of the NKVD and most prominent military leaders were trying to overthrow the government and kill its members.

Stalin was on the defensive. In his June 2 speech to the expanded session of the Military portrayed the series of recently uncovered conspiracies as limited, and largely successfully contained. Plenum too, he and his Politburo supporters had minimised the First Secretaries' overriding concern,

Zhukov notes, the situation was "slowly, but decisively, getting out of his [Stalin's] control". (Inoy Ch. 16, passim; 411).

The June 1937 Central Committee Plenum began with proposals to exclude, first, seven for "lack of political trustworthiness," then a further 19 members and candidates for "treason activity." These last 19 were to be arrested by the NKVD. Including the ten members expelled on by a poll of the CC members (including those military commanders already tried, convicted, and the 120 CC members and candidates as of May 1 had been removed.)

Yakovlev and Molotov criticised the failure of Party leaders to organise for independence, stressed the need to move even honored revolutionaries out of the way if they were unprepared for job, emphasised that Soviet officials were not "second-class workers."

Yakovlev exposed and criticised the failure of First Secretaries to hold secret elections on appointment ("cooptation"). He emphasised that Party members who were elected delegates to the Soviet under the discipline of Party groups outside the Soviets and told how to vote. They were not superiors, such as the First Secretaries. They were to be independent of them. And Yakovlev referred the need to "recruit from the very rich reserve of new cadre to replace those who had become rotten—statements constituted an explicit attack on the First Secretaries. (Zhukov, Inoy 424-7; Tayny,' documents)

The Constitution was finally outlined and the date of the first elections was set for leadership again urged the benefits of fighting bureaucracy and building ties to the

masses. However, he followed the equally unprecedented, summary expulsion from the CC of 26 members, nineteen of treason and counter-revolutionary activity. (Zhukov, Inoy 430)

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 governance, he remarked that in the West, thanks to a multiparty system, this problem did not exist. Immediate phrase that sounded very strange in a meeting of this kind: “We do not have different political parties unfortunately, we have only one party.” [Zhukov’s emphasis] And then he proposed, but only as a purpose of dispassionate supervision of elections representatives of all existing societal organs of the Party. ... The challenge to the Party autocracy had been issued. (Zhukov, Inoy 430-1)

The Bolshevik Party was in severe crisis.

At the end of the Plenum Robert Eikhe, First Secretary of the West Siberian Krai region, talked privately with Stalin. Then several other First Secretaries met with him. They probably demanded, granted shortly afterward: the authority to form “troikas,” or groups of three officials, to run the Soviet government in their area. These troikas were given the power of execution without to be shot and others to be imprisoned on the sole power of these troikas...were demanded and given. First Secretaries asked for, and received, higher limits. (Getty, “Excesses” 129; Zhukov, Inoy 435)

Who were the targets of these, draconian trials-by-troika? Zhukov believes they must have people whose citizenship rights, including franchise, had recently been restored and whose vote was danger to the First Secretaries’ continuance in power. Zhukov largely discounts the existence of documents recently published in Russia, makes it clear that, at the very least, the central leaders’ credible police accounts of conspiracies, including transcripts of confessions. Certainly Stalin said these conspiracies existed. My guess at this point, pace Zhukov, is that some, at least, existed, and that the First Secretaries believed in them. (Zhukov, KP Nov. 13 02; Inoy, Ch. 18;

A further hypothesis is that anyone who was currently, or had ever been, involved in a dissent likely to be viewed as an “enemy,” and subject to arrest and interrogation by the NKVD, one of the troika. Another group were those who openly expressed distrust or hatred towards the Soviet regime, evidence that such people were often arrested immediately. However, those who simply expressed especially at criticism meetings called for this purpose, were not arrested, (Thurston, 94-5)

Contrary, then, to those who argue that the conspiracies were phantoms of Stalin’s party concocted to strengthen Stalin’s megalomaniac hold on power—there is a lot of evidence that of conspirators who were later able to get out of the USSR—agree. The sheer volume of police action against conspiracies, only a little of which has yet been published, argues strongly against any notion fabricated. Furthermore, Stalin’s annotations on these documents make it clear that he believed. (“Excesses” 131-4; Lubianka B)

Getty summarises the hopeless contradiction in this way:

Stalin was not yet willing to retreat from contested elections, and on 2 July 1937 Pravda published the first instalment of the new electoral rules, enacting and enforcing ballot elections. But Stalin offered a compromise. The very same day the electoral law was published launching of a mass operation against precisely the elements, the local leaders had complained his telegram to provincial party leaders ordering the kulak operation [vs. the lishentsy — GF] that in return for forcing the local party leaders to conduct an election, Stalin chose to help to kill or deport hundreds or thousands of “dangerous elements.” (“Excesses” 126)

Whatever the history of these purges, extra-judicial executions, and deportations by Stalin—they were creating preconditions for contested elections.

The Politburo at first tried to limit the campaign of repression. Something convinced, or compelled, them to permit the NKVD to extend the period for four months. Was it the large numbers of those arrested? The conviction that the Party faced a widespread internal threat? We don’t know the details of how, and why, this mass repression unfolded.

This was exactly the period during which the electoral campaign was to take place. Even preparation for the contested elections, with rules about how voters were to indicate their choice, handle runoff elections, local officials actually controlled the repression. They could determine Party-which meant, in great part, to themselves—would be considered “loyal,” and what would be imprisonment or death (Getty, “Excesses,” passim.; Zhukov, Inoy 435)

Primary documents show that Stalin and the central Politburo leadership were convinced...and conspirators had to be dealt with. This is what the regional Party leaders had asserted during the time, the Stalin leadership had minimised this danger and had kept focusing attention back to prepare for new elections and the replacement of “bureaucratized” and old leadership with new.

By the June Plenum the First Secretaries were in a position to say, in effect: “We told you were wrong. Furthermore, we are still right-dangerous conspirators are still active, ready to execute their attempt to raise revolt against the Soviet government.” Was this how it happened? It seems certain Stalin and the central leadership had no idea how deep these conspiracies extended. The fascist Japan would do. On June 2 Stalin had told the expanded Military Soviet meeting that the Red Army’s operational plan to the German General Staff. This meant that the Japanese, who were “Axis” and an anti-communist political alliance (the “Anti-Comintern Pact”—really, an anti-Nazi Germany) would no doubt have it too.

Stalin had told the military leaders that the plotters wanted to make the USSR into “a Column” within coordinated with an invading fascist army. Given this horrendous danger, the Soviet Union reacted with brutal decisiveness. (Stalin, “Vystuplenie”)

At the same time much evidence suggests that the central (Stalin) leadership wanted repressions demanded by the First Secretaries, and to continue to implement the new Constitution From July 5 to 11 most First Secretaries followed Eikhe’s lead in sending in precise figures of-by execution (category 1) or imprisonment (category 2). Then, suddenly on 12 July, Deputy NKVD Commissar M P Frinovskii sent an

urgent telegram to all local operation to repress former kulaks. “I repeat, do not begin.” (Getty, “Excesses” 127-8)

Local NKVD chiefs were recalled to Moscow for conferences, after which was issued Order detailed instruction both expanded the kinds of people subject to repression (basically including those who opposed Soviet power, and criminals), and — usually—lowered the “limits” or numbers...All this vacillation suggested disagreements and struggles between the “center”—Stalin and the First Secretaries in the provincial areas. Stalin was clearly not in charge.

The Central Committee Plenum of October 1937 saw the final cancellation of the plan for Soviet ballot, showing several candidates had already been drawn up; several of them have survived in Soviet elections of December 1937. which were implemented on the basis that the Party candidates would cooperate with nonparty candidates—in other words, an “alliance” of sorts, but without a contest. Original slates; voting was to be only for individuals —a far more democratic method. Zhukov has managed to push through very document that Molotov signed, on October 11 at 6 p.m., cancelling contested elections. This was a retreat for Stalin and his supporters in the Politburo. (Zhukov, RP 19 Nov. 02; Zhukov, Tayny)

It was also at the October CC Plenum that the first protest against the mass repression arose. Secretary Peskarov:

“They [the NKVD? The troika? — GF] condemned people for petty stuff ... illegally, and when CC comrades Stalin and Molotov strongly supported us and sent a brigade of workers from the office to review these cases. ... And it turned out that for three weeks’ work of this brigade were set aside as illegal. What’s more, in 45% of the sentences there was no evidence of crime committed.” (Zhukov, Tayny, 43; emphasis added)

At the January 1938 Plenum Malenkov delivered a blistering criticism of the huge number of citizens, being sentenced, often without even submitting a list of names, but only of the numbers sent. Kuybyshev, was removed as candidate member of the Politburo.

It seems that the NKVD was out of control, at least in many local areas. (Zhukov, KP 19 Nov. 02; Tayny, pp. 47-51; Thurston 101-2; 112) However, the Politburo leadership were real conspirators that had to be dealt with. The full extent of NKVD abuses was not recognised in the report, blaming careerists within the Party for massive expulsions and arrests, was followed by the struggle against enemies and gave only slight attention to “naivete and ignorance”.

Pravda, under the direct control of the Stalin leadership, was still calling for removal over economic affairs and for the need to promote non-party people into leading roles. (Zhukov) Khrushchev, who had in 1937 called for power to execute 20,000 unnamed people when Party head intervened in Ukraine from where, within a month, he asked for authority to repress 30,000 people. (Zhukov)

Nikolai Yezhov, who had taken over the NKVD from Genrikh Yagoda in 1936, seems to have First Secretaries. The mass repression of 1937-38 has become so

associated with his name that “Yezhovshchina,” Yezhov was talked into resigning on September 23, 1938.

Incalculable damage had been done to Soviet society, the Soviet government, and the Bolshevik Party. What has not been understood until now is that the setting up of the troikas, deportations, was initiated at the insistence of the First Secretaries, not of Stalin. Fact that the Central Committee leadership to cancel contested elections, suggests that getting rid of the “threat” of contested Elections was the reason for the mass arrests and executions of the “Yezhovshchina”. (Zhukov, KP)

Nothing can absolve Stalin and his supporters of a large measure of responsibility for prosecution of several hundred thousands—that ensued. If these people had been imprisoned rather than execution many would have had their cases reviewed and been released. However, they gave in to the First Secretaries’ demands that they be given the life-and-death “troika” powers.

No government can ever be prepared against simultaneous treason by the highest-ranking figures in both the national and important regional governments.

A serious set of conspiracies, involving both current and former high-level party leaders had just been uncovered. Most ominous was the involvement of military figures at the disclosure of secret military plans to the fascist enemy. The military conspirators had had conspiracy also involved the very highest levels of the NKVD, including Genrikh Yagoda, who had been second-in-command for some years before 1934. It simply could not be known how widespread people were involved. The prudent course was to suspect the worst.

The Politburo and Stalin himself were at the apex of two large hierarchies, of both the party & government. What they knew about the state of affairs in the country reflected what their subordinates did the next twelve months, they repressed many of the First Secretaries, against over half of whom were precise charges, and the dossiers of their interrogations and trials, in post-Soviet, anti-communist Russia reveal.

The Bolshevik Party was set up in a democratic centralist fashion. Despite his status Stalin (like any Party leader) could be voted out by a majority of the Central Committee.

To illustrate Stalin’s inability to stop the First Secretaries from flouting the principle quotes one incident from the still unpublished transcript of the October 1937 CC Plenum :

A Kravtsov, First Secretary of the Krasnodar kraikom [regional committee—GF] was the only...what his colleagues had been doing on the sly for some weeks already. He outlined the selection to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR who suited the interests of the ‘broad leadership’.

“We put forth our candidates to the Supreme Soviet,” Kravtsov stated frankly. “Who are these co-opted Party members; two are non-Party members or members of the Komsomol [Communist Youth Organization]. That non-Party members indicated in the draft decision of the CC. By occupation these comrades are employees, two Soviet employees, one kolkhoz chairman, one combine driver, one tractor drivers?”

Stalin: Who else, aside from the combine driver?

Kravtsov: Among the ten is Yakovlev, the First Secretary of the kraikom.

Stalin: Who advised you to do this?

Kravtsov: I must say, comrade Stalin, that they advised me here, in the CC apparatus.

Stalin: Who?

Kravtsov: We in the CC assigned our krai executive committee chairman, comrade Simochkin, and apparatus.

Stalin: Who?

Kravtsov: I can't say, I don't know.

Stalin: A pity that you don't say, you were told wrong." (Zhukov, Inoy 486-7)

Evidently all the First Secretaries were doing what only Kravtsov openly stated—Soviet elections, a principle they themselves had voted for at previous Plenums, but clearly demanded final defeat on this issue, the Constitutional and electoral system reforms he and his central committee had forgot for over two years.

Democratic reform was defeated. The old political system remained in place. Stalin's gone for good. "Thus the attempt of Stalin and his group to reform the political system of the failure." (Zhukov, Inoy 491)

Zhukov believes that, if Stalin had refused the appeals of the First Secretaries for he — Stalin — would have most likely been voted out, arrested as a counter-revolutionary and might be numbered among the victims of the repression of 1937 and 'Memorial' and the commission since been petitioning for his rehabilitation." (Zhukov, KP 16 Nov. 02)

In November 1938 Lavrentii Beria effectively replaced Yezhov as head of the NKVD. The judicial executions stopped, and those responsible for many of the terrible excesses were themselves imprisoned. But war was approaching. The French government refused to continue even the very alliance they had agreed to (the Soviet Union wanted a much stronger one). The Allies yielded to Polish fascists piecemeal, without a struggle. Nazi Germany had a military alliance with the fascists of USSR. The Spanish Civil War, which the Soviets had done so much to support, was lost. Italy did nothing. France and Britain were clearly encouraging Hitler. (Lubianka B, No. 365; Leibowitz)

Japan, Italy and Germany had a mutual defense treaty and an "Anti-Comintern" pact. All the European border countries — Poland, Rumania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Finland, Estonia had fascist-style military dictatorships. A 1938 Japanese attack at Lake Khasan cost the Red Army heavily more serious Japanese assault was repelled by the Red Army at Khalkin-Gol. Soviet casualties were,500 killed — no small war. As it turned out, this war was decisive.

After 1938 the Stalin government did not try again to implement the democratic electoral reforms. Did this failure reflect a continued stalemate between the Stalin

leadership and the First Secretaries. An estimate that, with war rapidly approaching, further efforts towards democracy would have to be shelved...evidence available so far does not permit a firm conclusion.

However, once Beria had replaced Yezhov as head of the NKVD (formally, in December) a continuous stream of rehabilitations took place. Beria liberated over 100,000 prisoners, followed of NKVD men accused of torture and extra-judicial executions. (Thurston 128-9)

(Concluded)