Stalinism: The Complete Negation of Socialism

written by Thomas Harrison | February 18, 2018

This is the last of three articles commemorating the Russian Revolution of 1917 and analyzing its fate under Stalin. The first part, "Glorious Harbinger of a New Society: The Bolshevik Revolution," was published in New Politics*, number 62, winter 2017, and the second part, "The Tragic Fate of Workers' Russia," in* New Politics*, number 63, summer 2017.*

By the end of 1927, Joseph Stalin had eliminated the Left Opposition from the Soviet Communist Party and was on the verge of achieving total domination of the USSR**.** At this moment, however, the country was plunged into a deep crisis. In January 1928, much of the Soviet peasantry launched a "grain strike," refusing to sell grain to the government unless they were paid much higher prices. Soviet cities now faced a real threat of starvation.

Stalin was at first paralyzed by indecision. Just as in the days of War Communism, armed detachments were sent out to force the peasants to surrender their grain. But it wasn't until fall that Stalin finally decided to abandon the New Economic Policy (NEP),[1] which had been in place since 1921, and change course entirely. In October a Five-Year Plan for the Soviet economy was announced. Investment in industry was to be tripled, and within five years, it was proclaimed, 20 percent of Russian agriculture would be collectivized. By the spring of 1929, however, Stalin had begun to urge more extensive collectivization, and by the end of the year it was clear that he intended a full-scale assault on the Russian peasantry.

The Collectivization of Agriculture

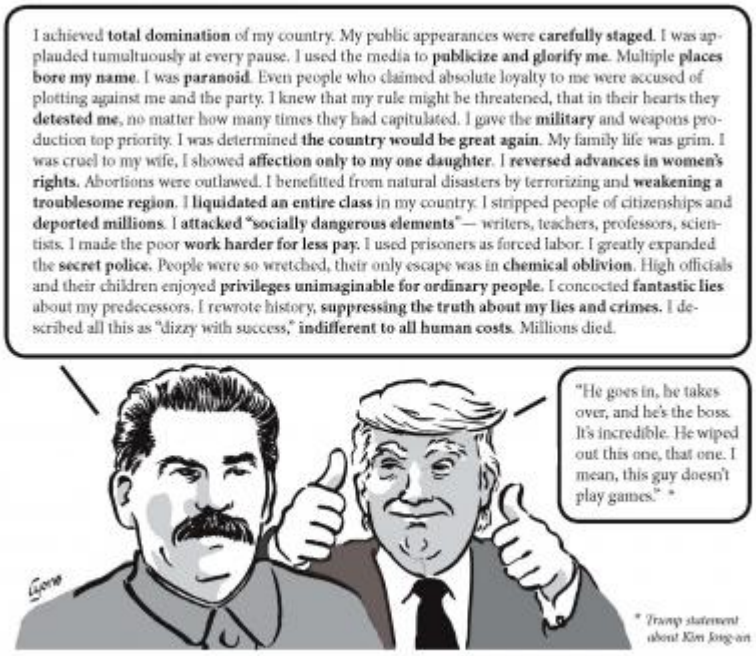
In the summer of 1929, Stalin announced that the Five-Year Plan had been revised: Now the government's goal was to abolish private farming completely—to collectivize all of Russian agriculture. The kulaks—the more prosperous peasants, who owned enough land to keep several livestock and to hire other peasants to work for them—were now portrayed as the mortal enemies of socialism and the Soviet state. They were to be "liquidated as a class." Thousands of armed "dekulakization" brigades were sent out to the countryside. Their orders were to "expropriate" the kulaks—that is, to seize all their property and turn it over to the new collective farms. Everything was taken: houses, barns, livestock, tools, even clothing, bedding, and the food on the stove. Kulak families were driven out of their villages and deported to Siberia and other remote and inhospitable parts of the Soviet Union. A brigade member later recalled, "It was terrible to watch them. They marched along in a column and looked back at their huts. … What pain they must have suffered! After all, they had been born in those houses. … The women were sobbing—they were afraid to scream. The party activists didn't give a damn about them. We drove them off like geese."[2]

The operation was chaotic as well as brutal. "Kulaks" was arbitrarily defined as any peasants who resisted collectivization. Much of their property was not transferred to the collective farms, but simply stolen.

But the vast majority of Russia's peasants—not just the kulaks—resisted collectivization. Most had to be forced, often at gunpoint, to give up their private property and join collective farms. Collectivization, they were convinced, was a new form of serfdom. Almost mad with desperation and fear, millions of peasants went on a rampage of destruction. They slaughtered their own horses and cattle, burned their crops, and smashed their tools rather than turn them over to the state. As a result, hundreds of thousands of ordinary peasants were branded as kulaks or agents of the kulaks, arrested, and deported. Weeping and cursing, those who remained were compelled to become members of the collective farms.

Already impoverished by the peasants' sabotage, the new collective farms—*kolkhozes* in Russian—did not receive the supplies and equipment they needed. If farming was to be modernized, the kolkhozes would need tractors. But by the end of 1929, there were only 30,000 in the whole country. Not only that, there were only a handful of people who could teach the peasants how to operate the tractors and even fewer who knew how to repair the machines when they broke down. Plus Russia's oil wells could not yet produce enough gasoline. So thousands of tractors just sat in the fields untended, rusting, and inoperable.

Alarmed by the chaos and waste, and fearing disaster, Stalin issued a statement in March 1930 entitled "Dizzy with Success." Blaming "abuses" and "excesses" on over-eager officials, he ordered a slowdown of the collectivization drive. But when peasants took advantage of the lull to resume their resistance, Stalin ordered the secret police, the GPU, to strike hard with more mass arrests. Collectivization continued until there was not a private farm left in the Soviet Union: All of agriculture was brought under the government's control. Before collectivization, there were 25 million individual farms; after, there were 250,000 kolkhozes. Eventually, peasants were permitted to own small private plots of land on which they could grow a few fruits and vegetables, and they could keep poultry and pigs. But everything produced by the kolkhozes belonged to the state; the collective farms were allowed to keep only enough for their members' own consumption.



In the countryside, the peasants were not the only targets of government repression. Stalin took advantage of the warlike atmosphere to attack a whole range of what were classified as "socially dangerous elements." These included priests, rabbis, monks and nuns, Nepmen (entrepreneurs who had been permitted to engage in trading and small-scale manufacturing under the NEP), and small-business owners. Some were jailed or sent to labor camps, others were simply stripped of their citizenship—which meant they could not receive housing, medical care, or food rations. The Russian Orthodox Church was particularly hard hit. Most of its higher clergy were arrested. Some of its churches were turned into museums or clubhouses, but most were simply demolished. The same fate struck the Soviet Union's other major religions—Islam, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism[3]—though to a lesser degree.

Collectivization, then, was achieved at a terrible cost in human suffering. About two million peasants, classified as kulaks, were deported, most of them to places thousands of miles from their homes, where they had to work at forced labor under horrendous conditions. Others managed to escape amid the chaos and confusion, and since they could not return to their villages, they drifted into the new industrial centers and found jobs in factories and construction projects. Back on the collective farms, the peasants had no incentive to work hard, apart from fear of punishment. The destruction of livestock meant that there was a shortage of horses to pull the plows when the tractors didn't work, and of manure to fertilize the fields. As a result, agricultural production actually fell during the first Five-Year Plan.

The fall in Russia's farm output posed a serious threat to the other part of the Five-Year Plan: rapid industrialization. Stalin needed to export grain—and other raw materials—to the West in order to acquire foreign currency with which to purchase industrial machinery. The problem was compounded by the fact that the start of the Five-Year Plan coincided with the onset of the Great Depression in Europe and the United States. The prices of Soviet export goods dropped 50 percent and more. Stalin was not to be dissuaded, however, and his determination to pursue industrialization at all costs led him to commit one of the worst atrocities in history.

The harvest of 1932 was a good one. There was enough grain to feed the Soviet population and provide an exportable surplus as well. But it was not enough for Stalin. So in the fall the brigades that went out every year to collect the surplus were instructed to take *all* the grain, including the peasants' own share. Quite simply, millions were thus condemned to die of starvation. From the fall of 1932 through the winter, spring, and summer of 1933, peasants died in their homes, in the fields, on the roads. There were cases of cannibalism. Many tried to go to the cities, hoping to find food there, but Stalin ordered the army to stop them. When peasants somehow managed to elude the patrols and slip into urban areas, they found that food was scarce there too. Soon the streets, squares, and especially the train stations of cities in the Soviet Union's agricultural heartland—Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa, and others—were littered with the emaciated bodies of peasant refugees. Those in the last stages of starvation were rounded up by the army, carted several miles outside the city limits, and dumped on the ground to die, out of sight, so as not to demoralize city dwellers.[4]

There is no accounting of how many died in the famine of 1932-1933, but the best estimate is around six million people. While the main reason Stalin brought it about was his relentless obsession with industrialization and his indifference—in this as in everything else—to the human costs, the famine also had the effect of finally breaking the resistance of the peasantry to collectivization. And there was another dimension. Ukraine was one of the country's most fertile and productive grain-growing regions, and it was there that the death toll was highest. Perhaps four million out of the six million dead were Ukrainians. Since Ukrainians were strongly nationalistic, and many longed for independence from the Soviet Union, the famine had the added benefit, from Stalin's point of view, of terrorizing and weakening a troublesome region.

Finally, the cruel saga of forced collectivization and famine has a terrible irony. Agricultural exports—the principal purpose of all this suffering—actually generated, in the end, only a small part of Soviet industrial investment. Most of it came, instead, from intensifying the exploitation of the urban working class and from the use of forced labor in the prison camps.

Rapid Industrialization

The main goal of the Five-Year Plan was to develop heavy industry. This meant, first of all, iron and steel, coal, and oil. But Stalin also aimed to establish industries in the Soviet Union that had scarcely existed there before: manufacture of automobiles and trucks, airplanes, chemicals, tractors and other farm machinery, electrical equipment, and machine tools.

Military needs were given top priority. Since the Civil War, Soviet leaders had expected another invasion by capitalist countries. In addition, Stalin's doctrine of "socialism in one country" implied that the Soviet Union should concentrate on becoming a great power rather than on spreading socialist revolution to other countries. And to be a great power, the USSR had to produce modern weapons—bombs, artillery, tanks, military aircraft, and battleships—in a hurry. This was one reason for the frenzied stress on speed: Production quotas were set, and then the Communist Party and the government would decree that these quotas must be exceeded. Factory managers and workers were exhorted to work harder and harder, to produce more and still more. When the economists and statisticians who worked on the plan objected that the government's demands were unrealistic, they were accused of sabotage and treason. Stalin declared, "To slacken the pace of industrialization would mean to lag behind, and those who lag behind are beaten. … We are 50 to 100 years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this lag in ten years or they will crush us."[5]

In other words, Stalin was demanding that the Soviet economy accomplish in ten years what it had taken a capitalist economy such as Britain's a century to complete—a full-scale industrial revolution. The British Industrial Revolution had been accompanied by terrible suffering for the lower classes: enclosures and dispossession of the peasantry; workhouses, starvation wages, and endless toil for the workers. But the British working class was at least able to organize and fight the capitalists and the government, even if illegally, and their protests could be printed in a relatively free press. In Stalin's Russia, the suffering and exploitation were much more concentrated and intense, and the peasants and workers had no way to defend themselves.

For the party, the job of the industrial working class was simple: to work harder for less pay. The result would be lower labor costs and a bigger surplus, which would be reinvested in industry. Getting workers to produce more for less was accomplished mainly by raising quotas and cutting wages. One way of cutting wages was the use of the piecework system—something that socialists and trade unionists had always opposed in capitalist countries. Workers were paid by the piece instead of by the hour; then the piece rates were steadily reduced, forcing workers to exert themselves to the very limits of human endurance in order to make enough to survive. Workers' wages were reduced even further by frequent fines, imposed for lateness, absenteeism, complaining, disobedience—some of these offenses could even bring a jail sentence. Between 1928 and 1933, the average wage of a Soviet worker fell by *half*.

To raise quotas, factory managers identified the strongest and most productive workers and organized them into special "shock" brigades. The output of these brigades was held up as an example to the other workers and eventually became the basis for higher quotas. Then there was Stakhanovism. In 1935 a coal miner named Alexei Stakhanov mined 100 tons of coal in one day—the quota was seven tons. The party made him an instant national hero. All workers were called on to emulate him, and, of course, the quota for coal miners was significantly raised. The Stakhanovites and shock workers formed a small working-class elite, whose members were rewarded with fame,

large bonuses (amounting to as much as ten times an ordinary worker's pay), and free vacation trips. The government used them to drive the rest of the workers on to greater and greater efforts. Trade unions were active, but since they were controlled by the party, their job was to promote higher productivity too, not to fight for higher wages.

In the cities, workers lived miserably. Rents were very low, but there was an acute housing shortage. Apartments were occupied by several families, each with no more than one room to live in—sometimes families were forced to sleep in hallways and basements. There were constant quarrels, and there was little privacy. In the new industrial outposts, things were far worse. Under the Five-Year Plan, whole cities were built in the wilderness, almost overnight.

The most famous was Magnitogorsk, an iron- and steel-producing center with a population of 250,000. Here workers had to endure the most wretched conditions, sleeping in crowded barracks, using outdoor toilets, living with almost no diversions except drinking. Vodka, at least, was cheap and plentiful.

Organized resistance seemed hopeless; strikes and protests were treated as counter-revolutionary treason. Even complaining in private was risky; in a crowded apartment one's neighbor in the next room might well be an informant for the GPU. Some workers retaliated by damaging factory equipment; now and then, a Stakhanovite or shock worker would be jumped in a dark alley and beaten or killed. For most, however, the only relief was in alcohol. On paydays and holidays, drunken workers—young and old, male and female—were everywhere to be seen, reeling and passing out in the snow, on the streets.

Under Stalin, the advances in women's rights that had been made since the Revolution were reversed. Because workers were so desperately needed in the industrialization drive, masses of women were encouraged to take jobs that had always been reserved for men—operating heavy machinery, stoking blast furnaces, doing construction, and the like. But the idea of equal pay for equal work was abandoned. Women were paid far less than men and generally kept in the lowest positions. In 1935 abortion was outlawed. Now women were offered financial bonuses and awards for having more babies. Women with five or six children received the "Motherhood Medal"; seven or eight children earned the "Motherhood Glory Medal" and nine or more, the "Heroine Mother." Divorce was discouraged. To "strengthen the family," divorcees had to pay stiff taxes, which increased with every subsequent divorce. In line with this new emphasis on traditional "family values," homosexuality was also made illegal and punishable by a three-year prison term.

The Gulag

Under Stalin, the GPU was greatly expanded: By the end of the 1930s it was nearly as big as the Red Army. Its head, Genrikh Yagoda, was the most feared man in the Soviet Union. The death penalty, which had been abolished prior to the end of the Civil War, was reintroduced, and the GPU was authorized to execute people on its own authority, without even a trial. One of the GPU's jobs was to build and administer a vast network of concentration camps. Euphemistically called "corrective labor camps," they comprised a system known by its Russian acronym as the Gulag. There were thousands of these sinister places, most of them in Siberia and the Arctic regions of Russia.

Beginning in 1928-1929, millions of Russians were condemned to work in the camps: Oppositionists who had refused to capitulate, kulaks and other peasants who had resisted collectivization, priests, factory managers and engineers who had failed to meet their quotas, workers accused of "sabotage," as well as ordinary criminals—thieves, murderers, swindlers, rapists, and so on. People were given ten- or fifteen-year sentences to the Gulag because they were overheard making jokes about Stalin. In 1932, internal passports were introduced; Soviet citizens were required to carry them at all times

when outside their homes. People were arrested and sent to the camps because they went out to buy a newspaper without their passport and had the misfortune to be stopped by the police.

This massive population of prisoners was forced to work on projects that were either inhumanly difficult or were located in the coldest and most forbidding parts of the Soviet Union. One of the first was the 150-mile-long White Sea Canal, connecting the Baltic to the Arctic Ocean. Rather than use excavating machines, which were scarce and expensive, the GPU put 150,000 prisoners to work with pickaxes, buckets, and wheelbarrows, digging through solid granite. The death rate was enormous, but there was a steady stream of fresh prisoners to replace those worked to death. Prison labor was essentially slavery. And it was cheap since the GPU provided less than the minimum amount of food and clothing. Whether prisoners survived simply was not important; so many Soviet citizens were being arrested every day that there was an endless supply.

Camps were built in the vast Siberian forests, where prisoners cut timber. Others were located in coal- and iron-mining regions. Some of the worst were in the Kolyma area of northeastern Siberia, where prisoners felled trees, split logs, and mined gold in some the coldest temperatures on earth. The guards beat them, threw them into unheated punishment cells in the dead of winter, raped the women. The most notorious camp was Vorkuta, which was where most of the Trotskyists and other Oppositionists were held. In Vorkuta, Kolyma, and the other camps in the far north most prisoners did not survive their first winter.

By the end of the 1930s, the Gulag contained nearly three million inmates. With so little invested in their upkeep, the prisoners constituted an almost free source of labor and thus an immense investment in the Soviet Union's industrialization. And so it was that out of the flesh and bones and spirit of his own people, without help from the West, Stalin built "socialism in one country"—in reality the very opposite of socialism.

The Great Purge

In 1934 Stalin ordered a slowing down of the terror. Arrests declined, and conditions in the camps showed a slight improvement. The GPU was renamed the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs—NKVD in Russian—and its power was supposedly curtailed. But then on December 1, 1934, Sergei Kirov, a close associate of Stalin and a chief party official in Leningrad, was assassinated.[6] The assassin was a young Communist named Leonid Nikolayev. The NKVD immediately declared that Nikolayev was part of a conspiracy *within* the party to murder its leaders and overthrow the Communist system. Of course, by 1934 there were no longer any open critics or opponents of Stalin in the party—they had all either capitulated or been sent off to the Gulag. So the NKVD pointed the accusing finger at the capitulators, claiming that despite all their fervent declarations of absolute loyalty to Stalin, they were actually plotting against him and against the party.

Within weeks of Kirov's assassination, the NKVD arrested Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev and began rounding up all the other former leaders of the Opposition who were still at large. In January 1935 they were sentenced to prison for five to ten years, convicted not (yet) of treason and conspiracy, but of the lesser crime of forming a secret faction within the party. Soon, however, the number of arrests began to mount. During 1935 virtually every party member who had ever opposed or even questioned Stalin and his clique was expelled from the party, arrested, and sent into the Gulag. By 1936 perhaps 150,000 party members had been "purged"—expelled and arrested. All were accused of being involved in a huge terrorist conspiracy, masterminded from abroad by the exiled Leon Trotsky. "Trotskyism" was now the worst crime of which one could be suspected.

But Stalin was not satisfied with the purges. The NKVD complained that party officials and ordinary members had not been sufficiently eager to unmask and root out the conspirators. Now all those

who had been friendly to or even merely worked in the same office with the purged "Trotskyists," or who had expressed doubts about their guilt, came under suspicion. To have failed to notice earlier that one's colleague, professor, fellow worker, or spouse was a traitor, and not to have turned in him or her, was seen as evidence of one's guilt.

In August 1936 Zinoviev, Kamenev, and 14 of their former associates were dragged from prison to face new and astounding charges. Put on public trial, before an audience full of foreign journalists, "the Sixteen" were accused of being among the top leaders of the conspiracy. All made complete confessions of their guilt. All avowed that Trotsky, the arch-fiend, had given them orders, had arranged the murder of Kirov, and was planning the murder of Stalin and his closest lieutenants. The Sixteen described an extensive conspiracy—thousands were involved—and it included terrifying acts of sabotage: blowing up hydroelectric dams, wrecking farm machinery, poisoning drinking water, and so on. Trotsky himself, they alleged, was working with Hitler (who had come to power in Germany in 1933) and the rulers of Japan.

As the chief prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky (a former Menshevik) screamed that they were "mad dogs" who deserved to be shot, the accused hung their heads and meekly agreed. One of them said, "We were bandits, assassins, fascists, agents of the Gestapo. I thank the prosecutor for having demanded for us the only penalty we deserve." Soviet newspapers carried banner headlines, "Shoot the mad dogs!" They reported that workers in factories voted "with enthusiasm" for resolutions calling for the death penalty for the "Trotskyist-Zinovievist monsters" who "sought to darken our happy lives." School children—doubtless with their teachers' encouragement—wrote poems and letters to Stalin demanding death to the conspirators. On August 24, the death sentences were announced. At dawn the next day, the Sixteen were taken out of their cells. One by one they were escorted down to the basement of the prison and led along a cement corridor. Silently, as each one walked, an executioner came up behind him and put a bullet through the back of his head.[7]

That day the executions were announced on loudspeakers throughout the country. According to reports in the Soviet papers, workers applauded in the factories, and everywhere citizens expressed their satisfaction. One story told of an orphanage where "little ones, boys and girls eight and ten years old, exclaimed with joy, 'let these dogs perish. … Oh how we would have liked to shoot them ourselves!'"

The trial of the Sixteen was a show trial, designed to justify the purges to the world. No evidence was brought forward except for the defendants' confessions. Before the trial began, the accused were tortured and threatened—usually with retaliation against their families—until they broke down and confessed to every preposterous crime with which they were charged. Then they were rehearsed by the NKVD. The trial went according to a script, but this was not known by the Western journalists who reported from Moscow. Trotsky, in exile, figured out the truth, but few—apart from some independent leftists and liberals such as John Dewey—listened to or believed him. Instead, news media and government circles in the West generally accepted the official Soviet version.

The trial of the Sixteen was followed by several other widely publicized trials in Moscow. In 1937, Georgy Pyatakov, Karl Radek, and fifteen others who had been close associates of Lenin and leaders of the October Revolution were convicted, naturally after full confessions; most were condemned to death. Later that year, Stalin struck at the leadership of the Red Army. Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky was brutally tortured until he confessed to treason (years later, his signed confession was found, stained with his blood). He and thousands of other high-ranking officers—including three of the Soviet Union's five marshals, 13 of 15 generals, and eight of nine admirals—were executed after secret trails. In 1938, Nikolai Bukharin, Alexei Rykov, Mikhail Tomsky, and 18 more were featured in yet another show trial, also charged with participation in the Trotskyist-fascist conspiracy. Stalin evidently had a soft spot for Bukharin; he was not tortured but merely told that if

he confessed his wife and son would be spared.

The slaughter of leading Soviet figures, from the past and present, was brought about by Stalin's paranoia. The collectivization of agriculture, rapid industrialization, building up of Soviet military power—all threw the country into turmoil. The triumph of the Nazis in Germany, along with the continuing hostility of the other Great Powers, seemed to increase the danger of invasion. At any moment, Stalin feared, his rule might be threatened from inside or outside the USSR. It became essential for him, therefore, to eliminate all potential rivals, including ex-leaders who might take advantage of a crisis. Stalin knew that the former Oppositionists, in their hearts, detested him, no matter how many times they had capitulated. And even those who had never been Oppositionists, like the military leaders, could not be fully trusted, he believed.

The trials of prominent figures were only the tip of the iceberg, however. The years 1936 to 1938 were a time of massive and systematic terror affecting every level of Soviet society. Stalin's mania for killing was insatiable. Yagoda was not considered ruthless enough, and in 1937 he was replaced as head of the NKVD by Nikolai Yezhov, a sadistic drug addict who was loathed even by Stalin's closest supporters in the Politburo. A year later, Yagoda found himself on trial along with Bukharin and the others. Under Yezhov's direction, the NKVD seized millions of victims. The educated and cultured were especially hard hit—teachers, professors, engineers, scientists, writers, actors, artists, and dancers. Anyone who showed a strong interest in foreign countries—stamp collectors, for instance, or people who listened to foreign broadcasts on their radios or corresponded with foreign friends, or who had ever traveled abroad—was likely to get arrested. And above all, anyone who had been politically active before the 1930s was in grave danger.

The NKVD worked 24 hours a day but was busiest at night. It was then that the questioning and torture took place in the prisons. NKVD headquarters in Moscow, the 15-story Lubyanka prison, was a beehive of activity, with unmarked vans full of prisoners coming and going constantly and lights burning in every window all night long (the cells were deep within the building, far from sight of the street). Just before dawn, in the basement corridors, came the shootings. NKVD agents usually made their arrests at night too, or if in daylight very surreptitiously; the goal was to avoid attention. Relatives of the arrested could never visit them and were rarely even told what had happened to them. They had simply been taken, and, while execution was likely, one could never be sure if they were alive or dead.

As the scale of arrests mounted, the old methods proved inadequate. In the cities, the condemned were driven by truckloads out to nearby forests, shot by the thousands and thrown into mass graves, which were dug by other prisoners.[8] Large-scale executions were also ordered in the labor camps. It is estimated that about eight million were arrested in 1936-1938. Of these, perhaps 700,000 were executed; the rest were swallowed up by the Gulag.

No one was safe—not even the members of Stalin's own Politburo. Yezhov himself eventually shared the fate of his predecessor, Yagoda. But the main victim of the Great Purge was the Communist Party itself—or, more exactly, that part of it which dated back to the days of the pre-revolutionary Bolshevik party, the 1917 Revolution, the Civil War, and the NEP. One statistic tells almost the whole story: In 1934, after Stalin had already become the unchallenged dictator of the Soviet Union but before the purges, about 40 percent of the party's members had joined before 1917. In 1938, after the purges, only five percent had been members since the Revolution. Stalin had wiped out virtually the entire generation of 1917.

A New Society

Stalin wrote of the Five-Year Plan that it was a "profound revolution … equivalent in its

consequences to the revolution of October 1917." This was in some ways an odd statement—odd because Stalin always portrayed himself as the heir of Lenin, as one who had simply continued the work of the 1917 Revolution by building socialism. Now, by calling the Five-Year Plan a second revolution, he seemed to suggest that what had been established in 1917 was *overthrown*. This was not what Stalin *meant*, of course, but, unintentionally, he was right.

The Stalin revolution encompassed not only the Five-Year Plan but the Great Purge as well. Together, these events brought a new ruling elite to power in the Soviet Union. During the first Five-Year Plan (there were new ones every five years), more than 100,000 young factory and office workers were selected by the party to receive higher education at technical and military schools. When the Great Purge exterminated a large portion of the Soviet Union's factory managers, engineers, and army and navy officers, this special group was quickly promoted to take their places. Soon its members achieved high positions in the party, the military, and the management of the economy. All were of working-class or peasant origin, and they were too young to have experienced any of the political events prior to Stalin's victory over the Opposition. They owed everything to Stalin, and they were unconditionally loyal to him as a result.

The new elite earned salaries that were much higher than the incomes of workers and peasants, but they were not wealthy; since virtually all property in the Soviet system was state-owned, there was no opportunity for individuals to accumulate personal fortunes from profits, investments, rent, or the like. High officials enjoyed privileges that were unimaginable for ordinary Russians: large apartments, servants, chauffeur-driven cars, country houses, foreign travel, and so on. But these were *political* privileges, provided to them by the state for free or at very low cost—not the rewards of personal wealth. They lived in special apartment houses with guards, shopped at special stores that carried imported merchandise, and vacationed at resorts reserved for them. And as the first generation of the elite matured, they sought to protect their children's privileges by closing off access to newcomers. From 1940 to 1950, for example, the percentage of university students from working-class families fell from 40 to 25 percent. Entry into elite jobs was thus increasingly reserved for the elite's own offspring.

Everything in the Soviet Union was tightly controlled by the Communist Party. There were party cells in every workplace. With millions of members throughout Soviet society, the party's job was to "lead" the "non-party" masses—to disseminate the party's instructions, to see that production targets were met, to whip up enthusiasm, and to report any signs of dissent. In other words, party members were supposed to make sure the leadership's policies were carried out. To be asked to join the party (one did not apply for membership) was considered an honor—and a privilege since all the best jobs were reserved for party members. One entered the party after spending one's early years in its youth groups: the Little Octobrists for children, the Pioneers for ages 9-14, and the Komsomol for ages 15-26.

Over all this, Stalin presided, a remote and all-powerful figure. In private, his life was relatively simple, even dull. He nearly always wore a plain military tunic. He worked at his desk until late every night, smoked heavily, and never exercised. His only distractions were movies—he loved American Westerns—and plays—he attended the theater several times a week. Family life in the Stalin household was grim. The dictator was estranged from his two sons, and he was so cruel to his wife that she committed suicide in 1932. He never remarried. Stalin showed affection only to his one daughter, Svetlana.

Stalin's public appearances were rare and always carefully staged. But he was the center of a leadership cult so extreme that there are few parallels in modern times. In Soviet newsreels, he usually appeared as a mild-mannered, fatherly figure, puffing thoughtfully on his pipe, smilingly receiving bouquets from adorable children, modestly accepting the frenzied adoration of the people.

Whenever he gave a speech, he was applauded tumultuously at every pause; at the end, ovations usually lasted for a quarter of an hour (of course, everyone in the audience was afraid to be the first one to stop clapping). Scarcely an article in a Soviet newspaper or magazine did not begin and end with a quotation from his ponderous writings. Whenever he was referred to in print, the personal pronouns were in capital letters. Every medium was used to publicize and glorify him: newspapers, magazines, books, film, radio, poetry, painting, sculpture. Cities, factories, kolkhozes, hydroelectric dams, and schools were named after him.

Because Stalin had wiped out his predecessors after having the GPU concoct fantastic lies about them, he needed to rewrite history. Older Soviet citizens had to be made to forget the truth about the past; younger ones must never learn the truth. All the history books were altered. Stalin was made into the greatest Bolshevik next to Lenin, the co-leader of the October Revolution. Trotsky, Zinoviev, and the rest became villains who had plotted against Lenin and the Soviet Union ever since 1917. The GPU and NKVD were especially thorough about doctoring and eliminating photographic evidence. In books, museums, people's own photo albums, there were thousands of pictures of Stalin's victims from earlier years, all of which had to be destroyed or retouched. For example, in pictures of Lenin standing next to Trotsky, Trotsky was airbrushed out. Frightened friends and relatives of the victims went through their personal albums with a scissors. Memory itself was purged.

Despite the terrible oppression under which the Soviet people lived, the cult of Stalin and all the rest of the party's propaganda could not fail to have an impact. Members of the new elite, of course, were acutely aware of the contrast between their privileged lives and the poverty and obscurity of their childhood, and they idolized Stalin for making their success possible. But even many workers and peasants, especially among the younger generation—those who came to young adulthood during the first Five-Year Plan—were genuinely proud of what the Soviet Union achieved under Stalin. Russia had emerged from backwardness; by the end of the 1930s, it was a formidable industrial and military power. And all this was accomplished at a time—during the Great Depression—when throughout the capitalist world, factories were shutting down and workers by the millions were losing their jobs.

The contrast between a stagnating capitalist world and a dynamic Soviet Union that was on the move, building and producing, drew international admiration for Stalin's version of "socialism." The famous American muckraking journalist, Lincoln Steffens, commented after visiting the Soviet Union, "I have seen the future, and it works."

For Stalin and the new Soviet elite, the social system they created "worked." But for the workers and peasants of the USSR, and for the historic cause of socialism worldwide, it was an unmitigated disaster, the effects of which still linger. Eventually this new social system—bureaucratic collectivist, to give it a label—was exported far and wide—to Eastern Europe, China, North Korea, Southeast Asia, Cuba. For millions of people throughout the world, on the left and the right and in between, the very definition of socialism came to be simply state control of the economy—without workers' control of the *state*, that is, without democracy. With the extermination of the older generation of Bolsheviks, only a tiny remnant of revolutionary socialists survived here and there to challenge this conception—to remind the world that this was not what socialism meant to Marx and Engels and not why the October Revolution of 1917 had been fought.

Footnotes

1. The New Economic Policy was an attempt to mollify peasant opposition to Bolshevik rule by allowing, among other things, free trade in agricultural produce. In addition, a limited amount of

private ownership was permitted in retail trade and manufacturing. The NEP was initially seen as a temporary program that would enable the Soviet regime to hold on until socialist revolution spread to other countries, especially Germany.
2. Vasily Grossman, *Forever Flowing* (Northwestern Univ., 2000), 145.
3. Persecution was directed at Judaism mainly as a religion at this point. Despite the whiff of anti-Semitism around the Stalinists' campaign against the Opposition, and Stalin's personal prejudice against Jews, there was no attempt to discriminate against the Jewish people as such. In fact, the Communist Party, including the GPU and the party leaders around Stalin, included a rather large proportion of people of Jewish origins. It was only in the late 1940s that a more generalized anti-Jewish policy was instituted by the Soviet state.
4. Another reason why the government was concerned to keep starving peasants out of the cities was to conceal the very existence of the famine—especially from foreigners. Stalin encouraged Western politicians and journalists to visit the Soviet Union. The GPU took them on carefully choreographed guided tours, complete with model kolkhozes filled with happy, well-fed peasants. And journalists, including Walter Duranty, the correspondent for the *New York Times,* obligingly wrote glowing reports of the great achievements of Stalin's Five-Year Plan. So effectively was the famine covered up that the truth did not come out fully until more than 50 years later. Of course, news had leaked out at the time—a catastrophe of such dimensions cannot be totally hidden. But Westerners who heard about it for the most part simply refused to believe.
5. "Speech to Industrial Managers," February 1931.
6. Kirov was a popular figure within the party, and Stalin may have regarded him as a rival. There has long been speculation that Stalin himself arranged the assassination, but this has never been proven.
7 This was the method of execution preferred by the NKVD for party officials. Unlike the Sixteen, however, most prisoners were condemned to death in secret, without trials; so when they were led out into the corridors, they did not know what to expect. The NKVD thought it was "less messy" if the executed were caught unaware—no tears and scenes, no pleading for mercy.
8. In the late 1980s, when Communism began to loosen up in the Soviet Union, people were finally allowed to investigate the Great Terror. Mass graves were uncovered throughout the country, in fields, woods, and riverbanks, but of course by then the corpses were unidentifiable. An organization, Memorial, was founded to record and commemorate the victims of Stalin's purges.