

ALTER LITVIN

**OUR
UNPREDICTABLE
PAST**

**Essays on Twentieth-Century
Russian History and Politics
2000-2015**



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Translator's Preface

The essays in this volume appeared between 2000 and 2015 as articles in the liberal newspaper *Vecherniaia Kazan'*, published in the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, Kazan'. Professor Alter Litvin was, until his recent retirement, Professor of Russian History and Historiography at the Kazan' (Volga Region) Federal University. He is a Distinguished Professor of the Republic of Tatarstan and has published many works on modern Russia, specializing in the history of the civil war of 1918-21 and the politics of repression under Stalin. Firmly committed to the defence of human rights and freedoms, he suffered from discrimination in his early career but triumphed over all obstacles placed in his path as a professional historian. He is revered by students and colleagues alike. These selected articles are written in a popular style designed to be readily understood by non-specialists. To the contemporary Western reader they offer a glimpse into the outlook of ordinary people in a relatively calm and prosperous part of the Russian Federation that is perhaps less familiar to us than it should be.

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1. Our Unpredictable Past

1

Everything in human history looks different to each individual, whether he or she is a historian, a politician, or a memoir writer -- and we don't know what Almighty God thinks of it either! That's to say, everyone is tendentious to some degree. He or she falsifies the record, for a variety of reasons, and all too often turns it into 'politics projected into the past', to use an expression that came into vogue in the 1920s.

It is also a well-known fact that history is written by the victors -- by those who managed to defeat their enemies and then sought to legitimize their power by praising the achievements of the regime they helped to found. But sometimes the opposite happens: history is written by the losers. One thinks of those who had to emigrate after the Russian revolution, of the White generals, for example, who refused to admit that they were beaten and whose writings were full of hatred for everything Soviet. Such subjectivism doesn't help us understand what really happened. For the truth exists independently of whatever any state authority may decree.

Some people aver that history is written in order to fulfil some sort of 'social command', and indeed orders or edicts of one sort or another have been issued by a variety of regimes in many different countries. They resulted in, for example, the invention of nuclear weapons and their use in 1945, as well as any number of other technical devices. As far as historians are concerned, the 'social commands' most relevant to their work are those that emanate from politicians, of whom some would like to rewrite history in accordance with their own preferences. They seek to adapt historical writing to the needs of their regime, so disregarding the fundamental purpose of the discipline. One instance of this occurred in the USSR in 1988, when the authorities simply decreed that no examinations in history should be held in schools throughout the country, because the old textbooks were no longer deemed suitable and there weren't as yet any substitutes for them. This action showed that the writing of history in the USSR was in a critical state. The British historian Bob Davies, in a book on Soviet historiography under Gorbachev, reproduced a cartoon showing a schoolboy asking his teacher whether he should answer the question put to him 'according to the textbook or the way things actually are'.¹

¹ R.W. Davies, *Soviet History in the Gorbachev Revolution*, London, 1989.

One can really only admire a boy clever enough to know that truth existed outside his textbook!

At first most Russian historians reacted positively to the new freedoms they had been granted during the era of glasnost' and perestroika. But then they began to have second thoughts. The myth began to spread that in tsarist times everything had been splendid, whereas in the Soviet era there had been nothing but brutality and wasted effort. But this view was biased, for one can't just chop up history into bits chronologically. Each period inherits something from its predecessor. Just as it is artificial to counterpose the era of Lenin to that of Stalin, so one cannot arbitrarily distinguish Yeltsin's era from Putin's. After all, we're thinking about different stages in the history of a single country - moreover, one that comprises many nationalities.

In the twentieth century Russia went through a succession of rapid and sudden changes. It had four different types of regime : monarchical, republican (in 1917), Communist, and after 1991 a parliamentary system with a strong presidency. The name of the state changed no less than five times! Before 1917 it was known as the Russian empire; then came the Russian republic, the RSFSR (1918-22), the USSR (1922-91), the Russian Federation, and from 1993 simply Russia. People born in the same generation might have sung five national anthems: first of all 'God Save the Tsar', then 'La Marseillaise' (1917), the 'Internationale' (1918-44), 'Union Indivisible' (1944-91), and finally a piece by Glinka that didn't have any text at all!²

A large proportion of historians, not just in Russia, has always been ready to lend support to the existing regime. Significantly, in the early 1990s a lot of people who had previously been ideologically orthodox suddenly came out with the sharpest criticism of the Marxist-Leninist world-view. This was because they had been trained to fulfil the 'social command' of the day, and the flood of information that suddenly descended on them in the late 1980s was something that they had craved earlier, in the days when such information was practically non-existent.

The collapse of the USSR took place with astonishing speed. Within a few years much of the substance of what had once been the Russian empire simply disappeared: vast territories, the vertical transmission of state power, the effort to impose uniformity of thought. Where once there had been a single 'national idea' there was now a struggle between ambitious rival national élites, which in some areas actually came to blows. In place of ideological censorship there were now economic pressures to conform. In these circumstances historians began to re-equip themselves

² This defect has since been made good by a further change, decreed in 2001, when S.V. Mikhalkov, who had composed the old Soviet anthem, came up with a new version.

methodologically and to place their pens at the service of the new authorities, both central and local. As a result the Soviet past did not vanish but instead has endured right up to the present day, so that both historians and the general public view events before 1991 in radically different ways.

On 21 December 1999 Stalin's admirers celebrated the 120th anniversary of the leader's birth. A poll was taken by sociologists working for VTsIOM (the All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion) which showed that 32% of respondents considered Stalin to have been a tyrant who had caused the death of millions of innocent citizens; but just as many respondents -- another 32% -- thought that he should be credited with victory over the fascist invaders in World War II. No less than 18% of those polled agreed with the statement that 'our people cannot do without a leader in the Stalin mould, and sooner or later such an individual will emerge and put a stop to all the disorder'. Asked to evaluate Stalin's historical role in general, 22% of respondents thought that his rule had been beneficial, or had brought more good than bad; 44% considered that there had been an equal amount of good and bad; and 25% viewed his rule critically: either it had been totally bad or else there had been more bad than good in it. (Those not included in these figures had not made up their minds.)

There is a myth circulating to the effect that Stalin was both 'great' and 'terrible'. He had inspired fear not only among the peoples over whom he ruled but also on a world-wide scale. This reminds me of Anna Akhmatova's words when someone in her presence said that Stalin had been a great statesman. 'It's as if you were to say that someone was a cannibal but he played the fiddle to perfection.' To be sure, this is an emotionally coloured judgement, but despite all that has been written about the Stalin phenomenon we still don't have a balanced scholarly evaluation of it. Instead, we have a lot of people for whom his ideas are still very much alive.

2

Not long ago an academic conference was held in Finland³ at which a group of historians specializing in Stalinism discussed the impact of the famous *Short Course* of Party history⁴ written under his close supervision and published in 1938. All the Russian scholars present agreed that for half a century this work had served historians of the ruling Communist party as

³ VIth World Congress of ICCEES (International Congress of Central and East European Studies), Tampere, 29 July - 3 August 2000.

⁴ *History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): A Short Course*, Moscow, 1938.

the fulcrum of their outlook on the past and future; it had been a weapon to make historians conform to the Party line and to differentiate Soviet-style 'socialism' from all other varieties elsewhere in the world. They went on to look at contemporary historical textbooks used in Russian schools and universities. The conclusion they came to was that their structure, treatment of historical issues, and even literary style were almost wholly identical with those of the *Short Course*. Moreover, they found that the liberal-democratic version of Soviet history current in the late 1980s and early 1990s had been sidelined by a 'patriotic statist' school that had much in common with the underlying concept of Stalin's *Short Course*, except that the monarchy and the Church, once scorned, were now looked on with favour.

The variety of opinions expressed about recent Russian history extends to published books as well. Some are just panegyrics to the Stalinist regime, whose repression of millions of innocent people is seen as a justified necessity: in order to modernize the country's economy, we are told, the Communists were obliged to liquidate all opposition; in other words, the end justifies the means, however cruel. But it was this approach that, to quote the liberal writer V.G. Korolenko, turned a 'theoretical paradise' into a 'hellish nightmare'. Several serious historians in Kazan' (R.K. Valeev, B.F. Sultanbekov, I.R. Tagirov and others) have written at length about the consequences that Stalin's terror had for the peoples of the Tatar republic. As a contrast to such works one may point to K.T. Gizzata's book *National Ideology* (Moscow, 1999), which displays a pathological hatred for anyone daring to doubt the correctness of Stalin's model of socialism or the methods employed to bring it about.

This is not the first time that writers have tried to excuse crimes against humanity. Efforts have been made to defend the Nazis who were found guilty of such crimes and sentenced after the war by the international tribunal at Nuremberg and then by other courts, on the grounds that they were only carrying out the orders of the Führer, or trying to strengthen the German state and so on. A few Russian historians have recently even argued in favour of the rehabilitation of those who headed the punitive organs under Stalin, claiming that these officials were likewise merely doing their duty and were shot for political reasons; they had not received a fair trial in a court of law, and no evidence had been produced of their alleged criminal behaviour. It is true that the successive NKVD chiefs, G.G. Yagoda, N.I. Yezhov and L.P. Beria, were shot as 'English spies' although the charge was never substantiated. On 4 February 1988 the plenum of the USSR Supreme Court rehabilitated all those sentenced to death on 12 March 1938 -- except for Yagoda. He had been accused, along with N.I. Bukharin and A.I. Rykov, of organizing the assassination of S.M. Kirov on 1 December 1934, of bringing about the death of Maxim Gorky, and of

making an attempt on the life of Yezhov. Fifty years or so later the procuracy established that the evidence against the accused had been fabricated, that they had been subjected to 'physical measures of influence' (i.e. torture), and that the NKVD investigators themselves had been sentenced in 1939-40 for their crass perversion of justice. It was now established by the court that none of the accused had had any contact with foreign intelligence services; nor had any of them ever engaged in terrorist activity. The procuracy carried out a second expert judicial-medical investigation, which showed that the writer Gorky, one-time OGPU chief V.R. Menzhinsky, and top economic official V.V. Kuibyshev had all died of natural causes; nor was there any evidence that Gorky's son, M.A. Peshkov, had been deliberately put to death -- although rumours continue to this day to that effect.

So why not rehabilitate Yagoda? After all, he too did not commit the offences with which he was charged in 1938, and for which he was shot. It would have been juridically more correct to amend the accusations levelled against him in 1938 and to declare him innocent 'for lack of any criminal conduct' (the phrase commonly used in rehabilitation documents). The reason why Yagoda was not rehabilitated was this: it would have meant admitting that Soviet citizens, exempt from any statute of limitation. It was precisely for crimes against humanity that proceedings should have been taken against such mass murderers as Yagoda, Yezhov, Beria and their stooges, and indeed against the political chiefs of the USSR into the bargain, for it was they who had staged and sanctioned the Great Terror, i.e. the killing of hundreds of thousands of their fellow-citizens. No statute of limitation should apply in their cases, just as it does not apply to the Nazi criminals either.

3

At the time all criminal acts -- orders and edicts by the state authorities, sentences passed by 'courts' outside the judicial system, torture of persons under arrest, and the infamous Article 58 of the Criminal Code -- were all covered at the time by the term 'socialist legality'. Let us recall that in 1939-40 Beria instituted a campaign of 'struggle against the Yezhovshchina', in the course of which NKVD operatives were arrested and shot in their turn for 'breaches of socialist legality', yet this did not stop him and his acolytes from going on to perpetrate innumerable crimes against further millions of innocents. Unfortunately this fact is obscured rather than clarified by the RSFSR law 'On the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression', issued on 18 October 1991. This lays down that individuals who commit offences that subvert the legal order should not qualify for rehabilitation. But what legal order is referred to here? Those

Soviet officials who perpetrated massive crimes against innocent citizens did so in accordance with Soviet law, i.e. the law of an illegal state. From this it follows that it is not just these officials who are guilty of crimes against humanity but the whole system of so-called 'socialist legality', which permitted them to do so, is basically flawed. The responsibility for killing and injuring the victims of Stalin's terror has to be shared by *everyone* who participated in the system, but each person's degree of responsibility varies. Rehabilitation ought really to mean declaring the system iniquitous, revealing all its secrets, and showing how it could be reformed.

Since this was not done, we have a legal vacuum that leaves open the question whether we do not need another 'Nuremberg' to condemn the crimes perpetrated by the Soviet regime. If this is not done, we are bound to experience a tendency in the reverse direction, i.e. attempts to rehabilitate those who set up and ran the Gulag. Here I am talking only about 'lower ranking' officials, those who carried out criminal orders, not about their bosses, those who inspired and issued such orders. For these architects of repression there can be no question of any rehabilitation -- unless this were to be promulgated by a properly constituted criminal court.

On 28 April 1998 *Izvestiia* reported that the case of General V.S. Abakumov, who headed the MGB from 1946 to 1951, and who was shot in December 1954, was being reconsidered. Of course he was neither a traitor nor a terrorist who planned to assassinate Soviet leaders, as the prosecution had then alleged. For this reason in 1994 the article under which he was indicted was amended, and the death sentence was changed to one of 25 years' imprisonment. In this way Abakumov posthumously ceased to be a state criminal and became just an official guilty of abuse of power! But this arbitrary act did not reduce the number of his crimes, nor of his victims. After all, Abakumov was the man largely responsible for fabricating the evidence in the 'Leningrad case' of 1949, which cost many innocent lives.

There was a precedent for such retroactive amendment of charges: on 4 June 1998 the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court initiated a review of the case against N.I. Yezhov, head of the NKVD in 1936-8, who was shot on 4 February 1940 in Moscow for (alleged) treason, wrecking, espionage etc. This decision was a response to an appeal by Yezhov's adopted daughter. Once again it soon became apparent that Yezhov had not been an agent of Polish or German intelligence, that he had not conspired to launch a *coup d'état*, and had not engaged in any subversive acts -- all of which had been alleged in the indictment. In the record of the investigation reviewing officials found a package containing three separately wrapped bullets from

Nagan and Colt revolvers that had been used to execute G.I. Zinoviev, L.B. Kamenev and I.I. Smirnov, leading Party officials in Lenin's day. The documents that formed part of the investigation showed that Yezhov had confessed 'everything', even to pederasty and the suicide of his second wife, Yevgeniia Feigenberg, who had been the lover of the writers Isaac Babel and Mikhail Sholokhov. In connection with the 1998 judicial review the procuracy carried out a fresh investigation, which resulted in a substantial volume of documents about the frightful genocide carried out by the NKVD under Yezhov's authority during the Great Terror, in which one in three of those arrested was shot... The Military Collegium refused to rehabilitate Yezhov, but annulled the charge of espionage.

In May 1998 the press reported that L.P. Beria might be rehabilitated. This did not happen. Nevertheless there still survives a tendency to whitewash the darkest pages in Soviet history. This makes it easier to understand why Lev Razgon, a former political prisoner under Stalin, uttered such a pessimistic statement shortly before he died: 'the Russian state is not interested in establishing historical truth, and our only hope lies with children now entering first grade'.

Our past has become a virtually insuperable obstacle to democratic reform in Russia. Its vitality is shown not just by the fact that there are still people around who are loyal to Stalin's brand of socialism, but also in the extreme opinions which were encouraged in Soviet times. People are still prone to adopt an either/or frame of mind: either Red or White, either for us or against us. Matters are complicated by the prevalence of corruption and mendacity, which are traits one finds among professional historians, too. Very few of them are capable of refusing to write untruths, of stating publicly: 'I've had enough of telling lies'!

4

In Kazan' historians are preparing to celebrate two great anniversaries : in 2004 it will be two hundred years since the founding of the University, and in the following year it will be one thousand years since the city itself came into being. Naturally, these events will lead to a resurgence of interest in history. The University, one of the oldest in the country, marked three earlier anniversaries - the 120th, the 150th and the 175th -- in Soviet times, and on each occasion a jubilee volume was published. Characteristically, three of these were written from a 'class-conscious' position, i.e. emphasis was laid not on the thousands of teachers, doctors and often brilliant scientists who had been educated there, but on the fact that some students had been involved in the revolutionary movement, especially if they became Bolsheviks.

Each of the first three Soviet premiers studied in Kazan': Lenin and A.I. Rykov in the law faculty, and V.M. Molotov in a secondary institution. Lenin's stay lasted only from 13 August to 5 December 1887, less than a single semester of the first academic year. V.I. Ul'ianov, as he then was, took part in a student gathering and then, together with a group of activists, submitted a request to the rector asking to be 'removed from the student body' in view of 'the present condition of university life'. In his incomplete autobiography he wrote that he 'had been arrested and expelled' from the University for 'involvement in student disturbances' and then forced to quit the city. What actually happened was that he and three dozen other students were arrested and treated to what today would be called a 'prophylactic talk', whereupon it was suggested that they should leave the city temporarily. Lenin chose as his residence the house of his late grandfather, Dr. A.D. Blank, in the village of Kokushkino, 40 km. distant from Kazan', where he stayed for the best part of a year. The house had been inherited by his mother, Mariia Alexandrovna, and her sister. Later historians misrepresented this as his 'first step towards revolution', followed by his 'first exile'.

The procedure adopted, one should note, was common practice at the time. In February 1901 A.I. Rykov, who was then studying law, was arrested for spreading Social-democratic propaganda among the workers. He was freed in September of that year and sent at his own request to Saratov, where he was put under police surveillance.

In 1887 there were student disturbances in many Russian universities in protest at the hated inspectorate and repressive police measures, as well as the class-based restrictions placed on admission. But Soviet historians failed to mention this, concentrating on the single incident involving the future Lenin. Later he had kindly things to say about N.E. Fedoseev, the leading Marxist in Kazan' at that time, and when he became leader took a benevolent attitude towards his former fellow student activists, even if they were not pro-Bolshevik. In 1919 Ye.N. Chirikov, a well-known writer of the day, published in Rostov-on-Don a brochure entitled *The People and the Revolution*. Lenin was sent a copy, which he filed away under 'White-guard literature' in his Kremlin library. But he sent Chirikov a private note: 'Yevgeniy Nikolaevich, you will have to leave. I respect your talent but you are getting in my way. If you don't go away I shall be obliged to have you arrested.' At once Chirikov emigrated, together with his family.

Today again a history of the University is being compiled to mark the latest jubilee. One can only hope that the authors will deal more objectively with the matter of the 1887 student meeting. Perhaps they will also tell us why since 1925 Kazan' University has borne the name of Ul'ianov-Lenin in its title, rather than St. Petersburg University, where the leader of the

international proletariat completed his legal studies (as an external student) in 1891. After all, this was one of the first occasions when a Soviet leader's biography was manipulated for reasons of current politics. One thinks in this connection of the enormous brouhaha there was about Brezhnev's wartime role after he wrote up his experiences in the 'Malaia zemlia', a stretch of land east of the Kerch straits, in 1943. This minor episode was boosted as though it had been as important as the battle of Stalingrad.

I think that in writing about our University the emphasis should be placed on those who contributed most to the scientific and cultural life of our city. People need to be told what happened to the professors and students in their later careers -- and this means not just the leading lights like the mathematician and the physicist E.K. Zavoisky, whose discoveries made them world-famous, but all of them, irrespective of their politics. It's time to stop carving society up into Reds and Whites. Today we live, at least in principle, within a single world-wide system of values, in which individuals may have different views on the past or hopes for the future. In September 1922 G.G. Yagoda, then a secondary figure in the Cheka (but later, as we know, its head) submitted to Lenin for his approval a list of scholars, writers, doctors and so on slated for exile abroad. There were 69 names on the list, which was headed by the rector of Kazan' University, A.A. Ovchinnikov, I.A. Stratonov, professor of Russian history, and G.Ya. Troshin, dean of the medical faculty. They were forced to emigrate along with such world-famous scholars as the philosophers N.A. Berdiaev and S.L. Frank and the historian A.A. Kizevetter. The Kazan' academics were charged with having taken part in a 'professors' strike' against the extreme poverty in which they had to live. (In 1921-2 a professor earned only 20-25 percent of his pre-revolutionary salary, or a third or a quarter as much as a porter, and even this niggardly sum was paid at irregular intervals.) The scholars from Kazan' met different fates once they lived abroad. Stratonov wrote several volumes on the history of the Russian Orthodox Church, but in March 1942 was arrested in Paris by the Gestapo for distributing anti-fascist propaganda and collecting money to help compatriots who had fled from Nazi captivity or had been assigned to forced labour in arms factories and the like. The Russian-language journal *Sovetskii patriot* (no. 97, 1947) published obituaries of some émigrés who had been active members of the Resistance, such as Boris Vil'de, Ariadna Skriabina, and Irinarkh Stratonov, to name just three.

It is also important to recognize that Kazan' academics who had stayed on after the revolution managed to preserve a sense of corporate identity. In October 1918 the Soviet government issued a decree abolishing all pre-revolutionary academic titles and degrees, and requiring that only those who could secure the recommendation of a senior scholar and who passed

a nation-wide competition should be issued with new titles. The archives contain splendid recommendations written by the geneticist N.I. Vavilov on behalf of the Kazan' botanist A.Ya. Gordiagin, and by the biologist I.I. Shmal'gauzen for his junior colleague N.A. Livanov. The aerodynamics experts N.E. Zhukovsky and S.A. Chaplygin vouched for E.A. Bolotov, a professor of mechanics; likewise the mathematician V.A. Steklov recommended his professional colleagues D.N. Zeiliger and N.N. Parfent'ev, while the chemist A.E.Favorsky did so for Professor A.E. Arbuzov.

Often historians are reputed by politicians to 'cook up' evaluations of their colleagues' work based on non-professional criteria and a total or partial disregard for the truth. It should be recognized that this is just yet another vestige of the past that has survived into the present. To judge by recent publications, some researchers are nostalgic for the Soviet era and are inclined to idealize it, while there are others who are merciless in their criticism of it. The future lies with those who assess the facts conscientiously and do not bow and scrape before those in power. The old vice of 'conjuncturalism', i.e. adapting what one writes to suit the demands of the hour, ought to be eliminated for good.

In Spain in the early 1990s some historians got together to produce a major collective work on the consolidation of democracy during the 'period of transition from totalitarianism'. Of the three prime tasks that in their view needed to be tackled, the most important was to discuss the past frankly, instead of being distracted by economic or social problems. Obviously they had their political and ideological differences, but like Spaniards generally they appreciated that unless they broke with a heavily politicized conception of the past, which made it unpredictable, they could not make any intelligent forecasts about the future.

Russian historians, and society at large, are still very far from reaching such an understanding of the problem. Many of them remain attached to the Soviet way of life, and there seems no prospect of bridging the gulf between its apologists and critics. This is a major impediment to stabilizing our society as a whole. As for historians, before they publish anything they should recall Vladimir Vysotsky's verse:

*To write what's true and discard what's false
Think first what impartiality means.
Treat our past like a precious china vase
Lest perchance you smash it to smithereens.*

10-17 October 2000

2. Stalin and Ossovsky

Yakov Il'ich Ossovsky is mentioned in the multi-volume official *History of the CPSU* as a supporter of Trotsky and Zinoviev who opposed Stalin in the late 1920s. A very different appreciation of his role will be found in M. Heller and A. Nekrich's *Utopia in Power*⁵, where he is described as an advocate of multi-party rule and a mixed economy. During the era of the New Economic Policy, 1921-7, Ossovsky argued that a single governing party cannot simultaneously represent and support two different forms of economic management. He wrote an article in the Party's theoretical journal *Bol'shevik*⁶ in which he argued that the existing political regime did not fit contemporary economic reality:

Party organizations and the Party press adhere to the principle of absolute unity within the Party and do not permit a free exchange of opinions, although in fact different opinions do exist among its members, due to the existence /in the USSR/ of different types of economy.

He thought that the resolution on Party unity passed at the Xth congress in 1921 was being used by the present leadership to extinguish all trace of intra-party democracy.

The article was countered in the same issue by A.N. Slepkov, a member of the editorial board, and in *Pravda* (7 October 1926) N.I. Bukharin alleged that Ossovsky's proposals 'shatter ... the foundations of the proletarian dictatorship, the unity of our Party and its dominant position in the country'. Stalin himself took issue on several occasions with the article, terming its author 'an enemy of the Party' and its 'boldest oppositionist'.

Ossovsky soon found himself penalized. On 11 August 1926 he was expelled from the RCP(b), as the ruling Party was then known, for 'propagating bourgeois ideology'. He refused to admit his errors and to repent. Although he had joined the Party in 1918, he was not in the same league as Trotsky, Kamenev or Zinoviev, who were trying to regain their former positions in the leadership. Ossovsky was just an economist in the Tsentrospirt trust, a rank-and-file Communist who objected to Stalin's growing assault on democracy within the Party and the country at large. He was unusual in that he spoke up for his views -- and paid a high price for doing so.

Born in 1893 at Kutno (Warsaw *guberniia*), the young Yakov became a teacher of Hebrew soon after completing school and devoted himself to the study of ancient Israelite history and culture. In 1913 he set out for Palestine with financial support from his local Jewish community, but as he

⁵ M. Heller and A. Nekrich, *L'Utopie au pouvoir*, Paris, 1982 (French ed.).

⁶ 'The Party before the XIVth Congress', no. 14, 1926.

was passing through Germany World War I broke out. He decided to stay in Berlin, working in a factory as a turner while studying economics and law at the university. In 1917 he joined the left-wing Social-democratic organization Spartacus and was arrested for making anti-war propaganda. Fleeing from Germany without ever reaching Palestine, he ended up in Moscow, where he lost no time in joining the Communist party, conducting illegal work for the Bolshevik cause in Lithuania; he then secured a job as an economist, first in the apparatus of the Supreme Economic Council (VSNKh) and then in Gosplan.

During NEP Ossovsky was doing reasonably well. He became the father of three daughters and rented a flat in central Moscow not far from the home of his brother and sister. But in the background loomed concern about the situation in the country. Although he approved of the revival of a market economy and private property, he saw what democratic principles and human rights were being increasingly trampled on. This was why he came out in favour of multi-party government. His article and ensuing loss of Party membership adversely affected his employment situation; 'everywhere', he wrote, 'I was treated with mistrust.' In 1928 his wife, Polina Ekstein, died. His father, who emigrated from Poland to Palestine at this time, worked in Jerusalem as a bookbinder but lived in poor conditions. Ossovsky wanted to join him, so realizing his earlier plans to study Jewish history at its source.

In the late 1920s he submitted several applications for exit visas for himself and his daughters, while struggling to survive by taking on short-term jobs and writing a number of scholarly essays. Among them was a comparative study of industrial production costs in the USSR, the United States and Canada. His health began to give way. He suffered increasingly from nervous tension and after undergoing medical and psychiatric examinations was classified as a third-class invalid.

In 1933 the British embassy in Moscow gave Ossovsky a permit to enter Palestine, but the Soviet authorities refused to issue an exit visa. He was no longer able to work and found life in the USSR distasteful. 'My thoughts and feelings were in Palestine', he wrote later. For assistance he turned to Maxim Gorky and his wife E. Peshkova, for the latter was head of a committee to help political prisoners and foreign colleagues in distress. But it was M.I. Kalinin, chairman of the CEC and thus nominally President, who in the end gave a helping hand. Receiving him on 24 February 1934, he said that his children could leave, but that his own fate could only be decided after Kalinin had spoken about the case with Stalin. Whether such a conversation took place one can only guess. As it was, he escorted his three daughters (Ruth, Shushan and Esther) to Odessa, where they boarded the *Chicherin* bound for Palestine, and then returned to Moscow.

To everyone he knew he spoke frankly of his wish to join his family. One of his acquaintances jokingly suggested he might smuggle himself across the frontier into Persia. Their conversation was overheard and reported. At once the machinery of repression came into motion. On 4 January 1935 he was arrested.

In his Moscow quarters the security police found copies of the works of Trotsky and Zinoviev, as well as personal correspondence and various manuscripts. Three days after his arrest he found himself facing charges of 'counter-revolutionary activity in connection with an intention to cross the border illegally into Persia'. Ossovsky categorically denied the first charge; as to the second, he stated that he would do anything to be with his children, adding that he was an invalid with psychic trouble. Examined by a medical commission, he was pronounced irresponsible and despatched to a psychiatric hospital with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. On 15 February 1935 he was transferred from the isolation ward of Moscow's Butyrki prison to a psychiatric facility at Sarov and then to one in Kazan'. For several nights after his arrest could not sleep and constantly heard his children's voices, so it was stated in his medical reports. These documents recorded not only the patient's mental condition but also -- typically for this era -- any 'anti-Soviet remarks'. Ossovsky considered himself a political convict rather than a mental patient. He insisted that he be given a passport so that he could leave the USSR for Palestine. When correspondence from his children was intercepted he went on a hunger strike, demanding books in Hebrew and German that he needed for his scholarly work.

In August 1937 the doctor responsible for his treatment wrote in Ossovsky's medical record that he had written his memoirs in English, and that these allegedly contained 'espionage data about the USSR'. He was said to have held 'anti-Soviet conversations' with other patients and to have criticized collectivization. In the hospital garden he had drawn a pattern in the sand to show that the severity of a country's political regime stood in inverse proportion to the intelligence of its ruling class. The doctor noted that Ossovsky conducted himself with dignity and that he claimed British citizenship on the grounds that he had been granted the right to settle in Palestine, a British mandated territory. He resented incarceration and kept up a flow of letters appealing for his release from 'the NKVD, which is holding me under a regime of thuggery, torture and humiliation'. On 15 November 1939 he used a scrap of grey wallpaper to write to his relatives in Palestine, stating that it was now five years since his arrest and imprisonment without cause or trial, and asking them to send him a Palestinian lawyer as well as some dried fruit, 'which I badly need on account of my health'. Some of Ossovsky's letters reached his daughters. In one he urged Ruth to study Jewish life under Christian rule and to look

after her sisters, adding that he could cope with all the misfortunes that had befallen him but that he missed Jerusalem, his children and his scholarly work.

The last entry in Ossovsky's medical record is dated 24-31 August 1940. It states that he is calm and has contact with his fellow-patients. But fate had new ordeals in store for him. On 6 December that year a senior NKVD official in Tatarstan, Katerli, decided that his treatment should end and the investigation into his case be resumed. He was transferred to the NKVD's internal prison. The new charge against him was 'anti-Soviet propaganda' in the psychiatric hospital and his prison cell. One of the other patients there bore witness that he had called the Politburo 'a band of robbers'; and two fellow-prisoners likewise affirmed that he had made slanderous anti-Soviet statements; their denunciation was supported by a warder. On 30 December Ossovsky petitioned President Kalinin for transfer to a Moscow prison and for return of the effects confiscated on his arrest. Naturally, no reply was forthcoming.

Ossovsky categorically refused to admit his guilt or to give any testimony, and on 24 February 1941, when his jailers demanded that he countersign the charge sheet, he once again refused to do so. This document contained the allegations standard at the time: Trotskyism and 'anti-Soviet propaganda', for which excerpts from his notes served as material evidence. On 12 March his case was referred to the Special Conference at the highest level of the NKVD hierarchy, but it is not known whether this body took any decision -- for within a year the prisoner was no more.

After Stalin's death his sister, who had been released from captivity, submitted an application to the USSR Procurator-General for her brother's rehabilitation, on the grounds that he had committed no offence. The investigators soon discovered that those who had testified against him in 1940-1 had since died in custody. The ex-warder could not recall the case. A graphological examination was conducted of five pages from one of his MSS, and eventually, on 19 January 1959, it was decided to drop the case against him but to deny rehabilitation, because there had been 'anti-Soviet content' in his writings -- although there was no evidence that he had ever belonged to any counter-revolutionary organization.

What was in these manuscripts? Written on large white sheets of paper in black ink, they were thoughtful considerations on the state of affairs in the USSR and the baneful effects of the 'struggle for socialism'. Neither the Soviet system nor the capitalist one, he contended, had 'liquidated the class contradictions' between rich and poor. For the 'revolutionary proletariat' the greatest tragedy had been the enslavement of the majority of the population by a small minority that had seized power by force. The Communist party had destroyed the old society but had failed to construct

a new one, because its leaders were hopelessly ignorant of economics. The General Secretary had concentrated all political power in his hand, but to no avail in raising the intellectual level of economic decision-makers. People's social status ought to be determined by their contribution to public wellbeing, not by political considerations. Can these general observations, written for his own benefit and never published, really be said to constitute 'anti-Soviet propaganda'? Certainly not in a *Rechtsstaat*, but in a dictatorship, where the ruling Party insisted on uniformity of thought, this was so -- in the 1930s and again in 1959.

Yakov Il'ich Ossovsky is now known to have died on 22 March 1942 in Prison no. 7 in the Tatarstan town of Kuibyshev. Fifty years later he was among those affected by the post-Soviet law of 18 September 1992 on the rehabilitation of victims of political repression. In 1992 I was in Israel, where I met Ossovsky's daughters, grandchildren, and other relatives. They were not rich. Ruth had a job but the youngsters had been placed in an orphanage since the family did not have enough money to keep them at home. Yet they were proud citizens of the new state of Israel. Ossovsky's nephew Leonid told me how his father, Yakov's brother, an officer, had been shot in 1935. His sister Livsha-Hannah had been arrested, too, and the family had had to move from Moscow to Omsk. These kindly folk had suffered a lot. I was struck by their grief but could not explain to them why the brave and outspoken Yakov Il'ich should have met his untimely end in a Stalinist prison.

30 May 2001

3. The Lasting Legacy of Iron Felix

Stalin was fond of repeating the phrase: 'If you have a person, then you have a problem; no person -- no problem!' Alas, Feliks Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky, who died in 1926, still presents a problem: in 1958 a statue in his honour was erected on Moscow's Dzerzhinsky (now Lubiensky) Square. In August 1991 it was torn down by an angry crowd, and now there is talk of replacing it. The mayor, Yurii Luzhkov, claims that over half the city's inhabitants want such a memorial to the 'first Chekist', who is said to have had 'a cool head, clean hands, and a warm heart'. To this Alexander Yakovlev responds that if Dzerzhinsky's statue is put back then he should be portrayed wielding an axe. Between them the Duma politicians and the Moscow municipal authorities have at least put the man back in the limelight. What's all the fuss about?

To my mind the real problem is this: why did the crowd in 1991, evidently in a spontaneous burst of euphoria, topple Dzerzhinsky's statue (and damage Kalinin's as well, by the way, but no one remembers this!), instead of making for Lenin's mausoleum on Red Square and removing the Bolshevik leader's mummified corpse? Why did they not destroy the busts of Stalin and his acolytes that are still in place nearby? Why does anything associated with Dzerzhinsky's name disturb so many people and give politicians a card to play in their endless intrigues?

Let us begin by pointing out that when regimes collapse people often destroy the monuments that symbolize them. The French revolution began with the storming of a prison, the Bastille, and not the palace of the Tuileries. The crowd took vengeance for past humiliations and was afraid of a building that symbolized royal tyranny. In the Russian revolution ideology played a conspicuous part in the destruction of monuments to the tsars, and much the same was true of Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy at the end of World War II.

Nowadays we are accustomed to seeing Dzerzhinsky's Cheka as carrying out policies decided on elsewhere, by the Party leadership; responsibility for its violent and arbitrary acts lies ultimately with Lenin, Stalin and their close comrades. The Chekists saw themselves as 'the sword and shield of the revolution', as loyal soldiers of the Bolshevik Party, whose job it was to defend the Soviet regime with all their might. The term 'Soviet past' has come to be used by historians and students of politics to refer to a period of history that is now thought to be over for good. But this is somewhat misleading, because many people in post-Soviet Russia were brought up on maxims derived from Marxist-Leninist ideology and so find it hard to shed Stalin's greatcoat -- or Dzerzhinsky's, for that matter.

It is generally known that Felix was the son of a Polish teacher who hailed from the lesser gentry in Vil'no *guberniia*. Born in 1877, he dreamed in his childhood of becoming a Catholic priest, but instead joined the revolutionary underground. This led to his frequently being arrested and sentenced to prison and exile, even to forced labour. He became an important member of the Social-democratic movement in Russia. In 1907, at the Vth Party congress, he was elected to the Central Committee, and in October 1917 he was prominent in the events that led to the Bolshevik victory. This chapter in his biography has been extensively written up by Soviet historians.

What is less well known is that before the revolution Felix belonged to a group of Party members who specialized in unmasking *agents provocateur* within the Party. Afterwards, from 1921 to 1924, he was in charge of the railway system, and then for three years chaired the Supreme Economic Council (VSNKh). This work earned him the plaudits of Vladimir Maiakovsky, who urged youngsters to model their lives on his, and later of Soviet historians. But so far there has been no study of his role as head of the VChK /GPU/OGPU,⁷ or principal security chief, from 1917 to his death. Memoirs by his comrades, as well as by his critics, make it clear that he was no ordinary individual. Probably the most perceptive characterization of the man comes from the pen of the philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev, who faced interrogation by Dzerzhinsky in person before he was forced to emigrate in 1922:

Dzerzhinsky gave me the impression of being absolutely sincere and self-assured. I think he was not by nature a wicked or even cruel person. He was a fanatic. The look in his eyes made him seem like one possessed. There was something awesome about him... He had once wanted to take a monk's cowl, but then had switched his faith from Catholicism to Communism.

Dzerzhinsky ran the Cheka throughout the violent and cruel Russian civil war of 1917-21, when he legitimized his actions by reference to 'revolutionary legal consciousness', embodied in the decrees of the Party Central Committee and the Soviet government (*Sovnarkom*). Already in February 1918 Lenin and Trotsky gave the VChK the right to shoot people without trial -- the first known execution occurred on 24 February -- during the emergency caused by the German army's advance on Petrograd. Lenin assured doubters that 'without the cruellest revolutionary

⁷ VChK stands for All-Russian Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counter-Revolution, Sabotage and Speculation. It had detachments in major centres throughout the country. (The name popularly given to its operatives, 'Chekists', stuck.) It later became known as the GPU (Main Political Administration) and OGPU; from 1934 its powers were exercised by the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) and MVD/MGB (Ministry of Internal Affairs/Ministry of State Security), and from 1954 by the KGB (Committee of State Security). Its successor today is the Federal Security Bureau (FSB).

terror ... the power of the toilers cannot exist'. Dzerzhinsky proved himself a talented organizer, who in a short time had built up a mighty, efficient institution that evoked fear in some, disgust in others. There was no limit to the plenary powers it exercised. It was an elitist body, most of whose operatives were in the Party. They received high salaries: a member of the VChK collegium earned as much as a people's commissar (equivalent to minister); in the spring of 1918 a rank-and-file Chekist drew 400 roubles a month, as against 150 roubles for a Red Army soldier; Chekists were also entitled to free rations of foodstuffs and other goods in short supply, such as uniforms and so on. In 1921 0.8% of security police personnel had higher education, which was more than in other Soviet institutions.

On 15 June 1918, a few weeks before the launching of the Red Terror, Dzerzhinsky set up the first *troika* (trio), three persons tasked with shooting alleged counter-revolutionaries. The body consisted of Dzerzhinsky himself and two of his deputies, P.A. Aleksandrovich and Ya.Kh. Peters (Jehabs Peterss). Soon such extra-judicial *troiki* appeared in other towns: they would flourish to maximum extent during the Great Terror of 1937-8, when hundreds of thousands fell victim to them.

On several occasions Dzerzhinsky spoke out against Lenin's policy. He joined Bukharin in forming the Left Communist faction which protested at the Brest-Litovsk treaty with Germany in March 1918. In 1922-3 he backed Stalin against Lenin over the Georgian question, deeming the latter too weak. But he got both men's support, and even Bukharin's, for expansion of the Cheka's powers. Several of the orders he issued would today be called criminal: for the shooting of hostages, the setting up of concentration camps, and extra-judicial persecution; he also helped to organize the first political trials of Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries. He was a loyal and honest servant of the Bolshevik party-state. He shared the conviction of Bukharin, who was a member of the VChK collegium, that 'proletarian coercion in all its forms, from execution to forced labour, is a ... method for forging Communist man out of the human material left over from the capitalist era' (1920). In the light of such sentiments the view taken in some quarters of Dzerzhinsky as a Chekist with 'clean hands, a cool head and warm heart' should be regarded as romanticized propaganda and nothing more.

Felix was neither a white-gloved 'chair-borne criminal' but nor was he a man with an axe constantly in his hands. The 'shield and sword' that he represented were indeed kept ready to strike down anyone who resisted the state, and he used every possible means to drive his fellow-citizens into the 'bright Communist future'. In recent years some publicists have called him a 'Red Bin Laden'. Yet he was not an international terrorist. He served the Bolshevik regime because he thought it was devoted to the

interests of the new ruling class, the proletariat. Of course it was nothing of the kind, but during the great revolutionary struggle people did not have time to contemplate such matters. Instead they concentrated on striking the enemy, reckoning that violence would make the new regime safe.

The first Chekist of the Soviet republic was different things to different people. V.R. Menzhinsky, who succeeded him as OGPU chief in 1926, called him 'a great terrorist' and incomparable psychologist, who used his vast knowledge, derived in part from Polish and Russian literature, to put down counter-revolution. Stories circulated about his mercilessness, for instance that he allowed his men to shoot people without trial, 'even if sometimes the sword falls on the heads of the innocent'. When he went to Petrograd in 1918 to investigate the assassination of the local head of the Cheka, M.S. Uritsky (30 August 1918), he sanctioned the shooting of over 500 hostages: arrested officers of the tsarist army, some with fine war records, and members of wealthy bourgeois families, even though they had no association whatever with Uritsky's death. He considered such methods effective and applied them against bandits as well as dissident intellectuals. Yet at the same time he stood up for former Mensheviks with jobs in his economic administration, so long as they kept out of politics.

At the end of his life Dzerzhinsky criticized the drift of the Party's economic policy away from NEP.⁸ He stood for an expansion of small-scale private trade and defended shopkeepers against bossy local officials. He reckoned that the system of economic management needed reform, that it was too bureaucratic, and warned that unless such steps were taken the country would find itself 'under a dictator who would bury the revolution, whatever Red colour there might be on his uniform'. Perhaps that was why Stalin did not care for him, since he had political views of his own.

In 1932, when Menzhinsky asked Stalin to approve a medal named for Dzerzhinsky, he refused. In June 1937, at a meeting of top defence officials, the Leader suddenly came out with the statement that Dzerzhinsky, too, had been a Trotskyist. 'He was not someone to remain passive in any situation', he averred, 'but a very active Trotskyite, who wanted to mobilize the entire GPU in defence of Trotsky, but he failed.' At the time such an accusation meant arrest and certain death. Had Dzerzhinsky survived until 1937 he would doubtless have shared the fate of thousands of ex-Chekists who fell victim to the Great Terror.

In January 1921 A.V. Lunacharsky's People's Commissariat of Education abolished the Children's Safety League, a voluntary organization that had been set up in 1918, on the grounds that it was staffed by former Kadets,

⁸ New Economic Policy, the temporary limited accommodation with 'capitalism', 1921-1927/8.

Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, and thus penetrated by the 'bourgeoisie', by people unfit to bring up the children of workers. In its place there appeared a 'commission to improve children's lives' attached to the all-Russian CEC.⁹ Dzerzhinsky was appointed chairman. At that time, according to official data, there were about 7 million waifs and strays (*bezprizorniki*) in the RSFSR. He tackled the problem with his usual determination, setting up homes and colonies for abandoned and homeless children, where they could learn a trade and hope to survive the famine that stalked the country. Many supervisors of these homes had the idea that orphans were suitable material for creating the New Soviet Man of the future. Dzerzhinsky also held to this fanciful notion, but at least his activities helped to keep a lot of children alive.

Some people saw in Dzerzhinsky's statue a tribute to a loyal servant of the state, whereas others considered it a symbol of merciless repression. This accounts for the vehemence of the public discussion as to whether a new monument should be erected on its former site. I am not alone in thinking that it would have been better to have removed it rather than to demolish it. Even so it would be wrong to commemorate the man in this way, since it is a grim reminder of an unsavoury past that, alas, some people would like to bring back. Let future architects decide the problem calmly, once a few years have passed and power has been handed down to today's youngsters, 'those who have not felt the whip', and no longer lies either with former political prisoners or with former Communist functionaries.

The decision will also have to await a time when operatives of the security service -- a body that will presumably continue to exist, as it always has in our country -- will no longer feel any emotional ties to the founder of the Cheka.

Russia is not the only country to have experienced civil war, state repression, genocide and vast losses of population. I alluded above (see p. 12) to the parallels in Spain, where in 1992 historians and sociologists decided to stage a dialogue about the past with the aim of easing the transition from fascism to democracy. South Africa offers another instructive example with its 'truth and reconciliation commission'. But in Russia we are still arguing about a civil war that took place some 80 years ago, and whose bitter memories have not yet been laid to rest. The controversy about Dzerzhinsky's statue shows that unless we learn to face up to the past we shall have no future. It is time to consolidate our society instead of poking fingers and assigning guilt.

⁹ Central Executive Committee of Soviets, i.e. formally the supreme legislative body in the early Soviet republic.

General Denikin, in his memoirs published in the 1920s, wrote: 'Human suffering is always just that: suffering. Killing is always killing, whether the blood that is shed is Red or White.' Unfortunately it takes a long time to heal the wounds caused by ancient hatreds and to feel compassion towards a former enemy.

11 October 2002

4. Who Shot Lenin?

An Interview with Alter Litvin

This interview was conducted early in 2003 by a Vecherniaia Kazan' reporter, some eight years after Professor Litvin had published a volume of documents drawn from the records of the official investigation held into the attempted assassination of V.I. Lenin, at the Michelson factory in Moscow, on 30 August 1918. The accused was a young Jewish girl, Dora (Fanny) Kaplan, but doubts still exist as to whether she was indeed the would-be assassin.

Q. Last autumn some TV journalists from Moscow came to visit us in Kazan' in connection with the attempted assassination of Lenin in 1918. Can you explain why?

A. Yes indeed, the journalists were connected with the TV series 'Historical Detective' on the *Rossia* channel, and they were collecting material about this affair. As far as I know, the film was made but never shown. The producer, a certain Demin, later sent me a videocassette. Previously I had not realized that an official of the procuracy, Solov'iev, the director of the Moscow Lenin Museum, and several fellow-historians had all played a part in this programme along with myself. We did not know each other, yet all of us individually came to the conclusion that Fanny Kaplan did *not* fire those shots that seriously injured the Bolshevik leader. Who did, and who organized the assassination attempt, are still matters for speculation.

Q. The book you edited, *Fanny Kaplan, or Who Shot Lenin?*, came out in 1995. What led you to take up this topic?

A. On 19 June 1992 the Russian Procurator-General, responding to a request by N.I. Avdonin, a writer in Ul'ianovsk, launched an investigation into Fanny Kaplan's responsibility for the attack. She had been shot on 3 September 1918, after a three-day investigation that was never completed. The review of the evidence took four years. It established that the bullets were indeed fired from a seven-chambered Browning pistol found at the scene of the crime, but many questions could not be conclusively answered. There were still four bullets left in the cartridge-chamber, although four expended cartridge-cases were found at the site. Lenin's chauffeur, S.K. Gil', stated in written evidence on 30 August that after the first shot he noticed a woman's hand holding the pistol. But was that hand Kaplan's? Divisional commissar S.N. Batulin, who held Kaplan after her arrest, stated that he had not seen 'the man who shot com. Lenin', but he surmised (*pochuial*) that his prisoner could have done it.

From his contradictory evidence it is not clear just where Kaplan was arrested: in the factory courtyard or among the crowd of people that fled from it after the shooting. None of the witnesses actually saw the assailant except Lenin himself, who asked Gil', when he ran up to him, 'Have they caught him (*sic*) or not?' So he thought that the suspect was a man. Nor was it proven how Gil', seated at the wheel of a car with the motor running, in semi-darkness (it was about 9 p.m.), in a factory courtyard, could have seen anyone's hand, let alone identified it as female; moreover, he confused a Browning pistol with a revolver...

Modern historians are divided in their opinions. Some hold to the view that Kaplan was a Socialist-Revolutionary who shot at Lenin, whereas others doubt both propositions. The latter suggest the names of several people who might have fired the shots: L. Konopleva, Z. Legon'kaia, A. Protopopov and V. Novikov. According to the SR activist G. Semenov,¹⁰ it was Konopleva (1891-1937), who belonged to an SR combat squad; in 1918 she proposed assassinating Lenin, and at one time 'thought that she herself' might do the job. But there is no confirmation of this, and Semenov is notoriously unreliable. Her later career tells against this theory: she joined the Communist Party in 1921 and in the following year testified against her former SR comrades at their trial, which the British historian Robert Service terms 'a disgrace to all standards of jurisprudence'.¹¹ She was arrested and shot in 1937, but rehabilitated in 1960. Both in 1922 and in 1937 she admitted under investigation that she had organized the assassination attempt, but this did not lead to her being charged with the murder.

As for Legon'kaia (1896-?), she was a Bolshevik and later a Cheka operative, who participated in searching Kaplan. She in turn was arrested in 1919 and indicted for having allegedly been involved in the shooting, but quickly produced an alibi to the effect that on the day of the attack she had been at her studies in a Party school for Red commanders; she testified that when she heard that Lenin had been shot she, along with other students, rushed to the military commissariat of Moscow's Zamoskvorech'e district, where Kaplan was being held, and was asked to assist in searching her person.

Protopopov was a former sailor who until July 1918 headed the Moscow Cheka's counter-revolutionary section; he took an active part in the Left SR uprising and was arrested and shot on the very night of 30/31 August.

Finally, Novikov, a worker, was a member of the SR combat group. Under torture by NKVD investigators in December 1937 he would admit only to

¹⁰ G. Semenov, *Voenno-boevaia rabota partii Sotsialistov-Revoliutsionerov*, Moscow, 1922.

¹¹ R. Service, *Lenin: A Political Life*, vol. 3, London, 1995, p. 32.

having pointed Lenin out to Kaplan; he himself, he said, had not gone into the courtyard but had awaited 'the results' outside in the street.

It seems to me that in the contemporary discussion about whether Kaplan fired the shots or not, the odds are even. There is no firm material or oral evidence that she did so. But members of the combat squad, such as Konopleva and Protopopov, were indeed present in the courtyard and they were bearing arms. This explains where the four expended cartridge-cases came from...

The investigators, in 1918 and later, held that the crime had been plotted by Right SRs and agents of the Entente. But no link could be established between them and Kaplan. On the other hand, it was hard to credit a single female terrorist with such a deed. That is why some researchers have come up with a different version, at least as a working hypothesis: a 'Kremlin plot' involving Ya.M. Sverdlov, then chairman of the CEC (*VTSIK*).

For many years it was beaten into our heads that the Bolshevik leadership was monolithically united -- although the subsequent purging of many of them ought to shatter such a belief. At least by the 1990s historians realized that there had been a struggle for power at the top, both before and after October 1917. In support of the conspiracy hypothesis they pointed to the way the leadership had reacted to the shooting: on 2 September the country was put on a war footing and three days later a decree launched the Red Terror, which involved the arrest and shooting of hostages and other acts of violence; meanwhile a propaganda offensive was started to discredit the Right SRs, who had set up an anti-Bolshevik regime in the Volga region that stood for a restoration of the Constituent Assembly. This marked the beginning of a phase in the civil war when both sides began to resort to terror against their adversaries, reckoning that the death of innocent people was of little account.

This was not the only attempt on Lenin's life in 1918. He threatened to resign as head of government unless he got his way over the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty with Germany in March. He only stayed on by the margin of a single vote (Trotsky's) in the Central Committee. The Left Communists, led by Bukharin and Dzerzhinsky, adhered to the doctrine of world revolution and saw the separate peace as treachery. At that moment things looked desperate for the Bolsheviks, and so they were again in August. As Trotsky put it graphically, 'Actually we were already dead but there was no one around to bury us.' The Soviet government's writ ran over a shrinking extent of territory. But it held on firmly to its waning power -- thanks to Sverdlov. It was he who concentrated in his hands all power in the Party Secretariat as well as the Sovnarkom. He made the appointments and issued the orders in place of the wounded Lenin, saying that they were actually managing pretty well without him. And it was he who on 3

September had Kaplan taken from her cell in the Lubianka to a cellar in the Kremlin, where on his personal order she was shot by the Kremlin commandant, P.D. Mal'kov, and her mortal remains buried...

Why did he have her transferred closer to himself, and why was he in such a hurry to shoot her without trial? It is difficult to give a precise answer, but it is clear that he wanted to get rid of the chief witness to the shooting of Lenin -- Kaplan herself.

In view of the intransigent nature of Bolshevik rule in the 1920s and 1930s, it is hard to explain why G. Semenov and L. Konopleva, who had admitted to their part in the shooting, should have made such brilliant careers in the Cheka and the Soviet administration.

Q. But how do you explain Kaplan's presence at the scene of the crime, and her telling the commissar who was holding her 'it wasn't I who did it'?

A. Recently there has been a suggestion that she was in the courtyard not for political reasons but for romantic ones. A document has been discovered in the archives dated 23 December 1906 in which the Kiev governor reported that a bomb had gone off in a room in a commercial travellers' hotel in the Podol district. A man and a woman had fled the scene, but the woman, who was wounded, was taken into custody. Police found she was carrying a false passport in the name of Feiga Khaimonovna Kaplan. (Later it appeared that this passport belonged to a friend of hers who lived in Minsk, and that she often borrowed it to make herself appear two to three years older than she then was, sixteen; without such a document the hotel management would not have let her share a room with a man.) Only much later did her real name become known: Feiga Faivelovna Roitman. In 1906 she protested that she had nothing to do with the explosion, but the Kiev garrison court-martial found her guilty of 'preparing, keeping and carrying explosive materials with a purpose prejudicial to state security and the public peace', for which she was sentenced to an indefinite term in prison with forced labour. Kaplan served her sentence in Mal'tsevo women's prison at Nerchinsk in eastern Siberia. In 1909 she went blind and also became hard of hearing; her eyes were operated on in 1917 but she did not fully recover her sight. Her companion and lover in 1906 was Viktor Garsky, who belonged to an Anarchist-Communist group in the south of Russia. Arrested in 1908, he stated that he alone had brought the bomb to the hotel and that Kaplan was entirely innocent. But this had no effect on her sentence.

At the end of August 1918 Garsky, now a Chekist, was summoned from Odessa to Moscow and taken to see Sverdlov. What they discussed is not known. Was he too in the Michelson courtyard when Lenin was shot? Did he perhaps arrange to meet Fanny Kaplan there?

There is no shortage of mysteries and myths in Russian and Soviet history, many of which are the stuff of TV serials. The circumstances of the attack on Lenin are only one of them. They raise insoluble problems. Alas, the myth of Fanny Kaplan's alleged responsibility has its logical place in what I call 'our unpredictable past'.

22 April 2003

5. The Battle for Kazan'

In the life of every city there are dates that stick in one's memory, despite all the changes that occur in the nature of the political regime and the attempts of those in power to make people forget them. It has become unfashionable today to recall the events of the terrible civil war that wracked Russia from 1918 to 1920/1, whereas in Soviet times there was no shortage of literature about the heroic struggle of the Bolsheviks against Whites, counter-revolutionaries of various colour, and foreign interventionists. Instead there is a tendency to romanticize the Whites, and the Reds' doings are regarded with indifference or even animosity.

I don't feel it is right to idealize anyone who took part in killing his fellow-citizens, and after all that's what any civil war is mainly about. There should be no place in historical memory for apologetics, even in regard to the democrats who tried unsuccessfully to resuscitate the Constituent Assembly, forcibly dissolved by the Bolsheviks early in January 1918.

The first armed clashes between the two sides took place in the Volga region, and from 4 August to 10 September Kazan' was the epicentre of the struggle. At first glance this would appear to have been a conflict that pitted the champions of democratic, constitutional government against the advocates of proletarian dictatorship, between those who stood for freedom and human rights and those who denied them in the interests of a higher goal, namely socialism. The former -- mainly Socialist-Revolutionaries -- set up their headquarters in the city of Samara, some 300 kilometres downriver from Kazan' as the crow flies. It was here, on 8 June, that they established the Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly, or *Komuch* for short, as it is usually known. They put together a force of 30,000 men and, together with the Czech legionaries, moved north up the Volga towards Kazan', passing through Simbirsk. The 'Czech Legion' was a corps of Czech and Slovak soldiers who had been taken prisoner by the Russians during the war, for whom the 1917 revolution spelled freedom. They wanted to return home to help build an independent Czechoslovak republic. But for Soviet historians, as for the Reds at the time, they were foreign interventionists, determined to overthrow Bolshevik rule, which they saw as pro-German. There were indeed some grounds for this attitude: Bruce Lockhart, the British diplomat and secret agent, writes in his memoirs that 'the Czechs were our allies; in supporting them we were backing the struggle against the Bolsheviks'. The legionaries resisted orders from the Soviet authorities in Petrograd that they should hand over their weapons, and instead responded favourably to appeals for aid by the SRs. (Many Czech and Slovak soldiers were Social-democrats and so saw the Russian socialists as comrades.)

Why did they march on Kazan'? One of the SR leaders, V.I. Lebedev, later explained that 'all the gold of the Russian state was located in Kazan'... as well as a colossal amount of military stores, artillery, and ammunition... and also many officers who were organized /and motivated/ to unseat the Bolsheviks, who had begun to shoot them mercilessly. Besides that, Kazan' was a large city and the political centre of the Volga region'.

On the Bolshevik side the commander of the Eastern front was Ioachim I. Vatsetis (Vacietis, (1873-1938), a former colonel in the tsarist army who commanded the Latvian rifle division. He was an educated man, a graduate of the General Staff Academy, and had then seen service at the front. But the civil war was unlike the wars he had been trained to fight: there was no front line or clear demarcation between friend and foe, so that academic teachings on strategy were of little use...

Vatsetis arrived in Kazan' on 16 July at the head of 507 men of the 5th Latvian regiment. On that same day a fellow-Latvian, M.Ya. Latsis (Lacis, 1878-1938), was appointed head of the Cheka detachment on the Eastern front, also based in Kazan'. On 20 July the city and its environs were placed under martial law, and on 6 August a state of siege was proclaimed.

At that moment almost the entire Latvian division, other Red Army units and armed worker militia squads, totalling some 10,000 to 15,000 men, were stationed in the city. Early in August Leo Trotsky, the People's Commissar of War, arrived in his armoured train at Sviiazhsk, a small town about 50 km. west of Kazan'. He lost no time in confirming Vatsetis's proposed senior appointments, notably P. Saven as commander of the 5th Army.¹² Later, as the 26th and 27th divisions of the 5th Army, these units would make their way east as far as Vladivostok.

On 2 August Trotsky summoned the Central Muslim Military Collegium, headed by M. Vakhitov, from Moscow to Kazan'. This was a political rather than military move, for they brought with them a mere 45 soldiers, from the 2nd Muslim socialist battalion.

Trotsky was fond of publicizing his activities and said he was prepared to agitate for Soviet power 'at every telegraph pole'. 'Our Levka is a smart fellow', said Lenin of him. He brought to Sviiazhsk a sizeable detachment of leather-jacketed bodyguards, a band, press correspondents and cinema operators. The latter made a documentary film, 'How Comrade Trotsky Took Kazan'', which was shown in our Apollo cinema that November. He

¹² Also Ya. Yudin as commander of the left-bank group and Ya. Saulit as commander of the right-bank forces. The former was replaced after his death by N. Alekseev and the latter, who was wounded, by I. Vakhromeev.

also had a team of secretaries whose job it was to record his speeches and military orders, as well as to keep the archive.

Trotsky's style of leadership was decisive and cruel. He set up a military revolutionary tribunal and concentration camps in Murom, Arzamas and Sviiazhsk; there were also special detachments posted behind the lines whose function was to shoot Red Army deserters. He gave each commissar the right to shoot the unit commander, a former officer, if he doubted his loyalty. It was at Sviiazhsk that Trotsky endorsed the tribunal's decision to 'decimate', that is, execute one in ten, men of the Petrograd workers' detachment for abandoning their positions. The word 'shoot' occurs all too frequently in his orders...

Soviet historical publications record five telegrams sent by Lenin to Trotsky while he was at Sviiazhsk, but no communications from Trotsky to Lenin. However, these are included in the *Trotsky Papers*¹³ published abroad. They allow one to disregard the rather widespread opinion that Trotsky operated under Lenin's close guidance, and that whatever good he may have done was due to this control from above.

To judge by Trotsky's messages and his later memoirs, his attitude towards the Bolshevik leader was respectful, without this leading to any loss of independence. He refused to carry out Lenin's instruction to shoot senior commanders or put them on trial if they acted dilatorily or were unsuccessful. As far as Kazan' is concerned, Lenin ordered that the city should be bombed by airplanes and artillery. If it were true that the city was tightly encircled, he wrote, the enemy was to be exterminated without mercy. To this Trotsky replied that the enemy artillery was superior to whatever the Reds had, and that the city would be liberated without suffering major damage.

In the summer and autumn of 1919, as historians have pointed out, Trotsky tried to build up outside Kazan' an effective army much as Stalin was doing in Tsaritsyn; the former leader gave 'military specialists' the right to take decisions without interference, whereas the latter was distrustful of these ex-officers and took a more consultative approach to operational decision-making. Trotsky was the more successful of the two, since the Red victory at Kazan' became 'the Valmy of the Russian revolution', as it was called, whereas Stalin was recalled from Tsaritsyn for his harsh treatment of the 'specialists', whereupon Sverdlov was sent off in a special train, in which he held a meeting of the two men. At this meeting, so Trotsky later recalled, they discussed the qualifications of K.E. Voroshilov and other commanders in the Tsaritsyn sector, with Stalin objecting: 'Do you really want to dismiss them all? They're good lads after

¹³ J.M. Meijer, ed., *The Trotsky Papers, 1917-1919*, vol. I /of 2/, The Hague and London, 1964.

all', to which Trotsky replied: 'These good lads of yours are wrecking the revolution, which can't afford to wait until they grow up. My only aim is to ensure that Tsaritsyn remains Soviet.'

The Komuch troops and the Czech legionaries took Kazan' within a couple of days. They entered the city at mid-day on 6 August, in pouring rain. Eye-witnesses on both sides report that even Latvian riflemen surrendered, whereas Bolshevik and Left SR civilians, fearing they would be shown no mercy, fought on stubbornly. And indeed the self-styled democrats, when they in turn captured the city, shot out of hand M. Vakhitov, the local Bolshevik leader Ya. Sheinkman, Justice commissar M. Mezhlauk, trade-union activist A.Komlev, and several other prominent Reds. In this respect they were no better than the Chekists fighting on the other side.

Vatsetis was very self-assured and delayed until the last moment the evacuation of the former tsarist gold reserves. As a result over 1 milliard roubles, mostly in the form of bars and coin, ended up in the hands of the anti-Soviet forces. By 1920 half of it was back in Kazan' bank safes, but the rest was in Prague or Tokyo, having been appropriated by unscrupulous private individuals.

Vatsetis had been sure of the loyalty and fighting spirit of his Latvian soldiers, but he miscalculated. On 6 August he left his headquarters (in what is now the Hotel Kazan') with 120 riflemen, but when he got to the top of Vysokaia gora (High Mountain) only six of them were left. In self-justification he wrote

The battle for Kazan' shows that the workers' militia detachments are completely useless in battle and really only exist on paper. They could not even build barricades, let alone fight. By the evening of 6 August they had all disappeared... The troops lacked all trace of discipline.

Soon Vatsetis arrived in Sviiazhsk, where he participated in what is called a 'political action'. On 20 August the 5th Zemgal'sky Latvian regiment, which had run away as soon as it confronted the enemy, was rewarded 'for its courageous and self-sacrificing defence of Kazan'' with the first honorary Red Standard in the history of the Red Army. Trotsky tried to prevent this propagandist gesture. That same day he received a letter from Lenin enclosing a report from the army's Senior Attestation Commission.¹⁴ This proposed appointing Vatsetis commander-in-chief of all Soviet armed forces. Trotsky commented maliciously that he was not opposed to such an appointment, but that it ought to be held by a victorious commander, not one who surrendered cities. Despite this on 6 September Vatsetis's

¹⁴ This was headed by A.I. Yegorov, 1883-1939, a graduate of the Kazan' cadet school and later a Soviet marshal who fell victim to the Great Terror.

appointment was confirmed by the newly formed Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic, and also by Trotsky himself.

Meanwhile the *Komuch* 'People's Army' was unable to muster more than a few thousand conscripts, for despite the SRs' radical agrarian programme the peasants of the region had no stomach for fighting, and the few workers preferred to stay neutral. Nor did its troops have enough of the equipment they badly needed. 'The military weakness meant that the few effective detachments had to be shuttled up and down the Volga, repelling one Red attack after another.'¹⁵ Their adversaries were meanwhile receiving thousands of reinforcements from the west and re-shaping their organizational structure on more professional lines. In late August the 5th Army under Colonel Slaven advanced on Kazan'. Although *Komuch* made a desperate attempt to regain the initiative, and even managed to penetrate the Red lines, after a day of heavy fighting its forces, numbering a mere 2,000 men, were obliged to fall back.

On 10 September the Reds' 5th Army entered the city and its exhausted adversaries withdrew. Latsis, who headed the Chekist detachment, wired Moscow: 'Kazan' is empty, there's not a single priest, monk or bourgeois left to shoot. We have only executed six people.' He was in no hurry to unleash repressive measures, reckoning that the most active of the Bolsheviks' opponents had left. Six months later, writing in the daily paper *Izvestiia VTsIK*, he recounted what happened to some Kazan' University professors who had collected money on behalf of *Komuch*: they had to part with a sum ten times greater than what they had collected, to be used to repair damage in the city. A chemistry professor, A.E. Arbuzov, was one of those who under pressure publicly repented of his conduct. Interviewed by a correspondent, he declared: 'Since Soviet power rests on real force, I recognize it *de facto*'. The historian N.N. Firsov echoed: 'I am sure that Bolshevism is a popular movement and so ... I shall support it.'

But then the Moscow press began to publish appeals for a continuation of the Red terror. Latsis was summoned to a meeting of the local Party committee and given a dressing down for his torpid prosecution of the terror campaign. After this a number of people were shot without trial, which aggravated the situation in the city. On 1 November the periodical *Krasnyi terror*, which was published in Kazan', included an article by Latsis in which he tried to defend the physical extermination of the bourgeoisie as a revolutionary necessity:

Do not look in the investigation for evidence of resistance to Soviet power by arms or in words. Your first duty is to ascertain which class the accused belongs to: what is his background, his educational level, his profession?

¹⁵ E. Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War*, London, 1987 (Edinburgh, 2008), p. 89.

Answers to these questions should decide the man's fate. That's what Red terror means.

Historians claim that Lenin took exception to these remarks. But the article in which he criticized Latsis, a leading Cheka official, was not published until 1926, when the question had ceased to be so topical. Soviet writers enthusiastically hail the Red victory outside Kazan' in August 1918. However, the events surrounding it deserve serious objective analysis. Hundreds of citizens perished in the fighting, and many more suffered in other ways. Nor did the victors live happily ever after: Trotsky was murdered in 1940 and both Vatsetis and Latsis, charged with Latvian nationalism during the Great Terror, perished in 1938. Their fate was shared by a good many rank-and-file Party members and officials who lived in Kazan'. Only those who managed to emigrate saved their skins.

The Soviet political leaders of the era, and also the historians who unthinkingly repeated their assertions, are guilty of myth-making. A defeat was turned into a signal triumph by fraudulent propaganda. Eventually it became known that similar claims, to the effect that the Red Army had scored great victories at Narva and Pskov, were likewise false. The date of these battles, 23 February 1918, became officially known as Red Army Day, and is still celebrated today as an occasion symbolizing the unity of the people and the armed forces. As for the 'heroic defence' of Kazan' on 6 August, this too was a legend. The army had not scored a victory but had actually surrendered the city, virtually without firing a shot. But certain people wanted everyone to believe that the armed forces were invincible.

The well-known liberal historian V.O. Kliuchevsky, writing at the turn of the nineteenth century, challenged the authority of the great German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, who claimed that no one ever learned anything from history. 'History,' argued Kliuchevsky, 'teaches even those who do not learn from it. It teaches them a lesson about ignorance and neglect.' Actually one must admit that Hegel was right! Each new generation, despite being taught a lesson, prefers to stick to its own experiences. Man began to kill his fellow-men long before he learned to read and write. But only in a totalitarian society did violence become state policy and the very concept of the value of human life become extinct. The victors of the October 1917 revolution created a regime that shocked the civilized world by unleashing a bacchanalia of violence, a permanent civil war against its own people that cost millions of innocent lives. The shock still mars our lives today.

As the poet A.A. Blok wrote:

*Men born in those harsh years
Can no longer find their way.*

*We children of Russia's leaden age
Remember it night and day.*

To this very day our country continues to be disfigured by the disregard for human life born of two world wars and the civil war. The willingness of the powers that be to apply 'war communist' methods, to push through reforms from above without a thought for the wishes of the common man or for the actual situation of the mass of the population -- what is this but a continuation of civil war in another form? Russian society has entered the twenty-first century but is said to be still in a 'state of transition'. One may well ask: a transition to what?

6 August 2003

6. Yevgeniia Ginzburg: Thoughts on the Centennial of her Birth

After 18 years in camps and exile Yevgeniia Solomonovna Ginzburg returned to civilization and wrote the book that made her world-famous.¹⁶ In it this talented writer, who herself had gone through all circles of Hell, described the tragic fate suffered by people victimized by illegal arbitrary actions at the hands of the state. She showed that it was possible to survive the most atrocious conditions physically, but not everyone was able to preserve their spiritual integrity -- as she managed to do.

As Solzhenitsyn pointed out in *The Gulag Archipelago*, there were thousands of different ways of arresting people. What happened in Ginzburg's case was that she was rung up by an NKVD investigator, a certain Captain Vevers, who ordered: 'get here within 40 minutes'. He said that he wanted to find out more about a certain prisoner, Professor N. Yel'vov. 'I opened the door very bravely', she recalled later. 'It was the courage of despair. If you have to jump into a bottomless chasm, it's better to take a run up to the edge and not stand dithering, taking a last look at the world you're leaving for ever.'

Only memoirs can give ne an impression of what these brave men and women were really like. Archival documents are of little use: there is something abstract, almost transcendental, about the records of an investigation by the secret police, with its endless questions and responses. As one reads them they seem to lose all sense until eventually the words mean nothing.

Here is the record of her interrogation on 15 February 1937:

Captain Vevers: You are accused of taking part in a counter-revolutionary Trotskyist organization and engaging actively in a Trotskyist struggle against the Party. Do you admit that you are guilty?

Ginzburg: I do not admit this. I never conducted any kind of Trotskyist struggle against the Party. I was never a member of any Trotskyite counter-revolutionary organization.

Here the record ends. Just a full stop, the date, and signatures.

Some days pass. Ginzburg suffers torments in the cell of the *izolator* at Black Lake. She can hear a band playing as the ice is broken on a nearby skating rink. No doubt the investigators are biding their time before continuing the battle of wits. Here is the record of her interrogation on 20 February 1937:

¹⁶ E. Ginzburg, *Into the Whirlwind*, tr. M. Hayward, London, 1967; *Krutoi marshrut: khronika vremeni kul'ta lichnosti*, Moscow, 2009. See also my *Dva sledstvennykh del Evgenii Ginzburg: politicheskaia zhertva totalitarizma v Rossii*, Kazan', 1994.

Lieutenant Livanov: Your previous statements were not sincere. Are you prepared to give truthful evidence?

Ginzburg: My statements concur with the truth. I can add nothing more in evidence.

Date. Signatures.

One could place the palm of one's hand over the signatures and try to guess which is Livanov's and which is Vevers's. The two functionaries are quite interchangeable. That is the only conclusion an impartial reader of these dry records could come to. It is not until we turn to Yevgeniia's memoirs that they appear as flesh-and-blood individuals:

Livanov /was/ calm and officious. He insisted on my signing the most monstrous rubbish, conveying by his attitude that this was a perfectly natural and trivial bureaucratic formality.'

Bikchentaev, another official, had

a chubby face from which stupidity oozed out like fat out of a piece of mutton. He was a short, rosy-cheeked lad with little curls, like a turkey stuffed with nuts.'

He even behaved like a little turkey, puffing himself up, straining himself, trying to play his role. He would assume ferocious airs, but when forced into a corner he was embarrassed. An odd thing happened with Bikchentaev. When searching Profesor Yel'vov's home police discovered a slip of paper with a humorous passage comparing Yevgeniia Ginzburg to Anna Karenina. Bikchentaev was triumphant:

'The investigation has discovered that your conspiratorial pseudonym was Karenina. Do you confirm this?'

Tsarevsky had a face the colour of earth, contrasting with his hair, a blaze of red. Aged only 35, he was already an old man, with a croaky voice.

Then there was the ever-solicitous Major Yel'shin, who expressed concern that Ginzburg was 'so pale', as though he did not know that she had been questioned for several days in succession without sleep or a morsel of food.

And finally the cocaine-sniffing Vevers. Ginzburg noted his eyes:

completely expressionless ... one could have shown such eyes in a film close-up. He made no attempt to conceal his cynicism and cruelty, his eager foretaste of the tortures he was about to inflict.

Almost all Ginzburg's interrogators disappeared once the NKVD in turn fell victim to Stalin's purges. Prisoners whom she met later in transit camps mentioned Yel'shin. Of Tsarevsky it was said that he had hanged himself in his cell on a strap that he had managed to obtain from some petty crook. He had exchanged messages with his fellow-prisoners by the time-honoured practice of knocking on the pipes running between the cells, and told them not to sign anything -- this from an entrenched Stalinist!

Let us take a look at what the official record has to say about some of these men.

Tsarevsky, Sergei Viacheslavovich, b. 1898, Russian, from Kazan', Bolshevik from 1918. Took part in civil war, higher education. Arrested 31 December 1937 in Kazan' for 'defending the counter-revolutionary views of Bukharin, an enemy of the people'. Fell sick during investigation, died in prison hospital 2 May 1938.

Vevers, Yan Yanovich, b. 1899, Latvian. From 1935 member of extra-judicial troika of Tatarstan ASSR. After the war worked in Latvian SSR ministry of state security. Dismissed from /security/ organs 12 March 1963. Died and buried in Riga.

Bikchentaev, Gareisha Davletshievich, b. 1902, Tatar, Bolshevik from 1924. Completed Kazan' pedagogical technical college and provincial Party school. Taught social studies at Tatar-Bashkir military school, Kazan'. From 1931 served in OGPU-NKVD, in 1937 junior lieutenant of state security. Arrested 26 November 1937, 'unmasked as member of counter-revolutionary Right-Trotskyist nationalist organization'. In August 1938 sentenced by Volga region military tribunal to be shot. On appeal sentence reduced to 10 years' imprisonment, 5 years' loss of political rights and confiscation of property. On 22 February 1940 the USSR Supreme Court resolved that he had been convicted on the basis of falsified materials. Released from Solovetsky prison May 1940, returned to Kazan', became a teacher.

Were these people perpetrators of criminal acts or victims? Should one feel anger for them or sympathy? But then it isn't a historian's job to judge, only to try to understand.

Turning to the bulky file on Ginzburg herself, one might at first experience a tinge of disappointment. How often people's memories waver at the most vital moment! She prided herself on having retained her human dignity by not signing a mendacious protocol. This moral courage cost her more effort than she thought she could summon up:

'My only consolation now, on the threshold of old age and death, is that I did not besmirch my soul by slandering an innocent person.'

She was put on the 'conveyor': seven days and nights without food or sleep, and without being allowed back into her cell. At the time her pain and suffering seemed to her to have attained the maximum possible limit. But later she learned that her 'conveyor' experience was child's play compared to the tortures practised after July 1937, and that she had actually been lucky: 'my investigation was over before they began to apply so-called 'special methods.'

We lived in a country inhabited by executioners, stool pigeons, and countless millions of simple folk who let themselves be cursed and humiliated. And so it is a source of satisfaction to the present-day historian, when poring over investigation record no. 2792, to find that the author of *Into the Whirlwind* was absolutely truthful and honest.

She was a meticulous observer of the judicial farce she had to face in the Military Collegium. The proceedings were held in a magnificent hall with a high ceiling, and through the open window there wafted a pure summer breeze. The judges' faces resembled one another and looked like marinated fish frozen in jelly. A mysterious chilling noise turned out to be the sound of papers being shuffled. Why had she never heard it before? By looking at the clock on the wall, with its shiny hands, one could tell that the entire proceedings lasted a mere seven minutes. The presiding judge calls the witnesses, mixing up their names. Yevgeniia asks to be told the name of the man whom she was accused of shooting. The answer: 'Comrade Kirov was assassinated, and by people who think as you do.' The court withdraws for consultations, and before she faints she spies the guards joining hands behind her back to stop her falling. She expects the death penalty. But her sentence is 'ten years' imprisonment in strict isolation'. She recalls Pasternak's words: 'forced labour, what a relief!' The minutes of the court hearing take up two small pages.

In 1949 the authorities began to re-arrest people who had already served their time in jail or camp and had been released. Former prisoners (*zeks*), acting like psychoanalysts, tried to find some rational meaning in this delirium. Antonov, who was working as a book-keeper, thought it must be because of some arithmetical error. Averbach, who had once been a Zionist, reckoned that they must need his old connections now that the state of Israel had appeared on the map. Nurse Vinogradova and Dr Vol'berg presumed that some patient of theirs had not survived. Gertrude, a *Reichsdeutsche* with a Ph.D., looked for some clue in the Marxist theory of cognition and Lenin's theory of imperialism. And the wise old Jew Umansky asked for a stub of pencil and worked out that they were simply going through the alphabet, starting with the As, Bs and Cs...When someone asked him what Gertrude could possibly have done wrong, since after all she had played the piano with an orchestra in the House of

Culture, Umansky replied: 'she did just the same as you did in your scrap-metal workshop, and what your lady friend did in the kids' nursery.'

One has to appreciate the absurdity of these pseudo-judicial proceedings to be able, as Ginzburg does, find them 'strange'. The prosecutor made no pretence about concealing how bored he was and did not present any charges against the accused. The court simply referred to articles 58-10 and 58-11 of the Criminal Code, which covered belonging to a 'terrorist group'. 'As later became clear, the sentence had been decided in advance in Moscow by the NKVD Special Conference: life imprisonment...'

All memoir writers mention how eager political prisoners under Stalin were to appeal their sentence. Yevgeniia did so two months after the dictator's death, sensing the change of mood that was taking place at the top. She wrote to K.E. Voroshilov, formally head of state at that time, although she had clashed with him earlier. The rehabilitation machinery was set in motion, grinding on with excruciating slowness, as indeed it still does today.

From the exile Ginzburg, Yevgeniia Solomonovna, b. 1904. Place of birth: Moscow. Education: higher. Profession: teacher. Former member of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik). Arrested in Kazan' in 1937. Present residence: Kolyma.¹⁷

During the sixteen and a half years that I have been repressed this is the first occasion that I approach the country's most senior body with a request to review my case. I earnestly appeal to you to read my statement and to reply to it. The facts are in brief as follows: I am a permanent resident of Kazan', where I completed a university degree and was retained by my institute to do research. Until 1937 I also gave lessons at the Pedagogical Institute and the State University. My husband, Aksenov Pavel Vasil'evich, a Party and government employee, was until his arrest chairman of the Kazan' city soviet. At the moment of my arrest I had two sons, aged 10 and 4...

What am I actually accused of? In 1934 the Tatar regional Party committee mobilized a number of scholars to improve the quality of the regional newspaper, *Krasnaia Tataria*. I was among them and for two years ran its cultural section, combining this work with my job as teacher. Among the editors there was a certain Professor Yel'vov. In 1935, after Kirov's assassination, he was arrested ... Even today, nearly twenty years later, I still do not know what Yel'vov was guilty of. But two years later, on 15 February 1937, I too was arrested ... This was possible only because of the

¹⁷ The Kolyma camp complex, in the Arctic north-east of Siberia, had the harshest regime in the entire Gulag. The approach to it was by sea from the port of Magadan to the south. The term 'continent' used here refers to the Siberian mainland, whence convoys of prisoners departed.

incorrect, illegal methods employed in the preliminary investigation and the utter lack of any judicial investigation ...

Later I discovered that my interrogator, Bikchentaev, and the official in charge of the investigation, Major Yel'shin, were repressed in 1939. However, the illegal measures they perpetrated in my regard have not been corrected to this day. Thus I became a state criminal, classified under the article dealing with 'terror'. I spent three years in various prisons and seven years in the Kolyma camps. During this time my elder son was killed on the Leningrad front, and my parents died before I could take leave of them. In 1947 I was released from the camp, but as I had no one to go back to on the continent I took a job in Magadan as a pianist in a children's nursery. I managed to get my younger son /Vasilii Aksenov/, from whom I had been parted for eleven years, to come and live with me. I expected to spend the rest of my days in this humble position. But on 25 October 1949 I was arrested again. My son, now sixteen, was once again deprived of his mother, and was left alone without any means, here at the very edge of the Earth.

As an exile I have had to suffer various acts of discrimination in regard to my work. Although the quality of my work satisfied my supervisors, as everyone tells me, they kept on dismissing me. And so today I am unemployed, since in February 1953, in connection with the vigilance campaign launched after the Moscow doctors' plot, I was sacked again on grounds of political unreliability and am at present unemployed, with no means of support, although I have two children to look after, a son still at school and a seven-year-old adopted daughter.

This is a brief factual account of my past sixteen and a half years, during which I lost everything: my family, my Party, a profession I loved, and my health. And now, nearly fifty years old and facing the prospect of an early death, I once again repeat that neither by the slightest action nor even thought have I deserved all the tortures I have had to put up with ... Even a cursory glance at the file on my case will show how absurd the charge of 'terrorism' (point 8) is, so that there is no need for me to refute it. When in 1937 I asked the president of the court which political leader I was supposed to have killed, he responded with a strange, complicated syllogism: Trotskyists had killed Kirov in Leningrad, you failed to oppose El'vov in Kazan', therefore you are regarded as a terrorist ...

In connection with my petition I implore you to consider the following: 1) that I was incorrectly convicted in 1937 ... 2) that in 1949 I was sentenced to an indefinite term of exile on the basis of the materials of the earlier case, i.e I was repressed twice for the same alleged offence, one I did not commit 3) that I am prohibited from working ...

In conclusion I would like to address a few words to you informally. Dear Kliment Yefremovich! I ask you to see behind this list of facts the fate undergone by a living person. Imagine a mother separated from her adolescent sons, one of whom was killed in action ... Now, in 1953, exhausted and browbeaten, I turn to you for justice, and would like to believe that I shall be vouchsafed this justice.

9 May 1953. Magadan, Nagaevskaia street, house 37, flat 21.
E. Ginzburg

This letter brought results. Yevgeniia Solomonovna was allowed to return to Moscow and to apply for rehabilitation. On 25 June 1955 her case was annulled for lack of any offence ...

Fate decided that Yevgeniia, who in her youth had been a Bolshevik and an atheist, died in 1977 as an anti-Communist and a Catholic, yet her tragic life eventuated in a wonderful book that graphically recounted her courage in the face of terrible adversity.

17 November 2004

7. We Need History, Not Myth

Reflections on the Great Patriotic War

In the USSR, according to the latest calculations, which are not complete, one-third of all males were called up in World War II ('the Great Patriotic War'). Of these 31 million men over 12 million were killed in battle, died of wounds, or failed to return from captivity. In the summer of 1945 14 million soldiers in all were on active service, and about the same number were also in uniform, in the rear areas; of these 15 million had been wounded and 2.5 million had become war invalids. At the present time only 1.2 million war veterans are still alive in ex-Soviet territory.

When we pay tribute to these survivors, we should not forget those who are no longer with us and cannot stand up for their rights. It is a sad fact that in the Volgograd region, the scene of the most furious and costly battles in 1942-3, over 200,000 Red Army soldiers who fell in action have no graves. It is sometimes said that wars go on until the last soldier has been buried. Yet in our country regimes come and go but the war is not yet over ... The immoral attitude taken by those in power stands in sharp contrast to the pompous victory parades that are held each year. After all, it is our sacred duty to ensure that those who gave their lives for our freedom and independence should at last receive a proper burial.

Thousands of books have been written about the Great Patriotic War, and there are also a good many films about it, both documentaries and works of fiction. These are valuable sources for historians, but to our shame there is not yet a generally recognized truthful history of the great conflict, such as there are in Britain or the United States. Americans can even choose between three series of histories of the US armed forces: 96 volumes for the army, 20 for the US Air Force, and 12 for the US Navy. Political leaders share with academics a common conceptual approach. But in Russia all we have is what some scholars have termed 'a war about the war'. The authorities always insisted on having 'their own' history, which does not always accord with what ordinary people remember, or indeed with many documents.

In the early 1960s there appeared a six-volume history of the Soviet-German conflict and in the 1970s a twelve-volume history of World War II as a whole. Unfortunately these works suffered from ideological and political bias, and many events were treated in a subjective manner. The activities of some leading personalities were mythologized and there was no in-depth examination of the sources. As a result they are today consulted only by specialists. In the late 1980s the Institute of Military History started work on a ten-volume history, but this effort was in turn not crowned with success. General D.A. Volkogonov, who was director of the

institute at the time, later said that the first volume had twice been the subject of discussion in the presence of leading generals and members of the Party Central Committee. The latter accused the authors of 'blackening the historical record'. Volkogonov replied to these objections as follows:

Did not the Germans reach Minsk on the sixth day of the war? Is it slanderous to say so? Near Viaz'ma almost 600,000 Soviet soldiers and officers were killed or taken prisoner. Is that slander? It is a fact that some three million men were taken captive in 1941.

But Volkogonov was not allowed to finish his remarks. Instead he lost his job as director of the institute and work on preparing these volumes came to a sudden halt.

A lot of contemporary scholars take the line that what happened sixty years ago is the province of historians, not politicians -- or even officers and soldiers who took part in the actual events, especially since many of those who have written memoirs, such as V. Astaf'ev, V. Bykov or V. Nekrasov, do not take the same line as the generals do. Not that all the generals and politicians agree on absolutely everything. And the same is true of the soldier memoir-writers, some of whom follow directives from above as to what they should remember while others do not. In recent years vigorous debates have taken place among historians of the war. Chief among the topics at issue is the price we paid for winning the great struggle.

The human and material costs of victory were so high that there is still no consensus as to the total number of casualties. After all one has to calculate a figure not only for the men and women who were called up into the armed forces but also those who were mobilized to build defence works, who often were unarmed, volunteers in the militia (*opolchenie*), partisans, railway and canal workers, and -- last but not least -- civilian victims. That is why the figure varies between 27 and 32 million. Most of these were civilians. At the time the saying went 'the front and the rear are united as one', and that was indeed how it was. Just as monstrous are the figures for material losses. During the war no less than 1710 towns, over 70,000 villages, and 6 million buildings (including 1670 churches and their equivalents), were destroyed. About 25 million people no longer had a roof over their head. The country's wealth was diminished by one third.

It is natural for questions to be asked *why* so many people lost their lives (the rate was a fearful 20,000 killed each *day!*). Could this number have been reduced? After all enemy losses were significantly lower. Nazi Germany suffered 7.4 million killed, its allies 1.2 million, for a total of 8.6 million -- i.e. about one-third as many as the Soviets.

It is generally recognized that the Soviet armed forces and civilians in the rear performed miracles of heroism during the war. By Victory Day 11,525 individuals had earned the Hero of the Soviet Union medal. Of these 104 did so twice, and 3 even managed to do so three times. Millions more received other distinctions for valour. Alexander Matrosov, who gave his life so that his comrades could go on to win a battle, had no less than 179 emulators. The most successful Soviet airmen, I. Kozheub and A. Pokryhkin, shot down respectively 62 and 59 enemy planes. But the Germans, too, had their heroes: E. Hartmann shot down 347 aircraft (and 5 others), while G. Barkhorn came close with 301 planes downed in combat. They were able to achieve most of these feats in the first phase of the war, when our lack of military preparedness showed itself in outdated technology and a lack of trained officers. It took incalculable sacrifices to turn the tide and defeat the foe.

Why were we so lacking in preparedness? Why were the Nazis able to conquer and occupy such a vast area during the summer and autumn of 1941, so that they reached the gates of Moscow and Leningrad? This was not due to any lack of will to resist among the Soviet population, but in large part to errors by the leadership -- as historians have recently recognized, once they were able to write frankly about the tragedy of '41. The repression of the armed forces' leadership, especially in the most senior ranks, in 1937-8 played a devastating role. Three out of five marshals were shot, including M.N. Tukhachevsky, who had done so much to modernize the army. Six hundred senior officers were likewise liquidated, and the killing did not stop even after the war had begun. These massive self-inflicted losses meant that whole divisions were commanded by captains and regiments by lieutenants, none of whom had the necessary experience of coping with large bodies of troops. The military purge undermined men's confidence in their commanders and led to acts of indiscipline. Nor was the Soviet military doctrine of the day up to scratch. The official view was that in the event of war the Red Army should cross the border and fight the enemy on foreign soil. There were no plans for a defensive Patriotic War. These had to be extemporized on the spot.

Another failure of the Soviet leadership pertains to the realm of foreign policy: the Molotov- Ribbentrop pact, so called, of 23 August 1939. Along with its secret protocols carving out spheres of influence in eastern Europe, this made the USSR *de facto* a participant in World War II from the very start, and was morally on the same plane as the Western Powers' appeasement of Nazi Germany at Munich in September 1938, when Hitler was allowed virtually to take over Czechoslovakia. The 1939 Soviet-German treaty enabled the USSR to annex several large slices of territory: the Baltic states, western Belarus and Ukraine, Bessarabia and the Karelian isthmus. In the judgement of history, Stalin went too far in

accommodating Hitler's drive to the west, for we continued to supply the Nazis with foodstuffs and industrial goods, including high-quality octane petrol for aircraft, right up to the eve of the invasion.

One can hardly still claim, in the light of recent documentary publications and historical research, that the Nazi attack on the USSR was sudden and treacherous, as was said officially at the time. Our leaders were fully informed about Hitler's preparations to invade. The plans for 'Barbarossa', which he approved on 18 December 1940, were on Stalin's desk by 29 December, and their authenticity was confirmed on several occasions. From then on Hitler was fully absorbed in measures to implement these plans, which would have made him the master of all of Europe. But Stalin took no notice. Why did he have such confidence in the continuing validity of the non-aggression pact?

Probably one has to seek an answer in his over-confidence in his own infallibility. This came with his achievement of absolute power, and brought him the plaudits of millions ready to acclaim him as a genius and to carry out his orders literally, even when they were of a criminal nature. He was desperate to avoid war, even if this meant pandering to the Führer's every wish. How else can one explain his readiness to permit German reconnaissance aircraft to penetrate Soviet airspace along the border, and to prohibit Soviet airmen from flying closer than 10 km. from the frontier -- as well as allowing the commanders of the western military districts to go on leave in May and early June 1941. On 14 June, a week or so before the invasion was launched, TASS was ordered to issue a mendacious and criminal communiqué assuring the public that rumours of an invasion were simply provocations ...

Thus the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War was actually marked by miscalculations on the part of the leaders on both sides. They were guilty both of military misjudgement and of moral and psychological inadequacy. The worst of these failures was the Soviet government's inability to guarantee the security of the population. This was evident initially in the collectivization drive and then the Great Terror, and finally in the events of 1939-41. Recently Russian historians have started to tackle what were previously taboo topics, such as the fate of Soviet prisoners of war in Axis hands and the willingness of some Soviet citizens to collaborate with the Nazi occupiers. It has become clear that no less than 5.7 million Soviet armed forces personnel were taken prisoner, of whom 3.3 million were shot, starved to death or died of wounds or disease. Moreover, of those who managed to flee from captivity, or to survive until they were rescued, a very large part landed up in Soviet concentration camps.¹⁸ Not until 24

¹⁸According to the archival research of P.M. Polian (*Zhertvy dvukh diktatur ...*, Moscow, 2002) and others, a total of 8.7 million individuals, including 5.2 million former soldiers, were repatriated from abroad or enemy-occupied areas and were sent to filtration

January 1995 were they rehabilitated, by a decree of President Yel'tsin, and their civil rights restored.

In the Soviet era everyone who collaborated with the occupier was regarded automatically as a traitor to the Fatherland. How was it possible that, despite all-encompassing propaganda and the repression of the least sign of dissent, about 1.5 million Soviet citizens served the Nazis, and some 150,000 of them actually joined SS formations? In some cases they did so because they were ideologically opposed to the Soviet regime, but in most cases they were simply motivated by an elemental wish to escape the atrocious conditions that prevailed under Nazi rule, especially in POW camps.

Years went by. In 1989 the Congress of People's Deputies condemned the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and its secret protocols. But in 2005 government officials, ostensibly in the interests of combating privilege, drew a dividing line between front-line soldiers and workers in the rear during the war, and scaled down the amount of pension paid to the latter. This measure was unjust; it was like saying that Kazan' munitions workers and aircraft constructors had catered only to the needs of the immediate region and not those of the entire country. Just before the sixtieth anniversary of Victory Day a sociological survey showed that 33 per cent of respondents still felt a debt of gratitude to the veterans who had defeated fascism, and somewhat fewer to the country as a whole; but 28 per cent felt humiliated at Russia's present miserable condition; and 10 per cent were bitter at the thought of the vast number of casualties incurred during the war. The popular press used these statistics to launch a campaign among local veterans' associations, urging them to plead for new monuments to be erected to Stalin as the architect of victory. At the same time a group of Duma deputies and cultural workers appealed to the procuracy to order the liquidation of all Jewish civic organizations.

Naturally the question arises: do those who are nostalgic for Russia's former imperial grandeur really want to take us back to the era of the Stalin personality cult and the 'planned' economy? Such individuals do exist, but it is hard to identify them, since they hide behind the war veterans or cultural figures with outrageously chauvinistic and racist

camps', of which there were some 140 in mid-1945. Of these, 3.2 million (62%) , mainly civilians, were released and sent home, where however they were kept under surveillance and suffered from discrimination; 1.2 million (20%) were placed in armed forces reserve units; 0.6m. (12%) were despatched to labour battalions under the Defence commissariat; and 340,000 (6.4%) formed a 'special contingent' among Gulag prisoners. These data should be regarded as approximations and exclude an unknown number who died or were killed prior to or during 'filtration'. Higher figures were given earlier by the reputed V.N. Zemskov, who stated that of 4.1 million returnees 881,000 (23%) ended up in the camps.

views. The authorities lack the political courage to tackle such people and condemn them.

As a rule monuments are put up to persons of whom the people have fond memories: for instance to Pushkin, whose poetry is testimony to his life-affirming genius, or to Lobachevsky and Zavoisky for their original ideas and devotion to science. And we can accept Falconet's Bronze Horseman, which Catherine II erected to commemorate Peter I, or the many statues that pay tribute to Russian generals who scored historic victories in the country's service. But memorials to politicians who are still alive or died only recently are another matter. They lead to social division and political argument. Do we really want them? Those that exist need not necessarily be pulled down and destroyed, even if the figures they represent were responsible for terrible tragedies. What we should do is move them to some special place, such as a park, where the nostalgically-minded can go and revere them, or schoolchildren be taken on an excursion and be told by their teacher who these men are and what they did.

It is really quite unnecessary to erect new statues to any of the Soviet leaders, least of all to Stalin. He was not a hero but a political leader, indeed in some ways a very talented one, who ordered millions of innocent citizens to be liquidated or else sent off to isolation and forced labour in the Gulag, where a large number of them succumbed to inhuman, slave-like conditions. It is wrong to make Stalin into a symbol of victory in the Great Patriotic War. Let us rather take the Unknown Soldier, or a partisan, a worker in the rear or some other representative of the common people, for it was they who saved the country from disaster, not Stalin. How could one even think of putting up a statue to the Generalissimo who on the eve of the war killed hundreds of our best officers and whose foreign policy was detrimental to the essential interests of the state, to a man who was responsible for the colossal losses in 1941 and who then, claiming credit for the victory, once again began to terrorize his people, persecuting scientists (geneticists, linguists, economists and so on), forcibly suppressing the least sign of dissent in literature and the arts, exiling or executing generals fresh from glory won on the battlefield?

This man and his acolytes do not need any statues. It is time to look facts in the face instead of propagating myths. Of course myths are nicer to hear about, and easier to inculcate into the populace. But to take refuge in myth is to forget the fate of millions of our fellow-citizens who experienced torture or were turned into 'camp dust', as the phrase then went. Instead we should rather foreclose any attempt to rehabilitate Stalin or the authoritarian regime he embodied, without however consigning the man and his works to oblivion -- for as a wise man once said, 'those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it'.

Let us put up memorials to those who died for our freedom and independence, so that we might live in peace.

4 May 2005

8. The October Revolution: Causes, Course and Consequences

The Bolsheviks came to power on 25 October 1917, but for many years the founding of the Soviet state was officially celebrated on 7 November. This disparity was due to Russia's change of calendar, from the Julian to the Gregorian, on 1 February 1918. The difference between them amounted to 13 days. Yet the revolution was left in October. This situation reminds me of an international conference in Moscow that I attended in the 1970s, at the height of the Lenin cult. One of the speakers, a historian of the CPSU, quoted Maiakovsky's lines: 'When we say Party we mean Lenin, and when we say Lenin we mean the Party.' An American who was present interjected: 'That's the trouble with you guys: you say one thing but mean another.'

In 2007 we are marking the 90th anniversary of the revolution and the foundation of the Cheka, which twenty years later, in 1937, was to be responsible for political repression on a massive scale in the USSR. These two events are intimately linked, but for the present let's concentrate on the first of them.

There were two revolutions in 1917, in February and October. Soviet historians referred to the first one as 'bourgeois-democratic' and the second as 'socialist'. According to Karl Marx a revolution is supposed to be a time of joy, 'a holiday for the oppressed and exploited', but today people are inclined to think that this is a festival they could do without. We call the February revolution 'democratic', but what about October? Was it really another revolution or just a *coup d'état*? Or perhaps a bit of one and a bit of the other? Opinions differ. Of course Soviet historians preferred to stick to the myth that the Bolsheviks, at the head of the proletariat, were the decisive force in both overturns. Post-Soviet writers, on the other hand, point to the fact that in February there were only 12,000 Bolsheviks in the whole of Russia. They were surpassed by far numerically by Mensheviks, Socialist-Revolutionaries (SRs), Kadets and various other political formations -- some two hundred in all. But even this was only half of 1 per cent of the total population, so that they did not exercise a great deal of influence nation-wide, at least to start with.

Eye-witnesses to February stressed the spontaneous nature of the disturbances that broke out among workers, soldiers and sailors in Petrograd, then the capital, which led to the overthrow of the Romanov dynasty and a start on democratic reforms. True, Trotsky later acknowledged that the February revolution had been led by Mensheviks and SRs. It would be more accurate to say that their leaders were more energetic in taking advantage of the chaotic situation and, using their

status as deputies to the State Duma, setting up new executive organs, in the shape of the soviets (councils of workers' and soldiers' deputies). The Petrograd soviet was chaired by a Menshevik, N.S. Chkheidze, who was head of the Social-democratic 'fraction' in the Duma. His deputies were M.I. Skobelev, another Menshevik, and A.F. Kerensky, then chief of the Trudoviks (a peasant party). As for Lenin and Yu.O. Martov, respectively the Bolshevik and Menshevik leaders, they and other prominent Social-democrats were still in emigration in western Europe. They had no idea that a revolution was in the works. In fact Lenin, in a lecture delivered in Zurich in January, said sadly that 'perhaps we oldsters won't live to see the decisive battles of the future revolution' and called on his listeners to be patient. At that juncture he was 47 years old.

The fall of autocracy meant initially that Russians were expected to lay a more active part in World War I, which was unpopular because it was causing such catastrophic loss of life and shortages of essential goods. The monarchy had failed to prepare the country to bear such colossal burdens. Tsarism had in fact exhausted itself, and even generals who had taken loyalty oaths did not rally to its defence; its collapse was relatively bloodless. One can compare it with the situation in 1991, when likewise the 19 million CPSU members failed to defend their local Party offices, because the system had by then become totally discredited. Indeed, some functionaries actually helped to close down those offices that were still operating.

With the fall of the monarchy power passed to the Provisional government. This lacked legitimacy because its members considered that their rule needed to be sanctioned by a democratically elected Constituent Assembly, and therefore any measures they took in anticipation of its convocation were just that: provisional. But before the assembly could be elected and convene, the Bolsheviks had seized power. They at once set up a Soviet government (*Sovnarkom*), which consisted wholly of Bolsheviks (although in November they were joined by a few Left SRs). This government likewise lacked legitimacy, and recognized the fact by including the terms 'provisional' in its title until the Constituent Assembly met.

Why did the Provisional government, committed as it was to a democratic future for Russia, have such a brief life? Why did it give way to the Bolsheviks virtually without firing a shot? The main reason was probably that it failed to stop the war and to institute the social reforms that were so badly needed. A revolution implies in the main two things: a change of political regime and redistribution of property and economic power. The men of February broke with the tsarist regime and carried out political reforms, but their revolution stopped halfway. They did not take steps

towards concluding a separate peace with Germany and its allies, and they did not confiscate the landowners' estates and redistribute them to the peasants. And so people remained disaffected and social tensions persisted. Lenin was right when he said, addressing the Mensheviks and SRs who had collaborated with the Provisional government: 'would a single fool have chosen to make a revolution if you had genuinely embarked on social reform?'

Today it is fashionable to say that in 1917 Russian society was immature for democracy and that it hasn't matured much since. I don't agree. It was not inevitable that February should have been succeeded by October, democracy by dictatorship. And anyway the Bolsheviks took power with democratic slogans on their banners: peace to the peoples, land to the peasants. And at the start they were willing to allow elections to proceed for the Constituent Assembly, due to meet within a couple of months.

Lenin dreamed of taking power already in June 1917, when at the First congress of soviets he openly declared that yes, his party was indeed ready to take over. During the 'July Days' some Bolsheviks made a bid for power, but he thought this was premature. Once he and Trotsky had pulled off their coup, he was determined not to cede power to anyone but to push on with his design for world revolution. He knew that the elections to the Constituent Assembly would not produce a parliamentary body that would back his 'Soviet' government, and of course he would not abide by the democratic principle whereby power passes to the party or parties that have a majority in the legislature. Instead he took the road of coercion, of dictatorship: the Kadets were ruled 'counter-revolutionary' and forbidden to function; the most critical press organs were suppressed; and on 7/20 December he set up the Cheka. Many public bodies that had come into existence under the previous government were likewise suppressed.

On 5 January 1918 the deputies to the newly elected Constituent Assembly met in Petrograd's Tauride Palace. The SRs had won 347 mandates (about 40%) and the Bolsheviks 180 (24% at the most). The Bolsheviks were not at all disposed to yield power to the SRs, and so during the night of 5/6 January, after the deputies had proclaimed Russia a democratic federal republic, they simply declared the assembly dissolved. This act spelled the death knell for all the democratic changes that February had stood for, an end to multi-party government. The inevitable consequence of the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly was a civil war destined to last for three years, which cost 16 million lives. More of the victims died from starvation and disease, and from having to live in unheated homes, than from military action or terror, whether Red or White.

Russia is no stranger to dissolved parliaments: apart from what happened in 1918, the tsarist government twice dissolved the Duma prematurely (in

1906 and 1907), and in 1993 a post-Soviet government liquidated the Supreme Soviet. The reasons were different in each case, but common to all was the abuse of executive power and the elimination of a regularly constituted legislature, in complete negation of democratic principles. In 1918 power was monopolized by the Bolsheviks (for their Left SR allies soon walked out in protest at the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty), and this was followed in short order by the total subjugation to the Party-state of all political, social and economic life, and the isolation of the country from contact with the Western democracies. Yet the populace had shown that it was perfectly capable of living in a democratic system. Its natural evolution towards such an order was simply brought to an end by coercion and terror.

What then actually happened on 25 October 1917? A *coup d'état*, the seizure of power by a minority party, without bloodshed in Petrograd but at the cost of many casualties in Moscow, as in many other towns and regions across the length and breadth of Russia. The terms 'October insurrection' (*perevorot*) was actually used by Stalin in the title of one of his articles in 1918, in which he also mentioned the prominent role that Trotsky had played in organizing the coup: 'One can assuredly say', he wrote, 'that Trotsky was primarily and chiefly responsible for the /Petrograd/ garrison coming over to the Soviet side so rapidly.' But when Stalin launched his merciless struggle against 'Trotskyism' in the early 1930s, the volume containing this article was placed in libraries' 'special repository' (*spetskhran*), so that no one could read it. The term 'insurrection' (or *coup*) was also used by Lenin, Trotsky and many others in regard to the events of October. Trotsky, for instance, wrote later that Lenin 'bears, and will always bear, responsibility before the working class and before history for October, for the *coup*, the revolution, the Red terror and the civil war.' He should have added that he himself was equally responsible along with Lenin, and so too were all the others associated with the enterprise.

As chairman of the Petrograd soviet of workers' and soldiers' deputies, Trotsky worked out the plan for the *coup* in the Smol'nyi (a former girls' school, headquarters of the soviet). Lenin came secretly from Finland to Petrograd, where he stayed in the apartment of M. Fofanova, a Bolshevik Party member, and there on 24 October he wrote a letter to his followers summoning them to rise up at once against the government. Then he decided to make for Smol'nyi himself, wearing disguise, accompanied by a Finnish Bolshevik named Eino Rakhia. The pair didn't have permits to enter the building and so the guard wouldn't let them in. They managed to get in by joining a crowd of workers. Here Lenin met Trotsky and approved his plan. On 25 October, in the aula of Smol'nyi, F.I. Dan, the Menshevik leader

and chairman of the CEC¹⁹, opened the Second congress of soviets. At that very moment soldiers, sailors and workers were already taking over part of the Winter Palace, seat of the Provisional government. There was no 'storming' of the palace, which was used as a hospital for war wounded – contrary to the legend (and the film!). Nor were shots fired at the palace from the cruiser *Aurora*, but only blanks, and this was just a signal to the insurgents to occupy the rest of the building and arrest the government ministers.

At the soviet congress Lenin did not appear for the first session, for he was waiting for the government to fall so that he could present the delegates with a *fait accompli*. In the palace meanwhile V.A. Antonov-Ovseenko arrested the ministers, who were conveyed to the Peter and Paul fortress under guard by a detachment of sailors.

There had been several *coups d'état* in Russian history -- for instance in 1741, 1762 and 1801 -- and the Bolshevik seizure of power was not really very different, except that the victors at once began to institute revolutionary social changes. The new Bolshevik government, at Trotsky's suggestion, called itself the Council of People's Commissars. It immediately issued decrees on land and peace that allowed the peasants to seize the land of 'non-toilers' (actions that had been underway for some months), i.e. to carry out a revolution in the countryside, and paved the way for negotiations with the Central Powers for an armistice and, eventually, a separate peace.

There were 649 delegates officially registered at the Second congress of soviets. Of these 390 were Bolsheviks, 160 SRs, and 72 Mensheviks. The Bolsheviks, as the majority party, took over control of the presidium; this was chaired by L.B. Kamenev, who also headed for a while the CEC until he was succeeded by Ya.M. Sverdlov. The Mensheviks and SRs refused to join the presidium as they stood for a peaceful resolution of the crisis and for a government that represented all of 'revolutionary democracy' (the left-wing parties). Trotsky memorably, but insultingly, told the opposition delegates that they deserved to be relegated to 'the dustbin of history' and thereupon they left the hall. When Lenin came to address the throng, he took a cautious line, as he wanted to demonstrate his party's democratic credentials. Thus he made no mention of the dictatorship of the proletariat, civil war and so on, and called on the mass of the population to take the initiative in prosecuting the revolution. To be fair, the Bolsheviks' initial decrees did have a democratic character. But later he would assert that democratic gains had to yield to the revolution's 'socialist' content, which was what truly mattered.

¹⁹ Central Executive Committee (of soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies).

Socialism meant for him the destruction of the existing government machinery, nationalization of industry, and forcible requisitioning of food from the peasants. 'Seize what has been seized from you', ran the slogan, or 'expropriate the expropriators'. This was equivalent to a ban on market relationships and private property, the obligation for all citizens to work and fight the revolution's adversaries, control of the press and so on. All such measures smacked of dictatorship rather than the building of a truly socialist order, and they made civil war inevitable. The Bolsheviks' doctrine and actions were condemned by the humanist writer V.G. Korolenko, who on 11 November 1917 wrote in his diary that 'Lenin and Trotsky are trying to impose a socialist order by the bayonet, wielded by revolutionary officials'.

Of course in the Soviet era 'Great October' could only be hailed in positive terms, as the greatest event of the twentieth century. It did indeed determine Russia's course for the next seventy years or so and the nature of world Communism, too. But the consequences of October 1917 also showed that it was illusory to try to achieve general welfare by violent means. This course could lead only to 'barracks socialism', or rather pseudo-socialism. When one steps back and takes a long view, considering what happened in Russia after the Bolshevik victory, one has to conclude that there can be no hope either of 'leaping into socialism' or 'returning to world civilization'. Such dreams are utopian, since any attempt to enforce an ideology that ignores human nature, or tries to drive it under by force, can only lead to bloodshed and civil strife. The October revolution was not inevitable. It came about largely because previous governments had neglected to introduce reforms in good time. So one moral of this story is that one should not indefinitely hold up measures that are essential to the wellbeing of the people. Their patience has its limits and sooner or later they will rise in revolt. It is fatal to promise pie in the sky for the distant tomorrow and turn a blind eye to the sufferings of one's neighbour in the present.

In the twentieth century Russia experienced the revolution of 1905-7, the two revolutions of 1917, collectivization and 'dekulakization' in 1929-33, mass repression and the deportation of entire ethnic groups, the famines of 1921, 1932-3 and 1946 and, finally, pauperization in the post-Soviet 1990s. The population lived through the Russo-Japanese war, World War I, the civil war, the Soviet-Finnish war of 1939-40, World War II, the Afghan war and two bouts of armed strife in the Caucasus. People had to endure a series of purges: anti-religious and cultural, scientific and political. All this violence cost the lives of countless millions, and many other millions of people were forced to emigrate. All this amounts to genocide, much of which can be traced back to the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in October 1917. Certainly other countries, too, have known catastrophe and have

gone through severe trials. But it would be hard to find any horror comparable to the man-made famine (*Holodomor*) of the early 1930s.

Russia is rich in natural resources and one might expect its inhabitants to live in happiness and prosperity. But unfortunately this has not been the case. I feel the philosopher Petr Chaadaev put it well when he wrote in the 1830s (I am quoting him freely here): 'The good Lord has allowed Russia to serve as an example of how not to do it.'

Hope springs eternal ... but unless we understand what happened to us in the twentieth century we shan't survive the twenty-first, which might otherwise turn into a 'golden age' in human history.

7 November 2007

9. Marshal Tukhachevsky and Stalin's Military Purge

The Cinematic Version and Some Present-Day Implications

Recently the official TV channels have been showing some old Soviet films about the Great Patriotic War that concentrate on Stalin as the main hero. Some viewers probably found them interesting and even may have waxed nostalgic about a past when he veterans of today were in the first flush of youth. Well, there's nothing one can do about old movies. What irritates me are those being produced today that misrepresent historical truth. I think more is involved here than artistic licence: what we have is rather a crude falsification of history. For instance, there is a film that shows a variety artist named Vol'f G. Messing, who claimed to have telepathic gifts that enabled him to foresee the future, being received by Stalin. Allegedly he told the Vozhd' that war with Nazi Germany was inevitable but would end in a Soviet victory, and also that he would lose a son in battle.

Now in the thirty years of his rule Stalin did indeed receive a large number of visitors, virtually the entire *nomenklatura*, in his Kremlin study. All such visits were meticulously noted down by his guards and have since been published. However, among the 30,000 or so names listed one would look in vain for that of Messing. Possibly the TV scriptwriter got the idea from Messing's memoirs, *About Myself*, but these are untrustworthy: he was an imaginative story-teller with a gift for putting himself in the limelight. Moreover, he was a Polish Jew, and we know that Stalin's anti-Semitic prejudices reached their peak around this time. For this reason alone he is unlikely to have granted an audience to Vol'f Messing.

Another subject of these contemporary films is Marshal M.N. Tukhachevsky. He certainly *did* meet Stalin on several occasions from the civil-war era onward. In 1935 he was one of the five Soviet marshals and Voroshilov's deputy in the people's commissariat of Defence. But in 1937 he fell into disfavour. On 11 May of that year he was dismissed from that post and sent to Samara (then Kuibyshev) to take charge of the Volga region military district. Before he left Moscow Stalin received him (13 May) and promised him that he would soon return to the capital. And indeed on 24 May he was back -- under arrest in the Lubianka, NKVD headquarters. In the film there is a disgusting scene in which Tukhachevsky is shown meeting Stalin for the last time. The marshal supposedly tries to blackmail Stalin with documents allegedly showing that the all-powerful dictator had once co-operated with the Okhrana, the tsarist security police. Now there are indeed some documents to that effect, well known to specialists, but they do not prove that Stalin was a traitor to the revolutionary cause and are anyway totally irrelevant to civil-military relations in the 1930s.

Soon after Tukhachevsky's arrest on 22 May 1937 a whole group of senior army officers suffered the same fate. The records of their investigation were classified together as a 'military conspiracy' against Soviet power. On 9 June, when the investigation was complete, Stalin received the Procurator-General, Andrei Vyshinsky, and signed the indictment. A 'special judicial bench' of the USSR Supreme Court was set up to try the case. Its members included two Soviet marshals, V.K. Bliukher and S.M. Budennyi, the chief of the General Staff, B.M. Shaposhnikov, and other senior officers, some of whom were later repressed in their turn.

The indictment characterized Tukhachevsky and the other accused of having engaged in a 'military-Trotskyist' conspiracy designed to 'unseat the Soviet government and seize power in order to restore the rule of landowners and capitalists in the USSR and to cede part of its territory to Germany and Japan'. The film-makers of today, basing themselves on these charges, would have us believe that the Wise Leader skilfully exposed such a conspiracy and punished the evil-doers. During the night of 11/12 June 1937 Tukhachevsky and seven other senior commanders were shot.

Some twenty years later, on 11 January 1957, Tukhachevsky and the other alleged 'military conspirators' were rehabilitated. The Chief Military Procurator went on to say that re-examination of the case had shown that the charges were falsified 'and the testimony given by Tukhachevsky, Yakir, Uborevich and others in the preliminary investigation and at the trial was obtained from them by criminal methods ... No data have been discovered that would compromise Tukhachevsky, Yakir and the other accused.'

So one would have thought that the myth of a 'military conspiracy' had been finally laid to rest. It is testimony to that ghastly era of the Great Terror. But now it is being resurrected before our very eyes. Why? Who needs such lies? Presumably Stalin's latter-day admirers, who dream of a 'strong hand' in government and somehow imagine that if such a regime were installed their own lives would be spared.

The history of the Stalin years shows how naive many citizens were: they thought they were safe because they were devoted to Soviet power, had fought for their country in the civil war, and had then helped to make the Red army an efficient military machine. Instead they were repressed. As a result of the purge over 40,000 officers were arrested, including a large proportion of the most senior men. Among them were 16 military district commanders, 5 fleet commanders and 76 divisional commanders. Out of 108 members of the Military Council only 10 were still at liberty in November 1938. In effect the army had been decapitated -- and this on

the eve of the Great Patriotic War. As the events of 1941-2 would amply show, its efficiency had been gravely impaired.

This year we are celebrating the 65th anniversary of Victory Day. The radio station 'Echo of Moscow' is holding a discussion as to whether the city should be decorated for the parade with portraits of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief, namely Stalin. Indeed he did hold the top office in the state, but that makes him ultimately responsible for everything that those in power did -- such as his disregard for all those reports filed by Soviet agents in 1941, warning that Hitler was about to strike. He thought that he had outsmarted the German dictator, and this blinded him to reality. So when he received one such report on 17 June, to the effect that the invasion would start five days later, he scrawled his resolution to V.N. Merkulov, the State Security commissar: 'You can send your "source" from the German air force to hell. He is a source only of disinformation.'

A historian should not try to act as judge. His job is to analyse the facts, to show the link between cause and effect, and draw his own conclusions. And in regard to our 'Generalissimo' the facts are hardly comforting. Take the overall number of casualties. The official estimate has been altered several times, and the latest figure stands at 38,794,000, of which 17,774,000 were armed forces personnel. Out of a total of approximately 2.5 million persons convicted during the war, 471,000 were sentenced for various 'counter-revolutionary' offences. Over 9 per cent of those convicted were executed: no less than 225,000 individuals!

The Supreme Commander-in-Chief was responsible for the reverses suffered by our forces in the initial months of the war, for the capture by the enemy of some 5 million soldiers, plus about as many civilians deported to work in Germany. Not all of them returned: nearly 2 million prisoners of war died in captivity, as did over 1.2 million deportees. These recently published figures are simply catastrophic. Moreover, during the war military tribunals convicted 994,270 Soviet prisoners of war, of whom 157,593 were shot --- equivalent to 15 divisions, whose presence on the battlefield would have made a great difference. In 1955 former collaborators in the occupation zone, including those who had served in the police (*Polizei*), were amnestied. But our own ex-prisoners of war were not granted an amnesty until January 1995, half a century after hostilities had ceased and four years after the end of the USSR.

It was Stalin who ordered the wholesale deportation of several Soviet ethnic groups during the war. It was he who in 1940 ordered the shooting of over 20,000 Polish officers and other leading citizens in the forests around Katyn and elsewhere. Likewise his policies were responsible for the catastrophic famine of 1932-3, followed by yet another famine after the war.

So when we think about the great Victory of 1945 we should also remember the families left behind by the innocent men and women who met their death at the hands of this merciless dictator. Perhaps this memory was one reason why Stalin cancelled the celebration of Victory Day in 1947. The traditional parade was not held again until 1965, to mark the twentieth anniversary. On this annual occasion the population remembers primarily those -- Russians and non-Russians alike -- who gave their lives in the struggle against Nazism. But when portraits of Stalin are displayed, they bear tribute not just to the man but also to the regime he embodied. After his death in 1953 several of his cronies tried to dissociate themselves from his repressive policies, for which they themselves had been partially responsible. Shortly before his death Anastas Mikoian admitted: 'then all of us were villains.' So to revive memories of those cruel times is a risky business, since it suggests approval of past crimes and injustices. It is as if certain people want them to return.

Unfortunately recent events in Russian domestic politics are all too reminiscent of our ugly past. For example, no longer do we vote democratically for regional governors or city mayors. Instead they are appointed from above, as in Soviet times. In Kazan' university, one of the oldest in the country, we no longer elect the rector of the deans of faculties, now that it is a federal institution. (Admittedly this change has brought an improvement in its status.) And when elections are held for leading regional officials the names of three candidates are put forward, from which the President chooses one, and then asks local parliamentary deputies to confirm his choice. The universities of Moscow and St Petersburg enjoy a privilege, in that their previous rectors, who are familiar faces, have been permitted to remain in office.

No one told the teaching staff why it was necessary to remove our present rector, Professor Salakhov, who had been democratically elected. Names of his potential successor are already circulating in the press. Why not let the university's learned council freely consider several alternative candidates for the job of rector, and then send the list to the President for confirmation? I feel this would be a more democratic method. Otherwise we shall find that the university rector has become its director, as used to be the case in Stalin's day. He will cater to the interest of his political superiors, to whom he owes his appointment. He will no longer need to listen to the views of the teachers, scholars and scientists employed by the university, whose reputation confers on the institution the honour and dignity it is entitled to enjoy.

12 March 2010

10. How I Survived

(This article is an extract from the author's memoirs, *Zhizn' kak sposob vyzhivaniia: vospominaniia i razmyshleniia o proshlom*, Moscow, 2013).)

My father's name was Lev Vul'fovich Litvin. In March 1941 he was arrested in Kazan' and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment in the labour-camp system popularly known as 'the Gulag'.²⁰ The pretext was that he had told a joke in which Stalin's name featured. In this way our entire family was categorized as 'relatives of an enemy of the people', a term applied to political prisoners by article 58 of the RSFSR Criminal Code.

At the time I was too young to understand completely what it meant to be both Jewish and a son of an 'enemy of the people' in a land which we cheerfully hailed in song as one where 'man breathes freely'. I only understood this after the war, when as an adolescent I experienced various restrictions as to my choice of faculty at university, and encountered a grass-roots anti-Semitism that echoed the anti-Semitic policies embraced by our top leadership. Although we lived just as badly as almost everyone else, and looked just like them, a number of people reckoned that were 'aliens' (*chuzhie*) by birth, and they let us know it. For several years I felt as though I belonged to some class of outlaws (*izgoi*), and the discrimination rankled. If I momentarily forgot about it, before long I was forcibly reminded of the fact. And I could never discover the reason why people treated me in this way.

In this connection I remember two episodes. My son, when he was a student, got into a common or garden brawl with some of his colleagues who were insulting him. In the heat of the fight he called one of them a fool and a pig. The fellow shouted out: 'I may be a fool and a pig, but you're a Jew.' Evidently he thought the latter appellation much worse than the former. The second episode was rather similar, but it happened to me in the spring of 1953, when I was a university student but earning my living by teaching in a school. This was at the peak of the anti-Semitic wave in the state administration, when everyone was talking about the doctors' plot²¹ and the fact that many of the accused were Jewish. One day

²⁰ Gulag: properly, Main Administration of Labour Camps of the NKVD; the term is frequently used to denote the entire penal system under Stalin, consisting of prisons, camps (ITL), colonies (ITK), and 'special settlements' (*spetspereseleniia*).

²¹ Stalin's latent anti-Semitism became overt from 1948 onwards. The disbandment of the war-time Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and the murder of its head, the respected Solomon Mikhoels, led to the expulsion of Jews from responsible positions in many institutions. It was widely believed that pogroms and deportation threatened. On 13 January 1953 *Pravda* announced the discovery of an alleged plot involving Kremlin doctors, who were accused of trying to kill leading politicians. After Stalin's death (5 March) the charges were officially voided.

I left work and caught a half-empty trolley-bus. Two lads sitting behind me, about my height, were discussing the news they had read in the papers and heard on the radio. One of them said he would happily hang some 'little Jew' by his bootlaces. I couldn't stand it, stood up, went towards him, raised my leg showing my torn boots, and said: 'Hang me then! Many of my relatives were hanged by the fascists. You're worse than they were!' The people in the bus fell silent. I grasped the fellow by the throat and called out: 'I'll strangle the bugger!' The other youngster came up, caught me by the sleeve, and in a whisper said: 'Calm down, brother!' An elderly man approached us and said forthrightly: 'What are you up to, lads? Can't you see he's a working man just as we are?' I could hardly contain myself and at the next bus stop got off, ready to fight the fellows who had behaved so insultingly, but they didn't come after me.

Of course I also knew a lot of fine people for whom my national and social affiliations were of no account, and they were more numerous than the anti-Semites. They often told me that they would like to give me a job but couldn't do so because the bosses wouldn't allow it. I recall talking to the rector of Kazan' university once in the 1970s, after I had defended my doctoral thesis and wanted to work in the university's Pedagogical Institute. He received me amiably, but added: 'I can't agree to your request. The quota is already over-filled.'

Let me recall another reminiscence on this point. In the early 1980s I went to Dnepropetrovsk to attend an all-Union conference of historians. My paper was on the peasantry of the Volga region during the Civil War. Afterwards I left the university building accompanied by a man who headed the Party history department at Kiev University. He had liked my talk, he said, so why didn't I come to Kiev and work for him? After all there were a lot of people named Litvin in Ukraine. 'Take a close look at me', I replied. He did so and remarked sadly: 'Yes, there would be a problem.' We changed the topic of conversation.

This 'problem' cropped up frequently. It made me work especially hard, to prove that I was a competent professional historian. Many of my colleagues approved of my published work, but there were always obstacles in the way of finding a better job and getting on with my career. There's a story from the late 1950s, during the Khrushchev thaw, about some little town where the Jewish community asked the authorities if they could turn their prayer-house into a synagogue and appoint a rabbi. Permission was granted, but some official thought that the job of rabbi came within the *nomenklatura*²² of the local district Party committee (*raikom*). The official in charge of organizational matters in its bureau

²² The *nomenklatura* was a list of official positions to which holders were appointed by the Party organization at the appropriate level; and, more generally, to all persons in authority.

reported that there were three candidates for the post: the first knew the Torah but was not a Party member; the second was a Party member but didn't know the Torah; the third knew the Torah and was a Party member, but he was a Jew. The committee's resolution was: continue the search for a suitable candidate for the office of rabbi.

The other story is a bit briefer and has a sharper point. A couple of peasants who had had a drink or two were walking down the street. Coming towards them was a Jew. 'Let's beat him up', said one peasant. The other looked at the Jew and thought: he's a tough-looking chap, he might beat us up instead. 'But why would he do that?' asked the first man. The moral of the tale is quite simple: you can beat a Jew because he's a Jew, but there's no reason to hit anyone else just because of his nationality.

I remember how upset I was at the entry in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* about the famous Russian (*russkii*) artist Isaak Levitan (1860-1900), to the effect that he had been born into a poor Jewish family. I thought: Jews are part of the all-Russian (*rossiiskii*)²³ population; this is their country as much as anyone else's; so the entry should have read 'famous *rossiiskii* artist'. Later I discovered that there had once been a polemical exchange on this point. The liberal writer Peter Struve had stated that he liked Levitan because he was *russkii* rather than *rossiiskii*, whereupon Konstantin Paustovsky had replied that Levitan had 'sung the praises of our vast but poor country, of its natural beauties. He looked on nature through the eyes of our tortured common people. This was what gave force to his art and solved the riddle why his works exude such charm.'

Everyone has a nationality of some sort or other, but you don't choose at birth which one it is to be. One can take pride in being part of the nation to which one is fated to belong. In Russia we are all united by the fact that we live in the same country, and are Russians (*rossiiane*) irrespective of our ethnic affiliation. This feeling makes us equal. It is a major reason why we are not aliens in our own country. But some representatives of other peoples inhabiting the USSR *did* feel themselves to be aliens. Take, for instance, the Daghestani poet Rasul Gamzatov. Once he was at a banquet in the Kremlin to celebrate the anniversary of the October revolution and proposed a toast 'to the Daghestani people, the one but last among equals'. Someone interjected: 'How can you be one but last?' He replied: 'among our equal peoples the last are the Jews.'

²³ The term *rossiiskii* refers to an inhabitant of the Russian empire, the USSR, or Russian Federation, i.e. it implies allegiance to or affinity with the entire state, whereas *russkii* denotes ethnic origin, i.e. (Great) Russian.

Unfortunately even such a courageous opponent of totalitarianism as A.I. Solzhenitsyn, in his two-volume *Two Hundred Years Together*,²⁴ seems to me to advocate the idea that the peoples living in Russia are unequal. For him Russia is the land inhabited by ethnic Russians, and all the others are their guests. They should either let themselves be russified or else get out. His idea is not new: it was propagated before World War I by Russian ultra-conservatives who held that the non-Russians ought to merge completely into one single Russian popular entity (*narodnost'*).

But such ideas of exclusiveness do not contribute to the consolidation of our multi-national state and its peoples. On the contrary, they are bound to lead to disunity and conflict. To put them forward today is counter-productive. It is one reason for the rapid growth of separatist feelings in the former autonomous regions of the USSR, where local élites drawn from the titular nationality look on Russian residents, or any others who do not share their own ethnic background, as 'guests'. The spread of this idea in post-Soviet Russia has led to alienation among those who do not belong to the 'principal nations'. They feel that they are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their colleagues as regards pay, career prospects and so on. It's clear that if one grants privileges to one group it has to be at the expense of others.

That's why I have always felt oppressed by this idea of 'alien-ness', although I can't complain about not being integrated. It's simply that I have had to expend much more effort than, say, my Russian colleagues to prove my abilities in the face of what I consider to be a medieval prejudice. In the twentieth century several countries were disfigured by adopting an 'inquisitorial' attitude towards national minorities. In the Holocaust of World War II the Nazis killed six million Jews just because to their ethnic origin. But even that horror doesn't seem to have put an end to racial or national intolerance. The twenty-first century, too, looks as if this crude hatred, unworthy of any civilization, is likely to continue without any end in sight.

My pessimism in this regard is fed by my inability to credit the self-satisfied statements of some of our political leaders, both Soviet and post-Soviet. Under Stalin we were urged to believe in the bright communist future. Khrushchev even publicly promised that we would attain the stage of full communism by 1980. Unhappily, when that year dawned what we had was not universal bliss but the chance to participate in the Olympic Games, or at least watch them. Brezhnev talked of constructing a 'mature socialist society' and introduced the term 'the united Soviet people'. Gorbachev promised each family in Russia an apartment of its own by the end of the century. Now we are told: hang on until 2020, or 2050, and everyone will live well, amidst a mass of technological marvels. All this

²⁴ A.I. Solzhenitsyn, *Dvesti let vmeste (1795-1995)*, Moscow: Russkii put', 2001-2.

reminds me of a saying of Il'ia Il'f: 'The radio is coming, happiness is coming. We've got the radio, where's the happiness?'²⁵

As a rule it turns out that those who made fine promises were no longer around when the time came for their prophecies to be fulfilled. People of my generation, and later ones too, have experienced disappointment more than once. If social promotion is based not on one's professional achievements but on one's class origin, nationality, or political loyalty, then there can be no true equality. Some people will have a ceiling over their heads while others can look up at the clear blue sky ...

Americans are known to exclaim 'God save America!' but sometimes they also say 'America for the Americans!' I am all for shouting 'God save Russia!' but I would be insulted if someone demanded 'Russia for the Russians!' A country has to belong to *all* the peoples that live in it. Internationalism is better than nationalism, that's for sure. On the other hand, some of our ethnic groups, having experienced on their own skins the realities of 'internationalism' Bolshevik style, are keen to reject everything associated with the former USSR and to assert their right to independence. This means resuscitating the language, national customs, and the freedom to choose which countries one wishes to ally with. In order for Russia to develop as a democratic state (rather than as an empire, for this implies all too often the use of force, and even terror), all the ethnic groups that reside within its borders have to be united on a voluntary basis. Each one of these groups, even the smallest, belongs to the human race, to world civilization.

I am often sad and nostalgic when I look back on the Soviet era, in which I lived for most of my younger years. I wonder how it was that the Bolsheviks' initial internationalism became perverted into the doctrine of 'Russia first'. For a long time we used to sing the *Internationale* as our national anthem ... Since 1991 my hopes for improved relations between the nationalities have not been realized, at least not yet. Some ethnic groups are fighting for autonomy or independence, while others tacitly accept the status quo. As for the Jews, a great many felt it was better for them to emigrate, since they could not accept the new Russian Federation as their fatherland.

1 March 2011

²⁵ I. Il' f (pseudonym of I.A. Fainzil'berg) and E. Petrov (pseudonym of E.P.Kataev), writers of the 1920s, were the authors of *Twelve Chairs* and other humorous sketches.

11. Debating Stalin – Yet Again

Every year the celebration of Victory Day leads to an upsurge of interest in the personality of Iosif Stalin. His admirers are much in evidence: the trolley-buses are placarded with his portrait, his statue re-appears on empty pedestals, and this year the communists of Yakutia have actually erected a monument to 'The Inspirer of All Our Victories'. It has even become fashionable to accuse anyone in Russia who says he was a dictator of being unpatriotic. Why this nostalgia for the Leader of All Peoples, a man who was responsible for the death of millions of our compatriots?

In tsarist times the national anthem was 'God Save the Tsar' After 1917 people called Lenin and Trotsky 'leaders of the revolution'. From the mid-1930s there was only one 'man of October' left -- Stalin, who was hailed as 'the coryphaeus of all ages and all peoples'. Later leaders were content to be called just CPSU General Secretary, but Stalin remained in the popular memory even after Khrushchev, at the XXth Party congress in 1956, denounced the 'cult of the individual' and began to release those sent to prison or the Gulag for political offences. In the world of Soviet officialdom his name was no longer mentioned, and instead a cult of Lenin was sanctioned which peaked in 1970, the centennial of his birth. Yet Stalin was also still present somewhere in the background, as the leader who had allegedly won the war, built the 'socialist camp' and turned the USSR into a world superpower.

The repressive aspects of Stalinist rule did not come to the fore until Gorbachev launched *perestroika* in the late 180s. People now openly said that Lenin and Stalin had been the architects of the Red terror and the Gulag, not to mention the World War II-era 'blocking units' (*zagraditel'nye otriady*), the troops stationed behind the lines to shoot deserters. Historians and journalists recalled that the Communists had liquidated entrepreneurs and Cossacks along with members of the old upper classes and had propagated atheism by violent means. In the mid-1930s Stalin's loyal satrap, the security police chief N.I. Yezhov, had divided the population into three categories: those under lock and key, those under investigation, and suspects. When one was asked 'how are you?' the apocryphal reply went 'like on a bus, some are sitting, others are shaking'.²⁶ Stalin used to say that he didn't want to be loved, but feared. And indeed he was, since one never knew if and when the blow might fall.

Under Gorbachev the euphoric refrain was 'Stalin died yesterday'. But evidently he's still alive and kicking, if one can believe the public opinion polls. We tend to believe that if something happens, it must have been

²⁶ Sitting = in jail.

deliberately set in motion from on high. So people ask: who stands to benefit from this rehabilitation of Stalin and Stalinism? What should we now do to prevent the past coming back?

A lot of what is going on today in Russian political life gives one cause for concern. In our 'sovereign democracy', as it is called, we once again have political prisoners. It is as though our leaders have forgotten that in a democracy people have the right to views that differ from theirs. There ought to be room for a legal opposition, and its activists should not have to fear arrest on implausible charges, such as 'economic offences'. Historians have been told to compile a single school textbook that would reflect the official viewpoint on our past and present affairs. They are supposed to write respectfully and favourably about the Soviet era -- and serfdom too, for both are inseparable parts of our history; unless they do so, their pupils will lack pride in their country and become unpatriotic. The idea itself isn't so bad, but what about historical truth? People of my generation can well remember the time when we had such a textbook: Stalin's *Short Course* of Party history. We had to recite it by heart from 1938 to the 1960s, when it was replaced by a new version with slightly different ideological stuffing. We learned and taught that the USSR was the world's most advanced and prosperous country, even though in reality people lived in poverty and were practically devoid of any rights.

In the new single textbook Stalin will no doubt be represented as an 'efficient manager', a term already used of him by some writers. Well, he certainly was 'efficient' at getting rid of citizens he took a dislike to: peasants who were expropriated and deported during the collectivization drive, for example, or who starved to death in the 'terror-famine' of 1932-3, when some five million perished. It was in those years that the Gulag camps came into being, whose incarcerated population rose from 994,000 in 1937 to a peak of 1,560,000 in 1941.²⁷ Whichever realm of policy he touched on, casualties resulted. As I have pointed out above (see ch. 7), his achievements on the credit side, as military organizer in the last phases of the Great Patriotic War, need to be offset against his serious errors in 1937-41, notably the military purge and the Hitler-Stalin pact. A share of the blame also falls to Stalin for the high number of Soviet citizens who collaborated with the occupying forces and the even higher number of armed forces personnel who fell into enemy hands in 1941, where most succumbed to inhuman treatment and starvation.

Russia is the only belligerent country in World War II in which most of the archives remain secret -- and not just the military archives. Up to the present historians have not been allowed access to the 35 volumes of

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Excluding colonists and 'special settlers'. The number of 'special settlers' rose from 917,000 in January 1937 to 2,464,000 in October 1946 and to 2,753,000 in January 1953.

papers covering the 'Katyn affair', which contain details of the shooting, in March 1940 near Smolensk and elsewhere, of over 20,000 Polish officers and others drawn from that country's élite, simply by a Politburo order and without any judicial formalities. Also shrouded in official secrecy are documents on Stalin's role in the repression of Red Army men whose loyalty or courage were deemed unsatisfactory. It was here that the 'blocking units' mentioned above came into action.

If all this documentation were made available to the public, one doubts whether anyone would now agitate for the city of Volgograd to be renamed Stalingrad rather than Tsaritsyn (the name it bore until 1925). Victory in the Great Patriotic War, as I have argued above, was primarily due to the stalwart bravery of our troops and civilians, who had to put up with the contempt of their own authorities as well as invasion by a cruel and determined foe. The battle of Stalingrad is but the prime example of their magnificent achievement.

A leader who signs decrees authorizing the destruction of masses of his innocent fellow-citizens, as Stalin did in the Great Terror, can only be described as a criminal. He certainly has no claim to be a model for people today. Iosif Stalin, together with those who carried out his criminal orders, were just executioners. Anna Akhmatova put this point well in her poem 'To Stalin's Defenders', where she wrote:

*There are those who shouted 'Release
Barabbas for us for this feast',
Those who ordered Socrates to drink poison
In his bare, narrow prison.
They are the ones who should pour this drink
Into their own innocently slandering mouths
Those sweet lovers of torture,
Experts in the manufacture of orphans.* ²⁸

Despite all Stalin's sins against his people, his popularity is growing among those who came into the world after 1953. Some see in this a movement of protest against the alarming situation prevailing in today's Russia, with its massive corruption and numerous abuses of power by officialdom. The officials themselves, on the other hand, consider that by centralizing power the way Stalin did they can go on governing the country for many years to come; after all, did he not command the helm for three decades or so? By projecting distortions of the past they seek to legitimize the present, not least their own coercive style of rule.

Yet Russian society today is too diverse for a 'second edition' of Stalinism to strike root. It is possible to resurrect its symptoms, but not its

²⁸ Translated by Judith Hemschemeyer. Roberta Reeder, ed., *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova* (Somerville MA, 1990), vol. II, p. 737.

totalitarian reality, the drive to control every aspect of the country's social life. The authorities are keen to establish such control over dissidents who speak out for human rights and NGOs they suspect of being foreign agents. Such limited repressive measures are calculated to strike fear into the populace, to make them accept that their rights and freedoms have to yield before state interests.

One must hope that it is impossible to recreate the past, that the officially-inspired myths about Stalin and Stalinism will be dispelled by the bright light of reason, that the 'unflogged generation' now reaching maturity, fearless and conscious of its rights, will act in time to stop any effort to govern by violent means, to revert to the despotic measures of the past. It is now sixty years since Stalin died. His shadow is still present, to be sure, but instead of it being a guide to action it should remain a matter for dispassionate study.

21 May 2013

12. Revolution: Pro and Contra

I can't get enthusiastic about revolutions, and this is why: the twentieth-century revolutions in Russia failed to improve the people's lot. Rather they made it worse and led to gigantic demographic losses. Between 1914 and 1922 our population decreased by 16 million, of whom 3 million emigrated and the rest died either from military action or from sickness, hunger and terror: Red, White and all sorts of other colours. This is the view of contemporary historians, who argue that World War I and the civil war need to be seen as a continuum, for without the war there would have been no revolution. Incidentally, that was Lenin's view, too.

In general one can say that revolutions are about changing a political regime, redistributing property, and putting in place a new governing élite. In Russia's case the fall of tsarist autocracy in March 1917 led to the formation of a Provisional government, which on 1 September declared the country to be a republic. The liberals and moderate socialists who ran its affairs until the Bolsheviks took over in October did not want to prejudge the decisions of the Constituent Assembly, but before this democratically elected body could meet, in January 1918, the Bolsheviks had seized power (see ch. 8). But by failing to embark on much-needed reforms at once, the democrats sealed their own fate. Lenin himself said, addressing the SRs and Mensheviks whom he had ousted, 'Would any fool in the entire world have made a revolution if social reforms had been implemented in time?'

The Bolsheviks, as we have seen, also initially called their Soviet government 'provisional' but had no compunction about establishing it on a permanent basis once they had forcibly dissolved the Constituent Assembly, with its SR majority. They were unwilling to share power with any group. True, for a few weeks they did put up with the presence of some Left SRs in the Council of People's Commissars (*Sovnarkom*), but they made sure that these unreliable allies, as they deemed them, should only have ministerial posts of secondary importance, and they were glad to jettison them once they had served their purpose. They were in no mood to form a coalition with the centrist SRs and the Mensheviks -- the latter their erstwhile comrades in the RSDRP -- or else Russia might have been spared three years of cruel civil war, at least that is what many historians think today. But it was not to be.

Lenin's Bolsheviks were smart enough to learn from the mistakes of their predecessors in power. Instead of putting off a decision on agrarian reform, they at once issued the Decree on Land, which authorized the carve-up of private estates that was already proceeding, and the distribution of this land to individual peasant proprietors. In doing so they blithely took over

the ideas of their chief political opponents, the SRs. When the latter protested that 'you have stolen our programme', Lenin caustically replied: 'it's a fine party that one has to throw out of power in order to realize its programme'. And he went on to explain: 'People here say that the land decree, and the peasants' *cahiers* /on which it was based/, were compiled by the SRs. Maybe so. But it doesn't matter a bit who compiled them. For as a democratic government we cannot afford to disregard the decisions of the popular masses, even if we disagree with them.'²⁹

The Bolsheviks had seized power by force, and from the start they ruled the country by a mixture of coercion and social demagoguery. Repression and terror were the order of the day. They behaved as if they were allowed to do whatever they wanted if they thought it justified by revolutionary expediency. The slogan 'Seize what has been seized from you' was a pretext for expropriating and destroying whole classes of pre-revolutionary society, which in turn was followed by the liquidation of the Cossacks and the elimination of all private property. These were 'leaden days', as the writer Ivan Bunin put it; traditional moral norms had no place, being supplanted by 'revolutionary legal consciousness'.

Lenin was a genius at seizing power and holding on to it, but he showed little concern for the people who were suffering from the acts of the new revolutionary authorities, and he treated their ideas with contempt. One example, from the war on religion, must suffice: on 19 March 1922, when famine was raging, particularly in the Volga region, he issued an order:

Precisely now, and only now, when there is cannibalism in the famine-stricken areas, and corpses are piling up by the roadside by the hundred, if not by the thousand, we can (and therefore should) seize church valuables with the fiercest, merciless energy, not shrinking from the suppression of any sort of resistance.

When I read these lines I can't help thinking of Alexander Galich's verses, with their refrain:

*You need to fear only him who cries
'I know what's to be done!' Off with him!
Don't believe him! He's lying.
He hasn't got a clue.*

In April 1922 Stalin was elected General Secretary of the ruling Party's Central Committee. None of those who elected him (except Lenin) died a natural death. They were all shot in the 1930s at Stalin's command. As for Lenin, he was reserved about the appointment, remarking to Trotsky: 'I'm not in favour. This chef knows how to cook only spicy fare.' Later, in a

²⁹ This was a hint that the Bolsheviks would later do away with peasant landholding and set up collective or State farms instead.

letter to the delegates to the next Party congress, he proposed that Stalin be removed from the post because of his personal characteristics and the fact that he 'has concentrated boundless power in his hands'. But the cadres, loyal to Stalin as they were, did not back the proposal. Little did they realize that their decision would cost many of them their very lives.

Russia has always identified itself with its leaders, whether they were tsars or Party bosses, and the populace has hailed enthusiastically those associated with great deeds. First we had Lenin and Trotsky, then Lenin and Stalin, once Trotsky had been ousted, and finally Stalin alone -- until he in turn was demoted when Khrushchev came out against the 'cult of the individual', whereupon Lenin returned to the spotlight, along with the revolution of October 1917, proclaimed the key event of the twentieth century. But this claim, as we know, was fraudulent. Nowadays Russia has a new 'brand', which I think is apposite: the Allies' victory over Nazism in World War II, symbolized by Victory Day parades on 9 May each year. We are all proud of the role that our armed forces played in this titanic struggle and mourn those of our citizens who lost their lives.

It would make no sense today to try to emulate any of the past leaders of totalitarian states. Individualism has replaced collectivism in our scale of values. You won't be able to persuade many present-day youngsters that they should willingly undergo great sacrifices for the sake of a mythical bright communist future. They look to their leaders for deeds, not words, for reforms that will improve their own lives, not for mythical constructs.

I don't want to go back to the mid-nineteenth century, when according to Karl Marx the spectre of communism was haunting Europe. Instead I look forward to the day when our country will honour, not some politician or general, but cultural geniuses like Alexander Pushkin, Lev Tolstoi and Petr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

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