



Lynne Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trials: Scenes From the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.

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Much has been brought to light in recent decades regarding the oppressive excesses of Joseph Stalin's secret police, the NKVD.¹ Despite the enormous oeuvre of

¹ NKVD was an acronym for *Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del* or People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs. As a law enforcement body, it was responsible for a variety of duties related to state security, which included foreign intelligence and counterintelligence operations, border security, control of local police, and regulation of prisons. The NKVD's covert activities also involved kidnappings, assassinations, deportations, and mass executions.

scholarly work devoted to fathoming Stalin's reasons for orchestrating the mass extermination of people within the Soviet Union—particularly those viewed as politically dangerous to his regime—his motives, nonetheless, remain for many an elusive mystery. Of all the republics comprising the Soviet State, Ukraine is widely noted as among those republics who suffered some of the greatest loss of life at the hands of NKVD forces that carried out what has become infamously known as the Great Terror. Perhaps what is not as well known is that many of the leaders of those extrajudicial forces would themselves later become victims of its own internal purge, culminating in the late 1930s. In *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial: Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine*, Lynne Viola brilliantly succeeds in revealing the intricate and often unseen connections involved in Stalin's myriad motivations for turning on those who served him so faithfully in this bloody enterprise. In examining the backgrounds and activities of NKVD leaders operating in several Ukrainian regions and districts, and the trials they would face for their crimes soon afterwards, *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial* offers a disturbing glimpse into the workings of this sinister organization and its ultimate betrayal by Stalin.

In her examination of NKVD leaders taken to trial for their role in perpetrating the horrors of the Great Terror in Ukraine, Viola brings to light the degree of culpability found from the highest echelons of the NKVD to its lowest local levels; in so doing, she highlights the depth and danger of what can occur when institutions of state violence are permitted to operate without accountability to either law or morality, all in zealous pursuit of achieving a political objective that no longer conformed to reality. To bring a halt to mass arrests, the plenipotentiary powers of the NKVD were finally curtailed by Stalin on 17 November 1938. Despite his encouragement and sanction to employ whatever measures the NKVD felt it needed to conduct its campaign of terror in the Ukraine, Stalin, in an act of duplicity, would later hold its senior leadership responsible for their horrible excesses through a series of closed trials, with most suffering similar fates as those they previously condemned.

It is difficult for many today to fully fathom life in a climate of such pervasive and palpable fear, perpetuated by mass arrests with most facing imprisonment or execution, nearly all based on confessions acquired by threats and torture, preceded by false allegations and denunciatory accusations. Such an environment exists well beyond

the pale of our moral imaginings. For Stalin, however, that enemies of the Soviet Union remained at large was intolerable; that a Fifth Column could possibly exist within the Soviet state meant those members had to be ferreted out and destroyed with savage cruelty and ruthlessness. Viola suggests that this dramatic concern for security may have stemmed from Stalin's previous experiences with enemies who fought against the forces of the Soviet Union during the dark days of the Russian Civil War when the Revolutionary regime was at its most precarious. While historians have traditionally dismissed Stalin as paranoid and irrational, Viola does well to show that there may have indeed been a diabolical rationale for his decision to initiate the Great Terror and, more bizarrely, a reason for afterward betraying those who committed it on his behalf.

The decision to initiate mass arrests began with NKVD Order 00447 on 30 July 1937; however, as the author notes, its true origins may have been the early days of the Russian Revolution. We are also reminded that much of the fighting during the Civil War did, in fact, occur in Ukraine. Furthermore, the country also suffered terribly under Collectivization when millions were forcibly uprooted from their farms to towns and cities in order to provide the necessary workforce needed to fulfill Stalin's Five-Year Plans. Soon after, from 1932 to 1933, Ukraine experienced the unspeakable horrors of the Great Famine, a period which witnessed the deaths of untold millions. In Stalin's mind, if a Fifth Column did indeed exist, it would be in Ukraine, for how could these tragedies not lead to the hotbed of resentment and discontent necessary for mounting a future insurrection against a state largely responsible for orchestrating them? It thus appeared logical (at least to Stalin) to assign some of the highest figures for mass arrests to this republic.

So who would make up this alleged Fifth Column? Who were its leaders? How would the NKVD identify them? Where could they be found? The use of broad categorizations in identifying enemies as outlined in Order 00447 allowed the NKVD to cast a very wide net.² Moreover, categorization of enemies and all its inherent negative connotations contributed to the dehumanization of those who stood in alleged opposition to Soviet goals, thus making the evil perpetrated upon them more palatable. The application of the most immoral methods to satiate the NKVD's obsession with

² For a review of NKVD Order 00447, please see <http://old.memo.ru/history/document/0447.htm>

producing the largest arrest figures possible required not only a willful disregard for juris prudence, but also a complete suspension of what little humanity prevailed in the hearts of its agents, agents whose leaders too carried out their gruesome duties with a sordid mixture of sadism and fear.

For offering reasons for what motivated its leaders and their subordinates, *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial* is not in any way apologetic for the crimes committed by Stalin's NKVD. Viola's methodology is found in its analysis of documented testimonies brought up during each of their trials. Rather than speculate on the personal motivations of each defendant, Viola, with admirable objectivity, presents them strictly in accordance to what they themselves revealed in trial documents. That she includes in her analysis Stalin's political motivations behind their outcomes does much to give the book a much wider context. Through this, the work offers us a very important view of the NKVD's internal mechanisms and, more broadly, the Stalinist system within which it operated.

What we discover is that the NKVD was a highly strained and overworked organization under immense pressure to find enemies who no longer existed. To ensure that arrest figures remained well above that assigned in Order 00447, leaders daily threatened subordinates who were below quota, cajoling them into utilizing whatever measures they felt would produce the highest number of confessions, even if most were false. The reigning mentality within the NKVD was that not only did arrest automatically imply guilt (even if the crime had yet to be established), but that to release anyone for any reason, valid or not, was viewed as a failure in vigilance. In the deadly hyper-Darwinian world of the NKVD, such negligence of duty was tantamount to treason.

The use of torture as a means of extracting confessions was brought up throughout the trials. While few operatives, such as S.A. Frishko, were hesitant about resorting to what the NKVD referred to euphemistically as "physical measures," most held no such qualms. In fact, some, like Ivan Stepanovich Drushliak, a high-ranking investigator and interrogator based in Kiev, engaged in it with a fiendish delight that shocked even the most hardened NKVD veterans, earning him the sobriquet "Vania the Terrible." Though torture was encouraged and widely practiced, becoming standard procedure in obtaining confessions, beatings and other acts of brutality were not always

necessary, however; threatening family members occasionally proved enough to coerce victims into signing false confessions. Conversely, Viola's sources also note that when prisoners sensed that political winds were changing, many would quickly retract their confessions, to buy time until release. Despite its sanction, the excessive reliance on torture by the NKVD in Ukraine was later condemned by trial judges.

The frequent looting of corpses was an impropriety viewed by the courts as another disturbing example of the endemic moral collapse within the NKVD. It was learned that prisoners who expired as a result of torture or from prolonged exposure to the terrible conditions of confinement would frequently have their personal effects taken to be sold at local markets. Money pocketed would be given to agents as compensation for their 'hard work.' It was also used to pay civilians who performed work for the NKVD (i.e. gravediggers). This contributed to the development of clientele networks devoted to fencing goods robbed from dead prisoners in exchange for services the NKVD relied on to maintain their ghoulish enterprise. Perhaps the most notorious NKVD agent to do this was a burly prison commandant in the Ukrainian city of Uman named Samuil Moiseevich Abramovich. According to witness testimonies, Abramovich extracted gold dental work from the mouths of the executed. His abrasive personality and reluctance to share in his ill-gotten gain earned him the scorn of his colleagues who were more than happy to testify against him during his trial. Despite mounting a lengthy and stalwart defense, Abramovich was subsequently convicted and sentenced to six years in a corrective labor camp in the Gulag.

Unlike those they victimized during mass arrests, NKVD agents accused of crimes were granted the privilege of hiring their own defense attorneys, were permitted to call witnesses, provide evidence, and even allowed to make final statements. That they were able to exercise such legal recourse created some semblance of juris prudence, though trials were closed with little to no information made available to the press. Blaming superiors was the most common defense. In the case of torture, subordinates often claimed that though they did not receive written authorization, they were nonetheless given oral permission by their superiors, either in person or by telephone. With the exception of Vasili R. Grabar, a senior official in the Ukrainian republican NKVD who was blamed by numerous subordinates as the *éminence grise* behind many

of its notorious activities, defendants generally assigned responsibility to their direct superiors, but rarely to any level above them.

Apart from those who denied any wrongdoing, there were some who readily admitted having done that which they were accused of, justifying their actions with the belief that despite the illegal or immoral nature of NKVD operations, it was done for the good of the Communist Party or the Soviet state. They argued that they had genuinely acted as in good faith as hard working communists. Viola warns readers that while some, such as Drushliak, may have been genuine in their admittance, it remains difficult to ascertain whether or not this was true, for their own confessions, like those of their victims, were mainly acquired via torture. Genuine or not, whatever intentions they may have had would not matter, for they would all inevitably become scapegoats for Stalin, thus inviting the question: why? Why would Stalin punish those NKVD agents and their workers who did as they were ordered, well above and beyond what was originally expected of them and performed with such fanatical zeal?

The number of complaints written to Soviet authorities by relatives of victims arrested by the NKVD from 1938 to 1940 rose to astronomical numbers. This was accompanied by ever-increasing numbers of people visiting the offices of high-ranking officials, demanding answers for the whereabouts of their family members. The level of concern among people simply could not be ignored. Failure to address this could undermine the legitimacy of Soviet rule. To mitigate this, Stalin initiated trials against the leading members of the NKVD (and their workers) in Ukraine responsible for carrying out Order 00447, all to inculcate the impression of combatting transgressions against the Soviet people. This narrative of innocent communists being persecuted by a 'few bad apples' was specifically orchestrated to avert blame, not only from Stalin himself, but also the NKVD, the Politburo and the Communist Party. It was imperative that these mass arrest operations were to be viewed as the result of the failure of individual officials to abide by Soviet law in their application of policy, and not as institutional malfeasance.

Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial is an important book, a work to be taken very seriously. Through Viola's clear narrative style and masterful use of primary and secondary sources, this book offers an additional dimension to a topic that has been traditionally been viewed solely from the perspective of surviving victims. Moreover, it

provides a greater, magnified view into the Byzantine world of NKVD politics, not only within its internal workings, but of its relationship to Stalin and other Soviet leaders. While the extensive list of bibliographical materials used in this work is of high caliber, additional sources would accentuate its value even further. With them, several more chapters on mass operations of NKVD agents in other areas, such as Kharkov and Chernigov, could have been included, allowing readers a fuller appreciation of the other areas of Ukraine that were affected by the NKVD. Regardless, Lynne Viola's *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial* stands as an important source for those seeking a greater understanding of the nature of state violence and what can occur when institutional leaders are conferred with unlimited power for a short period of time and the authority to rectify the colossal damage left in their wake.

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