Stalin and the Struggle for Democratic Reform (Part One)

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Introduction

This article outlines Joseph Stalin's attempts, from the 1930s until his death, to democratize the government of the Soviet Union.

This statement, and the article, will astonish many, and outrage some. In fact my own amazement at the results of the research I'm reporting on led me to write this article. I had suspected for a long time that the Cold War version of Soviet history had serious flaws. Still, I was unprepared for the extent of the falsehoods I had been taught as fact.

This story is well known in Russia, where respect for, even admiration of, Stalin is common. Yuri Zhukov, the main Russian historian who sets forth the paradigm of "Stalin as Democrat" and whose works are the most important single source, though far from the only one, for this article, is a mainstream figure associated with the Academy of Sciences. His works are widely read.

However, this story and the facts that sustain it are virtually unknown outside Russia, where the Cold War paradigm of "Stalin as Villain" so controls what is published that the works cited here are still scarcely noted. Therefore, many of the secondary sources used in this article, as well as all the primary sources of course, are only available in Russian.[1]

This article does not simply inform readers of new facts about, and interpretations of, the history of the USSR. Rather, it is an attempt to bring to a non-Russian readership the

results of new research, based on Soviet archives, on the Stalin period and Stalin himself. The facts discussed herein are compatible with a range of paradigms of Soviet history, just as they help to disprove a number of other interpretations. They will be utterly unacceptable -- in fact, outrageous -- to those whose political and historical perspectives have been based upon erroneous and ideologically motivated "Cold-War" notions of Soviet "totalitarianism" and Stalinist "terror."2

The Khrushchevite interpretation of Stalin as power-hungry dictator, betrayer of Lenin's legacy, was created to fit the needs of the Communist Party's *nomenklatura* in the 1950s. But it shows close similarities, and shares many assumptions, with the canonical discourse on Stalin inherited from the Cold War, which served the desire of capitalist elites to argue that communist struggles, or indeed any struggles for working-class power, must inevitably lead to some kind of horror.

It also suits the Trotskyists' need to argue that the defeat of Trotsky, the "true revolutionary," could only have come at the hand of a dictator who, it is assumed, violated every principle for which the revolution had been fought. Khrushchevite, Cold-War anti-communist, and Trotskyist paradigms of Soviet history are similar in their dependence on a virtual demonization of Stalin, his leadership, and the USSR during his time.

The view of Stalin outlined in this essay is compatible with a number of otherwise contradictory historical paradigms. Anti-revisionist and post-Maoist communist interpretations of Soviet history see Stalin as a creative and logical, if in some respects flawed, heir to Lenin's legacy. Meanwhile, many Russian nationalists, while hardly approving of Stalin's achievements as a Communist, respect Stalin as the figure most responsible for the establishment of Russia as a major industrial and military world power. Stalin is a foundational figure for both, albeit in very different ways.

This article is no attempt to "rehabilitate" Stalin. I agree with Yuri Zhukov when he writes:

> I can honestly tell you that I oppose the rehabilitation of Stalin, because I oppose rehabilitations in general. Nothing and no one in history should be rehabilitated -- but we must uncover the truth and speak the truth. However, since Khrushchev's time the only victims of Stalin's repressions you hear from are those who took part in them themselves, or who facilitated them or who failed to oppose them. (Zhukov, *KP* Nov. 21 02)

Nor do I wish to suggest that, if only Stalin had had his way, the manifold problems of building socialism or communism in the USSR would have been solved.

During the period with which this essay is concerned, the Stalin leadership was concerned not only to promote democracy in the governance of the state, but to foster inner-party democracy as well. This important and related topic requires a separate study, and this essay does not centrally address it. However the concept of "democracy" is understood, it would have to have a different meaning in the context of a democratic-centralist party of voluntary members than in a huge state of citizens where no basis of political agreement can be presupposed.3

This article draws upon primary sources whenever possible. But it relies most heavily upon scholarly works by Russian historians who have access to unpublished or recently-

published documents from Soviet archives. Many Soviet documents of great importance are available only to scholars with privileged access. A great many others remain completely sequestered and "classified," including much of Stalin's personal archive, the pre-trial, investigative materials in the Moscow Trials of 1936-38, the investigative materials relating to the military purges or "Tukhachevskii Affair" of 1937, and many others.

Yuri Zhukov describes the archival situation this way:

> With the beginning of *perestroika*, one of the slogans of which was *glasnost'* . . . the Kremlin archive, formerly closed to researchers, was liquidated. Its holdings began to be relocated in [various public archives -- GF]. This process began, but was not completed. Without any publicity or explanation of any kind in 1996 the most important, pivotal materials were again reclassified, hidden away in the archive of the President of the Russian Federation. Soon the reasons for this secretive operation became clear; it permitted the resurrection of one of the two old and very shabby myths. (6)

By these myths Zhukov means "Stalin the villain," and "Stalin the great leader." Only the first of these myths is familiar to readers of Western and anti-communist historiography. But both schools are well represented in Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

One of Zhukov's books, and the basis of much of this article, is titled *Inoy Stalin* -- "a different Stalin," "different" from either myth, closer to the truth, based upon recently declassified archival documents. Its cover shows a photograph of Stalin and, facing it, the same photograph in negative: its opposite. Only rarely does Zhukov use secondary sources. For the most part he cites unpublished archival material, or archival documents only recently declassified and published. The picture he draws of Politburo politics from 1934 to 1938 is very "different" from anything consistent with either of the "myths" he rejects.

Zhukov ends his Introduction with these words:

> I make no claim to finality or incontrovertibility. I attempt only one task: to avoid both preconceived points of view, both myths; to try to reconstruct the past, once well known, but now intentionally forgotten, deliberately unmentionable, ignored by all.

Following Zhukov, this article also attempts to steer clear of both myths.

Under such conditions all conclusions must remain tentative. I've tried to use all materials judiciously, whether primary or secondary. In order to avoid interrupting the text I have put source references at the end of each paragraph. I have employed traditional numbered footnotes only where I think longer, more explanatory notes are needed.

The research this article summarizes has important consequences for those of us concerned to carry forward a class analysis of history, including of the history of the Soviet Union.

One of the very best American researchers of the Stalin period in the USSR, J. Arch Getty, has called the historical research done during the period of the Cold War "products of propaganda" -- "research" which it makes no sense to criticize or try to correct in its individual parts, but which must be done all over again from the beginning.4 I agree with Getty, but would add that this tendentious, politically-charged, and dishonest "research" is still being produced today.

The Cold War-Khrushchevite paradigm has been the prevailing view of the history of the "Stalin years." The research reported on here can contribute towards a "clearing of the ground," a "beginning all over again from the beginning." The truth that finally emerges will also have great meaning for the Marxist project of understanding the world in order to change it, of building a classless society of social and economic justice.

In the concluding section of the essay I have outlined some areas for further research that are suggested by the results of this article.

A New Constitution

In December 1936 the Extraordinary 8th Congress of Soviets approved the draft of the new Soviet Constitution. It called for secret ballot and contested elections. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 307-9)

Candidates were to be allowed not only from the Bolshevik Party -- called the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik) at that time5 -- but from other citizens' groups as well, based on residence, affiliation (such as religious groups), or workplace organizations. This last provision was never put into effect. Contested elections were never held.

The democratic aspects of the Constitution were inserted at the express insistence of Joseph Stalin. Together with his closest supporters in the Politburo of the Bolshevik Party Stalin fought tenaciously to keep these provisions. (Getty, "State") He, and they, yielded only when confronted by the complete refusal by the Party's Central Committee, and by the panic surrounding the discovery of serious conspiracies, in collaboration with Japanese and German fascism, to overthrow the Soviet government.

In January 1935 the Politburo assigned the task of outlining the contents of a new Constitution to Avel' Yenukidze6 who, some months later, returned with a suggestion for open, uncontested elections. Almost immediately, on January 25, 1935, Stalin expressed his disagreement with Yenukidze's proposal, insisting upon secret elections. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 116-21)

Stalin made this disagreement public in a dramatic manner in a March 1936 interview with American newspaper magnate Roy Howard. Stalin declared that the Soviet constitution would guarantee that all voting would be by secret ballot. Voting would be on an equal basis, with a peasant vote counting as much as that of a worker7; on a territorial basis, as in the West, rather than according to status (as during Czarist times) or place of employment; and direct -- all Soviets would be elected by the citizens themselves, not indirectly by representatives. (*Stalin-Howard Interview*; Zhukov, "Repressii" 5-6)

> *Stalin*: We shall probably adopt our new constitution at the end of this year. The commission appointed to draw up the constitution is working

> and should finish its labors soon. As has been announced already, according to the new constitution, the suffrage will be universal, equal, direct, and secret. (*Stalin-Howard Interview* 13)

Most important, Stalin declared that all elections would be contested.

> You are puzzled by the fact that only one party will come forward at elections. You cannot see how election contests can take place under these conditions. Evidently, candidates will be put forward not only by the Communist Party, but by all sorts of public, non-Party organizations. And we have hundreds of them. We have no contending parties any more than we have a capitalist class contending against a working class which is exploited by the capitalists. Our society consists exclusively of free toilers of town and country -- workers, peasants, intellectuals. Each of these strata may have its special interests and express them by means of the numerous public organizations that exist. (13-14)

Different citizens' organizations would be able to set forth candidates to run against the Communist Party's candidates. Stalin told Howard that citizens would cross off the names of all candidates except those they wished to vote for.

He also stressed the importance of contested elections in fighting bureaucracy.

> You think that there will be no election contests. But there will be, and I foresee very lively election campaigns. There are not a few institutions in our country which work badly. Cases occur when this or that local government body fails to satisfy certain of the multifarious and growing requirements of the toilers of town and country. Have you built a good school or not? Have you improved housing conditions? Are you a bureaucrat? Have you helped to make our labor more effective and our lives more cultured? Such will be the criteria with which millions of electors will measure the fitness of candidates, reject the unsuitable, expunge their names from candidates' lists, and promote and nominate the best. Yes, election campaigns will be lively, they will be conducted around numerous, very acute problems, principally of a practical nature, of first class importance for the people. Our new electoral system will tighten up all institutions and organizations and compel them to improve their work. Universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage in the U.S.S.R. will be a whip in the hands of the population against the organs of government which work badly. In my opinion our new Soviet constitution will be the most democratic constitution in the world. (15)

From this point on, Stalin and his closest Politburo associates Vyacheslav Molotov and Andrei Zhdanov spoke up for secret, contested elections in all discussions within the Party leadership. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 207-10; *Stalin-Howard Interview*)

Stalin also insisted that many Soviet citizens who had been deprived of the franchise have it restored. These included members of former exploiting classes such as former landlords, and those who had fought against the Bolsheviks during the Civil War of 1918-1921, known as "White Guardists", as well as those convicted of certain crimes (as in the USA today). Most important, and probably most numerous, among the *lishentsy* ("deprived") were two groups: "kulaks," the main targets during the Collectivization

movement of a few years before; and those who had violated the 1932 "law of three ears"8 -- who had stolen state property, often grain, sometimes simply to avoid starvation. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 187)

These electoral reforms would have been unnecessary unless the Stalin leadership wanted to change the manner in which the Soviet Union was governed. They wanted to get the Communist Party out of the business of *directly* running the Soviet Union.

During the Russian Revolution and the critical years that followed, the USSR had been legally governed by an elected hierarchy of *soviets* (="councils"), from local to national level, with the Supreme Soviet as the national legislative body, the Council (= *soviet*) of People's Commissars as the executive body, and the Chairman of this Council as the head of state. But in reality, at every level, choice of these officials had always been in the hands of the Bolshevik Party. Elections were held, but direct nomination by Party leaders, called "cooptation," was also common. Even the elections were controlled by the Party, since no one could run for office unless Party leaders agreed.

To the Bolsheviks, this had made sense. It was the form that the dictatorship of the proletariat took in the specific historical conditions of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary Soviet Union. Under the New Economic Policy, or NEP,9 the labor and skills of former and current exploiters were needed. But they had to be used only in service to the working-class dictatorship -- to socialism. They were not to be permitted to rebuild capitalist relationships beyond certain limits, nor to regain political power.

Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s the Bolshevik Party recruited aggressively among the working class. By the end of the 1920s most Party members were workers and a high per centage of workers were in the Party. This massive recruitment and huge attempts at political education took place at the same time as the tremendous upheavals of the first Five-Year Plan, crash industrialization, and largely forced collectivization of individual farms into collective (*kolkhoz*) or soviet farms (*sovkhoz*). The Bolshevik leadership was both sincere in its attempt to "proletarianize" their Party, and successful in the result. (Rigby, 167-8; 184; 199)

Stalin and his supporters on the Politburo gave a number of reasons for wanting to democratize the Soviet Union. These reasons reflected the Stalin leadership's belief that a new state of socialism had been reached.

Most peasants were in collective farms. With fewer individual peasant farms every month, the Stalin leadership believed that, objectively, the peasants no longer constituted a separate socio-economic class. Peasants were more like workers than different from them.

Stalin argued that, with the rapid growth of Soviet industry, and especially with the working class holding political power through the Bolshevik Party, the word "proletariat" was no longer accurate. "Proletariat," Stalin averred, referred to the working class under capitalist exploitation, or working under capitalist-type relations of production, such as existed during the first dozen years of the Soviet Union, especially under the NEP. But with direct exploitation of workers by capitalists for profit now abolished, the working class should no longer be called the "proletariat."

According to this view, exploiters of labor no longer existed. Workers, now running the country in their own interest through the Bolshevik Party, were no longer like the

classic "proletariat." Therefore, the "dictatorship of the proletariat" was no longer an adequate concept. These new conditions called for a new kind of state. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 231; 292; Stalin, "Draft" 800-1)

The Anti-Bureaucracy Struggle

The Stalin leadership was also concerned about the Party's role in this new stage of socialism. Stalin himself raised the fight against "bureaucratism" with great vigor as early as his Report to the 17th Party Congress in January 1934.10 Stalin, Molotov and others called the new electoral system a "weapon against bureaucratization."

Party leaders controlled the government both by determining who entered the Soviets and by exercising various forms of oversight or review over what the government ministries did. Speaking at the 7th Congress of Soviets on February 6, 1935 Molotov said that secret elections "will strike with great force against bureaucratic elements and provide them a useful shock." Yenukidze's report had not recommended, or even mentioned, secret elections and the widening of the franchise. (Stalin, Report to 17th P.C.; Zhukov, *Inoy* 124)

Government ministers and their staffs had to know something about the affairs over which they were in charge, if they were to be effective in production. This meant education, usually technical education, in their fields. But Party leaders often made their careers by advancement through Party positions alone. No technical expertise was needed for this kind of advancement. Rather, political criteria were required. These Party officials exercised control, but they themselves often lacked the technical knowledge that could in theory make them skilled at supervision. (*Stalin-Howard Interview*; Zhukov, *Inoy* 305; Zhukov, "Repressii" 6)

This is, apparently, what the Stalin leadership meant by the term "bureaucratism." Though they viewed it as a danger -- as, indeed, all Marxists did -- they believed it was not inevitable. Rather, they thought that it could be overcome by changing the role of the Party in socialist society.

The concept of democracy that Stalin and his supporters in the Party leadership wished to inaugurate in the Soviet Union would necessarily involve a qualitative change in the societal role of the Bolshevik Party.

> Those documents that were accessible to researchers did allow us to understand . . . that already by the end of the 1930s determined attempts were being undertaken to separate the Party from the state and to limit in a substantive manner the Party's role in the life of the country. (Zhukov, *Tayny* 8)

Stalin and supporters continued this struggle against opposition from other elements in the Bolshevik Party, resolutely but with diminishing chances for success, until Stalin died in March 1953. Lavrentii Beria's determination to continue this same struggle seems to be the real reason Khrushchev and others murdered him, either judicially, by trial on trumped-up charges in December 1953, or -- as much evidence suggests -- through literal murder, the previous June.

Article 3 of the 1936 Constitution reads, "In the U.S.S.R. all power belongs to the working people of town and country as represented by the Soviets of Working People's

Deputies." The Communist Party is mentioned in Article 126 as "the vanguard of the working people in their struggle to strengthen and develop the socialist system and is the leading core of all organizations of the working people, both public and state." That is, the Party was to lead *organizations*, but not the legislative or executive organs of the state. (1936 Constitution; Zhukov, *Tayny* 29-30)

Stalin seems to have believed that, once the Party was out of direct control over society, its role should be confined to agitation and propaganda, and participation in the selection of cadres. What would this have meant? Perhaps something like this.

> The Party would revert to its essential function of winning people to the ideals of communism as they understood it.
>
> This would mean the end of cushy sinecure-type jobs, and a reversion to the style of hard work and selfless dedication that characterized the Bolsheviks during the Tsarist period, the Revolution and Civil War, the period of NEP, and the very hard period of crash industrialization and collectivization. During these periods Party membership, for most, meant hard work and sacrifice, often among non-Party members, many of whom were hostile to the Bolsheviks. It meant the need for a real base among the masses. (Zhukov, *KP* Nov. 13 02; Mukhin, *Ubiystvo*)

Stalin insisted that Communists should be hard-working, educated people, able to make a real contribution to production and to the creation of a communist society. Stalin himself was an indefatigable student.11

To summarize, the evidence suggests that Stalin intended the new electoral system to accomplish the following goals:

> Make sure that only technically trained people led, in production and in Soviet society at large;
>
> Stop the degeneration of the Bolshevik Party, and return Party members, especially leaders, to their primary function: giving political and moral leadership, by example and persuasion, to the rest of society;
>
> Strengthen the Party's mass work;
>
> Win the support of the country's citizens behind the government;
>
> Create the basis for a classless, communist society.

Stalin's Defeat

During 1935, under the aegis of Andrei Vyshinski, Chief Prosecutor of the USSR, many citizens who had been exiled, imprisoned, and -- most significantly for our present purposes -- deprived of the franchise, were restored. Hundreds of thousands of former *kulaks*, richer farmers who were the main target of collectivization, and of those who had been imprisoned or exiled for resisting collectivization in some way, were freed. Vyshinsky severely criticized the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, including internal security) for "a series of the crudest errors and miscalculations" in deporting almost 12,000 people from Leningrad after the December 1934 assassination of Kirov. He declared that from then on the NKVD could not arrest anyone without prior consent of the prosecutor. The enfranchised population was expanded by at least hundreds of thousands of people who had reason to feel that State and Party had treated them unfairly. (Thurston 6-9; Zhukov, *KP* Nov. 14 & Nov. 19 02; Zhukov, *Inoy* 187; Zhukov, "Repressii" 7)

Stalin's original proposal for the new constitution had not included contested elections. He first announced it in his interview with Roy Howard on March 1, 1936. At the June 1937 Central Committee Plenum Yakovlev -- one of the CC members who, together with Stalin, worked most closely on the draft of the new constitution (cf. Zhukov, Inoy 223) -- said that the suggestion for contested elections was made by Stalin himself. This suggestion seems to have met with widespread, albeit tacit, opposition from the regional Party leaders, the First Secretaries, or "partocracy," as Zhukov calls them. After the Howard interview there was not even the nominal praise or support for Stalin's statement about contested elections in the central newspapers -- those most under the direct control of the Politburo. *Pravda* carried one article only, on March 10, and it did not mention contested elections.

From this Zhukov concludes:

> This could mean only one thing. Not only the 'broad leadership' [the regional First Secretaries], but at least a part of the Central Committee apparatus, Agitprop under Stetskii and Tal', did not accept Stalin's innovation, did not want to approve, even in a purely formal manner, contested elections, dangerous to many, which, as followed from those of Stalin's words that *Pravda* did underscore, directly threatened the positions and real power of the First Secretaries -- the Central Committees of the national communist parties, the regional, oblast', city, and area committees. (*Inoy* 211)

The Party First Secretaries held Party offices, from which they could not be removed by defeat in any elections to the Soviets they might enter. But the immense local power they held stemmed mainly from the Party's control over every aspect of the economy and state apparatus -- kolkhoz, factory, education, military. The new electoral system would deprive the First Secretaries of their automatic positions as delegates to the Soviets, and of their ability to simply choose the other delegates. Defeat of themselves or of "their" candidates (the Party candidates) in elections to the soviets would be, in effect, a referendum on their work. A First Secretary whose candidates were defeated at the polls by non-Party candidates would be exposed as someone with weak ties to the masses. During the campaigns, opposition candidates were sure to make campaign issues out of any corruption, authoritarianism, or incompetence they observed among Party officials. Defeated candidates would be shown up to have serious weaknesses as communists, and this would probably lead to their being replaced. (Zhukov *KP* Nov. 13 02; *Inoy* 226; cf. Getty, "Excesses" 122-3)

Senior Party leaders were usually Party members of many years' standing, veterans of the really dangerous days of Tsarist times, the Revolution, the Civil War, and collectivization, when to be a communist was fraught with peril and difficulty. Many had little formal education. Unlike Stalin, Kirov or Beria, it seems that most of them were unwilling or unable to "remake themselves" through self-education. (Mukhin, *Ubiystvo* 37; Dimitrov 33-4; Stalin, *Zastol'nye* 235-6).

All of these men were long-time supporters of Stalin's policies. They had implemented the harsh collectivization of the peasantry, during which hundreds of thousands had been deported. During 1932-33 many people, perhaps as many as three million, had died by a famine that had been real rather than "man-made," but one made more severe for the peasantry by collectivization and expropriation of grain to feed the workers in the cities, or in armed peasant rebellions (which had also killed many Bolsheviks). These Party

leaders had been in charge of crash industrialization, again under harsh conditions of poor housing, insufficient food and medical care, low pay and few goods to buy with it. (Tauger; Anderson & Silver; Zhukov, *KP* Nov. 13 02).

Now they faced elections in which those formerly deprived of the franchise because they had been on the wrong side of these Soviet policies would suddenly have the right to vote restored. It's likely that they feared many would vote against their candidates, or against *any* Bolshevik candidate. If so, they stood to be demoted, or worse. They would still get some Party position, or -- at worst -- some kind of job. The new "Stalin" Constitution guaranteed every Soviet citizen a job as a *right*, along with medical care, pensions, education, etc. But these men (virtually all were men) were used to power and privilege, all of which was threatened by defeat of their candidates at the polls. (Zhukov, *KP* Nov. 13 02; 1936 Const., Ch. X; cf. Getty, "Excesses" 125, on the importance of religious feeling in the country).

Trials, Conspiracies, Repression

Plans for the new constitution and elections had been outlined during the June 1936 Plenum of the Central Committee. The delegates unanimously approved the draft Constitution. But none of them spoke up in favor of it. This failure to give at least lip service to a Stalin proposal certainly indicated "latent opposition from the broad leadership," a demonstrative lack of concern." (Zhukov, *Inoy* 232, 236; "Repressii" 10-11)

During the 8th All-Russian Congress of Soviets meeting in November-December 1936 Stalin and Molotov again stressed the value of widening the franchise and of secret and contested elections. In the spirit of Stalin's interview with Howard, Molotov again stressed the beneficial effect, for the Party, of permitting non-communist candidates for the Soviets:

> This system . . . cannot but strike against those who have become bureaucratized, alienated from the masses. . . . will facilitate the promotion of new forces . . . that must come forth to replace backward or bureaucratized [*ochinovnivshimsya*] elements. Under the new form of elections the election of enemy elements is possible. But even this danger, in the last analysis, must serve to help us, insofar as it will serve as a lash to those organizations that need it, and to [Party] workers who have fallen asleep. (Zhukov, "Repressii" 15).

Stalin himself put it even more strongly:

> Some say that this is dangerous, since elements hostile to Soviet power could sneak into the highest offices, some of the former White Guardists, kulaks, priests, and so on. But really, what is there to fear? 'If you're afraid of wolves, don't walk in the forest.' For one thing, not all former kulaks, White Guardists, and priests are hostile to Soviet power. For another, if the people here and there elected hostile forces, this will mean that our agitational work is poorly organized, and that we have fully deserved this disgrace. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 293; Stalin, "Draft").

Once again the First Secretaries showed tacit hostility. The December 1936 Central Committee Plenum, whose session overlapped with the Congress, met on December 4th.

But there was virtually no discussion of the first agenda item, the draft Constitution. Yezhov's report, "On Trotskyite and Right Anti-Soviet Organizations," was far more central to the C.C. members' concerns. ("Fragmenty" 4-5; Zhukov, *Inoy* 310-11).

On December 5 1936 the Congress approved the draft of the new Constitution. But there had been little real discussion. Instead, the delegates -- Party leaders -- had emphasized the threats from enemies foreign and domestic. Rather than giving speeches of approval for the Constitution, which was the main topic reported on by Stalin, Molotov, Zhdanov, Litvinov, and Vyshinski, the delegates virtually ignored it. A Commission was set up for further study of the draft Constitution, with nothing fixed about contested elections. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 294; 298; 309)

The international situation was indeed tense. Victory for fascism in the Spanish Civil War was only a question of time. The Soviet Union was surrounded by hostile powers. By the second half of the 1930s *all* of these countries were fiercely authoritarian, militaristic, anti-communist and anti-Soviet regimes. In October 1936 Finland had fired across the Soviet frontier. That same month the "Berlin-Rome Axis" was formed by Hitler and Mussolini. A month later, Japan joined Nazi Germany and fascist Italy to form the "Anti-Comintern Pact." Soviet efforts at military alliances against Nazi Germany met with rejection in the capitals of the West. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 285-309).

While the Congress was attending to the new Constitution, the Soviet leadership was between the first two large-scale Moscow Trials. Zinoviev and Kamenev had gone on trial along with some others in August 1936. The second trial, in January 1937, involved some of the major followers of Trotsky, led by Yuri Piatakov, until recently the deputy Commissar of Heavy Industry.12

The February-March 1937 Central Committee Plenum dramatized the contradiction within the Party leadership: the struggle against internal enemies, and the need to prepare for secret, contested elections under the new Constitution by year's end. The gradual discovery of more and more groups conspiring to overthrow the Soviet government demanded police action. But preparing for truly democratic elections to the government, and to improve inner-party democracy -- a theme stressed over and over by those closest to Stalin in the Politburo -- required the opposite: openness to criticism and self-criticism, secret elections of leaders by rank-and-file Party members, and an end to "cooptation" by First Secretaries.

This Plenum, the longest ever held in the history of the USSR, dragged on for two weeks. Yet almost nothing was known about it until 1992, when the Plenum's huge transcript began to be published in *Voprosy Istorii* -- a process that took the journal almost four years to complete.

Yezhov's report about the continuing investigations into conspiracies within the country was overshadowed by Nikolai Bukharin, who, in loquacious attempts to confess past misdeeds, distance himself from onetime associates, and assure everyone of his current loyalty, managed only to incriminate himself further. (Thurston, 40-42; Getty and Naumov agree, 563)

After three whole days of this, Zhdanov spoke about the need for greater democracy both in the country and in the Party, invoking the struggle against bureaucracy and the need for closer ties to the masses, both party and non-party.

> The new electoral system will give a powerful push towards the improvement of the work of Soviet bodies, the liquidation of bureaucratic bodies, the liquidation of bureaucratic shortcomings, and deformations in the work of our Soviet organizations. And these shortcomings, as you know, are very substantial. Our Party bodies must be ready for the electoral struggle. In the elections we will have to deal with hostile agitation and hostile candidates. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 343)

There can be no doubt that Zhdanov, speaking for the Stalin leadership, foresaw real electoral contests with non-party candidates that seriously opposed developments in the Soviet Union. This fact alone is utterly incompatible with Cold-War and Khrushchevite accounts.

Zhdanov also emphasized, at length, the need to develop democratic norms within the Bolshevik Party itself.

> "If we want to win the respect of our Soviet and Party workers to our laws, and the masses -- to the Soviet constitution, then we must guarantee the restructuring [*perestroika*] of Party work on the basis of an indubitable and full implementation of the bases of inner-party democracy, which is outlined in the bylaws of our Party."
>
> And he enumerated the essential measures, already contained in the draft resolution to his report: the elimination of co-optation; a ban on voting by slates; a guarantee "of the unlimited right for members of the Party to set aside the nominated candidates and of the unlimited right to criticize these candidates." (Zhukov, *Inoy* 345)

But Zhdanov's report was drowned in the discussions of other agenda items, mainly discussions about "enemies." A number of First Secretaries responded with alarm that those who were, or might be expected to be, preparing most assiduously for the Soviet elections were *opponents* of Soviet power: Social-Revolutionaries, the priesthood, and other "enemies."[13]

Molotov replied with a report stressing, once again, "the development and strengthening of self-criticism," and directly opposed the search for "enemies":

> "There's no point in searching for people to blame, comrades. If you prefer, all of us here are to blame, beginning with the Party's central institutions and ending with the lowest Party organizations." (Zhukov, *Inoy* 349)

But those who followed Molotov to the podium ignored his report and continued to harp on the necessity of "searching out 'enemies,' of exposing 'wreckers,' and the struggle against 'wrecking.'" (352) When he spoke again, Molotov marveled that there had been almost no attention paid to the substance of his report, which he repeated, after first summarizing what *was* being done against internal enemies.

Stalin's speech of March 3 was likewise divided, returning at the end to the need for improving Party work and of weeding out incapable Party members and replacing them with new ones. Like Molotov's, Stalin's report was virtually ignored.

> From the beginning of the discussions Stalin's fears were understandable. It seemed he had run into a deaf wall of incomprehension, of the unwillingness of the CC members, who heard in the report just what they wanted to hear, to discuss what he wanted them to discuss. Of the 24 persons who took part in the discussions, 15 spoke mainly about "enemies of the people," that is, Trotskyists. They spoke with conviction, aggressively, just as they had after the reports by Zhdanov and Molotov. They reduced all the problems to one -- the necessity of searching out "enemies". And practically none of them recalled Stalin's main point -- about the shortcomings in the work of Party organizations, about preparation for the elections to the Supreme Soviet. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 357)

The Stalin leadership stepped up the attack on the First Secretaries. Yakovlev criticized Moscow Party leader Khrushchev, among others, for unjustified expulsions of Party members; Malenkov seconded his criticism of Party secretaries for their indifference to rank-and-file members. This seems to have stimulated the C.C. members to stop speaking temporarily about enemies, but only in order to begin defending themselves. There was still no response to Stalin's report. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 358-60)

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

> "Some comrades among us think that, if they are a Narkom (=People's Commissar), then they know everything. They believe that rank, in and of itself, grants very great, almost inexhaustible knowledge. Or they think: If I am a Central Committee member, then I am not one by accident, then I must know everything. This is not the case." (Stalin, Zakliuchitel'noe; Zhukov, *Inoy* 360-1)

Most ominously for all Party officials, including First Secretaries, Stalin stated that each of them should choose two cadre to take their places while they attended six-month political education courses that would soon be established. With replacement officials in their stead, Party secretaries might well have feared that they could easily be reassigned during this period, breaking the back of their "families" (officials subservient to them), a major cause of bureaucracy. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 362)

Thurston characterizes Stalin's speech as "considerably milder," stressing "the need to learn from the masses and pay attention to criticism from below." Even the resolution passed on the basis of Stalin's report touched on "enemies" only briefly, and dealt mainly with failings in party organizations and their leaderships. According to Zhukov, who quotes from this unpublished resolution, not a single one of its 25 points was mainly concerned with "enemies." (Thurston, 48-9; Zhukov, *Inoy* 362-4)[14]

After the Plenum the First Secretaries staged a virtual rebellion. First Stalin, and then the Politburo, sent out messages re-emphasizing the need to conduct secret Party elections, opposition to co-optation rather than election, and the need for inner-Party democracy generally. The First Secretaries were doing things in the old way, regardless of the resolutions of the Plenum.

During the next few months Stalin and his closest associates tried to turn the focus away from a hunt for internal enemies -- the largest concern of the CC members -- and back towards fighting bureaucracy in the Party, and preparing for the Soviet elections. Meanwhile, "local party leaders did everything they could within the limits of party discipline (and sometimes outside it) to stall or change the elections." (Getty, "Excesses" 126; Zhukov, *Inoy* 367-71)

The sudden uncovering in April, May and early June 1937 of what appeared to be a broadly-based *military* and *police* conspiracy caused the Stalin government to react in a panic. Genrikh Yagoda, head of the security police and Minister of Internal Affairs, was arrested in late March 1937, and began to confess in April. In May and early June 1937 high-ranking military commanders confessed to conspiring with the German General Staff to defeat the Red Army in the case of an invasion by Germany and its allies, and also to being linked to conspiracies by political figures, including many who still occupied high positions. (Getty, "Excesses" 115, 135; Thurston, 70, 90, 101-2; *Genrikh IAgoda*)15

This situation was far more serious than any the Soviet government had faced before. In the case of the 1936 and 1937 Moscow Trials, the government took its time to prepare the case and organize a public trial for maximum publicity. But the Military conspiracy was handled far differently. A little more than three weeks passed from the date of Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky's arrest in late May to the trial and execution of Tukhachevsky and seven other high-ranking military commanders on June 11-12. During that time hundreds of high-ranking military commanders were recalled to Moscow to read the evidence against their colleagues -- for most of them, their superiors -- and to listen to alarmed analyses by Stalin and Marshal Voroshilov, People's Commissar for Defense and the highest ranking military figure in the country.

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

Stalin was on the defensive. In his June 2 speech to the expanded session of the Military Soviet (which met June 1-4) he portrayed the series of recently uncovered16 conspiracies as limited, and largely successfully dealt with. At the February-March Plenum too, he and his Politburo supporters had minimized the First Secretaries' overriding concern with internal enemies. But, as Zhukov notes, the situation was "slowly, but decisively, getting out of his [Stalin's] control." (Stalin, "Vystuplenie"; Zhukov, *Inoy* Ch. 16, *passim*; 411).

The June 1937 Central Committee Plenum17 began with proposals to exclude, first, seven sitting C.C. members and candidates for "lack of political trustworthiness," then a further 19 members and candidates for "treason and active counterrevolutionary activity." These last 19 were to be arrested by the NKVD. Including the ten members expelled on similar charges before the Plenum by a poll of the C.C. members (including those military commanders already tried, convicted, and executed), this meant that 36 of the 120 C.C. members and candidates as of May 1 had been removed.

Yakovlev and Molotov criticized the failure of Party leaders to organize for independent Soviet elections. Molotov stressed the need to move even honored revolutionaries out of the way if they were unprepared for the tasks of the day. He emphasized that Soviet officials were not "second-class workers." Evidently Party leaders were treating them as such.

Yakovlev exposed and criticized the failure of First Secretaries to hold secret elections for Party posts, relying instead on appointment ("cooptation"). He emphasized that Party members who were elected delegates to the Soviets were not to be placed under the discipline of Party groups outside the Soviets and told how to vote. They were not to be told how to vote by their Party superiors, such as the First Secretaries. They were to be independent of them. And Yakovlev referred in the strongest terms to the need to "recruit from the very rich reserve of new cadre to replace those who had become rotten or bureaucratized." All these statements constituted an explicit attack on the First Secretaries. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 424-7; *Tayny*, 39-40, quoting from archival documents)

The Constitution was finally outlined and the date of the first elections was set for December 12, 1937. The Stalin leadership again urged the benefits of fighting bureaucracy and building ties to the masses. However -- to repeat -- all this followed the equally unprecedented, summary expulsion from the C.C. of 26 members, nineteen of whom were directly charged with treason and counter-revolutionary activity. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 430)

Perhaps most revealing is the following remark by Stalin, as quoted by Zhukov:

> At the end of the discussion, when the subject was the search for a more dispassionate method of counting ballots, [Stalin] remarked that in the West, thanks to a multiparty system, this problem did not exist. Immediately thereafter he suddenly uttered a phrase that sounded very strange in a meeting of this kind: "We do not have different political parties. Fortunately or *unfortunately, we have only one party*." [Zhukov's emphasis] And then he proposed, but only as a temporary measure, to use for the purpose of dispassionate supervision of elections representatives of all existing societal organizations *except for the Bolshevik Party*. . . . The challenge to the Party autocracy had been issued. (Zhukov, *Inoy* 430-1; emphasis added; *Tayny* 38)

The Bolshevik Party was in severe crisis, and it was impossible to expect that events would unroll smoothly. It was the worst possible atmosphere during which to prepare for the adoption of democratic -- secret, universal and contested -- elections. Stalin's plan to reform the Soviet government and the role within it of the Bolshevik Party was doomed.

At the end of the Plenum Robert Eikhe, First Secretary of the West Siberian Krai (region of the Russian republic) met privately with Stalin. Then several other First Secretaries met with him. They probably demanded the awful powers that they were granted shortly afterward: the authority to form "troikas," or groups of three officials, to combat widespread conspiracies against the Soviet government in their area.18 These troikas were given the power of execution without appeal. Numerical limits for those to be shot and others to be imprisoned on the sole power of these troikas were demanded and given. When those were exhausted, the First Secretaries asked for, and received, higher limits. Zhukov thinks that Eikhe may have been acting on behalf of an informal group of First Secretaries. (Getty, "Excesses" 129; Zhukov, *Inoy* 435)

Who were the targets of these draconian trials-by-troika? Zhukov believes they must have been the *lishentsy*, the very people whose citizenship rights, including franchise, had recently been restored and whose votes potentially posed the greatest danger to the First Secretaries' continuance in power. Zhukov largely discounts the existence of real conspiracies. But archival documents recently published in Russia make it clear that, at the very least, the central leadership was constantly receiving very credible police accounts of conspiracies, including transcripts of confessions. Certainly Stalin and others in Moscow believed these conspiracies existed. My guess at this point, *pace* Zhukov, is that some, at least, of the conspiracies alleged actually existed, and that the First Secretaries believed in them. (Zhukov, *KP* Nov. 13 02; *Inoy*, Ch. 18; "Repressii" 23; *Lubianka* B)

A further hypothesis is that anyone who was currently, or had ever been, involved in any kind of opposition movement was likely to be viewed as an "enemy," and subject to arrest and interrogation by the NKVD, one of whose members always made up part of the troika. Another group were those who openly expressed distrust or hatred towards the Soviet system as a whole. Thurston cites evidence that such people were often arrested immediately. However, those who simply expressed criticisms of local Party leaders, especially at criticism meetings called for this purpose, were not arrested, while those whom they criticized, *including* Party leaders, sometimes were. (Thurston, 94-5)

Contrary, then, to those who argue that the conspiracies were phantoms of Stalin's paranoid mind -- or worse still, lies concocted to strengthen Stalin's megalomaniac hold on power -- there is a lot of evidence that real conspiracies existed. Accounts of conspirators who were later able to get out of the USSR agree. The sheer volume of police documentation concerning such conspiracies, only a little of which has yet been published, argues strongly against any notion that all of it could have been fabricated. Furthermore, Stalin's annotations on these documents make it clear that he believed they were accurate. (Getty, "Excesses" 131-4; *Lubianka* B)

Getty summarizes the hopeless contradiction in this way:

> Stalin was not yet willing to retreat from contested elections, and on 2 July 1937 *Pravda* no doubt disappointed the regional secretaries by publishing the first installment of the new electoral rules, enacting and enforcing contested, universal, secret ballot elections. But Stalin offered a compromise. The very same day the electoral law was published, the Politburo approved the launching of a mass operation against precisely the elements the local leaders had complained about, and hours later Stalin sent his telegram to provincial party leaders ordering the kulak operation [vs. the *lishentsy* -- GF]. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that in return for forcing the local party leaders to conduct an election, Stalin chose to help them win it by giving them license to kill or deport hundreds or thousands of "dangerous elements." ("Excesses" 126)

Whatever the history of these purges, extra-judicial executions, and deportations, Stalin appears to have believed that they were *creating* preconditions for contested elections. Yet all of this activity really sabotaged any possibility for such elections.

The Politburo at first tried to limit the campaign of repression by ordering that it be completed within *five days*. Something convinced, or compelled, them to permit the NKVD to extend the period for *four months* -- August 5-15 to December 5-15. Was it the

large numbers of those arrested? The conviction that the Party faced a widespread set of conspiracies and a huge internal threat? We don't know the details of how, and why, this mass repression unfolded as it did.

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

Primary documents show that Stalin and the central Politburo leadership were convinced that anti-Soviet conspirators were active and had to be dealt with. This is what the regional Party leaders had asserted during the February-March Plenum. At that time the Stalin leadership had minimized this danger and had kept focusing attention back to the Constitution, and the need to prepare for new elections and the replacement of "bureaucratized" and old leadership with new.

By the June Plenum the First Secretaries were in a position to say, in effect: "We told you so. We were right, and you were wrong. Furthermore, we are *still* right -- dangerous conspirators are still active, ready to use the electoral campaign in their attempt to raise revolt against the Soviet government." Was this how it happened? It seems plausible. But we can't be certain.

Stalin and the central leadership had no idea how deep these conspiracies extended. They did not know what Nazi Germany or fascist Japan would do. On June 2 Stalin had told the expanded Military Soviet meeting that the Tukhachevsky group had given the Red Army's operational plan to the German General Staff. This meant that the Japanese, who were bound in a military alliance (the "Axis") and an anti-communist political alliance (the "Anti-Comintern Pact" -- really, an anti-Soviet pact) with fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, would no doubt have it too.

Stalin had told the military leaders that the plotters wanted to make the USSR into "another Spain" -- meaning, a Fifth Column within coordinated with an invading fascist army. Given this horrendous danger, the Soviet leadership was determined to react with brutal decisiveness. (Stalin, "Vystuplenie")

At the same time much evidence suggests that the central (Stalin) leadership wanted both to restrain the "troika" repressions demanded by the First Secretaries, and to continue to implement the new Constitution's secret and contested elections. From July 5 to 11 most First Secretaries followed Eikhe's lead in sending in precise figures of those whom they wanted to suppress -- by execution (category 1) or imprisonment (category 2). Then,

> suddenly on 12 July, Deputy NKVD Commissar M.P. Frinovskii sent an urgent telegram to all local police agencies: "Do not begin the operation to repress former kulaks. I repeat, do not begin." (Getty, "Excesses" 127-8)

Local NKVD chiefs were recalled to Moscow for conferences, after which was issued Order No. 00447. This very long and detailed instruction both expanded the kinds of people subject to repression (basically including priests, those who had previously

opposed Soviet power, and criminals), and -- usually -- lowered the "limits" or numbers requested by the provincial secretaries.19 All this vacillation suggested disagreements and struggles between the "center" -- Stalin and the central Politburo leadership -- and the First Secretaries in the provincial areas. Stalin was clearly not in charge. (Order No. 00447; Getty, "Excesses" 126-9).

The Central Committee Plenum of October 1937 saw the final cancellation of the plan for contested elections. A sample ballot, showing several candidates, had already been drawn up; several of them have survived in various archives.20 Instead, the Soviet elections of December 1937 were implemented on the basis that the Party candidates would run on slates with 20-25% of nonparty candidates -- in other words, an "alliance" of sorts, but without a contest. Originally the elections were planned without slates; voting was to be only for individuals -- a far more democratic method. Zhukov has managed to locate in the archives the very document that Molotov signed, on October 11 at 6 p.m., canceling contested elections. This represented a huge but inevitable retreat for Stalin and his supporters in the Politburo. (Zhukov, *KP* 19 Nov. 02; Zhukov, *Tayny*. 41; *Inoy* 443)

It was also at the October C.C. Plenum that the first protest against the mass repressions was uttered by Kursk First Secretary Peskarov:

> "They [the NKVD? The troika? -- GF] condemned people for petty stuff . . . illegally, and *when we . . . put the question to the C.C., comrades Stalin and Molotov strongly supported us and sent a brigade of workers from the Supreme Court and Prosecutor's office to review these cases*. . . . And it turned out that for three weeks' work of this brigade 56% of the sentences in 16 *raiony* were set aside by the brigade as illegal. What's more, in 45% of the sentences there was no evidence that a crime had been committed." (Zhukov, *Tayny*, 43; emphasis added)

At the January 1938 Plenum Malenkov delivered a blistering criticism of the huge numbers of Party members expelled and citizens sentenced, often without even submitting a list of names, but only of the numbers sentenced! Postyshev, First Secretary of Kuybyshev, was removed as candidate member of the Politburo for insisting that there was "scarcely a single honest man" among all the Party officials.

It seems that the NKVD was out of control, at least in many local areas. No doubt the First Secretaries were too. (Zhukov, *KP* 19 Nov. 02; *Tayny*, pp. 47-51; Thurston 101-2; 112) However, the Politburo leadership was still concerned that there were real conspirators that had to be dealt with. The full extent of NKVD abuses was not recognized. As Zhukov notes, Malenkov's report, blaming careerists within the Party for massive expulsions and arrests, was followed by Kaganovich and Zhdanov who stressed the struggle against enemies and gave only slight attention to "naivetÈ and ignorance" in the work of "honest Bolsheviks."

Pravda, under the direct control of the Stalin leadership, was still calling for removing the Party from direct control over economic affairs and for the need to promote non-party people into leading roles. (Zhukov, *Tayny* 51-2) Meanwhile Nikita Khrushchev, who had in 1937 called for power to execute 20,000 unnamed people when Party head in Moscow, was transferred to the Ukraine from where, within a month, he asked for authority to repress 30,000 people. (Zhukov, *Tayny* 64, and see n. 23 below)

Nikolai Yezhov, who had taken over the NKVD from Genrikh Yagoda in 1936, seems to have been in close alliance with the First Secretaries.21 The mass repression of 1937-38 has become so associated with his name that it is still called the "Yezhovshchina." Yezhov was talked into resigning on September 23, 1938 22 and in November 1938 was succeeded by Lavrentii Beria.

Under Beria many of the NKVD officers and First Secretaries responsible for thousands of executions and deportations were tried and often executed themselves for executing innocent people and using torture against those arrested. Transcripts of the trials of some of these policemen who used torture have been published. Many people convicted and either imprisoned, deported, or sent to the camps were freed. Beria reportedly said later that he had been called on to "liquidate the Yezhovshchina." Stalin told aircraft designer Yakovlev that Yezhov had been executed for killing many innocent people. (*Lubianka* B, Nos. 344; 363; 375; Mukhin, *Ubiystvo* 637; Yakovlev)

Incalculable damage had been done to Soviet society, the Soviet government, and the Bolshevik Party. This, of course, has been long known. What has *not* been understood until now is that the setting up of the troikas, and large quotas for executions and deportations, was initiated at the insistence of the First Secretaries, not of Stalin. Zhukov believes that the close connection between this and the threat of secret, contested elections, and the fact that the Central Committee succeeded in forcing the Stalin leadership to cancel contested elections, suggests that getting rid of the "threat" of contested elections may have been a major reason for the mass arrests and executions of the "Yezhovshchina."23 (Zhukov, *KP*)

Nothing can absolve Stalin and his supporters of a large measure of responsibility for the executions -- evidently, several hundred thousand24 -- that ensued. If these people had been imprisoned rather than executed, almost all would have lived. Many would have had their cases reviewed and been released. For our purposes here, however, the key question is: Why did Stalin give in to the First Secretaries' demands that they be given the life-and-death "troika" powers? Though there are no excuses, there were certainly reasons.

No government can ever be prepared against simultaneous treason by the highest-ranking military commanders, high-ranking figures in both the national and important regional governments, and the head of the secret and border police.

A serious set of conspiracies, involving both current and former high-level party leaders who had ties all over the vast country, had just been uncovered. Most ominous was the involvement of military figures at the very highest levels, with the disclosure of secret military plans to the fascist enemy. The military conspirators had had contacts all over the USSR. The conspiracy also involved the very highest levels of the NKVD, including Genrikh Yagoda, who had headed it from 1934 till 1936 and had been second-in-command for some years before 1934. It simply could not be known how widespread the conspiracy was, and how many people were involved. The prudent course was to suspect the worst.25

The Politburo and Stalin himself were at the apex of two large hierarchies, of both the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet government. What they knew about the state of affairs in the country reflected what their subordinates told them. Over the course of the next twelve months they repressed many of the First Secretaries, over half of whom were arrested. For the most part, the precise charges against most of these men, and the

dossiers of their interrogations and trials, have yet to be declassified, even in post-Soviet, anti-communist Russia. But we now have enough of the investigative evidence that reached Stalin and the Politburo to get some idea of the alarming situation they faced. (*Lubianka* B)

The Bolshevik Party was set up in a democratic centralist fashion. Despite his status and popularity in the country, Stalin (like any Party leader) could be voted out by a majority of the Central Committee. He was in no position to ignore urgent appeals by a large number of C.C. members.

To illustrate Stalin's inability to stop the First Secretaries from flouting the principles of democratic election Zhukov quotes one incident from the still unpublished transcript of the October 1937 C.C. Plenum.

> Kravtsov, First Secretary of the Krasnodar *kraikom* [regional committee -- GF] was the only one to acknowledge, and in detail, what his colleagues had been doing on the sly for some weeks already. He outlined the selection of only those candidates for deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR who suited the interests of the 'broad leadership'.
>
> > "We put forth our candidates to the Supreme Soviet," Kravtsov stated frankly. "Who are these comrades? Eight are members of the Party; two are non-Party members or members of the Komsomol [Communist Youth Organization]. That way we held to the per centage of non-Party members indicated in the draft decision of the CC. By occupation these comrades are divided in this way: four Party employees, two Soviet employees, one kolkhoz chairman, one combine driver, one tractor driver, one oil worker . . .
> > Stalin: Who else, aside from the combine drivers?
> > Kravtsov: Among the ten is Yakovlev, the First Secretary of the *kraikom*, [and] the chairman of the *krai* executive committee.
> > Stalin: Who advised you to do this?
> > Kravtsov: I must say, comrade Stalin, that they advised me here, in the CC apparatus.
> > Stalin: Who?
> > Kravtsov: We in the C.C. assigned our *krai* executive committee chairman, comrade Simochkin, and he got the approval in the C.C. apparatus.
> > Stalin: Who?
> > Kravtsov: I can't say, I don't know.
> > Stalin: A pity that you don't say, you were told wrong."
> > (Zhukov, *Inoy* 486-7)

Evidently all the First Secretaries were doing what only Kravtsov openly stated -- ignoring the principle of secret Soviet elections, a principle they themselves had voted for at previous Plenums, but clearly never agreed to. This marks Stalin's final defeat on this issue, the Constitutional and electoral system reforms he and his central leadership had been championing for over two years.

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

Zhukov believes that, if Stalin had refused the appeals of the First Secretaries for the extraordinary "troika" powers, he -- Stalin -- would have most likely been voted out, arrested as a counter-revolutionary and executed. ". . . [T]oday Stalin might be numbered among the victims of the repression of 1937 and 'Memorial' and the commission of A.N.Yakovlev would have long since been petitioning for his rehabilitation." (Zhukov, *KP* 16 Nov. 02)

In November 1938 Lavrentii Beria effectively replaced Yezhov as head of the NKVD. The "troikas" were abolished. Extra-judicial executions stopped, and those responsible for many of the terrible excesses were themselves tried and executed or imprisoned.26 But war was approaching. The French government refused to continue even the very weak version of the Franco-Soviet alliance they had agreed to (the Soviet Union wanted a much stronger one). The Allies yielded Czechoslovakia to Hitler and the Polish fascists piecemeal, without a struggle. Nazi Germany had a military alliance with fascist Poland aimed at an invasion of the USSR. The Spanish Civil War, which the Soviets had done so much to support, was lost. Italy invaded Ethiopia, and the League of Nations did nothing. France and Britain were clearly encouraging Hitler, with most of Eastern Europe behind him, to invade the USSR. (*Lubianka* B, No. 365; Leibowitz)

Japan, Italy and Germany had a mutual defense treaty and an "Anti-Comintern" pact, both directed expressly against the USSR. All the European border countries -- Poland, Rumania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania -- were fascist-style military dictatorships. A 1938 Japanese attack at Lake Khasan cost the Red Army about 1,000 dead. The next year a far more serious Japanese assault was repelled by the Red Army at Khalkin-Gol. Soviet casualties were about 17,000, including almost 5,500 killed -- no small war. As it turned out, this war was decisive, and the Japanese never messed with the Soviets again. But the Soviet government could not know this in advance. (*Rossiia I SSSR v Voynakh*)

After 1938 the Stalin government did not try again to implement the democratic electoral system of the 1936 Constitution. Did this failure reflect a continued stalemate between the Stalin leadership and the First Secretaries on the Central Committee? Or an estimate that, with war rapidly approaching, further efforts towards democracy would have to await more peaceful times? The evidence available so far does not permit a firm conclusion.

However, once Beria had replaced Yezhov as head of the NKVD (formally, in December 1938; in practice, perhaps a few weeks earlier) a continuous stream of rehabilitations took place. Beria liberated over 100,000 prisoners from camps and prisons. Trials followed of NKVD men accused of torture and extra-judicial executions. (Thurston 128-9)

End of Part One
Go to Part Two in this issue.

Notes

1 Leon Trotsky's version of Soviet history preceded Khrushchev's, and has dovetailed into it as a kind of "left" version of the latter, though little credited outside Trotskyist circles. Both Khrushchevite and Trotskyist accounts portray Stalin in an extremely negative light; the word "demonize" would scarcely be an exaggeration. On Trotsky, see McNeal.

2 The widespread use of the term "terror" to characterize the period of Soviet history from roughly mid-1937 to 1939-40 can be attributed to an uncritical acceptance of Robert Conquest's highly tendentious and unreliable 1973 work *The Great Terror*. The term is both inaccurate and polemical. See Robert W. Thurston, "Fear and Belief in the USSR's 'Great Terror': Respose To Arrest, 1935-1939." *Slavic Review* 45 (1986), 213-234. Thurston responded to, and critiqued, Conquest's attempt to defend the term in "On Desk-Bound Parochialism, Commonsense Perspectives, and Lousy Evidence: A Reply to Robert Conquest." *Slavic Review* 45 (1986), 238-244. See also Thurston, "Social Dimensions of Stalinist Rule: Humor and Terror in the USSR, 1935-1941." *Journal of Social History* 24, No. 3 (1991) 541-562; *Life and Terror* Ch. 5, 137-163.

3 Marxist-Leninist political thought rejects capitalist "representative democracy" as essentially a smokescreen for elite control. Many non-Marxist political thinkers agree. For one example, see Lewis H. Lapham (editor of *Harper's Magazine*), "Lights, Camera, Democracy! On the conventions of a make-believe republic," *Harper's Magazine*, August 1996, 33-38.

4 Quoted by Yuri Zhukov, "Zhupel Stalina," *Komsomolskaia Pravda* Nov. 5 2002. Prof. Getty confirmed this in an email to me.

5 The Party's name was changed to Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1952.

6 Yenukidze, an old revolutionary, fellow Georgian, and friend of Stalin's, had long occupied a high position in the Soviet government and never been associated with any of the Opposition groups of the '20s. At this time he was also in charge of the Kremlin Guard. Within a few months he was one of the first to be exposed as a member of the plan for a "palace coup" against the Stalin leadership. Zhukov (*KP* 14 Nov. 02) notes that this must have been especially upsetting to Stalin.

7 Part II, Chapter 3, Article 9 of The Soviet Constitution of 1924, the one in force at this time, gave urban dwellers a far greater influence in society -- one Soviet delegate to 25,000 city and town voters, and one delegate to 125,000 country voters. This was in conformity to the far greater degree of support for socialism among workers, and with the Marxist concept of the state as the dictatorship of the proletariat.

8 This is actually not a law but a "decision of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars" -- i.e. of the legislative and executive branches of government. The fact that it is commonly called a "law" even in scholarship simply shows that most of those who refer to it have not actually read it at all. It is printed in

Tragediia Sovetskoy Derevni. Kollektivizatsiia I Raskulachivanie. Documenty I Materialy. 1927-1939. Tom 3. Konets 1930-1933 (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2001), No. 160, pp. 453-4, and in *Sobranie zakonov i rasporiazhenii Raboche-Krest'ianskogo Pravitel'stva SSSR, chast' I, 1932*, pp. 583-584.. My thanks to Dr. G·bor T. Rittersporn for this last citation.

9 To build up the economy as quickly as possible after the devastation of the Civil War and subsequent famine, the Bolsheviks permitted capitalism to flourish and encouraged profit-seeking businessmen, though under government scrutiny. This was called the New Economic Policy.

10 Stalin, "Report to 17th P.C.," 704, 705, 706, 716, 728, 733, 752, 753, 754, 756, 758.

11 This is not widely known, nor its significance understood. Our view of Stalin has been largely shaped by those who hated him (McNeal 87). Stalin had been an excellent student at the seminary in Tblisi, Georgia, to which his mother had sent him. Devoting his life from his teenage years to the working-class revolutionary movement, he had never had the opportunity for higher education. But he was highly intelligent, and a voracious reader whose learning ranged from philosophy to technical subjects like metallurgy. Contemporary records attest to his attention to details and thorough knowledge of many technical areas. A Russian scholar who has studied Stalin's library gives impressive figures: 20,000 volumes at Stalin's dacha after the war; many of the 5,500 taken to the Institute of Marxism-Leninism after his death are annotated and underlined. (Ilizarov). Roy Medvedev, who hates Stalin, grudgingly admits Stalin's considerable reading. (Medevedev, "Lichnaia")

Many of the people whom he picked as his closest associates reflected this same dedication to self-improvement. Sergei Kirov, Leningrad Party leader and close ally of Stalin's who was assassinated in 1934, was noted for his wide reading in literature. (Kirilina 175). "When Kirov was killed, experts from the investigation photographed everything that could aid the investigation including the top of Kirov's work desk. To the right lay H¸tte's engineering manual, on the left a pile of scientific and technical journals, the top title of which was 'Combustile Shale.' Wide indeed was the sphere of interests of this party worker -- as Stalin's was." (Mukhin *Ubiystvo* 625)

In 1924 Lavrenty Beria, fresh from several years of very dangerous underground revolutionary work, some of it as a Bolshevik infiltrator in violent anti-communist Caucasian nationalist groups, wrote his Party autobiography. His purpose in listing his deeds -- he had been awarded the rank of general at the age of 20 -- was to plead, not for a cushy job, as most "Old Bolsheviks" demanded and usually got, but to be allowed to return to his engineering studies, so he could make a contribution to the building of a communist society. (*Beria: Konets Kar'ery*, 320-325)

12 Thurston, Chapters 2 through 4, is the best single summary, as of the early '90s, of the evidence concerning the Moscow Trials. This article will not deal directly with these trials, the trial and execution of Marshal Tukhachevsky and other top-ranking military leaders in June 1937, or the interrelationship among all the anti-Soviet conspiracies alleged in them. As documents from the Soviet archives make clear, Stalin and other top Soviet leaders were convinced that the conspiracies existed, and the charges at the Moscow Trials, plus those against the military leaders, were, at least in large part, accurate.

13 Getty notes that CC members pointedly refused to respond to Zhdanov's speech, putting the Chair, Andreev, into confusion ("Excesses"124). Zhukov places less emphasis on this, as Eikhe and other First Secretaries did reply at the next session, while emphasizing the struggle against "enemies." (*Inoy* 345)

14 For the Resolution, see Zhukov, Inoy 362-3; Stalin, Zakliuchitel'noe. Like the resolution (which remains unpublished), Stalin's speech touches only very briefly on the subject of "enemies," and even then to warn the CC against "beating" everyone who had once been a Trotskyist. Stalin insists that there are "remarkable people" among former Trotskyists, specifically naming Feliks Dzerzhinsky.

15 This volume (*Genrikh IAgoda*) consists mainly of investigators' interrogations of Yagoda and a few of his associates, and Yagoda's confessions of involvement in the conspiracy to carry out a *coup* against the Soviet government; Trotsky's leadership of the conspiracy; and, in general, all that Yagoda confessed to in the 1938 Trial. There is no indication that these confessions were other than genuine. The volume's editors deny that any of the facts cited in the interrogations are accurate, and declare the interrogations themselves "falsified." But they do not give any evidence that this is the case. Jansen and Petrov, p. 226 n. 9, though very anti-Stalin, cite this volume as evidence and without comment. Furthermore, there is good evidence that this was so in fact -- that these conspiracies did exist, that the confessions given at the public trials were genuine rather than coerced, and that the major charges against the defendants were true. Another large volume of primary documents published in 2004 contains a great many NKVD reports of conspiracies and texts of interrogations (see *Lubianka* B). The most plausible explanation for the existence of all this evidence is that some of it, at least, is true.

16 Called the *klubok*, or "tangle," by the NKVD investigators at the time and by Russian historians today.

17 No transcript of the June 1937 Plenum has ever been published. Some authors have claimed that no transcript was kept. However, Zhukov quotes extensively from some archival transcript unavailable to others.

18 The order for setting up a "troika" in Eikhe's Western Siberian region exists. Eikhe's request has not been found, but he must have made such a request, either in writing or orally. See Zhukov, "Repressii" 23, n. 60; Getty, "Excesses" 127, n. 64.

19 Getty, Excesses 131-134 discusses some statistics about this. See Order No.00447.

20 The sample ballot is reproduced in Zhukov; *Inoy*, 6th illustration.

21 As late as February 1, 1956, less than four weeks before his "Secret Speech" to the XX Party Congress, Khrushchev was still referring to Yezhov as "undoubtedly not to blame, an honest man." *Reabilitatsia: Kak Eto Bylo. Mart 1953-Febral' 1956* (Moscow, 2000), p. 308.

22 His resignation was not formally accepted until November 25, 1938; see Lubianka B Nos. 344 and 364.

23 Khrushchev requested "to execute 20,000 people", Zhukov, *KP* 3 Dec. 02. Yakovlev's criticism of Khrushchev's massive expulsions is quoted above. Eikhe was arrested in October 1938, tried, convicted, and executed in February 1940. According to

Khrushchev, Eikhe repudiated his confession, saying he had given it after being beaten (i.e. tortured). Zhukov's analysis suggests that the real reason for Eikhe's fate may have been his leading role in the mass executions of 1937-38. See Jansen and Petrov, 91-2. The Politburo and January 1938 Plenum began to attack party secretaries who victimized rank-and-file members (Getty, *Origins* 187-8). The full record of Eikhe's investigation and trial is still classified. A desire to deflect attention and blame away from himself and his fellow First Secretaries of the time is one of the bases of Khrushchev's lies in his "secret speech."

24 Getty ("Excesses" 132) cites evidence that 236,000 executions were authorized by "Moscow," meaning the Stalin leadership, but that over 160% of that number, or 387,000 people, were in fact executed by local authorities.

25 At the 1938 Moscow Trial Yagoda confessed to involvement in the plot for a *coup d'Ètat* against the Soviet government, to the murders of Maxim Gorky and his son, and other heinous crimes, but vigorously rejected the prosecution's accusation that he was guilty of espionage. The fact that the charge of espionage was still raised over a year after Yagoda had been arrested shows, at least, that the Soviet government thought he might have given such information to a foreign enemy (Germany, Japan, Poland). As the head of the Ministry of the Interior, including the secret police and border police, Yagoda would have been able to do incalculable harm to Soviet security if he had given information to foreign governments

26 Thurston has the best discussion in English of this in *Life and Terror* 128 ff.

Additional Notes

Note on Yuri Zhukov's work:

To date there has been one extended scholarly attack on Zhukov's thesis -- that by Prof. Irina V. Pavlova, "1937: Vybory kak mistifikatsiia, terror kak real'nost'," *Voprosy Istorii* 10, 2003 19-36. Pavlova is a strident anti-communist of the "totalitarianism" school whose ideological hostility to communism undermines her historical research. For example, she has lied about Getty's research in order to try to discredit him. Pavlova is writing propaganda, not history.

Pavlova refers only to Zhukov's articles in *KP*; she wrote it before the publication of *Inoy Stalin*. Pavlova's criticism relies on the assumption that the Moscow Trials and that of Tukhachevskii et al. were frame-ups, and the whole constitutional and electoral campaigns a deliberate "cover" for this repression.

Pavlova also asserts that, because the Supreme Soviet did not have real political power in 1936, contested elections for it would not have given it any power either. If by "power" Pavlova means the ability to unseat the Bolshevik Party from its dominant position in the USSR and to undo socialism, she is undoubtedly right: surely Stalin had no intention of allowing a counter-revolution through constitutional means. Nor is this permitted in any

bourgeois democratic country. But if she means "power" to influence state policies and exert pressure, within limits, on the specific social policies and on the Bolshevik Party itself -- that is, the kind of powers determined by elections in bourgeois democracies -- then she cannot possibly be right.

Note on Iuri Mukhin, *Ubiystvo Stalina i Beriia*:

This book of Mukhin's is often dismissed by those unsympathetic to his conclusions on the grounds that he has made remarks that can be construed as anti-semitic. It should be noted that Mukhin makes remarks opposing anti-semitism in this same book. This paper does not draw upon any of the passages in which anti-semitic statements can be alleged.

Mukhin has also taken eccentric positions on some subjects not dealt with in this book. I do not draw upon any of those works either.

The same thing could, and should, be said when anti-communist scholars are cited -- the fact of their anti-communist prejudices does not mean that they cannot, on occasion, have some valuable insights. And, of course, anti-communism is normally closely aligned with anti-semitism. Neither a communist nor Jewish, Mukhin shows some hostility to both, but is neither a conventional anti-communist nor a conventional anti-semite.

Mukhin's analysis of primary and secondary sources is often very sharp, and I use, and cite, it where I find it helpful. Naturally, citation of those of Mukhin's analyses that the author thinks are useful does not imply agreement to parts of his analysis which are not cited. Nor is Mukhin responsible for any use I have made of his research..

I have checked every reference made by Mukhin and all other scholars cited here, except in the case of primary sources available only to those who work in the archives.

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