

Translated extract from

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Verbrannte Erde.
Stalins Herrschaft der Gewalt

C.H. Beck Verlag
München 2012
ISBN 978-3-406-63254-9

S. 9-12, 308-317, S. 362-368

Jörg Baberowski
Scorched Earth – Stalin's rule of terror

Translated by Steph Morris

Pages 9-12

‘Nor should we neglect the obvious point that Stalin did it because Stalin liked it.’

Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread*

Foreword

“It should be a custom, it should be called a sign of culture, if someone who makes a statement, also refutes what he just stated,” wrote Martin Walser.¹ Novelists can get away with such statements, because their writing is determined by a narrative perspective they have first elected. Historians however, required to serve opinion, must deliver results which can be seen to be scientific. At any rate this is what readers expect who turn to history books in search of truths, the answers to unresolved questions. Historians know, when they decide to write a book, that they will be identified as the advocates of theses and opinions and will frequently be expected to propound familiar ideas. Apparently there are historians who have clung to the same opinions throughout their lives and who elevate these opinions to the status of eternal truths simply because they once wrote them down. Being right is stressful. Even more stressful if you wish to remain in the right without changing your opinion. I was therefore pleased when I was given the unexpected opportunity to say something new and discard some of my old ideas.

When I was asked, two years ago, if I would rework my 2003 book *Der Rote Terror. Die Geschichte des Stalinismus* (‘red terror – the history of Stalinism’) to prepare it for translation into English, I did not fully realise what I was getting myself into. I imagined it would be extremely simple. I would simply read through the text and add anything significant which had been said on the subject since 2003. But

the more I read, the greater my disappointment. It pained me to read my own writing; the sentences and style no longer pleased me and I felt that the reader would feel the same. My book had ceased to represent me. Everything I had since read, said and written about Stalin and Stalinism stood in curious contrast to the strong opinions which had given that book its structure. While I didn't want the current text to lack identity, under no circumstances did I want to repeat what I had said in 2003, because much of what I had said then, read like nonsense to me seven years later. The book needed to be better written and clearer and I realised immediately that to achieve this I would have to refute things I had once written. After only a few weeks I was no longer working on the old book; I was writing a new one.

I had spent several years since 2003 attempting to explain to myself why millions of people in the Soviet Union during the Stalin era were killed, driven from their homelands, incarcerated in camps or starved. In 2003 I still saw the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's theses as a revelation. The modern 'gardening state' with its drive to achieve clarity and overcome ambivalence, its obsession with order, was the cause of the monstrous genocidal excesses of the twentieth century. An attractive idea undoubtedly, but nothing more than an assertion.

The more I read about the violence of the Stalin era the more it became clear that my earlier interpretations of events would have to be revised. The documents I had read in the mean time left no doubt that Stalin was the instigator and orchestrator of these many millions of deaths. The communist experiment to create a new human being provided those in power with a justification for the murder of enemies and pariahs. It did not require them to commit mass murder however. Thus Stalin and his associates did not talk about the

bright new world when they met to discuss what should happen to the alleged enemies of their system. What they talked about were techniques for violence. Only in a state of emergency could the malignance and criminal energy of a psychopath like Stalin be given free reign. The dream of the communist salvation was drowned in the blood of millions because violence was uncoupled from motives and because for Stalin violence was subject only to the dictates of maintaining power. Ultimately it was solely about the recognition of his decision-making power; the dictator's power to be master of life or death. Only in an atmosphere of paranoia and mistrust could the despot succeed in forcing his will on others and making his world everyone's world.

I attempted to imagine what made up the world of Stalin and his associates and the more I read, the clearer it became that ideas do not kill. Violence is contagious. It cannot be ignored by someone who experiences it, irrespective of the motive with which someone enters a violent situation. It is impossible to understand violence via its beginning, only through its dynamics. For violence changes people; it turns the world upside down and destroys the trust needed to live with others in a society. But it is also the elixir of life for those amoral people who authorise themselves to carry out acts others only dare to imagine. You only have to try to see the world with the eyes of Stalin and things which we could never imagine doing become normality. That is the subject of this book.

Why do we write books at all? Could we not seek other challenges in life? Anyone who writes knows that in the end only a few people will read the things you were so determined to say. This is missing the point however. Anyone who writes is involved in soliloquy and will learn more about themselves as a writer than about the object of their writing. This violence

robbed me of my sleep; it disturbed me so much that some days I wished I didn't have to return to writing this book. And yet writing about life amid violence filled me with a feeling of profound gratefulness. There has been no country where class differences were worse, where the privileges of the ruling caste were greater, no country where people were forced to live in such in such fear, as the Soviet Union. I, on the other hand, had never had to experience what its victims had to experience. "The lesson taught by this type of experience," Arthur Koestler wrote, looking back, "when put into words, always appears under the dowdy guise of perennial commonplaces: that man is a reality, mankind an abstraction; that men cannot be treated as units in operations of political arithmetic because they behave like the symbols for zero and the infinite, which dislocate all mathematical operations; that the end justifies the means only within very narrow limits; that ethics is not a function of social utility, and charity not a petty-bourgeois sentiment but the gravitational force which keeps civilisation in its orbit."² And it could be added that we are fortunate to live within a legal system in which people are treated as equal regardless of differences between them, where the freedom of one person is reconciled with the freedom of another. Anyone who has lived, even for a short time, in a society consumed by distrust and violence will immediately grasp that these achievements of civilisation protect us from one another. We should be grateful for this, every day.

V. DICTATORSHIP OF TERROR

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6. The omnipotence of the despot

Stalin remained in control of proceedings at all times. He goaded Yezhov on to supply information on traitors and spies and provide him with lists of suspects. None of Stalin's cohorts spent as much time in the dictator's office in 1937 as Yezhov.³ Now, during the Great Purge, Stalin was occupied solely with the technicalities of violence and killing. He had ceased to govern at all, as he needed to complete his work of destruction. In June 1937, as the terror reached its peak, Yezhov delivered his master daily interrogation reports, NKVD dossiers, denunciation letters and lists with the names of state and party functionaries who should be shot. Stalin read everything put in front of him, underlined passages in the letters and noted in the margins what should to happen to the people named in the letters. He even decided which accusations should be levelled against each person he had decided should die. When the party leader of Tajikistan informed him in July 1937 that the head of the republic's central executive committee Shotemur had been expelled from the party due to 'counter-revolutionary activities', Stalin wrote by hand at the bottom of the letter, "Shotemur must be expelled from the party as an English spy." No-one will ever discover if Stalin read the lists of murder candidates meticulously and fully. It would have been out of character if he had signed them without checking that the NKWD had fulfilled its obligations conscientiously however. In some cases he changed the death sentence to imprisonment or deleted a name from the list. Mostly however he sent every person named on the lists to their death with a stroke of his pen. On 12 December 1938 alone Stalin decided that 3,167 people should die. Between February 1937 and October 1938 he

received 383 lists with the names of 44,477 leading state functionaries, state security and army officers, 38,955 of which were shot because Stalin had approved their murder.⁴

For Stalin it was not a question of whether the NKWD had convicted spies and traitors on the basis of evidence. Anyone could be a traitor and therefore the 'organs' needed to kill as many people as possible so that no potential enemy would escape with their life. Some people seemed to think, Stalin declared on 2 June 1937 in a speech to the military council, that an enemy could only be someone with another social background who had previously been on the side of Trotsky. This idea was of course wrong, un-Marxist and 'biological'. Was it not clear that Lenin had been an aristocrat, Engels an industrialist and Chernyshevsky the son of a priest. Felix Dzerzhinsky and Andrey Andreyev, who belonged to the politburo indeed, were once followers of Trotsky, but had never proved disloyal. Others however had rested on the laurels of their proletarian background yet still proved to be 'rogues'. People should not be judged by their background but by their actions.⁵ The message could not have been clearer: anyone could become an enemy now, workers and peasants along with aristocrats and kulaks, both followers of Stalin and friends of Trotsky. There was one way only out of this dilemma. The terror could know no boundaries; it would spread like cancer into the deepest recesses of Soviet society and no enemy would survive the great cleansing storm.

Stalin's absolute power grew out of this unbounded terror. With functionaries denouncing each other, consumed fear, he could play the role of master over life and death. He had largely ceased to call meetings of the central committee or politburo. He was the central committee now. He still got members of the politburo to sign sometimes, when issuing another order for terror, but he dealt with such formalities using

circulation procedures. All important decisions were now made within a close circle, either in his office or at his dacha in Kuntsevo in the suburbs of Moscow where members of the politburo met to eat and drink with the dictator. By mid 1937 Stalin could do things he had previously needed to agree with his subordinates. He ceased writing letters, because everyone knew what had to be done to satisfy him. The despot now need only make a hint or a gesture and his henchmen would leap up and kill anyone around him he couldn't stand any more. He no longer even needed to provide justification. When Stalin decided to remove Janis Rudzutaks from the politburo and have him killed he no longer required anyone's approval. Stalin had always enjoyed a good relationship with Rudzutaks, Molotov recalled. But suddenly he issued an order for him to be shot.⁶

Stalin demanded loyalty from his aides; they were to subject themselves unconditionally to him, even if it meant total self-sacrifice. Anyone who was disloyal had effectively broken the code of male honour sworn in the kind of alliances Stalin knew from his childhood home of Georgia. Friendship and personal loyalty had a different resonance to him than to the 'European' Bolsheviks. His notions of friendship were formed in an uncertain world of war and violence, where to mistrust people you did not know and could not control demonstrated intelligence. In a society of insecurity such as this, the only chance open to people was to secure friendship by demonstrating loyalty. "We must respect each other and be able to rely on each other," Stalin wrote to Ordzhonikidze in September 1931. "We cannot demand that people respect us; we must also respect other people. I am talking about the members of our governing elite, which is not formed the way it is by accident and which must remain unanimous and indivisible. Only then will everything succeed."⁷

Anyone who was disloyal was stripped of their esteem

because they had betrayed the most important virtue, the unshakeable friendship between men. Stalin's model for government was the gang of thieves, who orientated themselves on the rules of the 'honourable society'. In summer 1932 Stalin invited the German communist Heinz Neumann to dinner at his country house near Sochi with several of his minions. Here he enacted a grotesque piece of theatre. Neumann would certainly never forget the experience. His wife recalled: "Many of the guests had already gathered in front of the villa when an elderly Caucasian stepped onto the terrace to be greeted heartily by Stalin, who then introduced him, in line with his duty as host, with the words: 'This is comrade X, my assassin...'. The assembled company looked up, astonished and bewildered, whereupon Stalin explained to his guests in an affable tone that this guest had recently hatched a terrorist plot against him with the sole aim of murdering him. Thanks to the vigilance of the GPU this assassination had not succeeded and the attacker had been condemned to death. He, Stalin, had however decided it was important that this old man, who had acted only out of nationalist infatuation, be pardoned, and had invited him here to Mazesta so that he understood that all animosity had been buried once and for all... The old man stood in front of the crowd of guests throughout this lengthy explanation, his eyes lowered."⁸

Stalin could have people killed, and he could grant them life. It depended entirely on his mood whether he opted for one or the other. And everyone who witnessed this staged presentation knew that their fate also lay in Stalin's hands. In Moscow five years later, in November 1937, Neumann was shot. Stalin was now master of life and death, and once there was no-one left who dared disagree with him his friends became clients who had no choice but to subjugate themselves to the rules of their patron. The Stalinist ideology of loyalty

became an ideology of fealty; the bonds of masculinity and fidelity became an ideal order.

Where loyalty is demanded, distrust and suspicion will also spring up. For naturally Stalin could not expect his aides to turn themselves in voluntarily and liquidate themselves as individuals. In order that they did what he required of them, he played them off against each other, entrusted them with the execution of ghastly crimes and set them tests. “Stalin was extremely vigilant and highly cautious,” Kaganovich recalled forty years later, explaining to the historian Kumanev why he had betrayed his own brother to Stalin. Mikoyan noted that Stalin had not even trusted him, an old comrade from the Caucasus. When he was overseeing the imprisonment of Armenian communists in Yerevan in summer 1937 in front of the central committee, something unfortunate occurred. “Beria was suddenly standing in the hall, a complete surprise to me. He came in while I was giving a speech from the rostrum. [...] I thought Stalin had ordered him to come here and arrest me during the meeting. I hope I was still able to hide my unease and that he didn’t notice anything.”⁹

Only those prepared to deliver victims to the dictator could win his trust. Stalin had the brothers of Ordzhonikidze and Kaganovich imprisoned and killed; both held high positions in the Soviet economic bureaucracy. He had Nikita Krushchev’s daughter-in-law imprisoned, along with Otto Kuusinen, son of the Finnish communist leader and Comintern functionary, and his secretary Poskrebysheva’s wife. Even the wife of Kalinin, nominal head of state, was taken off to a camp on Stalin’s orders because she had made a derogatory comment about him. In 1938 he drove Nikolai Yezhov’s wife to suicide, shortly before the all-powerful NKWD leader himself fell from grace. Finally, after the war, even Molotov was forced to make such a sacrifice. Stalin issued an order for the wife of his

closest ally to be arrested and taken to a camp. Only after the tyrant's death could she return to her husband. Kalinin, Kaganovich and Molotov passed this test, immediately consenting to the imprisonment of their wives and relatives. They acknowledged Stalin's right to test them in this way. "You have," Kaganovich once wrote to Stalin, "not only an official, political right, but also a comrade's moral right to give someone who you have formed politically orders, including myself, in other words, your student."¹⁰ Anyone who withstood the psychological violence the dictator inflicted on all around him sent a clear message that fidelity to his leader meant more to him than family ties and loyalties. Only those who were not unhinged by such terror could remain in Stalin's circle of friends.

No-one knew in advance what Stalin would do and how he would behave towards his aides, friends and relatives. The Stalinist system of despotism was based on this inability to anticipate or predict what he would do. Stalin even gave orders for the murder of close family members. Stanislaw Redens, one of the leading NKWD officers in the Soviet Union and husband of Stalin's sister-in-law Anna Alliluyewa, was murdered on the dictator's orders for no obvious reason. Sometimes however he seemed to have remembered childhood friends from the Caucasus, sending them money or saving their lives. In 1937 Stalin's friend from his Georgian youth, Sergey Kavtaradze, was arrested. He was accused together with Budu Mdivani of planning Stalin's murder. His wife Sofia was also arrested and, like Kavtaradze, brutally tortured in prison. Mdivani, who had belonged to Stalin's circle of friends, was shot; Kavtaradze on the other hand was granted his life because the despot had drawn a horizontal line next to his name on a list of people condemned to death.

In 1939 Stalin remembered his old friend and had him fetched out of the Lubyanka. Kavtaradze became deputy foreign minister and later Soviet ambassador to Romania. In Stalin's empire you could be condemned to death one day and a minister the next. However it was mostly the other way around. If we choose to believe Simon Sebag Montefiore, who spoke to Kavtaradze's daughter Maya, we have to imagine Stalin as a callous psychopath. When the Kavtaradzes moved into their new flat in Moscow they received a late-night visit. Stalin and Beria were standing at the door. They ordered Georgian delicacies from the Aragvi Restaurant, drank and ate till the early morning. Stalin asked Kavtaradze's wife who had tortured her so cruelly, as her hair had gone completely white in the short period of her imprisonment. He sat his friend's daughter on his lap and sang. "There he was, short and pockmarked. Now he was singing!" Maya was enchanted and horrified at the same time. "He was so kind, so gentle – he kissed me on the cheek and looked into his honey-coloured, hazel, gleaming eyes, but I was so anxious." Kavtaradze himself remembers that when Stalin summoned him after his release from prison, his parting words had been: "And still you wanted to kill me." A shiver ran down his spine.¹¹

Robert Tucker claims that if Stalin had written his memoirs the result would have been nothing more than a new edition of the *Short Course* on the history of the communist party.¹² There is no evidence however that Stalin was the kind of perpetrator governed by ideological dictates when he ordered people to be tortured or killed. Stalin was simply a murderer who took pleasure in destruction and hurt, who used the ideological framework the canonical texts provided him with to justify his crimes in public. In the inner circle of power, however, he talked about techniques for repression. If Stalin had written his memoirs it would probably have been a

fictitious story of conspiracies and traitors. It would not have revealed anything about his intentions and beliefs. Stalin never revealed what he actually thought in public. Such knowledge is not in any case necessary to understand Stalinist violence.

Stalin's actions followed a pattern which both his contemporaries and successors could easily recognise. They can be interpreted in a variety of ways, but they can definitely be identified. And this is all that matters.

Stalin was violent criminal whose murderous excesses continually increased because each crime unavoidably led to the next. Anyone who had once been imprisoned and tortured had little chance of being released. Survivors would have represented visible evidence of Stalinist cruelty; they would have reminded the dictator that there were people who would never forget what had been done to them. Stalin never forgot. And he assumed that other people felt the same as he did. In his homeland a murderer could assume that their victim's relatives would take revenge. A feud could only be avoided if the perpetrator killed everyone in his opponents' family or rendered them unable to fight. Stalin saw his dealings with enemies of the people and their relatives in exactly the same way. Genghis Kahn allegedly said that a victor cannot not live in peace if he has not killed those he has conquered. Stalin underlined this sentence when he read it in a history book. In June 1937 he provided an example of the logic that each crime led to the next when he gave orders to shoot all of former NKWD leader Genrikh Yagoda's subordinates as well as all NKWD members associated with him at the Dmitrovsk labour camp. Their corpses were to be flung in mass grave close to Yagoda's dacha so that even in death it was clear that clients would share the fate of their patron, for better or worse.

When Stalin raised his glass at a gathering of his most trusted associates in November 1937, the anniversary of the

October Revolution, he talked of destroying whole extended families. The head of the Comintern, Georgi Dimitrov, entrusted what Stalin had said to his diary: “And we will destroy every one of these enemies, even if they are old Bolsheviks, we will wipe out their extended family along with their immediate family. Anyone who attacks the unity of the socialist state with his thoughts or deeds will be destroyed mercilessly. To the destruction of all enemies, themselves and their families, right to the end!”¹³

During the Purge the system of hostage taking and the liability of kin became an integral part of the system of fear. Not only were prisoners’ relatives taken hostage in order to force information out of them; even after the victim’s death the wives, children and other relatives continued to suffer. On 19 June 1937 Stalin ordered Yezhov to deport the wives of Radek, Bukharin, Rudzutak, Yagoda, Tukhachevsky and other imprisoned generals out of Moscow immediately. A few days later, on 5 July, he gave orders for the wives of all Trotskyites and spies imprisoned for ‘treason’ to be incarcerated in the labour camps Narym in Siberia and Turgai in Kazakhstan for a period of between five and eight years. Their children were to be sent to the NKWD orphanages. In November 1937 Yezhov supplied Stalin for the first time with a list not only of imprisoned communists, army officers and NKWD employees but also with a list naming their wives. Yezhov accompanied the list with the request that Stalin also sanction the execution of the wives. As anticipated, Stalin gave his approval.

Over time Stalin’s aides internalised this system and it became normality. “Why was the repression extended to women and children, the journalist Felix Chuyev asked Molotov. “Why do you think?” Molotov replied. “They needed to be isolated in some way. Otherwise they would have served as channels for all kinds of grievances.”¹⁴

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10. Violence and its situation

Ideas do not kill. And not everyone who dreams of killing is actually capable of turning their dreams into actions. Violent people, experienced at killing, need ideas only to legitimise their desire to murder in front of people who do not practice violence. Neither Stalin nor Yezhov were guided by Marxism and its promises when they gave orders for people to be imprisoned, tortured and killed. Certainly Stalin and some of his aides saw the use of bloody terror as indispensable, as a surgical intervention into a society they believed they could not otherwise control, but such violence was only possible because Stalin and his aides saw it as a natural means for securing power. This certainty did not derive from the texts of European Marxism but from the perpetrators' experiences and conditioning. Stalin was a man of violence who did what he did to other people with cool calculation, because playing with death was part of his technique for holding power. He had not lost control of himself, neither did he suffer from depression or hallucinations. And it should never be forgotten that he took pleasure in destroying people. "One thing is certain," the prominent Polish Communist Roman Werfel recalled in the 1970s, "Stalin was malicious and devious – extremely! Here is an example. On the outskirts of Moscow there was an estate for old Bolsheviks, where everyone had their own little Finnish-style house, Stalin too; back then he had still lived modestly. His neighbour was Wera Kostrzewa. One day Wera was standing in her garden pruning her roses. Stalin came up to her and said, 'what delightful roses.' That same day she was arrested and later shot. Stalin knew all about it. When our delegation visited him in 1944, however, he suddenly said, 'there were so many bright people in your group, a certain

Wera Kostrzewa, for instance. Do you know what happened to her?”¹⁵

Anyone who wounds and kills a lot of people must reckon with revenge. Violence destroys trust and creates uncertainty; ultimately it undermines the perpetrator's sovereignty. Stalin was unable to cease being a perpetrator of violence because with no more fear his power would be endangered. For this reason he distrusted even his closest aides, surrounded himself with armed bodyguards and secured his dacha with multiple fences. He forced his minions to test his food and made sure he chose his domestic staff personally. At some point the violence justified itself for Stalin because it ensured his absolute rule. He would probably not even have understood the accusation that he was an unscrupulous murderer. How else can we explain the fact that he not only signed every terror order himself, but also retained them in his archives?

The space Stalin inhabited was a state of emergency. This gave him the chance to turn his political space into a space of violence. It could also be said that Stalin was the creator and beneficiary of this state of emergency as it not only enabled him to terrorise society but also to discipline his entourage through the controlled use of violence. Stalin was not only a man who used violence strategically however. He had no qualms about killing people and he despised weaklings who talked about violence but were not prepared to deal with the consequences. Even during the civil war he had burned villages to the ground and had people shot for no reason because he enjoyed inflicting violence on defenceless people. He had never been so happy as he was during the civil war, when he was able simply to be Stalin.¹⁶ “There are weaklings,” he said at a reception on the anniversary of the October Revolution in November 1938, “they are scared of grenades and crawl around

on the ground. We laugh at such people.” Where he came from violence broke out even for very minor reasons. Family-revenge feuds, violent disputes between peasant villages and attacks by robbers were all part of everyday life for the young Stalin. The only people who could survive such an environment were those who threatened violence and were able if necessary to assert themselves using violence against their opponents. Without friends and protégés however such threats remained empty. Men needed friends they could rely on at all costs, above all when they had committed acts of violence together.¹⁷

The significance of friendship and honour was different in Stalin’s Georgian homeland compared to the Russian centre of the empire. His idols were the leaders of robber gangs, not only because they were persecuted by the autocratic state and its officials, but because they embodied his adolescent ideal of masculinity. Men were warriors who bonded with other warriors against their enemies and subjugated themselves unconditionally to their leaders. Their sense of self-worth was dependent on honour, which determined a man’s status. Under this society’s code of honour treachery was punished with ostracism or death. Anyone who failed as a man lost his honour, ceased to be a man. Stalin’s notion of leadership resembled the mafia’s code of honour. The Italian journalist Roberto Saviano wrote that in the land of the Camorra where he was born, more people are murdered than anywhere else in Europe; business and brutal violence are inextricably linked there and amount to the same thing when it comes to power. You constantly think the apocalypse has begun. There is no peace even for a moment, no chance to catch your breath; it is a war in which your every action can mean your end, any difficulty become a weakness, a war in which you must conquer everything, as brutally as if flesh were torn from the bone.¹⁸

If we try to see the world through Stalin's eyes things which we could not even imagine doing or confronting suddenly become normality. It was no different for Stalin's friends, who learned to live with violence. Ordzhonikidze, Beria, Mikoyan, Voroshilov, Molotov and Kaganovich understood the significance of power and a man with a gun in Stalin's world. They had internalised the dictator's approach to violence to the extent that they were no longer able to imagine any other reality. At a celebration on 8 November 1938, the public holiday marking the revolution, Voroshilov declared that if, following Lenin's death, it had not been Stalin but his opponents Trotsky and Zinoviev who had emerged victorious from the power struggle within the party, "they would have slaughtered us all."¹⁹

The Bolsheviks were men of violence who staged the macho cult of violence publicly. They surrounded themselves with the insignia of military violence, wore military boots, black leather jackets, uniforms and holsters. No-one had ever seen Stalin without boots and a military cap on. The cult of violence also included brutalising language and scorning tolerance, sympathy and empathy. It became a normality in which perpetrators and victims were established. A few weeks after the execution of Zinoviev and Kamenev the Chekist Karl Pauker, commander of Stalin's bodyguards, demonstrated in Stalin and Yezhov's presence how Zinoviev had begged for his life when he was led to the execution room in the basement. Pauker got two bodyguards to drag him by his arms around the room Stalin and his circle were in, imitating Zinoviev's cries. "Hear, O Israel, our God is the only God," Pauker screamed in a Jewish accent raising both arms to the sky. Stalin and Yezhov jeered and while Pauker recreated the scene Stalin went into paroxysms of laughter. He clutched his belly and had to ask the bodyguards to stop.²⁰

Stalin had people who had been beaten and tortured paraded in front of him in his office, he gave instructions on how prisoners were to be beaten, and he beat his secretary Poskrebyshev. “How he beat me. He grabbed me by the hair and hit my head against the table,” Poskrebyshev told the writer Alekandr Tvardovsky . “Beat them, beat them,” Stalin wrote next to reports on imprisoned ‘enemies of the people’ placed on his desk. Stalin’s henchmen did not only take part in interrogations; they reached for a club themselves. Yezhov participated in tortures and shootings, he ordered the executioners to beat his predecessor Yagoda before they shot him. In March 1939 the cases from revolver cartridges were found in the drawer of his desk. Yezhov had written the names of prominent former Bolsheviks on the cartridge used to kill them. Nikita Krushchev remembered an encounter with Yezhov in 1937. There were blood stains on the NKWD leader’s shirt, the blood of ‘enemies of the people’ as Yezhov told him in explanation.

Lavrentiy Beria, Yezhov’s successor was also an unscrupulous perpetrator of violence, and surrounded himself with psychopaths and sadists who killed and tortured in his name. His cohorts from the Caucasus, Bogdan Kobulov, Avexti Rapava, and Juvelyan Sumbtov-Topuridze, who he furnished with influential posts in the NKWD, were brutal slaughterers, killers to whom no act of violence was too extreme. One of Beria’s underlings later recalled that he had given the NKWD executioners the instructions: “before you dispatch them, hit them in the face.” Kobulov and his aides tied the condemned men together with ropes and beat them with butt of their revolvers before shooting them. When Robert Eiche, who had once been a member of the politburo and party leader for Siberia, was lead to his execution, Beria instructed his aides Rodos and Esaulov to abuse the condemned man. In front of

Beria they beat him with clubs, kicked him, and one of his eyes was dislodged from his face. Then they shot him. Beria killed his opponents and competitors; he shot people with his own revolver, raped under-aged girls, but never made the mistake of deceiving his lord and master. Stalin had always known how to avail himself of such executors.²¹

What choice did men such as Yefim Yevdokimov, Nikolai Yezhov or Lavrentiy Beria have? They had murdered on Stalin's behalf and instilled fear in his aides. Without the dictator's protection they would have been helpless in the face of the elite's revenge. No-one pitied Yezhov's fate, no-one missed Beria when Krushchev had him shot in June 1953. Stalin was an ingenious strategist of power. As long as criminals and psychopaths were killing in his name he never need fear anyone: neither his aides, who lived in fear of the Chekists, nor the Chekists, who needed their patron's protection more than anyone.

The Bolshevik revolution was an attempt to subjugate the people of the empire, to control and change them. Steelworks and tanks were to replace huts and icons as peasants became communists. Under Stalinist conditions, however, the attempt to create the new human being by physically destroying the old led to organised mass murder. The dream of the new human being mutated into a nightmare. Peasants became slaves; socialism degenerated into despotism.

"I assumed," recalled Jakub Berman, who belonged to the leading circle of the Polish communist party after World War II, "that the terror of the Great Ppurge was a side effect of the search for a way out of the incredibly difficult international situation the Soviet Union was then placed in, and perhaps also a result of Stalin's contrariness and inner conflicts. Perhaps also of his pathological distrust, which took the form of a psychological disorder. I did not look for excuses for this

situation but accepted it as a tragic web of fate, generating thousands of unfortunate victims.” He searched in desperation for any sense to the colossal murders and tried to persuade himself that “you can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs.” Berman was clearly unable ever to make the leap of faith and believe what he tried to convince himself every day.²²

The survivors were left with nothing except the hope that the madness they had fallen victim to had served a higher purpose. Not everyone was consoled by this hope however. At the end of the Soviet Union the fifty-nine-year-old Moscow architect Anna looked back with fury. Her father had been shot, her mother sent to a camp, she herself had survived the horrors of an NKWD children’s home. What purpose could this nightmare have served? “We are fascinated by evil. [...] It is like hypnosis [...]. There are dozens of books about Hitler, dozens of books about Stalin – about what he was like with his family, about the women he loved, what wine he drank, what he preferred to read [...], it interests us even today! The devil’s favourite wine [...], his favourite cigarettes [...]. Who were these men – Tamerlane, Genghis Khan? [...] What kind of people were they? And the millions like them but much smaller who did terrible things. Only a few of them were driven mad by it. All the others lived totally normal lives. Kissed women, took the bus, bought toys for their children [...]. Everyone thought, it wasn’t me [...]. I didn’t hang people up by their feet and smash people’s brains out so they exploded against the ceiling. I didn’t stick a sharpened pencil into women’s nipples [...]. It wasn’t me; it was the system [...]. Even Stalin. [...] Even he always said, I am not the one who decides; it is the party. He said to his son, you think I am Stalin? No! That is Stalin! And he pointed to his picture on the wall. The machinery of death, the evil machinery, was in operation [...] for years. The logic was simple and ingenious: victim and executioner. With the

executioner in turn becoming a victim in the end. [...] That cannot have been conceived by a human being [...]. The wheel turns and no-one is guilty. [...] People alternate between good and evil throughout their lives. You either bore a pencil into someone's nipple or someone does it to you.”²³

Notes

¹ Martin Walser, “On Talking to Yourself: A Flagrant Attempt (2000)” in: Thomas A Kovach and Martin Walser *The Burden of the Past: Martin Walser on Modern German Identity: Texts, Contexts, Commentary* (New York/ Suffolk 2008), p. 121.

² Arthur Koestler, quoted in Richard H Crossman (ed.) *The God That Failed* (New York 2001), p. 68.

³ Anatolij A Cernobaev (ed.), *Na prieme u Stalina. Tetradi (žurnaly) zapiesj lic, priunajatych I.V. Stalinym* (1924-1953 gg., Moscow 2010), p. 197-228.

⁴ RGASPI; Fond 558, opis' 11, delo 57, l. 5; Petrov, *Kaderpolitik*, p. 24; Dimitrij A. Volkogonov, *Triumf i tragedija. Političeskij portret I. V. Stalina*, vol. 1, pp 576-577; Suvenirov, *Tragedija*, p 240.

⁵ RGASPI; Fond 558, opis' 11, delo 1120, ll. 28-44.

⁶ Čuev, *Molotov remembers*, pp. 274-275; Chlewnjuk, *Politbüro*, pp. 305-360.

⁷ RGASPI; Fond 558, opis' 11, delo 779, l. 23.

⁸ Margarete Buber-Neumann, *Von Potsdam nach Moskau. Stationen eines Irrweges*, Munich 2002, pp.274-275.

⁹ Kumanev, *Govorjat stalinskie narmkomy*, p. 105; Mikojan, *Tak bylo*, p. 583.

¹⁰ Chlewnjuk, *Stalin i Kaganovič. Perepiska*, p. 284; see also: Vadim S. Rogovin, *Partija rasstreljannyh*, (Moscow 1997), p. 34; Kumanev, *Rjadom so Stalinym*, pp. 80-82; Rasgon, *Nichts als die reine Wahrheit*, pp. 76-82; Mevedev, *Let History Judge*, pp. 547-548; Jansen/Petrov, *Stalin's Loyal Executioner*, pp. 170-171; Thurston, *Life*, p. 42.

¹¹ Montefiore, *Stalin: The court of the Red Tsar*, pp. 326-328; Torčinov/Leontjuk, *Vokrug Stalina*, pp. 236-237.

¹² Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, p. 539.

¹³ Dimitroff, *Diaries, Vol. 1*, p 162; Oleg V. Volobuev/Sergej V. Kulešov, *Očišćenie. Istorija i perestrojka. Publicističeskie zametki*, (Moscow 1989), p. 146; Petrov, *Kaderpolitik*, p. 24.

¹⁴ Semen S. Vilenskij (ed.), *Deti GULAGa 1918-1956*, (Moscow 2002), pp. 234-238, p. 242; Chaustov/Naumov, *Lubjanka. Staliin i glavnoe upravlenie gosbezopasnosti NKVD*, pp. 226, 238-239; Corinna Kuhr, "Kinder von «Volksfeinden» als Opfer des stalinistischen Terrors 1936-1938", in : Plaggenborg, *Stalinismus*, pp. 391-418.

¹⁵ Quoted in Termas Toranska, *Die da oben. Polnische Stalnikisten zum Sprechen gebracht*, (Cologne 1987), p 122.

¹⁶ Compare with the examples in: Service, *Stalin*, pp. 163-174.

¹⁷ RGASPI, Fond 558, opis' 11, delo 1122, l. 162.

¹⁸ Roberto Saviano, *Gomorrhah: Italy's other Mafia*, (New York, 2008); Tucker, *Stalin in Power*; Ronald G. Suny, "Beyond Psychohistory. The Young Stalin in Georgia", in: *Slavic Review* 50 (1991), pp. 48-58; Mikojan, *Tak bylo*, p. 354; Rieber, *Stalin. Man of the Borderlands*, pp. 1651-1691.

¹⁹ RGASPI, Fond 558, opis' 11, delo 1122, l. 162.

²⁰ Alexander Orlow, *Kreml-Gehimnisse*, (Würzburg 1956), p. 410.

²¹ Kirill aa. Stolyjarov, *Palač i žertvy*, (Moscow 1997), p. 264; Jurij V. Trifonov, "Zapiski sosedu", in: *Družba narodov* (1989), Nr. 10, p. 39; Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, p. 373; Andrej Sacharov, *Mein Leben*, Munich 1991, pp. 183-186; Torčinov/Leontjuk, *Vokrug Stalina*, pp. 257-258, 384; Dmitrij T. Šepilov, "Vospminanija", in: *Voprosy istorii* (1998), Nr. 4, p. 6; Jansen/Petrov, *Stalin's Loyal Executioner*, pp. 139, 152, 186, 199-201.

²² Quoted in: Toranska, *Die da oben*, p. 171.

²³ Alexijewitsch, *Henker und Beil*, p. 28.