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Stalinist Terror in the Donbas: A Note

In the history of the Soviet Union, political terror is undoubtedly one of the most incendiary issues.¹ This issue has provoked an outburst of national emotion, unleashed by Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost campaign. Even the hitherto sacred years of Lenin's rule are no longer immune to criticism and condemnation. Indeed, the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist party has made known Lenin's extreme cruelty towards the church and believers. This revelation is tantamount to dismantling "the Soviet myth that it was Stalin who initiated repression against the clergy and believers."²

There are still limits to the availability of sources, however. As V. V. Tsaplin, the director of the Central State Archive of the National Economy of the Soviet Union (TsGANKh SSSR) in Moscow, admits, the documents on political repression in the Soviet state archives have not been declassified.³ Consequently, all sorts of speculation on this hitherto forbidden subject circulate in the Soviet press and even scholarly publications, often drawing on western scholars' work. In the west, in turn, one may be tempted to believe that citations by the Soviets are authoritative.

While access to archival documents on terror is limited, the Soviet archives are not closed altogether. Soviet historians, who have had access to classified archival material, have published some informative articles on the extent of the terror under Stalin.⁴ The Committee for State Security (KGB), the successor to the notorious security police (OGPU-NKVD), also has recently published data on the victims of the state terror under Stalin. The KGB task force, working "carefully and painstakingly" with archival materials, has declared that from 1930 to 1953, 3,778,234 people (including foreigners) were indicted by judicial and extrajudicial organs for "counterrevolutionary and other state crimes"; of those, 786,098 people were sentenced to capital punishment and shot.⁵ As the KGB task force admits, these figures are still incomplete. Nor is

This note is part of a larger study of the Donbas. The author wishes to thank the British Council and the Moscow State Historical Archival Institute for facilitating his work in the USSR.

1. For the terror in the Stalin years, see Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), and the second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), J. Arch Getty, *The Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), Nicolas Werth, *Les proces de Moscou* (Brussels, 1987), and Gábor Tamás Rittersporn, *Simplifications staliniennes et complications soviétiques. Tensions sociales et conflits politiques en U.R.S.S. (1933-1953)* (Paris, 1988).

2. See Vera Tolz, "Another Blow to Lenin's Image," *Radio Liberty, Report on the USSR* 2: 18 (4 May 1990), pp. 4-6. Lenin's 19 March 1922 letter to the Politburo, which proposed to crush the church by taking advantage of the famine crisis, was published in *Izvestia TsK KPSS*, 1990, 4: 190-193.

3. "Perestroika v arkhivnom dele: po puti revoliutsii ili reform?" *Voprosy istorii KPSS*, 1990, 1: 57.

4. Note, for example, V. V. Tsaplin, "Statistika zhertv stalinizmu v 30-e gody," *Voprosy istorii*, 1989, 4; V. Zemskov's series of articles in the form of response to readers' questions in *Argumenty i fakty*, 1989, 38, 40, 1990; 5, and interviews with Zemskov, "'Arhipelag Gulag': glazami pisatelei i statistika"), *ibid.*, 1989, 45, and "Dokumenty tragicheskogo vremeni: arkhivy otkryvaiut tainy," *ibid.*, 1990, 35; V. Nekrasov, "Desiat 'zheleznykh' narkomov," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 29 September 1989; A. Dugin, "Gulag: otkryvaia arkhivy," *Na boevom postu*, 27 December 1989 (an abridged version appeared as "Gulag. Glazami istorika," *Soiuz* (Moscow), 1990, 9: 16); *idem.*, "Govoriat arkhivy: neizvestnye stranitsy GULAGA," *Sotsial'no-politicheskie nauki*, 1990, 7 (an abridged edition is "Stalinizm. Legendy i fakty," *Slovo*, 1990, 7); and F. B. Komal, "Voennye kadry nakanune voiny," *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal*, 1990, 2. Most of these articles are analyzed by Vera Tolz. "Publication of Archive Materials on Stalin's Terror," *Radio Liberty, Report on the USSR* 2: 32 (10 August 1990), and "Archives Yield New Statistics on the Stalin Terror," *ibid.* 2: 36 (7 September 1990). Information from closed (secret) funds is usually cited without any reference or as, for example, "kolleksiia TsGAORA." D. A. Volkogonov, *Triumf i tragediia. Politicheskii portret I. V. Stalina*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1989), also contains new information on the terror culled from various Soviet archives.

5. "Reabilitatsiia," *Pravitel'svennyi vestnik*, 1990, 7 (30): 11.

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it clear who is included in these figures. (For example, are all the dekulakized included?) The KGB announcement thus raises more questions than it answers.

The present research note is intended to provide some concrete data on the scale of terror in one particular area—the Donbas (Donets Basin) coalmining industry. These data are found in local newspapers and open archives of the TsGANKh SSSR in Moscow. How representative the Donbas is in this respect is open to question. Nor are these data likely to make a direct contribution to the ongoing controversy over “excess mortality” under Stalin.⁶ Yet they do afford a concrete view of the Stalinist purge in a specific locality in 1936–1938.

The Donbas was the major coalmining area located in the Donets region of the Ukrainian Republic and the Northern Caucasus of the Russian Republic. It accounted for 77.3 percent of the country’s coal production in 1929 and 60.8 percent in 1938.⁷ Political and social violence were not new to the Donbas. In the prerevolutionary period, the Donbas witnessed large-scale anti-Jewish pogroms, and during the civil war of 1918–1920 terror was perpetuated by both the Reds and the Whites. Even during the years of the New Economic Policy, there were staged show trials of “wreckers” in the mines. The famous Shakhty affair of 1928 led to the arrests of half of the Donbas engineers and technicians by mid-1931.⁸ The campaign for collectivization and dekulakization resulted in the dispossession and deportation or murder of untold numbers of peasants.⁹ In the grave famine crisis of 1932–1933, extraordinarily harsh punishments were again meted out to the Donbas population. According to the notorious 7 August 1932 law on “socialist property,” 301 people were shot and 8,728 were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment or forced labor, between 7 August 1932 and 1 May 1933.¹⁰ Simultaneously, the slump in coal production resulted in a savage attack against Communist managers (“saboteurs”), including expulsion from the party and arrest.¹¹ The onset of the Stakhanovite movement in 1935 contributed to the creation of a political atmosphere in which unprecedented political terror reigned in 1936–1938.¹²

A perusal of the Donbas newspaper, *Sotsialisticheskii Donbas*, suggests that massive terror (arrests, deportations, executions) lasted approximately from the summer of 1936 to the autumn of 1938, accentuated by several intensive campaigns against “enemies of the people.” Of course, this does not imply that terror did not begin until the summer of 1936, nor that it ended in the autumn of 1938, but rather that this was a distinctively violent period and came to be known generally as the time of the Great Terror.

In this period, the Donbas party leadership (which was politically responsible, among

6. For the most recent contributions, see note 23.

7. *Sotsialisticheskoe stroitel'stvo soiuza SSR (1933–1938 gg.). Statisticheskii sbornik* (Moscow, 1939), 47–48.

8. See L. I. Brodskii, “Ideino-politicheskoe vospitanie tekhnicheskikh spetsialistov dorevoliutsionnoi shkoly v gody pervoi piatiletki,” *Trudy Leningradskogo politekhnicheskogo instituta im. Kalinina*, 261 (Leningrad, 1966), 73.

9. Little work has been done on this subject either in the Soviet Union or in the west.

10. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Donetskoi oblasti (GADO), fond R-920, opis' 1, delo 9, list 50. As is well known, “socialist property” included a watermelon in the collective farm fields. There were cases in which hungry peasants and workers, who stole a watermelon from the collective farms, were shot.

11. See Hiroaki Kuromiya, “The Commander and the Rank and File: Managing the Soviet Coalmining Industry, 1928–1933,” paper presented at the Conference on Industrialization and Change in Soviet Society, 1928–1941, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 22–24 April 1988. A volume of this and other conference papers will be published by Indiana University Press in 1991.

12. For this movement and terror, see Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), Gábor Tamás Rittersporn, “Heros du travail et commandants de la production. La campagne stakhanoviste et les stratégies fractionnelles en U.R.S.S. (1935–1936),” *Recherches*, 32–33 (1978), and Robert Maier, *Die Stachanov-Bewegung 1935–1938. Der Stachanovismus als tragendes und verschärfendes Moment der Stalinisierung der sowjetischen Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1990). Francesco Benvenuto has also published *Fuoco sui sabotatori! Stachanovismo e organizzazione industriale in Urss, 1934–1938* (Rome, 1988).

others, for the performance of the most important industry of the region—coalmining) seems to have been virtually decimated. S. A. Sarkisov, the first secretary of the Donetsk party *obkom* since 1933, was transferred in April 1937 to head Donbas Coal, the very organization he had attacked for unsatisfactory work. Soon thereafter, in July 1937, he was expelled from the party and shot as an “enemy of the people” and a “fascist spy”; A. U. Kholokholenko, the second secretary of the *obkom*, met the same fate.¹³ The new first secretary, E. K. Pramnek, who expelled Sarkisov and Kholokholenko, was in turn removed in April 1938 and was shot in July 1938.¹⁴ With these leaders the majority of *obkom* members disappeared. There are no accurate statistics available, but of the 76 full members in May 1937, only six remained in June 1938.¹⁵ It may not be that all seventy that disappeared fell victims to the terror. Given the ferocious press campaign against the *obkom* as a nest of “enemies of the people,”¹⁶ however, one may reasonably assume that a large number of them did. Like the party leadership in other regions and provinces,¹⁷ the Donbas *obkom* was thus annihilated. This may be comparable to the terror inflicted upon the party central leadership.¹⁸

The scale of terror against coalmining managers in the Donbas seems to have been less extensive, although the information available is fragmentary. In no way, however, was the terror insignificant. The long-time doyen of the Soviet coalmining industry, V. M. Bazhanov, who had directly headed Donbas Coal, was demoted in April 1937 in connection with the appointment of Sarkisov. In September Bazhanov was removed from the chief editorship of the journal *Ugol'* which he had occupied for many years, and soon died at the age of 48 as a “counterrevolutionary wrecker.”¹⁹ In September 1937, the People's Commissar of Heavy Industry, L. M. Kaganovich, toured around “all trusts and mines” in the Donbas, discovered “wrecking activities,” and attacked and removed managers and engineers en masse.²⁰ Many of those removed were simultaneously or subsequently arrested by the NKVD.

No aggregate data on this or other waves of terror are available. However, according to one document (“Directory of Senior Officials in the Mines and Trusts of Donbas Coal”) by the Chief Coal Administration of the People's Commissariat of Heavy Industry (NKTP), between late 1936 and April 1938, at least 56 (or 26.7 percent) of the 210 listed were arrested, and two more were indicted for “wrecking.”²¹ Clearly, these data are far from complete, owing to the massive

13. *Promyshlennost' i rabochie Donbassa. Sbornik dokumentov. Oktiabr' 1917–iiun' 1941* (Donetsk, 1989), 174–175. See also the editorial in *Sotsialisticheskii Donbass*, 28 July 1937, and *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, 1989, 12:86 and 110.

14. See *Sotsialisticheskii Donbass*, 9 April 1938, *Moscow News*, 1988, 22:16, and *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, 1989, 12:86 and 109.

15. *Sotsialisticheskii Donbass*, 26 May 1937 and 8 June 1938. In June 1938 the Donetsk *obkom* split into two: the Stalino and the Voroshilovgrad *obkoms*. 70 of the original 76 members appeared on neither *obkom* membership list in June 1938.

16. See, for example, *ibid.*, 28 July 1938 (ed.) and 24 May 1938 (speech by A. S. Shcherbakov who replaced Pramnek).

17. For the decimation of provincial party leaders, see J. Arch Getty, “Party and Purge in Smolensk: 1933–1937,” *Slavic Review*, 42:1 (Spring 1983), 75.

18. The Central Committee of the All-Union Communist party lost the majority of its members to the terror: 44 of the 71 full members and 53 of the 68 candidate members (97 percent of the victims were shot in 1937–1939). See *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, 1989, 12:82–87.

19. *Sotsialisticheskii Donbass*, 29 April and 1 November 1937, and Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv natsional'nogo khoziaistva SSSR (TsGANKh SSSR), fond 7566, opis' 1, delo 2750, list 3. For a brief biography of Bazhanov, see I. V. Paramonov, *Komandarm ugol'nogo fronta* (Moscow, 1977).

20. See TsGANKh SSSR, f. 7297, op. 1, d. 232, l. 1–10, 23, 29, 30–37, 38–44, 45–57, 63–67, 68–73, 74–83, 84–94, 95–101, 102–110, 111–118, 128–129, 130–135, 136–139, 140–146, 147–155, 156–161, 215–223, 224–230. Before he went out to the Donbas, Kaganovich had “purged” his commissariat's Chief Coal Administration. See *Pravda*, 2 October 1937 (ed.), and TsGANKh SSSR, f. 7566, op. 2, d. 110, l. 8–14, which suggest that the great majority of new staff arrived in September and October 1937.

21. TsGANKh SSSR, f. 7566, op. 2, d. 79, l. 60–69. (“Spravka o rukovodiashchikh rabotnikakh shakht i trestov 'Donbassuglia.’” In this directory, “senior officials” refer mostly to mine directors and chief

arrests which created administrative confusion and chaos in bookkeeping. In fact, three documents on the “senior officials” of Donbas Coal, compiled by Donbas Coal itself at that time, list an additional 26 managers and engineers as arrested or repressed (*repressirovan*).²² Nor were the six officials of Donbas Coal’s Budennovskii Coal Trust, who were put on a show trial in November 1937 and then executed, included in this directory.²³ Although the purposes of this directory are unclear, the archival material shows that Donbas Coal, under pressure for ever higher production outputs, impatiently and frantically removed its subordinate mine and trust officials from their posts without clearing it with the NKTP or its Chief Coal Administration. (This was a violation of the *nomenklatura* system.)²⁴ The NKVD, for its part, independently intervened and arrested people. Neither the NKTP nor the Chief Coal Administration could control the appointment and removal of important officials. The directory seems to have reflected the effort of the Chief Coal Administration to come to grips with the chaotic state of affairs within personnel management. If one assumes that those senior officials whom the Chief Coal Administration failed to trace were at least as likely to have been repressed as those listed in the directory, then at least a quarter of the senior officials in the Donbas coalmining industry may have fallen victim to the state terror.

Soon after the directory of Donbas Coal senior officials was compiled, the Donbas Coal apparatus itself was “purged” as a nest of “enemies of the people.” In this case, too, Kaganovich took the trouble to travel to the Donbas in May and June 1938 to “unmask” these “enemies,” “wreckers,” and “saboteurs.”²⁵ A list of those dismissed from Donbas Coal between 20 May and 1 August 1938 reveals that 19 (or 59.4 percent) out of the 32 dismissed were “repressed”; 11 seem to have disappeared altogether (“[current] place of work unknown”); one no longer worked; and only one was demoted to another job.²⁶ It is unclear in this case, too, how complete this list is, but almost all senior officials seem to have been dismissed, and the majority of them terrorized.

This onslaught on Donbas Coal was followed immediately by three show trials of coalmining managers and engineers: the “Case of the Counterrevolutionary Rightist-Trotskyite Group at Mine Nos. 12–18 of the Budennovskii Coal Trust”; the “Case of the Counterrevolutionary Rightist-Trotskyite Wrecking Organization in the system of Donbas Coal”; and the “Case of the Counterrevolutionary Rightist-Trotskyite Group of Wreckers at Mine no. 18 of the Sovetsk Coal Trust.” Of the 16 defendants, 12 were sentenced to death and shot; the remainder were given from 18 to 25 years imprisonment.²⁷ Undoubtedly, untold numbers of people were terrorized in connection with these trials. Nor did the conclusion of the trials bring about an end to the terror in the Donbas.

These senior officials in the party and the coalmining industry composed but a small part of the overall victims of the Stalinist terror in the Donbas. Numerous lesser officials, activists,

engineers. This document is undated but signed in pencil by two officials: I. Fesenko, the director of Donbas Coal, who in June 1938 was removed by L. M. Kaganovich, and Savitskii, the head of Donbas Coal’s Registration and Allocation Department.) Donbas Coal was a giant industrial organization which in 1938 consisted of some 22 trusts and 277 mines. An almost identical document is also found in *ibid.*, f. 7566, op. 2, d. 114, l. 15–24.

22. TsGANKh SSSR, f. 7566, op. 2, d. 79, l. 32–40, 42–49, and d. 114, l. 37–43. “Repressed” meant arrest, deportation to labor camps, or execution.

23. For the trial and executions, see *Sotsialisticheskii Donbass*, 1–10 November, 3 December 1937.

24. See, for example, the lists of people thus removed in TsGANKh SSSR, f. 7566, op. 2, d. 114, l. 25–28. For this reason, Donbas Coal was repeatedly threatened with punishment by Kaganovich and the Chief Coal Administration. See *ibid.*, f. 7566, op. 1, d. 3422, l. 1, d. 3514, l. 129, and op. 2, d. 105, l. 127.

25. See *Sotsialisticheskii Donbass*, 17 June 1938 (speech by A. S. Shcherbakov) and 6 August 1938 (article by N. Kasurov).

26. TsGANKh SSSR, f. 7566, op. 2, d. 114, l. 14 and 19 (signed by the Chief of the Cadre Department of Donbas Coal, Zaitsev).

27. *Sotsialisticheskii Donbass*, 30 July–2 August, 4–6 August, 21 September 1938.

Dismissed Donbas Officials

1. Morgunov, G. V., chief engineer: repressed.
2. Fesenko, I. A., director: repressed.
3. Zuev, K. I., engineer, Emergency Management Group: [current] place of work unknown.
4. Polissarov, M. A., chief, Dept. of Mining Technology Supply: place of work unknown.
5. Karnets, I. I., socialist competition officer: place of work unknown.
6. Glushenkov, F. F., officer, Mining System Group: place of work unknown.
7. Evdokimov, G. S., motor transport engineer: place of work unknown.
8. Freidis, A. M., controller engineer: place of work unknown.
9. Kogan, A. E., mining system engineer: place of work unknown.
10. Iakushev, A. I., controller engineer: place of work unknown.
11. Zakutskii, A. P., controller engineer: place of work unknown.
12. Polstianoi, G. N., chief, Planning Department: repressed.
13. Levin, L. E., mining system senior engineer: place of work unknown.
14. Iatskikh, V. G., supervisor, Mechanization Group: place of work unknown.
15. Arkhipov, Ia. F., assistant director: repressed.
16. Popov, V. S., geologist: repressed.
17. Belikov, V. P., chief, Technology Dept.: repressed.
18. Khokhlov, I. A., chief, Administrative Dept.: repressed.
19. Bondar', Kh. N., chief, Major Repair Dept.: repressed.
20. Kharchenko, V. N., deputy chief, Labour Force Dept.: repressed.
21. Vasilenko, B. V., engineer in energy and electric mechanics: repressed.
22. Sukhovenko, M. I., chief, Housing and Services Dept.: repressed.
23. Shifman, M. I., engineer, Major Repair Dept.: repressed.
24. Kalinin, chief, Finance [And Accounting] Dept.: repressed.
25. Chaplenko, I. A., supervisor, Organized Recruitment Group: repressed.
26. Sibarov, A. D., deputy chief, Finance and Accounting Dept.: chief accountant, OGPU mine, Prosvetai Anthracite Trust.
27. Iglitsyn, O. A., chief, Special Dept.: repressed.
28. Poliakov, V. A., chief, Cadre Dept.: repressed.
29. Radiakhin, Z. D., chief, Underground Transport Dept.: repressed.
30. Chumichev, V. D., chief, Equipment Supply Dept.: repressed.
31. Sirenko, Mining System Group: repressed.
32. Reznikov, A. M., supervisor, Cadre Training Group: does not work.

workers, scientists, etc. were directly affected. Other industries than coalmining were also hard struck, so were the trade unions, cooperatives, collective and state farms, governmental, trade, and other organizations. A large number of people were executed and dumped into mass graves. One such grave, estimated to contain remains of “at least thousands of people,” has recently been found in Rutchenkovo in the city of Donetsk.²⁸

One can conclude from the data presented here that in 1936–1938, the Stalinist terror was indeed extensive in the Donbas: It virtually decimated the party leadership and felled at least more than a quarter of senior mining officials. These findings, however, like the aforementioned KGB announcement, raise more questions than they answer. Following the nation-wide pattern, the party officials in the Donbas were hit hardest by the terror: They were held responsible politically for all affairs in their domains.²⁹ Yet, was the extent of terror in the Donbas coalmines representative? Were the industrial managers more vulnerable to terror than, say, the writers, “the engineers of the human soul”?³⁰ These questions begin to appear insignificant in light of the massive terror.

Whatever the case, this note makes two significant points. First, the open funds in the Soviet archives provide some concrete data on the terror under Stalin. While the data are incomplete, they provide a new perspective for research.³¹ Second, local studies of the Stalin years now seem feasible, owing to the availability of historical sources. In a country as vast as the Soviet Union, the center-periphery relations are a critically important issue. Yet, because of the source problem, detailed examinations of it have been difficult.³² With the availability of both the local press and archives to foreign scholars,³³ the traditional, Moscow-centered historical perspective of the Stalin years may soon be corrected.

28. See, for example, *Vechernyi Donetsk*, 15 October 1989.

29. Economic affairs seemed to have been of particular importance. According to a study of the Moscow party elite of 1917, “anyone whose occupation was connected with economics was a certain victim of the Great Purge.” See J. Arch Getty and William Chase, “The Moscow Party Elite of 1917 in the Great Purges,” *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, 5, part 1 (1978), 113.

30. According to one account, by the end of 1937, of the six hundred delegates to the First Congress of Soviet Writers, not less than one third “had disappeared without trace.” When Stalin died in 1953, more than two hundred of the delegates had been “liquidated” and dozens were in prison. See Eduard Beltov, “Rastreliaia literatura,” *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 12 November 1988. According to another, during Stalin’s reign, more than 1,300 writers perished, and approximately 600 more were imprisoned. See Grigorii Nekhoroshev, “Khotelos’ by vsekh poimanno nazvat’ . . .” *Molodoi kommunist*, 1989, 12:66. For an attempt to compile a list of “physicists, philosophers of science, biologists, and agricultural specialists who suffered repression,” see David Joravsky, *The Lysenko Affair* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), appendix A.

31. Since the interview with Tsaplin was published, the archives of the State Planning Commission (Gosplan), which had been closed, were opened to public use. Note several recently published articles based on data from open Soviet archives such as Mark Tol’ts, “Repressirovannaia perepis’,” *Rodina*, 1989, 11; S. G. Wheatcroft, “More Light on the Scale of Repression and Excess Mortality in the Soviet Union in the 1930s,” *Soviet Studies* 42:2 (April 1990).

32. Smolensk is an exception. Part of the Smolensk party archives was captured during World War II and was subsequently used extensively by Merle Fainsod, *Smolensk under Soviet Rule* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), Getty, *The Origins of the Great Purges*, Rittersporn, *Simplifications staliniennes et complications soviétiques*, and Nicolas Werth, *Être communiste en URSS sous Staline* (Paris, 1981). There are also some studies of national republics and minorities based on a limited range of published sources. For example, Hryhory Kostyuk, *Stalinist Rule in the Ukraine. A Study in the Decade of Mass Terror (1929–1939)* (London: Praeger, 1960).

33. The open depositories of the GADO (see note 10) to which I was given access in the autumn of 1989 and the spring of 1990, provide substantial information on political, economic, and social life in the post-revolutionary Donbas.