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What Goes Up Must Go Down: Denunciations in the Great Terror

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What Goes Up Must Go Down

Denunciations in the Great Terror

An honors thesis presented to the
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Abstract

The Soviet Union of the 1930s was marked by fearmongering, denunciations, and a series of show trials that rocked the Communist Party. The Great Terror started officially in late 1934 and continued until 1938, entangling millions within its web of imprisonment, forced labor, and executions. The general consensus has been that the Terror was a result of government influence and citizens' actions. A lot of the research done on this era has focused on why the average citizen would willingly participate in the government's reign of terror. By examining a series of memoirs written during and about this time and official speeches and publications from high-ranking Party members, this paper will show that the promised utopia was not enough to prevent discontent and the Soviet government turned to terror to consolidate its power further. In an attempt to fight the alleged class enemies within the Soviet society or to prevent themselves from being implicated, citizens wrote denunciations against family members, neighbors, bosses, etc. Doing so spread the purge into factories and small towns. By looking into the role of denunciations, in the Terror, this paper sheds light on the mechanisms of other campaigns of fear.

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On December 1, 1934, Sergei Mironovich Kirov, the head of the Leningrad Communist Party, died under suspicious circumstances.¹ Following the death of Kirov within the Smolny Institute, which served as the local party headquarters, Josef Stalin announced this death to the public and declared Kirov's assassination the work of double-dealers, or traitor. Stalin's publication in the Soviet magazine *Pravda* spoke positively of Kirov's work, belying the tensions within the Communist Party, and described the terrible fate that had befallen Kirov. "A man who has given all his brilliant life to the cause of the working class, to the cause of Communism, to the cause of the liberation of humanity, is dead, victim of the enemy."² In using such strong language against the supposed perpetrators, Stalin emphasized the problem of enemies within the Soviet Union and fostered fear within the people.

While the circumstances of this assassination are still up for debate, its influence on the Purges that followed has never been questioned. This incident was used as justification for what has been called the Great Terror. Stalin and other party officials exploited this fear of enemies and violence and set about on an operation to purify the Soviet Union of its perceived imperfections and antagonists. In the aftermath, anyone considered a political enemy, as vague as that term was, was targeted by the NKVD, the Soviet secret police. The number of those affected by the Terror are difficult to pin down, disputed in almost every facet. "The estimates range from a few million to well over 20 million victims. There is relative consensus that in the years 1930-1956, between 17 and 18 million were sentenced to detention in prisons, colonies, and camps."³

¹ Wendy Z. Goldman, *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1-2.

² J.V. Stalin., "The Death of Kirov," Marxist Internet Archive, 2008, accessed February 2, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1934/12/01.htm>.

³ Nanci Adler, "Enduring Repression: Narratives of Loyalty to the Party Before, During and After the Gulag," *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 2 (March 2010): 215.

Until 1938, officials, party members, industrial leaders, average workers, peasants, etc. were labelled spies and saboteurs in the ensuing chaos.

The Great Terror of the 1930s rocked the Soviet Union into mass hysteria. This period was marked by arrests, forced labor, torturous interrogations, and executions. Fueled by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the show trials that popped up around the nation, the ordinary citizen was swept up into a campaign bigger than themselves but defined by their involvement. The Party, and the government that implemented its ideology, were responsible for creating the environment where denunciations, or communication between citizens and a higher authority that contains accusations against other citizens with the intent of punishment, thrived. Through enforcing the Party line and fostering mass hysteria through propaganda and inflammatory speeches and official publications, the government was able to indoctrinate the citizenry into the Party and subdue the rising tensions within society. This process of total indoctrination only became more rampant, a result of the Party realizing that their promised utopia did not match with the current state of the Soviet Union, creating a society based on fear and control and prompting denunciations and the Terror.

The real beginning of the Great Terror started before the 1930s with precedents set during the collectivization campaigns, dekulakization campaigns against prosperous peasants, the Bolshevik consolidation of power, and national campaigns against foreigners, all done by Stalin to amass power and enforce his will. Industrialization and modernization were starting to be achieved, though only on a limited scale, and many citizens became disillusioned with the communist system. Stalin, aware of the tensions mounting in cities and in the countryside, implemented terror to reign in the people and further indoctrination into the Communist Party. In the ensuing chaos, many started to exploit and project their impurities onto those around them,

perpetuating the categorization of people with new accusations and broadening the pool of victims. This indoctrination into Party ideology and crushing of any opposition created an important moment in Soviet history.

While there has been much debate on the source of the Great Terror, a general consensus has been reached: a mix of policy and influence from the party, the government it controlled, and compliance from the citizens. The government was culpable for its contribution in shaping the political climate, for following and enforcing party doctrine. By creating a sense of denounce or be denounced, the Party started a wave of fear and a process of guilt by association that encompassed everyone within the Soviet Union. When everyone was a target, including high-ranking members of the Party itself, drastic measures were taken and normalized. This culpability, however, did not absolve citizens of their involvement. The average citizen was responsible for their actions during the Purges. This was not limited to writing denunciations, but also the passive acceptance of the Terror and the promotion of Soviet ideals. Families and friendships were torn apart with the up and down motion of denunciation, the sending up of letters to higher authorities and the heavy-handed response sent down in return, and without resistance, the ripple effect was able to widen indefinitely.⁴ Why did the Great Terror happen? When does the responsibility for its spread switch from the Party to the average citizen? Who sustained it and what factors in society allowed it to flourish?

My paper draws on English translations of memoirs by those affected and involved, including Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Nadezhda Mandelstam, Victor Andreevich Kravchenko, Anna Larina, and Evgenia Ginzburg. It also uses speeches delivered by Soviet leaders and other official material, i.e. propaganda and the Penal Code of the R.S.F.S.R, specifically Article 58.

⁴ Goldman, *Inventing*, 299.

Besides these primary sources, secondary sources provide an interesting discussion of the historical precedents of denunciation and the willingness of the people to follow Party doctrine. I have been able to use the authors' archival research and their analysis of primary documents to shape my overall picture of the era. Important authors include: Sheila Fitzpatrick, who writes on the history of denunciation around the world with a focus on Russia; Zbigniew Brzezinski, a Polish-American diplomat and political scientist who writes about terror within totalitarian regimes; and Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin, who both focus on the issues of individuality and diaries during Stalinism. They all focus on different aspects of Soviet life in this time and have been invaluable in my investigation into this topic.

Within the memoirs, I was looking for reflections on the Terror. How did the author cope emotionally with the Terror, and how did their mindset change over the period? What did they believe, during or after the Terror, led citizens to denounce others? Because it is nearly impossible to figure out an individual's motives for writing their denunciation letter, I had to look for broader themes within the memoirs, including desperation, despair, grief, betrayal, etc. I then placed their experiences into the broader history of the time period shown in the speeches and official publications issued by the government and party. My secondary sources provided context and raw data for what the authors were experiencing and show the backdrop of citizen's actions and beliefs.

My paper will be split into five main sections dealing with Party's beliefs, the state's influence, and the citizens' responses. The first section will cover the background of the Party and the Soviet Union. The second will deal with the ideology of the Soviet self, detailing purity, diaries and autobiographies, literary campaigns, loyalty to the Party, replacement of religion, and national campaigns as precedents. This is important to show the pressures from the government

on the general populace and explain why people gave into these pressures. The third section will deal with letter-writing culture overall, which will show the tradition of communication between the people and the government, including denunciations. The fourth section is about the fear-mongering during the Purge, detailing indoctrination, enemies, the end of personal relationships, and the Gulag. Most of these aspects, excluding mass hysteria and the loss of self, have histories in the Tsarist era.⁵ While these topics seem disconnected from the Purge, all contributed to the environment where denunciations thrived and help to explain why some heeded this call. By analyzing memoirs and other primary sources, I hope to show the options people had during this era, their feelings, why they believed or continue to believe in the Party during and after the Terror, and the dissonance many developed from this epoch. The last section will deal with the aftermath of the Terror, the continued fear of persecution, and the petition process for rehabilitation and reinstatement into the CPSU.

Background

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union was a pervasive and powerful force that controlled the government and influenced the people in every almost aspect of their lives. Before Stalin, however, the Party used different methods to gain and keep power. By using World War I and the following Civil War to foster discontent and create extremists, the Party was successful in gaining, maintaining, and exerting its power. They also were able to point to Russia's backwardness as a problem of imperialism and revamp society based around modernization and industrialization.⁶ When the Civil War ended and the Party was finally sure of its survival,

⁵ Solzhenitsyn, 132, 298, 319.

⁶ J. V. Stalin, "A Year of Great Change: On the Occasion of the Twelfth Anniversary of the October Revolution," Marxist Internet Archive, 2008, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1929/11/03.htm>.

officials were able to change their tactics. During the Terror, the Party was able to consolidate control through fear and exploitation of crises and prejudices. With this, and by banning all other political parties, the Communist Party became the only power within the Soviet Union for over half a century.

The government imposed by the CPSU can be described as totalitarian. Through eliminating all other ideologies and dissenting opinions, the Communists believed they were able to set themselves up as the future of mankind. From the Cold War perspective of Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Communists wanted to undo everything from the Tsarist era, including basic aspects of society: "Their ideology," Brzezinski wrote, "provides a total critique of the antecedent form of societal organization and a prescription for a complete reconstruction of society and man."⁷ The Party believed they could take any action necessary to consolidate and keep power, including through the use of terror. Members of society, within and outside the Party, were swept up into the ideology and its required actions. Stalin was not the first general secretary to undertake this process. Lenin also used terror and coercion to transform the revolutionary movement into a disciplined government, though not to the extent that Stalin did after Lenin's death in 1924.⁸

The Russia at the beginning of the early communist movement, the late early 1900s until 1922, was plagued by widespread discontent from World War I, food and goods shortages, and the delayed then rapid industrialization, showcased when compared to their neighbors and subsequent enemies throughout Europe. Vladimir Lenin was able to take these problems and formulate them into a revolutionary movement centered around modernization. With this, he was

⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Nature of the Soviet System." *Slavic Review* 20, no. 3 (October 1961): 353.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 354.

able to overthrow the government and gain followers throughout the empire. During the Civil War, those with connections to the past regime were purged or converted to Marxism, forcibly.⁹ After the Civil War, the Party set out to remove all other aspects of society, including religion and anything related to the Tsarist era.¹⁰ Through modernization and the spread of communist ideology, the Party was able to recreate the Russian Empire into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and establish itself as the first communist country in 1922.

The late 1920s into the early 1930s was the time of the Five Year Plans introducing collectivization, dekulakization, and industrialization. In 1928, the First Five Year Plan was issued, calling for rapid industrialization on a scale never seen before.¹¹ The Soviet Union was successful, but at the cost of millions of lives. The Second Five Year Plan was issued in 1933, calling for collectivization and dekulakization aimed at removing private property in the countryside and ridding the nation of petite bourgeoisie, the prosperous peasants who were cast as exploiters. Many were forced from the countryside into cities as displaced citizens or forced to work on communes, named kolkhozes.¹² Industrialization was fueled by urbanization, continuing modernization, and became a focal point in propaganda. "The organizational compulsion of the party for ideology-action thus becomes the source and the means of modernization, thereby strengthening the party's social legitimization."¹³ This removal of the private economy and quest for modernization created a vacuum the Party could fill, instilling zeal in its members and converting bystanders into loyal communists.

⁹ Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

¹⁰ Brzezinski, 352.

¹¹ Lewis Siegelbaum, "Year of Great Change," *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, 2002, accessed May 9, 2019, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1929-2/year-of-great-change/>.

¹² Wendy Z. Goldman, "Twin Pyramids—Perpetrators and Victims." *Slavic Review* 72, no. 01 (Spring 2013): 26.

¹³ Brzezinski, 360.

However, the 1920s and 1930s were not only filled with problems for the average citizen, whether in the city or the countryside. After Lenin's death in early 1924, the Party faced leadership conflicts. Originally Stalin fought against Leon Trotsky to become the next general secretary until his victory that same year, clinched by Trotsky's flight from the country in 1936. After Stalin officially came to power, he still dealt with the issue of opposition.¹⁴ In the following years, he would purge, remove from the Communist Party, anyone he believed would oppose him, including Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, and Nikolai Bukharin. All three, and many others purged, were leading members of the Communist Party and part of the Bolsheviks long before the USSR was established. They all met their deaths in the show trials that marked the Terror and became some of the most publicized victims of the era.

While so-called Trotskyites, believers of Trotsky's theory of Marxism, and enemies were being publicly tried for their crimes in Moscow, people around the nation were called to denounce enemies and double-dealers. Members of the party were especially sensitive to this but the average citizen was also recruited into this endeavor. The Party was able to maintain conformity through indoctrination and to maintain order through terror.¹⁵ Terror, combined with improvements in industry and modernization caused many to join into the Party ranks and others to tacitly support the Party. These circumstances provide the background for what became the Terror and the history of the Soviet Union through the 1930s. People were conditioned to accept the Party and its ideology from the onset of the Bolshevik regime and this only continued through Stalin's regime.

¹⁴ Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

¹⁵ Nanci Adler, "Enduring Repression: Narratives of Loyalty to the Party Before, During and After the Gulag," *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 2 (March 2010): 211.

The Party

Ideology and Ideological Action

Ideology served as a mode of control in the Soviet Union and the image it presented to the citizens shows why some were willing to engage in denunciatory practices. The Stalinist period was defined by the destruction of Tsarist and early Bolshevik frameworks and the beginning of an outline for control that would span until 1953.¹⁶ Stalin had to deal with widespread discontent stemming from collectivization, the move from private farming to communal farming, usually by force, and industrialization that arose during this era.¹⁷ While consciousness, awareness of one's place in the world, i.e. proletariat or bourgeois, is seen as a basic tenet of Communism, it proved difficult in keeping the masses subjugated. Nevertheless, consciousness remained vital to the party line. As a result, a maxim of Lenin's was put into effect: "Bring order or implement terror."¹⁸ The Communist Party marked their ideology as one of action and struggle, and how one dealt with this struggle was the key to gaining the revolutionary consciousness necessary to further the Soviet Union to its utopian end.¹⁹

To implement their ideal world, the Soviets developed the idea of the New Man. The ideal of the New Soviet Man was pervasive and changed according to current party goals. The party, under the strict hand of Stalin, promoted this new man and an era of transparency. The new man was to epitomize the revolutionary spirit of the Bolsheviks and help to bring an international communist state into being.²⁰ They were to transform themselves into this ideal

¹⁶ Brzezinski, 354.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 352.

¹⁸ Nanci, 214.

¹⁹ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 26-32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

while maintaining complete openness and loyalty to the state.²¹ They were to be completely and wholly dedicated to the Soviet system and its future. A level of ideological purity was required, forcing many to overcome and disassociate with their family's history if they wanted to become a party member.²² This proved difficult after twenty years marked by revolutions in 1917, a civil war from 1917 to 1922, and a short stint under the New Economic Policy in 1921, where capitalism was briefly reestablished. Everyone was tainted in some way by the association to the past and this made the culture of denunciations viable. When everyone has something that makes them an enemy in the eyes of the Party, denunciations become easier to write and harder to dodge.

Another important aspect for membership within the Party was the writing and constant editing of an autobiography, which serves as a vital source for understanding the Stalinist period from a citizen's perspective. While overall there was a push for the removal of the individual self, which would cause tensions discussed later, the autobiography served to establish a person in their journey to self-realization under the Communist system. These autobiographies served as a vital part within Soviet culture, being a part of the interviewing process for university or employment opportunities and demanded at almost every stage in life. During the Purge, these autobiographies were frequently reviewed by their authors and those around them, and any fault could mean expulsion from the Party. "The Communist's subjective essence, the strength or weakness of his character, came to the fore in his 'autobiography,' which he recited to his party comrades in the climatic dramatic moment of the purge process."²³ These autobiographies showed a person's struggles, successes, and, even, their contribution to the Revolutions of 1917,

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²² Goldman, *Inventing*, 16-17.

²³ Hellbeck, *Revolution*, 26.

no matter how small. By forcing many to write themselves into history, many joined the CPSU in their missions implicitly, even without official party membership.

The Communist Party portrayed themselves as, “the bearer of light whose mission was to bring education and technology to Russia’s ‘dark’ masses.”²⁴ Under this guise, loyalty to the Party was noble, and many party members wanted to be part of the wonderful future that was promised to them. However, loyalty had a cost. When the state officially warned its people about internal enemies, many sprang to the defense of the nation.²⁵ It was one’s patriotic duty to report suspicious activity, no matter the relationship between the denouncer and denounced. As tensions escalated, people started to show their loyalty by publicly interrogating others, especially during Party meetings in factories.²⁶ Without this public display, one’s loyalty could be considered questionable and, in the era of denunciations, a fate marked by torturous interrogations, and forced labor was a reality for millions of Soviets. This loyalty can also be used to explain the multitude of rehabilitation letters filed after the death of Stalin in 1953 by those denounced and stripped of their party membership.²⁷

In the Stalinist era starting in 1928, legal specialists determined that a suitable socialist society had been achieved.²⁸ This was determined by the successes in Soviet Russia’s industrialization campaigns up to this point and the fight against capitalism seen in the cities and countryside.²⁹ As a result, people were no longer able to excuse anti-communist thoughts or actions on Russia’s past capitalistic history and the New Economic Policy was replaced with a planned economy. Suddenly, the average citizen was fully culpable compared to the leniency of

²⁴ Hellbeck, *Revolution*, 21.

²⁵ Goldman, *Inventing*, 300-301.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁷ Adler, 212-216.

²⁸ Hellbeck, *Revolution*, 34.

²⁹ J. V. Stalin, "A Year of Great Change."

the 1920s. The Soviet Union was attempting to create, “a social body defined in terms of absolute purity of spirit.”³⁰ In this drive to eliminate any individual or group that did not conform to the Soviet system, the government encouraged denunciations and people accepted this call.³¹ Simultaneously, many realized that any ideologically impure thought or history could be exploited, only exacerbating the fear and confusion.³² Everyone was vulnerable and this realization further divided the people within the country, creating a perfect storm for what became known as the Great Terror.

Autobiographies and Diaries

“And here we are! The Kirov wave from Leningrad has begun...an ‘accelerated’ judicial procedure was introduced... And there was no right of appeal. It is also believed that one quarter of Leningrad was purged – cleaned out – in 1934-1935.”³³ This was said by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a victim of the Gulag system who spent eight years in a forced labor camp then his life in exile. He was an outspoken critic of the Soviet Union. His memoir, *The Gulag Archipelago*, has become the foremost piece of literature on the Terror and the Soviet penal system. His memoir and various other writings he kept throughout his imprisonment, and used against him, are examples of the larger tradition of diary keeping, which, as mentioned earlier, was utilized by the Party as a proof of loyalty.³⁴

For some, a diary was not worth the risk. “When a person was arrested—and that could happen to anyone at any time in Stalin’s Russia—the first thing to be taken was his or her diary,

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

³¹ Goldman, *Inventing*, 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 16-17.

³³ Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney, Vol. 1, (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 58.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 164-165.

which would be scrutinized by the police for evidence of ‘anti-Soviet’ thoughts.”³⁵ For others, however, a diary allowed the ability to analyze their situation and work through problems they had with Communism without fully abandoning the Party, hopefully without the Party’s knowledge.³⁶ For those who had dedicated many years of their lives to the Party and were now faced with fears of denunciation or the denunciation of someone close, a diary proves crucial. The Party, for some, was the most important thing in their lives, and in a society where any fleeting thought can be criminalized, a diary provided an outlet. However, diaries, as noted above, held multiple risks and many have not survived the Terror.

Both the diary and autobiography were possible due to campaigns from the CPSU and the government to increase literacy and standardize education. This also allowed for a greater class consciousness. In order to achieve the widespread political understanding a Communist society required, elementary level reading and writing skills were necessary. While education would remain an important facet of Soviet life, originally this was done to instill the revolutionary consciousness that marked the ideal man. Interestingly, the method of teaching that would characterize Soviet schools developed in this era emphasized individual thought and championed intellect.³⁷ This is often used as a justification for the actions of the Communist Party and the Soviet government, becoming an example of good that arose during the early Soviet years, the so-called “light” mentioned above. However, this does not excuse the Purge overall nor absolve the government of their wrongdoings.

While not written for the sole purpose of being their official autobiographies, each of the memoirs I have highlighted are examples of this culture. Former Party members, Evgenia

³⁵ Figes, 118.

³⁶ Hellbeck, *Revolution*, 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

Ginzburg, Victor Andreevich Kravchenko, and Anna Larina, provide the reader with the pressure and sense of fear that permeated throughout the Party ranks. Evgenia Ginzburg was a stalwart party member until she was implicated in participating in counter-revolutionary groups after Kirov's assassination.³⁸ She details her interrogations, her trial, imprisonment and exile in her memoir, struggling to come to terms with what has happened to not only her but other party members within the Soviet Union. Anna Larina was married to Nikolai Bukharin who was a high-ranking party member and victim of the 1937 show trials in Moscow.³⁹ Because of her association, she was exiled, arrested, and sent to a work camp for 20 years. During her time in the Gulag, she learned of her husband's assassination and was only released upon Stalin's death in 1953. Victor Andreevich Kravchenko was lucky in the sense that he was not denounced or arrested before he defected in 1944.⁴⁰ He was a Ukrainian-born party member and engineer. However, he became disillusioned with the Communist Party after witnessing the Ukrainian famine and the Great Terror. He documents the fear that existed even within the educated circles during the 1930s.

The Terror also affected non-Party members, especially in campaigns targeting writers and the intelligentsia. Osip Mandelstam was a poet who was arrested in 1934.⁴¹ His wife, Nadezhda Mandelstam documents his four-year imprisonment and later death in a transit camp. She discusses the degradation of society after the 1920s and establishes her husband as a martyr of the system. Alexander Solzhenitsyn was a Soviet writer and outspoken critic of the Soviet

³⁸ Evgenia Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1975).

³⁹ Anna Larina, *This I Cannot Forget: The Memoirs of Nikolai Bukharin's Widow*, trans. Gary Kern (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).

⁴⁰ Victor Andreevich Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom: The Personal and Political Life of a Soviet Official* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946).

⁴¹ Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir*, trans. Max Hayward, (New York: Atheneum, 1970).

government who was later punished for his critiques.⁴² In 1945, he was arrested and sentenced to eight years in a forced labor camp. His story takes place after the Terror, but his book, a mixture of memoir and interviews, has proven invaluable to understanding the Soviet penal system, the NKVD and its methods, and the camps throughout Siberia. All five of these writers were victims of this turbulent time period and, without their contribution to the memory of the Terror, many of the millions of victims would have been forgotten along with the Stalin's crimes.

Historical Precedents

Stalin and other officials did not create the Terror out of nothing. On the back of terror campaigns dating back to the Russian Revolutions and carried throughout the Civil War, the basis for the Purges were in place by 1934. Dekulakization began, wholeheartedly, in 1929.⁴³ The process of eliminating these 'richer peasants' was defined by deportation, arrests, and executions, often on the basis of limited evidence from other peasants. More campaigns in 1932 against the criminal and marginal elements, especially in cities, also had extrajudicial proceedings and mass arrests. Both of these campaigns established a structure that would be used during the Purge and, specifically, the campaigns against national groups in 1937 and 1938. The disenfranchised as they became known were stripped of all "political and economic rights."⁴⁴ Other targeted groups included traders, middlemen, priests and rabbis, the mentally ill, and anyone connected to the past tsarist regimes.⁴⁵ The majority, however, were punished for economic transgressions as communism was more widely enforced.

⁴² Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*.

⁴³ Goldman, *Inventing*, 7.

⁴⁴ Golfo Alexopoulos, "Victim Talk: Defense Testimony and Denunciation under Stalin." *Law and Social Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 638.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 641.

These campaigns also served other functions. They reinforced the categorization of disenfranchised groups and established a sense of fear. Many denounced others according to these groupings, even if previously denounced themselves for being of the same class, bolstering the government's claim of the existence of political enemies.⁴⁶ "The disenfranchised helped to perpetuate the policy that condemned them." In addition to bolstering official policy, these denunciations continued to divide society into ever-smaller groupings based on increasingly-specific criteria. This would only bring about more denunciations in the end. On creating fear, these campaigns were not revealed to the public.⁴⁷ The public was aware of enemies but not of the mass round-ups and definitely not of the official operations behind them. As a result, citizens believed those arrested during these national campaigns were arraigned as wreckers and spies, only increasing fear and suspicion towards fellow citizens. If everyone arrested is an enemy, who is safe? Who can be trusted, besides the government?

By utilizing similar methods that had been used in the past, the CPSU was able to exploit past prejudices against prosperous peasants, landlords, managers, and minorities, to further their terror campaigns. People joined the call to rid society of those different from the average working class factory member or peasants, especially when they believed that they would be the leading group within the promised utopia. It also enabled the CPSU to continue campaigns against foreigners and other targets without drawing the ire from the citizenry. Many believed the arrests were done for national security reasons and, as a result, did not fight against the taking of neighbors or close friends. Some even joined in the campaign through denouncing these supposed enemies.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 652.

⁴⁷ Goldman, *Inventing*, 15.

Loss of Religion

In this era, with the dissolution of the Russian Orthodox Church and other political parties, the Communist Party became exalted as a religion to some. Faith to the Party, even if excluding some leaders, was common in the aftermath of the Gulag experience.⁴⁸ Religion is powerful, being noted by Marx as something to be avoided, and with the CPSU taking this position, they were able to influence behavior through the concept of sin, specifically punishment through expulsion and forced labor.⁴⁹ Through punishment and by offering group membership and a perspective that could explain the problems of the world, the Communist Party became the religion of the land, boosted by official government policy.⁵⁰ This faith is noteworthy because for some it was not shaken by the Gulag experience. For some, they saw themselves as the exception to the rule, the innocent among the guilty swept up in the Purge. “The claim that one is an exception presupposes an acceptance of the rule and effectively reassures the audience that the system in place is justified and does work.”⁵¹

The Party also became the path to opportunity and education during the 1920s and 1930s, causing many to join in its fight. The Communist Party provided opportunities to lower class workers and peasant farmers. These opportunities included social mobility, job offerings, higher wages, preferential housing, and other perks that seem almost like a form of salvation. The Party, in seeking members from modest backgrounds, were able to exploit the widespread poverty that existed in the Tsarist era and early Soviet period in recruitment.⁵² The members were usually more politically aware than the average citizen but, nevertheless, still connected to their roots, by

⁴⁸ Adler, 214.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 217-218.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 219-220.

⁵¹ Alexopoulos, 639.

⁵² Goldman, *Inventing*, 9.

association with non-member family, friends, and co-workers. The two largest groups within the Soviet Union were workers and peasants, and the Party was smart for tapping into such a large resource. They were able to mobilize their forces and, through party meetings, were able to influence members' behaviors.⁵³ Each meeting brought new rules which were then passed on through members onto non-members until everyone followed the same tenets. Through this, the behavior of the masses was controlled indirectly but effectively.

Through connections with non-members, the Communist Party was able to exert control over every member of society. However, this was easier with party members who were expected to base their entire lives around the ideals of the CPSU. "To the extent that the individual's subsistence becomes reliant on the Communist Party, it is psychologically and politically too dangerous to criticize the Party. Supplication, felt or feigned, can be in the service of self-interest."⁵⁴ With the Party controlling the monopoly of culture and social behaviors, even a non-believer was influenced by their directives and shifts in official ideology. This influence combined with Stalin's sudden ideological changes resulted in constant pressure to remain along the correct party line, whatever that happened to be that day. For party members, this pressure only increased ten-fold and party officials were always aware that a shift of ideology could be a shift in favor, resulting in show trials, forced labor, or execution for themselves and their families. While no one was safe from the threat of the Terror, conforming to Stalin's vision of communism provided some safety, if only temporarily.

Good standing within the Party was crucial for many aspects of life. This might explain the vast number of rehabilitation letters received by the Soviet government following Stalin's

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁵⁴ Adler, 220.

death. Upon release from the Gulag, even if proven innocent, reinstatement was not a guarantee.⁵⁵ Many letters express support for the very system that imprisoned them. Many were forced to reconcile their thoughts and actions, and this cognitive dissonance, from personal experience versus official Party account, was difficult for many.⁵⁶ But, in the end, reinstatement into the Party was preferred for victims of the Gulag. However, this loyalty was not widespread and many only wanted rehabilitation for the privileges being in good party standing brought: "If an ex-prisoner could receive rehabilitated status, with Party rehabilitation, the chances of a normal civil life, including material benefits, were much greater."⁵⁷ Rehabilitation, while beyond the scope of this paper, offers an important look into the mindset of those accused. Because those who were accused often overlapped with those who accused others, it shows the power of the Party within society, even after the return from the Gulag.

Letter-Writing Culture

Denunciations are only a small part of the overall letter-writing culture that was present within the Soviet Union. Many within the Soviet Union wrote for a variety of reasons, ranging from complaints, appeals for help, denunciations, and confessions. This letter-writing culture was present since the days of the Tsar, explaining the widespread involvement from the citizens and its cultural legacy. These letters also provided insight into how the people viewed the Soviet Union and were used by the government as a way to gauge the public opinion.⁵⁸ As a result, the government encouraged citizens to continue to write letters by responding to letters, either through aid or through investigations into allegations. This back-and-forth relationship between

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁵⁸ Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Supplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s." *Slavic Review* 55, no. 01 (Spring 1996): 80.

the citizens and the government through letters was important during the Terror and provides context for denunciations overall.

The letters written before and during the Terror were plentiful and commonplace and sent to multiple official outlets or leaders within the Party. The letters sent to newspaper were rarely published and letters to officials dealt with problems both public and private. Newspapers processed citizens' letters and passed them to the appropriate authorities, sometime even investigating the claim themselves.⁵⁹ The reason for letters is based on tradition, where the authority figure, in this case Stalin, becomes a "beloved father" who wants to help his citizens.⁶⁰ Letters directed to this father-figure, dubbed victim letters, were mostly calls for assistance, usually surrounding the constant housing crises within the cities. In return, the government sometimes would help the victims in these letters, prompting more letter writing. "The degree and kind of response that could be expected from the authorities is obviously crucial to one's understanding of the phenomenon of popular letter-writing."⁶¹

Another genre of letters deals with critiques towards Stalin and his Party. Many letters were signed anonymous, a genre labeled *anonimka*, usually directing anger towards the government policies and perceived injustices about privileged classes.⁶² Some stressed their individuality in the face of official policy and wanted freedom through their letters.⁶³ Other types of critiques were less forward and usually based on explaining one's conviction to an official. These letters, classified as confession letters, were usually sincere confessions aimed at explaining their actions.⁶⁴ These letters were primarily from women and show the importance of

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 84-92.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 89.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

the party in the minds of the people. Like a priest during the sacrament of reconciliation, citizens told the government of their faults in the hopes of receiving forgiveness for being forthcoming.

Denunciation letters were only a fraction of the letters received by Soviet officials. The attitudes towards denunciations are heavily influenced by the culture in which it exists.⁶⁵ The public opinion on denunciations influenced how the citizens reacted to calls for denunciations, and while publicly they might be reviled, in private there was something to gain from denouncing others. Not all denunciations were entirely voluntary, with many being extracted during NKVD interrogations, which routinely involved torture and threats.⁶⁶ There is also a distinction between formal denunciations, those done by informants to the secret police, and informal denunciations, the spontaneous revealing of law breaking, dissention, or political and social faults.⁶⁷ This paper focuses primarily on informal denunciations not extracted during interrogations, showing why ordinary citizens suddenly denounce others without explicit pressure.

While not being as severe as torture, the threat of punishment for many was enough to illicit denunciations. Article 58 of the RSFSR Penal Code, originally published in 1927 and amended six months before the death of Kirov in 1934, dealt with counterrevolutionary crimes, which ranged from suspected sabotage to treason. This article is important for its specific call for denunciations. Article 58-1 specifies that "Failure by a military member to denounce preparations or the carrying-out of treason shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty for 10 years."⁶⁸ For non-military citizens, the same crime "shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty

⁶⁵ Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, "Introduction to the Practices of Denunciation in Modern European History." *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 4 (December 1996): 747.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 748.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 750.

⁶⁸ The Government of the R.S.F.S.R, "Article 58, Criminal Code of the RSFSR (1934)," Cyber-USSR, 1999. Accessed April 20, 2019. <http://www.cyberussr.com/rus/uk58-e.html>.

for a term not less than six months,” according to Article 58-12.⁶⁹ With the threat of punishment, many were prompted to join the NKVD in the search for enemies and to denounce those around them, at least in the hopes of protecting themselves.

Motives behind denunciation include patriotism and loyalty towards one’s country, concern about enemies and criminals, fear of punishment, or personal interest. “Letters were written to solve problems, resolve disputes and settle scores. People wrote in a spirit of duty, malice, ambition, loneliness, despair.”⁷⁰ In these letters, a common theme was the presentation of the denouncer being a loyalty communist and a victim and the denounced being an exploiter or enemy. Many called upon specific stereotypes, like being a peasant, a widow, uneducated,⁷¹ and presented their enemy using their prejudices against managers and kulaks and other ethnic groups.⁷² Many cited civic duty to the state in order to prevent accusations of personal interest, though, “Frequently their motives were mixed, and personal interests could play a significant role in citizens’ decisions to turn in friends, neighbors, and even relatives.”⁷³ Denunciations against close relatives, including the parents of those in youth groups, was considered a civic duty to the nation, though denunciation was too common for individuals to receive praise.⁷⁴

For the secret police, denunciation letters proved invaluable. This was no different for the government, who was clear in their calls for denunciations. The issue of denunciations thus becomes one revolving around what it means to be a citizen. “Exploring the core of citizens’ commitment of loyalty to the state and their (perhaps incompatible) commitment of solidarity

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Fitzpatrick, *Supplicants*, 81.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁷² Fitzpatrick and Gellately, 748, 763.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 750.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 756-757.

with their fellow citizens.”⁷⁵ Denunciation becomes expected for any loyal citizen and one must prove their loyalty through denunciation. This was not universal but the Terror could not have happened on such a wide scale without citizen participation. Members of the Party felt obligated to denounce other members for even minor offenses.⁷⁶

Denunciation became a staple within the Soviet legal system, where verdicts and resolutions were not guaranteed.⁷⁷ Denunciations became essential to the governance of the country during the 1930s, becoming primarily a bureaucratic problem and a moral problem second. Thus the problem of morality surrounding denunciations became based on how close the denounced and denouncer were. Denunciations against family and friends was considered morally evil, but this was not common when bosses and managers were concerned. This line shows that while public opinion on denunciations were predominately negative, there were also situations where denunciations was seen as a good thing, complicating the matter of determining why denunciations flourished.

Denunciation was also seen as a way to guarantee loyalty, especially from NKVD officers, and became a primary method of control within the government. The government is, “particularly likely to encourage their citizens or members to write denunciations against each other for purposes of maintaining social control, ideological purity, virtue, and so on.”⁷⁸ As a result, denunciations were sometimes written preemptively to protect against being denounced. With this, the government and secret police were able to extend their sphere of influence and control over society. Without denunciations, the Terror, most likely, would have ended with the

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 763.

⁷⁶ Fitzpatrick, *Supplicants*, 85.

⁷⁷ Vladimir A. Kozlov, “Denunciation and Its Function in Soviet Governance,” in *Stalinism New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (London: Routledge, 2000), 118.

⁷⁸ Fitzpatrick and Gellately, 761.

1936 and 1937 show trials, and affected only government officials and Party members, instead of the millions that became entangled in its web.

Fear Mongering and Propaganda

The Terror is aptly named for its most visible symptom: widespread mass hysteria across all levels of Soviet society.⁷⁹ The Soviet government was the hardest hit by mass hysteria while also propagating its spread. Government and Party officials were directly responsible for creating a sense of fear and insecurity within the population, aided by inconsistent ideology, widespread cultural and social control, and propaganda calling for the liquidation of saboteurs and double-dealers. At the same time, Party officials were also affected by the fear of being denounced and a shift of favor along with the ever-changing ideology. This puts the government into a precarious situation that reinforces Stalin's orders and authority. To avoid being purged, officials followed Stalin's arbitrary and, sometimes, contradictory ideas, and defined the lives of millions within the Soviet borders. This fear eventually spread downwards and out, affecting the average citizens under Communist control. "Thus there were spies upon the spies in an intricate pattern that spread a tangible pull of fear."⁸⁰

Indoctrination

Communism, especially under Stalin, had striking similarities and differences when compared to other totalitarian regimes during the 20th century, such as Nazi Germany and Communist China. According to C. W. Cassinelli's, a political scientist writing during the height of the Cold War, most totalitarian regimes do not have a concrete doctrine, resulting in "contradictory and arbitrary 'ideological' practices."⁸¹ He proposes that, under Stalin's rule, this

⁷⁹ This phrase was popularized in the West with Robert Conquest's book, *The Great Terror*.

⁸⁰ Kravchenko, 75.

⁸¹ C. W. Cassinelli, "Totalitarianism, Ideology, and Propaganda." *The Journal of Politics* 22, no. 1 (February 1960): 90.

inconsistent rhetoric was intentional to foster insecurity within the masses and the Party ranks. With members of the Party seeing Stalin as infallible under his cult of personality, similar to the Roman Catholic Pope, Stalin becomes the leader of a quasi-religious ideology that is based on his word alone.⁸² In his pursuits, he emphasized ideas he agreed with and concealed or outright banned ideas that were dissatisfactory, contrary to his beliefs, or foreign.⁸³ While this had little direct effect on the masses, it greatly affected the rank-and-file Communist Party of the Soviet Union members. “The faithful party member never makes independent appraisals of the conduct of the party, since he possesses no definite criteria as to the content of the ultimate society or directions as to how to get there.”⁸⁴

Without a concrete doctrine, training of party members and their relatives was difficult to achieve without the use of fear and the dissolution of personal relationships. “Moreover, it is most significant that when the Communists train their real activists, they do not concern themselves with ‘ideological’ matters. Obedience and ruthlessness based upon the complete severing of all normal human intercourse is the goal.”⁸⁵ The Communist Party indoctrinated its rank-and-file members through fear and vague promises of utopia, doing away with a concrete doctrine and consistent ideology. Anything that would bring about utopia was considered along the party line. Without having a set doctrine, the Party was able to adjust its policies and ideals without reason. They were able to extract loyalty by changing what was considered normal social behavior, causing relationships to disintegrate and causing society to become fractioned and insecure. Without a strong support system, the average person was especially sensitive to the

⁸² *Ibid.*, 91.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

changes of the Party, even if not a member, and more easily manipulated into following the Party's, i.e. Stalin's, ideals.

Totalitarian states were successful in indoctrination because of their control of all aspects of life. This social and psychological control meant that dissent was not only banned but almost impossible to carry out. By breaking down support systems, people were isolated and more likely to agree to and follow the Party, even if they knew they it was wrong. Everyone's life, thoughts, actions, and relationships are scrutinized and any moment of weakness or apprehension is exploited. Anyone not willing to show their support was at risk of being arrested, interrogated, and executed. This vulnerability affected not only party members but also the average citizens within factories or working on communes.

Even without a set doctrine, the Party set out to control "all vital aspects of man's existence."⁸⁶ Everything done within the Soviet Union had to not only be along the Party line but should also benefit the Party in its mission towards utopia. This ranged from everyday actions and thoughts to the problem of hardships within this, supposedly, superior society. Hardships and the maintenance of loyalty became the pillar of the ideal Soviet Man. Stalin in his early days wanted to be a Marxist theorist and this is seen in his obsession with the ever-changing doctrine of the Soviet Union and the new ideals set forth, such as socialism in one country, the Five Year Plans, and the removal of old Tsarist and Bolshevik frameworks. To fit his new ideal, he promoted Lenin while also changing the very structures Lenin established to create a global powerhouse, isolated from the capitalistic world. He promoted whatever would solidify his power and increase the control the Party has over society.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

The Party, in fostering a widespread sense of fear, offered security through conformity and trust. While this did not affect everyone equally, this is an important shift for some and helps explain the fanaticism and willingness to denounce or renounce personal relationships seen in some individuals during Stalin's rule. If everyone outside, and some within, the Soviet Union are an enemy, then the only group you can trust becomes the government and the officials in charge, who become the sole protector of the nation. However this protection was based on loyalty and the meeting of expectations, causing many to change their personal behaviors to fit the new ideal of the day. "Of course, it was one thing to order reforms, quite another to enforce them. Stalin was right in his charge that the leaders feared the truth. They feared it because truth was an almost always counter-revolutionary and always dangerous luxury."⁸⁷

For others, conformity was a feigned response to the pressures from the state. In public they were just as communist as everyone else, but in private they were critical of the government and longed for a different way of life. However, any critique of the government or show of discontent was strictly prohibited under the rules of the Terror. The threat of execution or forced labor, or in extreme cases, the interrogation and torturing of relatives, was enough to keep most people in line. This was not only limited to those within the Party ranks but the average citizen as well. When you do not know who is listening and what they might do, it is better to remain silent and hope for better days.

However, loyalty was not always a guarantee of safety. For so-called kulaks, landlords, and members targeted during the national campaigns, orthodoxy to the Party line was not enough to overcome what the Soviet government saw as impurities and signs of being enemies.⁸⁸ Even

⁸⁷ Kravchenko, 77.

⁸⁸ Cassinelli, 89.

the most devout communists were under the constant threat of liquidation. This precedence was set during the early years of Stalin's reign when national campaigns against foreigners were rampant and dekulakization and collectivization was in full swing.⁸⁹ "It is not the dissenter but the 'political enemy' to whom the terror is applied. When the kulaks have been eliminated, their place is taken by national minorities, and the terror continues as before."⁹⁰ This cycle endured until the end of the Terror in 1938, but its effects and attitudes lasted well after World War II and into the 1950s.

The Soviets managed to create a closed system where outside information was filtered through them and their ideas were the only ones allowed.⁹¹ In doing this, they created a system where conformity was not only expected but seen as the only option. With this, some members of Soviet society adopted the Communist Party's ideals as strongly as their own. This was only exacerbated by time spent in the Gulag, as some blamed themselves for the Party's misguided actions and believed the allegation against them were true, or at least, partially their doing. Without outside ideas or a real view of the Western world, people were at the mercy of the Communist Party and the image they put forth. It is easier for a government to indoctrinate their people if citizens are only allowed to know what the government wants them to know. They are able to continue the narrative that the Western world wants to destroy the Soviet Union and its people, only continuing the fear that permeated society and convincing many to join in the fight against these external, and internal, enemies.

The 1930s was also the time of the Great Depression for the West, something the Soviet Union pointed to as a symptom of the problems with capitalism and the beginning of the end for

⁸⁹ Goldman, 13.

⁹⁰ Cassinelli, 90.

⁹¹ Adler, 228.

the capitalist world.⁹² By using this low point, Stalin was able to drive home the differences between the Soviet Union and the West and show the strength of the Communist system, according to the Party. This only served to create “greater antagonism” between capitalism and communism, especially within industrial communities. As opposed to the unemployment and stresses of the Great Depression, the Soviet Union could boast having low unemployment with basic amenities provided, even if these promises were not true, or equal, in practice. Through the promises of establishing a communist utopia, the CPSU was able to convince workers that everything they did was for the betterment of the future and any hardships were noble in this endeavor. This, compared to the plights of the capitalistic world of the 1930s, was preferred by many within the borders of the Soviet Union. “In brief, Communism is the realization of all man’s most noble ideals.”⁹³

Other remarks on the Western world at the time focused solely on their constant threatening of the Soviet Union and their goals. Marxist belief, while saying nothing on how a government should rule, does specify that in the class-less utopia, there is no need for government. Stalin’s justification for the continuation of his totalitarian regime was that “the state could not wither away as long as capitalist states ‘encircled’ the Soviet Union.”⁹⁴ With the use of threatening language, Stalin was not only able to justify his regime but also exacerbate the fear within the general populace concerning the outside world. He also promised that after the ‘encirclement’ ended, all of the hardships plaguing society would disappear.⁹⁵ With the promise to an end to the Terror, and denunciation, and poor living conditions, and forced loss of property and other restrictive measures, the people were more likely to act upon these calls and do the

⁹² *Ibid.*, 220.

⁹³ Cassinelli, 88.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

bidding for the Party. This only added to the noble call of communism and the willingness to participate under the CPSU.

While totalitarian regimes controlled every part of a person's life, the average citizen is not absolved of their crimes. Through nonaction, totalitarian regimes are able to thrive and remain in power. Totalitarian regimes could only continue if "the masses of the population remained politically neutral and passive."⁹⁶ This quote was said by Zbigniew Brzezinski, a Polish-American diplomat and the National Security Advisor under President Carter. He had done countless research on the Soviet system. However, this idea is challenged by the changes that affected Soviet society during this time, including industrialization, increased literacy, and the Stalinist ideals of nationalism and superiority. To maintain influence as the only ideology, the Soviets controlled art, science, and history taught within the standardized education system and in higher education.⁹⁷ This included the "proletarianization" of art, where art was determined by its usefulness in propagating the official agenda, not its content.⁹⁸

History was focused on the superiority of the Soviet state and science only focused on Soviet discoveries, doing away with any foreign concepts, including DNA and fields of linguistics.⁹⁹ Stalin's personal interest in the historical importance of Russia, including the Byzantine tradition and the concept of Holy Russia influenced the official history of the Soviet Union. With this, Stalin was able to control how the masses thought about art, history, and science, while also promoting the dominance of the Soviet Union and its Russian foundation. Again, with the control of *all* information, the CPSU was able to make the general populace

⁹⁶ Brzezinski, 351-352.

⁹⁷ Cassinelli, 79.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 85,

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 81-85, 91.

dependent on its ideals and perspective and make them sensitive to the requests of the government, including the writing of denunciations.

Another form of propaganda was created to convince the Soviet subjects of their exalted position within this budding Communist utopia. “The Soviet system is said to provide a life full of joy and plenty, with no unemployment and with the world’s lowest rent and most advanced social insurance, all thanks to Comrade Stalin himself.”¹⁰⁰ By promising a class-less society with opportunities from standardized education, industrialization, increased food production, and the increased standard of living for some with modernization, the Soviet Union was able to exploit the positives of the party to influence the people. Some clung to these improvements as evidence that the Party was successful in its endeavors and that their sacrifice meant something, that their suffering was not in vain.

Stalin, while Georgian, was very pro-Russian and stressed the importance of Russia to world history. “The role of Russia and the Russian has been stressed because, by stating that all important past events had occurred within the area currently controlled by Stalin.”¹⁰¹ By calling upon the past, Stalin is able to justify the legitimacy of the Soviet Union and showing the Soviet Union as the next stage of global development. This sets up his regime as the future and sets up basic education as a form of conversion or indoctrination. The Soviet Union and communist ideology just become the next stage in Russian domination and the utopia becomes a promise, given Russia’s past importance within religion and history. “To the totalitarian, ideas are weapons; by constructing an iron curtain he insures the monopoly of his own.”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 89-92.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 94.

Without a concrete doctrine, the Party was subject to changes in official ideals under Stalin without provocation or explanation. “The famous purges of Soviet activists are often based upon ‘opposition to the correct party line;’ the very arbitrariness of the line makes the purges more devastating.”¹⁰³ With a constantly shifting ideology along the lines of one man’s personal ambitions, many were caught having acted against party ideals without having actively opposing the Party. With this, fear and uncertainty plagued the minds of those living under this regime. Without any other information except what was given by party, people were hopeless to fight the influence of ideology and the indoctrination of the masses. Party members and average citizens, alike, were under the control of one man, Josef Stalin, whose ideals and plans changed without warning nor reason.

Enemies and Double-Dealers

Terror-era denunciations came from many sources. However one of the most important were denunciations sent to government officials and the NKVD exposing enemies of the Communist state, including class enemies, capitalist exploiters, and saboteurs.¹⁰⁴ Many citizens reacted to the official Soviet announcements with fear and insecurity and acted upon the government’s call. As a result, those who were denounced were deprived of their rights, a common aftermath of denunciation, and sent away for hard labor or just executed without prejudice. The government, knowing the perpetuation of a group of enemies would only prompt more denunciations, started a campaign of propaganda to continue its control. This propaganda, aimed at indoctrination and the creation of fear, was successful in the latter but questionable in the former.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰⁴ Golfo Alexopoulos, "Victim Talk: Defense Testimony and Denunciation under Stalin." *Law and Social Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 637-638

¹⁰⁵ Cassinelli, 86.

In a speech given at the Plenum of the Central Committee on March 3, 1937, Stalin called out Party members for carelessness when dealing with the issue of enemies and double-dealers. He recalled the death of Kirov: “first serious warning which indicated that enemies of the people would resort to double-dealing and that they would mask themselves as Bolsheviks, as Party members, in order to worm their way into our confidence and to thus open access for themselves into our organizations.”¹⁰⁶ He claims that Party officials and members were impressed by the economic successes of the Soviet Union, and thus, disregarded the war the Bolsheviks were still under from internal and external sources. With the Soviet Union only encompassing one-sixth of the world, the nation was sensitive to problems with the capitalist encirclement, “Is it not clear that for as long as we have capitalist encirclement, we shall have wreckers, spies, diversionists, and killers sent to our rear by agents of foreign states?” He also details how the Trotskyites from the 1930s are not the same as the ones from the 1920s, usually more subverted and concealing their platforms for fear of reprisal. Without acknowledging this difference, the Communist Party was not able to fight these enemies successfully, leading to spies.

This speech, while detailing the, alleged, issues of the Soviet Union with enemies, provides good background on Stalin’s thoughts during this time. By making such a speech at an important conference for the party, Stalin not only called upon fellow members and officials to act, but also was able to intensify the fear that many felt. One mistake, one association, was the only thing between an official and exile, forced labor, or even death. This fear only spiraled downward and Stalin’s continued references to these enemies convinced many that they were real and everywhere within the Soviet Union. Many believed that any dissenting opinion or

¹⁰⁶ J.V. Stalin, "Defects in Party Work and Measures for Liquidating Trotskyite and Other Double Dealers," Marxist Internet Archive, 2008, accessed February 2, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1937/03/03.htm>.

action was evidence of that person's association with enemies, leading some to become paranoid and believe that subversive and destructive behavior was imminent.

End of Personal Relationships

This propaganda also ruined the personal relationships maintained throughout the Soviet Union. With the ever-growing reliance on terror, people were forced to adapt by changing their views on their fellow countrymen, no matter their previous relationships. "The growing dread of personal vulnerability produced a pervasive mistrust of others. People developed twisted, often aggressive strategies for self-protection. The poisonous atmosphere seeped into even the closest and most private of human relationships."¹⁰⁷ Again, the destruction of a personal support base makes the populace more vulnerable to the influence of the Party. With this, denunciation against even a close family member in the hopes of protection become a means to an end. Stalin, in his mission to establish complete control, used this uncertainty and the rising social tensions to his benefit, only spreading the effects of the Terror further into the minds and lives of the average citizen.¹⁰⁸

The issue of emotions and relationships was a difficult and sensitive subject during the Terror. With many desperate to protect themselves from the fate of those around them, they denounced or were compliant in the arrests, destroying the very same bonds they relied on. In her memoir *Hope Against Hope* chronicling her experiences after her husband was arrested for anti-Stalinist poetry and sentenced to internal exile, Nadezhda Mandelstam laments the effects of denunciation and associations, even before being arrested. "It was always painful when somebody one had become friendly with mysteriously broke off relations, but this, alas, was the

¹⁰⁷ Goldman, 3.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 6, 301-302.

only thing that honorable people could do if they refused to play the role of an ‘adjutant.’”¹⁰⁹ She is very aware of what could happen if one associates with someone who is later implicated during the Terror. She spends many nights awake, afraid for her colleagues and friends. She wonders if they have been arrested and if so, what tortures await them at the hands of the interrogators.¹¹⁰ While her story is not the typical case within the Soviet Union, being educated and associating with other literary elites, her writings provide insight into the effects of fear on personal relationships and how few options were provided. Mandelstam lost her husband while in transit to a Gulag labor camp, escaping the fate of many during this era but only through death.

Kravchenko mirrors these concerns in his memoir, *I Chose Freedom*. He laments about the effects the Terror had on his relationships, especially as the Terror grew: “From this time forward it became a matter of ‘honor’ to denounce and expose ‘disguised enemies’ in the Party. You hesitated to talk to your closest comrades. You disassociated yourself from friends and relatives and colleagues. What if they were infected, germ-bearers of the political epidemic sweeping the land?”¹¹¹ He acknowledges the issue of association and the solution. He talks about how brotherhood is not enough to overcome the pressures from above, nor the response from below. How pressures built until the basic bonds within the factory, the neighborhood, the family were destroyed by the eminent explosion, marked by denunciations and arrests.

The Gulag System

The Gulag and its effects cannot be ignored when talking about the Terror. The Gulag is responsible for furthering indoctrination even long after the end of the Terror and has become

¹⁰⁹ Mandelstam, 36.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹¹¹ Kravchenko, 213.

linked with the Terror, especially after Alexander Solzhenitsyn's book was published in 1974. Nanci Adler makes a case for the adoption of Soviet ideals by the general populace as a symptom of the Terror, especially for those who served sentences. She states that they develop a form of Stockholm Syndrome to deal with the pressures and fatigues of forced labor.¹¹² "Fear is accompanied by the elevation of stress hormones, motivating people who are in a stressful situation to forge rapid, strong, and sometimes permanent, attachment bonds to relieve the neurobiological stress."¹¹³ Because they have adopted the ideals of their oppressors, they blame themselves for their plights and seek reconciliation from the Party about their perceived transgressions. Because of this, the stress of the forced labor camps stays with the victims long after their release in 1953 and the end of the Terror.¹¹⁴ This continues throughout their lives and for many within the Soviet Union, the threat of the being under the Gulag system keeps them within Party line long after Stalin's death.

Solzhenitsyn wrote about the pervasive fear within the prisons. "The convicted prisoner had to learn that his worst guilt out in freedom had been his attempt somehow to get together or unite with others by any route... In prison this fear went so far as to become fear of all kinds of collective action: two voices uttering the same complaint or two prisoners signing a complaint on one piece of paper."¹¹⁵ Prisoners were unable to rely on each other for fear of retaliation, for fear of punishment, for fear of conditions only worsening within the camps. The collective that was so expounded upon by the Communist Party was broken within the camps, rendering the Gulag its own little world within the Soviet Union, untouched by the ideals of the rest of the nation.

¹¹² Adler, 211.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹¹⁵ Solzhenitsyn, 504.

The Gulag served as a pervasive threat within the Soviet system, and many who knew of its existence were hellbent on remaining on the right side of Soviet opinion in order to avoid being imprisoned, no matter the costs. Forced labor was seen as a form of reconciliation, of repentance for past crimes. But if one is able to act in accordance with the Party, including in the writing of denunciations and by aiding in the Terror, then repentance is not needed and the Gulag can remain a distance threat rather than one's home and personal hell.

Aftermath: "Silence is the real crime against humanity"¹¹⁶

The Terror ended in early 1938. In a letter titled "On the Final Victory of Socialism in the U.S.S.R" to the staff propagandist of the Manturovsk District, Josef Stalin declares that they, "succeeded in liquidating our bourgeoisie, in establishing fraternal collaboration with our peasantry and in building."¹¹⁷ With this, the Terror of the 1930s was over. However, despite the end date of 1938, the effects of the Terror continued, with many people implicated, arrested, and killed for supposed crimes without justification and without due process until 1953. The fear still survived within the average citizen and millions were forced to readapt into the world after the Terror.

Denunciations during the Terror were not only limited to supposed enemies and other official targets, entangling many throughout the Soviet Union. The web even managed to entangle those who had denounced previously.¹¹⁸ Many who denounced were later denounced themselves, even with most of those who were denounced being innocent. Many played an active role in continuing the oppressive regime that later turned on them and punished them like they had before. Some were conflicted about this turn of events, wondering what they had done to

¹¹⁶ Mandelstam, 43.

¹¹⁷ J.V. Stalin, "On the Final Victory of Socialism in the U.S.S.R." Marxist Internet Archive, 2008, accessed February 2, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1938/01/18.htm>.

¹¹⁸ Adler, 214.

deserve this treatment. However, others believed they were an error within the system, an error which was justifiable for all of the ‘conspirators’ caught during the process. This belief also relates to the teachings from the party on the importance of hardships in the process of obtaining utopia.

This issue of justification was prominent in the later years of the Soviet Union. Mandelstam writes, “Every new killing was excused on the grounds that we were building a remarkable ‘new’ world in which there would be no more violence, and that no sacrifice was too great for it. Nobody noticed that the end had begun to justify the means, and then, as always, gradually been lost sight of.”¹¹⁹ No resistance or push back led many to see the actions of the government as a necessary evil and some even justified the horrors they witnessed by calling upon the promised utopia. With this, the aftermath of the Terror becomes focused on the gradual amnesia that has plagued the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation today. Many have come to see the Soviet Union as a high point and Stalin as the strong leader needed in a time of discontent and disorder.

The Terror has never been ‘claimed’ in Russia. Few have admitted fault and even more have passed the responsibility onto someone else.¹²⁰ Despite evidence to the contrary, the Party denies their actions and the masterminds behind the plan either died without having to directly accept their responsibility or were able to use the totalitarian regime to their benefit. This is true even in modern-day Russia, where memories of the Terror are repressed and the lessons of the 1930s are lost to history.¹²¹ For Gulag prisoners, “their survival is necessarily the cumulative consequence of how their physical and mental abilities coped with and adapted to the

¹¹⁹ Mandelstam, 167-168

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

repression.”¹²² But even their actions and behaviors were influenced by the attitudes of the nation that has never shied away from changing history for its benefit, denying them the peace that suffered for.

In 1953, many of those placed into the camps under Stalin were released. A commission was sent in the early months of Khrushchev’s tenure to the camps to investigate the penal system.¹²³ Many believed the CPSU would acknowledge the atrocities committed, but instead offered forgiveness to victims for crimes they were only accused of. Some were offered rehabilitation, but for many, rehabilitation and reinstatement would be life-long processes, sometimes only completed after the fall of Communism in 1991. Along with this, many petitions for reinstatement and rehabilitation focused on proving innocence through the denunciation of others, only continuing this cycle.

There is a lot of difficulty in attempting to understand the mindset of the Terror from memoirs, as memoirs are few and far in between. The average citizen was quick to repress their feelings and memories on the Terror while those affected by the Gulags number in the millions.¹²⁴ Those who wrote memoirs were usually highly-educated, prominent members of society before the Terror, and some were ardent followers of communism. However, with the number of letters calling for rehabilitation, a restoration of once-deprived rights, and reinstatement within the Party, some judgement on the victims’ mindset can be made. After Stalin’s death, many applied for rehabilitation, and many were able to receive this status.¹²⁵ The question becomes how can people victimized by their government, the very government responsible for their imprisonment, remain loyal to the party and ask for rehabilitation?

¹²² *Ibid.*, 230.

¹²³ Adler, 225.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 211-212.

For others, rehabilitation was not enough. They petitioned for reinstatement into the Party ranks, a bestowed position not automatically regained upon rehabilitation. For many, this process was about gaining or regaining the benefits membership gave. With reinstatement, time spent in the camps and fighting for reinstatement were added to one's tenure within the Party.¹²⁶ Membership, especially long-term, "offered instrumental social advantages for housing, job placement and professional advancement."¹²⁷ Those who applied for reinstatement hoped professing loyalty and acting within line would promise a normal live after the Gulag, something desperately needed. Rehabilitation and reinstatement were not uniform and victim's willingness to reengage with their oppressors has been seen as a testament to the strength of the Communist Party.¹²⁸

The petitioning to be reinstated into the party and to be rehabilitated into society was especially common in the countryside where dekulakization had many deprived of their rights.¹²⁹ In this process, many proclaimed their innocence through letters written to the CPSU where they portrayed themselves as victims of exploitation, the same thing they were accused of. "Petition writers also described how they, illiterate and incapable, were unable to 'set themselves up' under the new order."¹³⁰ Their denunciations called upon the policies and language established by the CPSU and established themselves as the party's ideal and their victim as the true enemy.

The CPSU was successful in the countryside through the use of already-present prejudices, only exacerbated by the campaigns towards dekulakization and collectivization where many were suddenly targeted. Golfo Alexopoulos argues that in these letters, denunciation

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹²⁸ Alexopoulos, 639.

¹²⁹ Alexopoulos, 645-648.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 646.

was not required but was a regular occurrence. He questions whether this strategy was an attempt for one to define their social identity in the polarized world of the Soviet Union.¹³¹ As a result, victim talk, when one tries to portray oneself as the victim, was a common feature of society on all levels, including within the Soviet leadership about their so-called enemies.¹³² By using the rhetoric put forth by the party, citizens were able to make themselves into the ideal Soviet person, including being victims of exploitation and struggle during the petition and reinstatement process. They reinvented themselves and carved their own part within this system, showing how easy it is for someone who was a victim to turn the page and victimize those around them. In doing so, “the disenfranchised helped to perpetuate the policy that condemned them.”¹³³

Dynamics were similar within the city but focused on the life within the factories. By using factory newspapers, Wendy Goldman was able to show the fear and desperation necessary to bring someone to denounce another.¹³⁴ She also touches upon the perpetuating cycle of denunciations. One denunciation has a domino effect, affecting everyone that knows the denounced but also aggravating the fear and suspicion many felt towards their friends and families. “‘True believers,’ eager at first to aid the Party in its hunt for internal enemies, wrestled with growing doubts at coworkers, bosses, parents, siblings, friends, and neighbors disappeared into prisons.”¹³⁵ The action of denouncing was not only limited to letters to the government, but also those who wrote defamatory articles within the factory and those who pressured managers to expel enemies. In this mostly closed-system, relationships were strained and many were accused of wrecking, especially during public meetings.

¹³¹ Alexopoulos., 650.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 651-652.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 652.

¹³⁴ Goldman, 10.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

In the beginning, some trusted the NKVD to investigate their claims and restore justice.¹³⁶ However, as the Terror only grew worse, this trust of the secret police was eroded and many became aware of their vulnerability and impurity. An inkling of doubt about the Party and its actions and its victims caused some to rethink what the government was considering an enemy. When any personal connection to the denounced or imperfection within one's biography can be used against them, hopelessness sets in. Some feel compelled to follow the Party's will in the hopes of protecting themselves and others become resigned to their fates, but in the end, the Terror scars everyone it touches and is felt for decades after its official end.

The period of the Terror was marked by changes in how the average citizen viewed the Party. Some were convinced that Stalin was responsible, so with the next general secretary, problems would be solved. However, with the beginning of Nikita Khrushchev's regime in 1953, hopes were dashed when the man who denounced Stalin's crimes continued to exercise the centralization of control within the empire.¹³⁷ As a result, the reprieve from Terror did not last long and the mindset of persecution, fear, and forced loyalty only continued.

This loyalty was not widespread. Many remained distrustful or resentful of the CPSU until they died and it is difficult to imagine what the thoughts of the millions who died within the labor camps would be.¹³⁸ Many saw themselves as an expendable slave labor within the larger issues of industrialization and modernization of small villages and parts of Siberia. This is contrasted with those who did not lose faith in the mission of the CPSU, even if they lost faith in Stalin as a leader. Some advocated for lost parents or spouses just for a sake of justice.¹³⁹ In the

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 299-301.

¹³⁷ Brzezinski, 358.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

end, “tens of thousands were to apply for and receive rehabilitation,” and while this did nothing to undo the injustice, for some it was enough.¹⁴⁰

So back to the question of why loyalty persisted within some individuals. On this topic, Nanci Adler, in her interviews with workers from that era, noted many were proud of the work they did in modernizing and building cities, some of which helped in the war effort.¹⁴¹ They became the foundation of socialism in these parts and, if they chose to remain in these isolated towns, were exalted for their efforts. While they might not agree with the methods that the CPSU took, they still believed in the end goal: class-less utopia. They saw their imprisonment as supporting the ideology in its mission, a noble perspective to take on such a harrowing experience. Adler also proposes that, once again, the Party has taken up a religious aspect: “If the Gulag experience is perceived as brutalized forced labour, it is repression. If it is perceived as a ‘labour of love,’ it veers in the direction of devotion. The redeeming value of religious suffering, even martyrdom, comes to mind.”¹⁴²

For many, the effects of the Terror still reign. Private life was obliterated, personal relationships were strained or ruined, fear was still a daily reminder of the past, and the belief in utopia never came. Wendy Goldman called a consequence of the Terror “dual-mindedness,” where one was forced to split public loyalty and private discontent.¹⁴³ This dealt with the issues of coming to terms with denouncing others while trying to protect family and friends, agreeing with the Party in actions but not in thought, feigning security in the face of vulnerability. What someone said in public was not necessarily what they believed, creating a disconnect in some people, aggravated by the continuation of fear, even after 1938.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁴³ Goldman, 304.

Over five million victims returned to Soviet society, a number which does not include exiles and deportees. These numbers are also complicated by the 1937 census. The data for the 1937 census was repressed when the extent of the 1932-1933 Famine and the Terror was shown.¹⁴⁴“In 1936, the official estimate of the total USSR population at the beginning of 1933 (based on the 1926 census and ZAGS data about births, emigration and deaths) was 165.7 million. The 1937 census figure, however, was only 162 million.”¹⁴⁵ This was a problem for the Soviet Union who intended to use this data for propagandistic purposes. While the real number of victims will never be known for certain, the census taken at the height of the Terror provides some insight into the destruction of the 1930s.

The CPSU had to toe a precarious line between the indoctrination and terror. When indoctrination failed, terror becomes the only option. “It is the party and the ideology together that provide the system with its inbuilt momentum. The decline of either would force the regime to rely almost exclusively on terror, as Stalin did, or face the prospect of far-reaching transformation of the system.”¹⁴⁶ With the onset of the Terror in 1934, the strains of Stalin’s totalitarian regime were beginning to show. However, some have pondered whether this reign of terror is just another stage within the system of trying to create a new order within the Soviet Union, including modernizing a traditional and, overall, uneducated society into a global powerhouse.¹⁴⁷ While this has been debated, it is clear that Stalin had a direct impact on the actions of the thirties. Stalin, aware of the discontent that beginning to rise, used the Terror as a social safety-valve, halting people’s thoughts and actions on acting against the government.

¹⁴⁴ Catherine Merridale, "The 1937 Census and the Limits of Stalinist Rule." *The Historical Journal* 39, no. 01 (March 1996): 232.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁴⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Nature of the Soviet System." *Slavic Review* 20, no. 3 (October 1961): 358.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 360, 365.

However, with this method, the terror becomes cyclical, making many wonder if terror is the only way to prevent tensions from spilling out while also contributing to this tension?

Conclusion

After Stalin's death in 1953, 1.2 million Gulag prisoners were liberated.¹⁴⁸ However, this does not account for the great numbers still within the camps or the problem of how the government should deal with the aftermath of Stalinism and the subsequent Terror. The release of the prisoners could be seen as a form of amnesty performed by the government without directly condemning the actions of the Party. Prisoners were forgiven for crimes they had not committed, for allegations that were unfounded, for being part of something bigger than themselves involuntarily, without the promise of rehabilitation.¹⁴⁹ This continues the victimization of Gulag prisoners while absolving the Party of any transgressions and mistakes. With Stalin's death, for many, the Terror was not over.

The Terror and its widespread effects are shown in the pervasive fear still felt within the Russian Federation. The government still has a strong hold on the citizenry within Russia, continuing the cycle proposed by Brzezinski of terror being a necessary part in consolidating power. Whether something like the Terror will happen again in modern-day Russia has yet to be seen, but the beginnings are there, in official government policy, in fear-mongering, and in censorship and propaganda. However, this paper has shown that while the government is responsible for fostering this environment, it is those who willingly denounced others, exploit this fear, and call for punishment that are responsible. It is easy, with pressure coming from all sides to conform to ideals that challenge one's morality, to go against social norms, and become

¹⁴⁸ Adler, 224.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 225.

involved in something bigger than one can imagine, but it is not impossible to resist, even silently.

It is this willingness to conform in the face of fear that makes the Terror and denunciations overall so important. It was seen during: the Salem Witch Trials, where people were executed for just an accusation of witchcraft; McCarthyism, where members of the public were blacklisted for even suspected sympathies to the Communists; and is still seen today in the era of social media, doxing, and people and companies being “cancelled” for anything, including misunderstandings. While the court of public opinion is not as forceful and punishing as a government effort, the court of public opinion still has a major influence on one’s daily life, and if one finds themselves on the wrong side of this line, it is very difficult to overcome and return to society untainted. Denunciation exists in cultures all over the world and has only become easier to issue with the access to the Internet and easier to enforce through the rapid spread of information. However, most would not see their actions as denunciation, which makes it all the more terrifying.

While another example like the Terror will, hopefully, never happen on this scale again, the issue of denunciation and its effects are important as technology makes communication and spreading of information quicker and easier. This argument is significant because it shows how easily a society can devolve into fear and how quickly denunciations can spread and wreak havoc. From learning from the Soviet example, one can see the beginnings and combat misinformation, propaganda, and fear. However, it is difficult to pin down why people denounce, and, as stated previously, there are many reasons, including patriotism and self-interest. This makes the act of denouncing difficult to fully understand and prevent. Without learning about this shameful moment of history, one cannot hope to prevent another Terror from taking place.

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