

STALIN'S



GENOCIDES

Norman M. Naimark

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Stalin's Genocides

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INTRODUCTION

This short book—really an extended essay—is intended to argue that Stalin's mass killings of the 1930s should be classified as "genocide." This argument is made more difficult by the fact that there was no single act of genocide in the Soviet case, but rather a series of interrelated attacks on "class enemies" and "enemies of the people," metonyms for diverse alleged opponents of the Soviet state. Episodes of mass killing also took a variety of forms, some involving mass executions, others exile in special settlements and camps of the Gulag, where many hundreds of thousands died from the unusually harsh character of arrest, internment, and interrogation, on the one hand, and hellish conditions of transport, housing, sustenance, and forced labor, on the other.

The social and national categories of the supposed enemies of the USSR changed and shifted over time; the justifications for the assaults on groups of Soviet citizens (and foreigners in the Soviet Union) were similarly labile. Yet Stalin and his lieutenants connected these genocidal attacks to the tenets of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism and used similar police, judicial, and extrajudicial means of

implementing them. Both Soviet party and state institutions were involved, as Stalin applied the impressive instruments of exerting power and control created by the Bolshevik revolution to strike at his opponents and potential opponents, real and—for the greatest part—imagined. As the result of Stalin's rule in the 1930s and early 1940s, many millions of innocent people were shot, starved to death, or died in detention and exile. It is long since time to consider this story an important chapter in the history of genocide.

There are a number of legitimate scholarly and even moral inhibitions in making this kind of argument, not the least important of which is the understandable reticence—pronounced among both scholars and journalists—to apply an appellation designed primarily to describe the Holocaust, the mass murder of the Jews by the Nazis, to the murder of Soviet citizens in the 1930s. In particular, German and Jewish scholars of the Holocaust will sometimes insist that the Nazi murder of nearly six million Jews was an event of singular historical meaning that cannot be fruitfully compared with other episodes of mass murder in the modern era. The combination of Hitler's murderous racism and traditional Christian anti-Semitic motifs make Nazi crimes, in the mind of many scholars, a unique genocidal undertaking.¹ But even this question becomes more complicated when one takes into account what could be considered Nazi genocidal campaigns against gypsies (Roma and Sinti), homosexuals, and the mentally disabled, not to mention Soviet prisoners of war, Poles, and others.

Related to this issue is the fact that the December 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide focuses on the murder of ethnic, national, racial, and religious groups and excludes—though not explicitly—social and political groups, which were, after all, the main victims of Stalin’s murderous campaigns. Some scholars isolate the Ukrainian killer famine of 1932–33 or the forced deportations of the so-called punished peoples in 1944 to support a claim of genocide against Stalin. Others point to the “Katyn forest massacre” of twenty-two thousand Polish army officers and government officials in the early spring of 1940 as an emblematic case of Stalinist genocide. But categorizing just these discrete murderous events as genocide, while leaving out others, tends to gloss over the genocidal character of the Soviet regime in the 1930s, which killed systematically rather than episodically.

Another objection to including Stalinist mass killings in the concept of genocide has to do with the special character of ethnic and national identity when thinking about the “human race.” Humanity is comprised of a marvelous diversity of peoples, each of whose distinct character, even if “invented,” in the famous formulation of Benedict Anderson, deserves special protection. As we will see, the development of the concept of genocide itself was closely tied to this idea. Yet the U.N. Genocide Convention also protects religious groups, despite the fact that their essentially ascriptive nature does not carry the same valence as ethnic and national groups. Jews and Armenians were killed as peoples, not as religious groups, though religion was used

as a marker of ethnicity, much as it was in the case of Serb attacks on Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s. But the obligation of protecting ethnic and national groups, as well as religious and racial ones, from mass murder should not obviate the need to protect political and social groups from the same horrendous crime, especially when the Soviet Union insisted that these groups not be included in the Genocide Convention. Certainly the victims and their progeny would have difficulty understanding the moral, ethical, and legal differences—not to mention historical distinctions—between one form of mass murder and another.

At the same time many observers think that the concept of genocide would lose its historical and legal salience, would in some senses be “cheapened,” by broadening the potential categories of victims to include social and political groups. It is certainly the case that the term is used imprecisely and irresponsibly by diverse, sometimes loosely defined, groups of people claiming genocide victim status. But it is the very enormity of the crime of systematic mass murder—intentionally perpetrated by the political elite of a state against a targeted group within the borders of or outside the state—that should distinguish genocide from other forms of mass killing, like pogroms, massacres, and terrorist bombings. To include the planned mass elimination of social and political groups in the definition of genocide can help make our understanding of the phenomenon more robust rather than diminish its historical usefulness. Often in episodes of genocide—we see this particularly clearly in the case of the Ukrainian killer famine of 1932–1933—social and national/ethnic categories over-

lap. Sometimes, as in the case of the Soviet attack against so-called kulaks, social and political categories of victims were “ethnicized” as a way to make the attack on their existence more comprehensible to the society and state. Genocide as a product of communist societies—Stalinist Russia, Mao’s China, and Pol Pot’s Cambodia—where millions of these country’s own citizens were killed in campaigns of mass murder, can and should be thought about alongside analogous cases of genocide perpetrated against minority peoples.

For decades, Cold War politics in academia (meaning, in particular, anti-Cold War politics) also militated against an open consideration of the genocide question in the context of Stalin and Stalinism. This continues to have some relevance to our understanding of the Soviet Union even today. Because Stalin killed in the name of the higher ideals of socialism and human progress, it is sometimes argued, his cannot be equated with the base motives of history’s other twentieth-century genocidaires, who killed for no other reason than the perceived “otherness” of ethnic or religious groups, and, in Hitler’s case, for a racial dystopia that could appeal to few except the Germans. In assessing Stalin’s motivations for overseeing the mass killing of so many millions of Soviet citizens in the 1930s, historians can sometimes seem anxious to find a plausible rationale for him to have done so, whether it be the breakneck program to modernize the country, the need to provide heavy industry with investment capital and agriculture with technological improvements, the protection of the Soviet Union from the threat of invasion

by its enemies, most notably Poland, Germany, and Japan, the presence of potential terrorists in the population out to kill Stalin and his confederates, and/or the nefarious influence of Trotsky and his Fourth International on the Soviet elite.

In the recent literature on Stalin's crimes, Viacheslav Molotov's memories in conversation with Feliks Chuev, recorded some thirty-five years after the events, are frequently used to explain the purges and the killing:

1937 was necessary. If you take into account that after the revolution we hacked to the right and to the left, and achieved victory, but the remnants of enemies of various viewpoints continued to exist, and in face of the growing danger of fascist aggression they could unite. We were obliged in 1937 to make sure that at the time of war we would not have a fifth column. . . . Of course, it's sad and regrettable about such people [who were innocent], but I believe that the terror that was carried out at the end of the 1930s was necessary. . . . Stalin, in my opinion, conducted absolutely the right policy; so what if extra heads fell, there would be no vacillation in the time of war and after the war.

Even in his old age, after having seen his wife, Polina Zhemchuzhina, hauled off into exile in Sakhalin on trumped-up charges, Molotov asserted that the purges were not just necessary but were directed against guilty comrades, though he admitted that injustices were inevi-

tably involved. The rehabilitations that occurred in the post-Stalin period were nothing more than “fashionable falsifications.”²

The notion that the terrible mass killing of the 1930s was carried out in anticipation of the coming conflagration and, indeed, was crucial in assuring the eventual Soviet victory in the “Great Fatherland War” over the Nazis fits not just Molotov’s and other Stalinists’ aphoristic injunctions that “an omelette cannot be made without breaking some eggs” and that “forests cannot be cleared without chips flying”—in short, that lives had to be sacrificed to achieve the greater gains of Soviet-style socialism. Many scholars in Russia and the West believe that Stalin prepared for war by carrying out dekulakization, purges, and campaigns against alleged internal enemies, social, political, and national. Even the mass purges of the Soviet armed forces, of the intelligence services, and of foreign communists, which one might assume would clearly damage Stalin’s chances of winning an impending war by eliminating those most knowledgeable about fighting it, are thought to be rational preparations for the coming conflict.³ Because Stalin won the war, the argument goes—*post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore because of this)—these supposed preparations during the 1930s, no matter how brutal, violent, and counterproductive, can be justified and therefore cannot be classified as genocide, the “crime of crimes” in international jurisprudence, which can have no justification.

The combination of the Soviet victory in the Second World War, the place of honor accorded Stalin in the re-