The Stalin Society

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The purges of the CPSU in the 1930s

This pamphlet cites facts and statistics about the purges in the Soviet Union in the 1930s which unmask the false accounts peddled by apologists for the bourgeoisie of the likes of Robert Conquest.

Extracted and edited from
The class struggle during the thirties in the Soviet Union
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THE PURGES OF THE CPSU IN THE 1930s

The purges of, or expulsions from, the Soviet Communist Party during the 1930's is favourite topic for bourgeois propagandists. This issue is brought up time and time again in bourgeois mass media which give the public a completely untruthful and false account of the purges, the political trials and the Soviet Union of the period. Their purpose is to defame socialism and the Soviet Union in order to discourage people from listening to communists so that they will accept capitalism as eternal. This is why it is important to propagate the truth about this chapter in the history of the Soviet Union in order both to counter bourgeois lies as well as to understand the difficulties which the Bolsheviks faced during the period of revolutionary transition.

Facts about the 1930's

Let us begin by providing to the reader a picture of the Soviet Union in the 1930's, a decisive decade in its history. Among other things, it was during the 1930's that the first and second five-year plans were realised and the collectivisation of agriculture took place. National income rose from 29 million rubles in 1929 to 105 million by 1938 - an increase of 360 per cent in ten years, an achievement unique in the history of industrialisation!

During the 1930's, production in the Soviet Union grew at an unprecedented rate. At the beginning of 1930 the total value of industrial production was 21 million rubles. Eight years later, however, this had risen above 100 million rubles (both these figures are based on 1926-27 prices). The country's industrial production had increased almost fivefold in eight years! At the beginning of 1930, the area sown with crops of various kinds was 118 million hectares. By 1938 it was 136.9 million hectares. At the same time, collectivisation of agriculture had been completed, in the course of which gigantic problems connected with collectivisation and modernisation had been overcome. At the begin-

ning of 1930 the Soviet Union had 34,900 tractors but by 1938 it had 483,500. The number of tractors had increased almost fourteen-fold in eight years. During the same period the number of combine-harvesters increased from 1,700 to 153,500 and the number of harvesters from 4,300 to 130,800.

In the 1930's the Soviet Union's cultural development also advanced by leaps and bounds. The number of students in all schools in 1929 was approximately 14 million. By 1938 the number had increased to approximately 34 million, and at that time students in all kinds of courses, including part timers, numbered more than 47 million. Almost a third of all citizens were involved in the school system. At the beginning of the 1930's, illiteracy in the Soviet Union still stood at 33 per cent (as compared to 67 per cent in 1913). By 1938 illiteracy had long been totally eradicated. During this period the number of students in higher of education almost tripled - from 207,000 to 601,000. The number of libraries in 1938 was 70,000 as compared to 40,000 in 1933. The number of books in these libraries had by 1938 reached the impressive figure of 126 million, as compared to the 86 million they had held in 1933. During the thirties another measure, demonstrating the Soviet Union's ideological and material strength as well as its commitment to the equality of all its citizens, was implemented, namely, the introduction of the requirement that all elementary school education should be in the languages of the different nationalities. This required a colossal amount of work on the cultural front, with a great number of new books, text books and other teaching materials being produced in languages some of which had previously hardly even existed in written form. Literature was published for several nationalities in their own languages for the first time. It is against this background that the class struggle in the Soviet Union during the 1930's was carried out and this should be borne in mind when reading this pamphlet.

The development of the Communist Party

In the 1930's millions of new members entered the CPSU(b) and took part in the struggle for production and social development. The great influx of people and the huge increase in production which took place did, however, have their downside. The Party was obliged to evaluate

the Party and social work of old and new members and expel or purge those whose performance did not match what is required of communists.

At this period, the external threat against the Soviet Union increased. Besides the blockade, acts of sabotage and the threat of aggression from capitalist countries, a new enemy emerged whose aim was the crushing of the socialist Soviet Union and the annihilation the Slavs as a people. Nazism came to power in Germany in January 1933 having promised, among other things, to crush communism, conquer new colonies in the East and to use the people there as slave labour in the German economy.

The rise of the Soviet Union during the 1930's, then, was vital. It was the very basis for the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany in World War II. The struggle against inadequacies within the Communist Party and the purges was essential for the purpose of achieving successes in the development of production and securing the country's defences. Bourgeois historians rarely mention this.

According to bourgeois mythology, the purges were a bloody persecution of those who criticised the regime; they were the means whereby a power-hungry bureaucracy made use of an extensive administrative structure and the apparatus of state violence, along with excessive cruelty, literally to kill off a progressive opposition, yes even an opposition harbouring - according to such historians - "genuine" socialists and communists. The hand guiding this persecution was of course that of Stalin, who is depicted as exhibiting paranoid behaviour. According to the bourgeoisie, Stalin had a long-term plan of killing all opponents and all old Bolsheviks in order to secure absolute power for himself. We shall see to what extent this myth has been exposed by honest bourgeois historians with access to Soviet archive material.

The Smolensk archives

Long before Gorbachev opened the Soviet archives, extensive archive material was in 1945 already in the hands of the West and the US. When Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union during World War II, it

reached as far as the outskirts of Moscow and Leningrad. German troops had occupied the Western oblast - the Western region, which had as its centre the city of Smolensk – from 1941 onwards. In Smolensk the Germans found the Western region's archives, which for some reason had not been destroyed by the retreating Soviet troops. These archives were forwarded to Germany that same year. At the end of the war in 1945 the Smolensk archives came to land in the American occupation zone of Germany. Although they belonged to the Soviet Union, an ally of the United States at the time, the American generals who had possession of them naturally, in the interests of capitalism, forwarded them to the USA. These Smolensk archives are today to be found in the United States National Archives.

The Smolensk archives are very large. With a few exceptions all the important doings of the Communist Party of the Western region are collected there, from membership registers and political directives at all levels to excerpts from discussions and debates at meetings, including those of the leading institution of the area, namely, the Organisation Bureau. All aspects of political life are included, from agricultural policies and industrial strategies to the planning of workers' annual holidays. Documents concerning Party purges in the Western region are kept there. The Smolensk archives should be a gold mine for all those who seek an insight into the functioning of Soviet society. Yet, the Smolensk archives have been very little used.

New facts supporting new conclusions

It was not until 1985 that a book was published that was based on genuine examination of the Smolensk archives. This book bears the name *Origins of the Great Purges - The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933 - 1938,* [1] by the American history professor J. Arch Getty. It provides us with statistics and other documents of great value for the study of the history of the Soviet Union.

Getty himself is a bourgeois author having limited ability to understand the conditions of the class struggle the Soviet Union. In a later book,

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[1] Arch Getty, J, *Origins of the Great Purges - The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933 - 1938*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

The Road to Terror, which is supposed to show that the Bolsheviks exterminated themselves during the 1930's as a result of in-fighting, there is for instance not a word on the greatest social developments by far in the history of mankind which had taken place in the Soviet Union during the 1930's. Not a word about that!

Yet throughout most of the thirties the Soviet Union was struggling against the clock to prepare the country's defences in the face of the threat of invasion from Nazi Germany. If one does not accord due importance to this fact, one will, of course, inevitably draw wrong conclusions. If the Bolsheviks had exterminated each other instead of developing the country as much as possible and building up its defences, the Nazis would have won the war and eradicated the Soviet Union and the Slav people.

Arch Getty does at least, however, contradict an earlier historian, his fellow American Merle Fainsod, who also had access to the Smolensk archives but who claimed in his book *Smolensk under Soviet Rule* that "*The assassination of Kirov in December 1934 touched off a new round of almost continuous purges which spread out in ever-widening circles and rose to a smashing crescendo in the virtual destruction of the oblast Party leadership in 1937*".

Getty's research totally contradicts this finding.

A brief history prior to the 1920's purges

After the victory of the revolution, when the Communist Party had become the ruling party, the Party leadership and Lenin were obliged to acknowledge that some unwelcome elements had penetrated the Party and state apparatus. These were people who wanted to make a career via membership of the Party. At the Eighth Party Conference in December of 1919, Lenin brought up this problem. According to Lenin it was "*natural, on the one hand, that all the worst elements should cling to the ruling party merely because it is the ruling party*". For that reason it was important to evaluate the contribution of Party members. On the proposal of Lenin, the Party carried out a re-registration of all Party members. Every member had to answer for his actions before a member

collective - those who were considered unreliable were excluded. That was the first purification of the Party apparatus. This method - to strengthen the Party by purging the opportunistic elements - was to characterise the Communist Party for many years to come.

The behaviour that justified the purging of Party members included corruption, passivity, breaches of Party discipline, alcoholism, criminality and anti-Semitism. For bourgeois individuals and kulaks who hid their class origin, expulsion was certain - unlike those who when accepted into the Party had admitted their class background. Former tsarist officers who hid their past were also inevitably expelled. All those who had been expelled could in their turn appeal to the Central Control Commission, and their cases were then reviewed at a higher level.

As we shall see later, a relatively high number were re-admitted. Decisions at general meetings of hundreds of members were, as a rule, stricter than those taken at the Party centre. The Central Committee of the Party, which had initiated the purges and decided their form, tried to encourage members at the grass roots level to speak out with a view to clamping down on corrupt functionaries and their associates.

This turned out to be difficult work. Corrupt bureaucrats knew thousands of tricks to escape criticism and tricky situations. Instead, the majority of those expelled were ordinary members who often could not defend themselves against accusations of passivity, political ignorance or bad drinking habits brought by Party Secretaries.

The 1920's purges

After the re-registration of 1919, Lenin and the Party leadership found that there were still considerable shortcomings in the Party. The re-registration had not achieved its aim. A great number of new members continued to be drawn into the Party without regard for the directive that only workers and reliable elements from other classes be elected. New purges took place in 1921, 1928 and 1929.

In Table 1 we can see the percentage of members who were expelled on these occasions. In other years the rate of expulsion of Party members varied between three and five per cent.

Table 1

Great party purges during the 1920s [Getty: *Origins of the Great Purges*]		
Year	**Reason for purge**	**Per cent expelled ***
1919	Re-registration	10 - 15
1921	Purge	25
1928	"Screening" (7 regions only)	13
1929	Purges	11
* This represents the percentage expelled of those undergoing the operation, which was not always the entire membership.		

In relation to the purges of 1929, Table 2 gives a detailed description of the causes. It does in fact provide good information and does away with at least the myth that the purges were a way of eliminating opposition within the Party. In 1929, 1.53 million Party members went through the purge process. Of these approximately 170,000, or 11 per cent, were expelled. When they appealed to the Central Control Commission, 37,000 were re-admitted (22 per cent of those expelled). In Smolensk, as many as 43 per cent of those expelled were re-admitted. On further

Table 2

The Party purge of 1929 [Getty: *Origins of the Great Purges*]	
Reasons for expulsion	**percentage**
Defects in personal conduct	22
Alien elements or connection thereto	17
Passivity	17
Criminal offences	12
Violations of Party discipline	10
Other	22
Total	100

examination, it turns out that the great majority were ordinary working class members, who had been expelled by local Party functionaries for passivity. No regard had been had for the living conditions which made it more difficult for these members to take part in Party activities.

According to Getty, those expelled for political reasons - "factional" or opposition activity - were included among the 10% expelled for "violation of Party discipline". The former constitute 10 per cent of these 10 per cent. Thus, expulsions for political reasons were not more than one per cent of all expulsions effected during the purges of 1929. Compare this to the prevailing myth about the "*Stalinists eliminating all those in opposition*". Moreover, the bourgeoisie always alleges that those expelled subsequently either met certain death in the work camps of the Gulag or just disappeared. The reality is otherwise. Of those expelled, only those who had committed criminal acts - theft, embezzlement, blackmail, sabotage or similar - and who were tried in court received any punishment. For others who were expelled, life continued as usual - without the obligations which accompanied membership but also without the support which membership gave.

The purges in the CPSU(B) during the 1930's

Robert Conquest has played a pivotal role in the defaming of socialism and the Soviet Union throughout the post war period. Conquest is a disinformer trained in one of the oldest and biggest secret services of the world, that of the British. Conquest became their foremost disinformation specialist on the question of the Soviet Union. He is a master of the manipulation of information and of changing black to white. Towards the end of the 50's, Conquest suddenly quit the British secret service. Next time we hear of him he is in the USA, where the CIA is publishing his books and writings! One assumes that he was offered better pay by the CIA than he was receiving from the British and for that reason he moved to the USA. In addition, the CIA provided him with a decent disguise, a research post at a university. Conquest's stories have been disseminated for decades by the CIA in capitalist mass media all over the world, and unfortunately they are assumed to be true by many people.

Conquest's best known work, *The Great Terror - Stalin's Purges of the Thirties,* was published in 1968 and has been one of the bourgeoisie's foremost weapons against socialism. The book is partly based on material generated during Conquest's time with the British secret service. His sources are dubious in the extreme - Nazi collaborators, defectors and terrorists.

The purges of 1933

During the 1930's the Party underwent three great purges, i.e., those of 1933, 1935 and 1937-1938.

The first purge, that of 1933, took place in a climate of great enthusiasm, with agricultural cooperatives spreading all over the Soviet Union at an astonishing pace, and industrial production attaining completely unprecedented results. The Party had opened its doors to all those who wanted to fight for socialism, and hundreds of thousands of new members were elected during the first three years of the 1930s. Because of this great onslaught, the Party leadership considered it essential to make an evaluation of all new Party members. It sought out opportunists, corrupt bureaucrats, criminals, anti-Semites, alcoholics and members who were in violation of Party discipline.

Party directives made it clear that all purges should be effected in a comradely atmosphere and that there should not be excessive intrusion into people's private lives. Moreover, the Party leadership encouraged ordinary members openly to criticise local bureaucrats and warned local Party leaderships against expelling such members on the grounds of passivity or political ignorance. The mistakes of 1929 were not to be repeated. Attention was to be paid to members' general development and it was provided that Party members could be demoted to the status of candidates or sympathisers until such time as they had improved their political understanding or increased their participation in Party activities, as the case may be. Expulsion was to be avoided as far as possible.

In spite of these directives, the purge of 1933 turned out differently from what the Central Committee had intended. In a country as vast as

the Soviet Union, local Party secretaries had great power, and this sometimes proved disastrous. Facts show that local Party Secretaries did their best to avoid criticism aimed at themselves or those close to them. Purely to prove their obedience to the call for a purge, some local Secretaries expelled many ordinary members, workers and farmers, even when they were loyal members and precisely the ones who should not have been expelled. The majority of those expelled were people who had joined the Party between 1930 and 1933, who had not had time to gain full knowledge of all Party issues. Many had not been able to study the Party programme in depth or Marxism-Leninism in general, and they were therefore regarded as ignorant by Party Secretaries. Others were people who had difficulty in participating fully in Party life because of their situation at work or because of family problems. In the purge of 1933, 18.5 per cent of Party members and candidates were expelled, circa 792,000.

The purge of 1933, which was terminated in mid 1934, revealed a serious contradiction within the Party. The Central Committee had intended to throw out thieves and corrupt bureaucrats, but the biggest group expelled - comprising almost a quarter of the total - were expelled for passivity [see Table 3]. Passivity, however, did not figure in the Party

Table 3

The expulsions of 1933 [Getty: *Origins of the Great Purges*]	
Reason for expulsion	**Percentage of expulsions**
Moral corruption, careerist, bureaucrat	17.5
Alien elements / hiding alien elements	16.5
Violation of Party discipline	20.9
Passivity	23.2
Other	17.9
Not mentioned in *Origins of the Great Purges*	4.0

directives as a criterion for expulsion. By the use of bureaucratic methods or in abuse of authority gained as a result of earlier merit, local Party leaders did whatever they wanted without paying attention to the import of the Central Committee's directives. The deepening of contradictions is reflected by the fact that a quarter of those expelled were expelled on the grounds of passivity. The Central Committee had to do something about local Party leaders' contravention of Party directives, but, as the future was to show, this was not an easy task. This became very pertinent during the years to come, when the Soviet Union was forced to increase the pace of economic development in order to survive.

Another aspect of the statistics uncovered by Getty concerns the allegation by Conquest and other rightists that the purge of 1933 was organised to throw out old Bolsheviks - old Party cadres from the days of Lenin - who had come to oppose Stalin. According to Getty, it is improbable that this allegation is true. The overwhelming majority of those expelled, two-thirds in fact, had entered the Party after 1928 and were therefore relatively new Party members. The distribution of those expelled - 23 per cent agricultural workers/farmers, 14.6 per cent civil servants and approximately 62 per cent workers - shows that the overwhelming majority, 85 per cent, were ordinary working men rather than Party cadres from Lenin's time. In *The Great Terror,* Robert Conquest touches upon the purge of 1933 and hints that over a million members were expelled for political reasons. To anyone with knowledge of the history of the purges, it is evident that Conquest's allegation is a lie.

"*Proverka*" - verification of Party documents in 1935

The purge of 1933 revealed that throughout the country there were very serious problems in the Party. The membership list bore no relation to reality. In many parts of the country the number of members did not tally with the number listed. Many members had moved, left the Party, or had been expelled or had died without this having been reflected in the membership lists. Local Party Secretaries were overwhelmed by economic work, i.e., with the fulfilment of the five year plan and with collectivisation. For that reason, or simply as a result of negligence or lack of interest, membership lists were not being kept up to date. As a

consequence of this the Party's financial records were also in disarray. When this was discovered, and the Party centre came to know of the disastrous situation prevailing in the area of membership records, it became clear that it was essential to verify all Party documents.

In October 1934, the Central Committee decided that the whole Party would undergo a process of membership re-registration. The Central Committee sent representatives to all Party Regions, both to examine the state of Party records and also, if possible, to implement a solution, while at the same time assisting with the work of re-registration.

Comrade Ostrovsky was sent to the City Committee (gorraikom) of Smolensk. He started by requiring it to take some straightforward decisions such as to appoint a person to take charge of maintaining local Party records, who should see to it that Party documentation was kept in a locked facility or safe. He also demanded that no new Party cards be distributed to people who had lost theirs unless first a careful investigation had been conducted. Ostrovsky also demanded that a new list of members be drawn up with effect from January 1935 and that all Party committees under the City Committee undergo the same procedure.

As it soon turned out, the problems were too great for Ostrovsky to handle. Central Committee representatives in many parts of the country had the same experience. Towards the end of April 1935, very little progress had been made in re-registration. A report from the City Committee of Smolensk showed that "*in the process of investigation of Party documents, there was revealed a series of massive deficiencies, demanding especially careful analysis and verification*".

The Communist Party at the beginning of the 1930's

Readers of this pamphlet this may find all this hard to believe. The bourgeois media have brought up most people in the western world to believe that a totally blind discipline reigned in the Soviet Communist Party, whereby everything and everybody was subject to registration and careful control, and everything was recorded - preferably several times over on long lists - with nobody being free of this all pervasive, allegedly continuous, control – a control, incidentally, which would

have been extremely expensive to maintain - while investing Party bureaucrats with extensive powers.

This picture is entirely false. As a matter of fact, one comes much closer to the truth by turning all these allegations upside down. Absorbed as they were in the struggle for production, and intoxicated by the incredible achievements in production which had set repeated world records, many local Party Secretaries ignored other Party matters. They considered increased production to be the most important thing - capable of solving all problems, while everything else was trivial. Even a question of fundamental importance for any party - and especially a party in power - namely that only Party members should own a Party card - was considered by many to be a question of only secondary importance. Party cards were, as a rule, kept in an ordinary writing desk or a readily-accessible cupboard in the Party's premises, and all over the country they were wont to disappear in their thousands. In the same irresponsible manner, Party cards were handed out to all who said they had lost theirs. For the most part no investigation was carried out to ascertain what had become of the lost card. Even members who had been expelled retained their Party cards without anybody demanding their return . When it came to deceased members, the families did not, as a rule, return the card to the Party, which often resulted in the card of the deceased person being misused. Production was growing to such an overwhelming extent that local Party leaders became convinced that soon there would be surpluses such as would sweep away all difficulties.

Two hundred thousand Party cards astray

At the beginning of 1935 the Central Committee was forced to conclude that over 200,000 Party cards had gone astray! Most had been given to people who had lost their Party cards or had had them stolen. More than 1,000 new, unused cards had been stolen from Party offices and 47,000 Party cards had been given people who had not had time to get themselves registered as Party members. The Party card was an important document. A person with a Party card could, among other things, enter all Party premises anywhere in the country, i.e., places where important documents were kept and important meetings took place. For that rea-

son, Party cards were much sought after by enemies, spies, opposition elements and foreign agents. It was therefore a major problem that, as it turned out, these people had little difficulty in acquiring a Communist Party card, which they could use to facilitate their activities aimed at undermining the Party's work. Such was the situation in 1935 that one could never be certain that a holder of a Party card was indeed a faithful and loyal Party member. That person could in fact just as easily be an enemy, a spy or a saboteur.

On 13 May, 1935 the Central Committee decided to implement a new, nationwide verification of Party documents - *proverka*. The campaign to implement verification of Party documents was led centrally by a commission of the Secretariat of the Central Committee led by Ezhov and his deputy, Malenkov. Verification necessitated each Party member being interrogated by the local Party Secretary in their locality or place of work as to their life, history, work and other things. These facts were then used to update Party records. If there was any irregularity, a closer scrutiny of the person concerned was carried out, and in the meantime the Party card was revoked. Those who could not confirm their Party membership were expelled and their Party cards were taken back. All those who had been expelled had, according to the Party Constitution, the right to appeal to a higher body, which was in turn required to carry out a new investigation and make its decision within two weeks.

Bolshevik order

It was time to "*to introduce Bolshevik order into our own Party house*". The Central Committee addressed itself especially to local Party leaders, who were responsible for the disorder: "*the Central Committee warned leaders of Party organisations at all levels that if they did not provide ... leadership for this important task ... and immediately restore order in this important business, then the Central Committee of the CPSU(B) would take strict punitive measures up to and including expulsion of offenders from the Party*".
Unlike the situation in earlier purges, in the 1935 campaign to verify Party documentation, social and political questions were not in issue as far as expulsion was concerned.

What was the result of the campaign to control Party cards?

It turned out that many of the local Party Secretaries who were responsible for implementing the control did not take the task very seriously. They did not accord to the task the priority which the Central Committee had demanded. Reports started to flow in to the Central Committee showing that there was a general tendency to carry out a quick control andto have done with it. Often, local Party Secretaries' commitment to the task was practically zero. The problems of the western region were very apparent. The region's deputy Party Secretary, A.L. Shil'man. and the local head of the control commission, Kiselev, were subjected to severe public criticism by the Central Committee and put up as an example of how card control should not be done. The Party Secretary, Stepanov, leader of a district in the western region, was expelled from the Party. In his verification exercise he had devoted at most five minutes per member to the investigation of their authenticity. The Central Committee demanded personal commitment in implementing this very important exercise, but this Party Secretary was only concerned with showing the high percentage of members whose status he had reviewed and the number of false members he had detected. The Central Committee objected to this bureaucratic way of dealing with the task. They wanted thorough investigations so that they could be sure that the members on the list were real members.

A further Party document verification exercise

The Central Committee was forced to conclude that the Party document verification exercise was at risk of failure. On 27 June 1935 the Central Committee decided on a second round of verification, to be carried out this time at general membership meetings. All members were now given the opportunity to make pronouncements against those whom they did not consider worthy to be Party members. This changed matters completely. The Central Committee had been publicly criticising the Party Secretaries for a job badly done. This encouraged members to demand criticism and self-criticism at the meetings, which thus turned into enormous arenas of debate. Those Party Secretaries who had something to hide got frightened, as such ongoing control could reveal faults

in the local Party leadership. Some tried to check the urge to debate by claiming that the campaign was for the verification of Party documentation, not a purge. It was still not possible to stifle members' criticism completely. Getty in *Origins of the Great Purges* gives us an interesting insight into the accusations made at a membership meeting of the Smolensk town committee in July 1935. At the meeting 616 accusations were raised.

Table 4

The accusations during the *Proverka* in Smolensk in July 1935 [Getty: *Origins of the Great Purges*]	
Kulaks, traders, families	226
Degenerates, drunks, womanizers, violators of discipline	143
Official malfeasance, theft, embezzlement	106
Lost or dubious Party cards	62
Trotskyists, Mensheviks, etc.	28
White Army officers, Tsarist police	41
Anti-Semites	10
Total	616

As can be seen in Table 4, more than a third of the accusations concerned kulaks and men who had enriched themselves during the NEP (the new economic policy). Another third and more of the accusations pointed to people who had committed severe moral and economic crimes. Only a small number of the accusations, hardly five per cent, had to do with political opposition. Simultaneously, one in six accusations (circa 17 per cent) related to criminal activities on the part of leading cadres and political civil servants. At the national level, the Party card control exercise resulted in the expulsion of 170,000 members out of the 1.8 million investigated, i.e. 9.1 per cent.

Party meetings during July 1935 became arenas in the campaign against arrogant Party functionaries and other bullies. In spite of the fact that

criticism and self-criticism were Party policy, it was far from certain that this was in fact being applied at grass roots level. But now, at least for a time, these circumstances changed radically in favour of ordinary members. Stalin pronounced himself on the need for criticism and self-criticism and pointed out that a lack of criticism was a fatal mistake, which "destroyed cadres" by not bringing up their faults for discussion. The 1935 Party documents verification exercise also highlighted another very serious shortcoming in the Party: the fact that it was easy to forge Party cards, and that they were not therefore a reliable guide to membership. The need for new Party cards was an issue demanding immediate attention.

The campaign of lies of the bourgeoisie and the reality

Let us now for a moment discuss some of the lies being spread in the capitalist mass media about the 1935 verification exercise. As we can see from the examples given of the membership meetings in Smolensk, open debates dealt a hard blow to bourgeois elements who had sneaked into the Party, people out for economic and social advantage. These included kulaks and merchants, thieves, former white army officers and tsarist policemen. Contrary to the falsifiers' version of history, the opposition was hardly affected at all. What happened during the Party card verification exercise was, above all, that Party workers threw out bourgeois elements who had been smuggled in. This is what really infuriates the falsifiers of Soviet history. They are people who are used to having special rights in society while workers are 'the mob', to be kept on a short leash, and they totally freak out when forced to recognise that it is the workers who are in command in the workers' party so that the uncovering of inimical, bourgeois values led to expulsion. The opportunities for the bourgeoisie to regain some power after years of careful sabotage were annihilated.

Another lie is that the Party card verification exercise was undertaken by the Party leadership – i.e., by Stalin - as an act of revenge for the assassination of Kirov. Kirov, a member of the Central Committee and Chairman of the Party in Leningrad, was assassinated on December 1st 1934 in the city's Party headquarters - the murderer, Nikolayev, had entered the Party headquarters by using an old, invalid, Party card. This

allegation of revenge being taken of a horrible and bloody nature, with a huge number of executions, originates with the police agent Robert Conquest. Anybody unfamiliar with these historical issues who reads his book, *The Great Terror*, will have difficulty in seeing through his deceit. But for those who have made it their business to acquire genuine knowledge of the history of this period, this allegation of revenge is nothing short of nonsensical. The 1935 Party card verification exercise was simply a consequence of a Central Committee decision concerning membership re-registration taken in October 1934. As a matter of fact, Kirov took part in this decision, which was made two months prior to his assassination! Are we to believe that Kirov participated in a decision to take revenge for his own assassination, which was to take place two months later?!

1936 – exchange of Party documents

After the 1935 Party documentation verification exercise, and as a consequence of it, the Central Committee decided to exchange all Party documents. There were efforts to have the Party cards as far as possible distributed to genuine members only, devoted Communists who really did honour to their membership. The directives of the Central Committee were very precise and full of details which nobody was entitled to bypass. Firstly, none of the new Party cards could be distributed in any given area until its 1935 verification exercise was concluded. Secondly, Party Secretaries alone were entitled to issue the new cards. Moreover, the exchange of new cards for the old could only take place in the building where the Party Secretary had his office, and there only in the presence of the member concerned and the Party Secretary of the cell to which the member belonged. The member was then requested to fill out a form in duplicate and to provide the necessary personal data. He was asked to sign the new Party card and the two forms, witnessed by the Party Secretary. The District Secretary did likewise and then stamped the new card. Every card had to bear a picture of the member, otherwise it was invalid. The new cards were sent to the regional Party Secretaries only and that by the NKVD mail, and they could be filled out only with a special ink sent by the Central Committee. The signatures of all Party Secretaries (i.e., those who had been authorised to issue Party cards) were kept in a special archive at the Party central office. The exchange of

the Party cards of millions of members was a major exercise by the Party central organ aimed at establishing effective documentation for proving of membership which would be very difficult to falsify.

The purpose of changing Party cards was not to discover and expel further Party enemies in a new purge. The Central Committee's purpose was just the opposite as expressed in its directive concerning the exchange of Party cards: "*If, in the proverka, Party organisations paid special attention to the uncovering of hidden penetration of the Party by enemies, rogues, and swindlers, then, in the exchange, they must turn their principal attention toward freeing themselves of passive members not deserving the high title of member of the Party; of people who accidentally find themselves in the CPSU(b).*".

Merely two per cent expulsions

The exchange of Party documents was scheduled to take place from February to April 1936, but in some places it was completed as late as November 1936. There are no national statistics as to the number of members expelled during that period, but the figures from Smolensk indicate that these were relatively few. In the Smolensk Party organisation, 4,348 Party cards were issued and 97 persons were expelled, circa 2.1 per cent. Approximately the same percentages are found in other districts in the western region. Unfortunately, the great majority of those expelled were ordinary working-class members expelled for 'passivity'.

The exchange of Party documents in 1936 is also used by Robert Conquest and other falsifiers of history in their dirty war against socialism. Conquest claims that there were massive purges undertaken during the exchange, and that the number of members purged was higher than in any previous Party purges. All this was, according Conquest, provoked by Stalin as a manoeuvre to ignite public opinion against the opposition who were awaiting the trials 19-24 August 1936. These trials were of the Trotsky-Zinoviev centre led by Zinoviev, Kamenev and Smirnov who were accused of having taken part in a conspiracy led from abroad by Trotsky to kill Soviet government leaders and to grab power. Conquest's allegations about mass expulsions in 1936 have for many years stood uncontradicted. The figures brought to light by Getty's research in the

Smolensk archives prove that Conquest's statements are complete lies. In fact, the numbers purged in 1936 were the lowest in the history of the Party, i.e., between two and three per cent of the members.

The political trials of 1936 - 1938 in the Soviet Union

The political trials [2] and the purges in the Communist Party were two separate things and they did not directly have anything to do with each other. The Party members who were expelled and tried at court for having been involved in criminal or counter revolutionary activities were a small minority of all those expelled.

The 1937 Party purge and the fight against bureaucracy

In 1937 it became clear that two major problems had to be confronted and a solution to them found if the building of Socialism was to continue to go forward in the Soviet Union. One of these problems had been brought to light by the Zinoviev-Kamenev and Pyatakov-Radek treason trials. These proved that the old opposition had not laid down its arms. Earlier self-criticisms had merely been an exercise in playing to the gallery, a way to secure for those who made them a return to the important positions they had previously held. The opposition's underground activities had been continuing without interruption ever since the beginning of the 1930's; and the number of those involved was unknown. The other problem was the fight against bureaucracy, corruption and opportunism within the Party. It related especially to the local and regional potentates whom the grass-roots members could not, or did not dare to, denounce and who therefore held stable and secure positions in the local and regional leaderships.

The Central Committee convened a meeting in February 1937 in order to deal with these two principal questions. This meeting turned out to be the starting point of a Party struggle which raged between 1937 and 1938. At the beginning of the meeting Bukharin and Rykov, members of the Cen-

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[2] The text from which this pamphlet was extracted went into considerable detail on the Moscow Trials. This original text is available in Swedish and French from mario.sousa@telia.com.
Alternatively, *Trotskyism or Leninism?* By Harpal Brar contains a major section on the Moscow Trials [available from lalkarpublications@hotmail.com]

tral Committee, were present. They were accused of having collaborated with the enemies of the Party and also of having been, with Trotsky, part of a counter revolutionary organisation whose aim was to overthrow the government of the Soviet Union. The accusations were based on material that had come to light during the investigations of the recently-concluded Pyatakov-Radek trial. The allegations against Bukharin and Rykov were presented by Pyatakov and Radek during the trial itself. Bukharin and Rykov tried to defend themselves but they were branded traitors by the Central Committee and evicted from the Party. Their case was handed over to the appropriate authorities for investigation and prosecution. We shall return later to the trial of Bukharin, Rykov and the others in their organisation.

Stalin's speech

During the meeting of the Central Committee Stalin gave a very important speech entitled *Defects in Party work and measures for liquidating Trotskyites and other double-dealers*. In his speech, Stalin turned to the other comrades of the Central Committee to ask how it was possible for foreign agents, Trotskyists and their political allies, to penetrate the economic and administrative organisations of the Soviet state, as well as Party organisations, and to carry out sabotage, espionage and wrecking. Furthermore, Stalin asked how it had come about that these alien elements had managed to acquire responsible positions, and even help from certain leading comrades in securing these positions.

Stalin went on to present a list of acts of sabotage and espionage during the preceding years and after referring to the warning letter of the Central Committee to the Party organisations, he continued:

"The facts show that our comrades reacted to these signals and warnings very slowly. This is eloquently shown by all the known facts that have emerged from the campaign of verifying and exchanging Party documents. How are we to explain the fact that these warnings and signals did not have the required effect? ... Perhaps our Party comrades have deteriorated, have become less class-conscious and less disciplined? No, of course not! Perhaps they have begun to degenerate? Again, of course not! There are no grounds whatever for such an assumption. What is the

matter then? Whence this heedlessness, carelessness, complacency, blindness? The matter is that our comrades, carried away by economic campaigns and by colossal successes on the front of economic construction, simply forgot about certain very important facts which Bolsheviks have no right to forget. They forgot about the main fact in the international position of the U.S.S.R. ... They forgot that the Soviet power is victorious only on one-sixth of the globe ... there are, besides, many other countries, bourgeois countries, which continue to lead the capitalist mode of life and which surround the Soviet Union, waiting for an opportunity to attack her, to crush her, or, at all events, to undermine her might and weaken her".

Spies from the capitalist countries

Stalin then went on to refer to the relationships between the capitalist countries:

"It has been proved as definitely as twice two are four that the bourgeois states send to each other spies, wreckers, diversionists, and sometimes also assassins, instruct them to penetrate into the institutions and enterprises of these states, set up their agencies and 'in case of necessity' disrupt their rear, in order to weaken them and to undermine their strength. ... Today France and England are swarming with German spies and diversionists, and, on the other hand, Anglo-French spies and diversionists are busy in Germany; America is swarming with Japanese spies and diversionists, and Japan is swarming with American spies and diversionists. Such is the law of the relations between bourgeois states. The question arises, why should the bourgeois states treat the Soviet socialist state more gently and in a more neighbourly manner than treat bourgeois states of their own type? Why should they send to the Soviet Union fewer spies, wreckers, diversionists and assassins than they send to their kindred bourgeois states? Why should you think so? Would it not be more correct from the point of view of Marxism to assume that the bourgeois states would send twice and three times as many wreckers, spies, diversionists and assassins to the Soviet Union as they send to any bourgeois state? Is it not clear that as long as the capitalist encirclement exists we shall have wreckers, spies, diversionists and assassins sent to us by agents of foreign states?".

These were, according to Stalin important circumstances which leading comrades had forgotten, and that was the reason why the sabotage and espionage had been unexpected for many of them. The economic achievements explained the laxity and carelessness. The really great steps forward in socialist construction had resulted in a tendency to boast, a tendency to overestimate the power on one's own side and to underestimate that of the enemy. The great successes had given rise to an "*atmosphere of success - success after success, achievement after achievement, overfulfilment of plan after overfulfilment of plan - gives rise to carelessness and self-satisfaction, creates an atmosphere of showy triumphs and mutual congratulations, which kills the sense of proportion and dulls political intuition, takes the spring out of people and causes them to rest on their laurels*".

The capitalist encirclement

And Stalin continues ironically to present the thoughts on the subject of a local, Party functionary. "*Capitalist encirclement? Oh, that's nothing! What does capitalist encirclement matter if we are fulfilling and overfulfilling our economic plans? The new forms of wrecking, the struggle against Trotskyism? Mere trifles! What do these trifles matter if we are fulfilling and overfulfilling our economic plans? The Party Rules, electing Party bodies, Party leaders reporting to the Party members? Is there really any need for all this? Is it worth while bothering about all these trifles if our economy is growing and the material conditions of the workers and peasants are becoming better and better? Mere trifles! The plans are being overfulfilled, our Party is not a bad one, the Central Committee of the Party is also not a bad one - what else do we need? They are some funny people sitting there in Moscow, in the Central Committee of the Party, inventing all sorts of problems, talk about wrecking, don't sleep themselves and don't let other people sleep...*"

Party education and Leninism courses

Stalin then elaborated upon a number of errors in party work and the measures he regarded as being necessary to correct the errors that had

arisen. He concluded by presenting a proposal for organised study on the part of leading Party cadres, from cell leaders to leaders in the regions and Party organisations of the Soviet republics. "*For Party education and the re-training of secretaries of Party organisations (cells), four month 'Party courses' should be established in every Regional centre*". "*For the political re-training of first secretaries of District organisations, eight month 'Lenin courses' should be established in, say, ten of the most important centres in the U.S.S R..*". "*For the ideological re-training and political improvement of secretaries of city organisations, six month 'Courses for the study of Party history and policy' under the C.C. of the C.P.S.U.(b) should be established*". "*Finally, a six month 'Conference on questions of internal and international policy' under the C.C. of the C.P.S.U.(b) should be established. The First Secretaries of Regional and Territorial organisations and of Central Committees of national Communist Parties should be sent here.*" Study is the right way to solve the problems and the contradictions in the Party - a line established by Stalin, Zhdanov and Kirov since January 1934.

In his *Speech in reply to debate* Stalin referred to some important controversies which had emerged during the debate. Among other things, Stalin pointed out that those who had once been Trotskyists or Trotsky sympathisers but who had since changed, had worked well and were loyal to the Party, were not targets in the fight against the Trotskyite wrongdoers and spies. "*In this matter, as in all others, an individual, discriminate approach is required. You cannot measure everybody with the same yardstick*".

Control of Party functionaries

In his summing up, Stalin directed sharp criticism at the relationships of Party functionaries to grass-root members. Stalin did not mince his words. He started by criticising the selection of Party functionaries. "*Most often, (Party) workers are chosen not for objective reasons, but for casual, subjective, philistine, petty-bourgeois reasons. Most often, so-called acquaintances, friends, fellow-townsmen, personally devoted people, masters in the art of praising their chiefs, are chosen without regard for their political and business fitness. Naturally, instead of a leading*

group of responsible workers we get a little family of intimate people, an artel, the members of which try to live in peace, try not to offend each other, not to wash dirty linen in public, to praise each other, and from time to time send vapid and sickening reports to the centre about successes. It is not difficult to understand that in such a family atmosphere there can be no place for criticism of defects in the work, or for self-criticism by leaders of the work. Of course, such a family atmosphere creates a favourable medium for the cultivation of toadies, of people who lack a sense of self-respect, and therefore, have nothing in common with Bolshevism."

Further on Stalin commented on the necessity of Party functionaries being controlled not just by their superiors but, even more importantly, by grass-roots members. "*Some comrades think that people can be tested only from above, when leaders test those who are led by the results of their work. That is not true. Of course, testing from above is needed as one of the effective measures for testing people and verifying the fulfilment of tasks. But testing from above far from exhausts the whole business of testing. There is another kind of test, the test from below, when the masses, when those who are led, test the leaders, draw attention to their mistakes and indicate the way in which these mistakes may be rectified. This sort or testing is one of the most effective methods of testing people.*"

Applying Leninism

Stalin also criticised strongly those who were unwilling to criticise themselves in the belief that this would be taken as a sign of weakness by the enemy and be taken advantage of, and could also lead to disorganisation and enfeeblement. "*That is nonsense, comrades, sheer nonsense. On the contrary, the open admission of our mistakes and their honest rectification can only strengthen our Party, raise the prestige of our Party ... To spare and take care of cadres by glossing over their mistakes means killing these very cadres for certain.*" Finally, Stalin urged the leaders of the Party organisations to listen to the voice of the masses, a certain way of practising correct leadership. He criticised firmly "*the formal and heartlessly bureaucratic attitude of some of our Party comrades towards the fate of individual members of the Party, to the question of expelling mem-*

bers from the Party, or the question of reinstating expelled members of the Party."

According to Stalin the leaders had to get to know the members, their development and way of life to be able to make a fair and individual judgement of each one. Lacking such knowledge "*they usually act in a haphazard way: either they praise them wholesale, without measure, or roundly abuse them, also wholesale and without measure, and expel thousands and tens of thousands of members from the Party*". Stalin opposed all expulsions for alleged passivity or on the grounds that the members in question had not properly understood the Party programme. Only tested and theoretically advanced Marxists could fully understand the Party programme.

Stalin appealed to the leaders of the Party to apply the Leninist formula for Party membership, according to which "*a member of the Party is one who accepts the programme of the Party, pays membership dues and works in one of its organisations.*" No Party member should be expelled for lacking a deep knowledge of the Party programme or Party policies. Stalin called it a heartless policy and enormous bureaucratism to exclude workers for small errors like being late to Party meetings or for failing to pay Party dues. Before raising the question of expulsion, a criticism, warning or a certain time should be given to the person in question to allow him or her to improve. Party leaders were required to have a genuine concern for the members "*this is exactly what some of our comrades lack*", Stalin concluded.

Party members start criticising

When Stalin's speeches were published, they became the starting point for public debate, as did other speeches by Molotov, Zhdanov and Ezhov. The main topics were Stalin's *Speech in reply to debate* and Zhdanov's proposal for secret votes in Party elections, which had been accepted by the Central Committee. Thus, the questions which aroused the greatest interest concerned the power of the Party leaders and their actions, as well as Party democracy. The Bukharin-Rykov trial and the necessity to be vigilant against spies and saboteurs was also discussed as well as the criticism of members' failures vis-à-vis Party discipline. But

the main question remained omnipotence and corruption among local Party leaders.

Throughout the 1930's the Central Committee had urged Party members to initiate criticism of leaders and to denounce corrupt and uncommitted Party secretaries. Now, at last, the discussion got underway! Party meetings were organised everywhere in consequence of the February meeting of the Central Committee. Meetings that had only recently been conducted in a routine and bureaucratic fashion in an aura of cronyism, all of a sudden had to be recalled in response to overwhelming demands on the part of the membership. The Smolensk archives provide plenty of instances of meetings where local leaders were literally put up against the wall and forced to criticise themselves in front of the members. The masses of members were not indulgent. At many meetings in District Committees and in workplace or local cells, the Party leaders were not only thoroughly unmasked but were also deprived of their positions on the spot, with new leaders having the confidence of the members being immediately elected. These elections were not part of the Central Committee plan for new secret ballots in Party leadership elections. At that time this plan was only at the preparation stage. But nothing could prevent the members from replacing corrupt bureaucrats.

Example in the district of Belyi

A typical example of the atmosphere in the working class after the Central Committee meeting of February 1937 is as follows. In the Belyi district (Belyi Raion), a meeting took place to analyse Party activities. This meeting lasted four days. Minutes of the meeting are available in the Smolensk archives. Grass-root members who had seldom spoken at meetings, or who had been labelled passive, took to the floor on this occasion and 'regardless of person' did not mince their words. 220 of the 240 members were present at the meeting of the Belyi district committee (Belyi Raion). Seventy-seven spoke at the meeting and raised harsh criticisms of the district Secretary Kovalev. He was accused of having become a bureaucrat without consideration for the members. He had falsified reports about political education and closed study halls with the excuse that they were not needed. His methods were dictatorial, biased and brutal. Members who were for any reason summoned to the district of-

fice had always felt uneasy, knowing that they would be kept waiting for long periods or return without completing the business in hand.

The NKVD head in Belyi, Vinogradov, came to Kovalev's help. He asked the Party members not to discuss Party work. According to him, the directives from the February meeting of the Central Committee meant that the members were to discuss the spring sowing campaign. Kovalev, on his part, tried to turn the criticism onto lower levels of the Party, the Party cells. According to him, that was where the errors were to be sought, not in the district. Even Golovashenko, the representative of the obkom (the regional Committee) came to Kovalev's aid. He tried to calm the debate and attacked the members who had been severely criticising Kovalev. But nothing could help Kovalev. The members' criticism continued without interruption throughout the meeting and the list of accusations grew longer and longer. The meeting ended by the members then and there giving Kovalev the boot and electing Karpovsky First Secretary of the Party district.

Stalin's *Speech in reply to debate* — a tool in the struggle

The story does not end here. The local NKVD head had tried to help Kovalev and so had the regional representative. A decision by the regional Secretariat annulled the appointment of district Secretary, Karpovsky, and proposed instead another member, Boradulin, for the position. Another large membership meeting took place during which Boradulin was declared even more incompetent than Kovalev and at which the members once again elected Karpovsky to be district Secretary. This occurred in spite of Karpovsky himself urging members to accept the proposal of the regional Secretariat.

That was the atmosphere following the February meeting of the Central Committee. With Stalin's *Speech in reply to debate* in their hands, grassroots members immediately started to throw out careerists and corrupt bureaucrats and electing their own leaders, irrespective of the wishes of higher authorities. It was a spontaneous struggle, as is clearly shown by the reports in the Smolensk archives, and it was shortly to have far-reaching consequences. At the same time corrupt bureaucrats in positions of power continued to protect each other. Kovalev, for instance, was

given a good job in the region's personnel department. The struggle, however, had only just begun.

The 1937 Party elections

One of the important resolutions passed at the February meeting of the Central Committee was a to hold general Party elections on the basis of secret ballots. On 20th March 1937, two weeks after the Central Committee meeting, a decree was issued by the Central Committee concerning Elections to Party Organisation and this started a debate in the press about the necessity for self-criticism, Party democracy and control of leading Party functionaries. The central leadership did its best to prevent corrupt Party leaders from manipulating the election meetings.

The elections took place during April 1937. The local leaderships were widely criticised during the election meetings. Previously, Party meetings for discussion and criticism had always been a forum for criticism of grass-roots members for lack of Party discipline or bad conduct. Now, the situation was reversed. This time, the local leaderships were the focus of criticism. As a rule, many members were nominated to the Party boards at these meetings. The discussions were long and carefully minuted. The secret elections came last. There are many documents in the Smolensk archives concerning the Party elections, including the ballot papers.

Old leaderships exchanged

The national results of the Party elections were later reported in the press. Of the 54,000 Party organisations whose election results were known in May 1937, the old leadership had been exchanged in 55 per cent of them. This was an incredible result. First of all it showed that the lack of confidence in the old leaderships had been very widespread, and secondly that the grass-roots members in practice had the collective strength needed to throw out politicians who were incompetent or abused their power. Evidently, the Central Committee meeting had given voice to an established cause for dissatisfaction.

The Party elections, however, also had another aspect. Most of the Party

leaders expelled operated on local level, in the districts and cells, the level where ordinary members could easily decide what was right and wrong and discover corruption, abuse of power or sabotage. Higher up in the municipal and regional Committees, the Party elections did not give similar results. The regional Party leaderships showed a great facility for surviving criticism. There were several cases at regional level of corrupt politicians, known to be prone to behaving like little kings, nevertheless managing to secure a vote in their favour. Ordinary members did not have the same opportunity to evaluate the work of these leaders as they had in the case of local ones. There was yet another factor operating against ordinary members: corrupt and incompetent regional and municipal Secretaries always surrounded themselves with a group who supported them no matter what. It was not easy for the ordinary members to overcome all this in their quest for truth.

Regional leaderships exchanged

Nevertheless the struggle against the bureaucracy and corruption within the Communist Party was also persevered with at the higher levels. At the beginning of June, the annual regional Party Conferences started as usual. These Conferences were not accorded any particular importance, for they usually simply discussed reports concerning the work of the regional leaderships. This time, however, something new occurred. Even at regional Conferences, Party leaders were criticised. The Party leadership knew that it would be much more difficult for ordinary members to make their voices heard at the regional level. Therefore, this time round the central leadership decided to send representatives from the Central Committee to the regional Conferences. These representatives came, sometimes totally unannounced, took a seat and participated in the discussions. This had the effect of tipping the scales at several regional Conferences to the disadvantage of the regional Party leaders. Among the twenty-five regional Conferences reported in the press, four ended by the Party leadership having to stand down. Nevertheless in many areas the regional satraps continued in power doing as they wished without regard for the Party directives.

The military trial against the generals

It was at the time of the regional Party Conferences when an event deci-

sive for the future of Soviet society took place. On June 11, 1937, *Pravda* announced that Marshal Tukhachevskii and Generals Putna, Iakir, Uborevich, Feldman, Kork, Primakov and Eideman had been arrested and charged with treason. These generals had been arrested on 26th May, 1937, charged with "*habitual and base betrayal of military secrets to a certain hostile Fascist power, and working as spies to encompass the downfall of the Soviet state and to restore capitalism.*" over a long period of time.

The conspiracy of the Generals was the military part of the struggle of the opposition against the Soviet government. The Pyatakov-Radek treason trial had dealt a severe blow to the opposition, but the Generals had not cancelled their plans for a coup d'état. On the contrary, they realised that any delay would be to their disadvantage. Their plans had been finalised and it was time to act. Following the trial of Pyatakov and the denuciation of the Bukharin-Rykov group, now under arrest, the military conspirators increased their efforts. Towards the end of March 1937, they decided on the timing of the coup. It was to take place within six weeks, or by March 15th at the latest.

The return of the political commissars

Once it came to know of the plans for a coup, the Soviet government acted swiftly. On May 8th an important resolution was passed: political commissars were reinstated at all levels in the army. The system of political commissars supervising the officers and military decisions had been abandoned ten years earlier, on 13th May 1927, at the behest of Frunze, an old Bolshevik and highly-placed Party cadre who had become one of the leading officers in the army. He abolished the political commissars and reinstated the power of the officers. On 11th May 1937, Marshal Tukhachevskii was demoted from his post as deputy war commissar and sent on a lesser mission in the Volga area. General Gamarnik, one of the conspirators (who subsequently committed suicide), was demoted on the same day as the deputy war commissar. Generals Iakir and Uborevich were also downgraded, while Generals Kork and Eideman were arrested, accused of spying for Nazi Germany. The conspirators thereby lost the practical means of directing a military coup.

Socialist society defends itself

The Soviet government's quick intervention averted the attempted coup d'état against the Socialist Soviet Union, but it was not known how widespread was the hold of the conspirators within civilian society and the army.

The regional Party meetings and the struggle against counter-revolution

In June 1937 the situation in Soviet Union was extremely tense. Nobody knew exactly the size of the military conspiracy, but there were many indications that it was larger than the group that had been discovered. The Central Committee decided to start a comprehensive investigation. The military conspiracy came from the top and its roots in civilian society were to be sought among people with leading posts. A number of extraordinary membership meetings were arranged in the regions to evaluate the work of the regional Party leaderships and to find out the size of the conspiracy. The relevant western region meeting took place over three days between June 19th and 21st, 1937. Kaganovich took part in the meeting as the representative of the Central Committee. The central question was the evaluation of the regional Party secretary Rumiantsev and his close associates.

Rumiantsev subjected to criticism

Ivan Petrovich Rumiantsev was an 'old Bolshevik' who had joined the Party as early as 1905. In 1929 he was named by the Central Committee First secretary of Smolensk, and Rumiantsev took with him to the post a number of his old comrades to be installed in several of the leading posts of the region. This nepotistic procedure was stamped anti-Marxist by Stalin at the February meeting of the Central Committee, but this did not bother Rumiantsev. In June 1937, Rumiantsev was 61 and was a member of the Central Committee with a strong standing in the western region, where several companies and factories had been named after him. In practice, Rumiantsev was immune to criticism. The 'old Bolshevik' Rumiantsev had over the years turned into a pompous bureaucrat mostly interested in his own welfare. The dissatisfaction with Rumiantsev in the

western region was obvious, but the opportunities for removing him were slight.

Conditions had, however, changed radically prior to the meeting of June 19-21, 1937. This was not only because of the presence of Kaganovich and his support of the critical voices. Even more important a factor in causing members to be so outspoken was that one of the conspiring and condemned generals, Uborevich, was a member of the regional Committee, and had collaborated closely with Rumiantsev. There were suspicions that Rumiantsev was one of the high Party functionaries involved in the military conspiracy. Old injustices committed by Rumiantsev and his group against individual members were mercilessly brought to light.

The situation for the western region leadership became increasingly dismal. Among other issues, the dismissal of Party secretary Kovalev was raised. Kovalev had been removed by the Party members at the Belyi district membership meeting, but he had been given a comfortable job for his retirement by ... Rumiantsev. The members now brought up what had happened and they were of the opinion that it was Rumiantsev who had caused Kovalev to act contrary to the will of Party members. It had been he who was behind the transgressions and abuses of power that had taken place in the district of Belyi. By resort to cronyism and patronage, Rumiantsev had "*suppressed criticism and self-criticism, creating a circle of 'his own people'*". The list of accusations of corruption and omnipotence against the leadership of the western region grew ever longer. As a consequence, the whole leadership was dismissed at the meeting. Following subsequent investigations, Rumiantsev and his group were arrested on charges of corruption and abuse of power.

The Central Committee launches a vast counter attack

By July 1937 the Central Committee had collected sufficient evidence to show that the military conspiracy had been part of a scheme involving many high Party functionaries. The situation was extremely serious. Even in the Central Committee itself there were corrupt members involved in the conspiracy. The building of Socialism was accompanied by consequences which some old Bolsheviks and newer high Party functionaries could not accept. The distant and somewhat romantic picture of

workers' power during the days of the 1917 revolution had now been realised in practice in the Soviet Union and it was now actually ruled by workers. This was a scary development for some people who had been privileged and living comfortably. They chose the road of counter- revolution. They found their indispensable allies in their struggle to halt Socialist development outside the Soviet Union. The Central Committee decided to fight this white terror and treachery in a determined manner.

The task of following up the clues thrown up by the traitors' attempted coup was handled by the security police, the NKVD, under the leadership of Ezhov. All over the country people who were known to have had connections with the conspirators in the Pyatakov group or with the Generals were investigated. Many were arrested. The political situation was insecure and it was still unclear which had been the foreign links of the conspirators. The Generals had divulged secrets about the defence of the Soviet Union and it was unclear to what extent this had weakened the country.

The purges hit the highest ranks

The purges in the Party gained momentum after the Central Committee had questioned the loyalty of the regional Party leaders to Socialism. The Party meetings were strongly influenced by the general tense situation, and ordinary members turned more and more vociferous against corrupted and inefficient functionaries. People who considered themselves totally immune all of a sudden found themselves thrown out from leadership positions by the Party masses. Some were directly delivered to justice for their crimes. Bourgeois history in the West talks of terror against leading functionaries and company administrators, people who were more affluent than the average. 'Nobody could sleep safe in their beds', say the bourgeois historians.

But why should one not question individuals who had traded public property 'under the table', who had used state funds to finance their own businesses and who had liberally handed out presents and bribes to friends and acquaintances? Why should one be particularly considerate to Party leaders who used power to oppress ordinary members and mistreat them? Why should one not persecute generals and other high ranking officers

who had betrayed the country's secrets and collaborated with the enemy? Why should they go free or be treated better than other criminals?

The expulsions and 'the old Bolsheviks'

Research also shows that most of those expelled during this time were people from the leading circles of the Party. Let us give a concrete example from the Party district of Belyi. Out of 244 members and candidates in the Party organisation of Belyi, 36 were expelled during 1937. 29 of those expelled were in leading positions - two First Party Secretaries of district committees, and two Deputy Chairmen of the district Soviet Executive Committee, one Komsomol District Secretary, the District Prosecutor, the chief of the district NKVD and one of his fellow officers, the directors of the three largest schools in the district, the head of the district land office, the director of the Belyi Machine and Tractor Station, four heads of industrial undertakings, two heads of trade organisations, five collective-farm chairmen and five chairmen of rural Soviets.

The myth of the 1937 expulsions

The myth about the terrible year 1937 which the bourgeoisie has made one of its top items, not surprisingly through the police agent Robert Conquest and CIA / MI5, the true fathers of the myth are unmasked by the statistics about the purges during the whole of the 1930's [see Table 6].

Analysing the statistics one can perceive the magnitude of the bourgeois lies. In fact, 1937 was one of the years in which the lowest numbers of people were expelled, i.e., not more than five per cent! How come the bourgeoisie and its lackeys have transformed 1937 into 'Stalin's incredible year of 1937' with "*millions of false accusations, millions deported, millions murdered*", as Swedish author Per Englund likes to claim. Which are the interests behind this? We understand that in such a mass movement of criticism and self-criticism involving millions of people, some wrong decisions will have been made and innocent people affected. But such things occurred in earlier purges also. Tens of thousands of Party members had been expelled for wrong reasons but these were reinstated after simply appealing to the Party centre. The injustices which affected ordinary workers more than others are of no interest to the West.

Table 6

Party expulsions by year		
Operation	Number expelled from Party	Percent of party
1929	170,000	11.0
1933	792,000	18.5
1935	170,000	9.0
1936	—	—
1937	100,000	5.0
1938	70,000	2.0

Note: There are no national statistics for 1936. In Smolensk two/three per cent of the members were expelled that year.

How to explain the interest shown in the 1937 expulsions? Why precisely is 1937 taken as the worst to befall the Soviet Union?

The class question gives the answer

The explanation is related to class. The great difference between the purges of 1937 and other Party purges is that during the latter it was mainly grass-roots members, ordinary workers, who were expelled - they constituted up to 80 per cent of all those expelled. The relationship was just the opposite in 1937. Of all those expelled, around 80 per cent were corrupt Party bigwigs and high level army officers. These were people who, having acquired privileges and financial advantages, were prepared even to collaborate with Nazi Germany in order to keep them. These were people who did not mind trampling on ordinary members and who readily threw out those who did not accept their transgressions. In 1937, Party functionaries and officers with inclinations to the West and bourgeois thinking were kicked out. They lost their positions of power, were thrown out from the Party and brought to trial. We can understand the hatred of the bourgeoisie for the Soviet year, 1937.

The policy of the Party & difficulties of mass struggle

The aim of the purges was to throw out corrupt bureaucrats and traitors from the Party and army. Such a far-reaching struggle, involving millions of Party members, could not be carried out without mistakes. Old personal contradictions could lead to unfair decisions. Strong mistrust could arise of all Party cadres and could easily spread when a highly-placed Party functionary proved to be corrupt bureaucrat. The Central Committee was aware of these difficulties and warned from the outset against exaggerations.

In some quarters this principle was difficult to apply. Party members who, for instance, had white collar jobs and had not shown a genuine interest in Party life could easily be expelled in spite of their loyalty to Socialism, as demonstrated by their work. The Central Committee opposed this and corrected the injustices when they heard the appeals of those who had been expelled. In October 1937, during a reception for technical cadres from the Donbas, Stalin personally criticised those who questioned all leading cadres. According to Stalin the new (white-collar) technicians and economists of the Soviet Union came from the proletariat and deserved the respect of the people.

Conclusion

What clearly emerges from all the above is that the purges were part of a struggle aimed at bureaucracy and treason and not at leading Party cadres in general, 'old Bolsheviks', or even people who simply found themselves in a minority on political questions, unless this led them to criminal and treasonable activity.

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