Comment: Twin Pyramids—Perpetrators and Victims

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In her thought-provoking essay, Lynne Viola raises the issue of why historians of Stalinism, in contrast to those of Nazism, have largely ignored research on perpetrators. She argues that the proponents of the "totalitarian thesis," with their obsessive focus on Iosif Stalin and the highest levels of state power, have been at least partially responsible for the field's failure to explore the activities and motivations of perpetrators at different levels of society. Their disregard of large social groups and processes created a convenient target of blame—Stalin—that obviated further inquiry. Viola argues that the field of Soviet studies would benefit from a new focus on perpetrators, a concept that originated in the literature on the Holocaust and has since been used in numerous countries to investigate mass violations of human rights.

In writing *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression* and *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin's Russia,* I found the concept of the perpetrator, so riveting in the context of Nazism and the Holocaust, of less utility in understanding Stalinist repression. First, the line between perpetrators and victims in the USSR of the late 1930s was blurred. The political terror that followed the murder of Sergei Kirov initiated a mass, internal purge, in which perpetrators often became victims. The divergence from Nazi Germany is immediately apparent: the Gestapo was not staffed by Jews who were then sent to Auschwitz. Second, perpetrators and victims frequently came from the same social groups. The motives and backgrounds of individual perpetrators were less important in explaining Stalinist violence than were broad structural processes of change. Peasants and workers composed the majority of camp inmates. The state, frantic to control the huge itinerant population it created through rural dispossession and industrialization, criminalized and arrested homeless people without passports, beggars, and unemployed "criminals" in mass police sweeps throughout the 1930s. During and after the war, millions more were rounded up and convicted of labor desertion. The state's need to stabilize new industrial and agricultural labor systems led to violence on a mass scale. As Viola explains, the Soviet state under Stalin became an "extraction" state. This vast process of expropriation and redistribution of labor paralleled the violent process of primitive accumulation in the early phases of capitalism.[1]

Viola, like many historians, rightly notes that Soviet socialism differed markedly from German fascism. The two states varied widely in their state and party structures, ideologies, social bases, relationships to old elites, class policies, rulers' personal styles, policies toward women and family, and forms

1. For a fuller explication of the complex dynamic of mutual denunciation as well as the class dynamics of the terror, see Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression* (Cambridge, Eng., 2007), and Goldman, *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge, Eng., 2011).

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and aims of violence. Terror in Germany was directed outward and did not affect the vast majority of Germans, while repression in the Soviet Union was aimed inward and affected millions of Soviet citizens. In the words of Michael Geyer, the comparison ultimately "reveals a total mismatch."[2] Nazi violence was part of a racial ideology built on *Lebensraum*, the idea that vast tracts of east European and Soviet lands should be cleared of their "inferior" populations to make way for "superior" German settlers. The "enemy" was a racialized and politicized "other," sharply defined and demarcated.

In the Soviet case, the "enemy" was internal, its identity repeatedly reinvented by the state. Many people found ways to escape these enemy categories and refashion their identities to conform to those favored by the state. As Viola points out, the term *kulak* lacked a fixed definition. A significant number of the individuals and families sent into exile were middle peasants. The commandants in the special settlements differed little in background and living conditions from their charges.[3] Likewise, "enemy of the people," a term of opprobrium popularized in 1937 by Stalin, was also a tremendously elastic concept that stretched to encompass a wide array of perceived opponents. After the Kirov murder, the state targeted successive groups of former political oppositionists, and eventually ignited a vast purge of the party itself. In my research on the factories, I discovered that just as the enemy was difficult to fix and define, so too was the "perpetrator." Many who ardently denounced others became victims themselves in a complex dynamic of aggressive and preemptive betrayal that consumed the party and the unions at every level. Ordinary people translated work-related tensions into a new language of "wrecking" and treason. By 1937, denunciation had become the main currency of exchange at meetings, in newspapers, and throughout public life. Every institution—the military, schools, scientific and cultural organizations, unions, collective farms, and factories—was convulsed by an internal hunt for enemies.

Soviet citizens at the time struggled to separate the hunters and the hunted, to explain why some were arrested and others remained untouched. No one fully understood what was happening or why. As party leaders repeatedly explained, "the enemy" was "masked." The process of "unmasking" involved the mass participation of coworkers, relatives, friends, and colleagues who turned against each other, poisoning the atmosphere with terror and fear. Public and private life became sharply bifurcated. Some publicly called for the arrest of coworkers as they privately aided imprisoned relatives and friends. Were they perpetrators or victims? Party leaders at the provincial, city, and neighborhood levels promoted the hunt for enemies and then themselves disappeared into the camps, victims of the denunciations of others. Indeed, the party officially halted the purge in January 1938 with a final campaign against *krikuny,* the "bawlers" and *samo perestrakhovshchiki,* the fanatical

2. For the most comprehensive comparison of Stalinism and Nazism, see the essays in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge, Eng., 2009), 21.

3. Lynne Viola, *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements* (Oxford, 2007).

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"self protectors" who had been the most zealous denouncers of others. This group too went to the camps. In such a complex political and psychological atmosphere, where recent agents of the purge became its latest victims, and even the NKVD's *kokolshchiki* (bone-breakers) disappeared into the camps, it was (and is) impossible to attribute a fixed meaning to "perpetrators."

Even the mass and national operations, which targeted specified groups, including former kulaks, priests, recidivist criminals, and various nationalities (Poles, Finns, Latvians, Koreans, and others) deemed potentially disloyal in the event of fascist attack, were not clearly demarcated. Provincial party leaders met their arrest quotas for Poles by seizing workers who were earlier deemed "kulaks" and for "recidivist criminals" with homeless people or workers lacking identification.[4] The mass and national operations, rooted in a decade of police sweeps and extrajudicial sentencing, were not simply an attack on demonized "others," but also on Soviet society itself. Even working-class party members with seemingly impeccable proletarian biographies turned out to have spouses, relatives, coworkers, or friends among so-called enemy groups and became vulnerable for their associational ties. No individual or group was immune from persecution.

Drawing on the work of Mark Levene, Viola suggests that we think of perpetrators as a pyramid, a metaphor that can be applied to the victims as well. In the Soviet case, the pyramid of victims featured an apex of former oppositionists, party leaders, prominent cultural and scientific figures, and other so-called counterrevolutionaries; a wider group accused of "wrecking" or of associational ties to those already arrested; and a broad base of *byvshie liudi* (former kulaks, nobles, priests, and White Guards); recidivist criminals; and various national groups. Industrialization and collectivization created a massive itinerant population in search of work and housing. A significant segment of this population, lacking proper documents, was criminalized after the introduction of internal passports in 1932. The greatest fear of Stalin and party leaders by 1936 was that former oppositionists would unite with this vast, impoverished, disaffected mass to undermine the state in the event of an attack.[5] During and after World War II, millions of workers were sentenced for desertion, unexplained absenteeism, or other violations of labor discipline, creating one of the largest groups in the camps. After thirty years of revolution, civil war, breakneck economic development, and draconian wartime labor legislation, the "victim pyramid" was thus nothing less than a microcosm of Soviet society itself.

What about the pyramid of perpetrators? At the top stood those party leaders, including Stalin and the Politburo, who drafted and approved the orders for the exile of the kulaks, the mass police sweeps of the 1930s, the

4. In Sverdlovsk province, for example, the NKVD arrested 4,128 people in the Polish operation, of which only 390 were Poles. The great majority were former kulaks and their children, most of whom were now workers. See V. N. Khaustov, V. P. Naumov, and N. S. Plotnikova, eds., *Lubianka: Stalin i glavnoe upravlenie gosbezopasnosti NKVD 1937–38. Dokumenty* (Moscow, 2004), 659.

5. See comments of various provincial party secretaries at the February–March 1937 Party Plenum, "Materialy Fevral'sko-Martovskogo Plenuma," *Voprosy istorii,* 1993, no. 5: 3–5; no. 6: 5–9, 27; no. 7: 3–5.

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arrests of party members and others, and the mass and national operations. The members of the *troiki* at the provincial and city levels who passed sentence on the victims of the mass and national operations, as well as those party leaders who initialed and approved the executions, also stand near the apex. All those who carried out the orders by conducting arrests and interrogations, shooting the victims, staffing the camps and prisons, and overseeing gulag work sites and special settlements constitute the broad middle of the edifice. And its imposing base is crowded with those who wrote denunciations, spoke against others at mass meetings, made fiery speeches about enemies, penned vicious critiques in newspapers, transformed accidents into "wrecking," and politicized technical, scientific, and cultural quarrels. They are joined by those who sought personal gain, promotions, and the property of their neighbors through the politics of terror. Many of these perpetrators would eventually find themselves in the pyramid of victims. Indeed the pyramid of perpetrators is also a microcosm of Soviet society, and one that bears a stunning resemblance to the pyramid of victims.

Historians will continue to debate the primary causes of Stalinist violence, but in the end, Viola is to be commended for insisting on the importance of connecting the larger structural forces to the individuals who perpetrated the violence. We must study mass participation in the mass repressions and terror in order to understand why so many Soviet citizens fervently joined the hunt for internal enemies. In examining the twin pyramids of Soviet victims and perpetrators, we must keep in mind their overlap and connections as we ask, what impels any social system with a vast prison population to criminalize and incarcerate such a significant portion of its citizenry?

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