The Question of the Perpetrator in Soviet History

Lynne Viola

> This question needs thought. We must not answer too quickly. Here they all are: expert reports from lying engineers and literary critics; speeches denouncing enemies of the people; intimate conversations and confessions made to a friend—transformed into the reports and denunciations of informers and stoolies.
>
> —Vasilii Grossman, *Everything Flows*

The question of the perpetrator is largely uncharted territory in the history of the Soviet Union. The term has not generally been used in the historiography of the Stalinist Soviet Union. In part, this omission is based upon a reluctance to go beyond Iosif Stalin in assigning agency or responsibility for the immense crimes of his reign. Stalin, therefore, becomes a lone perpetrator, surrounded by a coterie of loyal "henchmen," by virtue of a historiographical failure of imagination to depart from traditional assumptions of a passive, terrorized, agentless officialdom and society. In part, the omission derives from decades-long restrictions on archival access, the continued inadequacy of the source base due to official prohibitions against historians, especially foreigners, working in the Federal Security Bureau archives, and the fact of the Soviet Union's survival until 1991.

By contrast, historians of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust have discussed this question in great detail, virtually creating, according to historian Mark Roseman, a "separate subdiscipline in the history of the Third Reich." Characterizations of Nazi perpetrators have ranged over the decades from the "banal bureaucrat" or "desk murderer" and "ordinary man" at one end of the spectrum to zealous ideologue and vicious monster at the other end, with a variety of more nuanced views in between. The very notion of the historical *perpetrator* comes directly from the literature on the Holocaust.[1]

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1. Mark Roseman, "Beyond Conviction? Perpetrators, Ideas and Action in the Holocaust in Historiographical Perspective," in Frank Biess, Mark Roseman, and Hanna Schissler,

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In the Soviet Union, the 1930s was a decade of mass repression, offering an enormous field of play for perpetrators, from the dekulakization campaigns of the early 1930s to the mass operations of 1937–38. Yet the question of the Soviet perpetrator is not simple. As Vasilii Grossman said, "This question needs thought." On the face of it, the term can easily be employed to refer to the functionaries who envisioned, planned, or carried out the repressive policies of the Stalin era, ranging from the highest levels of the party-state to the lowest rungs of officialdom. The term, however, may be far broader and far more dynamic, encompassing a changing variety of social actors. Who the perpetrators were, why they acted as they did, and how they acted are questions that open a window to larger issues of mass violence in the repressive Stalin era.

I begin by exploring the postwar trajectories of the historiographies of the mid-twentieth century's classically paired "totalitarian" regimes in order to understand the relative absence of "perpetrator studies" for the Stalinist 1930s. Then I examine the question of the Soviet perpetrator, less to demarcate who the perpetrators were than to offer a conceptualization of the range of factors that enabled, conditioned, and shaped their violent acts. Remembering Grossman, this essay is one small attempt to give the question some thought.

Parallel Historiographies

> When we look one another in the face, we're neither of us just looking at a face we hate—no, we're gazing into a mirror. That's the tragedy of our age. Do you really not recognize yourselves in us—yourselves and the strength of your will?
>
> —Vasilii Grossman, *Life and Fate*

Nazi Germany's defeat and the enormity of its crimes forced the world, and particularly the allied nations, to confront what remained of the Nazi perpetrators, high and low. The confrontation occurred in a variety of ways (sometimes cynically, not always successfully), but most important for our purposes, in trials that began in Nuremberg in the late 1940s and continued into the 1960s and later.[2] The trials were designed to indict the people in the dock, but they were also an attempt to understand how a supposedly "civilized" nation could descend to such a level of atrocity. The downfall of the

eds., *Conflict, Catastrophe and Continuity: Essays on Modern German History* (New York, 2007), 83; and Christopher R. Browning, *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge, Eng., 1992), x. See also the nuanced and open discussion of the historiography in Michael Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation: The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office*, trans. Tom Lampert (Madison, 2009), 3–18.

2. For a range of views on the trials, see Donald Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial: War Crimes Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory* (Oxford, 2001); Hilary Earl, *The Nuremberg SS-Einsatzgruppen Trial, 1945–1958: Atrocity, Law, and History* (Cambridge, Eng., 2009), chap. 1; Devin O. Pendas, "Seeking Justice, Finding Law: Nazi Trials in Postwar Europe," *Journal of Modern History* 81, no. 2 (June 2009): 347–68; and Lawrence Douglas, *The Memory of Judgment: Making Law and History in the Trials of the Holocaust* (New Haven, 2001).

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Third Reich and subsequent investigations by historians opened a window to various semblances of truth about the working of the Nazi regime—truth behind lies, secrets behind euphemisms, as well as images of the desk murderers with their deadly blueprints, the operators of the gas chambers, and the shooters in the ravines of eastern Europe.

This is in stark contradistinction to what happened in the Soviet Union. Here there was no defeat or occupation by foreign forces to delegitimize Stalin's regime; instead, victory in the war elevated Stalin to new heights of grandeur. The Generalissimo had won the war, leaving another kind of legacy, an alternative past that served to legitimize future Soviet governments and to provide Vladimir Putin with a highly "usable past." The Soviet Union, or more accurately its successor state of Russia, experienced no Nuremberg Trial, no lustration, no "truth and reconciliation" commissions, no International Criminal Tribunal to unlock archives and redress wrongs. This is not to say that individual voices, largely outside the former Soviet Union, did not call for trials in what at times has appeared to be Cold War triumphalism, more a desire for vengeance than justice.[3] But apart from the failed trial of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the closest Russia came to its own personal Nuremberg were the dramatic, though always partial, revelations that accompanied "de-Stalinization" in the Khrushchev era and the more free-ranging discussions that overtook the press during Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost and in the 1990s under Boris El'tsin.[4] Civic organizations like Memorial have also served as brave forums for coming to terms with Soviet repression.

Although historians of Stalinist Russia (in the west) and Nazi Germany have traveled along fairly similar paths in the evolution of their respective historiographies, the question of the perpetrator has not received equal treatment in these historiographies, in part precisely because of the two country's different postwar trajectories.[5] Both historiographies grew out of war and postwar politics. Both historiographies grew out of the totalitarian model. Western historians of the Soviet Union, however, have had greater difficulty moving beyond the paradigm of the totalitarian model. This paradigm constriction is one of the reasons why the question of the perpetrator in the Soviet Union has been left largely unexplored.

The totalitarian model provided one of the first conceptualizations for understanding the repressive regimes of Adolf Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. Although the term itself—and the idea—had made its earliest

3. See, e.g., Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York, 2003), epilogue and esp. 575, where she uses the phrase "Gulag denier," in relation to a certain "few" but unnamed scholars; and Stéphane Courtois et al., eds., *The Black Book of Communism,* trans. Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), especially articles by Martin Malia and Stéphane Courtois, both of whom see communism as the moral equivalent of Nazism.

4. The trial ended without resolution. For information on the sources yielded by the trial, see I. I. Kudriavtsev, ed., *Arkhivy Kremlia i staroi ploshchadi: Dokumenty po "delu KPSS"* (Novosibirsk, 1995).

5. See, in particular, the fine historiographical discussions in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge, Eng., 2009), esp. chap. 1.

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appearance before World War II in Benito Mussolini's fascist Italy (first as a critique by antifascists, then as a positive self-appellation), the model became enshrined in academia only after the war in the context of the developing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.[6]

The Nuremberg International Military Tribunal served as a "primer" in totalitarianism, setting the course for the evolution of the early historiography of the Holocaust and its perpetrators.[7] French prosecutor Charles Dubost offered the following understanding of the role of the modern state and its bureaucracy in the crimes of Nazi Germany: "Genocide, murder, or any other crime becomes anonymous when it is committed by the State. Nobody bears the responsibility. Everybody shares it—those who by their presence maintain and support the administration, those who conceived the crime and those who ordained it, as well as he who issued the order. As for the executioner, he says it himself, 'Befehl ist Befehl.' 'An order is an order.'"[8] Renown historian of Nazi Germany, Raul Hilberg, called this reasoning on the part of Nazi perpetrators "the doctrine of superior orders."[9]

In her work on totalitarianism, violence, and especially the Adolf Eichmann trial of 1961, Hannah Arendt echoed the French prosecutor at Nuremberg: "We ought to add the latest and perhaps most formidable form of such dominion [to a list of definitions of power]: Bureaucracy or the role of an intricate system of bureaus in which no men, neither one nor the best, neither the few nor the many, can be held responsible, and which could be properly called rule by Nobody."[10] "Rule by nobody," "Befehl ist Befehl," and the "doctrine of superior orders" all offered up the description of the Nazi perpetrator as an obedient civil servant, "rational" if uncaring, and "terribly and terrifyingly normal."[11] In response to earlier views of the perpetrator as a deviant personality, Arendt's perpetrator—Eichmann—was "banal."[12]

The notion of "banality" fit well into the reigning totalitarian model. In the most general and simplified terms, totalitarian model scholars argued for a top-down view of history in which society was clearly separated from the state, atomized, and at most passively resistant. The Führer, or, in the Soviet case, the *vozhd'*, dominated the system, which aimed to maintain the permanent instability of elites and officials in order to prevent the possibility of political opposition. The actors who implemented repression, especially at the lowest and middle ranges, were simply obedient "cogs" in the well-oiled machine, lacking agency, perhaps terrified to do anything but follow orders.

6. For a history of the model, see Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York, 1995). Totalitarianism founds its theorists in Carl Friedrich, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jacob Talman, and, most famously, Hannah Arendt. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new ed. (New York, 1973); Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 2d rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1965); and J. L. Talman, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London, 1952).

7. See Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial*, 2–6.

8. Cited in Douglas, *The Memory of Judgment*, 91.

9. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York, 1985), 288.

10. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York, 1970), 38.

11. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev. ed. (New York, 1985), 276.

12. Ibid., 252.

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In studies of Nazi Germany, the totalitarian model blended almost effortlessly into the work of a generation of scholars later labeled "intentionalists." Intentionalists privileged the leader and the ideology over the "system." In this respect, intentionalists were a departure from the model, offering up prescience and fanaticism in the place of the impersonal bureaucracy.[13] A similar critique developed among scholars of the Soviet Union in the 1970s. Robert Tucker used the term *Stalinism* in an effort to describe (still) a system, but one dominated by the aberrant personality of its leader.[14]

Historian Ian Kershaw called into question the leader-centered approach, noting that "It is the apparent need to find a supreme culprit which comes close to trivializing *in terms of historical explanation* by diverting attention from the active forces in German society which did not have to be given a 'Führer order' to turn the screws of Jewish persecution."[15] A generation of "structuralist" historians of the Third Reich, along with a small group of "revisionist" scholars of the Soviet Union somewhat later, challenged such "trivialization," along with the totalitarian model, in wide-ranging studies of the two regimes.

Structuralist historians carried out detailed studies of various aspects of the Third Reich, emphasizing the centrality of context, contingency, and "cumulative radicalization."[16] Christopher Browning offered a useful summation of the structuralist view of Nazi Germany: "Nazi policy evolved through an unsystematic dialectical interaction of mutual radicalization between central and local authorities involving numerous variations of exhortation, legislation, and support, as well as decisions and orders from above; and intuition, initiative, and experimentation, as well as obedience from below."[17] Instead of clearly thought-out blueprints and exact Prussian-style policy implementation, officials "worked toward the Führer," to use the phrase popularized by Kershaw.[18] Without absolving Hitler of overall responsibility, the work of the structuralists brought historians closer to the world of the perpetrator by exploring precisely how policy evolved, how it was implemented, and how various social forces reacted, interacted, and worked with the Nazi regime.

The closest equivalent to structuralism in the historiography on the Soviet

13. For a discussion of the intentionalist-structuralist debate, see Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (New Haven, 2008), pt. 3.

14. Robert C. Tucker, ed., *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation* (New York, 1977), esp. xi–xx.

15. Kershaw, *Hitler,* 246. Emphasis in the original.

16. For a discussion of the German literature, see Ulrich Herbert, "Extermination Policy: New Answers and Questions about the History of the 'Holocaust' in German Historiography," in Herbert, ed., *National Socialist Extermination Policies: Contemporary German Perspectives and Controversies* (New York, 2004), 4–11.

17. Christopher R. Browning (with contributions by Jürgen Matthäus), *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942* (Lincoln, 2004), 214.

18. Kershaw writes: "Hitler would signal a 'green light' to party radicals to step up measures against Jews; 'action' would inevitably build from below, putting pressure on the regime to sanction it, and ultimately Hitler's intervention; this would 'legitimate' the radical action before starting the process once more . . . without any need for explicit orders." Kershaw, *Hitler,* 20–21, 40–41.

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Union was what became known as "revisionism" in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Like the structuralists, the revisionists represented diverse viewpoints and never minimized Stalin's role. Instead, they carried out a series of studies exploring the social base of Stalinism, the instrumental nature of terror, and the less than perfect implementation of policy in the provinces. Revisionist history broadened the range of approaches, topics, and sources available to historians. Work on center-periphery interactions resulted in a new picture of Stalinist governance, one that emphasized disorder, weak administration, and instrumental violence. Work on urban society explored issues of social support.[19]

Revisionist work elicited an acrimonious response from the advocates of the totalitarian model and Stalin-centered biographical history, with a series of historiographically, if not politically, hysterical charges of "leftist sympathies." The debate became so bitter that at one point Martin Malia compared the revisionists to Holocaust deniers, demanding that they repent.[20] Although the revisionists never quite lived up to the reputation suggested by the name calling, the issue of social support for the regime fell by the wayside in the highly charged political atmosphere of the Cold War.[21] This was a pity because the issues of social support and societal complicity are central to any understanding of the question of perpetrators in the Soviet Union.

When, in the 1990s, perpetrator studies "took off" for Nazi Germany, Soviet history veered off in other directions. The works of Browning and Daniel Goldhagen placed the spotlight directly on the question of the motivations of Nazi perpetrators with a focus on the rank and file.[22] In *Ordinary Men,* Browning viewed the perpetrators as "ordinary men" in extraordinary situations. He highlighted the importance of context, contingency, and situational and institutional factors to explain why these men did what they did. Echoing Hans

19. For classic work in the revisionist genre, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931* (Bloomington, 1978); Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921–1934* (Cambridge, Eng., 1979); J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985); Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin's Industrial Revolution: Politics and Workers, 1928–1932* (Cambridge, Eng., 1988); Roberta Manning, "Government in the Soviet Countryside in the Stalinist Thirties: The Case of Belyi Raion in 1937," *Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies,* no. 301 (Pittsburgh, n.d.); and Lynne Viola, *The Best Sons of the Fatherland: Workers in the Vanguard of Soviet Collectivization* (New York, 1987).

20. Malia, "Foreword: The Uses of Atrocity," in Courtois et al., eds., *Black Book of Communism,* xx. In "To the Editors," *Kritika* 3, no.3 (Summer 2002): 569–71, Malia writes, "To really put the revisionist corpse behind us, its conceptual failures will have to be *explicitly* [his emphasis] recognized by a consensus of the field, if possible by some of the responsible parties themselves." In "On the Primacy of Ideology: Soviet Revisionists and Holocaust Deniers," *Kritika* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 100–101, Michael David-Fox discusses Malia's political critiques of the revisionists, noting "The Soviet historical tragedy thus repeats itself as historiographical farce, with Malia issuing the call for self-criticism, recantation, and condemnation by an activist majority."

21. For a sense of the tone of the debate, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Revisionism in Retrospect: A Personal View," *Slavic Review* 67, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 682–704.

22. Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992); Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996).

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Mommsen's notion of "cumulative radicalization," Browning showed how "as in combat, the horrors of the initial encounter eventually became routine, and the killing became progressively easier."[23] In contrast, Goldhagen stressed the role of ideology (an "eliminationist anti-semitism") in producing the Holocaust in his controversial but important book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.[24] Although some historians questioned the notion of the "ordinary man," especially in regard to Einsatsgruppen members, most scholars embraced the notion earlier put forth by Hilberg that the "perpetrators were not different in their moral make-up from the rest of the population," instead representing a "cross-section of the German population."[25]

While there was no equivalent to perpetrator studies on the Holocaust, three new developments in the field of Soviet history in the 1990s laid the groundwork for further study. First, within Russia and other former Soviet republics, a vast number of archival document collections as well as monographs on various aspects of Stalinist terror, particularly in the 1930s, provided a multitude of primary sources for studies of Soviet perpetrators. Most of these works were "top-down" studies, providing an invaluable institutional framework for understanding perpetrators.[26] Second, continuing the revisionist tradition, a number of western historians produced rich and empirically detailed works on Soviet repression, based on archival research. The works of Wendy Goldman, Paul Haginloh, and David Shearer combined social and institutional history to provide new understandings of the Great Terror. While Goldman explores the microhistorical dynamics of the terror and especially denunciations within the factory, Haginloh and Shearer are able to demonstrate both the importance of developed Stalinist policing practices and the

23. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 161.

24. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 6–7, 28–29, 266–67, 419.

25. Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews*, 277. E.g., Earl, *The Nuremberg SS-Einsatzgruppen Trial*, 140–41, takes a middling view between Browning and Goldhagen. For another nuanced view, see Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation*. Wildt presents a sophisticated analysis of the conjuncture of generation, institution, and war to understand the shaping of the leaders of the Reich Security Main Office. Wildt is careful (and in this unusual) to note that his conclusions do not extend necessarily to other groups of Nazi perpetrators (425).

26. Two decades of archival work have yielded multiple empirical studies and a voluminous array of published documents on Soviet violence in the 1930s that allow us to begin the work of excavating the Soviet perpetrator. Some of the best work includes G. D. Zhdanova et al., eds., *Massovye repressii v Altaiskom krae, 1937–1938 gg.: Prikaz No. 00447* (Moscow, 2010); *Stalinism v Sovetskoi provintsii, 1937–1938 gg.: Massovaia operatsiia na osnove prikaza No. 00447* (Moscow, 2009); Marc Junge, ed., *"Cherez trupy vraga na blago naroda": "Kulatskaia operatsiia" v Ukrainskoi SSR 1937–1941 gg.*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 2010); V. Danilov, R. Manning, L. Viola et al., eds., *Tragediia Sovetskoi derevni. Kollektivizatsiia i raskulachivanie. Dokumenty i materialy, 1927–1939*, 5 vols. (Moscow, 1999–2006); A. Berelovich and V. Danilov, eds., *Sovetskaia derevnia glazami VChK-OGPU-NKVD, 1918–1939: Dokumenty i materialy*, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1998–2005); as well as the works of A. G. Tepliakov, most notably *Mashina terrora: OGPU-NKVD Sibiri v 1929–1941 gg.* (Moscow, 2008); Marc Junge and Rol'f Binner, eds., *Kak terror stal "bol'shim"* (Moscow, 2003); O. Leibovich et al., eds., *"Vkliuchen v operatsiiu": Massovyi terror v Prikam'e v 1937–1938 gg.* (Moscow, 2009); A. F. Stepanov, *Rasstrel po limitu: Iz istorii politicheskikh repressii v TASSR v gody "ezhovshchinu"* (Kazan, 1999); V. M. Samosudov, *O repressiiakh v Omskom Priirtysh'e: Istoricheskie etiudy* (Omsk, 1998).

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institutionalized use of specific arrest categorizations (according to class and other factors).[27] Third, a handful of western scholars pioneered the study of subjectivity, exploring notions of the illiberal self, thereby indirectly returning to the question of social support posed by revisionist scholars. Working within a rich fabric of cultural history, Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin posit the existence of a monolithic political discourse within which Soviet citizens actively shaped and transformed themselves. While Hellbeck explored Soviet self-transformation within Soviet diaries, Halfin examined the confessional culture of Soviet communism and the ways in which former communists turned victims were locked into the same language, the same political discourse as their interrogators.[28] In a new work, J. Arch Getty, who pioneered the political study of the terror, focused on discourse and ritual practices that served to create a kind of "corporate solidarity" among communists.[29] Other scholars, most notably Glennys Young, have begun to explore questions relating to emotion and emotional habitus, pushing earlier studies beyond the cognitive and the moral.[30] These are highly illuminating and original studies, suggestive of new ways of conceptualizing the more general moral and emotional world of communists under Stalin.

At about the same time, historians of a variety of national experiences carried out extensive theoretical work on issues of mass violence and genocide. Postmodernist scholarship on the state has featured importantly among

27. Wendy 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); Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926–1941* (Baltimore, 2009); and David Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924–1953* (New Haven, 2009). See also the excellent studies in Barry McLoughlin and Kevin McDermott, eds., *Stalin's Terror: High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union* (New York, 2003). Although unpublished, the work of Cynthia V. Hooper should be noted as an excellent study examining (among other things) the structural and institutional framework for repression. See Hooper, "Terror from Within: Participation and Coercion in Soviet Power, 1924–1964" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2003). Also noteworthy are the works of Golfo Alexopoulos, including *Stalin's Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926–1936* (Ithaca, 2003); Alexopoulos, "Stalin and the Politics of Kinship: Practices of Collective Punishment, 1920s–1940s," *Comparative Studies in Society and History 50*, no. 1 (January 2008): 91–117; and Alexopoulos, "Amnesty 1945: The Revolving Door of Stalin's Gulag," *Slavic Review* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 274–306. Alexopoulos's forthcoming work on practices in the gulag will undoubtedly prove formative in our knowledge and interpretations.

28. Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh, 2000); Halfin, *Intimate Enemies: Demonizing the Bolshevik Opposition, 1918–1928* (Pittsburgh, 2007); Halfin, *Stalinist Confessions: Messianism and Terror at the Leningrad Communist University* (Pittsburgh, 2009); and Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006).

29. J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–1939*, trans. Benjamin Sher (New Haven, 1999), particularly the introduction.

30. See the important new collection by Mark D. Steinberg and Valeria Sobol, eds., *Interpreting Emotions in Russia and Eastern Europe* (DeKalb, 2011), in particular the editors' introduction and the chapters by Ronald Grigor Suny ("Thinking about Feelings") and Glennys Young ("Bolsheviks and Emotional Hermeneutics").

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the macrohistorical studies that, especially for the Soviet Union, have largely gone beyond issues of social support (at times viewing it as implicit) to investigations, which are broad, comparative, and theoretical in their efforts to understand state violence in the twentieth century. The scholarship on the Soviet Union has been influenced by a series of important works focusing on the relationship between modernity and state violence. Viewed as the evil stepson of the Enlightment, modernity is generally understood as a compendium of modern practices used to shape and transform society through conscious social engineering. In Wolfgang Sofsky's study, *The Order of Terror,* perpetrators and victims are largely faceless cogs in the machinery of modernity.[31] Zygmunt Bauman also places the Holocaust within the context of the illiberal state and what he labels the "gardening state."[32] In the 1990s, a new generation of historians of the Soviet Union explored the question of illiberal modernity, using the tools of comparative history and focusing on the state and its policies.[33]

The focus on modernity and the state to some extent results in a relatively undifferentiated population of perpetrators enacting the policies of the rational and faceless state, while lacking individual agency. In the Soviet case, this means that issues of social complicity as well as actual practices of policy implementation are overlooked, thereby reducing the perpetrator to cog. In this, there is an echo from the totalitarian model. More generally, some of the modernity studies have been criticized for overlooking the actions of the "modern" state at the edge of the less than modern killing fields of the Soviet Union and eastern Europe or within the messiness of the gulag where notions of modernity seem to become tragically irrelevant to the barbarism of the moment.[34]

The question of the Soviet perpetrator, then, remains a relatively open one. Long hindered by a dogmatic understanding of the totalitarian model and the conformity of the Cold War, Soviet studies has yet to produce a literature resembling the Holocaust perpetrator studies of the 1990s. Yet the comparison with Germany may not be entirely apt. A variety of culturally specific, as well as broader comparative factors surrounding the question of the perpetrator in Stalinist Russia, suggest the necessity of looking beyond the German case to explore the question of the perpetrator in Stalin's Soviet Union of the 1930s.

31. Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp,* trans. William Templer (Princeton, 1997).

32. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, 1992), 18. See also Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton, 2003).

33. See, in particular, Amir Weiner, "Nature, Nurture, and Memory in a Socialist Utopia: Delineating the Soviet Socio-Ethnic Body in the Age of Socialism," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 4 (October 1999): 1114–55; and Weiner, ed., *Landscaping the Human Garden: Twentieth-Century Population Management in a Comparative Framework* (Stanford, 2003), especially the introduction by Weiner and the brilliant article by Peter Holquist, "State Violence as Technique."

34. See, e.g., Omer Bartov's critique of Sofsky in, "*Ordering Horror:* Conceptualizations of the Concentrationary Universe," *Germany's War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories* (Ithaca, 2003), 105–11; and Lynne Viola, "The Aesthetic of Stalinist Planning and the World of the Special Villages," *Kritika* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 101–28.

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Soviet Perpetrators and the Ecosystem of Violence

> But we remained silent in 1937 when thousands of innocent people were executed. Or rather some of us—the best of us—remained silent. Others applauded noisily. And we remained silent during the horrors of general collectivization.
>
> —Vasilii Grossman, *Life and Fate*

What then is a perpetrator in the Soviet context? The question is not easy. The answer is, at times, obscured by politics, subjectivity, and the "gray areas" that cover over the borders of definition. Politics invade the question because in lieu of a court of law, one person's or state's perpetrator may be another's dedicated communist, Chekist who "passionately hates his enemy and ardently loves his homeland [*rodina*]," or warrior in the class struggle.[35] Certainly this brand of thinking dominated the Soviet 1930s; and such opinions are not entirely absent in today's Russia. Subjectivity may enter into the question when historians—particularly western historians—attempt to determine who qualifies for the title. There was, as Mark Levene has written, a "pyramid" of perpetrators, a hierarchy ranging from high to low.[36] While it is not difficult to populate the summit of the pyramid, the base is another issue. Does, for example, social complicity or social support qualify an individual as a perpetrator? Does membership in the Communist Party or Komsomol or state and police bureaucracies automatically fit the definition? What about the legions of bureaucrats, the desk murderers so to speak, who played direct or indirect roles in the planning and functioning of the gulag? To complicate matters further, there is, as Primo Levi so artfully termed it, a "gray zone" in which the binary of perpetrator and victim crumbles, allowing for an exchange of roles over time or within a specific setting.[37] The identification of a Soviet perpetrator then, particularly once we go beyond the Kremlin, is likely to be conditional and unstable.

We must also be cognizant of the unstable nature of the "victim," the officially labeled "enemy." Definitions of the enemy were generally (although not always) politically subjective and arbitrary. The 1917 revolution and the first Five-Year Plan had radically altered objective and subjective social identities. Was a worker really a worker? Or was he a former nobleman, priest's son, or kulak? What was a kulak? Could one transcend the past? The "gray areas" of victimhood and perpetrator status were multiple and far more complex than in the case of Nazi Germany, where, regardless of the racial absurdities of concrete definition (regarding grandparents' status), the Jew was a Jew unless somehow dangerously cloaked within the official order. The enemy was clearly "the other." In the Stalinist context, the enemy was internal. He could be anyone.[38]

35. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 560, op. 1, d. 10, l. 159. This quote is taken from "Zapiski osobista," by M. F. Zhabokritskii, an unpublished manuscript dated 1967.

36. Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State,* 2 vols. (London, 2005), 1:99.

37. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved,* trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York, 1989), 186–87.

38. Regardless of the theoretically precise categorizations of the police files.

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The identification of perpetrators and victims, then, is not always so clear-cut. The traditional perpetrator-victim binary of Holocaust studies may not be so strictly demarcated in the Soviet case given the often dynamic nature of each category, not to mention the exceedingly large gray area that threatens to break down the binary, especially at the lower rungs of officialdom. Keeping this issue in mind, it is still possible to explore the range of individual motivations that may have been at work in the enactment of Stalinist violence and to compare them to those of the Nazi perpetrator.

Early characterizations of Nazi perpetrators as deviant personalities revealed their limitations in the historical literature on the Third Reich, but such characterizations are not uncommon in the literature on Stalin's Russia.[39] Stalin—as head perpetrator—has been figuratively put on the couch and subjected to a wide variety of different psychoanalytic evaluations in biographies that seek to understand his proclivity to violence based on childhood trauma, nationality minority status, latent homosexuality, or envy.[40] Stalin's closest associates have been variously described as henchmen, automatons, and careerists. And although we have no prosopographical studies of rank-and-file perpetrators, they too sometimes pop up, marginally, as criminals, careerists, and, in the village, as *bezdel'niki* (idlers, loafers, good-for-nothings), avaricious treasure-seekers (during expropriations), or simply drunkards, marginals, and vaguely cast deviants. Certainly, all of these "types" of deviant personalities littered the various landscapes of terror, but unless we wish to generalize deviance to the entire party-state structure and society, this character trait can merely describe random individuals and in a way that is necessarily subjective and highly politicized.

As in the case of Nazi perpetrators, alcohol invariably accompanied violence, particularly at the lower levels of administration and society and at the actual sites of interaction between perpetrator and victim. In the Soviet Union, however, alcohol abuse was endemic and invariably accounted for a large proportion of purged party members, sometimes the overwhelming majority in the 1920s and early 1930s. It almost inevitably accompanied what the top leaders euphemistically called *peregiby* (excesses) in the implementation of expropriation during dekulakization, the execution of the condemned, or in the day-to-day operations of camps and special settlements.[41] The execution teams who carried out the murders of 1937–38 were generally drunk be-

39. For an example of these characterizations in Germany, see Roseman, "Beyond Conviction?"

40. For examples, see Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879–1929: A Study in History and Personality* (New York, 1973); A. J. Rieber, "Stalin, Man of the Borderlands," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (December 2001): 1651–91; Rieber, "Stalin as Georgian: the Formative Years," in Sarah Davies and James Harris, eds., *Stalin: A New History* (Cambridge, Eng., 2005), 18–44; Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, *The Mind of Stalin: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Ann Arbor, 1988).

41. Viola, *The Best Sons of the Fatherland*, 21, 222n45; Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, 46, 68–69, 82–83; Lynne Viola, *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements* (New York, 2007), 108–9; E. A. Bakirov et al., eds., *Butovskii poligon, 1937–1938*, 8 vols. (Moscow, 1997), 1:26. On the use of alcohol among Einsatsgruppen members, see, e.g., Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 61, 69, 82–85; Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews*, 146; and Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness* (London, 1990), 200.

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fore, during, and after work.[42] It is likely, however, that alcohol in the Soviet context was less directly a cause then a lubricant, willingly self-administered, and an enhancer of excesses.

Careerism and opportunism were also at work somewhere in the mechanism of Soviet repression. For mid-level bureaucrats, the Soviet equivalent of the Nazi desk murderer, Stalin's Soviet Union presented a world of possibilities. As the work of Sheila Fitzpatrick has demonstrated, Soviet modernization led to massive upward social mobility.[43] People, particularly urbanites, had a lot to gain by joining the party or government. And the Stalinist order, like the Nazi regime, had mass appeal and a great deal of popular support. But here the gray zone quickly arises because repression also brought down many of those who had cast their lot with the system—in the university, the party and Komsomol, the government administration, industry, and so on.

Ambition was not an un-Soviet trait, and socialism did in fact leave room for a kind of competition. "Socialist competition" was rife at all levels during the collectivization campaigns, forcing up, artificially and violently, numbers of collectivized peasant households.[44] Fulfillment and overfulfillment of the "plan" were catchwords of the first Five-Year Plan and found a firm footing in the police apparatus. In the mass operations of the Great Terror, when quotas were more carefully adhered to, once those already on the police register were arrested, a kind of socialist competition developed in which police were literally dragging people off the street or using the phonebook to fulfill quotas.[45] And to be a Chekist in the 1930s, despite the eventual occupational hazards of 1938–39, was in itself considered the ultimate in revolutionary credentials.

Economic motives played directly into the violence of collectivization and dekulakization. Many peasants described the massive property expropriations as pillage and theft. Although officials were expected to keep inventories of the property they seized, expropriated possessions frequently ended up garnishing the pockets and hovels of the expropriators.[46] In the towns, people who wrote denunciations in 1937–38 were often motivated by petty desires for promotion or a better apartment.[47] Executioners fought over the clothing of the executed.[48] In Moscow, NKVD interrogators moved into the apartments of their victims.[49]

42. A. G. Tepliakov, *Protsedura: Ispolneniia smertnykh prigovorov v 1920–30-kh godakh* (Moscow, 2007), 33–37.

43. Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility.*

44. Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York, 1996), 24–27; and Viola, "The Campaign to Eliminate the Kulak as a Class, Winter, 1929–1930: A Reevaluation of the Legislation," *Slavic Review* 45, no. 3 (Autumn 1986): 503–24.

45. See, e.g., Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police,* 278–81.

46. See, e.g., the document in Lynne Viola et al., eds., *The War against the Peasantry, 1927–30: The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside,* trans. Steven Shabad (New Haven, 2005), 279–88; and Viola, *Unknown Gulag,* 36.

47. On "apartment denunciations," see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Signals from Below," *Tear Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton, 2005), 228–29.

48. Tepliakov, *Protsedura,* 67–71.

49. A. Iu. Vatlin, *Terror raionnogo masshtaba* (Moscow, 2004), 85–87.

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While studies of Nazi perpetrators have cast doubt on fear as a motive, there is little question that fear and actual coercion played into Soviet violence and could be inextricable from other motives.[50] Collectivization cadres later indicted for "excesses" spoke of their fear of being labeled "rightists" if they did not fulfill quotas.[51] During the Great Terror, people were *required* to report anything suspicious, potentially suspicious, or latently suspicious or risk arrest themselves for not reporting.[52] Arrested NKVD interrogators later justified their actions as provoked by fear of their superiors. Fear fueled the terror as much as alcohol lubricated its enactment.

What about duty? Is there anything like the Nazi "Befehl ist Befehl" in the Soviet case? If duty can be isolated from fear, not to mention from alcohol, then there is no doubt that many communists and Chekists were in fact committed to the cause or to Stalin or to Stalin's interpretation of the cause. But an order was rarely an order; the Soviet bureaucratic machine regularly ignored, violated, and misinterpreted orders or was materially unable to fulfill orders precisely while strictly deferring only in form to the myriad directives coming down from on high. The Soviet polity may have been a part of an authoritarian top-down system, but it had difficulty with obedience and was rarely more than superficially orderly. The only equivalent to the stereotype of German obedience is, perhaps, Russia's legendary bureaucratic sloth, punctuated by bouts of frenetic, often productive activity mimicking the agricultural work cycle. This neither negated nor affirmed obedience but rather altered its appearance, at times radically.

Finally, ideology and its manifestations in the form of mentality and behavior played an important role in the actions of individuals. There is little doubt that there were, especially in the 1930s, legions of "true believers"—especially among urbanites, party members, and youth. Dissidents from the 1970s often recalled, with a sense of retrospective bewilderment if not shame that they fully believed in Stalin and the Soviet system in the 1930s.[53] Halfin has argued not only that the ideological discourse of Bolshevik communism shaped the perpetrator but that it also shaped the victim in the interrogations of Leningrad students, resulting in a kind of linguistic parity that turned victims, in a sense, into their own accusers and muddled the traditional binary of victim and perpetrator.[54] This Koestler-like argument is very persuasive in the case of many communists. Ideology, however, was not fixed; it could change over time, it could change according to the situation, and it could mean different things to different people depending on a range of factors including age, education, social origin, and place of residence. It could also coexist with cynicism and pragmatism and serve the purpose of rationalization. Regardless, ideology in one form or another permeated all dimensions of Soviet life and consequently shaped official behavior at all levels.

In the final analysis, a range of factors quite naturally motivated the ac-

50. For Nazi Germany, see Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 170.

51. Viola, *Best Sons*, 127–29.

52. E.g., Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin*, 175, 205–6.

53. E.g., Petro G. Grigorenko, *Memoirs*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York, 1983), 28, 36; Lev Kopelev, *I sotvoril sebe kumira* (Ann Arbor, 1978); Raisa Orlova, *Memoirs*, trans. Samuel Cioran (New York, 1983), ix–x, 65, 83, 72.

54. See Halfin, *Stalinist Confessions*.

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tions of individual Soviet perpetrators. Following National Socialist studies, one could even make the claim that the perpetrator was simply an "ordinary man" (though Soviets are never "banal"). That is, anyone was capable of perpetrating acts of violence. Yet who were the perpetrators? What was their social background? What position did they hold in the pyramid of perpetrators? The answers still lay in supposition and generalization. Further, any concept of perpetrator in the Soviet case must take into account the unstable nature of the role. Perpetrators could easily become victims; the Great Terror of 1937–38 decimated Soviet elites and, in the end, the secret police as well. And where do we draw the line between perpetration and complicity, between "desk murderer," activist, and cadres directly involved in acts of violence?

Perhaps most important, individual perpetrators functioned within a larger setting that served to encompass and enable their violent acts. Contingency and situational factors shaped actions. It may be useful, therefore, to broaden the picture to explore the larger context in which perpetrators acted. There was, to borrow a term used in another context by Katerina Clark, an *ecosystem* of violence at work in the Stalinist 1930s.[55] It was a two-storied ecosystem, consisting of what we could call, first, environmental factors specific to Russia and, second, modernizing features of a more universal nature. This ecosystem served to enable individual perpetrators and formed the context for acts of violence. The first story of the ecosystem consisted of a number of components, including historical legacies, the various concrete settings of violence, the administrative or structural context of repression, the dominant political culture of the times, and the rarified atmosphere of a paranoid regime and leader obsessed with fears of internal and external enemies uniting to overturn Soviet power. Contingency acted as a "trigger" in the working of the system, while a form of "cumulative radicalization" enveloped both the system and individual within waves of almost continuous violence from World War I and the fall of the tsarist empire through the civil war, collectivization, and the Great Terror.[56]

The historical legacy of serfdom and the grinding poverty and social injustices of late tsarist Russia conditioned the violence of the revolution and the Stalin era. The anti-Marxism of Soviet studies during the Cold War largely led to the downgrading of the idea of class; in the process, scholars ignored the possibility of long-standing social antagonisms in the postrevolutionary

55. Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), ix–x.

56. A similar approach can be found in James Waller's masterful *Becoming Evil*. Waller combines a macrohistorical approach with a psychosocial exploration of the individual perpetrator. Starting from what seems now to be the consensus view—that perpetrators were "ordinary people"—he examines a range of factors including what he calls "ancestral shadows" (ethnocentrism, xenophobia, the desire for social dominance), the forces that mold perpetrators (cultural belief systems, moral disengagement, rational self-interest), the culture of cruelty (the role of professional socialization, binding factors of a group, the merger of bureaucratic role and person), and the notion of the "social death of the victim" (the us-them mentality, dehumanization, blaming the victim). He further argues that a "trigger" is necessary to put in motion this cultural and social baggage, therefore highlighting the situational and the contingent. See James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (New York, 2002).

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period that may very well have served to condition the violence of the regime. Alexander Etkind has written recently about the dearth of historical studies on the consequences of serfdom, suggesting that "serfdom must have had at least as deep and lasting an impact" in the twentieth century as slavery in the United States.[57] A well-propagandized, but genuine desire for social vengeance colored the actions of the party-state and, in particular, often manifested itself in the actions and words of individual lower-level cadres in the party and police as they sought out the class enemy. This legacy formed some part of the essential background of Stalinist political culture and requires further study.

The political culture of Stalinism was further shaped by the violence that formed the very foundation of the Soviet regime. The collective and future-oriented nature of Marxism-Leninism meant that the needs and, at times, the very lives of individuals could be and would be subordinated to the larger goals of the Soviet enterprise—"the end justifies the means" was a hallmark of Bolshevik thinking from before the revolution. Bolshevism also extolled violence as a necessary, at times sought after tool in the building of socialism. Stalin famously said that the class struggle would intensify as the country moved closer to socialism.[58] The newspapers and the endless factory and collective farm meetings broadcast these messages to Soviet citizens in a steady drumbeat through the 1930s.

Further, a decade of war, revolution, and civil war shaped the mentality of a generation of leaders and cadres. The language of the civil war permeated political speech; "enemies" became fixtures in politics. The party and its cadres were always fighting a war—a domestic civil war that they understood to be manipulated by the forces of capitalist encirclement. The top leaders of the party and the secret police were all veterans of the Russian civil war. Stalinism, in a sense, was a continuation of civil war practices and methods. It was *kto-kogo,* either them or us, setting up a we-they dichotomy with no shades of gray between the righteous and the other. Bolsheviks could therefore rationalize their actions as self-defense, as the same kind of "war necessity" that some Nazi perpetrators used to justify the murder of Jewish families.[59] At the same time, the chronic problems of breakneck industrialization and collectivization in the context of extreme backwardness were projected onto the enemy as sabotage, wrecking, and counterrevolution.

The glorification of violence conditioned rank-and-file cadres, providing justification for their actions. In the course of the 1920s and 1930s, we see something like the "cumulative radicalization" that scholars of National Socialism have noted. Collectivization cadres were "conditioned" in the grain requisitioning campaigns of the late 1920s, when the party-state resumed its civil war against the countryside. Police cadres were conditioned in the periodic "sweeps" of the "socially dangerous" that recurred through the 1930s,

57. Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge, Eng., 2011), 249.

58. I. Stalin, *Sochineniia,* 13 vols. (Moscow, 1951–1955), 11:171.

59. See, e.g., *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Poltics. Conversations with Felix Chuev* (Chicago, 1991), 254.

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anticipating the mass operations of 1937–38.[60] All that was necessary was a trigger, and triggers came handily from the top.

This culture of violence became an inextricable part of the dominant ideology. The ideology itself, however, was not fixed in place. Ideology is an unstable concept, subject to change according to the needs of the moment. More important, ideology-in-practice has little resemblance to ideology-in-theory. Marxism-Leninism did not produce killers. Arguably, the key animating factor in the ideology and one that spoke to many was less Marxism per se than class hatred. Issues of social grievance, envy, resentment, and vengeance compounded by the gross inequalities of the tsarist period and the terrible experience in the Russian civil war all figured to one extent or another in the actions of perpetrators. Class hatred is the closest equivalent to the poisonous antisemitism that animated National Socialist ideology. In spite of its importance, though, there have been few attempts to explore the meaning of class hate, its various permutations, and its penetration into the worldview of ordinary citizens.

Class hatred manifested itself in the construction of the enemy. This is not to say that definitions of class necessarily bore any resemblance to actual sociological categories. But on paper, notions (often varied and confused) of class formed the basis of official definitions of the enemy. Equally, perhaps more important, notions of class permeated the dehumanization of enemies. Graphic stereotypes of kulaks, for example, feature male, corpulent, older peasants dressed in city clothes (ubiquitous polka dots), usually with axes in hand; descriptions of the kulak followed those of Vladimir Lenin, which stressed the "avaricious, beastly, and bloated" nature of the kulak.[61] Other types of enemies were similarly dehumanized according to class stereotypes. And they were all ubiquitous, elusive, and dangerous.

What is interesting about class in the Soviet case is how easily class became unmoored from "objective" socioeconomic criteria. Bolshevism had famously upended Marx's dictum that being determines consciousness. In the Soviet context, consciousness, or actions and attitudes, determined being, or class.[62] This general inclination was expanded as poorly educated, poorly prepared cadres descended upon the villages in search of kulaks and, given the general lack of village support, were unable to differentiate enemy from friend. Class was therefore politicized to accrue with behavior. In practice, class could assume the aspect of caste. Moreover, peasants "inherited" the "class" position of fathers and grandfathers, regardless of current socioeconomic status. During dekulakization and the Great Terror, repression would affect entire families as if a class contagion lurked within. And entire generations of Soviet citizens would recall filling in questions about their parents and grandparents in the myriad official forms required to live and work in the Soviet Union.

A final, constituent part of this political culture was the regime's over-

60. Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police*; and Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism*.

61. Viola, *Unknown Gulag*, 5–6; Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin*, 32–38.

62. E. H. Carr was the first scholar to note that policy often determined class in the Soviet context. See Carr, *Socialism in One Country, 1924–1926*, 4 vols. (London, 1958–1964), 1:99.

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whelming paranoia. Paranoia, if not its own consciousness of its criminality, was exemplified in the obsessive secrecy that permeated the system as well as in the endless euphemisms that cloaked the reality of repression. Government commissariats, mimicking the security police, all contained "secret departments," which allowed, among other things, close contact with the police. The actual attempt to create a hermetic seal, at least in the case of the Commissariat of Agriculture, revealed in fact a kind of parody of secrecy.[63] Secrecy spread through fear and, in the end, permeated much of Soviet society at large.

Stalin both grew out of and contributed to the radicalization of this political culture. There is no doubt that he was the supreme conductor of Soviet violence, the absolute apex of the pyramid of perpetrators. He continually stoked the fear and xenophobia that spread through the country like a toxin, as well as the obsessive secrecy that permeated the system. Moreover, it is clear that Stalin, unlike Hitler, maintained minute control of policy formation. In his role as vozhd', he played a central role in the belief system and political culture of Stalinism.

This political culture, then, formed the backdrop for the various microsettings of Stalinist violence, including but not limited to the village, the factory, the gulag, and the interrogation room. The village was the primary setting for the enactment of Soviet repression during collectivization. Although we know relatively little about social, generational, gender, and other divisions in the village, it is likely that they played themselves out in various ways during collectivization. It is no coincidence, for example, that the majority of the approximately one thousand officials murdered in 1930 were not higher officials, but known village-level officials and activists. It is also not a coincidence that the kulak came to be equated with village notables and traditional leaders, thus enlarging the definitions of class enemy. The party-state had to break the control of these elites before it could subject the village to its will. Official violence, moreover, spawned peasant violence, leading to a continuing crescendo of violence as the village attempted to defend itself. In the aftermath of collectivization, the new antagonisms generated by dekulakization played themselves out both in the famine and in the renewed terror of 1937–38, when the "kulak" again became a major target.[64]

The factory also served as a microsetting of violence. Goldman's work has demonstrated how social antagonisms played into the widening terror in 1937–38. Her "arena" of action is the factory party committee meeting, where various combinations of social hostility, fear, and a kind of "preemptive" self-defense played into the dynamics of repression in the factory. Within this setting, yesterday's denouncers could become today's victims in a terrible, escalating logic that held the factory in its grip.[65]

The gulag, broadly defined, was, of course, one of the ecosystem's princi-

63. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv ekonomiki (RGAE), f. 7486, op. 37, d. 232–33, 177.

64. Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin*, chaps. 1, 4–5.

65. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin*; and Goldman, *Inventing the Enemy*.

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pal microsettings. Both the "kulak" special settlements and the "corrective" labor camps were places of officially sanctioned violence and of *proizvol* (arbitrariness). The commandant was the supreme authority in the special settlement. His word was law and could determine whether people lived or died in the context of lawless, undergoverned, and wide-open expanses far from the reach of Soviet power. The commandants were poorly prepared for their duties, living largely no better than their charges. Drunkenness, violence, sexual assault, and a terrible neglect prevailed, giving rise to sentiments similar to that of one Northern Territory official who said, "there was practically a directive that the sooner the special settlers die, the better." This was practice, not theory.[66]

In the labor camps, there were multiple "gray zones." Most camps were short-staffed and unable to retain personnel; the gulag archives contain pages of reports about staffing problems. The result—sometimes in violation of central law—was to use prisoners, preferably criminals or the "socially close," rather than politicals, in staff positions.[67] This created an interesting "gray zone," in which victims became perpetrators, but could just as easily become victims again. According to memoir accounts, where prisoners-turned-staff were criminals, they were often more brutal than non-inmates in similar positions.[68] In the meantime, so-called counterrevolutionaries ("article 58-ers") often served as "specialists" in the camps—working in clinics, statistics offices, kitchens, and engineering—offering another take on the gray zone, a zone in which these prisoners could legitimately claim that survival needs dictated employment, but yet undoubtedly contributed to the workings of the gulag. Gulag guards were conscripts—young, uneducated, and at times vulnerable to accusation and punishment that could result in their incarceration. And, from 1938, the NKVD itself was subject to blood purge, with former Chekists transformed into inmates.

The interrogation room was, perhaps, the primary cell among the various microsettings of this ecosystem.[69] Confession was the sole logic of the encounter between prisoner and interrogator, and fabrication was generally

66. Viola, *Unknown Gulag*, 104–12.

67. Iu. N. Afans'ev et al., eds., *Istoriia Stalinskogo Gulaga. Konets 1920-kh—pervaia polovina 1950-kh godov. Sobranie dokumentov v semi tomakh* (Moscow, 2004–5), 2:34, 43, 67–69, 96–99, 109–13, 145–46.

68. See Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney and Harry Willetts, 3 vols. (New York, 1973–78). The classic memoir account on the criminal-political dichotomy is by Eugenia Semenovna Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, trans. Paul Stevenson and Max Hayward (New York, 1967), but many other memoirs by intellectuals testify to this as well.

69. On interrogations, see the provocative and erudite *Stalinist Confessions* by Igal Halfin. Halfin was the first western scholar to explore interrogations. His great contribution is to examine the ways in which the dominant ideological discourse shaped the world of both interrogator and victim, thus, in his opinion, blurring the lines between perpetrator and victim. While his focus on Leningrad students allows him to make this argument quite brilliantly, it limits the possibilities of generalizing this understanding of perpetrators, not only beyond the Great Terror (e.g., the dominant discourse does not exist at any level during the mass repression of peasants in the early 1930s and represents at best a small part of the story within the gulag), but even within the Great Terror (when our attention turns away from the capital cities and away from communists and intellectuals).

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the order of the day. "Give us a man, and we'll make a case."[70] According to a letter of complaint from one prisoner, the NKVD boss G. G. Iagoda claimed that "once the C[entral] C[ommittee] agrees to your arrest, this means we have conclusive and persuasive proof of your guilt."[71] And if that were not enough, the interrogator still had to think of the necessity, perhaps even desire, of fulfilling and overfulfilling conviction quotas. At the same time, many prisoners "bought into the system" and believed there *were* genuine enemies, just not themselves.[72] At the height of the mass operations in 1937–38, the interrogation room became one gigantic paper mill, generating thousands of pages of fabricated documents, often in advance of or simply in place of interrogations. If a signed confession was deemed necessary and the accused proved reluctant, torture became a means to an end, a deadly tool in the arsenal of fearful, sadistic, or socialistically competitive interrogators.

In each of these settings, we see a combination of context, culture, and ideology at work, if not in the initiation of violence, then in its expansion. There is little doubt, moreover, that violence was contingent and situational. At the same time, it was individuals who operated within these microsettings of the larger ecosystem. In order not to lose sight of questions of agency and responsibility, it is therefore important not to neglect the range of motivations, inducements, and enhancers that may have shaped individual actions.

But what enabled the perpetrator more than any other factor was the inverse relation between power and violence in Stalin's Soviet Union. In this context, "power" refers to the state (or, more accurately, the party-state and its hierarchy from center to locality). In *On Violence*, Arendt remarked that, "Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent."[73] In the Soviet Union, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, violence was an instrumental mechanism of the party-state and a substitute for actual "power," that is, a substitute for a modern administrative infrastructure to manage the vast territories of what remained a largely agrarian country. This was a function of the very *rurality* of the Soviet Union in the prewar period. The hierarchy of the party-state was rife with poor organization, inefficiency, chronic disjunctures between policies and implementation, corruption, and ineffective controls. Moscow's perennial response to problems of administration was overcentralization; overplanning; inundating the provinces with orders, directives, and warnings; and the requirement that the provinces submit endless reports and justifications. The result was proizvol as the gap between central visions and local realities became more and more unbridgeable the more the party-state attempted to transform Russia into the Soviet state.

In the provinces, complex sets of relations between center and periphery and among political actors and institutions could inform policy outcomes, including repression. Moscow's difficulties in establishing its control over the

70. Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope against Hope*, trans. Max Hayward (New York, 1976), 81.

71. V. A. Viktorov, *Bez grifa "sekretno": Zapiski voennogo prokurora* (Moscow, 1990), 138–39.

72. Ginzburg discusses this phenomenon in *Journey into the Whirlwind*.

73. Arendt, *On Violence*, 56.

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periphery as it fought against the centrifugal forces let loose by 1917 would result in 1937–38 in a blood bath for provincial party-state actors. Patronage, *blat* networks, and local cults of powerful regional bosses were at the center of Moscow's target. As the work of James Harris has demonstrated, provincial leaders developed a range of coping or survival mechanisms that allowed them to deflect Moscow's criticism through double bookkeeping and other strategies that made them almost impervious to Moscow's full control.[74] When all else failed, the center assumed control through repression.

This ecosystem of violence then provided the context for the acts of Soviet perpetrators. To a great extent, it was sui generis, constituted as it was by a mix of older Russian and Soviet components. At the same time, however, the Soviet Union was in radical transition from a "backward" agrarian economy to what it expected to be a modern, industrial "socialism in one country." This all-consuming transition opens up analysis to a consideration of a series of larger issues that allow us to further contextualize Soviet violence.

Historians of Soviet Russia, as well as scholars of genocide and mass killing, have sought, as we have seen, to understand the violence of the Soviet Union, along with that of Nazi Germany and a series of other regimes, within the context of modernity. Yet it would be more apt to view Soviet violence, as a handful of scholars have, less as a study in modernity than as part of the *drive to modernity*. In his wide-ranging study of genocide, Levene links mass killing, like Mark Mazower before him, to the rise of the nation state.[75] Others have used the terms *developmental violence* or *violent societies* to describe mass killing.[76] Genocide occurs in the context of "acute social and political change," war, revolution, and other extreme situations. For example, Germany's defeat in World War I, its humiliation at Versailles, the economic dislocations and political polarization of the Weimar years played out in the background of Nazi genocide.[77]

In this sense, then, there is a larger ecosystem of Soviet violence. The Soviet Union was a *modernizing* state. Encapsulated within a compressed time period, the industrialization of the first Five-Year Plan generated a highly volatile and mobile society. Assumed (most likely incorrectly) to be a prerequisite for pumping funds into the industrial sector, collectivization transformed

74. James Harris, "Resisting the Plan in the Urals, 1928–1956," in Lynne Viola, ed., *Contending with Stalinism: Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s* (Ithaca, 2002), 201–27.

75. Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State;* Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent* (New York, 1998). For other comparative works, see Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan, eds., *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, Eng., 2003); Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven, 2007); Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge, Eng., 2005); and Donald Bloxham and Robert Gerwarth, eds., *Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Eng., 2011).

76. See, e.g., Christian Gerlach and Nicolas Werth, "State Violence–Violent Societies," in Geyer and Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism*, 151; and Christian Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth-Century World* (Cambridge, Eng., 2010).

77. Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*, 1:112–13, 163, 174, 176.

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Soviet society and politics. Collectivization resulted in massive population movement, voluntary and involuntary, as upwards of ten million people left or fled or were taken forcibly from the village.[78] While some ended up in the gulag where they would contribute to industrialization through the extraction of raw material in remote labor-scarce resource-rich areas, most ended up in cities, contributing to rapid urbanization mostly without the necessary infrastructure of housing, services, and supplies. Homelessness, juvenile delinquency, crime, and rural banditry were the result. The mass operations of 1937–38 were, in fact, consistent with similar operations of urban social purging that punctuated the entirety of the 1930s as the police sought to create order by deporting various socially "alien" or "dangerous" categories from the cities.[79]

The *modernizing* Soviet Union was engaged in a vast project of state building, centralization, and resource extraction. In a sense, Stalin's task of the 1930s was to recentralize the state after the centrifugal forces of revolution and civil war had come close to destroying it. And like the tsarist state before it, though with twentieth-century practices in violence, the Soviet state under Stalin became an extraction state based on extreme centralization. Collectivization and the gulag were, in part, instruments of extraction. Collectivization was meant "to pump" resources over into industry. The gulag served to isolate various types of populations in precisely those remote locations where it was next to impossible to maintain a permanent labor force, but where rich reservoirs of natural resources abounded.

In this context, repression became, in part, instrumental to state building in the Soviet Union. The instrumentality of repression is apparent in center-periphery relations. The *modernizing* Soviet Union was forced to depend upon a provincial and rural administration, which often operated on the basis of patronage networks, was rife with corruption, and was extremely thin on the ground. In the collectivization campaign, the center was forced to override its unwieldy rural administration by mobilizing urban cadres with plenipotentiary powers to implement policies. In 1937–38, terror was turned against the provincial administration in a last-ditch effort to impose central control on leaders who had proved largely impervious to the avalanche of directives that rained down upon them in the course of the 1930s and against which they had developed clever, intricate defense mechanisms. The result was a wholesale purge of the provincial administrative network.[80] The divide between the modernist visions of Moscow and the still (and slowly) *modernizing* practice of the hinterlands led to the instrumental use of repression to force through policy and/or to purge those incapable of following the center's mandates. In the final analysis, all that mattered was achieving the goal, and the end justified the means in the mental world of the Soviet 1930s.[81]

78. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, new ed. (New York, 1994), 140.

79. See Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police*; and Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism*.

80. See Getty's pioneering work on center-periphery conflicts, beginning with his *Origins of the Great Purges*.

81. See Viola, "Aesthetic of Stalinist Planning."

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Concluding Thoughts

The extreme violence of Stalin's Soviet Union then requires contextualization within this two-storied ecosystem. A combination of certain more or less distinctly Russian and Soviet aspects of the times *and* the Soviet Union's modernizing drive set against the backdrop of comparative trends in violence may provide an understanding of the larger forces at work that conditioned the actions of Soviet perpetrators. This combination was the context in which "ordinary men" became perpetrators.

This does not mean, however, that we should go beyond the individual perpetrator and focus only on the structural forces that shaped actions. The macrohistorical needs to be populated. To fail to do so would mean the disappearance of historical agency and responsibility, individual or collective, which would then only serve implicitly to reinforce long-held prejudices (historiographical and otherwise) of a dichotomy between state and society and "rule by nobody" (except Stalin). Furthermore, we know too little about Soviet perpetrators, especially middling officials and rank-and-file cadres, to dismiss them either as "ordinary men" or as part of a larger, complicit society. Further studies of actors in the party-state and police over time and at various administrative-territorial levels are needed before we can be certain of the balance between the microhistorical and the macrohistorical. Studies of Soviet perpetrators will open a window onto larger issues of belief, ideology in practice, social antagonisms, center-periphery relations, rural undergovernment, and, most important, larger questions of mass killing and violence in Stalin's Soviet Union. It is also important to keep in mind that a multitude of factors combined to create the necessary conditions of violence; to separate out and highlight only one factor or another would be to diminish the whole.[82]

This discussion of the Soviet perpetrator suggests that the traditional perpetrator-victim binary may obscure as much as it illuminates. Although the term *perpetrator* lays a certain onus of guilt on the individual, it may at the same time reduce societal guilt or, at the very least, diffuse it. By doing so, the binary then, can serve up a satisfactory justice in cases when individuals are brought to court, but it can never fully explain the national, social, and cultural dimensions of mass violence within specific national contexts. And that it largely depends upon defeat in war or radical regime change for perpetrators to be brought to justice calls into question the politics of the terminology. Defeat creates perpetrators just as victory absolves them. At the same time, real justice will always elude the victim in cases of mass violence.

This basic reality of defeat or victory, along with the complicated terrain of the terminology, may serve to challenge those who have bemoaned the

82. As a salutary warning, it is worth noting the words of the German historian of National Socialism, Wildt, who writes in respect to the study of the Nazi perpetrator: "Future research on the subject will be guided not by the presupposition of a single, predominant perpetrator type but by the analysis of different actors and institutions, of intentional will to exterminate and structural conditions, of ideology and function, as well as of individual premeditation and the dynamics of situational violence." Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation,* 8.

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failure of "transitional justice" in Russia. Although lustration and "decommunization" in parts of east and east central Europe have proven their political worth in closing the Soviet chapter of their histories, no one has quite closed this particular chapter in Russia.[83] Moreover, the blurred lines and the subjectivity surrounding the issue, not to mention the lengthy time delay, likely foreclose any possibility of judicial justice for victims.

To raise the question of the perpetrator in the historiography means neither to establish a paper court of history nor to condone or rationalize the perpetrators' deadly behavior. Marc Bloch noted that the "satanic enemy of true history" is "the mania of judgment."[84] I am not trained in the arts of the prosecutor. At the same time, it is essential to emphasize, quoting Browning, that "explaining is not excusing; understanding is not forgiving."[85] Raising the issue of the perpetrator may ultimately better our understanding of the dynamics of state violence, as well as aid us in understanding the very nature of the Soviet party-state in the 1930s. Perhaps most important, the question of *why* individuals, perhaps Soviet society at large, took part in state repression against officially labeled enemies, mainly innocent people, is arguably the question of questions in our efforts to fathom the mass violence of the Stalin era.

83. Katherine Verdery, "Postsocialist Cleansing in Eastern Europe: Purity and Danger in Transitional Justice" (unpublished manuscript, 2011), 11, 18.

84. Cited in Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness,* trans Jared Stark (Ithaca, 2006), 94.

85. Browning, *Ordinary Men,* xx.

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