

## **The Soviet retreat : revolution as improvisation**

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The second decade of Soviet history, the 1930s, was volatile and consequential in ways that none of the other six were. The revolution that occurred then, explicitly designated as a revolution, and the third since February 1917, recast economy and society in ways that justify the use of adjectives like tectonic and paradigmatic. Unlike the first two revolutions, the apical character of agricultural, industrial and social change – directed by the Politburo ‘from above’ – rendered this revolution a semantic mystery: where was popular participation in support of the regime, as against its strength in opposition?

It was certainly dialectical. If the thesis was erecting socialism, declared done in 1936, its antithesis lay in the offensive against capitalism that formed the thrust of Stalin’s speech on the twelfth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. It was an economically premature decision because the possibilities of industrial and agricultural growth based on production plans calibrated to market trends were still immense. It was a politically disingenuous decision because the leadership around Stalin stigmatised the opposition for being gradualists - supporting the economic capitalism that NEP, itself a retreat from the dirigisme of the Civil War, embodied. Either way, the new directions were expansive and regressive. The foundations were set for the USSR becoming globally emancipative, but domestically restrictive; and for a mounting dissonance between economic growth and political repression to set in. This anomaly persisted until the revolution, aged seventy in the eighties, confronted economic stagnation (or retardation, for some), manifest in income cleavages, *nomenklatura* (bureaucratic) privilege, a restless and fettered civil society, national restiveness in the Soviet republics, and scarce consumer necessities. The reformers around Gorbachev responded with an earnest intent to restore redress and equity but not revolution – perestroika and glasnost’. Their exertions served, ironically, to hasten the quadruple demise, those of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party, the KGB and the command economy. During the Gorbachev period (1985-91), it was the NEP that evoked the most nostalgia and the third revolution that provoked the most anguish.

In 1946, the émigré sociologist Nicholas Timasheff described the Stalinist age as *The Great Retreat*. In a book thus titled he wanted to locate the convulsive transformations of the 1930s in the context of a regime which was socially conservative, in the sense of having retreated from many of the emancipative ideas of 1917. Life was better only for the very few. A generation was being asked to sacrifice its comfort for the benefit of its children and grandchildren. Hunger, violence and chaos were widespread. Wage differentials had been sharply widened. The lives of women deteriorated as they entered the workforce in large numbers but they had less free time and found the opportunities for political, social and economic advancement limited.

The Constitution of the USSR in 1936 had proclaimed the attainment of socialism in Article One – this had been the goal set in 1917, if not in 1898 - promising, in Article Twelve, to take ‘from each according to his (sic) ability (but reward) each according to the work performed.’ This attainment was red in redolence but not in the

actual advent of a just and classless society. A gulf between rhetoric and reality opened and it animates impassioned polemic, historically and currently.

Rhetoric met reality in the utterly singular Soviet triumph in the Second World War. It was this victory that catalysed decolonisation and Soviet military and moral aid to revolutionary and national liberation movements, even as the inner empire in Eastern Europe was bound into submission by Comecon and the Warsaw Pact. This military triumph left the deepest imprint in the popular imagination, the most compelling advertisement for socialism and the socialist camp. From the moment of its inception until the Western allies opened the second front in Normandy in June 1944, the Soviet forces never faced less than 90% of Germany's front line fighting strength on land. Soviet citizens were faced with a war of extermination: four million lives were lost to starvation, of whom three million were prisoners of war and a million were residents of besieged cities. The assault on Jews began in the USSR, in the Ukraine, in the immediate wake of the German invasion in June 1941, six months before it was declared as the Final Solution. The bulk of the damage inflicted on German forces - 80% of their battle casualties - was in the eastern campaign, and it was here that the overwhelming weight of the Wehrmacht was concentrated until 1944. The USSR then proceeded to steadfastly maintain about half a century of global challenge to American hegemony.

The collectivisation of agriculture; rapid planned industrialisation; the purges and the terror; and, social engineering related to the family, marriage and divorce, and attempts to regulate the way history was to be taught, will be the aspects of the Soviet Thirties under consideration. As novelties, they were of deeper resonance and enduring consequence than those effected in 1917. This was so in the extinction of peasant family farms and the closure of private trade outlets - thereby ostensibly achieving a "socialised" agriculture and trade - and in the shift from an economy guided by market prices to the command economy directed by plan targets. When Timothy Snyder argued that 'The Soviet Union was most lethal when the Soviet Union was not at war', (*Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, 2010, 391), he implied that it was most lethal when it was at war informally and domestically, when it was at war during a formal peace. The revolutionary character of this assault is the quintessential core of the third revolution.

Since revolutions generate resistance, this one did too. This was so in the rebellion of village women (the *bab'i bunty*) to the disappearance of their families, farms and crafts; or by workers and managers to unreal plan targets; And, in the muffled tones of a nation of whisperers and diarists challenging the massive erosion of privacy. Orlando Figes makes a distinction between those who whisper out of fear of being overheard (*shepchushchii*) and those whose whispers informed the authorities (*sheptun*). The whole of Soviet society - often dismissed as a behemoth abstraction at the time - might have been comprised of one sort or another of whisperer.

By the end of the 1920s, when the revolution was ten, the main stresses in everyday life (byt") were food and manufactured goods shortages; unemployment; falling real wages; a fraying social safety net and urban crowding from housing shortages.

Unemployment had amounted to well over 10% of the employed population. Women were forced out of the labour market and, as males tended to be hired first and fired last, and enterprises preferred to employ seasonal rural in-migrants (*otkhodniki*) for lower wages than unionised workers, barriers for women entering

the industrial labour force were retrenched. Although unemployment gave way to labour shortages from 1930, women's participation in the labour force was complicated by factors related to changes in the family structure. Even as Soviet investment required more workers, the construction of a social infrastructure devoted to child-rearing and orphan care that was needed but delayed owing to other investment priorities prevented the influx of women into the labour force as they had to concentrate on motherhood. The real wages of workers started to decline from late 1927 (when the grain crisis occurred) mainly because of rising retail prices of agricultural produce. The grain crisis prompted the introduction of food rationing in the major cities. The chronic goods famine rapidly worsened, and long queues appeared everywhere. From September 1928, the country ran short of items like salt and kerosene and the food consumption of workers deteriorated. The urban population of the country ate less grain, meat, butter but more potatoes and cabbages in 1929 than in 1928 or in 1913. Real wages slumped from about 1929 as acute shortages affected virtually all goods and services, precipitated by the precipitous offensive on private trade.

The principal challenges the regime confronted as it prepared to abandon the NEP sprang from coordinating agricultural procurement prices with bread prices and nominal wage trends; of stepping up consumer goods production to mitigate the consumer goods famine (*tovarnyi golod*) stemming from a strategic and heavily capital goods biased industrialisation from 1925; then, of financing capital goods imports largely, if temporarily, from grain and primary commodity exports like timber and gems (the oil and gas of today); of a well paced and spaced replacement of private shops with state and co-operative ones to avoid what came to pass from 1929 (till the late 1930s), trade deserts or *torgovyi pustiny*, areas with no retail outlets whatsoever; and, finally, of creating a genuinely Soviet, globally novel, but preferably apolitical worker intelligentsia.

Peasant farming methods and technology remained extremely backward. In 1927, 88% of all arable land was in midget peasant holdings, and less than 5% of farms were fully-enclosed farms (*khutory*) or farms on which only the arable was enclosed (*otruby*). About 90% of land belonged to the commune (*mir*), fragmented in strips, and by 1929 land consolidation within the *mir* involved less than 20% of sown area in the Russian Federation. Most households owned or used no horse-drawn machines. Machinery was concentrated in the major grain-growing regions of the country, but even there small percentages of peasant households owned any machinery at all: 40 in the Ukraine, 29 in the North Caucasus, 13 in the Lower Volga and eight in the Central Black Earth region. On the eve of collectivisation in 1929 less than 10% of the cultivated area was worked by tractors.

Although grain production had recovered to pre-war levels (1913) by 1926, less grain was marketed than before the First World War. This affected urban and military consumption, and grain export. In addition to the unfavourable price ratios for his products, (low agricultural, high industrial), the peasant had less access to industrial goods than before the war. Throughout the 1920s, industrial goods were expensive, of poor quality and scarce. The number of trading outlets in rural areas had substantially declined after the war and this too compounded the problem of shortages.

The merging of peasant farms within collectives defined the agricultural revolution. Why was it done? For the purged Politburo around Stalin, there was a fervent certainty that food adequacy outside villages could only be achieved if cropping patterns and state procurements were determined solely by state quotas and official prices. The quotas were not designed to extract a norm on a per hectare basis: the goal was and remained to

take away all agricultural surpluses at prices that failed to meet production costs until the 1950s. As an obsession with size spread across the economy, branded as gigantomania, large came to be seen as synonymous with enhanced productivity, more surpluses, lower unit costs and machine-readiness: for farm and factory alike. Kulaks were expropriated, deported, arrested and executed – without ever being defined as having verifiable attributes. They were supposedly the *only* peasants who had garnered, cornered and hoarded grain ‘surpluses’ from state procurement agencies, but actually these were activities that attracted all peasants for they promised better prices offered by private grain dealers. The sharp fall in state grain collections in the winter of 1927/28, that brought on bread shortages and rationing in cities and lower grain exports, were the catalytic promptings for the decision to abolish peasants farms, persecute private trade, shelve realistic five year plan goals – and abandon the NEP. Non-Soviet research even before the 1990s and Russian scholarship subsequently, are in agreement that the grain crisis that ended NEP catalytically was a matter of fairly marginal price differences between state and private grain buyers from peasants – not one of malicious private traders bent on sabotage or pre-emptive strikes by kulaks on an impending socialism. Collectivisation ensued nevertheless.

Even for the state, collectivisation was a qualified success. Although the state could determine procurements, cropping patterns and fix real incomes, its political control remained tenuous. Collectivisation saddled the country with chronically depressed labour productivity – the will to work on the collective – as well as under-capitalised farms. Fewer fit males remained in villages, real incomes were low from the 1930s right up to Khrushchev’s reforms from 1954; rural crafts, accused of germinating private enterprise, were crushed in 1930; manufactured goods remained chronically scarce. The party barely consolidated an already scant rural presence amidst a sullen rural idiocy, that Marx had detected and derided among peasants in mid-nineteenth century France.

Collectivisation brought severe restrictions on peasants’ freedom of movement. Rural inhabitants were forbidden to travel outside the collective farm without the written permission of local authorities, and collective farm workers were, by and large, prevented from receiving the internal passports necessary to travel and to move from one location or place of work to another until 1976. Collectivisation was accomplished without demonstrating the better productivity of collectives; or without politically mobilising the peasantry as a supportive entity; or without possessing the tractors and metal-tipped ploughs necessary to replace the livestock peasants slaughtered to keep them away from the collective farms.

Private trade had been criminalised in 1918, legalised in 1921 and driven underground as fragmented units from about 1928/29 – but never formally banned. Traders, known as NEPmen, had been considered the ‘accomplices of socialism’ and were allowed to competitively meet consumer need along “socialised trade” – state and co-operative trade. But, already from 1922, as Banerji has charted, the NEP consensus of containing traders by market competition was mangled by the administrative measures of restricting industrial goods sales, the denial of bank loans, higher freight rates and extractive rates of tax. This culminated in the forced shuttering of shops and traders fleeing towns. Even as sections of the leadership harboured a suspicion about the susceptibility of the Union edifice to sabotage - even supplanting – by a few thousand retailers – Soviet citizens foraged for frugal necessities almost as intensely in 1928 as in 1918, amidst peace and after years of modest plenty. (Arup Banerji, *Merchants and Markets in Revolutionary Russia 1917-30*, 1996)

The goals for industrialisation were repeatedly revised upwards during 1929. Since the fulfilment of plan targets was set mainly by quantity, the overall quality of goods deteriorated. The production of coal, pig iron and steel fell short of the targets. Many branches of light industry did not grow at all and textile production declined. Observers of Soviet plans were at one in attributing the fatal deficiencies of planning to an insistence on exceeding targets, to the slipshod allocation of resources and unremitting pressure on under-prepared apparatchiks. This usually generated chaos. Inflation soared as the emission of currency was used to bridge the revenue deficit. Consumer goods, agriculture and, temporarily, military strength were sacrificed to a rapid growth in heavy industry in the first two five year plans. The urban labour force's growth exceeded expectations, thus severely straining public amenities like health and housing. By the end of this plan, Soviet defence output was higher than that of any other European power. Soviet industry was itself a global colossus, the converse of Western capitalism mired in crisis in the 1930s, and primed for an impending military triumph. On the converse side, investment in coal, electric power and railways was so inadequate that fuel and power shortages and transport breakdowns often threatened to stall metallurgical plants.

*Peasant Rebels* (2010) found their most assiduous chronicler in Lynn Viola. She thought that this was the most serious episode in popular resistance since the Civil War (1918-21), erupting in about 13,000 riots with over two million participants. (*Peasant Rebels*, 3, 4) Collectivisation was carried out by an urban cadre, the so-called 25000ers, selected despite (because of?) their ignorance of the matter and exhorted to go "too far rather than not far enough" (*luchshe peregnut', chem. nedognut'*) in seizing undefined surpluses. More than 1100 village level officials and activists were murdered, along with over 5000 assaults on officials. The main targets of peasant wrath were people closely associated with Soviet power who resided locally. Many of these people, whether activists or village soviet officials, were actually peasant in origin. It is important to note that these forms of peasant revolt were a last resort, after resort to James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* had been exhausted, by protecting neighbours, slaughtering livestock and smashing machinery, both meant to prevent their addition to kolkhoz capital stocks.

Peasant women emerged as natural leaders, understandable in that collectivisation hit women's domains the hardest: the domestic economy of private plot and livestock, the care of children, off-season craft activity (*remeslo*). The term *bab'i bunty* may be translated literally as "women's riots." *Babii* (singular adjective) is a colloquial expression for women which refers in particular to country women with rustic ways. The *baba* (singular, noun) is most often perceived as illiterate, ignorant, superstitious, a rumour-monger and, in general, given to irrational bouts of hysteria – obviously by outsider 'others'.

Industrial workers not only disliked inequality, piece-rates, Stakhanovism and bureaucrats and hated abuse of power, they let it be known and Moshe Lewin lets us know. They complained by posting petitions in the thousands and every which way, Strikes probably kept occurring, but they were now even more punitively dangerous than during NEP. Workers killed shock-workers (*udarniki*), jeered norm-busting Stakhanovites and attacked foremen. Their constant outcry was *snachala nakormii, potom sprashivai* (or, feed us first, then ask). Workers' real wages were only 49% of those in 1928, rising to 60% in 1937. Their rage found its sharpest weapon in nomadically seeking new jobs, known as *tekuchka* (labour turnover) linguistically and the fluidity of labour, in official speak. They did something to get fired or submitted their notice before they had managed to learn their job, leaving after eight months on an average. As the government found itself presiding over what

Moshe Lewin calls a "quicksand society," it responded by mandating internal passports, police permission for urban residence, linking access to housing and rations with fixed employment and penalties for absenteeism that defined absenteeism as twenty minutes absence.

Seasonal workers and women in the textile industry, who were the most economically vulnerable workers, mounted the most resistance to norms and targets during the first five year plan. Most major industrial centres witnessed some form of large-scale strike or demonstration between 1929 and 1934. The two most prominent causes of industrial action were norm rises and the supply situation. Industrial factory directors and engineers bore the brunt of criticism for failing to fulfil plan targets. The evidence shows that managers would have failed if they had not bribed workers, bought supplies from grey markets or falsified their fulfilment returns 14,000 industrial managers were arrested for 'wrecking' and revolutionary sabotage in 1936 alone.

Transforming an economic landscape that had been lush with prospective perspectives premised upon deepening, not departing the NEP, for farm and factory alike entailed the erasure of feasible alternatives. This involved, first, the political silencing of revolutionary Old Bolsheviks like Leon Trotsky, Evgeny Preobrazhensky, Nikolai Bukharin and others, allied in the Left and Right Oppositions, from 1928, and then their mortal silencing, officially their "liquidation," from 1936.

In the interim, their advocacy of agricultural change based on several types of collective farm rather than just the kolkhoz, and carried out only after prolonged political preparation; of industrial plan targets grounded in actually available resources; of meeting rural demand for manufactured goods; of outcompeting private traders in markets by better stocks and lower prices; and, critically for demanding a party-state that was genuinely elective, responsive and *democratically* centralist was suppressed. These lost alternatives came to form research agendas for historians, rather than the intended experiences of life for citizens.

Before 1934, the police had only limited powers of arrest and sentence, and the Procuracy, the body responsible for legal supervision of government institutions, still retained some control over the police. With the shooting in the back of the neck of Sergei Mironovich (Kostrikov) Kirov at 4.30 p.m. on 1 December 1934 in Leningrad where he headed the party, the position of the secret police changed rapidly. A popular figure in the Party, a member since 1904, he was said to be the best speaker since Trotsky – he had the gift for forceful, pungent, impromptu speech that Russians prize and that Stalin lacked.

Within hours of learning about Kirov being shot in Smolny (the Leningrad Party headquarters) at 4 p.m. on 1 December 1934, Stalin wrote out the text of a Central Executive Committee decree that would be called the Law of 1 December 1934. This emergency measure was put into effect essentially on the basis of Stalin's individual unilateral decision (the Politburo formally approved it on 3 December). The law ordered that the investigation of cases involving terrorist acts be completed within ten days, that those accused be informed of the charges against them only one day before the cases were heard, that trials be conducted without the participation of the accused, that no appeal or petition for reprieve be allowed, and that those convicted be shot immediately after their death sentences were announced.

On 7 April 1930 the prison and camp system was reformed under the Law on the Corrective Labour Camps. The OGPU camps were grouped under the Main Administration of Camps (or GULag). This law of 1930 was in

fact the only public acknowledgement of the existence and purpose of the camps throughout the Stalin period. Anne Applebaum, Richard Overy, Oleg Khlevniuk and Timothy Snyder have played Dante in depicting the descent to the Gulag: it comprised 476 camp complexes to which about 18 million people were incarcerated and of whom between 1.5 and 3 million, died in the estimation of Timothy Snyder (*Bloodlands*, 27). The camps were ostensibly institutions for moral rehabilitation, but also places where prisoners were supposed to work as participants 'in socialist construction'.

As for the latter, the secret police also shouldered part of the responsibility for Soviet economic development from 1929. The relationship between the expansion of the camp population and industrial demands in the 1930s, and reconstruction after 1945, is very close. The exploitation of prison labour was irresistible to a regime desperate to speed up industrial change powered by minerals located in climatically hostile and normally inhabitable regions, for virtually any wage. Throughout the 1940s, Stalin insisted upon giving even more economic power to the Interior Ministry (MVD) so that by 1952 it controlled 9% of the capital investment in Russia, which was more than that controlled by any other ministry. Though Soviet camps were brutal they were never designed or intended to be centres of extermination: ninety per cent of those who entered the Gulag left it alive.

Between 1934 and 1953 there were only two years – 1946 and 1947 – when the proportion of political, or counter-revolutionary prisoners, convicted under the provisions of Article 58, exceeded that of ordinary criminals. Political prisoners made up only 12% of the Gulag in the 1930s; in 1953, at Stalin's death, they were just 25%. The great majority among the political prisoners were not dissidents or priests saying mass in secret or even senior Party people; most were ordinary people swept up in mass arrests who did not have strong political views of any kind or they were others who were held for treason and nationalist resistance and only the rest, a minority, were held for spying, terrorism or lesser counter-revolutionary acts. Criminals treated the political prisoners whom they did not regard as fellow - inmates but as traitors or class enemies and so brutalised them in ways that makes one shudder when reading the relevant chapters in Anne Applebaum's *Gulag*.

The criminal world was not monochrome, because it had its own hierarchy, its own system of ranks – there were many different kinds of thieves, each split up into castes and communities, each with its own iron discipline. At the very top of this hierarchy, setting the rules for all the others, were the professional criminals, the *urki* or *blatnoi*, who were among the criminal world's most exclusive elite, the *vory v zakony* (or the 'thieves-in-law'). They had nothing to do with the vast majority of camp inmates who were ordinary criminals convicted of petty thefts, infringement of work place regulations or other non-political crimes, and therefore had "criminal" sentences. A true thief-in-law refused to work or to cooperate in any way with the authorities and the camp administration openly deployed them to control other prisoners. Their slang, so different from ordinary Russian that it almost qualifies as a separate language, either called *blatnoe slovo* (thieves talk) or *blatnoe muzyka*, became the most important means of communication in the camps. Alongside hardened criminals were hundreds and thousands of small-time crooks (*bytoviki*), whose cases in the 1920s might have brought no more than a fine or a spell of labour duty. They were the victims of harsher sentencing from the 1920s, partly driven by the need for more prison camp labour. Many were scarcely criminal by any conventional definition.

Membership of the party was no protection since the purges hit the Party worst of all proportionately. Communists were in greater danger than non-Party people, and higher-ranking ones in greater danger than lower. The most dangerous was to be close to the centres of power by geography or rank in the party-state by altitude. The highest ratio of arrests and executions per capita from a single compound occurred in the Dom na Naberezhnoy, the House on the Embankment, opposite the Kremlin, where the apex of the elite lived in 505 furnished apartments, the largest residential complex in Europe then.

The purges shattered the cohort of Communist leaders formed in the pre-revolutionary underground, the Civil War and the periods of collectivisation and the First Five-Year Plan. Stalin clearly saw the main threat coming from these older leaders, the established sections of the Soviet ruling group. Stalin killed more Bolsheviks between 1935 and 1937 than had been killed in all the years of the underground struggle, in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 and in the Civil War. When Russia entered the Second World War in 1941, her party political connections with Bolshevism had practically ceased to exist. .

The Party was not the only institution that was destroyed; the established military elite were also destroyed. The Great Purge decimated between 35% and 50% of the entire officer corps of the Soviet armed forces and the commanders of all the military districts. This was exactly what the Germans had hoped for, a blow at the offensive capability of the Soviet military. Thousands of officers convicted as 'spies' were recalled from the camps and re-commissioned. Prisoners who had not been officers when arrested were released, only to serve in the penal regiments that were meant to clear mine fields by marching in front of Soviet armoured vehicles. More senior officers were killed during the purges than during the entire war with the Nazis (1941-45).

The Communist elites were not the main victims: "ordinary" proletarians and peasants, particularly the kulaks, were the largest number of those who were arrested and executed. After 1933, repressive attention shifted to the borderlands and the new industrial centres. Even as class waned as a criterion of offense, the range of groups brought into the state's orbit widened to draw in ethnic and national minorities, creative artists, political refugees and foreign Communists.

Men were disproportionately large victims of purges and terror, both among those arrested and among those populating the GULaG. Gijss Kessler has rightly stressed that because of women's circumstantial dependence on the male breadwinner in the NEP and early 1930s, his loss, due to arrest or repression, meant that the families these men left behind had to survive bearing the stigma of being family members of "an enemy of the people." During the Second World War far more men died than women, as combatants and civilians, decimating the relevant generations by gender and creating an imbalance between the sexes that outlasted the Soviet Union. Alcohol abuse and poor industrial safety standards took more male lives. Women outnumbered men for several generations in succession, gifting sociologists with fertile fields of enquiry into male delinquency .

Religious establishments also bore the brunt of the terror. More than 75% of churches and houses of prayer that had functioned before 1917 had ceased to do so by 1936. Believers continued to meet furtively in homes or in the woods, guided by wandering priests – until about 1988. The only Soviet census that surveyed the religion of the population, in 1937, found that 84% of the illiterate population and 44% of the literate population responded as believers, or about 56% of Soviet adults, 16 years or older.



The total number of prisoners in the camps generally hovered around two million, but the total number of Soviet citizens who had some experience of the camps, as political or criminal prisoners, is far higher: almost five million persons were arrested between 1921 and 1938, about three million of them were charged with counter-revolutionary crimes and a million executed. At the apogee of the Great Terror, 681,692 people were killed in 1937 - 1938, This sombre estimate must remain only an estimate until several archives, but particularly those of the Secret Police and of Soviet Presidents are not just declassified by decree, but in fact. Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem* (1935-1940) [publ. 1963; 1987] must serve as a permanent reminder until then:

*"I should like to call you all by name, but the list has been removed and there is nowhere else to look. I have woven for them a great shroud out of the poor words I overheard them speak. I remember them always and everywhere, And if they shut my tormented mouth, through which a hundred million of my people cry, Let them remember me also. "*

Orlando Figes dissects NEP policies that sought to weaken the family, which was considered to be a "bourgeois institution," which exploited women and perpetuated a paternalistic notion of property. Wives were urged to refuse to give instinctive obedience to husbands, and children were encouraged to challenge the authority of their fathers and mothers. Any stable cohabitation, whether registered or not, could be considered a family, and the resultant children had the rights of any other citizen. Abortion was available on demand. Divorce was legalised on 19 December 1917, granted at the request of one or both of the spouses without regard to the reasons; sometimes divorce was achieved simply by sending a postcard. If the framers wanted to liberate women from the patriarchy they suffered within marriage, the decree actually did more to liberate men, from the responsibilities that marriage entailed, than women. As Wendy Goldman showed in her study of *Soviet Family Policy*, 'men would wander from one wife to another, often abandoning women after the birth of children without paying alimony'.

These provisions weakened the family as a social institution. In 1934, 37 divorces were reported for every hundred marriages; and in the hospitals and clinics of Moscow there were 57,000 live births, but 154,000 abortions. The birth rate remained low, depressing recruits coming forward for the army and labour force. The break - up of families meant a huge increase in the number of orphans, the *besprizorniki*, some of whom were absorbed into state orphanages, but many of whom simply roamed the streets and begged, became diseased and died, or formed into gangs, who would attack and rob people in the street, or even invade and ransack apartment blocks.

In the mid - 1930s, the Soviet state adopted pro-family and pro-natal stances, outlawing abortion in 1936 (except in cases involving a very serious health or life risk), rewarding mothers of many children, stigmatising irresponsible fathers and husbands and reinforcing the authority of parents vis-a-vis the school and the Komsomol. This change seems to have primarily been a response to falling birth-rates. As part of a return to traditional family relations, marriage became ceremonially glamorous and registration offices were smartened up. Large families were promised allowances. Divorce was made both more expensive and more difficult, becoming from 1944 contingent on court proceedings leading to a sudden fall in the divorce rate. The family was strengthened under male control, and illegitimacy was stigmatised by excluding children from unregistered marriages from inheriting property. Homosexuality was branded as sodomy and criminalised.

The revolution of 1917 sealed the working careers of numerous historians. A fifth of all historians in Russia perished. By the Civil War, the Bolsheviks could boast of only one historian of real professional standing, Mikhail Nikolaevich Pokrovskii (1868 - 1932). Besides him, the only other Marxist historian was N. A. Rozhkov, and he had been a *Menshevik* Minister in the Provisional Government. An extraordinarily coarse public campaign was launched against non-Marxist historiography from 1928. Purges of historians began in late 1929 and over the course of 1931 more than 100 historians were arrested, some executed and others compelled to emigrate while their work went out of circulation. By autumn 1933 the turmoil in the Soviet world of history exceeded that in any other academic field. Kirov helped to organise a purge in the Academy of Sciences in 1929. 130 Historian - Academicians were "liquidated" during just that one year.

All this happened even as the relatively pluralist and autonomous trends in historical scholarship of the NEP were replaced by an immense monitoring of the profession. The great traditions of pre-revolutionary historical writing – wide-ranging, prodigiously researched, multi-volume histories that were as much literary as historical works, exemplified by historians like S. M. Solov'ev and V O Kliuchevskii – were destroyed. From the late NEP, Pokrovskii had tried to disseminate an impeccably historical materialist methodology whose core was formed by a scheme of the succession of modes of production from primitive communism to socialism. The foregrounding of the socio-economic base, or structure and of economic history sat beside a sharp and concomitant disdain for chronology, events and individuals: he once memorably stated that 'ideas are nothing but the reflection of the economy in the human brain'. In addition, after Pokrovskii had started to oppose the teaching of history as an independent subject in schools from 1925, an idea that gathered the traction that Pokrovskii's stature deserved, history as a specific subject had begun to appear in Soviet schools only in 1931, prominently inflected with the Pokrovskiiian istmat bent: colloquially, the historical materialist *walas*.

At a Politburo discussion of history textbooks in early 1934, Stalin excoriated textbooks that privileged materialism and class analysis over a more traditional historical narrative. He called for a revival of conventional state and personality - based narratives, textbooks with facts, events and names: Banerji tried to capture the context in which Stalin led the retreat from historical materialism as the (former) dominant register in history textbooks, in 1934. "These textbooks aren't good for anything. What the heck is the "feudal epoch," the epoch of "industrial capitalism," the epoch of formations – it's all epochs and no facts, no events, no people, no concrete information, not a name, not a title, not even any content itself. It isn't any good for anything, History must be history," he said on 20 March to a group of historians invited to join the Politburo.

Kings, battles and dates were back in fashion, especially battles won by Russians. Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great were once again national heroes, model rulers, even if the regimes they presided over had been oppressive: the foundation and consolidation of a strong Russian national state was now held to be a virtue outweighing the exploitation of the masses. (Arup Banerji, *Making the Past Work: Writing History in the Soviet Union*, 2008, 58-60) The 1930s saw Russian culture, language and history being exalted over every other ethnicity in the USSR, in fact to the extent of embodying the entire multi-national, multi-ethnic empire itself.

In conclusion let me tentatively voice a suspicion I have about you: it is that you think it might have been difficult to know what people thought at this time. They could not speak freely, surveillance was ubiquitous, torture in custody was routine, the evidence elicited thereby was legally admissible, diaries were found and misused, and there were no genuine elections for seventy years after 1918, Most historians agree that

dissidence was confected, or artificially assembled, to justify the arrest and execution of Innocent people on the grounds that they were "enemies of the people" – without being legally proven to have been so. The extreme rarity of instances of evidence being found for establishing guilt for charges levelled – within the oceanic tumult of the terror and purges – is testimony to the waging of an inordinately unequal battle between the apex and the base. Historians saw just such an abyss, between the *verkhny* and the *nizhny*, as having been explosive in 1917. It would be wrong, however, to assume either that most Soviet citizens were opponents of the regime or that the majority actually supported it. Knowing what people thought is almost impossible to ascertain. This does complicate the scrutiny of this particular past.

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