demeaning both for the writer and for the revolution.’ He asked to be allowed to emigrate in order to continue writing. Stalin granted him an exit visa.

Therewith began the split between émigré and Soviet culture that has remained to the present day. But the triumph of RAPP was not long-lived. Here too the bearers of ‘cultural revolution’ soon succumbed to the imposers of order.


Stalin’s Terror

In his ode to Lenin of 1924, Mayakovsky had written: ‘I fear that these processions and mausoleums, this regulated rendering of homage, will drown Lenin’s simplicity in sickly-sweet union.’ His fears were amply borne out – which may help to explain his suicide in 1930. For Stalin, by the time of his fiftieth birthday in December 1929, had defeated both the oppositions, of left and right, and had more or less completed the process of taking over and monopolizing Lenin’s memory. On 21 December all Soviet newspapers were filled with eulogies to Stalin: indeed Pravda spent five days listing the thousands of organizations which had sent him greetings, many of which included the word ‘vozh’d’ (Leader with a capital ‘I’). A joint message from the Central Committee and the Party Control Committee hailed him as ‘the best Leninist and senior member of the Central Committee and its Politburo’. An official biography was issued for the occasion, glorifying Stalin as ‘the most outstanding continuer of Lenin’s cause and his most devoted disciple’, as one who ‘was always with Lenin, never departed from him, never betrayed him’. This was how Stalin wished to see himself, as the Peter of the Communist pseudo-church, more faithful than Peter had been to Christ, even though Lenin had been surrounded by turncoats and traitors.

These fiftieth birthday publications began the rewriting of history, what Mikhail Geller and Alexander Nekrich call the ‘nationalization of the memory’ which was to become such a devastating feature of Soviet intellectual life. Even former oppositionists joined in the choruses of praise. Especially this was the case at the Seventeenth Party Congress of 1934, the
so-called ‘Congress of Victors’ (because it celebrated the ‘victories’ of collectivization and the first Five Year Plan). There Bukharin praised Stalin as ‘the field marshal of the proletarian forces, the best of the best’, and Kamenev prophesied that ‘the era in which we live will be known to history as the era of Stalin, just as the preceding era entered history as the era of Lenin.’ Such encomiums completed the opposition’s self-abasement, their ritual recognition that Stalin had overcome them morally as well as physically.

Not surprisingly, there were few in the party or outside it who were prepared to stand against this tide of acclaim. All the same, there were many who were appalled at the human and economic cost the nation was being asked to pay for the upheavals in industry and agriculture. In the autumn of 1930, Syrtsov, prime minister of the RSFSR, and Lominadze, leading party secretary in the Transcaucasus, were expelled from the Central Committee and demoted to minor posts for having privately expressed to colleagues their doubts about the excessive growth targets and the regime’s disregard of the livestock disaster. Potentially more serious, perhaps, was the programme of Ryutin, which circulated among members of the Central Committee in 1932. This called for a disbanding of the collective farms, and a reduction of investment in industry, in order to revive agriculture, the retail trade and the consumer goods industries. Ryutin’s programme has never come to light, but he seems to have made a bitter personal attack on Stalin as the evil genius of the Russian revolution, who by his personal lust for power had brought the revolution to the brink of ruin. The GPU discovered that Ryutin had a group of supporters, perhaps fifteen to twenty strong, including former members of the Right Opposition and a number of Red professors; it reported that he was trying to stir up subversive activity in the Komsomol and among students and workers.

The Ryutin case became a test of opinion in the Politburo. The GPU recommended applying the death penalty against him. Since he was an official of the Central Committee apparatus, this would have meant the first execution of a high-ranking party member. Stalin was prepared to establish this precedent, and urged his colleagues to take the GPU’s advice; but a majority, apparently headed by Sergei Kirov (first secretary in Leningrad), voted against it. Ryutin was merely exiled.

There have been suggestions that Kirov’s opposition to Stalin went further than the Ryutin case, that he headed a group in the Politburo which favoured reconciliation, both with the former oppositions, and indeed with the people at large, now that the harshest battles of socialist construction were over. Gorky, who had some influence with the party leaders, is known to have been of this opinion. There is little evidence in Kirov’s speeches of any disagreement with Stalin, but it is known that Kirov was very popular, and that his appearance at the Seventeenth Congress was greeted with loud ovations. Stalin may also have distrusted Kirov because his fief, Leningrad, had once before furnished a geographical base for an opposition movement, that of Zinoviev.

However that may be, Kirov’s career was abruptly cut short on 1 December 1934, when he was murdered inside the party headquarters, the Smolny, in Leningrad. His assassin, one Leonid Nikolaev, was a romantic or embittered former Young Communist who imagined himself stimulating the appearance of a second Narodnaya Volya, a new revolutionary terrorist movement dedicated to eliminating the new ‘bureaucracy’. What is suspicious about the murder is that, on at least one previous occasion, he had been discovered by security guards trying to approach Kirov with a revolver. Instead of arresting him and charging him with attempted terrorism, as would have been natural, they had released him and allowed him to take his gun. In short, circumstantial evidence suggests strongly, though not conclusively, that the NKVD (as the GPU was now called) deliberately enabled Nikolaev to kill Kirov, probably acting on instructions from Stalin, who was anxious both to rid himself of a rival and to create a pretext for the elimination of other opponents.
What is quite certain is that Stalin promptly used the occasion for his own purposes. On the same day a decree was issued ordering speedy investigations (not more than ten days) in cases of 'terroristic organizations or acts'; such cases were to be heard in absentia by a special military court, no appeals were allowed, and an immediate death sentence was to be carried out. Thus Stalin created a machinery of summary justice which was to last twenty years. On 21 December it was announced that Nikolaev had acted on the instructions of a 'Leningrad opposition centre' having connections with Zinoviev, and on this basis Zinoviev, Kamenev and seventeen others were arrested. In spite of the new provisions, they were not dealt with summarily, but were brought to trial in January 1935. They accepted a general political responsibility for the murder, without the court being able, however, to establish any direct connection. Perhaps Stalin still hesitated at this stage to implicate so directly in terrorism, two individuals of such former standing. Or perhaps the NKVD had not yet fully perfected the techniques they deployed the following year. At any rate Zinoviev got ten years and Kamenev five. They remained, at least, available for further questioning.

During 1935 the NKVD finally arrested all those members of the Left Opposition who had hitherto remained at liberty, and set to work to try to induce them to sign testimony that they had been involved in a vast conspiracy, organized from abroad by Trotsky, aiming to assassinate not only Kirov but also Stalin and other members of the Politburo, to overthrow the Soviet system and re-establish capitalism in Russia. This mythical scenario would complement the now habitual flood of eulogies of Stalin by showing how treacherous were all Lenin's other colleagues, and how great was the danger from which Stalin had rescued the party and the country.

While these fabrications were being painfully strung together in the Lubyanka and other NKVD prisons, the shock waves were spreading throughout the party. An 'exchange of party cards' was started – euphemism for a purge – as a result of which about half a million members were expelled. All over the country party meetings were being held at which members were exhorted both to recall and to confess their own earlier 'mistakes' (which now came to mean disagreeing with the official party line in any way) and to denounce their colleagues. New categories of 'hostile acts' emerged: links with those already denounced – which might mean no more than the most fleeting personal or official acquaintance; 'failure to denounce', which might mean not having reported a private conversation. At the Kazan Pedagogical Institute, Evgeniya Ginsburg was accused at such a meeting of not having denounced the 'Trotskyist contrabandist' El'ev (who had written an article on the 1905 revolution which incurred Stalin's displeasure). To her objection, 'But has it even been proved that he's a Trotskyist?' she received the reply, 'But he's been arrested! Surely you don't think anyone would be arrested unless there were something definite against him?'

Great concert and lecture halls were turned into public confessionals. . . . People did penance for misunderstanding the theory of permanent revolution and for abstaining from voting on the opposition programme in 1923; for failing to purge themselves of great power chauvinism; for underrating the importance of the second Five Year Plan. . . . Beating their breasts, the 'guilty' would lament that they had 'shown political short-sightedness' and 'lack of vigilance', 'compromised with dubious elements', 'added grist' to this or that mill, and were full of 'rotten liberalism'.

When someone was expelled from the party or dismissed from his job, the only safe thing to do was to shun all further acquaintance with him, for fear of being tainted by the epithets which would be hurled at him. And if a friend or colleague was arrested, it was prudent to abjure any further contact with his family, no matter how much one might pity
their plight. Wives whose husbands were arrested were advised to seek a divorce as soon as possible. Children were encouraged to denounce their parents. One thirteen-year-old daughter of an arrested NKVD operative was turned out into the street when both her parents were arrested, and was required to speak at a Young Pioneer meeting saying she approved of the shooting of her mother and father, as they were spies.

The culmination of this denunciatory frenzy was a series of three show trials in Moscow. At the first, in August 1936, Zinoviev, Kamenev and others confessed to being members of a 'Trotskyist–Zinovievite Centre', which on instructions from Trotsky had conspired to murder Stalin, Ordjonikidze, Kaganovich, Voroshilov and other top party leaders. They also confessed to having organized the murder of Kirov. They were sentenced to death and executed, probably immediately. Their confessions implicated Tomsky (who thereupon committed suicide), Bukharin and Rykov. The prosecutor, Vyshinsky, announced that these implications would be investigated.

In the second, in January–February 1937, Radek, Pyatakov and others confessed to links with Trotsky and foreign intelligence services, and to setting up terrorist groups for assassination, wrecking and sabotage of industry (the latter referred to some disasters which had taken place in the fever of the Five Year Plans). Pyatakov was sentenced to death and Radek to ten years' imprisonment (he died in a labour camp a few years later).

In the final trial, in March 1938, Bukharin, Rykov, Krestinsky and Yagoda (himself a former head of the NKVD) confessed to membership of a 'Trotskyist–Rightist Bloc', involved in wrecking, undermining Soviet military power and preparing, in collaboration with the intelligence services of Germany, Britain, Japan and Poland, for an imperialist attack on the USSR and dismemberment of the country. This trial did not go quite so well as the others: Bukharin and Rykov both admitted general complicity in a 'bloc', but denied specific responsibility for any of the criminal acts enumerated in the indictment. Bukharin even made the telling remark: 'The confession of the accused is a medieval principle of justice.' All the accused were sentenced to death, and Vyshinsky concluded his prosecution speech by saying: 'Over the road cleared of the last scum and filth of the past, we, our people, with our beloved teacher and leader, the great Stalin, at our head, will march ever onwards, towards communism.'

Few people wholly believed the testimony of the courtroom, even at the time, but many observers, both domestic and foreign, felt there must be some substance to these charges, however fantastic they might seem. For otherwise why did tried and long-standing Bolsheviks, who had withstood the pressures of tsarist oppression, revolution and civil war, now agree to slander themselves in this extravagant manner in public? And why did the government, which had never scrupled to order summary executions, insist on the cumbersome rigmarole of obtaining signed confessions and getting the accused to repeat them in the courtroom?

The answers to these questions take us to the very heart of the Stalinist system. First of all, on the narrow legal plane, the confessions, whether they were repeated in court or simply (as in the great majority of cases) existed on paper, were indispensable to the presentation of a prosecution case which rested on no other evidence whatever. No scrap of documentary or material evidence was produced at any of the trials, only the statements of supposed witnesses, and the confessions of the accused themselves. Furthermore, the confessions were useful in that they could be used to implicate others, as Tomsky and others were implicated in the Zinoviev trial. This extended the network of conspiracies, and thereby increased both the work-load and the standing of the NKVD; it also enabled them to pull in more working hands for its slave labour camps, and to free a plentiful supply of vacant posts for the upwardly mobile to occupy. Perhaps that is why
the arrests of 1936–9 affected the highly placed disproportionately.

At any rate, even in the (much more numerous) cases where no public trial was intended, prisoners and interrogators spent millions of unproductive and tormenting man-hours in the fabrication of ‘statements’ which both parties knew to be false from beginning to end.

Why then did the accused agree to make these ‘statements’?

For them too the basic logic of the situation had been created by the way in which the party had seized and held on to power. They had all wholeheartedly supported the party’s ruthless monopoly of power while they had been among its leading members; many of them had continued to recognize its authority even when excluded from such power, perhaps in the hope of regaining a measure of it. As Kamenev had explained to the Fifteenth Party Congress, they had made ‘a full and complete surrender to the party’ because ‘nothing could be done outside and despite the party’. Begging for readmittance in 1933, Zinoviev had straightforwardly used the language of the religious penitent: ‘I ask you to restore me to the ranks of the party and give me an opportunity of working for the common cause. I give my word as a revolutionary that I will be the most devoted member of the party, and will do all I possibly can to atone at least to some extent for my guilt before the party and its Central Committee.’

These men had given their whole lives to the party, and they still believed, in spite of everything, in its ultimate victory. To ask them to do anything else would have been asking them to abjure everything they had ever believed. They had no alternative moral or religious foundation on which they could take their stand and resist the pressures directed against them. As Bukharin said at his trial: ‘When you ask yourself, “If you must die, what are you dying for?” — an absolutely black emptiness suddenly rises before you with startling vividness. There was nothing to die for. Nor indeed was there anything to live for once one was ‘isolated from everybody, an enemy of the people . . . , isolated from everything that constitutes the essence of life.’

However, not all party members reacted in this way, and even those who did usually capitulated only after weeks, sometimes months, of ‘working over’ by their interrogators. The basic NKVD method for breaking their prisoners was the ‘conveyor’, a system of continuous interrogation for days and nights on end by successive relays of interrogators. Exhausted, deprived of sleep, often cold and hungry, sometimes beaten, prisoners would sign what was required of them in order simply to be able to get some sleep, or sometimes perhaps because their physical weakness induced psychological doubts about reality, reinforced by the repetitive, ‘mad’ style of the questioning.

Many investigators seem to have used threats against the prisoners’ families as a weapon. In a world where all other certainties had broken down, memories of wife or children were often the most precious part of a prisoner’s personality, the only positive value he had left to hang on to, so that threats to arrest, torture or kill them were extremely powerful in their effect. This was especially the case with someone like Bukharin, who had married late, and had one baby son to whom he was devoted. Evgeniya Ginsburg recalls how in prison the thought that tormented her most was how she had spanked her son Vasya (now the well-known writer Vasily Aksenov) in a fit of temper because he had smashed a bottle of perfume. The promise that their families would remain unharmed if they duly recited their prepared confessions in court must have been a powerful incentive to comply.

To others, promises were made that their lives would be spared if they were cooperative. Some of them were visited in prison by former comrades of the Central Committee, who held out hopes, not only of survival, but even perhaps of ultimate readmittance to the party, and productive work, if only they would confess. Most, but not quite all, of these promises were unceremoniously broken.
Very few prisoners withstood all these pressures. Indeed, the former populist Ivanov-Razumnik in his memoirs reckons that of more than a thousand inmates with whom he shared prison cells, not more than a dozen resisted making the confessions demanded of them.

All the same, it is noteworthy that in the end only some seventy prisoners were subjected to public trial. Even some leading Oppositionists, such as Uglanov of the right, and Smilga and Preobrazhensky of the left, were convicted without public trial. Perhaps the prosecution did not feel sure they would play the roles written for them. And when it comes to the wider party and public, the fate of most of those arrested was either to appear before a special secret military court, or even simply to have their sentence read out to them in the cell.

For the arrests did not just affect Stalin's immediate political opponents. They cut into all levels of the party and into all walks of life. All social classes were affected, the elites disproportionately so. Out of 139 members of the party Central Committee elected at the Seventeenth Congress in 1934, 110 were arrested before the next congress met in 1939. And out of 1,966 delegates who attended the Seventeenth Congress, 1,108 were arrested and in fact only 59 took their places at the Eighteenth. Some geographical areas suffered more than others. Of Leningrad's 154 delegates to the Seventeenth Congress, only two were present at the Eighteenth, and neither of them actually worked in Leningrad. In the Ukraine, where Nikita Khrushchev took over as first secretary in January 1938, only 3 out of 86 members of the Central Committee survived from the beginning of 1937 to the end of 1938. In Bielorussia, as a combined result of the arrests and the exchanges of party cards, total membership of the party fell by more than half between 1934 and 1938. In Georgia, out of 644 members who attended a party congress in May 1937, 425 were arrested in the following months. In Kazakhstan the entire party bureau was arrested. The same happened in Turkmenistan, where, as a result, there was no party bureau at all for several months.

Not all the deaths of leading Communists in this period followed on arrest. Tomsky, as we have seen, committed suicide in order to escape the fate of Bukharin and Rykov. Kuibyshev, head of Gosplan, died in January 1935, reportedly of a 'heart attack', but in circumstances which have remained mysterious: he is rumoured to have opposed the imminent purges. Ordjonikidze, commissar for heavy industry, died suddenly in February 1937, after a bitter row with Stalin: it is not known whether he committed suicide or was murdered, but it is said that he wrote a long memorandum before his death, and that this was seized by Stalin himself when he came to the flat. Its contents have never become known. Maxim Gorky, another opponent of the purges, and perhaps the most influential, died in August 1936, again suddenly, and again in circumstances which have led to persistent rumours of murder.

It seems superfluous to mention that virtually every member of every 'opposition' or 'faction' there had ever been in the party was arrested – though, for some reason, this does not apply to Alexandra Kollontai. Stalin also disbanded the Society of Old Bolsheviks and the Society of Political Prisoners (of the tsarist regime), which up to 1935 had continued to serve as centres for Lenin's comrades and for the former revolutionaries of tsarist days. Stalin in fact succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of any tsarist police chief in destroying the Russian revolutionary movement.

At local levels the purges were often equally sweeping. Typically, since local people tended, at least at first, to cover up for one another, a central emissary would come down to carry out the purge, and would often finish by sacking and arresting the entire local leadership. Thus, in June 1937, Kaganovich announced to a specially convened meeting of the Smolensk obkom that their first secretary, Rumyantsev, his deputy, and most of the other local secretaries were 'traitors, spies of German and Japanese fascism and members of the Rightist-Trotskyist gang'. They all disappeared without trace. Further down, in the raion town of Bely, similar, if
less extravagant, denunciations took place. At a mammoth meeting, which lasted for four whole days, the first secretary Kovalev was attacked from all sides: for having allegedly left the party in 1921 in protest against NEP, for having lived with a Trotskyist, for having deserted from the Red Army, for abusive and dictatorial conduct. A representative of the oblast, who presided over the meeting, actually had the nerve to accuse Kovalev of appointing and dismissing members of his raion party committee, instead of following the electoral procedures laid down in the party rules. Kovalev admitted his mistakes, and was dismissed. His successor fared no better, and underwent the same ordeal six months later.

Not only the party suffered. The purges bit deep into the country's leaders in every field. Perhaps most striking, in view of the fact that the fascist danger was frequently cited in justification for vigilance, was the carnage among the senior officers of the armed forces. Among those arrested and executed were Marshal Tukhachevsky, deputy commissar for defence and the principal strategic thinker in the Red Army; Marshal Egorov, chief of the General Staff; Marshal Blyukher, commander of the Special Far Eastern Army, who had defeated the Japanese in a major incident at Lake Khazan only two months before his arrest in October 1938; the commanders of the Kiev and Byelorussian Military Districts (closest to the ever-vulnerable western frontier); the commanders of the Black Sea and Pacific Fleets. By 1940, in fact, three out of five marshals, three out of three first-rank army commanders, twelve out of twelve second-rank army commanders, and sixty out of sixty-seven corps commanders had been arrested. More than 70 per cent of divisional and regimental commanders, and more than 60 per cent of the political commissars went the same way. This would have been a crippling blow to any army. It was the more so to one which had painfully built up its senior officer corps over a twenty-year period, starting from very unpromising beginnings, and was now consciously preparing to fight its biggest war. The expectations this massacre aroused in the potential enemy

were succinctly summed up by Hitler at a conference of his generals in January 1941. 'They have no good military leaders,' he claimed. He was almost to be proved right.

A similar, if not quite so devastating hurricane swept through every profession and walk of life. Diplomats, writers, scholars, industrial managers, scientists, members of the Comintern — all of them lived through two or three years in unceasing terror of the midnight knock on the door, which would come without rhyme or reason, and many of them disappeared without trace.

Not least to suffer were the NKVD themselves. Yagoda joined Bukharin and others whose frame-ups he had devised in the same dock. Yezhov, his successor, simply disappeared in the early months of 1939. Most of their assistants in the monstrous interrogations of 1936–8 went the same way as those they had tormented. Some, who were working for the NKVD abroad and refused to return to Moscow to meet an obvious fate, were tracked down and murdered in the countries where they had sought refuge.

The very last act of the purges also took place abroad. On 20 August 1940, a Spanish Communist, Ramon Mercader, murdered Trotsky in Mexico with an ice-pick. He was jailed for twenty years by a Mexican court, but was decorated in absentia by Stalin.

It would be almost impossible to exaggerate the sufferings of the Soviet people during this period. For certain classes of the population other times may have been worse — for the peasantry the collectivization, for the inhabitants of the western regions the German occupation of 1941–4 — but for the totality of the population 1936–8 was a nightmare, during which no one, save Stalin himself, could be certain of not being woken in the small hours of the night by a knock at the door, dragged out of bed and snatched away from family and friends, usually for ever. Since there was neither rhyme nor reason to the process, no one could be sure of not attracting the next accusation
in the capricious chain. Many people, in fact, lived with a small suitcase permanently packed with a few essentials, just in case.

Why did it all happen? To start with, no doubt, Stalin wished to destroy and humiliate all those who had ever opposed him or might conceivably oppose him (this probably accounts for the carnage in the NKVD and the officer corps, the only bodies able by any stretch of the imagination to mount a challenge to him). He could not bear the presence of those who had even merely been Lenin's comrades, those who might have known about Lenin's Testament.

If that had been all, however, then a hundredth of the victims would have been more than enough. But what Stalin set in motion had a dynamic of its own. In all societies, individuals have grievances against one another. A colleague occupies a prestigious post that one covets, or lives in a luxurious apartment that one hankers after. In Soviet society of the 1930s, as we have seen, the number of young, ambitious and upwardly mobile people was unusually high. Doubtless many of them were envious of their seniors. The purges opened for them dizzy opportunities. A simple donos (denunciation) sufficed, no matter how absurd, for no party or NKVD official would run the risk of being accused of 'lack of vigilance'. Besides, given the structure of their economic enterprises (see below, page 199), it seems probable that the NKVD had a 'plan' to fulfil for arrests. And once an investigator had a prisoner in his hands, he needed for the sake of his career (and perhaps his neck) to secure a confession from him, and if possible more denunciations, leading to yet more arrests. Everyone was driven ineluctably on, the interrogators as well as the interrogated.

Perhaps, then, a pertinent question is: why did the purges ever stop? One answer is: they never have, quite. The security police even today retain most of the powers they had under Stalin, at least as regards the non-party majority of the population, and sometimes they make use of them in a similar way. But there was a real change in their methods

after 1939, and again after 1953. Probably one main reason for this was that Lavrenty Beria, who became head of the NKVD in 1938, was determined not to go the way of his predecessors. Besides, the stage had long ago been reached when the arrests had begun to affect the country's industrial, scientific and military potential. A few years more at the tempo of 1937–8, and half the Soviet population would be guarding the other half in labour camps. It was only reasonable, if belated, to try to get a grip on the situation and halt the ineluctable chain. This Beria did. A few people under investigation were released — though those already in labour camps stayed there. Thereafter terror became selective and sporadic, a system of rule rather than a hysterical campaign. The point had been made and did not need to be repeated every day.

The labour camps to which the arrested — those who were not executed, that is — were sent were direct descendants of the concentration camps opened on Lenin's orders in 1918. But their nature and function had changed for a good deal since then. The greatest changes had come about as a result of the first Five Year Plan. For much of the 1920s, socialists in prisons and isolators had enjoyed the status of 'politics', and had not been required to do forced labour. The same did not apply to criminals, 'former classes' and 'counterrevolutionary elements', who had to do manual work at least to maintain the camps and prisons themselves.

By the late twenties, however, faced with a desperate shortage of labour, especially in the harsher and more remote regions, the Soviet state naturally sought it in the camps. A decree of 26 March 1928 envisaged 'a series of economic projects with great savings in expenditure . . . by means of widespread use of the labour of individuals sentenced to measures of social protection'. And a conference of prison officials noted in October 1929: 'Local conditions sometimes present serious obstacles to the recruitment of labour. It is here that the places of confinement, having at their disposal
excess labour in great quantities... can come to the assistance of those economic enterprises which experience a labour shortage.' In 1930 Gosplan received instructions 'to incorporate the work performed by those deprived of liberty into the planned economy of the country.' A special department of the Commissariat of Internal Affairs, GULag, or the Chief Administration of Camps, was established to run the new convict enterprises. With that the aim of 'reform through work' finally ceased to be (if it ever had been) the aim of penal confinement in Soviet Russia — though the inscription 'Labour is a matter of honour, courage and heroism' continued to stand over the gates of many camps.

The first great project undertaken in this way was the White Sea-Baltic Canal, the 'Belomor Canal in the name of I. V. Stalin'. Construction was organized by Yagoda, then deputy head of the GPU. In order to save foreign currency, modern excavation technology was not used in the work; instead convicts were brought in in large numbers. Work started in November 1931, and completion was announced, with great fanfares, in May 1933. Maxim Gorky headed a team of writers who went to see the completed project. They spoke to some of the convicts under the watchful eye of their guards, and returned to extol the great work of 're-education' which they claimed had been done there. Solzhenitsyn has called their collective publication 'the first work in Russian literature to glorify slave labour'. Originally intended to provide an escape route by which the Baltic Fleet might, if necessary, be transferred to the White Sea, the canal proved too shallow for that purpose, perhaps because of the haste with which it had been built. According to Solzhenitsyn, who tramped along part of its length in 1966, it has almost ceased to be used.

The convicts who worked on Belomor were told that they were going to be amnestied if they completed it in good time. In fact, however, the great majority of them were transferred to other forced labour. Detainees — or to give them their pitier Russian name, zeks — were used for certain fundamental industries, timber felling and logging, the mining of gold, platinum and non-ferrous metals, coalmining, and construction work of all kinds, especially where these activities needed to be carried on in remote and inhospitable regions, to which it was difficult to attract free labour. The original geographical centre of the labour camps was in Karelia and along the White Sea coast, where timber was the principal industry. Other major centres which subsequently developed were around Vorkuta and the Pechora basin in the Arctic regions of European Russia, where there were substantial deposits of coal; in the new industrial areas of western Siberia, the Urals and Kazakhstan, where zeks laid the infrastructure of roads, railways, mines and factories; and, most notorious of all, around Magadan and the Kolyma River basin in the far east, where gold, platinum and various precious metals, as well as timber, were to be found. This last region was a whole frozen continent of its own, cut off from the rest of the country by hundreds of miles of trackless waste, and only reached by convict ships whose conditions recalled the Atlantic slave trade at its worst. But by the late 1930s labour camps were to be found everywhere in the Soviet Union: there were convict construction sites in every city, including Moscow itself, surrounded by watch towers and fences topped with barbed wire, where zeks toiled only a few yards from ordinary 'free' passers-by. Solzhenitsyn, in the most famous book on the subject, refers to the system as an 'archipelago', superimposed on the Soviet continent, and linked by a communications network hermetically sealed off from any possible contact with the outside 'normal' world.

It is a commonplace of economic theory that slave labour is normally very inefficient, as slaves have no interest in high productivity. That, during the Five Year Plans, was something the Soviet authorities were not prepared to accept. They were determined to achieve high production indices even with slave labour. Indeed, sometimes output targets were set higher inside the camps than in comparable enterprises employing free labour. The secret weapon used to induce the
zeks to work hard was the threat of hunger. One's daily ration depended on norm-fulfilment. According to Yury Margolin, the daily ration for 100 per cent fulfilment was 700 grams of bread, together with a thin soup morning and evening, some kasha (gruel) in the evening and sometimes a little salt fish. This was during the war, and rates reported from elsewhere were sometimes a little higher. There was also a 'Stakhanovite' ration for 150 per cent norm-fulfilment: 900–1000 grams of bread plus soup and kasha, but with the addition of macaroni or even meat rissole in the evening. This was the only diet available which really met the needs of a manual labourer, according to Margolin. The 'punishment ration', for under-fulfilment, was grossly inadequate: a mere 500 grams of bread, with a thin soup morning and evening. Of course, everything needs to be put in perspective, and even these rations were generous compared with those that prevailed in Leningrad during the worst of the wartime siege, when even manual workers got no more than 250–350 grams of bread a day. And there are reports, during the war, of peasants in Karelia coming out of their huts to greet columns of ragged zeks and begging them for bread.

Extra pressure was put on the zek by the fact that the daily ration depended on the output, not of the individual, but of the work-team. Thus the nourishment of each man depended on the hard work of his colleagues. This arrangement saved the guards and overseers a good deal of effort in spurring reluctant workers: their own mates could be relied on to carry out that function in the interests of being adequately (or less inadequately) fed.

The basic fact, however, was that the standard ration was insufficient to sustain hard and continued manual labour for ten to fifteen hours a day in the freezing cold, especially for those unaccustomed to it, as most politicals were. One witty zek in Kolyma applied to the camp commandant to be reclassified as a horse, since in that capacity he would receive work and rations in accordance with his physical strength, and would be allotted his own stable and blanket! The commandant put him in the punishment cells for ten days, but then, with lordly good humour, relented and allowed him warmer clothing and a Stakhanovite ration.

More normal was the experience of Margolin: 'We were never in a condition to do what was demanded of us to have enough to eat. The hungrier we were, the worse we worked. The worse we worked, the hungrier we became. From that vicious circle there was no escape.' And Varlam Shalamov reports from Kolyma: 'The gold mines turned healthy people into invalids inside three weeks: hunger, lack of sleep, hour-long heavy labour, beatings...'. No slave-owner of the past would have squandered his capital in this wastrel fashion, but then the NKVD did not have to pay for their slaves, and if they died could easily replace them by arresting more. There is every justification for the term Solzhenitsyn applied to the camps: 'exterminatory labour camps'.

The only way to avoid the vicious circle of under-nourishment, exhaustion, disease and slow death was to land a 'cushy' job that did not entail manual labour. The best ones were in the administration, the infirmary, the kitchens, or the KVC – the Cultural-Educational Section, a curious appendage to many camps, which combined political propaganda work with attempts to mount dramatic productions or concerts. Some camp commandants took pleasure in having a 'serf troupe' on hand to perform. These 'cushy' jobs literally saved people's lives. As Margolin says, 'Social inequality in the Soviet Union is nowhere more blatant than in the camp, where the difference between the kitchen supervisor – or any other supervisor – and the ordinary zek driven out into the forest every morning is greater than that between the millionaire and the boot-black in New York.'

In some camps the politicals actually had an advantage in competition for these jobs: most of them were at least literate, and many of them had administrative experience. Increasingly, however, the 'cushy' jobs were reserved for ordinary criminals, who only constituted about 15 per cent of the zek population, but came to occupy a dominant position
in the hierarchy. In post-war Vorkuta, Edward Buca reports that criminals monopolized all the ‘cushy’ jobs, living in separate, more comfortable quarters and enjoying better food and clothing. They brought the customs of the Soviet criminal underworld to their functions: strict observance of the interests of their own kind, and murderous exploitation of everyone else. They pillaged the politicals mercilessly, and imposed a kind of Mafia rule in barracks and workplaces.

Even the wretched ‘ordinary labourers’ had some mechanisms for survival, if they were in a good work-team. The key concept was tukhta, which means fiddling the books or padding the figures. An economy which runs so much on reported figures is always liable to this kind of distortion. Solzhenitsyn gives a good example of tukhta in a lumber camp. The work-team leader, if possible in agreement with the norm-setter, who might well also be a zek, would inflate the figures for the timber his men had felled, in order to ensure them a reasonable day’s ration. The loaders, transporters and river workers, responsible for floating the logs downstream, would have no interest in disclosing the nonexistent surplus, since they too could fulfil their norms with the help of it. The officials at the saw-mill downstream would work on the same principle, as would the freight crews transporting the wood by rail to timber yards. Only the ultimate recipient of the wood – perhaps a furniture works – would have an interest in showing up the discrepancy, but even he would be unlikely to refuse the consignment – he would be desperately short of raw materials, and only too glad to take what he could get. If he did decide to reclaim the missing quantity, the legal process would last months, and then might not result in improved supplies. Only in extreme cases did commissions of inquiry descend upon the camp, and by then the ‘guilty’ parties might well have been transferred elsewhere.

The principle of tukhta clearly applies not only to camps but to the entire Soviet economy, owing to the paramount importance of plan implementation figures, and the general practice of piece-rate labour remuneration. Its existence throws an element of doubt on all Soviet production figures.

Obviously, however, cosy arrangements of this kind could not be fixed everywhere and at all times. And indeed, the death rate in the camps was very high. It is impossible to make precise estimates, and conditions differed greatly from one camp to another: Kolyma and the Vorkuta railway were notorious, and lumbering was generally dangerous. Robert Conquest has estimated a minimum death rate of 10 per cent per annum up to 1950 (when things improved somewhat), and perhaps as high as 30 per cent in the worst camps.

It is even more difficult to give an accurate idea of the overall labour camp population. Nearly all calculations are based on projections from scraps of data about one camp, or from overall figures for the Soviet labour force, in which it is impossible to distinguish zeks from other working hands. On these uncertain foundations estimates of the zek numbers in the late 1930s range from 3 to 15 million. For a higher figure speaks impressionistic evidence that, among the urban and professional strata who have left written records, nearly everyone had friends or relatives who had been arrested. On the other hand, we really do not know how far the arrests affected ordinary workers and peasants, who after all constituted the majority of the population. In his authoritative work on the subject Robert Conquest arrives at a figure of 8 million, not including criminals, for 1938. Taking this as an average for the period 1936–50, he estimates that there were some 12 million deaths. Even this does not take into account those executed, nor the victims of dekulakization, most of whom will have died before 1936. With them in mind, it may be that the casualties of the Stalin terror totalled 15–20 million.

The labour camps and the terror were an intrinsic part of Stalinist society. They resulted directly from the methods the party resolved to use to transform industry and agriculture,
to eliminate 'bourgeois specialists' and to appoint its own promising young men, as well as from the methods Stalin used to defeat his opponents. But no nation can consume its own population in such a reckless manner without suffering incalculable damage. As a system of rule Stalin's terror could not persist indefinitely. Yet trying to end it was to bring his successors some very difficult dilemmas.

Stalinist Society

During Stalin's lifetime, contemporary Western observers sought an explanation for the bizarre and horrifying phenomena of the late thirties by concentrating on the situation of the leader. In the absence of a vigilant press or parliamentary opposition, they hypothesized that he needed to combat corruption, sloth and incipient independence among his subordinates by instituting a 'permanent purge' in their ranks, periodically removing those who had taken root too comfortingly, and replacing them with fresh appointees totally dependent on him personally. This 'permanent purge' was held to be the cardinal feature of a new kind of political system, 'totalitarianism', whose principal characteristics were (i) central direction of the entire economy, (ii) a single mass party mobilizing the population, either to 'build socialism' or to fight against enemies; (iii) an official monopoly of mass communications; (iv) supervision of everyone by a ubiquitous and terroristic security police; (v) adulation of a single leader; (vi) a single official ideology projecting a perfect final state of mankind and claiming priority over both the legal order and the individual conscience. Nazi Germany and fascist Italy (from where indeed the word 'totalitarianism' originated) were considered to offer further examples of this type, as were, after the war, Communist China, and the new socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe.

In most respects this model seems to me convincing. Whether it really applied to Nazi Germany or fascist Italy is questionable, but it certainly appears appropriate to characterize the type of society whose emergence I have been tracing