

STALIN, PROPAGANDA AND SOVIET SOCIETY DURING THE GREAT TERROR

Sarah Davies explores the evidence that even in the most repressive phases of Stalin's rule, there existed a flourishing 'shadow culture', a lively and efficient unofficial network of information and ideas

Today a man only talks freely with his wife – at night, with the blankets pulled over his head.' This remark, allegedly made by the Russian writer, Isaac Babel, is often cited as 'evidence' of the climate of fear which prevailed in the Soviet Union at the height of Stalin's 'Great Terror'. The terror swept through Soviet society in the second half of the 1930s, reaching a peak in 1937-38. Communist Party members, generals, writers, academics, engineers, ordinary workers and peasants were arrested as 'enemies of the people' on any pretext, and shot or sent to the Gulag. Despite the revelations from the former Soviet Union, there is still no consensus about the number of victims of the terror: figures range from tens of millions to several hundred thousand. The truth probably lies somewhere in between. Many historians have debated this issue of the number of victims, fewer have ventured into the more elusive and speculative areas of psychology and mentalities. Yet the question of the psychological impact of the terror is surely a central one. Was it indeed the case that the terror reduced the population to virtual silence, that men were only free to speak to their wives in the security of the bedroom?

Certainly there were many circumstances in which people may have refrained from openly voicing objections to the terror or other aspects of Stalinism. This was, after all, a period when individuals accused of expressing critical views could be prosecuted for the crime of 'anti-Soviet agitation' which carried sentences of up to ten years imprisonment. At the height of the terror, people were even prosecuted for statements such as: 'In Greece there are many fruits, and in the USSR few'. Citizens were encouraged to denounce each other; in the most celebrated case a child, Pavlik Morozov, denounced his own parents and was turned into a national hero. The knowledge that denunciation was widespread undoubtedly deterred some citizens from speaking out.

Propaganda and censorship must also have inhibited the articulation of alternative views. Propaganda lay at the heart of the Stalinist system. People were fed an unalloyed daily diet of the joys of life in the USSR, the horrors of the capitalist West, the genius of Stalin, and the self-evident guilt of certain 'enemies of the people' (Figure 1). This propaganda was omnipresent, pervading all areas of life, including education, newspapers, cinema and literature. Stringent censorship was enforced to prevent the articulation of 'forbidden' themes. These measures inevitably restricted the emergence of competing definitions of reality.

But how far did these circumstances succeed in eliminating all but the official voice? Robert Conquest, a leading histo-

rian of the terror, has suggested that 'Everyone was isolated. The individual, silently objecting, was faced with vast meetings calling for the death "like dogs" of the opposition leaders, or approving the slaughter of generals. How could he know if they were not genuine, or largely so? There was no sign of opposition or neutrality ...'. Although not without its critics, this has long been the prevailing view amongst historians. Only recently, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the partial opening up of the Russian archives, has it been possible to unearth evidence which suggests that this may not have been the case after all. This article will analyse the new evidence, and then demonstrate how an alternative 'shadow culture' was able to survive in Stalin's Russia.

Spying on the Nation

Ironically, it is largely thanks to Stalin's secret police (the NKVD) and the surveillance organs of the Communist Party that we now have access to this 'shadow culture'. The regime was acutely concerned about the attitudes of its citizens, and went to great lengths to monitor them, not openly via opinion polls or surveys, but covertly, through the use of informants, who either volunteered or were paid to eavesdrop on their fellow citizens. This eavesdropping by the state gives historians wonderful opportunities for exploring the mental world of 'ordinary people': peasants, workers, clerks, low-level party members – the sort of people who rarely leave documentary evidence and whose opinions and attitudes usually elude the historian.

How did the state spy on its population? It is worth examining its methods in a little detail, partly because these are intrinsically interesting, partly because this helps us evaluate the documentary material which it produced. The main organs involved were the Communist Party and NKVD. The Communist Party had its own Information Department responsible for liaising between Moscow and the regions. Part of its remit was to assemble reports on the mood of the masses. Each party organisation within factories, government departments and so on was supposed to have an informant who was required to report back to the district party secretary on the mood amongst his co-workers. This information from informants throughout a region was then summarised into a report which was passed on to the regional party secretaries and head of the local NKVD. Stalin also appears to have received digests of the national mood. Although seemingly well structured, this system was in practice quite haphazard, and only really well developed in areas where the party was strong. Thus in the countryside, where the party had

Figure 1: 'Leader, Teacher, Friend.' (Stalin at the Presidium of the 2nd Congress of Collective Farm and Shock Workers, February 1935).

This painting by Shegal from 1937 was typical of the propaganda of the cult of Stalin.

State Russian Museum, St Petersburg

feelings ... For us it is unusually important to know how these measures (i.e. NEP) are accepted by various groups of the population (such as workers, peasants, soldiers, petty bourgeoisie, etc.), to what extent these groups understand the sense of what is happening, how it is reflected in their consciousness.'

This brief appears not to have changed essentially in the 1930s, when the NKVD was responsible, through the information department of its Secret Political Department, for preparing reports on the popular mood for the party on a regular basis. These 'special reports' were compiled on the basis of material from NKVD agents from all walks of life: its range was therefore more extensive than that of the party, and included workers, peasants, intellectuals and artists.

Another service supplied by the NKVD was perustration – the opening and inspection of private correspondence (a practice inherited from tsarist times). Censors copied out sections of letters in any way related to the political mood of the people. Digests of these extracts were prepared for the party to supplement the informants' reports.

The nature of the evidence

These, then, were the primary channels of information. The reports produced by the NKVD and party, which were classified 'top secret', usually consist of about two to ten pages of typewritten script. All invariably begin with the standard formula that 'the majority of the people' has reacted to a policy or event in a 'healthy' way. This is always followed by examples of typical 'correct' opinions, which tend just to reiterate

relatively little influence, it had great difficulty collecting information.

While the party's information network was only really well developed in the city, the NKVD ranged far more broadly. Unfortunately, much remains obscure concerning the organisation of NKVD information work in this period. The NKVD's modern-day successor is reluctant to divulge material relating to what it still considers, rather ominously, to be 'operational work'. The picture is clearer in relation to the NKVD's earlier incarnation, the GPU. At the beginning of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1922, the GPU's role in the collection of information for the state was described in the following way: 'The most important task of state information is the illustration of the feelings of all groups in the population, and of the factors influencing changes in these

the official line published in the newspapers. Negative remarks follow the positive comments in a section beginning 'However, alongside this there are certain cases of backward/negative/unhealthy/anti-Soviet/counter-revolutionary statements' (usually about three of these adjectives are employed).

What are immediately striking are these so-called 'anti-Soviet' remarks, which diverge so markedly from the official picture of unanimity portrayed in the press. Because historians have so long assumed that in the conditions of Stalin's 'terror', people were too afraid to criticise and complain, it is sometimes suggested that, given the general atmosphere of conspiracy which characterised the terror and pressure from above to exercise vigilance and expose 'enemies', the negative comments recorded in these reports were fabricated as part of the whole phenomenon of denunciation.

It is obviously hard to know whether party, and particularly NKVD informants, invented or distorted the negative comments in their reports. The temptation to invent remarks, or to report an unverified denunciation must have been great. Informants signed undertakings to provide accurate material, and could be punished for not doing so: in 1932, 180 secret police informants were sentenced to five years for supplying 'unobjective information'. Informants could also be excluded from the party for failure to be 'objective'. However, these undertakings may have meant little at the height of the terror in 1937-38.

It is plausible that some genuine expressions of discontent may have been given a more 'counter-revolutionary' gloss by some informants, perhaps by the addition of fictitious praise of Trotsky, threats to kill Stalin, or other such incriminating formulae. However, it is also clear that many of the opinions cited in the reports do correspond with those contained in other sources, such as reports prepared by the agitprop (Agitation and Propaganda) department on feedback from the grassroots, letters, memoirs, diaries, emigré journals, censors' reports, and even occasionally the official media. The authenticity of the reported opinion can also be verified by comparing it with that from various areas and periods. A comparison of reports in several archives reveals that there were certain consistent traits of popular opinion which existed independently of the whims and fantasies of those responsible for the reports. Nor did the opinions articulated during the terror period differ significantly from those of earlier and later years. Evidently a body of critical opinion existed throughout the early Soviet period, and views held by ordinary Russians during the terror did not diverge significantly from those expressed at other times.

Distortion occurred rather in the manner in which material was selected and analysed. The selection of material was clearly influenced by considerations of what informants and the compilers of reports imagined their superiors wanted to hear at any particular moment. If the regime was particularly concerned with, for example, exposing 'Trotskyists' or 'saboteurs' of the Stakhanovite (shock work) movement, informants may have made a special effort to record comments expressing pro-Trotsky or anti-Stakhanovite feelings (Figure 2). Reports were compiled because the regime wished to monitor reactions to particular events and policies; thus the subject matter of the reports was already circumscribed.

Although party and NKVD reports were very similar in structure and content, they differed in one important respect: party reports included a large proportion of positive com-

Figure 2: 'Our Army and Our Country Are Strengthened with the Spirit of Stalin!' A poster from 1939, when the Red Army was about to be humiliated in war against Finland. Although official information was sparse, people became skilled at discovering the facts for themselves *Russian State Library, Moscow*

ments. Presumably this was because party officials were keen to demonstrate that their particular organisation was functioning well, and that the propaganda was being absorbed. Unlike the party, the NKVD was concerned primarily with monitoring 'enemies' and the suppression of dissent: its reports therefore devoted the majority of space to critical comments. However, in both cases the insistence was always that negative comments were in a minority. No statistics were provided so it is almost impossible to establish how widely these opinions were in fact articulated. Were they the preserve of a tiny disaffected minority, as the regime would claim? Or were they shared far more widely? This is a crucial question, but one on which these sources at least are unilluminating.

This is frustrating, but certainly does not invalidate the reports as sources. While they may not enable us to reconstruct grassroots opinion with scientific accuracy (but how far do even contemporary opinion polls do that?), they do create a picture, albeit impressionistic, of recurring tendencies and themes within popular opinion. When used in connection with other sources, such as letters, they show quite clearly that the seemingly all-pervasive Soviet propaganda failed to eliminate dissonant opinion, that the terror failed to silence people altogether and that an alternative 'shadow' political culture managed to survive the horrors of Stalinism.

FORMS OF SHADOW CULTURE

Propaganda and experience

How, then, did dissonant opinion survive at the grassroots? It is worth noting that the Soviet Union in this period was still in many ways primarily an oral culture. The almost universal literacy which was attained in the 1930s was a recent phenomenon. People did not necessarily rely on newspapers for information. Aware of the importance of oral communication, the party sent round agitators and propagandists to speak to the people, but they were not always highly educated and the official propaganda messages could be distorted in the process of transmission.

Nor were people likely to absorb the official messages if these seemed too blatantly to contradict their own experience. It was no use reiterating and expecting people to believe that 'life has become better, life has become gayer' (a popular slogan from the mid-1930s) if their lives did not seem to be improving at all, if prices were going up or if shortages and queues were endemic as they often were in the Soviet Union. For example, workers in 1937 asked, 'Why does everyone say that life has become better; the stoves in our hostel have not been lit for three days, there are no sheets or pillows.' The endless reiteration of such slogans could actually become counter-productive. As one worker wrote in a letter of 1938:

As we embark on the third five-year plan we shout at meetings, congresses and in newspapers 'Hurray, we have reached a happy, joyful life!' However, incidentally, if one is to be honest, those shouts are mechanical, made from habit, pumped by social organisations. The ordinary person makes such speeches like a street newspaper-seller. In fact, in his heart, when he comes home, this bawler, eulogist, will agree with his family, his wife who reproaches him that today she has been torturing herself in queues and did not get anything — there are no suits, no coats, no meat, no butter.

This writer went on to note explicitly that 'Those who are well off shout that life has become better, life has become merrier. This slogan of Stalin's is spoken with irony and is used when people are experiencing some kind of difficulty.'

Rumour

Rather than trusting the official propaganda, some people simply turned to alternative, more reliable sources of information. Rumours are particularly important in closed societies, and the Soviet regime devoted much effort to tracing and quashing them, usually without success. Rumours spread quickly and, most importantly, relatively anonymously. They flourished in areas where people were crowded together, such as the ubiquitous queues, and on public transport. They concerned a huge variety of subjects, from impending price rises, to Stalin's relations with his colleagues, to the alleged forthcoming disbandment of the collective farms. Although sometimes wildly distorted (if probably less so than the official propaganda), they often contained more than a grain of truth.

Rumours emerged most strongly at times of crisis, or when official information was particularly sparse, such as during the Soviet-Finnish Winter War of 1939-40. The USSR sustained enormous losses in this war against a supposedly much weaker opponent (Figure 3, overleaf). The Soviet media offered

almost no concrete information about the course of the war, yet people became skilled at discovering for themselves what was actually going on. Especially in Leningrad, close to the frontline of war, the rumour-mill functioned remarkably efficiently. Many rumours focused on alleged 'wrecking' by Soviet commanders. It was claimed that the latter were deliberately leading soldiers under the artillery fire of the enemy. According to one rumour, the head of the armed forces, Voroshilov, had apparently come and replaced the entire military command. Many of these rumours were in fact accurate and based on first-hand knowledge and observations, often extracted from wounded soldiers who were brought back to hospitals in Leningrad. At one military hospital in Leningrad, as soon as the wounded were brought in, they were surrounded by crowds desperate for the latest information. Soldiers returning to Leningrad from the front related graphic stories. For example, one reported:

In the first days of our forces' attack (Petrozavodsk direction) there were numerous losses, as a result of wrecking on the part of the command. The commander of one regiment gave an order to attack and he himself fled. The regiment found itself in a dense forest and was surrounded by white [enemy] Finns and destroyed ... there are many abnormalities in the actions of our military units. The infantry goes in front and the tanks behind. Only after Voroshilov came to the front were some of these abnormalities eliminated ... Many of our fighters have frostbite in their feet and have left the formation. Only in the last few days have soldiers got warm footwear ... Our commanders organised a Finnish corps of 6,000 men to work in the rear of the white Finns. Only 3,000 of the corps remain; the rest deserted to the white Finns.

Such graphic personal information was in striking contrast to the official silence on the whole question of the war, and was typical of the way in which rumours functioned in Soviet society.

Letters

Personal letters were a useful source of first-hand information. Remarkably, some people do not seem to have been afraid to put down their critical views in writing. Perhaps some were unaware of the extent of censorship of mail, or perhaps they thought their criticisms were not sufficiently political to merit persecution. During the winter of 1936-37, near famine conditions prevailed in some parts of the country. The media never mentioned this. However, the alternative news network continued to operate.

Private letters intercepted by the censor reported dire shortages of bread. Writers described how the collective farms had collapsed, how they were obliged to stand in queues of thousands for bread. Some wrote that they had to get to the bread shop at six o'clock the previous evening, bringing chairs and pillows so that they might get some sleep, but even then they had no guarantee of obtaining any bread. Shop windows were being smashed and there was an upsurge in crime, especially murder and theft. Many said 'the famine has arrived', and deaths were reported, both from starvation and from people, including small children, getting crushed in queues. Parallels were drawn with the famine of 1932-33. Others wrote that the situation was worse than in 1918. The flavour of these letters emerges in just one from a resident of the Leningrad region to a relative in Leningrad city:

There's no bread in the *kolkhoz* [collective farm]. We got 12 pounds for the whole year. Now we've got such a bread crisis in Miaksa that they bring in 400kg — that's all — and they give out 2kg per person. There's a queue from 2 o'clock in the morning. We stand and stand and leave without any bread, you live for a day without bread, or even two without having eaten. The administration gives the answer that there was a big over expenditure and that now we have to go hungry. All the people are exhausted.

It seems likely that many people would have trusted these letters from members of their own family rather than official propaganda.

Leaflets and inscriptions

Less common, but still important, were the hand-written or even printed subversive leaflets which circulated, usually in small numbers, although sometimes in up to 100 copies. They tended to be placed in people's mailboxes, but could also be pasted to walls. They were usually written in a rhetorical style and often contained emotional pleas to the people to rise up. During the winter of 1936-37, leaflets appeared in the countryside which read: 'I, Aleksandr Ob'edkov, declare that in the USSR hunger reigns, there is no bread, people get up at 2am to get a piece of bread. Gather an army and attack the USSR.' In one district, a leaflet attached to a letter box appeared entitled 'Give bread' and enjoining comrades to 'rise up for bread, comrade peasants', to rout the shops and village soviets. During the 'free' elections of 1937 in which all the candidates were fixed by the party, leaflets were spread urging people to vote for alternative candidates, such as Bukharin and Trotsky, who had been Lenin's close associates but were now prominent 'enemies of the people'. At the height of the terror in 1937-38, the following appeared:

To the Russian people, devoted to the motherland. All around the popular masses are groaning under the yoke of bolshevism. The bloody hangman of the soviets — the NKVD — is fulfilling its foul work. Unite in a powerful nucleus to achieve the right to freedom. It is near and belongs to us. Everyone is prepared for an armed uprising, but time is holding us back. Down with the soviets!

A simpler version of the leaflet was the inscription. The NKVD often reported finding inscriptions on walls, especially in 'private spaces such as toilets'. These inscriptions were usually short phrases, such as 'Long live Trotsky!' Swastikas too were often daubed on walls in direct defiance of the USSR's strongly anti-fascist line.

Popular culture

Dissonant opinion could also be articulated through various forms of 'popular culture' such as jokes, songs and poems. Like rumours, these were relatively anonymous. They were also usually concise and easily memorised, which aided transmission. Political jokes ranged across a variety of subjects, but many focused on the country's leaders, especially Stalin. They often involved the reversal of traditional social

hierarchies, as in the following in which a cunning peasant outwits Stalin: 'A peasant went up to Stalin and asked him when socialism would be built. Stalin replied that it would be soon, in two years time. And the peasant asked, "So then there will be no GPU [secret police] or other guard?" Stalin said that there would not be. Then the peasant said, "Then we will shoot you all."'

The signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in August 1939 led to a spate of jokes: 'The two dictators have agreed simply that there should be no leaders of the opposition and no parliaments. Now all that is needed is for Hitler to transfer from fascism to socialism and Stalin from socialism to fascism.' The unlikely combination of fascists and communists also led to jokes that Hitler and von Ribbentrop had put in applications to join the Communist Party, and that Moscow was deciding whether to take them or not.

'Long Live the Stalinist Order of Stakanovites!' A poster from the height of the Stakanovite movement in 1936 Russian State Library, Moscow

Particularly significant, especially amongst peasants, were the *chastushki*: four-line ditties which were a traditional part of peasant popular culture. Like jokes, many of these focused on leaders. The assassination of Leningrad party leader, Kirov, at the end of December 1934, was followed by a plethora of *chastushki* expressing glee and irreverence — far from the official attitude of abject sorrow and mourning. These are just a few examples:

Kirova ubili
Skoro Stalina ub'ut
Vse kolkhozy razbegutsia
Nam svobodnei budet zhit

(Kirov's been killed/Soon Stalin will be killed/All the *kolkhozy* will collapse/We will live more freely);

Kirova ubili
po kotletke podarili
Stalina ub'ut
po kuritse dadut'

(Kirov died/We had cutlets/Stalin'll die/We'll have chicken).

Other *chastushki* highlighted the miseries of life on the collective farm:

V kolkhoz prishla

Iubka novaia

Iz kolkhoza ushla

Sovsem golaia.

(I arrived at the *kolkhoz*/with a new skirt/I left the *kolkhoz*/

Completely naked).

Propaganda and its manipulation

These, then, were the main forms in which alternative views circulated. This 'shadow culture' ensured that the official propaganda was never able to secure a total monopoly on popular opinion. This is not to deny the significance of propaganda. Many people clearly did absorb its messages. Yet even the most ardent believers were able to move between the official culture and the shadow culture, to articulate different languages on different occasions, to spout the official slogans at meetings, while cursing Stalin in the privacy of the toilets.

Also, the propaganda itself could be used for subversive purposes. An example of this practice is the way in which the rights enshrined in the Stalin Constitution of 1936 were employed by ordinary people. An enormous propaganda campaign accompanied the promulgation of the new constitution which guaranteed, among other things, freedom of conscience and belief. It soon became evident that the regime was not going to take these rights seriously, but it is interesting that ordinary people, by then well-versed in the official language, invoked these rights in their battles with the regime. For example, one peasant said, 'They say there's freedom of religion, but then why do they make us work on Pokrov [a church holiday]?' So too, when the authorities tried to close down churches, people would send letters of protest and petitions to Stalin and other leaders demanding that they be left open, and citing article 124 of the Constitution which guaranteed freedom of religion.

Likewise Stalin's own words, which were very familiar to the people because of the intense propaganda, could also be cited. So when it transpired that the Stakhanovite shock movement was causing some workers' incomes to fall in 1936, workers recalled Stalin's earlier promises and asked agitators 'how should we understand Stalin's statement that "you should not suffer, your income will stay the same" — where is the distortion: in the workshop or the Commissariat of Heavy Industry?'. Thus the official propaganda could be used by people as a way of asserting themselves, but also of shielding themselves.

Stalinism and Soviet society

What is the significance of this new information? Apart from the intrinsic interest of being able for the first time to resurrect the voices of ordinary Soviet citizens, the sources also allow us to understand more clearly the workings of the now defunct Soviet 'system'. In recent years, discussion about Stalinism has often centred on the question of whether the USSR under Stalin was 'totalitarian'; whether 'society' in any meaningful sense was completely destroyed or atomised by an all-powerful state. Those who support the totalitarian thesis tend to point to factors such as the use of

propaganda to brainwash people, and the use of terror to silence opposition and break down social ties.

The new evidence indicates that although Stalin's regime was undoubtedly totalitarian in aspiration (the use of informants is just one example of this), in practice Soviet society was more resilient than has sometimes been assumed. It is clear, for example, that the Stalinist propaganda machine, and Soviet propaganda more generally, was incapable of 'brainwashing' the population. The machine itself was far from omnipotent, lacking sufficient resources and personnel to make it fully effective. Whole regions and social groups were excluded from its influence at various times, and the propaganda that it did manage to transmit was sometimes communicated in a distorted form.

In addition, it seems obvious now that the communication of propaganda is a two-way process, and an understanding of the functioning of propaganda is incomplete without a consideration of its consumption. Soviet propaganda was multivalent, and ordinary citizens invested it with meanings quite foreign to those intended by the regime, invoking official propaganda to criticise the regime itself. The official propaganda also had to compete with a remarkably efficient unofficial parallel network of information and ideas. The importance of rumour, anecdotes and other Aesopian strategies in Soviet society has perhaps not been fully appreciated.

The mere existence of these dissonant views does not imply, however, that there existed a hard core of non-conformist individuals unequivocally opposed to the regime. This would be to repeat the errors of the regime itself which classified the most trivial criticism as an anti-Soviet subversive act. By relating an anti-Stalin joke or *chastushka*, or criticising price rises, an individual was not necessarily rejecting the Soviet system or socialism or Stalin. A critic of one policy could also be an enthusiast of another. As in other authoritarian states (Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy) elements of consent and dissent, conformity and resistance could coexist within the same individual. People moved freely between the two worlds of official culture and the 'shadow culture'.

This shadow culture evidently flourished in the USSR even during the worst moments of Stalinist authoritarianism. While not symptomatic of outright opposition, its existence must have contributed towards the frailty of the Soviet system, and have played some role in the emergence of the Khrushchev and Gorbachev reform movements. It was one of several interlocking factors undermining the legitimacy of the Communist regime. It helped, therefore, to hasten the eventual demise of the USSR.

Further Reading

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