

Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial: Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine, by Lynne Viola

William Heisey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/ohlj>

 Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Book Review



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Citation Information

Heisey, William. "Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial: Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine, by Lynne Viola." *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 55.2 (2018) : 607-613.

<https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/ohlj/vol55/iss2/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Osgoode Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Osgoode Hall Law Journal by an authorized editor of Osgoode Digital Commons.

Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial: Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine, by Lynne Viola

Abstract

In February of 1938 in Chernigov, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, a concerned regional official approached Nikolai Ivanovich Ezhov, the People's Commissar of the Soviet Union's fearsome Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (NKVD). In a recent roundup of local "potential enemies" of Soviet power, the man was unsure of what to do with the "invalids" and elderly peoples who happened to fall among the arrested. Seemingly irritated by this inquiry, Ezhov shot back at him blithely: "Ekh, you are a Chekist! Take them all to the woods and shoot them." This haunting exchange provides a real glimpse at some of the callous indifference driving the infamous Great Terror—the widespread Soviet imprisonment and execution of perceived "Fifth Columnists"—across the Soviet Union between 1936–38, and is one of many illustrated in Lynne Viola's *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial: Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine*. This work studies in detail an under-explored dimension of the Great Terror: the secret trials and purges of the very NKVD operatives that carried out the Great Terror, who found themselves, in a stunning reverse of fortune in late 1938, on the other side of the interrogation table. This reversal turned out to be a successful tactical ploy by Stalin, enabling the leader to both celebrate and take credit for the successes of the Terror while scapegoating the NKVD for the increasingly public atrocities that were committed under his direction. Because of the secrecy of this "purge of the purgers," the real stories behind the perpetrators of the Great Terror remained shrouded in mystery for much of the twentieth century.

Book Review

Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial: Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine, by Lynne Viola¹

WILLIAM HEISEY²

IN FEBRUARY OF 1938 in Chernigov, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, a concerned regional official approached Nikolai Ivanovich Ezhov, the People's Commissar of the Soviet Union's fearsome Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (NKVD).³ In a recent roundup of local "potential enemies" of Soviet power, the man was unsure of what to do with the "invalids" and elderly peoples who happened to fall among the arrested. Seemingly irritated by this inquiry, Ezhov shot back at him blithely: "Ekh, you are a Chekist! Take them all to the woods and shoot them."⁴ This haunting exchange provides a real glimpse at some of the callous indifference driving the infamous Great Terror⁵—the widespread Soviet imprisonment and execution of perceived "Fifth Columnists"—across the Soviet Union between 1936–38, and is one of many illustrated in Lynne Viola's

-
1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 304 pages.
 2. JD/MBA (2018), Osgoode Hall Law School and the Schulich School of Business, Toronto, Canada.
 3. The NKVD was the leading Soviet secret police organization between 1934-1946.
 4. Viola, *supra* note 1 at 26. Ezhov's role was so central to the Great Terror that the period was named afterward "Ezhovshchina" (the "time of Ezhov") (*ibid* at 19). See also Donald Rayfield, *Stalin and His Hangmen: The Tyrant and Those Who Killed for Him* (New York: Random House, 2005) at 291-340.
 5. This term was first coined by Robert Conquest in 1968, and will hereinafter be used to refer to the Soviet purges of 1936-1938 generally. See generally Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial: Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine. This work studies in detail an under-explored dimension of the Great Terror: the secret trials and purges of the very NKVD operatives that carried out the Great Terror, who found themselves, in a stunning reverse of fortune in late 1938, on the other side of the interrogation table. This reversal turned out to be a successful tactical ploy by Stalin, enabling the leader to both celebrate and take credit for the successes of the Terror while scapegoating the NKVD for the increasingly public atrocities that were committed under his direction.⁶ Because of the secrecy of this “purge of the purgers,” the real stories behind the perpetrators of the Great Terror remained shrouded in mystery for much of the twentieth century.

Before the partial opening of state archives in the early 1990s, most scholars assumed the Great Terror was limited to intelligentsia and elites, but thanks to comprehensive studies of these archives, it is now clear that the majority of the victims were ordinary people.⁷ While most documents concerning the subsequent purges of the NKVD still remain secreted in the archives of Moscow and inaccessible for study, a recent opening of the Ukrainian security police archives has provided a unique chance for scholars to examine in detail the trial records of NKVD operatives involved in the Great Terror—a challenge taken up wholeheartedly in *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial*.⁸ Viola’s pioneering research utilizes these trial records—structuring them into a series of “microhistories”⁹ about specific NKVD operatives across the Ukraine—to reveal a “master plot” of “fictions,” which animated the Great Terror and drove its cruelty. In short, this “master plot” envisioned the Terror as a completion of the decades-old civil war with the final elimination of all remaining members of the pre-revolutionary elites and political parties, while simultaneously heading off the activation or growth of a “Fifth Column” before the looming Second World War.¹⁰ These fears were all the more pronounced in the Ukraine, a borderland that spelled danger to Stalin, who saw spies (especially Polish and German) everywhere and feared the nascent forces of Ukrainian nationalism.¹¹ The trial records poignantly reveal

6. Viola, *supra* note 1 at 170-71. At least 22 per cent of the NKVD operatives were removed over 1939, and the NKVD purges continued well into the war years. *Ibid.* at 4, 23..

7. *Ibid.* at 3.

8. *Ibid.* at 6-7.

9. *Ibid.* at 8.

10. *Ibid.* at 10, 172. As evidenced by the words of Vyacheslav Molotov (signatory of the famous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact): “1937 was necessary...[t]hanks to 1937 there was no fifth column in our country during the war.” See Philip Boobbyer, *The Stalin Era* (London: Routledge, 2012) at 75-76.

11. Viola, *supra* note 1 at 24.

that these fictions of the Great Terror even extended to its victims, from “the policemen who had known some of the ‘enemies’ from their youth, as well as the village and collective farm officials and activists who were forced ... to tell lies about their neighbors in their capacity as ‘witnesses.’”¹²

In order to elaborate upon this idea of a “master plot” of the Great Terror driving its perpetrators, *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial* adopts a case study-like format across several chapters, weaving biographical details of various individual NKVD perpetrators on trial with information about the charges they faced, their defences, witness accounts of their behaviour, and wider contextual information such as the movements of their superiors during the Great Terror. Viola carefully examines a variety of settings in the Ukraine, including a rural district, industrial city and factory, and the regional capital of Kiev.¹³

Through her interrogation of the trial evidence in each case, Viola highlights numerous examples of a widespread “perverse legal and administrative fetishism” amongst the NKVD over 1937-38, culminating in a “reigning logic” to “destroy the omnipresent Fifth Column at any cost”.¹⁴ This administrative fetishism motivated some extraordinary behaviour on the part of the NKVD, including outright falsification of evidence and the widespread use of torture to coerce individuals to conform to the official NKVD narrative. As one NKVD operative related during his trial:

In general, they sent from Kiev a standard model form, according to which to write indictments. In this form, they indicated the aims and tasks of the counter-revolutionary organization and in general if I corrected the introduction...I took data from the material of the case.¹⁵

In another trial during the subsequent purge of the NKVD, one NKVD operative admitted that interrogators invented, in advance of interrogations, charts of counter-revolutionary organizations that they then made prisoners confess to through interrogation and torture.¹⁶

Quite literally, we see here both official witnesses and victims following “the script of the Great Terror under the dictation” of one investigator or another, often giving their testimony according to standard forms provided by the NKVD.¹⁷ In some cases, we see locals following this master narrative even without official

12. *Ibid* at 82-83.

13. *Ibid* at 8.

14. *Ibid* at 143, 167.

15. *Ibid* at 82.

16. *Ibid* at 117-19.

17. *Ibid* at 83-84.

prompting—for example, a local doctor charged with autopsying the dead from an NKVD prison and torture centre in Uman refused to cite murder as the cause of death for any of them, for fear of his arrest.¹⁸ Viola’s focus on different community contexts across the Ukraine also helps to reveal different responses to this narrative. For example, as she argues, in the villages of the Soviet Union, the Terror was far more public (with the clothes of executed prisoners often turning up in local markets) and required the active participation of locals much more than in urban centres.¹⁹ Perhaps more grimly, some trial records reveal that the NKVD operatives themselves were aware of the theatrical or performative nature of their persecutions, calling NKVD workers visiting from higher positions *gastrology*, or “touring actors.”²⁰ Many NKVD operatives clung to this narrative all the way to the end, with some final statements of condemned operatives indicating no remorse, and accepting “the truth of 1937”—*i.e.* that all measures were legal and only directed against enemies.²¹

Aside from evidencing wider ideological conformities amongst the perpetrators of the Great Terror, *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial* also highlights the more concrete constraints and motivations of NKVD operatives as they undertook their mass operations in the Ukraine. Many were driven by personal enrichment, such as NKVD execution squads that systematically looted the corpses of their victims or interrogators who extracted gold teeth from the mouths of the dead. Others were swayed by the prospect of career advancement, such as the *vydvizhenets*, who were “intoxicated by associations” with their superiors.²² Still others succumbed to increasingly demanding arrest figures from their superiors above, stealing prisoners from other districts to fulfill their quotas.²³ As one agent admitted during his trial concerning the torture of prisoners: “[n]o one ordered me to beat the arrested, but they said that I had to provide 100 confessions a day.”²⁴ The wider institutional culture of the NKVD encouraged these prisoner abuses even further—it was considered a matter of shame and weakness to release

18. *Ibid* at 102-03.

19. *Ibid* at 85, 97. Viola observes that “there was by necessity mass social participation in the Great Terror” and with it, “huge areas of gray.” *Ibid* at 18.

20. *Ibid* at 95.

21. *Ibid* at 109.

22. *Ibid* at 89-92, 160, 174. This Stalinist-era term refers to workers (often lower class) appointed or promoted to responsible positions in the Soviet administration. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times in Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) at 243, n 78.

23. Viola, *supra* note 1 at 95.

24. *Ibid* at 96.

a prisoner because of a failure to obtain a confession, and “once you arrest[ed] someone,” it meant they were guilty.²⁵

Taken together, these competing ideological, administrative, cultural, and self-serving motivations left the NKVD operatives “caught in an invisible vortex of nightmarish logic,” where they would recognize their wrongdoing in individual cases of torture or arrest yet continue to believe unquestionably in the Communist Party, the NKVD, and the pernicious existence of Fifth Columnists.²⁶ In short, the detailed case studies in this work allow readers to see the perpetrators not as simple “cogs,” but rather as individual actors working within a larger culture of NKVD violence shaped by war, revolution, and terror that permitted and sanctioned a wide range of criminal behaviour.²⁷

With these findings in mind, it is easy to agree with Viola’s assertion that this study of trial documents sheds “new light” on Stalin’s Great Terror.²⁸ Indeed, this study is based upon access to newly unearthed archival material, of which little has been written—the product of an international research project centred at the archives of the Ukrainian Security Service titled *Ekho bol’shogo terrora* (“Echo of the Great Terror”).²⁹ These archival resources constitute one of the few sources available for the study of lower- and mid-level NKVD cadres during this period.³⁰ While some writers who have worked on the Great Terror have had access to similar files in the central archives in Moscow, their efforts have not been as comprehensive.³¹ Further, the more traditional corpus of scholarly material on the Great Terror tends to elide the rich interplay of ideological and social forces exposed here.³² Other more recent works, while succeeding in adopting a comparable emphasis upon the social motivators of Stalinist repression, nevertheless focus largely upon the victims of the Great Terror rather than its perpetrators.³³

25. *Ibid* at 22, 41.

26. *Ibid* at 143.

27. *Ibid* at 113–14.

28. *Ibid* at 6.

29. *Ibid* at 187, n 20.

30. *Ibid* at 7.

31. See e.g. Marc Jansen & Nikita Petrov, *Stalin’s Loyal Executioner: People’s Commissar Nikolai Ezhov, 1895–1940* (Stanford, Ca: Hoover Institution Press, 2002).

32. See e.g. Conquest, *supra* note 5; Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, translated by George Shriver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Vadim Z Rogovin, *1937: Stalin’s Year of Terror*, translated by Frederick S Choate (Oak Park, Mich: Mehring Books, 1998).

33. See David R Shearer, *Policing Stalin’s Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924–1953* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

Although the trial records constitute a scarcely available scholarly resource, they are certainly rich in detail: “[t]he trials of NKVD operatives in Ukraine suggest that most of these men...more or less understood that they were being scapegoated and resented the fact”, consequently denying very little and admitting to an array of abuses and horrors.³⁴ The abundance of historical minutiae is evidenced in the deposition of an informant planted in the same cell of one NKVD operative during his trial, drawing compromising information from the prisoner that he seemingly believed was disclosed in confidence to a cellmate.³⁵ It is therefore without a doubt that, far more than many other contemporary studies, these trial documents represent a fertile source for “exploring the machinery of terror and the behavior and mentality of NKVD perpetrators” during the Great Terror.³⁶

Even though this work constitutes an initial foray into the study of Great Terror perpetrators, it remains remarkably comprehensive for its modest length of 179 pages. However, there are a few occasions in which the analysis may have benefitted from a more thorough discussion. Given the author’s interest in the social and ideological forces impacting the actions of NKVD perpetrators during the Great Terror, it is a curious omission that she avoids elaborating in greater depth upon significant demographic changes that occurred in the NKVD simultaneously during the Terror. Instead, she emphasizes the contrasting “formative experiences” of different generations of operatives, rather than any ethnic, social, or political tensions which undoubtedly would have been prevalent in this period (in particular, the growing anti-Semitism of the organization as it went into the war years).³⁷ Furthermore, the ideological value of the “master plot” and “fictions” of the Great Terror in supporting its operations is arguably one of the most extraordinary findings amongst the trial records presented by Viola. As such, this might have warranted a more dedicated and elaborated discussion, rather than dispersed references throughout the case studies presented.

Regardless, *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial* represents an auspicious first step into the study of the perpetrators of the Stalinist Great Terror. Viola has demonstrated convincingly throughout her various case studies just how “[p]olitics and ideology determined the contours of Soviet Justice,” and how both ideological and social motivators were weaponized in the furtherance of

34. Viola, *supra* note 1 at 28.

35. *Ibid* at 50.

36. *Ibid* at 6.

37. *Ibid* at 20-21.

one of the worst Soviet atrocities of the twentieth century.³⁸ It is a testament to the efficacy of these strategies that despite their subjection to numerous forms of torture during interrogation, many perpetrators on trial ““believed and continued to believe”...in the world of enemies omnipresent and in league with the forces of the capitalist encirclement to destroy the Soviet Union”.³⁹ Even Ezhov, himself on trial in 1940 for his central role in the Great Terror, remained unrepentant in the face of execution: “...my enormous guilt lies in the fact that I purged so few of them...All around me were enemies of the people, my enemies.”⁴⁰ The master plot of the Great Terror was to conclude, in Ezhov’s case, like so many of his victims: a bullet to the head and hasty burial in a common grave.

38. *Ibid* at 167.

39. *Ibid* at 178.

40. Jansen & Petrov, *supra* note 31 at 188.