

INTRODUCTION

This short book—really an extended essay—is intended to argue that Stalin’s mass killings of the 1930s should be classified as “genocide.” This argument is made more difficult by the fact that there was no single act of genocide in the Soviet case, but rather a series of interrelated attacks on “class enemies” and “enemies of the people,” metonyms for diverse alleged opponents of the Soviet state. Episodes of mass killing also took a variety of forms, some involving mass executions, others exile in special settlements and camps of the Gulag, where many hundreds of thousands died from the unusually harsh character of arrest, internment, and interrogation, on the one hand, and hellish conditions of transport, housing, sustenance, and forced labor, on the other.

The social and national categories of the supposed enemies of the USSR changed and shifted over time; the justifications for the assaults on groups of Soviet citizens (and foreigners in the Soviet Union) were similarly labile. Yet Stalin and his lieutenants connected these genocidal attacks to the tenets of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism and used similar police, judicial, and extrajudicial means of

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implementing them. Both Soviet party and state institutions were involved, as Stalin applied the impressive instruments of exerting power and control created by the Bolshevik revolution to strike at his opponents and potential opponents, real and—for the greatest part—imagined. As the result of Stalin's rule in the 1930s and early 1940s, many millions of innocent people were shot, starved to death, or died in detention and exile. It is long since time to consider this story an important chapter in the history of genocide.

There are a number of legitimate scholarly and even moral inhibitions in making this kind of argument, not the least important of which is the understandable reticence—pronounced among both scholars and journalists—to apply an appellation designed primarily to describe the Holocaust, the mass murder of the Jews by the Nazis, to the murder of Soviet citizens in the 1930s. In particular, German and Jewish scholars of the Holocaust will sometimes insist that the Nazi murder of nearly six million Jews was an event of singular historical meaning that cannot be fruitfully compared with other episodes of mass murder in the modern era. The combination of Hitler's murderous racism and traditional Christian anti-Semitic motifs make Nazi crimes, in the mind of many scholars, a unique genocidal undertaking.¹ But even this question becomes more complicated when one takes into account what could be considered Nazi genocidal campaigns against gypsies (Roma and Sinti), homosexuals, and the mentally disabled, not to mention Soviet prisoners of war, Poles, and others.

Related to this issue is the fact that the December 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide focuses on the murder of ethnic, national, racial, and religious groups and excludes—though not explicitly—social and political groups, which were, after all, the main victims of Stalin’s murderous campaigns. Some scholars isolate the Ukrainian killer famine of 1932–33 or the forced deportations of the so-called punished peoples in 1944 to support a claim of genocide against Stalin. Others point to the “Katyn forest massacre” of twenty-two thousand Polish army officers and government officials in the early spring of 1940 as an emblematic case of Stalinist genocide. But categorizing just these discrete murderous events as genocide, while leaving out others, tends to gloss over the genocidal character of the Soviet regime in the 1930s, which killed systematically rather than episodically.

Another objection to including Stalinist mass killings in the concept of genocide has to do with the special character of ethnic and national identity when thinking about the “human race.” Humanity is comprised of a marvelous diversity of peoples, each of whose distinct character, even if “invented,” in the famous formulation of Benedict Anderson, deserves special protection. As we will see, the development of the concept of genocide itself was closely tied to this idea. Yet the U.N. Genocide Convention also protects religious groups, despite the fact that their essentially ascriptive nature does not carry the same valence as ethnic and national groups. Jews and Armenians were killed as peoples, not as religious groups, though religion was used

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as a marker of ethnicity, much as it was in the case of Serb attacks on Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s. But the obligation of protecting ethnic and national groups, as well as religious and racial ones, from mass murder should not obviate the need to protect political and social groups from the same horrendous crime, especially when the Soviet Union insisted that these groups not be included in the Genocide Convention. Certainly the victims and their progeny would have difficulty understanding the moral, ethical, and legal differences—not to mention historical distinctions—between one form of mass murder and another.

At the same time many observers think that the concept of genocide would lose its historical and legal salience, would in some senses be “cheapened,” by broadening the potential categories of victims to include social and political groups. It is certainly the case that the term is used imprecisely and irresponsibly by diverse, sometimes loosely defined, groups of people claiming genocide victim status. But it is the very enormity of the crime of systematic mass murder—intentionally perpetrated by the political elite of a state against a targeted group within the borders of or outside the state—that should distinguish genocide from other forms of mass killing, like pogroms, massacres, and terrorist bombings. To include the planned mass elimination of social and political groups in the definition of genocide can help make our understanding of the phenomenon more robust rather than diminish its historical usefulness. Often in episodes of genocide—we see this particularly clearly in the case of the Ukrainian killer famine of 1932–1933—social and national/ethnic categories over-

lap. Sometimes, as in the case of the Soviet attack against so-called kulaks, social and political categories of victims were “ethnicized” as a way to make the attack on their existence more comprehensible to the society and state. Genocide as a product of communist societies—Stalinist Russia, Mao’s China, and Pol Pot’s Cambodia—where millions of these country’s own citizens were killed in campaigns of mass murder, can and should be thought about alongside analogous cases of genocide perpetrated against minority peoples.

For decades, Cold War politics in academia (meaning, in particular, anti-Cold War politics) also militated against an open consideration of the genocide question in the context of Stalin and Stalinism. This continues to have some relevance to our understanding of the Soviet Union even today. Because Stalin killed in the name of the higher ideals of socialism and human progress, it is sometimes argued, his cannot be equated with the base motives of history’s other twentieth-century genocidaires, who killed for no other reason than the perceived “otherness” of ethnic or religious groups, and, in Hitler’s case, for a racial dystopia that could appeal to few except the Germans. In assessing Stalin’s motivations for overseeing the mass killing of so many millions of Soviet citizens in the 1930s, historians can sometimes seem anxious to find a plausible rationale for him to have done so, whether it be the breakneck program to modernize the country, the need to provide heavy industry with investment capital and agriculture with technological improvements, the protection of the Soviet Union from the threat of invasion

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by its enemies, most notably Poland, Germany, and Japan, the presence of potential terrorists in the population out to kill Stalin and his confederates, and/or the nefarious influence of Trotsky and his Fourth International on the Soviet elite.

In the recent literature on Stalin's crimes, Viacheslav Molotov's memories in conversation with Feliks Chuev, recorded some thirty-five years after the events, are frequently used to explain the purges and the killing:

1937 was necessary. If you take into account that after the revolution we hacked to the right and to the left, and achieved victory, but the remnants of enemies of various viewpoints continued to exist, and in face of the growing danger of fascist aggression they could unite. We were obliged in 1937 to make sure that at the time of war we would not have a fifth column. . . . Of course, it's sad and regrettable about such people [who were innocent], but I believe that the terror that was carried out at the end of the 1930s was necessary. . . . Stalin, in my opinion, conducted absolutely the right policy; so what if extra heads fell, there would be no vacillation in the time of war and after the war.

Even in his old age, after having seen his wife, Polina Zhemchuzhina, hauled off into exile in Sakhalin on trumped-up charges, Molotov asserted that the purges were not just necessary but were directed against guilty comrades, though he admitted that injustices were inevi-

tably involved. The rehabilitations that occurred in the post-Stalin period were nothing more than “fashionable falsifications.”²

The notion that the terrible mass killing of the 1930s was carried out in anticipation of the coming conflagration and, indeed, was crucial in assuring the eventual Soviet victory in the “Great Fatherland War” over the Nazis fits not just Molotov’s and other Stalinists’ aphoristic injunctions that “an omelette cannot be made without breaking some eggs” and that “forests cannot be cleared without chips flying”—in short, that lives had to be sacrificed to achieve the greater gains of Soviet-style socialism. Many scholars in Russia and the West believe that Stalin prepared for war by carrying out dekulakization, purges, and campaigns against alleged internal enemies, social, political, and national. Even the mass purges of the Soviet armed forces, of the intelligence services, and of foreign communists, which one might assume would clearly damage Stalin’s chances of winning an impending war by eliminating those most knowledgeable about fighting it, are thought to be rational preparations for the coming conflict.³ Because Stalin won the war, the argument goes—*post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore because of this)—these supposed preparations during the 1930s, no matter how brutal, violent, and counterproductive, can be justified and therefore cannot be classified as genocide, the “crime of crimes” in international jurisprudence, which can have no justification.

The combination of the Soviet victory in the Second World War, the place of honor accorded Stalin in the re-

construction of the world order after 1945, and the secretiveness of the Soviet regime kept the extent and intensity of Soviet mass killing from world attention, not to mention from the Russian public. Now that many archives of the Soviet period are accessible and some Russians, including most recently the president of the Russian Federation, Dmitri Medvedev, are asking fundamental questions about the murderousness of the Stalinist regime, the genocide question can and should be approached with new openness. A majority of Russians continue to hold Stalin in high esteem, despite their knowledge of the killing fields that contain the mass graves of their forebears. To establish the contours of genocide is crucial for the country's own self-understanding and future. Moreover, relations with Ukrainians, the Baltic peoples, Poles, Chechens, and Crimean Tatars, all of whom claim to one extent or another to be the victims of Stalinist genocide, can improve only if the Russians openly acknowledge and conscientiously investigate the crimes of the past. Genocide lives in historical memory and, unrecognized—as we know from the case of the Turkish government and the Armenian genocide of 1915—distorts and disrupts relations between peoples and nations. Scholars of the Soviet past, here and there, are obliged to face genocide and its consequences squarely.

The book begins with a discussion of the issues surrounding the use of the term genocide itself. I argue that there are good reasons to think about and apply the U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in a broader and more flexible pattern of cases than has sometimes been done in the schol-

arly literature. This is especially important in examining Stalinist cases since the Soviet Union and its allies helped to formulate the definition of genocide by essentially vetoing the inclusion of social and political groups, which had been included in virtually all of the early drafts of the U.N. genocide convention. Also, the international courts have moved in the direction of a broader understanding of genocide. A good example is the 2004 judgment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the case of Radoslav Krstić, which ruled that the Bosnian Serbs' mass execution of nearly eight thousand Bosnian Muslim men and boys in Srebrenica in July 1995 constituted genocide. That same court concluded in an appeal of the case that an incident of mass killing like Srebrenica can be designated as genocide, even without having been able to convict any of the perpetrators of genocide. In February 2007 the International Court of Justice (ICJ), also in The Hague, similarly ruled that Srebrenica was a case of genocide in a ruling on a suit, otherwise dismissed, that was filed by the government of Bosnia-Herzegovina against Serbia.

Chapter 2 turns to a consideration of the making of Stalin as a genocidaire. Here, as elsewhere in this study, I rely heavily on some of the best biographies of Stalin that have recently been published, by Robert Service, Hiroaki Kuromiya, Dimitri Volkogonov, Simon Sebag Montefiore, Donald Rayfield, Miklos Kun, and Ronald G. Suny (in manuscript), among others, as well as some memoirs and unpublished works about Stalin's life. The third, fourth, and fifth chapters of the book examine concrete episodes

of mass killing in the 1930s that made up the foundation of Stalin's genocidal enterprise: dekulakization in 1929–31, the Ukrainian famine in 1932–33, and the murderous campaigns against non-Russian nationalities that stretched from 1934 into the war. Chapter 6 surveys the Great Terror in 1937–38. There is by now a huge literature on all of these subjects; much of the most recent scholarship is based on the opening of important archival collections and the publication of seminal documents in Russia and in the West. In this connection, this book owes a great debt to the substantial international community of historians of the Soviet Union, who have done a remarkable job of researching the dark corners of the Stalinist period.

The goal of these chapters on mass killing in the 1930s and early 1940s is to emphasize some of the most important definitional characteristics of genocide: the motives of the perpetrators; the line of command from the “boss” (*khoziain*) or the “warrior-leader” (*vozhd*)—Stalin—to the executors of his policies; and the attempt to eliminate all or part of these groups of victims, as groups. These questions of intent, motive, and line of command have dominated the cases brought against the perpetrators in the wars in the Balkans and Sub-Saharan Africa in the ICTY in The Hague and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in Arusha, and they are the most important in assessing the culpability of Stalin and his regime for genocide in the 1930s. But also relevant are cases of alleged genocide that have been brought before the judicial systems of the post-Soviet Baltic states and of several Latin American countries, most notably Argentina.

The final chapter of the book surveys the problem of comparing Nazi and Soviet crimes. Implicit in any evaluation of Stalin's mass killing of the 1930s is our knowledge and understanding of the horrors of the Holocaust. Nothing in history can quite capture the shock to the human system of the image of hundreds of thousands of naked and helpless men and women, including the very old and the very young, being systematically gassed and then incinerated in the ovens of Nazi crematoria. Many historians believe that Hitler's ultimate goal was to kill all of the world's Jews, which would represent unprecedented and unmatched criminal intent. Yet Stalin's responsibility for the killing of some fifteen to twenty million people carries its own horrific weight, in part because it was done in the name of one of the most influential and purportedly progressive political ideologies of modern times, communism.

Before proceeding, a word about the number of Stalinist victims is in order. Since 1990 a large number of Soviet documents have been declassified and made available to researchers by the Russian archival service. Especially reports from the OGPU and NKVD—the Soviet security police organizations—list in striking detail and with extraordinary completeness the numbers of arrested, executed, and deported in the period under consideration. But these numbers need to be used very carefully, and in no way do they represent the final word on how many Soviet citizens were “repressed” in the 1930s and how many were killed. The fact that the columns of numbers always add up and that the numbers themselves are al-

ways given to the last digit—496,460 deported Chechens and Ingush, for example, or 1,803,392 dekulakized peasants in 1931–32—leads one to believe that this impossible accuracy may reflect deeper problems with the veracity of the numbers.

Sometimes the incentive of the police and judicial bureaucrats was to ratchet up the numbers of arrested and executed, so that their superiors—Stalin and particularly his OGPU/NKVD chiefs, Yagoda, Yezhov, and Beria—would be pleased with the results. More often, their incentive was to underreport or not to report at all, especially when it came to “extraneous” deaths in the Gulag system, including the special settlements, and in the case of famine or dekulakization. In considering the numbers of Soviet citizens killed in the Gulag, Alexander Yakovlev, who was head of several commissions to investigate Stalinist mass killings and had unusual access to a wide spectrum of archival sources, warns against accepting the NKVD numbers as gospel. He states point-blank that “these [NKVD figures] are false. . . . They do not take account of the number of people confined in the internal prisons of the NKVD, and those prisons were jammed packed. They do not break down the mortality rates in camps for political prisoners, and they ignore the number of arrested peasants and deported peoples.”⁴ In any case, the false precision of the NKVD data, plus the constantly shifting political agendas of Stalin’s chief repressive agencies, should be enough to insert a note of skepticism into the confident use of NKVD numbers by contemporary historians.

The observer needs to approach the history of Stalinist mass killing from the early 1930s until the war with several warning signals in mind. There is the problem of conflating political purges with dekulakization, the forced deportation of nations with the elimination of “asocials” in Order 00447, the shooting of Polish officers in 1940 with the trials and execution of Soviet military officers in 1938, and all of these “episodes” in the history of the period with each other. At the same time, scholars have been wont to miss the genocidal characteristics of Stalin’s rule in this period by making excessively rigid distinctions between these events. Also, not every one of these cases can be considered genocide, which required a certain level of murderous premeditation on the part of Stalin and his government and an intention to attack the group as a whole by destroying a significant part of it. This was not everywhere and always the case in the 1930s and early 1940s; some episodes bear more clearly than others the taint of genocide. Of course, intention is very difficult to demonstrate, even with improved documentation and access to archives in Russia. Stalin and his lieutenants frequently used forced deportation to punish one group or another within the Soviet population for alleged crimes. Forced deportation is clearly a “crime against humanity,” but the results can sometimes be considered “genocidal,” meaning “like genocide,” but not necessarily with the same jurisprudential implications that come from labeling discrete episodes “genocide.” Altogether, these kinds of distinctions are tricky and elusive. Yet, they are impor-

tant in understanding the murderous character of Stalin's rule. In short, there are scholarly dangers in conflating these episodes of mass killing, but also in separating them too rigidly.

To place Stalin at the center of the genocide question is not meant as a way of excluding social, political, economic, and ideological determinants of mass killing in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. The Soviet Union in the Stalinist period was not simply a personal dictatorship, though it was also that. A vast network of state organizations had to be mobilized to seize and kill that many people, most prominent among them the police, especially the political police. The "accomplices of genocide"—in a legal as well as historical sense—had to number in the tens of thousands. Yet once Stalin died, mass killing ceased altogether in the Soviet Union. Before Stalin's dictatorship, this study argues, one should not use the appellation of genocide for the mass killing that took place, despite its horrific character, especially during the Civil War of 1918–21. Stalin made a huge difference, and it is Stalin's role in mass killing that is essential in understanding the genocidal character of his regime.