

INTRODUCTION

The Revolution Devours Its Children

For every Communist, the Great Purge marked the opening of a momentous personal trial. To determine whether he was worthy of entering the classless paradise, the most dedicated of revolutionaries had to wrestle with a fundamental issue: who was to judge his ideological purity, himself or the Party? Not only state policy but also a state of mind, Stalinist terror was characterized by never-ending interrogations of the self.

Few will deny that the Great Purge remains the most pervasive mystery of Soviet history. The years 1934–38 witnessed the great Moscow Show Trials, as well as a large number of less prominent investigations that ended with the execution or interior exile of countless Party members.¹ Historians find it difficult to explain the determination of Stalin and his lieutenants to destroy the country's administrative and military elite, especially as war was looming on the horizon.² Nor is it easy to come to terms with the mass psychosis the Great Purge generated, as a flood of denunciations turned Soviet society into a war of all against all, a chaotic seesaw of mutual incriminations.³

Defying all social logic, the payoffs of social status tended to be reversed—the higher one's position, the more likely one was to be shot. From this perspective, the Great Purge seems to be a morbid carnival, with the bottoms devouring the tops. The White general major A. Von Lampe observed in June 1937 that the Party had turned its violence against itself: "For twenty years the Bolsheviks lived without killing each other. The next twenty years of their reign open with them doing just that. Internecine war is the normal outcome of every revolution."⁴ In his study of the period, Nicolas Werth declares that with Stalin's purges, "one ceases to understand. One constructs hypotheses in search of an

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explanation of the phenomenon, to tally it with reason. And one finds nothing. One is left with mystery.”⁵

What transpired in Soviet Russia in 1936–38 cannot be comprehended by recourse to typical explanations such as personal interest and ambition. The true Communist acted for society, not for his own sake. Iurii Piatakov, the deputy head of the Heavy Industry Commissariat, famously stated: “I am ready to sacrifice my pride and self-esteem and everything else. I know that ordinary people cannot change or reverse or give up their convictions instantly. . . . But because we are steeped in the idea of violence, we Bolsheviks know how to direct it against ourselves. If the Party so demands, and if it is necessary and important for the Party, I can by an act of will expunge from my brain within twenty-four hours ideas that I have cherished for years . . . , reorient myself, and come to agree with the Party inwardly, with my whole mind.”⁶

A radical instrumentalization of their subjectivities rendered Party members selfless. Modern ascetics, they worked around the clock, forfeiting riches and recreation—recall Stalin’s famous frugality, the modest dress of Communist leaders.⁷ Dedicated to the emancipation of humanity, the perpetrators of the Great Purge regarded themselves as vehicles of history. Having shaken off all petit bourgeois squeamishness, they were proud to denounce, torture, and kill. All this was morally justified: “When wood is chopped, splinters fly” (*Les rubiat, shchepki letiat*).⁸ It is important to distinguish here between immoral behavior, instigated by egotism, and the hypermoral behavior of the Communists who transgressed for the sake of humanity. Marx conceived of History as an eternal circuit of exploitation and futility caught in the implacable necessity of the class struggle: the only way out was a violent social upheaval—revolution—whose negative force shattered social fetters and made new forms of life possible.⁹ Titanically destructive, the Communist moved beyond good and evil. First he annihilated the institutions created by centuries of tsarist rule, dismantling every state institution. But this was only the beginning: his next step was to abrogate not just positive law but also moral law, along with the traditional beliefs, conventions, and familiar pathways of social organization.¹⁰

Of course, the desire to implement a radical ideology, to close the gap between what ought to be and what is, is hardly unique to Communism. In many case studies, scholars have established that once radicals seize control of the state and begin molding society in their image, violence ensues.¹¹ And those prepared to limit the domain of the human to their own kind tend to inflict terrible suffering on ethnic, racial, and religious minorities. Focus on difference, it seems, breeds hatred and cruelty. Remarkably, however, the origins of Communist morbidity distinguish it from other seemingly comparable events.¹²

Communists promoted universalism, believed in a universal humanity, professed themselves the heirs and perfectors of Enlightenment values.¹³ They

killed the similar, not the different. The other could never be terribly threatening because he or she could be converted, while those from within—traitors and spies, ubiquitous and undetectable—stood to besmirch revolution itself. NKVD interrogators fell on such suspects with terrible violence, anxious that the enemy was undetectable because undistinguishable from the faithful. And the Communist prisoner, in turn, identified with his interrogators—he had no mental universe or language other than that the Party had given him. Even as firing squads raised their rifles, their victims cried, “Long live Comrade Stalin!” Savagely beaten during his interrogations, Nikolai Chaplin, the former head of the Komsomol, kept repeating, “The Party, the Party, the Party . . .”¹⁴

It was sometimes difficult to distinguish between a Populist and a Social Democrat, a Bolshevik and a Menshevik, a Stalinist and a Trotskyist—after all, they professed the same revolutionary values, spoke the same Marxist language, adhered to the same emancipatory project. Many who challenged the Party, including Georgi Plekhanov, Leon Trotsky, and Nikolai Bukharin, had formerly been not just legitimate but highly esteemed members of the revolutionary camp—could it be that they now rebelled mostly out of evil will?¹⁵ So said their accusers, who reacted to their transgressions with unchecked ferocity. As one reads the records of these trials, the shared language of accuser and accused leaps to the eye. Precisely because the language duplicates itself, because there was scarcely any room for real argument, political struggles had a repetitive quality that easily spilled into violence. Clashing head to head, revolutionaries fought desperately to settle who incarnated the proletariat. Their disagreements may now sound doctrinaire, academic, absurd to the point of humor, but the implications of these disagreements were always grave.

The Eschatological Time Line

Determined to spread the gospel of universal emancipation, the Communist Party was unique in its willingness to kill hundreds of thousands of its own members. For the longest time, the brunt of the attack was borne by oppositionists, whose dissent seemed like the main threat to socialist progress. The increasingly strong emphasis on the oppositionist’s inner self suggests that the crisis centered not on a traditional power struggle but on a peculiar form of state instrumentality, a modern type of soul shepherding.¹⁶ In earlier work, I have traced the gradual change in official Communist conceptualizations of wrongdoing, away from an emphasis on the importance of “nurture” to an insistence on the primacy of “nature.”¹⁷ Over the years, the Party moved from viewing error as something that could be corrected, given a socially pure environment, to seeing it as something fundamental and intrinsic to a person—a quality that could never be transformed, only concealed, and that thus could be rooted out only using techniques of inquisition.

The notion of messianic time provides the key to understanding this progression toward physical annihilation of the inner enemy.¹⁸ Soviet Communists' sense of history and the present was shaped by a linear, teleological notion of time in which the future was always deferred. Such eternal postponement instilled the morose reaction of many revolutionaries to the concessions of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and drove out many disappointed devotees. But it also permitted officials to show lenience toward social misfits and the opposition. If the moment of perfection was still far away, human weakness had to be expected, so individuals were given additional time to broaden their minds, to perfect themselves.

All this changed, however, once historical time began to move more quickly, after the completion of the first and second Five Year Plans. Contemporaries viewed the Great Transformation (1928–34) as more than the collectivization of agriculture, the massive onset of industrialization, and the killing of kulaks and petty traders. Beyond these dramatic events lay something deeper—massive social purification linked to personal apotheosis.¹⁹ Following the descent of the Party into bedlam, the belief that society was about to shed all class distinctions became linked to the advent of a messianic dynamic in official discourse.²⁰ A bold eschatological diagnosis described the consummation of the revolutionary process as the end of all exploitation of men by men and hence the conclusion of history.²¹ This entailed the erasure of narrative from autobiographies; the transcendence of the body; and a death sentence imposed on metaphor, irony, and wordplay.²²

If internal conflicts and multilayered meanings indicated individual incompleteness, the inhabitants of classless society were of one piece, marked by no lack or deficiency.²³ The mid-1930s portraits of Kazimir Malevich depict individuals “devoid of psychology and selves”; the writings of Andrei Platonov conjure up “entirely new people who can be characterized ideologically, but who lack any trace of distinctive appearance or personal psychology.”²⁴ Stalinist Manicheism had set in: every interior had been externalized, and each comrade's self announced itself absolutely pure or absolutely wicked.²⁵ A line had been drawn; the objective potential of history had been realized; deviants could not be saved.²⁶ Wherever one looks, there is evidence of the assumption that the human subject had reached perfection. Comrades at a Party meeting assumed that self-control was absolute and error impossible, and the NKVD maintained that actions made intentions transparent.²⁷ Analysis could be jettisoned: texts and utterances were self-evident, open to just one interpretation. What had formerly been thought of as slips of the tongue could only be signs of clandestine, subversive intentions.

One might describe the Stalinist discourse of the time as flat, but its apparent simplicity was accompanied by verbosity and obsessive repetitiveness—to

prevent even the remotest possibility of a misunderstanding, the same thing had to be said over and over again. At the same time, discourse became facile: when every utterance has but a single meaning, there is far less to talk about. Announcing their achievement to the world, Communists adopted slogans and clichés. The litmus test of consciousness for Party cadres was no longer sharp argumentation and theoretical acumen but “enthusiasm,” a spiritual state beyond political engagement that borders on bodily rapture.²⁸

Inevitably, some denied the truth, and such naysayers were recognized by all as traitors and double agents. Who in his right mind would reject the Party line and rally around Trotsky, Zinoviev, or Bukharin, those lackeys of fascism and the international bourgeoisie? The interrogators went to work, and the textual results of their efforts piled up in NKVD offices. “Yes,” many confessed, “I planned to assassinate Stalin.” Others confessed to different crimes: “Yes, acting at Trotsky’s behest, I promised Germans (or Poles, or Latvians) the western provinces of the Soviet Union.” But this outpouring rendered itself superfluous because one side of the dialogue, that of the interrogatee, was ignored. Even when his discourse was elicited, it was flattened out and coerced into a preexisting scheme. Torture, mockery, and ritual humiliation were the only ways to communicate with prisoners—truncated forms of address that assume that truth can be imprinted on the other, not imparted to him.

Few questioned Stalin’s claim that behind every error lay a wicked intention. In 1937 financial managers maintained, “Though we used to think that explosions at the oil refineries resulted from neglect, the accused have recently confessed that they were acts of sabotage.”²⁹ Later that same year, a high-ranking Red Army officer noted, “The air force ran into so many difficult situations that the enemy hand must have been involved.”³⁰ War Commissar Kliment Voroshilov admitted that “where I saw lack of resolve [*nereshite’nost’*] and absent mindedness [*rasteriannost’*], conscious counterrevolutionism [*soznatel’naia kontrrevoliutsiia*] was actually hiding.”³¹ The blame for every breakdown lay not with the system, but with the freak chicaneries of wicked individuals. As soon as Nikolai Ezhov was purged, he found himself accused of the same crimes he had blamed on Kamenev and Zinoviev: “The enemy consciously confused everything. Large factories were intentionally stripped of working personnel.”³²

The tenor of Party meetings also changed. In the early years, the sound of laughter often rang out during heated assemblies. Stenograms of Party Congresses from the 1920s record participants quarreling and joking as political and economic questions were debated into the wee hours. How macabre those quips and barbs must have seemed from the perspective of the mid-1930s.³³ After all, many of those singled out for teasing were later executed because of the testimony of their erstwhile comrades. Language realized itself, and threats once made in jest were now taken seriously and acted upon.³⁴

This new transparency also collided with family bonds: love became a cerebral relation, guaranteeing a perfect ideological understanding. Blood loyalty was defunct, and the Party announced that there could be no secrets between spouses, siblings, or parents and children. The sense that time has ended took its toll even on acts of imagination. Deprived of his fantasies, of his desires, the New Man knew no impediment between thinking and achieving. As we shall see, this fantasy of the end of fantasy proved remarkably resilient, the regime eternally on the lookout for those who dared to continue dreaming.

For the longest time, the self baffled the Party. Who truly embraced the Communist message? Who despised it deep in his heart? The inner recesses of the soul were concealed from the official eye, and there was no choice but to listen to what the individual himself had to say about his beliefs and inclinations. Enacted at every Soviet institution, Communist hermeneutics of the self materialized through an array of inquisitorial practices such as comrade trials, rituals of criticism and self-criticism, endless campaigns of unmasking, repeated grilling that tried to get at a suspect's most intimate hopes and inclinations. But under the semantic conditions prevailing during the Great Purge, hermeneutics lost most of its incisiveness. Even a cursory perusal of contemporary Party protocols and NKVD interrogations shows that officials gave up wringing their hands over how to distinguish between the true revolutionary and the impostor—they simply knew.

No longer attributed to objective difficulties in socialist construction or any other external circumstances, political heterodoxy came to be seen as an innate character trait. As such, it must have announced itself at different points in the past. Hence the enormous interest in political biography—individuals had to strain their memories, recalling exactly what they had done during this or that intra-Party battle. Did they say so much as one word in support of this oppositionist leader, or that factionist platform? Investigators went through huge quantities of old files and stenograms to try to find out. This exposed other misdeeds, corroborating current charges, however unrelated. Nearly every Communist who had ever been accused of the slightest political insubordination was now at risk of being placed beyond the pale.

When the case of V. R. Karpov, a prominent Party functionary, was debated at the plenary session of the Central Committee in February and March 1937, everybody agreed that they needed to understand the ontology of Karpov's self:

POSTYSHEV: Here's what I think: during the years of twisting and turning—the period of industrialization and collectivization—some comrades were broken, others remained standing, and still others defected to the enemy. Who would have guessed that anyone who made it through all that would

later join the enemy camp? So now they tell me that Karpov has been in the hands of our enemies since 1934. . . . Personally, I find it hard to imagine changing sides so late in the game. How can you spend the hardest years with the Party and then go over to the Trotskyists? Strange! . . .

MOLOTOV: You think it's hard to believe that Karpov became an enemy in 1934? He was probably our enemy from early on. . . .

POSTYSHEV: Yes, he must have had a worm living inside him the whole time. It first appeared in 1924, or maybe in 1926, or 1930. Hard to say when, but it was definitely there the whole time.³⁵

Karpov's unfortunate attitude was not a late development, only a late discovery.

No algorithm can tell us how the victims of the Great Purge were chosen. One can speak of probabilities: Mensheviks were seized, then former Trotskyists, then former Zinovievists. But the further one goes, the less one understands. Communists with tainted biographies were arrested, but so were revolutionary heroes. Stalin's old foes died, but so did his friends. Many victims had impeccable records. In this modern-day witch hunt, anyone might prove a witch.³⁶ The appropriate term was "enemy of the people," but this did not designate class aliens, oppositionists, or even the already mythologized wreckers and spies. Pragmatics was crucial—the term inscribed a radical alterity onto those excluded from the body politic. As such, "enemy of the people" was neither a term nor a concept, but a set of marks in a signifying chain shaped by the ever-changing context of enunciation.³⁷

Violence occurred routinely in the Communist polity: institutionalized violence, violence associated with the activity of the state, its courts and its military. But the random violence of wreckers and saboteurs could not be contained within the law. And by law I mean here not just the state's juridical framework but also its legitimizing discourse—Marxism with its iron laws of historical development. Communists knew how to speak about the bourgeoisie and kulaks, how to analyze social forces. But when the official language switched to abstract moral categories, objective indicators of identity turned out to be little more than indexes of subjective moral essence; they no longer predicted moral choice, only registered it after the fact. Once the Party came to rely on tautologies to define the good and the bad, it short-circuited the Marxist argument, and all that remained of Soviet sociology was the empty shell of its scientific vocabulary. Too variable to cleave to a single principle, the enemy could not be defined intensively. Might this explain the absence of logic in the Great Purge? A logical foundation would not necessarily have proceeded deterministically, nor would it have absolved Stalin's zealots of their crimes, but without a working definition of who was with them and who against, their descent into murderous chaos was

that much more likely. The internal enemy, that sinister shadow of the New Man, appeared everywhere and everywhere eluded capture. Stalin's pursuit of this creature obsessively reenacted the boundary between inside and outside, loyal comrade and deserter. The source of pollution changed faces, from a kulak to a Menshevik to a former oppositionist to a seemingly ordinary functionary, but always the polluter thrived. As if acknowledging the impossibility of the messianic project, the Stalinist utopia structured itself around an incessant struggle against vaguely specified deadly foes.³⁸

The randomness of the Great Purge, its terrible capriciousness, does not make this phenomenon mystical. If anything, the purge was hyperrational, a result of the ironclad resolve to enfold all reality into the Communist order. The Party's determination to overcome transcendence made language itself messianic.³⁹ In claiming to have described reality fully, language met its outer limits: everything that remained on the outside had to be foreclosed, condemned, and exterminated. Paradoxically, even as it rejected rhetoric, pragmatics, everything that normally alludes to the gap between words and things, the language of Stalinism deployed its performative dimension with a vengeance: annihilation resulted from the act of pointing—a borderline linguistic phenomenon.

Narratives of Guilt

The accusatory characteristic of the language of the Great Purge jumps to the eye when one reads investigation transcripts. In 1937–38, NKVD interrogators gave up completely on any attempt to understand their prisoners, to interpret their actions in light of motives. Only one overwhelming curiosity dominated their line of questioning: whom the prisoner knew, who else could be counted among the counterrevolutionaries. The NKVD's aim could not have been more ambitious: to create a full list of everyone good and of everyone evil.

Within NKVD discourse, it made no sense to distinguish between truth and fiction. Once the revolutionary project was consummated, every thought immediately and effortlessly realized itself. When the desired and the real became indistinguishable, the connection between the potential and the actual took the form of logical necessity—historical materialism extended itself ad absurdum.⁴⁰ The realm of possibility was wiped out—what happened had to happen, and what had to happen happened; one state of affairs became the necessary and sufficient cause of the other. There were no accidents or unpremeditated crimes in the universe of the security organs: all events were conditioned and the chain of causality unbreakable. Once contingency had been excluded as a possible aspect of interpretation, it reappeared as the gatekeeper of language; the limits of language (what had meaning and what did not, what was just and what was unjust, who was to live and who was to die) became arbitrary, a state of things with no motivation or explanation, an extension with no intention.

Now that criminals were believed to have lived up to their potential, the enemy's course of action became predictable—acts of oppositionism, wrecking, and espionage could be foretold. So why should confessions not be prepared by NKVD investigators themselves?⁴¹ The prospective traitor became identical with the real traitor—and it was not that important whether he was caught before or after the act. What mattered was that he had fully exposed the wicked creature he had always been. His counterrevolutionary essence (*kontrrevoliutsionnaia sushchnost'*) had to be urgently drawn out so that additional culprits could be disarmed—hence the exponential growth in the number of files, one person implicating several others. Individualized confession remained the medium of choice: whether actualized or not, destructive urges remained a question of subjective attitude and could be captured through this medium alone. But once the self reached the surface, compositional work was easy.

If the interrogator was thus a soothsayer divining essence, not to say an artist making things up, his creations may be examined in the light of the theory of literature. The countless testimonies stored in the vaults of the archives of security organs emerge as morbid works of art that should be read as one piece instead of being sliced up into “unlikely insinuations” and “tidbits of truth.” A holistic approach that examines the form of prisoners' confessions is in some ways more fruitful than exclusive preoccupation with their content.⁴² The plot is usually ghoulish but abstract—its images are magnified but not developed. This was a work of fictional criminological writing inscribed upon the Stalinist slate. Its wooden character and lack of precise setting reflect the fact that much of the action indeed took place in the chamber of the investigators' minds. Its situations were not ones in which the accused had actually existed, instead based in a world full of sinister connections, ploys, and nightmarish images. The counterrevolutionary plot was thus removed from the ordinary, catapulted into the air of a chilling, if remarkably uninspired spy novel, where the identity of the villain was known in advance.

Interrogation transcripts reveal some core assumptions of Communist subjectivity; dismissing them as meaningless clutter amounts to closing our eyes to a key source of information. NKVD confessions borrow many of their narratological features from Communist autobiographies and should be examined in the light of the evolution of that genre.⁴³ Certain poetic continuities must be accounted for, though differences must also be noted. Both types of documents claimed to tell the truth, both tried to say something about their authors' moral nature, and both were created to be read with the hermeneutical gaze.⁴⁴

Confessional narratives in autobiographical form were not an invention of Ezhov and his NKVD satraps—they were already widespread during the purges of the 1920s, when Trotskyists, Zinovievists, and Bukharinists recanted their sins. But if autobiographical recitals earlier served to minimize guilt, during

the Great Purge they took the form of self-denunciations that ensured condemnation and almost certain execution. “And here I stand before you in filth,” Piatakov stated at the end of his 1937 trial, “crushed by my own crimes, bereft of everything through my own fault, a man who has lost his very self.”⁴⁵

Communist life stories were always fabricated insofar as the author followed the official script and inserted himself into the revolutionary narrative. The author always hoped to present himself in the best light possible, not just to others but to himself as well. But Party autobiographies, pruned of compromising detail and embellished, were true in the sense that the particulars they contained corresponded to reality. One finds in them a certain narratological freedom, but this freedom seldom extends to facts. Filled with accounts of hair-raising crimes, the life stories composed in the cellars of the NKVD bore little relation to reality. Fabrication had become falsification.⁴⁶

As important as it was complex, this ontological and epistemological shift can only be described in fits and starts. In this preliminary exposition of the material, I want to feel my ground through looking at the autobiography composed by a senior Menshevik economist during a trial that took place in 1931, a text that begins as a more or less typical revolutionary account and then swerves into astonishing tales of deception and sabotage.⁴⁷

Party-application dossiers, purge protocols, and other documents preserved in Party archives allow us to identify the genre of Communist autobiography, revealing how the Party autobiographer typically narrated his life up to his moment of rebirth as a process of spiritual growth. The achievement of Communist perfection required an imperfect starting point: an unconscious, ideologically naive state. At the decisive moment, when the autobiographer claimed to have seen the light, his consciousness and the Party line embodying proletarian consciousness merged. Individual thoughts merged with the collective consciousness, individual feelings with the collective unconsciousness. The author in question, Mikhail Petrovich Iakubovich, follows this model but starkly verges from the standard narrative in its contents.⁴⁸ Almost a revolutionary, nearly a Bolshevik, this protagonist chose instead to wage a clandestine war against Soviet power.

Iakubovich related two parallel tales: how he joined the revolutionary camp and how he turned against it: “I joined the Social Democratic Party in 1908, when I was seventeen. My political consciousness was shaped by the revolutionary storms of 1905, but I was also struck by the collapse of the revolutionary element. . . . This political reaction raised doubts in my mind about the odds of deepening the Russian Revolution.” Like his political thinking, his family background pushed him in two directions: “I grew up in a family steeped in the Russian intelligentsia’s tradition of political radicalism, but no one ever confronted the question of class struggle.” Such contradictory influences led to

an inevitable outcome: “During the period of self-determination in the Party, I joined the Menshevik faction.”⁴⁹

Iakubovich remained in the Soviet Union after the Revolution and held top jobs in state trading agencies, but it all felt wrong. Frustrated by being able to rise no higher than the position of “expert,” he considered joining the Bolsheviks in the mid-1920s. But this never amounted to more than a brief political flirtation; when Iakubovich began to avoid his Communist friends, he surrendered all hope of self-transformation.⁵⁰ “I felt lonely,” he declared, “and I began looking for ways to revive my old comradesly ties and friendships. This brought me to the wreckage of the Menshevik party. . . . Gradually, imperceptibly, I was drawn into the atmosphere of antipathy [*nedobrozhelatel'stvo*] to the fabric of Soviet life, its economic and political forms, the methods of Party leadership, and the organization of Party activity.”

“What were the tactics of the resurgent Menshevik party supposed to be?” The autobiographer poses this question in a counterrevolutionary soliloquy. Forgetting that he was no longer living under the tsars, he fell back on old underground habits: “Gathering cadres, aligning their thinking . . . all the while waiting for the fall of the Bolshevik party.” Such admissions would have raised eyebrows anywhere, but let’s not forget that their author was a prisoner. This makes sense of some details: the Menshevik activity foreshadows the later actions of Trotskyist wreckers and spies, apparently a favorite theme among interrogators. And Iakubovich’s aims would have been familiar to any reader of Andrei Vyshinskii’s latter-day declamations: “The demise of the Soviet regime, the establishment of democracy, and the reconstruction of economic life on a realistic basis—in short, a partial revival of capitalism.”

Though his every word conveys a profoundly negative outlook, the narrator restrains himself, waiting for events to unfold on their own: “Mass action was impossible—we knew that the GPU [an early Soviet state security agency] would stop it instantly. So at first the tactics of the social democratic organization were passive, nothing but making contacts between individuals, groups, and cells, and then with the Menshevik center abroad, the ‘Foreign Delegation.’ This tactic made sense given the country’s imminent political change. We had to come to the open political struggle fully prepared.” Nowhere in these lines can one find the typical protagonist of the revolutionary autobiography. Iakubovich is vicious and deliberate; only destruction and treason are on his mind: “How many times did the Mensheviks double-deal during the revolutionary years between 1917 and 1930? Wasn’t double-dealing an everyday thing for them?” Still, the narrative differs from the sort of confession that would come in the Great Purge. Not yet fully convinced, Iakubovich tries to validate his actions in moral and theoretical terms. “It was important to stop the suffering of the working class—doctors sometimes use strong poisons to save their patients.” Such em-

phasis on “psychological preconditions” and the “ideological justification” of an individual’s wrecking agenda would be impossible in 1936–38.

Nor would the typical NKVD transcript of the Great Purge include introspective interludes. “Subjectively,” Iakubovich notes, “I felt like and thought of myself as a revolutionary, even a proletarian revolutionary. But if I ever was one, it was only by fits and starts. I had a shallow political education; I was not trained in Lenin’s party. . . . I was a petit bourgeois revolutionary, a socialist—meaning a pseudo-socialist—and in relation to the proletarian, Communist revolution I was a counterrevolutionary.” And then comes a lament, one that also harks back to the autobiographies of the 1920s: “I’ve realized this all just now, in jail. Understanding came too late, when nothing can be taken back, when I can’t begin my political life from scratch.”

On the other hand, the final part of Iakubovich’s testimony already closely resembles the matter-of-fact depositions promoted by Ezhov. Here introspective ruminations give way to a torrent of dates and names: chronology replaces narrative. It is a legal document we are reading now, not a life story. The reader learns that many experts had been drawn into industrial sabotage, that “bourgeois funds were used to finance wrecking activity.”⁵¹ When the working class persevered despite starvation and deprivation, the final resort of the counterrevolutionaries was “international intervention. . . . The Bolshevik government, this gang of usurpers behaving like oriental despots, had to be swept away.” Iakubovich admits to having given up all of his scruples: “Intervention is a desperate measure to be avoided at all costs, but . . . the economic and political situation could only be fixed by surgery.”

In the ensuing interrogations, Iakubovich detailed the connections between his underground organization and the Peasant Party, as well as other fictional Socialist Revolutionary units.⁵² If conviction was to follow, his guilt had to be individualized. “The wrecking I did in the Commissariat of Trade included reducing the distribution of industrial commodities in the second half of 1927 and early 1928,” he obliged, “and then, in 1928 and 1929, I organized trade crises.”⁵³

This long and detailed account unfolds the nuances of Menshevik political thinking as the Bolsheviks imagined it in the context for the industrial difficulties of the First Five Year Plan and the final delegitimation of socialist parties. But I am interested principally in how Iakubovich’s self-narration bridges the revolutionary poetics of the 1920s and the Stalinist confessions of the 1930s. Alongside the standard revolutionary autobiography—its tropes spiritual development, tribulations and doubts, conversion to Communism—are matter-of-fact, dry references to every imaginable sabotage. Half autobiography and half interrogation transcript, Iakubovich’s text is transitional: the interpretation of events gradually yields to their invention. Ironically, the matter-of-fact

parts of the testimony read as pure fiction, whereas the poetic early parts comprise believable stories of miraculous self-transformation.⁵⁴

To make sense of confessions such as Iakubovich's, their epistemological foundation must be understood.⁵⁵ The questions raised here refer less to knowledge of truth than to knowledge of verisimilitude: a narrated event may not have occurred, but it did belong to the realm of the conceivable. In a way, testimony's reception reveals as much as its production; for my purposes here, when an author is lying, his text is no less significant than when he is speaking the truth. What matters is that what the NKVD forced prisoners to say made sense to contemporaries and was acted on.

Stalinist confessions present a unique combination of form and content; they are literary documents that achieved real-world effects—after all, most of the protagonists were shot based on the stories they told. The testimony of Iakubovich (and his account is echoed in the accounts of Nikolai Sukhanov, Isak Rubin, and other Menshevik theorists prosecuted during the same trial) and many others shows that the study of Stalinist confessions must combine a politico-juridical approach with a literary one. Examining the form of these confessions, their language and style, will unlock the symbolic presuppositions that made NKVD activity sensible and legitimate.

We must move beyond the obvious point that the security organs closed ranks with Communist Party organizations to eliminate resistance and free thinking. More than just a tool in the hands of Stalin, the secret police embodied the revolutionary ethos. This vitiates the view of Genrikh Iagoda's and Ezhov's purges as the terrible outcome of a breakdown in the Soviet legal system. It was not the absence of a legalistic procedure but the presence of a moral agenda—the belief that history needs assistance in separating the good individuals from the wicked—that drove these events.⁵⁶ As I show how security organs reinterpreted the hermeneutical project so dear to the Party, I hope to substantiate my claim that the hermeneutics of the soul preserved its essential traits as it migrated from one institutional setting to another.

A far better introduction to the Great Purge than Soviet jurisprudence proper is provided by the Bolshevik impromptu courts of conscience.⁵⁷ Even a cursory look at the evidence from the early 1930s suggests that purge boards and control commissions were overwhelmed with the work of judging individuals. Party members were “warned,” “reprimanded,” “purged,” and this information was carefully entered in their personal files. While censures carried no legal sanction, it is important to emphasize that grassroots Party meetings shared many of the attributes of an official legal procedure. When a cell discussed an “individual case” (*personal'noe delo*), witnesses were called to testify and adversarial procedures were routine. One or more comrades usually assumed the role

of prosecutors, pressing the accused without mercy. Others assumed the role of defense attorneys. “Final words” were registered in the meetings’ protocols. The hermeneutical procedures on display throughout addressed the heart of the revolutionary project—the degree of the individual’s loyalty to the Revolution. And an unfavorable outcome could be calamitous: those unwilling or unable to shoulder the tasks of human emancipation were disgraced, shunned, and they could expect NKVD officers at their door at any moment.

Only when the Stalinist discourse on culpability is examined in the broader sense does it become apparent why Soviet institutions might rely on a revolutionary “hunch” (*chut'e*), rather than on legal training.⁵⁸ And to the extent that Communists appealed to the criminal code, they had recourse to Article 58, which covered a nebulous crime that might involve just about any words or deeds: “counterrevolution.”⁵⁹ Jurisprudence had no specific arena, no carefully delineated area of application, and it is this that makes the study of the Stalinist notion of guilt so fascinating.⁶⁰ In one form or another, trials permeated all social institutions, from the NKVD and the courts proper to the Central Committee plena, from public rallies with agitated participants yelling out verdicts (“Wipe out Zinovievists from the Face of Earth!”, “Death to the Enemies of the People!”) to more intimate gatherings where friends and colleagues exposed each other as “untrustworthy” or “double-dealing.” Even the diary was a court of sorts, perhaps the most important of them all—it was there that the individual examined his conscience and determined whether or not he was worthy of Communism.⁶¹

The question that animated Party inquiries later haunted courtroom deliberations: was the accused corrigible or irredeemable? Of course, 1936 was very different from 1930: the legal and administrative state apparatus became the place where Communists were judged during the Great Purge because the personal qualities of the transparent subject were now amenable to the jurist’s gaze.⁶² It would be simplistic, however, to say that in 1936 the Party lost out to the legal system. These domains were intertwined in a myriad of ways, and any attempt to disentwine them would oversimplify a complicated picture. If Soviet society had been perfected, legal reforms ineluctably followed: laboratories for education and healing were replaced by juridical and administrative boards, diagnosis by judgment. If at the Party meeting the key question had been the relation between environment and self or between body and self, in court the question was not genealogical but ontological—what is the self of this or that individual all about? Inspired by messianic jurisprudence, the NKVD and the Stalinist court announced that they had solved the mystery of the soul: verdicts became final.

The Discourse of the Purges

Much has been written in the attempt to grapple with the extraordinary set of events called the Great Purge. Studies have examined the power struggles among the Communist elite and the amount of resistance purges encountered.⁶³ Many scholars have asked why Stalin masterminded the destruction of the Old Bolsheviks, who supported him in this morbid endeavor, and whether any leaders opposed the mass slaughter.⁶⁴ By and large, explanations have converged on two basic interpretations: the totalitarian explanation, which blames the Great Purge on Stalin, and the revisionist explanation, which blames the clashes between cliques in the Party elite.⁶⁵

Historians of the totalitarian school focus on Stalin's biography, his personality, and his leadership style.⁶⁶ One researcher claims, "What united all aspects of Terror was their contribution to Stalin's goal of destroying all persons who seemed to represent a potential danger to him or his regime." Others emphasize that the Moscow Show Trials were "basically one-man shows designed to rationalize Stalin's own paranoid tendency."⁶⁷ But why did the scope of the Great Purge expand as industrialization and collectivization wound down? Although the extirpation of proprietary classes and the campaigns against the intelligentsia from 1929 to 1931 may indeed have produced oppositionist outbursts, the paradoxical fact remains that killings increased as the internal security of the Stalinist court improved.⁶⁸ It remains puzzling that a handful of lunatics, with or without a persecution complex, could be the "organizers," "producers," or "stage managers" of a series of events of such magnitude. And even when successfully carried out, the study of personal aberrations gives us a psychological insight, but not a truly historical one.⁶⁹ The crucial problem, namely, how an entire country could participate in one man's madness, is not even posed within the framework of personality studies.⁷⁰

Revisionists quickly identified gaps in the totalitarian view. Breaking away from ideology and psychology, they saw agency in the chaotic and self-divided governmental apparatus. Searching for the key to understanding "the interplay between the political, social and economic forces of which the history of the Soviet Union is constituted," those adhering to the revisionist line of interpretation declare their commitment to explaining the shedding of Party members' blood in the 1930s in terms of "day-to-day, empirical politics."⁷¹ Justly critical of the image of Stalin as mad, however, revisionists unwittingly displace this label onto the Soviet system in general. For them, interest-driven politics shook apart the skeleton of the Soviet polity, returning Russia to a systemic state of nature. What remains is just one more manifestation of a universal, historically generic power struggle—power is always the same power, and the individual is

always the same individual.⁷² While they have taught us much about the Soviet government, revisionists ultimately trivialize what is most important about the Stalinist regime—its murderous character. Wrangling occurs within any government, but it does not normally leave a trail of bodies.⁷³

Because they insist on seeing the Soviet polity as a structure that functioned mechanically, revisionists fail to appreciate how language creates a world for its users. No wonder this school fails to account for purposeful change in Soviet history. A system completely devoid of meaning can change erratically, but it cannot manifest a tendency for self-realization. The year 1917 was not 1927, and 1927 was not 1937: if 1917 brought street demonstrations and public rallies, 1927 initiated unprecedented onslaught on the opposition, and 1937 brought *Ezhovshchina*—by far the bloodiest year of Soviet history in peacetime. Why would violence take a qualitative leap with each revolutionary anniversary? Clearly, the Revolution took regular stock of its achievements and enthusiastically leaped to the next stage of historical development, using violence to propel itself forward.

Stalinist violence cannot be reduced to circumstances. While it is necessary to understand the context in which murderous institutions function, Communist millenarianism—the vision of history as a struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, of good against evil, and the certainty of a positive outcome—predated Stalinism and, as an outlook, enjoyed an independent existence.⁷⁴ Rejecting the position that models the Great Purge on Byzantine court machinations, which turns the Great Purge into a fortuitous interruption of a modern and progressive but unfortunately overheated governmental machine, this study seeks the explanation for the death toll in Communist discourse itself.⁷⁵

Nowhere is the newness of this discourse more evident than in the records of primary Party cells—the base of the Party's institutional edifice. In describing the struggle over the right to belong to the brotherhood of the elect, protocols document the process of elaborating Stalinist identities. Few doubted that workers and peasants had to be promoted, that remnants of the bourgeoisie were undesirable, or that the brotherhood of the elect had to be constantly purified lest counterrevolutionaries thwart the achievements of 1917. But how were identities to be determined? This was a contested issue, its drama conveyed in the transcripts.

But perhaps the most important sources tapped in the present study are the protocols of NKVD interrogations. These blood-chilling documents register with cold impartiality the alleged conspiracies hatched by Communists against Stalin and the Soviet state. Until now most of these sources were off-limits to the researcher, which hardly mattered, since historians who read the little that was available dismissed the contents as useless falsification. Fictitious or not,

however, NKVD protocols amount to a distinct genre of testimony. Looking at both their form and their contents thus reveals important facets of the contemporary perception of the enemy. A list of charges, for instance, tells us how Stalinism was legitimized. The morbidly imaginative ways in which prisoners were tortured and humiliated take us beyond platitudes about sadism to the behavioral grammar of the Great Purge.

The latter part of the present study contextualizes NKVD confessions by looking at recommendations and denunciations, appeals for help and self-reports, all written in a peculiar, Stalinist style. Everything was political during this period: people besmirched those they loved, divorced their loyal spouses because the Party told them to, and paraded their own sinfulness. The book's final section examines Stalinist demonology. Minutes of Central Committee plena and NKVD files reveal how absolute evil was operationalized by interrogators, used to determine who deserved to die and whether such death could serve as atonement.

The bulk of the material examined here comes from the Leningrad Communist University—the flagship of the new, revolutionized education. Located in the Uritskii Palace, the revolutionary headquarters during 1917, the Leningrad Communist University provides us with the unity of time, place, and action necessary for a microstudy of Stalinism.⁷⁶ I rely on the university journal, materials in Party and NKVD archives, and the personal files of leading instructors to bring the school to life. Unlike the traditional academic institutions still very active in the old capital, Communist University consisted almost entirely of the initiated. Only trusted comrades with experience in collectivization or industrialization could enroll; the standards for teaching staff were even more stringent. Red professors distinguished themselves on the local and national Party scene; several were elected to the prestigious Leningrad branch of the Academy of Sciences. Under their guidance, the university Party organization, over a thousand members strong, devoted considerable attention to Leningrad's industrial workers and carried its expertise to the countryside.

The internal structure of Communist University was elaborate: a vast pyramid of student bodies divided into ever-smaller units, with hierarchies of the leaders and the led. Annual student conferences elected a university Party committee; this top group (including ten to twelve comrades) nominated the Party secretary, the head of the university Propaganda Department, and the editorial board of the university journal. But much more effective in observing student behavior were smaller units and subunits—students were divided among a number of “circles” (*kruzhki*), based on year of entry and academic subject. Each circle, consisting of about twenty students, was run by a Party secretary—a student put in charge of discipline at the grassroots level.⁷⁷ Close mutual supervision in these circles established horizontal lines of observation.

At each level—and with ever-increasing vigilance at the lower levels—lines of mutuality were formed; vast examination systems tracked individual academic and political performance. From shaving in the morning to reading an assignment before going to sleep, every action was carried out as part of a collective. Anyone who deviated from this mechanism of mutual supervision would be censored and sometimes even ostracized. It was up to the Party secretary to address a problem, which could involve a report to the highest overseers—the head of the Party organization or even the university rector. This complex pyramid was woven into an even more elaborate structure that plugged the university into the larger Communist Party apparatus. The organization of the Party as a nationwide messianic order thus overlapped with the university, understood as a microcosm of Stalinist power. Through its Party committee and rector, the university belonged to the Smol'nyi Leningrad Party district. Monitoring the behavior of the rank and file and assessing the loyalty of local dignitaries, the district Party committee reinforced the rule of the Party in a descending chain of authority that extended all the way from the headquarters of the Leningrad Party organization.

Homing in on a handful of actors, a few key conflicts, and the rhetoric that linked actor to situation, I examine the nuts and bolts of the Great Purge at the microlevel. At Communist University, the ordinary was extraordinary because individuals and community were seen in the context of the process of accelerated change; everyone was making final preparations for the advent of classless society.⁷⁸ Students elsewhere studied and worked for mundane reasons; here they labored to root out evil once and for all. How did students react to the daily arrests of friends and colleagues? Did they show pity toward victims, or did they demand that the purge be deepened and the last Trotskyist spy brought to light? How were the Show Trials received? Was there praise? Disapproval? Were there alternatives to the official language, in private if not in public, and if so, who promoted them, and how and when?⁷⁹ And what about the attitude toward death, always a touchy subject in messianic times? Why was suicide not considered an honorable exit?

When student strategies of self-presentation and interaction are analyzed, they are found to have intersected with a panoply of issues, ranging from the ideal Stalinist self to the role of ideas, emotions, and humor in political violence. Stalinist political terms became existential coordinates, defining right and wrong, purity and pollution, loyalty and treason. Party members need not be conceived as members of a social or ethnic group, susceptible to the influences of age, sex, and money—the New Man had transcended all these. Rather, the individual emerges here as an effect of linguistic processes: students and instructors existed as agents in the eschatological drama, as actors on the historical stage outlined by Marx. The varieties of Communist identity shifted

constantly: if in the early 1930s students defined themselves by the distance each had to cover before achieving perfection, by the end of the decade they could belong to only two categories, either saved and assigned to the Stalinist heaven or condemned as counterrevolutionaries.⁸⁰

During the Great Purge, students were driven to actions they would not have imagined a few short weeks earlier: groveling before their enemies, denouncing their friends, sending their parents to the scaffold, confessing to crimes they had not committed. Stalinist language bested their wills. Instead of the nitty-gritty, flesh-and-blood details that political historians and biographers often favor, I have here collected words, tropes, rhetoric. Listening to how my protagonists themselves talked about their motives, I flesh out these historical agents in terms they would have recognized.

Needless to say, I do not argue against the existence of historical reality, but I do insist that access to this reality is always already linguistically mediated. The context is in the text, revealing what people could think and say, what course of action they considered legitimate. I turn to additional sources when they are available—public testimony is read against a private letter, a Party decree is compared with its grassroots interpretation—yet these are treated not as hints at hidden circumstances and secret agendas, but as supplemental windows into the linguistic universe. Thus, in my study of students' public speeches, gossip, reminiscences, I examine the how of the narratives they contain, not the why. Juxtaposing a number of different utterances by the same individual—versions of autobiography or confession, recommendations that were retracted and denunciations that came in their stead, expressions of enthusiastic support for a leader replaced by vehement condemnations of that same leader—shows how room for maneuver shrank over time.

Here and there, I draw examples from other academic institutions in Leningrad, Moscow, and—more rarely—the provinces. From time to time, I move out of the academic milieu altogether and listen to such disparate figures as Nikolai Bukharin, Kliment Voroshilov, and Sergo Ordzhonikidze. For a brief moment, the reader might find him- or herself at a Central Committee plenary session, at a convention of the military high command, or in the NKVD dacha. An important point emerges here: the paperwork of the primary Party organizations, the records of deliberations at the Central Committee level, NKVD internal memoranda, and even student letters and diaries all display remarkable similarities. Words, idioms, turns of phrase, even jokes remain almost identical. This interchangeability highlights the versatility of the Stalinist language, its ability to address any audience without losing its internal coherence.

Communist University, like any other Party institution, depended on signals coming down from the top. Local discourse changed abruptly and profoundly every few years in the 1930s (and every few months during the Great Purge), and

these changes did not originate within the small community that is the focus here. Whereas discourse analysis normally rules out a strong, trendsetting center, Communist discourse always had a clear origin.⁸¹ Terms such as “Trotskyist contraband,” “Zinovievist wreckers and saboteurs,” “Fascist-Japanese spies,” and so on, were put into circulation by Stalin and his entourage.⁸²

And yet, the role of the vigilantes reached far beyond obedience: never “passive,” never “taciturn,” they had to show resourcefulness and ingenuity in identifying the enemy.⁸³ Stalin made no bones about their duty in his speech before the military high command on June 2, 1937: “Every Party member has not only the right but also the duty to inform. . . . Signaling must be better developed . . . so that everyone will be looking, noting every shortcoming, every breakdown, seeking the enemy out. . . . Some people think that the center knows everything, sees everything. Nothing of the kind. The center sees only a part; the rest can be seen only on the ground. The center nominates people, but it does not know them one hundred percent. . . . Local people must evaluate them.”⁸⁴

Moscow may have been the discursive trigger, defining the agenda, but the grassroots had to demonstrate zeal in elaborating, expanding on, and improvising the prescribed themes—considerations that justify examination of the Stalinist polity through a discursive lens. The center could invent abstract categories of evil, but the grassroots filled these categories with content. The former did the theorizing, the latter the pointing, repeatedly asking, for instance, that arrest quotas be increased.⁸⁵ Even when the January 1938 plenary session of the Central Committee sent a signal that the vigilance campaign had got out of hand, Leningrad students concluded that “this does not mean that no one should be purged anymore. On the contrary, recent decisions have helped us tell the difference between the real enemies and the phony ones.”⁸⁶ Moscow’s attempt to halt the purge backfired.

All this begs the question of the relation between the subject and the state.⁸⁷ The totalitarian approach speaks about authoritarianism, tyranny, and repression, opposing the omnipotent general secretary and the powerless individual.⁸⁸ The private sphere, the sacred space where one expresses one’s true self, so this line of argumentation goes, was violated and eventually completely overtaken by the state. Individuals were isolated from one another, emasculated and rendered defenseless. No wonder that they turned paranoiac and began denouncing each other.⁸⁹ Revisionists retort that a scenario that emphasizes repression alone misses the mark, presenting official discourse as external to the individual. While it is true that some Party members dreaded a late-night knock on their door, abundant evidence suggests that many were enthusiastic believers in the ability of state coercion to expedite the Communist apotheosis.

My own approach to the problem of agency during the Great Purge arose out of dissatisfaction with the way the individual is treated in historiography.

Questioning the totalitarian interpretation, which ascribes agency only to the peak of the power pyramid, I show that executive decrees were in fact actively embraced by the grassroots. At the same time, I also take issue with revisionist explanations, which focus exclusively on interest as a motivating factor. The forces that brought the Stalinist self into being did not operate from top to bottom or from bottom to top, instead constituting a field of play delimited by a set of Communist beliefs.⁹⁰ Examining how official discourse was appropriated rather than who generated it and why, I want to show that the new conception of the self—hermeneutics, essentializing moral qualities, eliciting confessions, and all—was put to work throughout the Soviet system.⁹¹

But does the view that fuses the student with the state and the subject with his language risk voiding the Great Purge of its most salient features? Does the term “terror” itself—which, as most historians believe, characterizes the period—not posit a certain separation between the individual and the forces that somehow terrorize him?⁹² Whether the atmosphere of the Soviet Union deserves the term “terror” is a controversial issue. According to some, “terror” stands for a “broad use of extralegal coercion,” something the state, appearing as an external agency, does to an individual. Yet there is an apparent contradiction between widespread intimidation of the population and the secrecy that shrouded so many aspects of the Great Purge. The Moscow Show Trials notwithstanding, most trials took place behind closed doors, and death sentences were disguised as “ten years of imprisonment without the right of correspondence.” NKVD cars, called “Black Ravens” in the vernacular, were actually painted in light colors and inscribed with words such as “Meat” or “Bread.”⁹³ Communist students who participated in arrests and investigations signed special papers vowing “to keep silence,” and the NKVD demanded “full and complete preservation of secrecy regarding the time and place of executions” in 1937.⁹⁴ So profound is this contradiction that some have disputed the assumption that people feared the state at all.⁹⁵

Fueled by the new materials constantly pouring out of the declassified Soviet archives, this controversy shows few signs of subsiding. Yet it is far from certain that the problem hinges on evidence *per se* and that archival revelations can themselves set matters straight. Rather, the terminology itself might be reexamined: what exactly do we mean by “terror”? Even if we suppose that Communists indeed feared something, fear in itself is a psychological category that requires closer examination. While human emotions are clearly contingent upon historical context, the assertion that Communists were terrorized by threats of deprivation and death relies on an ahistorical notion of an unchanging, ordinary agent who always desires and dreads the same things.⁹⁶

Commenting on the French Revolution, Edmund Burke points out that terror is a unique state of being that calls forth the “sublime”—that peculiar

human condition that welds fear and exhilaration into one single emotion.⁹⁷ As Burke sees it, the two aspects of terror are intimately connected in that each is prone to veering to its seeming opposite—since every hope carries a fear, and every fear cures itself by turning to the corresponding hope. A group of peasants wrote in August 1937 that “Stalin’s Constitution brought us into a state of euphoria [*vostorg*].” “No country knows so much happiness as the Soviet Union,” others agreed in June 1938, urging the simultaneous “merciless extirpation of the inner enemies who raise their hands against the Constitution’s achievements.”⁹⁸ The writer Aleksandr Afinogenov claimed he was living in messianic times. “Do you want to be a participant in this purpose or an inanimate object?” he asked himself in his diary. The next sentence was preordained: “A participant, of course!” Afinogenov welcomed even the prospect of being crushed by the Party as long as he could contribute to history’s eventual consummation.⁹⁹

Could it not be, then, that Stalin’s disciples were simultaneously thrilled by the prospect of thorough housecleaning and petrified by the fear of being relegated to the camp of the counterrevolution? Such an understanding of terror has the virtue of reconciling those contradictory assessments of the Great Purge that see it as a period marked by either overwhelming trepidation or tremendous spiritual uplift. Indeed, an unexpected, strange, yet ever-present anxiety permeated Communists’ self-presentation at the time. Mandated from above, expected at this stage of historical development, comrades’ confidence in their own purity was never absolutely secure.

Every Communist was supposed to promote the proletarian truth and persecute deviation. Normally, these two imperatives went hand in hand, so that no moral conflict ensued. But doubt sometimes crept into the mind: it could be that certain official policies were profoundly wrong, putting the Revolution into jeopardy. Because no Party member was free of moral responsibility, certain comrades were willing to link their fates to the fates of Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Bukharin. Hardly a self-seeking step—Communists had witnessed too many of their friends purged and exiled to delude themselves as to the chances of success—oppositionism expressed a fundamental anxiety that Stalin was wrong and that later, when the truth came out, those who knew but looked away would be held accountable before history.

The conflict between individual conscience and obligation to the institution of the Party reached a climax with the Great Purge. During this period, Communist martyrology swelled to macabre proportions, as comrades who were somewhat critical of official policies were commanded to denounce themselves. Most agreed to do so, hoping to save themselves and their loved ones or bestowing a parting gift on the Party. Others, a small minority, clung to their personal truth and argued that they would rather die than betray their under-

standing of the political situation, but they too did so for the sake of the Russian proletariat.

By interrogating Communist notions of martyrdom, a different phenomenology of the Great Purge can be constructed. I doubt whether torture and brute external force alone could have yielded such profuse and phantasmagoric confessions. An anxiety that one was a weak, possibly even wicked individual tormented the Communist deep down, sometimes prompting bizarre admissions. Communists feared that they were indeed the wicked enemies their interrogators accused them of being. At least in part, terror was in the soul.