

INDIVIDUAL TRUTH AND PARTY TRUTH

Could two people be more dissimilar than Malinovskii and Trotsky? The first had stolen, lied, and betrayed his fellow Party members for money; the latter had dedicated his life to returning the Party to the truth. Though in 1918 they looked quite different from one another, provocateurs and oppositionists would become, to all intents and purposes, identical by 1936, the year when the Trotskyists were declared subhuman. As it moves from the relatively amicable intra-Party debates of 1918–1921 to the demonization to which the opposition was subjected in the late 1920s, this book documents in detail the process by which these two concepts gradually fused.

In a secret letter circulated by the Central Committee following Kirov's assassination in December 1934, Malinovskii is mentioned in the same breath as the Trotskyists and the Zinovievists who were trying to undermine the Party "from within." Weaving manifold connections between the "liars," "provocateurs," and "Judas-traitors" of the prerevolutionary era and the oppositionists who had allegedly tried to undercut the Party, the letter drew heavily on the concept of the intimate enemy. "It might appear strange and perverse that the role of the agent of terror, the last resort of the dying bourgeois classes, was assumed by individuals who came from our own ranks, but was not Malinovskii a scion of the working class? Was this agent provocateur not a former member of the Bolshevik faction in 1913?" Widely considered the trigger of the Great Purge, the letter, apparently drafted by Stalin himself, was clear: the real enemy had to be sought inside the Party.¹

It is impossible to understand the ferocity of the Stalinist onslaught against the opposition without studying the fear surrounding those Party members regarded as more dangerous than the imperialists, the fascists, or even the White Russian immigrants. Once a legitimate criticism of the Party line, the opposition evolved gradually in the official perception into an act of "apostasy" (*otstupnichestvo*).² As the case of Malinovskii amply shows, the Party suspected its own people from the beginning. If they were pronounced traitors, their fate was harsh. In the early years,

though, the Bolsheviks were largely forgiving. While the population at large suffered immense losses at their hands, Party members were always spared. Almost no blood was spilt in the Party until the mid-1930s, and even Trotsky, who was judged to be a dangerous political instigator, was spared. In the mid-1930s, by contrast, many in the Party expressed an open regret that he was not put to the wall when still within reach. To understand why judgment during the Great Purge (1936–1938) became so severe, why almost every suspected Communist ended up being shot, we have to look into how the Party dealt with its intimate enemies over the years.

An entire vocabulary had to be drawn up to capture the essence of the intimate enemy. In a letter received by the Social Democratic activist Lidia Dan after one of her friends had been denounced, provocateurs were described as “friend-foes” (*drugo-vragi*).³ In the context of the political struggles among Bolsheviks in 1923, there was talk of “the enemy in our own camp” (*vrag v sobstvennoi srede*).⁴ At first, “oppositionist” and “provocateur” appeared to be very different terms, the former indicating ideological apostasy while the latter suggested treason for the sake of treason—yet they shared something important: much like the spies and provocateurs whom Stalin’s henchmen saw everywhere, the Trotskyist “renegades” (*renegaty*) had been born within the Bolshevik camp.⁵

What distinguished intimate enemies from other, more regular foes—the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, liberal political parties—was their familiarity with revolutionary theory, revolutionary practice, and the revolutionary thought process. Such knowledge was reckoned to make the intimate enemies doubly dangerous: the well-meaning but gullible working class could be seduced, lulled by the superficial similarity between the language of the Party and the language of the inner enemy into the belief that the Party’s greatest foes were its saviors. Had not the Trotskyists, for example, toiled to undermine the Party when the conflict with Hitler’s Germany became inevitable? Had they perhaps studied Malinovskii, who had tried to hand over the entire Bolshevik Central Committee to the Okhrana? Trotsky and Malinovskii alike presented themselves as scions of the working class, concerned only about the Revolution—this made them doubly dangerous.

How could an intimate enemy be told apart from a loyal comrade? Might virtuous activists not innocently err from time to time? Ought a single error doom one to being cast out of the Bolshevik brotherhood? In order to be able to tell apart the souls of the befuddled comrade and the true provocateur, the Party developed a quasi-judicial practice I shall call the Bolshevik hermeneutics of the soul.⁶ Because the inner recesses of the mind could not be read directly, the Bolshevik hermeneutics searched for the signs of dispositions that would permit them to gauge the private thoughts of each and every Party member, to “elucidate his or her character, to bring him or her into the open [*vnyiavit*]”.⁷ Consider the following ruminations, from 1925, of a rank-and-file member on the difference between essence and appearance

in the Bolshevik hermeneutics: “In judging people, we Communists should adduce external evidence least of all. . . . Instead we should monitor our comrades’ internal inventory very closely. . . . Indeed, the Party’s first duty is to expose the putrid insides of its members.”⁸

As part of their investigation, the Bolshevik hermeneuts hoped to determine whether subjects acted intentionally or out of ignorance. When an oppositionist decided to recant, he always maintained that he had fallen into error thanks to “ideological backwardness” or “political shortsightedness,” not because of something done deliberately. “There are mistakes and then there are mistakes,” a Bolshevik columnist explained in 1924. “Unintentional mistakes, stemming from insufficient knowledge of the issue or from insufficient attention—this is one thing. But conscious mistakes must be combated with all our might, so that revisionism is nipped in the bud.”⁹ Once one knew why a mistake had been made one knew how to pass judgment. Questions of scientific truth and moral judgment, of consciousness and conscience, were intimately linked.

Without an understanding of the demonizing discourse that elided all differences between the oppositionist, the traitor, and the provocateur, no one can hope to grasp Stalin’s cleansing campaigns, during which the Bolshevik notion of guilt—how it was established and punished—underwent a thorough revision. Over the years, tolerance for the type of defense that presented the accused as a comrade in error shrank and then nearly vanished. To understand this severity, to understand why nearly every Communist suspected of anti-Party activity was purged, we have to investigate the conceptual preconditions framing the Bolshevik search for the intimate enemy.

Despite the outcome of his appeal, Malinovskii’s confession provided the model for the oppositionists’ recantations of the 1920s and the 1930s, including the recantations of those arraigned for the Show Trials. They too confess to terrible crimes, express deep regret over their treacherous thoughts and actions, and go on to declare their undying devotion to the Revolution. On the day of his execution, August 24, 1936, Lev Kamenev, a major leader of the New Opposition from 1925, wrote: “I deeply regret my enormous crimes against the Proletarian Revolution and implore the presidium [of the Supreme Court] to spare my life, if this is not found to be at odds with Lenin and Stalin’s enterprise.”¹⁰ Early in the morning of the same day Grigorii Zinoviev, the other leader of the New Opposition, had scribbled a note, reading in part: “I have told the proletarian court everything about the crimes I committed against Soviet power. I ask you to believe me, believe that I am no longer an enemy and that I want to contribute what remains of my life to the socialist motherland.”¹¹

Coolly considered, Malinovskii’s 1918 trial and the Moscow Show Trials exhibit important differences. For example, while Malinovskii committed many of the crimes attributed to him, the Bolshevik oppositionists were largely innocent.

Threats and, possibly, torture drove Kamenev and Zinoviev to accept the indictment brought against them, but as we have seen, Malinovskii pleaded guilty from the outset. Yet in the context of the Great Purge these distinctions were elided.

If we are to understand how the confessions sounded by Kamenev and Zinoviev could be openly printed and how they could make sense to the Soviet populace, we must consider the genre of recantations that developed during the intra-Party struggles. After each defeat, oppositionists submitted “recantations” (*zaiavleniia ob otkhode*). Addressed to the bureau of the cell, the provincial Party committee, or the Central Committee, depending on the author’s seniority, recantation letters stated that the author disassociated himself from the opposition, regretted ever joining it in the first place, and promised to stick to the Party line in the future. As oppositionists recanted, they typically did their best to show that they succeeded in fully purging themselves of all counterrevolutionary thoughts. Reapplying the poetics of Malinovskii’s defense, a well-executed recantation traced the spiritual history of the offender’s consciousness. The crux of the narrative was the attempt to explain and somehow justify the oppositionist lapse; generally this meant depicting the act of defiance as fleeting. The identification with the position of the Central Committee’s majority allowed the penitent to claim that he had returned to the bosom of Party orthodoxy.¹²

The inquisitorial character of interrogation, so prominent in Malinovskii’s trial of 1918, dominated Soviet jurisprudence throughout. The prosecutors were interested in material facts only to the extent that these could be used as hermeneutical signs illuminating motives, and punishment was tailored to correspond to subjective guilt, not to objective injury. A pardon was forthcoming if Party members offended “unconsciously.” Deliberate crimes, even if they led to little harm, had to be heavily punished.

The Bolshevik comrade courts can be described as legal institutions for a number of reasons. First, they had the trappings of court proceedings: true, there were no official prosecutors or defense counselors, but it is easy to identify individuals assuming these roles as cases were examined by the Party collective. Second, the accused was always present during hearings and was given the opportunity for self-defense. Indeed, he or she had the right to a final word and to an appeal. Third, deliberations always ended with some kind of censure—“reprimand,” “warning,” “purge”—that strongly resembles a court’s verdict. Finally, and most importantly, the procedure was geared to assess culpability.¹³ Party courts sought truth not in the formality of the judicial process but in the acumen of their hermeneuts; but that does not diminish their perception of themselves as judges establishing individual guilt.

The centrality of hermeneutics of the soul to the everyday functioning of the brotherhood of the elect suggests that notions such as revolutionary justice, intra-Party debating, deviation, and oppositionism, to name just a few, have to be exam-

ined against a new background. Events such as the ban on factions in March 1921, Lenin's Testament from December 1922, and the formation of Trotskyism in 1924–1925 will appear in a new light. Stalin's defeat of Zinoviev in 1926 and the purge of the leaders of the United Opposition in the autumn of 1927 also require a fresh interpretation. The protracted contest between the Central Committee majority and the various factions and groupings that challenged it will be shown less as a political battle and more as an ethical agon.

Bolsheviks understood opposition to be not so much a political platform as a spiritual predicament—a dangerous infirmity of consciousness. Because emancipatory truth was supposed to speak in a single voice, to be in opposition to the Central Committee meant to challenge proletarian truth, to become a source of discord in the brotherhood of the elect. “I know one cannot be right against the Party,” Trotsky avowed in 1924, “for history has created no other way for the realization of its right.”¹⁴ Mikhail Pokrovskii agreed three years later that “If in our midst two opinions are encountered, then for us it is completely clear that one of them is undoubtedly wrong. Thank God, all of us are sufficiently Marxists, Leninists, and Communists” to accept this proposition, he noted with evident relief.¹⁵

Given this set of premises, the Party theorists found it difficult to explain how dissent could originate within a Bolshevik soul. How did the Party come to terms with this anomalous fact, the perseverance of dissent inside the Bolshevik camp? The hermeneutical diagnoses evolved over the years until a category was created, not this or that minority platform, not a current of opinion, a grouping, or a faction, but the opposition as such, a source of dangerous contamination that had to be contained. If in the early part of the decade the Party believed it had to cure the opposition, by the end of the 1920s, the opposition was declared to be deliberately treasonous and its supporters were arrested and exiled. During the Trade Union Discussion (1920–1921), support of a minority view was still compatible with Party affiliation, and the term “opposition” was not yet applied to all expressions of political freethinking. Oppositionists were reassured, given advice, and pardoned. Emerging on the scene six years later, the United Opposition (1926–1927), led by Trotsky, Kamenev, and Zinoviev, was already accused by the Stalinist leadership of violating sacred revolutionary principles. Allegedly setting up a second party, an anti-Party that was the Party's sinister shadow, the opposition was held guilty of intentional subversion.

I hope that the motif of the Black Mass—an image turned concept that is crucial to this book's argument—conveys something of the transformation of the opposition from an illness into a demonic crime. Christians described the Black Mass as a carefully conceived inversion of the sacred order. Instead of elaborating an independent set of rituals to suit their faith, Devil worshipers mocked God by styling their worship after orthodox Church rituals. Since it assumed that the Opposition related to the Party in the same way the Devil relates to God, the Stalinist leader-

ship recognized in the nascent oppositionist organization a diabolical perversion of official Party ceremonies.¹⁶ Even as it replicated orthodox Party trappings, the opposition deliberately inverted their meaning: Party cells became “oppositionist cells,” Party conferences “factionalist gatherings,” Party agitation departments “Trotskyist propaganda agencies,” and all of this anti-Soviet activity was masterfully concealed behind emphatic calls for a return to true revolutionary values. Far from being innocuous and well-meaning comrades who temporarily lost their way, the worshipers of the oppositionist Black Mass were proclaimed in the late 1920s to be virulent and dangerous—a wicked cabal that had to be isolated. An excellent indication of the increasing identification of the opposition with the intimate enemy was the condemnation of Trotsky on the basis of paragraph fifty-eight of the penal code, specifically directed against “counterrevolutionaries.”¹⁷

The transformation of the Bolshevik humor during the 1920s—another major theme in this book—gives us an additional angle from which to observe the growing demonization of the opposition. In the early days, bickering at Party congresses included a lot of mockery and ridicule, yet no one behaved as if he was irreparably humiliated. What amused the oppositionists made the Central Committee supporters sulk, and the reverse, but laughter seemed to have relaxed the atmosphere and eased anxieties. In teasing each other and scoffing at each other the contending groupings and factions suggested that the Bolshevik camaraderie remained intact. Since at the early stages no supporter of Trotsky or Zinoviev was indeed treated as an inveterate counterrevolutionary, speakers were clearly not attributing a serious meaning to these labels.

But the Bolshevik humor also had a more and more sinister ring, one that was amplified with the intensification of the intra-Party struggles. If in the early 1920s Party meetings devoted a great deal of energy to assaying different interpretations of revolutionary language, towards the end of the decade speakers were more and more interested in claiming they were the ones who incarnated that language. Debate over interpretation allowed for dialogue and persuasion, but there could be no compromise over who personified revolutionary lore. When the mirroring logic obtained and the warring parties made identical and yet mutually exclusive claims, the blows they exchanged struck more fiercely. The anxiety that the working class might be confused by the similarity of languages and mistake the wrong side for its true spokesman provoked some nervous giggles, not a hearty laughter. Humor became derogatory, completely indistinguishable from malice.

How could the oppositionists themselves make sense of their heterodox, defiant stance? Did they not agree that there could be only one truth and the Party was supposed to speak in a single voice? And if so, why would they willingly take on themselves the role of pollutants, the source of dissention in the proletarian camp? An inquiry into the Bolshevik ethics might hint at an answer. The Bolsheviks defined their moral worth through their individual response to the Party’s emancipa-

tory call: the truthful identified fully with the laws of history and yoked themselves to the revolutionary project.

What mediated between individual truth and collective truth and allowed the brotherhood of the elect to function was Lenin's famous principle of "democratic centralism" (*demokraticheskiĭ tseĭtralizm*)—the alpha and omega of Bolshevik political theory and practice. "Democratic centralism" involved the election of officials responsible for running the Party's affairs but excluded the possibility that the decisions made by these officials would be challenged. The governing body was elected on a democratic basis. From that point on, however, centralism applied: everyone had to comply with the governing body.¹⁸ The tension between the democratic and the centralist tendencies inherent in democratic centralism created the discursive space for the opposition phenomenon. On the one hand, opposition was abnormal since it went against centralism; on the other hand, opposition was a necessity because it instigated the democratic debate crucial for the hammering out of the Party line.

According to the Trotskyist narrative, opposition to the Central Committee had its origins in the safeguard of values that were supposed to be the concern of every Bolshevik but were for some reason neglected, or even betrayed. In such cases, dedicated comrades were supposed to prefer their consciousness to institutional authority: elections and support of numbers proved nothing since, according to the first principle of democratic centralism, the opinion of every comrade had to be reckoned with.

Had the opposition ranked comrades' individual judgment over the judgment of the central Bolshevik institutions? Was every comrade supposed to act as his own Party? Time and again, we will see the opposition throwing full responsibility for political judgments back onto the conscience of the individual. Time and again, oppositionist groupings would argue that in times of crisis, regular authority had to be replaced by charismatic authority. In 1904 Trotsky pointed to the tension between discipline and consciousness that cropped up in democratic centralism: "If the minority is compelled to violate what the majority calls discipline because it suppresses the vital interests of the movement, only one conclusion is possible: to hell with such 'discipline'!"¹⁹ From this followed the first systematic defense of the right of the minority. "If a number of us in the Party have a separate point of view, we, the minority, will organize into a force," even if this meant doing away with centralism. Truth was more important. Trotsky asked:

Is it so difficult to understand that any movement obliged to choose either silence and self-obliteration for the sake of discipline, or a struggle for existence, will take the second road, so long as the movement is even slightly serious and important? This is so because discipline makes sense only when it secures the ability to struggle for what we think is right. . . . In the last eventuality, the representatives of the heretical current (*kramol'noe*

techenie) either bring about a schism in the Party, thus rating discipline for the sake of their own principles above the “principles” of formal discipline, or they remain in the Party and try to . . . maximize their freedom to resist what they believe to be detrimental tendencies.²⁰

Far from being a prerevolutionary idiosyncrasy, this defense of individual self-expression found support among a number of Bolshevik leaders, including Trotsky’s opponents after 1917. Speaking in the name of Workers’ Opposition, Aleksei Kiselev, a trade union leader, set truth before discipline at the Ninth Party Congress (1920): “There is a tendency on the part of our centers to diminish, weaken, and destroy the thinking of the Party’s grass roots. . . . This is too bad: there are moments when an expression of independence [*samostoiatel’nost*] can play a decisive role in history.”²¹

During the New Course Discussion (1923–1924) the tensions within democratic centralism surfaced again. Still a majoritarian, Kamenev stated in a speech given on January 1924: “There are comrades who believe that . . . the line of the Central Committee is wrong. Do they have the right to think so? Yes, they do. . . . And the one who thinks that the Central Committee line is wrong must, of course, begin an attack on the apparatus that implements that line.”

A voice cut in: “So opposition is possible?”

“Of course it is possible,” Kamenev answered.²²

Trotsky, by then already an oppositionist, agreed: “A Bolshevik is not merely a man of discipline: he is a man who in each case and on every question forges a firm opinion of his own and defends it courageously and independently, not only against his enemies but also within his own Party.”²³ Finally there was Lenin’s widow Nadezhda Krupskaya, who reminded the delegates at the Fourteenth Party Congress (1925) that “for us Marxists, truth [*istina*] is what corresponds to reality,” and that “there have been congresses in which the majority was in error.” Individual responsibility in the pursuit of truth could not be overestimated: “Precisely because the congress must be the expression of collective thinking, every delegate must evaluate every question himself.”²⁴

Within the framework of democratic centralism, there could be no strictly constitutional solution to the crises of authority engulfing the Party from time to time. Trotsky, Kamenev, and Krupskaya could always beseech a comrade to trust his consciousness rather than his Party secretary, urge him to act in the name of revolutionary justice as he saw it. Oppositionists of various stripes claimed repeatedly that no one could predict who, of whatever status, would turn out to be speaking the proletarian truth.

So often did the interrogations of oppositionists return to conflicts between epistemological individualism and Party authority that this tension must be treated as the book’s main axis. In the earlier chapters, we will see the Party attempting to

negotiate the tension between the consciousness of individual members and its institutional structure without sidestepping “Party regulations” (*partiinyi ustav*). The Central Committee accepted a modicum of criticism; the opposition, for its part, bowed before the decisions of the Party congresses. Later on, however, a group of oppositionists felt compelled to break out of the institutional straitjacket by asserting the priority of their consciousness over what they perceived to be the degenerate Party leadership. A watershed in this connection was the readiness of some supporters of Trotsky to accept the title “oppositionist” as their own (1926–1927) and create an alternative political organization: they preferred to release the anchor of the Party, guaranteeing their collective emancipation, in order not to violate their own conscience.

Bolsheviks could not conceive of themselves outside the heroic framework of action, which initially involved a readiness to sacrifice one’s life for the Revolution.²⁵ During the underground period (1898–1917), all Bolsheviks were heroes of sorts: did they not give up their personal security and the comforts of cozy bourgeois life for the sake of justice and equality? Were they not ready to rot in Siberian exile or even lose their lives in the battles of the Civil War so that the proletariat won? More than any other motif, “self-sacrifice” (*samopozhertvenost’*) featured in their self-presentation. Once tensions within the Party surfaced, and especially as the persecution of critics of the Central Committee began, the more radical among the oppositionists took on the colors of martyrs. Zuev, a student at the Tomsk Technological Institute, was described in 1927 as a “typical oppositionist, one affected by the spirit of heroism and selflessness [*samootverzhenmost’*].” Chastised for his failure to report the wide dissemination of oppositionist literature at the school to the authorities, another oppositionist, Gorsunov explained that he was ready to risk everything “for the sake of the Revolution.” According to the official report, one oppositionist at Leningrad Communist University had the temerity to present herself as a “martyr to the truth.”²⁶

Standing on the side of discipline, the majoritarians mocked such heroic posturing. The oppositionist, wrote Vasili Slepko, a prominent youth activist, in 1926, “is always pompous, always messianic. He who betrays the proletarian cause always claims that he will save that cause, that he and he alone represents the interests of the proletariat.”²⁷ Emel’ian Iaroslavskii, one of the heads of the Party’s ethics police, was “scarcely inclined to kowtow before . . . the oppositionists’ supposedly heroic, critically thinking personalities.” Iaroslavskii ridiculed oppositionists’ attempts to cover “a petit bourgeois deviation . . . behind their big names and their past revolutionary achievements.”²⁸ Under this onslaught, the opposition asserted even more fiercely its right to the mantle of true Bolshevism.

There were many important disagreements within the Party over the course the Revolution should have taken. The wrangling sides agreed on so many common premises, however, that I will focus not only on the fierce debates separating

the sides but also on shared premises. This search for discursive cohesion involves a partial erasure of the political persuasion of this or that comrade and the specific ideological context in which he spoke in favor of treating the fundamental discursive similarities and repetitions that outlined the accepted preconditions of speech. No one wanted to give up his membership in the epistemologically omnipotent proletarian vanguard, and everyone was fond of characterizing his rival's position as "unscientific," "backward," and therefore illegitimate. Stalinists and their rivals agreed that the proletariat was the sole arbiter of truth and that only Party members could speak in the name of the revolutionary movement as a whole. When viewed from this perspective, the opposition, in all its manifestations, hardly seems to be the comprehensive conceptual alternative to Stalinism it has been called.²⁹

While some historians ask their readers to believe that the study of archival materials would convince anyone that "all that could justly be criticized in Stalinism had already been stated by the Communist oppositionists,"³⁰ and that "a Trotsky regime would have been much less hard on Russia,"³¹ I will show that the examination of recently unearthed documents suggests that the presuppositions on which the opposition's argument was founded did not deviate in its core assumptions from what is normally identified with Stalinism. Both the Central Committee majority and the opposition maintained that there was only one path to the light and only one platform that could show correctly what that path was—and claimed that the adversary undermined proletarian emancipation. The belief in the singularity of history explains the refusal of the sides to compromise. The battle between the oppositionists and the Stalinists was then hardly a savage repression of the conscientious, democratic part of the Party by the merciless and totalitarian part. What really happened was more like two heroic groups, the supporters of the opposition and the supporters of the Central Committee, involved in simultaneous self-fashioning in a hall of distorting mirrors: self-representation, the transmission of that image to the other, and a reflection of the image in aggrandized, distorted form. "Two rival and quasi-messianic beliefs seemed pitted against one another," comments Isaac Deutscher.³²



Focusing on the form of Bolshevik politics, not its contents, I have not set out to document the secret history of the Politburo, Lenin's illness and the fierce succession struggle that followed, or to review the Byzantine intrigues that accompanied Stalin's rise to power. Little space will be dedicated to economics, international relations, the army, propaganda, and so on. I do not say much about why the Bolshevik debating evolved so that the opposition was delegitimized over the course of the 1920s but only trace the linguistic shifts that heralded this process.

Is it possible to discuss the Bolshevik discourse of the 1920s without incorporating the social context into analysis? Political rhetoric may be important, some

scholars would say, but it does not exist in a vacuum and does not operate independently—language is spoken by living people with their own backgrounds, interests, and circumstances. However, my analysis does not presuppose the existence of a multilayered social structure so that language somehow expresses the social interests lurking behind it. Instead, I treat language as a constitutive force that brings society into being in the first place. I show how the meaning of political language was activated by other meanings and how political behavior was modified in and by the political process itself.³³

In fact, a question mark might be put before the notion of society itself—the sacred cow of so much historiography.³⁴ For society is too often interpreted as something fixed, a field where social agents vie for power and privilege. No matter how fluid and heterogeneous society is, or how complex and conflicted its constitutive components are said to be, society remains a totality in such accounts. According to this approach, the historian is supposed to place himself, at least temporarily, outside the society he studies and examine it dispassionately from an external vantage point. While some scholars tend to ignore the fact that society is not a reality but a construct—a discursively mediated notion that never fully actualizes itself—I suggest that many imaginary societies coexist within a single political discourse hoping to be realized, and that the historian cannot, and should not, totalize his knowledge.

While the surge in intra-Party violence has been studied within the context of Soviet economics, politics, and society, I suggest that this phenomenon is better addressed through the examination of a set of messianic ideas and practices that the Russian Revolution implemented. By examining how the revolutionary discourse was embodied, put to work, and contested at the various levels of the Party apparatus, I hope to transcend the reductive understanding of language widespread in current scholarship. Sidestepping high politics and the decision-making process within the Bolshevik elite, I focus on how the official discourse—the language and ritual of the Communist Party in the 1920s—was appropriated at the grassroots level.³⁵ A series of microstudies undertaken below enable me to examine the daily interactions between the Bolshevik rank and file, provincial and central Party organs, and official discourse on the opposition. The archives unfold before us the minutes of endless discussions, edifications, and heated arguments, as well as a series of autobiographies and recantations in which individuals spoke about themselves, their values, and their opinions openly and in great detail.

Drawing material not only from the minutes of the Moscow Party congresses but also from institutions of higher learning in Petrograd-Leningrad and Siberia, the focus below will be on how ideology was interpreted by the grass roots, not on how Party policy was conceived by the center. While I do not ignore the peculiarities of the regions from which the material is taken, my aim is to provide a set of microstudies—not regional studies. Rather than comparing specific geographical

areas and their social relations, I intend to examine the ways in which Bolshevik political identities were negotiated in specific arenas—imagined communities in the process of self-purification.

What follows, then, is not a history of the Party, its institutions, personnel, and internal politics, but what might be termed an archaeology of the Bolshevik discourse on the opposition.³⁶ I am interested in the particular sets of practices and language games that brought about and assigned to Party members different subject positions and that claimed to adjudicate who is playing by the rules and who is not, who should be promoted as a loyal Bolshevik and who should be cast out as a repeat offender.³⁷ “Party Discussions”—the official deliberating periods that preceded a Party congress—are treated here as an institutionally embedded ritual filled with rhetorical maneuvers, innuendos, victories, and losses.³⁸ My analysis takes the form of an interactional ethnography of the ways of speaking that were used by Party members in enacting their encounters and in which they mutually construct their political identities.³⁹ And politics emerges as a discursive enterprise, a struggle over the coining of political terms, their interpretation and embodiment. I am interested here not in the why of Soviet history but in the what and the how—not why certain things happened to certain oppositionists at certain times but how the opposition was construed and how it was treated.⁴⁰

Nowhere is the work of the new discourse more evident than in the Party meetings—the base of the Bolshevik institutional life and the main source for the present study. In describing the struggle over who gets to implement Party policy and how, protocols document the process through which new political rituals were constituted and elaborated. Every Party meeting, not only at the central Party congresses but also at the primary Party cells, was carefully recorded by a stenographer. These thick folders contain a considerable number of transcripts, sometimes a number of pages long. Many of the turbulent and intense beliefs of the revolutionary era emerge from these transcripts, which were abbreviated and condensed by the stenographers to keep up with what must have been very animated and contentious debates. The attentive student of these records soon becomes familiar with the language Bolsheviks used in addressing each other and can trace fine shifts in terminology. The transcripts detail the perceptions of comrades and foes, trust and suspicion—I sometimes feel I am reading not Party documents but the field notes of an anthropologist.⁴¹

Remaining at the level of the phenomena, I treat the language of these transcripts with utmost seriousness. The reader might in fact be struck by a certain congruence between Bolshevik metahistory and my own reconstruction of Soviet history, for I argue that the Bolshevik perception of their own historical conjuncture—where they were in their revolutionary quest and what had to be done to bring it to conclusion—had very tangible effects. Indeed, what drives events forward in both narratives—the principles of eschatological time reckoning—appears

strangely similar. Of course, such an approach stands the risk of being dismissed as historical naiveté: taking what he finds in the archive at face value, the historian, so the charge would go, does not approach sources critically. Focusing on what the archive reveals, he is blind to what the archive supposedly conceals—intrigues, passions, real people. Should we not assume that, at least from time to time, documents mean something other than what they say? Is there a point in writing history, if we do not distinguish between saying and meaning, the statement and the intention behind it? No wonder that historians who adopt this interpretative skepticism tend to pride themselves on the distance they achieve vis-à-vis the source base they study. It is true that I am reluctant to employ a principle of historical causality extrinsic to the one used by the Bolsheviks. It is equally true that I take very seriously not only what contemporaries were doing but also what they were saying they were doing. Indeed, instead of establishing a critical distance from the Soviet sources, I opt for a good measure of intimacy with them. The Bolshevik language, as it were, contaminates my narrative.

It is my claim, however, that the approach I take has its benefits: by remaining at the level of the contemporary discourse itself, I am trying to show how discourse operates and with what consequences. An effort is made herein to transcend the self-understanding of contemporaries by showing that these consequences were unknown to those who “spoke Bolshevik.”⁴² Neither language producers nor language consumers are always fully aware of what is implicit in the language they use. What is often said of human economic and social activity can also be said of language, namely, that language use has unintended results.⁴³ The Bolsheviks ended up committing hair-raising acts that they hardly expected would follow from the humanistic principles that, they were convinced, shaped the revolutionary project. But once entrenched in the tissue of power relations that structured the Bolshevik discourse, providing it a frame of reference and setting standards of conformity, messianic dreams could not be easily curbed, even when some of their horrific implications became evident.

To be sure, human intentions and a certain manipulative approach to language cannot be completely ignored—Party members used language as a tool to achieve their goals.⁴⁴ At the same time, it is imperative to penetrate their language and make it, as it were, speak against itself. Certain slippages are symptomatic because intention is always subverted. We do not have to postulate some kind of a radical separation between identity and discourse against which the speaker was constantly dissimulating. Rather, the forces that shaped the Bolshevik public sphere constituted a field of play delimited by a set of beliefs and practices. The speaker was neither an actor essentially possessed of agency, nor a puppet of language. And agency was produced in the course of practices under a whole gamut of more or less explicit disciplinary constraints.⁴⁵ There can scarcely be an identity outside language: I discard the notion of an agent whose sense of selfhood remains unchanged to advance

the notion of a self that comes into being in different ways, depending on a changing linguistic context.⁴⁶

If historians have in the past been inclined to view the human species as a given, explaining differences in terms of reactions to varying social, political, and cultural contexts, recent research suggests that subjectivity can be a fascinating agenda of research in its own right.⁴⁷ No longer must we imagine a universal self putting on a range of disguises based on its environment; revolutionary discourse helps the self reflect upon itself, articulate itself, and assume its concrete outline.⁴⁸ The identity of the Bolsheviks examined over the course of this book becomes a locus of discourse, not of a fixed selfhood.⁴⁹ Because the self is always in flux, constantly reinvented, the personal narratives are treated below as something that encompasses radical discontinuities and ruptures. Self-presentations constantly changed not because Bolsheviks were exceptionally self-seeking and opportunistic, but because at moments of crisis the revolutionary discourse called on them to rethink and retell their life stories, adding new insights into why they behaved the way they did.⁵⁰ No one entered the 1920s as a Trotskyist, a Zinovievist, or a Stalinist. Individuals emerged as such following long and complicated negotiations, sometimes embracing their new identity, other times forced into it.

Verbal formulas are voiced below by rather abstract name-bearers, usually without first names and almost always also without intentions, material circumstances, and so on. To identify the oppositionists in personal terms I have to rely on the biographical information my protagonists provided to Party authorities and to their peers and the denunciations their opponents launched against them. Unfortunately, we simply do not have a broader spectrum of documents pertaining to the lives of our protagonists.⁵¹ On a deeper plane, however, I want to emphasize that it is futile to search for the oppositionist's true self or to attempt to return his voice to its pristine condition—one cannot escape the filter of the official language that produced the voice in the first place. The context I am interested in is in the text—the discursive presupposition of the protagonists' speech. What I emphasize is not personal background and interests but the rhetorical strategies historical figures employed, the institutions and rituals they enlisted to have their definition of reality prevail.⁵² To the extent that biographical information is treated here, it is regarded as a discursive category, a part of an already existing though never stable regime of self. What is important is not whether this or that figure revealed the truth about his life according to our present-day criteria, but how and why the genre of recantation and the ritual of the hermeneutical interrogation constructed every deposition as the revelation of an interior truth.

Diverse institutions and practices that went into the Bolshevik hermeneutic of the self allowed the creation of pragmatic typologies that made it possible to distinguish between the good and the wicked, the loyalists and the oppositionists. The Party cell was a place of systematic and coded observation of the individual

—a practice informed by the ideological propagandist, the medico-psychological expert, and the judge. The general framework of this enterprise remained remarkably stable over the years—Party hermeneuts always obsessed by the relations between errant comrades and wicked foes. The same fundamental question that animated comrade trials went on to haunt the Party's Central Control Commission's hearings, and prosecutors might have phrased it thus: Is the accused corrigible or irredeemable? But if we are to account for the changes that did occur between 1918 (the first cleavages in the Bolshevik government) and 1928 (Trotsky's forced exile) we must look within the discourse itself, and there we find that as the Bolshevik perception of the present evolved, hermeneutical judgments became harsher and harsher. At first the opposition was construed as an illness to be healed; by the late 1920s it became a wickedness that had to be extirpated. Stalin's apparatus diagnosed opposition as a hopeless mental predicament, one that transcends a political position *per se*, and assimilated it into the stereotype of the intimate enemy, along with Malinovskii and the rest of the traitors who threatened to undermine the Party from within. Guilt was relocated from a person's background and upbringing to the heart of his being—the moral self.