

# **Crimes against humanity under communist regimes**

## **Research review**

Klas-Göran Karlsson and Michael Schoenhals.

ISBN: 978-91-977487-2-8

Crimes against humanity under communist regimes.  
Research review.

Forum for Living History 2008.

Authors: Klas-Göran Karlsson and Michael Schoenhals.

Layout: Hampus Brynolf  
Print: Edita, 2008

Forum for Living History  
Box 2123  
103 13 Stockholm  
[info@levandehistoria.se](mailto:info@levandehistoria.se)  
[www.levandehistoria.se](http://www.levandehistoria.se)

ISBN: 978-91-977487-2-8  
© Forum för levande historia 2008

# CONTENTS

<b>CONTENTS</b>	<b>3</b>		
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>4</b>		
Terms	5		
Terms of reference	6		
New trends in research – three analytical perspectives	8		
<b>RUSSIA AND THE SOVIET UNION</b>	<b>9</b>		
Soviet communist criminal history	9		
The Red Terror	10		
Dekulakisation	12		
The terror famine	13		
Gulag	14		
The Great Terror	15		
The 'punished peoples'	18		
Anticosmopolitanism	19		
Sources and archives	20		
Four paths to knowledge	22		
Conquest	23		
The source and archive revolution	24		
The academic debate	26		
The three paradigms	26		
Totalitarianism	27		
Research practice	28		
Revisionism	29		
Research practice	31		
Postrevisionism	33		
Contradictions and paradoxes	36		
Victim studies and microhistories	38		
The cultural change	41		
Memories of the terror – reception history perspective	44		
Paradigms and transitions	46		
Comparing communism and Nazism	48		
Difficult questions and limited research	49		
Good and bad intentions?	50		
Three comparative perspectives	54		
A historical platform	56		
		A totalitarian platform	60
		A reception history platform	63
		The People's Republic of China	67
		Consolidation of the regime (1949-1953): 'Suppression of counterrevolution'	68
		The hunt for 'internal enemies' and 'rightists' (1954-1958)	73
		The 'Great Leap Forward' (1958-1961)	76
		'The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' (1966-1976)	81
		<b>CAMBODIA</b>	<b>88</b>
		Criminal history of Cambodia	88
		Background	89
		Mass violence and its mechanisms	90
		The old against the new, rural against urban, utopia against history	92
		Ethnicity and race	93
		The end – and the beginning	93
		Sources and archives	94
		The academic debate	95
		A totalitarian regime	95
		A peasants' revolution	97
		A genocidal society	98
		History and culture	99
		Reception history	102
		<b>SUMMARY</b>	<b>103</b>
		The official history and the scientific interpretation patterns	104
		Paradigm shifts	107
		Future research	110

# INTRODUCTION

KLAS-GÖRAN KARLSSON

This report is an analysis of research carried out on crimes against humanity perpetrated by communist regimes. Michael Schoenhals is responsible for the section on research on the Chinese regime's crimes against humanity. Klas-Göran Karlsson wrote the other sections. The report has been drawn up for the Forum for Living History, which in turn has been tasked by the government with 'elucidating and informing on communism's crimes against humanity'. The report is not only meant to document the development and front lines of research. It should also function as a basis for a more extensive and outward-focused information initiative from the Forum. Furthermore it should, as noted in the guidelines, 'analyse the need for additional and advanced research and, if necessary, initiate such research'. In terms of the need for research, the final section points out areas that have not been researched in depth and that have the potential to offer new knowledge and perspectives. However, the initiation of such research is outside the reasonable remit of a report writer.

This research review does not claim to list all research on the communist regimes' crimes against humanity. Bearing in mind the large number of books written on Soviet communism in particular, and on the terror of the last decade in the West and in post-Soviet Eastern Europe, this would be an impossible task. Rather, its purpose is to identify and analyse the main lines of research as they have appeared and been developed, primarily in the leading academic publications of recent decades. These publications have mostly been written by historians, but also by representatives of other humanities and social science disciplines, and in some cases also by authors and other intellectuals with no direct link to the academic community. The review will include publications in the Scandinavian languages, English, French, German, Russian and Chinese. A research review such as this must make mention of some of the fundamental questions of scientific and historical theory on the nature of scientific knowledge and on the driving forces of history, not as a goal in itself, but placing these questions in their historiographical and analytical context. One idea is for these main outlines to be illustrated empirically, through concrete analyses

of how they are manifested in leading academic works. Bearing in mind the controversial nature of the area of research, issues relating to the sociology and politics of science cannot be omitted from the analyses.

The research review is organised as follows: After this introduction, there is an analysis of the terms that may arise and that have been used in research to classify the crimes of the communist regimes: terror and genocide are discussed as well as crimes against humanity. This is followed by a discussion of the terms of reference that are both necessary and desirable in a scientific study of this nature. One important issue here is that of which regimes and countries should be placed in the focus of historiographical analysis. Other terms of reference relate to the chronological scope of the review, its thematic scope, and its comparative perspective. Thus far, the question of comparative perspective has primarily concerned the sensitive issue of the extent to which the criminal histories of the Nazi and Soviet communist regimes can and should be compared.

The research review will then focus on the crimes against humanity committed by three communist regimes – the Soviet Union, China and Cambodia. Each country and each criminal history is discussed individually. Introductory sections will describe the actual crimes committed and identify perpetrator groups and institutions as well as categories of victims. The underlying circumstances and mechanisms of the crimes will also be analysed. Within this chronological context, the most important research problems and areas of conflict will be pointed out. Following short reports of the situation in terms of access to relevant documentation and source material, there will be detailed analyses of the research carried out and research in progress on the crimes against humanity perpetrated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the communist regimes selected. The key themes of each criminal history, as presented in the most prominent national and international research literature, will be exposed and analysed. On the matter of Soviet terror – undoubtedly the most extensive and well-developed area of research – it is

possible to identify three well-defined schools of thought or paradigms, which correspond to different conditions in terms of societal development, development of scientific theory, and access to relevant source material. It is also justifiable to devote particular attention to the crimes of the Soviet communist regime, as the crimes of the Russian Bolshevik and Soviet communist regime came first and as such, were the most 'original'. The section on the Soviet Union will also cover how research has tackled issues relating to the relationship between, on one side, Stalin, Stalinist communism and the Gulag, and on the other side, Hitler, Nazism and Auschwitz. As such, the classic debate on totalitarianism will be reviewed, and new research efforts on totalitarian societies will be presented. A reception historical perspective will also be laid out: How have the societies affected by large-scale crimes against their own citizens been affected by these crimes? How have they dealt with them with the benefit of hindsight?

In the final chapter, the analytical threads are drawn together. The summary serves as a background for reflection on weaknesses and shortcomings in the research carried out so far, and for a number of personal wishes for research in this area, which could realistically be carried out by the Swedish academic community.

## Terms

First of all, it should be noted that the phrase 'crimes of communism' can be misleading and has been replaced in this research review with the phrase 'crimes of communist regimes'. Ideologies are systems of ideas, which cannot commit crimes independently. However, individuals, collectives and states that have defined themselves as communist have committed crimes in the name of communist ideology, or without naming communism as the direct source of motivation for their crimes. Thus, the communist ideology is not an actor that can perpetrate crimes against humanity. However, it can legitimize and has de facto legitimized the perpetration of crimes by placing these crimes in the context of a viewpoint that has rendered them understandable, acceptable and even necessary and good for large groups of the population. Even for later generations who have sought to defend or mitigate the judgement of past crimes, the communist ideology has functioned as a tool for modification of criminal history. Adherents

to the ideology have used it as a source of ideas that dress historical events as 'objectively' regulated by law, which means that 'victims' along the way towards the ideal communist society can be viewed as both necessary and legitimate.

The term 'crimes against humanity', used in the formulation of the title of this review, has been in use for a hundred years and is used in international legal and political discourse to describe the Young Turk government's brutal treatment of its Armenian subjects during the First World War in the declining Ottoman Empire. It was codified for the first time thirty years later, in the statute that formed the legal ground for the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg following the Second World War, and was then broadly defined as 'murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against civilian populations, before or during the war; or persecutions on political, racial or religious grounds...'. This definition is very similar to the one in the 1998 Rome Statute, the treaty that has regulated the International Criminal Court (ICC) since 2002<sup>1</sup>.

This broad definition has the advantage in this context that it covers all the widely varying types of inhumane actions carried out by communist regimes against their own people, and the various underlying mechanisms and motives. It is particularly 'practical' that political motives are mentioned explicitly, since this can be applied to the communist regimes' persecution of opposition groups. As we know, the idea that victim categories can be defined politically is not compatible with the UN Genocide Convention, since the communist Soviet Union and its satellite states in Eastern Europe opposed this development in the political process that led to the adoption of the convention<sup>2</sup>. The fact that victims' 'racial' attributes are mentioned in the Nuremberg Statute affords the opportunity to link in with a modern academic debate on categories of victims, or rather, on the correctness of the established notion that the victims of the Nazi holocaust were determined by race, while the categories wiped out by the communists were

---

<sup>1</sup> For the text of the Rome Statute and an analysis of its origins, see Bring 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Kuper 1981, pp 24–27.

determined by class. However, the Nuremberg Statute's characteristic linkage of 'crimes against humanity' to civilians and impending or current war situations must be toned down, since the crimes against humanity of communist regimes were not solely carried out in the context of war situations. However, it is relevant to give a general description of the communist-run societies of violence that were highly militarised and permanently prepared for warfare.

'Crimes against humanity' is the overall instrument of analysis used in this report. Nonetheless, in the actual analysis, this is supplemented and objectified using other appropriate and established crime classifications, primarily genocide and terror. In the UN Genocide Convention, the concept of intentionality – the specific intent to commit genocide – is a key condition for the recognition that genocide has been committed and the retrospective punishment thereof. However, in scientific terms, there is often good reason to soften the intentionality perspective and broaden it to include functional reasoning, in which genocide is presented as a 'cumulative radicalisation' of societal development characterised by military mobilisation and asymmetrical power relations. Another key point is that genocide is the killing of a category of people selected primarily on the basis that they – through race, ethnicity, nationality or religion, according to the Genocide Convention – are judged to belong to this category, and not because its members are judged to belong to political opposition movements or to be suitable for slave labour. Terror is a broader and less precise type of violence, referring particularly to the often unsystematic and arbitrary use of violence by individuals, groups or states, with the purpose of striking terror into a society. The fact that terror can be used in a 'didactic' way, to intimidate and educate in order to force a desired social change, can be seen to a high degree in the actions of communist regimes.

'Crimes against humanity' is a linguistically and logically cumbersome term when the aim is to analyse physical violence perpetrated by individual groups, institutions and states against specific victim groups in their own country, which is essentially the case in the context of communist regimes' crimes against humanity. In addition, it is not in keeping with the terms that have long been used by the academic community. Naturally, the work of creating an

inventory includes examining the terms used in practice by researchers in their analyses, and it is reasonable to assume that every time, every society and every paradigm has its own terms to refer to the crimes of communist regimes. Nonetheless, it is possible to establish at this early stage that researchers have long used the word terror to describe the crimes of the Soviet communist regime, regardless of the framework of interpretation to which they adhere. Although the extent to which the mass operations and forced deportations of specific ethnic groups ordered by Stalin before and during the Second World War can be defined as genocide is debated, there is agreement among researchers that the term 'terror' is the best reflection of the development of violence in Bolshevik Russia and in the communist Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin. As a result, terror will be the term most frequently used here in analysing the Soviet communist criminal history.

On the other hand, the term terror is seldom used to describe the mass killings in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, which may be because it is less clear that the actual intention and stated motive of the Khmer Rouge was to terrorise people into submission. The term genocide, however, is relatively widely accepted and established in describing the systematic and selective crimes of the communist regime in Cambodia, although the use of this term is not entirely uncontroversial. Therefore, in analysing the criminal history of Cambodia, this term will be used in precise contexts dealing with the killing of a category of people, whereas more neutral terms such as mass killing and massacre are used to refer to the general use of violence. The terminology used in the Chinese criminal history is dealt with in detail as part of the section on China.

## Terms of reference

One important aspect of this kind of piece of work is setting sensible delimitations. There are four specific problems in terms of setting delimitations, which need to be solved in a satisfactory way. The first concerns geographical scope, in other words, which communist-led countries should be covered by the review. History hardly offers any example of countries that are or have been led by communist powers that have retained respect for human rights as defined in the UN Convention on Human Rights, but it is possible to say that crimes against humanity are or

have been committed in countries like North Korea and Cuba? The question is worth some discussion in the light of the research that is available, but in this context focus will be placed firmly on three communist-led countries where there is no doubt that crimes against humanity have been committed by individuals, parties and states that have defined themselves as communist: the Soviet Union, China and Cambodia.

The second delimitation problem is chronological. Where and how did the historical process begin that was to lead to communist regimes committing crimes against humanity? Did it begin with Marx and Marxism, or when Marxism took root in Russian ground and was remoulded to conform to Russian political culture, or when Lenin and the Bolsheviks carried out their coup d'état in Petrograd on 7 November 1917, or when Stalin began the major, radical Soviet revolution in the early 1920s? If these crimes are an integral part of the modern project, for which there is much evidence in modern research, what marked the beginning of the unbalanced Russian modernisation process that was to have such terrible consequences? These questions are in one sense academic, since this review concerns the development of research, and the simple answer is that it depends what the research says on these issues. However, in reality it is not this simple, since it all depends on where we decide to look, based on our prior understanding. This is a problem that cannot be solved once and for all. It is clear that the question of how the communist utopia metamorphosed into a dystopia cannot and should not be ignored, especially since well-argued texts such as François Furet's *Le passé d'une illusion* (1995) have been devoted to this question. However, the focus here, in terms of Russia and the Soviet Union, will be on Lenin and Stalin's periods in power, characterised as they are by a fateful structure of ideological struggle, revolutionary pathos, hunger for power, total war, modernist zeal, and crimes against humanity.

There is another chronological delimitation problem at the other end of the timeline. The end of the periods of physical crimes against humanity can be established relatively accurately, but recent research has given much attention to the reception history of these crimes. What have been the fates of surviving victims of these crimes, and how have they dealt with their memories? How have the crimes committed

been dealt with retrospectively, by the surrounding world and the offending society, in collective memories, monuments and myths? Can past unsolved crimes against humanity form the basis for new ones, as in the case of Chechnya, where historical memories function as ammunition in current conflicts and crime situations? It is impossible to separate such questions from the crimes themselves. Questions like this form an integral part of the research carried out on crimes against humanity perpetrated by communist regimes, and as such they will be mentioned in the report. The fact that they form an integral part is established not least by the reception historical nature of the task at hand: creating an inventory of how research, in varying conditions and with different results, has interpreted and represented the criminal histories of communist regimes. Such questions are also important in information and education activities, not least because they show why issues relating to crimes against humanity committed by communist regimes continue to be relevant and important issues for research and debate to this day.

The third delimitation problem concerns the scope of this review. 'Crimes against humanity', as defined in the Nuremberg Statute, relates to physical activities aimed to harm and dehumanise their victims. Research relating to these activities, their mechanisms, intentions and motives, and their actors, perpetrators, victims and witnesses, will of course be presented. What, however, are the outer limits of the context of these crimes, in a communist state structure where different institutions and social bodies are linked in an overall framework? Could issues concerning education, language and the situation for women form part of the context? Such aspects may seem far-fetched, but modern research devotes a significant amount of attention to issues relating to the social and cultural conditions of crimes committed in communist societies. The question of what people read and sing in a society like this relates to how those in power in communist regimes legitimised their criminal activities, and to how ordinary people handled their fear and insecurity. Such aspects, propelled by the linguistic and cultural 'u-turns' that have taken place in human and social sciences in the last two or three decades, now stand out as invaluable advances in research. However, for purely practical reasons, it is necessary to be strictly restrictive in relation to the hundreds of biographies

that have been written on the communist leaders who carry the ultimate responsibility for the crimes committed. The same is true for the extremely extensive and ideologically biased discussions on the number of victims. Only the overall trends will be dealt with here, linked to various frameworks of interpretation and schools of thought.

The fourth and final major delimitation issue relates to research on different crimes perpetrated against humanity. One problem here is how to portray the relationship between the communist systems and the crimes, and another, which may be the problem that stimulates the most discussion and agitation, relates to the connection between communist and non-communist crimes against humanity. There are several factors indicating that research on the relationship between Nazi and Soviet communist crimes against humanity should be commented on. This is partly because more and more research reports on this comparative theme are being published. It is also partly because it is clear that analyses of the similarities between Nazi and Stalinist atrocities committed during the same era in societies with similar characters and with political leadership that had many features in common, as well as of differences between them, could add to our knowledge of crimes against humanity committed by communist regimes. It is not necessary to compare things that are identical, nor things that are entirely dissimilar, but anything in between can have its contours sharpened through comparison. Comparing two things is not the same as saying they are equal. However, works relating to the terror, genocide and crimes against humanity of modern society in general terms will necessarily be dealt with extremely restrictively. Exceptions will only be made for works that clearly have a bearing on communist criminal history and that the academic community accept as being related thereto, such as Zygmunt Bauman's *Auschwitz and the modern society* (1989).

### **New trends in research – three analytical perspectives**

A research trend can be analysed in a host of different ways, depending on the theoretical starting point and area of interest. Attention can be focused on the intra-scientific process, or on the relationship between the research and external change factors, or on ideological shifts and political transformations.

Interest may focus on the researchers and the scientific works that introduce the new trend, or on the process by which this trend is disseminated and gains support in the academic community. The following describes three ways to illustrate and analyse new scientific trends that include these earlier perspectives.

A *cumulative* perspective means that bricks are laid on top of one another in an additive and quantitative sense. Early research on communist countries was often of this nature, as a result of the fact that these societies and states were closed. Researchers had to make do with fragments of knowledge, often information of an official nature, which made the research process into something of a jigsaw puzzle. Over the last two decades, conditions have changed radically for research on the Soviet Union and its satellite states. This means that researchers have been able to work cumulatively to fill gaps in their knowledge on issues concerning the crimes against humanity perpetrated against different groups of victims and in different regions in Lenin and Stalin's Soviet state.

In an *evolutionary* perspective, research is moved forward by rejecting 'antiquated' and 'obsolete' scientific interpretations, which are replaced by new interpretations that are thought to concur more fully with the historical 'reality' or with the relevant framework of interpretation as described by the appropriate authorities. Both these aspects apply to research on the crimes of communist regimes: improved access to relevant archives means that there is now much better expert knowledge on their criminal histories. At the same time, the major shifts in post-war scientific development in the 1960s and 1970s from history of political events to sociohistorical structural history, to what has in later years been called the linguistic and cultural turns of research, also clearly reflected in research on communist regimes.

A third, *revolutionary* perspective means that research and its conditions are radically and thoroughly altered, often as a result of an 'exemplary' scientific work that leads to a change of perspective in major research groups. A number of works of this nature will be identified, also in earlier research. In the context of the crimes of the Soviet communist regime, British historian Robert Conquest's books on



the Great Terror 1936-1938 and what he called the 'terror famine' in Ukraine 1932-1933 will be analysed, not only because they have long been viewed as an authoritative interpretation of a factual sequence of events, but also and primarily because Conquest's interpretations have had such authority that all other

researchers in the same area have had to take up a position in relation to his results. The different schools of thought to which researchers belong have largely been determined by their position on *The Great Terror*.

## RUSSIA AND THE SOVIET UNION

KLAS-GÖRAN KARLSSON

### Soviet communist criminal history

Early in the morning on 19 January 1918, with the help of soldiers loyal to the Bolsheviks, Lenin dissolved the inaugural assembly who had gathered in the Tauride Palace in Petrograd to elect a parliament for the new Russia, which was to replace the old Tsardom. The reason for this was that the Bolsheviks had not succeeded in mobilising enough popular support in a democratic way. No blood was shed during the action, however there was bloodshed in the unrest before and after the meeting was dissolved. There was no Soviet Union and no Russian communist party at this time, since the Bolsheviks did not take this name until more than a year later. Nonetheless, there is good reason to take this as the date of birth of the Soviet communist terror system.

In Russia, which was rechristened the Soviet Union in 1922, the all-powerful communist party and the Soviet state were to perpetrate crimes against groups of their own population over the next thirty five years, on a scale that is without historical precedent for an individual state. In a protracted and total internal war, millions of people lost their lives, not only in executions and through the inhumane conditions of life in prison and labour camps, but also through forced deportations and famine created or worsened by a regime that wanted to retain power and recreate society – and to begin with, the entire world – literally at any price. The ends were thought to justify the means, or, as expressed in 1919 in the magazine of the Ukrainian

security police: "For us, everything is allowed, as we are the first in the world to raise the sword not to oppress and enslave, but to liberate mankind from its shackles".<sup>3</sup>

Those who stood in the way of this double goal of winning power and radically transforming society – or those who were thought to stand in the way – were called *byvsjje ljudi*, or people of the past. This was a generally accepted term which was meant to indicate that these people were connected with the old regime and stood in the way of the communist society, which mean that they could be characterised as lacking the right to exist. However, a surprising number of 'people of the past' of aristocratic origins were forced, and managed, to create an existence after the revolution, in the grey area between memories of the past and the stigmatisation and demands they faced in the communist society, while others emigrated or were arrested<sup>4</sup>. The ideological term was flexible enough to be able to be used for anyone who, despite not having roots in the tsarist system, discovered that the Soviet state was not the utopia people had hoped for, and tried to oppose it<sup>5</sup>.

This statement of intent does not mean that the leading figures of the Soviet communist regime, Lenin and Stalin, literally signed the death sentences of all the victims, rather that they, through their political leadership, laid the

---

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from Werth 1999, p 116.

<sup>4</sup> Chuikina 2006.

<sup>5</sup> This term is investigated further in Viola 1993, pp 65–98.

foundations for the practice of violence that was to penetrate all levels of the Russian and Soviet society. However, many acts of violence were ordered directly by the communist leaders, and were carried out by the terror institutions created by Lenin in conjunction with the Bolshevik seizure of power in November 1917: the secret police, the Red Army, a system of concentration camps and a legal system based on paragraph 58 of the penal code on various types of anti-Soviet activities<sup>6</sup>, revolutionary courts that judged on the basis of a 'proletarian' definition of justice, and show trials. Neither does this mean that the Soviet communist criminal history was uniform during this long period. The types of expressions of violence, victim categories and the underlying mechanisms altered in line with the major changes in the internal and external situation in Russia and the Soviet Union, from the 'Red Terror' of the early years to the 'Great Terror' of the Stalin era, and to the forced deportations of the 'punished peoples' during the years of the world wars.

The main outlines of this many-faceted history will be sketched in the following section. The idea is not to present new information on or interpretations of Soviet communist terror, but to offer a brief chronological description of the key events, processes and trends in the criminal history, along with a basic analysis of the driving forces and causes, which will hopefully serve as a background or context for the research review that is the main purpose of this report.

In this context, the date of the end of the Soviet communist criminal history has been determined as 5 March 1953, the day of Stalin's death. This is not without its problems. After this date, the Soviet regime did not lead the country and its citizens with respect for human rights as defined in the UN declaration from December 1948. However, the communist powers of the post-Stalin Soviet Union did not perpetrate any crimes that can be unequivocally described as crimes against humanity. In the satellite states where Soviet-led communist

parties took power after the Second World War, there were purges, and mass violence was directed against the former leadership and against specific ethnic groups and other actual or alleged opposition groups, although not to the extent of the purges in the Soviet Union between 1918 and 1953. In late 1952, Stalin carried out what would be his last major crime, the execution in Moscow of the 13 Jewish doctors who, according to the Soviet leader, has sworn an oath to murder him. At the same time in Prague, the trial of the Jewish former party chief Rudolf Slánský and 13 other leading communists, ten of whom were Jewish, began. Eleven of the accused were sentenced to death. The accusation was that they had plotted to kill the first president of communist Czechoslovakia, Klement Gottwald, with the help of 'doctors from enemy circles with dubious backgrounds'<sup>7</sup>. However, it was not doctors with Jewish backgrounds, but the Soviet advisor to the Czechoslovakian secret police, who ensured that the terror was not limited to Lenin and Stalin's Soviet Union. However, the focus of this research review will be on the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Soviet regime within the Soviet state.

## The Red Terror

Over the course of 1918, mass violence escalated in a Russia hit by war, revolution, famine and collapse, which Lenin and his party had taken power over in the previous year. At this time, the Bolsheviks' position in power was far from secure. Their enemies, representatives of the Tsar and opposition parties, men and women of the church and the more affluent farmers who were called 'kulaks', were stigmatised as 'class enemies' or 'socially dangerous persons', and were persecuted to an increasing degree. Representatives of socialist ideas and parties that were not judged to be Bolshevik were hit hard. Uprisings in rural areas and demonstrations and strikes in the cities were met with violence. The death penalty was reintroduced, after having been abolished by the Bolshevik party in early 1917 when the Tsardom was toppled, and society was militarised both organisationally and linguistically. Problems with food supplies were to be remedied

---

<sup>6</sup> This penal code was not abolished until December 1958. It is quoted in translation in Conquest 1971, pp 486–490.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Brent & Naumov 2003, p 191.

using a 'war communist policy', the main thrust of which at this time was that farmers who refused to hand over food supplies to poor starving farmers in rural areas and workers and soldiers in cities (the main power base of the Bolshevik party) were hit by reprisals from the 'food patrols' that were sent out by the government.

Using terror, which seemed to Lenin and his aides to be a legitimate and indeed necessary policy, enemies of the revolution were to be forced to capitulate to the revolutionary power. The methods were executions, arrests and taking hostages. Extensive amounts of documentation exist that show that leaders of the Bolshevik party were prepared to annihilate all who were deemed to pose a threat to their position of power, and that terror was openly promoted as an effective tool of power<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, the fact that this mass violence was seen as a passing and revolutionary phenomenon is shown by the 'extraordinary' nature of the first communist terror organisation, called by its acronym, Cheka, a commission charged with neutralising counterrevolution, speculation and sabotage. However, the fact that it was 'extraordinary' also meant that the terror campaigns that the organisation carried out were run entirely without legal ground and outside the control of all except the highest ranks of the Bolsheviks. In the summer of 1918, Lenin ordered the local Cheka members in Yekaterinburg to execute the Tsar and his family. Only days later, an attempt was made on his own life, after the assassinations of several other leading Bolsheviks. At this point, the social unrest and violence in Russia was already on its way to full-blown civil war between the 'red' adherents of the revolution and the 'white' supporters of the toppled Tsar's power.

The assassination attempt on Lenin marked the start of more organised and systematic use of mass executions, detention in newly created concentration camps, and other terror activities directed against 'counterrevolutionary' forces. This Red Terror, which was to include strengthening the work of the Cheka, isolation of class enemies in

concentration camps, execution of all those with 'white' relations and publication of the names of all those executed, was ordered by the Soviet government in a decree issued on 5 September 1918<sup>9</sup>. Both sides of the Russian civil war resorted to extreme brutality in their struggle for power. While the 'whites' persecuted individuals and groups with 'Jewish-Bolshevik' sympathies in pogrom-like activities, the 'red' Bolsheviks saw enemies of the people and anti-revolutionaries in more or less all political and religious groups and social categories. Post-revolutionary Russia was a society at war with itself.

Some groups were hit particularly hard and uncompromisingly by the Red Terror, although there is no clear-cut evidence that they belonged to the 'white' side. Rebellious 'green' farmers, who protested against both forced requisition of grain and forced conscription to the Red Army, were met with extreme violence throughout the period of 'war communism'<sup>10</sup>. The same was true of the Cossacks of the Don and Kuban regions, whose villages were destroyed and whose inhabitants were killed or deported. This deliberate plan to 'decossackise' rural Russia – historian Bent Jensen points out that the term is reminiscent of 'delousing' and other mechanical destruction processes<sup>11</sup> – claimed between 300,000 and 500,000 victims<sup>12</sup>. It was also a step on the way to larger operations to 'dekulakise' the same areas, carried out by the communist powers less than a decade later, not least in the sense that it divided victims into categories of 'rich Cossacks', who were to be exterminated altogether, and 'middle Cossacks', who were to be scared into submission using appropriate means<sup>13</sup>. A third vulnerable group in atheist Russia was the clergy, monks and nuns, who were killed or imprisoned by

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf Pipes 1992, p 789ff, Pipes 1996.

---

<sup>9</sup> "Postanovlenie SNK RSFSR o 'krasnom terrore'", published in Kokurin & Petrov (eds.) 2002, p 15.

<sup>10</sup> They were named the 'green' farmers because they hid in the forests. See Osipova 1997, p 167.

<sup>11</sup> Jensen 2002, p 63.

<sup>12</sup> Werth 1999, p 116.

<sup>13</sup> See the order of the Central Committee issued on 24 January 1919, published in Danilov & Shanin (eds) 1997, pp 137–138.

the thousand during campaigns against church and religion carried out by the regime<sup>14</sup>.

There are no reliable figures available for the total number of victims of the Red Terror. This is due not least to the difficulty of distinguishing terror victims among the several million people who were killed in the Russian civil war or who succumbed to the severe famine that hit Russia in 1920 and 1921. In 1921, the Russian civil war ended with a communist victory, and the terror lessened, although it did not cease altogether.

The following period between 1921 and 1928, characterised by a spirit of compromise and christened the New Economic Policy (NEP) by the history books, turned out to be a temporary ceasefire in the ongoing conflict between the regime and Russian society. Many communists, particularly young member of the Komsomol, were profoundly indignant that the confrontation policy of the civil war period had been abandoned, and demanded a return to what they perceived as the core of a communist policy<sup>15</sup>. Before the cerebral haemorrhage that was to end his active life, Lenin adopted several measures that were to facilitate the return of terror on a grand scale. With the Soviet leader as its driving force, a new penal code came into force in 1922, under which 'counterrevolutionary crimes' were given a much broader and more developed meaning than in previous years. The same year, the Cheka was replaced by a permanent secret police force known as the State Political Directorate or GPU, which was placed under the People's Commissariat for Interior Affairs, without any major personnel changes. This measure was an expression of the intention to make political violence into a permanent instrument for the communist regime's dictatorial leadership of the Soviet society. The other Soviet terror institutions that were to succeed the GPU had the same function – the OGPU, NKVD, MVD and KGB. Several experts on early Soviet society have underlined the fact that the country that was named the Soviet Union in December 1922 was already strongly characterised

by a culture of political violence with roots in the Bolshevik exercise of power and the Russian civil war. More controversial is the question of whether the NEP was a route that could have led away from this society of terror, or whether the civil war and Bolshevik policy had already limited the possible routes to what Donald Raleigh, in his study of the south-western industrial town of Saratov during the civil war, has described as "no real alternatives to a Stalinist-like system"<sup>16</sup>.

### **Dekulakisation**

The continuation of the violent use of power also became clear when the farmers' agricultural deliveries to the state began to decrease in 1928, despite a good harvest. For Lenin's successor Stalin, who had strengthened his position of power at the expense of other would-be leaders, and who benefited from a much more stable economic and political situation than during the civil war, this constituted a reason to declare war on the agricultural class once again. This time, it was not enough to confiscate grain and pit rich farmers against poor farmers. Instead, Stalin enforced a social and economic revolution that put Lenin's 'war communism' in the shade. One aspect of this revolution was state planning of the economy, and another was accelerated industrialisation. The third aspect concerned changes in rural society: individual farmers were to be removed from their land to establish gargantuan collective farms - 'kolkhozes' and 'sovkhozes' – in order to give the government direct control over agricultural production. An integral part of this agricultural policy was what Stalin described in 1929 as an ambition to 'liquidate the kulaks as a class'.

In fact, all these aspects of Stalin's revolution were closely interlinked: Market forces were to be eliminated by the introduction of economic planning, farmers' land was to be expropriated and deported farmers were to be forced into tough

---

<sup>14</sup> Figes 1998, pp 745–751.

<sup>15</sup> Gorsuch 1997, pp 564–580.

---

<sup>16</sup> Cf Raleigh 2002, p 409. In 1994, chapter 8, Richard Pipes calls the NEP a 'false Thermidor' in order to underline the fact that this period of Russian and Soviet history, in contrast to post-revolutionary France, could not be described in terms of moderation and liberalisation except in an economic sense.

forced manual labour in peripheral and inaccessible parts of the Soviet territory, according to prearranged plans and established quotas. Soviet economic planning was therefore highly dependent on forced labour, and required a regular supply of new slaves. Society was to be mobilised and disciplined using economic means, regardless of the human cost. A law passed on 7 August 1932 made all kolkhoz property, including livestock and the grain in the fields, state property. Misappropriation of these goods was punishable by death, or if there were mitigating circumstances, ten years in prison and loss of all personal property<sup>17</sup>.

Collectivisation of agriculture and dekulakisation, which reached their peaks between 1929 and 1933, claimed millions of lives among the agricultural class. In accordance with a regulation drawn up by a commission within the Central Committee in early 1930, the kulaks were to be divided into different categories, depending on the degree of resistance to collectivisation they were judged to have displayed<sup>18</sup>. Some of them were executed immediately, but many more were subjected to forced deportation, often to special kulak settlements in inhospitable, uninhabited areas. Lack of coordination between the links in the deportation chain led to extreme hardship, not least for the families and children of the kulaks. According to Russian researcher Zemskov, during the most intensive period of dekulakisation in 1930-1931, 381,026 kulak families or 1,803,392 people were subjected to forced deportation. When the authorities counted the number of dekulakised in 1932, the official figure was 1,317,022<sup>19</sup>. This does not mean that half a million people died during the deportations or upon arrival to the deportation destinations over this two-year period,

since it is likely that a significant number of those who were fit and healthy managed to escape. Another Russian researcher, Ivnitsky, claims that in the special settlements to which many kulaks were sent, more than 100,000 people died in 1930 alone<sup>20</sup>. As has been mentioned, the deportations formed part of a centrally organised campaign, but the actual responsibility for arresting and deporting kulaks lay with local three-man committees, known as troikas, who did have central quotas to meet, but who also sometimes used their responsibility to settle conflicts in their local societies or to exploit the situation purely for their own benefit.

It was not only the agricultural class who were affected by the return to terror campaigns around 1930. *Spetsy*, groups of 'bourgeois' specialists with their roots in the administration and commerce of the Tsar period, were made scapegoats not only for the hatred of the Soviet society's 'people of the past', but also for the widespread fear of a war against the West. In May 1928, over fifty mining engineers from the Shakhty region in Donbass faced trial in Moscow for having sabotaged equipment and for being in the pay of Western powers. This was the first in a long series of show trials against well-educated groups in industry and science. At the same time, the communist regime made great efforts to create a new 'red' technocratic intelligentsia, who could fulfil the functions of the old specialist groups in the drive towards industrialisation, through investing in education and promoting social advancement.

### The terror famine

In 1932 and 1933, the Soviet Union was hit by a severe famine that claimed more than six million lives. It differed from the famine that hit Bolshevik Russia in 1920 in that it was not recognised by the authorities, and no international help was allowed access. Instead, the Soviet Union continued to export grain throughout the years of famine.

---

<sup>17</sup> "Postanovlenie TsIK i SNK SSSR 'Ob ochrane imushtjestva gosudarstvennyh predpriyatij, kolchozov i kooperatsii i ukreplenija obshtjestvennoj (sotsialistitjeskoj) sobstvennosti'", published in Danilov et al. (ed) 2001, pp 453-454.

<sup>18</sup> "Projekt postanovlenija Politbjuro TSK VKP(b) o likvidatsii kulatjestva kak klassa, podgotovlennoj komissiej Ja.A. Jakovleva", published in Ivnitsky (ed) 2000, pp 123-126.

<sup>19</sup> Zemskov 1991, pp 3-20.

---

<sup>20</sup> Ivnitsky 2000, p 27. According to Ivnitsky 1994, p 257, over 2 million people were deported to special settlements between the years of 1930 and 1933. This figure does not include farmers who were forced to move within their own regions. See also Davies, Harrison & Wheatcroft (eds) 1994, p 68.

Ukraine was the Soviet Republic that was worst affected, but fertile agricultural areas in other parts of the Soviet Union were also affected since these areas were under the most pressure from the food seizure campaigns directed against the kolkhozes. The small harvest in 1931 and 1932 made the demands from the state unrealistic, and brutal methods were used in order to tackle the 'fight against sabotage'. In addition, when the famine was looming, one escape option that had been used on a grand scale in 1920 was no longer available: taking refuge in the cities. This was because the Soviet leadership introduced domestic passports in December 1932, along with requirements for registration of all city residents, in order to limit migration from the kolkhozes. In practice, this was a major step backwards towards the feudal system that Tsar-ruled Russia had abolished seventy years earlier.

The causal relationship between the major upheavals in rural Russia and the crop failure and famine is thus quite clear: the Soviet regime's deliberate work to eliminate the traditional agrarian structure, disperse the kulak families that had been the most productive, and confiscate the harvests of the kolkhozes, led to a major food shortage. Somewhat less clear is the conclusion drawn by the 1988 US Congress commission on the Ukrainian famine, which, with strong backing from Ukrainian-American organisations, maintained that the famine was man-made and that Stalin and his closest advisors were guilty of genocide against the people of Ukraine.<sup>21</sup> This view essentially concurred with the interpretation expressed by Robert Conquest a couple of years earlier, although he placed more emphasis on Stalin's guilt for not intervening to eliminate or alleviate the famine.<sup>22</sup> One point of controversy is whether it really was a planned and deliberately created 'terror famine' or an unintentional and 'natural' famine, combined with policies that recklessly prioritised other areas, in particular the expansion of heavy industry.<sup>23</sup> Another question is whether the victims should be

defined first and foremost in ethnonational terms, as Ukrainians, whose alleged nationalism was a thorn in Stalin's side, or in class terms, as the farmers that had long been the main enemies of the communist regime. Conquest does not take a clear-cut stand on this question, but refers to Stalin's own simple solution to the problem: "The nationality problem is, in its very essence, a problem of the peasantry."<sup>24</sup>

## Gulag

The system of concentration camps that the Bolsheviks began to construct as early as 1918 was not only intended for the political opponents of the regime. During the first decade or more, the idea of penal labour went hand in hand with a didactic notion that individuals, through hard work in labour camps, would be encouraged to become good communists. However, when the more extensive camp system of the 1930s was filled with kulaks, political opponents of the regime, clergy, criminals and 'ordinary' citizens who had fallen victim to an increasingly indiscriminate wave of repression, it was not the re-education aspect of the camps but the economic aspect that was most prominent.

In gigantic camp complexes, often but not always situated a long way from densely populated areas, prisoners were to contribute to the modernisation of the Soviet Union through working in primitive conditions to build canals and railways, extract gold, clear forests or break virgin soil and mine coal. Even technologically and scientifically advanced activities took place in special camps, particularly during and after the war years. Moscow University and the capital city's subway system were also the work of camp prisoners.

The decision by the Politburo on 5 May 1930 to begin building a canal between the White Sea and the Baltic Sea with 19 sluices, using forced labour, was a pilot project on a colossal scale, carried out under the leadership of the OGPU by more than 100,000 prisoners in the record time of 20 months. The project acted as an example and had an accelerating effect on the creation of camps, since it

---

<sup>21</sup> Commission on the Ukrainian Famine: Report to Congress 1988, p VII.

<sup>22</sup> Conquest 1988.

<sup>23</sup> For the latter view, see Davies & Wheatcroft 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Conquest 1988, p 219.

showed that forced labour could produce good results.<sup>25</sup> The creation of the White Sea Canal cost the lives of tens of thousands of people, but only brought limited economic benefits as a result of the crude and defective construction of the canal.

Gulag, which is really an acronym for the Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps and Colonies, *Glavnoe Upravlenie Ispravitelno-Trudovykh Lagerej*, has come to be used to refer to the camp system itself. The man who popularised the term Gulag all over the world was author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who on the basis of his own experience of being held prisoner for eight years after calling Stalin the 'ringleader of a band of thieves', published several books exposing the reality of camp life, including *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) and *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973-1975). Today we do not only have the personal, partly literary memoirs provided by Solzhenitsyn or Varlam Shalamov, but also large parts of the Gulag's extensive archives which are now available.

The Gulag consisted of different types of places for forced labour: prisons, colonies and special settlements, all forming part of larger camp structures. Turnover of prisoners and between prisoner categories was high. The camp system varied in size in different historical periods, and the regime's level of political and economic interest in the camps also varied over time. During the Second World War, with its increasing demands for military supplies, the NKVD strengthened its hold on the camp system, which received large numbers of prisoners of war. There was also a steady stream of new prisoners from 1939-1941 and after the end of the war as a result of new western territories being annexed by the Soviet state and 'Sovietised'.

The 'archipelago' of labour camps reached its peak in the early 1950s, when over 2.5 million people lived their lives in barracks, often kept in by barbed wire.<sup>26</sup> The fact that the number of prisoners peaked at this time is linked to a lack of discipline

in the workforce, which led to tougher punishments, and the war that gave rise to whole new groups of people to imprison: prisoners of war, deserters and collaborators. Only a few years later, the camp system began to be dismantled, and people were gradually able to leave the camps. This was not only a result of the death of the dictator, but also of increasing problems with supervision, discipline and economic productivity. However, many of those who had lived in the camps for a long time remained there, since after all their years of imprisonment they had nothing to which to return. The fact that a series of Russian towns were born out of camps is just one piece of evidence that the Gulag formed a cornerstone and integral part of the *malaya zona* or little zone of the Soviet society's *bolschaya zona* or big zone, long after the camp system had been formally laid to rest. In his well-documented history of the Gulag, Khlevniuk summarises the role of the camp system in a similar way:

Thus the Gulag spread beyond the barbed wire. Society absorbed the criminal mindset, the reliance on violence, and the prison culture. This spread of the Gulag is a real problem – as real as the monstrous price paid by millions for the establishment and expansion of Stalinism.<sup>27</sup>

### The Great Terror

In the same way that the Red Terror and famine in 1920-1921 was followed by the liberalisation of the NEP period, before Stalin's major revolution pushed terror back up the agenda, after the war against farmers and the famine of 1932-1933 there was a short-lived period of liberalisation, followed by a massive escalation of the violence that, since the publication of Robert Conquest's book, has generally been referred to as the Great Terror. This pattern suggests a system that regularly demanded real or imagined enemies to destabilise the social and political situation, meaning that power constantly had to be captured and recaptured. In other words, political stability in the Soviet Union had become dependent on crises and the use of terror in crisis management.

---

<sup>25</sup> Cf Khlevniuk 2003, pp 46-47. Documentation of the political and administrative decisions concerning the building of the canal are compiled in Dmitriev 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Ivanova 2000, p 187.

<sup>27</sup> Khlevniuk 2004, p 344.

History repeated itself in another way: while the assassination attempt on Lenin in 1918 was a driving force in the initiation of the Red Terror, the murder of Leningrad party chief Sergey Kirov on 1 December 1934 gave Stalin a pretext for the initiation of the Great Terror. The question of the extent to which Stalin was involved has been the object of much speculation. There are two opposing opinions here. According to the first, Kirov's popularity within the party posed a threat to Stalin's leadership, causing Stalin to order his murder in secret. The other opinion is that there is no evidence for Stalin's involvement. Two official investigation commissions, under Khrushchev and Gorbachev, supported the latter view, that the murderer acted on his own initiative.<sup>28</sup>

However, one aspect of the Great Terror between late 1936 and the end of the 1938 was something new in a qualitative sense: many of the terror victims were active communists. This was certainly the case for over seventy party officials and Stalin's competitors to the right and left, who were put on trial in three major show trials in Moscow, accused of seeking to undermine and topple the Soviet regime, and subsequently executed. This was also the case for the high-ranking officers who, with Marshal and Deputy Commissar for Defence Mikhail Tukhachevsky at their head, were put on trial and executed in 1937 after accusations of espionage for the German *Wehrmacht* and planning a coup d'état.<sup>29</sup> This was also the case at all levels of military and civilian cadres. In some locations, such as Ukraine and Leningrad, the party structure was purged particularly effectively. There was a link between the Red Terror and the Great Terror in another sense: the first Leninist generation of Bolsheviks, who led the process of establishing Soviet power in the years following 1917, formed one of the main groups of victims of the Stalinist Great Terror. The few opposing voices that remained within the party disappeared in the Great Terror, and a new generation faithful to Stalin took

over what had become an increasingly monolithic party.

The Great Terror is usually referred to as 'Yezhovschina' in Russian, since the mass violence coincided with the term of office of NKVD head Nikolai Yezhov. This does not mean that Stalin and the Politburo were outside the spiral of violence; the Soviet leader's notes in the margin and signature can be found, along with those of his associates Lazar Kaganovich, Vyacheslav Molotov and Kliment Voroshilov, on a remarkably large number of decrees relating to purges and mass killings over these years. Yezhov himself was one of the final victims of the Great Terror, in the culmination of a process initiated after the Great Terror by Stalin and the new head of the secret police, Lavrentiy Beria, in order to punish the NKVD officers who had obeyed orders in 1937. After the terror was over, all traces of it were to be erased by murdering the murderers.

During these dread-filled years, the Great Terror reached all political levels, all social strata, and all geographical areas of the Soviet society, from military leadership to authors' unions, from the party organisations of Soviet Union republics to industry and kolkhozes. Of the 139 members and candidate members of the party's Central Committee who were elected at the 17<sup>th</sup> party congress in 1934 – the 'Congress of the Victors', in reference to Stalin's 'victorious' collectivisation process – 100 were arrested before the 18<sup>th</sup> party congress in 1939.<sup>30</sup> Of the 1966 delegates who participated in the 17<sup>th</sup> congress, 1108 were arrested.<sup>31</sup> Only 59 of these were present five years later. In Ukraine, where Nikita Khrushchev became first secretary of the party in 1938, only three of the 86 Central Committee members survived the Great Terror, all three of whom were non-political honorary delegates.<sup>32</sup> Total continuity of members between party congresses was less than two percent.<sup>33</sup> Hardly anyone who had ever belonged to

---

<sup>28</sup> Knight 1999, p 19.

<sup>29</sup> Cf Samuelson 2000, chapter 8. See also Samuelson 1999, pp 216–225.

<sup>30</sup> Medvedev 1973, p 93.

<sup>31</sup> The figures were presented in Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956. See note 67.

<sup>32</sup> Conquest 1992, p 233.

<sup>33</sup> Conquest 1992, p 446.



an 'opposition' or 'faction' within the party or the state mechanism avoided being drawn into the purges.

Nonetheless, researchers, now with access to more extensive source material, are agreed that the majority of the victims of the mass operations of the Great Terror were more or less arbitrarily selected 'ordinary' citizens, who for various reasons were not judged to belong in the Stalinist social system. Even in 1937, no more than a fraction of almost a million people affected by the mass operations were punished for counterrevolutionary offences. Much larger groups were found guilty of 'ordinary' crimes like theft, assault and hooliganism. The proportions in the figures for 1938 are no different.<sup>34</sup> Relatively many belonged to ethnic groups that were regarded as suspect, or that had immigrated to the Soviet state during the communist period. They were deported to face an uncertain future, or executed and thrown into mass graves on the outskirts of cities and in forested areas all over the Soviet Union. The fact that the Great Terror affected so many 'ordinary' people, who were probably poorly educated and socially marginalised, shows that the Gulag's connection to purely political repression should not be over-emphasised.<sup>35</sup>

The extreme expansion in the use of terror meant that the mechanisms of violence had to be extended and their work rationalised. Quotas were issued for the number of people to be executed or deported from different regions. The notorious order 00447 from 30 July 1937, signed by Yezhov, established the number of people from different regions of the Soviet Union, in hundreds, thousands or tens of thousands, who either belonged to the first category and thus should be shot immediately, or who belonged to a second category of 'less active but nonetheless hostile elements' who were to be imprisoned and put on trial before troikas. A total of 268,950 people were arrested, 75,950 of them were killed and 193,000 were imprisoned in camps.<sup>36</sup> In order 00486, issued just weeks later,

instructions were given on how the wives and children of traitors to the country were to be dealt with.<sup>37</sup> The work of the legal authorities was often reduced to abbreviations: KRД stood for counterrevolutionary activities, TjSIR for family members of traitors to the country, while ASA(b) meant that the guilty party had committed anti-Soviet agitation and spread Nikolai Bukharin's banned 'right-wing' ideas. The NKVD submitted lists of those involved to the Politburo, and Stalin and his associates decided the cases by writing *za* for (execution) after the name, and adding their signatures.<sup>38</sup> Official show trials were also retained, probably to function as a deterrent. At the beginning of *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn describes how the practical act of imprisonment was automated and became a scientificised 'arrestology'.<sup>39</sup> Apart from the mass operations carried out against entire groups, which have already been mentioned, almost 1.6 million individuals were arrested by the NKVD between 1937 and 1938, only 1 percent of these for counterrevolutionary crimes. Almost half of these, or 681,692 people, lost their lives. Hundreds of thousands more died in the camps as a result of disease, cold, starvation and accidents.<sup>40</sup>

Naturally, the mechanisms of terror permeated every level of Soviet society during these dramatic years. No-one felt safe. Even the members of the Politburo were armed. Informing and denial of social origins flourished. A large number of secret agents or *seksoy* supplied the NKVD with 'negative' information on their colleagues and party chiefs. As

---

<sup>34</sup> Mironov & Werth 2004, pp 632–633.

<sup>35</sup> This is also emphasised by Brown 2007, p 76.

<sup>36</sup> "Operativnyj prikaz NKVD SSSR No 00447 'Ob operatsii po repressovaniju byvsjich kulakov, ugovolnikov

---

i drugich antisovetskich elementov", published in Kokurin & Petrov (eds) 2002, pp 96–104. The document is available in translation to English in Getty & Naumov 1999, pp 473–480. The 'mass operations' are analysed in detail in Jansen & Petrov 2002, pp 79–102.

<sup>37</sup> "Operativnyj prikaz Narodnogo Komissara Vnutrennykh del SSSR No 00486 'Ob operatsii po repressirovaniju zjen i detej izmennikov Rodiny", published in Vilenskij, Kokurin, Atmasjkina & Novichenko 2002, pp 234–238. The document is available in translation to English in Yakovlev 2002, pp 29–31.

<sup>38</sup> Jansen & Petrov 2006, p 591.

<sup>39</sup> Solzhenitsyn 1974, pp 15–30. See also Applebaum 2003, chapter 7.

<sup>40</sup> Getty, Rittersporn & Zemskov 1993, pp 1022–1024.

has become clear, not least from cultural products and the language constructions used, people saw scapegoats and spies everywhere.<sup>41</sup> The harvest was poor in 1936, and Stalin did not miss any opportunities to call attention to the international vulnerability of the communist Soviet Union, surrounded by hostile powers. Traditional Russian perceptions that terror is something perpetrated by 'them' against 'us' became difficult to maintain in a society where those in power had suddenly fallen victim to purges, and where the arbitrary violence seemed to have taken over from the violence perpetrated against the class enemies that people had learned to recognise and hate. In this context, who were 'the people', and how did this relate to the newly defined category of 'enemy of the people', to which it seemed the former Soviet leaders belonged? In October 1937, in a toast to the glory of the revolution, Stalin referred to this distinction: "Leaders come and go, but the people remain. Only the people are eternal."<sup>42</sup>

### **The 'punished peoples'**

The part of the Second World War that was fought on Soviet territory, called the Great Patriotic War in Russian, changed the nature of the terror campaigns. In actual fact, this change took place in the years leading up to the declaration of war. It is best described as an increasingly ethnic definition of the terror of the Soviet regime, illustrated by the increasing use of the aforementioned term 'enemies of the people', to stigmatise not only general opponents to the regime, but also specific ethnonational groups within the Soviet state. The other side of the same coin is that ethnic Russians were increasingly presented as the foundation of the state, the 'first among equals', and that the link between the Soviet Union and Russian history and orthodox Christianity was presented in a positive light, in diametrical contrast with the first Soviet decade.

The terror weapon that had already been used against the kulaks, but which was made more effective and systematic at this stage and which came to involve not only large groups of victims but

also significant numbers of NKVD troops, was forced deportation.<sup>43</sup> First to be affected were a number of ethnic groups that were judged to be or to have potential to be unreliable in the event that the Soviet Union went to war against its aggressive neighbours to the west and east, Germany and Japan respectively. Among the first victims of the process of mass operations that in modern terminology could be called ethnic cleansing, were Poles and Soviet Koreans.<sup>44</sup> Over 170,000 of the latter people group were deported from their traditional home area around Vladivostok to Central Asia. After the task had been carried out to his satisfaction, Yezhov informed the Kremlin that the transportation process had gone well, but that the recipients were unprepared, which had placed the deported individuals in "a vulnerable situation".<sup>45</sup>

Early on in the Great Terror, in 1937-1938, Germans in the Soviet Union were singled out as potential traitors of the country and subjected to mass operations: 55,000 were punished, 42,000 by death.<sup>46</sup> When the war against Germany began in the summer of 1941, almost half a million Soviet Germans from the Volga area were loaded into railway carriages for transportation to Siberia, collectively accused of being Germany spies. At least as many Germans from other parts of the Soviet Union met with the same fate in the following year, in the midst of raging war.<sup>47</sup> This German people group had lived in Russia since the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939, which led to the annexation of the Baltic republics and western parts of Ukraine and Belarus, also brought about major migrations. Just prior to the war, around 400,000 Poles and Jews were forced to move eastwards from Ukraine and Belarus. In the

<sup>41</sup> See Davis 1997, Rittersporn 1992, pp 101-120.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted from Fitzpatrick 2000, p 195.

<sup>43</sup> An outline of Soviet deportation history is given in Polian 2001.

<sup>44</sup> Cf Martin 1998, pp 813-861.

<sup>45</sup> The document is published in Bugai & Vada 1992, pp 220-221. For the deportation of the Soviet Korean population, see also Gelb 1995, pp 389-412.

<sup>46</sup> Ochotin & Roginsky 1999, pp 63-66.

<sup>47</sup> A total of 209,430 Soviet Germans were deported. See Bugai 1991, pp 172-180.

irony of history, they were therefore spared the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust machinery. In Katyn and its surroundings in 1940, on Stalin's orders, 15,000 Polish officers were killed who had been captured when the Soviet Union attacked Poland in September 1939, in accordance with the German-Soviet Pact. In the Baltic States, deportations primarily affected individuals who had had prominent positions in the free Baltic States during the interwar period, and who were thus viewed as nationalists. Only the progress of the Nazis on the eastern front was able to put a temporary stop to the deportations. However, once the communists secured their power over the Baltic region in 1944, new and more extensive waves of deportation were to follow. As a result of a decree issued by the Soviet Council of Ministers on 29 January 1949 on 'deportation of kulaks, their families, bandits, nationalists and their families', the Baltic States lost a total of 94,779 people in the largest deportation in March 1949. The largest group, 42,129 people, were from Latvia. The end station for these deportations was Siberia, and the areas of Irkutsk and Omsk for the majority of deportees.<sup>48</sup>

These deportation stories are very much 'living history'. In February 1944, the entire Chechen people (362,282 people) were deported from their home area in the North Caucasus to Central Asia, as one of eight 'punished peoples' from Crimea and the Caucasus, who Stalin wanted to eliminate as a result of their long-term resistance to the Soviet powers and their lack of loyalty in times of war.<sup>49</sup> The Chechens were accused of collaboration with the Germans, despite the fact that during its occupation of the Soviet Union the German army never reached the Chechen territory.<sup>50</sup> Roughly one quarter of the North Caucasians died during the deportations or shortly thereafter in camps.<sup>51</sup> However, hundreds of thousands of Chechens also

grew up in exile and learned to hate the Russians in Moscow who had destroyed their lives and the lives and society of the Chechen people. For generations of Balts and Chechens, these stories of ruthless deportation of their people have strengthened their national identities and their hatred for what they see as the eternally repressive regime in Moscow.

### **Anticosmopolitanism**

The ethnic dimension is also prominent in the persecution of Jews that became a characteristic of the post-war Soviet terror society. This was not a matter of large-scale mass killings of the nature described above, but of a series of murders and arrests of individuals and small groups as well as anti-Jewish policies primarily in the areas of culture and medicine. Nonetheless, this issue has been discussed in a research context.<sup>52</sup> The main reason for this is that the persecution of Jews in the Soviet Union has raised questions on the relationship between Soviet communism and Nazism, and on the place of the traditional Russian antisemitism in the context of Soviet history.

In 1948, two incidents occurred which marked the start of a Soviet terror policy with antisemitic overtones. However, the discourse of the regime stated that the policy was dictated by 'anticosmopolitanist' and 'anti-Zionist' concerns, indicating that the repression was a legitimate reaction to the general rootlessness of the Soviet Jews and their preference for the state of Israel, founded in 1948 and recognised by the Soviet Union. During this year, the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, a body established in 1942 to facilitate American aid to the Soviet Union and promote anti-Nazi propaganda during the war against Nazi Germany, were arrested. Their successful work during the war was used six years later as proof that the committee sought to spread the evil message of American imperialism in the Soviet Union. The committee, which had become a hub for Soviet Jews and whose work included pushing for recognition of the Holocaust, was no longer allowed to function and its members were

---

<sup>48</sup> Kokurin 2004. See also Köll 2005, pp 218–255.

<sup>49</sup> Figures taken from Bugai 1989, pp 135–144. The term 'the punished peoples' was coined by Nekrich 1978. Cf also Conquest 1970 and Burds 2007, pp 267–314.

<sup>50</sup> Avtorkhanov 1992, p 147.

<sup>51</sup> According to Bugai 1990, p 22, 144,704 people or 23.7 percent of all North Caucasians died in the camps between 1944 and 1948.

---

<sup>52</sup> For documentation of the Jewish people's 'imprisonment by the red pharaoh', see Kostrychenko 1994.

executed by firing squad in 1952. In 1948 the leader of the committee, Jewish actor Solomon Mikhoels, had been killed on the streets of Minsk by secret police agents.

A short time after the execution of the committee members, TASS and *Pravda* 'revealed' a conspiracy among the Jewish doctors who were responsible for the medical care of Stalin and several other political and military leaders, but who were in fact 'murderers in white coats'. Like those accused in the Moscow trials, the Jewish doctors confessed under torture that they had been part of a global conspiracy to use drugs to kill the Soviet leaders. Soviet workplaces began to compile lists of Jews, and plans for mass deportation were developed. There is much, including the historical patterns described in this background, to suggest that these terror operations against the Jewish people would have been realised if Stalin, who was busy engineering the 'doctors' conspiracy' in his last days, had not died. As researchers have noted, the ground had been prepared since 1948, if not earlier. In early 1953, the Soviet press had launched a major campaign to stigmatise the Jews, and there are signs that the MVD had made preparations for deportation and built new labour camps.<sup>53</sup>

## Sources and archives

Even during the 35-year period when the Soviet regime perpetrated mass physical violence against its own people, it was possible to find information in Sweden regarding events on the other side of the Baltic Sea. This knowledge process was characterised by strong ideological elements: The Soviet Union was either a role model or a vision of horror, a promise or a threat.<sup>54</sup> Newspapers contained news items and features on the terror, but with the exception of the spectacular Moscow trials reports from the Soviet Union were fairly

infrequent.<sup>55</sup> History textbooks described the Bolshevik revolution and its brutal consequences,<sup>56</sup> in the 1920s and 30s often in drastic and deprecating terms, and visitors to the Soviet Union and others recorded their impressions of Lenin and Stalin's society in writing. A number of them, on fleeting visits and often without any grasp of the Russian language, were presented with the propaganda 'truth' and the Potemkin villages that had been created just for them, and on return gave thoroughly positive reports from this 'society of the future'. Others were well-prepared and had already gained personal experience of the Bolshevik terror institutions. As early as 1925, it was possible to read foreign correspondent George Popoff's inside account of the Cheka, the Bolshevik secret police, which he presented as a hybrid of eastern brutality and western systematic effectiveness, as 'the bearer of the Asian spirit, which, when united with the western doctrine of Marxism to create a peculiar whole, forms the current reality of Soviet Russia'.<sup>57</sup>

Other eye witness accounts were written by people who had travelled there with positive expectations on the basis of ideological convictions and who had stayed in the country for a long period, but who returned disillusioned. In 1924, Swedish readers could acquaint themselves with revolutionary Emma Goldman's realisation that 'the Russian Revolution was steeped in blood and was dead'. Goldman, who was deported from the USA to Russia in 1919 as a political prisoner, was no stranger to the idea that a revolution must allow room for temporary elements of violence, but that did not mean that she accepted Lenin's policy to 'make terrorism a principle or elevate it to an institutional function and allow it to take on the greatest significance in the social battle'.<sup>58</sup> More than a decade later, Finland-Swedish engineer Hjalmar Andersson spoke bitterly of his three years in the Soviet society that had recently gone through forced collectivisation:

---

<sup>53</sup> Brent & Naumov 2003. See also Vaksberg 1994, p 241ff. For a discussion of the knowledge available in terms of Stalin's plans for forced deportation of the Soviet Jews, see Brandenberger 2005, pp 198–202.

<sup>54</sup> Cf e.g. Gerner 1996, pp 307–333, Olsson & Åker 2002, Blomqvist & Ekdahl 2003, and Alm 2005, pp 19–49.

---

<sup>55</sup> Cf Pollack 2005, pp 50–84, and Leth 2005, pp 85–140.

<sup>56</sup> Karlsson 1985/1986, pp 44–59. See also Johansson 2004.

<sup>57</sup> Popoff 1925, p 7.

<sup>58</sup> Goldman 1924, pp 5, 14.

Inside the barbed wire fence around the provisional concentration camps in Siberia sit formerly free farmers. The self has disappeared – together with livestock, fields and meadows. Soldiers stand outside with their bayonets fixed on: the forced conscripted soldiery of the communist party, the governing minority. Is this really the goal of ‘every idealist’s most audacious hopes?’<sup>59</sup>

In the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s it was not difficult to find information on and expressions of the terror present in Soviet society. This information was open and easily accessible, but did not refer to the use of violence as such. Many contemporary commentators did not perceive the available ‘sources’ as relating to the mass violence. The context in which terror activities were placed were often social-hygienic and didactic, which meant that the purpose of camp imprisonment and forced labour was presented as both progressive and necessary: educating people to become good communists and Soviet citizens, and fostering positive characteristics such as cleanliness, high morals and good health. A common name for this activity was *chistka*, cleaning or purging, an administrative word referring to control of party membership but which gained another meaning, both figuratively and literally, of mass violence.<sup>60</sup> This didactic intention was highly prominent in the camp literature written in the 1920s that culminated in 1934 with the collective work *Belomorkanal*, in which Maxim Gorky and over a hundred other authors told the story of how the White Sea Canal had been built by camp prisoners who, through their humanitarian efforts, were seen to have undergone a successful transformation from enemies of the people to well-integrated members of the Soviet collective.<sup>61</sup> The greatest hero of terror-related didactic literature was Pavel Morozov, a young boy from Western Siberia who was killed by relatives in 1932 after having denounced his father as a ‘friend of kulaks’. Despite his youth, little Pavel did manage to show that the most important loyalty of Soviet citizens lies not

with their own families and fathers, but with their greater Soviet family, led by their ‘little father’, Stalin.<sup>62</sup>

Open court proceedings, *pokazatelnye protsessy*, were not only or even primarily designed to fulfil a legal function, but aimed to use a graphic didactic process to show the way towards the communist future. *Agitsudy*, agitational trials, were not only acted out in courts but also in theatres and film in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, in order to stress not only that the Soviet society had many enemies, but also that there was potential for these people to be made new, if they went through the ritual stages of confessing their sins, doing penance and begging for reintegration into society.<sup>63</sup> It hardly needs to be mentioned that this didactic process was not actually intended to make ‘people of the past’ into functioning Soviet citizens, but to justify the terror campaigns against enemies of the Soviet powers in the eyes of society and the surrounding world, and perhaps also in the eyes of the victims. Besides, laws and regulations were in a process of constant change, keeping pace with changes in the ‘party line’, thus creating an increased need to communicate these changes to the population at large.<sup>64</sup>

From the mid-1930s, as this didactic discourse was given less and less space, openness also declined. It became difficult to dress up the forced deportation of farmers and mass killings of political opponents as didactic acts. After the Great Terror, the Soviet Union entered the Great Silence, a period during which the violence of the regime was no longer allowed to make an impression in media, culture, or academia. One drastic expression of this new policy of silence was Stalin’s intervention into the population statistics. At the party congress in 1934, when he declared that Soviet population development showed strong positive results, his declaration lacked any factual basis in the demographic results of statisticians.<sup>65</sup> Hardly surprisingly, the Soviet population census carried

---

<sup>59</sup> Andersson 1935, p 125.

<sup>60</sup> Cf Karlsson 2003, pp 218–222.

<sup>61</sup> Tolczyk 1999.

<sup>62</sup> Cf Kelly 2005.

<sup>63</sup> Cassidy 2000.

<sup>64</sup> Argenbright 2002, p 252.

<sup>65</sup> Blum 1994, pp 39–40.

out in 1937 showed that the population had not increased in line with Stalin's claims. An earlier census, from 1926, had reached a total of 147 Soviet citizens. Estimated growth figures suggested that the new total would be 170 million, but in fact it was only 163 million. The census takers were then arrested, several of them were executed by firing squad, and their work was seized, only to be made public during the glasnost period.<sup>66</sup> Two years later, a new census of the Soviet population was taken, with entirely different and hardly credible results. The silence was not total, since rural reforms and settlement of conflict with internal opponents were given brief mention in various kinds of historical publications, but only as an expression of the malevolent impact of internal enemies of the people and their western backers, and always as legitimate and 'objectively necessary' measures to benefit the Soviet future. The proof was the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in the war, and its transformation to an economic and political superpower.

#### Four paths to knowledge

During the post-war period, researchers with an interest in the crimes against humanity committed by the Soviet communist regime under Lenin and Stalin had access to four different types of source material. Several of these could be used in parallel. The first route was the rare and heavily biased information issued by the Soviet authorities, and the documents that they made available in newspaper articles, political speeches, and summaries of party congresses, economic planning and demographic statistics. The official records of the Moscow trials were one such source, which played an important part in early historical writings. The most important source was Nikita Khrushchev's speech to a closed session of the 20<sup>th</sup> party congress in February 1956, when he, as part of his criticism of the 'cult of personality' surrounding Stalin, attacked the mass repression that had first been directed towards key opponents and thereafter

"also against many honest communists, against party cadres that were on the front lines during the civil war and the difficult early years of industrialisation and collectivisation, and who had actively struggled against Trotskyists and right-wing opponents to Lenin's party line".

Khrushchev also made reference to the mass deportations of the war years and the post-war persecution of Jews in the Soviet Union. However, he did not mention the mass violence that took place prior to the Great Terror. The brutal and morally and politically warped figure of Stalin was declared solely responsible. Lenin, by contrast, was presented as the opposite of his successor, and as such was written out of the terror history.<sup>67</sup> This one-sided focus on Stalin also ensured that the spotlight did not land on Khrushchev himself, the Moscow party chief during the time of the Great Terror. In *Let History Judge*, written by Soviet dissident historian Roy Medvedev in 1968 causing the author's exclusion from the party, the terror context is broadened to include forced collectivisation and dekulakisation, but the interpretation was still narrow and psychologising. The policy of violence is reduced to Stalin's 'serious mistakes' and Lenin's involvement is not mentioned.<sup>68</sup>

Another significant element of Khrushchev's speech was that it began a 'thaw' policy that gave authors like Yevgenia Ginzburg and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn the opportunity to speak of their own experiences of the terror of camp life. However, the latter stepped well over the boundary for what was politically permissible in *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973-1975), by tracing the criminal history of Soviet communism back to Lenin. The result was his exile from the Soviet Union.

The second option for obtaining information was to interview people who had experienced the Soviet regime's policy of violence first hand, particularly those who had emigrated to the west.<sup>69</sup> Some of them also wrote their own accounts of their time in

---

<sup>66</sup> Poljakov, Zjtomirskaja & Kiselev, no. 6, 1990, pp 3-21, no 7, 1990, pp 50-70, no 8, 1990, pp 30-52.

<sup>67</sup> Khrushchev 1956.

<sup>68</sup> Medvedev 1973, chapter 3.

<sup>69</sup> See e.g. Inkeles 1950 and Inkeles & Bauer 1959.

the Soviet Union. The most well known of these was defector Victor Kravchenko's *I Chose Freedom* from 1946, which included a famous section on how the author was sent out to rural areas as part of a party expedition to gather grain and speed up the collectivisation process, tasks which were carried out with unparalleled cruelty and indifference to human suffering.<sup>70</sup>

The third possibility was studying the party archive in the west Russian city of Smolensk. The entire archive for the period between 1917 and 1938 was seized by the German army as it advanced through Russia in 1941 and came into American possession after the war, where it was much used in Soviet research of the post-war decades, in order to illustrate the history of the purges and collectivisation at a local level. The work of the Cheka, GPU and NKVD in Smolensk in terms of decision-making, organisation and implementation turned out to be well documented, while the population's response to the terror campaigns was naturally expressed more indirectly.<sup>71</sup>

The fourth and final research strategy was to take totalitarian theory as a starting point and hypothetically or deductively assume significant similarities between the Soviet communist society and the more well-researched Nazi society, in terms of societal structure and function. This method was thus less to do with extracting new factual knowledge, focusing rather on uncovering the driving forces and mechanisms behind this mass violence, by assuming that the crimes perpetrated by Hitler and the Nazis had been caused by the same structural conditions as the atrocities that Stalin and the communist party had inflicted upon Soviet citizens. An alternative or supplementary strategy in terms of totalitarian theory was to assume a far-reaching continuity between the violent regime of the Russian Tsar and Lenin and Stalin's terror mechanism, so as to use the academic community's more reliable knowledge of, for example, the practice of subjecting courts to

political pressure in autocratic Russia, to shed light on the history and practices of Soviet crimes.<sup>72</sup>

## Conquest

The academic work which, more than any other, came to be known as the standard work on the crimes against humanity committed by the Soviet communist regime was British historian Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror* from 1968. 'Standard work' in this context means that the book had such a central place in academic debate for several decades, that all interpreters of Soviet terror history quite simply had to take a position in relation to its information and interpretations, and that it was also known in academic and political circles in the Soviet Union. In his book on the culmination of the terror period in 1936-1938, Conquest made use of all the abovementioned sources types and knowledge strategies, as well as other research carried out on the Soviet system and its leadership.<sup>73</sup>

Conquest's terror history deals with politics transmuted into mass violence and the historical actors, with Lenin as the source of ideas and Stalin as the leader who used terror to crush all actual and suspected opposition within the party and the Soviet state. The top-down perspective is therefore natural and inevitable, and is further strengthened by the nature of the source material available. The turning point is the murder of Kirov, "the foundation of the entire edifice of terror and suffering that Stalin used to secure his grip on the Soviet people".<sup>74</sup> Conquest makes it seem probable that Stalin was behind this murder. He also constructs a wider background of political motivation, by pointing out that the Soviet leader met opposition in the years leading up to the Great Terror, not only on the left and right of the party leadership, but also at a lower level, where a local

---

<sup>70</sup> Kravchenko 1947, chapter 8ff.

<sup>71</sup> Primary work is Fainsod 1958, chapters 11 and 12.

<sup>72</sup> Se Brzezinski 1962, pp 23-24.

<sup>73</sup> Conquest himself divides his source material into the following categories: contemporary official communications, later official reports, 'official' material not intended for publication, descriptions written by prisoners, and memoirs written by defectors and others with access to political and policial information. See Conquest 1971, pp 491-497.

<sup>74</sup> Conquest 1971, p 54.

party secretary, Martemyan Ryutin, gained support for a petition against Stalin's revolution and against Stalin himself, "the evil genius of the Russian revolution". According to Conquest, when Stalin wanted to sentence Ryutin to death, he gained protection from the Politburo in general and Kirov in particular. In a chapter on the camp system, Conquest suggests that there was also a financial motivation behind the terror, but he sees this as secondary to the goal of gaining political power through the creation of a system built on silence and obedience, fear and submission. In this judgement he differs from several other early western scholars of the Soviet communist criminal history, who devoted much attention to forced and slave labour and the mechanisms thereof.<sup>75</sup>

As another framework of interpretation, Conquest also refers to the comparison with Hitler and the Nazi party. He states that Stalin seems to have been inspired by the killings of Ernst Röhm and other SA leaders ordered by Hitler in 1934, in the "night of the long knives", particularly in 1937, when he ordered the killings of selected leaders of the Soviet defence department, accused of subversive collaboration with Germany. Conquest is nonetheless anxious to demonstrate the differences between the German Nazi and Soviet communist powers, within the framework of totalitarian theory:

The only deeply-rooted principle in the Nazi party – that the will of its leader is the highest law – did not have an equivalent in the Communist party. Even later on, when Stalin could eliminate his enemies at least as easily as Hitler could, this always took place in the form of some kind of trial, conferring a semblance of legality on the event, or in total secrecy.<sup>76</sup>

This does not mean that Conquest's history only deals with the major trials. He takes a broader approach to the *yezhovchina* when he describes how it took its toll on the armed forces, the party, the Soviet republics, cultural life, the diplomatic corps, and the communist youth movement, Komsomol.

In terms of the general top-down perspective, his victim tallies are at their most exact when referring to the upper echelons of the organisation concerned. He states that during the Great Terror, three out of five marshals, 14 out of 16 army commanders, 8 out of 8 admirals, 60 out of 67 corps commanders, 136 out of 199 divisional commanders, 221 out of 397 brigadiers, 11 out of 11 deputy defence commissars, and 75 out of 80 members of the Supreme Military Soviet disappeared. Roughly half of all officers were shot or imprisoned.<sup>77</sup> Conquest states that the total death toll of the crimes against humanity committed during the 23 years of the Stalin regime amounted to 20 million people. However, he does add that this figure is "almost certainly too low, and may need to be increased by perhaps 50 percent in order to give a true account of the losses".<sup>78</sup>

### The source and archive revolution

The glasnost policy of the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, radically changed the conditions for research on the terror of the Soviet regime, over the course of just a few years from his entry into power in 1985. This policy quickly led to the interest of the general public being directed towards the most dramatic, and thus far least analysed, aspects of Soviet history. This was far from complete openness, as can be seen from the fact that Gorbachev's glasnost discourse could hardly be said to have applied to the greatest traumas of Baltic Soviet history: the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Sovietisation of the Baltic republics, and the waves of deportation during and after the war. The fact that these histories became sharp-edged weapons against the Soviet government when in the hands of radicalised Baltic popular fronts was, from Gorbachev's perspective, an unintentional consequence of his reforms.

However, revelations on forced collectivisation and the history of the purges came in quick succession, in a spirit of passion for the truth. This could be explained by the idea that Gorbachev was seeking

---

<sup>75</sup> See e.g. Dallin & Nicolaevsky 1947 and Swianiewicz 1965.

<sup>76</sup> Conquest 1971, p 55.

<sup>77</sup> Conquest 1971, p 422. In his new edition, Conquest 1992, p 450, he has modified his figures somewhat, but not their magnitude.

<sup>78</sup> Conquest 1971, p 464.



to explain that the severe agricultural problems caused by perestroika were a result of Stalin's policies rather than his own, and that he wanted to root his reform policy in what he saw as Leninist ideas that had been destroyed by Stalin's purges of political opponents. Reformist newspapers and journals published memoirs, reports of the camp system, and new documents on the terror activities. Researchers with an interest in living Soviet history could observe how, one by one, Stalin's henchmen disappeared from monuments, pedestals and the names of cities and industrial plants. Hundreds of thousands of victims were rehabilitated. The *Memorial* organisation, founded in 1987 to honour and keep alive the memory of all those who perished in the Soviet regime's war against its own people, contributed to the moral indignation that characterised this reconciliation with Soviet terror history. The idea behind the work of Memorial, as expressed in the organisation's mission statement, was not to place the terror in its greater historical, philosophical and sociological context, nor to tackle old myths with new antimyths, but to let the facts speak for themselves, on the basis of archive documents, oral and written testimonies, statistical information and other sources.<sup>79</sup>

Those who delivered the glasnost policy were the liberal intelligentsia, authors and journalists, not historians, most of whom were seen as compromised by their close connection to the Soviet ideology and regime. Nonetheless, during the years of openness, it was possible for Soviet researchers to gain access to previously unavailable source material and publish statistics that shed light on the death tolls of the collectivisation of agriculture, the creation of the camp system and the forced deportations.<sup>80</sup> As with the work of

Memorial, this was a matter of publishing articles that communicated facts, that did not have an explicit framework of interpretation or connection to the wider academic debate. Since the death tolls released were considerably lower than those published by Conquest and other western researchers who agreed with his framework of interpretation, there was an initial suspicion that the authors, in classic Soviet style, were seeking to minimise the extent of the terror, and there was confusion surrounding the terminology used for different types of camps and victim categories.<sup>81</sup> However, in the light of further newly produced data, the figures presented then have proved to be, if not definitive, then at least close to what now seems to be a broadly accepted view among researchers of the human extent of the Gulag system.

During the years following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, more archives were made available to researchers. The years between 1991 and 1994 in particular were characterised by a very liberal archive policy. Several research partnerships were initiated involving Russian and western researchers, and commissions were established at a political level in order to investigate the Soviet communist criminal history, and make its remains available to a wider audience. These partnerships resulted in a number of multi-volume publications documenting the regime's crimes against humanity, such as *Istoriya stalinskogo Gulaga* (The History of Stalin's Gulag), *Tragediya Sovetskoi Derevni Kollektivizatsiya i raskulachivanie* (The Tragedy of the Russian Village: Collectivisation and Dekulakization), as well as the volumes published by an official Russian rehabilitation commission appointed by President Yeltsin and led by the main ideologist behind perestroika, Alexander Yakovlev, under the collective title *Rossiya, XX vek* (Russia during the 20<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>82</sup> A similar partnership, based primarily in the USA, is the English and Russian language project *Annals of Communism*.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> "Ot sostavitelej", *Zvenia* 1991, p 7. Cf Karlsson 1999, pp 161–168.

<sup>80</sup> However, the texts published by researchers such as Viktor Zemskov, A.N. Dugin and Nikolai Bugai after gaining access to previously closed archives in the NKVD/MVD were able to be used to shed more light on processes and structural conditions in Soviet society. See e.g. Karlsson 1993, p 70ff. Both Dugin and Zemskov later compiled their mainly statistical research results in monographic publications: Dugin 2003 and Zemskov 2003.

---

<sup>81</sup> Cf Bacon 1992, pp 1069–1086.

<sup>82</sup> Afanasev 2004–2005, Yakovlev 1997–2003, Danilov 1999–2004. The latter is also available in an abridged English version. Viola et al. (eds) 2005.

<sup>83</sup> Brent 1995ff.

Partnerships of this kind have helped Russian researchers to move from being deliverers of statistics and documents, as they were during the glasnost period, to integral parts of an increasingly international – albeit still centred on American universities and researchers – academic discussion.

Regional and local archives have also been opened up to researchers, and as a result a number of Russian and western researchers have been able to contribute to significant increases in knowledge of how the terror affected individuals, various kinds of collectives, and entire communities outside the centres of power, Moscow and Leningrad. The activities of *Memorial* have also contributed to increased knowledge of the effects and remains of the terror, by publishing lists of those executed, files of documents, and investigations of locations where people were executed and buried. Books known as martyrologies or memorial books, *knigi pamyati*, have been compiled and published widely by the Memorial organisation and other groups, containing endless lists of victims with photos, dates of birth, professions, nationalities, and places of birth, as well as dates of arrest, charges, verdicts, executions or, where applicable, rehabilitation.<sup>84</sup> As such, there is now a firm basis for recognising both cumulative and evolutionary research development.

This does not mean that we can automatically assume there will be a further broadening of research opportunities in the immediate future, or an increase in international research partnerships. There is documentation referring to the work of the party establishment and the secret police stored in the presidential archive and the archive of the current secret police, the FSB, which is still not available, or only selectively available for research. In general, provision of access to archives has been less complete in the Russian Federation than in other post-communist states in eastern and central Europe. As an aspect of Vladimir Putin's increasingly introspective 'patriotic' policies, non-Russian researchers have begun to face increasing

difficulties in gaining access to 'sensitive' archives.<sup>85</sup> This is clearly one reason why, at the time of writing, empirical research on the criminal history of the Soviet communist regime is increasingly being carried out by domestic historians.

The following analysis will concentrate mainly on the research carried out since the mid-1980s and the breakthrough of the glasnost policy on the crimes against humanity of the Soviet communist regime.

## The academic debate

### The three paradigms

There is an established dividing line between different ways of adopting academic perspectives on the criminal history of the Soviet communist regime. Few researchers dispute that the Great Terror had its immediate starting point in the murder of Kirov in December 1934, and that it ended with the elimination of Yezhov in November 1938. However, behind these 'facts' are questions that do not always evoke the same unanimity from the academic community – questions relating to the causes and effects of the terror process, where it started and how it developed, and who was responsible for it. The question of the extent to which crimes were precipitated by social conflicts, more or less well-founded fears of external threats, economic problems, Stalin's personality or mass hysteria, has been the object of protracted debate.

There are three different paradigms to speak of, if we understand this term as reasonably well-defined and coherent interpretations of the origins and driving forces, key figures and structural conditions of the Soviet communist criminal history, linked to various theoretical and – particularly in the case of a 'sensitive' subject such as this one – basic ideological perspectives. The shifts between these paradigms therefore reflect shifts in the wider contexts of academic theory and ideology, as well as, at a more practical level, the different options that are open to researchers at different times and in different societies, in terms of access to relevant source

---

<sup>84</sup> See e.g. *Rasstrelnye spiski* 2000. For a list of memorial books, see [www.memo.ru](http://www.memo.ru).

---

<sup>85</sup> See testimonies in e.g. Fitzpatrick & Gellately 1997, pp 7–9, McLoughlin & McDermott 2003, p 3.

material and publication opportunities. These three paradigms can be described analytically as reactions to each other, and as such they follow each other chronologically, although this means that there are no current advocates of the earliest paradigm. In the light of this, it seems appropriate to outline these paradigms in a chronological sense, before moving on to a more thematic perspective in order to illustrate how some central points of conflict and sets of problems have been interpreted and developed.

## Totalitarianism

The first paradigm is that of totalitarian theory. This theoretical structure has a broader analytical scope than theories that only apply to the Soviet society and terror system. Later in this text, the ambition to compare communism to Nazism under this heading will be reviewed, but 'totalitarianism' has also been compared in a research context to 'authoritarianism', to name two kinds of interwar dictatorships. The first is a 'totalitarian', forward-looking dictatorship, seeking to radically and permanently recreate the old society, while the other is an 'authoritarian', backward-looking dictatorship that seeks to re-establish an almost feudal social order. However, during the Cold War, it was mainly the parallels between the regimes of Stalin and Hitler that were in focus, with the Soviet Union as the primary focus.

The starting point of the totalitarian framework of interpretation that has been drawn up to explain and understand the criminal history being analysed here is that Bolshevik Russia and the communist Soviet Union, from its origins in 1917, was a terror state whose leaders chose from the start to exert total control over the population using open and brutal violence, and succeeded. The major Soviet communist projects were 'revolutions from above'. There was a watertight seal between government and society. The highest-ranking Soviet leaders and their closest associates are singled out as being responsible for the process of violence, while the citizens are presented as passive victims and faceless cogs in the machinery of the totalitarian society. The explanatory model of totalitarian theory is simply intentionalist, in other words, it is based on the notion that the perpetrators within the Soviet state and the communist party harboured the

intention, before the terror broke out, to eliminate every form of opposition. A particularly important role is attributed to the NKVD, which managed to appropriate power over the party while implementing the party purges ordered by Stalin at the outset of the Great Terror.<sup>86</sup> They succeeded with this ambition to eliminate all resistance partly because of the strength of their own ruthlessness and desire for power, and partly because of the lack of resistance from citizens and society. The terror perspective is unambiguously political in the sense that the communist regime is thought to have been motivated in its criminal activities by a primary desire to conquer, consolidate and strengthen the position of power of the state and the party. The notion of a secondary goal of establishing a strong Soviet economy with the help of forced labour is compatible with this emphasis on the primacy of the political incentive. Adherents to totalitarian theory do not agree with researchers who see Soviet criminal history as a result of good and progressive ideological ambitions which, for different reasons, came to nought. Neither do they agree with a functionalist interpretation, which sees the terror as a more or less unintentional consequence of various kinds of social processes.

According to the interpretation of totalitarian theory, Stalin is placed in immediate succession after Lenin, who is presented as the founder of the party dictatorship and the terror campaigns. Advocates of totalitarian theory sometimes see the Russian-Soviet symbiosis of power and violence that culminated under Stalin's leadership as originating even further back in history, with the Russian Tsardom or the forefathers of socialism. Leninism is the end product of Marxism, and Stalinism is nothing other than the end product of Leninism. However, this emphasis on continuity does not prevent a clear boundary being drawn between the pre-revolutionary era and the period following the Bolshevik seizure of power, when the spiral of violence escalated drastically, the extent of the terror increased radically, and the leaders' ambition to reform society totally, in line with revolutionary values and whatever the cost, formed

---

<sup>86</sup> See e.g. Khlevniuk 2003, pp 21–33.

a clear historical turning point. From this perspective, parallels with the partly simultaneous Nazi regime in Germany seem more relevant than historical continuity. The crimes committed by these two related totalitarian regimes constitute the most catastrophic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which claimed innumerable lives.

This totalitarian theory, which found its opposite number in the Stalinist writing of history in the Soviet Union, although with inverted values, can be linked partly to a state idealist writing of history in which 'major' figures and ideas are judged to create and propel history. It can partly, and indeed primarily, be ascribed to a 'power realist' writing of history, focusing on political events and processes that express the struggle between political powers and to a certain extent also between economic interests. It is also well adapted to – or indeed necessitated by – a specific source situation where historical individuals, political drama, statements of goals and intentions, and top-down perspective in general, appear in much sharper focus than the underlying social and cultural processes and structures. From a critical perspective, as opponents have frequently established, it could be claimed that the advocates of totalitarian theory, on the basis of fairly thin and insignificant documentation, assume a far-reaching, a priori agreement between what the Soviet leadership wanted to achieve with their policies, and the impact that these policies actually had on society. Finally, one more central characteristic of an interpretation based on totalitarian theory should be mentioned, namely the notion that the terror was kept secret for a long time, not only in the Soviet Union but also in supporter groups in the west, who it was thought would not wish to allow Soviet criminal history to compromise the Soviet regime and communism.

### Research practice

The perspective of Robert Conquest's interpretation of Soviet communist criminal history, as it appears in the abovementioned pioneering work on the Great Terror, is strongly characterised by totalitarian theory, as are his other books on the terror.<sup>87</sup> In the

same way, this perspective permeates Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. In Merle Fainsod's *Smolensk under Soviet Rule* from 1958, which builds on documents from the abovementioned party archive in Smolensk, the party organisation is presented according to the totalitarian model as a strictly hierarchical structure, where the leaders' recurring decisions on purges, which are issued from Moscow, are conveyed directly to obedient party representatives at a lower level who duly implement them. On the other hand, the analysis of the collectivisation of agriculture in the agrarian-dominated Smolensk region differs from the prevailing totalitarian interpretation, by referring to the reluctance of the rural population to cooperate, sometimes taking the form of direct resistance to collectivisation and the treatment of the kulaks. What the party had not anticipated, according to Fainsod, was the fact that many kulaks were respected and influential agricultural leaders. What is more, they could take advantage of a strong sense of solidarity between different farming groups, which came to expression in joint, sometimes physical, resistance to the grain seizures. Fainsod shows that sympathy for the situation of the kulaks was also expressed at lower levels in the party and Soviet structure.<sup>88</sup>

However, totalitarian theory is not a historical framework of interpretation in the sense that it has been abandoned by the academic community. It is still used by researchers and still evokes discussion with opponents, and has in recent years gone through a revival, which will be shown later in this research review. In 1991, an updated edition of *The Great Terror* was published, in which Robert Conquest essentially sticks to his interpretations from 1968.<sup>89</sup> Among the current researchers who concur with this interpretation as an explanation of the Soviet communist terror is Nicolas Werth, author of the section on the Soviet terror in *The Black Book of Communism*, and leading Russian researcher Oleg Khlevniuk, who, in his book on the history of the Gulag, maintains the unequivocal position that the terror was 'a centrally organized

---

<sup>87</sup> These include Conquest 1960, 1970, 1978, 1985, 1986, 1989 and 1992. Cf also Karlsson 2008

---

<sup>88</sup> Fainsod 1958, pp 228–251.

<sup>89</sup> Conquest 1992, pp 484–489.

punitive action, planned in Moscow, against a potential fifth column perceived as capable of stabbing the country in the back in the case of war'.<sup>90</sup> In some cases, when the purpose of the research has been to examine the main protagonists of the terror, such as the heads of the secret police Nikolai Yezhov, Semyon Zhukovsky (one of Yezhov's deputies) and Lavrentiy Beria, or Stalin's associate Sergo Ordzhonikidze, the perspective can be said to be more in line with the biographical method.<sup>91</sup> In *Gulag og glemsel* (Gulag and oblivion) from 2002, Bent Jensen presents an interpretation of the Soviet criminal history which follows the framework of totalitarian theory closely from its introductory statement of purpose: 'This book will concentrate on Lenin's and the Bolsheviks' utopian and murderous notions of devastating, breaking down and liquidating entire social classes as the necessary prerequisite to enable the construction of a socialist utopia.'<sup>92</sup> By way of conclusion, after having presented an extremely well-informed and detailed analysis of the terror, a severe critique of Danish and western sympathisers, and intermittently related Soviet communism to Nazism, he is less clear on the nature of the total breakdown of civilisation that he describes the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin's regimes as:

'Communism' in this form as the realisation of Marxism, became a system that gathered all resources and all potential in the hands of a ruthless government, controlled by a monolithic and 'scientifically' ideologised and fanaticised party, that was prepared to use boundless terror in order to be able to control not only politics and the state, but also the entire economic process and thereby the life of society and even the private existence of individuals. This really was something entirely new, and it exceeded all existing notions of political power.<sup>93</sup>

## Revisionism

In the 1980s, criticism of totalitarian theory grew stronger.<sup>94</sup> It came from a new generation of radical and revisionist researchers who, without having an interpretation perspective that was as cohesive as the representatives of totalitarian theory, wanted to replace the traditional focus on political history and top-down perspective with a sociohistorical interest in 'ordinary' people's history and perspectives, from the bottom up. Some of these were historical materialists and others just had a general interest in the history of social movements and everyday structures that did not necessarily reflect political power in a simple and straightforward way. All were critical of what they perceived as a traditional conservative and anti-communist writing of history, long distorted by the Western Cold War perspective.

In contrast to the homogenous depiction of the monolithic communist regime's merciless repression of its citizens and the population's absolute submission to this regime, as presented in totalitarian theory, the revisionists sought to focus on various kinds of 'fracture areas', changes and disparities: shifts and inconsistencies in communist policy, conflicts between government authorities and groups involved in terror campaigns, and issues of how external threats affected the internal development of terror campaigns. On the issue of the Ukrainian famine, instead of emphasising 'the perception of the situation by the *vozhhd* himself, and the similarities to the agricultural policy introduced by Lenin at an earlier date,<sup>95</sup> researchers with a revisionist interpretation have chosen to talk about 'the major misconceptions of agriculture that influenced Soviet policy', emphasising that the Soviet leaders, when they discovered the extent of the agricultural crisis, tried to do something – although not enough – to alleviate the famine.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Werth 1999, pp 40–277, Khlevniuk 1992, and Khlevniuk 2004. Quote is in the latter publication on p 148.

<sup>91</sup> Jansen & Petrov 2002, Zhukovsky 2001, Knight 1993, and Khlevniuk 1996.

<sup>92</sup> Jensen 2002, p 14.

<sup>93</sup> Jensen 2002, p 410.

<sup>94</sup> Revisionism can be dated relatively exactly to the middle of the 1980s and the debate sparked by Fitzpatrick 1986, pp 357–373.

<sup>95</sup> Elman 2005, pp 823–841. Quote on page 824. Italicisation Elman's. *Vozhd* is the Russian word for Leader.

<sup>96</sup> Davies & Wheatcroft 2006, pp 626–627.

Revisionism has brought a perspective of social response to the terror campaigns and the unintentional consequences that could occur, which sometimes forced the perpetrators to change or modify their terror strategies. One such social response consisted of purely physical uprisings, such as when farmers met the collectivisation process with violence. Social responses could also be of a rhetorical or symbolic nature, as when farmers and workers protested by reporting their seniors for abuse of power. Another could be a bureaucratic group or *nomenklatura* that used terror campaigns to promote their own collective or individual interests, in competition with other bureaucratic groups. Still another social response could be the panic and hysteria in local societies that gave the terror campaigns a kind of escalating dynamic all of their own.<sup>97</sup>

The terror process did not have the same definitive and straightforward nature when it was shown that the orders and decrees issued from above were met and changed by various expressions of interest from below. The purges of the party, industry and other bodies caused by the Great Terror were of course catastrophic for those affected, and in the short term for the work of the body concerned. However, at the same time, they created many vacancies that could be filled by *vidvizhentsy*, young and technically trained individuals seeking social and professional advancement, who formed the backbone of the Stalinist state.<sup>98</sup> The practice of reporting a person to the authorities, in other words, voluntarily and deliberately and reporting the 'incorrect' deeds, thinking or background of a person or collective in writing, was therefore not only dictated by the citizens' moral duty to the state, but also by much more selfish and manipulative motives.<sup>99</sup> These kind of bottom-up information activities in the Soviet terror society have been called 'informing with an interest'.<sup>100</sup>

The dominant revisionist perspective on the terror is a functionalist one, which means that instead of

being portrayed as a result of a deliberate and malicious intent, terror is analysed as a response to different stimuli, interests and processes – which could have been lawful and even 'progressive' – in the context of a particular period. One particularly prominent factor in this interpretation is the growing international threat from capitalist and later fascist states, and the resulting perceived threats, which to some extent shifts the responsibility for these crimes from the Soviet communist regime to an outside world that was hostile to the regime. Another shift that comes into focus is the shift from Soviet ideology as a motivating factor, which in totalitarian theory is ascribed a crucial role as an underlying continuum, to much shorter-term interests on the parts of different groups who were beneficiaries of the terror process. A third shift relates to the increasing interest in the consequences of the terror campaigns, such as the Yezhovschina's discarding of technologically and economically important personnel, which had a particularly negative effect on technology and industry in which the state was not actively interested. The slight autonomy given to politically and economically significant groups had a negative effect on modernisation in general and in particular on the industrial development that the political system sought to promote in other ways.<sup>101</sup>

This major change in perspective has also been undoubtedly significant in terms of the image of the Soviet leaders. In leading revisionist John Arch Getty's character sketch, Stalin is transformed from the omnipotent, omniscient evil genius who steered the Soviet Union towards the Great Terror with an iron grip, to a representative of what Hannah Arendt in the 1960s called 'banal evil':

Stalin was a cruel but ordinary mortal unable to see the future and with a limited ability to create and control it. He was not a master planner, and studies of all of his other policies before and after the 1930s have shown that he stumbled into everything from collectivization to foreign policy. Stalin's colossal

---

<sup>97</sup> See e.g. Getty 2002, pp 113–138.

<sup>98</sup> Cf Hoffman 1993, p 167.

<sup>99</sup> Fitzpatrick 1997, pp 107–110.

<sup>100</sup> Kozlov 1997, p 133ff.

<sup>101</sup> See Davies 2006, pp 80–82.

felonies, like most violent crimes everywhere, were of the unplanned erratic kind.<sup>102</sup>

The most radical revisionists have not hesitated to absolve Stalin and his immediate associates from the terror campaigns of the 1930s. For them, the first half of the 1930s was a period of positive social development, when 'progress was being made toward a fairer, more consistent, and less political application of law'.<sup>103</sup> What followed is described as a social mobilisation, where actual political opposition to Stalin grew, but where there was also a significant rallying of support for the leader and the regime. This was against a background of the mass fear or mass hysteria that took possession of the Soviet society as a result of a real increase in the threat of war. In the mobilisation process that the Great Terror is presented as from a revisionist perspective, Stalin and his closest associates are not key players but objects who react passively to, are propelled by, and occasionally panic in the face of, developments that they neither planned nor anticipated. This is a pattern that the revisionist school of thought also seeks to apply to the earlier process of forced collectivisation. When they finally manage to stop the Great Terror, it is necessary to instigate a policy of silence, since it would be much too damaging for their own political legitimacy to confess to the mistakes made when the leadership lost control of the terror campaigns and allowed them to take on a life of their own.<sup>104</sup>

In an extension of the same line of argument, but not always expressed as such, there is often a perception that the Soviet Union, even under Stalin's regime, showed much greater similarities with other countries than is suggested by totalitarian theory. This perception always went hand in hand with the idea, popular at the time, that Western capitalist society and Eastern communist society were moving towards convergence. Both systems were characterised by processes of industrialisation and modernisation, which, despite differences in different countries, showed broadly similar features. Links in the same

chain include a questioning of the extent to which Stalin and his associates' were responsible for the terror campaigns, and of the high numbers of victims of the Soviet communist terror alleged by Conquest and others.

### Research practice

The revisionist line of argument reached its most exaggerated expression in the late 1970s, when Jerry Hough published a radical revision of Merle Fainsod's classic work of totalitarian theory, *How Russia is Ruled* (1953) renaming it *How the Soviet Union is Governed*. In the latter work, Soviet communist terror is universalised and portrayed as a change of generation which, although drastic in nature as Stalin was a brutal leader, 'only' claimed tens of thousands of lives, or a hundred thousand at the most, while the 'beneficiaries of the purges' were much more numerous. In this context, important factors underlying the Great Terror are described as 'the desire to utilize the newly trained products of the engineering institutes in administrative posts and a fear that a peaceful purge would leave far too large a pool of discontents with organizational experience'.<sup>105</sup>

In Arch Getty's *Origins of the Great Purges* from 1985, generally regarded as the fundamental and 'exemplary' work of the revisionist paradigm, the author directs sharp criticism at the previous 'journalistic' and 'anecdotal' manner of writing the history of the Soviet Union in the 1930s. In particular he scrutinises the traditional perception of a monolithic communist party, characterised by a hierarchical decision-making procedure. Instead Getty describes an unstructured, contradictory and occasionally chaotic political process, full of conflict between the centre and the periphery and opposition to centrally-made political decisions. As a result, in Getty's eyes, the Great Terror was not the coherent and homogenous process evoked by previous research. For him, the Soviet society of the 1930s was indeed dictatorial but not totalitarian, since the latter would demand a technological and

---

<sup>102</sup> Getty 1993, p 62.

<sup>103</sup> Thurston 1996, p 15.

<sup>104</sup> Thurston 1996, pp 57, 132.

<sup>105</sup> Hough & Fainsod 1979, p 177. The term 'beneficiaries of the purges' is used in a similar argumentation by Sheila Fitzpatrick, a close colleague to Hough, in Fitzpatrick 1992 p 177ff.

administrative effectiveness that simply did not exist.<sup>106</sup> He had already shown this in a revised analysis of the Smolensk archive. In contrast to Fainsod, Getty did not find any trace of the mass violence forced on the local party structure in Smolensk in a totalitarian and top-down manner. Instead, he made a sharp distinction between a process of relatively ineffective and non-political purges within the party between 1933 and 1936, and a later process, from mid-1937, in which Smolensk was hit by the full force of the Yezhovschina.<sup>107</sup>

In the 1990s another leading revisionist, Lynne Viola, carried out several analyses of the dramatic reorganisation of Soviet agriculture around 1930. She took advantage of increased access to relevant source material to draw up similar perspectives on peasant resistance and what she describes as universal agrarian conflict strategies or the culture of resistance in the ongoing war between the Soviet state and the peasants. This perspective could of course be attributed to Fainsod's abovementioned analysis of the collectivisation of agriculture in the Smolensk region, but Viola shows that the peasants' resistance was so extensive, so deliberate and so articulate that it is appropriate to speak of a specific peasant policy, built on strong cultural notions of the peasant society as characterised by cohesion and solidarity, and of Stalin's policy as a deadly threat to this, which had to be met with vocal protests and active resistance.<sup>108</sup>

The revisionist paradigm, with its emphasis on broader social and cultural processes, brought a widening of the boundaries of Soviet criminal history, and the beginnings of the establishment of

a multidisciplinary perspective. From a more critical perspective, it can be stated that precision in the research area decreased, when the terror campaigns were brought together with what Sheila Fitzpatrick called 'everyday Stalinism'. This included analyses of everything from informant activities, denial of social origin and other 'mechanisms of terror', which undoubtedly formed part of terror history, to things like consumption patterns and family problems, which were not so clearly related to the terror campaigns.<sup>109</sup> The show trials in rural parts of the Soviet territory in 1937 were changed from manifestations of political power to carnivals in which peasants could witness the humiliation of their previous superiors and see existing power structures turned upside down.<sup>110</sup> This revisionist expansion of the synchronous social frameworks of terror is in stark contrast to the diachronic time framework, which instead was tightened up in comparison to totalitarian theory. Revisionist accounts of the terror history rarely go back to the period prior to the Revolution, and rarely bring Lenin into this history. On the other hand, Viola, Fitzpatrick and their successors have often pointed out that new research on Stalin's regime sees 'Stalinism' as a specific culture or 'way of life', a self-contained discursive system, or, in the words of Viola,

an entire world within the Stalinist dictatorship, a semiautonomous world of many layers, cultures, and languages of existence, experience, and survival that coexisted with, evolved within, interacted with, and at times bypassed the larger and seemingly omnipresent reality of Stalinism.<sup>111</sup>

As a result the terror of the 1930s, including its precursors during the agrarian revolution of the late 1920s, is more or less disengaged from the wider historical context, which is one of the key points of totalitarian theory. This is not so much a matter of actively writing Lenin out of the context of Soviet

---

<sup>106</sup> Getty 1987, p 198.

<sup>107</sup> Getty 1983, pp 60–79.

<sup>108</sup> Viola 1996. Interestingly enough, Viola's perspective is radically different from that of her revisionist colleague Sheila Fitzpatrick who, in Fitzpatrick 1994, p 48, has an entirely different view of how the Soviet peasants met the threat of collectivisation: "The peasants, on their part, responded with wailing and lamentations and all manner of passive and furtive resistance, but on the whole they bore it fatalistically, signed up for the kolkhoz when they saw no other choice, and did not erupt into outright rebellion."

---

<sup>109</sup> Fitzpatrick 1999.

<sup>110</sup> Fitzpatrick 1993, pp 299–320. For a different perspective, see Ellman 2001, pp 1221–1233, and Ellman 2003, p 1308ff.

<sup>111</sup> Viola 2002, p 1. See also Fitzpatrick 2000b, p 3, Getty 1999, pp 15–24, and Siegelbaum & Sokolov 2000.



criminal history, but more about simply choosing not to deal with the issue of his possible participation. A consequence of this has been that the objects of the Red Terror, non-communist or anti-communist collectives or institutions, have not received much attention in this research either.<sup>112</sup>

In general, as will become clear later in this research review, there is a marked difference in scope between research on the Leninist period and studies on the Stalinist era, a difference which remains to this day.

In this context, there is good reason to problematise the term 'revisionism', which can essentially be used to refer to every attempt to revise a previously established framework of interpretation, not through modification but through replacement with a paradigmatically new framework. Also in the context of interpretations of Hitler, the Nazi regime and Holocaust there is a revisionism that is often linked with Holocaust denial, and a revisionist school of thought that has appeared as a protest against an older interpretation paradigm. However, these two revisionisms are diametrically opposed. German revisionism, a reaction to earlier attempts to see Hitler's regime as a divergence from or parenthesis within German history, builds on the idea of a German *Sonderweg*, a special path that can be traced back to the Wilhelmian, Imperial Germany of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which led to the birth of the Nazi regime. Revisionism in the case of Stalin, communism and the crimes of the Soviet regime has developed as a reaction to attempts to show the deep roots of Stalin's regime in Soviet, and to an extent even Romanov, Imperial history. In this case, the revised perception has been, as far as possible, to lift out the mass violence of 'Stalinism' from Soviet history, and to show that this violence was a deviation rather than a norm, or something completely different from 'true' communism.<sup>113</sup>

It is difficult to say how much the revisionist project has been based on a hidden ideological desire to 'vindicate' Lenin, his Leninist communism and the positive foundations of the Soviet project that are thought to originate from Lenin, or whether the primary motivation has been to establish a scientific alternative to the fundamental criticism of the Soviet regime that characterises the totalitarian theory paradigm, or whether both are true. The revisionists' answer to this question is that this is clearly a revolutionary scientific paradigm shift. For Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, one of those personally affected by 'Stalinism', who has used the rest of his life to describe, analyse and criticise it from a perspective of totalitarian theory, it became clear as early as the mid 1970s that the term 'Stalinism' was being used in left-wing revisionist circles in order to 'shift onto it the whole bloody burden of the past to make their present position easier'.<sup>114</sup>

## Postrevisionism

During the 1990s, conflict between totalitarian theorists and revisionists began to be toned down and defused. This was a result of three things – partly the emergence of new source material that rendered some of the classic points of contention obsolete, partly new perspectives in scientific theory that focused researchers' attention on issues that neither totalitarian theory nor revisionism had seen as primary problems, and partly that a new generation of researchers who were not entrenched in the intellectual and scientific perspectives of the Cold War were able to break down the locked positions that had made a large amount of the research carried out on Soviet communist terror both predictable and unproductive. This new generation also included researchers from Russia and other post-Soviet states, many of whom had no connection whatsoever to the two major interpretation paradigms. With a few notable exceptions, however, the participation of Russian and post-Soviet historians in research development is primarily in the roles of document presenters and descriptive, purely empirically oriented researchers,

---

<sup>112</sup> Cf Brovkin 1997, p 3.

<sup>113</sup> One of the revisionist researchers who most clearly questioned the applicability of the term communism to Soviet conditions, by demonstrating that the term worked as a cover for a nationalist, agrarian despotic, statist or state capitalist ideology, or simply a 'brutally

---

repressive police state', is Moshe Lewin. See Lewin 1995, chapter 8. Quote from Lewin 1985, p 311.

<sup>114</sup> Solzhenitsyn 1975, p 12.

who widen the social and geographic framework of the terror.<sup>115</sup>

This new paradigm can be called a postrevisionist paradigm. However, this term should not be understood as a further development solely of the revisionist paradigm. Rather, it describes an evolutionary development of both previous paradigms, or a synthesis that develops and integrates the elements of earlier ideas that are still seen as fruitful and worthwhile interpretation perspectives. All the same, several features of the revisionist paradigm have survived postrevisionism, and several of the most prominent representatives of the revisionist paradigm have, in recent years, presented tendencies that can best be described as postrevisionist. The notion that the crimes of the Soviet communist regime were one-way, hierarchical processes in which a despotic leadership exercised violence on a defenceless and passive population has now been rejected in favour of a revisionist framework of interpretation that credits broader swathes of society with a will of their own and the power to resist, and ascribes a certain degree of autonomy to bureaucratic and professional groups in relation to the Soviet centre of power. Few would now oppose Getty when he summarises his position:

Powerful as he was, Stalin had to function within a matrix of competing interests and powers. Local leaders had to obey him, of course, but they were also able to press their cases with him; and to some extent, he had to listen. He was not stupid; he needed them to run the country, and they were closer to the ground than he was.<sup>116</sup>

At the same time, the new source material has made it quite clear that it is impossible to leave

politics and the highest political leaders out of the history of terror, and that Josef Stalin as an individual, along with his closest associates, had a great deal of influence over the decision to initiate the purges and over their implementation, carried out by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the secret police – as claimed by adherents to totalitarian theory. This influence reached all the way down to regional and local levels, but that does not mean that regional departments of the NKVD were not able to take initiatives of their own during the years of the Great Terror, within certain parameters. This could take expression in a kind of ‘socialist competition’ to see which departments could fulfil and exceed centrally determined quotas most effectively.<sup>117</sup> One consequence of these new insights is that political historians increasingly widen their framework of interpretation to include the social mechanisms that made it possible for the terror process to reach out into Soviet society, while social historians are becoming more inclined to include the political decisions made in the top echelons of party and government in their analysis.

In the same way, there is growing agreement in the academic community that the Stalinist terror period was determined by the specific circumstances of the Second World War and the interwar period, as claimed by revisionists, but that the Leninist period also contributed many of the institutional and politico-cultural conditions of the Stalinist terror period, as has long been emphasised by totalitarian theorists. At the same time, there is significant acceptance of the idea that the structural conditions for Lenin’s Red Terror and Stalin’s Great Terror were fundamentally different: while the Red Terror was carried out in a society ravaged by revolution and war, where power relations were unclear and the politics of the Bolsheviks met strong resistance, Stalin’s society at the time of the Great Terror was characterised by much more stability in terms of societal development and power relations, although Stalin sought to depict it otherwise.

---

<sup>115</sup> Despite an essentially very positive assessment of new developments in Russian research, this is a perception that is shared by Lennart Samuelson in the review of Russian research he presented in ‘Old and new writings of the history of the rural Soviet Union – the significance of the ‘archive revolution’ since the 1990s’ and (with Andrei Sokolov) ‘The archive revolution and writing the history of rural Russia’, both in Samuelson (ed.) 2007, pp 27–41 and 241–255 respectively.

<sup>116</sup> Getty 2004, p 234.

---

<sup>117</sup> Cf Jansen & Petrov 2002, pp 92–93.

In terms of who bears the responsibility for the Red Terror of the first few years following the Revolution, however, there is not the same consensus. The question is whether there are the right conditions for a consensus to be reached on the issue of responsibility, given that both 'red' and 'white' warfare against various groups of the population between 1918 and 1921 claimed many lives. An underlying issue is the historical question of the extent to which the October Revolution was a seizure of power from above that implied dictatorship and repression from the start, since the Bolsheviks had few supporters, or whether it was more of a broad social transformation process which stimulated the Bolsheviks and which they were able to lead. On top of this, there is the basic ideological question of the extent to which it is justifiable to use mass violence to topple an autocracy like that of the Russian Tsar. While a number of researchers who have investigated the early post-revolutionary period have underlined the disproportionate and institutional violence used by the Red regime against groups that did not belong unequivocally to the white resistance armies, such as peasants, Cossacks and priests, representatives of revisionist ideas have proposed a radically different thesis, built on reverse causality: 'the civil war was an attempt by the old order to restore its reign, an attempt that was supported by Western intervention'.<sup>118</sup> See how it happened in Finland, where the 'white' representatives of the old order were successful in their uprising, and much blood was shed in 1918 when the revolutionaries were crushed by counter-revolutionary forces!<sup>119</sup> This revisionist interpretation, with 'white' and foreign troops as perpetrators of violence, and the 'reds' and the ordinary people legitimately defending the revolution, is identical to the traditional Soviet interpretation. If there is a postrevisionist

---

<sup>118</sup> Haynes & Husan 2003, p 52. See also Mayer 2002, who, not quite so unequivocally, points out: "The Furies of revolution are fuelled above all by the resistance of the forces and ideas opposed to it. This confrontation turns singularly fierce once it becomes clear that revolution entails and promises – or threatens – a thoroughly new beginning or foundation of polity and society." (p 23).

<sup>119</sup> Haynes & Husan 2003, p 48.

interpretation that reconciles the two previous interpretations, it is represented by historians like Vladimir Brovkin, who emphasises the open and chaotic situation that reigned in Russia after the Bolshevik seizure of power, and who puts the Russian civil war in plural in the title of his book:

It is time to move beyond the assumption that because the Bolsheviks won they had social support. We must abandon the assumption that during the civil war there was the Party, the State, and Society in Russia. In fact, there were many parties and movements; there was no state, only pieces of the old state warring with one another; and there certainly was no one society during the civil war, but at best a society torn to pieces.<sup>120</sup>

Another issue that continues to create discord between representatives of the different paradigms, although there is less polarisation here due to the emergence of more documented evidence, is that of the death toll. As has been seen, there have been major differences between the results presented by radical spokespeople for the different paradigms. While Jerry Hough suggested Stalin's terror claimed tens of thousands of victims, R.J. Rummel puts the death toll of Soviet communist terror between 1917 and 1987 at 61,911,000.<sup>121</sup> In both cases, these figures are based on an ideological preunderstanding and speculative and sweeping calculations. On the other hand, the considerably lower figures in terms of numbers of Gulag prisoners presented by Russian researchers during the glasnost period have been relatively widely accepted.<sup>122</sup> Some of these figures have been mentioned in the historical section of this report, and will not be repeated here.

In terms of the total number of victims of the crimes of the Soviet communist regime, however, the figures still vary widely. There are two main sources: the documentation of the Soviet authorities and the secret police, and the census statistics.

---

<sup>120</sup> Brovkin 2004, p 3.

<sup>121</sup> Rummel 1996, p 1.

<sup>122</sup> These are also mentioned in an often cited article on the extent of the Gulag system during the prewar period, Getty, Rittersporn & Zemskov, pp 1017–1049.

Neither of these sources offers exact information for the entire terror period and all its institutions and processes, and it is notoriously difficult to draw a line between ordinary deaths and 'excess deaths'.<sup>123</sup> On the basis of these sources, a number of qualified demographers and economic historians have, using a revisionist framework of interpretation, indicated that there were circa 10 million 'excess deaths' in the period between 1927 and 1938.<sup>124</sup> Robert Conquest's figure for the same period is 16-18 million deaths.<sup>125</sup> On the basis of his work in the Russian rehabilitation commission under President Yeltsin, Alexander Yakovlev has estimated that 20 to 25 million people died for political reasons and in prisons and camps during the regimes of Lenin and Stalin. This total does not include all those who died during the famine, over 5.5 million who died in the civil war, and a further 5 million who died in the 1930s.<sup>126</sup>

### Contradictions and paradoxes

There are aspects of the postrevisionist paradigm that point clearly towards totalitarian theory. One such aspect is the newly awakened interest in the communist ideology and its relation to crimes against humanity. This revived aspect will be illustrated in detail in the following section on comparisons between communism and Nazism. Only one such issue will be dealt with here, since its only link to Nazism is in terms of its consequences. It relates more to the structure of the Soviet ideology and the criminal history of the Soviet communist regime.

In his book *A Century of Genocide*, Eric Weitz establishes that Soviet citizens were categorised according to two opposite and fundamentally incompatible ideological principles: on the one hand, on the basis of the idea that all individuals can change and become good Soviet citizens, regardless of class and ethnic background, and on the other hand, on the basis of an understanding that this background would forever determine an

individual's or group's relationship with the Soviet project. In the period from 1937 to 1953, the latter principle took the upper hand when the Soviet regime 'defined certain nations as suspect and dangerous, and those characteristics were seen to inhere in each and every member of the group'.<sup>127</sup> According to Weitz, this ideological shift makes it easier to comprehend the treatment of the 'punished peoples' during the Second World War and the treatment of Jews during Stalin's last half decade in power. Weitz concludes, therefore, that despite the Soviet ideology's explicit rejection of the notion of race, there were nonetheless 'traces of racial policy'.<sup>128</sup>

In a subsequent debate, he was criticised by several fellow researchers. One of them claimed that the discrimination and exclusion inherent in Soviet policy during the late Stalin era was not based on racial biology, but on sociohistorical arguments. At the same time, she stressed that the Soviet example shows that there may not necessarily be any differences between these two lines of argument in terms of respect for human life.<sup>129</sup> Another referred, somewhat superficially but from a clearly postrevisionist point of view, to the tension between social and biological categorisation, which was never resolved in the Soviet Union, and to the fact that the terror was multifaceted, ambivalent and arbitrary.<sup>130</sup>

Furthermore, there are several aspects of postrevisionism that can be seen as developments of the revisionist paradigm. One such aspect is the emphasis on Soviet criminal history as a part of what was fundamentally a modern project, but a project with disruptive 'premodern' or 'Russian' elements. Marxist, modernist theory could not be brought into harmony with Soviet practice.<sup>131</sup> As a result, the Stalinist period of Soviet history is often described in analytically or morally contradictory or paradoxical terms, such as those we have just discussed on the possible racism of Stalin's Soviet

---

<sup>123</sup> Some of these problems were investigated constructively in Ellman 2002, pp 1151-1172.

<sup>124</sup> Davies, Harrison & Wheatcroft 1994, p 77.

<sup>125</sup> Conquest 1991, p 951.

<sup>126</sup> Yakovlev 2002, p 234.

---

<sup>127</sup> Weitz 2003, pp 64, 83.

<sup>128</sup> Weitz 2003, p 97. See also Weitz 2002, p 3.

<sup>129</sup> Hirsch 2002, pp 30-43.

<sup>130</sup> Weiner 2002, pp 52-53.

<sup>131</sup> Cf Hanson 1997, Brandenberger 2002.

Union: the violently accelerated industrialisation process contrasts with concentration camps, forced labour and destruction of the agrarian economy, social advancement for 'new' groups contrasts with liquidation of the 'old', increased literacy contrasts with reduced freedom, and a cultural revolution that went hand in hand with the breakdown of cultural values. On the issue of the Soviet economy, which also included the Gulag system, tension is depicted between, on the one hand, the aspiration towards economic rationality and effectiveness, and on the other hand, various kinds of political and social goals, which were expressed in class wars and terror campaigns against 'opposing' groups. The system included both 'carrots' and 'whips', but the latter came to be used as the dominant instrument during the 1930s.<sup>132</sup> Already mentioned, and by now well analysed in a research context, is the contradictory transition from 'class enemies' to 'enemies of the people', and the continuation of this idea in specific 'enemy nations'.<sup>133</sup>

In the light of all this, the idea that terror and democracy under Stalin's regime could be brought together in a book title is not as remarkable as it may first seem. During the first half of the 1930s, more and more leaders within the party and the trade union movement spoke up for increased democracy in the organisations. By democratisation, they meant secret ballots between several party candidates, and more opportunities for workers on the shop floor to criticise the management of workplaces and industry, as well as the upper echelons of the trade union movement. In 1936 and early 1937, after the NKVD and the party leadership had set up a number of trials against supposedly negligent and autocratic groups of leaders in industry, a veritable 'democratic orgy' broke out, in which dissatisfied workers openly criticised and accused the intermediate levels of industry and the trade union movement. For Stalin, this process fulfilled the double purpose of justifying the elimination of 'opposition' groups,

and making the mobilised working class more involved in the industrialisation process:

Democracy was not peripheral, not a smoke screen, not a collection of meaningless slogans designed to mask the 'real' meaning of events. It was the very means by which repression spread to every union, factory committee, and primary party organization. If the hunt for oppositionists ignited a fire within the Party and the unions, the campaign for "democracy" served as the gasoline.<sup>134</sup>

A consequence of this research initiative is a renewed and diversified postrevisionist interest in both the perpetrator groups and victim categories of the terror. In both cases, this interest is directly related to the fact that new documentation has been made available for research. This reawakened interest in the perpetrator perspective is largely associated with the fact that the minutes of the plenary meetings of the Central Committee from December 1936, February-March 1937 and June 1937 have become available and published. The contents of the minutes of the first Committee meeting in 1937, published over the course of several years in the historical journal *Voprosy istorii*, have been discussed in particular, since this material is judged to contain important clues as to the immediate antecedents of the Great Terror, especially the central role of NKVD head Nikolai Yezhov.<sup>135</sup> At this meeting, Yezhov, who was chairing the meeting with Stalin, launched an attack on his predecessor Genrich Yagoda, who was arrested shortly thereafter and put on trial in the last of the 1938 Moscow Trials and subsequently executed. The main accusation was that the NKVD had neglected its political activities in favour of ordinary police activities focusing on fighting crime and social unrest.<sup>136</sup> On the basis of this plenary meeting, Oleg Khlevniuk believes it is possible to identify a change in the power balance between the party and the secret police, in the sense that the

---

<sup>132</sup> Cf Shearer 1996, and several chapters in Gregory & Lazarev 2003. Cf also Baron 2004, pp 439–462.

<sup>133</sup> Weiner 1999, pp 1114–1155, Weiner 2001, Martin 2001.

<sup>134</sup> Goldman 2007, p 130.

<sup>135</sup> See 'Materialy fevral'sko-martovskogo plenuma TsK VKP(b) 1937 goda', no 2–12, 1992, no 2 and 5–10, 1993, no 2, 6, 8, 10 and 12, 1994, and no 1–8 and 10, 1995.

<sup>136</sup> Shearer 2001, pp 507–509, Hedeler 2003, pp 34–55.

NKVD, in the context of an intensified paranoid atmosphere, managed to appropriate more and more power over the appointments and purges of the *nomenklatura* in the party and the state machinery over the course of a couple of years.<sup>137</sup> Newly released letters have also contributed to illuminating this political process. In a collection of Stalin's letters to one of his closest associates, Vyacheslav Molotov, his conspiratorial tendencies come to light: activities seeking to undermine Soviet society, led by subversive individuals and groups, were ubiquitous. In his letters, Stalin specified the trials in which he wanted the defendants to be tortured to make them confess the truth about these activities and the guilty parties to be shot.<sup>138</sup>

In reading the swiftly growing postrevisionist research literature that refers to the key figures of the terror campaigns, it can be difficult to know whether the individuals or groups in question belong to the perpetrator category or the victim category. One example illustrates this analytical problem. The Great Terror of the Stalin period also affected the Comintern, the Communist International, an organisation founded in 1919 to lead the workers of the world to communism, headquartered in Moscow. Its main opponents were the social democrats or 'social fascists' and 'lackeys of imperialism', and the organisation stood firm behind of Stalin's settlements with opponents on his left and right within the Soviet communist party. Stalin himself was on the executive committee of the Comintern. In the initial phases of the Great Terror, the organisation participated willingly in, and helped to justify, the search for 'enemies' or 'suspects', not least among the groups of foreigners and emigrants to which many of the members of the leadership and bureaucracy of the Comintern belonged. During the Great Terror, the leadership of the organisation was wiped out, as were many members of its vast bureaucracy, thus completing the terror process in which the

Comintern played three roles: as perpetrator, instrument and victim.<sup>139</sup>

### Victim studies and microhistories

The postrevisionist research of the last decade or more has also significantly increased our knowledge of the crimes committed against groups that can be called terror victims in a more unequivocal sense. This no longer directly concerns the more or less articulated grass-roots resistance to the terror regime, although some researchers with roots in the revisionist paradigm have continued during the 2000s to emphasise the popular resistance and its strategies.<sup>140</sup> The 'victim studies' of postrevisionism take the reader to the micro level of history, where the arbitrary, contradictory and absurd nature of the terror is at its most visible. This research can be said to correspond to what Sheila Fitzpatrick has described as 'Soviet subjectivity', a school of thought that, according to Fitzpatrick herself, has turned from the large, totalising theories that focus on class, ideology and discourse, towards smaller-scale issues concerning people's identities and self-perception in daily life and social practice.<sup>141</sup> In the context of research practice, however, this issue is more about prioritisation or emphasis, where Fitzpatrick's revisionist background still comes to light. For example, she establishes that people in the Soviet Union had 'file identities', linked to the administrative files and internal passports that the authorities used for supervision and control of the population, but that Soviet citizens could still manipulate these and create their own self-image by falsifying and purchasing new identity documents, changing their social group status through marriage or education, or protesting in court against being allocated an undesirable identity.<sup>142</sup>

This kind of identity-oriented research has, for example, drawn attention to the significance of family ties in the development of the terror process. Regardless of whether used against 'class enemies' or 'enemies of the people' as defined in ethnic or political counterrevolutionary terms, family ties

---

<sup>137</sup> Khlevniuk 2003, pp 21–33.

<sup>138</sup> Lih, Naumov & Khlevniuk 1995.

<sup>139</sup> Chase 2001.

<sup>140</sup> See e.g. Viola 2002.

<sup>141</sup> Fitzpatrick 2005, p 8.

<sup>142</sup> Fitzpatrick 2005, pp 14–18.

were judged to be highly relevant. One implication of this was that gender patterns became apparent: 'enemies' were the heads of families and were virtually always men, while women and children were stigmatised on the basis of their family ties. Using Pavel Morozov as an example, women and children were encouraged to inform against the heads of their families and distance themselves from their families.<sup>143</sup> Children in particular were affected by this unusual type of collective punishment, since it was necessary to 'tackle evil at the root'.<sup>144</sup> Not even the highest echelons of the Soviet leaders escaped this terror system: even foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov's wife, of Jewish origin, was arrested in December 1948, accused of treason. Molotov himself confessed his 'political mistake' of not supporting her arrest from the outset, and he maintained that her arrest 'was in the interests of the party and the state'.<sup>145</sup> This focus on family ties went hand in hand with a cultural and social reevaluation of family relationships, moving from the 'small' nuclear family to the 'big' Soviet family.

This kind of study has also drawn attention to the 'mass operations' carried out during the Great Terror against socially and ethnically defined groups that were judged to disturb the social order of the Soviet society, or to constitute potential threats to the territorial integrity of the Soviet state.<sup>146</sup> The numerous Germans in the Soviet Union – either those whose families had been in the country for centuries, or convinced communists seeking to escape the Nazi regime of their home country – were hit particularly hard, partly after the NKVD uncovered a 'Hitler Jugend' conspiracy in the capital in 1938.<sup>147</sup> As in the case of family relationships, ethnic groups were also judged to have some kind of primordial and prioritised relationship to a root and an origin that was not Stalin and communist Soviet Union.

A number of studies of this nature have also been carried out on individual Soviet industries and their shop floors. The work of the Petersburg company *Ostechbjuro* focused on supplying weapons for the Red Army and the Soviet Navy, as part of a sector that was important for the Soviet government and that was framed in terms of science, experimentation and innovation. When the party discovered in 1936 that the employees of the *Ostechbjuro* included members of a 'terrorist hub' with links abroad and to Stalin's major opponents, Trotsky and Zinoviev, many of the workers at the factory were accused of being 'enemies of the people'. In his dealings with them, the local party secretary did not mince his words:

Guided only by a thirst for personal and careerist power ambitions, this pitiable and despised faction of fascist monstrosities and brutes have, in their animalistic hatred towards the land of socialism, feverishly prepared their attack on the leaders of the party and the state. Like beasts of prey, they waited for the moment in which they could destroy what workers all over the world treasure most of all – the life of our own Stalin, our beloved leader and the friend of all workers. These dirty fiends aimed for the very heart of the party. Through their political bankruptcy, which lacks any support among the masses, they have made terror their goal. Crooked dealings and deception have been oft-used methods in their fight against the party and the people. They have trained the sights of their poisonous weapons – hired from the arsenal of the fascist Gestapo – on the powerful Stalin and his closest disciples and colleagues, the party's beloved comrades Voroshilov, Zhdanov, Kaganovich, Ordzhonikidze, Kosior and Postyshev.<sup>148</sup>

The accused disappeared from history in the same way they disappeared from the company archives. This information was released for the first time in 1990. In a book on *Ostechbjuro*, published by Memorial in St Petersburg, the victims are listed with photos and personal information.

Some other works fall into the category of 'victim histories', taking as their starting point the

---

<sup>143</sup> Alexopoulos 2008, pp 91–117.

<sup>144</sup> Cf Viola 2000, pp 34–72.

<sup>145</sup> Gorlizki & Khlevniuk 2004, pp 75–79.

<sup>146</sup> Cf McLoughlin 2003, pp 118–152.

<sup>147</sup> Schafranek & Musienko 2003, pp 208–224.

<sup>148</sup> Sjosjkov 1995, p 49.

'forgotten' categories and processes that have not yet received much attention in research on the Soviet communist criminal history. These books often have a stronger biographical, narrative side than revisionist writings of history, which is partly to do with access to concrete source material offering everyday perspectives on terror, and partly also a response to more major changes in perspective in terms of ways of writing history. Some of these works identify groups that have previously gone unnoticed in favour of the political groups that were in focus for totalitarian theory or the peasant and worker groups that formed the main interest of revisionists. One such group is professional musicians,<sup>149</sup> another is *lishentsy*, the 'bourgeois' elements who were deprived of their civil and social rights, and to a greater extent their freedom, by the communist regime as part of a deliberate and brutal class policy.<sup>150</sup>

Another clear example of this postrevisionist genre is Nicolas Werth's depiction of 'Cannibal Island', situated in the Ob River among the camps of western Siberia. In 1933, when the Soviet authorities purged Moscow and Leningrad of almost one hundred thousand 'declassed' and 'socially harmful' elements, many of them ended up in Siberian camps. Ten thousand of them, however, were dumped on the uninhabited and inaccessible island of Nazino, without food or shelter. The Siberian authorities were unwilling to accept this contingent, since they demanded material resources that were not available and it was feared they would cause social unrest. In a situation of increasing anarchy and chaos, the group of deportees were left to starve to death or eat each other. Werth emphasises that his coherent story – one of total disorganisation, lack of coordination and lack of preparation for receiving large groups of destitute people – could be told many times over to describe the kulak deportations of the early 1930s.<sup>151</sup>

One such 'reproduction' that combines a wider analytical perspective with glimpses of the fates of individuals, is Lynne Viola's book on

*spetspereselentsy*, the hundreds of thousands of kulak families who were 'eliminated as a class' at the peak of the deportations and who were used in the Soviet colonisation process, being placed in 'special settlements' around the Arctic Ocean, the Urals, Siberia or Kazakhstan. The conditions of their transportation, and arrival in the often completely uninhabitable areas that were allocated to former kulak families, were not very different to the conditions on Nazino. In the Arctic Ocean area alone, the OGPU reported a death toll of 21,213 in 1930. The highest mortality rates were among children.<sup>152</sup>

This postrevisionist movement away from the 'major' political figures and events of the history or the terror, which were prioritised by advocates of totalitarian theory to the exclusion of all else, and from the overall socioeconomic processes and structures on which many revisionists mainly focused, towards microhistory and small-scale stories, has been expressed in two other ways. One of these is a focus on the development of terror at geographically local and regional levels. Issues relating to the causes, expressions and consequences of the terror in individual Soviet towns and communities have been illustrated both in their local contexts, and in relation to the centre of communist power, Moscow. If Merle Fainsod's study of Smolensk was a prominent work of totalitarian theory, then the exemplary work of the postrevisionist paradigm is Steven Kotkin's biography of the city of Magnitogorsk in the southern Urals. The city was built in record time – in three and a half years, the population grew from 25 to 250,000 – around a gigantic steelworks that was completed in the early 1930s. Like several revisionists, Kotkin sought to describe Stalinism as a civilisation, but he is careful to emphasise that he does not share his predecessors' view of the destructive closedness of Stalinism in relation to, and in contrast with, more progressive and open development under Lenin, Leninism and the first decade of the Soviet regime. Neither does he believe what he describes as the common assumption of both totalitarian theory and

---

<sup>149</sup> Brooke 2002, pp 397–413.

<sup>150</sup> Alexopoulos 2003.

<sup>151</sup> Werth 2007.

<sup>152</sup> Viola 2007, p 87.



revisionism, that the Stalinist state was despotic. In contrast to this perspective, Kotkin turns to Michel Foucault's notion that 'individuals are made, and also make themselves, into subjects under the aegis of the state'.<sup>153</sup> Therefore, he sets out to portray Stalinist civilisation from below and from within, using newspapers from the period, modern interviews and other sources that are 'close to the people'. He takes seriously the language, experiences and ideology of the ordinary people who lived in Magnitogorsk and 'built socialism' during the terror period. Thus, the terror itself was to a large extent engineered by the citizens and 'brought out both the basest and the noblest instincts in the population'.<sup>154</sup> In fact, in Kotkin's account, it is depicted as a result of people's manipulated participation, based on a kind of revolutionary rationality and the logic that acts of terror were being committed for their own best, in response to Stalin's will to discipline the people and eliminate all opposition.

Another far-reaching expression of the primacy of 'small' and 'subjective' history is the interest in 'life stories' from the terror period as they appear in diaries, private archives and present-day interviews with people who were involved in one way or another.<sup>155</sup> Indeed it has been pointed out that the boundary between public and private in the Soviet Union was not always clear and unequivocal, since the Soviet leaders, in their efforts to subjugate the consciousness of the people, also used diaries or 'autobiographies' in order to encourage citizens to participate in the life of society. With this 'subjectivisation technique', they sought to remove the distance between the individual and the Soviet

society as a whole. Nonetheless, a private sphere clearly still existed.<sup>156</sup> Drawing on in-depth interviews and private archives, Orlando Figes has sketched out the little mental universe of the private life within Stalin's Soviet Union, in relation to the 'large-scale' history that often made a brutal intrusion. The title of the book, *The Whisperers*, has a double meaning in its Russian form: *shepchushchy* is a person who whispers out of fear of being overheard, while *sheptun* is a person who informs against fellow men and women, in a whisper and behind their backs. The distinction is central to Figes' book, whose main message is quite different from what advocates of the revisionist paradigm have long claimed: that one lasting consequence of Stalin's time in power is a quiet and conformist population.<sup>157</sup> Kate Brown offers a more positive conclusion on the effects of the terror. She shows that ethnic Poles who were deported from the western border areas of the Soviet Union to Kazakhstan, at least individually and in hindsight, saw themselves as colonisers on a mission to introduce a European civilisation – an attitude not entirely dissimilar to the official Soviet line.<sup>158</sup>

### The cultural change

It is hardly surprising, and it has already been mentioned indirectly in this research review, that research on the criminal history of the Soviet communist regime has been influenced by the 'changes' in scientific theory in recent decades, towards phenomena relating to language, culture and memory. The perspective in this context could be described as double, and completely in line with the general framework of interpretation of postrevisionism: linguistic and cultural phenomena can, on the one hand, give those in power legitimacy in their governance and criminal activities, and on the other hand, provide safety, meaning and identity for ordinary people who live under what they perceive to be unsafe conditions in a society characterised by terror.

---

<sup>153</sup> Kotkin 1997. Other works that belong to the same genre but that lack the theoretical and analytical sophistication of Kotkin include Boterbloem 1999 and Samuelson 2007. A large number of descriptions of how the terror affected people at local and regional levels are available in Russian. The criminal history of the Great Terror in Karelia is analysed thoroughly in, for example, Tjuchin 1999. See also Baron 2001 pp 615–648, and Baron 2002, pp 139–180.

<sup>154</sup> Kotkin 1997, p 348.

<sup>155</sup> See e.g. Garros, Korenevskaya & Lahusen (eds) 1995, Sokolov 1998, Hellbeck 2000, pp 77–116, Siegelbaum & Sokolov 2000, Hellbeck 2006.

---

<sup>156</sup> Cf Hellbeck 2001, pp 340–359.

<sup>157</sup> Figes 2007, pp XXXI–XXXII.

<sup>158</sup> Brown 2003, pp 301–303. See also Kaznelson 2007, pp 1163–1177.

One currently popular perception in the academic community is that cultural phenomena can be illustrated in power-linked discourses and negotiations about the fundamental values in society, held in an independent cultural dimension, where the role of history's players is downplayed and the researcher is to a large degree a proactive participant. From this angle, language and culture come first in terms of analysis and they construct history, which is not the same as the perspectives of totalitarian theory and revisionism in which politicians or social categories respectively use language and culture as tools to satisfy their needs and interests. In its radical form, however, this approach has not gained acceptance in the research reviewed here. This may be connected to the 'sensitive' nature of the subject matter: reducing serious crimes against humanity to purely linguistic constructions and making real perpetrators and victims into constructed 'perpetrators' and 'victims' may strike many researchers, except the minority who deliberately seek to deny or trivialise these crimes, as both morally reprehensible and intellectually dubious.<sup>159</sup> This does not stop many researchers from presenting the expressions of Leninist and Stalinist ideology in song, theatre, literature, film, poster art and ritual in Russia and the Soviet Union as sharp-edged and widely used weapons in seeking to influence society in the desired direction. However, this bird's eye view must be supplemented with a bottom-up perspective in the context of the postrevisionist paradigm. Stephen Kotkin's Stalinist civilisation, as reflected in the steel town of Magnitogorsk, was held together by the fact that the people there 'spoke Bolshevik'. In this language, which in a postrevisionist sense must be taken seriously by researchers and not reduced to a pale reflection of 'real' political and social conditions, the leader and the led met:

Stalin's speeches, his catechizing, his reduction of complexities to almost absurd simplicities and slogans, his logical mistakes, are easy to ridicule.

---

<sup>159</sup> So far this problem has mostly been discussed in terms of the writing of the history of the Holocaust; see Friedländer 1992.

But Stalin, who lived relatively modestly and dressed simply, like a "proletarian", employed a direct, accessible style and showed uncanny insight into the beliefs and hopes – the psychology – of his audience.--- Stalin was transformed into a warm and personal figure of father, teacher, and friend.<sup>160</sup>

In a series of works on Soviet linguistic and cultural forms of expression during the age of terror, postrevisionist researchers have analysed how identities have been defined and symbolic meaning created in the interface between the ambitions of the state and people's individual and collective needs to adapt and create meaning. Language and culture have become, in other words, 'a code of communication, whose signals served to sanction and legitimize the actions of the crowd, to define the revolution's common enemies, to uphold principles and generate authority for certain leaders'.<sup>161</sup>

In many cases, contemporary studies have reinforced the image of Stalin's Soviet society as a specific culture or civilisation, but the cultural perspective has also renewed discussions on continuity and change over time. This cultural perspective has been applied to the relationship between Bolshevik Russia and pre-revolutionary Russia and the connection between Lenin's Soviet Union and Stalin's Soviet Union, the latter long defined by Nicholas Timasheff's concept of 'the great retreat', now over 60 years old. According to this work, the Soviet leaders realised in the mid-1930s that communism had not taken root in the population at large. In the face of escalating external threats, they decided to increase popular support for the regime by seeking to unite communism with traditional Russian culture, reinstating institutions like the family, school and, as time went on, the orthodox church. Timasheff describes the result as 'the amalgamation of traits of the historical and national culture of Russia with traits belonging to the Communist cycle of ideas and behaviour patterns'.<sup>162</sup>

---

<sup>160</sup> Kotkin 1997, p 227.

<sup>161</sup> Figes & Kolonitskii 1999, p 3.

<sup>162</sup> Timasheff 1946, p 354.

Postrevisionist research has been unwilling to accept this notion of retreat. Although many researchers have presented the idea that religious, national or nationalist cultural traits linked with pre-revolutionary Russia became more prominent over the course of the 1930s, they have dismissed Timasheff's idea by pointing out that use of these traditional institutions and cultural traits was modern and had a mobilising effect, aimed at stimulating support for the new revolutionary order.<sup>163</sup> In one sense this is a fairly trivial comment, that history never repeats itself identically, because the conditions when history begins to approach a repetition are different the second time. This is the case not least because, as Karl Popper pointed out in a classic argument, the memory of the first time is a new variable that affects the result. The interesting question is whether Stalin made a conscious and politically instrumental attempt to use old cultural patterns at a time of mass mobilisation, and whether the language and culture of the revolution acted as a bridge to the past for leaders and the led alike. If so, a comparison with the period directly after the Bolshevik coup d'état may provide some enlightenment, since language and culture were used consciously at that time to create a contrast with the past, to implement 'the symbolic revolution'.<sup>164</sup> Or are cultural phenomena subject to other perspectives of change, mechanisms and periodisations than the political and social factors that were the previous focal points of research? Is culture best illuminated from a contemporary perspective, as has been suggested in a Foucault-inspired text, where culture and terror go hand in hand and complement each other: in contrast to terror as the arbitrary and negative use of power, culture was a disciplinary and positive dimension of power.<sup>165</sup>

Political poster art – which was of great significance in a country where literacy was long limited, visual pedagogics were greatly valued and figurative iconic culture had deep roots in the Russian orthodox

culture – has been reviewed in this way, with links back to what is usually called the 'binary model' of Russian culture, with reference to semioticians Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky. In the Bolshevik demonology of visual propaganda, heaven is pitched against hell, all that is holy and pure against all that is sinful and dirty, Russia against the west, and true faith against false faith.<sup>166</sup> Other research has taken as its starting point how the language of the terror society took form in effective dichotomies between 'us' and 'them', between the people and the elite, with the leader always unequivocally on the side of the people. Military expressions, such as front, fight and weapon, entered everyday vocabulary.<sup>167</sup> Attention has also been given to written language and its relation to terror. In 1929 and 1930, language policy in Ukraine and Belarus was put on trial in two show trials against 'national communist' intellectuals who were accused of wishing to promote the national independence of the republics and westward orientation through their initiative of Latinising the Ukrainian and Belarusian languages. This 'westward orientation' mainly concerned the suspicion that they wanted to bring Ukrainian and Belarusian culture closer to Polish culture, thus distancing them from the Russian culture.<sup>168</sup> During the interwar period, relations between the Soviet Union and Poland were hostile.

Naturally the didactic or social hygienic aspects of terror, based on the idea that the specific culture prevalent in concentration camps would encourage people to become good Soviet citizens and communists, have also attracted attention in this context, like the show trials, and described as 'highly stylized productions involving fantastic scenarios of conspiracy and treason'.<sup>169</sup> Cultural representations of terror can also include the spreading of rumours and conspiracy theories, denial of social origin and various types of informing, as researchers influenced by the postrevisionist school of thought have increasingly noted. Sheila Fitzpatrick in particular has

---

<sup>163</sup> Cf Brooks 2000, chapter 4, Hoffman 2003, pp 2–4.

<sup>164</sup> Figes & Kolonitskii 1999, pp 30–70.

<sup>165</sup> Volkov 2000, p 216.

<sup>166</sup> Bonnell 1997, p 187.

<sup>167</sup> Davies 1997, chapter 8, Halfin 2001, pp 316–339.

<sup>168</sup> Martin 2001, pp 204–207, 249ff.

<sup>169</sup> Tolczyk 1999, Kelly 2005, Cassidy 2000, Wood 2002, pp 235–248. The quote is from Fitzpatrick 1993, p 300.

emphasised the nature of informing as a cultural practice, by pointing out the duplicity in the Bolshevik understanding of the phenomenon: on the one hand, they rejected informing as an expression of the corruption of the old regime, while on the other hand, they believed revolutionary informing to be both a necessity and a virtue, since the purity of the revolution had to be guaranteed. She notes that the latter argument won, since '[t]here can be no secrets in the community of saints'.<sup>170</sup> Thus, informing became a new expression of the social duties and morality of the Soviet citizen.<sup>171</sup>

### **Memories of the terror – reception history perspective**

The last postrevisionist perspective to be dealt with here is the reception historical perspective. This means that the researcher turns his or her attention from the Soviet communist criminal history, its origin, implementation, historical context and consequences, to the interpretations, representations and use of this history in later eras. In contrast to the forward-looking development perspective that dominates the scientific writing of history and that has featured in this review thus far, a backward-looking perspective is applied, taking as its starting point the questions and interests expressed since the end of the terror period. These may stem from individual experiences and the memories of those who experienced and suffered under the terror, like those presented above in terms of 'life stories' and 'oral history'. They could also be collective and indirect manifestations of memory, such as those expressed in the teaching of history, in public debate through the media, in film, monuments and museum exhibitions. This historiographical review, and the government commission of which it is a result, can and will probably be analysed from the perspective of reception history: How is the criminal history presented? Why is it being written in 2007-2008? Why has it been commissioned?

The two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are dependent on each other to a large extent: Increased knowledge of the crimes committed and a greater understanding of the mechanisms behind them can reasonably be thought to increase present-day interest in this history. An increased interest in the Soviet Union and Russia – a natural reaction to the dramatic process of transformation that has taken place during the last twenty years – has spurred the production of knowledge. This double-edged process is clearly an important background factor in researchers' increasing interest in the reception history of the Soviet communist terror. Another is, once again, the reorientation of scientific theory towards linguistic and cultural factors, and towards historical MENINGSKONSTRUCTION. The culture studied in reception history is the culture of history itself. In and through it, a society chooses what it wishes to remember, document, debate, exhibit and celebrate from the past, as well as what it wants to forget.

For research oriented towards reception history, the Soviet glasnost period starting in 1985 was a veritable Eldorado. The historical revelations published on an almost daily basis by journalists and writers in reformist newspapers and journals, the process of breaking with old Soviet ideological interpretations of history in the glare of the media spotlight, and the many name changes of places that had previously borne the names of prominent figures of the terror period, were all elements in the conflict between the politics of reform and the reaction thereto and between the defenders of the Soviet state and advocates of national division, as well as being an accessible source for researchers with an interest in history's role in society in general, and in late Soviet society in particular. Questions concerning the extent to which forced collectivisation and dekulakisation were necessary, why the Great Terror took place and so many communists and others were murdered and no-one opposed Stalin's policies, what the point of the Gulag camps was, why the treatment of non-Russians was so unprecedentedly brutal, and why Soviet Jews were stigmatised, were dealt with in

---

<sup>170</sup> Fitzpatrick 1997, pp 85–120, p 86. See also Kozlov 2000, pp 117–141.

<sup>171</sup> Fitzpatrick 2005, p 261.

public debate and in literature. Over time, the question of Lenin's responsibility also moved up the agenda of reception history.<sup>172</sup>

All these questions shared the feature that their answers had implications stretching far forward into the future: How did the terror in rural areas relate to the escalating problems in agriculture and the food supply system? Would the political alternatives recommended by the more moderate NEP-advocate Nikolai Bukharin, executed after the last of the Moscow trials, have been a better choice for the Soviet Union? Was there still a camp mentality and a 'Stalin shadow' over Soviet society? Were Hitler and Stalin united by their antisemitism, and why was this ideology still flourishing in Soviet society? Was the Soviet nations' struggle for liberation from the Soviet state a result of the historical injustices that had been exposed? And: Was very basis of the Soviet society and state – Lenin, his ideology and his political practices – no longer stable and unimpeachable?

Research in reception history has focused to a large degree on presenting and chronologically or thematically systematising the ongoing historical debate, but it has from time to time posed more analytical questions connecting use of history to key figures and various types of interest. For example, why were professional historians so absent from the debate? How did the Baltic popular fronts' cultural demands for a history of their own transform into a political struggle for independent Baltic states? How did Gorbachev, whose economy-based reform was inspired not by the atrocities of the Stalin period but by the stagnation of the Brezhnev era, handle the moral and critical break with the first decades of Soviet history that threatened to rob the entire Soviet project of legitimacy? The answer to the last question is that from Gorbachev's perspective, until his final day as Soviet president, Lenin was infallible and the 1930s, despite the

terror, was primarily a period of constructing a socialist society. Several researchers have noted the instrumental nature of the president's relationship to Soviet history, and the 'controlling' openness whose main purpose was to preserve and legitimise the Soviet Union, although in a reformed state.<sup>173</sup> However, Gorbachev and his politics became less and less synchronised with the general thinking and politics of the population, and the result is well-known.

Hand in hand with the major academic project that has characterised the post-Soviet era, that of documenting Soviet communist terror history and broadening its frameworks of interpretation from a postrevisionist perspective, researchers have also shown increasing interest in the memory of the terror. The primary purpose of this interest is not to accumulate further knowledge to add to the existing academic knowledge bank that is the main focus of this research review, but to gain new insights on the function and significance of the memory for individual and society, in relation to existentially, morally and ideologically traumatic phenomena such as the Soviet communist terror. For western researchers, the fall of the Soviet Union brought new opportunities to interview survivors of the terror, in order to understand how their lives were affected by the crimes to which they were subjected and by 'the Great Silence' that followed the Great Terror, which 'prevented the bereaved and the frightened from rehearsing their stories, from sharing them, from the comfort that comes from discovering a social framework for events that otherwise retain the quality of a guilty dream'.<sup>174</sup> The most successful methods of breaking this silence, namely the autobiographical 'camp literature' on life in and after the Gulag and Memorial's work to gather, publish and honour the

---

<sup>172</sup> Worth a mention in terms of major literature on the glasnost years and the historical debate of the first post-Soviet years are Kolstø 1989, Nove 1989, Davies 1989, Ito (ed.) 1989, Laqueur 1990, Nichol 1001, Remnick 1994, Davies 1997, and Karlsson 1999. See also Cerf & Albee (eds) 1990.

---

<sup>173</sup> Cf e.g. D'Agostino 1998, pp 238–243, Karlsson 1999, p 97ff.

<sup>174</sup> The term 'the Great Silence' is used and investigated from the perspective of reception history by Hochschild and Merridale 2000. The quote is from p 328. See also Adler 2002 and Gheith 2007, pp 159–175.

memory of individual terror victims, have been analysed.<sup>175</sup>

The development of the collective memory in post-Soviet Russia has also been subjected to analysis from a reception history perspective. The tendency of this literature has been well summarised in the title of an article by Nanci Adler: 'The Future of the Soviet Past Remains Unpredictable: The Resurrection of Stalinist Symbols Amidst the Exhumation of Mass Graves'.<sup>176</sup> On the one side there are still millions of people who have more or less direct memories of the terror society, and on the other side is a Russian government that chooses to fix its attention on collective memories that are more 'patriotic' than those of the Soviet communist terror, such as the Great Patriotic War.<sup>177</sup> What the author of this review calls 'the small silence' is prevalent at this level – not a total and absolute silence but nonetheless a useful one for a state in search of national pride.<sup>178</sup> However, as long as Memorial's work to preserve memories continues, and as long as the Chechen conflict provides a reminder of Stalin's ethnic cleansing in the North Caucasus, the small silence is unlikely to grow into a great silence.<sup>179</sup>

## Paradigms and transitions

In this review of the Soviet communist regime's crimes against humanity under Lenin and Stalin, three comprehensive paradigms or explanatory models have been identified: the totalitarian theory paradigm, the revisionist paradigm, and the postrevisionist paradigm. The bases of these three paradigms can be illustrated in the following way:

---

<sup>175</sup> Toker 2000, Adler 1993, Yaroshevski 1990, pp 5–31, and Smith 1996.

<sup>176</sup> Adler 2005, pp 1093–1119.

<sup>177</sup> Cf Smith 2002, the Russian obsession with the Great Patriotic War is analysed in Tumarkin 1994.

<sup>178</sup> Karlsson 2003, p 245ff.

<sup>179</sup> Williams 2000, pp 101–134.

	TOTALITARIAN THEORY	REVISIONISM	POSTREVISIONISM
<b>General perspective</b>	historical and comparative (with the crimes of the Nazi regime)	structural and comparative (with modern states)	historical, structural and reception historical
<b>Aspect</b>	politics, ideology and economy	social processes and economy	diversity, often culture
<b>Explanatory model</b>	intentionalism	functionalism	diversity
<b>Understanding of time</b>	continuity	change	continuity and change
<b>Direction of analysis</b>	top-down	bottom-up	top-down and bottom-up
<b>Themes</b>	oppression and submission	conflict and resistance	oppression, everyday life, reception history
<b>Perpetrators</b>	a monolithic party and state government	'mini-Stalins' with their own interests and power of resistance	an omnipotent leader and bureaucracy and 'ordinary' people
<b>Victims</b>	party members, kulaks	peasants and workers	different victim groups, local population and survivors
<b>Death toll</b>	extremely high	relatively low	exact and differentiated

The three paradigms can be said to follow each other in a fixed chronology. The paradigms have nonetheless been a development of each other, or rather emerged as a reaction to or revision of each other. The transition from totalitarian theory to revisionism, linked to an ideological turn to the left and a shift in academic theory from focusing on politics, individuals and event history to an interest in social conditions and processes, was of a revolutionary nature in so far as the frameworks of interpretation for both paradigms were radically different and essentially mutually exclusive. Clashes between advocates of the paradigms on everything from tangible differences like death tolls to general interpretation perspectives have been severe and long-lasting, and have been intensified by the fact that Lenin's role in the terror history has often been discussed more on an ideological level than on an analytical or empirical level.

The transition from revisionism to postrevisionism, not as clearly related to ideological shifts, but to shifts in scientific theory and towards an interest in language, culture and memory, was of an evolutionary nature. There was a continuity in relation to both the earlier paradigms, but there is no doubt that this was strongest in relation to revisionism in terms of leading researchers, choices of themes, and a general bottom-up perspective on the terror history. The increasing access to relevant source material brought by the major changes in Eastern

Europe was of central significance, in certain aspects rendering old interpretations obsolete. In the background there was and is also a partly new and more complex perspective on historical change. The starting point of this is that cultural factors cannot easily be related to straight chronologies, simple distinctions between power from above and resistance from below, and notions that language and culture are only secondary reflections of political or social conditions. Rather, this culturally-oriented research has emphasised that people at all levels are history and make history simultaneously, also in the context of a terror society. This means that Soviet citizens were entangled in physical, institutional and mental structures that, in the context of a dictatorial society, greatly reduced their freedom of action, but that they were able to create some room for manoeuvre under these difficult conditions, even within the barbed wire of the Gulag, and much later were able to process and make use of their tragic histories.

Finally, postrevisionist research can also be described as cumulative. Researchers have gained access to and analysed more and more of the documents issued by the Soviet regime to initiate and limit the terror. We are finding out more and more about the complex structure of the Gulag archipelago and the people who populated it. Our knowledge of how the terror affected different institutions, social and ethnic categories, professions and

geographical areas is constantly growing. If relevant source material continues to be made available, there is every reason to believe that cumulative development of research will continue. This certainly does not mean that terror history is at risk of becoming 'over-researched'. There are areas where research is still in its infancy. One of the more controversial of these is comparative, focusing on comparing Soviet communist and Nazi crimes against humanity.

## Comparing communism and Nazism

1941 was a year of historically unparalleled violence. The Second World War became a real world war with the German invasion of the Soviet Union and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. At the same time the Nazis began their genocide of European Jews, while in the Soviet Union, the communist party and the secret police persecuted and began the forced deportation of categories of their own citizens who were judged to have betrayed their country and collaborated with Nazi German invaders.

Lund-based philosopher Alf Nyman asked about this fateful year in the introduction to his book *Nazism, Caesarism, Bolshevism*: 'Do ideas have a value in battle? An explosive strength that means that even a cold, calculating general staff chief is obliged to depend as much on ideas as on his air divisions, artillery parks and other weapons?'<sup>180</sup> Nyman's question was of course purely rhetorical, and his reply is unconditionally affirmative:

Depending on the demands of the situation, value is attached to them as uniting emblems, as means of instilling terror, as means of strengthening the people or dulling the conscience. It is clear then that no-one doubts their power in these respects. One can cling to them with the violence of a drowning man – and with a faith that seems to invalidate the well-known Marxist statement that ideas are, at all times and in all places, *secondary* and that all convictions and ideals are but derivative shadows on the surface of capital and economic life, are illusions or 'ideologies', as the disparaging word sounds.<sup>181</sup>

After two world wars and, during this thirty-year period saturated with violence, at least three processes of crimes against humanity – as well as those mentioned, the Nazi and Soviet communist crimes, there was also the genocide carried out by the Young Turks on the Armenians during the First World War – it has become difficult to take a 'disparaging' attitude to ideologies in general, and to the mass ideologies of modern times in particular – nationalism and socialism/communism. On the contrary, many historians have described the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the 'century of ideologies'. In the midst of this history, historians have faced what can undoubtedly be regarded as the century's most destructive and violence-saturated idea systems, Nazism and communism. These can both be described as extreme hybrid forms of nationalist and socialist/communist systems of ideas, although they have the two main ingredients in different proportions. Nazism is of course an abbreviated form of national socialism, while the Stalinist form of communism has been described, with good reason, as national bolshevism. The latter was a current of ideas that brought support to the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution, since they were seen as representing the only party in Russia that could safeguard Russian national interests. However, this term has also been used in later years to refer to the Soviet Stalinism that developed a growing aspect of Russian nationalism and xenophobia from the 1930s onwards.<sup>182</sup> Particular attention has been paid to the roles of these ideologies as mental tools to mobilise the masses for a 'great' thing, and to justify, conceal and as such prepare the way for the two great tragedies of modern history. One of these was the Holocaust, the other the terror campaigns in a number of communist-led states, starting in Russia after the Bolshevik seizure of power in late 1917.

These crimes against humanity have had a long reception history, that is still far from over. In our time, we live perhaps more than ever in the shadow of the communist and Nazi atrocities. In Eastern and Central Europe, experience and memories of the double occupations – Nazi and communist – have been awakened and articulated on a large scale since the fall of communism and the Soviet state. Even in other parts of Europe and the western world, into the new

---

<sup>180</sup> Nyman 1941, p 5.

<sup>181</sup> Nyman 1941, p 7.

---

<sup>182</sup> For the different interpretations, see Agursky 1986 and Brandenberger 2002 respectively.



millennium, they provoke major questions and animated debate between right and left on the political ideology scale, despite the fact that these countries do not often have the same experiences of living through these atrocities. The abovementioned paradigm of totalitarian theory, which seeks partly to compare communism and Nazism and partly to analyse the hierarchical political system built on these ideologies, retains its controversial nature in the academic community. At the same time, it has gained new ground, not least in Germany, where the debate following the publication of *die Wende* has brought topical interest to the relationship between Nazi Germany and communist East Germany.<sup>183</sup> The complexity of processing this history can be considerable. One example of this is the concentration camps in Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, where the Nazis killed prisoners during the Second World War and where after the war, communist East Germany staged their great foundational story of the communist-led resistance to the Nazis, but where the Soviet occupation forces later killed Germans in what they called 'special camps'.<sup>184</sup> In this way, it could be said that these camps have been transformed into memorial sites for the crimes of totalitarian regimes. On the whole it is difficult to imagine any relevant research on contemporary European history that is able to avoid these controversial issues of the crimes of Nazism and communism.

### Difficult questions and limited research

Despite the fact that he wrote his book in the midst of these historic events and did not have access to the 'answers' we have today, Alf Nyman had a clarity of vision on the controversial aspects of these issues. He urged for integrated studies of these two ideologies, Nazism and Bolshevism–communism, which in his eyes fought against each other, but at the same time were similar. He warned, however, that this was no easy task, since the study area can be compared to a 'masquerade of ideas': the two key teachings, 'fanatically maintained', were hidden by both 'covers for their true intentions' and 'bait for the gullible'.<sup>185</sup>

Nyman's warning was reasonable. During the postwar period, a relatively small number of researchers have

taken up the gauntlet that he threw down and sought to analyse Nazism and communism using one coherent approach, neither from the point of view of idea history, nor from a historical or social science perspective on the societies and power structures that have supported and been supported by these ideologies. 'Relatively' in this context means that few academic studies have been carried out in this area in comparison to the extensive research on Nazism and the Holocaust, especially in recent decades, and the increasing, although not as extensive, research carried out mostly since the fall of the Soviet Union on communism and crimes of the communist regimes referred to in this research review. American historian Martin Malia has suggested that this difference in proportions between research on Nazi and communist crimes accounts for the lack of comparative historical studies. In fact, Malia's interpretation is more provocative, since he observes that the lack of balance in the amount of research carried out has caused or heightened a 'double standard' in the analyses carried out. The underlying premise he identifies is the idea that the crimes of the Nazi regime were historically unique and unprecedented, and as such cannot and should not be compared with the crimes of communist regimes.<sup>186</sup> Other researchers are content to note that writings of German and Russian/Soviet history have long tended to avoid coming face to face over perspectives and problem areas.<sup>187</sup>

However, Malia fails to mention that this imbalance in the research carried out has also been caused by indisputable historical realities. The Nazi regime was after all defeated in 1945. Shortly thereafter the documentation of its despotism was made available to researchers, and with the exception of small and insignificant groups, Nazism and the atrocities carried out in its name since the Second World War have had few advocates or proponents. For a long time, Nazism also took the blame for Stalinist crimes, such as the Katyn massacre in 1940, where thousands of Polish officers were killed by the Soviet secret police on Stalin's orders.

There is undoubtedly a large contrast when it comes to communist regimes. The Soviet regime continued until

---

<sup>183</sup> See e.g. Roth 1999, Siegel 1998, and Hildebrand 2003.

<sup>184</sup> Cf Farmer 1995 pp 97–119.

<sup>185</sup> Nyman 1941, pp 11–12.

<sup>186</sup> Malia 2002, pp 63–78. For a critique and a radically different interpretation see David Fox 2004, pp 81–105.

<sup>187</sup> Kershaw & Lewin 1997, p 343.

1991, and as has been mentioned, no researchers with an interest in Soviet crimes against humanity were allowed over the threshold of the archives. Chinese communism is still alive. There has been a long series of communist regimes, each of which has developed its own brand of communism and its own register of human rights violations and crimes against humanity, with particular historical and structural characteristics.<sup>188</sup> For the sake of comparison, it is relevant to ask whether it is possible to distinguish what has been called 'communism's genetic code', in all likelihood first developed and observable in early Soviet history, such that it is possible to compare it to the only Nazi regime in history.<sup>189</sup> However, it should be added that Nazism is not easily handled in this sense either – many researchers, particularly those influenced by Marxism, place Nazism in a broader context of fascist ideas and regimes.<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, a lack of linguistic ability and cultural affinity has probably made it more difficult to research communist criminal history. In addition, there are, and have been, large, powerful groups of politicians, researchers and intellectuals who are prepared to stand

---

<sup>188</sup> For a review of these 'communisms' see Service 2007. A concise and much more critical analysis, with a stronger emphasis on these regimes' crimes against humanity, is given by Pipes 2001. For a politically and philosophically sophisticated analysis, with particular emphasis on communism's strained relationship with democracy, see Lefort 2007.

<sup>189</sup> Cf Courtois 1999, p 761.

<sup>190</sup> I have chosen not to conduct a deeper analysis of the relationship between fascism and totalitarianism here, since there is a great risk that an analysis of this nature will digress too far from the focus of this research review, which is communist regimes' crimes against humanity. That does not mean that wider issues of fascism, Nazism, communism and totalitarianism should not continue to be debated and investigated more empirically, but without the basic ideological starting points that have been dominant in social and scientific debate. The first of these is that fascism, Nazism and communism, despite their differences, are basically built on the same totalitarian characteristics, and as such represent expressions of the same anti-liberal and anti-human phenomena. The second is that Nazism is within the context of a larger fascist ideology and movement, based in Germany and Italian and in a capitalistic world. Soviet-based communism, then, is presented as completely different, and even as an antifascist counterpart to fascism/Nazism. For the embryo to such a discussion, created with insufficient background information on the Soviet communist regime, see Paxton 2004.

up for communism as an ideology, although not as often or as wholeheartedly for the regimes that have perpetrated large-scale atrocities in the name of communism. This is probably not only because the ideas themselves have exerted a pull, but also, as French historian François Furet has noted, because in this context, communism has long been linked with antifascism, and that anticommunism has been seen as having a connection to ideas that even Hitler capitalised on.<sup>191</sup> If Malia's claim that there is a 'double standard' is not true, there has at least been an ideologically conditioned aversion to placing Nazism and communist side by side. The reactions to attempts that have been made, particularly noticeable in what was known as the 'German historians' dispute' or *Historikerstreit* of the mid 1980s, have followed two closely related arguments: that behind every comparison there has been a conscious desire partly to blacken communism and partly to detract from the Nazi crimes.

### Good and bad intentions?

It is in the context of these key questions that a review of research that seeks to compare the crimes of communism and Nazism should begin. Both communism and Nazism can be described as ideologies whose goal is to create the perfect society – the communist society and thousand-year kingdom respectively – by wiping out anything bad or old that stands in the way of the realisation of this society. The 'bad' and the 'old' are defined in simple, pedagogical means, through dualistic notions based on race or class, which gain adherents in all those who hope for the 'good' and 'new' society. Language and culture are made use of to strengthen the duplicity of this existence, and of this history.

Both ideologies are based on a deep historical context and use scientifically 'objective' claims and religious assurances to stake out a route from a dark and gloomy past, via a present of conflict and struggle, to a bright and promising future. This route is essentially determined in advance, but it is possible for selected political leader figures – a *Führer* or a *vozjd* – and collectives to intervene in the timeline, in political practice or through modifications of the ideological basis. In other words, they claim the ideological right to

---

<sup>191</sup> Furet 2004, p 17.

accelerate history or return history to the right path. Violence against anyone thought to constitute an obstacle on this path is not ruled out, rather, it is seen as an effective method, carried out 'in the name of the people'. It has been said that 'terror becomes representative'.<sup>192</sup> The principle that permeates both communism and Nazism, and that has constantly guided the regimes that have followed these ideologies in political practice, is that 'the ends justify the means'. For a totalitarian regime, in the classic words of Hannah Arendt, total terror is 'supposed to provide the forces of nature or history with an incomparable instrument to accelerate their movement'.<sup>193</sup>

However, for researchers with an interest in the criminal histories of both regimes, there is a basic ideological difference to be factored in to the comparative process. According to the statements of purpose of Hitler and other founding figures of the Nazi ideology, it is an ideology that contains elements that aim to segregate, discriminate, demonise and stigmatise people on the basis of the fact that they belong to specific human categories, hierarchically defined in terms of people group and race. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler distinguishes these people by referring to biological and cultural traits such as history, language, 'blood and soil'. Jews were a collective *Untermenschen* for the Nazis, from the birth of this ideology until it became the dominant party in 1930s Germany, and this provided the motivation for the massacre of European Jews during the Second World War. Being Jewish was enough for an individual to be judged not to have the right to exist in Nazi Europe. The Nazi plan expressed an intention to physically exterminate every single Jew. It was only the circumstances at the time, primarily the increasing German defeats and finally the downfall of Nazi Germany, that prevented this plan from being carried out.

In the light of this intentionalist reasoning, one key question for all Holocaust researchers is how it was possible for the racist Nazi ideology to take possession of so many people's thinking in Germany and elsewhere, to retain its grip despite its visible inhumanity and for all these people to justify the Nazi massacre of Jewish people. Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*,

a prominent and controversial work from 1996, delves into this question. This does not mean that all researchers accept the intentionalist model of explanation where the Holocaust is only explained on the basis of ideological continuity. Many researchers who take a more functionalist starting point also search for the 'igniting spark' or 'cumulative radicalisation' that set the Holocaust machinery in motion in practice. However, for the vast majority, the fact that the Nazi ideology was able to transform itself from a world of ideas and rhetoric into real, brutal policies in a relatively straightforward manner – in the words of British historian Ian Kershaw, 'how Nazi hatred of the Jews became translated into the practice of government'<sup>194</sup> – is the most basic problem to explain and understand..

As an ideology, communism is viewed as having a different nature to Nazism. Its appeal is not narrowly national or nationalist, but universal, in other words, independent of every cultural, historical or religious affiliation. The Soviet utopia was egalitarian and open to all. It is based on a bottom-up perspective, wholly different to the *Untermensch* of Nazism. Communism takes the side of the weak, against all exploitation and oppression that comes about as a result of economic and social injustice. The communist ideal goes back to the ideas of the French Revolution in terms of freedom, equality and brotherhood, a link that the communist Bolsheviks who seized power in Russia in 1917 were keen to point out and affirm in their search for legitimacy, as revolution historian Furet has pointed out.<sup>195</sup> It was not only Russian-Soviet revolutionaries and other advocates of liberation from *l'ancien regime* who were attracted to the ideas of communism, however. Many intellectual figures in culture and academia all over the world, and much larger groups of socialists and other radicals, also saw the appeal of this ideology. Not all shared the communist persuasion, but many felt some affiliation or kinship with it in one way or another. The Soviet Union, described in Leninist vocabulary as 'Soviet power plus electrification', was a modern and progressive project. In addition, many came to admire communism for its leaders' active resistance to

---

<sup>192</sup> Overy 2004, p 180.

<sup>193</sup> Arendt 1979, p 466.

<sup>194</sup> Kershaw 1993, p 81.

<sup>195</sup> Furet 1995, chapter 1. For a comparison of French and Russian-Bolshevik terror, see Mayer 2000.

fascism and Nazism during the 1930s and the Second World War.

As a result of all this, simple intentionalism – the notion that it is the ideologues’ opinions and ideas that provide the best explanation for the atrocities of a later era – has never reached the same level of popularity as an explanation of the link between communist ideology and crimes against humanity. It is not possible to prove that the communist parties and leaders had the intention of physically eliminating every individual in the groups affected by the terror, not even in the case of the most ruthless injustices against the Soviet peasants in the years around 1930, or the forced deportation of Chechens and a further seven people groups during the Second World War. Liquidation of the kulaks as a class, as Stalin stated among the intentions of the regime in a decree from December 1929, did not mean that every individual who could be described as a rich freeholder was to be executed. In many cases this was certainly what happened, since they were judged to stand in the way of Stalin’s great reform of the Soviet Union to too great an extent. In addition, the measures taken against ‘class enemies’ such as the bourgeoisie or the kulaks, or against people who happened to be related to or sympathise with them, often led to death through starvation, slave labour or other hardships. At the same time, however, for reasons of economic planning they were much too important for their unpaid labour in the network of labour camps that were established in the most inaccessible and inhospitable regions of the Soviet state to be killed as a collective. Political, economic and other rational considerations lay behind the communist terror, not just death sentences based on belonging to a particular category. There was even a didactic notion behind the camps, at least during the 1920s, that people who were perceived as enemies of the system could be rehabilitated there and transformed into good citizens and communists. There are no equivalents to Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor or Treblinka in Soviet criminal history.

It is clear that the fundamental research questions must be rephrased in a more functionalist manner, which has often been done directly or indirectly: How have advocates of communist ideas, after seizing power, been transformed from universalist defenders of the oppressed to perpetrators of crimes against humanity? How was it possible for the good revolution to be transformed into an evil revolution? What factors and developments provoked this ‘Orwellian discrepancy’ between the

original idea of Marxism and the Gulag?<sup>196</sup> Why have communist regimes never respected human rights in their relations with their citizens, but often reverted to terror, genocide and crimes against humanity, despite the communist ideology? Why was the idea of using ‘social engineering’ to radically and hastily restructure communist society seen as so important that it was worth the high price of millions of human lives? With the statement that ‘it takes a great ideal to produce a great crime’, Martin Malia links these questions to ‘Columbus’s mistake’: the party set sail towards a communist utopia, but instead they went ashore in a Soviet dystopia. Nonetheless, Malia points out, this unexpected landing did lead to the creation of a new society, with a new political and economic structure.<sup>197</sup>

One of the researchers who would probably accept a distinction of this nature between two murderous ideologies is American historian Charles Maier. He in turn refers to French philosopher and sociologist Raymond Aron, who, like Maier, was careful to maintain objective differences without wishing to excuse or retrospectively explain any of the horrific crimes against humanity perpetrated by terror regimes in the name of these ideologies:

Of course, I do not ignore the fact that Stalin probably massacred more people as enemies of the revolution than Hitler did in the name of the purity of the race... Hostility based on the class struggle has taken on no less extreme or monstrous forms than that based on the incompatibility of races. But if we wish to “save the concepts” there is a difference between a philosophy whose logic is monstrous and one which can be given a monstrous interpretation.<sup>198</sup>

Having established this basic distinction between Nazism and communism, however, it should be added that far from all researchers make the clear distinctions between the Nazi and communist ideologies described above. Not all agree with the ‘positive legacy’ of communism, at least not if this legacy directly concerns Lenin and Leninism. There are those who see the mass violence as deeply ingrained in the Bolshevik-

---

<sup>196</sup> For this ‘Orwellian discrepancy’, see Barnett 2006 pp 457-466.

<sup>197</sup> See Malia 1994 pp 4, 15.

<sup>198</sup> Maier 1997, p 78.

communist project, and see Lenin's adaptation of the Marxist idea as a crucial 'ideological turn'.<sup>199</sup> Richard Pipes believes that Lenin's misanthropic ideas were bound to meet with opposition when attempts were made to realise them, and that the Bolshevik leader decided from the start to eliminate compromise as a reaction, in favour of increased violence.<sup>200</sup> As has been mentioned, adherents to totalitarian theory trace the dekulakisation and 'Great Terror' of the Stalin era back to Lenin or even further back in Russian or Marxist history, and as such, mark the continuity of the criminal history and system. In general, they have found it more difficult to accept the starting point of a 'positive ideological legacy of communism' than their revisionist colleagues. As has been shown above, revisionists prefer not to involve Lenin and Leninism in the thinking of the communist terror, but rather to emphasise the progressive politics that were thought to have characterised the 1920s NEP society, and to see the crimes against humanity of the Stalin era as a qualitatively new and unnatural element of communist history, primarily determined by an increasing external threat against the Soviet Union from a nationalist Japan in the east and Nazi Germany in the west. The fundamental ideas of this scientific paradigm have tangible similarities with the division of Holocaust research into intentionalists and functionalists, although the distinction between totalitarian theory and revisionism usually refers to wider frameworks of reference in Soviet history than just that of its terror and criminal history.

The Russian Bolsheviks have also only been portrayed as advocates of an altruistic universal doctrine of salvation by real apologists, the most recent of these in Sweden being Stefan Lindgren in his iconographic book on Lenin. In this kind of literature, which deviates from the methodology that is traditionally regarded as defining historical science by consciously and systematically ignoring known facts, the evil elements come from external sources, from foreign warmongers or domestic traitors who betray what is good, or from current day historians who lack the necessary preunderstanding.<sup>201</sup> However, the ideological notion that Lenin's use of

terror during the period of 'war communism' from 1918 to 1921 was a necessary and legitimate measure, but only in the context of a transitional period of civil war and consolidation of power, has had more adherents. The fact that Lenin died in 1924 and was partly incapacitated by ill health two years before this, has made it difficult to falsify this notion. There are many historians who have used Lenin's testament, with its criticism of Stalin, to absolve Lenin of the atrocities of his successor, and in this way confirm an absolute dividing line between 'good' Leninism/Bolshevism and 'evil' Stalinism.

There are also historians who have expressed doubt in a more general sense in relation to the simple and unequivocal distinction between good intentions and bad consequences, although this has been less common in the case of the German Nazi pattern of bad intentions – bad consequences. The question of whether crimes against humanity should be seen to have mitigating circumstances because they are perpetrated with 'good' intentions does not always have an affirmative answer. There are researchers who say that 'a crime against a collective is not less alarming or less important to repudiate if it can be given a rational comprehensible background – rather, the opposite is true'<sup>202</sup>, and there are researchers who explicitly state that it is an aggravating circumstance, an extra perversion and a particular insult to the offers to, as in the communist case, surround the raw mass violence with hypocritical speeches on justice and righteousness. French historian Alain Besançon is one of these. He accuses the communist project of having been the more dangerous and demonic, since its deceptions led many more thoughtless people to support it, and for its arbitrary and unpredictable violence against newly-created enemies, each time for new purposes.<sup>203</sup>

Other researchers have chosen to rank the crimes in the same category from a moral point of view. Historian Stéphane Courtois, in his famous or notorious foreword to *The Black Book of Communism*, stated that the massacre of a 'class' is no different from the massacre of a 'race' and that

---

<sup>199</sup> Todorov 2005, pp 35–36.

<sup>200</sup> Pipes 2001, chapter 2.

<sup>201</sup> Lindgren 1999.

---

<sup>202</sup> Nolte 2004, p 13. See also Barnett 2006, pp 458–461.

<sup>203</sup> Besançon 2007, pp 26–30.

when a kulak child in Ukraine dies of starvation after having been intentionally driven to starvation by the Stalinist regime, this is 'equivalent' to when a Jewish child in the Warsaw ghetto dies of hunger after being starved by the Nazi regime.<sup>204</sup>

Bearing in mind the charged nature of the subject, it is polemically effective to make such comparisons, but it does not seem particularly fruitful, neither morally nor scientifically, to judge the regimes on the basis of their 'dangerousness' or to assess the relationship between communism and Nazism on the basis of what the international academic community calls their 'atrocities toll' or 'body count'.<sup>205</sup> In that case, should the crimes of all communist regimes, in the Soviet Union, China, Cambodia and other countries where communism is or has been the dominant party, be compared to the Nazi regime's massacre of six million Jews? Should the Nazi death toll also include the tens of millions of people who the German Nazi armies and their supporting troops killed during the Second World War? Not even Courtois' analytical qualification, that ranking the two regimes the same is based on the idea that the 'weapon of hunger' was used systematically by both the Nazi regime and a number of communist regimes, makes this more reasonable, since this 'weapon' on the whole played a very limited role in the Nazi genocide in relation to other types of methods of mass destruction, and in relation to how it was used by communist regimes.

### Three comparative perspectives

A comparison that seeks to be scientific must be based on different, more stable grounds, and should not aim to equate and establish identical developments and structures, but to compare, which means observing likenesses and differences with the same level of interest. In their anthology on Stalinism and Nazism, Nazism researcher Ian Kershaw and Soviet researcher Moshe Lewin point out three perspectives on what they describe as 'common ground', a shared platform, that makes a comparison well worth carrying out: one historical perspective, one system-oriented, and one

retrospective.<sup>206</sup> This seems to be a reasonable multifaceted starting point for a comparison, which the author of this review has in fact applied and developed in several works on genocide in general and the Soviet communist terror in particular.<sup>207</sup> Consequently, one relevant comparative perspective concerns the historical conditions of the communist and Nazi regimes. What are the similarities and differences in terms of the rise of the ideologies and the regimes' roots and developments, up until the perpetration of the crimes?

A second comparative perspective is structural and functional, and notes similarities and differences between the two systems and regimes in terms of exercise of power, autocratic techniques and the practice of violence. At times they converge, but differences and open conflict are much more prominent than similarities. This system perspective traditionally belongs to totalitarian theory. This perspective also includes an almost discursive interest in the linguistic and cultural forms of expression that permeate and mould a terror society, as well as a perspective that emphasises the relationship between these violent regimes and modern society. Despite almost archaic elements and tangible imbalances between different modernity aspects, it is hardly possible to deny that both Germany and the Soviet Union, at the time of the mass violence of Stalinism and the Nazi regime, had gone through or were in the process of a sudden modernisation process, characterised by technical and industrial development, militarisation, bureaucratisation and social engineering.

The third useful comparative perspective is based on reception history, which means that the spotlight is placed on how later generations have understood, processed and represented the communist and Nazi regimes and their crimes against humanity. Clearly this perspective has a particular interest in the states that replaced the genocide regimes, one of which, communist East Germany, is of particular interest since it is coloured by both German and Soviet history. However, interest should also be taken in the wider process that transformed these crimes against specific ethnic, social, religious and other groups into crimes 'against humanity', in other words, into a matter of

---

<sup>204</sup> Courtois 1999, p 26.

<sup>205</sup> Nonetheless, within Soviet research there has been a debate on the moral and ideological overtones of the terror regimes' death toll. See Rosefielde 1996, pp 959–987, Wheatcroft 1996, pp 1319–1535, Conquest 1997, pp 1317–1319.

<sup>206</sup> Kershaw & Lewin 1997, pp 4–8.

<sup>207</sup> Cf Karlsson 2003, and Gerner & Karlsson 2005.

importance for more or less the entire world, even the long 'neutral' Sweden. This paper would hardly have come about without the process of Europeanisation and universalisation of genocide and terror that has taken place in the last decade or so.

Some abovementioned external circumstances have encouraged the burgeoning interest in dealing with communism and Nazism in a comparative context, such as the fall of Soviet communism and the Soviet state and subsequent improvement in the archive situation; the endeavours of the postcommunist states to overcome their dual heritage of Nazi occupation and communist societal development; and the weakening of European communism. Some of the academic works and debates already mentioned also belong to this development. The effects of these have not only shaken the academic community, but have also called upon wider groups of intellectually and politically active persons to take an official position on the ideologies and regimes, in isolation and in their reciprocal context. They have not all had comparison as their explicit goal, but their works have nonetheless stimulated comparative reflections through their broad and provocative frameworks of interpretation. In turn, this has injected new life into the debate on the totalitarian society that was at its most prominent in the 1950s.

It started with the 'German historians' dispute', which began when historian Ernst Nolte, an academic authority on the history of European fascism, threw out a number of rhetorical questions on the roots and explanations of the Nazi genocide, in an article in a German newspaper in 1986:

Did Hitler and the National Socialists perhaps commit their 'Asian' atrocities because they and their equals saw themselves as potential victims of 'Asian' atrocities? Didn't the Gulag Archipelago come before Auschwitz? Was the Bolshevik murder of an entire social class not the logical and actual precursor of the National Socialist 'racial murder'?<sup>208</sup>

It is hardly wrong to claim that these questions have, for over twenty years, kept alive German efforts to deal with and overcome the legacy of their Nazi past. One aspect of this *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or struggle to come to

terms with the past has been particularly 'German': do Hitler, Nazism and the Holocaust form part of a historically rooted German *Sonderweg*, a special path that can be traced back to the history of the German Empire, or should the period from the Nazi rise to power in 1933 until the defeat of the regime in 1945 be seen as a deviation or a parenthesis in German history? Since Nolte, however, it has been difficult to exclude Stalin, communism and the Gulag from the synchronous alternative in this debate, in other words, the perception that both criminal histories belong to the non-democratic, totalitarian societies of the interwar period.

Another work, whose main area of interest is the Holocaust, is *The Holocaust and Modernity* by Jewish-Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. This work connects the Holocaust to the nature of modernity, to a bureaucratic culture that can be seen clearly in the both the communist and the Nazi social project. The debate has been furthered to an even greater degree by two historical works of French origin that focus on the communist atrocities and their circumstances; two books both written by former communists but which are extremely different from one another: François Furet's *Le passé d'une illusion* (Eng. trans. *The Passing of an Illusion*, 1999) from 1995, and an anthology by Stéphane Courtois et al, *Le Livre noir du Communisme* (*The Black Book of Communism*, 1999) from 1997.

Furet's book, as its title suggests, comes to an extremely critical conclusion on the revolutionary delusions of communism – politically as well as psychologically. He is careful to point out that the 'illusion' he attributes to communism has nothing to do with actual mistakes based on miscalculations or misjudgements – mistakes that everyone makes and that are easy to correct. In his eyes, the communist illusion has a different and deeper basis, since it 'offers a meaning in life, and the safety of assurance, to people who are lost in history'.<sup>209</sup> In this way, he refreshes an idea that gains a more prominent place in discussions of the totalitarian society during the 1990s: the idea that communism and Nazism were not just ideologies, but also religious belief systems, although of a secular nature. In addition, Furet draws far-reaching conclusions on the common 'matrix' of

---

<sup>208</sup> Ernst Nolte, quoted and translated from Woods 1999, p 47.

---

<sup>209</sup> Furet 1995, p 13.

communism and Nazism, the foundations of which he believes were laid in the figurative and literal trenches of the First World War. After the war, this matrix was transferred to politics, which in both places came to be characterised by 'the habit of violence, the simplicity of extreme passions, the subordination of the individual to the collective, and finally the bitterness of fruitless and betrayed sacrifice'.<sup>210</sup>

In *The Black Book of Communism*, six leading historians come together with the ambition of providing a comprehensive analysis of the global criminal history of communism. In practice, the analysis covers communist crimes, terror regimes and histories of oppression on four continents, Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America, with the largest space given to the Soviet Union, China and Cambodia. The book provoked fierce debate all over the world.<sup>211</sup> One American critic has described the book in its historiographical and politico-historical context as

retreads that had thrived during the Cold War, been marginalized during the heyday of social history, and revived with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a neototalitarian approach to Soviet history".<sup>212</sup>

As has been mentioned, Stéphane Courtois makes an explicit link in the introduction of the book between its contents and Nazi criminal history. However, this connection is implied at an even earlier stage, in the title of the book. In 1947, two Soviet authors Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman published another 'black book', a detailed account of Nazi crimes against Jews on the Eastern Front of the Second World War, written on the initiative of the Soviet Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, an organisation formed during the war. As has been mentioned, the organisation was disbanded by Stalin after the war, its chairman Solomon Mikhoels was killed by the Soviet secret police in 1948, and thirteen of its leading members were put on trial and executed in 1952,

accused of 'rootless cosmopolitanism'. The book was also banned by Stalin, who it seems did not want the Jewish victims of the Holocaust to compete with Russians and communists for the position of the most suffering and heroic groups of the Second World War, and who perhaps also did not want the book to put readers in mind of the partly simultaneous Soviet terror history. This new black book was aimed to break this other 'great silence', exactly half a century later. It is likely that that was the message behind the book title chosen by the French historians.

### A historical platform

The history behind the crimes against humanity of the Nazi and communist regimes is clearly far more complex than can be captured in simple distinctions between altruistic and selfish leaders and between good and evil in intentions and consequences. The problem is that very few historical works have been written against a background of systematic historical comparison of the two main types of violent regimes. Apart from a small number of classical and now ageing macrohistorical works, such as *The Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship* by Barrington Moore, which traces the appearance of the dictatorships back to strong landowner interests and the lack of a middle-class civil society,<sup>213</sup> and some works that take Hitler and Stalin as their starting point,<sup>214</sup> as far as is known there are only a handful of academic works that illuminate aspects such as concentration camps and informing from a broad comparative perspective.<sup>215</sup> Historian Jan Gross's analysis of how Polish West Ukraine and West Belarus were affected by Soviet and Nazi aggression during the Second World War also has comparative dimensions, even if its main focus is the Soviet conquest of these territories in accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Soviet attack on Poland in September 1939.<sup>216</sup> A recently published historical analysis that aims to systematically compare the circumstances and prehistory of the Nazi and communist atrocities, where 'communist atrocities' refers to crimes committed in Bolshevik Russian and the communist Soviet Union until Stalin's death, is *Lenin, Stalin and Hitler: The Age of*

---

<sup>210</sup> Furet 1995, p 197.

<sup>211</sup> An account of the French debate is given in Dean 2006, pp 43-85. A prominent French critique, emphasising the idea that the different kinds of 'communism' are too different to be placed in the same interpretative framework, is represented by Dreyfus 2004. For the German debate, see Mecklenburg & Wipperman 1998.

<sup>212</sup> Suny 2007, p 9.

<sup>213</sup> Moore 1966.

<sup>214</sup> Bullock 1991, while Overy 2004 has a broader approach.

<sup>215</sup> Cf Dahlmann & Hirschfeld 1999 and Fitzpatrick & Gellately (eds) 1997.

<sup>216</sup> Gross 2002.



*Social Catastrophe* by American historian Robert Gellately. However, there are a number of modern anthologies where these histories are recounted in parallel, but where it is more or less left up to the reader to draw conclusions on whether it is the similarities or the differences that are most salient. This is also the case in several general works on the history of genocide.

There is a series of historical 'truths' that these and other works have repeated regarding the development of the Nazi and Soviet societies towards terror systems and terror states. Some of these emphasise the similarities and parallels, while others emphasise the differences and lack of parallels. Both societies were preceded by authoritarian empires that existed up until the end of the First World War. In both of these, the monarchs had made parliamentary concessions, which were much more far-reaching in the case of Germany. In both cases, the empires were also imperial states, in which Germans and Russians were the dominant nations. Their imperial ambitions played a significant part in the outbreak of the First World War. Both state structures had strong bureaucratic and militarist traditions, which were primarily supported by the conservative, landowning nobility.

Both societies had gone through a process of rapid modernisation, in terms of economic, industrial and military growth. However, their political and social development into modern civil societies lagged behind, which meant that in both cases there was a lame or unbalanced modernisation process, which also included a regional component, particularly in Russia. Essentially it was only the western parts of Russia that were modernised, and this process started later and was much weaker than the equivalent economic modernisation in Germany. There was no equivalent to the well-organised German workers' movement in Russia.

For both Romanov Russia and Wilhelmian Germany, defeat in the First World War constituted a catastrophe in many respects. The end result was that both Nikolai II and Wilhelm II were forced to abandon their thrones, with the consequences of social disintegration, economic collapse and insecurity. The ensuing period in both countries was one of revolution and civil war, although the consequences were not as disruptive for Germany as for Russia, at least not in the short term. As a result of war and revolution, both countries ended up on the outside of the international community, Germany humiliated by defeat and Russia characterised by global

revolutionary ambitions that instilled fear in the victors of the First World War.

In the vast majority of portrayals of the prehistory of the Nazi and communist dictatorships, the First World War is attributed a crucial role as the 'platform' on which both were based. Apart from the millions of people in both Russia and Germany who lost their lives as a direct or indirect consequence of the war, the social consequences were immeasurable: people's lives and thoughts were militarised and brutalised, liberal individualism took a back seat to collectivism and bureaucracy, established social differences were evened out, and huge sums of money were lost, as was the entire international system that the world had become used to during the previous century. A whole generation of people was 'lost'.

However, the other side of the same coin is that this war also created political and other opportunities for individuals and collectives that could not have asserted themselves in the pre-war society. The Great War broke down traditional political life in Europe, along with the institutions that had supported it, and gave previously marginalised people and groups access to the political arena. In the context of the Nazi and Soviet communist dictatorships, this idea has been captured by Robert Gellately:

Before 1914 they were marginal figures and would not have had the slightest hope of entering political life. Only in their dreams could they have imagined themselves as powerful rulers and leaders of mass movements. But once the "war monster" was released in 1914, the social and political crisis that swept across Europe opened up wholly new opportunities for the radicals and the utopians.<sup>217</sup>

Therefore, both the Nazi and Soviet communist dictatorships had their breeding ground in military defeat. Beyond this, however, the developments cannot be said to have been parallel or even similar. The German revolutionary period, characterised by both a communist and a nationalist movement, was short-lived, and civil war resulted more from the polarised

---

<sup>217</sup> Gellately 2007, p 3. Also, cf Rubenstein 2004, p 126. The problematics of the war trauma have been captured well by Kramer 2007, particularly chapter 8.

atmosphere than from actual conflicts. In comparison, the October Revolution in its broadest sense appears as a violent and radical social revolution that was followed by a Russian civil war with a death toll in the millions and terrible brutality on both sides. The spiral of violence did slow down during the subsequent NEP period, but in contrast with Germany the Soviet Union remained a one-party dictatorship, where the communist party consolidated its position of power using violence and oppression, throughout the interwar period.

The German society over which the Nazis gained power in 1933 was an advanced industrial economy with a capitalist structure and private property, a constitutional state and a democracy whose citizens voted the Nazi party and Hitler into power through political elections. By comparison, the Russian Soviet society led by Stalin during the same period seems economically backward, although the state-planned economic system that he launched in the years around 1930 included major investments in agriculture and heavy industry and led to the end of food rationing in 1935. The constitutional state had to concede to a state in which law and justice were defined by the state and the party on the basis of the interests of the communist leaders. Lenin put a stop to the embryo of political democracy in Russia in January 1918, when the Bolsheviks felt that their position of power was under threat. Soviet citizens did not have the opportunity to vote for any other party than the communist party during the Soviet period.

This comparison touches on another basic difference, which French historian Henry Rousso pointed out: while Hitler founded a Nazi system, which came to power with him in 1933 and died with him in 1945, Stalin inherited a communist system, which in fact outlived him by almost 40 years.<sup>218</sup> By pointing this out, Rousso is probably not seeking to portray Nazi Germany as a historical parenthesis without links to the past in terms of, for example, antisemitism. Instead he wants to underline the fact that Hitler himself, as Chancellor of the Reich in January 1933 and formal head of state after the death of Hindenburg in August 1934, and to a certain extent his party and bureaucratic state, were able to create the political, organisational and

institutional frameworks within which the Holocaust took place, while the way was already paved for terror in this sense in the Soviet Union. It was after all during the time of the 'Red Terror', the years following the Bolshevik seizure of power, that Lenin set up concentration camps, forced labour camps, secret police, revolutionary tribunals and a legal system for state-sponsored terror activities. It was also Lenin who decided to disband the constituent assembly that, in January 1918, could have led to the establishment of democratic governance in Russia, and Lenin who later used terror operations to control all imagined and real opposition to the new holders of power. In this way he laid the foundations for a Soviet political culture where mass violence was both a recommended and frequently used solution to political or socioeconomic problems. This continuity remained, despite the fact that the external political and social conditions for the 'Red Terror' under Lenin and the 'Great Terror' under Stalin were extremely different.<sup>219</sup>

The nature of the terror was also clearly influenced by these differing development processes. Hitler and the Nazis defined the victims of their terror activities on the basis of their ideological principles, which gave it what has been called 'a certain horrific predictability'.<sup>220</sup> Soviet communist terror did not always lack detailed planning, as can be seen from the specific quota systems for forced deportations of workers to the camp systems in the east, or the well-organised translocation of millions of people belonging to what was known as the 'punished peoples' during the Second World War. However, Soviet terror did lack the long-term awareness, methodical nature and predictability of focus on certain categories of people – Jews in particular – that characterised the Holocaust process. The Soviet communist regime's crimes against humanity were characterised by a fickleness, an arbitrariness and a fundamental lack of safety that made sure that no-one, not even the administrators of the terror, the communist party nor the Soviet Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) and its secret police could be sure of avoiding Stalin's 'Great Terror' between 1936 and 1938.<sup>221</sup> In the Soviet context, 'internal' enemies were more dangerous

---

<sup>218</sup> Rousso 2004.

<sup>219</sup> See Karlsson 2003, pp 203–205.

<sup>220</sup> Kershaw & Lewin, 'Afterthoughts' 1997, p 355. Cf discussion in Maier 1997, pp 71–84.

<sup>221</sup> See Goldman 2007, p 8.

than 'external' ones, and 'imaginary' enemies were at least as demonic as 'real' enemies. Distinctions like this are meaningless in the systematic and consistent context of the Nazi crimes.

In this context it is also relevant to mention the established distinction between the Nazi genocide, based on stigmatisation according to a firm and unchanging racial criterion, and the Soviet communist terror, based on division of the population into classes, some of which were seen as surplus to requirements in a society heading towards communism. This class-related terminology can be described as more fluid and changeable, as is shown by the way in which the term 'kulak' was used in a very flexible way during the terror period. However, it is important to warn against over-simplified categorisation of the communist and Nazi victims. Both regimes killed groups that were judged to be political enemies. From the late 1930s onwards, Stalin focused more clearly on identifying 'enemies of the people' according to ethnic criteria. In the words of genocide researcher Eric Weitz, he sought to:

define groups as the bearers of an inheritable, and sometimes immutable, essence that might not be marked by skin color or even biology but had a cultural form so deep-seated that it was transmitted – automatically, inevitably – through the generations.<sup>222</sup>

Another historical relationship that has been much discussed in the limited academic debate is the interdependence of the mutual enmity between Nazism and Soviet communism: while the Nazi ideology and movement fed on anti-communism, in a similar way, communism fostered anti-Nazi and anti-fascist feelings. It is clear that both systems and regimes were acutely aware of each other and fuelled and reacted to each other in different ways. Hitler even managed to unite both of his enemies in one image by talking in demonising terms about 'Jewish Bolshevism'. This has led researchers to the conclusion that Hitler saw the war against communism as an expansion of his war against Jews. The latter were the primary enemy, since the German nationalism in which Hitler's ideas were rooted was characterised by a racist antisemitism. For Hitler,

Soviet communism was just one element in a series of Jewish plans to destroy the German nation.<sup>223</sup>

Ever since Nolte's presentation of Nazism as a defensive, causal reaction to communism, a crucial question in the academic community has been which ideology and which politics initially stimulated the other regime to react. So far, however, this discussion has essentially been carried on at a polemical level, in terms of exculpation and acquittal. Without answering the question, François Furet emphasises the fact that bourgeois liberalism has to be integrated into this interdependency, as a hateful European ideology that representatives of both communism and Nazism distanced themselves from on similar grounds. It was not possible to unite the idea of democracy with the notion that a certain party was entitled to a special position of power because it represented either a social class chosen by history, or a national community superior to all others.<sup>224</sup>

In this context, it is sometimes possible to trace a tendency to let the 'results' decide whether historical analysis will focus on convergence or divergence between Hitler and Stalin's regimes. Researchers who emphasise the importance of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the agreement between Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union that was entered into on 23 August 1939, prefer to underline the similarities between the regimes, for example in terms of the aggressive policies that led to the dictatorships dividing up the Eastern and Central European States between them in an additional secret protocol. One historical writer links Germany to communist Russia through Stalin's efforts to preserve an antagonism between German communists and social democracy, which is judged to have made it easier for Hitler to come to power; through the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922 and military cooperation between the countries that went on until 1933; and through the more general idea that Stalin 'may have felt more comfortable working with Hitler, a fellow dictator, than with the Western democracies'.<sup>225</sup> Some researchers present Stalinist and Nazi politicians as having an ambivalent or dualistic attitude to their opponents: confrontation and hatred went hand in hand with fascination and a desire

---

<sup>222</sup> Weitz 2003, p 97.

<sup>223</sup> Gellately 2007, pp 13–14, 98–101, 107–110.

<sup>224</sup> Furet 1995, pp 201–208.

<sup>225</sup> Kort 1996, p 203.

to increase contact. One of these researchers is Robert Conquest, who maintains that Hitler's anticommunism was indeed a problem for the pragmatic Stalin, but that this did not stop the Soviet leader from approaching the Nazis through personal emissaries. He summarises his interpretation as follows:

When the Pact was signed in August 1939, the result of years of hard organisational and propaganda work within the Comintern was revealed. All over the world, communist parties accepted this sudden change, with insignificant and temporary exceptions, and began to explain its necessity – sometimes in later editions of newspapers that had urged a struggle against the Nazis to the last drop of blood earlier the same day.<sup>226</sup>

The majority of researchers who instead emphasise the Nazi German attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 and the ensuing relentless war on Soviet territory as the 'result' of history, tend to focus on the differences and fundamental conflict patterns. For the latter group, the Soviet-German pact was a functional solution in a precarious situation, since Hitler did not want his army fighting on two fronts, and Stalin needed respite in order to be able to build up Soviet military capacity in the face of the unavoidable confrontation with his Nazi archenemy. According to this perspective, Stalin's decision in May 1939 to replace the Jewish Prime Minister Maxim Litvinov with Russian Vyacheslav Molotov, and to purge the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs of Jews, was not dictated by similarities or influence from Nazism in ideology or politics, but by purely pragmatic consideration for the fact that the negotiations with Germany were approaching. In addition, another, more weighty, 'results-based' argument is presented, for example by American Soviet historian Ronald Grigor Suny:

The Soviet Union was many things at once, and as compatible as Stalinism was in its worst moments with fascist terror, it also embodied both for most of its adherents and for most of its history the single most potent opponent to Nazi expansionism and its racist program. The USSR abused its anti-fascist credentials, without doubt, but ultimately it was the Soviet army and

people who stopped the Nazi scourge in the name of a quite different view of the world.<sup>227</sup>

### A totalitarian platform

The starting point for a line of argument on totalitarian states is undoubtedly also historical: in the years following the First World War, why did two extreme types of dictatorships emerge, in the forms of fascism/Nazism and communism, both with such 'total' claims to power that civil society was engulfed by the state? At the same time, many researchers have maintained that this question is not essentially historical, or at least not deeply historical, since these very claims to total and all-embracing power cannot be compared to the despotic and tyrannical regimes of the past, but that they belong unequivocally to the 'short' twentieth century that began with the First World War and the Russian Revolution. In addition, these regimes made use of technical and communicative infrastructures that were new, or that were being used for the first time by the governing power to penetrate civil society.

As early as the 1920s, Mussolini commented that what was historically new was his own fascist movement's 'fierce totalitarian will'. He used this term to describe a state that mobilises politically and that exercises control over all parts of society, right down to the smallest individual. Thereafter, the term 'totalitarian' was gradually adopted by anti-Nazi intellectuals and emigrants to analyse and dissociate themselves from the Nazi regime from the late 1930s, often in comparison to the Soviet communist regime of the same period. Ten years later, the situation was the opposite: the term totalitarianism was used by anticommunist intellectuals and emigrants to analyse and distance themselves from the Soviet communist regime, often in comparison to the Nazi German regime that no longer existed. Consequently, it can be said that totalitarian theory began to a large extent among groups of exiled intellectuals, whose home countries had been affected by totalitarian violence. With the publication of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951, the term spread within academic discourse and gained greater analytical clarity.<sup>228</sup>

---

<sup>226</sup> Conquest 1971, p 206. See also Lukacs 2007, pp 13ff, 51ff.

---

<sup>227</sup> Suny 2007, p 9.

<sup>228</sup> This brief historical description is based on Furet 1995, chapter 6.

In the 1950s, totalitarianism developed primarily into a structural, ahistorical term the main aim of which was to identify variables and factors that were judged to exist in the Soviet communist and Nazi social systems in general, and their power structures in particular. Behind its usage there were notions of tangible similarities in terms of how they worked, how the regimes gained popular support, how a system of oppression was established and the legal system adapted to suit it, and how cultural life, education systems and the mass media were used for instrumental power-related purposes. The essence of totalitarianism has been described, critically and not without good reason, as 'domination through fear by psychopathic tyrants'.<sup>229</sup>

More specifically, the factors in which totalitarian theorists have shown an interest include a revolutionary and mass-mobilising ideology that aims to restructure society altogether; an omnipotent party and a powerful bureaucracy to implement this restructuring process; and effective terror and propaganda machinery as a tool for social reform.<sup>230</sup> This systems thinking certainly does not mean that the historical dimension disappeared altogether; the totalitarian theorists emphasised that the totalitarian regimes did not only want to seize power and then maintain it unchanged, like the absolute autocrats of the past, but saw their goal as propelling and maintaining a revolution with the disruptive and forward-looking aim to 'pulverize all existing social units in order to replace the old pluralism with a homogeneous unanimity patterned on the blueprints of the totalitarian ideology'.<sup>231</sup> However, with some exceptions, primarily from Arendt's book, this totalitarian research took on a strongly synchronous ahistorical nature and focused rather one-sidedly on the totalitarian society that was still alive, that of the Soviet Union.

From the 1960s, under the influence of Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation and hopes of convergence, criticism of the totalitarian theory paradigm grew. In particular, a new generation of radical historians began, relatively

unanimously, to reject the comparative ambition of totalitarian theory on scientific and ideological grounds. Concrete elements of the theory were also rejected, such as the fact that the citizens of these societies were presented as faceless cogs in the totalitarian machinery, with no chance of putting up resistance to the government or deviating from its orders. According to this anti-totalitarian way of looking at things, the straight road to terror became much more of a winding route.<sup>232</sup> This change in perspective reflected an academic shift from political to social history, and an ideological shift to the left.<sup>233</sup>

Criticism of the totalitarian system as a static monolith is both reasonable and correct, but the a priori rejection of the comparability of communism and Nazism is not as self-evident. In the words of British sociologist Michael Mann, it's important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.<sup>234</sup> He has paid particular attention to the role of totalitarian bureaucracy in what he has called 'the continuous revolution', which he says is the driving force behind the development of a totalitarian society. At the same time, he takes into account criticism of the notion of the monolithic and hierarchical nature of totalitarian power. Even in a totalitarian state, there is room for dynamics and protection of particular interests using constantly escalating violence as a tool, but not for compromises and institutionalisation. For Mann it is this particular aspect, the escalating revolutionary violence, that provides the connection between the Nazi and Stalinist totalitarian regimes.

In both cases, a driving force of this permanent process was a 'semi-institutionalised' modern bureaucracy, whose room for manoeuvre was determined by the leaders' 'divide and conquer' policy and more or less vague orders, a kind of revolutionary common value system based on terms such as 'discipline' or 'comradeship'. In addition, according to Mann, the

---

<sup>229</sup> Overy 2004, p XXVII.

<sup>230</sup> The classic work of totalitarian theory is Friedrich & Brzezinski 1956. Older historical works written with inspiration from totalitarian theory include Fainsod 1958 and Ulam 1965.

<sup>231</sup> Brzezinski 1962, p 42.

---

<sup>232</sup> See for example Schleunes 1972. On the issue of Soviet terror, during the 1970s a whole new school of thought was established, revisionism, with the main task of showing that 'vacillation, switchbacks, and backtracking marked the Party's winding 'road to terror', as it has been expressed. See Goldman 2007, p 6.

<sup>233</sup> For a present-day but 'classical' left-wing critique of the term totalitarianism, see Losurdo 2004, pp 25–55.

<sup>234</sup> Mann 1997, p 137.

bureaucracy possessed a technical, administrative and communicative control that made it possible to communicate the ideology, to exercise power and to resolve conflicts at local and regional levels. This often happened in a violent way and for the benefit of people in specific bureaucratic positions, such as regional party chiefs or leading figures in the secret police.<sup>235</sup> In several aspects, this reasoning is similar to Zygmunt Bauman's ideas on the significance of modern bureaucratic culture for genocide and terror, and more generally on the functional division of labour in a genocidal society. There are, however, some differences between these two sociologists' lines of argument. One is that Bauman does not use the term totalitarianism, but chooses consistently to talk about modernity and its relation to genocide, and that Mann, just as consistently, uses 'ideology' instead of 'culture' when he talks about how values and ideas are mobilised in a terror society.<sup>236</sup> More importantly, however, Mann, unlike Bauman, maintains that the bureaucracies of the terror regimes took their own initiative and had their own responsibility, not just a mechanical obedience reflex characteristic of the modern age.

Nonetheless, Bauman's modernity perspective has left its mark on terror and genocide research, within and beyond the totalitarian theory perspective. One important element has been his interest in pointing out how linguistic and cultural discourses and practices have come to characterise people's frame of reference, making them vulnerable to the brutalities of modern society. For example, using the metaphor of the 'gardening state', a modern state where 'gardening and medicine were the archetypes of the constructive attitude, while normality, health and hygiene were archetypes of man's duties and strategies in the care of his own affairs', he shows how linguistic constructions linked to pairs of opposites such as clean-dirty and healthy-sick played an important part in making genocide and terror understandable and justifiable. According to Bauman, in the gardening state, 'useful elements, which should be able to live and flourish, are distinguished and segregated from harmful

and unhealthy elements, which should be exterminated'.<sup>237</sup>

Through his analytical level and focus, it is likely that he has been significant in restoring interest in a comparative perspective. With the focus of earlier research on political events and players and on social processes, it was easier to show the variation, diversity and uniqueness of historical development, and thereby also show the problems of a comparative approach. With a shift in perspective towards cultural and linguistic structures, towards the language of totalitarianism and its discursive elements expressing hatred and hostility for the 'bourgeois' world, parallels and similarities appear more clearly, and this can be seen as a contributing factor in promoting a comparative perspective. In addition, the question of the individual's freedom of movement within the totalitarian system is to some extent defused, or rather, linked to less definitive and more multicausal mental and cultural categories that define people's frame of reference and readiness to act.

Mann and Bauman's handling of totalitarian theory can be said to be in line with the more widespread changes in research in totalitarianism that have taken place in recent years. One new focus, that takes François Furet's book as an important source of inspiration, has been to see ideologies as just that, with their absolute frameworks of interpretation, their dualistic emphasis on good against evil and friend against enemy, and their utopian content, all of which makes it easier to identify more broadly with the ideas and their exponents. The notion that these ideologies functioned as a 'doctrine of salvation', with their immense utopian charm for broad groups of the population, has led to the totalitarian ideologies being related to what has been called 'political religion', 'secular religion' or the 'sacralisation of politics', again with inspiration from Furet's eye-opening book, but also from historians such as George Mosse,<sup>238</sup> Italian historian Emilio Gentile, one of the leading researchers in this area, has defined this political religion as:

---

<sup>235</sup> Mann 1997, pp 135–157.

<sup>236</sup> Cf also Mann 2005, p 30.

---

<sup>237</sup> Bauman 1994, p 109. It is likely that interest in totalitarianism's linguistic forms of expression has also been inspired by Klemperer 2006.

<sup>238</sup> Cf Mosse 1975.

a type of religion that sacralises an ideology, a movement or a political regime through the deification of a secular entity transformed into myth, considering it the primary and indisputable source of the meaning and the ultimate aim of human existence on earth.<sup>239</sup>

In connection with this relatively newly awakened interest in political religion, over the last decade a large number of researchers have shifted the emphasis of their analyses of totalitarianism from its external economic, legal and political power aspects to its internal cultural and aesthetic manifestations, not only to the ideologies themselves, but also to rites, festivals and symbols. To all appearances, the aim of this has been to explain the fascination that the totalitarian movements offered their adherents, and to better illustrate the historical dynamic implied quite literally in the term 'the totalitarian movement'. A cultural focus makes it easier to understand how totalitarian leaders could exaggerate and win support for the various potential threats and conspiracy theories that they presented. By placing an emphasis on this less discussed side of totalitarianism, researchers have been able to show how linguistic, figurative and symbolic expressions had a legitimising effect on the leaders of the totalitarian movement, a motivating effect on its administrators, and an orientating and mobilising effect on wider groups within the totalitarian society.<sup>240</sup> Another aspect, or rather a consequence of this new culture-historical totalitarianism concept should be added in this context, and that is that the chronological and geographical framework of analysis has been broadened significantly. In the light of this, it is perhaps logical that British historian Michael Burleigh's new book on the theme of totalitarianism and political religion bears the title *Sacred Causes: Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Qaeda*.<sup>241</sup>

In line with this cultural focus, and with Bauman's modernity perspective, questions have arisen in recent years regarding both regimes' use of 'scientific' institutions and findings. What has been called 'the cult of science', a strong belief in a unified science with organic and utopian overtones that would be able to

solve problems of social planning, medicine, eugenics, technology and social engineering, was not specific to the totalitarian states, but it did play a central role in supporting the ideologies of both the Stalinist Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.<sup>242</sup> A third historical focus, already mentioned in this text, relates to how perception, imitation and learning processes had a reciprocal effect on the rise of the totalitarian regimes.<sup>243</sup>

### A reception history platform

Reception histories may be of two types. The first type of histories take as their analytical starting point the events of which they are a result or effect. The second type, on the other hand, starts from the surviving society and its questions for the past, questions linked to cultural phenomena such as memories, monuments and myths. Although these two types of reception history are difficult to separate from an analytical point of view, the following is primarily an attempt at a brief discussion of how the Nazi and communist terror histories have been interpreted and represented in relation to each other in the post-war society. To a certain extent, this discussion seeks to make connections to, and summarise observations of current relevance from, the introductory pages of this text.

For some time it has been entirely conceivable to state publicly that Josef Stalin did run terror campaigns that robbed many Soviet citizens of their lives, yet at the same time created the embryo of the Soviet welfare state and defeated Hitler's Nazi Germany. However, it has not been conceivable to even suggest that Hitler was not only the perpetrator of genocide, but also built motorways and ensured that the German people had employment. This relationship says something about the conditions under which Nazi and communist history is communicated. It is enough to look up more or less any history textbook to ascertain that the communist and Nazi leader figures and their crimes have been presented and evaluated in extremely different ways by future generations.

The introductory sentences above should not be applicable to either of these cases, even if there is firm historical evidence that both dictators did actually gain

---

<sup>239</sup> Gentile 2004, p 328.

<sup>240</sup> See for example Burleigh 2001, Hildebrand (ed) 2003, Maier (ed) 2004 and Griffin 2005.

<sup>241</sup> Burleigh 2007.

<sup>242</sup> See Todorov 2005, pp 25–28.

<sup>243</sup> These three 'new totalitarian' emphases are launched in Schönpflug 2007, pp 267–268.

significant popularity in the 1930s through promotion of economic and social development for broad swathes of the population, and in a more general sense, large-scale terror activities went hand in hand with strong socio-political dynamics in terror societies like those of Nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union. There is an immediate risk that the juxtaposition of one 'good' and one 'evil' policy makes this history appear as a zero-sum game, where the negative aspect – a regime's unprecedented use of violence – can be balanced by or even compensated for by the aspects of that regime's practice and results that seemed at the time or seem in hindsight to be positive.

So is it not also immoral to compare communism and Nazism, as ideologies, as movements and as regimes that perpetrated crimes against humanity? It is possible to do this without automatically arousing suspicion that the atrocities perpetrated by Hitler and the Nazi regime are to be covered up or minimised? The idea that there could be suspicions of the opposite is hardly current. One important difference is that a comparison of this nature is not as closed and conditioned as the previous one. Rather, it allows room for many more alternatives and interpretations. The thought process involved in comparing communism and Nazism is not a zero-sum game. It has every chance of leading to the conclusion that two evil things are being compared. Nonetheless, for many reflective people, the comparison is challenging, since it risks getting 'locked' into the fundamental difference between the good intentions and evil intentions established at the beginning of this text, and into the fear of a single-track approach that places the two regimes on a par. At the same time, this comparison is urgent and important, partly because it is carried out in practice, indeed to a greater extent in our time, and partly because it responds to a scientific need and interest in understanding and explaining the most significant phenomena of contemporary history, both individually and in their wider context. A comparison promotes both perspectives and helps us to pose new questions, establish new perspectives, and clarify unspoken assumptions in the academic community. There is an intrinsic comparative challenge in comparing the type of mass brutality ordered by Stalin

and Hitler on a European battlefield hit by revolution, civil war, world war and major social upheaval.<sup>244</sup>

There is a further motive that is greater than the scientific one. Both the Soviet communist and the Nazi regime's atrocities were crimes against humanity. They did focus on more or less specific categories of victims, but in hindsight they are directed at all of us, since they, more than any other events in recent history, shake our faith in the basic values of civilisation. It is no coincidence that after all these years, we still devote so much attention to these crimes. Certainly, questions surrounding these crimes are primarily scientific, political and ideological, as the above description has hopefully demonstrated. However, more than anything these questions have an important function for our existence, identity and morality: Why were these crimes committed? How could people do what they did to other people? Who bears the blame? Were they separate phenomena, or were they connected? How are they connected to us? How can we prevent similar incidents from happening in the future?

In recent decades the Nazi extermination of over two thirds of European Jews has, more than any other historical process or event, developed into a paradigm. In other words, it has become a widely used conceptual device and a symbol for the absolute evil that is opposed to what we perceive as our basic humanistic and democratic values. When new genocides are committed or old ones are interpreted, the Holocaust constitutes the analytical and terminological framework of interpretation. When Robert Conquest sought to frame the area of the Ukrainian terror famine, he called it 'one vast Belsen'. It is likely he was not seeking provide a scientific definition of the nature of the area, but rather to make use of a word with much stronger connotations than those belonging to the Soviet communist terror history, and in this way, to give the area the character of what is now called a *lieu de mémoire*, memorial site.<sup>245</sup> In the same way, Richard Pipes seeks to paint Nikolai Yezhov as an even darker historical figure by calling him

---

<sup>244</sup> For this 'intrinsic comparative challenge' see Bartov, Grossman & Nolan 2002, p XXIV. For an example of such a comparison being made, with sounding boards that reach far beyond the academic community, see Dietsch 2006.

<sup>245</sup> Conquest 1988, p 3.



'Stalin's Himmler'.<sup>246</sup> This paradigmatic approach is not altogether without its problems, since a term such as 'bystander', created to describe all the individuals, groups and states that, for various reasons, remained passive on the outside of the Holocaust and its victim and perpetrator categories, has dubious application in the Soviet communist case, where perpetrators could become victims and bystanders could become involved.<sup>247</sup>

The paradigmatic status of the Holocaust is also visible outside the academic community. When politicians or other prominent figures want to draw public attention to what they judge to be an aberration, an injustice or a case of discriminatory treatment, and be sure of success, they relate the situation to Hitler, Nazism and the Holocaust. When Hollywood wants to be sure of a box office success, in a time of interest in historical films, plots are built around the Holocaust and Auschwitz, not around the Soviet terror and the Gulag.

However, it should be added immediately that this relationship is to a certain extent dependent on geographical perspectives and historical experiences. In Eastern Europe, where people carry painful experiences and memories of both Nazism and Soviet communism, a double burden, the priorities have often been the opposite way round. During the communist period, many of the system's internal dissidents found the term totalitarianism useful in their criticism of the regime.<sup>248</sup> Since the fall of the system, it has become a weapon in settling up with communism, which has caused academics to adopt a traditional totalitarian theory perspective in relation to the Soviet communist regime and terror. Nazi totalitarian oppression has not been discussed nearly as much. The reason given for this is often that the communist terror against them carried on for an incomparably long time, but in the background there is also a Holocaust history in which the Nazis were not the sole perpetrators. However, it should be mentioned that different Eastern European historians have attributed varying relevance and applicability to the term totalitarianism.<sup>249</sup>

Even in the West the term has regained its topicality, after decades of dormancy. It is clear that questions surrounding the conditions for the Eastern European transition to non-totalitarian governance have contributed to restoring interest in totalitarianism. Since the end of the Cold War conditions have improved, particularly for historians and other researchers, for getting a closer look at the Soviet terror society under Lenin and Stalin than was possible via the novels of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov or via Robert Conquest's historical works based on official and narrative sources. This has made it more possible to compare it to the Nazi terror society on a more equal footing. It is just as clear that the great interest that has been shown in the Holocaust in recent decades has inevitably aroused questions on similarities, differences and dependencies in relation to the partly simultaneous terror perpetrated by the Soviet communist regime against its own people.

The German debate in particular has emphasised that issues surrounding how traumatic phenomena from the past are called up in the individual and collective memory are essentially generational. The historical memory changes over time, from the communicative, often personally experienced and changeable memory, to the cultural memory, which is a constant and institutionalised memory that normally belongs to generations that did not experience the trauma personally, but who still experience a need to remember it, learn about it and take a position on it.<sup>250</sup> It has primarily been the generation of grandchildren of those who experienced the Nazi and Stalinist terror regimes who are responsible for the renewed interest in the regimes. This interest includes gathering eyewitness accounts from those who experienced the crimes of the Nazi and communist regimes, while there is still time. Such collections of memories show that the totalitarian society may have been monolithic and homogenous, but the memories of it are not.<sup>251</sup>

One part of the cultural memory is historical science. As has been mentioned in this research review, the renewed scientific interest in the history of Nazism and communism can to a large extent be related to a number

---

<sup>246</sup> Pipes 2001, p 66.

<sup>247</sup> Karlsson 2007.

<sup>248</sup> See Gleason 1998, chapter 9.

<sup>249</sup> See for example Frison-Roche 2004, pp 218–241.

<sup>250</sup> Various memory perspectives are dealt with theoretically in Rösen 2004, pp 37–41.

<sup>251</sup> Cf Passerini 2005, Welzer, Moller & Tschuggnall 2002.

of central debates and works within historical science, whose effects have spread beyond academic circles. They have had comparative implications, despite the fact that many of them deal only with one of the regimes. Of equal importance in this context are the major changes in scientific theory that have taken place in recent decades, and that are usually summarised as a series of ‘turns’ relating to language, culture and memory. These changes in scientific thought have had the benefit of bringing new questions and opening up new perspectives, which has probably been both valuable and fruitful in the context of a rigid and predictable area of research like that of comparison of Hitler and Stalin’s terror regimes. The fact that the focus of research has moved from political figures, events and processes – which can easily be called unique – to cultural processes and structures that often communicate with each other and can therefore be related to one another more easily, has facilitated and stimulated an interest in comparison in recent years, within and beyond the framework of totalitarian theory.

Naturally, these openings and new lines of thought have come at a cost. If history is reduced to linguistic and cultural constructions that are not rooted in real historical facts, it is easy and convenient to remove the terror and violence – not from the Nazi history, since the Holocaust cannot easily be glossed over without raising suspicions of denial and trivialisation, but from the history of Soviet communism. A few years ago, celebrated American Soviet historian David Hoffmann published a book on the cultural values of Stalinism between 1917 and 1941. In over 200 pages he managed to avoid one single explanation that these values were created and lived out in a terror society, and that crimes against them could lead to consequences that do not belong in a state governed by law.<sup>252</sup>

---

<sup>252</sup> Hoffmann 2003.

## The People's Republic of China

MICHAEL SCHOENHALS

Drawing up an inventory of research on what the Swedish government, in the assignment given to the Living History Forum, calls 'the crimes against humanity of Chinese communism' is no easy task. In the Soviet case, as Klas-Göran Karlsson so rightly notes, there is an 'established term' for the crimes of the regime, namely 'terror' – and this is used almost regardless of the general frameworks of interpretation employed by individual researchers. In the same way, he notes that 'the term genocide is established and accepted as a description of the crimes of the Khmer Rouge'. In the case of the People's Republic of China, however, there are no equivalent terms that are accepted or generally established in the academic community and that can be made use of in a research inventory. Bibliographies and search engines all speak their own clear language: those who carried out research on Maoism in its day made very limited use of words such as terror and genocide, and neither do these terms appear among the key terms that carry implicit clear explanations and are therefore regularly used by current foreign and Chinese historians. Perhaps Confucius is to blame: after all, 2500 years ago the Master spoke of the importance of finding the *right* word in a political context, and of the disastrous consequences of careless use of vague terminology.

In other words, in the case of China it falls to the party drawing up the inventory to make an *ad hoc* decision on where the boundaries should be drawn between what does and what does not deserve to be mentioned under the heading of 'crimes against humanity', including cases in which there is uncertainty. There are no sequences of events or phenomena that are consistently defined in the academic community as tantamount to terror or genocide, nothing that can be made the subject of this inventory through simple terminological substitution. At the same time, there are events that few researchers, if any, would hesitate to mention in this context. For example, since the early 1980s, the Chinese Communist Party has claimed that the darkest parts of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) did indeed constitute a 'crime' (*zuixing*), if not against humanity then at least against a large segment of Chinese representatives of humanity. In China in 1985, significant resources were invested in a broad national campaign whose government backers saw it as their job to, with the use of simple tools (such

as pamphlets with titles like *Renounce the 'Cultural Revolution' Thoroughly and Purge the Influence of the 'Left'* and *On Renouncing the 'Great Cultural Revolution'*) help ordinary people to reach a 'politically correct' understanding of the past, an understanding intended to increase acceptance for the market economic reforms that Deng Xiaoping et consortes were in the process of implementing.

However, when it comes to the appropriateness of including other events and phenomena that form part of the 'criminal history' after 1949, opinions often diverge. For reasons that range from pure lack of space via vaguely political concerns to strictly scientific ones, this inventory has been limited to four major examples of what Klas-Göran Karlsson calls 'physical violence perpetrated by individual groups, institutions and states against specific groups of victims within their own country'. This selection, therefore, should not be interpreted as anything other than a selection: other cases could have been discussed in the context of a more extensive inventory. The first example dealt with is known as the 'suppression of counterrevolution' during the early years of the People's Republic, a brutal campaign that provides an unusually clear illustration of dictatorships' didactic use of 'terror... to intimidate and educate in order to force a desired social change'. The second example is the 1950s witch-hunt against 'hidden enemies', one of the results of which was the 1957 'anti-rightist campaign'. The official line of the Chinese Communist Party has always been that the latter was 'necessary'. At the same time, since 1980, it has been officially recognised that the campaign went 'too far' and that an astounding 98 percent of the 550,000 victims, most of whom were intellectuals, did not deserve to be branded 'rightists'. The third example is the famine of catastrophic proportions between 1959 and 1961, which it is widely agreed, both inside and outside China, was a direct result of the arrogance of Mao Zedong's so-called Great Leap Forward (1958), which included the economic goal to 'catch up with and overtake Great Britain in fifteen years'. The fourth and last example, as has already been mentioned, is the Cultural Revolution.

In the light of the fact that much of the information taken up in this inventory may be unknown to many Swedish readers, each section begins with a short

contextualisation. After this, the inventory takes up the main lines of research, within and outside China. The human toll cited in academic circles (and questions surrounding its reliability) is given a relatively large amount of space, for the simple reason that it is of particular interest to many Swedes.

### **Consolidation of the regime (1949-1953): 'Suppression of counterrevolution'**

The People's Republic of China was proclaimed by the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Mao Zedong, on 1 October 1949, and was immediately recognised by the Soviet Union and its allies. In December 1949, China's neighbours India and Burma followed suit. On 14 January 1950, Sweden's Social Democratic Foreign Minister, Östen Undén, sent a telegram to the Foreign Minister of the People's Republic, Zhou Enlai, to inform him that 'the Government of Sweden in view of the fact that the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China now effectively controls the greater part of the territory of China have decided to recognize de jure the Central People's Government as the Government of China'.<sup>253</sup> On 12 June 1950, the Swedish Ambassador, Hammarström, submitted his letters of credit to the Chinese head of state, Mao Zedong.

In the early 1950s the domestic political arena of the People's Republic was dominated by regime consolidation, in other words, not only the (re-)creation of a functioning national political, social and economic infrastructure after decades of civil war and conflict, but also socialisation and as yet tentative efforts (compared with what was to come) to foster pro-socialist attitudes in the citizens of what was called 'the New China'. Regime consolidation in particular has formed a common theme in many standard historical works, such as the massive *Cambridge History of China*, in which the description of the period between 1949 and 1957 goes under the heading 'The Establishment and Consolidation of the New Regime'. Less neutral names for the years immediately following 1949, which also appear frequently in literature on the period, include 'revolution' (as in Derek Boddes 1950 book *Peking Diary: A Year of Revolution*), 'communist takeover' (as in Doak Barnett's classic *China on the Eve of Communist*

*Takeover*, published in 1963), and 'liberation' (as in *Prisoners of Liberation* by American student couple Allyn and Adele Rickett, who were imprisoned as spies for four years by the new regime). The kind of vocabulary often used in titles on the early years of the Soviet Union is conspicuous by its absence in the context of China: for example if you search for 'red+terror+China' in the huge reference work *Bibliography of Asian Studies*, the response is 'no matches'.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, no historian of China has chosen to structure an in-depth study of the early years of the People's Republic around the term 'crimes against humanity' or a close synonym. The closest thing to a specific study on this theme may be Robert Jay Lifton's 1961 work on 'brainwashing', *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of 'Brainwashing' in China*. In the 1960s, Lifton (best known as the author of *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*, published in 1986) was one of the founders of the *Wellfleet Psychohistory Group* that sought to ascertain the psychological motives behind war, terrorism and genocide in modern history.

The fact is that a feature of much academic research, particularly in recent years as China's archives have been opened, has been an implicit *rejection* (time will tell whether this is permanent or just temporary) of 'grand' explanatory models with names such as totalitarianism. Has this been reflected in a research debate on paradigms, we could ask, comparable to what Klas-Göran Karlsson refers to in terms of 'academic perspectives on the criminal history of the Soviet communist regime'? The answer is no, and in general it is striking how little room, comparatively speaking, historians of China give to debating and relating the links between their own interpretations and 'basic theoretical and ideological perspectives'. The intra-scientific process in the research community, both within and outside China, is still best described as having a 'cumulative perspective' (Klas-Göran Karlsson speaks of research that deals primarily with filling gaps in knowledge as being 'something of a jigsaw puzzle'). Following on from an earlier generation who devoted much time and effort to describing the Maoist forest from a great height, today's younger historians, both in and outside China, are concentrating more and more on looking at individual trees at a close distance, in the hope of reaching deeper insights on the nature of Chinese communism. This is a trend that is clearly reflected in the 2007 anthology *Dilemmas of Victory: The*

---

<sup>253</sup> Quoted from Bexell 2000, pp 13–14.

*Early Years of the People's Republic of China* with its many contributions from young American historians, based on archive research.

In the introduction to *Dilemmas*, the years from 1949 to 1953 are described as a 'transitional' period in which the academic community's interest was limited as its 'direct relevance to the upheavals that followed remained unclear'.<sup>254</sup> The challenging complexity and confusing nature of this period for the generalist is accentuated, and it is pointed out that 'it is unwise to generalise about China during the early 1950s... Our reassessment of the period reveals an astonishing degree of variations and exceptions'.<sup>255</sup> It seems it is much more difficult to find a general pattern than has previously been claimed by researchers whose research had a narrower empirical base.

The aspect of the CCP's regime consolidation that deserves to be dealt with first of all in this context is the events that began in October 1950 that the history books usually call 'the suppression of counterrevolution'. In the cities these are the events which, from a perspective of comparative history, come closest to the Soviet 'Red Terror' of 1918-1921. Without beating about the bush, Mao described this 'suppression' as follows on 27 February 1957:

After liberation we rooted out a number of counterrevolutionaries. Some were sentenced to death for major crimes. This was absolutely necessary, it was the demand of the masses and it was done to free them from long years of oppression by the counterrevolutionaries and all kinds of local tyrants; in other words, to liberate the productive forces. If we had not done so, the masses would not have been able to lift their heads.

It is unusual among those who write on this period to claim that communism is the *only* explanatory factor behind the violence and repression that Mao describes here, in the imagery that is typical of him. Not even political scientist R.J. Rummel, author of *China's Bloody Century*, goes quite so far, though we may be led to believe it by the link to his website at the University of Hawaii, which is called 'Murder by Communism'. It is

more common that a comparative approach seeks and finds thought-provoking similarities with other political systems. (In the monumental three-volume work *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, Roderick MacFarquhar, a political scientist at Harvard, devotes a short section to identifying similarities between Mao and Hitler/Stalin, under the title 'Comparative Dictatorial Roles and Styles'<sup>256</sup>). Outside academic circles, among those who speak from their own experience, like decision-makers, it is possible to find support in unlikely places for the idea that violence and chaos characterise *all* 'liberations', in the sense of transitions from one kind of political regime to another. As US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld put it on 9 August 2002, in the context of NATO's operation in Afghanistan: 'Well, my goodness, democracy is untidy. Freedom is untidy. Liberation is untidy.'<sup>257</sup> If we maintain a narrow Chinese perspective, but look back a few more years into the period before 1949, we find more reasons to suspect that there were driving forces other than those that can be called communist behind this bloody 'suppression'. In 1945 when Chiang Kai-shek's troops liberated the island of Taiwan in the name of the Republic of China, after 50 years of Japanese occupation, and began to reconsolidate Chinese rule, the result was 'untidy' to say the least. Following an incident on 28 February 1947 which was used as a pretext, almost 28,000 people were killed (0.44 percent of the total population of Taiwan at that time, which was 6.343 million) by the new government.<sup>258</sup>

One question that must be asked on the basis of what has been written outside China about the 'suppression of counterrevolution' relates to purely conceptual precision. What is being referred to in time and space by authors citing widely divergent death tolls? For example, exactly what is the aforementioned Rummel talking about when he claims that 8,427,000 Chinese citizens were victims

---

<sup>254</sup> Brown & Pickowicz 2007, p 1.

<sup>255</sup> Brown & Pickowicz 2007, p 7.

---

<sup>256</sup> MacFarquhar 1997, pp 331-333.

<sup>257</sup> Jonathan Miller, 'Rumsfeld's Untidy World', *The Nation*, 25 April 2003.  
<http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20030512&s=miller>

<sup>258</sup> For further information on these events, see the links on the website 'The February 28 Holocaust',  
<http://www.uta.edu/accounting/faculty/tsay/feb28hd.htm>  
The death toll is given as 'over 30,000' here, but historians usually quote the more conservative estimate of 28,000.

of ‘genocide’ over the course of what he calls a ‘totalitarianization’ between 1949 and 1953.<sup>259</sup> How can statistics from independent sources be *compared* with the CCP’s own statistics, or with statistics commissioned by an American senate committee with the aim of showing ‘how much communism has cost China in terms of human lives?’<sup>260</sup> For a long time in academic literature, the ‘suppression’ was described as a ‘short-lived, violent initiative’ and, for example, the second revised and expanded edition of an American standard reference work from 1989 claims that this ‘very severe campaign’ began to ‘tail off’ in May 1951.<sup>261</sup> We now know that the ‘suppression’ was at its most intensive in spring 1951, but that in certain parts of China it continued until late 1953.<sup>262</sup> How does knowledge of this nature affect our view of *apparently* contradictory information where source (A) says that unspecified ‘political liquidation campaigns’ at the vaguely-defined beginning of the history of the People’s Republic cost the lives of 15 to 30 million people; source (B) says that the number of people who died through ‘executions or mob violence or committed suicide’ during the ‘suppression of counterrevolution’ that is claimed to have taken place between 1950 and 1951 was a total of 3 million; and source (C) says that 1 million people died in ‘purges in the cities’ between the years of 1950 and 1957?<sup>263</sup>

Just as Klas-Göran Karlsson notes in the comparison between communism and Nazism, an approach that focuses *exclusively* on ‘what the international academic community calls their ‘atrocities toll’ or ‘body count’ is not ‘particularly fruitful’, neither morally nor scientifically. Of far greater importance in this context than the question of which or whose figures are ‘largest’ is the question of the extent to which the figures are rooted in ‘empirical soil’ What then are the main sources on which researchers (historians) with limited faith in the explanatory power of suggestive macrostatistics like those just mentioned currently base their studies and their reasoning? For the last ten or fifteen years, the types of sources used have not been dramatically

different from those that are familiar to historians researching other countries’ histories. The Chinese *archives* (state *and* other) are the current destination of many researchers with their laptops and scanners, primarily in search of official documentation made public. Those in search of individual memories take their digital microrecorders and cameras and look up survivors with their recollections, diaries, letters and memoirs. A network of bloggers, websites, conferences and email addresses then links historians and groups of historians inside and outside China to form a distinct ‘research community’. Information, findings and theories are exchanged and subjected to vigorous criticism. Current research from outside China on the course of the ‘suppression’ among the grassroots, where state, communist party, society and individual collided after 1949, have already resulted in works such as the abovementioned *Dilemmas*. It is also reflected in publications such as the first half of the thematic anthology of primary sources which I edited, *Public Security in the People’s Republic of China: A Selection of Mood Assessment Reports (1951–1962)* and in shorter specialised articles such as professor of law Susan Trevaskes’s ‘Public Sentencing Rallies in China: The Symbolizing of Punishment and Justice in a Socialist State’ and political scientist Julia Strauss’s ‘Paternalist Terror: The Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries and Regime Consolidation in the People’s Republic of China 1950–1953’.<sup>264</sup> Shortly before his death in 2006, Berkeley historian Frederic Wakeman Jr (author of the definitive study of Chiang Kai-shek’s secret service *Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese Secret Service*) completed a study of the work of the communist security services in the 1940s and early 1950s, which is to be published posthumously and which is likely to shed new light on some of the most dreadful aspects of the ‘suppression’. The best contemporary historians in China are often linked to government research institutes or universities. They are published both in China and abroad, including in Hong Kong, but almost *exclusively* in Chinese. Many have made active use of the internet as an alternative forum for publication of research results, and as a result more and more β-versions of articles (sometimes containing information that print publishers in the People’s Republic have chosen to remove or omit) are being

<sup>259</sup> See <http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/CHINA.TAB8.1.GIF>

<sup>260</sup> Cf Walker 1971.

<sup>261</sup> Lieberthal 1995, p 92; Lieberthal & Dickson 1989, p 9.

<sup>262</sup> Cf chronology in *Gongan shi zhishi wenda* 1994, pp 71–73.

<sup>263</sup> Cf figures from *The Black Book of Communism*, Chang & Jon Halliday 2006 and Walker 1971, quoted on the site. <http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/warstat1.htm#Mao>

<sup>264</sup> Schoenhals 2007, Trevaskes 2003 and Strauss 2002.

uploaded and can be read on the internet. One of the Chinese researchers who has long focused specifically on the ‘suppression of counterrevolution’ and who enjoys great respect among his colleagues is Yang Kuisong in Shanghai, author of ‘Initial Attempts at Regime Consolidation in the Cities of the New China: A Historical Investigation Starting with the Campaign to Suppress the Counterrevolution in Shanghai’ and *A Study of the Campaign to ‘Suppress the Counterrevolution’ in New China*.<sup>265</sup> Generally speaking, his research is characterised by (a) arguments backed up by an unusually wide selection of previously confidential documentation from state archives in Shanghai and (b) convincing source-critical arguments on the credibility of official statistics. The *official* account of the ‘suppression’, directly sanctioned by the Chinese state and the CCP, was written in the 1980s by the Leading Group for Collection of Documentation for Research on the History of Public Security, part of the Ministry of Public Security. The ‘Leading Group’ was, along with the Chinese Police Study Association, responsible for the 200-page handbook *Questions and Answers on the History of Public Security*, which, according to the flyleaf, is intended ‘for internal distribution within the police and judicial systems’<sup>266</sup> (in today’s China, distribution limitations of this nature have surprisingly little significance, and even foreign researchers can often purchase their own copies at second-hand bookshops or at the annual book sales, when publishing houses often try to get rid of remaining copies and don’t worry too much about the regulations). As the name suggests, *Questions and Answers* sheds light on much more than just the regime consolidation of the 1950s, as does the 1997 publication *A Draft History of the Chinese People’s Public Security* (marked ‘Only for Official Use’), which has received attention abroad.<sup>267</sup> The first official history dealing exclusively with the ‘suppression’ was the ‘Short History of the Early Campaign to Suppress the Counterrevolution’ by Sun Yuting et al, first published in 1989. Along with further documentation and various annexes, it formed the core of *The Early Campaign to Suppress the Counterrevolution* (marked ‘for internal

distribution within the police and judicial systems’), published in 1992.<sup>268</sup>

In late 2007, history enthusiasts could find the 500-page tome *The Great Suppression of the Counterrevolution when the Nation was Founded: Let History Tell the Future* in many Beijing bookshops. This was a chronologically structured popular history for a wide readership, written by an author with no clear connection to any government authority or academic institution. In typical Chinese manner, long sections of the text have simply been copied/plagiarised: it is clear from the bibliography that much use has been made of the local press of the 1950s, the research of academic historians in recent years, the memoirs and biographies of leading political figures, and much more. The first edition – which for reasons that are difficult to explain does not seem to have been distributed in Beijing, where the publishing house is registered, but which appeared in bookshops in peripheral parts of China, such as the provincial capital Kunming in Yunnan, on the Burmese border – was 10,000 copies. These days it is possible to buy the book in all Chinese online bookshops where it is described as a ‘bestseller’ – which is probably an exaggeration.<sup>269</sup>

There is probably some well-grounded scepticism among those who are not able to read Chinese as to the extent to which books published in China today on the ‘suppression of counterrevolution’ actually have any ‘meat on their bones’. The answer is that they often contain more than one would imagine. The accounts contained in Chinese provincial, city and local histories of how the representatives of the new regime consolidated their power at a local level after 1949 are very informative. For example, the text published in three parts on Chinese website Tianya by signature Yi Ting, *The Suppression of the Counterrevolution in Guangdong in the 1950s* contains details of the following kind: ‘The authorities in Lianping County killed two people without having asked for instructions and, without a care for how this might affect public opinion, allowed the masses to cut them into pieces and take the meat home.’ The same source cites information on the number of people executed in various parts of the province of Guangdong, as well as extracts from policy

---

<sup>265</sup> Yang 2005.

<sup>266</sup> Gong’an shi zhishi wenda 1994.

<sup>267</sup> Zhongguo renmin gong’an shigao 1997.

---

<sup>268</sup> Jianguo chuqide zhenya fangeming yundong 1992.

<sup>269</sup> Bai 2006.

documents that either ordered a harder line or demanded 'restraint' at different points in time.

On the controversial issue of how many of the 'suppressed' were executed, the figures vary, as has been mentioned. The *sources* on which researchers have long based their 'guesstimates' differ markedly, which perhaps is no great surprise: some are generally more reliable than others, while one researcher's *reliability criteria* may differ entirely from another's (for reasons that can often be traced back to more or less openly expressed political convictions, or in some American cases even religious convictions). In my own research I have chosen to *take as a starting point* and to make critical use of what I would claim are the best macrostatistics available (based on knowledge of the context of the time in which they were compiled, including the Chinese administrative establishment and the statistical reporting systems), namely the report presented to a Central Committee Plenum on 6 February 1954 by Liu Shaoqi, then the second-in-command of the CCP. In this document, which was classified as confidential for almost three decades, Liu had the following to say:

Of the bandits, local tyrants, enemy agents, core members of reactionary political parties and organisations, and leaders of secret reactionary societies that had engaged in counterrevolutionary activities, we killed 710,000 and put 1,290,000 in prison. Of the latter, 450,000 were later released after having served their sentences in full; 840,000 remain under lock and key. Almost 1,230,000 were subjected to checks and surveillance, which have already ceased for 590,000 of these. A total of 640,000 continue to be subjected to checks and surveillance measures.<sup>270</sup>

It is worth noting in the case of a source such as this, that, in contrast with the estimates made in other contexts (such as Rummel, mentioned above), the estimates here do not only consist of figures referring to the alleged numbers executed, imprisoned, and 'subjected to surveillance'. They also indicate, in the latter two cases, how many people were released after a certain period, or who are no longer under surveillance.

The aforementioned Chinese historian Yang Kuisong also uses and bases his research on figures that largely coincide with Liu Shaoqi's. He writes as follows:

How many people in total were 'killed', 'imprisoned' or 'objects for surveillance by the masses' during the 'suppression of counterrevolution' as a whole? Later, Mao stated that 700,000 had been killed, 1,200,000 imprisoned and 1,200,000 subjected to surveillance. This statement from Mao was based on information he had been given in a report by Xu Zirong, Vice Minister for Public Security, in January 1954. In this report, Xu stated that since the beginning of the 'suppression of counterrevolution', a total of 2,620,000 people had been arrested, of whom 712,000 counterrevolutionary elements had been killed, 1,290,000 had been imprisoned, and 1,200,000 had at some point been under surveillance. Of those who had been arrested, 380,000 were released after re-education, because of the less serious nature of their crimes.<sup>271</sup>

What both this quote from Yang and the earlier quote from the Liu Shaoqi report contain are death tolls that are lower than the 'guesstimates' cited in some non-Chinese literature. It can be seen that this is *not* CCP propaganda aimed at misleading the public and belittling the extent of the 'suppression' because these statistics were confidential until recently, and had not previously been quoted in a public setting. At the same time, however, there is no less reason to believe that the figures had to be 'adjusted upwards' and that the politicians and decision makers who based their policies on them in the 1950s did so with the help of heuristic formulae based on their familiarity with the distortion that was inherent to the system.<sup>272</sup> It should be noted here that the best Chinese historians now view colleagues as naïve who accept the state-issued statistics and do not use them as the basis of a more sophisticated line of reasoning on why a given figure for a specific period of time may need to be multiplied by a factor of x.

One might ask why more has not been written on the CCP's 'suppression of counterrevolution' to date. When

---

<sup>270</sup> Quoted from Liu's rapport as cited in Zhonggong zhongyong zuzhibu bangongting 1980, p 49.

<sup>271</sup> Yang 2007.

<sup>272</sup> Interview with economic historian whose father was a member of the CCP's Politburo Standing Committee during Mao's time, Beijing November 2007.



all is said and done, this is a traumatic and unusually bloody chapter in the history of the People's Republic of China. Almost two years ago, Yang Kuisong speculated on how this was possible, and presented what he believes to be two plausible reasons. Despite the fact that this was a bloody campaign on a colossal scale that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, he states that:

so far, we have not yet seen any great number of major in-depth academic studies on this campaign. The reasons for this clearly have to do with the limited extent to which relevant archives have been made accessible, however the main reason may be that among the political campaigns that followed the founding of the People's Republic, the role of the campaign to suppress counterrevolution has never been much debated among researchers on the Chinese mainland.<sup>273</sup>

It is difficult to explain why for a long time researchers outside the People's Republic did not show any great interest for the 'suppression' and its history. However, in recent years it has been possible to discern a burgeoning interest among younger historians. From a comparative perspective on crimes against humanity, after all, an exploration does seem called for of the many differences between the domestic practice of the CCP between 1949 and 1953, and the regime consolidations attempted by non-communist actors on the *international* political stage today, following their violent 'liberations' of this or that part of the world.

### **The hunt for 'internal enemies' and 'rightists' (1954-1958)**

The end of the regime consolidation period marked the beginning of the first five-year plan of the People's Republic of China (1953-1957). Taking the experience of its Soviet 'big brother' as a model, the CCP set out to 'build socialism'. There was much speculation in Beijing surrounding how the western world would react to this. On 14 June 1954, Mao guessed that they would claim that China had chosen 'a clear and definite but very bad path, a wrong path, and that socialism and people's democracy are blunders'. He also made the assumption that there were many watching the Chinese experiment with great suspicion: What they would like best would be for us to conjure up socialism overnight and make a

mess of everything. That would make them really happy.'

Historical research on this period emphasises how the raw didactic violence (in the form of mass executions etc), which had been an important part of regime consolidation, began to wind down. One source often utilised by non-Chinese researchers in this context is a famed declaration made by Mao on 27 February 1957, where he claimed: 'Last year we more or less stopped killing people: only a small number of people were killed... In the last four, five years we have only killed a few tens of thousands, but last year the killing more or less came to an end'.<sup>274</sup> Although it would be wrong to claim that there is not even a shred of statistical truth in Mao's statement, neither is it possible to draw a conclusion that a thorough, fundamental change took place. In the current Chinese literature on the 1950s, which appears as a peaceful period in the collective memory, there is a clear tendency to romanticisation and flattering descriptions. It is sometimes even possible to glimpse this tendency in non-Chinese historical accounts. However, in this society where veritable waves of official executions became a thing of the past for a few years, there remained the constant presence of an undertone of terror. The CCP's leaders expressed the threat again and again: 'Even when all existing counterrevolutionaries have been uncovered, new ones may appear. If we lower our guard, we will be thoroughly deceived and suffer greatly for it'.

Outside China, there has been much research and writing on the subject of how Mao's speech on 27 February 1957 on the importance of not 'lowering our guard' manifested itself at the highest decision-making level of the CCP.<sup>275</sup> Researchers have only managed to create a clear picture of what happened behind the scenes in slightly wider circles, while the outward image suggested that everything was peaceful and 'only a small number of people were killed', in recent years. For three years in the mid-1950s, there was a secret, systematic purge of so-called 'internal enemies' throughout the government, communist party and the Chinese armed forces. We know now that the number of people who found themselves under scrutiny within the framework

---

<sup>273</sup> Yang 2007.

<sup>274</sup> Quoted from Schoenhals 1986b, p 104.

<sup>275</sup> MacFarquhar & Fairbank 1987, MacFarquhar 1974, Teiwes 1993, Li 1994 and MacFarquhar, Cheek & Wu 1989.

of this purge (about which hardly a word was mentioned in the Chinese press at the time) totalled over 18 million. According to official information that is no longer subject to confidentiality, over 100,000 'counterrevolutionary elements and other bad elements' were found, as well as over 65,000 'historical counterrevolutionaries' and ordinary criminals. Research surrounding the politics and practice of the Mao era still has not afforded these 'internal purges of counterrevolutionaries' (*sufan*) the attention they deserve, not by a long shot. Julia Strauss, political scientist and editor of well-reputed research forum *The China Quarterly*, is one of the non-Chinese researchers writing on this subject on the basis of Chinese archive material. However, she makes the mistake of extrapolating weak empirical evidence that actually only describes what happened to take place locally, in this case within the commercial sector of a few districts of Shanghai, to form provincial and even national trends.<sup>276</sup>

In the context of a research review such as this, the 'internal purges' are important for reasons other than the number of victims they claimed. There is also the fact that it was during this period, the mid-1950s, that many of the repressive methods and practices that were to become the norm during the Cultural Revolution were 'refined to perfection'. These methods included the creation of *zhuan'an zu*, ad hoc extrajudicial groups that had the right/power to investigate cases and impose sentences in the name of the CCP (not the state), without having to take any legislation or other judicial praxis into consideration.<sup>277</sup> Torture was indeed forbidden, but in the context of these groups it was practiced alarmingly often with the aim of forcing confessions. The Chinese armed forces' internal debriefing during the final phase of the 'purges' raised this problem again and again, but what, if anything, was done to solve it is not clear from a first reading of the relevant primary sources. There is much to be done here for non-Chinese researchers in particular: it has certainly been possible to build up a picture of the part played by *zhuan'an zu* during the Cultural Revolution, but the entire prehistory of this Maoist inquisition remains more or less unexplored.

One of the few major representative cases from this period, which has become well known and has been written about both in and outside China, concerns the progressive author and writer Hu Feng. Before the founding of the People's Republic he had been an agent or 'inoffizieller Mitarbeiter' of the CCP on several occasions, but in 1955 became the victim of a broad defamation campaign in the press and was eventually imprisoned.<sup>278</sup> In typical fashion, the government authorities investigated almost 2100 people with whom he had had dealings or contact over the course of his long career, and in the end 92 of these were formally detained and a further 135 were subjected to 'administrative' measures such as dismissal from their jobs or extended periods of house arrest.<sup>279</sup> The Central Committee of the CCP issued formal communications, first in 1980 and then again in 1988, in which all those who had been affected or been victims of this process (known as 'Hu Feng elements'), were rehabilitated. Despite the fact that it was so far back in the past, the case received official attention in the USA in 1991, and a special issue of a translation journal published by the CIA-affiliated *Joint Publication Research Service* was dedicated to the case.<sup>280</sup>

After the Hu Feng case in 1955, while the secret police continued their secret hunt for the 'internal enemy', Mao Zedong personally launched a series of policies that appeared to promote a more liberal and 'tolerant' line, primarily among China's intellectual elite. In artistic and literary circles there was talk of 'letting a hundred flowers bloom' and in education and science Mao said he wanted to see 'a hundred schools of thought contend'. Frightened as they were by all they had witnessed since 1949, there were only a few at first who dared to take Mao's fine words seriously. When they finally did so and began to make their critical voices heard in public, the repressive state apparatus hit back with all its might. Beginning in June 1957, the CCP more or less systematically to classify both loyal critics and genuine dissidents among China's intellectuals as 'bourgeois rightists'.

According to the earliest available source, an internal report in the *Public Security Work Bulletin* published by

---

<sup>276</sup> Strauss 2006.

<sup>277</sup> Schoenhals 1996a and Schoenhals 1996b.

<sup>278</sup> Li 1989. See also Mei 1989.

<sup>279</sup> Sun 2001.

<sup>280</sup> Reflections on Hu Feng Counterrevolutionary Case 1991.

the Ministry for Public Security on 20 September 1959, the total number of victims of the anti-rightist campaign in China reached a total of 463,812. However, this figure does not tally with the official statistics of ca 550,000. The discrepancy is probably a result of the fact that 'rightists' in the armed forces were not included in the first figure. Since 1979 in China, a figure has been released of 160,000 additional victims of the anti-rightist campaign. These were people who were classed as 'moderate right-wing elements' (*zhongyou fenzi*) or simply 'anti-socialist elements' as well as close relatives of one or other kind of 'element'.<sup>281</sup>

The anti-rightist campaign is probably the second most-discussed political 'campaign' in the history of the People's Republic of China, second only to the Cultural Revolution. The most extensive literature (in terms of scope and size of editions) about it and its victims is undoubtedly published in China. Memoirs, biographies, correspondence and diaries are published, as well as occasional unusual material, such as an entire 'dossier' documenting one particular case. At the same time, it is quite clear to the reader that much of what is published in printed form has been censored or self-censored. Self-censorship is not as common in literature published (in Chinese) in other countries and in Hong Kong/Taiwan. The *Laogai Research Foundation* in the USA publishes the *Black Books*, a series of memoirs and recollections in Chinese, written by former prisoners and political prisoners (20 titles have been published since 2001).<sup>282</sup> The books, with titles like *China's Bastille*, *Fire Under the Snow: Testimony of a Tibetan Prisoner*, *My Fall from Leningrad University to Xinzhao Prison*, and *Tortured Souls: Stories of Lost Happiness* are without doubt banned in China, and would be confiscated by customs if they were discovered, not primarily because of the content (which is not always fundamentally different from the content of books that can be found in China) but because the publisher and founder of the *Laogai Research Foundation*, Harry Wu, has been *persona non grata* for over ten years and is accused of subversive activities.

The victims of the anti-rightist campaign were not sentenced to death. In the late 1950s, they filled many

of the camps that existed at the time for 'reform through labour' (*laogai*, the name of a formal sentence) or 're-education through labour' (*laojiao*, known as an 'administrative measure') Unfortunately, academic research on these camps and their history is limited.<sup>283</sup>

According to volume 71/1959 of the ministerial *Public Security Work Bulletin*, the number of 'criminals in custody' (*zaiyafan*) in China totalled 2,011,800 on 1 October 1959. If we compare this statistic with the total population of the country (which according to the Ministry of Public Security was ca 650 million, including children) we find that no less than 310 of every 100,000 Chinese citizens were in custody. In addition, in the case of China, if the comparison is to be at all meaningful, it is important to take into account the fact that as well as the number of 'criminals in custody' (which covered all those who had been sentenced to 'reform through labour') at this time there was also a significant number of people who were subject to 're-education through labour', usually for a period between two and three years. According to volume 1/1960 of the *Public Security Work Bulletin*, at the end of 1959 over 400,000 people were subject to 're-education through labour'. Another category of people who were partly deprived of freedom where all those who, after completing their sentences in camps, were immediately 'employed' in the same camps. In this way they did have a safe source of income, but only under conditions that could not be compared to those of a free worker – usually continued restrictions on domestic travel and relocation. At the end of 1959, a total of 450,000 people were in this situation. If we add these three categories together, we find that in reality, a total of 2,861,800 people, or 440 out of every 100,000 Chinese citizens, were deprived of their freedom. The equivalent figures for Sweden and the USA today are 80 out of 100,000 and 751 out of 100,000 respectively.<sup>284</sup>

---

<sup>281</sup> Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu bangongting 1985, pp 641–42 and 648–49.

<sup>282</sup> There is a list of titles with short descriptions in English at [www.laogai.org](http://www.laogai.org)

---

<sup>283</sup> Among the most interesting publications of recent years is the growing 'camp literature' in the form of *fictional* portrayals written by former prisoners. See Williams & Wu 2004 and Williams & Wu 2006. See also Mühlhahn 2004.

<sup>284</sup> Adam Liptak, 'Inmate Count in US Dwarfs other Nations', *New York Times*, 23 April 2008.

## The 'Great Leap Forward' (1958-1961)

In the spring of 1958 the CCP, with Mao as the driving force, initiated the Great Leap Forward, a ruthless attempt to speed up the process of what had until then been called 'building socialism' but what now became known as realising communism 'within the near future'. Extreme measures were implemented in all areas, from politics and legislation to economic planning, from agriculture to infrastructure and industry, and from education to research and development.<sup>285</sup> If the Soviet Union could 'catch up with the USA' in the next fifteen years, as Nikita Khrushchev asserted when Mao met him in Moscow in November 1957, then China was not to be outdone. Soon, the most well-known slogan of the Great Leap Forward was to 'catch up with and surpass Great Britain in fifteen years!' The science fiction film *Fantasia on the Shisanling Reservoir* (in which Mao Zedong plays himself), shot during a few hectic weeks in the summer of 1958, takes viewers twenty years forward in time and allows them to experience the communist dream once it has become reality: apples, pears, bananas and grapes all grow on the same tree; a professor flies through the air to a conference using a personal 'strap-on helicopter' that folds up and fits into his backpack; party members communicate with each other using videophones that are so small and light that they are portable; the island of Taiwan has been liberated for ten years... and the entire leadership of the CCP, with Mao at its head, is in fine communist fettle and not a day older!

The result of the arrogance of the Great Leap Forward was an unprecedented economic and social catastrophe, and more than anything else, it was a human tragedy in the form of the worst famine in the history of China. The course of events at the highest level of the communist party was interpreted and described in the 1980s and 1990s by non-Chinese political scientists with access to what had been written by official Chinese historians, limited (but informative) documentation from the Great Leap Forward, and leaked collections of Mao Zedong's speeches as compiled during the Cultural Revolution. The best products of the international research of this period, which for the sake of simplicity can be said to belong to the 'Pekingological school',

---

<sup>285</sup> See Schoenhals 1987.

include *The Origins of the Great Leap Forward* by French researcher Jean-Luc Domenach; the second and third parts of the trilogy *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution* by Scottish scholar Roderick MacFarquhar; Australian Frederick C. Teiwes' *Politics and Purges in China: Rectification and the Decline of Party Norms* (revised edition); *China's Road to Disaster: Mao, Central Politicians and Provincial Leaders in the Unfolding of the Great Leap Forward* by Teiwes and Taiwanese researcher Warren Sun; American David Bachman's *Bureaucracy, Economy and Leadership in China: The Institutional Origins of the Great Leap Forward*; and Canadian Alfred L. Chan's *Mao's Crusade: Politics and Policy Implementation in China's Great Leap Forward*.<sup>286</sup>

At the time when several of these works were written, there was still no access outside China to several important parts of documentation that now make it possible to connect individual members of the upper echelons of the CCP to very specific events during the Great Leap Forward and to policy decisions that had catastrophic results at a grassroots level. Since the mid-1990s, the situation for researchers has improved markedly in this sense, primarily as a result of the publication of volumes 7-9 of *Mao Zedong's Manuscripts since the Founding of the People's Republic of China*, 2000 pages edited by the central documentation unit of the CCP. These publications are supposedly meant 'for official use only', but they are widely available in Chinese bookshops and second-hand bookshops.<sup>287</sup> They supplement the material already available to Chinese and non-Chinese researchers alike, the standard collection of Central Committee documents from the Great Leap Forward (not commercially distributed but no longer confidential), volumes 22-24 (over 2000 pages) of *Reference material for Teaching the History of the CCP*, compiled by the Chinese National Military Academy.<sup>288</sup> In November 1998, the CCP's Central Party History Office announced a very ambitious national documentation project, dealing exclusively and specifically with the Great Leap Forward. The project is to involve all provincial archives

---

<sup>286</sup> Domenach 1995, MacFarquhar 1983, Teiwes 1993, Teiwes & Sun 1998, Bachman 1991 and Chan 2000.

<sup>287</sup> Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi 1992-1996.

<sup>288</sup> Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun guofang daxue dangshi dangjian zhenggong jiaoyanshi 1986. For a critical introduction to this important anthology, see Sun 1992.

and city archives in China, with coordination provided by a central group in Beijing, and the idea is that the project will result in a multivolume work of 15,000 pages, using archive material from all over the country to document all aspects of the Great Leap. One of the volumes already published (in a limited edition of 1000 copies, 'for official use only') documents the Great Leap Forward in Yunnan province in text, figures and images.<sup>289</sup> It contains a study of the famine in Yunnan, which began unusually early in autumn 1958, that seems to be substantiated by reliable statistics.<sup>290</sup> Enquiries made at the bookshop linked to the CCP's central documentation unit in Beijing in 2007 indicated that work on the other volumes in the collection is moving extremely slowly (the volume for the Fujian province was available for purchase but was a disappointment). The reason given for this was a general lack of funding.

Since the mid-1990s, a small group of Chinese researchers carrying out doctoral studies in modern history under the supervision of Professor Jin Chunming (Central Party School), Professor Cong Jin and the late Professor Wang Nianyi (Chinese Military Academy) have played a central part in the work to document the place of the Great Leap Forward in political history after 1949. Ten or fifteen years earlier, following the end of the Cultural Revolution, these older mentors had been charged with the task of writing the 'official history' of the post-Maoist CCP and People's Republic, and as a result they had access to central party and state archives on uniquely generous conditions over a long period. Later, as research supervisors, they exercised positive influence in the sense that they encouraged critical thinking (which, in the current political climate, as then, should not be confused with critical writing). One of them has a habit of pointing out how little of the official writing of history would 'survive' if all of the Chinese archives were *really* opened up to the extent that the Russian archives were opened up after the fall of the Soviet Union: at best, he warns his own students and non-Chinese colleagues, 10 percent of the history might *not* need to be rewritten entirely.

Several of the Chinese historians of the Great Leap Forward, who learned the basics of their craft after the Cultural Revolution, spent short or longer periods at research institutes in the USA in the 1990s, such as the *Fairbank Center for East Asian Research* at Harvard University, and the *Cold War International History Project* at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington DC. Many of them now have well-developed academic links with researchers in Europe, Japan, Australia and North America. It is possible to get a good overview of who they are and what they write about through the website *coldwarchina.com*, where a search for 'Great Leap Forward' (in Chinese) yields over 260 hits under titles such as 'Demographic changes caused by the Great Leap Forward', 'Study of the Great Leap Forward from a quantitative perspective: on 'natural' and 'human' factors and their relation to the three catastrophic years' and 'The expansion of the government and the Great Leap Forward campaign'.<sup>291</sup>

There is a transnational network studying the Great Leap Forward, including researchers at state research institutes and universities in China as well as academics working outside China, which has its 'virtual centre' in Vienna. One of the central figures in this network is the productive research assistant Felix Wemheuer, author of *Großer Sprung nach vorne" (1958–1961): Von der kommunistischen Offensive in die Hungersnot und Ländliche Erinnerungen und staatliche Vergangenheitsbewältigung der "Großen Sprung"-Hungersnot in der chinesischen Provinz Henan*.<sup>292</sup> Along with an American colleague, Kimberley Manning, Wemheuer is editing an anthology (the result of the conference in Vienna in 2006) under the working title of *Perspectives on the Great Leap Forward and Great Famine* which is expected to be published in 2008. Interesting contributions to the anthology include Jeremy Brown's 'Great Leap City: Surviving the Famine in Tianjin', Gao Hua's 'So-called 'Methods to Increase Food' and Food Substitutes During the Great Famine', Qiao Peihua's 'Origins of the Xinyang Incident' and Ralph Thaxton's

---

<sup>289</sup> Zhonggong Yunnan shengwei dangshi yanjiushi & Yunnan sheng dang'anguan 2004.

<sup>290</sup> Zhonggong Yunnan shengwei dangshi yanjiushi & Yunnan sheng dang'anguan 2004, pp 305–328.

---

<sup>291</sup> <http://www.google.com-/custom?q=%E5%A4%A7%E8%B7%83%E8%BF%9B&hl=zh-CN&cof=&domains=www.coldwarchina.com&sitesearch=www.coldwarchina.com&oe=GB2312&start=0&sa=N>

<sup>292</sup> Wemheuer 2004 and Wemheuer 2007.

'How China's Great Leap Forward Famine Ended: Implications for State Legitimacy'.

Without a doubt, the most dramatic part of the Great Leap Forward was the famine of almost incomprehensible proportions and the subsequent mass starvation that hit large parts of China between 1959 and 1961.<sup>293</sup> In recent years, many demographers, historians and political scientists have conducted research on this, primarily looking for answers to questions concerning its precise scope (i.e. the number of victims in different parts of the country during different periods) and the extent to which the responsibility for the large number of deaths in some provinces should be attributed to political or natural factors.<sup>294</sup>

There is still no official figure sanctioned by the CCP for the total number of 'people who died an unnatural death' (*fei zhengchang siwang* – the Chinese expression that could be translated more idiomatically in this context to 'victims') in China between 1959 and 1961 – in other words, the number of victims of the famine during/following the Great Leap Forward. Various sources at various levels have given different figures over the years. In 2000 the former secretary to the father of the Red Army (Zhu De) and vice-director of the CCP Central Party History Office, Liao Gailong, claimed that there may have been as many as 'almost 40 million' victims. In a television interview in 2004, a secretary to the former chairman of the Chinese National People's Congress, Wan Li, said that '30 million people starved to death during the three difficult years'. In an encyclopaedical work called *The Population of Contemporary China*, published in 1988 on the initiative of the CCP's Central Propaganda Department, it is suggested that the number of 'people who died an unnatural death during the three difficult years' was somewhere between 20 and 30 million.<sup>295</sup>

Two Chinese researchers presented a domestic research review of what has been written inside and outside

China on the famine and the number of people who starved to death, at the Seventh Annual Academic Conference on the History of the Nation in November 2007, in the city of Yan'an. The authors included and critically assessed a large number of independent figures, based on varying methodological and empirical grounds. In the context, some figures were deemed entirely unreliable, such as those cited by 'the extremely influential web-based researcher Chen Bihong, who claims that "the number of people who died an unnatural death could not have been 30 million, or 20 million, or 10 million, or even one million..."' and 'another researcher on the internet, Zhang Zhihong, who claims "the idea that 30 million could have starved to death during the Great Leap Forward is pure fabrication"'. It is interesting to note that here, the great famine of 1959-1961, just like the Holocaust in Europe, has given rise to a kind of 'discourse of denial'. However, this refusal to accept a tragic truth has no legitimacy in the Chinese research community, and it is not given any room in any media other than the internet. The Chinese research review came to the conclusion that there was no consensus on the number of victims, but that a majority of researchers in and outside China estimate that the probable total must have been between 20 and 30 million people.<sup>296</sup>

On the question of who carries the main responsibility, few claim that it was anyone other than Mao Zedong. The differences between the various descriptions in this context are mostly a result of how each author interprets Mao's personality: Was he an evil, oriental despot who literally enjoyed killing his own people? Or was he a ruthless politician who, in this case, was aware that his policies had failed and had had consequences that he could not, or did not think he had the means to, prevent? The latter case refers to the fact that even at the height of the famine, the construction of a Chinese atomic bomb was still a high priority, despite the fact that resources could have been taken from this project to alleviate the famine – which did not happen. Political scientist Thomas P. Bernstein at Columbia University is one of many representatives of a kind of academic 'mainstream' outside China that claims that 'not until spring 1960 did Mao again express concern about

---

<sup>293</sup> Cf Peng 1987 and Ashton, Hill, Piazza & Zeitz 1984.

<sup>294</sup> There is an excellent website with many good papers on the famine (most in Chinese, some with abstracts in English) in downloadable format administered by the Universities Service Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Cf [http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/wk\\_wzdetails.asp?id=1854](http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/wk_wzdetails.asp?id=1854)

<sup>295</sup> Li & Shang 2007.

---

<sup>296</sup> Li & Shang 2007. Cf also <http://www.jessedi.com/archiver/tid-447229.html>

abnormal deaths and other abuses, but he failed to apply the pressure needed to stop them'.<sup>297</sup> One account that places less blame directly on Mao as a person, and more on the political 'system' he helped shape, is the alternative academic 'mainstream' that is expressed, for example, in the work of Judith Shapiro, lecturer in environmental politics at American University in Washington DC. She writes: 'urgency to achieve utopian socialism led to widespread deforestation as trees were cut to fuel 'backyard furnaces.' Fanciful agricultural schemes and competitions to produce impossible yields sapped farmers' energy, impoverished the land's productivity, and contributed to the greatest human-made famine in history.'<sup>298</sup>

R. J. Rummel is one of those who claim to have identified an extreme intentionality in Mao, and who insists that even the mass starvation was in some way 'intentional'. He writes: 'Mao's policies caused the famine. He knew about it from the beginning. He didn't care! Literally. Indeed, he wanted to take even more food from the mouths of his starving people in order to increase his export of food. It was all he had to export and he was after power... Those in the top circle of the CCP tried to alleviate the famine. They were arrested, some tortured, some executed or allowed to die horribly... So, the famine was intentional'.<sup>299</sup> It could, quite rightly, be claimed that the opinions that Rummel presents here (they are hardly an example of a serious and empirically-based writing of history) do not deserve to be mentioned in a research review, but they are still perhaps worth bringing up on the basis of the interest in him in the blogosphere.

A major research project is currently being undertaken in China on the Great Leap Forward, funded by the domestic equivalent of the Swedish Research Council and bringing together demographers, historians and archivists from the national meteorological service, the revelations of which could have delicate repercussions on the communist party in terms of the question of responsibility. In the archives of the meteorological service at a provincial level, precise daily information has

been found on the local climate, over the entire relevant period. With the help of this information, the intention is now, once and for all, to bring clarity to the question of how much of the blame for the famine can be placed on 'nature' and how much *must* be placed on human factors – primarily of a political and administrative nature. I have had several opportunities to speak to the researchers leading this project, and in an early conversation they jokingly said that if their findings allow the CCP to 'save face' then a huge volume with a large amount of data will be published openly, but if the findings show the party in a bad light, then the project will only publish a thin, non-committal report and most of the results will be classified as confidential and only distributed 'for official use'. Some kind of official reporting process will probably take place during 2008, but it is not yet clear what this will show.

Thus far I have focused on elite politics and the macro level. In terms of the micro level, and research that seeks to clarify how the Great Leap Forward affected ordinary people, it is possible to identify three main schools of thought, albeit somewhat simplified. The first is mainly based on interviews with survivors or their descendants. This current is primarily made up of investigative journalists, Chinese and non-Chinese. One result of journalistic efforts that has received some attention outside China (and in China been criticised as poorly substantiated and 'sensationalist') is *Hungry Ghosts* by Jasper Becker.<sup>300</sup> In the absence of a better description of a terrible tragedy, this book can only be warmly recommended to all those trying to understand the reality behind the victim statistics of the Great Leap Forward. In the words of the author's own website:

This is the first book to unravel the story behind the statistics. Based on hundreds of interviews and unpublished documents, it describes how Mao Zedong created a man-made famine throughout China... Through graphic eyewitness accounts, the author describes a catalogue of terror, cannibalism, slavery, torture and imprisonment that took place on a massive scale during the great famine in which 10 million people were arrested and sent to death camps while a further 10 million fled their homes.<sup>301</sup>

---

<sup>297</sup> Bernstein 1983, Bernstein 1984 and Bernstein 2006.

<sup>298</sup> Shapiro 2001.

<sup>299</sup> Rummel's blog  
<http://freedomspace.blogspot.com/2005/11/reevaluating-chinas-democide-to-be.html>

---

<sup>300</sup> Becker 1996.

<sup>301</sup> [http://www.jasperbecker.com/jb\\_hungryghosts.htm](http://www.jasperbecker.com/jb_hungryghosts.htm)

Another current of thought, limited to China, is a bi-product of the officially sanctioned project, ongoing since the 1980s, to compile large encyclopaedic 'local gazetteers' (*difang zhi*) in each of China's 2000 counties.<sup>302</sup> This is a Chinese way of writing history, the form of which has been a living tradition since the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD): an eclectic gathering of 'all kinds of information' on what has taken place in a village, a county or a city, and compiling it in book format, often under the direct supervision of representatives of the local political, economic and cultural elite: mandarins one century ago, communist party cadres today. In the local gazetteers published today (in which the emphasis is on everything that has happened since 1949) there is always a section that documents what happened during and after the Great Leap Forward. Researchers who have made use of this source of information on the conditions in some of the parts of China that were worst hit by the famine include members of the abovementioned network that has its 'virtual centre' in Vienna.

A third and final current of thought is the conventional research that focuses on systematically locating, gaining access to and finally interpreting various kinds of archive material. Until the early 1990s this was extremely difficult for foreign researchers who were forced to put up with randomly leaked documents from obscure sources from 1967-1968 (when the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution conducted raids on local archives and published whatever they found that documented politicians' alleged 'crimes', including during the Great Leap Forward). However, the little it was possible to find out suggested that when more extensive documentation one day became accessible, there would be a terrible reality to face, as is illustrated by this confidential quote from a speech by a leading politician in the early 1960s:

Some cadres are hounding the common people to death. They exploit them, and deprive them of every single possession they have. They treat them the way Tibetan slave owners treat their slaves, only they don't actually flay them. When they don't beat the masses, they curse them. They're even worse than the Japanese. How come some cadres dare to act this way? It's because they have a

perfect excuse, the name of which is the practice of "communism".<sup>303</sup>

In later years, primary sources of the kind that foreign researchers lacked in the 1990s have become accessible, and this has allowed a veritable 'leap' for research on the Great Leap Forward for historians outside China. Perhaps the most important of these is a complete set of the confidential daily news bulletins *Internal Reference* (for the years from 1949 to 1964) owned by the Universities Service Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. These reports, which were long classified as state secrets, on the famine during its worst months in 1960, leave little to the imagination. One example of information available from this source is the report on cannibalism that is quoted in Swedish in the fact booklet published by the Living History Forum. Members of the abovementioned network in Vienna have also made systematic use of *Internal Reference* with the aim of clarifying the events of the Great Leap Forward (partly taking up the question of how well-informed the decision-makers in Beijing were of the famine in distant parts of the country).

Another similar internal source, in some ways even more politically sensitive, is constituted by the reports produced by the Chinese security services and quoted by the Ministry of Public Security in the *Public Security Work Bulletin*. A complete set of these for the years between 1959 and 1962 was recently sold by a state second-hand bookshop in Beijing. Sooner or later, when the research community begins to incorporate the contents of the *Work Bulletin* into its writing of history, what has been said about how the archives will force 90 percent of the history of this period to be rewritten may well prove to be correct. Here is a quote from volume 14/1962:

During the years from 1958 to 1961 (primarily the first three years), [the authorities in the province of] Qinghai arrested a total of over 62,000 people. [In addition to this] the number who were subjected to treatment similar to arrest in the form of capture, disciplining, detention, re-education through physical labour or similar was over 46,000, which represents a total of more than 108,000 people. This is equivalent to 5.1

---

<sup>302</sup> Cf Thøgersen & Clausen 1992.

---

<sup>303</sup> Yang Xianzhen, then principal of the CCP Central Party College, cited in Schoenhals 1992, p 604.



percent of the total population (2.1 million) of the province. If we add to this total over 16,000 who, during the same period, were shot to death in suppression of uprisings, and the 27,000 who were subjected to control measures, struggle meetings, or forced into supervised physical labour, it appears that during a four-year period in the province as a whole, over 151,000 people were attacked, which is equivalent to 7.2 percent of the population. This figure does *not* include the people who were subjected to capture, disciplining or re-education through physical labour as organised by People's Communes and production brigades. The number of those arrested who died while detained in facilities administrated by prefectures or counties amounts to 30,000, which is equivalent to 1.4 percent of the total population of the province. (In addition, a further 49,000 people died in the brigades run by the provincial authorities for re-education through labour.) The most serious situation was in the autonomous Tibetan prefecture of Tushu, where the number arrested was equivalent to 12 percent of the total population, and those who died represented 45 percent of those arrested. Qumalai county was only home to 4000 people, and 1500 of these were arrested. After these arrests, 60 percent of those arrested then died.

It should be emphasised that, even in the context of the internal reporting of the security services, what is described here is an extreme case. In other parts of China the situation was better, in many cases incomparably better. The ministerial level in Beijing saw what had happened in Qinghai as something so serious that they were close to calling it a crime against humanity: 'Never before in the history of public security work,' it is underlined in this report, 'have mistakes of this kind, of a criminal nature, been committed.'

### **'The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' (1966-1976)**

The period in the history of the People's Republic of China that has received the most attention from researchers, both inside and outside the country, is the decade that is usually called the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution', or simply the Cultural

Revolution.<sup>304</sup> The Soviet Union also had a *kulturnaya revolyutsiya* around 1928-1931, but with a narrower focus and content, mostly limited to attacks on supposed 'bourgeois' phenomena within the domestic cultural arena. The Soviet version did not leave much of a trace in comparison to the massive impact of Mao Zedong's brutal 'mother of all revolutions' on all areas – not only or even primarily cultural – on a local and global level. To attempt to describe and understand not only *what* happened after the summer of 1966, when Mao challenged the youth of China with the words 'to rebel is justified!' thus plunging the CCP and the entire People's Republic of China into crisis, but also *why* it happened, is difficult. Just as significant as ideological factors in this context, the historian must also impute political, social, military, economic, cultural, legal and demographic factors, as well as idiosyncratic psychological factors such as Mao Zedong's increasingly paranoid disposition. The role of the leader of the CCP was critical, but much of the responsibility for the crimes that were committed in the name of the Cultural Revolution also falls on other people, including the political leaders who were later to become victims of the Cultural Revolution (including the party's second-in-command, Liu Shaoqi, in 1969) but who supported it fully in its early stages.

Serious, empirically-based *Chinese* research on the Cultural Revolution did not get underway until the early 1980s. In 1966, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai said that the highest criterion of truth in the Cultural Revolution was Mao Zedong Thought: until Mao's death this essentially meant that if there was any conflict between something said or thought by the Great Helmsman and what was demonstrable in reality, it was reality that was in the wrong.<sup>305</sup> The underground *samizdat* independent analyses of the Cultural Revolution that circulated in relatively limited number in China during this period were seen by the authorities as heretical and subversive and their authors were thrown in jail without exception while Mao Zedong was alive, but were later rehabilitated and released (if they were still alive) in the

---

<sup>304</sup> The best (in the sense that it is the most extensive) bibliography of texts *about* (as opposed to *from*) the Chinese Cultural Revolution in all languages is Song & Sun 1998.

<sup>305</sup> Cf Zhou Enlai, 'Letter to Capital University Red Guard Revolutionary Rebel HQ', i Schoenhals 1996c, p 27.

cases that have become famous, several years after his death.<sup>306</sup>

Beyond the borders of the People's Republic of China, a number of academic studies of the Cultural Revolution were published in the early 1970s, which are still worth reading.<sup>307</sup> This early literature was primarily in the realms of political science or sociology, but in some cases the authors were also diplomats or intelligence analysts writing under pseudonyms. No critical studies of the Cultural Revolution worth mentioning were written in Sweden during this period; as late as 1977, Swedish students returning from China were met with scepticism on opinion pages of the media when they expressed criticism of the Cultural Revolution on the basis of their own experiences during one or several years of study in the country.

A pioneering anthology partly based on archive material, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*, published in 2006 with contributions mostly from young American historians, begins with a review of the research carried out during the years Mao Zedong was still alive and the first period after his death in 1976. Academic research outside China at this time was:

notable for its emphasis on the structure of society and what would later be termed state-society relations. Students of political participation examined the ways in which individuals and groups could pursue their interests within the evident constraints of political institutions. Students of political institutions looked closely for evidence of bargaining among bureaucratic interests and mass constituencies, both in the process of policy making and policy implementation. Students of the educational system and the occupational structure examined the career incentives that drove individuals into patterns of cooperation with or withdrawal from regime-sponsored political activity. Students of grassroots politics and economic institutions explored the ways that state institutions bred social networks and personal loyalties that served to extend the power of the

state while at the same time blunting or diverting it... The result was a specialized scholarly literature that looked remarkably unlike anything connected with the term totalitarianism.<sup>308</sup>

*The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History* also notes that research dealing specifically with the climax of the Cultural Revolution in 1966-1968 was something of a special field of studies of China as a whole. The primary fascination was the rise of social movements and mass organisations. The following retrospective observation is also made, important from a current perspective and of particular relevance to a research review such as this:

how remarkably thin the evidence was for these interpretations. One has to admire the ingenuity with which authors reconstructed patterns of inequality and conflict from a relatively small number of interviews with émigrés, and from scattered copies of red guard tabloids, critical wall posters and pamphlets, transcripts of radio broadcasts, and rare issues of local newspapers. All of this work proceeded without the benefit of the kinds of sources that scholars take for granted today: direct local interviews and oral histories with key participants; extensive collections of tabloids, pamphlets, speeches, and wall posters; published local histories, reference works, and official compendia of social statistics; and even survey research with retrospective questions.<sup>309</sup>

The focus of what can be called the first wave of research on the Cultural Revolution outside China was certainly not 'crimes against humanity'. This first wave ebbed out when the CCP initiated the 'reform era' in 1979, distancing itself at the same time from its extreme Maoist heritage, which was said in an official Central Committee resolution on 27 June 1981 to have contributed to an unprecedented 'national catastrophe'.<sup>310</sup> During the 1980s, increasing numbers of foreign political scientists and sociologists began to focus their research on the period after the Cultural Revolution, while historians still did not regard the course of events during Mao's last ten years as a part of

---

<sup>306</sup> Some of the most important critical analysis texts from this early period that have been preserved for posterity are printed in translation in Liu 1987 and Chan, Rosen & Unger 1985. See also Yang 1997.

<sup>307</sup> For example Robinson 1971, Lindbeck 1971, Johnson 1973 and Ahn 1976.

---

<sup>308</sup> Esherick, Pickowicz & Walder 2006, p 3.

<sup>309</sup> Esherick, Pickowicz & Walder 2006, p 5.

<sup>310</sup> Cf Excerpt from "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China," in Schoenhals 1996c, pp 296-303.

their own 'turf'. Outside China, the 1980s and early 1990s were something of a low-water mark in terms of the research community's interest in the Cultural Revolution.

The first generation of *Chinese* research on the Cultural Revolution was with the explicit aim of providing a basis for an official, negative, post-Maoist perspective on the Cultural Revolution. Ironically enough, this is a clear example of research led by a 'crimes against humanity' paradigm, although it is not the CCP that is seen as the perpetrator here, but a faction within the party – the 'Gang of Four' or the clique surrounding Lin Biao. This perspective was expressed partly in the official trial of Mao Zedong's widow and several 'radicals' of the Cultural Revolution in late 1980, and partly in the abovementioned Central Committee resolution from 1981 entitled 'On Some Issues in the History of the Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China'.<sup>311</sup> It was highly significant that a number of previously confidential victim statistics were now published. For the first time, the true extent of 'physical violence perpetrated by individual groups, institutions and states against specific groups of victims' in the name of the Cultural Revolution became widely known. The CCP now openly confessed that

- no less than 84,000 people had been 'persecuted and subjected to false accusations' in eastern Hebei province. 2955 of these had lost their lives;

- almost 14,000 people had been persecuted and lost their lives in the 'search for secret agents' in Yunnan province;<sup>312</sup>

- almost 346,000 people had been 'persecuted and subjected to false accusations' (primarily for what was called 'ethnic separatism') in Inner Mongolia. 16,222 of these had lost their lives;<sup>313</sup>

- almost 80,000 officers and soldiers in the People's Liberation Army had been 'persecuted and subjected to false accusations'. 1,169 of these were said not to have survived the treatment to which they had been subjected.<sup>314</sup> (At the trial for Lin Biao's generals, various forms of torture were documented in detail that were said to have occurred in parts of the armed forces, however, information on this was not made public until 1992.<sup>315</sup>)

These figures and many more macro-statistics that were said to illustrate the number of victims of the purges in the upper levels of the CCP, armed forces and government administration were published in several collections of basic documentation on the Cultural Revolution during the 1980s. These are easily accessible at Chinese university libraries, but were not commercially distributed.<sup>316</sup> The collections, the primary focus of which was a selection of historically significant central policy decisions and texts by Mao and other leaders, had a powerful influence on the writing of history in China and among foreign researchers throughout the 1980s. The most widely distributed of these was the three volume, 2000 page work entitled *Research Material on the 'Great Cultural Revolution'*, which formed part of the series *Reference Material for*

---

<sup>311</sup> See the 500-page volume compiled by the Chinese Supreme People's Court, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zuigao renmin fayuan tebie fating shenpan Lin Biao Jiang Qing fangeming jitian'an zhufan jishi*, originally published in 1981 'for official use only', but which has long been available for purchase in Chinese second-hand bookshops. Since 1992, a number of people directly involved in the trial have published their memoirs and personal notes, and in several cases these give an interesting insight into what happened behind the scenes as arguments were formulated, sentences were decided, etc. Cf Xiao 1992 and Xiao & Tumen 1994. Several Chinese historians have used this new documentation as a basis to openly reject the trial as little more than a political act of revenge on the part of the survivors (and Deng Xiaoping in particular).

<sup>312</sup> The events in Yunnan referred to here are documented and described in terrifying detail in Ding 1999.

<sup>313</sup> There is a description by a Chinese historian of the unusually brutal Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia in English in Woody 1993. A complete and partly reworked version of the same author's history will be published in 2008 in Hong Kong by Cosmos Books.

<sup>314</sup> *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zuigao renmin fayuan tebie fating shenpan Lin Biao Jiang Qing fangeming jitian'an zhufan jishi* 1981, pp 22–24.

<sup>315</sup> Xiao 1992, pp 290–293.

<sup>316</sup> The violent aspects of the Cultural Revolution now replaced ideology as the aspect that to some extent continued to attract the attention of foreign sociologists. White 1989, Madsen 1990 and Lu 1995.

*Instruction in the History of the CCP* and became something of a standard work.<sup>317</sup> The editor of these three volumes on the Cultural Revolution was the abovementioned Wang Nianyi. The Nestor of American historians of China, John K Fairbank, based his words partly on this new information when he claimed, in the first edition of his influential work *China: A New History* (1992): ‘Estimates of the victims of the Cultural Revolution now hover around a million, of whom a considerable number did not survive’.<sup>318</sup> In a revised, posthumous edition of the same work (1998), Fairbank’s co-writer and former pupil, historian Merle Goldman wrote, on the basis of more detailed information partly originating from the same type of Chinese source, that the Cultural Revolution was a political campaign ‘in which half a million people were killed or committed suicide and an estimated 100 million were persecuted’.<sup>319</sup>

Not everything that was written and printed in book form in China at that time, on the worst injustices of the Cultural Revolution, made it through all levels of censorship. The 1000-page volume *May the Young Learn From This*, based on the internal documentation of the Ministry of Public Security, using a narrative and somewhat fictionalised form to describe over a hundred human tragedies, was due for publication in 1981, but was never distributed. The remaining copies of an incomplete edition that was destroyed have been sold in second-hand bookshops in Beijing since the mid 1990s.<sup>320</sup>

By the mid 1980s, the official, almost total revision of the positive history of the Cultural Revolution from Mao Zedong’s time was more or less complete. The ‘fundamental denial of the “Cultural Revolution” (*chedi fouding* “*wenge*”) that was now the policy of the CCP was extremely significant for many supporters of reform. What was ‘denied’ and said to be deception was the idea that the Cultural Revolution had anything good about it or had brought any good consequences. When the

research and historical writings of the 1980s were most susceptible to political correctness on this point, they became a question of black versus white. A good example is the one-volume history of the Cultural Revolution published in Chinese in the People’s Republic in 1986 and in English in the USA in 1996, under the title *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*. In my review of the translation I wrote the following:

The persuasive power of many statements in this book would have been enhanced considerably had the authors occasionally inserted qualifying markers such as “appeared to,” “as far as we know,” “may,” “might” or “one would like to believe did...” But instead of admitting that what much of what they say still remains to be proven, the authors assert simplistically that they *know* what “Mao dreamed of...” (p. 306), the “Chinese Communist Party has a tradition of believing...” (p. 257), and Lin Biao “also pondered” (p. 310). Given their disciplinary background in political science and sociology, it is particularly surprising that they appear to have little appreciation of the *complexity* of politics. Oftentimes their explanations are simply too simple to be convincing...<sup>321</sup>

The writer couple who wrote *Turbulent Decade* now live in exile in France and, as bona fide dissidents, spend their time advocating federalism in China and working on a new constitution for what they hope will one day become the Federal Republic of China.

By far the best history of the Cultural Revolution from this period is *The Years of Great Turmoil* by Wang Nianyi, originally published in 1988 with a revised edition published in 2005.<sup>322</sup> Wang had long been a propaganda cadre in the armed forces, but when the reform era began he became Professor of Modern History at the National Military Academy in Beijing. One of his strengths was the ability to ‘write between the lines’ and thus circumvent rigid censorship... In a review of *The Years of Great Turmoil* I wrote the following:

---

<sup>317</sup> Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun guofang daxue dangshi dangjian zhenggong jiaoyanshi 1988.

<sup>318</sup> Fairbank & Goldman 1998, p 402.

<sup>319</sup> Fairbank & Goldman 1998, p 410.

<sup>320</sup> Shangfang tongxun bianjishi 1981. A greatly abridged ‘sanitised sequel’ to this work which was later sold openly is Shangfang tongxun bianjishi 1986.

---

<sup>321</sup> Schoenhals, review (published in *The China Quarterly*, no. 156, 1997) by Yan & Gao 1996.

<sup>322</sup> Wang 1988.

Within the confines of the CCP Centre's 'official line' on the Cultural Revolution, Wang Nianyi has succeeded in writing a history that is eminently readable... A low-key irony reverberates throughout the narrative, though Wang does reflect some partiality to various individuals and groups. With dead-pan seriousness the author admits that there are certain things about the Cultural Revolution he has not been able to figure out... And so, precisely because of all the glaring contradictions left unresolved, this becomes a far better work of history than the 'line struggle' histories produced in China in the past. Extended extracts from previously classified texts are scattered throughout the narrative.<sup>323</sup>

The previously unknown information – both in China and abroad – that Wang was able to reveal in his history included the sky-high number of victims of the witch-hunt against what was known as the 'ultra left' in the early 1970s, as part of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>324</sup> It should be mentioned here that one of the positive functions of the internet in international research on the Cultural Revolution is the fact that many of the texts that Wang's generation wrote by hand in the early 1980s and published 'for official use only', copies of which are no longer available, have been uploaded in electronic form to servers in and outside China, by their younger colleagues and former students.<sup>325</sup>

At the end of the 1980s, a result of the growing contact between Chinese and foreign researchers was that new research findings and new source material on the Cultural Revolution were disseminated outside China. The content of the *CCP Research Newsletter*, published between 1988 and 1992 by an international network of young historians, gives a good picture of this with its news on books and short announcements and analyses of often hard-to-find sources. At the same time, much of what was published in China (in limited editions, sometimes marked confidential or 'for official use only') continued to pass the outside world by. An example from this period (1990) that is highly relevant to the theme of crimes against humanity is the photographic work *Photographic Documentation of the 'Cultural*

*Revolution' in Guangxi*, an ethnic autonomous region (the equivalent of a province) in southern China bordering on Vietnam, where a bloody civil war raged over long periods in 1967–68.<sup>326</sup> The preface of this work of almost 400 pages, whose existence did not come to be known outside China until fifteen years later, states:

The 'Great Cultural Revolution' was an enormous disaster. *Photographic Documentation of the 'Cultural Revolution' in Guangxi* provides a faithful record of the history of that period, and constitutes a major source of evidence, in addition to the 18 volumes of *Archived documents from the 'Cultural Revolution' in Guangxi*. It is particularly valuable that the pictures that have been found have now been collated in a volume that is annexed to the party and state archive. They illustrate the Cultural Revolution in Guangxi in miniature, and can serve a purpose in terms of historical research, and contribute to educating this generation and future generations. This is a lesson in blood, which we must learn from. Never again can we allow this to happen.<sup>327</sup>

In the early 1990s, Guangxi in particular was the object of foreign interest for a time, when it became known that a bizarre kind of 'political cannibalism' had taken place in parts of the region during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>328</sup> This was documented in an investigation by a Chinese journalist/researcher, which caused a justified sensation, and was later published in English translation.<sup>329</sup>

Since the mid 1990s, the focus of research on the Cultural Revolution in and outside China has in many respects been driven by a wave of documentation – in other words, all the new information that has become available since Mao Zedong's years in power were been irrevocably relegated to history. One of the foreign researchers who has made unusual use of this new documentation and who deserves mention here is Andrew G. Walder, who, in a pioneering study (based on a sophisticated analysis of quantitative data from no

---

<sup>323</sup> Review published in *CCP Research Newsletter*, no. 3, 1989, pp 57–58.

<sup>324</sup> Wang 1988, pp 336–39. In English, see MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2006, pp 221–38.

<sup>325</sup> Cf pages for documentation and debate on [www.linbiao.org](http://www.linbiao.org)

<sup>326</sup> Guangxi wenge dashi nianbiao bianxie xiaozu 1990.

<sup>327</sup> Guangxi "wenge" dang'an ziliao bianxie weiyuanhui 1990. The most terrifying photographs from the Cultural Revolution in Köll 2003 are all taken from this work.

<sup>328</sup> Sutton 1995.

<sup>329</sup> Zheng 1996.

less than 1500 local gazetteers published in China after 1987) reached the conclusion that the number of victims of the campaign to 'cleanse the class ranks' (1968-1971) in rural China was much greater than foreign researchers had imagined, and probably totalled between 750,000 and 1.5 million deaths.<sup>330</sup> The first seed of something that could one day become a Chinese version of the Russian 'Memorial' movement has been founded in the USA by a Chinese academic, Wang Youqin. So far, her work has resulted in books and articles, as well as a dedicated website called the *Chinese Holocaust Memorial* and oral histories in Youtube format.<sup>331</sup>

Wang's ambitious project forms an important part of something that deserves to be called documentation of, rather than research on, crimes against humanity during the Cultural Revolution. An impressive documentation project along the same lines is the work carried out in recent years by a group of Chinese academics in the USA and Canada, including Song Yongyi, currently working at John F. Kennedy Memorial Library, Los Angeles. Originally a loose network of university librarians and researchers without any particular financial resources or explicit political goals, in recent years this group has become increasingly involved in exile politics, in the hope of being able to secure resources for ambitious initiatives such as the *Virtual Museum of the Cultural Revolution* website, which is now more than 10 years old and constantly growing. For his work compiling an enormous *Chinese Cultural Revolution CD-Rom Database*, and thus 'fighting censorship in the library world', Song Youngyi received the American Library Association Paul Howard Award for Courage in 2005.<sup>332</sup> In the exile journal *Human Rights in China* he has claimed: 'According to the estimates of overseas scholars, based on secret documents that have been leaked, approximately 2.8 million people met with unnatural deaths during that period'.<sup>333</sup> In the same journal, another member of the same loose network, Hu Ping, a writer and publicist based in Canada, posed and answered the question

'How many victims were there during the Cultural Revolution? We lack reliable statistics, but even conservative estimates indicate more than 1.72 million'.<sup>334</sup>

An exhaustive inventory of international research on the Chinese Cultural Revolution is hardly possible in the space available here. What has been described in brief is merely trends, a few important works, and influential currents of thought. By way of conclusion, it is appropriate to mention that some researchers now claim that the situation for researchers is good, while others are more pessimistic. In reference to the current situation in China, just over a year ago I wrote the following for the journal *The China Quarterly*:

The year 2006 saw the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the launching of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution come and go in silence in the PRC. No memorials were uncovered, no plaques unveiled. CCP historians – custodians of the archives and writers of *official* history – held a few closed workshops on Mao's final decade in power, but no major conferences. Under the radar of the authorities, though, a three-day unofficial conference bringing together sixteen Chinese and foreign scholars and historians of the Cultural Revolution was held in a resort outside Beijing in March. Participants included a number of widely respected names whose scholarship normally appears in liberal Chinese-language print-media... and on the world-wide web. The conference saw "a hundred schools of thought contend," as those who felt comfortable occupying a moderate middle ground engaged with those who claimed more radical positions on the left and right.<sup>335</sup>

What does the future hold? The history faculties at some Chinese universities now teach courses on the Cultural Revolution, which can be seen as positive. However, the pessimism of many Chinese historians is still justified by the censorship that continues to limit free communication and the possibility of getting work published. (On the internet, linguistic 'tricks' are used to deceive the search engines of the cyber police, which it is thought are programmed to react to terms such as 'the Cultural Revolution') This pessimism is also justified by

---

<sup>330</sup> Walder & Su 2003.

<sup>331</sup> [http://humanities.uchicago.edu/~faculty/ywang/history/memorial\\_homepage.htm](http://humanities.uchicago.edu/~faculty/ywang/history/memorial_homepage.htm)

<sup>332</sup> <http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=News-&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=95110>

<sup>333</sup> *China Rights Forum*, no. 4, 2005, p 23.

<sup>334</sup> *China Rights Forum*, no. 4, 2004, p 78.

<sup>335</sup> Quote from Schoenhals, review (published in *The China Quarterly*, no. 190, 2007) by Hao 2006, p 492.

the lack of interest in history that seems to characterise the younger generation:

Close to the end... one participant lamenting the fact that three decades after it came to a close with the death of Mao Zedong, the Cultural Revolution is being “covered up, forgotten, misinterpreted, and ‘transformed and abused’ at will.” And if that is not in itself bad enough, he charged, an even bigger problem is the fact that there seem to be so few younger scholars showing an interest in researching, interpreting, understanding, and teaching its history: “We who are here today are in our fifties; in another ten year’s time, if it’s still only members of our generation meeting like this, then the study of the Cultural Revolution may well face the risk of becoming an ‘extinct subject!’”<sup>336</sup>

Outside China we can only hope, bearing in mind how tragic and important the Cultural Revolution was, that it will sooner or later attract the attention of more researchers. A growing interest is already discernable among a younger generation of historians and the educated general public, reflected not least in the sales figures for the 2006 publication *Mao’s Last Revolution*, a history of the Cultural Revolution based primarily on new sources and new research findings that is also being published in Chinese, French and Korean in 2009.<sup>337</sup> In a review of the book in the *New York Times Book Review*, Judith Shapiro speculated on how ‘Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals’s book, *Mao’s Last Revolution*, the first major history of the elite politics of the period, may generate a wave of Cultural Revolution scholarship within China and encourage healthy debate over state manipulation of historical memory.’<sup>338</sup> Who knows, a translation to Swedish might even manage to provoke a debate of this nature in this country...

---

<sup>336</sup> Quote from Schoenhals, review (published in *The China Quarterly*, no. 190, 2007) by Hao 2006, p 493.

<sup>337</sup> MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2006.

<sup>338</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, 6 October 2006, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/10/06/arts/idbriefs7C.php>

# CAMBODIA

KLAS-GÖRAN KARLSSON

The third criminal history whose academic interpretation is to be presented here is that of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge and its massacre of categories of its own population during the second half of the 1970s. The section will start with an analysis of the actual course of events, as presented in the available research literature, and of the terms that are used. After that there will be a selective analysis of the prominent dividing lines and discussion issues that arise in this research.

## Criminal history of Cambodia

During the course of one term of government lasting three years and eight months, the Khmer Rouge killed between one and a half and two million people out of a total population between seven and eight million in a violently escalated holocaust in Cambodia. This means that between one fifth and one quarter of the Cambodian population was annihilated as a result either of direct executions or of death through starvation or disease as a result of the policies of the regime.<sup>339</sup> This is, in all likelihood, the greatest demographic catastrophe that has hit any land in the post-war period. Hundreds of thousands more were forced to flee their country. No group of the population and no region of the country was spared. The scene of this massacre is sometimes known as Kampuchea, the official name of the Khmer Rouge republic, and a term that is equivalent to the pronunciation of the French word Cambodia in the dialect of the Khmer people, the ethnic majority of the country. In this text, however, the country will be referred to consistently as Cambodia.

The deadly storm that swept over Cambodia between April 1975 and January 1979 is called genocide by many, although not all researchers, on the basis that the mass violence was largely directed towards ethically and religiously defined categories of people who were stigmatised and killed by the regime for

what they *were*, not what they had *done*. The term 'autogenocide' sometimes crops up in literature on the subject, to communicate the idea that Cambodia fell victim to itself, in the sense that the dominant majority people group, the Khmer, formed the largest category of victims. However, the term is inappropriate, or at least imprecise, since the fact that the communist revolution, in the words of Trotsky, 'consumed its own', applies to all three criminal histories analysed in this research review, particularly if the term 'own' means the country's own citizens, majority people groups and party cadres.

On the issue of the Khmer Rouge's crimes against humanity, the most important question – apart from the general issue of how this process of extreme violence could occur at all and whether it was genocide or not – is the role played by the communist ideology, or rather, the relative importance to be attributed to communism in relation to other ideological systems, processes and factors that were also clearly involved in the Cambodian tragedy: colonialism, nationalism, social conditions, tension between urban and rural areas, geographical conditions, the long border with antagonistic countries Vietnam and Laos, and historical circumstances such as the Vietnam war and the general American involvement in the development of the social and governmental systems of South East Asia.

Indeed, the Khmer leaders' goal was to introduce a communist ideology in an exceptionally short period of time, defined as introduction of collective agriculture and the removal of established social differences and disparities between rural and urban areas, in order to go further in terms of ideology-led development than Lenin, Stalin and Mao, who Pol Pot identified as his communist predecessors, while also emphasising that the Khmer revolution had no predecessors. In hindsight, from the perspective of the historian, it is not difficult to identify the exact sources of ideological inspiration. The first came from Lenin, and his idea that it was possible for a revolutionary regime to 'skip' certain stages of humanity's fixed route towards Utopia, in order to increase the speed of the

---

<sup>339</sup> Current demographic research seems to show relatively strong agreement on these victim statistics. See Heuveline & Poch 2007, pp 405–406.



disruptive process. The second came from Stalin – the idea of rooting socialism in a country, which in the Cambodian case meant that they linked to an ‘original’ national heritage from a Khmer kingdom, emphasised the importance of internal economic expansion, and took on an isolationist approach that rejected every ‘foreign’ influence. The third ideological source was Mao’s idea that the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution could drive development forward radically and ‘cleanse’ the communist revolution. In the light of this, several researchers have defined the Khmer Rouge regime as Maoist or inspired by Maoism. However, in the context of an academic analysis, the communist self-understanding must be confronted with other, underlying notions of an ideological and historical nature. In other words, the massacres in Cambodia must be placed within a wider historical context.

## Background

In the South East Asian country of Cambodia, which had been a Buddhist monarchy until 1970 and had spent almost a century as a French Indonesian colony, the Khmer Rouge captured the capital city of Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975. This marked the end of a several-year civil war, and Democratic Kampuchea was declared by a communist party whose members called themselves *Angkar*, or ‘the organisation’. The highest leader and architect of the revolution, ‘brother number one’, within a leadership made up of young radical Khmer intellectuals who had spent study years in Paris in the 1950s and who in many cases had worked quietly as school teachers and been persecuted in Cambodia for their Maoist views, was the almost fifty-year-old Pol Pot. He had been leading the Cambodian communist party in secret since 1963, although he did not become a public figure until a couple of years after the seizure of power. The communist party had its roots in Cambodia’s post-war struggle against colonialism, for independence.

The internal supporting troops of the Khmer Rouge were primarily from poor Khmer youths from rural areas. Before Pol Pot had taken control of the whole of Cambodia, which took until 1976, when a formal government was declared, he was also forced to seek support from rival regional warlords, who he later had killed systematically. A major rebellion against this brutal centralisation of power in February 1978, led by Heng Samrin, later to become leader of the communist party, in the eastern parts of the country,

led to the killing of 100,000 people.<sup>340</sup> Despite the traditional hostility between Cambodia and Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge received economic and military support from the Vietnamese communist party, while tackling resistance from local communist groups. China also gave its support to Democratic Kampuchea. South East Asian communism was a deeply divided movement.

The USA was one of the enemies of the new government. The country had given its support to the adversaries of the Khmer Rouge, the regime of anti-communist general and president Lon Nol, who ruled the Khmer Republic between 1970 and 1975 after seizing power in a military coup from Prince Norodom Sihanouk, whose authoritarian rule had dominated Cambodian politics since liberation from France in the 1950s. As well as a regular invasion in 1970s, American opposition to the communists was primarily expressed through the dropping of more than half a million tonnes of bombs on Cambodia during the civil war. These bombs were not so much directed against the Cambodian regime as against a transportation route through the country, the Ho-Chi Minh Trail, used by North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, these bombings, which killed tens of thousands of Cambodians, caused a widespread hatred of the USA that the Khmer Rouge were able to benefit from in an ideological sense. Ben Kiernan is one of those who strongly emphasises the significance of the American bombings when he states that Pol Pot’s Cambodian communist party rose from the ashes of this widespread destruction, and that this to a large extent justified the brutal and radical policies of violence that the Khmer Rouge were able to conduct against their internal enemies, even those on the left-wing.<sup>341</sup> The fact that the bombs could be said to show that the Vietnamese brought misfortune to Cambodia gave the Khmer Rouge an excuse to liquidate the pro-Vietnamese faction of the communist party.<sup>342</sup> After 1975, the long-established hostility between Cambodia and Vietnam was fully restored. In an isolated country with hostile relations

---

<sup>340</sup> Cf Raszlenberg 2002, p 69.

<sup>341</sup> Kiernan 2002, p 19. Shawcross, 1979, expressed the responsibility of the US precisely and provocatively: without American B-52s, no genocide in Cambodia.

<sup>342</sup> Lemarchand 2003, p 151.

with its immediate neighbours and with a regime that rejected all forms of foreign economic or humanitarian aid, mass murder could begin without risk of intervention from the outside world.<sup>343</sup>

During the years of the civil war, between 1970 and 1975, unprecedented atrocities were carried out on both sides: massacres were carried out, camps with lethal conditions were set up for enemies and their families, and tens of thousands of people were subjected to forced migration. Once the Khmer Rouge reached victory in the civil war, they lacked an organised internal opposition to question their power and reduce their control. Their position of total power may be one of the reasons why the violence grew to such extremes.<sup>344</sup> In addition, the large-scale atrocities were carried out in times of peace, apart from the very last period. In the eyes of the perpetrators, however, this was not a peaceful period, but a time when internal and external evil powers conspired to overthrow the regime of the Khmer Rouge. In the new constitution adopted in December 1975, it was established that anyone who threatened the 'people's state' would be sentenced to the 'harshest possible punishment' after facing the 'people's court', whose legal principles and function were not specified.<sup>345</sup>

Researchers have emphasised that the communist regime gradually escalated and widened the framework for violence between the early stages – 'year zero' in the revolutionary chronology – when it primarily encompassed the officials of the old regime, and later stages, when it began to affect wider political and social groups, as well as relatives of officials of the old regime. At the same time, hardships resulting from lack of food, illness and general chaos in rural areas were on the increase, and were further aggravated by the regime's anti-modernist technophobia. It is not really possible to draw up a chronology of crimes, with different phases for different backgrounds, types and mechanisms of violence, as one can with the Soviet communist

criminal history.<sup>346</sup> In addition, the period during which the crimes were committed was too short and intensive. Its development could perhaps be described as an extremely compressed variant of the Soviet crimes, without any intention of placing these two criminal histories on a par.

### **Mass violence and its mechanisms**

At a early stage after the Khmer Rouge consolidation of power, the groups of soldiers, police officers and others who had belonged to the supporting troops for the defeated Lon Nol, who was backed by the Americans in the civil war and on the side of the USA in its war on North Vietnam, were eliminated. Parallels with the Bolshevik Red Terror against their 'White' opponents in the Russian Civil War are noticeable here. In the Cambodian case, however, the 'Great Terror' follows much closer in time than in the Soviet case, since major purges within the communist party organisation began as early as late 1976. At a meeting of the party cadre it was established that the party had started 'a strong and uncompromising fight to the death against class enemies... particularly in our own revolutionary ranks'. The more poetic conclusion was as follows: 'let there be no holes through which the enemy, like a worm, can make his way into the inner core of the party'.<sup>347</sup> Another text from the same occasion made mention of 'evil microbes' that had been able to get a foothold in revolutionary Cambodia since it had not previously been run with enough hardness and observance.<sup>348</sup> Conspiracies and plots were uncovered, with either neighbouring Vietnam or the American CIA or both in the role of 'villain', and with 'bourgeois' or 'urban' elements in Cambodia as their accomplices. Imprisoned in the regime's camps, communists were forced to admit secret connections with foreign powers or inform on other spies and saboteurs. Families and supporters were executed along with the 'guilty'. Behind this development, as in Stalin's Soviet Union, were constant rumours, either produced by the regime or substantiated, of foreign

---

<sup>343</sup> For analyses of Cambodia's relations with its neighbouring countries, see Porter 1983, pp 57–98, Mosyakov 2006, pp 41–72, and Rungswasdisab 2006, pp 73–118.

<sup>344</sup> Cf Kissi 2003 pp 307–308, 322.

<sup>345</sup> Becker 1986, p 218.

---

<sup>346</sup> For an attempt at a chronology of this nature, see Chandler 1996, p 212ff.

<sup>347</sup> Quoted from Kiernan 2002, p 333. See 'Summary of the Results of the 1976 Study Session', in Boua, Chandler & Kiernan 1988, pp 164–176.

<sup>348</sup> Chandler 1996a, p 218.

invasions, in the Cambodian case an invasion by the Vietnamese army.<sup>349</sup>

The work of the purges was carried out by the *Santebal*, the secret police of Democratic Kampuchea and the Khmer Rouge, who had access to an archipelago of prisons and whose speciality was torture. Officially, of course, there were no prisons, since these – along with other capitalist and repressive notions such as money, private property and religion – were seen as remnants of an earlier society that could not exist in the communist Cambodia of the Khmer Rouge. The reality, however, was quite different. An old high school on the outskirts of the capital, Tuol Sleng, housed the secret headquarters of the secret police, referred to in code as S-21, in which 14,000 people were held prisoner, tortured and killed. The goal of activities of the *Santebal* was to make everyone confess to political crimes. However, there may be good reason to exercise caution in calling S-21 a prison. David Chandler, writer of its history, has pointed out that a prison is an institution from which the prisoners are eventually released, but that no-one was ever released from S-21. Chandler prefers to call the institution an ‘antechamber of death’. Only seven people who had been interned there survived the Khmer Rouge period of government and were able to give testimony.<sup>350</sup> One of them was artist Vann Nath, who was ordered to paint heroic portraits of a man who he later identified was Pol Pot.<sup>351</sup> In 1980, S-21 was turned into a museum of the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge.

Soon the victim categories in Cambodia were broadened to include those who had lived outside the zones that the Khmer Rouge had ‘liberated’ during the civil war, who were therefore suspected of harbouring a lack of loyalty to the new regime. Raids were carried out into neighbouring countries to capture refugees from Cambodia or other opponents of the regime. All these people were judged as being ‘contaminated’ by having lived in these areas, which meant that they did not have the positive characteristics that people should have in the ‘new’ and ‘clean’ society that had been created by the Khmer revolution. This destructive

logic, based on identifying social, political and professional groups on a class basis and wiping them out, also meant that the families of individual victims were hit by the fulmination, since all other family members were seen as ‘contaminated’. French monk François Ponchaud, who worked in Cambodia until the fall of Phnom Pen, has stated that notions of genetic spread of infection were widespread, which meant that individual lines of descent had to be destroyed, right down to the last member.<sup>352</sup> The guards at S-21 were young, recently mobilised and unmarried men from proletarian backgrounds, who did not carry any genetic encumbrances, and who could easily be made to comprehend the revolutionary social ideals of the Khmer Rouge.<sup>353</sup>

As in the Soviet Union, there was an idea, based on basic class logic, that ‘old’ and ‘dirty’ people could reach a new status as ‘new’ and ‘better’ people, through being imprisoned in ‘re-education centres’ – as the prisons could be called – or forced to carry out unpaid labour in ‘work brigades’ on paddy fields, drainage projects and construction projects in sparsely populated, malarial areas in the country’s peripheral mountainous or jungle regions. This ‘didactic’ dimension is also applicable in understanding the later persecution of Khmer intellectuals and well-educated groups, whose more or less imagined links to western ideology and modern urban lifestyles had to be cut off, from the perspective of the Khmer Rouge’s anti-western and anti-modernist ideology, through a cleansing process. In practice, this process often constituted either immediate execution or a life in circumstances that gradually led to death, through disease, famine or other hardships. Demographic research has shown that well-educated city dwellers were particularly vulnerable in the context of the mass killings.<sup>354</sup> One extreme echo of the Soviet terror of Stalin’s era was the disciplinarian efforts of the Cambodian regime, which in practice meant that seemingly harmless crimes such as theft of food, late arrival at work or attempts to contact the ‘old’ family were punishable by death. It can be said that death was rendered commonplace and banal in Cambodia.

---

<sup>349</sup> Becker 1986, chapters 8 and 9.

<sup>350</sup> Chandler 1999, p 15.

<sup>351</sup> Nath 1998.

---

<sup>352</sup> Ponchaud 1978, p 70.

<sup>353</sup> Chandler 1999, pp 32–35.

<sup>354</sup> See De Walque 2005, pp 351–358.

Large-scale, brutal forced deportations were carried out to move allegedly unreliable people away from the eastern parts of Cambodia – economically significant and previously relatively autonomous regions bordering with Vietnam. This forms yet another parallel with the Soviet communist policy of moving potential groups of fifth columnists, before and during the Second World War. In contrast to the ‘punished peoples’ of the Soviet Union, however, tens of thousands of Cambodians were able to flee from the repression to neighbouring countries Vietnam and Thailand, despite being threatened with the death penalty. In addition, the Khmer Rouge ‘evacuated’ hundreds of thousands of city dwellers to rural areas, which meant that people had to leave their homes and possessions and that families were often split up permanently. Directly after the capture of Phnom Penh in April 1975, the new government ordered the capital city to be emptied of people. It had two million inhabitants, the majority of whom had moved there recently, seeking shelter in the city from the American bombings of rural areas. The decision to evacuate the city may have been based partly on concerns over how its residents would be provided for, and concerns that the city was home to many potential opponents of the regime. However, the most important reason was in all likelihood ideological: for the Khmer Rouge, the city represented an environment that promoted capitalism, and the urban population represented an exploiting class. As part of the deportation process, officers and other potential opponents were gathered and executed, without trials and after being tortured.

### **The old against the new, rural against urban, utopia against history**

People were divided into general groups, like the Soviet distinction between peasants and kulaks, according to the relationship they were judged to have to the regime: while ‘basic people’ or the ‘old’ people were judged to be reliable and were sometimes referred to as ‘70’ to denote that they had been controlled by the Khmer Rouge since the beginning of the civil war in 1970, the ‘new’ people – ‘75’ or ‘17 April’ – were unreliable. To show this distinction, and to increase antagonism between the groups, contact between the groups was banned, and measures were introduced including different colours of clothing and

different rights, which for ‘75’ people meant no rights at all.<sup>355</sup> This division is thought to have decreased somewhat in 1978, when the surviving ‘new people’ were reinstated in certain high social positions. This change has been linked to two aspects of the wider context: the increased need for national unity in the face of escalating hostilities with Vietnam, and the fact that so many people had disappeared that there were gaps to be filled in the social structure.<sup>356</sup>

Life in rural areas was strictly regulated, which meant that the population was split into small agricultural units, and that larger groups of ‘new people’ were brought in to help sow and reap. A barter economy was introduced, and the majority of the harvest was nationalised. Old patterns of authority, such as parents’ authority over children, were questioned or eliminated when children were taken from their parents to be raised by the state. The overall goal, paradoxically enough, was to homogenise Cambodian society by atomising and splitting it, or rather, to eliminate all sources of identity except that which related the individual to the communist regime. The ideal society of the Khmer Rouge was a self-sufficient and egalitarian Cambodian agricultural nation without a monetary economy and with ‘pure’ citizens without any ‘destructive’ contact with the western world. Communism was to be achieved through a nationalist policy. By skipping the modern project with its industrialisation and urban development, as implemented by Stalin in the Soviet Union in the years around 1930, Cambodia was to go directly from feudalism to communist utopia, thus taking a shortcut through history.<sup>357</sup>

While this future direction was explicit, there was also a somewhat contradictory idea of returning to an idealised version of the small-scale agricultural society that was thought to have existed in Cambodia prior to colonisation. Angkor was a mythological period and a mythological kingdom in the history of Cambodia, which although it existed many centuries before the revolution of the Khmer Rouge, between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, could nonetheless be used to provide

---

<sup>355</sup> Margolin 1999, p 584.

<sup>356</sup> Margolin 1999, p 602.

<sup>357</sup> Cf documentation in Boua, Chandler & Kiernan 1988, pp 45–46.

inspiration in the present day, partly since this history was judged to demonstrate a Cambodian greatness created without any foreign involvement, and partly because it showed that 'ordinary people, when mobilized in vast numbers by the state can do extraordinary things'.<sup>358</sup>

### Ethnicity and race

Still other categories of victims, which are closer to the UN Convention definition of victims of genocide, were hit by the mass violence of the Khmer Rouge. In contrast to the situation in the Soviet Union and China, these groups in Cambodia did not have autonomous territories with limited self-government, and the Khmer Rouge denied their very existence. Religious groups such as monks, Christians and Muslims were decimated in the massacres; it has been estimated that less than 2000 of Cambodia's 70,000 Buddhist monks were still alive by the end of the Khmer regime's period in power, in January 1979.<sup>359</sup> Ethnic minority groups such as Chinese, Vietnamese and Cham people, who made up a total of around 15 percent of the Cambodian population, met a similar tragic fate. Both Vietnamese and Chinese people had close links with the commercial life and small businesses of the cities, and as such with the capitalist sector that was the primary object of hatred of the Khmer Rouge. The Vietnamese also had links with the main external enemy of the Khmer Rouge in the South East Asian region Cambodia's Vietnamese minority was more or less entirely wiped out, the Chinese minority was reduced from 425,000 in 1975 to 200,000 less than four years later, and around 100,000 of 250,000 rurally based Cham people disappeared over the same period.<sup>360</sup> At the same time, the Khmer Rouge ordered measures to undermine the physical and mental wellbeing and identity of these groups, for example by banning use of minority languages, forcing them to change their names, closing their schools and forcing the Muslim Cham people to eat pork and work as pig farmers.

It has been pointed out that the Khmer Rouge treatment of the Cham people and other minority groups formed part of a racist policy of ethnic

cleansing, with the aim of creating a racially pure Khmer state.<sup>361</sup> However, in the case of Cambodia, racial classification has not only been related to ethnicity and religion, but has also been described as a more general principle in the Khmer Rouge policy of violence, bearing in mind the importance attached to nature and hereditary factors when victims' criminality and guilt was pointed out.<sup>362</sup> Ben Kiernan established that race was a more important basis of identity than class.<sup>363</sup> Other researchers reason that the class aspect was always the most important factor in the collective stigmatisation of people groups, and therefore place less emphasis on the significance of the victims' ethnic origins.<sup>364</sup>

### The end – and the beginning

On Christmas Day 1978, Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia. Shortly after the new year, they took Phnom Penh, forcing the Khmer Rouge to flee. The Vietnamese invasion was a continuation of a series of mutually aggressive policies pursued by both countries throughout the Khmer Rouge period in power. A new republic was declared, the People's Republic of Kampuchea, with a new communist government led by Heng Samrin and others who had fled Pol Pot's regime, with the support of the Vietnamese troops. The leaders of the Khmer Rouge were convicted *in absentia* in a show trial, backed by the new government.<sup>365</sup> From their new position in the jungle areas of Cambodia bordering on Thailand, the Khmer Rouge took up guerrilla resistance, supported by China and indirectly by the USA, humiliated by its recent retreat from Vietnam and fearing that the Vietnamese invasion was simply a pretext for establishing regional dominance. This had the remarkable consequence that in November 1979, the UN General Assembly voted to recognise Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea, whose delegation then received a place at the General Assembly.

In the jungles of Cambodia the killing continued, albeit on a smaller scale, within Khmer Rouge circles.

---

<sup>358</sup> Chandler 1996b, pp 234–235, 244–245.

<sup>359</sup> Cf Kiernan 1997, p 340.

<sup>360</sup> Kiernan 1997, pp 340–343.

<sup>361</sup> Marcher & Frederiksen 2002.

<sup>362</sup> Margolin 1999, p 645.

<sup>363</sup> Kiernan 2002, p 26.

<sup>364</sup> Margolin 1999, pp 601–605.

<sup>365</sup> The trial is documented in De Nike, Quigley & Robinson 2000. See also Fawthrop & Jarvis 2004, chap 3.

Several of the leading representatives defected to the side of the Cambodian government, taking their troops with them. In 1997, a request from Cambodia to the UN for an international tribunal to put the perpetrators on trial led to a declaration from an international expert group, two years later, establishing that the treatment of ethnic minorities and Buddhist monks at the hands of the Khmer Rouge was a result of an intention to conduct mass killings of groups protected by the genocide convention in Cambodia. It was established, therefore, that the atrocities did constitute genocide.<sup>366</sup>

In 2003, after protracted negotiations, Cambodia and the UN reached an agreement on the establishment of the ECCC, *Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, a war crimes tribunal tasked with putting those responsible for the crimes of the Khmer Rouge on trial. Pol Pot could not be put on trial for his crimes, since he died in 1998, but others were tried including 'brother number two', Nuon Chea, who was charged with crimes against humanity, but not with genocide.

## Sources and archives

The Cambodian communist party did not announce its existence until September 1977, almost two and a half years after seizing power, and Pol Pot was entirely unknown to the general public. The party was enshrouded in secrecy and did not print many documents of a political nature, an approach that has been related to a general disdain for any work that was not of a concrete, practical nature.<sup>367</sup> This does not mean that the mass killings were not documented. On the contrary, recently uncovered sources have shown that the Khmer Rouge kept meticulous records of both victims and perpetrators, often including photographic documentation. The general lack of information early on meant that the country was relatively isolated from the outside world during the period that the Khmer Rouge was in power. Correspondents were not permitted to work in Cambodia, and even the few visitors who were allowed to enter the country faced firm restrictions in

terms of freedom of movement, even if they were ideologically supportive of the Khmer Rouge. This did not stop the writing of books and articles about Cambodia during these years, but these were often based on inadequate information and strongly polarised in their sympathy or antipathy for the Cambodian communist government. Some saw the Khmer Rouge as liberators, others as agents of genocide. Some, like Jan Myrdal, took the side of the Khmer Rouge and the successful peasants' revolution against the expansionist Vietnam, while others, like Ben Kiernan, saw Vietnam as a part of the defence against an aggressive and tyrannical Cambodia.<sup>368</sup>

When the Vietnamese army, along with an exile group called the Kampuchean National United Front for National Salvation, took Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979, official documents fell into their hands. The archives of S-21 were more or less intact. This documentation included forced confessions from thousands of political prisoners. The lack of written documentation has also caused researchers to make the most of information given in interviews with refugees from Cambodia and other eye witnesses, in order to reconstruct events or bring a tangible dimension to impersonal documents.<sup>369</sup> Both Cambodians and others with various types of connections to Cambodia have published books recounting their experiences from, and traumatic memories of, the revolutionary era.<sup>370</sup> There is even an account from the side of the perpetrators written by a central figure in the Khmer Rouge, Khieu Samphan, who was a member of the central committee from 1971 and president of Democratic Kampuchea throughout the period from 1975 to 1979. It is a well-tailored written defence, based on the claim that he was entirely unaware of the atrocities carried out by the regime over which he presided until he handed himself over to the authorities in 1998.<sup>371</sup> Other types

---

<sup>366</sup> Jfr Kiernan 2002, pp XI–XII.

<sup>367</sup> Chandler 1996b, p 256.

---

<sup>368</sup> There is a good summary of this early research debate on the Cambodia of the Khmer Rouge in Ebihara 1981, pp 63–71.

<sup>369</sup> A good example of this approach, where the interview results are integrated into the analysis, is Slocomb 2006, pp 59–72.

<sup>370</sup> See for example Pran (ed.) 1997, Ung 2000, and Huor 2006. See also Fröberg Ilding 2006.

<sup>371</sup> Samphan 2004.

of 'internal' material, such as newspaper articles and transcripts of Khmer Rouge radio broadcasts, have been used to reconstruct the historical context. The *Cambodian Genocide Program* – a result of the *Cambodian Genocide Justice Act*, an act adopted by the US congress in 1994 with the aim of putting the Khmer Rouge perpetrators on trial – was established at Yale University in the USA in collaboration with an Australian university in 1995, headed up by Ben Kiernan.<sup>372</sup> The programme has now gathered large collections of source material on the mass killings, including confidential correspondence between members of the party leadership and Santebal. The *Documentation Centre of Cambodia* grew out of the Yale programme's Cambodian centre, with the aim of finding new sources and making documents available to victims' relatives and researchers, but also seeking to identify burial places, often situated close to the prisons.

## The academic debate

Compared to the research developments on the crimes against humanity of the Soviet communist regime, which have flourished over the last two decades in particular, the academic debate on the criminal history of the Khmer Rouge has been both insignificant and much less nuanced. Neither has research on the violence in Cambodia increased in scope in recent years. On the other hand, much has been written about the UN's efforts to instigate trials against the perpetrators. Some of these texts have had a dimension of legal history, but only a brief mention of such research will be made here. Compared with writings on the Soviet terror, a larger proportion of interpretations of the mass violence in Cambodia have been written by journalists and activists. This literature, with its propensity for narrative and strong political/ideological tendency to judge or defend the course of events, will also be omitted from this research review.

In terms of the general interpretations of the Soviet and Cambodian criminal histories, there are tangible similarities. There are researchers who approach a totalitarian theory model, by portraying the Cambodian tragedy as a terror campaign motivated by

ideology and political power, waged by a communist party and totalitarian state on a defenceless population who were forced into slave labour in large agricultural and construction projects, while the regime destroyed the social and cultural microcosms of its subjects. On the other hand, other researchers question the totalitarian nature of the Khmer Rouge's state and emphasise, in a revisionist manner, that social processes among the peasant population in rural Cambodia initiated the Khmer Rouge revolution in ways that could not have been planned or predicted, or place greater emphasis on the external political conflict situation. There are also traces of a dawning postrevisionist interest in cultural history and reception history dimensions, although such manifestations are as yet few and far between. However, it should be stressed that in the case of Cambodia, research thus far has mainly dealt with individual researchers' interpretations of issues that are central to or related to the criminal history: What were the motivations of the perpetrators? What was the role of the communist ideology? How many victims were there? Did the atrocities constitute genocide?

## A totalitarian regime

The most prominent researcher of the Khmer Rouge's crimes against humanity is Ben Kiernan, who is involved in almost all research projects that focus on the mass violence in Cambodia, and who, like Robert Conquest, is a researcher whom other commentators tend to return to and relate to constantly. His books, dominated by a general perspective of hierarchy and power realism, are often referred to as the most authoritative works on the criminal history. In his book on Pol Pot's route to power, he presents the violence as a chain reaction. First, the regime drove the 'new people' from the cities to rural labour camps, then they subjected their victims to famine while Cambodian rice was exported, then categories of people who represented or were thought to represent the defeated government were subjected to repression, then the terror broadened and escalated to include 'basic people' until 15 percent of them and one quarter of 'new people' had died as a result of direct or indirect violence, after which the Khmer Rouge intensified

---

<sup>372</sup> See [www.yale.edu/cgp](http://www.yale.edu/cgp).

their violence towards the ethnic minorities of Cambodia.<sup>373</sup>

At the top of the power hierarchy was the 'Party Centre', a closed and secret organisation, whose control over the government was more to do with family ties than ideological unity.<sup>374</sup> On the one hand, the Khmer Rouge genocide was a result of a – successful – political desire to win total power over Cambodian society, and a – less successful – desire to widen their sphere of influence to include parts of neighbouring Vietnam. Within this process, the peasant population constituted a terrorised and passive category of victims in the rising agrarian state. There was widespread support for the Khmer Rouge among the peasants, claims Kiernan, but this was quickly undermined by the massive attacks carried out by those in power on the basic values of the peasant society: land, family and religion; and by their transformation of the peasants to malnourished, unpaid 'contract workers'. Forced migrations, purges and forced labour, as well as interventions into the mental world of their citizens, were tools for obtaining totalitarian control over society and preventing any kind of opposition.

Behind the mass violence there was an ideological motivation to make Cambodia into the leading communist state. Kiernan's intentionalist conclusion has strong elements of the reasoning of totalitarian theory:

Despite its underdeveloped economy, the regime probably exerted more power over its citizens than any state in world history. It controlled and directed their public and private lives more closely than government had ever done.--- It concentrated more and more power, progressively provoking and eliminating regional challenges as well as dissidents and rivals in the capital.<sup>375</sup>

On the other hand, according to Kieran's interpretation the genocide was a policy – again a successful one – to base persecution, forced deportation, and mass killings, on racial and ethnic

distinctions more than on class differences. Only true Khmer people were to survive in Pol Pot's communist Cambodia. Vietnamese individuals and influences were to be wiped out in particular.<sup>376</sup> In total, according to Kiernan's estimations, roughly 1.5 million people fell victim to the ravages of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, either through direct killings or through a policy that claimed lives through famine and disease.<sup>377</sup>

An important question in a research context is where the Khmer Rouge got their political ideas and murderous political practices from. In a later text, Kiernan puts great emphasis on the colonial relationship with France, specifically with the Vichy government during the Second World War, which, via its colonial administration, put Cambodia in touch with a 'xenophobic European nationalism', based on racist and isolationist ideas about returning to agrarian values and the establishment of a 'Great Cambodia'. To the chagrin of the French administration however, according to Kiernan, these ideas did not inspire stronger loyalty towards the colonial power, but rather stimulated anti-colonial notions of ethnic nationalism.<sup>378</sup>

Pol Pot's biographers, David Chandler and Philip Short, have also naturally reflected on the origin of these ideas, but they place stronger emphasis on the ideological heritage of communism. Pot Pot – or Saloth Sar, as he was then called – and several others in the group that was to become the leadership of the Khmer Rouge, spent several formative postwar study years in Paris, establishing close personal relationships and joining the French communist party. On the initiative of a Khmer student organisation, they spent a summer in Tito's Yugoslavia, with its strong social mobilisation and socially-owned associated labour. The period from 1949 to 1953 was also a formative period for the communist movement: the French communist party was stronger than ever and

---

<sup>373</sup> Kiernan 2004, pp XXV–XXVI.

<sup>374</sup> Kiernan 2002, p 437.

<sup>375</sup> Kiernan 2002, p 464.

---

<sup>376</sup> For interpretations of the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge that have the same intentionalist features as Kiernan's, see for example Barnett 1983, pp 212–229, and Margolin 1999, pp 587–646.

<sup>377</sup> Kiernan 2002, pp 456–457.

<sup>378</sup> Kiernan 2007, pp 540–543.



characterised by the cult of personality surrounding Stalin, who died in 1953. The communists took power in China, and in Korea, communist armies took up arms against anti-communist forces. In Cambodia, the communists were at the forefront of the resistance movement against French colonial rule. Both Chandler and Short draw attention to the fact that Pol Pot, in the Marxist discussion cells of the day, did not stand out as a great ideologue, despite inspiration from the vigorous intellectual life of the French capital. It was not easy to apply Marx and Lenin's ideas to Cambodia. The thing that attracted him was the organisational strength of the communist party, and the opportunity of fellowship and advancement that this kind of party could offer a dedicated follower like him. The inspiration was decisive: "The Cambodians embraced Marxism not for theoretical insights, but to learn how to get rid of the French and to transform a feudal society which colonialism had left largely intact."<sup>379</sup>

Searching for an early intention, or at least finding the roots of the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror in a wider ideological context than that of their short four years in power, is central to this research. One of those who has placed most emphasis on the mass violence as a result of the Khmer Rouge's criminal lust for power, and that they 'perpetrated a level of violence upon the people of Cambodia that has rarely been matched in the history of the world', has expressed the idea that the regime in Cambodia pursued one long coherent thirty-year war from the 1960s until the late 1990s. It did not only affect the Cambodian people, who were murdered all over the country using similar methods, but also neighbouring countries and their people.<sup>380</sup>

### **A peasants' revolution**

Left-leaning Michael Vickery represents a diametrically opposite interpretation. He categorically rejects the applicability of the term genocide in the Cambodian case. In his bottom-up history with revisionist elements, the course of events between 1975 and 1979 is described as a successful peasants' revolution, with the Khmer Rouge as the revolutionaries. They were much more than power-

hungry politicians – they were intellectual groups with a middle class background and a distinct and romanticised sympathy for the poor people in rural areas, but with little awareness that their radical policies would lead to the violence that took place. The mass violence was therefore an unintentional consequence, a development that was beyond the control of the leadership of the Khmer Rouge.<sup>381</sup> 'Evacuation' of the urban population during the early stages of the revolution was certainly not a conscious political move meant to terrorise them, but an honest attempt to save them from the threat of famine, and the authorities also made an effort to keep existing industry alive. It was only at a later stage of the revolution, in 1977-1978, when everything was already out of hand, that the massive food shortage occurred and large groups of people died of starvation.<sup>382</sup>

As proof that there was no hierarchical or straightforward exercise of power, but that the process was more complex, Vickery argues that the policies of the Khmer Rouge also had different effects in different geographical areas, which, in his eyes, suggests that the 'zone authorities' outside the Party Centre, with their varying ideological approaches and political programmes, and often with their own internal conflicts, had a significant influence over the course of events. He also points out that the mass violence varied in nature and effects at different stages of the Khmer Rouge period in government.<sup>383</sup> Western commentators have often chosen to focus on regions where the violence was particularly intense and brutal.<sup>384</sup>

For Vickery therefore, communism as an ideology, which was such an important element of the Khmer Rouge leadership for Western intellectuals, is of much less significance in explaining the massacres than ideologies closer to the everyday ideas of the peasants: nationalism, populism and an agrarian ideology. In addition, Vickery prefers to talk about 'communisms',

---

<sup>379</sup> Chandler 1992, chapter 3, and Short 2005, chapter 2. Quote from Short, p 71.

<sup>380</sup> Etcheson 2005, chapter 1. Quote from p 4.

<sup>381</sup> Vickery 1985, pp 66, 287–290.

<sup>382</sup> Vickery 1985, pp 79–80.

<sup>383</sup> Vickery 1983, pp 99-135. For an interpretation similar to Vickery's as regards the regime's level of control, see Heder & Tittmore 2001.

<sup>384</sup> Vickery 1985, p 101.

since he says that different communist factions opposed and fought against each other, with the result that the violence escalated further.<sup>385</sup> Finally, he also revises the interpretation of the regime's treatment of ethnic and religious minorities. With reference to the Cham people, he claims that the victim toll has been significantly exaggerated and that the Khmer Rouge never had a coordinated policy to exterminate them, but that Cham individuals were killed or survived in the same proportions as the Cambodian population in general:

The Chams of course, like everyone else, were denied the right to practice their religion in Democratic Kampuchea, and no doubt their temples were converted to the same lay uses as Buddhist temples...; but one must think carefully about stories that they were forced to eat pork, since the general complaint of all refugees is that there was too little meat of any kind. It may have been true that Chams found themselves in places where pork was the only meat ever distributed at all, since it had always been the most commonly used meat in Cambodia, but that does not necessarily signify discrimination by the new authorities.<sup>386</sup>

It is hardly surprising that Vickery's total number of victims of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia is only half of Kiernan's total: a maximum of 740,000 individuals, 300,000 of whom were executed.<sup>387</sup> This is a result of differing demographic trend projections in relation to the only existing census in Cambodia, which was carried out in 1962. However, it is very clear that the different figures are closely tied to the different general frameworks of interpretation, which, in turn, are based on differing ideological starting points.

### **A genocidal society**

An intermediary framework of interpretation rejects the perspective of totalitarian theory that Pol Pot had absolute power over Cambodia, in favour of a bottom-up perspective, but at the same time it emphasises that the Cambodian peasant population in general terms did not have revolutionary ambitions. As such, the

Khmer revolution becomes the result of the revolutionaries' highly developed ability to manipulate the peasant population effectively, infiltrating closed villages and exploiting all kinds of internal conflicts in order to transform local politics and thus mobilise people towards collective goals that they did not actually comprehend.<sup>388</sup> Or, it was not at all motivated by the revolutionaries' desire to create a new society, but by their desire to tear down the old one as part of an ongoing revolutionary process, where all social relations were turned upside down: while the old Cambodia respected age, education, religion and non-physical work, the new regime turned to young, uneducated physical labourers, often with no religious convictions.<sup>389</sup> In this society, violence became an end in itself, and gradually those in power came to undermine themselves:

The rifles of the Khmer Rouge destroyed the old power, but those same guns could not in the end create a new power base. That requires a degree of popular support and understanding of the new order that the Khmer Rouge never cultivated or won. They ruled, instead, through violence and terror.<sup>390</sup>

These interpretations could be described in terms of the meeting of a contemporary revolutionary movement and a wider social and deeper historical context of interpretation, or as conscious attempts on the part of the Khmer Rouge to break from this context, which nonetheless strikes back at them and causes their actions to have unexpected consequences. Cambodia is thus the 'sick man' of South East Asia, with a regime that condones extreme political solutions in a country characterised by extremely weak economic growth and widespread poverty.<sup>391</sup>

Some researchers have focused on using a sociological perspective to identify the contemporary processes and structural conditions surrounding the actions of the Khmer Rouge, which they were able use to gain support and legitimacy. One key term in this context is war, which has increased the significance of the

---

<sup>385</sup> Vickery 1985, p 150.

<sup>386</sup> Vickery 1985, p 182.

<sup>387</sup> Vickery 1985, p 185.

<sup>388</sup> Thion 1983, pp 10–33.

<sup>389</sup> Jackson 1979, p 82.

<sup>390</sup> Becker 1986, p 221.

<sup>391</sup> For an analysis of the 'sick man of South East Asia', see Margolin 1999, p 628.

American bombings in the development of Cambodian history, moving them up the research agenda. Research has shown that more or less everything in Cambodia was seen as a legitimate target, and that gradually, over the course of the civil war, bombs were dropped on increasingly densely populated areas. The verdict on Nixon, Kissinger and the USA has sometimes been hard:

In Cambodia, the imperatives of a small and vulnerable people were consciously sacrificed to the interests of strategic design.--- The country was used to practice ill-conceived theories and to fortify a notion of American credibility that could in fact only be harmed by such actions.<sup>392</sup>

Another of these terms is mobilisation of the poor Khmer peasant class. This was partly a result of the abovementioned bombings, which forced large groups of peasants to flee, giving the Khmer Rouge a massive recruitment ground among the homeless, destitute and bitter refugees who had been torn up by the roots. This mobilisation was also a result of the Khmer Rouge skilfully reaching out to a rural population that was searching for support and protection, but that had been left to its fate by Lon Nol's regime. Indeed, many of these people did not have the ideological convictions that the leadership of the regime had gained through abstract theoretical studies, and the Khmer Rouge lacked a sufficiently stable and homogenous political infrastructure. The regime's solution to this problem was radicalisation and mass violence:

The uniqueness of the Khmer Rouge case was in the radical literalism with which all these abstract principles were applied and the virtual absence of institutional restraint that could have forestalled such spiralling disaster. In the face of persistent factionalism and regionalism, the clandestine atmosphere and systemic paranoia which prohibited even internal discussion, radical tendencies which were evident in other revolutionary experiences, went virtually unchecked in democratic Kampuchea.<sup>393</sup>

The perspective here is distinctly functional. Unequal power and strength relations, and other factual circumstances, ensured that the Khmer Rouge were almost driven to mass violence in an accelerated process of 'cumulative radicalisation' and where viable alternatives seemed to be lacking. For researchers focusing on the structural conditions that reigned in Cambodia in the 1970s, it is easy to present such an interpretation. For such researchers, it has also been quite natural to compare the genocide in Cambodia with other genocides. The fact that comparison has been a more common approach in the case of Cambodia than in the case of the Soviet Union is probably to do with the Cambodian criminal history being more clearly defined and straightforward, despite the differences in interpretation presented here.<sup>394</sup>

However, comparative studies rarely establish a deeper historical perspective. They also often imply that the mass killing was the result of long-harboured intentions, although this may not necessarily be the case. A historical perspective can also be used by researchers to identify historically developed cultural traits and mental structures that affect those who act in a situation of escalated violence, either as perpetrators or as victims.

### History and culture

As has been mentioned, and as with research on Soviet communist crimes against humanity, there are relatively straightforward interpretations of the mass violence in Cambodia that fit the paradigms of totalitarian theory and revisionism. The revisionist interpretation includes researchers who explain the violence primarily as a result of a bottom-up reaction to Khmer Rouge policies, as well as some who analyse it more generally as structurally conditioned and rooted in a genocidal society. There is no equally clear postrevisionist approach, which may to a large extent be a result of the limited number of researchers involved in studies of the criminal history of the Khmer Rouge. Nonetheless, some postrevisionist works have appeared in recent years, if this term can be applied to works with a dual interest in both the perpetrators and their intentions, and the historical

---

<sup>392</sup> Shawcross 1979, p 393f.

<sup>393</sup> Cf Um 1998, p 144.

---

<sup>394</sup> Cf Raszelenberg 1999, pp 62–93, Fein 1993, pp 796–823, Cook (ed.) 2005, and Kiernan 2008.

dimension, perceived as cultural understanding and mentality. This perspective also involves giving greater attention to a reception historical approach.

The researcher who, more than anyone else among the pioneers of research on Cambodia, can be defined as the innovator and inspiration of such double-sided and deep historical perspectives on the revolutionary mass violence in Cambodia during the second half of the 1970s, is David Chandler. He places particular emphasis on two kinds of historical continuity that are relevant to the understanding of the Khmer Rouge regime, notions that, in his opinion, both propelled and undermined the revolution. The essence is that not even radical social change, like a revolution, can take place in a vacuum. The first continuity, according to Chandler, is made up of strong and widespread mental images linked to Cambodia's magnificent history, to the unique and superior qualities of the Cambodian 'race', and to Vietnam's position as the great eternal enemy. Not least during the colonial period, French researchers had helped to promote the idea of pre-colonial Cambodia as a higher civilisation, and as such, says Chandler in the same spirit as Kiernan, above, they 'decreed the Cambodia's subsequent attempts to live within its means represented a decline'. The fact that Cambodia's history went wrong was the fault of foreigners.<sup>395</sup>

On a level of political practice, despite paying rhetorical tribute to the collective leadership that was to be a historical break with the past for Cambodia, he emphasises the significance of the fact that the power of the Khmer Rouge was concentrated in the hands of a few people, whose actions could not be questioned but were given quasi-divine status. Ideas of fallibility and total freedom from responsibility were linked to notions that the path of history was fixed and unavoidable, and that the Khmer Rouge, with their revolution, were simply carrying it into effect. As such, reports of mistakes and problems could be dismissed, or blamed on evil forces that stood in the way of history. In Chandler's view, Pol Pot could not

distinguish between differences of opinion and treachery.

Cambodia had not previously developed political traditions of power sharing, opposition and election, neither during centuries of absolute monarchy nor during French colonial rule, and when colonial rule came to an end in 1953, domestic politics was seen as the personal domain of the ruler of the time. This was not only the point of view of the leader – broad swathes of the Cambodian population also saw politics as submission to and dependence on the ruling power.<sup>396</sup> In his book on S-21, Chandler summarises how this political culture was active below the surface of grandiose political rhetoric and brutal political practice:

This culture of exploitation, protection, obedience and dependency had deep roots in Cambodian social practice and strengthened the grip of those in power in Democratic Kampuchea in spite or even because of the power-holders' insistence that prerevolutionary power relations had been destroyed. Hierarchies, patronage, and "paying homage", so characteristic of "exploitative" society (the Cambodian phrase translated as "exploit", *chi choan*, literally means "ride on and kick") had not been extinguished by the revolution. Instead, familiar, lopsided relationships involving a new set of masters and servants (however much they might be deemed "empowered" and designated as comrades), as well as a new set of victims, came into play.<sup>397</sup>

In concrete terms, Chandler's interpretation underlines that the violence directed towards certain people groups in Cambodia, for example when the cities were emptied, was a conscious policy from a close-knit group of communist politicians who had waited a long time for this opportunity. The use of violence was 'a calculated, political decision, part of a wider agenda, with an economic and ideological rationale', with the ultimate aim to 'topple and overturn prerevolutionary Cambodian society'.<sup>398</sup> This policy meant that the Khmer Rouge alienated other groups of politicians and broad groups of the

---

<sup>395</sup> Chandler 1991, p 67. For other researchers who focus on the roots of Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia's history and culture, see Ponchaud 1978, Thion 1993, and Frieson 1993, pp 33–50.

---

<sup>396</sup> Chandler 1991, pp 3–6, 236–246.

<sup>397</sup> Chandler 1999, p 149.

<sup>398</sup> Chandler 1991, p 247.

population, particularly during their latter part of their period in power, when their policies were radicalised. Targets were made increasingly unrealistic, paranoid conspiracy theories intensified, and the tense relationship with Vietnam escalated into open conflict, thereby becoming more important than utopian goals. However, according to Chandler the regime had not reckoned that the costs of the revolution would be so great – to a large extent these costs had to be attributed to the power of history. It may be this ‘limited intentionality’ that causes him to avoid using the term genocide to describe the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge.

Anthropological research has deepened our knowledge of the cultural conditions of the Cambodian mass violence, particularly regarding the deeply rooted notions of obedience and submission. The ‘disproportionate revenge’ has been presented as another significant factor. In the light of the fact that honour and status play an important part in the Cambodian culture, it is important to repay good deeds. The opposite is also true however – revenge, and its symbolic manifestation in the sacrificial victim, are also important aspects of Cambodian culture. By repaying not only ‘an eye for an eye’ but ‘a head for an eye’, the aggrieved party raises their status in relation to their opponent. By dealing a ‘final defeat’ to one’s opponent, one ensures that reprisals will not develop into a chain reaction. Such basic cultural features cannot single-handedly explain why massacres take place, but they were strengthened in the context of the Cambodia of the Khmer Rouge to become a kind of revolutionary consciousness of the strong ideological emphasis on class enmity, and of the need to settle scores with old ‘oppressors’ and ‘American lackeys’ that was emphasised in propaganda and indoctrination. The external course of events, in the form of bombings, killings, famine and other external sources of dissatisfaction and hatred, had a reinforcing effect.<sup>399</sup>

In this cultural setting, Buddhism, the religion practiced by the vast majority of Cambodians, has also come into focus. There are researchers who place strong emphasis on the basic differences between

Buddhism and ‘Khmer Rougism’; Buddhists advocate a culture of non-violence that is far from the political practice of the Khmer Rouge. However, there are other elements that are more compatible, such as anti-individualism, extreme egalitarianism, anti-materialism and an emphasis on self-purification and ascetism. In Buddhism the leaders of the Khmer Rouge found support for the establishment of a hierarchical society, placing themselves at the top as an expression of their superior insights and authority. However, Buddhist teaching also leaves room for ideas of social mobility and change, which are less suited to power seeking intentions.<sup>400</sup>

There are also researchers who point out in more distinct terms how the cultural expressions of Buddhism can be related to the Khmer policy of violence: *Dhamma*, the absolute principle, the system of rules or life path that is advocated in Buddha’s teaching and is gathered in the three Buddhist ‘baskets’, repeated itself in *Angkar*, the party organisation; the Buddhist monks principles for self-denial in life were reproduced in the Khmer Rouge’s disciplined regulatory system; and the meetings on the theme of ‘criticism and self-criticism’ that the party set up in order to purify participants from the individual and the private, until their personalities had been erased, point to Buddhist religious practices related to introspection, study and annihilation of the individual in favour of the purely spiritual. It has been pointed out that these are not only parallels that the Khmer Rouge leaders were happy to admit and speak of, but that they may also, subconsciously, have facilitated the work of young adherents in accepting the new ideas and practices of the Khmer Rouge: ‘To youthful Khmer Rouge devotees, echoes of the novitiate placed the new communist teaching in a familiar setting’.<sup>401</sup>

In addition, it has been stressed that Buddhist teaching contains strategies, though they may be contradictory, to overcome the memories of the terrible events that took place in Cambodia during the regime of the Khmer Rouge. The law of karma condemns the idea that sinners should suffer and be punished for the sins they have committed. However,

---

<sup>399</sup> Hinton 2005, chapter 1. See also Hinton 1998, pp 352–377.

<sup>400</sup> Hinton 2005, pp 186–187. See also recurring discussions in Ponchaud 1978 and Etcheson 1984.

<sup>401</sup> Short 2004, p 235.

Buddhism also teaches that anger and hatred are expressions of emotions that are a result of ignorance, and should be overcome internally.<sup>402</sup> This perspective leads us to another element of postrevisionist research: reception history.

### Reception history

As in the case of the Soviet communist terror, postrevisionist questions on how posterity has chosen to remember, represent and use the history of the violent regime of the Khmer Rouge have arisen not only among the victims of the mass violence and their survivors, but also in the research community. It has already been pointed out that researchers have made good use of the opportunity to interview surviving eye witnesses.

In contrast with the Soviet case, in Cambodia after 1979 there was no prolonged period of silence due to 'major' ideological factors or 'minor' issues of political practice. In Cambodia, the power position of the terror regime was broken abruptly. Just one year after one hundred thousand Vietnamese soldiers took Phnom Penh in January 1979, Tuol Sleng, or S-21, opened as a museum where the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge were exhibited for all to see and where Cambodians could search for information on missing relatives. At the same time, Choeung Ek also opened, an area of mass graves or 'killing fields' around a Buddhist grave filled with skulls, located near Tuol Sleng. They soon became two of the city's most popular tourist attractions. This was not primarily an attempt to give people the opportunity to remember and process the trauma of the previous years, which has happened as survivors have erected their own monuments all over Cambodia. Rather, these sites can be seen as, as well as a source of income, historiopolitical measures to legitimise the new government and the Vietnamese intervention, and to delegitimise the Khmer Rouge. The Vietnamese claim the death toll was over three million people; while the deposed Khmer Rouge admitted to 20,000 dead.<sup>403</sup>

It has been pointed out that the success of this legitimisation may have been reduced by the fact that the memorial sites were opened by the Vietnamese

archenemy of the Khmer Rouge, which has led Cambodians to claim, like the Khmer Rouge, that they were fabricated by the Vietnamese propaganda machine. In witness thereof, an inconsistent and changeable official Cambodian memorial policy has affected people's reception of the criminal history, and caused the symbolism and meaning of the memorial sites to change with time. While hatred of the Khmer Rouge – there is an annual 'day of hate' – characterised the period until 1988 when the Vietnamese retreated from Cambodia, since then policies have featured more proposals of peace, forgiveness, reconciliation and forgetting. The lack of will to put the Khmer Rouge on trial should be seen in the context of an absence of official, state initiatives for remembrance.<sup>404</sup> Finally, the lack of a stable memorial policy is also an important aspect of the wider and deeper issue of the development of the Khmer identity in the traumatic history of Cambodia, a question that research has thus far only touched upon.<sup>405</sup>

---

<sup>402</sup> Hinton 2005, p 94.

<sup>403</sup> Heuveline 1998, p 49.

---

<sup>404</sup> Ledgerwood 2002, pp 103–122, Williams 2004, pp 234–254, and Hughes 2005, pp 257–280.

<sup>405</sup> See Heder & Ledgerwood 1996, pp 19–26.

# **SUMMARY**

KLAS-GÖRAN KARLSSON

In one sense, it may be misleading to call the mass violence of the Soviet, Chinese and Cambodian communist regimes ‘crimes against humanity’. The violence essentially targeted their own citizens, collectively defined as social classes that were enemies of the regime, or ethnic, political or professional groups. General terms such as ‘enemies of the people’, which could cover all groups and categories that were perceived as having a hostile attitude to the communist parties and states, were particularly useful in the regime’s attempts to stigmatise and demonise.

However, in two other senses, the term ‘crimes against humanity’ constitutes a highly useful analytical tool. Firstly, it is a legal term that is well suited to describing the broad, multifaceted state terrorist activities that were carried out by the communist regimes that have formed the focus of this research review. These activities included the direct mass killings of politically undesirable elements, as well as forced deportations and forced labour, partly based on economic considerations, and affected collective groups that can be defined politically, socially, ethnically and religiously. This emphasis on the fact that crimes against humanity refer to attacks on the civilian population and constitute a state of war, as stated in the Rome Statute that regulates international legislation, is also relevant.<sup>406</sup> Partly because war actually went hand in hand with, or was a contributing factor to, crimes against humanity in the Soviet Union and Cambodia, partly because the communist societies were highly militarised in various ways, and partly because in all three states and societies dealt with here there was a general perception of a direct threat of war, which in turn seemed to escalate the development of the terror process.

Secondly, these criminal histories contain important lessons from which all can learn. They constitute some of the most disastrous events to affect the human race in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it is of great importance – scientifically, intellectually, morally and existentially – to get answers to questions on why the communist parties’ seizures of power in particular, on recurring occasions over the last century, have led to such large-scale crimes. These crimes count as offences that

target mankind as a whole because, as it has been expressed, ‘the very fact that a fellow human being could conceive and commit it demeans every member of the human race, wherever they live and whatever their culture or creed’.<sup>407</sup> Important questions include why these crimes were committed, how they were committed, whether they can be committed again, and how we can prevent them from being repeated. The first two questions form the normal focus of academic thought. However, in the political arena and from a broader perspective of human historical awareness, the emphasis falls more on lessons for the future.

Bearing in mind that this report charts academic research that has been carried out with a focus on the crimes against humanity of communist regimes, it is natural that questions relating to the origins and development of these criminal histories take a central place. The attention of the research community has focused on the driving forces behind the crimes, including ideological forces, and on the cultural and structural circumstances present when the crimes were initiated and committed. As has become clear, more recent research has begun to show an interest in the reception history of the communist regimes’ crimes. Historical experiences, memories, films, monuments, textbooks, debates and scientific monographs that interpret and represent a traumatic past and that suddenly come to life mean that history can live on and affect a society and humanity as a whole, long after the historical events in question take place. A reception history perspective could also be applied to this report.

## **The official history and the scientific interpretation patterns**

There is a type of historical writing that cannot be said to have much to do with science and as a result has not been mentioned in this research review. Its purpose is not so much to interpret history as to influence the present and point out the best path in the future. Such writings of history have been prominent in countries where communist regimes have committed crimes against humanity. In these cases, history has been adapted for political and

---

<sup>406</sup> Cf Bring 2002, p 93.

---

<sup>407</sup> Robertson 2006, p IX.



ideological purposes, which has usually caused the criminal histories to be told in a manner that differs from this report. In some cases silence has reigned, while in other cases, the burden of responsibility has been radically redistributed. *Istoriya SSSR*, monopolitical textbooks for Soviet schools and other broad reader groups, claim that Lenin's intention was to seize power in Russia using peaceful means, but that the brutal opposition of internal enemies, like the Cossack counterrevolution, forced the Bolsheviks to resort to violence against their will in order to 'liquidate the remains of the feudal class society', eagerly backed by 'the people'. The situation in rural areas in 1928 is described as follows:

The class struggle in rural areas intensified. By beginning to sabotage the state food purchases, the kulaks strived to cause famine in the country in order to put a spoke in the wheel of Soviet economic policy. The kulaks intensified their struggle against the kolkhoz structure: they burned down kolkhoz buildings and killed the livestock that was collectively owned. They turned to increasingly drastic measures, murdering village and kolkhoz leaders, representatives of the Soviet government, and communists. The Soviet government responded to these crimes with firm measures. No mercy was shown to terrorists and arsonists. Those who had withheld provisions were put on trial. Poor and middle peasants supported these measures. Anger against the kulaks grew among rural workers.<sup>408</sup>

These textbooks follow ideological dogmata and formulaic language, which can be traced back to Stalin's own writing of history in what is usually called *Kratkij kurs*, the brief history of the Bolsheviks that Stalin himself put his name to in 1938.<sup>409</sup> It provided the guiding principles for all Soviet historians for half a century.<sup>410</sup>

This kind of historical writing is entirely lacking in what are traditionally defined as scientific qualities. There are no presentations of problems, no critical analyses, no openness to dissenting interpretations, and no series of notes that provide backing for analytical conclusions in empirical documents and observations. The needs and demands of the present single-handedly determine the representation of the past. Nonetheless, there are elements of formulaic language, chiselled from ideological and theoretical starting points, in the academic research that has been analysed in this review, although it does not have the same dogmatic constancy and free-hand construction. These basic interpretation patterns that provide a kind of preunderstanding for writers of history have been called paradigms.

In the case of the Soviet criminal history, and to some extent also the Cambodian one (although considerably fewer researchers are involved), it is relatively unproblematic to distinguish three such paradigms: totalitarian theory, revisionist and postrevisionist. In terms of research on the Soviet Union, these three paradigms connect to a larger, traditionally historiographical context. The researchers who form part of the totalitarian theory school of thought take their starting point in interpretation patterns dating back to the early Cold War period, and, regarding the Soviet communist terror, to Robert Conquest's epoch-making *The Great Terror* from 1968. This interpretation, which still has its representatives in the academic community, sees the crimes of the communist regimes as initiated from above and primarily motivated by a desire for political power, which means that the heavy burden of responsibility falls on the communist leaders, Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot, their leadership hierarchies and their henchmen in the secret police services. The vertical nature of the analysis is prominent, in a double sense. Firstly in the sense that the chronological order of the leaders is important, since there is an underlying notion of continuity or development from one to the next, such that Lenin is the founder and Pol Pot the leader who wants to outdo both Stalin and Mao in his brutality and commitment to communism. Secondly, the communist society of totalitarian theory is strictly vertical in the sense of power relationships and hierarchically organised, meaning that lower levels of society could only respond passively to the intentions and orders of their leaders, whether they were

---

<sup>408</sup> Kim 1964, p 168.

<sup>409</sup> The book was published in Swedish for the first time one year later in 1939, under the title *Sovjetunionens kommunistiska partis (bolsjevikerna) historia*.

<sup>410</sup> Relatively extensive research has now been carried out on the official communist writing of history, its development, and its impact on society as a whole. See for example several articles in Afanasev 1996 and Watson 1994.

bureaucrats who supported their leaders in carrying out atrocities, or victim groups who were affected by them. However, these lower social levels are not as clear-cut in terms of hierarchy, since the arbitrary nature of the communist terror could change perpetrators to victims, and vice versa, in the blink of an eye. Totalitarian theory does also include a horizontal perspective, in so far as it places strong emphasis on similarities and parallels between the crimes against humanity of the Soviet communist regime and the partly simultaneous annihilation of European Jews by the Nazi regime.

With its characteristic focus on the power politics of the communist party and the core of the communist state, and on the unifying communist ideology, this paradigm of totalitarian theory has been noticeably reluctant to place the communist crimes against humanity in wider geographical, social and cultural frameworks of interpretation. It has been more in line with this paradigm to write biographical works on the communist leaders and those responsible for the terror. At the other end of the terror process researchers within the totalitarian theory paradigm, lacking a broader basis of information, have attached great importance to information given by those who were affected by the crimes of the communist regimes but who managed to escape abroad.

This choice of source material has been strongly criticised by revisionist researchers, judging it to be one-sided and distorted and therefore 'of little use in understanding the revolutionary regime or for situating it properly within wider contemporary history'.<sup>411</sup> Revisionist research constitutes a paradigm that can be seen to a large extent as an inversion of totalitarian theory, or a complete revision thereof. Its interpretations are permeated by a bottom-up perspective, often with its starting point in class terminology, which means that the terror is carried out and explained on the social level where peasants, workers and soldiers lived their daily lives. However, this has seldom been the case. To a greater extent, it has been an issue of identifying social, economic and political processes that have been able to show that the use of violence was much less straightforward and

homogenous than indicated by the reductionist approach of totalitarian theory. It has been claimed that the result of communist policy was not what was intended, and that Stalin, as in John Arch Getty's abovementioned account, 'stumbled into everything from collectivization to foreign policy'. The key words of the revisionist paradigm, taken from Getty's exemplary *Origins of the Great Purges* from 1985, are complexity, structurelessness, insecurity, inner conflict, opposition, mistakes and chaos.

In their emphasis on the diversity and variety of the criminal histories, revisionists have sought to underline the differences between the processes of violence in the communist states, and by doing so, the differing background factors and motives. However, they have been consistent in toning down the importance of the communist ideology in favour of a functionalist framework of interpretation with emphasis on changeable contemporary variables and processes, with some emphasis on external threats. In the case of the Soviet Union, the link to a broadly defined process of modernisation has made it possible to place the Soviet state under Stalin within a pattern where similarities with contemporary western states have become more prominent than differences, while parallels with Nazism and the Holocaust have been categorically rejected. Using this method, it has also become possible to leave Lenin out of the group of communist leaders who chose mass violence as a tool to safeguard their dictatorial power.

If revisionism was a direct and radical reaction to totalitarian theory, and as such a revolutionary development in scientific terms, postrevisionism is a collective term for a series of research focuses that have developed out of totalitarian theory and revisionism in an evolutionary manner, without directly rebelling against or agreeing with them. If we call totalitarian theory a thesis and revisionism its antithesis, postrevisionism could perhaps be called a synthesis. The main element drawn from totalitarian theory is an attempt to save the power political dimension from above, by directing renewed interest towards the communist party and secret police and their terror institutions: the Gulag, S-21 and Maoism's laogai ('reform through labour') camps, and towards the relationship between the men who contributed more than anyone else to crimes against humanity. The revisionist heritage is primarily made

---

<sup>411</sup> Vickery 1985, p 26.

up of an interest in the criminal history as it developed in the meeting between the intentions of the regime and the social reality, a meeting between often contradictory figures, which postrevisionism assigns to local society, to specific groups or institutions, or even to the micro level of history, to the individuals who were subjected to the arbitrary violence of the regime. In this context, research on the Soviet terror, not least as it was carried out in Russia, has become so empirically extensive that it is possible to talk about a cumulative research development.

The postrevisionist area of interest also includes a scientific movement turning away from the criminal histories themselves, towards their cultural representations. This movement can be described as double-sided. On the one hand, it is about studying the linguistic, ideological and cultural expressions of this mass violence in their historical context, in order to get answers to questions on how the communist regimes were able to justify their use of violence to their own citizens and the world around them and on how the individuals and collectives who populated these violent societies were able to orientate themselves in their turbulent everyday lives and create meaning in their lives, despite insecurity and threats. On the other hand, postrevisionist researchers have also given more importance to cultural representations of these criminal histories created in hindsight, often in the form of memorials, monuments, symbols and myths. The starting point of this reception history approach is that living history can make its mark in different ways, not least politically, both in and beyond the societies affected by the crimes of communist regimes. The constantly heated debate around the possibility and desirability of comparing Nazism and communism, Hitler's and Stalin's violent regimes, and Auschwitz and the Gulag, as presented in this review, is one example of how the communist regimes' crimes against humanity continue to create conflict long after they were committed.

## **Paradigm shifts**

The general explanations for these paradigm changes must be sought in both intrascientific and extrascientific developments. The totalitarian theory paradigm was strongly rooted in the general outlook of the Cold War, characterised by an absolute antagonism between the capitalist and communist systems. It is hardly wrong to claim, as critics often do,

that during the early post-war decades, totalitarian theory developed into a Cold War weapon against the Soviet Union. However, it should be added that the same theory, applied in such a way as to bring out both similarities and differences, has also contributed to moving important issues up the agenda of the academic community, relating to the relationship between Nazism, fascism and communism, and between the regimes that ruled in the name of these ideologies. It should also be pointed out that at the time when totalitarian theory got a footing in the academic community, there was a general, realistic conviction on the primacy of power politics and political history, and on the superior significance of the party and the state. Despite the fact that the starting point was the global ideological conflict between West and East, the totalitarian theory paradigm can nonetheless be described as a consensus theory, based on the ubiquity of a firmly hierarchical social structure and an interest in psychological reasoning on power and powerlessness.

Revisionism is an aspect of the general radicalisation of society that took place around the end of the 1960s, in the wake of the Vietnam War and growing general criticism of capitalist society, and of the wave of left-wing thinking, 'the new left', which decades later came to set its mark on intellectual life and scientific thinking. Its ideological sources of inspiration included Lenin and Mao, and this left-wing movement was strong when the Khmer Rouge seized power in Cambodia in the mid 1970s, although for many radicals, Pol Pot hardly stood out as an ideological guiding light. Naturally, following on from totalitarian theory in linking communist ideological inspirers to large-scale mass violence against the 'people' who formed the basis of society from a left-wing point of view, was not a popular notion. It had to be revised. This revision involved an aspect of social history, developing as it did from a younger generation of historians' perspective on history during the post-war period. The basic idea was that traditional history – political, centred on individuals and events – had to be replaced by an interest in aspects such as class and conflict-based history, social movements and the protest phenomenon, and sweeping social changes such as the processes of modernisation and industrialisation. From around 1980 onwards when this social history approach, which often but far from always had Marxist features, was applied to the

communist crimes against humanity as they had been described in the interpretation of totalitarian theory, the revisionist paradigm arose, with its emphasis on social class relationships and social conflict. With names like Sheila Fitzpatrick, John Arch Getty and Lynne Viola, who through their interest in socioeconomic and demographic conditions had good relations with prominent economic and demographic historians like R. W. Davies and Stephen Wheatcroft, the revisionists are a generation of historians, or rather several generations, who have had a dominant influence over the interpretation of the Soviet communist terror for decades, both in the Anglo-Saxon research community and more widely. From the late 1980s onwards, the revisionist movement was able to benefit from a wider range of documentation on the Soviet terror, made available for research and debate by the glasnost policy.

In recent years, several leading revisionists have altered their frameworks of interpretation in what has been called a postrevisionist direction, which shows the continuity between these paradigms. The postrevisionist interest in linguistic discourse, cultural phenomena and representations of reality reflects a preoccupation, both in society and in science, with issues of ethnicity and identity, memories and morals. Oral history has spread, along with other anthropological approaches, causing a shift in the focus of scientific research, towards human perception, interpretation and representation of the crimes, more than on the crimes committed as such. Underlying this postrevisionism there is an attitude of questioning that is at least as radical as the revisionists' questioning of totalitarian theory, since it is based on fundamental doubts regarding whether it is possible to reach the truth based on all accepted knowledge of what has happened in the past. Neither totalitarian theorists nor revisionists have shown any doubt that it is possible to reach scientifically-based knowledge of the criminal histories of the communist regimes. They only disagreed on which aspects of this history are the most important. However, such a radical questioning of the very status and value of scientific knowledge, which in the academic community is usually defined as postmodern, poststructural or postcolonial, has not yet made major inroads into research on the crimes of the communist regimes. This fact has been attributed to the nature of the research area; questioning whether these criminal histories really 'existed' in historical

reality is close to banalisation, trivialisation and denial, which are currently seen as morally reprehensible.

In comparative terms, it is more than clear from this review of research on the crimes against humanity of the communist regimes in the Soviet Union, China and Cambodia, that research on the Soviet Union is the most well-developed of the three. It is the most extensive, not least as a result of the explosive growth in this research area since the early 1990s. In addition, it stands out as more theoretically elaborate and analytically qualified than similar research on China and Cambodia. Various explanations for this can be found. One is that the Soviet communist criminal history is the oldest and the original of the three, which means that research on it has been ongoing for longer. In addition, scientific interest in what has been called 'the genetic code of communism' should reasonably lead to research on Soviet communism gaining a unique position. Also, research on the Soviet terror, despite the troublesome lack of relevant source material, has benefited from the antagonistic interest in the 'East' during the Cold War, as shown by Soviet defectors among others, and from the double-edged focus of the totalitarianism debate on Nazism and Soviet communism, Hitler and Stalin. Finally, adding the West's greater familiarity with the Russian language and culture than with the Chinese or Cambodian languages and cultures, it becomes easy to comprehend the differences.

Research on the crimes against humanity of communist regimes has primarily been driven by Anglo-Saxon researchers, especially in the cases of the analyses of the Soviet Union and Cambodia. These researchers have been and are integrated members of a greater research community and of discussions on scientific theory. Where researchers of a non-Anglo-Saxon background have participated, this has remarkably often been in the context of wider research networks based at American universities. It is likely that the existence of this large research community offers the best explanation of the similarities between the development of research on crimes against humanity in the Soviet Union and in Cambodia. It is only in the analysis of totalitarian ideologies and movements, and in particular, in comparisons between communism and Nazism, that researchers with non-Anglo-Saxon backgrounds have played prominent roles. In the 1980s in Germany, the historians' dispute

took place, with its background in broad social controversy regarding the legacy of Nazism. In France in the 1990s, Furet's critical analysis of communism and the *Black Book of Communism* were published, both with roots in the strong position of communism in French intellectual, cultural and political life. The German and French debates have made a significant mark on international research on the crimes of communist regimes.

Research in the countries where the communist regimes' crimes against humanity were carried out has, under these regimes, been full of limitations in terms of the extent to which researchers have been able to participate in international research networks and present interpretations that differ from those accepted by the regime in question. In *Kratkij kurs* the Soviet communist terror history is not mentioned. In China, during the first three decades of the People's Republic, there was nothing that merits the title of serious research on 'actual existing Maoism'. As one of Mao Zedong's ghost writers expressed on several occasions in the mid-1950s: in writings that 'seek to reveal shortcomings', it was an absolute necessity to begin with a detailed account of all the positive, good victories that have been won and that continue to be won, etc etc. Only after that was it possible, if it served a good political purpose and even then only to a limited extent and as a kind of rhetorical contrast device, to allow a few drops of the bitter truth to mix with the rest of the text. In the 1960s, books that depicted a reality, or the memory of a reality, that was not compatible with the official, romantic and 100 percent optimistic interpretation, were only published in limited editions with grey front covers. The absence of the colour red sent a clear signal to the politically trained reader: Watch out! This is a dangerous text! When something that did deserve to be called research did finally develop, it happened at first slowly and in isolated settings that had no contact with international research.

In these cases, the term 'research' referred more to empirical documentation than to critical analysis with a theoretical basis. As new documentation has gradually become available, authorities and historians faithful to the regime have often sought to make it more politically correct by including it in established accounts that stay within a certain ideological framework. For example, just a few years ago, the

following was established concerning Chinese domestic historical accounts of Mao and the Cultural Revolution:

Inside China today, establishment historians serving as the CCP's custodians of the late great chairman's political legacy confront a well-nigh impossible task in trying to square the "official Mao" with what they know to be historically true... Supposedly representative collections of primary texts, like the 13-volume *Mao Zedong's Manuscripts Since the Founding of the Nation* edited by the Historical Documentation Research Office under the CCP Central Committee... skirt the problem by resorting to omission. In a long note at the end of volume one of the *Manuscripts*, the editors claim to have "included those manuscripts that practice has proven were sound, as well as those manuscripts that practice has proven were not sound or not entirely sound" and to have aspired to meet the needs of "practically oriented and all-sided" historical research... [In reality, when] dealing with Mao at his most radical, the editors of *Manuscripts* still serve, not the needs of serious historical research, but those of propaganda and mythology.<sup>412</sup>

However, since the 1990s in Russia, and to a certain extent also in China and Cambodia, research with higher scientific ambitions and greater compatibility with international research has been carried out. Russian, Chinese and Cambodian researchers have spent long research periods in the USA and begun to be published internationally, in the Chinese case not least in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Younger researchers in particular use their better linguistic abilities to participate in transnational and international research networks. The internet has been hugely significant in increasing international exchange. It has brought greater access to new source material for western researchers, while for researchers in former or currently communist states, it has brought new insights into scientific theory and methods. In China in recent years, research – often an eclectic mix thereof – has been imported and translated in abundance: some younger historians take great pains to enrich the latest postcolonial theories with empirical information from China, while more traditional historians from

---

<sup>412</sup> Schoenhals 2005, pp 278–279.

the Marxist school often take a sceptical attitude to the need to develop new theories at all.

Swedish research initiatives in these areas have generally been small-scale. The most extensive set of research has been on the Soviet communist terror, carried out by a handful of academic researchers, although they have not made a major mark on the development of international research. Judging from academic publications, one Swedish researcher who has participated in international – primarily Russian – research collaborations on the Soviet communist criminal history is economic historian Lennart Samuelson, whose work includes editing an anthology of relatively disparate articles, written by international researchers, on the history of rural Russia during the first four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>413</sup> Other names that should be mentioned are economic historian Anu-Mai Köll, historians Johan Dietsch, Kristian Gerner, Klas-Göran Karlsson and Gudrun Persson, as well as journalists Kaa Eneberg and Staffan Skott. Several of these have published several works for an English and Russian speaking audience. Michael Schoenhals has carried out internationally established research on the Chinese criminal history, while the terror regime of the Khmer Rouge is yet to be analysed by a Swedish researcher.

There are several explanations for the relatively weak position of Swedish research. Generally, Swedish research in humanities and social science has been and continues to be strongly nationally orientated. Swedish historians write in Swedish about Swedish history. It seems that this lack of interest in internationally oriented research has also been visible in terms of scientific studies on the crimes against humanity carried out by communist regimes. In addition, in-depth empirically based research demands linguistic abilities that are not common in Sweden. Where language courses are offered, they are often kept separate from courses in history or social science subjects, which results in a very small base from which to recruit researchers focusing on the criminal histories of communist regimes. Neither is it particularly common for Swedish historians to make reference in their research questions to current issues and problems

in contemporary history, where this area obviously belongs. It is enough to look at the latest edition of *Historisk tidskrift* to establish the fact that the relevance criteria that dominate Swedish historical research are strictly intrascientific in nature. Finally, it is also possible that Swedish researchers have avoided studying the crimes against humanity of communist regimes either because the area has such clear political and ideological implications that taking an interest in it would prove difficult to combine with a ‘free’ scientific approach, or because it has proved incompatible with the researcher’s own ideological motivations.

## Future research

There is, therefore, a great need for Swedish research on communist regimes’ crimes against humanity, and a great need to create the right conditions for this research. This research would benefit from taking a comparative approach, either focusing on comparing these criminal histories with each other, or with crimes against humanity perpetrated by other regimes in modern history. The comparison should include similarities as well as differences, and structural parallels as well as influence. A comparison of this nature necessarily places the role of ideology in the spotlight, but it must also deal with questions that place ideology in a wider and deeper context. How did it take root in the Russian Soviet, Chinese and Cambodian national cultures? How was it transformed to a sharp-edged weapon in communist societies, characterised by revolution, war, colonial relationships and more? This research should also be linked – theoretically, analytically and empirically – to the international academic community and to research carried out in the countries where the crimes were perpetrated. In order for this to happen, research results must be published in English, and Swedish researchers must pay regular visits to international conferences.

Naturally, this kind of research is dependent on new source material being identified and analysed. In the case of the first three decades of the People’s Republic of China, from 1949 until the beginning of what is known as the reform era a few years after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the archives have been partly opened, and a slowly growing proportion of the collections relating to events at local and regional level have been made available to researchers and others,

---

<sup>413</sup> Samuelson 2007.

Chinese and foreign alike. Compared to Swedish principles regarding the individual's right to access official information and documentation, the situation in China is restrictive to say the least, but it must be acknowledged that it is moving in the right direction for researchers working on a living Chinese history. Statistics that shed new light on the Chinese equivalent to the Gulag have been made available. Information on the Chinese equivalent to the 'inoffizielle Mitarbeiter', the unofficial collaborators of East German communism in the 1950s, has been released for the first time.

Our knowledge of the Soviet communist terror has certainly increased dramatically over the last two decades, but much practical research work on the terror remains to be done, not least in our nearby surroundings, in Karelia and the Baltic republics. It would also be desirable for theoretically oriented Swedish researchers to make a deeper and broader mark on postrevisionist research on the ideological, cultural and linguistic representations of these criminal histories. In *The Holocaust and Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman's theoretical assumption on genocide and terror as integral parts of modernity, characterised by a bureaucratic culture that gives much attention to distinguishing between new and old, normal and abnormal, clean and dirty and healthy and sick, is also applicable to the communist criminal histories.<sup>414</sup> How did Stalin's ambition to carry out *chistki*, purges or cleansing, show itself through the modernist use of language of Soviet communism? What cultural form did this take in a society that sought to be depicted as organic, as a social body with the heart and brain provided by the ruling powers, but also with sick and dirty parts that needed to be cleansed, healed or amputated? And, in more general terms: what kind of language and culture was used to represent and justify communist regimes' crimes against humanity?

Finally, the culture of memory and of history also belong in this cultural research complex. How have the societies and states that suffered the crimes against humanity of the communist regimes dealt with this historical legacy? This question falls into two parts – one regarding the physical legacy in the form of

human and material destruction to be dealt with by later generations, and the other relating to the individual and collective experiences and memories that make an indirect mark on the survivors and their society.<sup>415</sup> Again, the comparative perspective is particularly applicable in the latter context: what are the similarities and differences between how memories are dealt with in China, where the communist party is still in power, and in Russia and Cambodia, where other parties and other ideologies have come to power?

This kind of historicocultural perspective, which deserves attention from Swedish researchers, does not only refer to the countries and societies immediately following the communist regimes, but also to the surrounding world, including Sweden. How have Swedes, Swedish institutions and Sweden reacted to the crimes against humanity perpetrated by communist regimes, both at the time they were committed, and in hindsight? Despite commendable research initiatives in recent years, this area of research is still in its infancy.

---

<sup>414</sup> Bauman 1994, chapter

---

<sup>415</sup> Karlsson 2003, pp 70–79.