The main hero, of course, was Stalin. Another was the Russian nation and its great figures; Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible walked again. This tide of nationalism boded ill for the other nationalities. Stalin formulated the slogan 'National in form, Socialist in content', to describe what was permissible. In reality this amounted to little more than saying, for example, in Uzbek, what was being said about Stalin and Russia in Russian. The national heroes who had fought against imperial Russian control were banished; the local bards were swept aside and replaced by Russian luminaries. The purges which wiped out the non-Russian élites completed the process.

## THE PURGES

All the show trials between 1928 and 1934 linked the accused to the economy: the Shakhty engineers, the 'industrial party' trial, the Menshevik trial of 1931, the two secret trials of March 1933 which resulted in seventy state farm and People's Commissariat of Agriculture officials being shot, and the trial of the Metro-Vickers engineers. Other trials led to the passing of the death sentence on food scientists and bacteriologists. The trials all had to be carefully prepared since they had to appear plausible both inside the Soviet Union and outside. The paraphernalia of the great Purge Trials of 1936–38 was already in place: the written confessions, often to the most preposterous crimes, the bullying, sarcastic behaviour of the prosecutor, and the complete absence of any rules of evidence. All the shortcomings of the economy were to be blamed on the unfortunates in the dock.

The only major trial with political overtones which occurred before 1934 was that involving a group around a communist called M.N. Ryutin. They had produced a 200-page indictment of Stalin and his regime from a Bukharinist point of view in late summer 1932, in which the Secretary-General was described as the 'evil genius of the Russian revolution who, motivated by personal desire for power and revenge, had brought the revolution to the brink of destruction'. Since they wanted Stalin removed, he took this to mean that they were going to kill him, and therefore demanded the death penalty. But a majority of the Politburo was opposed to such an extreme measure, and in the event Ryutin and his followers were merely expelled from the party. Since many other party members had seen the offending document and had not reported it, the opportunity was seized to purge the whole organisation. Some 800,000 members were expelled in 1933 and a further 340,000 in 1934. The Ryutin affair rankled with Stalin, and time and again during the Purge Trials reference was made to it.

Stalin was shaken by the suicide of his second wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva, in November 1932. She took her own life as a protest against the brutalities of collectivisation. Stalin never remarried and over time isolated himself more and more from his family. He seems to have lived surrounded by men, and



although Khrushchev records that on one occasion he encountered a 'dark Caucasian beauty' in the Kremlin, she scurried away in an instant.

The murder of Sergei Kirov, party secretary in Leningrad, on 1 December 1934 set in motion a train of events which resulted in death for hundreds of thousands of people. Some of the details of the assassination are still not known, but it would appear that Stalin himself was implicated. Kirov was the only credible political alternative to Stalin, for he had been elected a secretary at the XVIIth Party Congress in 1934 at which Stalin had lost his post of Secretary-General. Kirov had been approached by delegates to stand for the post of Secretary-General but declined and reported this to Stalin. It is tempting to regard this episode as sealing Kirov's fate. With Kirov dead, much repressive legislation was introduced. One of the chief targets was the party itself, as inhibitions about spilling Bolshevik blood were cast aside. The XVIIth Congress, described at the time as the 'Congress of Victors', might more appropriately have been called the 'Congress of the Condemned', for 1,108 of its 1,966 delegates were executed and 98 of the 139 members of the CC elected at the Congress were shot in the years following.

The punitive legislation introduced – which included, for example, the death penalty for boys of twelve – was consonant with Stalin's views of the class struggle. Classes would disappear, he said, 'not as a result of the slackening of class conflict but as a result of its intensification'. The state would wither away 'not through the weakening of its power but through it becoming as strong as possible so as to defeat the remnants of the dying classes and to defend itself against capitalist encirclement'. This really was standing Marx on his head and is another example of Stalin's ideological relativism. An orthodox Marxist would expect classes to disappear as class conflict declines and for the state to wither away as the need for it disappears. Marx saw the state as an oppressive instrument used by the minority to oppress the majority.

Paradoxically, at the same time as these punitive measures were being applied, the Stalin constitution of 1936 – the 'most democratic in the world', as Stalin described it – came into effect. This introduced a bicameral legislature, the Soviet of the Union and the Soviet of Nationalities, collectively known as the USSR Supreme Soviet.* The role of the local soviets now changed. Hitherto they had been seen as both legislative and executive organs, not mere extensions of the central authority, constituting a unified system of equal links of varying sizes. They had also been seen as peculiar to the stage of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The 1936 constitution shattered the unity of the soviets. Local soviets (all those below republican level) were reduced to the status of local authorities. The Supreme Soviets ('the supreme organs of the soviets') became legislative organs; and the government ('the supreme organ of state power') became the executive organ. The Supreme Soviets even began to call themselves parliaments, despite Lenin's contempt for that institution.

The new constitution stated that the foundations of socialism had been laid and that the exploiting classes had ceased to exist. There were now only fraternal classes – the working class and the collective farm peasantry – and they coexisted harmoniously with the intelligentsia, defined as a stratum rather than a class since it owned no property.

Freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly and of religious observance were guaranteed by the 1936 constitution. However, it was pointed out that the party remained the key institution and it was clear to every Soviet citizen that the party's interests would override any personal or group interest. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union appeared to be moving in the right direction and made a refreshing contrast to the rest of Europe where fascism was on the march.

There were three great Show Trials during the years 1936–38. The first took place in August 1936 and involved Kamenev and Zinoviev, along with sundry minor officials. Trotsky was introduced as the arch villain and it was claimed that he had ordered numerous assassinations and wreckings. Andrei Vyshinsky, who became notorious as a brutal prosecutor, demanded in his closing speech that these mad dogs be shot, every last one of them! They were all shot, but it was Stalin who was the real judge. Vyshinsky epitomised a certain type of official who slavishly served Stalin. As an ex-Menshevik he felt that he had repeatedly to reaffirm his credentials of loyalty to the regime.

The second great Show Trial should have involved Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky in September 1936, but it was cancelled. Tomsky cheated the executioner by taking his own life and it was possible that neither Bukharin nor Rykov would make the obligatory confession. Also Yagoda, the man in charge, lost his position to Nikolai Ezhov in September 1936. Yagoda's dismissal may have been connected with his failure to deliver Bukharin and Rykov to the executioner. Everyone who knew Ezhov before he became head of the NKVD commented on how nice a man he was. There was, however, nothing nice about his two years in office (he was replaced by Lavrenty Beria in December 1938). They were the most dreadful peacetime years in the history of the Soviet Union. During the *Ezhovshchina*, the Ezhov times, blood flowed in rivers, and the guilt or innocence of the accused was completely immaterial. The political police had their plan targets like everyone else and were certainly not going to underfulfil them. According to a report, dated 11 December 1953, sent to Khrushchev and Malenkov, the total number condemned by the political police (*Cheka*, NKVD, etc.) between 1921 and 1953 was 4,060,306. The number shot was 799,455 of which no fewer than 681,692 were executed during 1937 and 1938, the *Ezhovshchina*. Lesser peaks of repression were 1930–33, 1942 and 1945–46. Another remarkable statistic is that over the period 1923–53 over 42 million Soviet citizens were imprisoned (39.1 million in the RSFSR alone). The vast majority of these were sentenced for non-political offences. If one excludes those under 14 and over



60 years of age, then during the course of one generation, 1923–53, every third citizen was sentenced to a term of imprisonment. In comparison, the highest number in prison in the immediate pre-war period was 111,800 in 1912. There were 884,000 children in internal exile (not permitted to live in their home towns but obliged to reside hundreds and sometimes thousands of kilometres away) in 1954. The bloodiest year for the Russian Orthodox Church was 1937 when 85,000 priests were shot. Add to this the fact that 5 million persons starved to death in the man-made famines of the 1930s. Five and a half million families (one can assume on average four members per family) were deported or exiled, half of them dying en route. In all, over the years 1918–53 about 3.5 million people from ethnic groups (the repressed people) were driven from their homes with, perhaps, a third dying en route.

The second great Show Trial turned out to involve Pyatakov, mentioned by Lenin in his 'Testament'; Sokolnikov, a signatory of the Brest-Litovsk treaty and later a Commissar for Finance who had resisted the wild targets of the first FYP; and various other party functionaries. They were all lumped together as an 'Anti-Soviet Trotskyist Centre'. Pyatakov debased himself but nevertheless was shot. Sokolnikov died in a labour camp in 1939.

The turn of the military came in due course. Marshal Tukhachevsky, a deputy Commissar for Defence and a leading strategic thinker, and many other top military figures were branded as traitors and shot in June 1937. Then followed a veritable slaughter of the top brass. All eleven deputy Commissars of Defence and seventy-five of the eighty members of the Supreme Military Council were executed. All eight admirals were shot. In total 35,000, half of the officer corps, were either executed or imprisoned. As Khrushchev was to admit later, it had all been a ghastly mistake since the charges against the officers were baseless (Khrushchev, 1971: 75).

The last great Show Trial opened on 2 March 1938 and involved the pair who had previously slipped the net, Bukharin and Rykov. Others thrown in included Yagoda, getting a taste of his own medicine. Vyshinsky branded them as the 'Bloc of the right wingers and Trotskyites', and the inevitable death sentence followed.

Foreign communists in exile in the Soviet Union were mown down like ripe corn, the NKVD being especially severe on the Germans and Poles. The greatest prize of all, however, eluded them until 21 August 1940, when an agent put an ice pick through Trotsky's skull in Mexico.

After such a catalogue of methodical madness the question must arise: was Stalin himself a victim of the frenzy of the period? Did he lose his sanity for a while? Svetlana Alliluyeva, his daughter, believes that officials such as Beria poisoned his mind and convinced him that the mad accusations were true. This is not so. Stalin himself edited the indictment against Pyatakov, Sokolnikov, Radek and others for the second great Show Trial. All lists of condemned were forwarded to Stalin and during 1938 at least 383 lists,

containing 44,000 names of whom 39,000 were executed, were passed on to him. Stalin signed 362 lists, Molotov 373, Voroshilov 195, Kaganovich 191 and Zhdanov 177. Stalin's Politburo colleagues were enthusiastic in their support of these repressions. They often wrote comments in the margin encouraging the NKVD to step up the torture: for example, against certain names: 'beat again and again!'. The terror was turned off like a tap in 1939, but the show trials had had a momentum of their own. The NKVD did not have to go and look for suspects; they were inundated with denunciations. Such was the spirit of the times that in order to avoid being denounced one had to denounce everyone else first. There were even targets set for the number of people one had to denounce in a given period.

The heroic work of Aleksandr Yakovlev (Gorbachev's 'Comrade Glasnost') and others have seen over four million rehabilitated in the half-century after Stalin's death, a fraction of those who were unjustly sentenced, being quite innocent, but a laudable move to redress the moral balance. Yakovlev continues to be shocked by what he found in the archives. Repression was very wide-ranging. 'Terrorist gangs and groups' were discovered even in the Kremlin commandant's office and in the government library. In some departments, socialist competitions were held to see which could achieve the highest numbers of people shot and quotas of people proposed for shooting were also the subject of competitions.

An understanding of the period can be gleaned from the fortunes of two persons caught up in the NKVD net, Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam (Mandelstam, 1971: 304–5). Thousands, perhaps millions, had similar experiences.

Osip Mandelstam was a gifted poet but never became a Bolshevik. Like many other writers his patron was Bukharin. He was arrested in May 1934 for composing a poem which contained an unflattering reference to Stalin [*Doc. 8*]: 'All we hear is the Kremlin mountaineer/The murderer and peasant slayer.' His wife Nadezhda recalls the techniques used to force confessions [*Doc. 9*]: lack of sleep, bright lights shining in the eyes, poor food, the deliberate telling of lies to confuse the prisoner and make him more anxious – 'such and such a person had been arrested and had confessed everything' – and physical beatings, although Mandelstam was spared these. This goes a long way towards explaining why innocent men and women confessed to the most outlandish crimes. Broken down they were willing to admit anything providing they could just get some sleep and be left in peace. Of course some did not break down: they were the prisoners who never appeared at the trials. Nadezhda Mandelstam draws a distinction between the type of person who was an interrogator before 1937 and afterwards. Until 1937 the Chekist or NKVD man was often well read in Russian literature, the sort of person who would have been all in favour of RAPP and delighted to display his culture, convinced that his work was helping to build the new Russia. In 1937 a new type took over: men who had little culture and no beliefs, and were



only concerned with meeting their quota of confessions. Osip Mandelstam's interrogator, like many of the pre-1937 men, himself became a victim of the purges and was shot.

Denunciations flowed into the NKVD in torrents. Before 1937 they had to have a semblance of truth to be effective; afterwards it did not matter. Denunciations became a convenient way of acquiring something desirable. If one's superior was found guilty, promotion was in prospect. If neighbours were removed, a flat would become vacant. Personal relations became hazardous, for anyone might let something slip which would then be reported to the police. Spontaneous and personal openness became things of the past. Parents could never be completely frank at home, since something they said might be repeated at school with disastrous consequences. If the head of the household was sentenced the whole family fell into disgrace. Wives and children could then be expelled from the cities and obliged to live at least 105 km away. Life for the convicted was relatively easy before 1937, but then things got worse. Wives were interned in camps and small children were confined in special institutions.

Mandelstam was saved from death by the intervention of Bukharin. He was packed off to the Urals, but a further plea resulted in him and his wife being allowed to reside in Voronezh. They spent three years in exile in Voronezh and returned to Moscow in May 1937. Mandelstam had even tried to write an Ode to Stalin in January 1937 in order to rehabilitate himself and his wife but the words would not come. He and his wife were again thrown out of Moscow in June 1937 and told to reside at least 105 km from the capital, since they were 'convicted persons'. They eventually moved to Kalinin, north-west of Moscow. Mandelstam travelled frequently to Moscow and begged the Union of Soviet Writers for work. He and his wife were given accommodation in a rest home east of Moscow, but shortly after their arrival, on 1 May 1938, Mandelstam was arrested and was never seen again. His wife returned to Kalinin and narrowly escaped arrest. She then moved to a small town north-east of Moscow, coming in regularly to the capital in search of information about her husband. She eventually discovered that he had died in a labour camp, probably in December 1938.

## FOREIGN POLICY

The rise of fascism was completely misinterpreted in Moscow, where it was assumed to be the most predatory face of finance capital, with only a limited capacity to endure, if it ever came to power. The Comintern, the Russian Communist Party wearing its foreign suit, came to the conclusion that the German National Socialists (NSDAP)* were claiming to do the impossible. They promised to put German industry back on its feet, which implied that big business would do very well, but at the same time they canvassed the votes