

Binner, Rolf; Bonwetsch, Bernd; Junge, Marc (Hrsg.): *Stalinismus in der sowjetischen Provinz 1937-1938. Die Massenaktion aufgrund des operativen Befehls Nr. 00447*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag 2010. ISBN: 978-3-05-004685-3; 732 S.

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Iosif Stalin took nearly one million lives in the Great Terror of 1937-1938. Until the formerly closed Soviet Archives began to open in the 1990s, the details of this massive terror were not well known. Even though it was known that untold numbers of people were arrested and killed at that time, no one knew the actual scale and mechanism of the Great Terror until relatively recently. Stalin's Great Terror was a catastrophe of extraordinary dimensions, the understanding of which naturally requires an extraordinary effort.

The present book, the result of a massive scholarly effort, meets the challenge well. The size of the book reflects the extent to which the editors have gone in pursuit of this difficult subject.

Unlike the sensational Moscow show trials when prominent Bolsheviks were tried openly (and executed subsequently), much of the Great Terror was carried out in secret: the majority of the victims, simple, „ordinary“ citizens of the country, were arrested and executed behind closed doors. In almost all cases, their fates were not made known even to their families and relatives. Without access to archival documents, serious research has been really impossible.

Like most recent books on the subject, the present book draws abundantly on the formerly closed Soviet archives. It assembles results of collective efforts by scholars from Germany, Russia and Ukraine: 24 individual essays in addition to two very useful summary essays by the editors. Unlike many similar works, the book examines how the Great Terror was carried out in the provinces (Perm, Sverdlovsk [today's Ekaterinburg], Kalinin [Tver], Leningrad [St. Petersburg], Altai, Novosibirsk, Kyiv, the Donbas, and others).¹ The analysis of the volume focuses on one particular order, Order 00447, which affected the largest number of

the victims of the Great Terror. The order is commonly known as one for the „Kulak Operation“, because it targeted, among others, the former „kulaks“, peasants who were previously persecuted on political charges. In fact, as the present volume shows clearly, the victims included groups of people far wider than the „kulaks“: priests, „nationalists“, White Guards, criminals, hooligans, prostitutes, beggars, the homeless and unemployed, and other „marginal people“ of Soviet society. Moscow initially specified for each region of the country round figures of how many people were to be executed and how many to be sent to the Gulag. These initial „limits“ were almost always abrogated quickly by higher limits.

One of the most significant conclusions of the book is that the Great Terror did not necessarily target arbitrary groups of people, but intentionally singled out certain groups. The book shows convincingly that even though the terror may have appeared to some people and scholars as arbitrary, it in fact targeted those whose political loyalty was suspect or whose „social use“ Moscow doubted. Certainly, in the actual implementation of Moscow's order, the provinces enjoyed a certain freedom in determining exactly who was to be arrested and executed. Indeed, the operation was different from other, similar mass operations such as those aimed at certain national groups (ethnic Poles, Germans, Latvians, Greeks, Koreans and others) carried out simultaneously. These other operations were tightly controlled by Moscow.

Another important conclusion consists of a refutation of those scholars who claim that the provinces were so eager to carry out the Kremlin's terror order that Moscow succumbed to local pressure and lost control in the end. Drawing on individual essays included here as well as on their own research, the editors convincingly demonstrate that in fact it was Moscow that was the „driving and radicalizing“ force of the operation (p. 41). There is no ground to contend that it was

¹ Vgl. dazu auch Wladislaw Hedeler, Rezension zu: Rolf Binner / Bernd Bonwetsch / Marc Junge (Hrsg.), Massenmord und Lagerhaft. Die andere Geschichte des Großen Terrors, Berlin 2009, in: H-Soz-u-Kult, 18.05.2010, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/type=rezbuecher&id=137213721>>.

not Moscow (Stalin) but the provincial bosses who were the real „villains“. True, there was leeway for the provinces to exercise their discretion in numerous details. But this did not mean that the Kremlin could not control the provincial officials. Throughout the operation, Moscow was in fact in control.

Many individual essays on the Soviet provinces make for fascinating reading. For instance, Natal'ia Ablazhei's essay on the mass operation against the alleged members of the anti-Soviet émigré military organization (ROVS - Russkii obshchevoinskii soiuz) is of special importance. Ablazhei demonstrates that the special ROVS Operation started in June 1937 in Western Siberia, that means before Moscow initiated the Kulak Operation. The two operations were carried out simultaneously from the summer of 1937, so it is not always clear which operation was responsible for which arrests. There was considerable overlap between the two. Viktoriia Voloshenko's study of the Donbas shows the same. Iurii Shapoval's study of Kyiv, Ukraine, also shows that a large number of alleged Ukrainian separatists and nationalists were repressed through the Kulak Operation. According to my own research, there was very significant overlap among all of the mass operations carried out simultaneously.

This brings up one of the problems of the present book. Disaggregation for analysis is often a useful method. Yet synthesis is often evasive. True, the editors do not neglect synthesis. They suggest, correctly in my view, that Moscow enacted the national operations in view of the growing threat of war: they were intended as counter-espionage measures (the elimination of potential fifth columnists). Regarding the Kulak Operation, they state that it was „Janus-like“ (p. 50): one part was essentially domestic (social cleansing and social engineering), another part principally foreign-oriented (targeted against the potential foreign agents). Yet it is worth noting that the Kremlin regarded the socially marginal as perfect candidates for foreign agents. Take hooligans and hooliganism, for instance. Moscow insisted that a hooligan was merely one step away from becoming a terrorist and hooliganism a step away from diversionary activity. In other

words, Moscow dealt with even the seemingly purely domestic, social issues as matters of utmost significance to „national security“.

Undoubtedly, the Kulak Operation served the end of social cleansing. Yet why did it have to take place precisely in 1937-38 and simultaneously with other mass operations? In fact, the Kulak Operation was merely part of the larger effort of Stalin to prepare the country politically for war. He meant to cleanse the country of all people who might potentially impede the country's war efforts. Of course, it was not possible to determine exactly how each individual would act in the event of war. Stalin did not trust certain groups of people (such as the former „kulaks“ and priests). Yet what was the point of specifying, in round numbers like 3,000 and 4,000, just how many people were to be executed in this or that region?

On several occasions Stalin stated why he liked Mikhail Bulgakov's famous play „Days of Turbins“ („The White Guard“): it demonstrated to the Soviet people that there was no alternative but to accept the Bolsheviks. The play depicted, to Stalin's liking, the „all-conquering power of Bolshevism“. In 1937-1938 Stalin meant to subjugate the Soviet population to his will in preparation for war: he sought to eliminate any threat to his power in the event of war. For this reason, he terrorized the Soviet population into accepting that there was no alternative but to submit. The Great Terror, of which the Kulak Operation was merely a part, should be understood in this political context.

This short review does not do justice to such a rich collection of excellent essays. The two introductory essays by the editors serve as a good guide to the collection. No one in the field can afford to ignore this important volume. It will be read widely and with much profit.

HistLit 2010-2-130 / Hiroaki Kuromiya über Binner, Rolf; Bonwetsch, Bernd; Junge, Marc (Hrsg.): *Stalinismus in der sowjetischen Provinz 1937-1938. Die Massenaktion aufgrund des operativen Befehls Nr. 00447*. Berlin 2010, in: H-Soz-Kult 18.05.2010.