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Whistleblower or Troublemaker?
How One Man Took on the Soviet Mafia

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Whistleblower or Troublemaker? How One Man Took On the Soviet Mafia

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Abstract

The paper tells the story of a pensioner's fight against a local mafia of Soviet party and government officials and farm managers in a remote rural locality in the 1950s. To Moscow, he was a whistleblower. To the leaders of his local community, he was a troublemaker. Working together, the local people went to extraordinary lengths to suppress his criticisms. Eventually, Moscow intervened to vindicate him. The story illustrates vividly the political and economic issues that arose when a centralized dictatorship that relied on mass mobilization over a vast territory with sometimes poor communications tried to contain local rent seeking while moving away from mass terror as its chief instrument of control.

Keywords: Corruption, Mafia, Soviet Economy, Whistleblowing.

JEL Codes: D7, N4, P3.

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Troublemaker or Whistleblower? How One Man Took On the Soviet Mafia

“Truth-seeking” can become a real illness. People start writing and they can’t stop – this becomes a life purpose, and turns into scandal-mongering or graphomania. Some of these people need a medical cure. Isn’t it crazy to appeal to Soviet laws all the time and expect them to be observed?

A roundtable discussant, imagined by Lampert (1985: p. 183).

Men that live in retirement under the care of their wives and daughters are often in need of occupation. This was certainly true of Mr Nikolaenko, who lived with his wife, elder daughter Valentina, and their other children near Denau where vines and cotton grow in the sunlit valley of the Surkhan Daria River, not far from the Afghan border to the south of Uzbekistan. To fill the time on his hands, he wrote letters to the newspapers.

This was a time of great change in the public life of the Soviet Union. In 1953 an era ended with Stalin’s death. There was a period of limited openness and honesty, known as the Thaw. After a brief struggle Nikita Khrushchev picked up the reins of power as Soviet leader; rejecting Stalin and forsaking mass terror, he began to pursue policies that might be called “Stalinism with a human face.” Within strict limits, Soviet citizens began to engage with the chief problem that Khrushchev raised: the abuse of personal authority in a secretive, centralized one-party state.

Making Trouble

Mr Nikolaenko was a civil war veteran and pensioner.¹ In the record he is described as having a disability of the “second group”; this official classification implies something serious, arising possibly from war wounds. His pension was most likely compensation for his disability since most Soviet rural inhabitants did not have access to an age-related retirement pension at this time. Despite this, he evidently had reasonable underlying health. He had worked as carter and storekeeper of the Communism collective farm until 1951. In retirement, he kept an allotment and went hunting and fishing to supplement his family income. His daughter Valentina also worked on the Communism farm and subsequently on the bigger farm, named after Khrushchev, created through a local merger.

¹ The story is from the Hoover Archive, Documents from the Russian State Archive of Recent History (RGANI), *Fond 6, Opis 6, Delo 1706*, folios 6 to 16 (Instructor Fedorenko of the Committee of Party Control of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, report “On the results of verification of the complaint of Nikolaenko M.A. about the facts of incorrect attitude to criticism of faults in the Surkhan Darya district of Uzbekistan,” dated August 19, 1959) and 17 (Committee of Party Control member Dzhurabaev, memo to the Committee of Party Control dated October 22, 1959).

In pensioner Nikolaenko's view, the farm was mismanaged. With a wife and daughter to make his home and run after him, he may have had time to brood and not much else to think about. In due course, time to brood became time to act. One avenue open to him was to write to the press.

In the conditions of the Thaw, public opinion was being voiced openly again. Newspapers received far more letters than could be published. The number of letters reaching *Izvestiia*, the government newspaper in Moscow, for example, exploded from 37,301 in 1952 and 46,974 in 1955 to 211,000 in 1960 (Lampert 1985, p. 64). Of the letters circulating in the Denau region, many were probably from Mr Nikolaenko. Three of them scored direct hits.

His first letter to be accepted for publication appeared in The Uzbek republican paper *Pravda Vostoka* (Truth of the East) in March 1954, and was followed by a second in March 1956. Letter no. 1 complained about abuses by local work brigade leader Muminov. Letter no. 2 aimed higher. It alleged that Khrushchev farm chairman Keldyev had fired the farm's agricultural technician (agronomist). It complained of abuses committed by deputy farm chairman, Alikulov. In passing, it raised suspicions about Alikulov's social origins, claiming the latter was a child of wealthy individual peasant farmers ("kulaks") deported on Stalin's orders in the 1930s when the collective farms were created. And it took aim at secretary Khaidarov of the Denau regional party committee, who had adopted an "incorrect attitude to the question of the elimination of defects" – in other words, most likely, Nikolaenko had written to Khaidarov about these issues and Khaidarov had ignored him or told him to get lost.²

As for letter no. 3, published in the Surkhan-Daria district paper *Leninskoe znamia* (Lenin's Banner) in early 1958, it complained about the poor postal service ("No, Mr Nikolaenko, I'm certain we never received your letter"), abuses on the pig farm, insanitary maintenance of the vegetable plot, and so on.

During this time Mr Nikolaenko became increasingly angry. He was already cross about things that he could see people doing (or not doing), and he was cross with the people doing (or not doing) these things. We will see that a lot of his points were well made. He wanted to let the world know – at least, the world of the Surkhan Daria. He had plenty of persistence, and he needed this because he faced many obstacles, usually put in his place by the people he was complaining about or their friends. Every time he hit one of those obstacles it fuelled his anger and determination and it added another target for his complaints. Finally, as a pensioner he had time and not much else to do. Or maybe his wife or daughter would have liked him to do something else and stay quiet, but he didn't care! This was more important, and it came first. So, he kept the letters coming.

² It may help to recall the Soviet territorial hierarchy. The Soviet Union's basic constituents were *republics* – the Russian, Ukrainian, Uzbek, and other Soviet Socialist Republics. Republics were parcelled up into *districts* – for example, the Surkhan Daria district. In turn, districts were made up of *regions* – for example, the Denau region. So, USSR → republic → district → region.

Whistleblowing in the Soviet Union

Soviet citizens had limited ways of confronting corruption, injustice, or other abuses. In Russia, traditions of public and legal redress were historically weak. Instead, the subjects of the Empire relied on private petitions to the seat of power; when this failed, they turned to drink or to insurrection. The Bolshevik leaders cultivated the tradition of personal appeal to the ruler (Livshin and Orlov 1998; Sokolov 1998; Livshin, Orlov, and Khlevniuk 2002), for several reasons. They shared a collective preference for the private petition over outlets for discontent that were more public or less peaceful. Since they already managed “public opinion” with great care, the changing tenor of personal petitions also gave them insight into the true underlying mood of the masses. Privately, also, many leaders exploited the personal appeals they received, dealing selectively with favoured correspondents to form networks of patronage and loyalty. As the poet Osip Mandelshtam famously remarked, “Everyone goes to someone; there’s no other way”; the Mandelshtams, for example, “went to” Nikolai Bukharin (Nadezhda Mandelshtam 1975, p. 133).

The total volume of such correspondence was huge (Lampert 1985, pp. 63-4). Over the decade of the 1970s, for example, the central party committee alone received more than five million letters from citizens. Citizens also wrote to the press. In 1975 more than 7,000 letters reached the central committee and the three biggest daily papers in Moscow on an average working day. It follows that nearly all letters went unanswered. If as many as 130 of the 7,000 received a substantive reply, then the average letter writer could expect this with a probability similar to the chance (1.86%) of winning at least the smallest prize (£10) on a single ticket in the British national lottery. We know that poor people will buy lottery tickets in spite of adverse odds, and the tradition of writing to authority also persisted through the life of the Soviet Union.

It was a different matter when abuses were exposed in public. It was not just that a whistle blown out loud invited the authorities more forcefully to take action; given close political censorship, the fact that the whistle was blown for all to hear suggested that officialdom had already heard it. Those subject to exposure could not ignore it; they had to react.

Table 1. Some Outcomes of Whistleblowing in the Soviet Union, 1979 to 1983

<i>Accused of wrongdoing</i>		<i>Complainants</i>	
No penalty	16	No adverse consequences	23
Reprimanded	31	Dismissed permanently	9
Transferred to other work	5	Reinstated after dismissal	14
Discharged	16	Dismissed permanently	
Fined	3	after reinstatement	3
Tried and convicted	2	Less severe penalty	13
Expelled from party*	7	Left work voluntarily	4
Total	80	Total	66

* Expulsion from the party was sometimes a prelude to prosecution, since it avoided the disgrace of a party member appearing in open court.

Source: Figures are from Lampert (1985, pp. 141, 155).

Table 1 sets out what is known about the extent and nature of counteractions to whistle blowing in the late Brezhnev period. In 70 cases that appeared in the Soviet national press between 1979 and 1983, Nicholas Lampert tracked the fates of 80 persons accused of wrongdoing and 66 complainants. These cases should not be taken as fully representative, since they were selected for exposure in the national media, often after the complainant had failed to find satisfaction locally. It is not completely surprising, therefore, that four fifths (64) of the 80 accused of wrongdoing were subsequently penalized in some way. Notably, three fifths (39) of the 66 complainants also suffered some kind of victimization. Many were dismissed at some stage in the dispute, although in some cases the dismissal was subsequently reversed. Lesser forms of victimization included ostracism, transfer to less preferred work, reprimands, and the withholding of bonuses.³

Lampert explained the scope for counteraction against whistleblowers as follows: First, corrupt or illegal practices tended to have many immediate beneficiaries. The factory manager who padded production or wage figures would share the gains with the management team and workforce, who all relied on his patronage for bonuses and higher wages. Second, the party leaders in the workplace and locality typically sided with the malefactor for the sake of goodwill and personal connections, to uphold the reputation of the region for success in implementing the plan, and so as not to wash dirty linen in public. In general, it was easy for those whose behavior gave rise to criticism to mobilize opinion against the critics, isolate them, and present them as troublemakers.

In this light, the story of Mr Nikolaenko's fight for justice against the party mafia of the Surkhan Daria valley will turn out to be typical. What is gained by telling it? It is worth telling for three reasons. One is that it is uncensored. It has not been selected or crafted for publication to suit some official purpose. There are gaps, but what is missing reflects the incompleteness of all historical records; the documents have not been cut about by some prissy official with concealment in mind. Another reason is the notably large number of people and wide range of agencies that were eventually drawn into the case. A third is its timing: we catch Soviet society in transition from mass terror to selective repression, as centre-local relationships are adjusting to the new realities. In these ways, typical or not, the story of Mr Nikolaenko provides a drama in the best tradition of social realism, with high political stakes and a wide cast of characters from many walks of life.

Action and Counteraction

By writing his letters, Nikolaenko annoyed a lot of people. You can imagine them all telling him to shut up. Why did he have to make a fuss? Those he criticized were the pillars of the local community. These men knew each other, worked together, and

³ To these cases might be added the voluntary departures. Although few in number (4), they raise the suspicion of constructive dismissal, or resignation forced by the employer's deliberately unreasonable conduct. Lampert's interview evidence (1985, pp. 156-157) suggests that this was a common counteraction against critics.

drank together. They were happy with things as they were, and they were not doing any particular harm to Mr Nikolaenko. They didn't want to have to change for the sake of this grumpy old man with a bee in his bonnet. All they wanted was that he should be quiet and let them be. But he wasn't listening. So, they acted.

The result was a scandal that broke quietly, behind closed doors, in Moscow in the late summer of 1959. It engulfed the farm managers, party leaders, civil police, secret police, and judiciary of the Denau region and ended with the leaders of the Uzbek communist party in Tashkent being held to account for their subordinates' crimes and misdemeanours.

Nikolaenko's first problem was that, no matter what he complained about, nothing was done.

Mr Nikolaenko was ignored by those to whom he complained, but those about whom he complained did not ignore him. This was his second problem. In the summer of 1957, he complained to the local police about assaults on his children and damage to his property. The police established the facts, but merely cautioned the culprits – the local farm managers. In September, section chief Badalov of the Denau regional party committee shared Nikolaenko's complaints with the farm leaders, but then dropped the matter.

The following March the editors of *Leninskoe znamia* passed one of Nikolaenko's letters to Denau regional prosecutor Alimov, who filed the letter and forgot about it. At about the same time, Nikolaenko's targets began to escalate their counteraction. On March 28, 1958, farm chairman Keldyev instructed his deputy Alikulov to send in the tractors. Without warning, farm workers ploughed up Nikolaenko's private allotment, destroyed his orchard and market garden, and blocked access to his own house. Since the inception of the collective farms, every Soviet farmer had retained the right to a small private allotment that ensured personal survival when the state had taken everything else. An orchard and a market garden were all that stood between many families and penury.

In justification Alikulov claimed that the collective farm needed to put more land under cotton, and Nikolaenko was holding more than his fair share privately. Both claims were false. Nikolaenko's share was less than the others', and the land ploughed up remained fallow through 1958. Nikolaenko now had fresh grounds for complaint. He turned to section chief Badalov of the Denau regional party committee – the same Badalov that had ignored him the previous autumn.

At this point the affair took a new and shocking turn towards conspiracy. Badalov (for the party) and Keldyev (the farm boss) brought in the secret police in the person of the Denau regional KGB commissioner Suleimanov. The three visited Nikolaenko at home to call him out for a fistfight. The purpose of this was more sinister than just to inflict physical punishment. It was a provocation; afterwards, they filed a complaint to the effect that Nikolaenko had threatened to murder Alikulov in retaliation for ploughing up his land.

During April 1958, the local KGB gathered other compromising documents. Suleimanov sought out farm workers that had crossed Nikolaenko's path for any reason over the years and secured statements from them that Nikolaenko had threatened to murder them or people they knew. One wrote that Nikolaenko had

wanted to kill him “roughly, in August 1955”; another said that Nikolaenko had “fired a rifle at him and others in the spring of 1951.” (Like many men in the Soviet countryside, Nikolaenko had legal possession of a hunting rifle.) The significance of this went beyond threatening behavior. Since the December 1934 murder of the Leningrad party leader Kirov, the secret police had investigated and prosecuted violence or threats against party and government officials as terrorism. Suleimanov was building a case against Nikolaenko as part of the Soviet “war on terror”!

On May 20, 1958, the Denau police confiscated Nikolaenko’s rifle and arrested him. At this point there was a hitch: the police themselves could not see hard evidence of a crime. Still, they understood what was expected of them: they passed the case to local prosecutor Alimov – the same one that had ignored Nikolaenko’s representations just two months earlier. Alimov now indicted Nikolaenko with:

Preparation of the premeditated murder of deputy chairman of the Khrushchev collective farm, party organizer Alikulov; chairman of the collective farm and member of the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, hero of socialist labour Keldyev; first secretary of the Denau regional party committee, hero of socialist labour Khaidarov; director of the Khazarbag state farm, hero of socialist labour Zibrov; and others.

(Remember all those “heroes of socialist labour.” It’s important later.)

The case now went outside Denau, to the Surkhan Daria regional court. Twice, the court threw the case out. The judge could see that the witnesses were all interested parties, and some allegations concerning Nikolaenko’s way of life and means of support were obviously fabricated. Nikolaenko was not released, however; the case was returned to Alimov for further investigation.

Foiled in the courts, the conspiracy now took another extraordinary turn. The prosecutor sent Nikolaenko to Tashkent, the capital city of Uzbekistan. Writing letters and attacking people like this – he must be crazy! He was detained in a psychiatric clinic. Silencing trouble makers by diagnosing mental illness was not without precedent in the Soviet Union, but it was still a decade before the application of punitive psychiatry to political and cultural “troublemakers” became routine.

In Tashkent, the psychiatrists examined Nikolaenko. He continued to behave in a very annoying way, writing “dozens” of complaints about his unjust imprisonment. But he was not crazy. The psychiatrists put professional ethics before the interests of the Denau regional clan. On December 22, 1958, Nikolaenko was released for lack of reason to detain him.

But there was no triumphant return. During his detention the Nikolaenko family was deprived of his pension; his daughter lost her job on the farm. While Mrs Nikolaenko was away visiting her husband, “unknown persons” visited their home and burned the storehouse, destroying possessions and grain. Subsequently farm chairman Keldyev ordered the house demolished on the (spurious) grounds that it was built on a site previously occupied by the farm’s mill, and was also obstructing the cotton crop.

After these events Mrs Nikolaenko threw herself on Keldyev's mercy and asked for his protection. He gave her no succour. One night in November farmworker Karaev, accompanied by a gang armed with knives, visited the family to demand the Nikolaenko daughter in marriage. This was the last straw. The family fled the neighbourhood, resettling near Tashkent. Mr Nikolaenko no longer had a home to return to in the valley of the Surkhan Daria River.

For one guilty pair, retribution was speedy. In March 1959 the prosecutor of the Uzbek republic fired Denau prosecutor Alimov because of his malicious prosecution of Nikolaenko, and disciplined a local investigator. For the time being, the buck stopped there.

Moscow's Intervention and More Shocking Disclosures

With Nikolaenko free once more, the remaining parties to the conspiracy agreed on the only possible course of action available to them: pretend nothing had happened. Forced to accept the illegality of Nikolaenko's arrest, they turned their efforts to protecting each other and avoiding accountability. When Nikolaenko asked the prosecutors for compensation from the Khrushchev collective farm, they told him he would have to bring a private action. He sued them for 5,350 rubles – half a year's salary for a waged farmworker. Denying liability, the farm paid him 3,000 rubles out of court. When Surkhan Daria district prosecutor Faizylov asked the Denau regional party committee to hold the farm deputy chairman Alikulov to account for his actions, first secretary Khaidarov consigned the letter to the archive. But when the Uzbekistan republican prosecutor ordered Faizylov to hold a special inspection of the Khrushchev farm, Faizylov refused on the grounds that a routine inspection had recently taken place.

At this point everybody knew what had happened. The party organizations, the prosecution service, the local police and KGB had all colluded in it. Complicity extended up to the level of the Surkhan Daria district party committee, which delayed action until an investigator showed up from Moscow, 2,000 miles away; the day he arrived, it resolved at last to condemn Mr Nikolaenko's illegal detention – and asserted in the next breath that his claims of persecution by any specific person were unfounded.

Moscow's man was Instructor Fedorenko of the Committee of Party Control. This committee, to which Mr Nikolaenko had appealed as a last resort, was the Soviet leadership's watchdog on the party, charged with investigating wrong doing and negligence by individual party members (Getty 1997; Markevich 2007). Instructor Fedorenko reviewed the papers and interviewed the principals. It was like pulling at a loose thread: quickly, the fabric of local power in the Denau region unravelled.

Having established the facts of his ordeal, Fedorenko turned to Mr Nikolaenko's initial complaints, about which the local authorities were still in denial. Nikolaenko had objected, for example, to the Khrushchev farm being run without the services of a professional agricultural technician. The technician, who had criticized the farm managers in party meetings, was fired while away at an agricultural show. His case of unfair dismissal rose to the level of the Uzbek republican party central committee

which, ordering his reinstatement, reported this to Moscow as the outcome. Fedorenko discovered that the true outcome was the opposite of the report: the technician had not been taken back, and had been forced out of the district.

Again: the farm had passed more land and livestock than the law permitted into the private ownership of farm members. Having complained to the regional party committee that Keldyev was selling livestock to friends and relatives, a farmworker had been disciplined for “slander.” Fedorenko established easily that the accusation was true.

When Fedorenko delved into the facts, he found that the abuses that Nikolaenko had sought to expose were the tip of an iceberg. As his spotlight widened from the original allegations to the cover-up on the Denau regional party committee, Fedorenko found more and more suppressed complaints. For example, he identified several other whistleblowers that had tried to expose faults and abuses on the Khrushchev farm and elsewhere, who had been silenced, disciplined, removed from their jobs, or excluded from farm membership.

He reported other striking incidents, several featuring regional party committee secretary Khaidarov. Remember the “heroes of socialist labour” that Nikolaenko was supposed to have planned to murder? In 1956 and 1957, Fedorenko found, Khaidarov had conspired with other local party leaders and farm managers to underreport the regional acreage under cotton. In both years they “lost” more than ten thousand acres. By reporting less land under cotton they were able to raise the reported yield of cotton per acre, and so exceed the centre’s target for the cotton yield. As a reward, they and their colleagues received a state decoration: “hero of socialist labour.” How they had done it was not exactly a secret. Anonymous complaints had reached Moscow. Moscow passed them back to the district committee for investigation. The district committee passed them down to the regional committee, and the regional committee filed them away.

Khaidarov’s personal life spilled over into his party activities – or was it the other way around? He had started a sexual relationship with party worker Miss Kobliakova, and had helped her financially. He was already blessed with a large family and his wife took exception. Mrs Khaidarova protested loudly to both the regional and district committees. Khaidarov assured everyone that the affair was over. Miss Kobliakova left the district, and no more was said about it (or her).

Khaidarov also built himself a large private residence near the Khrushchev farm with timber supplied by chairman Keldyev from the farm. Underlying this was a complex exchange of favours. Khaidarov reportedly paid for the timber with cash. The construction was done by workers from another farm, the neighbouring Stalin agricultural cooperative, where Khaidarov’s brother was a member. Supposedly the work done on the house paid off the work done by Khaidarov’s brother on the Stalin farm. Meanwhile Khaidarov’s brother built his own house – and then left the cooperative.

Fedorenko found that private residential construction was booming in the Denau region. The boom reflected supply and demand. On the demand side, several local farm managers and party functionaries seemed to have money to spend beyond their official means, and were putting the money into housebuilding. On the

supply side, the labour and timber for housebuilding were being taken out of local farms.

What did it all mean? It is easy to see what drove demand. The Soviet economy provided few legal instruments for personal saving: cash, saving bank accounts paying low interest, and government bonds that not only paid low interest but were non-transferable and redeemable only after relatively long terms. Neither cash nor bank accounts were secure; in living memory the government had compulsorily converted both on unfavourable terms. Other instruments that were secure, such as foreign currency and precious metals and stones, were not legal. How could a family with surplus income diversify its assets securely? Building a private home in a rural neighbourhood was one of the few options.

From Moscow's point of view, this undermined the plan for national economic development. Personal saving, if held in cash or at the bank, could be matched by public investments in the economic and military infrastructure. Directly or indirectly, these investments drew on the food and materials produced by the country's farms. But if householders invested their own savings in private homes, and if the building of these homes diverted farm resources from supplying the state with resources for public investment, the private investment was competing resources away from the state plan for public investment and so actively undermining the Soviet economy.

Fedorenko found that the Uzbek republican party central committee knew all about the private housing boom in the Denau district. In Tashkent they told him that the Surkhan Daria district committee had the matter in hand. The persons responsible were now willing to transfer their homes to the social housing stock in return for compensation at the state's valuation. To pay for this, the district housing authority was currently seeking a "large" additional grant from Moscow's budget. (If allowed, this would eventually have to be paid for out of higher taxes or cutbacks in public spending somewhere else.)

Fedorenko's fact-finding also suggests how precious private residences were to the owners, with how much energy they were defended, and how those with connections could defend them. A petrol tanker driver accidentally damaged the home of a farm bookkeeper. Instead of pursuing the legal remedies available, the farm chairman held the tanker hostage, siphoning off fuel and removing the tires, until the driver had personally compensated the home owner.

One last petty abuse. Close by the Denau station one day, railway worker Aliev detained secretary for propaganda Umarov of the Surkhan Daria district party committee for trying to drive over the track at an unauthorized crossing. Umarov provoked Aliev into a bitter argument, during which the latter let slip an "uncensored expression." So Umarov had Aliev arrested for "petty hooliganism" (i.e. swearing at a party official) and imprisoned for ten days with loss of pay. Aliev's legitimate complaint rose to the Uzbek republican party central committee. Umarov gave an assurance that he had apologized to Aliev. But not so; Fedorenko found that, far from apologizing, Umarov had sought Aliev out, shouted at him, demanded a meeting of the workers to investigate the latter's misdemeanour, and was restrained from starting the scandal up all over again only by others present.

Outcomes and Explanations

Fedorenko concluded with a recommendation: the next step should be to summon farm chairman Keldyev, secretary Khaidarov of the regional party committee, first secretary Khakimov of the district party committee, and representatives of the republican party and prosecution service to meet the Committee for Party Control. To judge from the record, this meeting took place in the late summer of 1959. As a direct result the Uzbek republican party central committee took steps to “correct the indicated faults and punish the guilty.” We do not know what that meant; the only concrete measure of punishment in the record is that district committee secretary Umarov was reprimanded and demoted to work at a lower level as a regional party committee secretary.

Mr Nikolaenko’s moral victory over the party mafia of the Surkhan Daria district raises a fascinating question. What enabled this ordinary, undistinguished pensioner to triumph over the local power elite? Why did Moscow listen to him, when the local authorities were not only deaf to his complaints but conspired to break him? At this time, even after Stalin’s death, the Soviet Union remained a harsh, centralized dictatorship with a censored press; the citizen’s voice had no right to be heard against the decisions of the party and state. Between 1917 and 1991, millions of Nikolaenkos were silenced and trampled underfoot without a second thought. As long as the vital interests of the Soviet state were not damaged, nobody in power gave a damn about an individual miscarriage of justice. What made Mr Nikolaenko different?

The answer lay partly in timing; we’ll come back to that. The fundamental thing was this: from Moscow’s standpoint, the enemies of Mr Nikolaenko were the enemies of the state! If the state was to defend itself, it had to defend Mr Nikolaenko.

Think about Stalin, a brutal and bloody tyrant but a very smart one. Stalin had clear goals for the country that he ruled. At least four times in the quarter century that he ruled, Stalin set about mobilizing the resources of the entire country into huge efforts: in the early 1930s, to industrialize the country and organize the peasants into collective farms that would supply the country’s new towns and factories with bread, meat, and milk; in the late 1930s, to arm the country against German plans to colonize the East; in the early 1940s, to fight off Hitler’s devastating surprise attack and conquer Germany; in the late 1940s, to build a country ruined and decimated by invasion and war into an atomic power.

At every stage, Stalin faced resistance. He understood its sources and learned to anticipate it. An obvious source was the enemies he could see: the leaders abroad and at home who could turn against him. More challenging was resistance by the enemy he could not see: the ordinary citizens. These were the millions who, as they went about their daily lives, worked consciously or unconsciously to frustrate the dictator’s plans. They did this by doing what came naturally. When Moscow spoke, they nodded, then watched and waited to see how things turned out. They were slow to respond and avoided responsibility. At meetings they cheered socialism and saluted the banner of Lenin and Stalin – often sincerely. Afterwards they went home

to build their own homes and futures and those of their friends and relatives. Above all, they helped each other appear to the outside as if they were utterly loyal servants of the proletariat and heroes of socialist labour, and this was not so hard because they did not necessarily *disbelieve*. But at heart they were just doing their best to protect themselves and their families.

All this came naturally. They were still doing it naturally when they became pillars of the community and joined the party, got appointed to the farm management, and were selected for the regional and district party committees. For them, politics was a continuation of everyday life by other means.

This strategy worked better in some places than in others. The places where it worked best of all were a long way from Moscow. Such places tended to have stable populations – most people would know each other and each other's background, and many would be related by blood or marriage. Most people knew whom they could trust; even if they didn't completely trust each other's good will, they often knew about their neighbours' peccadilloes and secrets to the extent that they could still rely on cooperation. Perhaps it worked still better where a dominant non-Russian ethnicity clearly marked insiders from outsiders. In fact, the remote valley of the Surkhan Daria probably had just about the best conditions imaginable for a local clan to work up some protection against the guys from Moscow.

To the extent that they succeeded in quietly going about their everyday business in this way, such little people could win a modest degree of security and private prosperity to which they had no legal right. As a result, in common with their neighbours, they had a lot to lose. Anyone who threatened to spoil things could become a problem for the whole community – a troublemaker, like Mr Nikolaenko.

The main task that Keldyev and Khaidarov faced in dealing with their troublesome neighbour was to confine the matter to the Denau region, where they knew everyone and could limit the consequences. If only the repercussions could have been contained within the territory of the local power structure, they would have got away with it. The stratagem they chose, however, relied on a few key people outside the Denau region to collude with them. Some were willing, for example the district party committee and district prosecution service. Fatally, some were not. If only the district court had not tossed out the evidence against him for planning terrorist acts, if only the republican psychiatric service had gone along with declaring him crazy, we would never have heard of Mr Nikolaenko.

Now think about this from the perspective of Moscow in the mid-1950s. Stalin was dead. But Stalin's problem had not gone away. His successors had the same problem of ensuring Moscow's supremacy over local communities and clans the length and breadth of that vast country, a sixth of the world's land surface, 6,000 miles from end to end. In fact, their problem was now worse than before, because they had voluntarily thrown away Stalin's chief instrument: mass terror. Their new regime was fragile – they must have wondered, what if mass terror had been the *only* thing that was making all those millions of party members in the faraway republics, districts and regions fall in line? The Kremlin's new tenants had closed down the Gulag and purged the secret police, replacing the old ministry of state

security with a new government committee under “party control”: the KGB. Would this be enough to hold the country together?

For Moscow, pensioner Nikolaenko was a godsend. Unexpectedly, he gave the centre a direct line of microscopic vision into the inner working arrangements of a local power elite. That vision was alarming and comforting at the same time. Alarming, because they could suddenly see with their own eyes how a little mafia was at work – the self-protection club of the Surkhan Daria valley.

The scale and multiplicity of local corruption would have set alarm bells ringing in the Kremlin, but loudest may have been the bell rung by the collusion of the local KGB. This was a society without free expression or public opinion, in which everyone tried to look loyal, whatever they were actually doing or trying to do. Given that, how was Moscow to uncover disloyalty? Everywhere, under and after Stalin, before and above all, the secret police was the Kremlin’s eyes and ears in the farm and factory, in the village hall and community centre, and on the streets. The KGB’s loyalty to Moscow was a fundamental assumption.

Under Stalin, loyalty to Moscow meant personal loyalty to the tyrant that Stalin became. Stalin used the secret police any way he liked, and that included policing the “ruling” party. In moving the Soviet political system away from Stalinism, Khrushchev took a calculated risk. He brought the secret police under “party control.” The party would control the KGB, not the other way around. But who was the party? The party had millions of members and was organized in every establishment and locality of Soviet society. The party in Moscow was not the same as the party in the Denau region. “Party control” created scope to divide the loyalties of the secret policemen. In the Nikolaenko affair a KGB officer had gone native; he had thrown in his lot with a local clan, with the Keldyevs and Khaidarovs. If that pattern became widespread it was bad news for Moscow.

The comforting news for Moscow was that Mr Nikolaenko was not alone. Not everyone in this story was a crook or a timeserver. There were many Mr Nikolaenkos that had been trying to speak the truth to Moscow. These were special people; each and every one of them needed Moscow’s attention and support.

A Speculation

Mr Nikolaenko was a special person. His persistence certainly exceeded the normal range. Another special characteristic was surely his preference for Moscow’s objectives and Moscow’s rules over those of his neighbours. How do we know that? Not directly; but we can guess.

Mr Nikolaenko was not, apparently, a party member. If he was, Fedorenko’s report would surely have said so. Besides, as we have seen, party membership did not guarantee alignment with Moscow’s goals. But Nikolaenko had fought in the civil war – presumably, with the Bolsheviks. Moreover, this was not the last conflict in which he had sided with Moscow.

Buried in Nikolaenko’s original complaints against Khrushchev farm deputy chairman Alikulov is a reference to the latter’s family origins: in the 1930s Alikulov’s parents had been victims of Stalin’s repression of those peasants considered to be unduly wealthy – the “kulaks.” Fedorenko confirms this, adding: “Whether

Nikolaenko, as he writes, took part in the dekulakization of [Alikulov's] family cannot be established." But it seems that Nikolaenko was trying to explain his persecution partly on the basis that Alikulov was resurrecting a vendetta against one of Stalin's loyal agents that originated in the 1930s.

Consider the ethnicity of names like Alikulov, Alimov, Faisulov, Karaev, Keldyev, Khaidarov, Khakimov, and Suleimanov. Alikulov was from an Uzbek family. Nikolaenko's family origin, on the other hand, lay in the far distant Ukraine. How did a Ukrainian come to be involved in the dispossession of an Uzbek family in the early 1930s? Here's a possibility; let's call it an educated guess.

In November 1929, Stalin's Politburo launched a campaign to send 25,000 urban workers to the countryside to force the pace of farm collectivization. The total number of party activists mobilized from the cities for the war against the peasantry eventually reached a hundred thousand. Their story has been told by Lynne Viola. No one volunteered for this battle that was not motivated by an idealistic commitment to the general party line. In the countryside, their ideals were tested. Many suffered conditions of dreadful isolation and extreme deprivation. Many fell out of the ranks; some lost their health, others their ideals, and more than a few lost their lives. Those left when the battle was over were hardened in their convictions, unable "to merge with their local surroundings, to cast off their proletarian identity" (Viola 1987, pp. 185, 192).

A minority of the 25,000ers settled permanently in the countryside to work, uphold the new villages, and raise their families there. Maybe, the young Nikolaenko was one of these. He would have arrived in the Surkhan Daria valley around 1930, an outsider sent by Moscow to enforce the general line of the party and impose a violent "revolution from above" on the countryside. If so, a quarter century later he was still there.

If this is truly what happened, it would explain for sure why Mr Nikolaenko never quite bonded with his Uzbek neighbours. The old man just wouldn't let himself be drawn into their little local games or endorse their petty ambitions; or perhaps they wouldn't let him in. By the 1950s the neighbours all looked like loyal citizens, stalwarts of collective farming, and pillars of the party. But only one generation had passed since the confiscations and deportations of Stalin's "great breakthrough." Nikolaenko remembered it, and they remembered Nikolaenko. Perhaps the past wasn't over yet. Nikolaenko was getting on in years. The children of Stalin's victims were getting on with their own lives, but evidently they did not feel much need to play fair with him if he was still making trouble for them.

In Conclusion

Instructor Fedorenko has left us an historical epic of everyday life in the middle of the twentieth century in a faraway valley of Soviet Uzbekistan. In the background, a far-flung dictatorship and its vast bureaucracy struggle to turn from mass terror to controlled repression. In the foreground a quarrelsome old man carries on a bitter feud with his neighbours; although badly battered, he emerges vindicated.

In those complex times the protagonists dressed up in complex identities. The old man cast himself to carry the sword of truth and the shield of justice against a

self-interested mafia that had corrupted the legality of the proletarian state. The network that opposed him was made up of ordinary people, not master criminals. Scarred by their own history, often rough and ill-mannered, they had no interest in trust or mutual aid as fundamental moral values, only as means of survival. By cooperation they aimed to hollow out a niche for themselves and their families, to defend their homes, to hold up a roof against brutal, distant outsiders, and to close the curtains against an intrusive, confrontational neighbor. Surely they would have echoed the words of Lampert's invented character (1985: p. 183):

What principle do the "truth seekers" represent? They represent a world of thorough and cold-blooded state control. The whistleblowers are the totalitarians of the piece, spying on their colleagues and fellow workers and setting themselves up as agents for the prying eyes of the state.

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