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Fact and Fantasy in Soviet Records: The Documentation of Soviet Party and Secret Police Investigations as Historical Evidence

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Fact and Fantasy in Soviet Records: The Documentation of Soviet Party and Secret Police Investigations as Historical Evidence

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Abstract

When we use Soviet documentation of political and secret police investigations to write history, to what extent are we vulnerable to the biases and inventions of the investigators? The problem is framed as one of principal and agent. It is argued that Soviet principals allowed their agents scope to manipulate facts and bias interpretations, not freely, but within strict limits that were laid down from above and varied from time to time. These limits were set by the leader's "revolutionary insight," the communist equivalent of what passes in more open societies today as "truthiness." An understanding of the Soviet truthiness of the particular time is the best guide we have to interpreting the documentary records of that time. Evaluating them in this light, we see that Soviet historical documents are little different from the records of any other time and place.

Keywords: communism, dictatorship, information, Soviet Union, truthiness.

JEL Codes: D83, N44.

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Fact and Fantasy in Soviet Records: The Documentation of Soviet Party and Secret Police Investigations as Historical Evidence

My book *One Day We Will Live without Fear: Everyday Lives Under the Soviet Police State* presents a number of true stories from the archives of the former Soviet Union.[1] Drawing on events from the 1930s through the 1970s, these stories show how, by accident or design, people became entangled in the workings of Soviet rule. In the process I outline and illustrate the seven principles on which that police state operated during its history, from the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Well-known people appear in the stories, but the central characters are those who will have been remembered only within their families: a budding artist, an engineer, a pensioner, a government office worker, a teacher, a group of tourists. Their tales, based on historical records, shine a light on the many tragic, funny, and bizarre aspects of Soviet life.

Each of my stories arises from the records of an investigation by either the Party Control Commission or the KGB (Committee of State Security). This raises an important question: can the records of these bodies be trusted? Did party investigators really take the trouble to establish the facts without fear or favor? Did Soviet secret policemen not manufacture fantastic threats and invent fictitious agents in order to impress superiors and win funding, like *Our Man in Havana*? In Graham Greene's novel of 1958, a British businessman in need of funds becomes a spy. To please his new paymaster he develops a fictitious agent network using the names of local people whom he meets accidentally, and reports important military installations using diagrams of vacuum cleaner parts.[2]

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[1] Harrison, *One Day We Will Live Without Fear*.

[2] Greene, *Our Man in Havana*.

Could an NKVD officer do that and get away with it? It is true that many investigative documents of the Soviet era, and especially from Stalin's time, contain claims for which there was no independent evidence. These often concerned attributions of treasonous intention to commit particular acts or allegations of conspiracy to carry them out. Many such allegations were fabricated. The story of Stanislav Bronikovsky (chapter 1) revolves around just such a fabricated claim. The weaving of lies by investigators charged with establishing the truth has led some historians to view Stalin as a "weak dictator." Although Stalin's hand can be found in every major decision of the Soviet state over three decades, perhaps he was not truly in control because he could not control the propensity to lie of those from whom he needed to hear the facts.

The weak-dictator hypothesis merits a short digression. It is concisely stated by James Harris in his review article, "Was Stalin a Weak Dictator?" An earlier version of the same argument, much-cited, is by J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*. Getty returned to the subject in "The Politics of Repression," suggesting that in 1937 Yezhov "pursued initiatives, prepared dossiers, and pushed certain investigations in order to promote his own agenda" which "may not have been identical" with Stalin's.[3]

Much of the case for Stalin's supposed weakness, however, is based on attacking a straw man: the idea that the Great Terror was the culmination of a long-term plan to imprison or murder millions of people that Stalin followed over several years, at least from the murder of Leningrad party chief Sergei Kirov in 1934. There is no evidence that Stalin had such a long-term plan, so advocates of the weak-dictator hypothesis swing from one extreme to another, concluding that Stalin was pushed or manipulated by others into mass murder.

This is a false alternative. For Stalin, terror was an instrument, not a goal. He did not have a long-term plan for mass murder, but he did have

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[3] The quoted words are by Getty "The Politics of Repression," pp. 59–60. See also Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, and Harris, "Was Stalin a Weak Dictator?"

stable objectives for national power and his own security and the capacity to pursue them in ways that changed as his information changed.[4] At a certain point, mass murder was the result.

At the same time, the reliability of particular historical records cannot be resolved by debates at such a high level of abstraction. Cautious historians have rightly raised concerns about the private agendas of the investigators. Did the secret police of Stalin's time, for example, not invent underground networks and conspiracies so as to justify their own employment and extract more funding from their political masters? And does this not introduce uncontrollable distortions into the documentary record?

Because this is such an important question, it makes sense to consider the veracity of the documentation underlying this book in some detail. Can the documents be trusted to tell us the truth? No. No document deserves unconditional trust. Can the documents be analyzed to extract a reliable message? Can we identify fact from distortion? Yes. My confidence is based on arguments that I will set out briefly.

First, every record has a message; the problem is to work out what it is. According to the political scientist Robert Jervis, "Most communications convey two messages: what the actor is saying and the fact that he needs to say it."[5] The craft of the historian who works with documents is to triangulate the contents of the document with its authorship, with other sources, and with prior knowledge about the authors, their position in the world as it worked at the time, and their need to say what was said.

Second, we are dealing with records of investigations where the investigator could report the facts selectively, and suppress or invent them at key points, so as to favor one interpretation over another. This

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[4] This case is made in more detail by Gregory and Harrison, "Allocation Under Dictatorship," pp. 732–733; Gregory, Schröder, and Sonin, "Rational Dictators"; and Harrison, "The Dictator and Defense."

[5] Jervis, "Signaling and Perception," p. 298.

creates a dilemma for the reader of any document: where, exactly, did invention take over from the facts?

It is helpful to understand that the investigations carried out by Soviet state and party officials were not liable to *free* invention. Invention was permissible only within strict limits. The limits were handed down from above, and corresponded to the revolutionary insights of the party leaders at the time. These insights could be used to fill in the gaps between the facts as they were known and, if necessary, would take priority over the facts.

This is less strange than it might sound. A close analog to the idea of "revolutionary insight" is Stephen Colbert's invention (on his TV show *The Colbert Report* in 2005): "truthiness." Truthiness, defined in a recent brief to the US Supreme Court, is the quality of something that is "felt to be true"; it is known by instinct and therefore "without regard to evidence or logic."[6] (So truthiness goes deeper than mere plausibility or verisimilitude.) Truthy beliefs tend to persist even when they are contradicted by verified facts. This is because they are felt to be true in general, and such feelings outweigh detailed invalidation.

Truthiness may well be a feature of political discourse in every society, but the Soviet and American ways of politics differed in an important respect. In Soviet life, access to claimed truths was entirely monopolized by the party, and within the party by the leaders. A leader like Stalin had revolutionary insight, and you could not be a Soviet leader without it.[7] Stalin based important decisions on instinct, that is, on claimed insights into the true (or "truthy") state of the world that did not require external validation. He worked assiduously to share these insights with others around him and to ensure that they learned to conform.

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[6] Shapiro et al., "Truthiness and the First Amendment."

[7] On Stalin and revolutionary insight, see Davies and Harris, *Stalin's World*, pp. 60–61, 79–80.

Here are Stalin's revolutionary insights that are most relevant to this book. Some of them have already appeared as illustrations of the First Principle (from chapter 1: *your enemy is hiding*).

- We have enemies: "We have internal enemies. We have external enemies. This, comrades, must not be forgotten for a single moment."[8]
- War can come at any time: "We could not know just when the imperialists would attack the USSR … but that they might attack us at any moment … of that there could be no doubt."[9]
- The internal enemy is hand in glove with the foreign enemy: "a gang of wreckers, diversionists, intelligence service agents, spies, assassins, a gang of sworn enemies of the working class, working in the pay of the intelligence services of foreign states."[10]
- The most dangerous enemy is the one who is already among us: "Wherein lies the strength of the present-day wreckers, the Trotskyites? Their strength lies in the Party card."[11]
- When something bad happens, look for the link to the foreign enemy: "He [a mutinous officer] is, of course (of course!), not alone. He must be put up against the wall and forced to talk—to tell the whole truth and then severely punished. He must be a Polish-German (or Japanese) agent" (a remark that Stalin made during an investigation in 1934).[12]
- Finally, "truthiness" can be more reliable than the truth, and the reason is that we cannot expect to find independent verification of

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[8] Stalin, *Works*, vol. 11, p. 67.

[9] Stalin, *Works*, vol. 13, p. 186.

[10] Stalin, *Works*, vol. 14, p. 252.

[11] Stalin, *Works*, vol. 14, p. 256.

[12] For the full story of the so-called Nakhayev affair, see Davies et al., eds., *The Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence*, pp. 240–242, 246–264.

> what we believe: "Experienced conspirators don't leave behind a trail of documents in their work."[13]

Stalin used these messages to guide his own fact-finders. He obligated them to make certain presumptions. You must presume that anyone can be an enemy; that anyone who looks loyal can turn out to be an unconscious enemy; that one explanation for gaps in the evidence can be that enemies cover their tracks; and that among the missing facts may be coordination between domestic and foreign enemies.

The prudent investigator would follow these insights when the facts were missing. There were times such as the Great Terror, but not only then, when Stalin's insights would take precedence even though the facts contradicted them. A result was the widespread fabrication of charges, torture, and false confessions. The story of Stanislav Bronikovsky (chapter 1) takes place at one of those times.

Thus Soviet investigators were authorized to apply "Soviet truthiness" in the course of their investigations, and the documentary records of their investigations became correspondingly distorted. But there was no authorization to invent freely. The authority to invent was limited to those things that would confirm Stalin's revolutionary insights.

Stalin died, and his successors modified his insights. They continued to assert the belief in a homeland encircled and penetrated by enemies that strove ceaselessly for the overthrow of communism. But they dispensed with the infamous notion of the unconscious enemy, and they no longer looked for the most dangerous enemies inside the party. They continued to look for the hand of the enemy in every unplanned event and unauthorized initiative. But they sharply increased the burden of proof that was required to identify the enemy. Suspicion of disloyalty would still lead to investigation but it would not lead to arrest and punishment unless independent facts were found that pointed to specific responsibility, including guilty intention. Thus, there was change as well as continuity in "Soviet truthiness."

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[13] Quoted by Davies and Harris, *Stalin's World*, p. 90.

Stalin was no weak dictator. He and his successors set firm limits on what could be asserted as "truthy" (as opposed to what was verifiably true). Whatever it was that they believed at the time, they set the same limits in both secret business and public discourse. They were fully alive to the possibility that their own officials might push at these limits, and they used multiple strategies to control them.

How, exactly, did Soviet rulers enforce their beliefs on those around them—and specifically on the fact-finders of the party and the secret police? How did they ensure that investigators would follow the authorized presumptions, and not go an inch beyond them?

The Soviet system was designed with this in mind. It began with keeping the fact-finders apart from those they had to investigate.[14] The secret police, in particular, were an elite group: "Stalin's praetorians."[15] After that, it was important to keep them few in number and close to hand. Stalin kept his fact-finders modestly staffed and funded. As their numbers grew he also limited their influence at the center by dividing them into smaller, more specialized agencies.[16] He understood what modern democracies forget at their peril: a fact-finding apparatus that is bloated by too much money and too little supervision is dangerous because it can attract empire builders who acquire their own vested interests and become a political lobby. Stalin wanted conduits of reliable information, not rival centers of power. Stalin's successors took these lessons to heart. We saw in chapter 5 that the KGB, for example, remained a relatively small organization right up to the last days of the Soviet Union.

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[14] Discussed by Gregory, *Restructuring the Soviet Bureaucracy*, pp. 18–23.

[15] These words are used by Gregory, *Terror by Quota*, pp. 33–59.

[16] Described by Gregory, *Terror by Quota*, pp. 98–103; Gregory and Belova, "Dictator, Loyal and Opportunistic Agents"; and Markevich, "How Much Control is Enough?"

The Soviet system of rule also limited the fact-finders' scope for straying beyond prescribed limits by denying them the capacity to engage in policy analysis. Stalin never allowed his party investigators or secret policemen to criticize policy, form or frame policy choices, or even just consider broader implications of the facts they found. Analysis was his prerogative, which no one else could assume. The Party Control Commission, responsible for investigating wrongdoing by party members, had no right to analyze the conditions that might lead party members to do wrong. When investigating threats to security, the KGB was restricted to finding facts; it had no right to analyze the factors behind the threats.

Here, perhaps, is an important but neglected difference between intelligence work in a democracy and under a totalitarian dictator. Americans consider that the intelligence officer has a duty to "speak truth to power," even when the truth is painful.[17] The KGB could not speak truth to power. It could speak only facts. This was a surprising discovery for Vadim Bakatin, a provincial party boss whom Gorbachev appointed to bring the KGB under control after the attempted putsch of August 1991. Bakatin did not foresee that as KGB chief he would be expected to handle an avalanche of "almost unprocessed" facts that landed daily on his desk from below. The facts that reached him were undigested because it was nobody's job to make sense of them before they reached his desk. He looked for the cause of this and decided that the party itself had monopolized the role of data analysis, and did not want to share this role with any other body, including the KGB.[18]

This leads me to discount those interpretations of Soviet rule in which a weak ruler was manipulated by his security officials, who fed the paranoia of the regime with fabricated plots of their own devising in order to win funding and job security. The Soviet system was designed to

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[17] Peterson, "What I Learned in 40 Years."

[18] Bakatin, *Izbavlenie ot KGB*, pp. 44–45.

ensure that subordinate officials had neither the freedom of action nor the capacity to manage their superiors in this way.

Where does this leave us? The documents underlying this book are records created by the Soviet rulers' fact-finders. They were written to serve the rulers, and they must be understood in that light. Those who wrote them shared the rulers' mind-set, including their "insights" into what must be true yet cannot be confirmed. Thus our records show characteristic biases that are easily identifiable based on knowledge of the period. These biases arise from the investigators' obligation to conform to the party leaders' insights and to elaborate on them without going beyond them by an inch. The biases do not arise from the investigators' preference for framing the rulers' choices or their desire to manipulate power from below.[19]

In that light I approach the records of party and KGB investigators that form the basis of my book: like any historical documents, they require consideration of the circumstances and motives of the authors, always paying particular attention to the facts that are missing and the facts that were sacrificed to the truthiness of the time and place.

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[19] For a level-headed discussion that reaches similar conclusions on the reliability of Soviet secret-police records concerning the popular mood, see Davies, *Popular Opinion*, pp. 9–17.

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