



Paul R. Gregory. *Terror by Quota: State Security from Lenin to Stalin.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. viii + 346 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-13425-4.



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The “Rational” Mass Violence of Stalin’s Secret Police

After the fall of the Soviet Union, documents from state and party archives began to reveal a disturbing and previously little understood aspect of Soviet repression operations. The Soviet secret police worked according to quotas. Just as Soviet economic planners set targets for industrial growth, so too did state security organs set their own “limits” for arrests and executions. Why did the secret police function in this way? Why were so many people arrested for crimes they had never committed?

In *Terror by Quota*, Paul R. Gregory seeks to understand Stalinist repression through a detailed study of the organization, management, and methods of the Soviet secret police. As “producers” of repression, state security organs provided a service that the regime utilized to specific ends. Joseph Stalin was a “rational totalitarian dictator,” and the actions of Soviet state security “follow[ed] distinctive patterns as suggested by a rational choice model” (p. 32). Soviet repression operations were not the product of political ideology or Stalin’s paranoia, but the rational application of repression in the pursuit

of Stalin’s objectives as a “power maximizing dictator” (pp. 13-14).

Stalin’s secret police handled a large portfolio of state security and internal security matters. “Anti-soviet activity” included political as well as economic crimes. In many cases, criminality was believed to be the product of a person’s class consciousness. Class distinctions served as a measure of a person’s potential loyalty or adversity to the proletarian dictatorship. Members of the aristocracy, former landowners, and clergy as well as their families were arrested for who they were, not what they had done.

The Bolsheviks also viewed criminality in terms of acts that endangered society. A wide variety of “socially harmful elements” were arrested and deported as early as 1924. Beginning in 1934, the unemployed, former criminals, and others were denied internal passports (which allowed one to live in major urban areas) and sent to remote “special settlements.” As Gregory notes, most of these “enemies of the worker” and peasant “state

were themselves workers and peasants (p. 131). They were not the foreign saboteurs and counterrevolutionaries described in the newspapers. In actuality, Stalin's enemies were better-off peasants, resisters of collectivization, intellectuals and religious persons, members of banned parties, slackers, drunks, homeless persons, family members of traitors and careless cadres (p. 132). The enemy was whoever the dictator portrayed as an enemy in the pursuit of his goals.

As noted before, nearly all of these individuals were arrested for having fit the profile of a potential enemy, not for things they had actually done. Stalin proceeded from the belief that innocent people would inevitably be repressed in the process of destroying enemies and that it was better to arrest innocents than to let the guilty go free. As he stated during the Great Terror, "every communist is a possible hidden enemy. And because it is not easy to recognize the enemy, the goal is achieved even if only 5 percent of those killed are truly enemies" (p. 196). Gregory demonstrates the logic of this statement with the "eliminations model." For a dictator to remain in power, he must suppress both those actively conspiring to overthrow him and those who would potentially support his enemies. However, it was difficult to correctly identify one's enemies. During party purges, members "mask[ed]" their true past and beliefs to avoid repression.

Given great uncertainty, widespread repression was necessary to assure that a sufficient number of enemies were destroyed. The secret police used similar methods during dekulakization. The Politburo decree of January 30, 1930, which called for the "liquidation of kulaks as a class," targeted 3-5 percent of the rural population for execution, deportation, or corrective labor (p. 173). With limited accuracy, it was necessary to eliminate a large number of people to ensure success.

Given that no crime had been committed, traditional criminal courts were ill equipped to handle the type and quantity of prosecutions required by large-scale operations. The solution to this problem was the *troika*. These three person tribunals were composed of a member of the party, a member of the procuracy, and a member of state security. In practice, these "trials" were held without testimony or even the presence of the accused. The defendant was usually found innocent or guilty based on confessions. As Gregory observes, confessions provided an effective means of increasing the productivity of state security officers by dramatically reducing the amount of time needed to investigate and prosecute a suspect.

Troikas and the use of confessions made it possible to issue as many as 1,500 death sentences per day without any noticeable increase in the number of state security agents.

Gregory argues that the center tightly controlled state security operations and that state security operatives generally followed Moscow's plans. Limits for the Great Terror may have been "over-fulfilled" by 2 to 15 percent, but field personnel routinely asked permission before exceeding their limits (p. 189). Here, Gregory differs with J. Arch Getty and others who have argued that field personnel substantially exceeded their quotas. Gregory recognizes that such "excesses" took place, but if we account for limit increases, they were "not large deviations" by Soviet standards or an indication that Moscow had lost control of operations in the field (pp. 188-190).

One of the many strengths of *Terror by Quota* is its documentation of the interactions between the center and periphery during the Great Terror. On July 2, 1937, Stalin requested that each of sixty-five regional People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) chiefs present a "bid" for the number of enemies to be repressed in their jurisdiction. This was done without any one region knowing the others' "bids." Gregory details how each regional chief was faced with a "repressors" dilemma (pp. 220-224). They could offer a low (and perhaps more accurate) bid or they could send a high bid. Higher bids meant that evidence and charges needed to be fabricated, but there was less risk of appearing lenient relative to other regions with potentially higher bids. On July 20, 1937, NKVD chief Nikolai Yezhov issued Order No. 00447, which adjusted bids and established official limits for each region. As "mass operations" proceeded, regions were encouraged to request higher limits from Moscow. What followed was a contest, true to the spirit of socialist competition, to raise regional limits and to demonstrate vigilance. On average, regions increased their limits by 96% percent (p. 233).

Terror by Quota provides useful models for interpreting the archival record and identifying the "fundamentals" of Soviet repression operations. Taken as individual insights, they highlight significant aspects of how state security functioned. The "repressors" dilemma reveals a dynamic that led to increasing quotas. The "eliminations model" helps to explain why large numbers of innocent people were arrested. Each of the eight chapters presents a useful and thought-provoking model. However, by limiting the focus to goal-oriented "rational behavior," we lose much of the complexity and multicausality of mass

violence in the Soviet Union.[1]

Additionally, Gregory does not exploit the strengths of his method. As he notes, "models of dictators offer a powerful tool to generalize about dictatorial behavior, as they can be applied to different times and places" (p. 11). Gregory uses the term "dictator" throughout the book to make claims that apply equally to Vladimir Lenin, Stalin, and post-Stalin leaders. However, Gregory does not provide evidence that his claims are valid for other periods of Soviet history. Additionally, *Terror by Quota* offers no reference to comparable authoritarian and "totalitar-

ian" regimes. Such comparison might have significantly strengthened the book's conclusions and broadened the potential readership. As written, this text will be of great interest to political scientists, economists, and historians of Stalinism and the Great Terror.

Note

[1]. Christian Gerlach and Nicolas Werth, "State Violence-Violent Societies," in *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, ed. Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 133-179.

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