



CHICAGO JOURNALS



Stalinist Terror and Democracy: The 1937 Union Campaign

Author(s): By Wendy Goldman

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 110, No. 5 (December 2005), pp. 1427-1453

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.press.uchicago.edu) on behalf of the [American Historical Association](http://www.ahahistory.org)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/ahr.110.5.1427>

Accessed: 29/08/2012 22:12

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press and American Historical Association are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to The American Historical Review.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Stalinist Terror and Democracy: The 1937 Union Campaign

WENDY GOLDMAN

IN A PRISON CAMP IN THE 1930s, a young Soviet woman posed an anguished question in a poem about Stalinist terror:

We must give an answer: Who needed
The monstrous destruction of the generation
That the country, severe and tender,
Raised for twenty years in work and battle?¹

Historians, united only by a commitment to do this question justice, differ sharply about almost every aspect of “the Great Terror”:² the intent of the state, the targets of repression, the role of external and internal pressures, the degree of centralized control, the number of victims, and the reaction of Soviet citizens. One long-prevailing view holds that the Soviet regime was from its inception a “terror” state. Its authorities, intent solely on maintaining power, sent a steady stream of people to their deaths in camps and prisons. The stream may have widened or narrowed over time, but it never stopped flowing. The Bolsheviks, committed to an antidemocratic ideology and thus predisposed to “terror,” crushed civil society in order to wield unlimited power. Terror victimized all strata of a prostrate population.³

I would like to thank the American Council of Learned Societies for its support, and William Chase, Anton D’Auria, Donald Filtzer, J. Arch Getty, Lawrence Goldman, Jonathan Harris, Donna Harsch, Aleksei Kilichenkov, Marcus Rediker, Carmine Storella, and the members of the Working Class History Seminar in Pittsburgh for their comments and suggestions.

¹ Yelena Vladimirova, a Leningrad communist who was sent to the camps in the late 1930s, wrote the poem. It is reprinted in full in Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* (New York, 1989), 634.

² The period of Nikolai Ezhov’s tenure (September 1936–November 1938) is called the “Ezhovshchina” or “the Terror,” terms that encompass purge, repression, and the general climate of fear. The term “purge” or *chistka* refers to a process within the Communist Party in which members were periodically reviewed and sometimes expelled for corruption, passivity, moral laxity, political differences, or other reasons. In the mid-1930s, these purges turned deadly, and expulsion was often the prelude to arrest, imprisonment, or execution. “Purge” is also sometimes used to describe expulsions from an institution. The term “repression” refers to the larger phenomena of arrest, imprisonment, and execution affecting people within and outside the Party.

³ Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York, 1990); Stephanie Courtois, Nicolas Werth, Jean-Louis Panne, Andrzej Paczkowski, Karel Bartosek, and Jean-Louis Margolin, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999); Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, 1918–1956* (New York, 1973); Marc Jansen and Nikita Petrov, *Stalin’s Loyal Executioner: People’s Commissar Nikolai Ezhov* (Stanford, Calif., 2002); Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Terror and Freedom in the Donbas* (Cambridge, 1999). Oleg Khlevniuk’s works, including *In Stalin’s Shadow: The Career of “Sergo” Ordzhonikidze* (New York, 1995) and *1937-i: Stalin,*

In the 1980s, a new interest in social history prompted a “revisionist” reaction to this view. Historians began to take a closer look at the fissures and tensions within the state. They charted sharp vacillations in policy, relationships among central and local authorities, conflicts between campaign-style justice and the rule of law, and the effect of foreign and internal social threats. They explored a dynamic dialectic between state policies and social responses in which state action produced unforeseen social and economic consequences, which in turn led to increasingly Draconian measures. They identified specific targets and episodes of repression.⁴ A few historians investigated institutions and groups, uncovering complex interactions between state initiatives and social or community interests. They began to explore “popular elements” in the terror, discovering that workers and peasants used its rituals and rhetoric to denounce managers and officials for abuse. But with a few exceptions, they did not fully develop these initial findings.⁵ Most recently, historians have begun to focus on individual subjectivities, charting the inner psychology beneath the public reaction to repression.⁶

In the 1990s, newly released archival materials provided important information

NKVD i sovetskoe obshchestvo (Moscow, 1992), are informed by a similar view of the state, but focus mainly on the Ezhovshchina.

⁴ See, for example, J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–38* (New York, 1985); Getty, “State and Society under Stalin: Constitutions and Elections in the 1930s,” *Slavic Review* 50, no. 1 (1991); Getty, *Pragmatists and Puritans: The Rise and Fall of the Party Control Commission*, The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies, no. 1208 (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1997); Getty and Oleg Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks* (New Haven, Conn., 1999); James Harris, *The Great Urals: Regional Interests and the Evolution of the Soviet System, 1934–1939* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999); E. A. Rees, ed., *Centre-Local Relations in the Stalinist State, 1928–1941* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2002); Gabor Rittersporn, *Stalinist Simplifications and Soviet Complications: Social Tensions and Political Conflicts in the USSR, 1933–1953* (London, 1991); Peter Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin* (Cambridge, 1996).

⁵ On workers, industry, and repression, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Workers against Bosses: The Impact of the Great Purges on Labor-Management Relations,” in Lewis Siegelbaum and Ronald Suny, eds., *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class and Identity* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), 311–340; and David Hoffman, “The Great Terror on the Local Level: Purges in Moscow Factories, 1936–1938,” Roberta Manning, “The Soviet Economic Crisis of 1936–1940 and the Great Purges,” and Robert Thurston, “The Stakhanovite Movement: The Background to the Great Terror in the Factories, 1935–1938,” all in J. Arch Getty and Roberta Manning, eds., *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993). This collection included pioneering articles on repression in factories, villages, the military, and other places, yet only a few contributors developed their initial findings. See also Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935–41* (Cambridge, 1988); Thurston, “Reassessing the History of Soviet Workers: Opportunities to Criticize and Participate in Decision-Making,” in Stephen White, ed., *New Directions in Soviet History* (Cambridge, 1992); and Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin’s Russia, 1934–1941* (New Haven, Conn., 1996). On peasant reactions, see Fitzpatrick, “How the Mice Buried the Cat: Scenes from the Great Purges of 1937 in the Russian Provinces,” *Russian Review* 52 (1993), and *Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York, 1994); Roberta Manning, *Government in the Soviet Countryside in the Stalinist Thirties: The Case of Belyi Raion in 1937*, The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies, no. 301 (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1984). On institutional conflict, see William Chase, *Enemies within the Gates: The Comintern and the Stalinist Repression, 1934–39* (New Haven, Conn., 2001); Asif Siddiqi, “The Rockets’ Red Glare: Technology, Conflict, and Terror in the Soviet Union,” *Technology and Culture* 44, no. 3 (July 2003).

⁶ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times—Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1999); Veronique Garros, Natalia Korenevskaya, and Thomas Lahusen, *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s* (New York, 1995); Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Jochen Hellbeck, “Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, 1931–39,” in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism: New Directions* (New York, 2000). This list does not include memoirists and novelists, who explore the reactions and psychology of the individual in great detail.

on Iosif Stalin's role and the targets of repression. The documents reinforced the earlier tendency to focus on a few highly placed leaders by providing incontestable proof of Stalin's close personal involvement in repression. Peppered with Stalin's signature and marginal notes, they revealed his hand to be quite literally everywhere. The archives also yielded new information about victims, substantially expanding the categories of people marked for repression beyond the economic managers, Communist Party and military leaders, former oppositionists, and foreign communists previously identified by historians. "Order 00447" for "mass operations" in July 1937 set target numbers for the imprisonment or execution of criminals, clergy, former kulaks, and other "hostile elements." It was followed by "Order 00485," which led to the mass roundup of Polish nationals, and "Order 00486," which mandated the arrests of wives of men convicted of counterrevolutionary crimes.⁷ These findings led to a new subset of research, termed "victim studies."⁸ The discovery of the "mass operations" encouraged some historians to conceptualize the terror more narrowly as "a series of centrally directed punitive actions." In attributing the terror almost solely to Stalin and his close supporters, they discounted the influences of local officials, social tensions, and institutional conflicts in spreading repression.⁹

Scholars working in newly available archives have thus taught us much about the role of central authorities and the victims targeted, but the issue of mass participation still remains relatively unexplored. The gap is particularly striking in light of the scrupulous attention that historians of Nazism have given to attitudes and actions of "ordinary" Germans. Their attention to the responses of women, workers, farmers, and the middle classes, to what people knew and how they understood what they knew—in short, to the social history of Nazi terror—still has no fully developed counterpart in the historiography of Stalinism.¹⁰ In posing questions about the social

⁷ On mass operations, see J. Arch Getty, "'Excesses Are Not Permitted': Mass Terror and Stalinist Governance in the Late 1930s," *Russian Review* 61 (January 2002); Paul Hagenloh, "Socially Harmful Elements and the Great Terror," in Fitzpatrick, *Stalinism: New Directions*; Oleg Khlevniuk, "The Objectives of the Great Terror, 1937–1938," in J. Cooper, M. Perrie, and E. A. Rees, eds., *Soviet History, 1917–1953: Essays in Honor of R. W. Davies* (London, 1995); and Barry McLoughlin, "Mass Operations of the NKVD, 1937–9: A Survey," Nikita Firsov and Arsenii Roginskii, "The 'Polish Operation' of the NKVD, 1937–8," and David Shearer, "Social Disorder, Mass Repression and the NKVD during the 1930s," all in Barry McLoughlin and Kevin McDermott, eds., *Stalin's Terror: High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2003).

⁸ Barry McLoughlin and Kevin McDermott, "Rethinking Stalinist Terror," in McLoughlin and McDermott, *Stalin's Terror*, 3.

⁹ Oleg Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven, Conn., 2004), 140. See also Khlevniuk's review of Jansen and Petrov's *Stalin's Loyal Executioner* in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4, no. 3 (2003), and J. Arch Getty's response in "To the Editors," *Kritika* 5, no. 1 (2004).

¹⁰ A sampling includes Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992); Norman Finkelstein and Ruth Birn, *A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth* (New York, 1998); Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, 2001); Michael Geyer and John Boyer, eds., *Resistance against the Third Reich* (Chicago, 1994); Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996); Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945* (New York, 1992); Eric Johnson, *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews, and Ordinary Germans* (New York, 1999); Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria, 1933–45* (Oxford, 1983); Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York, 1987); Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life* (New Haven, Conn., 1987); and Marlis G. Steinert, *Hitler's War and the Germans: Public Mood and Attitude during the Second World War* (Athens, Ohio, 1977).

responses to terror, Russian historians can build on long-standing comparisons of the political and coercive elements shared by Nazism and Stalinism.¹¹ Both regimes were dictatorial states ruled by leaders with strong personality cults. Both mobilized wide popular support, destroyed civil liberties and judicial rights, established vast camp systems, relied on terror and coercion, and promulgated encompassing ideologies that sought to remake politics, culture, family, and the individual. They even shared “founding events” in mysterious conspiracies: the Reichstag fire and the murder of Sergei M. Kirov, the head of the Leningrad Party organization. And their historiographies, too, are marked by certain similarities. The “totalitarian” versus “revisionist” debate among historians of the Soviet Union has its parallel in the “intentionalist” versus “functionalist” controversy among historians of Nazism. The explanatory weights assigned variously to the power of the leader, to ideology, intention, political improvisation, and contingency shape both sets of debate. Both groups of historians have engaged in similar polemics, impugning the motives of the opposite camp. Just as “intentionalists” charged “functionalists” with “implicitly, unwittingly furnishing an apology for the Nazi regime,” so proponents of the “totalitarian” thesis accused “revisionists” of “fairly dripping with whitewash of Stalinism.” New work suggests that historians of both countries may be moving beyond earlier debates in an effort to integrate the ideology and deliberate intentions of the state with contingent social pressures and responses.¹²

Of course, similarities between Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia can easily be overstated. In the Soviet case, an older Cold War emphasis on facile similarities may have discouraged a deeper exploration of institutional and social responses to the terror. Soviet leaders never promulgated a racist eliminationist ideology; on the contrary, they insisted, at least officially, on the broad principles of internationalism. Unlike Nazi terror, which was directed externally and sought to unite Germans around the demonization of Jews, Gypsies, and the conquered peoples of the east, the terror in the Soviet Union was directed internally in ritualized exposures and expulsions that affected every workplace and institution. The initial perpetrators of purge often became victims of the very processes they had initially promulgated, and unions and local Party organizations devoured themselves. This internal dy-

¹¹ Comparative approaches include Omer Bartov, “Review Forum: Rewriting the Twentieth Century—Extreme Opinions,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3, no. 2 (2002); Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (New York, 1992); “Special Issue on Denunciation,” ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, *Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 4 (1997); Fitzpatrick and Gellately, eds., *Accusatory Practices: Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789–1989* (Chicago, 1997); Gellately and Ben Kiernan, *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (New York, 2005); Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin, eds., *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge, 1997); Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (New York, 1999); and Eric Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton, N.J., 2003.)

¹² Tim Mason, “Intention and Explanation: A Current Controversy about the Interpretation of National Socialism,” in Jane Caplan, ed., *Nazism, Fascism and the Working Class: Essays by Tim Mason* (Cambridge, 1995), 212; Martin Malia, “To the Editors,” *Kritika* 2, no. 4 (2001). See also Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London, 1993); “From the Editors: Really-Existing Revisionism?” *Kritika* 3, no. 3 (2002); Christopher Browning, “Beyond ‘Intentionalism’ and ‘Functionalism’: A Reassessment of Nazi Jewish Policy from 1939 to 1941,” in Thomas Childers and Jane Caplan, eds., *Reevaluating the Third Reich* (New York, 1993). On “revisionism,” see *The Russian Review* 45, no. 4 (1986) and 46, no. 4 (1987), and more recently Martin Malia, “Judging Nazism and Communism,” *National Interest* 69 (Fall 2002); Michael David-Fox, “On the Primacy of Ideology: Soviet Revisionists and Holocaust Deniers (In Response to Martin Malia),” *Kritika* 5, no. 1 (2004).

namic, with its complicated organizational, psychological, and political mechanisms of self-destruction, clearly differs from the mobile killing squads and genocidal death camps of Nazism. If the rhetoric of Nazism was aimed at the “enemy” without, the rhetoric of the Soviet terror centered on “unmasking” the “enemy” within.

This article shifts attention from the machinations of top Party leaders to the mechanisms by which repression engulfed Soviet society. The Kirov assassination, the rise of fascism, and the threat of war fueled widespread fears of foreign enemies, “wreckers” (saboteurs), and spies.¹³ Party leaders presented the murderous abrogation of civil rights that we presently term “the Terror” as patriotic “anti-terror” measures, stressing that vigilance and denunciation were duties of all loyal citizens. Moreover, they couched these “anti-terror” measures in the language of anti-bureaucratization, socialist renewal, and mass control from below, appeals with strong popular resonance. Repression was a mass phenomenon, not only in the number of victims it claimed, but in the number of perpetrators it spawned. The Stalinist leadership played a key role in launching and directing the terror, yet *repression was also institutionally disseminated*. People participated as perpetrators and victims, and sometimes both, through their membership in factories, unions, schools, military units, and other institutions. The complex issues and rivalries unique to these organizations helped fuel the political culture of repression. This article also examines repression in the unions, a network encompassing almost 22 million members. It maps the spread of repression as it flowed downward and outward through the hierarchical layers of a mass institution that reached from a central governing council of unions to committees in factories and shops.

In the unions, the slogans of repression were intimately intertwined with those of democracy. Nowhere is this astounding, puzzling pairing more evident than in the campaign for union democracy (*profdemokratiia*), a mass movement to revitalize the unions that coincided with the sharpest period of political repression in 1937 and 1938. Superficially, these two phenomena appear in sharp contradiction. What could spy mania, mass arrests, extralegal trials, and executions possibly have in common with secret ballots, new elections, official accountability, and the revitalization of union democracy from below? Historians have placed so much emphasis on “terror” during the Stalin era that it is difficult to see a mass campaign for union democracy as anything but a cynical propaganda ploy from above. Yet the campaign was a complex movement in which the interests of many groups—top Party leaders, union officials, and workers—combined, collided, and ignited. It had important intentional and unintentional consequences for the unions, and it refocused attention, albeit briefly, on working and living conditions. Most importantly, the campaign sparked a power struggle within the unions that fueled repression.

This article is the first to examine these tumultuous events. Drawing on new

¹³ A disgruntled former Party member, Leonid V. Nikolaev, assassinated Kirov in December 1934. The murder led to mass arrests of former oppositionists and the abrogation of civil liberties. On the Kirov murder, see Amy Knight, *Who Killed Kirov? The Kremlin's Greatest Mystery* (New York, 1999), and Robert Conquest, *Stalin and the Kirov Murder* (Oxford, 1989). John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989), 197, notes that newspapers, radio, and theater constantly encouraged Soviet citizens to be vigilant about spies. *Ochnaia Stavka* (The Confrontation) was one of several spy plays popular in the late 1930s. The movie *Velikii Grazhdanin* (Great Citizen) taught audiences how to “unmask” hidden oppositionists.

archival documents, it traces the devolution of democracy and repression from the Central Committee of the Communist Party to the central governing body of the unions into more than 160 unions and thousands of factory committees. Within a year, democratic elections from union central to factory committees had routed the old leadership and stirred up a frenzy of denunciation and slander. This article seeks to answer the poet's cry, "Who needed the monstrous destruction?" by exploring not only the interests of Stalin and top Party leaders, but those of union officials and members as well.

THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE (CC) OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY held its "historic" plenum from February 22 to March 5, 1937, amid an intensifying hunt for enemies in Party circles and an escalating climate of fear within industry. Nikolai Ezhov, appointed head of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) in September 1936, had already arrested more than 1,000 officials in industry for "wrecking" and "industrial sabotage."¹⁴ In January, former members of the left opposition, including Iurii Piatakoy, the deputy commissar of heavy industry, were charged with industrial wrecking and espionage for fascist Germany. They were tried in the second of the famous "Moscow show trials," and subsequently shot. The commissar of heavy industry, Grigorii (Sergo) Ordzhonikidze, unable to protect his employees from arrest, foresaw his own fate and committed suicide on the eve of the CC plenum. Parallel to the quickening tempo of arrests, the new "Stalin Constitution" had recently been adopted after broad discussion and a national referendum. It lifted previous voting restrictions on priests, white guards, former aristocrats, and other *byvshie liudi* (former people of the old tsarist regime), mandated multi-candidate, secret-ballot, direct elections, and provided equal weight to rural and urban votes. Party leaders were more than a bit nervous about how Party candidates would fare in such elections. The lead editorial of the main union journal queried anxiously, "Are we ready for this?"¹⁵ The hunt for enemies among industrial and Party leaders was thus accompanied by great fanfare trumpeting "the most democratic constitution in the world."¹⁶

The CC plenum, too, was shaped by the striking duality of terror and democracy. Much of the plenum was devoted to the "anti-Party activities" of Nikolai Bukharin and Aleksei Rykov. The discussion, marked by rude accusations and piteous defenses, ended with the CC's vote to expel Bukharin and Rykov from the Party, arrest them, and march them directly from the plenum to prison. Ezhov and other Party leaders delivered lengthy speeches on the threats posed by a new terrorist bloc of Trotskyists and rightists who aimed to assassinate Soviet leaders. At the same time, Stalin and Andrei Zhdanov, secretary of the CC and the Leningrad Party organization, criticized the Party purge in 1935–1936, which had permitted the "heartless and bureaucratic" expulsions of "little people" or lower Party cadres while failing

¹⁴ Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, 282.

¹⁵ "Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie ob Ocherednom Plenum TsK VKP (b)," *Voprosy profdvizheniia* 5–6 (March 1937): 2. Elections to the Supreme Soviet were held in October 1937, but single-candidate elections were substituted for the promised multi-candidate form at the last minute. See Getty, "State and Society under Stalin."

¹⁶ *Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* (Moscow, 1938).

to eliminate former oppositionists. They focused on the need for greater internal Party democracy, presenting a vision of a new, revitalized Party purged of oppositionists. The Party needed to eliminate the noisy boasting, servile flattery, and empty sloganeering that characterized its activities.¹⁷

The Party plenum, and Zhdanov's speech in particular, served as a type of "action text," studded with set phrases that were in turn disseminated from the CC to the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VTsSPS) to the unions themselves.¹⁸ Using the same phrases that had marked the earlier nationwide discussion of the Stalin Constitution, Zhdanov linked the coming elections to the Supreme Soviet to the need for greater democracy within the Party itself. He called for "multi-candidate, secret-ballot elections from top to bottom," "an end to appointments (*kooptatsiia*) in place of elections," "mass participation in government," "activation of the Party masses," "criticism and self-criticism," and "greater accountability of Party leaders before their members." Zhdanov held that elections within the Party had become "a mere formality": heads of local Party committees were chosen and confirmed by rote elections, or appointed and removed "from above," practices that "deprived members of their legal rights to control the party organs." The Party had to be rebuilt "on the basis of unconditional and full realization of internal party democracy."¹⁹

What did Party leaders mean by "democracy"? The answer here is fairly clear-cut: secret ballots, multi-candidate elections, increased involvement of the rank and file, greater accountability of leaders, and an end to the "mini-cults" surrounding local and regional officials. This definition, which was applicable to both the general electorate and the Party, shared much with the classical liberal conception, yet differed from it in two crucial respects. First, although Party leaders encouraged the rank and file to speak out against bosses and officials, they never endorsed the abstract principle of free speech. They placed limits on speech and policed them. Second, although they insisted on secret ballots and multi-candidate elections, they considered the ballot only one element in the ideal of social and economic democracy. Placing greater emphasis on active participation, they organized various forms of control from below to oversee, for example, prices in stores, disbursement of funds, housing construction, and the regendering of industrial jobs. These control organizations often wielded real power to redress problems. Yet like elections, they could easily be transformed into empty performative rituals.

What did Party leaders intend in their invocation of democracy? This question

¹⁷ "Materialy Fevral'sko-Martovskogo Plenuma TsK VKP (b) 1937 Goda," *Voprosy istorii* 5 (1993), contains Zhdanov's speech; *Voprosy istorii* 7 (1993) contains resolutions on Zhdanov's speech; *Voprosy istorii* 3 (1995) contains Stalin's speech; and *Voprosy istorii* 11–12 (1995) contains Stalin's concluding words. For many years, knowledge of the February–March 1937 Central Committee plenum was based on rumors and reminiscences. The full stenographic report was published in sections in *Voprosy istorii* between 1992 and 1995. An excerpt in English, dealing with the purge of Bukharin and Rykov, and discussion can be found in Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, 364–419.

¹⁸ I am indebted to J. Arch Getty for the phrase "action text," which describes how key speeches set the agenda for action in a much wider arena. He writes, "The role that such speeches played as action-texts was certainly different than the roles speeches play in other countries. It's almost as if the texts had power in themselves and were used at many levels in different ways as power deployments. The most graphic example, of course, was the physical display of Mao's Little Red Book where, quite literally, the text was a tangible weapon." Personal correspondence, October 2003.

¹⁹ "Materialy Fevral'sko-Martovskogo Plenuma," *Voprosy istorii* 5 (1993); 7 (1993).

is more complicated. Party leaders believed that the practice of *koopatsiia* fostered resentment, widened the gap between leaders and the rank and file, and hindered removal of oppositionists. Regional and local leaders staffed the posts beneath them with their own loyal appointees, creating an atmosphere of *semeistvennost'* or "family-ness" based on circles of mutual protection. Not beholden to an electorate, wielding vast power to hire and fire, they built up personal fiefdoms and cults. A. I. Ugarov, former secretary of the Leningrad City Committee, complained that "parades, clamor, boasting, glorification of leaders, and toadyism" had replaced honest, direct relations. When a newspaper sycophantically described how "the working class listened with great love" to a Party secretary's speech, Ugarov noted with disgust, "This is obviously false and distorts our relationship with workers."²⁰ At the same time, the Kirov murder provoked deep fears among Stalin and his supporters that oppositionists might mobilize the social discontent created by collectivization and rapid industrialization.²¹ Party leaders thus had several interests in democracy. They wanted to revitalize the links between the Party and its base, eliminate the creeping apathy in the lower ranks, mobilize those ranks to break up the "family circles" around the regional leaders, and remove former oppositionists or "enemies." Most importantly, in their promotion of democracy, *they viewed these aims as complementary, not contradictory.*

Nikolai Shvernik, the head of the VTsSPS, delivered the main address on the unions to the CC plenum. Although a number of speakers had prepared their texts in advance for review by the Politburo, Shvernik's speech seemed to surprise Stalin and other CC members.²² When Shvernik mentioned that wreckers had seized leadership posts in the unions, Stalin called out, "Who seized these posts?" Shvernik replied that Gil'burg, the head of the Coke and Chemical Workers' Union, had been arrested, and Stalin interrupted again, "He seized a post?" His bewilderment suggested that he was not aware which union leaders the NKVD had arrested. Shvernik also surprised the delegates with his announcement that the unions were as badly in need of democratic overhaul as the Party. "I should say here directly and with all frankness that the unions are in even worse shape." He casually tossed out the suggestion that the unions, too, might benefit from democratic elections. The suggestion clearly startled the plenum delegates. Lazar Kaganovich, a Politburo member and one of Stalin's staunchest supporters, called out in surprise, "By secret voting?" Shvernik shook his head doubtfully: "I don't know about secret voting." There was general laughter in the hall as one CC member blurted out, "It's frightening!" Shvernik replied thoughtfully, "I think this wouldn't be too bad."²³

The campaign for union democracy thus appears to have begun on Shvernik's recommendation, without planning by Stalin, the Politburo, or the Central Com-

²⁰ "Materialy Fevral'sko-Martovskogo Plenuma," *Voprosy istorii* 5 (1993); 10 (1995).

²¹ These fears were among the main subtexts of the first Moscow show trial in August 1936. See *The Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Center: Report of Court Proceedings* (Moscow, 1936). See also the speeches of Stalin, Ivan Kabakov, Robert Eikhe, A. S. Kalygina, and Stanislav Kosior in "Materialy Fevral'sko-Martovskogo Plenuma," *Voprosy istorii* 6 (1993); 7 (1993); 3 (1995).

²² The Politburo met on February 17 to review the draft resolutions to be adopted at the upcoming plenum, and the key speeches to be delivered by Zhdanov, Stalin, Ezhov, Ordzhonikidze, and Kaganovich. Shvernik's speech, along with many others, does not appear to have been reviewed by the Politburo. See Khlevniuk, *In Stalin's Shadow*, 126–127, 145–146.

²³ "Materialy Fevral'sko-Martovskogo Plenuma," *Voprosy istorii* 10 (1995).

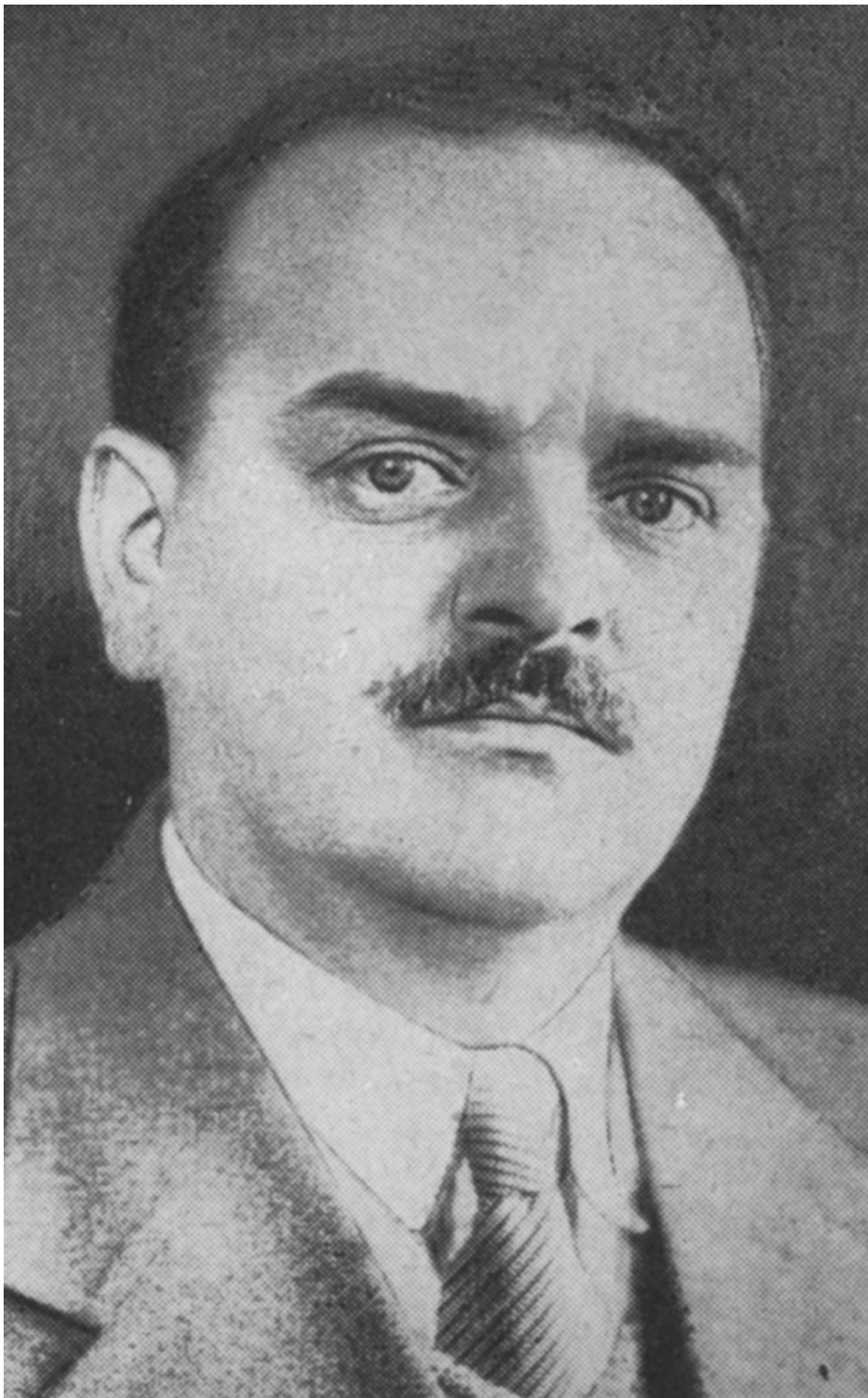


FIGURE 1: Nikolai M. Shvernik (1888–1970) was head of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions from 1930 to 1944. He launched the campaign for union democracy in 1937. *Voprosy profdvizheniia* 9–10 (May 1937): 6.

mittee. The key speeches at the plenum were used to formulate its resolutions, which in turn set the future program of the Party. The plenum resolutions also became the new marching orders for the unions. Calling for “mass control from below,” direct voting, individual candidates in place of lists, secret ballots, and “the unlimited right to criticize candidates,” the resolutions mandated new elections by May at every level of the Party hierarchy, from the primary party organizations to the central committees of the republics, and set terms of office not to exceed eighteen months.²⁴ J. Arch Getty and Oleg Naumov note that Zhdanov’s speech and others unleashed “serious insurrections” within the Party against the entrenched regional leadership.²⁵ Within less than three weeks, the CC plenum was followed by a plenum of the VTsSPS, the central governing council of the unions, which was followed in turn by meetings within individual unions at every level. From the VTsSPS to the shop floor, union leaders disseminated the themes of the CC plenum. Recycling discrete “language pieces” or slogans from Stalin’s and Zhdanov’s speeches, they set a new course. The March issue of *Voprosy Profdvizheniia*, the main journal of the VTsSPS, paired publication of the resolutions with a searing editorial that excoriated the unions and the VTsSPS from top to bottom. The editors wrote, “The insufficiencies characterizing the Party characterize the unions to an even greater degree.” Their critique echoed Zhdanov’s precisely: violations of union democracy, *kooptatsiia*, “bureaucratic perversions,” “weakening ties with the masses,” “arrogance,” “toadying,” and suppression of criticism.²⁶

In the unions, too, the call for democracy was wedded to the politics of purge. VTsSPS leaders claimed that former oppositionists occupied numerous posts. Mikhail Tomskii, a former head of the VTsSPS, and Nikolai Uglanov, a former head of the Commissariat of Labor, had been key figures in the right “deviation” of the late 1920s. When the Commissariat of Labor was eliminated in 1932, the VTsSPS incorporated its functions along with hundreds of former “rightists” on its staff. The Department of Social Insurance, for example, which provided support to sick and disabled workers, moved from the Commissariat of Labor to VTsSPS. Union leaders now claimed that the department “was riddled with embezzlers and enemies of the people” who had stolen millions of rubles and “systematically disrupted pensions.” Skillfully blending anti-oppositionist rhetoric with an appeal to workers’ needs, VTsSPS leaders charged that “enemies of the people” had organized accidents, violated safety rules, poisoned the air in the mines and copper-smelting works, embezzled union funds, and wrecked housing construction and social services. The NKVD had arrested leading officials in the chemical, agricultural machine-building, and blooming metallurgical industries, among others, yet the unions had failed to identify and stop “wrecking.”²⁷

Echoing Party leaders at the CC plenum, VTsSPS leaders made the same link

²⁴ “Materialy Fevral’sko-Martovskogo Plenuma,” *Voprosy istorii* 7 (1993); “Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie,” 2–3.

²⁵ Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, 358–360. Although the resolutions ostensibly called for more democracy, Getty and Naumov contend that the real aim of Stalin, Zhdanov, and other leaders was not to empower the lower ranks, but to use them to weaken the regional leadership, thus strengthening power at the top. See also Getty, “Pragmatists and Puritans,” 25–26.

²⁶ “Itogi Plenuma TsK VKP (b) i Zadachi Profsoiuzov,” *Voprosy profdvizheniia* 5–6 (March 1937): 4–8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

between terror and democracy: wreckers flourished because democracy had withered. "Enemies," they argued, were "able to pursue their dark, traitorous affairs because the unions did not encourage self-criticism and did not heed the complaints and declarations of the workers." Production meetings in the factories had "turned into occasions for empty speechifying." Union and Party leaders discussed every possible topic "except the suggestions of the workers, masters, and technicians." The unions abandoned occupational health and safety and ignored dangerous work environments.²⁸ The solutions proposed by VTsSPS leaders were identical to Zhdanov's program for the Party: to revive democracy, criticize the "union 'hats' who overlooked wreckers," and bring in "fresh blood" through democratic elections. Invoking a return to "the authentic Bolshevik Leninist spirit," they urged their members to sweep out the bureaucrats, take power back into their own hands, and bring important issues such as safety, housing, and health to the fore.²⁹

This message resonated strongly with union members. Millions of peasants had flocked to the cities during the first Five-Year Plan (1929–1932), real wages had dropped by half, and living and working conditions were very difficult. When the Party purged the "rightists" and forced the unions to "face toward production" in 1929, they largely abdicated defense of working-class interests.³⁰ Although VTsSPS leaders were disingenuous in blaming accidents and poor living conditions on "wrecking," they were accurate in their assessment of the unions. The call for revitalization was guaranteed to appeal directly to workers by linking the hunt for enemies to a new workers' democracy. It was quickly translated into action. Within less than one month, the VTsSPS convened its own plenum to promulgate the new approach. Its double-edged message of democratic revival and repression was in turn disseminated through the unions and into factories.

THE VTsSPS HELD ITS 6TH PLENUM IN APRIL 1937, its first since 1931. The long hiatus figured prominently in Shvernik's keynote address, which charged that the unions had fallen apart after the purge of Tomskii and the rightists in 1929. Shvernik, who had first floated the idea of union democracy, now vigorously promulgated the new campaign. He sharply criticized union leaders for violating democratic principles, omitting elections, and entrenching themselves in posts without a popular mandate. Many unions, in fact, did not have legally elected central, regional, or factory com-

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 8–9.

³⁰ The "rightists" were branded as "capitalist trade unionists" for suggesting that unions should defend workers' interests against managers and the state. After they were purged, the unions' main role was to encourage worker productivity. On living conditions and the wage crisis, see Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 40–66, 89–114; Wendy Goldman, *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge, 2002); Elena Osokina, *Our Daily Bread: Socialist Distribution and the Art of Survival in Stalin's Russia, 1927–41* (Armonk, N.Y., 2001). On unions and workers in the 1930s, see Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization: The Foundation of Modern Soviet Production Relations, 1928–1941* (New York, 1986); Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin's Industrial Revolution, 1928–1932* (Cambridge, 1988); Kevin Murphy, *Revolution and Counterrevolution: Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory* (Oxford, 2005); Jeffrey Rossman, *Worker Resistance under Stalin: Class and Revolution on the Shop Floor* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Kenneth Straus, *Factory and Community in Stalin's Russia: The Making of an Industrial Working Class* (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1997).

mittees.³¹ Officials were dismissive of the people they were supposed to serve, “insensitive toward complaints,” and cavalier about safety rules, labor laws, housing, and occupational health.³² Shvernik’s repeated invocations of workers’ rights were interspersed with references to wrecking, “enemies of the people,” and loss of “class vigilance.” Union officials had allowed enemies, Trotskyists, wreckers, and diversionists to flourish at every level.³³ Leaders of the Department of Social Insurance, the VTsSPS Information Bureau, the Teachers’ Union, the Coke and Chemical Workers, the Oil Refinery Workers, and the Oil Workers of the Caucasus had been arrested as “enemies of the people.” Shvernik broadened the attack further to include those “impermissibly politically blind, sluggish, and careless” union officials who failed to help the NKVD in its hunt for enemies.³⁴ He urged union officials to participate actively in identifying and denouncing the enemies in their midst.

The delegates, prominent union and VTsSPS officials, listened carefully to Shvernik’s speech. Attentive readers of the Party and union press, they were not surprised by his message. Yet this was the first time they had responded publicly, as a group, to the change in course. Their reactions, initially defensive, spanned the gamut from fear to enthusiasm as they took up the new slogans to advance their own hopes and interests. In fact, the delegates’ responses foreshadowed the range of reactions that would be replayed with growing intensity as the campaign spread. Some took advantage of the new course to advance the interests of their workers and expose conditions in the factories; some scrambled to blame their bosses; others publicly distanced themselves from union colleagues who had recently been arrested. Delegates fired criticism in every possible direction, including at Shvernik himself. Not even the head of the VTsSPS was off limits.³⁵

Voronina, an older woman from Elektrozavod, a large Moscow electrical factory, and a member of the VTsSPS presidium, pressed the claims of her fellow workers. A factory worker for almost forty years, Voronina understood conditions well. Railing against everything from lack of ventilation in the shops to the recent prohibition of abortion, she roundly criticized union officials for ignoring the plight of the very people they were supposed to be representing. Although Voronina was uneducated, her strong commitment had brought her to the attention of union and Party officials, who appointed her to the VTsSPS presidium in 1933. Yet Voronina was in many ways a token appointment, unsure of her role. She complained that no one ever told her what to do. She had tried to meet with Shvernik, N. Evreinov, and other VTsSPS leaders, but “was not able to have a proper conversation with a single secretary.” Shvernik had visited her factory only once since 1931. Voronina argued that VTsSPS

³¹ Each union was headed by a central committee, with regional (*oblast’*), factory, and shop committees, and the *profgrup*, the smallest unit, at the base. Some unions also had district (*raion*) committees.

³² “Ob otchetakh profsoiuznykh organov v sviazi s vyborami poslednikh,” Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), fond 5451, opis’ 21, delo 1, 68.

³³ “Rezoliutsiia VI plenuma VTsSPS ‘Ob otchetakh proforganov v sviazi s vyborami poslednikh’ po dokladu tov. Shvernika,” GARF, f. 5451, o. 21, d. 1, 126–129.

³⁴ “Ob otchetakh profsoiuznykh organov,” 58–59.

³⁵ “Stenogramma VI plenuma VTsSPS,” GARF, f. 5451, o. 21, d. 1–6, contains the stenographic report of the plenum in six volumes.

leaders passed and recorded endless resolutions, but were disconnected from the real problems of workers.³⁶

Voronina's deepest concern, however, was not the useless paper generated by the VTsSPS, but the 23,000 workers in her plant. If VTsSPS leaders genuinely cared about workers, they would address stoppages, low wages, and living conditions. "The factory is a scandalous mess!" she said with disgust. In three years, the factory committee had had five different chairmen, and not a single one was elected. She contrasted conditions in the lamp department, which was 90 percent female, with the promises of the state. "We know that according to the Stalin Constitution, everyone has the right to work, to education, and to rest. But what do we have in the lamp department? As a result of stoppages, women workers with two or three kids and no husbands earn 150 rubles a month. They swear at the Party and the government, but the Party and government are not to blame. The unions and managers who don't struggle with these stoppages are guilty. And as a result, women receive miserable pay!"³⁷

Voronina complained that conditions were deplorable. After the 1936 decree prohibiting abortion, the factory director had promised to build a crèche for 180 infants. "Due to the decree, we have 500 women on maternity leave, 300 more ready to take maternity leave, and 200 women bringing their babies to the factory committee. Did we build crèches? No."³⁸ Housing had not kept pace with the massive influx of new workers from the countryside. People slept in the factory or in make-shift huts. Older workers who had lost the strength and energy to work were afraid to retire on pensions of 75 rubles a month. They deserved better. Sick workers were deprived of rightful insurance awards in an attempt to "economize" on funds. And working mothers received little help. "On this you should not economize," Voronina declared angrily. Her words rushed out, building to a crescendo of criticism. There were no ventilators in many shops, and temperatures reached over 130 degrees. When Voronina exclaimed in frustration, "We have been talking about this for five years now, and we still have no ventilators," the entire plenum burst into spontaneous applause.³⁹

The response to Voronina's speech showed that an auditorium of union officials could still be moved by a heartfelt appeal to workers' interests. Yet their applause was also strangely displaced. For who, if not union and VTsSPS leaders, was responsible for the lack of ventilation in the shops? Voronina's critique of VTsSPS leaders revealed the dangerous dilemma that Shvernik's speech posed. If union leaders recognized that conditions were bad, why had they not done anything to rectify them? Voronina herself was a member of the VTsSPS presidium. Many officials at the plenum struggled to escape this trap by shrugging off responsibility and casting themselves as victims of *other* "bureaucrats." Several repeated Voronina's excuse

³⁶ *Ibid.*, d. 1, 195. See also the comments of Diachenko, the chairman of the factory committee of "Serp i Molot" in Ukraine, 224.

³⁷ "Stenogramma VI plenuma VTsSPS," d. 1, 197, 198.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 198. After a tightly scripted national debate and much opposition from women, the Soviet state prohibited abortion in 1936. The decree led to considerable hardship, particularly among working mothers. Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (New York, 1993), chap. 7.

³⁹ "Stenogramma VI plenuma VTsSPS," d. 1, 199, 200, 201, 202.

that “no one told us what to do.” The VTsSPS leaders came in for a drubbing by plenum delegates, who themselves held leading posts. At times it appeared that every delegate was looking for someone a little higher in the *apparat* to blame. Aleksandra Artiukhina, head of the Cotton Textile Workers in Moscow and Leningrad, blamed Shvernik, the head of the VTsSPS; Evreinov, its secretary and the editor of its journal; and all thirteen members of its presidium for their failure to establish closer contact with the union central committees.⁴⁰ “Every time I come to see Evreinov about work, I receive the same answer, ‘Solve it yourself.’” She asked indignantly, “Where is the collective? Where are Abolin, Evreinov, and the other secretaries?” Artiukhina noted that she represented a union with 350,000 members and a paid staff of 42. Echoing Voronina’s critique, she stated, “We want help, not papers.” She, too, was furious about the abortion decree and the lack of childcare facilities. “Why doesn’t the VTsSPS concern itself with this?”⁴¹

S. Bregman, a member of the VTsSPS presidium and head of the Shoe Workers’ Union, also cast himself as a powerless victim: “We have no help, we have no oversight, we have no controls.” He complained so much about the VTsSPS leaders that one exasperated voice in the audience finally burst out, “But you’re a member of the VTsSPS presidium!” Yet Bregman refused to take any responsibility, retorting quickly that it was all Shvernik’s fault: “The secretariat and presidium of the VTsSPS are in the position of an orchestra without a conductor.” Critiquing the leaders of the VTsSPS, he righteously declared, “It is much better to sit in an office, to give orders, to defend the paper barricades.” Bregman especially targeted VTsSPS secretary Evreinov: “It’s a great event when the secretary goes to a factory,” Bregman sneered. “In two years, Evreinov went to the Urals once. What kind of leadership is this?”⁴² While Bregman cast himself as a bold and outspoken fighter against the “bureaucrats,” his own position on the VTsSPS presidium and as head of the Shoe Workers undercut his blameless, heroic pose.

The delegates’ alacrity in shifting blame was also prompted by fear. Party expulsions and arrests were occurring all around them, and even casual contact with “an enemy of the people” was grounds for investigation. The head of the Union of State Beet Farm Workers, Radianskii, noted that the union’s secretary had proved to be a “Trotskyist” who had been excluded from the Party several years before for participating in the left opposition. Radianskii anxiously explained that the members of the union presidium had been unaware of its secretary’s past, but once they realized that the Party had expelled him, they fired him immediately, and asked the VTsSPS to affirm their decision. The secretary was thus placed in an untenable position shared by thousands: excluded from the Party, he also lost his job. He appealed to the Party Control Commission, which overturned his expulsion, reinstated him in the Party, and ordered the Beet Workers’ Union to rehire him. Radianskii, eager to prove his “vigilance,” objected and pressed for further investigation, but Evreinov refused, and hired him onto the staff of the VTsSPS. He was arrested soon thereafter

⁴⁰ The presidium of the VTsSPS had thirteen members and candidates as of March 1937, according to “Protokol zasedaniia prezidiuma VTsSPS ot Marta 1937,” f. 5451, o. 21, d. 12, 1.

⁴¹ “Stenogramma VI plenuma VTsSPS,” d. 1, 209–210, 214–215.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 204, 206.

“within the walls of the VTsSPS.”⁴³ This story of expulsion, appeal, reversal, reinstatement, and arrest was common, as thousands of desperate people attempted to save their Party standing, their jobs, and their very lives by pushing for review of their cases at higher levels. Radianskii, terrified that he would be associated with his arrested colleague, painted himself as a scorned crusader who had tried repeatedly to bring an “enemy” to the attention of the VTsSPS. Yet Radianskii also revealed the problems that union officials faced when last week’s colleague became yesterday’s enemy, today’s exonerated victim, and tomorrow’s enemy again. Radianskii’s behavior was typical, if not honorable. Fearing guilt by association, he severed contact with his former colleague and shifted blame to the VTsSPS. “I was vigilant, comrades,” he implied. “The problem is yours now.” Shvernik’s speech forced the delegates to explain why they had ignored conditions and failed to encourage union democracy. Some spoke out on behalf of the workers, seizing on “union democracy” as a long-awaited opportunity to alleviate real problems. Yet in an attempt to escape blame, the delegates also searched for scapegoats. The small winds of recrimination and denunciation were kicking up. They would gain greater power and speed as the delegates brought Shvernik’s message back to their own unions.

THE RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED BY THE 6TH VTsSPS PLENUM added up to nothing short of a bold new charter for union democracy. The unions were to be recast by a newly activated membership in secret-ballot elections from the central to the factory committees. Voting by lists was to be replaced by individual candidates, and union members would have the “unlimited right” to reject and criticize candidates. These were not vague principles for some unspecified future. Elections for factory and shop committees were to be held in June and July, followed immediately by regional conferences, union congresses, and elections for higher-level union organizations in July, August, and September. The VTsSPS would hold its own capstone congress composed of newly elected officials on October 1, 1937. Voting was to be accompanied by accountability. Before the elections, every union central and factory committee was to submit a report on its activities to its members, begin a process of “criticism and self-criticism,” and actively solicit suggestions, which would serve as “commands” for the newly elected leadership. The VTsSPS plenum instructed *Trud*, its daily newspaper, to investigate various unions to ensure compliance. Control of funds was to be decentralized and democratized. The factory committees in the larger enterprises (three hundred workers or more) were instructed to organize soviets of social insurance (*sotsstrakha*) of fifteen to thirty people to oversee disbursement of money, study occupational safety and health, and ensure that managers observed labor laws on overtime, rest days, and holidays. The unions were to stop managers from withholding workers’ wages to meet other pressing expenses and to ensure that workers were paid on time. Finally, permanent committees of union volunteers were to be attached to soviets at every level of government to guarantee

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 218–219.



FIGURE 2: Women workers in the Kauchuk rubber factory at an accountability election meeting, listening to union officials report on their activities on behalf of their members. *Trud*, June 9, 1937, 2.

that workers' issues, including housing, food, consumer goods, and working conditions, were at the forefront of local and regional policies.⁴⁴

Taken together, the resolutions promised workers real, albeit limited, power over the unions. Multi-candidate, secret-ballot elections offered the possibility of new leadership. Workers' control over social insurance funds encouraged fairer and prompter distribution. And the new emphasis on occupational safety and health promised elimination of the more flagrant violations. The campaign fell considerably short of workers' control of the factories, but it offered the possibility of genuine improvement. For mid-level officials, the campaign portended no good. Blamed for poor working and living conditions, and faced with the possibility of dismissal, they scrambled to retain their posts. The impulse to shift blame intensified, creating new turmoil at every level of the union hierarchy.

OVER THE NEXT TWO YEARS, THE UNIONS WENT THROUGH A MAJOR SHAKE-UP. Immediately following the 6th Plenum, the VTsSPS and *Trud* sent investigators into factories and unions throughout the country to expose abuses, publicly shame officials,

⁴⁴ "Rezoliutsiia," 130–137; "Ob otchetakh profsoiuznykh organov," 62–64. See also "Resheniia VI plenuma VTsSPS," GARF, f. 5451, o. 21, d. 114, 69–82.

and jump-start change. VTsSPS investigators reported that the factory committees, once the soul of the revolution, had become little more than purveyors of pyramid schemes, enrolling new members in organizations that did nothing but enroll members.⁴⁵ Two workers in a Moscow gas factory summed up the role of union officials: “They sit in the factory committee like some kind of clerks, they never go to the shops, and they don’t work with the active workers (*aktiv*).”⁴⁶

Union leaders, now held responsible for accidents and safety violations, were charged with “wrecking” and arrested by the NKVD. Leaders of the Metallurgical Workers’ Union of the East became embroiled in frightening accusations when the managers and factory committee of a Cheliabinsk factory were charged with constructing a ferrous molybdenum shop without regard for technical safety, and for spending 400,000 rubles over budget on equipment. The shop was shut down after numerous accidents, and several officials were arrested for “wrecking.”⁴⁷ The Cement Workers’ Union sent a labor inspector to the Amvrosievskii factory in Briansk to investigate conditions after the director and the main engineer were accused of wrecking in a series of accidents that they attributed to technical defects. The inspector found “mass accidents,” “dilapidated housing,” no clean drinking water in either the factory or the nearby workers’ settlement, temperatures over 125 degrees in some shops, and constant fires in the factory and the settlement. The factory committee had done nothing. The union sent the inspector’s report to the procurator, urging him to bring criminal charges against the director if the problems were not fixed within one month.⁴⁸ The Party’s single-minded emphasis on production, coupled with newly imported technologies and a young, untrained work force, was sufficient to explain most accidents. Yet accusations of “wrecking” rapidly replaced any rational assessment of fault.

The concentrated attention of VTsSPS and NKVD investigators jolted union officials out of their long torpor. Terrified of public censure and arrest, they began to address the more egregious violations. The Metallurgical Workers’ Union of the South discussed and drafted new safety rules for the industry to be disseminated in all factories by September.⁴⁹ The Union of Machine Instrument Workers addressed the large number of accidents and eye injuries in the Stankolit factory, ordered management to provide safety goggles, special boots, work clothes, and other items in short supply, and pledged to investigate every accident in the future.⁵⁰ Factory com-

⁴⁵ “Zavod ‘Proletarskii Trud,’” GARF, f. 5451, o. 21, d. 103, 48–51. The membership process was cumbersome and time-consuming. A new worker would write an application and submit it to the union group (*profgrup*), the primary organization in the plant. After a cursory background check, the *profgrup* would make a recommendation and pass the application to the shop committee, who would in turn make their decision and send it to the factory committee for final approval. In most cases, these reviews were *pro forma*; yet the large size of factories coupled with high labor turnover and poor records meant that many shop and factory committees did little more than process applications. In the metal factory Proletarian Labor, for example, the factory committee plenum discussed thirty or more applications every time they met. Turnover in the factory was so great that the number of workers quitting exceeded the number hired in certain months. The factory committee kept no records of its meetings, but it appeared to be occupied solely with membership.

⁴⁶ “O perestroike raboty profsoiuznykh organizatsii v sviazi s sokrasheniem platnogo apparata,” GARF, f. 5451, o. 22, d. 11, 12.

⁴⁷ “TsK soiuzov metallurgov vostochnykh raionov,” GARF, f. 5451, o. 21, d. 114, 1.

⁴⁸ “TsK rabochikh tsementnoi prom.,” GARF, f. 5451, o. 21, d. 114, 1–3.

⁴⁹ “TsK metallurgov iuga,” GARF, f. 5451, o. 21, d. 114, 3.

⁵⁰ “Prezidium TsK souza stanko-instrumental’noi prom.,” GARF, f. 5451, o. 21, d. 114, 9.

mittees everywhere began taking minutes and forwarding their records to VTsSPS headquarters. The days of lax attendance and fiddling with membership applications seemed to be over.⁵¹ The accusations of “wrecking” were patently false, but they did concentrate attention on health and safety issues that had long been overlooked.

THROUGHOUT THE SUMMER OF 1937, the unions held multi-candidate, secret-ballot elections at every level from the factory to the central committees. The workers took up the campaign for union democracy and swept out the old *apparat* in one election after another. A report from the Woolen Workers' Union to the VTsSPS optimistically noted, “Work in the factories has completely changed its face.” For the first time in years, woolen workers actively participated in large, noisy “accountability” meetings. Of the more than 1,300 people elected to 195 factory committees in the woolen industry, 65 percent were new, and 43 percent had never participated in union activities. They voted out about half of the old factory committee chairmen, and elected more than 1,000 people to shop committees and another 1,000 as shop organizers. The sheer numbers of new participants pointed to a major overhaul of the union. In the Red Weaving Factory, about one-sixth of the 4,400 workers were elected to shop committees, an unprecedented level of voluntary participation. Paid officials were eliminated from the shops and replaced with volunteers. The factory committee began meeting regularly to discuss living conditions. In August, the Woolen Workers held their first congress, with 245 delegates. After sharply criticizing the members of the union's central committee for their phony performances, poor leadership, and “deep violations of union democracy,” the delegates voted them out of office. Only four previous members were reelected. Stakhanovite workers from the shop floor composed almost half of the new 41-member central committee. It promptly created labor protection commissions to improve ventilation, record accidents, provide work clothes, and monitor overtime work.⁵²

The electoral shake-up in the Woolen Workers' Union was replicated in other unions. Through the fall of 1937 and into the winter, 116 unions held congresses attended by more than 23,300 delegates. They were turbulent affairs. Using the language of democracy and purge, the delegates strongly criticized the existing central committees and “unmasked an entire series of individuals in leadership positions who were politically blind and careless, as well as a number of corrupt elements, idlers, and bureaucrats.” The blame game spread like wildfire. At the congresses, each layer of leadership criticized the one above it: delegates from the Railroad Construction Union criticized their central committee; the central committee of the Union of Central Cooperative Employees criticized its presidium. Union members from electric power stations, peat bogs, schools, and dining halls denounced their

⁵¹ The unions also launched investigations in the barracks and dormitories that housed hundreds of thousands of new workers who had migrated to the cities during the industrialization drive. See “Piatidnevnaia svodka o praktike raboty profsoiuzov,” GARF, f. 5451, o. 21, d. 114, 22.

⁵² “Dokladnaia zapiska o perestroike prof. raboty na osnove resheniia VI plenuma VTsSPS,” GARF, f. 5451, o. 22, d. 64, 211–224. Of the people elected to the factory committees, 40 percent were Party members, and 17 percent were engineering or technical employees.



FIGURE 3: Workers cast secret ballots in multi-candidate elections to the factory committee in the Moscow machine-building Chicherin factory. *Trud*, June 15, 1937, 3.

officials for “bureaucracy, separation from the masses, and ignoring the needs of their members.”⁵³

Workers embraced the campaign for union democracy, but they did not control it. Regardless of the rhetoric spouted at the podium, workers constituted only about one-quarter of the total number of delegates at the union congresses; the remainder included union officials, white-collar employees, engineering/technical personnel, and more than six hundred directors of trusts and enterprises and their deputies. About two-thirds of the delegates were Party members. The congresses, aimed at revitalization from below, were still dominated by paid union officials and managers.⁵⁴ Along with genuine efforts by workers, the congresses thus replicated the delicate exercise that the VTsSPS plenum delegates had performed earlier, in which “bureaucrats” trumpeted against bureaucracy.

By the end of 1937, more than 1,230,000 people had been elected to positions in 146 unions in hundreds of thousands of union groups (*profgrupy*) and shop committees, almost 100,000 factory committees, and 1,645 regional committees. Elections at every level and in hundreds of workplaces were nullified for violating “the principles of union democracy” by not offering secret ballots and more than one candidate. Final election returns showed a serious shake-up of personnel. More than 70 percent of the old factory committee members, 66 percent of the 94,000 factory committee chairmen, and 92 percent of the 30,723 members of the regional committee plenums had been replaced. The election results, however, were mixed in

⁵³ “Dokladnaia zapiska o khode vyborov tsentral’nykh komitetov profsoiuzov i vydvizenii bespartiiinykh na rukovodiashchuiu profsoiuznuiu rabotu,” GARF, f. 5451, o. 22, d. 64, 12–13.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

terms of putting workers into positions of power. At the lower levels of the union organizations, many of the new people were workers or “people from production”: in the *profgrupy* (the primary organization), 65 percent of those elected were Stakhanovites or shock workers; in the shop committees, 62 percent; in the factory committees, 45 percent, and in the regional committees, 25 percent. These figures indicated strong participation from “leading” workers in the factories, but they also revealed an inverse ratio between the level of the union organization and the percentage of workers: the higher the level, the lower the percentage of workers elected to it. From the *profgrupy* to the regional committees, for example, the representation of workers dropped by 40 percent.⁵⁵ People who did not work in the industry represented by the union still occupied most of the positions at the upper levels. The wave of renewal weakened as it rolled toward the upper reaches of the unions.⁵⁶

In elections for the highest level of union leadership, the central committees, union members also returned strong votes of no confidence. Electoral returns from 116 union central committees showed that more than 96 percent of 5,054 plenum members, 87 percent of presidium members, 92 percent of secretaries, and 68 percent of chairmen had been replaced. Here, too, officials at the apex of the hierarchy retained a greater share of posts than those immediately below them: 96 percent of central committee members were replaced, but only 68 percent of chairmen. Moreover, the new chairmen and secretaries often transferred from other important Party, managerial, or union posts. In about one-third of the central committees, they were former heads of factory committees.⁵⁷ The new electoral shake-up provided the greatest benefits to this group, catapulting them from leadership of the factories into positions of national prominence.

Party and VTsSPS leaders pointed with pride to the fact that many newly elected officials were *not* Party members, evidence that “new people,” “the best Stakhanovites,” were becoming active in union affairs. Far more non-Party members could be found at the lower than at the upper reaches of union leadership. Fully 93 percent of *profgrup* members did not belong to the Party, in contrast to 19 percent of the central committee presidium members.⁵⁸ Just as the percentage of workers steadily decreased from the bottom to the top of the union hierarchy, so the percentage of Party members increased.

Party leaders’ active endorsement of non-Party people stood in sharp contrast to their usual policy of promoting Party candidates. What was their motivation? Union leaders officially presented the elections as a means “to liquidate stagnation in the unions and root out the entrenched Trotskyist-Bukharinist agents of fascism and their supporters.”⁵⁹ The aims were thus an exact replica of Stalin and Zhdanov’s

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 10–14.

⁵⁶ There was a similar pattern in the May 1937 Party elections: the regional (*oblast’* and *krai*) first secretaries retained their positions, while the district (*raion*) and primary party officials were voted out. Getty, “Pragmatists and Puritans,” 28.

⁵⁷ “Dokladnaia zapiska o khode vyborov,” 10–14.

⁵⁸ The percentage of non-Party members decreased as one moved up the unions’ hierarchies: 84 percent of shop committee members, 80 percent of factory committee members, 66 percent of factory committee chairmen, 47 percent of regional committee members, 34 percent of regional committee presidiums, and 33 percent of central committee members did not belong to the Party. “Dokladnaia zapiska o khode vyborov,” 16.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.



FIGURE 4: Winners of the election to the pendulum shop committee in the 2nd State Clock Factory in Moscow reviewing the election results. *Trud*, July 24, 1937, 2.

program for the Party itself: to renew democracy from below and to remove former oppositionists. In the campaign for union democracy, “non-Party” served as a signifier for workers, just as “Party,” especially among unionists in leading posts, signified a greater likelihood of oppositional activity. Top Party and union leaders may have viewed mid- and upper-level union officials as the analog to the regional leaders they denounced at the February–March CC plenum. By mobilizing workers to remove these officials, top Party leaders were able to target former oppositionists and gain working-class support in much the same way they sought to use the rank-and-file Party cadres against their regional leaders.⁶⁰

UNION ELECTIONS BROUGHT THE MESSAGE OF RENEWAL AND REPRESSION into every workplace. Workers voted out the overwhelming majority of old officials, but did they succeed in replacing them with workers? Salary data show that more than half of the newly elected officials did not receive a pay increase in their new posts. In other

⁶⁰ Getty argues that regional leaders were targeted for removal by Stalin and his supporters not only because they represented a threat to centralized power, but because they were a likely pool of oppositionists. The process of mobilizing the lower ranks against the regional leaders involved several advances and retreats between the June 1936 and February–March 1937 Central Committee plenums. See Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, 263–268, 322–333, 357–361, 576–583.

words, they did not move up from lower positions, and certainly not from the shop floor. In 1938, there were 5,484 salaried positions within the unions. Of the people elected to these posts, 59 percent either took a pay cut or stayed at the same level. Of the remaining 41 percent who increased their salaries, the overwhelming majority did not make a big jump: they gained less than 200 rubles per month. Union elections thus encouraged leading officials to play a type of leapfrog. The union “pots” began to boil, but unlike the proverbial frogs that remained in hot water, leading officials began leaping laterally. The newly elected chairman of the Oil Refinery Workers’ Union, for example, had previously been the head of a shop. As head of the union, he earned 1,000 rubles a month, 100 rubles *less* than he had earned as shop boss. The new chairman of the Coalminers’ Union of the East had previously been the head of the Cadre (Personnel) Department of the Eastern Coal Transport Trust. He, too, took a pay cut, from 1,200 to 800 rubles. The new chairman of the Construction Workers’ Union of Heavy Industry in the Far East earned 880 rubles, in contrast to 1,540 rubles in his previous job as head of the energy sector in the eastern town of Komsomol’ka. The new chairman of the Medical Workers’ Union (Medsantrud) had previously been director of a shoe workshop; the chairman of the Fish Workers’ Union had been the deputy chairman of the Murmansk town soviet; and the head of the Iron Ore Workers’ Union had been director of the Liebknicht mine.⁶¹ These newly elected chairmen of the union central committees were not workers; they were managers in powerful local and regional posts. They earned high salaries in comparison to workers.⁶² Leading officials stubbornly defended their privileges even through the unpredictable vagaries of “revitalization.” Managers moved into unions, and former union officials were most probably appointed to management posts. Lateral leapfrog was one way that regional and local cliques protected each other. If these men were representative of the newly elected officials, the higher union *apparat* appeared to have been “renewed” by the bosses!

Analysis of the elections suggests that many interests were in play. Stalin, Shvernik, and other Party leaders aimed to gain workers’ support and root out former oppositionists. The workers hoped to remove corrupt and complacent “bureaucrats.” And regional and local leaders sought to preserve their standing by moving members of their own “family circles” from one leading post to another. The elections were not an unalloyed victory for any of these groups. Party leaders were circumvented by lateral leapfrog from breaking up “family circles” and rooting out oppositionists. The workers did not succeed in removing “bureaucrats.” And regional and local leaders continued to be arrested even after assuming new posts. More than ten members of the new union central committees were arrested as “enemies of the people”

⁶¹ Salaried posts included chairmen and secretaries of union central and regional committees, and chairmen and secretaries of their respective presidiums. The study covered 1,349 paid elected officials, or about one-quarter of the total paid elected union *apparat*. “O zarabotnoi plate shtatnykh vybornykh rabotnikov v tsentral’nykh komitetakh i oblastnykh komitetakh profsoiuzov,” GARF, f. 5451, o. 22, d. 75, 2–4.

⁶² The average monthly wage in industry in 1935 was 185 rubles, with a range from 129 rubles for workers in the linen industry to 223 rubles in the oil industry. Women textile workers were frantic when machine stoppages further reduced their small paychecks, because they could scarcely feed their children on their regular wages. Highly skilled workers in heavy industry might earn up to 500 rubles. Yet union officials earned considerably more than workers even at the highest end of the pay scale. *Trud v SSSR: Statisticheskii spravochnik* (Moscow, 1936), 97.

soon after the elections. In the Railroad Workers' Union alone, nineteen newly elected officials were "unmasked" and arrested.⁶³ Throughout 1937 and 1938, the NKVD continued to cull their ranks. These arrests encouraged union officials to denounce each other, which in turn prompted ever-widening circles of arrests.

The new elections opened a Pandora's box of grudges, charges, and grievances. In fact, the real struggle in the unions began *after* the elections. Expulsions from the Party, VTsSPS investigations, and arrests kept union officials in a state of churning uncertainty. Fear raised the stakes: even a casual comment could result in disgrace, job loss, arrest, and even execution. Officials charged with "indifference to the needs of the workers" lashed back with countercharges, tarring their accusers to discredit the attack. *Everyone* cloaked criticism or complaints in the language of democracy, using the same phrases to advance differing interests. Just as delegates to the VTsSPS plenum used the new slogans to various ends, so did union officials and members. As the message of democracy and repression percolated down through the unions' hierarchies, the meanings attributed to the slogans multiplied along with the number of people using them. Events in the Timber Cutters' and Floaters' Union were typical of what happened in many unions in the wake of elections.⁶⁴ Union officials used Zhdanov's phrases to advance their own interests in the struggle for local power. Terror and union democracy mixed with charges of corruption and personal resentments to create a toxic brew.

IN THE FALL OF 1937, after elections in the Timber Cutters' and Floaters' Union, *Trud*, the national labor newspaper, published an unflattering article about the new leadership, which was headquartered in Sverdlovsk. The article spurred one Nifetov to write a lengthy denunciation of the presidium of the union's regional committee to the newspaper's editor, who promptly forwarded it to the VTsSPS. Nifetov accused the newly elected presidium of abusing its position by not meeting regularly. As Nifetov explained, the seven-member presidium was in disarray. Rubel', its new chairman, had recently been expelled from the Party and the union for "a tie with an enemy of the people," another member for "systematic drunkenness and scandal," and a third for "drunkenness and beating his wife, who also happened to be a Stakhanovite." A fourth member was sent to supervise prisoners in an NKVD timber camp, and another was not in Sverdlovsk. Although the two remaining members continued to meet, they were hardly a substitute for the full presidium. Members of the larger regional committee, including a labor inspector and a physical culture instructor, had also been arrested. Nifetov bore a serious grudge against Vatolin Pestov, one of the remaining members, who had become the presidium chairman. He complained that Pestov held three positions, including instructor of the regional

⁶³ "Dokladnaia zapiska o khode vyborov," 23.

⁶⁴ See, for example, the Plywood and Matches Workers' Union, "Sekretariu VTsSPS, tov. Shverniku, N.M., tov. Bregmanu, S.," GARF, f. 5451, o. 22, d. 64, 204–204 ob.; the Glass Workers' Union, "Dokladnaia zapiska o rezultatakh proverki raboty TsK soiuza rabochikh stekol'noi promyshlennosti," GARF, f. 5451, o. 22, d. 64, 187–193; the Cotton Textile Workers' Union, "Material k protokolu prezidiuma VTsSPS ot 10/V/38: O polozhenii del v TsK soiuza khlopchatobumazhnoi promyshlennosti," GARF, f. 5451, o. 22, d. 11, 241–276; and the Coal and Slate Workers' Union, "V sekretariat VTsSPS: Dokladnaia zapiska," GARF, f. 5451, o. 22, d. 64, 93–94.

committee, a post that paid him 700 rubles a month to read the newspaper aloud to workers. (Pestov may have picked up these additional jobs when members of the union's paid staff were arrested.)⁶⁵

According to Nifetov, Pestov was also guilty of "violations of union democracy." He had tried to rig the union elections by convening the Sverdlovsk delegates to prepare a list of candidates in advance. Pestov had allegedly told the delegates, "We must discuss and decide who we will put up for candidates to the plenum and who we will vote for." And Pestov had attempted to stack the union's congress by instructing a workers' committee to organize a by-election to overturn the results of an earlier vote for delegates. Nifetov wrote furiously, "The regional committee was transformed in a back-room deal."⁶⁶

Nifetov was not the only person hurling accusations. A safety inspector also accused Pestov of violating election rules, and demanded that he write up an honest report of the union's congress. Pestov refused, and promptly fired him for "political mistakes." The safety inspector demanded an explanation; Pestov refused to provide one. When Nifetov stepped in to defend the safety inspector, Pestov withdrew the charge, rehired the safety inspector, and sent him on a vacation. Nifetov promptly charged Pestov with "suppression of criticism." After pages of charges, Nifetov ended his denunciation: "Considering the adverse state of the leadership of the regional committee, I want to interest and involve the central committee of the union and the VTsSPS in this business and publish this material in *Trud*, and also to end Pestov's scorn for the officials of the regional committee and end violations of union democracy and consider the possibility of terminating Pestov's tenure in the union regional committee."⁶⁷ Thus Nifetov built his denunciation of Pestov, layering each charge between handy slogans of union democracy.

In his second denunciation, Nifetov's rhetoric became even harsher. "When will Pestov, the chairman of the Sverdlovsk union regional committee, finally be unmasked?" he demanded impatiently. "This swindler, double-dealer, and lickspittle has trampled on union democracy, and surrounded himself with a collection of swindlers, aliens, and degenerates, including that counterrevolutionary physical culture instructor." He went on to describe Pestov as the "main lickspittle" of Rubel', the former chairman of the union regional committee, who had been thrown out of the Party for a counterrevolutionary conversation about Stalin. Pestov knew about this conversation! Pestov tried to defend Rubel'! Pestov had written Rubel' a recommendation, which claimed that such a conversation had never occurred! Nifetov recounted with rising hysteria that he had exposed everything, informed on them all. The letter ended with a barely veiled threat to the VTsSPS: "Don't you think that nothing has changed. Comrade Stalin is teaching us to work in a new way." Phrases from the Central Committee and VTsSPS plenums splattered Pestov's denunciations: "violations of union democracy," "toadies, lickspittles, corrupt degenerates," "gross political mistakes and violations of secret-ballot elections."⁶⁸ Yet the letters were also fueled by what appeared to be a deep personal grudge.

⁶⁵ "Otvettstvennomu redaktoru gazety 'Trud' tov. Popovu," GARF, f. 5451, o. 22, d. 64, 122, 123, 125.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 123, 124.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 126. For the charges, see 122–126.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 127, 129. For the entire denunciation, see 127–129.

Aleksei Sholmov, the head of the Timber Cutters' and Floaters' Union, tried to put an end to the affair in a reasonable letter to Bregman, the former head of the Shoe Workers' Union, who had vaulted into the post of a VTsSPS secretary. He explained that the newly elected presidium of the regional committee had been decimated over the fall. It was left with four people, two of whom were not in Sverdlovsk. It had been difficult to meet regularly, but elections had been held again, and Pestov had been fairly elected as chairman. A local union investigation had cleared him of all accusations. According to Sholmov, Pestov was a reliable and able official.⁶⁹

It is difficult to understand exactly what motivated the charges and countercharges, but they seem to have emerged from a local struggle for power around the elections. The old union leaders had tried to protect their positions by organizing bloc voting and overturning unfavorable election results. They were successful to a limited extent. The NKVD then moved in, made arrests, and ensured the removal of Rubel', the regional committee chairman. Pestov, one of the few officials associated with the old leadership who were reelected, took on several vacated positions. Accused by Nifetov of various misdeeds, he fought to clear his name and maintain his position. Both sides in this ugly fight claimed to be representing union democracy. Which side was the true defender of democratic principles, however, was far from clear. Was Nifetov an honest man trying to reform the regional committee and eliminate abuses of power? Was he a member of a rival clique for power, in league with the safety inspector and others, eager to unseat Pestov in order to install his own people? Or was he a deranged individual irrationally obsessed with Pestov for personal reasons? And what about Pestov? Did he cynically collect four salaries while union members stood hip-deep in icy rivers, rafting logs to the lumber mills for a paltry 250 rubles a month? Or did he try hard to keep the union functioning, assuming extra jobs after the union staff was decimated by arrests? Who was Sholmov, a quiet man of reason or a "lickspittle" protecting Pestov? And what of the outcome? Did the NKVD eventually arrest Pestov and his circle, and laud Nifetov for advancing "union democracy" in Sverdlovsk? Or did Nifetov end up raving about the "alien clique" from the locked ward of a mental asylum? The shifting, subjective perspectives of the drama's actors obscure the "objective" truth. Yet regardless of where "truth" lay, Nifetov's ability to couch his obsessions in the language of the day ensured that he received a full hearing. His charges, real or imagined, had consequences, and ultimately launched a serious investigation of the regional committee.

The Party, the VTsSPS, the unions, and the NKVD were flooded with denunciations such as Nifetov's. On countless stages from Kiev to Khabarovsk, local actors played in petty dramas packed with political accusations, trivial details, personal grudges, and grubby entanglements. Charges and countercharges flew back and forth, dense with the rich trivia of daily life: who drank with whom, who earned more than he was worth, who had made an improper political remark. This was not a story of one villain and many victims, but a far richer drama in which political repression became a convenient expression for resentment toward officials, organizational rivalries, and personal ambitions. Daily workplace gossip turned deadly, creating an ugly mess that the NKVD was all too eager to "investigate" under the watchword

⁶⁹ "Sekretariu VTsSPS, tov. Bregmanu," GARF, f. 5451, o. 22, d. 64, 120.

of democracy. There was no dearth of villains or victims: officials in every union were soon caught up in the deadly game.

THIS ARTICLE HAS TRACED THE INSTITUTIONAL DISSEMINATION OF REPRESSION through the campaign for union democracy. From the beginning, democracy and terror were both part of the vision of a revitalized Party purged of oppositionists that Stalin and Zhdanov had articulated at the February–March 1937 Central Committee plenum. Zhdanov’s speech on Party democracy served as an “action text” that created ever-widening circles of disruption. Shvernik picked up the theme and applied it to the unions. The VTsSPS amplified it into a mass campaign, which brought elections into every union. Yet as the campaign spread, various groups refashioned its message to serve different ends. For Stalin and his supporters, democracy was a way to rebuild working-class support, and to forge a united Party, purged of opposition and corruption. They viewed the personal fiefdoms that had developed around regional elites as obstacles to these aims. For workers, the campaign for union democracy offered the opportunity to elect officials who would address accident rates, working conditions, housing, food supply, and wages. They voted the old leadership out, especially at the lower levels, in the hope of creating unions that would represent their interests. For union officials, the campaign initiated a desperate struggle to maintain their standing. And they were largely successful in preserving control, especially at the higher levels.

In the wake of elections, events in the Timber Cutters’ and Floaters’ Union (and other unions) reveal that the central authorities had lost control of the campaign. By 1938, thousands of union leaders had picked up the double-edged sword of terror and democracy and were slashing each other to ribbons. The new leaders attacked the old, and everyone scrabbled frantically to find someone to blame for problems in the factories. It became impossible to disentangle the knot of charges and countercharges. The leaders all portrayed themselves as avatars of democracy and defenders of the working class. In less than eighteen months, the interests of top Party leaders had been subsumed by those of mid-level union officials and workers, who were in turn engulfed by chaotic mudslinging at the local level.

After the Kirov murder in 1934, Stalin and his supporters were increasingly convinced that silent yet stubborn oppositionists still lurked in the Party and union *apparatus*. They believed that many Party members, once active in the left or right oppositions, had never fully accepted Stalin’s program, no matter how hardworking and loyal to the Soviet project they appeared to be. They were biding their time, quietly encouraging young people in vaguely oppositional sentiments, building circles of power and protection, and waiting for a more propitious political climate. By 1937, Stalin was bent on rooting out this silent “opposition,” destroying anyone who might doubt his own leadership and program. The campaign for union democracy targeted both former oppositionists and corrupt officials. Yet once the slogans of democracy became the *lingua franca* of struggle within the unions, there was no way to distinguish the true Stalinist from the oppositionist, the honest from the corrupt, or even the sane from the mad. In the end, the Party lost control of the “action text” as its

phrases and intentions were twisted to serve a variety of personal, political, and class interests. Repression was not something done to the Soviet people by an evil “other.” It was actively supported and spread by people in every institution, who used it to pursue their own ends. The campaign for union democracy not only paralleled the mass repression of 1937–1938, it became the very means by which groups with different aims were transformed into the willing, even enthusiastic, proponents of purge and repression. And herein lies the painful answer to the question posed by the young communist poet so many years ago.

Wendy Goldman is a professor of history at Carnegie Mellon University. She is the author of *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (1993), *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin’s Russia* (2002), and *Terror and Democracy in Stalin’s Russia* (forthcoming, 2006), a study of repression in the unions and the factories in the 1930s.