Historiography of the Soviet Great Purges

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“Life has improved, comrades. Life has become more joyous,” proclaimed Stalin at the All-Union Stakhanovite conference in 1935, prior to the implementation of the Great Purge.¹ Since 1929, the Soviet Union enacted rapid industrialization and collectivization programs in response to supposed threats from external forces, mainly the West. The First Five Year Plan involved the liquidation of the kulaks—meaning the confiscations of their belongings and subsequent deportation into hard labor camps (the Gulag) or Siberian exile. The Plan also herded peasants into collective farms, which ultimately resulted in a famine that killed millions. Other policies of the early to mid-1930s included cleansing the Party membership of inept communists as well as the start of educational reform for a more trained intelligentsia. Following the assassination of the Leningrad party boss, Sergei Kirov, a large-scale purge occurred that targeted oppositional Party members (including high-ranking officials), the Red Army, and an overall repression of the population. The peak cruelty of the purges ran from 1937 to 1938, called the Ezhovshchina in reference to Nikolai Ezhov, who was head of the NKVD secret police. By the time the Soviet Union entered World War II, this unprecedented period of widespread violence ceased.

For roughly the past seventy years, a passionate and often volatile debate existed between historians concerning the nature and reasoning behind the Great Purges. From the end of World War II to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, two models of historical thought dominated the scholarship of Stalin’s reign—the totalitarian school and the revisionists. This great divide often limited historians in their research as many chose one side or the other. Arguably, the rift between historians was a result of the Cold War and generational differences.² These historians

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² Sheila Fitzpatrick gives a great analysis of the generational problems within Soviet historiography in her own essay, “Revisionism in Soviet History” History and Theory, 46 (December 2007): 77-91.
worked in a highly politicized environment in which tensions flared and absurd accusations were commonplace. Furthermore, the historians came from separate eras with separate ideals, motives, and biases. In general, the trends in Soviet historiography paralleled those within the historical field as a whole, but the political and social context of the time period trapped Soviet historians in scholarly warfare.

The totalitarian school typically encompassed those historians of post-World War II conservatism, and many of the scholars maintained a certain political agenda in their analysis of the Soviet Union. For instance, two of the most prominent scholars from the totalitarian school, Robert Conquest and Richard Pipes, worked for Western governments during the Cold War.\(^3\) It was in their best interest to portray Stalin and the Soviets in an overwhelmingly negative light to exacerbate anticommunist sentiment. Thus, for the average historian of the totalitarian model, Stalin was the epitome of evil, an all-encompassing terror and a prime example of the horrid inherent nature of the political system he represented. In the eyes of the totalitarian model, Stalin created a one-man dictatorship fueled by his own paranoia and lust for supreme power. Yet, the school also argued that the root of Stalin’s terror dated back to the 1917 Revolution and the ideals of Marxism-Leninism.\(^4\) Overall, the totalitarian school established the Soviets as a

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\(^3\) Robert Conquest, an Anglo-American born in 1917, worked for the Information Research Department of the British Foreign Office, which attempted to expose the truth behind Soviet propaganda and to expose the country’s wrongdoings. Richard Pipes, a Polish-American born in 1923, joined the Central Intelligence Agency’s Team B program in the 1970s. Team B was a group of designated experts that analyzed threats from the Soviet Union. He was also Director of East European and Soviet Affairs under President Ronald Reagan.

monolithic, top-down society with a passive population in which the government used terror as a means of total control.

Contrastingly, the revisionists arose in the 1970s during the Cold War’s détente and during the shift in historical scholarship toward social history, which heavily influenced their analysis of the Soviet Union. The revisionists focused less on Stalin, especially in terms of the Great Purges, and instead dissected the factors “from below,” such as rank-and-file Party members, the intelligentsia, and social mobility. It seems a possible political agenda existed among some revisionists, as well, especially those on the extreme who were part of a Marxist revival in the field of history. Many Americans felt a disillusionment with the United States government in light of events like the Vietnam War, so it is not unreasonable to believe that some historians carried similar feelings. In response to this new model of scholarship, the totalitarian school accused revisionists of being pro-communist and anti-American with their attempts to justify and legitimize Stalin’s policies. Historians of the totalitarian school even added job displacement in academia to their list of grievances as revisionism solidified its preeminence in Soviet historiography by the 1980s. The revisionist model saw the Soviet Union from the bottom-up with an active citizen class and with opportunities for social mobility.

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6 Letters to the Editor. Slavic Review 68, no. 1 (2009): 219-224. The letter from Peter Kenez specifically discusses the difficulty for historians of the totalitarian school to find a job in academia due to the popularity of the revisionist model. Additionally, the letter from Venelin I. Ganev is particularly exemplary of how extreme the hostilities and insults penetrated this historical debate.
This paper will discuss the major points of contention between the totalitarian model and the revisionist model within the historiography of the Great Purges from the 1960s to the early 1990s with the fall of the Soviet Union. The three main debates covered will be: the source base, Stalin’s role in the purges, and the estimation of the total death count. The paper will then explain the significance of greater access to Soviet archives and how scholars reassessed (or failed to reassess) their arguments. Finally, this essay will cover the shift toward a third model in the scholarship, called post-revisionism, and where the historiography stands today both within academia and with the public.

A Source Evaluation

The totalitarian school and the revisionists featured some overlay in their sources, naturally, but also disagreed on one very distinct source base—defector and émigré accounts. The first piece of scholarship to focus solely on Stalin and the Great Purges was Robert Conquest’s *The Great Terror*, published in 1968. Conquest analyzed and utilized documents from the Smolensk Archive, official documents released by the Soviet Union, the census, and the official newspaper of the Russian Communist Party, *Pravda*. These sources were typical of both the totalitarian school and the revisionists. However, Conquest also heavily relied on the experiences of defector and émigré accounts (some from former NKVD members) in order to

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8 The Smolensk Archive is a collection of Party documents from the western regions of the Soviet Union that were captured by Germans during World War Two, and then captured by the United States from Germany, who in turn microfilmed the archive in its entirety. The provenance and selection of the files is unclear, so it is difficult to know the completeness of the record. During the Cold War, it was the only Party archive sources available for research for both the totalitarian school and the revisionists. In 1958, Merle Fainsod published *Smolensk under Soviet Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), which, to this day, is the most notable piece of scholarship analyzing the archive. Fainsod’s arguments reside with the totalitarian school in his discussion of Stalin’s power and how the Party was essentially a mechanism for Stalin to execute his megalomania ideas.
discuss the relationships between Party officials, including Stalin. He stated that “on almost every major point covered in this book, it will be found that the evidence comes from those who have defected or escaped from the USSR.”9 As with any source, relying on these accounts came with issues of bias, accuracy, and representativeness. These sources included first and secondhand accounts of the events during the 1930s, and often contained elements of hearsay and rumor. Conquest believed that he could solidify the accuracy of a rumor by comparing stories between these defector accounts, thus justifying their use in his work. Revisionists wholeheartedly disagreed.

Certainly, defector accounts contained incredibly valuable information on individual perspectives of life in the Soviet Union, but revisionists disagreed with the totalitarian school’s use of these accounts to examine internal conflicts and relationship dynamics within the Communist Party because many of the defectors were not directly involved and were actually far outside Moscow’s core group of officials. One of Conquest’s most noted critics was J. Arch Getty, who published Origins of the Great Purges as practically a direct response to The Great Terror.10 In it, Getty called out Conquest for this “weak” use of defector accounts, claiming “it is not clear what the Great Purges memoirs can reveal about why the terror happened, or even about exactly what happened,” and continued to state that these defectors were “victims who saw the process from below, and their observations on high politics are merely guesses.”11 Indeed, Conquest’s central arguments in two of his most vital chapters, “Stalin Prepares” and “The Kirov Murder,” often cited defector and émigré accounts. Getty stressed his use of official documents

9 Conquest, The Great Terror, xii.
11 Ibid, 4-5.
from the Party and the Soviet press, meaning his work involved “no willing suspension of disbelief nor any blind acceptance of official cant.”\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Stalin’s Role}

The totalitarian school of thought suggested that the Great Purges were a product of Joseph Stalin’s unique lust for absolute power. “The nature of the whole Purge depends…on the personal and political drives of Stalin,” explained Conquest in his chapter titled “Architect of Terror.”\textsuperscript{13} Stalin had a master plan. He planned every moment of repression, every show trial, every order of mass violence and terror in order to gain power, and, then once he had it, to maintain that power. Many scholars also refer to Stalin’s “cult of personality” as a part of his ability to project such tragedy upon his people. Richard Pipes, in his published work \textit{Communism: A History}, explained this aspect of the Great Terror, in which Stalin was “omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, infallible, and he remained such until his death in 1953.”\textsuperscript{14} A more straightforward analysis of the source of Stalin’s terror comes from Martin Malia and his ideological argument. It was within Marxism and Leninism that Stalin discovered the foundations for the purges and how he justified his reign of terror.\textsuperscript{15} Additionally, as part of his grand role, the totalitarian school attributed the assassination of Sergei Kirov to Stalin. This scholarship defined the murder of Kirov in1934 as a major turning point. Stalin needed a rationalization for the next phase of his repression, and he needed to show that enemies of the Party still persisted. “If enemies were lacking, they had to be fabricated,” and thus Stalin

\textsuperscript{13} Conquest, \textit{The Great Terror}, 62.
organized the murder because he perceived Kirov’s rise in popularity as a threat to his power.\textsuperscript{16} According to many in the totalitarian school, Stalin then arrested other high ranking officials that represented the remaining members of the Old Bolsheviks—Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Bukharin, for example. Stalin used Kirov’s murder as justification for the show trials and the Ezhovshchina of 1937-1938. In a four page appendix, Getty found it unreasonable to blame Stalin for Kirov’s murder; he claimed the evidence simply is not there and that Stalin gained zero advantage from such an act. The revisionists understood Kirov as a staunch supporter of Stalin who at no time revealed the want to be supreme leader, and that no disputes existed between the two men to call for an assassination.

The revisionist model did not give Stalin as much of a central role in the purges, and tended to focus the scholarship on internal party conflicts in Moscow and throughout the Soviet Union as reasoning for the events of the 1930s. Getty suggested that the Communist Party “was inefficient, fragmented, and split several ways by internal factional conflict,” and that these problems ultimately erupted toward the implementation of the purges.\textsuperscript{17} He claimed that “Stalin sanctioned the use of violence to settle political disputes,” within the chaotic and erratic environment of the Party’s regional leaders, and that Stalin’s role was a reactionary to events rather than planning.\textsuperscript{18} Sheila Fitzpatrick, perhaps the most distinguished revisionist scholar, explained the nature of the purges through an examination of the educational reform policies the Party enacted in the early 1930s. Her work focused not on Stalin but on those who surrounded closely him—his cadres. She argued that Stalin felt the old cadres’ lack of proper qualifications “exposed the regime to manipulation by its present and potential enemies,” and, while educating

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 12.
a new group of cadres during the First Five Year Plan, the purges got rid of the old cadres. The Great Purges allowed for social mobility and rapid promotion into areas of industry, government, and Communist Party leadership. Fitzpatrick also gave one of the more compelling reasons—among scholars from both the totalitarian school and the revisionists—for why the Great Purges decreased immensely by 1938; she expressed that it would have been counterproductive to purge the educated cadres that finally entered into leadership positions because it would erase all of the reform efforts of the past decade. Generally, revisionists recognized that there were many other factors and agents involved in the nature and cause of the Great Purges that went far beyond the monolithic and megalomaniac Stalin reasoning provided by the totalitarian school.

Some scholars did not fit neatly within the distinct parameters of either school. Stephen F. Cohen, considered a revisionist, disagreed with the totalitarian school on the applying their model to the 1917 revolution and the New Economic Policy period of the 1920s, but decided it was an appropriate comparison for Stalin and the purges. Cohen understood the periods of leadership between Lenin and Stalin to be separate entities instead of a continuation of policy, which countered the claims of scholars such as Malia, who saw a direct correlation between Marxism-Leninism and Stalinism. David J. Nordlander’s “Origins of a Gulag Capital,” criticized revisionists for not taking into account Stalin’s obviously overwhelming power in the police provinces. His article centered on Magadan, one of the worst areas for labor camps. Although these police provinces had regional leadership similar to what Getty described, the extent of communication between Moscow and places like Magadan demonstrated Stalin’s attentiveness

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20 Ibid, 399.
to officials throughout the Soviet Union. Indeed, Stalin “exercised his hegemony over Dal'sstroi [the agency in charge of Magadan] through several underlings, all of whom carried out his orders while serving at his discretion.” Nordlander urged revisionists to consider that if Stalin could maintain tight control over Magadan from the other side of the vast country, then it was entirely plausible that Stalin was at the center of every decision occurring in Moscow. In this sense, Nordlander belonged more to the totalitarian school than the revisionist. However, he dissented from totalitarian model on one major issue—the death count.

The Death Count

During the Great Purges, many people died from famine, the gulag, and executions, and, with unreliable sources, the totalitarian school and the revisionists came to different calculations on the total number of deaths during the terror. Using census records, Conquest famously estimated an average total of nearly 20 million deaths, and compared the casualties to those in World War I, when the “whole civilization was badly shaken.” Malia iterated that a political agenda existed to argue for higher or lower figures depending on which school of Soviet scholarship a historian claimed as their own. Conquest’s role in working for the British government very well may have pushed him to inflate the numbers against the Soviet Union in

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23 Conquest, *The Great Terror*, xiv. In an appendix from page 525 to 535, Conquest breaks down how he came to the 20 million figure.
24 Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy*, 261. One group with an obvious political agenda and bias are those scholars who adhere to *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), edited by Stéphane Courtois. *The Black Book* is a collaboration by mainly European scholars that compares all crimes and repressions executed by Communist countries. The book agrees with the casualty figure of 20 million in the Soviet Union. The book claims that the overall total number of deaths committed by Communist regimes is nearly 100 million. Several scholars from the totalitarian school, such as Malia, praised the book, while others criticized it for exaggerations.
order to help substantiate the West’s anticommunist policies. Getty notes that the many scholars in the totalitarian school lived during a time of high cultural and political stakes, influencing the school’s numbers debate (and overall hostility toward the challenge of revisionists). The revisionists estimated the casualty figure at a much lower number. Getty largely brushed aside the numbers debate, but suggested that perhaps the total ran up to only hundreds of thousands, which garnered him a lot of backlash. Stephen Wheatcroft, a revisionist, did some of the most extensive studies concerning the amount of deaths during the purges, and his article is one of the most widely noted for reasonable conclusions of roughly 3.5 million. Nordlander sided with the revisionists in this debate, but also urged historians to consider that a lower estimate did not mean that what occurred was any less tragic or equate to a weaker central authority. The totalitarian school did not need to inflate numbers in order to prove Stalin’s all-encompassing influence, and lower estimates by revisionists did not mean that this school attempted to play down those that died. As with the other historical debates, the highly politicized atmosphere maintained a stronghold on determining the death count.

The Fall of the Soviet Union: A Reassessment and a New Approach

Before 1991, Soviet historians dealt with limited resources to analyze because much of the needed information was locked away in the country’s archives, in which very few attained access. With the end of the Communist regime, scholars gained greater access to documents from government archives (although some information, specifically from the NKVD, remains

So how did historians from the totalitarian school and the revisionist school reassess their arguments? Shockingly (or maybe not), most of the historians stood firm on their original research and analyses; many from both sides of the debate felt that the information gained from the archives validated their previous results. Conquest published an updated edition of *The Great Terror* with a “reassessment,” except there was not much reassessing at all. Ridiculously enough, many scholars from the totalitarian school did not even visit the opened archives, often citing a general mistrust of Soviet records. Overall, Conquest maintained many of his previous points: that his use of defector accounts was legitimate because many of the firsthand experiences proved to be mostly factual; that it was still likely Stalin killed Kirov but we will probably never know the truth; and that the number of deaths was probably still near 20 million, maybe a little more around 15 million. Since Stalin’s influence appeared all over the fresh set of documents, Getty reassessed his argument giving a bit more credit to the leader during the purges and fleshed out his calculations of the death count more than he previously did, agreeing with lower estimations given by other revisionists. Many historians may have thought that the opening of the archives would solve some of these hostile debates, but truly not very much changed between the totalitarian school and the revisionists. What did change was the introduction of an entirely new model in which to examine the Soviet Union, pushing the totalitarian and revisionist schools out of academic popularity.

Following the natural progressions of the historical field, cultural and intellectual history appeared in the 1990s as the dominant model for analyzing the past. Within the Soviet

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historiography, a group referred to as the post-revisionists sanctioned innovative and diverse ways of studying Stalin and the Great Purges; indeed, these historians were free from the limitations of the previous two schools and mostly ignored the aggression of the past decades. Two leading scholars in the post-revisionist field were Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck. Halfin drew on scholarship that investigated a person’s identity in relation to their state, called subjectivity studies. Halfin understood the show trials during the Great Purges as a way for the Communist Party to judge a person’s identification with the ideology of the state. In one article, Halfin argued that the Soviets engaged in “hermeneutics of the soul,” which was a “complex ritual of words and deeds designed to permit the Party to determine who was worthy to belong to the brotherhood of the elect.”30 Considering this examination of language and discourse, the work of Michel Foucault and postmodernism certainly influenced post-revisionist work. Jochen Hellbeck also wrote about the role of individual ideology under Stalinism. Through an untapped source base of diaries and autobiographies, Hellbeck studied how individuals in Soviet society personalized their ideology while remaking themselves on the same terms as the industrialization and collectivization in the 1930s.31 Post-revisionists did not rehash old arguments, but introduced entirely different ways of studying the life in the Soviet Union, and these studies continue as the dominant model today.

31 Jochen Hellbeck, Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
Conclusion

Although the current Soviet historiography centers on post-revisionism, the debates between the totalitarian school and the revisionists persists. Most recently, revisionist Lynn Viola published an article discussing the role of the perpetrators during the Great Purges in comparison with those of Nazi Germany.\(^\text{32}\) Perhaps future scholars should consider the environmental history of the purges, involving collectivization, industrialization, and the Gulag system of labor camps. Another possible topic for future in-depth research is the experience of athletes during the purges; a few historians touched upon Soviet sporting culture before, but none have really given the 1930s a decent critique.\(^\text{33}\) In terms of the mainstream public consciousness, the totalitarian model is most popular—still taught in public schools and projected in the media, especially film. However, in public history mediums, neither school really controls the interpretative landscape. In fact, many exhibits do not include academic debates; instead, they focus on personal experiences relatable to a broad audience.\(^\text{34}\) Exhibits become more about invoking emotion and less about understanding current historical discussions.

There is much to learn from the contention in Soviet historiography. The disputes from the totalitarian school and the revisionists reveal plenty about the subjectivity imbedded in


\(^{33}\) James Riordan’s work on Soviet sport is often the most noted in the field. See *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

historical work, and how two people looking at the nearly the exact same sources can come to completely different conclusions. The surrounding political, social, and economic atmosphere can influence history, and it often does. Just as historians are a product of their time, so are their research and inquiries. Each generation of historians creates a new way of thinking about the past, and it is that diversity and continuous change that enriches the field.