

# **THE MASS DISSEMINATION OF TERROR:**

## **Workers and the First Moscow Show Trial**

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## **Executive Summary**

This paper looks carefully at the two year period between the Kirov murder and the repression of 1937, examining the responses of Party leaders in dynamic interaction with those of the party committees (*partkomy*) in the factories. Both sets of responses changed over time, but at very different rates. At the top, Stalin and top Party leaders were initially unsure what meaning to impart to the Kirov case and therefore, how to prosecute it.

In the factories, the *partkomy* responded even more slowly. Apart from occasional references to Trotskyists and wreckers, they carried on business as usual, largely impervious to the political squall at the upper levels of the Party. And while they approved a variety of resolutions condemning Kirov's killers, they were not eager to hunt for oppositionists within their own ranks.

In the end, this paper looks examines how, between December 1934 and January 1937, party members and workers had become active agents in the dissemination of terror. How did repression, initially confined to Kirov's murderer, engulf and engage large sections of society? By what stages did this hysteria take hold?

## Introduction

The Kirov murder is commonly seen by historians as the portal to “terror,” the extra judicial arrests, political witch hunts, mass operations, and executions that reached their apogee in 1937-1938.<sup>1</sup> On the very day of the murder, the state passed a law abrogating civil liberties and judicial rights. The *spread* of repression, however, was intimately linked to the meanings the state and local Party committees ascribed to the murder.

This paper looks carefully at the two year period between the Kirov murder and the repression of 1937, examining the responses of Party leaders in dynamic interaction with those of the party committees (*partkomy*) in the factories. Both sets of responses changed over time, but at very different rates. At the top, Stalin and top Party leaders were initially unsure what meaning to impart to the Kirov case and therefore, how to prosecute it. Investigation of the case moved forward in fits and starts as the narrative of the murder expanded to include ever more plots, conspiracies, and perpetrators.<sup>2</sup>

In the factories, the *partkomy* responded even more slowly. Apart from occasional references to Trotskyists and wreckers, they carried on business as usual, largely impervious to the political squall at the upper levels of the Party. And while they approved a variety of resolutions condemning Kirov’s killers, they were not eager to hunt for oppositionists within their own ranks. Yet by 1937, the *partkomy*, too, were convulsed by denunciations, accusations,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Conquest, *Stalin and the Kirov Murder* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1989), Amy Knight, *Who Killed Kirov? The Kremlin’s Greatest Mystery* (Hill and Wang, New York, 1999), J. Arch Getty, “The Politics of Repression Revisited,” in Getty and R. Manning, eds. *Stalinist Terror. New Perspectives* (Cambridge University Press, 1993). Investigations of “terrorism” were to be completed within ten days. The accused were to be informed of the charges twenty-four hours before trial, they were denied legal counsel for their defense, their sentences could not be appealed, and a death sentence was to be carried out immediately. In September 1937, another law extended these provisions to other crimes, including wrecking and subversion. Peter Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996): 236.

<sup>2</sup> J. Arch Getty, Oleg Naumov, *The Road to Terror. Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999) argue persuasively that Party leaders repeatedly vacillated between repression and legality.

and expulsions, and the country was gripped by an insidious culture of denunciation and witch hunting.<sup>3</sup> In other words, between December 1934 and January 1937, party members and workers had become active agents in the dissemination of terror. How did repression, initially confined to Kirov's murderer, engulf and engage large sections of society? By what stages did this hysteria take hold?

### **Vigilance and Drift**

The investigators of Kirov's murder initially limited their search to a small group of possible suspects. On December 28-9, Nikolaev and thirteen other defendants, were convicted, sentenced to death, and shot immediately in accordance with the new law of December 1. In a second trial on January 15-16, G.E. Zinoviev, L. B. Kamenev, G.E. Evdokimov, I. P. Bakaev, and fifteen others were convicted of establishing a so-called "Moscow center," which allegedly guided the activities of various counter revolutionary groups, including the one convicted of murdering Kirov. Zinoviev and Kamenev, convicted only of "abetting" Kirov's murder by encouraging opposition, were sentenced to prison.

The day after the trial ended, Stalin summarized the political situation in a letter to the Politburo. The very next day, on January 18, the Central Committee forwarded this "closed, secret" letter to all party organizations for discussion. Prepared under Stalin's personal supervision, the letter explained that Kirov was killed by a "Leningrad center," headed by another center in Moscow, which encouraged terrorism but had not known about the plan to assassinate Kirov. Both centers shared a "Trotskyist-Zinovievite platform", and aimed to place

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<sup>3</sup> On the culture of denunciation, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford University Press, London, 1999): 164-218.

their members, many of who were still in the Party, into leading Party and state positions.<sup>4</sup> The letter warned that “masked” oppositionists still remained in the Party and in high posts. It demanded the exclusion, arrest, and exile of all “remnants of anti party groups within the party”, and encouraged the study of Party history, so that Party members could recognize and destroy them.<sup>5</sup>

Some historians believe that the letter gave “a straightforward directive” not only to exclude oppositionists from the Party, but to arrest them.<sup>6</sup> Yet the text offered no specific course of action beyond heightened vigilance and study. The last open opposition within the Party was vanquished in 1927, and most Party members in 1935 did not believe that their local organizations contained “remnants of anti-party groups.” They had members who had voted for Trotskyist resolutions, and even been active in the left opposition, but these people had long since abandoned their oppositional views. Party members were respectfully attentive to the letter, but did not find it directly applicable to their own organizations.

Shortly after sending the letter, the Politburo, on Stalin’s initiative, undertook wider reprisals against the former left opposition. The Leningrad NKVD arrested an additional 843 former Zinovievites in January and February. During their interrogations, the version of the Kirov murder presented at the trial and in the letter began to expand to include more perpetrators, plots and targets. Ezhov elaborated the new version in a manuscript, “From Factionalism to Open Counterrevolution,” which he sent to Stalin in May 1935 with a cover letter requesting further instructions. According to the manuscript, Zinovievites had been encouraged and abetted

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<sup>4</sup> “O Tak Nazvyvaemom ‘Antisovetskom Ob’edinennom Trotskistsko-Zinov’evskom Tsentr’,” *Izvestiia TsK*, No. 8, 1989: 78- 81.

<sup>5</sup> “Zakrytoe Pis’mo TsK VKP (b). Uroki sobytii, sviazannykh s zlodeiskim ubiitstvom tov. Kirova,” *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, No. 8 (1989): 95-100.

<sup>6</sup> O Tak Nazvyvaemom ‘Antisovetskom Ob’edinennom Trotskistsko-Zinov’evskom Tsentr’,” p. 81.

by former Trotskyists, who had also opted for terror. That summer, Ezhov instructed the NKVD to find and liquidate a still-hidden “Trotskyist center.” The widening scope of the investigation had ugly consequences for former oppositionists in exile, in prison, and in leading posts. People who had long abandoned oppositional activity were arrested or brought back to Moscow to be interrogated or re-interrogated.<sup>7</sup>

Yet in the factories, the *partkomy* responded sluggishly to the letter and the ongoing investigation, thus insulating their members from arrests. Naturally, they were aware of Kirov’s murder. They attended meetings and memorials, and read countless articles devoted to Kirov’s achievements and “villainous murder.” They paid lip service to “vigilance”, but by and large, they continued to regard participation in past opposition as a harmless survival of the Party’s once vibrant culture of debate.

Officials from the Proletarskii district committee (*raikom*) organized discussions of the Kirov murder in the huge factories, Dinamo, AMO, and Serp i Molot. A secretary of the Moscow party committee, M. M. Kulikov, reported unhappily that many party members maintained a tolerant view of former oppositional activity. Despite the steady drumbeat against Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and others in the press and at the upper levels of the Party, many members retained considerable respect for them. One Party member from the rolling mill in Serp i Molot declared, “It is not necessary to forget the merits of Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Kamenev in the Civil War.” Kulikov indignantly responded, “Is this the question? The question now is who would work against the Party.”

Yet many Party members and workers refused to demonize former oppositionists. In bread factory No. 3, a worker stood up and told the official speaker, “You are still too much of a greenhorn to be criticizing Zinoviev and Kamenev.” Kulikov fumed, “And two communists

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp. 81-2.

were sitting right there and did nothing.”<sup>8</sup> Kulikov was particularly angry at the easy tolerance of workers and party members in the factories. Stubbornly adhering to opinions based on their own memories and experiences, their discussions of the Kirov murder did not always follow the “lessons” the Central Committee had carefully outlined in its January letter.

In June 1935, the *partkomy* were jolted into activity by an organizational verification (*proverka*) and exchange of documents (*obmen*). Launched under the title, “On Disorders in the Registration, Distribution, and Safekeeping of Party Cards and on Measures for Regulating this Affair,” the verification initially began as a “housekeeping affair.” According to the screening instructions, the purpose of the *proverka* was to eliminate members who no longer belonged in the Party, organize membership records, and ensure that members’ documents were correct; no mention was made of the Kirov murder.<sup>9</sup> Initially, the purge did not seem to differ significantly from those that preceded it: members could expect a careful review of their documents, biographical data, personal behavior, and activities.<sup>10</sup>

In Krasnyi Bogatyr, a large Moscow rubber and chemical factory, the *partkom* responded to the Central Committee’s January letter with the standard vow to increase “political literacy”. Yet it carefully distanced itself from responsibility. Playing to the letter’s recommendation to study, the *partkom* claimed that managers, foremen, and other leading Party members in the

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<sup>8</sup> “Stenogrammy Soveshchanie Sekretarei Partkomov RK VKP (b),” Tsentral’nyi Arkhiv Obshchestvennykh Dvizhenii Moskv (TsAODM), fond 80, opis’ 1, delo 528 k. 32, pp. 1-8.

<sup>9</sup> Getty and Naumov, pp. 197-8. See also Getty, *The Origins of the Great Purges. The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-38* (Cambridge University Press, London, 1985): 58-92.

<sup>10</sup> “Stenogramma Preinii Zakrytogo Partiinogo Sobraniia Zavoda ‘Serp i Molot’”, TsAODM, f. 429, op. 1, d. 126, p. 6. In Serp i Molot’s *partkom*, for example, twenty people were expelled between June and October 1935 for poor attendance at meetings, discrepancies in their documents, false biographical claims, and anti-state and Party comments. Although the *partkom* sharply scrutinized its members, there was little discussion of masked enemies, wreckers or oppositionists. The *proverka*, at least in its initial phase, differed little from those the Party had conducted in the past.

factory were “not able to be vigilant because they are politically illiterate.” And while they readily promised to remedy everyone’s deficiencies, they ignored the hunt for oppositionists.

Their main focus was on production and running the factory. Few were versed in the finer points of past debates, and fewer still cared to revisit these issues. Ignorance provided the ideal excuse for not getting involved with what was clearly proving a messy and unpleasant business. “We informed the higher organizations about alien people and no steps were taken,” one Party member announced with a shrug. Everyone cheerfully admitted that there was “wrecking” in the factory: “A blockhead did the ordering and buying.” “There were great piles of rags obstructing production.” But no one seemed unduly alarmed. “Everyone needs to increase their political level,” they assented. When the *partkom* held a meeting to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the Kirov murder, the speeches were formulaic: “Kirov is not with us, but his courage remains.” “The murder of Kirov tells us the class struggle continues.” Once again, everyone enthusiastically agreed that there were wreckers in the factory.<sup>11</sup> At the time, a rhetorical endorsement of vigilance seemed sufficient to satisfy the rumblings in Moscow.

Statistics partially explain the complacency in the factories. In 1935, Party members at the local level were still fairly insulated from hunt for oppositionists. Between July, when the verification campaign began, and December 1935, the Party expelled 9 percent (177,000) of its two million members; the vast majority for routine causes, including moral corruption, embezzlement, hiding class origins, and discrepancies in documents. Only a small fraction (2.8 percent or 4,956 people) was expelled for Trotskyist-Zinovievite opposition. Of the total number expelled, about 8 percent were arrested (15,218 people), less than 1 percent of the Party’s total membership. And even if all of those expelled for opposition were subsequently arrested, this

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<sup>11</sup> “Protokol Zakrytogo Partsobraniia”, “Protokol Partiinogo Zakrytogo Sobraniia Sm. B”, “Protokol Obshchego Sobraniia Chlenov Partii VKP (b)”, “Protokol Zakrytogo Partsobraniia Iacheiki VKP (b)”, “Protokol Obshchego Zakrytogo Partsobraniia Mekhstroi Transportnogo Otdela,” TsAODM, f. 462, o. 1, d. 18, k. 2, pp. 1-12.

group still accounted for only one-third of the total arrests, suggesting that the remaining two-thirds of Party members who were arrested were charged with non political crimes such as embezzlement.<sup>12</sup>

The *partkomy's* lack of concern about Trotskyist-Zinovievite terrorist groups in the factories resulted in a low level of expulsions and arrests for “political” reasons, and the low number of arrests, in turn, ensured that Party members were not dragged into widening investigations spurred by the “unmasking” of trusted work mates. All in all, throughout 1935, the apathy of the local party committees served as excellent protection against intensifying machinations at the top.

### **The Case Widens**

In January 1936, there was a major shift in the Kirov case. Ezhov's expanded version of the murder plot, presented first to Stalin in May, and to the Central Committee Plenum in June, was revived by a confession extracted from V.P. Ol'berg, a former member of the German Communist Party who had fled fascism, acquired Soviet citizenship, and settled in Gorky. It is not clear whether interrogators forced Ol'berg to confess to their fabrications or whether he unwittingly supplied information that supported Ezhov's expanded version of the plot. Within a month of his arrest, Ol'berg confessed that Trotsky instructed him to create a counter revolutionary terrorist organization and to assassinate Stalin.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Other figures indicate that more Party members were expelled (263,885 or 11.1 percent of the membership). RGASPI, f. 17, op. 120, d. 278, pp. 2-3. (Figures provided courtesy of Arch Getty, personal correspondence.) By the beginning of 1937, 3,500 additional Party members had been removed from office as “enemies”. Getty and Naumov, pp. 197-8, 263.

<sup>13</sup> “O Tak Nazyyaemom ‘Antisovetskom Ob’edinennom Trotskistsko-Zinov’evskom Tsentr’,”p. 82.

Over the spring of 1936, NKVD investigators used a wide variety of illegal methods, including torture, sleep deprivation, psychological abuse, and isolation, to extract and shape confessions from key oppositionists. These interrogations spawned new subplots of assassination and terror linked directly to Trotsky. According to the rapidly evolving narrative, supporters of Trotsky and Zinoviev had formed a “united center” in 1932 aimed at assassination and terror. Ezhov had accused Zinoviev and Kamenev in June of direct involvement in Kirov’s murder, but the latest variant went even further by positing a whole new list of suspects and targets in a growing conspiracy of terror.

In March, G. G. Iagoda, the head of the NKVD, reported his progress in uncovering the Trotskyist underground to Stalin. He suggested that its members be handed over to the Court of the Military Kollegiia, sentenced under the law of December 1, 1934, and shot. A. Ia. Vyshinskii, USSR procurator, affirmed Iagoda’s suggestion and added that Trotskyists in exile, “carrying out active work” as well as Trotskyists expelled from the Party in the *proverka* be sent to distant labor camps. Stalin accepted the suggestions and asked Iagoda and Vyshinsky to draw up a list of people to be brought before the Court. The tempo of arrests quickened.<sup>14</sup>

Up to this point, arrests were still limited to former oppositionists and foreign communists. The circles widened as these people were interrogated and forced under duress to name others. Yet through the spring of 1936, the *partkomy* in the factories were still relatively undisturbed.<sup>15</sup> In June, Vyshinsky and Iagoda, responding to Stalin’s earlier request, delivered a preliminary list of 82 people for trial. They asked whether to include Zinoviev and Kamenev, in

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pp. 83-4.

<sup>15</sup> See for example, “Protokoly Obshchikh Zavodskikh Partsobraniï,” “Protokol Partiinogo Sobraniia,” “Protokol Obshchezavodskogo Partiinogo Sobraniia, Sovmestno s Komsomolom i Sochuvstzuiushchimi,” “Protokol obshchezavodskoi Teoriticheskoi Partiinoi Konferentsii po Ustavu VKP (b),” “Obshchezavodskogo Partiinogo Sobraniia,” “Protokol Zakrytogo Partsobraniia,” TsAODM, f. 462, o. 1, d. 19, pp. 1-51.

jail since the previous year. Stalin instructed the NKVD through Ezhov to prepare for a trial of Trotskyists and Zinovievites together. From June 1936 on, state efforts were directed at building the case of a “united center.”<sup>16</sup>

At the end of July, Ezhov sent Stalin a draft of a letter, outlining the case against Zinoviev, Kamenev and other defendants. Stalin made numerous corrections. The Central Committee then sent this “closed” secret letter to the party organizations on July 29.<sup>17</sup> The case had grown considerably. The letter claimed that Zinovievites and Trotskyists united in 1932 against the current leadership, and subsequently formed terrorist groups in major cities. Trotsky sent this “united center” instructions from abroad to murder Kirov, Stalin, and other Party leaders. Zinoviev and Kamenev, previously charged with “arousing terrorist moods,” were now charged with Kirov’s murder, as well as the attempted murders of Stalin and others. Each of the new targets – Stalin, Voroshilov, Kaganovich, Zhdanov, Kosior, Postyshev, and Ordzhonikidze – had “their own” terror cell devoted to their assassination.

The new plots naturally involved a slew of new plotters.<sup>18</sup> I. K Fedotov, the director of the Gorky Pedagogical Institute, was charged with heading a Trotskyist terror cell, which aimed to kill Stalin in Red Square during the Mayday demonstration. Fritz David, a Comintern official, and Berman-Iurin, were accused of plotting to kill Stalin at a Comintern Congress, a charge that set off mass arrests in the Comintern. D. A. Shmidt, an army commander, was charged with plotting to kill Voroshilov, a Politburo member and Red Army general. Workers in the

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<sup>16</sup> “O Tak Nazyvaemom ‘Antisovetskom Ob’edinennom Trotskistsko-Zinov’evskom Tsentr’,” pp. 82-4.

<sup>17</sup> “Zakrytoe Pis’mo TsK VKP (b). O Terroristicheskoi Deiatel’nosti Trotskistsko-Zinov’evskogo Kontrevoliutsionnogo Bloka,” *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, No. 8, 1989: 100-15.

<sup>18</sup> These included former Zinovievites I. P. Bakaev, G. E. Evdokimov, M.N. Iakovlev, M. N. Motorin, I. I. Reingold, R. V. Pikel’, and Trotskyists I. S. Esterman, I. N. Smirnov, S. V. Mrachkovsky, E. A. Dreitser, and V. A. Ter-Vaganian.

Kaganovich leather factory were charged with plotting to kill Kaganovich. A number of German communists, who escaped Hitler and settled in the Soviet Union, were accused of terrorism and spying on behalf of Russian fascist émigré organizations and the GESTAPO.

Leading institutions were also pulled into the investigation. The letter claimed that hidden Trotskyists helped “terrorists” infiltrate the Gorky party organization, the staff of *Leningradskaia Pravda*, the Academy of Science, and a weapons factory in Tula. G.M. Arkus, the deputy chairman of Gosbank, the main state bank, was accused of funding the terrorists. And at least one “terror cell” was accused of planning various robberies or “expropriations.”<sup>19</sup>

One short, but stunning line, introduced the possibility that “rightists,” too, had participated in the plots to unseat Stalin. According to the letter, Kamenev confessed only five days before that the plotters, “would accept the participation of the rightists, Bukharin, Tomskii, and Rykov, in the organization of a new government.” Finally, the letter was very critical of the *partkomy* for failing to uncover “terrorists.” It noted sharply that the NKVD had arrested numerous Party members, who passed successfully through the *proverka*. This terrible breach in security was the result of the Party members’ failures, “to recognize an enemy of the Party, no matter how well he may be masked.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The Germans included K. B. Berman-Iurin, M. I. Lur’e, N. L. Lur’e, E. Konstant, P. Livshits, V. P. Ol’berg, F. David, Kh. Gurevich, and M. Bykhovskii, William Chase, *Enemies Within the Gates. The Comintern and the Stalinist Repression, 1934-1939* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2001):162-3 notes that the Cadres Department of the Party notified Georgi Dimitrov, general secretary of the Comintern, that it sent material to the NKVD on 3,000 foreign communists and émigrés living in the USSR suspected as spies, provocateurs, and wreckers.

<sup>20</sup> “Zakrytoe Pis’mo TsK VKP (b). O Terroristicheskoi Deiatel’nosti Trotskistsko-Zinov’evskogo Kontrevoliutsionnogo Bloka,” pp. 100-15.

Vyshinskii, the procurator, and Stalin worked closely together to draft an indictment. Finalized by August 14, it appeared in the newspapers the following day.<sup>21</sup> On August 19-24, 1936, the case of the “Trotskyist-Zinovievite terrorist center” was tried in open court. The sixteen defendants, handpicked by Stalin with Vyshinskii’s assistance, included Zinoviev, Kamenev, and five former members of the German Communist Party.<sup>22</sup> They were accused of direct involvement in the Kirov murder, as well as multiple plots to kill Stalin and other Party leaders. The accused all declined the assistance of counsel; their confessions and mutual denunciations constituted the main evidence. During the trial, Vyshinsky, the state procurator, guided the defendants through the confessions they had already provided investigators. The testimonies of the accused were fictions invented by Stalin, Ezhov and NKVD investigators.

The Party officially admitted in 1991 that the charges were false, the confessions, fabrications extracted under torture and duress.<sup>23</sup> The vague imputations against the rightists in the Central Committee’s July 29 letter assumed greater substance during the trial when the defendants connected prominent “rightists” with a variety of plots. On August 21, in the middle of the trial, the State Procurator’s office announced an investigation of Bukharin, Rykov, Tomskii, Radek, and several others. Tomskii promptly committed suicide. The defendants were

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<sup>21</sup> “O Tak Nazывaemom ‘Antisovetskom Ob’edinennom Trotskistsko-Zinov’evskom Tsentr’,” pp. 78-81. Stalin added E.S. Holtzman, Fritz David, K.B. Berman-Iurin, and N.L. Lur’e to the list of defendants. See, *The Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Center. Report of Court Proceedings* (People’s Commissariat of Justice USSR, Moscow, 1936): 9-39. Hereafter cited as *Court Proceedings*.

<sup>22</sup> The defendants were G.E. Zinoviev, L. B. Kamenev, G.E. Evdokimov, I.N. Smirnov, I.P. Bakayev, V.A. Ter-Vaganyan, S.V. Mrachkovsky, E.A. Dretizer, E.S. Holtzman, I.I. Reingold, R.V. Pickel, V.P. Olberg. K.B. Berman-Yurin, Fritz David (I.I. Kruglyansky), M. Lurye, N. Lurye.

<sup>23</sup> “O Tak Nazывaemom ‘Antisovetskom Ob’edinennom Trotskistsko-Zinov’evskom Tsentr’,” p. 78.

found guilty of organizing a terrorist center, murdering Kirov, and attempting to murder Stalin and other Soviet leaders. All sixteen were sentenced to the “supreme penalty” and shot the day after the trial.<sup>24</sup> The Kirov murder, however, was still not “solved”.

## **Responses to the Trial**

The Party made a great effort to mobilize workers and local party organizations around the trial. There were meetings in factories and huge open air demonstrations. Hundreds of thousands of workers met after every shift, in small groups and in mass meetings. Workers demanded the death penalty and shouted for the blood of the defendants. Although many workers asked thoughtful questions about the trial, the emotional atmosphere of the meetings made public disagreement difficult.

When workers spoke privately in small groups or pairs, however, they voiced a variety of objections. These comments were often recorded by informers and forwarded to local party organizations and the Moscow party committee with the name, shop, and factory of the speaker. Yet despite the noisy and vociferous demonstrations of support for Stalin and the state, even the most rabid workers and local party members regarded the hunt for enemies as a distant spectacle unfolding on a national stage far from their own factories.

The first set of meetings in the factories took place on August 15, four days before the trial opened. Organizers read aloud the lead editorial in *Pravda*, “Enemies of the People Caught Red-Handed,” a carefully edited version of the closed TsK letter of July 29.<sup>25</sup> Workers were intensely interested in the upcoming trial. One participant later noted, “the meetings took place

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<sup>24</sup> *Court Proceedings*, pp. 55-6, 65, 68, 71-2, 178-80, 117. “O Tak Nazyyvaemom ‘Antisovetskom Ob’edinennom Trotskistsko-Zinov’evskom Tsentr’,” pp. 78-81. Anna Larina, *This I Cannot Forget*. p. 283.

<sup>25</sup> “Vragi Naroda Poimany s Polichnym,” *Pravda*, August 15, 1936: 1.

in an atmosphere of absolute electrification . . . In the meeting hall there was dead silence as the indictment was read, and a forest of hands demanding that the last word be read. No one walked out, even though the meeting lasted until very late.”<sup>26</sup>

In Factory No. 46, 1,300 workers showed up during the dinner break to hear the news read aloud.<sup>27</sup> In the meetings, both non-party and party members proclaimed their gratitude to Stalin for the achievements of Soviet power. A sixty year old woman textile worker (non-party) said, “In the years when we lived through hardship, comrade Stalin led us out of these difficulties and we began to live better. These scoundrels wanted to mess up our business, to kill our best leaders and comrade Stalin. We must deeply investigate the case and not leave a single enemy.”<sup>28</sup> Party organizers skillfully used the threat of terrorism to elicit mass affirmations of support for the state and its leaders. One old worker, a recent candidate for party membership, vowed with tears in his eyes, “I am seventy-four years old. All my life, before the revolution there was poverty, hunger, and humiliation by the brutal landowners. Only under Soviet power did I see what life might be. There is no father who cares so much for a son, who teaches him so much, as Stalin. . . For Soviet power, for comrade Stalin, I would go to any front and die.”<sup>29</sup> Party organizers, depicting the defendants as counter revolutionary fascists who sought to reestablish the oppression of the tsarist period, provoked emotion-choked testimonials to Soviet achievements.

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<sup>26</sup> “V O.R.P.O. MK VKP (b),” TsAODM, f.3, o. 49, d. 129, p. 64.

<sup>27</sup> “M.K. VKP (b) O.R.P.O. Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie,” TsAODM, f.3, o. 49, d. 129, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> “Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie ob Otklikakh Rabochikh g. Moskvyy na Soobshchenie TASS o Predanii Sudu Tsentra Trotskistsko-Zinov’evskogo Bloka,” TsAODM, f. 3, o. 49, d. 129, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> “V MK VKP (b) Informatsiia,” TsAODM, f. 3, o. 49, d. 129, p. 85.

Both party and non-party members angrily demanded the death penalty. A party member in a typographical factory, stated, “An open trial gives us the chance to show the whole world all the vile activities Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Kamenev directed against Soviet power and its leaders. I think that if fascists use terror against the working class, then we should also use terror against those reptiles who are in the direct service of the fascists.”<sup>30</sup> “I never imagined that in our country there were such people who might prepare an attempt on our leaders,” said an older, non-party woman worker, “We should shoot them even for thinking about such a crime. Zinoviev and Kamenev, direct participants in the murder, should be shot quickly.”<sup>31</sup>

Not only did the workers demand that the defendants be executed, many declared the trial a waste of time and effort. One non-party worker from the Bolshevik factory explained, “Let’s finish with the Trotskyists and Zinovievites, it’s not necessary to try them, to waste time. Just shoot them.” Another declared, “Court? What for? Shoot them all without the court, and don’t waste time on this. And if it’s necessary to investigate the case further, then leave a few of them.”<sup>32</sup> The workers showed little respect for the “legal niceties.” “Hang them,” “Shoot them,” they yelled. “Why let them live when they murdered comrade Kirov?”<sup>33</sup>

Several declared that Zinoviev and Kamenev should have been shot two years earlier, immediately after Kirov’s murder. “Those bastards should have been annihilated a long time ago,” stated an old non-party worker in the Dzerzhinskii factory. “They have repeatedly betrayed the party. Zinoviev and Kamenev even revealed the plan for the armed uprising in October 1917. They should have been shot for that.” A turner and party member from the Kalibr

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<sup>30</sup> “Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie ob Otklikakh Rabochikh g. Moskvyy,” p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> “Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie ob Otklikakh Rabochikh g. Moskvyy,” p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> “Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie ob Otklikakh Rabochikh g. Moskvyy,” p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> “M.K. VKP (b) O.R.P.O. Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie,” p. 12.

factory demanded, “Why wasn’t the entire counter revolutionary group shot after the Kirov murder? We have coddled them too long. It’s time to put an end to this business.”<sup>34</sup> In Factory No. 95 in Kuntsevskii district, workers declared, “Enough standing on ceremony!” and “Further patience is impossible.” “Shoot this group so that it cannot exist in our land as traitors to our country.”<sup>35</sup>

The high emotion of the meetings made it difficult to ask intelligent questions about the trial or the evidence. Yet many workers did speak up. Some were honestly puzzled about the development of the case. They asked, “Why did the investigation of this case take so long?” and “Why were the Trotskyist and Zinovievite groups not decisively eliminated after the murder of Kirov?”<sup>36</sup> Other questions were more provocative, noting that at least two groups of people had already been tried for Kirov’s murder. “Why are they trying people for Kirov’s murder a second time?” asked one worker. Others asked about the death penalty: “Can a proletarian court sentence people to be shot?” Some worried about the effect of the trial on international opinion, wondering if the Soviet Union had the right to judge people who were not Soviet citizens. They asked, “How does the capitalist world look at the information of the procurator?” “Will the bourgeoisie protest the trial of terrorists from abroad?”<sup>37</sup> And many workers privately expressed doubts about the death penalty if not the guilt of the defendants. They felt that Zinoviev and Kamenev deserved the same treatment as Ramzin, a bourgeois specialist accused of wrecking in

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<sup>34</sup> “Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie ob Otklikakh Rabochikh g. Moskvyy,” p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> “M.K. VKP (b) O.R.P.O. Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie,” pp. 7-8.

<sup>36</sup> “Rabochie Sobraniia i Besedy po Egor’evskomu Raionu o Terroristicheskoi Deiatel’nosti Trotskogo, Zinov’eva, Kameneva, i dr.,” “V Informatsionnyi Sektor ORPO MK VKP (b). Ot Shelkovskogo RP VKP (b),” TsAODM, f. 3, o. 49, d. 129, pp. 5, 39.

<sup>37</sup> “Otkliki na Soobshchenie Prokuratory SSSR o Predanii Sudu Trotskistsko-Zinov’evskuiu Kontr-Revoliutsionnuiu Terroristicheskuiu Grupp,” f. 3, o. 49, d. 129, pp. 18, 19.

1928. “We should consider their old contributions,” said one. Another explained, “Considering their past revolutionary activities, I would hardly shoot them.” A non-party mechanic from a chemical factory said, “It would be better to send them abroad than to shoot them.”<sup>38</sup>

The working class in 1937 was composed of very different groups with distinct sensibilities, which were reflected in workers’ private comments. Older workers had vivid memories of the revolution. Many had participated in the overthrow of the old regime, fought with the Red Army, and felt a powerful, deeply personal connection to those years of struggle and hardship.

A number rejected the Party’s effort to rewrite the history of the revolution, and recalled Trotsky with great respect. A packer in the Garden Trust told a party organizer, “Trotsky was a brilliant, prominent person who made great contributions, which the Party is now hiding and not discussing.” He added that older histories of the Party discussed Trotsky’s contribution, but made no mention of Stalin.<sup>39</sup> A distributor in a calibration shop said, “Trotsky is a representative of the intelligentsia. He led from above, but it is necessary to give him credit, he is a good orator and he always led the masses.”<sup>40</sup>

A young Komsomolets in a sewing factory announced to a party member in the workers’ dormitory, “Trotsky made a revolution in Russia in 1917, and the reason everything went bad was because they expelled him. But he was a great person, he commanded the Red Army, and without Trotsky, we never would have had a revolution.” Another worker chimed in, “Our Party should not shoot such smart people, but re-educate them like Ramzin. They should send back those who came from abroad. There is a communist party there. Let them unmask and re-

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<sup>38</sup> “Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie ob Otklikakh Rabochikh g. Moskvyy,” p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> “V ORPO MK VKP (b). Informatsionnaia Svodka,” p. 79.

<sup>40</sup> “Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie ob Otklikakh Rabochikh g. Moskvyy,” p. 4.

educate them.”<sup>41</sup> And in the Malenkov factory, Frolov, a party member and Gusarev, a non-party member, working side by side at the machine spoke about the trial. Frolov said, “There is a good article today in *Pravda*.” Gusarev replied, “Yes, the article is good, but all the same, Trotsky had great force and great success in the Red Army.” When Frolov tried to argue, Gusarev firmly put an end to the conversation. “This is all nonsense,” he said. <sup>42</sup>

A few workers, unaware that their comments would be reported to higher authorities, came out in support of the defendants. Some referred to the betrayal of the revolution’s ideals. One welder said, “It’s understood that Trotsky and Zinoviev want power. But they have their convictions. Perhaps they wanted to make a second revolution. Lenin said that everyone will be free, but in reality there is no freedom. Here, for example, if I don’t want to go to a meeting, they force me to go, and if I don’t want to work, they force me.”<sup>43</sup>

A greaser in a spinning factory who had been excluded from the party, openly called for a new revolution at a workers’ meeting, “Terror was, is and will be!” he cried, “Yes, and at the same time, it’s necessary to overturn everything! Gather the working class . . . They (the authorities) have ruined everything completely!”<sup>44</sup> And in one of the workers’ dormitories in the construction sector of Factory No. 46, an unemployed worker and former party member challenged the organizer assigned to read *Pravda* aloud at a gathering of 40 people. “Trotsky was a friend of Lenin’s.” he explained, “but after Lenin’s death they began to vault over Trotsky. “ The NKVD, informed that he was living in the dormitory without a passport, arrested him that

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<sup>41</sup> “V ORPO MK VKP (b). Informatsionnaia Svodka,” p. 79-80.

<sup>42</sup> “Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie ob Otklikakh Rabochikh g. Moskvyy,” p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> “Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie ob Otklikakh Rabochikh g. Moskvyy,” p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> “Rabochie Sobraniia i Besedy po Egor’evskomu Raionu o Terroristicheskoi Deiatel’nosti Trotskogo, Zinov’eva, Kameneva, i dr.,” p. 6.

evening.<sup>45</sup> A timekeeper in the Dedovskaia Factory told his fellow workers a joke: “Lenin, lying in the mausoleum, told Stalin, ‘Turn me face down so that I won’t have to see everything that you are doing.’”<sup>46</sup>

Some workers, concerned about the “right oppositionists” and other Party leaders vaguely linked to various plots, urged further investigation. One Komsomol worker demanded, “I believe there is still much to be revealed and uncovered . . . We must sweep these low agents of fascism and evil enemies of the people off the face of the earth.”<sup>47</sup> Other workers demanded that Bukharin, Rykov, Tomskii, Uglanov, Sokol’nikov, Piatakov, and others be investigated. One non-party shop foreman stated, “All the leftists and rightists pledge their loyalty and at the same time, they betray the party in critical ways. Rykov, Bukharin, and Tomskii admitted their mistakes. They work in important jobs. How can we trust them? How can we believe them in the future? We should hold them accountable in court.”<sup>48</sup> And a weaver in the Nogin factory stated, “The Supreme Court should investigate the counter revolutionary activities of the leaders of the right deviation and other former Trotskyists. Our sentence frightened that scoundrel Tomskii. He was obviously not innocent because he ended his life by suicide.”<sup>49</sup> Yet not all workers agreed. A large crowd, abuzz with rumors, gathered spontaneously on the street in front

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<sup>45</sup> “M.K. VKP (b) O.R.P.O. Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie,” p. 13.

<sup>46</sup> “Informatsionnaia Svodka,” p. 16.

<sup>47</sup> “Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie ob Otklikakh Rabochikh g. Moskvyy,” p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> “V Informatsionnyi Sektor ORPO MK VKP (b). Ot Shelkovskogo RP VKP (b),” pp. 76-7.

<sup>49</sup> “V Otdel Rukovodiashchikhkh Partorganov MK VKP (b),”TsAODM, f. 3, o. 49, d. 129, p. 87.

of Tomskii's apartment after his suicide. Several people were overheard to say that Tomskii had left a note for Stalin, which stated that he had always been loyal to the Party, but killed himself because he could not stand the slander about him.<sup>50</sup>

The Party used the trial to push several agendas. Party organizers spoke about the need "to strengthen discipline and increase the productivity of labor." Workers were asked to pledge their support for Stakhanovism and higher productivity as a way of rebuffing "enemies." In one factory, for example, workers vowed, "We, the workers, in response to the ally of the class enemy, will demonstrate even greater Bolshevik vigilance and still more broadly develop Stakhanovite methods of work, rallying closely around the Central Committee and our beloved leader of the people, comrade Stalin."<sup>51</sup> As a result, some workers distrusted the meetings, viewing the trial as a gimmick to raise support for another Party campaign.

Less politically sophisticated workers, especially those who had experienced collectivization and recently arrived from the countryside, viewed Soviet leaders as a united pack of scoundrels bent on extorting the last drop of blood from the workers and peasants. "Left" or "right," it made no difference. They doubted whether Party leaders, who always protected each other's privileges, would execute each other. A non-party worker in a watch factory explained to a party member, "They cooked up all this foolishness in order to lead some kind of campaign. Zinoviev is in the Kremlin, and he has five good apartments in Moscow."<sup>52</sup> An apprentice

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<sup>50</sup> "V ORPO MK VKP (b). Informatsionnaia Svodka," p. 85.

<sup>51</sup> "Rabochie Sobraniia i Besedy po Egor'evskomu Raionu o Terroristicheskoi Deiatel'nosti Trotskogo, Zinov'eva, Kameneva, i dr.," pp. 6, 5.

<sup>52</sup> "Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie ob Otklikakh Rabochikh g. Moskvy," p. 3.

weaver also doubted whether the trial was genuine, “Who cares what you say about Zinoviev and Kamenev,” he said to a party organizer, “Nothing will happen to them because they are Stalin’s friends.”<sup>53</sup>

Workers’ opinions of the trial thus ran the gamut, from fierce official avowals of support for the death penalty, to stubborn insistence on the “truth” of the revolution, to a blanket condemnation of the Bolsheviks as the new exploiters. Yet whatever their opinions, workers were deeply engaged. Many asked if they could take off from work to attend. “Can we go to court and look at these vermin?” asked one. Others asked if they could get tickets to the trial, send representatives from their factories, and listen to the court proceedings over the radio.<sup>54</sup> The defendants’ shocking revelations animated the factories for weeks, providing a welcome distraction from heavy labor. Yet the trial did not substantially change relations among workers or the daily routines of the *partkomy*. Even workers who staunchly supported the execution of the defendants showed little interest in broadening the hunt for enemies to the factories. The trial was a deeply engrossing spectacle, but it was a diversion from daily life, not a part of it.

### **From the “Trotskyist-Zinovievite Center” to Kemerovo**

The political climate within the *partkomy* had gradually intensified over the course of 1936. Some party members were excluded or arrested, forcing others in turn to explain their ties to these newly “unmasked” comrades, friends, or relatives. In several *partkomy*, prior

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<sup>53</sup> “V Moskovskii Komitet VKP (b). Otdel Rukovodiashchikh Partorganov (ORPO). Informatsiia,” f. 3, o. 49, d. 129, p. 60.

<sup>54</sup> “Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie ob Otklikakh Rabochikh g. Moskvy,” p. 4; “M.K. VKP (b) O.R.P.O. Informatsionnoe Soobshchenie,” p. 9; “V Informatsionnyi Sektor ORPO MK VKP (b). Ot Shelkovskogo RP VKP (b),” p. 39.

connections to Trotsky or prominent Trotskyists, led to mutual denunciations and investigations.<sup>55</sup>

Yet as late as September, well after the trial was over, the Moscow city committee continued to criticize the *raikomy* and *partkomy* for their disinterest in purging their organizations of “enemies.” The July 29 Central Committee letter had strongly encouraged the *raikomy* to hone the “political” edge of the *proverka* by combing their records for former oppositionists.

Yet even after studying the letter, district officials were still unsure how to identify a “Trotskyist-Zinovievite.” Was it someone who voted for a Trotskyist resolution in 1926 or someone in oppositional activities in the present? It seemed unfair to punish hardworking, loyal comrades for a “mistake” made over a decade ago. On the other hand, there did not seem to be any Party members currently pushing a Trotskyist program. And if these people were “masked,” how were they to be uncovered?

S. Z. Korytnyi, a secretary of the Moscow city committee, urged the *raion* officials to take a stricter approach. “You whitewashed this business,” he told them angrily. “Undoubtedly there are several people you need to look at again.” He urged them to look over their members “extraordinarily closely.”<sup>56</sup> But the process of involving the *partkomy* in the hunt for enemies was slow. While they seemed to agree that there were enemies in high places, they balked at hunting for enemies under their own beds. Korytnyi told them that they acted as if the trial had nothing to do with their *proverka*.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See for example events in Ozerskii *raion*, “MK VKP (b) Otdel Rukovodiashchikh Partorganov Sektor Informatsii,” pp. 30-7.

<sup>56</sup> “Stenogramma Soveshaniia u Tov. Korytnogo, S. V. po Itogam Obmena Partiinykh Dokumentov v Kuibyshevskom Raione,” TsAODM, f. 3, o. 49, d. 119, pp. 45-8, 54.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p.161.

On September 23, 1936 however, there was a major turning point in the dissemination of repression. A gas explosion in the Kemerovo mines killed ten workers and injured fourteen. The press was initially quiet about the explosion. In fact, there was not a single mention of the accident in *Trud*, the labor newspaper. Yet less than two months later, on November 20, a group of defendants were accused of deliberately murdering workers and tried for the Kemerovo explosion. Unlike the “Trotskyist-Zinovievite center,” accused of plotting the assassination of Stalin and other Party leaders, the Kemerovo defendants were charged with the murder of workers. They were accused of deliberately refusing to install working ventilators in the mines. One of the defendants was quoted as saying, “Soon our workers will die in the mines like rats.”<sup>58</sup>

The trial sent the message to party members and workers that these enemies were not famous figures on a distant national stage, but their own foremen, managers, and engineers. Once again, the Party rallied workers to express their indignation. Once again, the workers vowed “unbounded loyalty to our Bolshevik Party and its leader, comrade Stalin.” But this time, workers also spoke repeatedly of “strengthening vigilance” in their work places. Zakharov, a non-party corer in the Stankolit factory rapidly reinterpreted the trial’s message to his shop mates, “We have so much gas in the shop while we are working.” he said. “The ventilators don’t work despite the demands of the workers. We need to look around. Perhaps this is the work of the same bastards who poisoned the workers by gas in the Kuzbas.”<sup>59</sup> The meaning of the case occurred to Zakharov, along with thousands of other workers, in a flash. Perhaps someone would fix the damned ventilators, if they found a “wrecker” to blame.

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<sup>58</sup> “Protssess Kontrevoliutsionnoi Trotskistskoi Vreditel’skoi Gruppy na Kemerovskom Rudnike,” *Trud*, Nov. 21, 1936: 3.

<sup>59</sup> “Sekretariu MK i MGK VKP (b) Tov. Khrushchevu N.S., Sekretariu MGK Tov. Kulikovu M.M., Sekretariu MGK Tov. Korytnomu, S. Z.,” TsAODM, f. 3, o. 49, d. 129, pp. 119-120.

Once the hunt for enemies was wedded to the problems of safety and production, repression would gain thousands of eager advocates. It had taken almost two years to involve the *partkomy* and the workers in the dissemination of terror. The narrative of the Kirov murder had steadily expanded from a lone murderer to multiple terror plots and targets. The Party organized a public show trial of the defendants and mobilized workers to demand their deaths. Although workers and party members in the factories were absorbed by the Kirov case and trial, they were slow to apply its lessons to their own organizations and work places. With the Kemerovo explosion, the drama finally came home.