

STALIN'S GREAT TERROR AND ESPIONAGE

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TITLE VIII PROGRAM

Project Information*

Principal Investigator: Hiroaki Kuromiya
NCEEER Contract Number: 824-09
Date: September 14, 2009

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* The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract or grant funds provided by the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, funds which were made available by the U.S. Department of State under Title VIII (The Soviet-East European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained herein are those of the author.

Executive Summary

Espionage is a fact of life in international politics. No political leader lives without it. While astute political leaders know well the traps inherent in the mutual deception game of espionage, Stalin's Great Terror of 1937-38 illustrates the extraordinary reach of espionage. In this particular case, Stalin set traps for the world in order to prepare for a forthcoming showdown with his mortal enemies--Germany (and Poland as a corollary) and Japan. He took nearly a million lives of men and women of his own country in the process. Although this momentous event still remains an enigma, it appears that Stalin's traps still ensnare people. It offers lessons to be learned about politics in general.

Introduction

Espionage is ubiquitous in politics and war. So much so that it is often called the “second oldest profession.” Clearly no political leader or military commander has done and can do without it. Although espionage exists in the shadows of public life, enormous sums are expended on it. In open, democratic societies, the scale of the expenditure is often deliberately understated or even falsified so as to avoid public scrutiny. In general, however, a common assumption obtains that no society can live without espionage and that therefore it is an undesirable necessity.

By its nature, espionage, euphemistically called “intelligence,” is secretive. Many operations are never recorded, and even if recorded, the relevant details may never be published. Espionage is in essence mutual deception: to deceive the enemy by clever means (secretly stealing information, misleading the enemy by disinformation and misinformation, and the like). Danger is inherent in this business. Who is deceiving whom is often uncertain even among the immediate parties. Although espionage is indispensable to politicians, they are well aware of the danger of traps.

Stalin and his entourage were no exception. Stalin’s Commissar of Foreign affairs V. M. Molotov used to spend half the day every day, reading intelligence reports. When interviewed decades later, he insisted that it was impossible to rely on spies, who “could push you into such a dangerous position that you would never get out of it”: “You have to listen to them, but you also have to verify their information.”¹ In 1940, after the bitter victory in the Winter War, Stalin accused his military spy chief I. I. Proskurov of having not the “soul of a spy” but the “soul of a naive person in a good sense of the word,” “too honest a soul.” Stalin then

insisted that “a spy must of necessity be steeped in poison and gall and should not believe in anyone.”² Stalin, according to his intelligence officer (who later defected) used to say, “An intelligence hypothesis may become your hobby horse on which you will ride straight into a self-made trap.”³ In this light it is extraordinarily instructive to observe that in June 1941 Stalin himself fell into a trap of his own making: he believed that he was outsmarting his archenemy Hitler, whereas in fact the exact opposite was the case.

Politicians manipulate information in order to achieve political goals. Consequently, complaints abound that people were deceived by such and such a manipulation of the truth. This is inevitable to an extent under the conditions of a monopoly of information. Yet some truth, albeit often far from the whole truth, does come to light at some point--hence the perception of having been deceived. Scholars, particularly historians who study the past professionally, ought to be extraordinarily attentive to the traps of espionage and intelligence. The same is true of those engaged in international politics and diplomacy. The case of Stalin’s Great Terror affords an excellent lesson in this regard.

The Enigma of the Great Terror

In spite of intense archival work over the past two decades or so since the formerly closed Soviet archives began to open, The Great Terror still remains an enigma. It is not easy to explain the purposeful mass killings (approximately one million people were executed in 1937-38). The

¹*Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics* (Chicago, Ill., 1993), p. 22.

²*Zimniaia voina 1939–1940. Kn. 2. I. V. Stalin i finskaia kampaniia. Stenogramma soveshchaniia pri TsK VKP[b]* (Moscow, 1999), p. 206. In 1941 Proskurov was arrested and executed, only to be rehabilitated in 1954.

³Alexander Orlov, *Handbook of Intelligence and Guerrilla Warfare* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1963), p. 10. In this connection, it should be noted that under Stalin no head of the secret police was ever a member of the highest organ of the Communist Party. After World War Two, the Politburo was vastly expanded into the Central Committee Presidium. S. D. Ignat’ev, who as the head of the secret police, was a full member of the Presidium. This hardly constitutes an exception.

Holocaust perpetrated by Hitler is comparatively much better studied, in part because all relevant and extant archival documents are accessible to scholars. Students of the Great Terror have no or little access to a substantial part of Stalin's archive, the secret Politburo archive, and the secret police/foreign intelligence archives.

A Soviet secret police official who lived through the Great Terror left this retrospective account after defecting to the West:

If the purges were bewildering to a person in my privileged position in Moscow, they must have been absolutely incomprehensible to the toiling officials and loyal Party workers in remote provinces, who suddenly found themselves denounced as secret enemies of the cause they served.

In 1939 I spoke with a friend who had been an official in China and far Mongolia at the time of the "Yezhovshchina." He told me that in his area, some of the accused, just before they were shot, shouted, with wild abandon, "Greetings to Stalin! Long live our great leader!" I was puzzled and questioned him about it. He explained that they were not sarcastic cries, but sincere. Unable to understand what was happening to them, or why they had been forced to sign confessions to crimes they had never committed, these innocent victims nevertheless felt an urge to proclaim with their last breath their unswerving loyalty to the Party and their Leader, little realizing that it was Stalin's deliberately calculated policy that had sent them to their death.⁴

Stalin's archenemy, Hitler, thought somewhat similarly. Of Stalin's mass terror, Hitler commented, "Stalin is probably sick in the brain [*gebirnkrank*]": "His bloody regime can otherwise not be explained. But Russia knows nothing other than Bolshevism. That's the danger we have to smash down some day." To Hitler, Stalin and his followers were mad. "Must be exterminated [*Muß ausgerottet werden*]' was his sinister conclusion."⁵

Apart from the extermination, Hitler's views are understandable, even if not analytical, given the scale of killings. (One is tempted to speak of Hitler in the same vein.) Obviously,

⁴Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov, *Empire of Fear* (London, 1956), p. 78.

⁵Quoted in Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-45: Nemesis* (New York, 2000), p. 44.

however, seventy years after the event, one is at a much more advantageous position than Hitler and his contemporaries.

One of the most influential accounts outside the former Soviet Union is that in 1937 when Stalin faced (“perceived”) a serious political challenge (“immediate political threat” from inside, i. e. from those disaffected with his government. They included numerous former peasants who had been dispossessed and exiled (the de-kulakized). Stalin was almost panicked by the “opposition in the countryside” which he feared was “reaching dangerous levels.” Stalin’s Great Terror (particularly his “kulak” operation) was a defensive reaction to this immediate threat.⁶ This sort of view is supported by impressive archival documents.

As I have discussed elsewhere, this is exactly the point of view that Stalin projected to the entire world.⁷ Stalin, using the secret police, presented a country in danger of being overrun by its enemies (former kulaks, former oppositionists, foreign spies, and other hidden “enemies of the people”) in cahoots with capitalist countries. It was easy for the secret police with its extensive network of agents and informers to provide the “evidence” to prove the existence of threat. The police also used threat and torture to invent “evidence.”

It is unimaginable, given the dictatorial government, that there was no disaffection. One should not confuse disaffection with opposition, however. Stalin’s government had broken up almost all non-official organizations and had driven almost all illicit political sentiments underground. Desperate workers sometimes did resort to wildcat strikes.⁸ Yet the police were able to contain any actions immediately.

⁶ See J. Arch Getty, “‘Excesses are Not Permitted’: Mass Terror and Stalinist Governance in the Late 1930s,” *Russian Review*, 61:1 (January 2002).

⁷ “Accounting for the Great Terror,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 53:1 (2005), pp. 86–101.

⁸ See the August 20, 1935 report by the Polish Consul S. Sośnicki on strikes in Kharkiv, Ukraine. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv (RGVA), f. 308k, op. 6, d. 21, l. 287.

The police control of Soviet society was so thorough that there was very little room for any action. Indeed, between the mid-1930s and the end of World War Two no notable organized actions are known to have taken place. Certainly there was none that even came close to threatening Stalin's power. Nevertheless, suspicions that opposition still did exist made the police look for enemies everywhere.

The assumption of "immediate internal threat" is based on no credible evidence apart from police reports. As a result, it fell right into the trap Stalin had set: extensive terror was needed to eliminate the "immediate threat." Of course, Stalin did not fall into his own trap. In a rare, candid speech he gave in October 1938, Stalin said as much:

Well, were the ["ten, fifteen, twenty thousand" Bukharin supporters, and "as many, possibly more, Trotskyites" who were executed] all spies? Of course, not. Whatever happened to them? They were cadres who could not stomach the sharp turn toward collective farms and could not make sense of this turn, because they were not trained politically, did not know the laws of social development, the laws of economic development, the laws of political development.. How to explain that some of them became spies and intelligence agents? It turns out that they were not well-grounded politically and not well-grounded theoretically. They turned out to be people who did not know the laws of political development, and therefore they could not stomach the sharp turn.⁹

The crime of the executed was not that they were allegedly spies or still opposed to Stalin's government but that they had not followed Stalin's political line. Publicly Stalin presented the "Bukharinists," "Trotskyites," and former kulaks as unrepentant enemies and spies. This case presents an important lesson to the academic community.

⁹RGASPI, f. 17, op. 163, d. 1217, ll. 51–2. See also Stenogrammy zasedanii Politbiuro TsK RKP (b)-VKP (B) 1923–1938 gg., t. 3 (Moscow, 2007), p. 695.

External Threat

Even if there was no “immediate threat,” was there a potential threat? Obviously, Stalin thought so. All dictators strive to eliminate not merely immediate threat but all potential threat. In the case of Stalin, external threat was much more serious, both because the capitalist countries were generally opposed to the Communist state (and indeed many of them had a record of militarily intervening in the Civil War against the Bolsheviks) and because external affairs were much harder for him to control than internal affairs.

The logic of the Great Terror was to eliminate the threat that could arise in the event of war: hidden enemies (whose existence Stalin suspected within the country) could link up with external enemies and pose mortal danger to his power. This was a logical supposition on the part of Stalin: even though hidden internal enemies posed no immediate threat, they could rise up if external enemies seriously threatened him. Stalin sought to eliminate this potential threat by the Great Terror.

True, Stalin inordinately exaggerated the threat. Subsequently, he and his close associates such as V. M. Molotov and L. M. Kaganovich admitted that they had played it safe and, as a result, many innocent people were executed. All the same, they never doubted that the Great Terror was justified on the grounds of the threat to the government.¹⁰

Did external threat actually exist in 1937–1938? An argument similar to that of Stalin’s fear of “immediate internal threat” has been presented: Stalin was frightened by almost constant external threat which directly and indirectly shaped his policy. Unlike those emphasizing “immediate internal threat,” however, some historians emphasizing external threat consider Stalin’s fear a “striking misperception” because no real threat of foreign invasion existed until

¹⁰See Kuromiya, “Accounting for the Great Terror.”

the late 1930s.¹¹ True, threat was ever present. Stalin and his followers believed, based on their ideological convictions, that the capitalist system was inherently inimical to the Soviet Communist system. Ignoring this would have been tantamount to political suicide.

Yet was Stalin always defensive? Did not the Soviet Union directly and militarily intervene in northern China in 1929 in order to protect its colonial interests there? In 1929 and 1930 Stalin also sent Soviet forces to Afghanistan in order to protect a regime friendly to Moscow. Likewise, in 1933-34 Stalin sent his military forces to Xinjiang (Chinese Turkestan) in order to support the Chinese government against the Muslim rebels. Moscow ended up almost colonizing Xinjiang where it stationed its forces. In 1937 Moscow intervened again militarily in Xinjiang to crush Muslim rebellions. Obviously one knows well the Soviet imperialist expansion in 1939-1940 in Eastern Europe. Less known is Outer Mongolia (People's Republic of Mongolia), which Moscow controlled tightly as its first satellite state. It is difficult to imagine that Moscow, fearful of invasion, was merely acting defensively.

At any rate, what made the years 1937-38 different from other years in terms of foreign threat? Moscow frequently sounded the tocsin of war: 1927, 1930, 1932-33, and so on. Were 1937 and 1938 fundamentally different from the preceding years? This question deserves scrutiny.

Foreign espionage and intelligence are at the core of the question. The most significant problem here is obvious: one still does not have access to numerous documents, especially intelligence information, on which Stalin based his decisions. In addition, some important Soviet espionage operations were controlled not by the intelligence apparatus but personally by Stalin. Moreover, Stalin deployed personal diplomats, circumventing official diplomatic channels. The

¹¹See, for instance, James Harris, "Encircled by Enemies: Stalin's Perceptions of the Capitalist World, 1918-1941," *The*

better examples are his use of Karl Radek in the mid-1930s and David Kandelaki in 1935–37.¹² Unless critically read, the available documents, including those in the now open archives in the former Soviet Union, present a picture conveniently distorted by the Soviet and Russian governments. One should not fall into such a trap.

Fundamental Threats to Soviet Security

Moscow faced two fundamental threats: from the west and from the east. Here the two will be examined separately. It was Nazi Germany that posed the greatest threat from the west. In spite of all its hype against Poland after the 1935 death of the Polish leader Józef Piłsudski Moscow no longer believed that Poland was a real threat. Certainly he feared an alliance of Germany and Poland and sought hard to prevent it. Stalin was said to have opined once: “Piłsudski – he is the entire Poland.”¹³ In 1934 the Soviet Ambassador to Poland Iakov Davtian expressed to the American Ambassador John Cudahy his “doubt concerning the capacity of Poland to exist as an independent nation”.¹⁴ It was logical from these views that Stalin indeed meant to destroy Poland after Piłsudski.¹⁵ That was what he actually did in 1939 in cooperation with Hitler. Writing off Warsaw, Moscow focused on Berlin.

Stalin had for some time understood the mortal danger of Nazi Germany. By 1937 the threat had become even more pronounced. In March 1936 Hitler blatantly broke the Treaty of Versailles and advanced his military forces on the Rhineland. Soon after the Spanish Civil War

Journal of Strategic Studies, 30:3 (2007), p. 542.

¹²See Oleg Ken, “Karl Radek i Biuro mezhdunarodnoi informatsii TsK VKP (b), 1932–1934 gg”, *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 44:1 (January-March 2003) and “Osobaia missiia Davida Kandelaki”, *Voprosy istorii*, 1991, nos. 4–5.

¹³As related to a Polish diplomat by Karl Radek: Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe (Warsaw), I.303.4.3158, 235.

¹⁴National Archives and Record Administration, T1243, roll 8, 760c.6/682 (dated December 4, 1934).

¹⁵This explains why in 1937–38 so many more people were killed as “Polish spies” than as “German spies”. Stalin left room for a deal with Hitler. Therefore, while killing many as German and Polish spies, he did not go after “German

broke out, Hitler began to support militarily the forces of General Franco. The reason for his decision was ideological: “If Spain really goes communist, France in her present situation will also be bolshevized in due course, and then Germany is finished. Wedged between the powerful Soviet *bloc* in the East and a strong communist Franco-Spanish *bloc* in the West, we could do hardly anything if Moscow chose to attack us.”¹⁶

For the same reason, Stalin supported the Republicans militarily. Certainly, this was a momentous decision, which potentially could have led the Soviet Union into international war. In any case, the Spanish Civil War began to become a vicarious war. In addition, in November 1936, after year-long discussions, Germany and Japan concluded an anti-Soviet pact veiled as the Anti-Comintern Pact. In January 1937 Germany officially abrogated the Versailles Treaty. Italy soon joined the Anti-Comintern Pact (in November 1937).

According to Joachim C. Fest, “this was indeed the period when he [Hitler] developed remarkable control and energy, seemed to know intuitively when to push forward and when to show restraint, threatened, cajoled, and took action so forcefully that all resistance yielded before him.”¹⁷ Internally and externally Hitler was winning prestige and respect at a time when Stalin appeared insane to many (including Hitler).

It was then that Stalin came firmly to be convinced that war with Nazi Germany was at some point inevitable. In November 1936, according to Joseph Goebbels, Hitler was “very content with the situation. Rearmament is processing. We’re taking in fabulous sums. In 1938 we’ll be completely ready. The show down with Bolshevism is coming. Then we want to be

spies” with abandon. See Hiroaki Kuromiya and Andrzej Peplowski) “La Grande Terreur, connections polono-japonaises,” forthcoming in *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*, 2009.

¹⁶Kershaw, p. 16.

¹⁷Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler*, tr. from the German by Richard and Clara Winston (London, 1974), p. 511.

prepared.”¹⁸ In December 1936, when he addressed the cabinet for three hours on foreign affairs, Hitler “concentrated on the danger of Bolshevism. Europe was divided into two camps. There was no more going back.”¹⁹ It was also around this time, probably in late August 1936, that Hitler was persuaded by Herman Göring to “dictate a lengthy memorandum on the future direction of the economy—one of the extremely rare occasions in the Third Reich (leaving aside formal laws, decrees, and directives) that he put forward his views in writing.” This memorandum was presented to government ministers in early September. What is interesting about the memorandum is not so much the economy as the politics. In it Hitler declared that “The world was moving towards a new conflict, centered upon Bolshevism... Germany would be the focus of the inevitable showdown with Bolshevism.” He went on to say:

It is not the aim of this memorandum to prophesy the time when the untenable situation in Europe will become an open crisis. I only want, in these lines, to set down my conviction that this crisis cannot and will not fail to arrive. A victory of Bolshevism over Germany would lead not to a Versailles Treaty but to the final destruction, indeed to the annihilation, of the German people... In face of the necessity of defense against this danger, all other considerations must recede into the background as being completely irrelevant.”²⁰

Hitler concluded his memorandum with this dictate: “Herewith I am setting the following task: First. The German army must be ready for commitment within four years. Second. The German economy must be ready for war within four years.”²¹

It appears that this top-secret memorandum (and/or related instructions to the Wehrmacht) eventually fell into Soviet hands. It is not known how, but it is certain that a Soviet

¹⁸Kershaw, p. 17.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Quoted in Ibid, pp. 19–20.

²¹Fest, p. 538. Note in addition a German diplomat’s recollection: “His [Hitler’s] speeches of March 8, 1936, and January 30, 1937, were virtual declarations of cold war against Bolshevism, and in his speech of September 12, 1936, at the Nuremberg Party Congress, he went so far as to say how wonderful it would be if Germany had the riches of the

agent or agents within the heart of the German government and/or the Wehrmacht acquired a copy or at least got acquainted with its content. Stalin took it seriously. Vasilii M. Zarubin, a Soviet master spy who from 1934 to 1937 had worked in Berlin as an “illegal” (i. e. as a private, disguised ordinary citizen), has left the following account. When he temporarily returned to Moscow from Germany in March 1937, he was summoned to the Kremlin. The secret police chief Nikolai Ezhov asked him whether the Hitler memorandum, which he had earlier sent to Moscow, was genuine: did Hitler indeed mean to fight the Soviet Union? When Zarubin responded by saying that at least from the information he had acquired, the answer was yes. Ezhov further interrogated Zarubin whether it was not meant to disorient, mislead, and provoke Moscow. Zarubin defended himself. Ezhov then reminded Zarubin that it was the English who wanted to pit Moscow against Berlin and that careless Soviet spies had been misled by false information. Zarubin stood his ground.²²

The following day Zarubin was called to Stalin’s office. Stalin asked him whence he had acquired the memorandum. When Zarubin answered, “From reliable sources,” Stalin again queried: “Do you not assume that this is a provocation specifically cooked up for us?” Zarubin was confident of his sources: “Such a presupposition is completely precluded, Comrade Stalin.” “Are you sure of it?” “Yes, Comrade Stalin, certainly.” Stalin entertained another possibility: “Can’t you assume another possibility – all this history connected with Hitler’s memorandum was organized by the English and it reached us by their intelligence work.” Zarubin: “No, Comrade Stalin, such a version is also precluded.” When asked by Stalin why he was so confident, Zarubin explained to him that his sources had been tested and proven not once or twice but many times: he had been working with them for several years and not once had they

Urals, Siberia and the Ukraine at her disposal.” Gustav Hilger and Alfred G. Meyer, *The Incompatible Allies: A Memoir-History of German-Soviet Relations, 1918–1941* (New York, 1953), p. 278.

tried to deceive him. Zarubin added that in his walk of life, it was an unwritten law that before sending such important information one had to test it against other sources.²³

Stalin praised Zarubin's work and then spoke to Ezhov:

We don't have intelligence, real intelligence! I mean it in the broad sense of the word, in the sense of being vigilant and also in the narrow sense, in the sense of a good intelligence organization. Our intelligence is poor, weak, it is infested with spies.

It's turned out that, in our intelligence organ, there is a whole group of masters of this business, working for Germany, Japan, and Poland. Intelligence is where for the first time in twenty years we have been trounced.²⁴

Stalin told Zarubin that although it was completely incredible that Hitler would risk war with the Soviet Union before solving his conflicts with the English, Zarubin's assurance convinced him that the memorandum did in fact exist. Still Stalin reminded Zarubin that the purpose of the memorandum was open to question: Hitler could be pursuing different goals. So it was necessary to follow the folk saying: "Measure off seven times and cut one time."²⁵

It appears that Stalin was well informed of Hitler's intention. Stalin correctly understood that while there would be no immediate invasion, war would come and that by 1937 the prospect of war had certainly become much more evident than before. Stalin was weighing all possibilities. It is difficult to characterize Stalin's perception as a "striking misperception." What is striking is not his "misperception," at least in this case, but his solution to the problem he saw (forthcoming war that was inevitable). His solution was the Great Terror in which nearly a million people were purposefully killed as foreign spies, defeatists, anti-Soviet elements and the like.

²²Ervin Stavinskii, *Zarubiny. Semeinaia rezidentura* (Moscow, 2003), pp. 367–69.

²³Ibid., 373–74.

²⁴Ibid., p. 374.

²⁵Ibid., p. 375.

On the one hand, Stalin secretly explored rapprochement with Germany through Kandelaki. Any rapprochement was no doubt to be temporary even if it proved successful. In fact, Hitler rejected it. Kandelaki was soon called back to Moscow where he was executed. In August 1939, however, Hitler and Stalin came to an agreement (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact). On the other hand, Stalin ordered a complete reversal of the policy of accommodation and cooperation with Germany since the 1922 Rapallo Treaty which had created an “illusion of friendship.” True, by 1932–33 the Rapallo accommodation had ceased to exist, and by 1935 Stalin had turned decisively against fascism and Nazism. In 1937, by declaring that German spies had deeply penetrated the Soviet Union, he meant to destroy any illusion of possible, long-term accommodation with Nazi Germany. He urged Ezhov to build good intelligence: “Good intelligence could put off war. The enemy’s strong intelligence and our weakness mean a provocation of war.”²⁶ In May 1937 Stalin explicitly told K. E. Voroshilov and Ezhov that the main enemy was the German intelligence service.²⁷

The situation in the East, with Japan, was somewhat different from that in the West. In the mid-1930s hundreds of small border clashes with Japanese forces on the Soviet-Manchukuo and Mongol-Manchukuo borders had taken place. The Japanese counted “152 disputes during the two-and-a-half years between the outbreak of the Manchurian Incident [in 1931] and 1934 but in 1935 the number soared to 136 and in 1936 to 203.”²⁸ These conflicts escalated into much larger battles in 1938 and 1939 (the battles of Lake Khasan and Khalkin Gol). In early 1937

²⁶See his instructions of May 21, 1937 reproduced in Nikita Petrov and Mark Iansen, “*Stalinskii pitomets*” – Nikolai Ezhov (Moscow, 2008), pp. 290–93.

²⁷Quoted in V. K. Vinogradov, “Tret’ia reforma organov bezopasnosti (1934–1941)”, in *Trudy Obshchestva izucheniia istorii otechestvennykh spetssluzhbb*, v. 2 (Moscow, 2006), p. 93.

²⁸Hata Ikuhiko, “The Japanese-Soviet Confrontation, 1935–1939”, in James William Morley (d.), *Deterrent Diplomacy: Japan, Germany, and the USSR, 1935-1940* (New York, 1976), p. 133.

Stalin, according to one account, admitted that the Soviet Far East was in a “state of semi-war” with Japan.²⁹

Furthermore, Japan had long eyed Mongolia (both the People’s Republic of Mongolia and Inner Mongolia) and Xinjiang. There were people with power in these regions who sought Japan as a counterweight against the Soviet Union and China. After it founded Manchu-kuo in northeast China, Japan advanced to Heibei (a province which included Beijing), where it set up a puppet government in 1935. Soon Japan extended its control to Inner Mongolia where in May 1936 it created the “Government of the Mongolian Army” (Mengjian) in Chahar, Inner Mongolia under Demchugdongrub (Teh Wang). Moreover, Japan looked farther west, eyeing Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai and Xinjiang. “In December 1936, shortly after the Comintern Pact was signed between Germany and Japan, a parallel agreement on aviation was signed between Lufthansa, on the one hand, and Manchuria Airlines and Keitsu Airlines, a joint venture of Manchu-kuo and China, on the other. Germany and Japan sought to establish an air route aimed against the Soviet Union from Berlin to Tokyo via Rhodes in the eastern Aegean Sea, Baghdad, Kabul, Anxi (today’s Guazhou) in Gansu, Hsinking (Xinjing, the capital of Manchu-kuo, today’s Changchun), and Tokyo. In 1937 Japan strengthened its efforts to build secret air bases in Inner Mongolia leading to Xinjiang.”³⁰ Japan appeared to be directly on a collision course with the Soviet Union.

One may depict a picture of imminent threat from the East. In fact, the situation was far more complex. Japanese politics was unstable and unpredictable. Between 1925 and 1941, sixteen cabinets were formed: there were divisions between politicians and military leaders, and

²⁹N. I. Dubinina, “Tragediia lichnosti,” *Dal’nii vostok*, 1989, no. 7, p. 130.

³⁰See my essay, “The Great Terror and ‘Ethnic Cleansing’: The Asian Nexus,” paper prepared for “Stalin and Stalinism,” Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, October 29-30, 2009.

within both groups there were numerous divisions. Often, as was the case in the 1931 Manchurian Affair, the civilian government could not control the military. In March 1937, a little over three months after Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany, Naotake Satō, new Minister of Foreign Affairs in a newly created cabinet, even declared to the French press that “I was the first to regret the Japan-German Accord,” that he intended to prevent the anti-Communist German-Japanese agreement from becoming a military alliance, and that “There should be no war between Japan and Russia during the next ten years.”³¹ It is easy to imagine how the Kremlin perceived this political comedy (unless Stalin suspected that this was an elaborate Japanese ruse, which it was in fact not).

It was also a time when Japan’s policy became more accommodating and less confrontational towards China. This raised China’s hopes for a peaceful rapprochement with Japan. Consequently, China did not yield to Moscow’s insistence that the two countries sign a non-aggression pact, directed against Japan, because it would destroy a possible deal with Japan. The Chinese Government did not trust Moscow’s long-time support of the Chinese Communists. In addition, Moscow consistently turned down China’s proposal to conclude a treaty not of non-aggression but of mutual assistance. Such a commitment on the part of the Soviet Union would have made China’s position immeasurably strong against Japan. Yet Moscow dismissed China’s request as too dangerous, because it would involve the Soviet Union in war against Japan.³²

As Moscow’s dealings with Chiang Kai-shek had shown repeatedly, Moscow found China as unpredictable as, or perhaps even more so than, Japan. Moscow’s trouble with China never ceased. Neither China nor Japan was like Germany which Hitler controlled, just as Stalin

³¹*Japan Chronicle*, March 12, 1937.

³²See D. B. Slavinskii, *Sovetskii Soiuz i Kitai: istoriia diplomaticheskikh otnoshenii, 1917-1937 gg.* (Moscow, 2003), ch 6.

did the Soviet Union. Stalin sought someone similar in China, Chiang Kai-shek. Yet he was adamantly anti-Communist and Stalin could not trust him.

In late 1937, after the war with Japan quickly expanded in the wake of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident (on July 7, 1937), Chiang disclosed to the world his clandestine agreement with Moscow (Moscow's secret military aid to China) in order to cajole it into war against Japan. When Stalin knew of the disclosure, he wrote in his note to Molotov and Voroshilov: "To hell with him."³³ As for Japan, things were even worse, because there was no one remotely similar to a dictator; in fact no one appeared to be in charge or in power.

It is not that Moscow was in the dark about Japan's politics. Stalin's spy ring in Japan (Richard Sorge's group) penetrated the heart of Japan's political power. In all likelihood, Stalin was au courant with the situation in Japan. Even though Stalin did not necessarily trust the intelligence reports Sorge provided to Moscow, Stalin possessed other sources (other spies in Japan and Soviet agents elsewhere, including Japan's embassies abroad).³⁴

Unlike Poland, Japan could not have been destroyed easily. Unlike Germany, Japan was almost impossible to deal with. Moreover, Japan was unpredictable and, as Moscow frequently described it, "adventurist." Therefore, Stalin's goal was to keep Japan as weak as possible and as far away from the Soviet Union as possible. This meant to keep Japan pinned down in China and to direct its aggression against the USA and Britain. In the end, this was exactly what Japan ended up doing in the following years.

By this time, Stalin understood that Japan's unpredictable actions were a sign of weakness. However much Japan wanted to find a political base in Xinjiang, it had very little

³³*Russko-kitaiskie otnosheniia v XX veke*, t. 4, kn. 1 (Moscow, 2000), p. 180.

material base (although it did enjoy significant political support). Xinjiang was simply too far: the distance from Harbin to Urumchi in Xinjiang is 1,900 miles. Japan's attempt to build secret air bases in Inner Mongolia closer to Xinjiang also did not succeed in 1937.

This was all known to Stalin. Still Stalin took no chance. Here as in the west, potential danger was certainly ever present. He constantly drove home the danger of Japan to the Soviet Union. He did the same in Mongolia and Xinjiang which by then had virtually become a Soviet colony. Taking no chances, Stalin terrorized anyone politically suspect as a spy, a defeatist or anti-Soviet element.

Stalin was right that Japan was unpredictable and weak. In July 1937 a very minor incident in Lugouqiao near Beijing rapidly expanded into large-scale war in China. In addition, Japan immediately began to extend its control into Inner Mongolia more firmly than before. Although this may have been a surprise to some observers,³⁵ it was hardly so to Stalin who knew well the political nature of Japan.³⁶

³⁴In the summer of 1937 the Japanese government estimated that there were approximately 2,000 "direct spies" in Japan and Manchu-kuo and 50,000 conscious and unconscious Soviet agents. Gaimushō Gaikō Shiryō Kan (GGSK) (Tokyo), S.9.4.5.

³⁵There is yet no scholarly consensus on whether the Marco Polo Bridge Incident was provoked by Japan or China (possibly backed by the Soviet Union). Subsequently Moscow arrested and executed the then Soviet Ambassador to China, D. B. Bogomolov, who wrote to Moscow in June and July of 1937 that Japan would not resort to another "adventure" and that he expected no flare-up of large-scale war. After the incident, Bogomolov wrote that the Japanese aggression was "unconditionally a result of an Anglo-Japanese agreement." This of course was wrong. See A. Ledovskii, "Zapiski diplomata," *Problemy Dal'nego vostoka*, 1991, no. 1, p. 114 and V. V. Sokolov, "'Zabytyi diplomat': D. B. Bogomolov (1890–1938)," *Novaia i noveishaia istoriia*, 2004, no. 3. A. Sidorov, "Problema zakliucheniia pakta o nenapadenii v sovetsko-kitaiskikh otnosheniakh (1932–1937 gg)," *Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka*, 2009, no. 1, p. 130 states that Bogomolov was the supporter of a pact of mutual assistance with China, which, like the 1936 pact of mutual assistance between the People's Republic of Mongolia and the Soviet Union. This latter pact ended up in the introduction of Soviet forces into Mongolia. See Jakub Wojtowiak, "Kontyngent Armii Czerwonej w Mongolii w latach 1936–1938," *Dzieje najnowsze*, 40:3 (2008).

³⁶Sidorov, op. cit., p. 132, states without presenting any evidence, that the development in China was a surprise to the Kremlin and that the Soviet intelligence provided the same prognosis as Bogomolov. One does not know yet whether Stalin received different intelligence assessments and whether Stalin was indeed taken aback by the event. In any case the Japanese cabinet that formed on February 2, 1937 collapsed by June 4, 1937, taken over by a new one, five weeks before the Lugouqiao Incident. This again illustrates the importance of sources unavailable to historians.

Japan's move greatly helped Moscow. In August 1937 Moscow and China concluded a non-aggression pact explicitly directed against Japan. Moscow began to help China militarily, while rejecting China's request for the Soviet Union to fight against Japan. In November 1937 Stalin quite frankly told the Chinese that China was strong enough not to be beaten by Japan. He added, however: "If Japan begins to triumph, the Soviet Union will enter into the war!"³⁷ Stalin did not have to enter into war against Japan. Two years later Stalin told Chiang: "As a result of the now two-year-old war with China which hasn't been won, Japan has lost its balance and begun to get nervous and act out of gear, now attacking Britain, now the Soviet Union, and now the People's Republic of Mongolia. Its action has no reason. This has revealed Japan's weakness. Its conduct may unite all others against her."³⁸

Conclusion

The Great Terror affords an excellent case for studying policy and intelligence. It also affords an excellent trap for "misperception." The ablest politician makes devastating misreadings and misjudgments. Stalin was no exception. Yet there was little evidence that at the time of the Great Terror Stalin had any serious "misperception," certainly no striking one. On the contrary, it appears that he read the international situation quite accurately. This was due partly to the extensive Soviet espionage network: Soviet intelligence penetrated Britain, Germany, Japan, Poland, the USA, and other countries with extraordinary success. (In spite of the shrill rhetoric of Stalin, no foreign intelligence penetrated the Soviet Union deeply.) Yet it was also due to Stalin's formidable political acumen.

³⁷*Russko-kitaiskie otnosheniia v XX veke*, p. 156.

³⁸*Zhonghua min guo zhong yao shi liao chu bian – dui Ri kang zhan shi qi. Di 3 bia, Zhan shi wai jiao* (Taipei, 1981), p. 425.

Stalin was keenly aware of intelligence traps. In 1927 he ended up allowing Chiang to massacre Chinese Communists. In 1933, Stalin and Radek sharply disagreed with the Foreign Department of the Secret Police (OGPU) regarding Poland's strategic thinking. Stalin even accused its chief Artur Artuziov of "misinforming the Politburo."³⁹ Subsequent events proved Stalin wrong and Artuzov right. Stalin must have known that he could not repeat his mistakes in the future. He treaded carefully but determinedly in 1937–38, only to make a catastrophic blunder in 1941.

Once determined, Stalin resorted to extraordinary measures: by ringing the tocsin of foreign invasion, he took almost a million lives as spies, defeatists, and anti-Soviet elements. Intelligence organs provided necessary information or extracted it from the arrested. In all likelihood he knew that those killed were not foreign spies. In November 1934 Stalin gave the Mongolian leaders a political lesson:

Regarding the big lamas [Buddhist priests] who have committed some political crime, it is necessary from time to time to punish them by trying them on charges of treason, and not on general charges of counter-revolution. It is necessary to try them publicly so that the people and peasants will understand that these lamas, in cahoots with external enemies, have betrayed their own country. But you can do this *for now* only from time to time.⁴⁰

"For now" ended by 1937. Stalin had carried out a Mongolian version of the Great Terror in the People's Republic of Mongolia: it is said that more than 20,000 people were executed as Japanese spies. If the numbers are correct, proportionately speaking, the Mongolian Great Terror was almost certainly greater by a wide margin than the Great Terror in the Soviet Union.⁴¹

³⁹Evgenii Gorbunov, "Voennaia razvedka v 1934–1939 godakh," *Svobodnaia mysl'*, 1998, no. 2, p. 103. See also W. G. Krivitsky, *I was Stalin's Agent* (London 1939), 28–29.

⁴⁰Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii, f. 89, op. 63, d. 13, l. 10 (emphasis added).

⁴¹See Kuromiya, "The Great Terror and 'Ethnic Cleansing'."

As Natalie Zemon Davies has written, fiction abounds in the archives. Stalin was absolutely right that documents could mislead. He knew this extremely well because he himself engaged in extensive misinformation and disinformation both domestically and internationally. In fact, such practice is universal. As I write this essay, American newspapers carry reports of allegations that the US government engaged in similar practices: on the eve of the 2004 election the White House pressured the Department of Homeland Security to raise the terrorist threat level. The fact that Stalin constantly raised the foreign threat level does not mean that he perceived or misperceived the actual threat level. This is a lesson to be learned from the Great Terror for scholars and public officials alike.