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STATE VIOLENCE IN STALIN'S REGIME : OUTLINE FOR AN INVENTORY AND CLASSIFICATION

For about 15 years now, the opening of the Soviet archives, partial though it was, has allowed historians to go further in the understanding of the darker, repressive and criminal aspects of the Stalinist regime. Of course, before the 1990's, there had been many accounts of this - numerous memoirs of Gulag survivors, lots of theoretical elaborations (based on the concept of totalitarianism or its critique).

The « archival revolution » prompted a new start on inventorizing the main political decisions in the field of repression, taking an inventory of the victims, analyzing the mechanisms, decision-making processes and methods for implementing the various repressive policies of the Soviet, and especially of the Stalin period. Concerning orders of magnitude, categories and levels of violence, a firm basis has been set up. Figures and the overall scale of repression are no longer the main question at stake (lets remember how important this topic, both particularly vulnerable to political passion and unamenable to solution was, just a few years ago !). This solid factual basis provides a better understanding of the complexities of what appears to be not a single phenomenon, not one uniform policy fueled exclusively by ideology, but rather a number of related phenomena, several intermingled repressive lines and policies of very different scope, character and intensity, implemented both through the legal and extra-judicial apparatus, aimed at very different categories of « enemies » over a quarter of a century. Arguments of Ideology, personality, political culture (Stalinist violence as an inherent, « visceral » aspect of the Bolshevik mentality and « culture of violence » which emerged in the wake of WWI, Revolution and the civils wars (1914-1922) – while offering a necessary understanding of mass violence under Stalin, are clearly insufficient to explain the extraordinary diversity of the regime's repressive policies and the multiplicity of its targets. New research has revealed a more contingent and complicated set of scenarios . In the 1930's, for

example, mass violence was used both toward a specific goal (the reshaping of Soviet society through an aggressive policy of social engineering) but also in response to a sequence of crisis triggered by the regime itself in a period of interrelated and mounting dangers, culminating in the ultimate threat of annihilating international conflagration. Each of these crisis was either unanticipated or led to unanticipated consequences and each required emergency, largely improvised responses. It was the convergence of those circumstances, combined with Stalin's personality, bolshevik utterly destructive political culture, and background which explains the peculiar virulence of Stalinism.

During the long Stalinist period, we can notice several quite remarkable shifts : from class-based repression (first half of the 1930's) to ethnicity-based repression (second half of the 1930's, 1940's) / a shift which must be seen as paralleling a wider change in the Soviet political system : once « socialism » and the « classless society » were built, the emphasis was henceforth on strengthening the cohesion of the huge « state of nations » that the USSR had become, a new type of Empire/ Another shift should be mentionned = from « class targets » (1930's) to a much wider and general criminalization of minor social insubordination and deviance (1940's) / paralleling another major change in politics = from a « revolutionary class war » project (against « kulaks », « former people », etc) to the everyday,routine, more « conservative » struggle of the Socialist State in order to « discipline » the « masses ».

Third shift – from the instrumentalization of social tensions and violence from below, with large public participation of « activists » (as in the first stage of the « dekulakization campaign » of 1930), to highly « professionalized », secret arrests (and executions) performed by « operational groups » of the GUGB (State Security) (as in the 1937-1938 Great Terror).

Recent research based on an empirical, contextualized and more in-depth approach, has led historians exploring the repressive and violent dimensions of the Stalinist State and society towards questions which had already been, for quite a time, explored by their colleagues working in the field of Nazi Germany such as :

- decision-making processes (thoroughly discussed, in the Soviet case, without the proper documentary basis in the 1970's and 1980's)

- implementation processes, including issues such as interactions between the central and local levels (the importance of local, regional initiatives varying considerably – more important in the early 1930's, when centralization was not so effective, than in the late 1940's) ; « excesses » and foot-dragging, if not overt resistance ; planned operations and improvisation (the example of « dekulakization » illustrates this point vividly) ;
- the public and the secret in the development of repressive policies and mass violence. On the public side, the instrumentalization of social and ethnic tensions ; « mobilization techniques » ; « political theater », public scapegoating campaigns and large social participation ; on the secret side, police round-ups, « mass operations » and « hidden transcripts » (of the NKVD secret mass operations of 1937-1938 for example, not designed for circulation or discussion even among the Party middle-rank officials). Of course, a large « grey zone » stretched between the public and the secret sides of social and State violence.

Since I touched the comparison Nazi/ Stalinist violence, let me just remind here one of major differences between the two : unlike the violence practised by the Nazis, essentially directed outwards (95% of the victims in the Nazi era were foreigners), as part of a powerful, expansionist and imperialist thrust aimed at establishing the Third Reich rule over the whole of Europe, or indeed the world, Stalinist violence was directed mainly inwards, at the Soviet society itself. Quite remarkably, the sovietization of foreign territories in 1939-1941, and after 1944 (Baltic States, Western Ukraine, Eastern Poland) merely duplicated, in an almost routine way (though condensed in time) repressive policies (arrest, deportation, forced labour, mass executions) which had been applied, for a long time, to Soviet citizens, without crossing any additional threshold of violence.

After this introduction listing some of the multiple « entries » into the subject of Stalinist violence, I shall focus now on the angle I chose- a short inventory of the main forms of State violence implemented during approx. a quarter of a century/ « man-made » famines (James Mace)- 7 million deaths/ mass death sentences passed by special courts held by the political police or military tribunals- over a million people shot/ mass deportations/ over 6 million/ mass camp forced labour/ 17 to 18 million people.

Approximately seven million Soviet citizens died of hunger in the course of the two last peacetime European famines, in 1931-1933 (*circa* 6 million deaths), and the other in 1946-1947 (between 500 000 and 1 million deaths). In spite of a very different context, it is undeniable that the regime bore an overwhelming responsibility for these two famines which went totally unmentioned. Since the pioneering book by Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow* (1986), numerous recent studies, both western and Russian or Ukrainian, have cast light on the mechanisms that brought about the terrible famines of the years 1931–3. In 1931 the famine first struck Kazakhstan, the USSR's most important livestock-raising area where collectivization of the herds was accompanied by a vast plan for sedentarizing the populations of nomadic and semi-nomadic herdsmen. In two years, about a million and a half Kazakhs, that is, more than a third of the native population, died of hunger or in epidemics. Beginning in spring 1932, famine spread to Western Siberia and the regions of the lower and middle Volga (approx. half a million deaths), but also to the rich plains of Kuban, in the North Caucasus, which were administratively rattached to Russia, but populated mainly by Ukrainians and Cossaks (approx. half a million deaths) and to the Ukraine (3.5 to 4 million deaths).

Apart from a few divergences with regard to the analysis of certain chains of cause and effect or of the respective weight to be given to the various factors leading to the famines, historians agree that these tragic events were the outcome of policies implemented by the regime from the end of 1929 onwards, in particular the forced collectivization, the huge increase in predatory state quotas levied on harvests and herds. These policies were made even worse in the case of the ethnic Ukrainian regions because of the specific view of the situation in Ukraine taken by Stalin, from the summer of 1932 onwards.

Recently, the Parliament of the Republic of Ukraine officially recognized that the famine of 1932-1933 was a genocide perpetrated by Stalin's regime against the Ukrainian people. The qualification of the 1932-1933 famine as a genocide is not, however, universally accepted among historians. Schematically, we can distinguish two main interpretive trends. On the one hand, are historians who see the famine as having been artificially organized by Stalin's regime since 1930, in order to break the back of the Ukrainian peasants' resistance to the kolkhoz

system, which was particularly strong, and in addition, to destroy the Ukrainian nation in its "peasant-national" specificity, which constituted a serious obstacle to the transformation of the Soviet Union into an imperial state of a new kind, dominated by Russia. These historians adhere to the genocide thesis. On the other hand are historians who, while recognizing the criminal nature of Stalin's policies, consider it necessary to study all the famines of the 1930's as a complex phenomenon in which several factors, ranging from the geopolitical situation to the imperatives of industrialization, played an important role alongside Stalin's "imperial intentions." For these historians, the term "genocide" is not appropriate to describe the famine of 1932-1933 in Ukraine and Kuban. As Andrea Graziosi, the Italian specialist on the *Holodomor*, rightly suggests, it is possible to propose a way of moving beyond the two main existing lines of interpretation. According to Graziosi, who draws particularly on the work of the American historian Terry Martin as well as on that of the Ukrainian historians Juri Shapoval and Vassili Vassiliev, from the late summer of 1932 on, the Ukrainian famine is characterized by a high degree of specificity with regard to other Soviet famines. The latter (including the terrible Kazakh famine) appear to be direct but unforeseen, unprogrammed, *unintentional* consequences of policies inspired by ideology that had been implemented since 1930. Until the summer of 1932, the Ukrainian famine, which was already underway, can be related to other famines that began earlier. After mid- 1932 however, the Ukrainian famine changed in nature as Stalin developed his "national interpretation of the famine" (Terry Martin). The recently published correspondence between Stalin and his main aides during the summer of 1932, clearly shows how Stalin persuaded himself that a vast resistance front ranging from simple kolkhozians to Ukrainian communist leaders had been constituted in Ukraine in order to refuse the state procurement quotas . From that moment on, Stalin decided to use the weapon of hunger to aggravate the famine that was beginning, to instrumentalize it, to *intentionally amplify it* in order to break the « Ukrainian resistance ». His two closest collaborators, Vyacheslav Molotov and Lazar Kaganovitch, were sent to Ukraine and the North Caucasus as "plenipotentiaries" charged with "purging" and bringing into line the local communist organizations that were "dragging their feet"—and sometimes even refusing to implement excessive plans for cereals deliveries. Reinforcements composed of "activists" were sent from Russia, and armed detachments of the

political police engaged in veritable punitive actions in the Ukrainian kolkhozes in order to requisition all the available wheat, including seed grain for the next harvest. A whole set of measures intentionally aggravating and expanding the famine was implemented: the closing of all stores, including food stores in districts and villages that "have not fulfilled the delivery plan"; the setting up of police cordons to prevent starving peasants from fleeing their village; a blockade of the regions where there was famine; and a "conspiracy of silence" about the famine. If the peasants were hardest hit—by hunger, leading to the death, in the most atrocious conditions, of millions of persons, repression also affected local officials and Ukrainian intellectuals who were arrested and imprisoned. In December 1932, two secret decrees issued by the Poliburo put an end—in Ukraine and in Ukraine only—to the policy of « indigenization » of officials that had been pursued since 1923 in all the federal republics; Ukrainian "nationalism" was firmly condemned.

Recent research undoubtedly shows the strong specificity of the Ukrainian case, at least from the second half of 1932 on. On the basis of these new elements, how should we qualify the whole of the measures Stalin's regime took to punish by hunger and terror the Ukrainian peasantry as an ethnically defined group, measures whose result was the death of more than four million people in Ukraine and the North Caucasus? The crucial point—so far as the use of the term "genocide" is concerned—on which historians, including Ukrainian historians, differ is this: Did Stalin target the peasants of Ukraine and Kuban as peasants or as Ukrainians? For some historians, the main objective of the famine was to break down peasant resistance, not national resistance. Other historians insist, on the contrary, that the peasants of Ukraine and Kuban were targeted first of all as Ukrainians; for Stalin the question the Ukrainian peasantry was in fact "essentially a national question, the peasantry constituting the main force behind the nationalist movement."ⁱ Breaking the Ukrainian peasantry amounted to breaking the most powerful nationalist movement capable of opposing the process of constructing the Soviet Union.ⁱⁱ This specifically anti-Ukrainian orientation, these historians conclude, allows us to qualify as "genocide" the whole of the political actions Stalin's regime undertook intentionally, starting at the end of the summer of 1932, to punish by hunger and terror the Ukrainian peasantry, actions whose

consequence was the death of more than four million persons in Ukraine and the North Caucasus.

Mass executions following death sentences swiftly passed by special courts were another major form of violence implemented by the Stalin regime. Between 1930 and 1953, over one million people were executed for « counter-revolutionary activities », as defined by the infamous Article 58 of the Soviet Penal Code (another 3 million being sentenced, on the basis of the same article to long terms- ten years and over- in forced labour camps). About 75 to 80% of these death sentences were handed down during 1937-1938 alone. Trailing far behind –with a few tens of thousands executions per year – 1930-1931 / « dekulakization » and repression of anti-collectivization peasant uprisings/ and 1942-1943/ years of increased repression within the context of WWII.

Recent research on the « Great Terror » has shown that this mass crime (800 000 people shot in 16 months, 1.5 million arrested) can be best understood as a convergence of several phenomena : a) as the outcome of tensions among the Stalinist elite and in Center-periphery relations ; b) as the culmination of a decade-long radicalization of policing practices against marginal and « socially harmful » elements, the last blow against these previously identified social outcasts, many of whom had already been, in previous years, expelled from the major cities or deported, but were still considered as a major cause of public disorder and, by 1937, even more – as a potentially dangerous group, supposedly linked with « counter-révolutionary » elements ; c) as the result of a growing « Soviet xenophobia » targeting « diaspora nationalities » supposedly connected to hostile States. The term of « great purges » is clearly inappropriate to characterize this murderous outburst of violence, as the purging of the communist political, military, economic and intellectual elites was no more than the public face of the Terror, the visible part of the iceberg, one might say : a few tens of thousands of victims out of about 800 000. These purge campaigns relied heavily on a ritualized process of denunciation, arrest and interrogation, sometimes public « show trials ». In contrast, the secret « mass operations » encompassed a much broader spectrum of « socially marginal » or « ethnically suspicious » groups, people being arrested *en masse* because they belonged to suspect category, or at random in order that « quotas » be fulfilled. These « mass operations » were

catalogued into two « lines », the « kulak line » and the « national » line. The « kulak line » was intended to « eradicate once and for all » (in Ezhov's words) a wide range of « traditional enemies » (in the bolshevik political culture) labelled as « socially harmful » or « belonging to the past » (*byvshie ljudi*) - « ex-koulaks » who had escaped deportation », « ex-members of non-bolshevik parties », « ex-Tsarist civil servants », « anti-Soviet elements who served in White or Cossack divisions », « members of sects or clergy engaged in anti-soviet activities » - all of them considered as potential « fifth columnists » in a pre-war context. Each region was assigned by the Politburo (i.e by Stalin) quotas of individuals to be shot (« 1st category » in the hidden transcripts of the secret NKVD orders) and others (« 2nd category ») to be interned in camps for a period of ten years. These quotas were based, at first, on figures of « suspect » individuals already under police surveillance ; but as « mass operations » were being implemented, planned orders from the Center plus bureaucratic reflexes spurred local officials to try to anticipate and surpass the directives that arrived from Moscow, ask for « extra quotas », proceed to sweeps and round-ups to such an extent that, in the course of the 16 months of the « operation », the initial « quotas » were doubled for « Cat.2 » and multiplied by five with regard to « Cat 1 » !

The « National line », as defined by a dozen other secret operations, referred to as « national » (the Polish, German, Finnish, Latvian, Estonian, Harbinian, etc, operations) targeted « new » categories of « enemies » - representatives of minorities and national diasporas suspected of maintaining links with foreign powers hostile to the USSR, but also all Soviet citizens who had (or had had) any link, whether professional, familial or merely through geographical proximity (those living in border areas were especially vulnerable) with foreign countries.

Recent research into this frenzied stage of Stalinist repression has disproved two ideas that were widely held : that it was the denunciations originating from society itself that made this « uncontrolled outburst » possible ; that it was the Communists and party officials that were the main victims. In fact, the « Great Terror » was not merely another, harsher, *political* purge. It was, foremost, a radical, murderous form of *social* engineering, relevant to practices of mass deportation, policing, categorization, ascription and cleansing experimented during the 1930's. As Pasternak acutely noted in his *Doctor Zhivago*, the

« unprecedented cruelty of *Ezhovschina* » bore the imprint of the events of the earlier part of the decade, a decade characterized by an explosive mixture of a peculiar kind of modernity, embodied by an almighty industrial and bureaucratic state, and of deep social regression, as millions of peasants were deported, children abandoned, famine spread. As an expression of extreme violence, pushing aside limits to what was « possible », man-made famines of 1932-1933, kept in secrecy, denied by the regime, were a major milestone on the road to the mass killing of 1937-1938, also kept in secret – for decades, as families and relatives were denied all information about the fate of the executed.

Mass deportations constituted a third major form of state violence under Stalinism. Between 1930 and 1953, over six million people were deported simply on the basis of an administrative decision, most often together with their families, to inhospitable « dustbin areas » (Siberia, Kazakhstan, the Far North, etc). A closer analysis of the dozens of specific deportation operations decided on and planned at the highest levels of the Party and State Security shows the extraordinary diversity of the groups that were targeted and of the objectives to be attained : « liquidation of the kulaks as a class » (1930-1932), punitive deportation of entire peasant communities which had not « fulfilled their obligations towards the State » (1932-1933), cleansing major towns of their « socially harmful elements » (from 1933 on), cleansing and « making secure » border regions (from 1935 onwards), deportation of « bourgeois nationalist elements » from countries annexed in 1939-1941 and after 1944, total preventive or punitive deportations of entire peoples during WWII (Soviet Germans, Chechens, Ingush, Karatchaïs, Balkars, Kalmuks, Crimean Tatars)... As years went by, deportation became a major strategy for managing populations and territories, setting up a new social stratification, as deportees were granted a specific discriminatory status (« special settler ») on the ever more complex scale of « statuses » and « regimes » (*regimnost*) which characterized the soviet society. Several considerations can be drawn from the overall picture: a) the distinction between peacetime and wartime seems scarcely pertinent when considering soviet mass deportations ; b) criteria of class, social engineering, dominant up to the mid-1930's, were, generally speaking, replaced by ethnic cleansing ; c) deportations became, over the years, more « efficient » and

« professionalized »- the difference, for example, is striking between the chaotic « deportation-abandonment » of « kulaks » at the beginning of the 1930's and the elaborate military infrastructure (hundreds of train convoys, 120 000 men) deployed for the arrest and deportation, in six days, of half a million Chechens and Ingush in February 1944 ; d) deportations of specified groups for a limited period of time (generally five years) were replaced, in the 1940's, by total deportations « in perpetuity » - this meant that every member of the « punished » community passed on to the next generation the « collective fault » committed by his ancestors (unlike the case of the kulaks, for example, whose children, once they reached adulthood, were freed of their deportee status). Can we deduce from this that elements of racial politics had surreptitiously crept into Stalin's ethnic cleansing ? An analysis of Stalinist policy regarding nationalities indicates that the regime did not persecute this or that people because of alleged « biological defects ». Its goal was not to eliminate this or that race or ethnic group, but rather to eradicate any form or manifestation of ethnic or national particularism that might hamper the project of constructing a community of Soviet socialist nationalities and slow the realization of the Communist Utopia. Based on the conviction that nationalities, like social classes, were socio-historical formations and not racial or biological entities, the treatment inflicted on « punished peoples » or « enemy nations » was more closely related to a form of « ethno-historical excision ». The regime sought more to eradicate the national, cultural and historical identities of a community than to physically eliminate every one of its members. Nevertheless, the death toll among deportees was huge, especially among children and infants, both in the wake of « dekulakization » and of the « punishment » of enemy nations ». In 1930-1932, about 25% of the 2 million deported « kulaks » disappeared ; by 1948, 30% of the 600 000 people deported from the Northern Caucasus to Kazakhstan four years before had died, and only 30 000 were born. Altogether, for a total number of deportees from 1930 to 1953 of over 6 million people, the excess death toll is around 1.5- 1.8 million.

The fourth form of violence I would like to mention briefly – is forced labour. The number of people held in the Gulag camps, the subject of a vast body of writing over several decades and of bitter disputes among historians, is nowadays well established. In the course of one generation (from 1929 to 1953), 17 to 18

million Soviet citizens - or one adult in six – experienced a stay in camp. This huge proportion raises the question of the « Gulag syndrom » contaminating various aspects of social life, producing a series of perverse effects, a topic yet hardly explored by historians. It is important here to underline a major feature of Soviet forced labour : it stretched far beyond the Gulag camps, as millions of deportees, released detainees, repatriates (both civilians and Soviet ex-prisoners of war), young peasants recruited by force through the so-called « organized recruitment » (*orgnabor*) were in fact « indentured labourers » (D.Filtzer), that is workers coerced into entering the workforce and who were bound to their place of work under threat of harsh criminal sanctions if they left.

Entry to the Gulag was not a one-way ticket. Apart from « politicals » (20 to 25% of the Gulag inmates) who were invariably sentenced to a minimum spell of ten years, nearly always systematically extended, the other detainees spent on average 4 to 7 years in a camp, if they survived that long. The majority of detainees were by no means « common criminals » in the usual sense of this term. Most of them had ended up in camps after falling foul of one of the innumerable laws that criminalized many kinds of social behaviour and imposed totally disproportionate punishments on the most trivial of misdemeanours. One might cite as an example the laws of August, 7, 1932 or June, 4, 1947, relating to « theft of State or cooperative property » : under the provisions of these laws, the most trifling of thefts were punishable with a sentence of five to ten years in a camp, even where these were first offences, or committed by teenagers. In both cases, these laws reflected a particularly brutal reaction by the regime to various forms of struggle for survival experimented by rural populations (but also by workers in the wake of WW II) reduced to theft in a situation of extreme misery, dearth or even famine.

How many people died in the Gulag ? The data in the archives now available lists about 1.8 million deaths in camps and colonies between 1930 and 1953. « It's not that death has no meaning here, it's that life no longer has any value » - this observation by Tzvetan Todorov is entirely vindicated by the erratic mortality rates in the Gulag, a world where administrative chaos, sloppiness, indifference, chance and neglect played a more important role than any systematic intention to exterminate. We might recall in this connexion the way that Hannah Arendt characterized the Soviet camps, « where neglect is combined with chaotic forced labour » as opposed to the Nazi camps, « in which the whole of life was

thoroughly and systematically organised in view to the greatest possible torment ». Mortality rates in the Soviet camps varied considerably both geographically and over time. Amongst the most dreadful years, 1933 (year of famine in the country and of uncontrolled growth of the Gulag) had a mortality rate of 15%. In 1938, 10% of the detainees perished in camps that had become terribly overcrowded because of the huge influx of all those sentenced during the « Great Terror ». But the most terrible years of all were 1942 and 1943 (with an annual mortality rate in excess of 20%). In two years, nearly half a million detainees died, abandoned to their fate in camps that were scarcely provisioned at all. At the same time, however, a million people were set free before expiry of their sentences and immediately made to enlist in the Red Army. From 1948 onwards, when the regime had come to realize the need to be « sparing » with the penal labour-force in a country that had been bled dry, the death rate in the camps dropped considerably at about 1-3% per year at the beginning of the 1950's. At that time, anticipated release of « less socially dangerous elements » attested to a growing awareness of a major crisis in the increasingly unproductive forced-labour system, which was to be gradually dismantled after Stalin's death.

The contamination by the « Gulag experience » shared by tens of millions detainees, deported, indentured workers left an indelible stain on Soviet society. The same can be said of the other forms of extreme violence imposed over decades – and, largely kept secret such as the 1932-1933 famines or the 1937-1938 mass executions. Twenty years after the « Great repentance » of the *glasnost* period, the renewed silence over the Stalinist mass crimes reveals that this past is, paradoxically, everpresent.
