

A Darker “Big Deal:” Covering Up Party Crimes in the Post-World War II Era

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In his pioneering account of the opulent yet sinister court life of Ethiopia under Haile Selassie, Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski elaborated on the set of unspoken rules that underlay elite behavior in a country where it was not uncommon for regional leaders to own palaces filled with gold and roses, even as they were technically obliged to win the Emperor’s personal approval for any expenditure of more than ten dollars. As one servitor explained, the dictator allowed, even encouraged, corruption in exchange for unswerving allegiance:

Thanks to his unequaled memory and also to the constant reports, our monarch knew exactly who had how much. But as long as his subject behaved loyally, [the Emperor] kept this knowledge to himself and never made use of it. But if he sensed even the slightest shadow of disloyalty, he would immediately confiscate everything and take the bird of paradise away from the embezzler. Thanks to that system of accountability, the King of Kings had everyone in his hand, and everyone knew it.¹

In Nazi Germany, relations between Adolf Hitler and his inner circle – like those throughout the National Socialist Party hierarchy – were similar, characterized by camaraderie, leadership cliques, and legal immunity. For the most part, self-enrichment on the part of NS cadres, particularly at the expense of Germany’s Jews, was tolerated by higher-ups as long as it remained within certain bounds, and as long as those who prospered proved willing to promote central decrees. The press was barred from reporting on corruption and mismanagement cases involving NS party members without special permission, and investigators proceeded according to the unspoken understanding: “The small ones we hang, and the big ones we let go.”²

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¹ Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Emperor*, trans. William Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand (London: Quartet Books, 1983), 49.

² Frank Bajohr, *Parvenüs und Profiteure: Korruption in der NS-Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2001), esp. 148-163, 166, 171.

From its inception, the Soviet regime had always cast itself in opposition to such models of corrupt governance. Under socialism, so the propaganda went, those at the bottom of any particular hierarchy would have the right to evaluate the actions of those at the top; constant monitoring by vigilant members of society at large would thus keep the ruling apparatus honest and prevent it from turning into a moneyed stratum of self-interested office-holders. Rhetoric, of course, differed from reality, for regional Soviet elites tended to create the same kinds of insular power networks and “family circles” typical of most centralized dictatorships.³ Nevertheless, during the 1920s and 30s, Josef Stalin periodically attacked the complacency of provincial leaders, most memorably in 1934, when he labeled them “appanage princes” who felt Politburo decrees were written only “for fools.”⁴ With his backing, forms of public surveillance – self-criticism sessions, show trials, complaint bureaus, unannounced inspection raids – combined with severe police sanctions, served, at times, to counterbalance the authority of local cliques. Embezzlement and arbitrary power existed, but any one person’s hold on that power was tenuous, and never guaranteed. As one party secretary warned a factory director: “Tomorrow I might not be secretary, but tomorrow you also might not be director.”⁵

This essay argues, however, that the nature of the Soviet dictatorship changed in the wake of World War Two, given the grueling demands of postwar reconstruction, the onset of Cold War animosities, and the decisions taken by Moscow leaders struggling both to rebuild a shattered economy and to re-impose a standardized shape of centrally defined Bolshevik power over a fragmented land. For the war had left the USSR in a state of devastation and disorder. It had become a country plagued by crime, unable to absorb all its veterans or provide for all the widows, orphans, and invalids left behind – a place where women outnumbered men in many villages by 5 to 1, where

³ See, for example, Merle Fainsod, Smolensk Under Soviet Rule (New York: Vintage Books, 1963) and James Harris, The Great Urals: Regionalism and the Evolution of the Soviet System (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), esp. 38-70.

⁴ XVII s’ezd Vsesoiuznoi Kommunisticheskoi Partii (27 ianvaria – 10 fevralia 1934 g.): Stenograficheskii otchet (Moscow, 1934), 23, 33.

⁵ ??

bandits roamed the provinces, and where millions died in famine from 1946 to 1947.⁶ Meanwhile, the country, though joined in the war effort, had disintegrated into a patchwork of diverse communities governed largely from the grass-roots. Though many citizens expected Moscow to continue to tolerate a degree of regional experimentation and variation during peacetime, central leaders instead fought to restore political orthodoxy and civic order, simultaneously.

They succeeded, in part, by forging a type of “tacit concordant” between the central government and local *nomenklatura* elites willing to promote central policies. Vera Dunham, one of the only scholars to locate the beginning of a substantive change in the nature of Soviet political power in the postwar years, coined the term “Big Deal” to refer to Moscow leaders’ deliberate cultivation of a host of Soviet middle-class “organization men” in the provinces. These cadres were, in her opinion, Babbitt-esque figures whose qualities included “apolitical conformism” along with “loyalty to the leader, unequivocal nationalism, reliable hard work, and professionalism.”⁷ Dunham links their rise to a larger cultural turn inside the post-war USSR towards a growing acceptance of traditionally middle-class, material values of diligence, acquisition, and, above all, stability.

This essay ventures further, arguing that during the post-war period, Moscow came to allow the same kinds of opportunities for illicit nest-feathering and pocket-lining to members of the Soviet *nomenklatura* as those which Hallie Sallasie dispensed to members of his Ethiopian court or Adolf Hitler tolerated among his party faithful. For the “rapprochement” between Moscow and the middle bureaucratic classes that took place after 1945 was more sinister than which Dunham describes, grounded as it was in an indulgence of corrupt activities on the part of Soviet elites and a redefinition of the rules of party and state control sufficient to protect these elites from overly vigilant public scrutiny and unauthorized prosecution. In consequence, one can glimpse, despite a continued

⁶ Germans had occupied territory on which 45% of the Soviet population had resided; 12-15 million Soviet citizens had been evacuated eastward; 20-25 million had been killed; 32,000 industrial enterprises and 65,000 km of railroad track had been destroyed. Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Postwar Soviet Society: The ‘Return to Normalcy,’ 1945-1953,” The Impact of World War II on the Soviet Union, Susan Linz, ed. (1985), 130. Soviet leaders retrospectively reported the country lost 30 percent of its national wealth during the war. In *Pravda*, 6 April 1966.

⁷ Vera Dunham, In Stalin’s Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 17.

censorship of relevant archival materials, a fusing of organized criminal structures with those of the party-state over the course of the postwar era and, above all, a gradual silencing of public discussion in regard to the problem of wrongdoing within officialdom. This chapter will explore the mechanisms of this more insidious type of “Big Deal.” In so doing, it will focus on the change in attitudes towards upper-level corruption and on the shift in practices of Soviet control.

Silencing Scandal

Prior to World War Two, secrecy and silence had long been features of Soviet public life. So, too, however, had been a tradition of “speaking out” in defense of Communist Party values. During intervals such as the Great Terror, for instance, Moscow exhorted ordinary citizens to “speak out” about the conduct of officials inside the party/state bureaucracy and even went so far as to criticize those who sought to insure their own well-being by keeping quiet. So-called “little people” inside every workplace, office, or professional organization were called upon to uncover the “secret truth” of the actions and attitudes of their superiors. “Abuse of authority” thus became a frequent topic at party, election, and union meetings. In 1938 Nizhnii Novgorod, for example, police cadres denounced the new chief of the region’s militia for covering up egregious crimes on the part of his most trusted deputies, even after he had, just one year earlier, contributed to the downfall of the former militia leadership by exhorting members of the militia rank-and-file to act, in similar fashion, to expose the illicit intrigues of their superiors. One recruit recounted how the chief had condemned his predecessor for his elitist possession of a piano, then, after his predecessor’s arrest, secretly arranged to have that same piano placed in his own home; another described how he had been ordered to ignore the fact that workers from State Security routinely helped themselves to suspects’ confiscated goods.⁸

However, even at the height of USSR’s hunt for hidden enemies, there were always limits on this kind of surveillance from below – or at least attempts on the part of those in power to impose

⁸ Gosudarstvennyi obshchestvenno-politicheskii arkhiv Nizhegorodskoi oblasti (GOPAN), f. 817, op. 1, d. 67, l. 89.

such limits. In the above case, although the chief fled town secretly following his men's complaints, his successor took immediate steps to penalize those who had accused him, faulting them for a display of "incorrect criticism" that had overstepped permissible bounds. After World War Two, the position of those in authority grew ever more protected from the scrutiny of their subordinates; at the same time, facts about crime, particularly crime committed by party members and demobilized soldiers – both social categories of crucial importance to the Soviet regime – were hushed up, even in many internal government reports. In a meeting of judicial and police officials in Tallinn in October 1945, one procurator claimed that "the criminal element in certain places is able to terrorize the population. It's gone so far that employees at several factories have refused to work the evening shift. But if you look of the official accounts of crime statistics for Tallinn over the last three and a half months, it sounds as if everything is fine."⁹ Newspapers for the public at large covered such topics even more cautiously. While articles frequently referenced the problems of post-war banditry and black-market criminality, they blamed these phenomena on clear-cut groups of "enemies" such as former Nazi collaborators and former wartime speculators, not on citizens who had at any time displayed a willingness to sacrifice themselves for the regime.¹⁰

Post-1945 Soviet propaganda cast the long process of demobilization as a way of renewing the party/state apparatus by infusing it with honest and loyal veterans. Former *frontoviki* starred in a mass-produced mythology of the "virtuous Communist" who had successfully defeated the fascists and returned home to continue to battle for good, often in the bureaucracy and especially in the operations of Soviet security.¹¹ Images of the upright, manly veteran-policeman-hero who turns down enormous bribes or risks his life to catch a thief (often one who was portrayed as having preyed upon a hapless woman or child) filled both the popular press and papers internal to the security organs.¹²

⁹ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsialno-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 598, op. 1, d. 16, l. 111.

¹⁰ Politburo leaders reproduced this rhetoric, terming bandits "agents of fascism" even when they acknowledged them to be Red Army soldiers. RGASPI, f. 598, op. 1., d. 8, l. 102,103.

¹¹ Jeffrey Wade Jones, "'In my opinion, this is all a fraud!' Concrete, Culture, and Class in the 'Reconstruction' of Rostov-on-the-Don, 1943-1948," diss. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2000), 252.

¹² An example of such heroic stories is contained in *Post revoliutsii*, 18 June 1949. See also A. M. Beda, *Sovetskaia politicheskaia kultura cherez prizmu MVD: Ot "Moskovskogo patriotizma" k idee "Bol'shogo Otechestva," 1946-1958* (Moscow: Mosgorarkhiv, 2002). Amir Weiner notes that "a barrage of popular novels on the postwar countryside

Even movies about the post-war period made in the 1960s, such as the cult favorite “The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed,” a picture based on a series of crimes committed by a notorious Moscow gang from 1950-1953, recapitulate such symbolism. The film pits a “good” Communist soldier against an iconic “bad” one, which is to say one who did not, in actuality, serve as a soldier at all: the former is a young but much-decorated veteran sent to revitalize Moscow’s anti-speculation police unit after the war, while the second, his chief protagonist, is a ruthless killer who poses as a demobilized officer by wearing a stolen uniform.¹³

Certain government documents, however, attest to the fact that, in actuality, such lines between “good guys” and “bad” were far less clear cut after 1945, although any evidence of crossover was carefully hoarded. Agencies such as SMERSH – set up to fight against spies during the war and afterwards directed towards battling corruption inside the police and procuracy – and the Commission of Party Control, which dealt with wrongdoing among members of the Communist *nomenklatura*, shrouded their work in the highest levels of classification and secrecy. The Politburo’s “Special Files,” still off-limits to most researchers today, contain discussions of relations between disgruntled Soviet soldiers and criminal gangs (including soldiers’ tendencies to form gangs themselves), especially in the western territories. In Estonia, procurators attributed a crime wave in the capital directly to servicemen, “often officers,” claiming that it was “commonplace” for troops to jump off trains transporting them back to their native villages, “in order to stay in Tallinn to commit robberies and theft.”¹⁴ Reports from the republic’s Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1946 mention organized, violent groups of demobilized soldiers looting houses, killing civilians, selling stolen goods to speculators

celebrated a new hero: the demobilized officer who transferred his zeal from the front to pursue the electrification of the backward countryside. As a rule, the character of the relentless veteran was contrasted with that of a laid-back bureaucrat, most likely one who avoided the front and adapted a “soft” and conservative approach to the tasks of reconstruction.” In Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution (Princeton University Press, 2001), 49.

¹³ Such tropes also appear in memoirs written in the 1960s about the immediate postwar period. Take, for example, Ivan Parfent’ev, Proshloe v nastoiashchem: Zapiski byvshego nachal’nika Moskovskogo ugovolnogo rozyska (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1965). In a note to readers, Parfent’ev writes about his years in the police. “I worked together with many fighting comrades, friends... I will never forget them, daring, determined, hardened men.... I want [in this book] to show the closeness of the Soviet police to the people, its tight connection to them” (5).

¹⁴ RGASPI, f. 598, op. 1, d. 16, l. 114.

(often women), and engaging in frequent shootouts with local police.¹⁵ One typical document describes Russian-speaking soldiers marauding through the forests and highjacking factory shipments of food and consumer goods – in one case, 275 kg. of butter – transported via stagecoach along the roads.¹⁶ Higher up the military hierarchy, battalion leaders commandeered trains and cars, to ship contraband western goods back to their families. In the early 1960s, the Commission of Party Control infuriated First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev by charging the head of the Soviet KGB (an unpopular man and former deputy of ousted Lavrenti Beria, but also a close friend of Khrushchev from years of joint service in Ukraine) with having stolen two million marks worth of German property during the Red Army occupation of Berlin. Khrushchev reportedly demanded the accusations be stifled, exclaiming “You are forbidden to make a lot of noise about this. After all many generals committed similar sins during wartime.”¹⁷

The actions of many non-combatant party officials inside Russia during this same time also fell outside the law, yet were similarly barred from widespread discussion. Party control files describe numerous infractions, including the ubiquitous “stealing and selling of alcoholic spirit from enterprises” on the part of Communists. Investigators noted, as just one example of many, that “in six factories of the Ulianovskii alcohol trust 325,000 liters of spirit disappeared from 1946-1948...at a cost to the state of approximately 65 million rubles.”¹⁸ The central Soviet Anti-Speculation Unit estimated that, of the gifts delivered from the United States at the end of the war, administrators stole 22,423 items of clothing and footwear, 15,467 unspecified “precious objects,” and more than 2.46 million rubles worth of other valuables.¹⁹ In Rostov-on-the-Don, an inspection found that the

¹⁵ RGASPI, f. 598, op. 1, d. 8, l. 30, 108-110.

¹⁶ RGASPI, f. 598, op. 1, d. 8, l. 110.

¹⁷ Anastas Mikoian, *Tak bylo: Razmyshleniia o minuvshem* (Moscow, 1999), 607, 608.

¹⁸ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI), f. 6 op. 6, d. 1, l. 28.

¹⁹ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskii federatsii (GARF), f. 9415, op. 5, d. 95, l. 60.

director of the ration card bureau had, for a city with about 450,000 residents, printed out some 795,829 extra cards, worth well over half a million rubles, which then were either stolen or sold.²⁰

Finally, the activities of many law-enforcers during the post-war years were equally dubious, although, again, this fact was only openly discussed in the most exclusive circles. Factory directors in 1946 continually complained about the railroad police, recounting such incidents as a train loaded with 20 tons of coal arriving at its destination with only one ton, 880 kg. in tow.²¹ Political police files, briefly available to researchers but now reclassified, include the disgruntled impressions of a new Novosibirsk Minister of State Security in May of 1946, regarding the prevalence of drunkenness, debauchery, stealing, and hooliganism among Siberian operatives and their families. The chief pointed out that although officers lived in the most prestigious, 100-unit apartment building in the city, the complex was full of violence and dirt, with gangs of children throwing stones and beating up outsiders. “On the buildings of our houses are painted fascist swastikas; young people – both boys and girls – curse in filthy language. And this complex houses our best personnel, our best Communists.”²²

Despite the public mythology of Communist and Red Army virtue and the secrecy surrounding most investigations of illegal activities on the part of elites, many ordinary people were not blind to such abuses. In a number of communities, the first years after the war saw heated, angry discussion about local corruption and complaints about what was perceived to be a widening divide between bosses and employees, haves and have nots. In Samara, at election meetings in 1946 and 1947, members of the rank-and-file hurled numerous accusations against local dignitaries – faulting factory directors, for example, for diverting electricity from street lamps into their own apartments. Citizens appear to have spoken relatively frankly about both their own material difficulties and the ways many higher-ups seemed to be enjoying a more comfortable life at their subordinates’ expense,

²⁰ Jones, 214. The director was not arrested, but only rebuked for negligence and “loss of party vigilance.”

²¹ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv ekonomiki (RGAE), f. 1884, op. 31, d. 7198, l. 109.

²² A. G. Tepliakov, “Personal i povsednevnost’ Novosibirskogo UNKVD v 1936-1946,” Minuvshee: Istoricheskii al'manakh (Novosibirsk, 1997), 273.

often by siphoning food and fuel earmarked for workers' canteens into their own hands.²³ Railroad employees in Stalingrad protested gross inequalities among the food offerings at three separate stores, one for ordinary depot workers, another for railroad administrators, and a third only for 80 of the city's most prominent officials. Investigators confirmed that leaders included on a special list routinely received such luxuries as eight to ten kilograms of fish at a time, and that several top railroad executives, together with the Stalingrad MVD chief, had appropriated most post-war "gifts" from the Americans for their personal use, including twelve trophy pianos.²⁴ A collective of mechanics and conductors from Iaroslavl protested that, while working in Moscow, they and their families of five to ten people were forced to rent tiny rooms for 300 rubles a month, when the director of the railroad, who owned a house and a dacha in Iaroslavl, also kept four apartments in the capital.²⁵

In Moscow, the files of the Central Commission of Party Control contain letters vividly describing a Soviet society made up of a mass of terribly poor workers, ruled over by a small, self-interested, mutually protective, and, for the time, extraordinarily wealthy clique. One from 1946 began:

The moment of elections has arrived and in the city of Vodsk we have so many legitimate complaints and misfortunes among the people that it is hard to describe. Like never before, in the city an epidemic of typhus... has broken out, the hospitals are overflowing, apartments also, in the hospital there is nothing but contagion, it is cold... dirty, teeming with insects, the sick lie in their fur coats, caps, there are no sheets, there is no hot water even for the ill, the food is exceedingly bad, delivery of medical supplies has been interrupted, and yet the head of the city health department Kurnikova has received a medal for her heroic work [in helping battle the epidemic]. No one can touch the head of the hospitals, Ermolaeva, in regard to the chaos there, because she is the wife of the head of the NKVD, her protection is strong (*zashchita krepkaiia*).

In the city from early morning all the people are on the search for water, the pumps don't work, we take water from open man-holes wherever they are, and on the streets people take turns collecting water from broken pipes. For a population of more than 50 thousand we have only one functioning bathhouse and a very big

²³ Samarskii oblastnoi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (SOGASPI), f. 714 op. 1, d. 1149, l. 18.

²⁴ RGAE, f. 1884, op. 31, d. 7201, l. 51. At the urging of the Stalingrad oblast party committee, they ultimately donated one of the twelve to a city cultural center.

²⁵ RGAE, f. 1884, op. 31, d. 7201, l. 518.

propuskaemost...there are huge lines to get into the bath and they are only made of up the damned directors of the city...²⁶

The three authors (who do not identify themselves) continued on to describe how the head of the city soviet together with his close friend, an official in charge of the city's alcohol supply, organized drunken revels for a tight-knit circle of comrades who, authors claimed, "will carry secrets to their graves." One kept an office safe full of quality U.S. suits, stolen from among the Allied war gifts intended for families of veterans; another, the head of the city health department, allegedly drew full salaries and benefits from six or seven different postings.

According to these writers, city leaders were occasionally forced to initiate investigations into wrongdoing for the sake of appearances, but at such moments they typically punished lower-level personages for less serious offenses in order to mask larger and more incriminating crimes. In 1945, when the leaders of the city soviet and party committee allegedly stole 36,000 rubles worth of food products from the city supply center, in order to turn the attention of higher-ups away from the incident (*dlia otvoda glaz*), a state trade inspector filed an anodyne report referring vaguely to an illegal appropriation of goods, and the city procurator issued a pro-forma slap on the wrist to those involved, warning them not to repeat such actions in the future. Meanwhile, authors wrote, the director of the City Food Production "continues to make house visits [delivering bribes] to all those who are useful to him, and, as for himself, he continues to feed even his pigs the finest grade of grain."

Ordinary people, the writers conclude, are reluctant to speak out against members of such an insular elite, especially as investigators themselves often hesitate to make waves:

In the city soviet you don't meet laborers who have anything to say, and if there were no one would listen to them... the sessions of the city soviet are strictly for show, the *aktiv* never speaks out... In November during 43 sessions only one soviet deputy, a three-time medal winner, dared to criticize the kind of abuses described here, and now no one in the city soviet will speak to him... Communists among the workers' *aktiv* have also forgotten how to speak out, and very many Communists are without work. [You] need to assign an investigation [of the charges contained in this letter] to comrades who are capable of uncovering all this decay. Signals we relayed earlier were handed over to middle-level personages in the regional party committee for

²⁶ Harvard University microfilm collection, Commission of Party Control (Feb. 1946), op. 6, d. 556, l. 204.

verification and these people were encouraged [by city leaders] to turn a blind eye, they were given lots of presents and sent very lovingly on their way.²⁷

In this case, the Party Control Commission did launch an investigation which generated some change, although hardly the type of severe punishments one might have expected, considering that virtually all of the charges authors leveled were confirmed. Ultimately, the regional (*oblast*) party committee sanctioned the removal of the head of the city soviet and one of his deputies; however, none of the incriminated officials was arrested, expelled from the party, or tried.²⁸ But even such partial successes in protesting the conduct of local *nomenklatura* appear to have grown more and more rare over time, due, in part, to a renewed focus on “labor discipline” and workplace hierarchy at the expense of loyal criticism.

Thus the years following the end of the Second World War in many ways resemble those of 1939-1941, as Soviet authorities struggled to reign in practices of mass denunciation that had contributed to the unpredictability and self-consuming aspect of the Great Terror. During both these intervals, one sees a gradual stabilization of existing power relations and the suppression of unscripted rank-and-file opinion. In 1939, for example, all the military organizations in the Soviet Union, including the NKVD, point-blank revoked the right of subordinates to critique the performance of their commanding officers. Officials announced that “in the interest of discipline, criticism of defects in a commander’s and [political] commissar’s performance would... instead be considered and discussed at the next higher level of command.”²⁹ Communist officers in Nizhnii Novgorod further encouraged their colleagues to hold their tongues in 1940, by pronouncing that “none of us has the right to discuss orders given by the Chief of Police.” Meanwhile, workers fell under uncomfortable scrutiny from above. One can trace this shift in power relations in party meeting transcripts and newspaper headlines. At the height of the Terror in 1938, for example, editors of a police newspaper in Nizhnii Novgorod published an article demanding that leading regional NKVD and party officials

²⁷ Ibid., 208.

²⁸ Ibid., 211.

²⁹ Roger Reese, “The Red Army and the Great Purges,” in *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, J. Arch Getty and Roberta Manning, eds. (1993), 212.

be punished for the poor construction of a police dormitory and the abject conditions residents had consequently been forced to endure. In 1940, in contrast, a similar article about the dormitory blamed not authorities but “ungrateful” residents for the squalor, charging them with spoiling a quality living space by sleeping on their beds in dirty boots, failing to throw away their empty vodka bottles, and allowing portraits of Stalin and other leaders to collect dust.³⁰ As the chief of police stated that same year, while he was not opposed to “criticism from below” in principle, he failed to see why this criticism should focus primarily on leaders when there were “so many insufficiencies within the rank and file.”³¹

Similarly, in the post-war years, and particularly after 1947, employees who dared complain about their superiors were most often subject to intimidation and harassment, and the tone of public meetings – such as those held before Supreme Soviet elections – grew far more muted over time. Party and state officials inside the same organizations frequently joined forces to silence criticism, prompting control officials and workers alike to note the inclination of leaders “not to hang each other’s dirty laundry out to air” or “not to let arguments out of the family hut.”³² In 1951, for example, the Moscow City Party Committee referenced an incident where the chief of police and the head of the city police party cell had worked together to remove entire press runs of successive editions of the police newspaper *Na boevom postu*, because they included critical observations about the metropolitan police administration.³³

Newspaper coverage, in general, grew increasingly circumspect. In contrast to both the early 1930s and the later Khrushchev era, leaders during the postwar Stalin years were almost never mocked in cartoons or satires, and news of wrongdoing within the Communist elite, even following judicial convictions, was only selectively approved for publication. At a Moscow meeting to discuss the role

³⁰ “Priniat’ mery po uluchsheniiu byta,” *Na strazhe*, 20.12.38, (51:269), 4. Compare to “V obshchezhitii nado podderzhiat’ poriadok” from 21.6.40 (23:354), 4.

³¹ GOPAN, f. 817, op. 1, d. 69, l. 76.

³² Jones, 311.

³³ Sovetskaia politicheskaia kultura, 75.

of newspapers internal to the police, a few editors complained about these rules of silence. One regional editor recounted how, after he printed an unsigned feuilleton about corruption inside his district, Soviet central police authorities in Moscow phoned his *oblast* party committee one week later, to announce that the author had “made a mistake.” As a result, a party meeting was called, allegedly to discuss the feuilleton, but according to the editor, in actuality to discredit the people involved in its publication. “They spent most of their time talking about the dubious affairs of the editorial board, about the editors, but not about the article,” the speaker claimed. He said he was ultimately issued a party rebuke for “immodest behavior” in relation to some manufactured, unrelated offense and advised to avoid such controversy in the future.³⁴

Another editor from Kazakhstan described how he had tried to publish a satirical paper exclusively for police workers in Alma-Ata, including, in a discussion of police efforts to battle debauchery, such things as a sketch of a police officer embracing a vodka bottle and jokes about officers watering down confiscated spirits after themselves consuming a sizeable percent. The editor said that he had printed only two issues of 40 copies each, before running into problems from the Central Committee of Kazakhstan, which objected to his ironic tone, forbade future publications, and issued him a rebuke. Such attitudes, the officer remarked, made it impossible to compose anything but sycophantic articles:

We here all speak about criticism, that it is necessary to find space for sharp critical material in papers and it is absolutely correct that... in our paper in the current year there has been very few critical articles, but our bosses don't especially want to air their disputes outside the home (*vynosit' sor iz izby*); they say wouldn't it be better to focus on something positive.³⁵

The head of the Political Division of the central Soviet militia administration responded by stating firmly that no publications, however exclusive their audience, could be permitted to discredit the socialist regime. Communists, he said, “cannot allow” such unflattering portraits (such as that of policeman holding a vodka bottle), even in the name of self-criticism. Echoing a tenet of socialist

³⁴ GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 516, l. 79.

³⁵ GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 516, l. 144.

realism, the Political Division chief said that editors must not focus on insufficiencies as that exist in the present, but rather should show lives and careers in their ideal form, as they should be, and “talk about such evils [as alcoholism] as relics of the past.” His comments reflect the secrecy with which the Soviet regime addressed any kind of persistent social problem, and its ambivalence about whether the interests of the state were best served by acknowledging troublesome facts or denying their existence. In this case, the Political Division chief said that, as part of a USSR-wide temperance campaign, the Central Committee had approved one realistic poster, showing an intoxicated citizen in front of his apartment, as his wife, with two children, shuts the door in his face. But even this poster, the speaker continues, “is only being printed for closed circulation, for hanging in prison sobriety cells, in laboratories, and other appropriate places, but not for broad distribution.”³⁶

Closing the Door on Control from Below

This gradual muffling of public discussion of elite corruption was matched, inside the regime, by new practices of control. This shift is evident in the evolution of the Ministry of Soviet Control, an agency that in the first months after the Second World War strove zealously to uncover scandal. In 1946, its leader, Lev Mekhlis, went so far as to send an exasperated letter to the top party and state officials in the republic of Ukraine, criticizing his own inspectors for their laxity in pursuing administrative wrongdoing. His lengthy memo told of controllers appropriating leather coats, suits, boots, alcohol, and food from organizations they were supposed to be investigating, organizing nighttime orgies, and systematically receiving bribes, and it ended by asking them to remove the Ukrainian Minister of State Control.³⁷

But Mekhlis’ attitudes, however, would change over time. In urging his deputies to be more vigilant, he appears to have antagonized a host of powerful officials. As one historian explains, his Ministry:

³⁶ GARF, f. 9415, op. 3, d. 516, l. 145.

³⁷ GARF, f. 8300, op. 2a, d. 32, l. 1-8.

...managed to dig out and bring to Stalin's notice within two or three years [of the war's ending] "cases" against many bosses in Moscow and in the republics. Quite a few ministries – finances, railways, and defense – were offended. Mekhlis even boasted that "in the central administration of the armed forces, the prestige of the ministry of state control is great, in short, our controllers are feared." Perhaps more than anyone else, Mekhlis went too far in his desire to be useful for Stalin. He antagonized influential people in the power-elite. A commission was launched to examine "cadre work" in his ministry, in other words, to find out weaknesses in his domain."³⁸

Subsequently, the place of surveillance and investigatory work plummeted in prestige. Controllers' secondary status manifested itself in low pay, overcrowded offices, and miserable living conditions, far below those of colleagues inside the ministries they purported to oversee.³⁹ At a Moscow meeting in 1952, one senior inspector mentioned his shame at having to take two officials from the Fish Production Ministry to eat lunch with him, after they had been going over figures in his office for several hours. "Knowing our buffet I grew terribly embarrassed... Fortunately, it turned out we had some new bread that day." He said that, in comparison, the Fish Production Ministry boasted two luxurious cafeterias. "Not only do they have a wide assortment of food, but there it is actually pleasant to eat, it smells of freshness. But by us things are still the same as they were during the war, in 1943."⁴⁰

Above all, many of the Ministry's employees deplored what they saw as an increasing number of regulations designed to undercut the authority and limit the mandate of controllers inside state organizations. Their own Ministry, they said, had become far more hierarchical; issues to investigate had to be assigned from above, and inspectors on the ground were not allowed to initiate inquiries, follow-up on accidental discoveries of dubious activities, or even write down facts pertaining to ministers and department heads without special government permission.⁴¹ Bosses inside the factories

³⁸ In N. V. Romanovsky and Zafar Imam, *Russia under High Stalinism: The Last Phase of Stalin's Rule, 1945-1953* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1995), 138/139. Quotation cited from RGANI, f. 386, op. 1, d. 70, l. 18.

³⁹ GARF, f. 8300, op. 1, d. 699, l. 18.

⁴⁰ GARF, f. 8300, op. 1, d. 701, l. 21-22.

⁴¹ GARF, f. 8300, op. 1, d. 687, l. 20; f. 8300, op. 1a, d. 9, l. 100.

and departments where controllers worked did not hesitate to resist appeals for information or thwart verification campaigns on those grounds, demanding that the Moscow Ministry of State Control sanction in advance every action or request their subordinates made. Controllers bemoaned the fact that they had no way of holding top managers accountable and could not answer such resistance. “What was left for [us] to do? Turn around and leave,” said one, recounting a fruitless meeting with a deputy director.⁴²

Above all, the Ministry was forced to abandon former tactics of popular control, which had involved mobilizing members of the rank-and-file in efforts to expose top-level abuse. Taking quite a different tone than he had in earlier years, in 1948 Mekhlis met with Soviet leaders in order to apologize for the performance of the newly appointed head of Soviet Control in the republic of Azerbaijan. Upon arriving in Baku, this deputy had been assigned a specific accounting problem to investigate; however, instead of restricting himself to the investigative parameters assigned by Moscow, he had allegedly begun “on his own initiative, without any instructions,” to receive petitioners and read through popular complaints. Although such practices had been ubiquitous in the 1930s, in 1948 Mekhlis blamed them for fomenting an intolerable degree of chaos. To make matters worse, the minister had – shamefully, Mekhlis implied – begun to trust the “scurrilous” accusations of the dubious riff-raff that besieged his office more than the party/state officials who surrounded him and who had rendered the Soviet government many years of service:

The head of inspection Emelianov and other controllers from the Ministry set out on the wrong path, using politically damaging methods of inspection, which included showing special attentiveness to unreliable petitioners (*somnitelnye zhalobsbchiki*). Through this they continued on the anti-party path of discrediting the most senior party and soviet workers of Azerbaijan, preparing and organizing materials against them, which created an unhealthy atmosphere around the inspection.⁴³

This Emilianov had, Mekhlis concluded, “intentionally shown mistrust towards the leaders of the Central Committee and Council of Ministers of Azerbaijan and conducted himself in relation to them,

⁴² GARF, f. 8300, op. 1, d. 701, l. 20, 23.

⁴³ GARF, f. 8300, op. 1a, d. 9, l. 114.

as if to people on trial,” forgetting that controllers were obliged to treat fellow bureaucrats not as aliens or enemies, but as trusted colleagues and friends (*rodnye nashi liudi*). In another violation of post-WWII procedures, the renegade Minister had himself hired a number of “unofficial” informants to further collect evidence against an array of local leaders – prompting them to join forces and contact Moscow, demanding a halt to investigations and the Minister’s dismissal.

In describing the actions of his subordinate to his critics, Mekhlis’ comments dripped disdain for the strategies of popular control that prevailed during the First Five Year Plan and Great Terror years. As he concluded:

The fact that the inspection team had begun to listen to complaints quickly became known throughout Baku. Lines began to form. It is typical, that initially, for the first eight to ten days there were *no* complaints from the populace, but as soon as [news of] this heightened official concern for [whiners] began to circulate, as soon as some people began to obtain residence permits and medical treatment and work reinstatement, complainers began to flock to the Ministry in droves...I must say that to this day these complainers still persist in congregating...they won’t go away, they keep banging on the windows of the Ministry of State Control in Azerbaijan.”⁴⁴

This case clearly emphasizes the most important ingredients of the late-Stalin era “Big Deal.” These included a deepening alliance between officials at all levels, a willingness to turn a blind eye to self-enrichment, and a deep suspicion of little people and their motives. Denunciation, once lauded as a virtuous civic activity, the preserve of “daring” people willing to risk their own comfort, began to be described inside the bureaucracy in far more contemptuous terms. Whereas the rhetoric of the 1930s had celebrated the role of every Soviet citizen as a voluntary informant, by 1948 agencies shied away from “amateur” or community-based surveillance activities. In Azerbaijan, Mekhlis claimed that the organization of a cadre of unverified, untrained informants had “enabled gossip, careless conversation, bias, and the spreading of all kinds of sensational stories.”⁴⁵ In other incidents,

⁴⁴ GARF, f. 8300, op. 1a, d. 9, l. 106-107, 115.

⁴⁵ GARF, f. 8300, op. 1a, d. 9, l. 103.

inspectors were faulted for trusting the “wrong” people, and for taking the word of even “gossipy women” over those of officials.⁴⁶

Even organizations such as the political police that continued to rely on informant activity over the course of the postwar period came to do so in a much more structured and organized way. In meetings within the central police administration to discuss this issue, officers argued that the “excesses” of the Terror had resulted from an over-reliance on volunteer vigilantism, and they mocked the hiring practices of the 1930s, when they claimed hordes of housewives had been taken on as NKVD informants after writing on applications nothing more professional than statements such as: “I could help ascertain those who speculate in bread, because I spend a lot of time standing in lines.”⁴⁷

Officers inside the Anti-Speculation Unit advocated, instead, the cultivation of cadres who would be dependent on and subordinate to their minders, provided with fixed assignments rather than set them loose to comment on whatever activities they deemed suspicious. “Politically reliable” informants, they said, were generally capable only of fingering the most petty of criminals; the most seemingly dedicated volunteers, they claimed, were often the most useless, “deadweights” who clung to their security service connections and accompanying material benefits or who were fired from the rolls as “ballast,” only to offer their services again and be rehired.⁴⁸ Officers called for a “fundamental reconceptualization” of agent work, demanding the creation of a spy network made up of “criminal elements and personages tied to them” in order to penetrate the machinations of an increasingly complex black-market underworld.⁴⁹

In order to achieve this aim, officers repeatedly urged that more and better use be made of “compromising materials” in order to recruit agents, and that a more efficient pay scale be introduced to reward them (with compensation not constant, but linked to the quality and quantity of information

⁴⁶ GARF, f. 8300, op. 3a, d. 9, l. 15.

⁴⁷ GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 87, l. 47.

⁴⁸ GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 87, l. 7.

⁴⁹ GARF, f. 9415, op. 5, d. 88, l. 6; d. 89, l. 4.

provided). Both memoirs and archival documents suggest the accelerated evolution after 1945 of strategies for forcing cooperation from sources the Ministry of Internal Affairs deemed worthwhile.⁵⁰ The political police developed a virtual science of blackmail in the post-war years, touting in MVD textbooks as exemplary, cases of investigative work organized around carefully supervised schemes of entrapment, seduction, and monitoring through wiretaps or other technological devices. One such example was entitled “Orientation in Methods” and began with the case of one agent “L” who found suspicious evidence surrounding a family’s apartment, indicating that its members were illegally printing labels from the Stalin State Chemical Factory in Moscow for bootleg containers of homemade dye:

Monitoring of the house showed that in the apartment of the Ianulinasov family was living their maid “R,” with whom, as it turned out, agent “L” was acquainted. In connection to this, the agent was assigned. . . to entangle R in an intimate relationship, to gain her confidence, to incline her to him, and, through her, to discern the criminal activity of the [family]. In one of her conversations with the agent, R said that she was living at the Ianulinasov’s without a residence permit. After a study of the personal characteristics of R we decided to use this circumstance for her recruitment. Operational workers planned and carried out a secret summons and interrogation of R. At the interrogation, R confirmed that she lived at the Ianulinasov’s as a maid without a residence permit and simultaneously gave detailed accounts of several facts of their criminal activity. On the basis [of that evidence] R was recruited as an agent with the goal of further investigation of the designated suspects. The recruitment of R turned out to be a success. Soon she had determined that Ianulinasov and his wife possessed three counterfeit label-making machines, with the help of which every day they prepared from two to three thousand packages of counterfeit dye and earned from 130-200 rubles for every thousand pieces.⁵¹

These developments in surveillance practice after 1945 did not mark an abrupt break with those that had preceded them; in some ways, rather, they legitimated tactics that had been in use for

⁵⁰ In his memoirs, Anatoli Granovsky – himself recruited from prison in 1939 under Beria to work secretly for the political police - recounts an operation he was involved in during the post-war period to plant double agents in the West, by selecting “refugee types of non-Soviet nationality, and [evacuating] them across the western frontiers into the hands of the western allies.” Carefully orchestrated spy “recruitment” sessions were staged in an isolated “safe house” surrounded by vineyards and based on bribery and entrapment – involving threats to separate and starve married couples if they refused to cooperate or to retaliate against other family members inside the Soviet Union if they tried to back out of their spy commitments once abroad. In I Was an NKVD Agent (1962), 243, 244.

⁵¹ GARF f. 9415, op. 5, d. 87, l. 144. Ironically, despite the fact that 22 people were ultimately arrested in this operation, the political police never did find who supplied the dye and how.

decades. But at the same time, they resolved a tension that had characterized most of the 1930s and particularly the Great Terror years. That decade had seen parallel and interrelated developments towards collective, vigilante activism and outspoken, often strident criticism, on the one hand, and secret forms of surveillance, on the other. Post-WWII authorities, however, abandoned the more horizontal principles of popular control, with its emphasis on voluntarism, universal amateur involvement, and fanatical enthusiasm for party aims, in favor of a vertical, far more calculated, system of information supply, in which official “handlers” manipulated designated “sources” in order to achieve precisely delineated, predetermined operational “objectives.”

Two-Tiered Justice

For ordinary people, the post-war period was one of tremendous want, brutally hard work, and subordination to rigorous central decrees designed to discipline the workforce and check any outbursts of possible disaffection.⁵² Conditions compelled virtually all citizens to engage in some form of small-scale subversive activity (above all stealing state property and selling it on the black market) in order to survive.⁵³ Such actions, however, carried a not insignificant degree of risk. In 1947, authorities initiated a campaign against theft that required judges to level astronomical penalties against even first-time offenders, who suddenly faced up to ten years instead of a maximum three months in jail.⁵⁴ Yoram Gorlizki has shown that while this campaign resulted in only a fleeting rise in numbers of theft cases heard before the courts, the sentences imposed on the approximately quarter of a million people convicted annually were far higher after 1947 than before.⁵⁵ This increasing severity, however,

⁵² These include draconian (although arbitrarily enforced) sets of labor laws limiting worker mobility and severely punishing absenteeism and a system of quasi-indentured servitude for young people seeking employment. In Donald Filtzer, Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism: Labor and the Restoration of the Stalinist System after WWII (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵³ Julie Hessler refers to “survivalist strategies” of black-market participation in A Social History of Soviet Trade: Trade Policy, Retail Practices, and Consumption, 1917-1953 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁵⁴ Yoram Gorlizki, “Rules, Incentives and Soviet Campaign Justice after World War II,” Europe-Asia Studies 51:7 (1999), 1250.

⁵⁵ Gorlizki, 1261 and 1262.

seems to have most affected those lowest down on the social scale, citizens bereft of what in mafia slang is termed a “roof.”

In contrast, Communists in positions of authority who fell under investigation could generally count on both the party and their relevant ministries to take on something of this “roof” function, in protecting them from prosecution. Elite solidarities, combined with the changing role of primary party organizations inside the workplace, contributed to the development of a two-tiered, status-based system of justice in the post-WWII Soviet Union – cushioning the *nomenklatura*, but providing ordinary people with little defense from the actions of those above them. During the 1920s and 30s, party cells had functioned in a very different fashion; from the earliest days of the Revolution, they had been assembled inside workplaces in order to counterbalance bureaucratic authority, monitor performance, and, on occasion, terrorize those in positions of administrative power (even when those officials were Communists themselves). In theory, if not always in practice, party secretaries and administrative bosses were required to maintain a certain distance from one another, with party leaders organizing management self-criticism sessions, publishing wall papers, and processing rank-and-file complaints. During the Terror evidence of friendship could lead to charges of “loss of vigilance” or even arrest, as in the Nizhnii Novgorod police force, when the oblast police party secretary was condemned and later imprisoned for his close personal ties to the region’s chief of police, who had been arrested several months earlier. “Proof” of their suspect attachment included the fact that the secretary had played cards at the chief’s house and suffered a seizure upon his arrest.⁵⁶ After the war, in contrast, party officials actively collaborated with administrators in limiting the autonomy of the rank-and-file, carefully scripting who spoke and what they said in meetings and often (according to many controllers) hampering investigations of management wrongdoing. As Peter Solomon has noted, “a party secretary was more likely to be reprimanded by his superiors for failing to anticipate and prevent trouble than to be praised for discovering it.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ GOPAN, f. 817, op. 1, d. 64, l. 89.

⁵⁷ Peter Solomon, “Soviet Politicians and Criminal Prosecutions: The Logic of Party Intervention,” in James Millar, ed. *Cracks in the Monolith: Party Power in the Brezhnev Era* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1992), 18.

Party organizations stretching all the way up to the central Commission of Party Control often chose to limit scandals rather than to unearth their full details. In a typical case in 1947, the Commission declined to investigate a complaint from a supply agent in a county trade department, who claimed to have been scapegoated by county leaders, after they threw a party in a restaurant and wasted 7000 rubles of state money. To cover up the affair, he said he had been ordered to sign a fictitious document attesting to the raikom's procurement of 3200 rubles worth of potatoes. For this, he had been sent to jail but the relevant party officials had gone untouched.⁵⁸ In many incidences of alleged corruption that involved the word of one communist official against another, the Commission simply decided to abandon the case without either resolving who was to blame or apportioning any punishment.⁵⁹ "We consider that in these conditions it will not be possible to confirm which of them is saying the truth," one file concluded. "We suggest, as a result, to close the investigation and consign the report to the archives."

During the Great Terror, the Central Committee had issued a set of secret party rules mandating that no Communist could be arrested or handed over to the courts without prior written permission from the appropriate party committee.⁶⁰ However, these decrees had been meant only to ensure that party leaders would be able to expel Communists facing imminent arrest from their ranks before they were taken into custody. After the war, however, party leaders came to use these same secret rules to delay, if not outright prevent, unwanted judicial actions against CPSU members.⁶¹ In 1951, the Procurator of Kazakhstan bitterly criticized the consequences of these party prerogatives in a letter to the head of the Republic's Central Committee. He claimed that a number of heads of

⁵⁸ RGANI, f. 6, op. 6, d. 1608, l. 23.

⁵⁹ RGANI, f. 6 op.6 d. 1586, l. 3; f. 6, op. 6, d. 1600, l. 29

⁶⁰ Solomon, 8.

⁶¹ The position of Soviet bureaucrats after WWII thus came ever more to resemble that of NSDAP officials in the Third Reich. According to Frank Bajohr, in Nazi Germany, the party had always been anxious to preserve its autonomy and to limit the rights of other organizations to investigate its doings or take its members to court. He writes that "public prosecutors were explicitly forbidden to independently pursue tips [of wrongdoing] as well as to confiscate account books and papers of the NSDAP. The courts in their verdicts were thus to rely completely on documents provided by the NSDAP Reich Protection Minister and the reports of his own accountants." In corruption cases, especially, Nazi authorities frequently insisted on their right to regulate matters internally and apply punishment outside the courts. Bajohr, 151-2, 158.

country (*raion*) and regional (*oblast*) party committees took Communists accused of crimes “under their protection,” giving them party “rebukes” but forbidding their arrest:

All of this creates lengthy red tape in the investigation of criminal cases, especially those involving groups where several people are accused. Citizens who are not party members and who are involved in such cases are arrested, but Communists who have committed crimes remain at liberty only because the party organs do not allow them to be arrested and tried, which cannot help but arouse justified condemnation among the surrounding population...⁶²

Commission of Party Control files also demonstrate how Communists, particularly those inside powerful ministries such as Internal Affairs, could generally escape arrest, even when investigators acknowledged abuse. In those rare instances where the CPC did recommend prosecution, a number of elaborate protective mechanisms and lengthy procedures still had to be overcome in order to finally get a case involving such high-placed officials to court. In one instance, the head of a county MVD division was accused of beating suspects who refused to confess to stealing grain, including a girl whom he hit so badly that she suffered a seizure and was hospitalized for a week. Although his attacks were confirmed by three of his subordinates in 1949, the Moscow Party Control Commission received the case only in late 1951, due to efforts on the part of a variety of authorities to limit the officer’s punishment (efforts, however, which seem to have met with equally determined attempts on the part of the Soviet judicial apparatus to continue to push for criminal prosecution). Initially the county party committee issued the officer a rebuke, and later the regional party committee fired him from his MVD leadership post; nevertheless, such sanctions failed to appease the regional Military Procurator who in December 1949 contacted Moscow to ask that the officer be taken to court. This request had to work its way up to the highest government levels, until finally, eight months later, the General Procurator of the USSR submitted a petition for the officer’s arrest to the Soviet MVD chief, who first ordered an internal investigation before ultimately agreeing to hand over the officer in question. Nevertheless, no arrest was carried out, and in December of 1950 the regional party committee again tried to block prosecution by taking up the case a second time, issuing the

⁶² GARF, f. 8131, op. 32, d. 13, l. 15.

officer a “strict rebuke,” but concluding that “to try him for the violations of legality he committed would not be fruitful, considering a great deal of time has passed, and he has more than 20 years of service in the organs.”⁶³ Their verdict meant that the case was again sent back to Moscow authorities, this time to the Commission of Party Control. The CPC agreed to allow the officer to face charges, although the final outcome on the ground remains unknown.

In another case, a former county MVD chief was accused by a member of his own police force of summarily shooting several citizens without investigation (including one juvenile whom the chief dragged from the boy’s home and executed on his doorstep) during a hunt for a gang of bandits in February of 1945; following a subsequent shootout with the gang, he ordered his men to set fire to a small village, destroying, among others, several homes belonging to families of Red Army soldiers. An internal investigation by the MVD confirmed these allegations; however, the case still had to pass up to the level of the USSR General Procurator, who had, again, to request formal permission from the USSR Minister of Internal Affairs to prosecute the case. The officer in question was eventually sentenced in March 1947 to ten years’ imprisonment, but even then he was allowed to file a protest against the relevant regional procurator, who consequently had to endure a lengthy investigation, first conducted by his own organization, then by the Party Control Commission, before being cleared.⁶⁴

These more or less successful prosecutions appear to have been the exception, rather than the rule. In an analysis of the vast amount of stealing taking place from alcohol and food industries, party officials in Moscow concluded that local procurators and members of the MVD did not attempt to verify the vast majority of complaints they received but rather “sent them back to the very same organizations against whom the authors were complaining.”⁶⁵ Meanwhile, inside these organizations, officials frequently acted to protect their own. Moscow leaders noted that in the rare cases where a complaint was looked into:

⁶³ RGANI, f. 6, op. 6, d. 1576, l. 30-39.

⁶⁴ RGANI, f. 6., op. 6, d. 1576, l. 5-6.

⁶⁵ RGANI, f.. 6 op. 6 d. 1 l. 29.

...even then when the facts of stealing were confirmed and it was necessary to take the guilty to court, the Ministry of Food Production and the main departments confined themselves to transferring the administrative workers of various enterprises and trusts to other enterprises, where they continued to live lawlessly (*tvorit' bezzakoniia*). For example, the former director of the Moldavian trust, Stepanov, who earlier had been fired from work and expelled from the party for black-market selling of vodka and other abuses, was chosen to head a division of Glavspirt in October of 1947; Slepsov, removed from his position as director of Khovrinskii spirit warehouse for releasing a large amount of spirit without sanction, in 1948 was promoted to the position of Glavspirt senior inspector....Workers in the procuracy during their investigation of the stealing of alcoholic spirits have not taken the main thieves to court – the directors of factories – but have instead arrested the little people who executed the thievery – rank-and-file factory workers. In all of the cases, members of the procuracy have violated Soviet legality, covered up material about hidden crimes, and a number themselves have illegally received alcohol [as bribes].⁶⁶

This division of Soviet society into two groups – those subject to the law and those whose networks of protection helped place them outside it – is reflected in almost any corruption investigation during the postwar period. In 1947, controllers in one ministry succeeded in uncovering, over the course of the year, “damage to the state” totaling more than 200,000 rubles, embezzlement of 1,138 thousand rubles, and illegal stockpiles of surplus materials worth 4,124 thousand rubles; yet during this same time they turned only three party members over to the procuracy.⁶⁷ An analysis of state control around this same time mentioned the tendency of administrators to condone corruption on the part of their deputies. “Upper-level directors often encourage and cover up the illegal activity of their subordinates,” the document reads. Directors allowed such surreptitious activities as the “making of repairs at state expense of their personal apartments and cars” or the “release at wholesale prices, and sometimes entirely for free” of food products and construction materials “for building personal dachas or houses for qualified workers under their command.” The report faulted ministry officials for their excess liberality even in cases of more egregious abuse, contending that “they don’t even like to transfer workers, and instead of turning the guilty over to the courts, they will limit themselves to leveling an internal disciplinary rebuke.”⁶⁸ An officer in the Uzbekistan police, during

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ GARF, f. 8300, op. 3a, d. 9, l. 17.

⁶⁸ GARF, f. 8300, op. 1, d. 347, l. 59.

an investigation of the militia's anti-speculation unit in 1952, similarly observed that those who broke the rules inside the force generally received nothing worse than "a pat on the head." For systematic drinking, one officer got a warning; for beating citizens, a five-day internal garrison arrest; for taking bribes, dismissal. "In the Fifth Police Division of Tashkent for seven years the boss of the central market was for all intents and purposes the police officer Rasulov, to whom everyone paid an 'offering.' He organized trade in meat at the market... On the side, he worked as a chef at all the national festivals...Through criminal methods he procured two houses and one dacha. For those crimes he was fired from work but not handed over to the courts."⁶⁹

Conclusion

From 1917 to 1953, one can trace a series of shifts in the rules governing investigation of bureaucratic wrongdoing across the Soviet Union. In the early 1920s, for instance, hosts of amateur inspectors were encouraged to show initiative in uncovering crime inside the Soviet administration. As Peter Holquist has noted, the political police during the Soviet Civil War went so far as to stress to informants that "it was not enough merely to describe attitudes; they should also 'indicate what explains' them."⁷⁰

By the time of the Great Terror, leaders such as Nikolai Antipov, head of the Commission of Soviet Control, contended that that informant-investigators could not be allowed to limit themselves to abstract analyses of workplace shortcomings, but were obliged to point fingers, assign guilt, and name names in their findings. Such duties, he noted in 1936, made it difficult for his organization to find good low-level cadres, for many people were unhappy with what the center expected from them:

It's obvious that it's highly unpleasant [for a person involved in control work] that in order to enforce the fulfillment of one or another decrees, he must thoroughly expose

⁶⁹ GARF f. 9415, op. 5, d. 124, l. 73, 74.

⁷⁰ Peter Holquist, "Information is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work," *Journal of Modern History* 69:3 (1997), 431.

shortcomings and reveal the reasons for these shortcomings, and when these shortcomings have been exposed and these reasons revealed, then, of course, the matter is not an abstract one, and [a controller] is required to point to concrete people who directed the work; he is required to draw the appropriate conclusions, and of course, this is not a pleasant thing to have to do... [Inspectors] are dissatisfied... some [inspectors] send letters here, some send letters to me and to the Central Committee, asking to be released from their [control responsibilities], even for just six months, asking to be left alone... and they ask not because we've heavily presumed upon them, but just simply because control is not an especially pleasant thing.⁷¹

During the post-war period, however, many officials inside the control apparatus expressed frustration about the opposite condition – their inability to conduct more than superficial investigations or to confront local authorities. On the ground, they were blocked from reporting many of the things they saw and repeatedly warned not to discredit representatives of the Soviet regime. When their investigations, in the eyes of superiors, “went too far,” they were chastised for what Moscow termed their tendency “to heap together a pile of negative facts and hurl them all onto the head of one or another department or individual.”⁷²

In the months just after Stalin's death, former members of State Control actually waxed nostalgic for the 1930s, including the Great Terror years, recalling them as a time when their own organization had been truly powerful due to its ability to mobilize millions of ordinary citizens in the battle against clandestine bureaucratic corruption. We can see such attitudes, for instance, in a spectacular assessment meeting convened by the Ministry of State Control in early 1954, to which organizers invited a significant number of former control work alumnae to speak with current ministry employees. All those who made comments deplored the state of Soviet control in the post-WWII years, as compared to what they described as its 1930s glory.

What these alumnae recalled with greatest fondness was their agency's past ties to the Soviet people. “Now our attitude towards [volunteer] signals is a formal one,” commented one speaker. “We act as if we only trust [officials], as if we're surrounded by alien and hostile people... But back then, everything very much rested on ordinary people, on the masses, on their signals, which pointed

⁷¹ GARF, f. 7511, op. 10, d. 18, l. 10.

⁷² GARF, f. 8300, op. 1a, d. 9, l. 95.

to disorders and shortcomings in the work of the state *apparat*.⁷³ Guests urged their younger colleagues to return to what they described as the unparalleled civic energy of the Great Terror years. “Why is there no active citizenry now?” a senior inspector demanded. “Where is the *aktiv* hiding? What happened to conscientious, good-faith (*dobrosovestnye*) people? Conscientious soviet people are everywhere and we have many shoulders we could rely on. But we must admit that we ourselves are to blame for having alienated this *aktiv* in recent years and driven these good citizens away.”⁷⁴

These points of view are, of course, highly idealized and sentimental, never once mentioning the violence and debasement of the era they recall. But they also reflect the fact that many controllers experienced the post-war era as a qualitatively different time – one marked by a growing chasm between self-interested leaders and society at large and a rejection, certainly in practice if not in propaganda, of the need for the latter to be able to hold the former to account. The new rules of state surveillance encouraged investigators not to dig too deeply, not to stir up scandal or disrupt hierarchies, and not to publicize the facts of any abuses they might encounter. These rules would shape the future development of the Soviet bureaucracy, laying a foundation for the partnership between organized crime and political dictatorship characteristic of the late Brezhnev years, and thwarting attempts at reform even today.

⁷³ GARF, f. 8300, op. 2, d. 1033, l. 49.

⁷⁴ GARF, f. 8300, op. 2, d. 1033, l. 63.