

How Mr Nikolaenko Beat the Soviet Mafia

Mark Harrison

University of Warwick
mark.harrison@warwick.ac.uk

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Abstract

The paper narrates the story of a pensioner's fight against a local mafia of Soviet party officials and farm managers in a remote rural locality in the mid-1950s. This struggle eventually came to the attention of officials in Moscow, who vindicated our protagonist at the expense of the local politicians. The story provides a vivid illustration of historical and political issues that arose as a centralized dictatorship that relied on mass mobilization over a vast territory with sometimes poor communications tried to contain local rent seeking without recourse to mass terror.

Keywords: Corruption, Mafia, Soviet Economy, Whistleblowing.

JEL Codes: D7, N4, P3.

* Department of Economics, University of Warwick; Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham; and Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford University. Mail: Department of Economics, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, United Kingdom. Email: mark.harrison@warwick.ac.uk. The research for this paper was carried out during the 2008 summer workshop of the Hoover Soviet Archives Research Project. I thank Christopher Burton, Robert Service, and Lynne Viola for comments and advice and the staff of the Hoover Archive for access to documents.

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Men that live in retirement under the care of their wives and daughters are often in need of occupation. This was certainly true of Mr Nikolaenko, who lived with his wife, elder daughter Valentina, and their other children near Denau where vines and cotton grow in the sunlit valley of the Surkhan Darya River, not far from the Afghan border to the south of Uzbekistan.

This was a time of great change in the public life of the Soviet Union. In 1953 Stalin died. There was a period of limited openness and honesty, known as the Thaw. After a brief struggle Nikita Khrushchev picked up the reins of power as Soviet leader; rejecting Stalin and forsaking mass terror, he began to pursue policies that could be called “Stalinism with a human face.”

Mr Nikolaenko was a civil war veteran and pensioner. In the record that we have he is described as disabled, with his disability being of the “second group”; this was an official classification that implies something serious, possibly arising from war wounds.¹ His pension was most likely compensation for disability since most Soviet rural inhabitants did not have access to an age-related retirement pension at this time. Despite this, he evidently had reasonable underlying health. He had worked as carter and storekeeper of the Communism collective farm until 1951. In retirement, he kept an allotment and went hunting and fishing to supplement his family income. His daughter Valentina also worked on the Communism farm and subsequently on the bigger farm, named after Khrushchev, created through a local merger.

Pensioner Nikolaenko was convinced that the farm was being mismanaged. With a wife and daughter to care for him and make his home he may have had plenty of time to brood, and little else to think about. In due course, time to brood became time to act. Like others in his situation, one action available to him was to write to the local press.

¹ The story is from the Hoover Archive, Documents from the Russian State Archive of Recent History (RGANI), *Fond 6, Opis 6, Delo 1706*, folios 6 to 16 (Instructor Fedorenko of the Committee of Party Control of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, report “On the results of verification of the complaint of Nikolaenko M.A. about the facts of incorrect attitude to criticism of faults in the Surkhan Darya district of Uzbekistan,” dated August 19, 1959) and 17 (Committee of Party Control member Dzhurabaev, memo to the Committee of Party Control dated October 22, 1959).

In the conditions of the Thaw, public opinion was being voiced openly again. No doubt, the newspapers received many more letters than were published. From the Surkhan Darya, many were probably from Mr Nikolaenko. With three of them, he scored direct hits.

The first letter appeared in the Uzbek republican paper *Pravda Vostoka* (Truth of the East) in March 1954, and a second in March 1956.² Letter no. 1 complained about abuses by local work brigade leader Muminov. Letter no. 2 aimed higher. It alleged that Khrushchev farm chairman Keldyev had fired the farm's agricultural technician (agronomist). It complained of abuses committed by deputy farm chairman, Alikulov. In passing, it raised suspicions about Alikulov's social origins, claiming the latter was a child of wealthy individual peasant farmers ("kulaks") deported on Stalin's orders in the 1930s when the collective farms were created. And it took aim at secretary Khaidarov of the Denau regional party committee, who had adopted an "incorrect attitude to the question of the elimination of defects" – in other words, most likely, Nikolaenko had written to Khaidarov about these issues and Khaidarov had ignored him or told him to get lost.

As for letter no. 3, published in the Surkhan-Darya district paper *Leninskoe znamia* (Lenin's Banner) in early 1958, it had complained about the poor postal service ("I'm sorry, Mr Nikolaenko, I'm certain we never received your letter"), abuses on the pig farm, insanitary maintenance of the vegetable plot, and so on.

In short, Mr Nikolaenko was getting angry. He was angry about things that he could see people doing (or not doing), and he was also angry with the people doing (or not doing) these things. We will see that a lot of his points were well founded. He wanted to let the world know – at least, the world of the Surkhan Darya. He had lots of determination, and he needed this because he faced many obstacles, usually put in his place by the people he was complaining about or their friends. Every time he hit one of those obstacles it fuelled his anger and determination and it added another target for his complaints. Finally, as a pensioner he had time and not much else to do. Or maybe his wife or daughter would have like him to do something else, but he didn't care! This was more important, and it came first. So, he kept those letters coming.

² It may help to recall the Soviet territorial hierarchy. The Soviet Union's basic constituents were *republics* – the Russian, Ukrainian, Uzbek, and other Soviet Socialist Republics. Republics were parcelled up into *districts* – for example, the Surkhan Darya district. In turn, districts were made up of *regions* – for example, the Denau region. So, USSR → republic → district → region.

As a result, Nikolaenko annoyed a lot of people. You can imagine them all telling him to shut up. Why did he have to make a fuss? All these people were pillars of the local community. They knew each other, worked together, and drank together. They were happy the way things were. They didn't want to have to change for the sake of a grumpy old man with a bee in his bonnet. All they wanted was that he should be quiet and let them be. (Probably his own wife was telling him to be quiet.) But he wasn't listening. So, they took action.

The result was a scandal that broke quietly, behind closed doors, in Moscow in the late summer of 1959. It engulfed the farm managers, party leaders, civil police, secret police, and judiciary of the Denau region and also brought the leaders of the Uzbek communist party in Tashkent to account for their subordinates' crimes and misdemeanours.

Nikolaenko's first problem was this. No matter what he complained about, nothing was done. Everyone ignored him. In the summer of 1957, he complained to the local police about assaults on his children and damage to his property. The police established the facts, but merely cautioned the culprits – the local farm managers. In September, section chief Badalov of the Denau regional party committee shared Nikolaenko's complaints with the farm leaders, but then dropped the matter. The following March the editors of *Leninskoe znamia* passed one of Nikolaenko's letters to prosecutor Alimov in Denau, but the latter filed it and forgot about it.

Nikolaenko's next problem arose when the people he was annoying decided they could ignore him no longer. I've already mentioned attacks on his family. On March 28, 1958, things took a more serious turn: farm chairman Keldyev instructed his deputy Alikulov to send the tractors in. Without warning, farm workers ploughed up his private allotment, destroyed his orchard and market garden, and blocked access to his own house. Since the inception of the collective farms, every collective farmer had retained the right to a small private allotment which provided them with the means of personal survival despite the harsh exactions of the Soviet state. An orchard and market garden were all that stood between many families and penury.

For justification Alikulov claimed that the collective farm needed to put more land under cotton, and Nikolaenko was holding more than his fair share privately. Both claims were false. Nikolaenko's share was less than the others', and the land ploughed up remained fallow through 1958. Nikolaenko now had fresh grounds for complaint. He turned to section chief Badalov of the Denau regional party committee – the same Badalov who had ignored him the previous autumn.

At this point the affair took a new and shocking turn towards conspiracy. Badalov (for the party) and Keldyev (the farm boss)

brought in the secret police in the person of the Denau regional KGB commissioner Suleimanov. The three visited Nikolaenko at home to call him out for a fistfight. The purpose of this was more sinister than just to inflict physical punishment. It was a provocation; following this, they filed a formal complaint to the effect that Nikolaenko had threatened to murder Alikulov in retaliation for ploughing up his land.

During April 1958, Suleimanov gathered other compromising documents. He sought out farm workers that had crossed Nikolaenko's path for any reason over the years and secured statements from them that Nikolaenko had threatened to murder them or people they knew. One wrote that Nikolaenko had wanted to kill him "roughly, in August 1955"; another said that Nikolaenko had "fired a rifle at him and others in the spring of 1951." (Like many men in the Soviet countryside, Nikolaenko had legal possession of a hunting rifle.) The significance of this went beyond threatening behavior. Since the assassination of the Leningrad party leader Kirov in December 1934, violence or threats of violence against party and government officials had been investigated and prosecuted by the secret police as terrorism. Suleimanov was now building a case against Nikolaenko as part of the "war on terror"!

On May 20, 1958, the Denau police confiscated Nikolaenko's rifle and arrested him. At this point there was a minor hitch: the police could not see hard evidence of a crime. Still, they understood what was expected of them; they passed the case to a local prosecutor, the same Alimov that had ignored Nikolaenko's representations just two months earlier. Alimov now indicted Nikolaenko for:

Preparation of the premeditated murder of deputy chairman of the Khrushchev collective farm, party organizer Alikulov; chairman of the collective farm and member of the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, hero of socialist labour Keldyev; first secretary of the Denau regional party committee, hero of socialist labour Khaidarov; director of the Khazarbag state farm, hero of socialist labour Zibrov; and others.

(Remember all those heroes of socialist labour. It's important later.)

The case now went outside Denau, to the Surkhan Darya regional court. Twice, the court threw the case out. The judge could see that the witnesses were all interested parties, and several allegations concerning Nikolaenko's way of life and means of support were obviously fabricated. Nikolaenko was not released, however; the case was returned to Alimov for further investigation.

Foiled in the courts, the conspiracy now took another extraordinary turn. The prosecutor sent Nikolaenko to Tashkent, the capital city of Uzbekistan. He didn't recognize his own guilt. He must be crazy! He was detained in a psychiatric clinic. (This was a decade before the

application of punitive psychiatry to Soviet political and cultural dissidents became routine.)

In Tashkent, the psychiatrists examined Nikolaenko. He was probably continuing to behave in a very annoying way – for example, he wrote “dozens” of complaints about his unjust imprisonment. But he was not crazy. The psychiatrists put their ethics before the interests of the clan of the Denau region. On December 22, 1958, Nikolaenko was released for lack of reason to detain him.

But there was no triumphant return. During his detention the Nikolaenko family was deprived of his pension; his daughter lost her job on the farm. While Mrs Nikolaenko was away visiting her husband, “unknown persons” visited their home and burned the storehouse, destroying possessions and grain. Subsequently farm chairman Keldyev ordered the house demolished on the (spurious) grounds that it was built on a site previously occupied by the farm’s mill, and was also obstructing the cotton crop.

After these events Mrs Nikolaenko threw herself on Keldyev’s mercy and asked for his protection. But she got no succour. One night in November farmworker Mukhamadi Karaev, accompanied by a gang armed with knives, paid a visit to the family to demand the Nikolaenko daughter in marriage. This was the last straw. The family fled the neighbourhood, resettling near Tashkent. Mr Nikolaenko no longer had a home to return to in the valley of the Surkhan Darya River.

For one guilty pair, retribution was speedy. In March 1959 the prosecutor of the Uzbek republic fired Denau prosecutor Alimov because of his malicious prosecution of Nikolaenko, and disciplined a local investigator. For the time being, however, the buck stopped there.

With Nikolaenko free once more, the remaining parties to the conspiracy agreed on the only possible course of action remaining to them: act as if nothing had happened. Forced to accept the illegality of his arrest, they turned their efforts to protecting each other and avoiding accountability. When Nikolaenko asked the prosecutors for compensation from the Khrushchev collective farm, they told him he would have to sue. He sought 5,350 rubles – half a year’s salary for a waged farm worker. Denying liability, the farm paid him 3,000 rubles out of court. When Surkhan Darya district prosecutor Faizylov asked the Denau regional party committee to hold the farm deputy chairman Alikulov to account for his actions, first secretary Khaidarov consigned the letter to the archive. But when the Uzbekistan republican prosecutor ordered Faizylov to hold a special inspection of the Khrushchev farm, Faizylov refused on the grounds that a routine inspection had been put on in the recent past.

At this point everybody knew what had happened – the party organizations, the prosecution service, the local police and KGB; all

were complicit or, with rare exceptions, acquiesced in it. This extended up to the level of the Surkhan Darya district party committee, which delayed action until an investigator showed up from Moscow, 2,000 miles away; the day he arrived, it resolved belatedly to condemn Mr Nikolaenko's illegal detention – and asserted in the next breath that his claims of persecution by any specific person were unfounded.

Moscow's man was Instructor Fedorenko of the Committee of Party Control. This committee, to which Mr Nikolaenko had appealed as a last resort, was the Soviet leadership's watchdog on the party, charged with investigating wrong doing and negligence by individual party members. Instructor Fedorenko reviewed the papers and interviewed the principals. It was like pulling at a loose thread: quickly, the fabric of the entire power structure of the Denau region unravelled.

Having established the facts of his ordeal, Fedorenko turned to Mr Nikolaenko's initial complaints, about which the local authorities were still in denial. Nikolaenko had objected, for example, to the Khrushchev farm being run without the services of a professional agricultural technician. The technician, who had criticized the farm managers in party meetings, had been fired while away at an agricultural show. His case of unfair dismissal had risen to the level of the Uzbek republican party central committee, which had ordered his reinstatement and reported this outcome to Moscow. Fedorenko discovered that the true outcome was the opposite of the report: the technician had not been taken back, and had been forced out of the district.

Again: the farm had passed more land and livestock than the law permitted into the private ownership of farm members. Having complained to the regional party committee that Keldyev was selling livestock to friends and relatives, a farm worker was disciplined for "slander." Fedorenko established easily that the accusation was true.

When Fedorenko delved into the facts, he found that the abuses that Nikolaenko had sought to expose were the tip of a large iceberg. As his spotlight switched away from the original allegations to the cover-up on the Denau regional party committee, Fedorenko found more and more suppressed complaints. For example, he identified several other whistle-blowers that had tried to expose faults and abuses on the Khrushchev farm and elsewhere, who had been silenced, disciplined, removed from their jobs, or lost their farm membership.

There were other striking incidents to report, several featuring regional party committee secretary Khaidarov. Remember the "heroes of socialist labour" that Nikolaenko was supposed to have planned to murder? In 1956 and 1957, Fedorenko found, Khaidarov had conspired with other local party leaders and farm managers to underreport the regional acreage under cotton. In both years they "lost" more than ten thousand acres. By reporting less land under cotton they were able to

raise the reported yield of cotton per acre, and so exceed the centre's target for the cotton yield. Their reward was to create a certain number of local "heroes of socialist labour." This practice was not exactly a secret. Anonymous complaints had reached Moscow. Moscow passed them back to the district committee for investigation. The district committee passed them down to the regional committee, and the regional committee filed them away.

Khaidarov's personal life spilled over into his party activities – or was it the other way around? He had started a sexual relationship with party worker Miss Kobliakova, and had helped her financially. He was already blessed with a large family and his wife took exception. Mrs Khaidarova protested loudly to both the regional and district committees. Khaidarov assured everyone that the affair was over. Miss Kobliakova left the district, and no more was said about it (or her).

Khaidarov also built himself a large private residence near the Khrushchev farm with timber from the farm provided by chairman Keldyev. Underlying this was a complex exchange of favours. Khaidarov reportedly paid for the timber with cash. The construction was done by workers from the neighbouring Stalin agricultural cooperative, where Khaidarov's brother was a member. Supposedly the work done on the house paid off the work done by Khaidarov's brother on the Stalin farm. Meanwhile Khaidarov's brother built himself his own house – and then left the cooperative.

Fedorenko found that private residential construction was booming in the Denau region. The boom reflected supply and demand. On the demand side, several local farm managers and party functionaries seemed to have money to spend beyond their official means, and were putting the money into housebuilding. On the supply side, the labour and timber for housebuilding were being taken out of local farms.

What did it all mean? It is easy to see what drove demand. The Soviet economy provided few legal instruments for personal saving: cash, saving bank accounts paying low interest, and government bonds that not only paid low interest but were non-transferable and redeemable only after relatively long terms. Neither cash nor bank accounts were secure; in living memory the government had compulsorily converted both on unfavourable terms. Other instruments that were secure, such as foreign currency and precious metals and stones, were not legal. How could a family with surplus income to put aside for the future diversify its assets securely? Building a private home in a rural neighbourhood was one of the few options.

From Moscow's point of view, this undermined the plan for national economic development. Personal saving, if held in cash or at the bank, could be matched by public investments in the economic and military infrastructure. Directly or indirectly, these investments drew on the

food and materials produced by the country's farms. But if householders invested their own savings in private homes, and if the building of these homes diverted farm resources away from supplying the state with resources for public investment, the private investment was competing resources away from the state plan for public investment and so actively undermining the Soviet economy.

Fedorenko found that the Uzbek republican party central committee knew all about the private housing boom in the Denau district. The Tashkent party leaders told him that the Surkhan Darya district committee had the matter in hand. The persons responsible were now willing to transfer their homes to the social housing stock in return for compensation at the state's valuation. To pay for this, the district housing authority was currently seeking a "large" additional grant from Moscow's budget. (If allowed, this would eventually have to be paid for out of higher taxes or cutbacks in public spending somewhere else.)

Fedorenko's fact-finding also suggests how precious private residences were to the owners, with how much energy they were defended, and how those with connections could defend them. A petrol tanker driver accidentally damaged the home of a farm bookkeeper. Instead of pursuing the legal remedies available, the farm chairman held the tanker hostage, siphoning off its fuel cargo and removing its tires, until the driver had personally compensated the home owner.

One last petty abuse. Close by the Denau station one day, railway worker Aliev detained secretary for propaganda Umarov of the Surkhan Darya district party committee for trying to drive over the track at an unauthorized crossing. Umarov provoked Aliev into a bitter argument, during which the latter let slip an "uncensored expression." So Umarov had Aliev arrested for "petty hooliganism" (i.e. swearing at a party official) and imprisoned for ten days with loss of pay. Aliev's legitimate complaint rose to the Uzbek republican party central committee. Umarov gave an assurance that he had apologized to Aliev. But not so; Fedorenko found that, far from apologizing, Umarov had sought Aliev out, shouted at him, demanded a meeting of the workers to investigate the latter's misdemeanour, and was restrained from starting the scandal up all over again only by others that were present.

Fedorenko concluded with a recommendation: the next step should be to summon farm chairman Keldyev, secretary Khaidarov of the regional party committee, first secretary Khakimov of the district party committee, and representatives of the republican party and prosecution service to meet the Committee for Party Control. To judge from the record this meeting took place in the late summer. As a direct result the Uzbek republican party central committee took steps to "correct the indicated faults and punish the guilty." We do not know what that meant; the only concrete measure of punishment in the records is that

district committee secretary Umarov was reprimanded and demoted to work at a lower level as a regional party committee secretary.

Mr Nikolaenko's final victory over the party mafia of the Surkhan Darya district raises a fascinating question. What enabled this ordinary, undistinguished pensioner to triumph over the local power elite? Why did Moscow listen to him, when the local authorities were not only deaf to his complaints but conspired to break him? At this time, even after Stalin's death, the Soviet Union remained a harsh, centralized dictatorship with a censored, centralized press; the citizen's voice had no right to be heard against the decisions of the party and state. Between 1917 and 1991, millions of Mr Nikolaenkos were trampled under foot, their lives circumscribed and cut short, their hopes crushed, and their voices silenced. As long as the interests of the Soviet state were not damaged, nobody in power gave much of a damn. What made Mr Nikolaenko different?

The answer lay partly in timing; we'll come back to that. The fundamental thing was this: from Moscow's standpoint, the enemies of Mr Nikolaenko were the enemies of the state! If the state was to defend itself, it had to defend Mr Nikolaenko.

Let's go back to Stalin, a brutal and bloody tyrant but a very, very smart one. Stalin had clear goals for the country that he ruled. And he understood clearly the many tricks and stratagems that his subjects would employ to frustrate his intentions. Three or four times, Stalin had set about mobilizing the resources of the entire country into huge efforts. In the early 1930s, to industrialise the country and organize the peasants into collective farms that would supply the country's new towns and factories with bread, meat, and milk. In the late 1930s, to rearm the country against German plans to colonise the East. In the early 1940s, to fight off Hitler's devastating surprise attack, rebuild the armed forces, and conquer Germany. And, in the late 1940s, to build a country ruined by invasion and war into an atomic power.

At every stage, Stalin faced resistance. The obvious obstacle was the enemies he could see: the leaders abroad and at home who could turn against him. But the more challenging resistance was the enemy he could not see: the ordinary citizens. These were the millions who, as they went about their daily lives, consciously or unconsciously worked to frustrate the dictator's plans. They did this by doing what came naturally. When Moscow spoke, they nodded, then watched and waited to see how things turned out. They were slow to respond and avoided responsibility. At meetings they cheered socialism and saluted the banner of Lenin and Stalin – often sincerely. Then they went home to build their own homes and futures and those of their friends and relatives. Above all, they helped each other appear to the outside as if they were utterly loyal servants of the proletariat and heroes of socialist

labour, and this was not so hard because they did not necessarily *disbelieve*. But at heart they were just doing their best to protect themselves and their families.

All this came naturally. And they were still doing it when they became pillars of the community and joined the party, got appointed to the farm management and selected for the regional and district party committees. For them, politics was a continuation of everyday life by other means.

This strategy worked better in some places than in others. The places where it worked best of all had to be a long way from Moscow. They tended to have stable populations – most people would know each other and each other's background, and many would be related by blood or marriage. Most people knew whom they could trust; even if they didn't completely trust each other's good will, they often knew everyone's little peccadilloes and secrets to the extent that they could still rely on cooperation. Probably it worked even better where a dominant non-Russian ethnicity clearly marked insiders from outsiders. In fact, the remote valley of the Surkhan Darya had just about the ideal conditions for a local clan to work up some protection against the guys from Moscow.

To the extent that they succeeded in quietly going about their everyday business in this way, such little people could win a modest degree of security and private prosperity to which they had no legal right. As a result, in common with their neighbours, they had a lot to lose. Anyone who got in their way could become a problem for the whole community – a trouble maker. Like Mr Nikolaenko.

The main task that Keldyev and Khaidarov faced in dealing with their troublesome neighbour was to confine the matter to the Denau region, where they knew everyone and could limit the consequences. If only the repercussions could have been contained within the territory of the local power structure, they would have got away with it. The stratagem they chose, however, relied on key people outside the Denau region to collude with them. Some were willing, for example the district party committee and district prosecution service. Fatally, some were not. If only the district court had not tossed out the evidence against him for planning terrorist acts, or if the republican psychiatric service had gone along with declaring him crazy, we would never have heard from Mr Nikolaenko again.

Now think about this from the perspective of Moscow in the mid-1950s. Stalin was dead. But Stalin's problem had not gone away. His successors had the same problem of ensuring Moscow's supremacy over local communities and clans the length and breadth of that vast country, a sixth of the world's land surface, 6,000 miles from end to end. In fact, their problem was now worse than before, because they

had voluntarily thrown away Stalin's chief instrument: mass terror. Their new regime was fragile – they must have wondered, what if mass terror had been the *only* thing that was making all those millions of party members in the faraway republics, districts and regions fall in line? Stalin's successors had closed down the Gulag and purged the secret police, replacing the old ministry of state security with a new government committee under "party control": the KGB. Would this be enough to hold the country together?

For Moscow, pensioner Nikolaenko was a godsend. Unexpectedly, he had given the centre a direct line of microscopic vision into the inner working arrangements of a local power elite. That vision was alarming and comforting at the same time. Alarming, because they could suddenly see for themselves a little mafia at work, the self-protection club of the Surkhan Darya valley.

The multiplicity of local corruption would have set several alarm bells ringing in Moscow, but loudest may well have been the alarm caused by the complicity of the local KGB. This was a society without free expression or public opinion, in which everyone tried to look loyal, whatever they were actually doing or trying to do. Given that, how was Moscow to know what people really thought? Everywhere, under and after Stalin, before and above all, the secret police was the Kremlin's eyes and ears in the farm and factory, in the village hall and community centre, and on the streets. The KGB's loyalty to Moscow was a fundamental assumption.

This arrangement raised the problem: Who was Moscow? If loyalty to Moscow meant personal loyalty to the tyrant that Stalin had become, then the party leader could use the secret police any way he liked, including against the party. In moving the Soviet political system away from Stalinism, Khrushchev had taken a calculated risk. He had brought the secret police under "party control." But who was the party? The party had millions of members and was organised in every establishment and locality of Soviet society. "Party control" created scope to divide the loyalties of the secret policemen. In the Nikolaenko affair a KGB officer had gone native; he had thrown in his lot with a local clan, with the Keldyevs and Khaidarovs. If that pattern became widespread it was bad news for the Kremlin.

The comforting news for Moscow was that Mr Nikolaenko was not alone. Not everyone in this story was a crook or a time-server. There were many Mr Nikolaenkos that had been trying to speak the truth to Moscow. But each and every one of them needed Moscow's attention and support. They needed to be listened to, nourished, and defended.

One special thing about Mr Nikolaenko was that he must have had some personal commitment to all the talk from Moscow about progress and the common good, and the rules that Moscow made to promote it,

and Moscow's drive to subordinate the local community to these goals and rules. How do we know that? Not directly, of course, but we can build a guess on some odd remarks by Instructor Fedorenko.

Mr Nikolaenko was not, apparently, a party member. If he was, the report would surely have said. (Besides, as we have seen, party membership did not guarantee alignment with Moscow's goals.) But he had fought in the civil war – presumably, on the winning side. This was not the only conflict in which he had sided with Moscow.

Among Nikolaenko's original complaints against the Khrushchev farm's deputy chairman Alikulov was a reference to the latter's family origins: in the 1930s his parents had been victims of Stalin's repression of those peasants considered to be unduly wealthy – the "kulaks." Fedorenko confirms that this was in fact so, adding: "Whether Nikolaenko, as he writes, took part in the dekulakization of [Alikulov's] family cannot be established." So, it seems that Nikolaenko was trying to explain his persecution partly on the grounds that Alikulov was resurrecting a private vendetta against one of Stalin's loyal agents that dated back to the 1930s.

Consider the ethnicity of names like Alikulov, Alimov, Faisulov, Karaev, Keldyev, Khaidarov, Khakimov, and Suleimanov. Alikulov was from an Uzbek family. Nikolaenko's family origin, on the other hand, lay in the far distant Ukraine. (And so was Fedorenko's, but that is more than likely irrelevant.) Now: how on earth did a Ukrainian get involved in the dispossession of an Uzbek family in the early 1930s? Here's one possibility; call it an educated guess.

In November 1929 Stalin's Politburo launched a campaign to send 25,000 urban workers to the countryside to force the pace of farm collectivization. The total number of party activists mobilized from the cities for the war against the peasantry eventually reached a hundred thousand.³ When the battle was over, some of the hundred thousand remained, becoming the core personnel for Soviet control over the countryside. Maybe, the young Nikolaenko was one of these. If so, he would have arrived in the Surkhan Darya valley in the early 1930s, an outsider sent by Moscow to enforce the general line of the party and impose a violent "revolution from above" on the countryside. A quarter century later, he was still there.

This would explain for sure why Mr Nikolaenko never quite bonded with his Uzbek neighbours. The old man just wouldn't let himself be drawn into their little local games or endorse their petty ambitions; or perhaps they wouldn't let him in. By the 1950s the neighbours all

³ The mobilization is described by Lynne Viola in *The Best Sons of the Fatherland: Workers in the Vanguard of Soviet Collectivization*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

looked like loyal citizens, stalwarts of collective farming, and pillars of the party. But only one generation had passed since the confiscations and deportations of Stalin's "great breakthrough." Nikolaenko remembered it, and they remembered Nikolaenko. Perhaps the past wasn't over yet. Nikolaenko was getting on in years. The children of Stalin's victims were getting on with their own lives, but perhaps they did not feel much need to play fair with him if he was still making trouble for them.

Instructor Fedorenko has left us a story of everyday life in the twentieth century in a faraway valley of Soviet Uzbekistan. In the background we hear the stirring music and grand themes of an historical epic: a far flung dictatorship and its vast bureaucracy struggling to turn from mass terror to controlled repression. In the foreground a bitter, quarrelsome old man carries the sword of truth and the shield of justice against his neighbours, emerging battered but triumphant.

As for the losers, were they the corrupt, criminal mafia that Moscow feared and aimed to repress? Or simple people, scarred by their own history, keeping alive the flame of community spirit and mutual obligation, carving out a niche for themselves and their families and defending it as best they could, trying to hold up a roof against brutal, distant outsiders and to close the curtains against local spies? There's no simple answer. Possibly, they were both.