

Agents of Terror: Ordinary Men and Extraordinary Violence in Stalin's Secret Police. Vatlin, Alexander. Translated by Seth Bernstein. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780299310806

During the most extreme period of the Great Purge between 1937 and 1938, more than a million Soviet citizens were arrested or killed by the secret police. During the 1990s, the archives holding evidence of these arrests and interrogations were opened for a limited time. Through his work with the Group for the Commemoration of the Memory of Victims of Political Repression, Alexander Vatlin accessed these archives at the district level (6). These documents revealed not only widespread fabrications of crimes, but also the severity with which the police abandoned their humanity to produce quotas of arrests and protect their own interests.

Much of the archival information before World War II was either lost or destroyed, leaving Vatlin to examine countless individual case files at the district level of Kuntsevo. This approach provided the advantage of seeing the early stages of the police process. Contrary to previous historical claims, the scale of repression in the villages were at a similar level to the repression in the towns (26).

The Cheka arrested those who were suspected of being counterrevolutionaries or foreign spies. NKVD operatives used confessions as their main form of evidence. However, since many arrestees denied any guilt, the investigators resorted to fabricating their testimonies or forcing them to sign under duress (31). Additionally, authorities often used their personal acquaintances as witnesses, usually for multiple accused parties (36). But these facts do not explain the reason for the sheer number of arrests. A clue to that cause is that district-level policemen were required from above to fulfil regular quotas. If these quotas were not met, officers risked their own arrest.

This pressure provoked officers to arrest people in large numbers and obtain confessions through devious methods (42). Further, officers distributed the goods and housing of those arrested among themselves (58). This means that the motivation for arrests was a combination of self-preservation and self-indulgence.

Vatlin's *Agents of Terror* is not just a narrative history of these arrest records. What is unique about his study is that he delves into the psychology of the police making the arrests and forging the confessions. How was it possible that the Cheka could act so inhumanely? Why were they willing to falsely accuse thousands of innocent Soviet citizens? Vatlin shows that implementing these methods took a toll on the psyche of the officers, resulting in anxiety attacks and even suicides (44). As a defense mechanism, many officers adopted criminal practices. Vatlin notes, "These customs included fear-induced submission to authority, the presence of an honor code, mutual assurances, ritual division of spoils, and the use of coded language. Under these conditions of mass terror, these practices emerged in the monstrous form of disciplined atrocities" (74). This amalgam of emotions led to a "collective psychosis," which allowed for mass atrocities to take place (79).

Instead of focusing on the typical Soviet figures, *Agents of Terror* takes a detailed look at the interrogations and reports of the police at the ground level. These documents reveal that police felt pressure from outside the system to produce arrests, and these procedures were intensified by the bureaucratic chaos inherent within the system. These political and psychological forces made monsters of regular men, resulting in mass killings of Soviet citizens. While a microhistory, Vatlin's book tells a larger story. Instead of relying on faceless statistics, Vatlin uses names, pictures, and stories of real people—both officers and victims—to give life to

this tragic tale. This emotional angle makes his study unique in the history of the Great Terror and provides a much-needed human element to the existing literature in the field.

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