Supplementary Information (SI):
Career Pressures and Organizational Evil

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The Great Terror under Stalin

In the essay we describe how career pressures incentivized officials in Nazi Germany to join the Einsatzgruppen and carry out mass shootings during the Holocaust. In the following, we illustrate how Stalin exploited career pressures to get gruesome work done. The qualitative evidence stems from the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD)—the secret police that orchestrated the Soviet repression campaign against an untold number of citizens during the Great Terror. While a large literature covers the atrocities at the time, we draw on two seminal works by Gregory (2009) and Vatlin (2016b), which offer a rare glimpse into the shadowy machinery of the Soviet security apparatus.

While the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were antagonists, both dictatorships shared key characteristics. In both regimes, leaders centralized state power and based their rule on personal cult and totalitarian ideology. The leaders also came to power through a strong break with the previous system at times of difficult economic conditions. In order to enforce stability, Stalin’s Soviet Union and Hitler’s Third Reich emerged as the two most violent regimes in modern history. The Einsatzgruppen as well as the NKVD were unleashed to subdue of what Hitler and Stalin believed to be existential threats. In view of their wide range of tasks and target groups, both organizations required significant human resources which could not be satisfied by sadists alone.

Despite these similarities, both dictatorships also featured stark differences. Hitler and Stalin utilized distinct ideological programs located at opposite extremes of the ideological spectrum. Both states showed great differences in terms of economic development and educational attainments. The Weimar Republic was considered to be one of the cultural and scientific centers of Europe as a result of swift urbanisation and industrialization. In contrast, the Soviet Union had been preoccupied with a delayed industrialization of its economy and the literarization of large parts of the country’s population. Together, the similarities and differences of both cases show
that the impact of career pressures on the execution of evil is neither limited to a specific ideology nor to a certain level of economic development.

**Evil Work and Psychological Burden**

Between 1937 and 1938, the Soviet Union experienced an unprecedented wave of repression. In the attempt to destroy an alleged “fifth column,” the Stalin regime arrested 1.5 million people and sentenced roughly 700,000 individuals to death “for crimes they did not commit or for activities that could hardly be classified as crimes at all” (Bernstein 2016, xix). Beyond the arrests and executions, the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) was also responsible for disappearing over one million people in secret “mass operations.” NKVD agents not only targeted wealthy peasants or ethnic minorities but also the regime’s very elite, which included members of the Communist Party, the Red Army, and the larger Soviet bureaucracy. The purpose of the ruthless terror campaign was to build a “new social-political system and create an industrial economy” by cleansing the society from all suspicious elements (Bernstein 2016, xi).

The execution of the Great Terror consisted of horrendous crimes which came with extreme psychological burden for NKVD officials. Operations often broke the psyche of agents causing lasting depression or mental illness (Vatlin 2016a, 76). For example, officials employed in Kuntsevo District could barely “withstand the physical and psychological strain” (Vatlin 2016a, 44). Unable to cope with the filthy work, one secret police investigator reportedly shot himself in his office, while others went on permanent sick leave (Vatlin 2016a, 76). Some agents “could not stomach [the] work” and were allowed to transition to other units. Many officials categorically refused to enter the killing units in the first place (Gregory 2009, 77).
The Secret Police Organization in Charge

Similar to the Reich Security Main Office in Nazi Germany, the NKVD served as the parent organization for the Soviet criminal and secret police forces. This provided the organization with far-reaching powers, which put Stalin in constant fear of potential disobedience and collusion. To tighten control, he profoundly reorganized the NKVD shortly before the start of the Great Terror in 1937 (Gregory 2009, 96-7). After the modifications, the NKVD consisted of 65 regional offices that directly received their orders from Moscow. Yet repression during the Great Terror was far from being centralized. “Although terror operations were [centrally] planned, local executors were left with considerable discretion with respect to the number and the actual choice of victims” (Gregory 2009, 248). In this system, lower-level NKVD agents were responsible for fulfilling “arrest quotas in the city and the countryside” (Vatlin 2016a, 22). In exchange, NKVD superiors “promised impunity and promotion” to those who could deliver the required arrests and confessions (Vatlin 2016a, 5).

Recruitment and Promotions within the NKVD

Like Bruno Streckenbach in Heydrich’s Reich Security Main Office, the NKVD leadership under Genrykh Yagoda (1934-1936), Nikolai Yezhov (1936-1938), and Lavrentiy Beria (1938-1953), meticulously selected its personnel. Candidates “had to be carefully vetted; they had to be the right for the job” (Gregory 2009, 78). The goal was to choose individuals who were able to “tolerate the conditions of work [as well as the] moral qualms” (Gregory 2009, 78). The vast majority of Stalin’s lieutenants joined the NKVD from party or military posts. However, despite their horrendous tasks in the name of the communist regime, most agents were neither sadists nor ideologues (Vatlin 2016a, 73-4). Especially rural cadres had very little understanding of the regime’s political ideology and were often confused about “the particulars of Marxism-Leninism” (Vatlin 2016a, 73).
Those who participated in the Great Terror could count on lucrative rewards. For most agents serving in NKVD district offices, doing the regime’s evil work was attractive because it offered “a launching pad for their careers” thereby increasing the chances for promotion (Vatlin 2016a, 11). These promotions were highly enticing. In an otherwise egalitarian Soviet society, moving up in the NKVD hierarchy could yield a multiple of the average worker’s salary. Apart from power and influence, the so-called “Kremlin ration” promised “goods, apartments, vacations, medicine, and even more exotic benefits” unattainable to ordinary officials (Gregory 2009, 73). Together, this made service in the NKVD and the zealous participation in the Great Terror a beneficial undertaking. We next describe how those individuals disadvantaged in the struggle for lucrative promotions had a particular interest in executing Stalin’s terror campaign.

Career Pressures and the Execution of State Terror

In the words of Gregory (2009, 58), NKVD agents “were, by conventional standards, a sorry lot (...) compromised by current and past transgressions; [and] they were poorly educated.” This summary characterization of Stalin’s executioners is fully in line with the general logic of our argument that individuals with career problems have an incentive to carry out an organization’s evil deeds. In the following, we illustrate how personal shortcomings and other disadvantageous characteristics motivated Soviet officials to zealously undertake the Great Terror.

**Incompetence and Underperformance.** We have argued that individuals with poor skills or achievements have an incentive to demonstrate their value by undertaking the kind of work others want to avoid. We can clearly observe this motivation for the leaders of the NKVD. For example, Genrikh “Yagoda was poorly educated,” never attended secondary school, and unsuccessfully tried to become a pharmacist (Gregory 2009, 42). Likewise, also Yagoda’s successor—Nikolai Yezhov—completed primary school only. His “texts were full of crude errors, (...
he was a poor speaker,” and while he had taken “a one one-year course on Marxism Leninism in a Central Committee training program,” he remained “a totally ignorant man” (Gregory 2009, 43). As our argument suggests, Yagoda and Yezhov ruthlessly pursued Stalin’s repression campaign. Until today, Russian historiography refers to the Great Terror as “Yezhovschina”—the period of Yezhov.

Both incompetence and underperformance also applied to the lower-ranking personnel of the NKVD. Like Yagoda and Yezhov, most operatives working in the district offices only had primary education (Vatlin 2016a, 73). Although Stalin saw the NKVD as his central instrument of power and could have easily selected agents from a large number of well-educated university graduates, the NKVD deliberately recruited individuals with poor formal skills and knowledge (Gregory 2009, 67). Furthermore, leaders nurtured their subordinates’ fear to fall behind for the lack of performance. In 1937, Order No. 00447 officially introduced quotas of repression, which instigated fierce competition among agents and entire offices for the highest number of arrests. Each agent’s performance would now “be judged relative to the performance of others” (Gregory 2009, 249). The consequences could be observed in the competition between the district offices of Kuntsevo and Kolomna, where the head of the former told his subordinates to “produce even more arrest reports so that Kolomna would not overtake” them (Vatlin 2016a, 43). The sheer fear of underperformance pushed NKVD members to escalate violence.

Misconduct. Individuals may also come under pressure due to their tainted records. Stalin knew very well how valuable it was to have compromising material on his party and military cadres (Hüburt and Little 2021). His entire inner circle consisted of characters who could be blackmailed for their tainted records or deviant sexual preferences. Yagoda was a “notorious womanizer and gambler” and there were rumors that he had previously worked for the Tsarist secret police, “Yezhov was an alcoholic and bisexual,” and “Beria had a predilection for underage girls” (Gregory 2009, 46). Stalin allegedly kept records on these personal missteps in his safe, which
he could pull out at any time, should a NKVD head refuse to go along with the terror campaign.

Tainted records also pressured mid-level and low-ranking agents to do evil work. Some operatives had been members of anti-Bolshevik parties, while others had been involved in crime or corruption (Gregory 2009, 272). In the district of Kuntsevo, for example, most men “had pasts filled with serious mistakes at previous positions” (Vatlin 2016a, 12). Superiors probably valued these kinds of employees because of their incentive to zealously carry out dirty tasks. In line with our argument, Vatlin (2016a, 13) describes how the “[i]nformation about the stains in the biographies of underlings (...) guaranteed their absolute loyalty” and allowed superiors to assign pressured individuals to tasks “that fell outside the bounds of their official duties.”

**Background.** Career pressures can also emerge from the tainted background of individuals. Questions of descent and origin concerned both high- and low-ranking members of the NKVD. The NKVD’s higher echelons were dominated by ethnic minorities. For example, Yagoda was Jewish while other high-ranking security officials were of Polish descent, which commonly precluded individuals from higher positions (Gregory 2009, 272). Given that ethnicity was a well-known source of discrimination, people like Yagoda had to show particular zeal in carrying out Stalin’s orders as a way of compensating for their dubious backgrounds.

On the lower ranks of the NKVD, an individual’s social background could also pose a career hindrance. For example, Viktor Karetnikov served as the right-hand man to a district leader but had little chances of advancing in the secret police because of his “[p]etit-bourgeois origins” (Vatlin 2016a, 18). In result, he started to work on special assignments to make himself irreplaceable. For individuals with a dubious background participating in the Great Terror can thus be understood as a chance to demonstrate their loyalty to the regime.

**Connections.** Finally, clientelistic networks and the lack of influential patrons can nurture career pressures and motivate individuals to do evil deeds. The Soviet administration and the NKVD in particular were dominated by clans that could
influence the career trajectories of individual agents (Vatlin 2016a, 14). These “bureaucratic ‘families’ within the Soviet party-state contained patrons and clients who helped one another” (Bernstein 2016, xxx). When patrons assumed new positions, they often took their fellow clan members with them. In result, these groups traveled across departments and up the hierarchy. At the same time, a fallen patron could quickly become a liability, as happened when the Yezhov clan was replaced by Beria’s men (Gregory 2009, 75). Individuals that had been embedded in clientelistic networks “were willing to undertake any task, no matter how unjust” (Bernstein 2016, xxx).

References


