Chapter Seven

Relatives and Falsifying Death Certificates

Background

Ezhov's Operational Decree No. 00447, which initiated the Great Terror, kept sentences separate from case files to make it difficult to trace what happened to the condemned person. Great Terror victims simply disappeared into the NKVD's repression conveyer; especially in cases of capital punishment, their fate was carefully concealed.

Unwitting relatives of those executed were given a standard response: they had been sentenced to ten years in prison "without the right of correspondence." There may have been an underground network that explained the grim meaning of "no correspondence," but probably most clung to the hope that their loved one was alive and toiling away in a Siberian camp.

At the time of Stalin's death in March of 1953, few relatives of the almost three quarters of a million persons executed in 1937 and 1938 had official word on their fate. They, however, could do simple arithmetic. If their loved ones were sentenced to ten years in 1937 or 1938, they should have been released in 1947 or 1948. As this deadline came and went, frustrated petitioners flooded NKVD (now MVD) offices, the justice ministry, and the Politburo with pleas to learn what had happened to their family members.

This chapter tells of the official response to a problem that confronted both the Stalin regime and its successors: how to conceal the

fact that three quarters of a million of Soviet citizens were executed in 1937–1938 when it became increasingly obvious that the official story (they are in prison) was not true? The cover-up lasted over sixty years. It was not until after the collapse of the Soviet Union that repressed persons and their survivors received the official right to view their case files.

The Cover-up

By 1951, the Ministry of State Security, now independent of the interior ministry, was the target of petitioners inquiring about the fate of those who disappeared during the Great Terror. By this time, most of those executed had been dead more than a decade. State-security minister S. D. Ignatiev wrote to Stalin's Politburo in October of 1951, describing how he proposed to handle the matter: [1]

> Ministry of State Security procedures have been to tell relatives of those executed that they were sentenced to ten years and sent to special regime camps without the right of correspondence. For the majority of cases, ten years have already passed, and such an answer is no longer appropriate. Without a death certificate, legal issues such as inheritance or remarriage cannot be resolved. Accordingly, relatives turn to party and judicial offices, to the leaders of the party and government, stubbornly insisting on conclusive answers.
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> The Ministry of State Security proposes to establish the following rule: Relatives of those executed more than ten years earlier are to be orally told that the sentenced person died in the place of confinement. . . . If necessary a death certificate can be issued.
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> To maintain secrecy, the lists of those sentenced to death will be maintained in the central office and responsible state-security employees will inform relatives at the locality.

Ignatiev's solution provided only stopgap relief from the flood of inquiries that became a torrent after Stalin's death in March of 1953. Stalin's successors were caught in a dilemma. Most had participated personally in Stalin's massacres; revelation of the scope of the Great Terror could threaten them. Also, official ideology continued (up until

1956) to present Stalin and the Politburo as omniscient and flawless. To come clean about Stalin's crimes would raise fundamental questions about the nature of the communist regime.

After a three-year power struggle from which Nikita Khrushchev (himself a notorious executioner under Stalin) emerged victorious, it was decided to reveal some of the truth to the party faithful at the Twentieth Party Congress of February 1956. Khrushchev's "secret speech," which did not remain secret for long, focused only on Stalin's purge of party leaders; he scarcely mentioned the massive killing and imprisonments of ordinary citizens. Khrushchev's anti-Stalin speech unleashed a violent reaction in the Eastern European satellite countries, the most prominent being the Hungarian revolution of 1956.

It fell to Stalin's successors to decide what to do with the inquiries concerning the fate of relatives pouring into state offices. On February 10, 1956, the head of the letters department of the Council of Ministers complained to the head of state, Nikolai Bulganin, about "letters from citizens with complaints about the organs of state security which are either not answering questions about the fate of relatives arrested in 1937–1938 or are giving contradictory answers." Bulganin requested of KGB head I. Serov an explanation of current KGB procedures. The KGB's top secret response (two copies only) on April 5, 1956, less than two months after Khrushchev's secret speech, shows that Stalin's successors were still not ready to come clean:

> The answer given to relatives inquiring about the fate of relatives sentenced to death by former troikas of the OGPU or NKVD, by Special Assemblies of the NKVD-MVD, and by Military Collegiums of the Supreme Court was, until September 1955, that they were "sentenced to ten years in prison without right of correspondence and that their location was not known." Such answers, naturally, did not satisfy and led to repeated complaints and petitions. For this reason, we discussed on June 19, 1954, and on August 13, 1955, changes in the procedure for examining such requests and giving more specific answers. The Central Committee also discussed on June 19, 1954, and August 13, 1955, whether to change the procedure and to give more direct answers. On August 13, 1955, it was decided that the KGB, in consultation with the prosecutor's office, come up with recommendations on this issue.

Photograph of poet Anna Akhmatova and family, including repressed son (Lev) as a boy.

> On the basis of the decision by the KGB of August 24, 1955, an instruction was issued that local KGB offices tell relatives of those sentenced to death that they were sentenced to ten years and died in captivity. In necessary cases, the death can be registered and a death certificate issued.[2]

The new KGB procedure meant that death certificates had to be issued with a false date of death. To perpetuate the lie that relatives had not been executed but had died in prison meant that dates of death had to be moved. Serov's memo gives an example of a death that was officially moved to 1942:

THE POEMS OF ANNA AKHMATOVA

Nor in the park by the hallowed tree
Where an inconsolable shade seeks me,

But here where three hundred hours and more
I stood and no one unlocked the door.

Because even in blessed death I'm afraid
I'll forget the noise Black Marias made

And the ugly way the door slammed shut
And the old woman's howl like a beast that was hurt.

And from my motionless bronze lids
May the thawing snow stream down like tears

And the prison dove coo from afar
And the boats go quietly down the Neva.

1940
March

(ABOVE) Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem* (English translation), describing her efforts to learn the fate of her repressed son.

(LEFT) Portrait photograph of Anna Akhmatova.

As to the inquiry of N. P. Novak, submitted to the KGB office of Denpropetrovsk on December 24, 1955, she received within ten days confirmation of the death certificate of P. P. Novak for January 21, 1942.

Information and Rehabilitation

The flood of inquiries placed the KGB, the prosecutor, the Politburo, and the state in an uncomfortable position. Between 1937 and 1938, almost three quarters of a million persons were executed and their relatives were not informed. Most had been sentenced not by courts or tribunals but by troikas, which automatically confirmed the sentence recommended by NKVD operational groups. Between 1940 and 1955, another quarter million were executed, sentenced by military tribunals and special assemblies. Again, their relatives were not told.

As Stalin's successors grappled with the issue, they were unable to admit to relatives and hence to the public, that more than one million citizens had been killed on their watch as Stalin subordinates. The most convenient solution was to lie. Relatives were falsely told that, if the term of the supposed prison sentence had passed, their relative had died in prison. If the term had not yet expired, they were told that their relative was in prison—a lie that became less credible with the passage of time. The highest party authorities even tolerated falsification of official records. Rather than tell the truth, they simply changed dates of death.

Khrushchev's secret speech of February 1956 told the party faithful that most of the party members purged by Stalin were innocent. Therefore, it was easier for the relatives of the elite to rehabilitate their loved ones than for ordinary people. Another obstacle was that the bureaucratic process of rehabilitating the more than one million people executed would be overwhelming. However, there was little doubt in official circles about the innocence of the vast majority of those killed. A December 1953 memo from interior minister Kruglov and chief prosecutor Rudnenko to Khrushchev stated that most of the 442,531 persons sentenced by NKVD Special Assemblies for counterrevolutionary crimes were falsely accused, sometimes "with the most crude violations of Soviet laws." Kruglov and Rudnenko recommended the creation of a special commission (including themselves plus the chairman of the supreme court and the head of a Central Committee

department) to examine cases of those incorrectly sentenced, but they conveniently decided to consider only cases after June of 1945, when death sentences averaged "only" around 3,000 per year.[3]

Relatives did not have the legal right to information on the fate of loved ones until the June 6, 1992, law of the Russian Federation "About the rehabilitation of victims of political repression" which gave rehabilitated persons, or in the case of their death, their relatives, "the right to obtain for their examination copies of the case materials" from either the interior ministry or the prosecutor's office.

Although the Russian Federation has not published official statistics of the number of executions for political offenses, it has not prevented formerly secret statistics from being published in the scientific literature.[4] Even more remarkable is the fact that the KGB's successor has posted statistics on arrests during the Stalin period on its own website.[5]