H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David R. Shearer. *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924-1953.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 507 S. $55.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-14925-8.

Reviewed by Wendy Goldman (Carnegie Mellon University)
Published on H-Russia (October, 2010)
Commissioned by Teddy J. Uldricks

Police, Purges, and Social Order

David R. Shearer's magisterial history of the political and civil police in the Soviet Union provides a stunning narrative of social upheaval, repressive policies, and institutional development. It is no mere bureaucratic history of the police, but rather a sweeping study of the relationship between repression and social transformation. The book provides a deeply researched history of policing in the context of the state's desperate attempt to manage the social consequences of civil war, collectivization, industrialization, and urbanization. Shearer provides a new and far-reaching explanation of the "Great Terror," setting Joseph Stalin's mass repressions of 1937-38 within a set of policing techniques that became progressively more extreme in their intent to remove entire social and national categories. His interpretation forces us to enlarge a narrower view of Stalinist repression, which focused primarily on victims, such as former political oppositionists, industrial managers, and local and regional party leaders. The book is gracefully written and well organized, and brings clarity to tangled and complex policies. Its melding of social and institutional history to reinterpret the phenomenon of Stalinist repression demonstrates great mastery of a dauntingly complex period.

The book is big: it covers a large span of Soviet social history as well as numerous changes, feints, starts, and abrupt reversals in policing policies. Its findings are far too many to detail in a short review. Yet three important contributions stand out. First, Shearer provides a history of "social order policing," or the efforts of both political and civil police to remove those groups that the state deemed a threat to the social order of socialism. Second, he examines the role of passport laws and policing in the urban cleansings of the early 1930s and their role in the mass operations that followed. Third, he analyzes the mass and national operations of 1937-38 as a culmination of social order policing techniques in the face of international and domestic political threats.

Beginning in the early 1920s, Shearer tells a fascinating story of the conflict between the political police and their opponents in the courts and Commissariat of Justice. Extra judicial sentencing boards first gained popularity during the Civil War, but their usage was a highly contentious issue throughout much of Soviet history. In the 1920s, OGPU (United State Police Administration, political police) fought to maintain its right to sentence outside the court system using troikas that were not subject to rules of trial and defense. OGPU also sought to expand its jurisdiction over unemployed and criminal elements. Yet OGPU's jurisdiction remained limited: OGPU troikas in the 1920s did not hear political cases, which were adjudicated by an *Osoboe Soveshchanie*, OGPU's highest sentencing board, and the troikas could pass death sentences only in limited cases. Shearer concludes that OGPU leaders won a partial but significant victory by the mid-1920s over the rule of law: it was transformed from "a temporary organ of revolutionary justice" active during the Civil War into "a permanent state institution" (p. 98).

In 1929-30, Stalin pushed to restructure the police. The NKVD (Commissariat of Internal Affairs) RSFSR was eliminated, the Commissariat of Justice was given responsibility for the administration of prisons, OGPU gained responsibility for the labor camps, and local militias were subordinated to OGPU. There were numerous opponents to these reforms, including Nikolai Krylenko, the head of the Commissariat of Justice, who feared the police would become "an independent investigative body unaccountable to state or procuracy" (p. 109). In 1933, the state recognized Krylenko's concerns and moved to control police powers by strengthening the Procuracy. Henceforth, all arrests would require the Procuracy's sanction. An All-Union Procuracy was created under Andrei Vyshinsky, who became an early advocate of the rule of law. Yet Shearer stresses that this period of mild relax-

ation did not last long. Troikas continued to operate and issue death sentences in many areas of the country. In December 1933 and January 1934, party and government leaders were gripped, in Shearer's words, by "a panic mood" (p. 120). The Politburo adopted measures aimed at urban criminal recidivists and other marginal and unemployed elements in Moscow and other cities. The use of troikas was widely revived to deal with the mass number of arrests provoked by police sweeps of the cities. Both these policing techniques–mass sweeps as well as extra judicial sentencing–had been used before, especially in the dekulakization campaigns during collectivization in the early 1930s. The state attempted to purge the cities of large numbers of the unemployed, itinerants, criminals, ex convicts, orphans and street children, the politically disenfranchised, and other groups, what Shearer terms "the social detritus of Stalin's industrial and agrarian revolutions from above" (p. 4).

After 1933, the state redefined social disorder as a class threat to the regime. Social disorder was not, however, merely a figment of Stalin's paranoid imagination. Shearer notes, "By late 1932, forced collectivization and dekulakization had resulted in a critical, even dangerous situation for the regime" (p. 187). In Shearer's striking words, "Stalin's industrial revolution and class war in the countryside created social dislocation on a new-biblical scale" (p. 64). Millions of people migrated from rural to urban areas, taxed urban infrastructures, and threatened the fragile socialist distribution centers of food and other scarce commodities. Shearer resolves the debate over whether passportization was aimed primarily aimed at peasants or workers by showing the effect of collectivization and famine on both social groups. Passportization, he argues convincingly, was prompted by rural and urban crises, both connected with lack of food.

Shearer challenges what he terms the "bookends interpretation," which posits two main periods of violence–collectivization and the terror–separated by a period of relative liberalization. In several substantive chapters, he details the urban policing campaign during the alleged period of liberalization, which centered on enforcement of the newly enacted passport laws. Political and civil police carried out vast sweeps and arrests on a mass scale, using troikas to expel offenders from certain areas or sentence them to labor camps. In the spring of 1935, the state passed a series of laws against hooliganism, giving police wide powers to arrest and convict juvenile offenders and other "socially harmful elements" (*sotsvredelementy*). Such individuals could be sentenced to up to five years in labor camps by extrajudicial police boards; they did not have to commit an actual crime. People were repressed according to social categories developed by the state based on a level of perceived threat. While dekulakization was carried out publicly, part of a mass, highly publicized campaign, the passport sweeps were hidden from the general population. Foreshadowing the deadly mass and national operations of 1937-38, targets were identified through registration information in police catalogs.

In the 1930s, the catalog and registration system became the primary means of policing, containing basic information about 1.2 million people. The civil and political police kept lists of resident foreigners, former convicts and oppositionists, known criminals, and those denied residence in key cities. The system was messy and never worked the way it was originally envisioned, but it proved surprisingly effective as a rudimentary tool for purging the cities. Shearer provides a wonderfully detailed chapter on Kiril Korenev, the wayward son of a Socialist Revolutionary mother, who fell afoul of the authorities and assumed at least five different identities in his various escapes from prison and camps. The chapter shows both the reach and the limits of policing as well the inventiveness of Soviet citizens in reshaping their identities.

In contrast to the state's grandiose conceptions of policing, local police were overwhelmed, poorly equipped, and unqualified. In the Urals, for example, in 1930, there was one police inspector for every 15,400 people. Some police were actually registered as homeless. Many cities, including Moscow, which had a relatively high ratio of police to citizens, were completely "lawless" (pp. 77-78). Ordinary citizens were terrified of mugging, robbery, and home break-ins. Shearer argues that by the middle and late 1930s, pressing problems "opened the door for more drastic measures than exile" (p. 80)

In July 1937, political and civil police launched mass roundups and executions of allegedly anti-Soviet elements. Known as the mass and national operations, these sweeps lasted until November 1938. Operations were carried out in secret. Troikas, made up of regional or district party heads, chief procurators, and NKVD leaders, were established with the right to sentence and execute. On July 2, the Politburo issued a decree on anti-Soviet elements. The following day, Nikolai Ezhov, head of the NKVD, telegraphed instructions to regional NKVD heads to compile lists of kulaks and criminals slated either for execution or exile. Additional orders targeted Latvians, Finns, Poles, Germans, Koreans, and other national groups residing within the Soviet Union. Many of the arrested were left-wing refugees from fascist coun-

tries. The orders also set limits on the numbers to be arrested, which were revised upward over the following months. After October, Shearer notes, the numbers no longer corresponded to figures in the police registries. Innocent people were swept up to make quotas and organized into conspiracies to facilitate processing. In Novosibirsk, an astounding 6-8 percent of the adult male population was arrested. Executions were carried out within weeks or days of arrest. The mass and national operations accounted for 770,000 arrests by their end in November 1938. Unlike several historians, who argue that the mass operations were a hasty response to requests from regional party leaders, Shearer contends that Stalin intended a mass purge and began mobilizing for it in spring 1937. He offers evidence that some NKVD heads had begun compiling lists in June.

Shearer provides an important new interpretation of the mass repressions of 1937-38. Unlike many historians, who see the Kirov murder as a pivotal moment in unleashing the terror, Shearer makes a careful distinction between the political repression launched against former oppositionists in the wake of the Kirov murder and the executions and arrests initiated by the mass and national operations. The latter, in his view, emerged from the long practice of police sweeps and extrajudicial sentencing beginning in the 1920s. Yet in Shearer's view, the mass and national operations were not simply the culmination of an internal radicalization of state policing policy. Rather, the operations in 1937-38 differed from the mass sweeps and extrajudicial sentencing of the past in several critical respects. First, they were prompted by fears of war, internal political opposition, and discontented social groups. Second, limits were set for every region in negotiation between the center and regional party and NKVD leaders. And third, the troikas had the power to impose death sentences.

Shearer also provides a final chapter on World War II and the postwar period, in which he sketches the main trends in policing. Mass operations largely ceased within the Soviet Union's pre-1939 borders, but were used after the war in the newly acquired territories. Penal incarceration reached its high in 1945-53, mostly for infractions of labor discipline and anti-theft laws. These cases, however, went through the courts, and the civil police was separated from the organs of state security.

In the final analysis, Shearer does not see violence as an inherent part of Bolshevik culture or ideology. Rather Stalinist leaders used mass repression in response to "a sequence of crises," unanticipated by the regime (p. 17). Soviet leaders did not resort to the type of violence that characterized the Stalin period either in the 1920s or after Stalin's death. And even Stalinist leaders considered the violence of 1937-38 a temporary aberration. After the victory in World War II, Stalin did not resort to mass violence again in the pre-1939 borders of the country despite great destruction and social chaos. In Shearer's careful judgment, the decision to execute so many was closely connected with the political culture that developed in the wake of the Kirov murder and the leadership's heightened fears of international and domestic threats.

Shearer's book raises important questions about the nature of Stalinism, and more broadly, the perils of unbridled police power. The use of mass sweeps of the homeless, criminals, beggars, and other marginal people to address urban crime is hardly unique to the Stalin period, the Soviet Union, or socialist countries. These are standard techniques used by police in capitalist countries as well. Extrajudicial extradition and sentencing has also become a serious issue in the struggle against terrorism in the United States and other countries. Shearer's book stands not only as a magnificent contribution to our understanding of Soviet history and the Stalin years, but also as a warning about the perils of social order policing and extrajudicial sentencing. It raises critical questions about the difference between political terror and social policing, and the role of incarceration in creating social order. In the Soviet Union in 1937, there were 1,196,369 prisoners out of a general population of 162,500,000, or 736 prisoners per 100,000 people. This ratio was lower than the 754 prisoners per 100,000 people in United States today! Moreover, 87 percent of the prisoners in 1937 were nonpolitical criminals. Shearer argues convincingly that the vast numbers of people arrested and executed in the mass and national operations must be counted as part of Stalinist repression. Yet if this is so we must also rethink the old division between "political" and "criminal," and in so doing, reconsider the Soviet experience in the context of incarceration rates and policing techniques in the capitalist world.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Wendy Goldman. Review of Shearer, David R., *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924-1953.* H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. October, 2010.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31443

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.