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**Archives et nouvelles sources de l'histoire soviétique,
une réévaluation**

The new Soviet archival sources

Hypotheses for a critical assessment

Andrea Graziosi



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ANDREA GRAZIOSI

THE NEW SOVIET ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Hypotheses for a critical assessment*

Introduction

THE 1991 EVENTS struck me, as a historian, in the form of the news that archives were being *seriously* opened after the rumor-filled, but largely empty fanfare of the late 1980s. I was then completing a biography of G.L. Piatakov, a bolshevik leader whose life had kept me busy for some years. The news about the archives then came for me at a critical moment, raising what seemed to be a difficult question: what to do with a fairly advanced manuscript? To publish or not to publish?

Both choices seemed painful, and for obvious reasons. Eventually, I decided in favor of the second option, tempered by the decision to write a long essay summing up the results of my research.¹ At the time, I thought that contingencies were forcing me to make a sacrifice. With hindsight I can say that that decision was instead at the origin of a most extraordinary and professionally very felicitous time. Once more Vico's famous saying — *sembrano traversie, sono opportunità* — had been proved right.

This has not been just my experience: these years have been for our profession a fantastic period, in spite of the unquestionable “degradation” in status which

* I had first discussed the problems raised by the new Soviet archival sources in a lecture at the Centre d'études du monde russe, soviétique et post-soviétique of the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in 1993. In 1996 I analyzed the sources for the study of collectivization and industrialization at the conference “Les années 30: nouvelles directions de la recherche,” organized by the Maison des sciences de l'homme. A year later I was offered the occasion to discuss my ideas in a lecture at Harvard and in the context of the Yale seminar whose proceedings we are publishing in this issue of the *Cahiers*. I thereby seize the occasion to thank all the above mentioned institutions, the numerous friends and colleagues who, often animatedly, debated these questions with me, and especially Paul Bushkovitch, who struggled with the inconsistencies of both my text and my English.

1. A. Graziosi, “G.L. Piatakov (1890-1937): A mirror of Soviet history,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 1-2 (1992): 102-166.

accompanied it. I still vividly remember when one studied Soviet history in Paris, London, New York and Harvard, research money was always there and families were happy. Now one has to study it in Moscow, Sverdlovsk, Rostov-na-Donu or Kharkiv, children protest and very few others seem to care.² Yet I believe that not many among us would be willing to return to those seemingly happier days.

Though impoverished and relatively marginalized, we — as historians — have been in fact given the promised land. Archives of fundamental importance, and not just for the history of Russia or Ukraine,³ opened before our eyes. We were thus given the possibility to re-write the history of our century. From this point of view, one can say that Soviet (a term I prefer to *Russian* because it does not leave the other peoples of the former USSR out) history is today in that blessed, “original” state that other histories enjoyed a century or so ago.

Three things surprised me when I was given the possibility to work in these archives, in their reading rooms first and soon, through the courtesy of the archivists, in their depositories.

First, their sheer size. Obviously, these enormous dimensions have several causes, ideological ones in the first place. In June 1918 Lenin signed a decree ordering the formation of a “Unified State Archival Fund” (*Edinyi gosudarstvennyi arkhivnyi fond*) that, as Patricia Kennedy remarked, “was to embrace all types of archival records, from economic, social and cultural spheres that would not be considered state records in non-communist countries.”⁴

The very *étatiste* logic which inspired this decree had another important consequence, represented by the scale and the working needs of the bureaucratic apparatus of a state which owned, controlled, or pretended to control a huge slice of society: all of industry, distribution, culture, real estate, etc. Over the years, this led to the huge bureaucratic production of what the French call *paperasserie*. If one remembers the passion with which states conserve their papers one can begin to have an idea of the situation. There are all the reports, the *protokoly*, the internal documents, the minutes, the records of literally thousands of bureaucratic organizations. Exceptions have been the product of occasional events, like World

2. Presenting the documents in O. Khlevniuk, A. Kvashonkin, L. Kosheleva, L. Rogovaia, eds, *Stalinskoe Politbiuro v 30-c gody. Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow: AIRO-XX, 1995) (hereafter *Stalinskoe Politbiuro*) to a small crowd in Rome, Michael Confino noted that a few years before some of them would have made the front page of most Western newspapers. Recently, I believe, many of us asked themselves how much their baggage’s weight in photocopies would have been worth ten years ago

3. Besides the Comintern and Cominform collections, and the papers of most communist parties the world over, the Soviet archives contained a number of important foreign archives, some seized by the Germans during WWII and found by the Red Army in 1945, others directly sequestered by the Soviets in Central-Eastern Europe. In 1946 the foreign archival loot was stored in a newly formed “Special archive,” in 1992 renamed Center for Preservation of Historico-Documentary Collections (TsKhIDK). For a discussion of its holdings see P. Kennedy Grimsted’s *Archives of Russia five years after. “Purveyors of sensation” or “shadows cast to the past”?*, International Institute of Social History Research Papers (Amsterdam, 1997): 61 ff.

4. *Ibid.*: 26.

War II, when for example the central records of the agency responsible for industrialization, the *Komissariat tiazheloi promyshlennosti* (NKTP), were destroyed.

It should be added that Soviet bureaucrats conserved almost everything, including the short handwritten messages exchanged by leaders during important meetings (thousands of them, often with no dates and just a few scribbled words)⁵ and sometimes even notes taken down during telephone conversations. This, perhaps, in order to be able to justify later on this or that decision, a behavior shared by many state officials administering the economy in other countries,⁶ but which surely reached extreme proportions in the Soviet Union of the 1930s and 1940s, with its recurring purges. It is therefore not surprising to read that, according to a recent estimate, “as of late 1992, the 17 federal archives under *Roskomarkhiv*’s (the federal agency then in charge of archives — AG) direct control housed some 65.3 million files, comprising many billions of pages of documents. The other state archives in Russia — at the republic, regional and provincial levels — accounted for another 138.7 million files, with billions more pages of documents.”⁷

By the way, the remaining evidence of this huge bureaucratic effort soon convinced me that there was some truth in a paradox that immediately caught my attention. Rather than a system collapsing under the weight of its own enormous and inefficient bureaucracy, the archives showed the remains of a grandiose, if gritty, bureaucratic adventure which had been able to keep alive a system that was condemned by the very folly of its principles much past the time these principles would have allowed.

The second feature of these archives that impressed me was the quality of their upkeep, equal if not superior to that of the other European archives in which I had worked. The inventories (*opisi*) of the various *fondy* were extremely detailed. In the case of the documents formerly in the so-called Kremlin or presidential archives even individual files had very accurate internal *opisi*. Again, if we think about the reasons for it, we have to conclude that these must be somehow linked to the fact that these were in a way “service archives” of living bureaucratic organisms with a constant need to be able to search for precedents when dealing with unexpected problems or in one of their endless bureaucratic-legalistic feuds. Of course, fear and

5. The existence of a rule regulating the preservation of such messages could be derived by the presence of Trotsky’s ones in the Trotsky Archives at Harvard. Recently those of other leaders became available. See for example the notes exchanged by Kamenev in 1924–1926 now in RTsKhIDNI, f. (*fond*) 323, op. (*opis*’) 2, d. (*delo*) 27.

6. Speaking of what saved him from the judiciary investigations that destroyed a number of reputations in the Italy of the 1990s, Pietro Armani, a former IRI (the state industry *koncern*) vice-president, said: “I followed Ugo La Malfa’s (an important political leader — AG) advice: IRI, he told me, is an extremely dangerous environment. Read everything, conserve even tramway tickets. That’s what I did: I did not throw anything away....” *Corriere della sera* (November 26, 1996).

7. M. Kramer, “Archival research in Moscow: Progress and pitfalls,” Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) *Bulletin*, 3 (1993): 17–39. According to N. Okhotin and A. Roginskii, “Die KGB-Archive ein Jahr nach dem Putsch von August 1991,” in A. Roginskii, ed., *Russland heute* (Moscow—Bremen, 1993), the KGB archival holdings account for 9.5 million files.

“prudence” played a role in this case too: officials wanted to be able to find as soon as possible everything they needed in order to prove their innocence.

Finally, I was struck by these archives’ multiple levels of secrecy which, thanks to Jonathan Bone, we are now able to reconstruct in some detail, and which — as we shall see — represent by themselves a formidable source of bias. I still vividly remember when, working on the recently opened Ordzhonikidze fund in the former Central Party Archives (now RTsKhIDNI) I was advised by a very kind and professional archivist to ask for its secret part. I immediately ran to ask for the necessary authorization. The strange expression on the face of the lady who was to grant it at first pushed me to believe that I was going to be kicked out of the archives. Then she burst into laughter: how could a foreigner already know of the existence of things that people who had worked in those very archives for 20 years had just apprehended? Later the extremely interesting story of the *konspiratsia* and of the *osobaia papka*, upon which I shall return, proved to me that “secret” had been one of the system’s key features, and one of its slow poisons. It is in fact easy to imagine the slack deriving from the slowing down in the circulation of information and the costs this involved (even though there are serious problems in competently estimating them).⁸

The former Soviet archives are therefore immensely rich and the beneficial effects of this richness are already being felt. They are witnessed, among other things, by the unexpected — at least to me — revival of scholarly history both in Russia and in the West.

Given the constraints in which Soviet historians had to work, and the negative selection operated by the system — which systematically marginalized and repressed the most independent minds — I had thought that we had to wait for years before the new conditions would have allowed for something good to emerge. We are instead facing a boom of solid and often very interesting historical production. If ten years ago one could more or less survive without seriously reading the Soviet historical journals, to miss issues of journals like *Otechestvennaia istoriia* or *Istoricheskii arkhiv* is today a serious affair. And the prodigious stream of new collections of archival documents pouring out after 1991 — partially reconstructed in Peter Blitstein’s valuable bibliography — is there to witness that very soon we shall get the scholarship built on this renaissance of archival work.

Coming to the West, it is my very personal opinion that ten years ago our profession had run into a dead end. Monographs often reflected current political and cultural concerns more than Soviet history’s key problems, their line of argument was vitiated by ideology and fashions much more than in other fields. Preparing with a number of younger colleagues the Yale seminar on sources, whose

8. One should not underestimate the parallel Western obsession with secrecy. Discussing *Secrecy: Report of the Commission on protecting and reducing government secret* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), T. Draper reminded us that in the U.S.A. “government vaults hold over 1.5 billion pages of government records over 25 years old still classified and unavailable to the public” and that “in 1995 alone there were an estimated 3.6 million new classification actions, of which about 400,000 were Top Secret,” “Is the CIA necessary?,” *New York Review of Books* (August 14, 1997): 18-22.

papers are collected in this special issue of the *Cahiers*, proved a refreshing experience.⁹

Yet these archives are not only a blessing from heaven. They also raise enormous problems. Let me give just an example: after reading many Soviet minutes and protocols, I decided to conduct a little experiment. I went to my faculty archives and took out the minutes of the faculty meetings I had been attending in the past couple of years. Well, if anybody is ever going to write the history of my University on their basis he or she is going to fabricate a lie, and I am sure that everybody with a little of academic experience easily understands why. We loved each other so much, and we always agreed — save in a few cases in which refined gentlemen and real ladies politely pointed up to minor differences. The same applies of course to the minutes of search committees and other commissions.

The necessity to assess these archives' holdings thus slowly became central to my work. The more so since I was soon directly or indirectly involved in sources publication projects like the series *Dokumenty sovetskoi istorii*.¹⁰ The systematization of my considerations on the subject, organized in the form of working hypotheses, represented my contribution to the above mentioned Yale conference. These hypotheses also form the nucleus of this essay. But they have been substantially enriched and emended by the discussion at the conference, and even more so by the papers of the colleagues who participated in it, both those published in this volume and those that, for various reasons, it was unfortunately impossible to collect.

In spite of these contributions, I am sure I ended up writing many things that are wrong and not a few platitudes. Yet if for the former I have no other excuse but my ignorance, regarding the latter I believe that it is possible to list a large number of very good reasons for repeating them.

On one hand, there are what could be called the miseries of our profession, already denounced by Michael Confino in a series of essays which, unfortunately,

9. As Blitstein's bibliography testifies, 1991 opened an extraordinary season of sources publication in the West too. Often the introductions to these volumes discuss the same kind of problems we try to address in this issue of the *Cahiers*, and are therefore required reading for anybody willing to deal with the problems raised by the Soviet archival sources.

10. Three volumes in this series are already in print: *Stalinskoe Politbiuro*; A. Kvashonkin *et al.*, eds, *Bol'shevitskoe rukovodstvo. Perepiska, 1912-1927* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1996) and A. Livshin *et al.*, eds, *Pis'ma vo vlast'. 1917-1927* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1998). Those in preparation include a volume bringing the *perepiska* up to WWII, another devoted to the petitions, denunciations, requests, etc. addressed to the authorities in the 1930s, and a final one concerning the *Politbiuro* and other top party organs after 1945. For a time I was involved in the preparation of the first volume (1918-1922) in the series *Sovetskaia derevnia glazami VChK-OGPU-NKVD*, a French-Russian project directed by professors V.P. Danilov and Alexis Berelowitch (see A. Graziosi, "Stato e contadini nelle Repubbliche sovietiche attraverso i rapporti della polizia politica, 1918-1922," *Rivista storica italiana*, CX, 2 (1998): 463-528). I also prepared the publication of the GPU reports on collectivization and dekulakization in Ukraine for the *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 35, 3 (1994), and took part in a two-volume project on the Red Army in the 1930s directed by professor Fabio Bettanin: A. Cristiani, V.M. Mikhaleva, eds, *Repressii v Krasnoi Armii, 30-e gody. Sbornik dokumentov iz fondov Rossiiskogo gosudarstvennogo voennogo arkhiva* (Napoli: Istituto universitario orientale, 1996); A. Romano, N.S. Tarkhova, eds, *Krasnaia Armia i kollektivizatsiia derevni v SSSR, 1928-1933 gg. Sbornik dokumentov iz fondov Rossiiskogo gosudarstvennogo voennogo arkhiva* (Napoli: Istituto universitario orientale, 1996).

have not been heeded as they deserve.¹¹ Let us remember the repeated calls for using the newly available documents in the “search for usable pasts,” as if this and not something very different were the essence of the historian’s craft. I am thinking of course of the search for what we might call that unreachable, but so alluring and worth going for “past as it really was,” a past which may at times prove very difficult to “use.” (Let me add that these are the cases I prefer, because they are usually those raising the most interesting problems). Furthermore, some colleagues seem to see the influence of political moods upon the writing of history not as an inevitable phenomenon against which we are called to fight in a Sisyphean effort. They rather appear to consider this influence a positive factor that may perhaps someday swing research in the “correct” direction.¹²

On the other hand, we have the appearance of a strong tendency to “adore” the new archival sources,¹³ to ask them questions they cannot answer and to derive the wrong conclusions from their “silence.” As if the lack of archival documents “proving” that something existed was by itself sufficient to deny that this something did exist, or as if the fact that on paper somebody seems to have been the initiator of something ruled out the possibility of a phone call in the night arranging things beforehand.¹⁴ But more about this later.

Finally, there are the already numerous instances of “sloppy” use of old and new documents, like in the case of Bukharin’s secret conversations of 1928 and 1929.¹⁵

Coming to the problems I would like to address, they can be re-grouped under three main headings: 1. Lacunae (“white spots”) and their sources; 2. Biases and their sources; 3. The margins of errors of several kinds of data.

I will analyze these questions from two different angles.

The first relates to the documentation generated by, or directed to the group ruling the country. Given the centralistic, top-heavy nature of the Soviet system (and more so of its records), and the state of today’s research, this will be by far the largest section of this essay.

The second concerns the people inhabiting the country.

11. M. Confino, “Issues and non-issues in Russian social history and historiography (1890s-1920s),” *KIARS [Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies] Papers*, 165, Washington, DC (1983); Id., “Present events and the representation of the past: some current problem in Russian historical writing,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 35, 4 (1994): 839-868.

12. See for example A. Gleason, “Presidential address,” *AAASS Newsnet*, 37, 1 (Jan. 1997). In my view, both the search for usable pasts and the extolling of the primacy of today’s political (and other) agendas over historical research are in fact different manifestations of the same, wrong intellectual premises.

13. Quite rightly, Mark Kramer recently recalled Carr’s critique of the nineteenth-century “fetishism of documents,” seen as “the Ark of the Covenant in the temple of facts.” Carr was of course right, yet I sometimes feel we are today facing the opposite risk.

14. On the importance and psychological impact of Stalin’s night phone calls in the life of Soviet leaders, see A. Bek’s *Novoe naznachenie*.

15. See the judicious remarks by Ju.G. Fel’shtinskii, “Konfidentsial’nye besedy Bukharina,” *Voprosy istorii*, 2-3 (1991): 182-203. An uncritical use of some of the collections in Blitstein’s bibliography can bring about very serious problems.

On one hand, there were what the regime called “the masses”: peasants, workers, soldiers, etc. As we shall see, their study in the Soviet experience raises complicated problems. In her essay, Golfo Alexopoulos underlines those arising from what she rightly calls mass sources (*massovye istochniki*) and, as Matthew Lenoe’s critique of the “letters” written to Soviet newspapers shows, if uncritically used, even this apparently more spontaneous source can be very misleading. Above all, given the nature of most of the records we possess — like police reports — it seems difficult that we shall ever be able to produce a really satisfying “history from below” (it is rather with a “below” observed by a suspicious and inimical eye that we have to deal).

On the other hand, there are what could be called the Soviet intermediary social layers. Unfortunately, they have been but little studied, so that I will confine myself to the few words needed to raise some of the problems they present.

In both the case of the rulers and of the ruled, I will try to show that the problems raised by the records left by the Soviet regime, and not just these records’ riches, can shed some light on that very regime’s nature and inner working. Eventually, some brief reflections on possible remedies will conclude this essay.

As far as my temporal horizon is concerned, with but a few exceptions this will be defined by 1917 and 1941.¹⁶ I must also add that my experience is by and large limited to Moscow’s central archives: RTsKhIDNI, for the pre-1953 party records; GARF, for state ones; RGAE, for the economy; RGVA, for the pre-WWII military. My essay therefore has its own biases and limitations, as Golfo Alexopoulos’ or D’Ann Penner’s contributions to the present collection convincingly show. However, I do believe that the already recalled extremely centralized nature of the Soviet system partially compensates for the second of my deficiencies.

There are of course a few other central archives that I would have liked to add to my list.¹⁷ Unfortunately, some of these are still more or less closed to the normal scholar. They are:

1. The so-called presidential “archives” in the Kremlin, which — it seems — are not archives in the literal sense of the word. Documents from many administrations and many personal files were collected there for the use of the *Politbiuro*. I have been told that at least part of this documentation was thematically arranged in order to cater to the needs for information on specific problems of the country’s top decision-making structure. In the past few years, some extremely valuable material has been moved from the Kremlin to RTsKhIDNI. It includes things like the *osobaia papka* (the *Politbiuro* top secret file) up to 1934 and the secret inventories (*opisi*) of the personal files of many key leaders, including Voroshilov, Kamenev, Ezhov, Kaganovich, Enukidze *et al.* Recently, a few scholars received limited access to other

16. The various issues of the CWIHP *Bulletin* are essential to any discussion of the sources relating to the post-war period.

17. For a general panorama of the former Soviet archives, see P. Kennedy Grimsted, *op. cit.*, and T. Khorkhordina, *Istoriia otechestva i arkhivy, 1917-1980-e gg.* (Moscow: RGGU, 1994). In his contribution to this collection, Mark Kramer discusses at length the problems raised by the holdings of the TsKhSD, the post-1953 party archives.

pre-war files, which seem to be of extreme interest.¹⁸ As J. Haslam has noted, however, because of the haphazard manner in which revelations in these very sensitive fields have emerged, paradoxically enough we know perhaps “more of the Brezhnev era than of the formative era of Stalinism.” Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, for example, the former dissident Vladimir Bukovskii gained access to most *osobaia papka* documents from the mid-1970s to 1982 and scanned them onto his computer.¹⁹

2. The FSB (the former KGB) and MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) archives. They contain two different sets of material. On one hand, there are the personal files of the unlucky millions who had something to do with these organizations which for many years represented a unified organism. According to official data, in the Central Card Registry of the MVD archives there are records relating to 25 million individuals, incarcerated or otherwise processed for prison or labor camps.²⁰ Since 1988 millions of people have petitioned or requested the documents necessary to their relatives’ rehabilitation. It is precisely on the basis of their “personal” content that access to these depositories has been restricted to those belonging to the families of the repressed, for which a reading room has been available since 1994.

On the other hand, however, the FSB archives also contain periodical reports on the moods and activities of the different layers of the population, on foreign affairs and covert operations, on the economic situation, etc., that the secret police had prepared for the leadership of the country. Some of these reports — or *svodki* (more about them later) — are slowly coming out. The above mentioned series *Sovetskaia derevnia glazami VChK-OGPU-NKVD, 1918-1941* is publishing the parts relating to the countryside. Copies of other crucial reports were found in the files of important leaders or of different bureaucratic agencies. Furthermore, also in this case, and for the same reasons, we have some crucial documents pertaining to the last years of the Soviet regime, including six of the annual KGB reports to the top leader of the country (those for 1960 and 1967 and four relating to the Gorbachev years).²¹

Finally, individual scholars and the Memorial Association have been publishing crucial material pertaining to repressed intellectuals and to forced labor camps, found both in the state and in the FSB archives.²²

18. See for example Oleg Khlevniuk’s work on the great show trials and the mass terror of 1936-1938.

19. J. Haslam, “Russian archival revelations and our understanding of the Cold War,” *Diplomatic History*, 2 (1997): 217-228 (special issue: “Symposium: Soviet archives. Recent revelations and Cold War historiography” — hereafter *Symposium*); V. Boukovsky, *Jugement à Moscou. Un dissident dans les archives du Kremlin* (Paris: Laffont, 1995).

20. P. Kennedy Grimsted, *op. cit.*: 36-40; N. Okhotin, A. Roginskii, *art. cit.*; V. Bakatin, *Izbavlenie ot KGB* (Moscow: Novosti, 1992).

21. R.L. Garthoff, “The KGB reports to Gorbachev,” *Intelligence and National Security*, 4 (1996): 224-244.

22. See for example V. Chentalinski, *La parole ressuscitée: dans les archives littéraires du KGB* (Paris: Laffont, 1993) and *Sistema ispravitel’no-trudovykh lagerei v SSSR, 1923-1960. Spravochnik*, published jointly by Memorial and GARF (Moscow: Zven’ia, 1998).

3. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives. As Anna Cienciala and Silvio Pons point out, though formally open, these archives are still run on the basis of the old “Soviet” procedures. Scholars are denied access to inventories, and have to content themselves with the documents that the archivists give them. From a certain, and not secondary, point of view, these archives are therefore unusable, even though we shall naturally continue to use them, and to pay a scholarly price for this.²³

A final warning is in order before venturing into the real discussion. Very often, when I tried to discuss with friends and colleagues what seemed to me very important, perhaps crucial, problems, I was struck by what remains to me an inexplicable reaction. Ah, they would say, you are therefore denying the possibility to write history on the basis of these new documents, you are a skeptic, a “Neo-Pyrrhonist” (this being my friends’ version of what was, for them, the most infamous insult: *quoque tu*, Andrea, are thus the follower of the current fashions that reduce history to literature and rhetoric...). Now, far from being an adept of these cults, I am in fact a firm believer in, and practitioner of the historian’s craft. I think it is of crucial importance to establish how slippery the ground is upon which we move (i.e. our sources), precisely because I still believe in a properly modernized (that is properly relativized) Rankean ideal, that is, in the necessity for any historian who wants to be such to strive to reconstruct, as far as it is humanly possible, the “past as it truly happened.” To fight for such an elusive goal is by the way much more exciting, because of its difficulty, than the comfortable surrender to a total, very easy relativism, a night in which, if not all cows, all histories and all historians are equal.

1. Ruling the country

Recently, the crucial importance of the personality issue in Soviet history has been forcefully re-stated.²⁴ Yet precisely because this is so, it is important to introduce some distinctions. Especially after 1928, the nature and the characteristics of the papers and the records left by Stalin; by his personal circle of friends (people like Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov or Ordzhonikidze), especially up to 1935-1936; by other central leaders not so personally close to Stalin but whose “biography” had

23. The problems raised by the records of Soviet foreign policy have been recently discussed in *Symposium* and form the object of many interesting articles in the various issues of the CWHIP *Bulletin*.

24. “The more data emerges from central party and state archives, the more persuasive becomes the argument that Stalinist politics is best understood personalistically rather than institutionally,” wrote for instance Sheila Fitzpatrick (I quote from D. Brandenberger’s review of M. David-Fox, *Revolution of the mind: Higher learning among the Bolsheviks, 1918-1929* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), which appeared on H-Russia on May 5, 1998). As my teacher Moshe Lewin used to tell me, once a country gets a despot it is useful to know what goes on in his mind, a point recently made also by R.D. English, “Sources, methods and competing perspectives on the end of the Cold War,” *Symposium*: 283-94. I would add that the “personal element” is crucial to the understanding of all *étatiste* systems, the more so when — like in the Soviet case — their *étatisme* is extreme. *Etatiste* systems are thus, by definition, more “subjectivist” than others, with all the problems that this involves.

not been marred by militancy in any of the oppositions, with the possible exceptions of the 1918-1919 ones (people like Postyshev, Iakovlev or Stanislav Kosior); and finally by those who had committed the original sin and then repented (the Piatakovs, Radeks, Bukharins, Sokol'nikovs and Kamenevs), vary in crucial ways.

Let us take for example their correspondence. The total freedom of Stalin's letters, and the more limited, almost "unconscious" freedom of his closer associates (at least while they believed themselves to be such and harbored little or no doubts about their relationships with the "master" (*khoziain*)), contrast sharply with the more guarded tone of the third group, especially after 1927 (this layer of leaders has still to find its historian, so that I am here relying mostly on personal impressions).

As for the "sinners," a group I have directly studied, the difficulties posed by the interpretation of their post-1927 papers and behavior, which possess a most ambiguous character, are enormous. These people shunned politics, took refuge in workaholism, showed evident signs of psychic enslavement to the master, and even of mental derangement. At the same time, are we really to believe that Piatakov's letter to Ordzhonikidze in August 1936 about his total devotion to work, and proposal to Ezhov, and thus to Stalin, to kill his own wife with his own hands in order to prove his faithfulness to the despot, were sincere?²⁵ Were not these rational tactics to escape annihilation — even though of course such rationality is that of an already deranged mind? What did a man constructing such tactics think of the regime and the "historical era" he was living through? And how are we to read Bukharin's last, pitiful letter to Stalin, "forgive me Koba" (*prosti menia Koba*)? Again, as a survival strategy, or as a sign of total psychic breakdown?

Everything is further complicated by tantalizing hints at different behavior, at parties in which people got drunk, despaired about their predicament and derided the socialist pretenses of the Soviet system. On the other hand, did these parties really take place? Were not these people too scared to engage in such risky behavior? Can we thus believe our sources or were not these just rumors? These are things that we shall probably never know (but which we can generally ascertain in the history of more "normal" countries).²⁶

A. What we do have

But let us briefly review what the historians of the Soviet leadership do have at their disposal.

25. *Stalinskoe Politbiuro*: 112-153; *Bol'shevitskoe rukovodstvo. Perepiska...*, *op. cit.*; "Parallel'nyi antisovetskii trotskistskii tsentr," in *Reabilitatsiia. Politicheskie protsessy 30-50-kh godov* (Moscow, 1991): 210-235; Piatakov's 1936 letters to Ordzhonikidze are in RTsKhIDNI, f. 85, op. 1/s, d. 136. They shall soon be published in the second volume of *Bol'shevitskoe rukovodstvo. Perepiska*.

26. "Prosti menia Koba," *Istochnik*, 0 (1993): 23-24; J. Berger, *Nothing but the truth. Shipwreck of a generation* (London: Harvill, 1971): 88-92.

We can now read through the personal funds (*lichnye fondy*) of some of the country's top leaders, including most of the recently released secret, parallel *opisi*. These funds generally contain part of these people's correspondence; various documents relating to their activities, including copies of their reports to various state and party bodies, sometimes at different stages of elaboration; many of the above mentioned short notes exchanged at party meetings; personal papers of different nature; photos, etc. There is however one huge problem: often these funds were not the natural byproduct of these people's activities. As Larisa Rogovaia points out, in general they have been actually constructed over time by archivists, who selected and put together documents according to a variety of evolving criteria. This means that possibly a majority of these personal funds *do not* reflect what these leaders thought or judged important at various stages of their lives, or anyway kept in their own private files. Properly speaking therefore, they *are not* personal funds and should not be considered as such. It would thus be of the utmost importance to establish which are the real *lichnye fondy*, and how the most important "fake" ones have been constructed, to understand what was probably left out of them.²⁷

The minutes of the meetings of some important bodies are also available. Mark Kramer and Gael Moullec rightly called our attention to the fact that we often have three different versions of these minutes: the raw, unedited one; that edited by the authors; and the final, printed one. Needless to say, whenever possible, scholars should try to use the second.²⁸

In any case, continuing the Tsarist tradition (a good example are the lively records of the *osobyie soveshchaniia* of the tsar with his most important ministers), some of these minutes are very good and appear to be on the whole reliable.²⁹ This is for example the case of pan-Soviet and republican party and soviet congresses up to 1927-1928, i.e. as long as real factions existed and the party still was — as Moshe Lewin noted — a political party, that is a body actually discussing political options. For the same reason, very good Central Committee minutes seem to exist only for the 1923-1927 period. Then, the advancing *étatisation* of the party, which was steadily being transformed into an administrative organ, brought with it the progressive stultification of the Central Committee minutes.

27. More often than not therefore, we are dealing with an arbitrary process of construction rather than with that filtering of a pre-existing body of documents that some colleagues have denounced. The problems deriving from such different actions are of a very different nature. This of course does not mean that the second activity did not take place.

28. M. Kramer's contribution to this issue of the *Cahiers*; G. Moullec, "De quelques sténogrammes des pléniums du Comité central (1941-1966)," *Les Cahiers de l'IHTP [Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent]*, 35 (1996): 95-106 (special issue: "Pour une nouvelle historiographie de l'URSS," ed. by N. Werth)

29. An important exception seems to be represented by Lenin. According to the generally very reliable Valentinov, Lenin recommended not to trust stenographic reports which in general did not reflect the content of his speeches. Lenin thought that this was due to the fact that he spoke too fast, and many necessary words were thus missed. N. Valentinov (Vol'skii), *Novaia ekonomicheskaiia politika i krizis partii posle smerti Lenina* (Stanford, 1971): 102-104.

Later on, the ripening of Stalin's personal despotism — let us say from the mid-1930s on — was accompanied by the swift emptying of the party governing bodies: as we know, Central Committee meetings became less and less frequent (only six plenums were held between 1941 and 1953) and the same applied to *Politbiuro* ones. Silvio Pons, who co-edited the publication of the minutes of the Cominform meetings, tells us that the impression that he was dealing with strong self-censorship on the side of the participants to those meetings never abandoned him. It is, however, true that during the conflicts of the mid-1950s and on the occasion of big events such as the split with China, discussions became lively again, though never as lively as thirty years before.³⁰

The *Politbiuro* records raise even more serious problems. It seems (“seems” because of the relative inaccessibility of the presidential archives) that, but perhaps in exceptional cases, no minutes of its meetings were produced, at least until Stalin's death.³¹ There are instead minutes of later meetings. As Mark Kramer tells us, Khrushchev started asking for detailed notes (these were initially the responsibility of a single person, Vl. Malin, with all the problems deriving from this person's preferences and allegiance, upon which more later). Under Brezhnev such notes became real verbatim transcripts, some of which were declassified after 1991.³²

We also know with certitude that as early as 1922-1923, official *Politbiuro* meetings were preceded by informal gatherings in which seven persons took part and to which Trotskii was not invited. In his intervention at the July 1926 plenum, Zinov'ev revealed that the “seven” kept their own, separate records. However, because of its “clandestine,” parallel nature, this documentation is probably not to be found in the archives, unless Stalin decided to keep it with his papers or among those of his personal secretariat. Yet these meetings were “truer” and more important than the *Politbiuro* official sessions.³³

To make the matter even worse, Stalin clearly preferred this system of informally running the country over formal procedures. This preference, also witnessed by his letters to both Molotov and Kaganovich, grew with the years. In 1930 Syrtsov raised a scandal about it, stating that the *Politbiuro* was “a fictional organ. Everything is actually decided behind its back by a small group” which met in Clara Zetkin's former apartment in the Kremlin and included non-*Politbiuro* members like Postyshev and Iakovlev, while formal members like Kalinin or Voroshilov were not invited. Yet later on Stalin almost completely dispensed with official meetings, calling whomever he

30. See M. Kramer's and S. Pons' contributions to this issue of the *Cahiers*; V. Zubok, “Stalin's plans and Russian archives,” in *Symposium*: 295-305.

31. O. Khlevniouk, *Le cercle du Kremlin* (Paris: Seuil, 1996): 18-23.

32. Among them, those relating to Afghanistan (1979); to the shooting down of the KAL-007 airplane (1983) and to the Chernobyl catastrophe (1986). In R.L. Garthoff, “Some observations on using the Soviet archives,” in *Symposium*: 242-257.

33. B. Bajanov, *Bajanov révèle Staline. Souvenirs d'un ancien secrétaire de Staline* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979); O. Khlevniouk *et al.*, “Les sources archivistiques des organes dirigeants du PC(b)R,” *Communisme*, 42-44 (1995): 15-34 (special issue: “Les archives: la nouvelle histoire de l'URSS,” ed. by S. Courtois and N. Werth).

wanted, independently from rank, to his cabinet or to his *dacha*.³⁴ According to Khrushchev, for instance, in 1948, Stalin opted for the [Berlin] blockade without even discussing the question with *Politbiuro* members: “with whom Stalin discussed it I do not know, but I think it was only with Molotov. Nobody else.”³⁵

There are reasons to believe that, as a rule, no minutes were produced also in the case of the Council of commissars (SNK) meetings. At least for the 1920s however, we have an almost perfect surrogate in the well kept minutes of the debates in the Council of Labor and Defense (STO), and in the journals of the meetings of the chairman of the SNK with his deputies, a body which ran the country’s daily routine up until 1930, when Stalin disbanded it in order to eliminate a dangerous institutional rival to his personal power and personalistic way of handling things.³⁶

In the *Politbiuro* case, as in that of many other executive bodies down the hierarchy line, we do have instead protocols. These are laconic documents registering the date, the participants, and the issues discussed at each meeting. In general, for each of these issues they report on one side of the page the name of the person(s) introducing the problem, and on the other the decision taken on the matter.

We know that *Politbiuro* members received materials relating to each one of the points in the *ordre du jour*. There were norms regulating the length of these materials, which were not very voluminous (a few pages per point seems to have been the rule, a not unreasonable one given the fact that each meeting could decide up to 200 questions — the quality of these decisions being of course another matter).³⁷ Unfortunately, most of these materials are still in the presidential archives and are therefore not available. On the other hand, we do have the materials prepared for the SNK meetings, and we can reasonably assume that they often duplicated, with a few days’ delay, those prepared for the *Politbiuro*. In the funds of the single commissariats we also have some of the papers prepared to push for this or that *Politbiuro* decision.

What is more, we do have the 1923-1934 *osobaia papka* documents. As I said, this was the country’s highest level of secrecy, a special file where, starting in 1923,³⁸ the most sensitive *Politbiuro* decisions were collected (this means that in

34. O. Khlevniuk *et al.*, eds, *Pis'ma I.V. Stalina V.M. Molotovu, 1925-1936. Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow, 1995); Y. Cohen, “Des lettres comme action: Stalin au début des années 1930 vu depuis le fonds Kaganovič,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 38, 3 (1997): 307-346; *Stalinskoe Politbiuro*: 94-111; “Posetiteli kremlevskogo kabineta I.V. Stalina,” *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, 6 (1994), 2-3 (1995); M. Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (New York: Harcourt, 1962).

35. R.C. Tucker, “The Cold War in Stalin’s time: what the new sources reveal,” in *Symposium*: 273-81. Already in late 1936 the Soviet consul-general in Barcelona, Antonov-Ovseenko, sent his reports directly to Stalin, bypassing the normal diplomatic channels. S. Dullin, “Le rôle de Maxime Litvinov dans les années trente,” *Communisme*, 42-44 (1995): 75-93.

36. Both the STO minutes and the journals of the meetings of the chairman of the SNK with his deputies are to be found in GARF, f. 5674/s, op. 2 and f. 5446/s, op. 55.

37. *Stalinskoe Politbiuro*: 183-255.

38. A decision to keep the *Politbiuro*’s most important decisions separated from ordinary ones was taken already in November 1919. Apparently on Stalin’s insistence, Krestinskii was then ordered to register the former in a special file. In this way, Central Committee members, who had the right to receive the *Politbiuro* protocols, lost an important part of this privilege. O. Khlevniouk *et al.*, “Les sources archivistiques...,” *art.cit.*

the normal *Politbiuro* protocols one reads things like: “point 23, see the *osobaia papka*”). This file, which increased in volume year after year, also contains some of the documents relating to each question, and it is thus of invaluable importance.³⁹

Finally, we have the materials of the big bureaucratic organizations each one of the leaders directed, meaning the orders (*prikazy*) and the letters they wrote, the reports and the papers they read, etc.

We can thus say we now have many documents. Yet from another angle, we have very little, especially if we take into account the scarcity of good quality literature on the leadership's inner life and ideologies⁴⁰ and, above all, the rarity and the low quality of Soviet leaders' memoirs. I am referring here to the autobiographical material published before 1991, that is, by and large, to what is available for the pre-1941 period. Besides, at least in this case, the post-1991 crop has not greatly improved the situation. The lowest point has been probably reached with Kaganovich's memoirs, a selection of several hundred almost valueless pages out of the many thousands he wrote. But even Chuev's conversations with Molotov, though not deprived of interest, are well below standard. We are thus left with Khrushchev's memoirs and with the new edition of Mikoian's ones, which shall replace the heavily censored and edited version published in the USSR (the situation changes for the post-1956 period, as witnessed by materials like Petro Shelest's valuable diary).⁴¹

It goes without saying that we shall have to use this disappointing material, yet one cannot help feeling a certain envy for our more fortunate colleagues studying other countries. From our perspective, even the historians of nazism, who like to complain about the paucity of this kind of sources, look like spoiled, hard-to-please people. They even have the minutes of Hitler's table-talks, while we have to be content with the occasional, if keen, eyewitness account.⁴²

It may well be that the presidential archives will surprise us in the future with yet new revelations. Only a small part of Stalin's personal fund — comprising, it

39. Parts of the *osobaia papka* are already in print. See for example G.M. Adibekov, ed., “Spetspereselentsy — zhertvy ‘sploshnoi kollektivizatsii’,” *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, 4 (1994): 145-180 on dekulakization, and Kuo Heng-y, M.L. Titarenko, eds, *RKP(b), Komintern und die national-revolutionäre Bewegung in China. Dokumente. I: 1920-25* (Paderborn, 1996) on the Soviet intervention in China.

40. We do have however some exceptional literary documents, like V. Grossman's *Sud'ba i zhizn'* and Aleksandr Bek's novels, the already mentioned *Novoe naznachenie* in the first place.

41. L.M. Kaganovich, *Pamiatnye zapiski rabochego, kommunista-bol'shevika, profsoiuznogo, partiinogo i sovetko-gosudarstvennogo rabotnika* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1996); F. Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym* (Moscow, 1991); E. Crankshaw, ed., *Khrushchev remembers* (New York, 1970); the first volume of Mikoian's memoirs was published in 1971; M. Kramer, ed., “New evidence from the diary of Petro Shelest,” *CWIHP Bulletin*, 10 (1998): 234-247. It must be added that very valuable memoirs were published in the 1920s, that we of course have Trotskii's ones as well as those of some prominent foreign communist leaders like Ruth Fischer or the above mentioned Joseph Berger. A special case is represented by Svetlana Allilueva's valuable books.

42. K. Hildebrand, *Das dritte Reich* (München: Oldenbourg, 1979); I. Kershaw, *The Nazi dictatorship* (London: Arnold, 1989); M. Djilas, *op. cit.*

seems, 10 *opisi* — is today available.⁴³ But after the release of the *osobaia papka* and of secret funds like Ezhov's or Kaganovich's, I think we can formulate more or less accurate hypotheses on what can, and what cannot be done, with the new materials. We can certainly write, I believe, a reliable history of how the country was ruled (and later "administered"), listing — for example with the help of the *osobaia papka* — what the leadership believed to be important, how these priorities changed over time and how they were met. On this basis, and with the help of other kinds of documents, we also can, *but only indirectly*, go for a history of the Soviet leadership's mentality and of its evolution. But I fear that, at least for the 1930s and 1940s, the reconstruction of a credible portrait of its members' psychology and ideology — i.e. of these people as real human beings — will prove impossible and that in this field we shall have to content ourselves with what shall remain more or less informed speculations.

B. Lacunae

I will not refer here to the lacunae generated by historical "accidents" — like the above mentioned German bombs — which have affected and will affect archival collections the world over, nor to those caused by the temporary unavailability of more or less secret documents that do exist. Rather, the lacunae produced by the system and its way of working will occupy the center of the stage.

In one of the private investigations that I conducted to get a better sense of the workings of the communist party's top bodies, I asked a good friend who had been very close to the Italian party's top leadership in the 1950s, what was known then of the debates within the Italian Ufficio politico and segreteria. Let us remember that we are speaking of a party then known for its "moderation" and "intelligence," living in a democratic, tranquil country. She answered, "formally we knew very little, but of course there were continuous rumors about in-fighting, feuds, personal falls from favor and the like." We can imagine the situation in the USSR of the 1930s for a Central Committee member living in the Urals, where his authority was supreme, but whose conduct was actually regulated by small, often incomprehensible excerpts (*vypiski*) from *Politbiuro* decisions, phone calls (see below), and information coming from Moscow through his personal *sviazi*. In other words, without rumors no credible history of the second tier of the top leadership of the party is possible, especially — again — for the 1929-1953 period, but also for the previous⁴⁴ as well as for the later one (though in the latter case some remedy does exist).

43. See for example V.A. Kozlov, S.V. Mironenko, eds, "*Osobaia papka*" I.V. *Stalina: iz materialov sekretariata NKVD-MVD SSSR, 1944-1953 gg.* (Moscow, 1994), for a catalogue of the materials Stalin received in those years from the secret police and kept in his private files. The same authors prepared similar catalogues of Molotov's, Beria's and Khrushchev's special files.

44. According to Valentinov, during the struggle against the opposition the party was rife with rumors on the conflicts within the top leadership, so much so that the XIII Party Congress voted a special resolution against their diffusion. N. Valentinov, *op. cit.*: 43.

There is then the problem of the documents that, as Mark Kramer accurately noted, “never existed at all.”⁴⁵ For instance, if we leave aside the above mentioned handwritten notes exchanged at meetings, we have almost no direct or indirect records of private discussions between party leaders, an important exception being the summaries of the Bukharin-Kamenev-Sokol’nikov-Piatkov meetings of 1928 and 1929.⁴⁶ But if there were — and I believe there were — debates on Stalin’s “tenure” at the height of the crisis in the summer and fall of 1932, these must have taken place in such private meetings. It was in these kinds of discussions that the Riutin platform was prepared, and it was this kind of discussions that it generated. In other countries and in other political climates, like that of the USSR in the preceding decade, such debates generated a vast documentary production in newspapers, journals, documents, letters, memoirs, diaries and the like. For the 1930s — and I fear also for the following two decades — we have to content ourselves with tantalizing accounts, like those which can be found in the memoirs of foreign but competent observers like Serge, Ciliga, the above mentioned Berger, Babette Gross (Willi Münzenberg’s wife), etc. They can give us a few illuminating hints, but no more than that.⁴⁷

We also do not have the records of the many things that were either informally or illegally done by the various members of the party top leadership. We already met with this problem when speaking of the informal *Politbiuro* meetings to which Trotskii was not invited, and we shall meet it again when we shall deal with *perlustratsiia* (i.e. the control upon private correspondence). The problem is however much bigger. Let us think for example of what Stalin’s personal secretariat, headed by notoriously unscrupulous people, was doing as early as the 1920s. According to the generally believable Bazhanov (whose tendency to blow his role out of any proportion has of course to be correspondingly discounted), telephone conversations between Central Committee members were for example taped. At the same time, “special projects” of various nature to discredit or blackmail this or that leader were organized (something which of course is being done today in every country of our planet but which Stalin did on a different scale and in different conditions: with Trotskii’s exception, his victims never had, for example, the opportunity to protest or denounce his schemes). Later on, as Lesley Rimmel reminds us, Stalin’s secretariat even produced regular reports (*svodki*) devoted to the “opinions” of party, police, state and army officials. And we

45. “In a country like the Soviet Union, where ‘telephone justice’ (i.e. telephone calls from top CPSU officials to state functionaries ordering them how to resolve specific issues) and ‘word-of-mouth-only’ decision-making long prevailed, one is apt to find important activities or decisions that were not committed to paper.” In M. Kramer, “Archival research in Moscow...,” *art. cit.* We also know of official events whose records were not printed in order to encourage a free exchange of opinions. The famous meeting of June 1931, devoted to the critical state of industry, was among them. See O. Khlevniouk, *Le cercle du Kremlin, op. cit.*: 86.

46. Now in Ju.G. Fel’shtinskii, *art. cit.*

47. M. Riutin, “*Na koleni ne vstanu*” (Moscow, 1992); V. Serge, *Memorie di un rivoluzionario, 1901-1941* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1974); A. Ciliga, *Dix ans au pays du mensonge déconcertant* (Paris: Champ Libre, 1977); J. Berger, *op. cit.*; B. Gross, *Willi Münzenberg. A political biography* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974).

know that Stalin's successors too had their own informal structure, from Brezhnev's "shadow cabinet" to Gorbachev's "brain trust."⁴⁸

We thus have the paradox of a system which kept accurate and detailed records of its crimes if these were regularly generated through the appropriate bureaucratic machinery (dekulakization, Katyn, etc.) but under whose conditions no record of other, more petty crimes was produced, precisely because these actions were not and could not be regularly discussed, formally approved and therefore registered in what are — let me repeat myself — *bureaucratic* archives (one exception being the above mentioned *perlustratsiia*, which embodied the living paradox of an illegal, but state-sanctioned and therefore regular bureaucratic organization).

We do not have the transcripts of phone calls, most probably even of those which Stalin did tape. This in a time in which — as the records of the Civil War prove all too well (the military structure then kept a record of conversations *po priamomu provodu*) — the telephone was already a decisive instrument of command. The more so in the hands of Stalin, whose preference for an "informal" style of ruling I already mentioned and whose early morning phone calls, which dictated the tempo of the lives and the very destiny of so many Soviet leaders, are quite well known.⁴⁹

Speaking of Stalin's preferences, we must recall that — as I underlined earlier — we do not have any records of the informal, private evening meetings in which things were decided in the 1930s and 1940s. At first these meetings took place in Stalin's cabinet at the Kremlin, where they did leave a formal trace in the journal of the cabinet's visitors, recently published in its entirety (on the other hand we can only wonder about real discussions).⁵⁰ After the mid-30s they were even more informally convened in Stalin's private dwelling. We can get an idea of what went on then from the above mentioned Khrushchev or Djilas memoirs, but these relate to just a few meetings out of hundreds.⁵¹

A much more important keyhole on Stalin's private, informal way of running the country is provided by the letters he sent to his most trusted henchmen when on vacation. In particular, we have 86 letters addressed to Molotov, who probably operated a selection before donating them to the party archives in the 1960s, and 83 to Kaganovich. Unfortunately, these letters tend to cover only a specific period of time, generally starting in July and ending in September. In Molotov's case the

48. B. Bajanov, *op. cit.*; L. Rimmel's contribution to this issue of the *Cahiers*; N.E. Rosenfeldt, *Knowledge and power. The role of Stalin's Secret Chancellery in the Soviet system of government* (Copenhagen, 1978); V. Medvedev, *V komande Gorbacheva. Vzgljad iznutri* (Moscow, 1994); P. Palazchenko, *My years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: The memoir of a Soviet interpreter* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997). The last two titles are discussed in R.D. English, *art. cit.*

49. A. Bek, *La nuova nomina* (Milano: Garzanti, 1973): 76, this being the Italian edition of *Novoe naznachenie*.

50. "Posetiteli kremlevskogo kabineta I.V. Stalina," *art. cit.*

51. It seems possible to maintain that with the ripening of Stalin's despotism and as a consequence of the devitalization of the country's top organs, real life tended to abandon these organs' official documents. Yet however perverted by the presence of such a malignant despot, real life at the top did not disappear. It just became very difficult to reconstruct it.

most valuable nuclei pertain to 1926 and the years 1929-1930; in Kaganovich's case it is impossible not to mention the extraordinary 28 letters of the fateful summer of 1932 when a weakened but angry Stalin left Moscow for three months and the terrible famine of the years 1932-1933 started to plague the country.⁵²

Another important documentary hole is mapped by the boundaries of the regime's mental horizon and political interests and by these boundaries' evolution. In other words, there are very few or no documents relating to events and phenomena the leadership thought unimportant or not dangerous. As we shall see, this kind of lacuna is particularly relevant in the case of the country's population. But, as Peter Blitstein's contribution shows, even important political issues, like the nationality questions, could be for years under-documented at the top level.⁵³

There is, finally, the problem of the papers that have been intentionally destroyed or altered, out of precaution or fear.

As Patricia Kennedy Grimsted rightly remarked, archives the world over do not preserve more than 3-4% of state-produced documents (perhaps 10% in the case of papers related to foreign affairs). It is therefore crucial to know the rules regarding the selection of the documents which are in principle to be preserved, and to understand why in some cases even these documents have been illegally destroyed. It is also important to keep in mind that among the routinely, legally destroyed documents there could also be very sensitive material. On January 3, 1929, for instance, in what was probably a routine decision, an official act ordered the burning of top secret documents referring to an epidemic of plague on the border with China.⁵⁴

There have been in the USSR at least five relevant cases of extraordinary or illegal mass destruction of documents officially marked for preservation. The first took place during the years 1929-1930, when the need for paper, that was rapidly becoming a scarce resource, seemingly played a certain role. The second was related to the great mock trials and the purges of the years 1936-1938. It is reasonable to assume that many party and state leaders then tried to destroy at least part of their papers before the feared knock on the door came.⁵⁵ Yet other papers were lost after that knock. In the chaos of the years 1937-1938, and in spite of rather precise orders, sometimes the papers of the arrested persons — there were so many of them — were disposed of or were simply forgotten. This seems to have been the case even of important party leaders like Shliapnikov, whose daughter — after her father's rehabilitation — was told that there were no papers left (I am writing on the basis of a 1994 conversation).

The third, and quantitatively by far the most significant episode, occurred in the summer of 1941, during the partial evacuation of Moscow and other important cities

52. O. Khlevniuk *et al*, eds, *Pis'ma I.V. Stalina V.M. Molotovu*, *op. cit.*; Y. Cohen, *art. cit.* The letters to Kaganovich should be published soon.

53. See also G. Moullec, *art. cit.* and M. Kramer's essay in this issue of the *Cahiers* for an evaluation of the topics discussed at CC plenums.

54. P. Kennedy Grimsted, *op. cit.*; GARF, f. 5446/s, op. 55, d. 1866, l. 37.

55. It is plausible that such destruction started already in the 1920s, with the repression of the various party oppositions. And it is legitimate to imagine that many important intellectuals destroyed part of their papers during the great trials of the years 1928-1930.

like Kiev. Understandably enough, archival material was then assigned a low priority and many important collections were burned rather than loaded on the trains. Thus more than one million GULag files were burned and less than 100,000 saved, 5,000 Supreme Soviet's records were evacuated and almost 750,000 destroyed, etc. It seems that even the archives of the Central Committee's various departments were burned.⁵⁶

In 1953-1956 Beria's fall and Khrushchev's report at the XX Congress generated a minor wave of document destruction. In 1955, for example, eleven large sacks of documents collected by Beria and containing unique documents sent by Stalin to the NKVD, were ordered destroyed by a commission which was seemingly afraid even to read their contents. During those same years Khrushchev asked general Serov to conduct a "purge" of Stalin's files. Remembering that in 1959 Shelepin formally asked for the destruction of the documents relating to the Katyn massacres, it is reasonable to assume that material of great importance was then eliminated. Furthermore, we know that some of the leaders more directly implicated in Stalin's excesses tried to purge their records when destalinization came.⁵⁷

The fifth and final incidents occurred during the years 1990-1991, right before the fall of the USSR. As Mark Kramer noted, the collapse came so fast that the bulk of the archives was left largely intact. This however was not the case with the KGB where, apparently, extensive destruction took place before the newly appointed Bakatin was able to stop it.⁵⁸

In the light of what has been said up to now, how can we assess the reliability of sources like Nicolaevskii's famous "Letter of an old Bolshevik," and of famous stories like the supposed destruction of anti-Stalin ballots at the XVII Party Congress or the most famous of them all, those relating to Kirov's murder?⁵⁹ It is my contention that it is *impossible* to maintain that Nicolaevskii's account of an opposition to Stalin during the years 1932-1933 is false, or that no tampering with ballots took place, or that Kirov was not murdered on Stalin's order simply because we *are not finding archival evidence* of it. This is in fact precisely the kind of events that, given the nature of the Soviet system and of its records, would have *not* left a trace in the archives, unless Stalin decided to keep something in his personal files. Now, I personally agree with Khlevniuk, and believe that Kirov was not killed on Stalin's order, and that Ordzhonikidze did commit suicide in 1937. But these are just informed guesses, and — though miracles are always possible — I do suspect they will remain such. On the other hand, I do tend to believe that a strong opposition to Stalin during the years

56. O. Khlevniuk *et al.*, "Les sources archivistiques....," *art.cit.*; O.N. Kopylova, "K probleme sokhrannosti GAF SSSR v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny," *Sovetskie arkhivy*, 5 (1990): 37-44.

57. D.A. Volkogonov, *Sem' vozhdai* (Moscow: Novosti, 1996) 1: 260-261, 397.

58. P. Kennedy Grimsted, *op. cit.*: 57-58; M. Kramer, "Archival research in Moscow....," *art. cit.*: 22.

59. B. Nicolaevskii, *Power and the Soviet elite* (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 1965); R. Conquest, *Stalin and the Kirov murder* (London: Hutchinson, 1989); A. Kirillina, *L'assassinat de Kirov* (Paris: Seuil, 1995). A new collection of documents on the Kirov murder should soon be published in the series *Annals of Communism* by Yale University Press.

1932-1933 did exist within the party, though it was probably never formalized and it did not directly involve any *Politbiuro* member. Actually, more than of an opposition we should speak of a strong discontent with Stalin's policies and their consequences, which is perfectly compatible with the production of a few anti-Stalin ballots in 1934.⁶⁰ But these, again, are just speculations and cannot be but such.

By the way, it would not be unfounded to maintain that the feeling that Kirov could have become — even in a distant future — a more or less autonomous person, i.e. an alternative center of power, sufficed to push Stalin to decide in favor of his elimination (let us remember that by 1930 there was no major leader of the party capable of even imagining to run the country on his own, with Stalin's exception of course). This task would have been entrusted to Stalin's personal secretariat. Therefore, it would not have left any official trace — again, unless Stalin so wished.

In other words, such a decision could have been taken independently of any political motivation, that is even if Stalin was personally convinced that Kirov supported his political line, as it indeed seems to have been the case. In fact, a couple of transcripts of phone calls and a glance in the eyes were sufficient to make Stalin's mind click. Not by chance the accusation of *dvurushnichestvo* (double dealing) dominated the 1930s, as the recently opened Ezhov fund so powerfully reminds us. Everybody who knew of the 1932-1933 famine — and we now know that the top leadership did receive accurate information about its progress —⁶¹ must have thought that there was something wrong with Stalin's choices. Stalin himself must have dwelt upon the idea, perhaps after his wife's suicide. So that, in a way, he was a *dvurushnik* himself. He knew he had made mistakes but could not certainly say so. And if even he himself thought so, what must he have wondered about the inner thoughts of others... But evidently, I am speculating once more.

2. Biases

When in 1931 Stalin wrote the words we put on the cover of this issue of the *Cahiers* — “who but hopeless bureaucrats can rely solely on paper documents? Who but archives rats [...]” —, he was perhaps technically wrong. The young historian he was attacking had in fact found some archival evidence proving that before WWI Lenin had been closer to German and other “social-fascists” than Stalin would have people believe at the beginning of the 1930s.⁶² Yet from the point of view of his own experience — and as far as Soviet history is concerned — Stalin was basically right and knew what he was saying. In fact, we now know that he systematically and

60. O. Khlevniouk, *Le cercle du Kremlin, op. cit.*; O. Khlevniuk, *Politbiuro. Mekhanizmy politicheskoi vlasti v 1930-e gody* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1996).

61. A. Blum, “À l'origine des purges de 1937, l'exemple de l'administration de la statistique démographique,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 39, 1-2 (1998): 169-196 (special issue “Les années 30. Nouvelles directions de la recherche,” ed. by A. Graziosi and J. Scherrer).

62. I.V. Stalin, *Sochineniia* (Moscow, 1952) 13: 96; F. Bettanin, *La fabbrica del mito* (Napoli: ESI, 1997): 1.

periodically rearranged not only history — as Trotskii had proven and already denounced in the 1930s — but also the archives and the papers on which future historians were going to work. According to D. Volkogonov, for example, “not infrequently after examining some documents the dictator would order their destruction. In general he did so orally, to Poskrebyshev, but sometimes he also did it in writing.” Being those future historians, we cannot but ask ourselves how much the records left by such a man can be trusted and this without even taking into account the above mentioned “purges” of Stalin’s files conducted after the despot’s death.⁶³

Stalin was very smart, and his case is perhaps the most compelling one, but we have to remember that we are *more generally* dealing with a party whose leaders openly discussed in 1923, when Lenin, their beloved Lenin, was still alive in his bed, whether or not to feed him with a fake issue of *Pravda*, produced to show the “old man” that his opinions and *desiderata* were still duly taken into consideration. In other words, we are dealing with a man, a group of leaders, a party and a system for which, as Trotskii wrote in 1927 to Ordzhonikidze, “he who believes in words is an idiot.”⁶⁴ We thus risk being as many idiots listening to and trusting documents that are, after all, just *written* words.

Yet not all the biases of these documents derive from willful manipulation.

As Terry Martin convincingly shows in his essay, the very nature of the system, with the deep cleavage dividing what he calls soft-line bureaucracies from hard-line ones, was responsible for the production of a biased bureaucratic record, capable of misleading even *bona fide* historians. Martin’s conclusions fit very well with Jonathan Bone’s remarks about the strong biases produced by the “secrecy” principles and with Blitstein’s warnings about the biases deriving from the parallel documentary production of party, state and security institutions. Since hard-line institutions were in general more secretive than others, the bulk of the records left by the system is clearly biased in favor of “soft-line” practices and behavior. To repeat Martin’s words, “bias in the direction of the soft-line perspective is undoubtedly the more common error.” The slow and incomplete process of “desecretization” makes this bias even stronger: comparatively fewer of the already in principle rarer documents, like those produced by security organs, are today accessible.⁶⁵ We must

63. D.A. Volkogonov, *op. cit.*, 1: 260-261; L.D. Trotskii, *The Stalin school of falsification* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1937).

64. Trotskii archives, Houghton Library, Harvard University, T 984.

65. In his “Archival research in Moscow,” *art. cit.*, Mark Kramer made a slightly different but as true remark, noting that the non-availability of material from certain institutions “can lead researchers to exaggerate the policy-making role of other agencies.” Garthoff rightly adds that “under the circumstances of incomplete release or selective access” the researchers’ natural tendency “to look for material that conform to their own expectations and views” is increased (R.L. Garthoff, “Some observations on using the Soviet archives,” *art. cit.*: 249). Soviet historians have therefore a number of good reasons to follow Charles Darwin’s example. I am referring to that passage in his *Autobiography* in which Darwin describes the system he developed against this natural “tendency.” He forced himself to immediately take note of all the facts, observations and thoughts contradicting his conclusions, and made a principle to re-read them as often as possible (Freud liked the idea and discussed it in his *Psychopathology of everyday life*).

always remember that we are dealing with a regime that, at least in its early stages, was, in its own definition, a “conspiracy,” and behaved like one.

I would like now to examine three particular sets of biases characterizing the records left by the Soviet regime. These biases were either spontaneously produced or, if maliciously so, did then spontaneously penetrate the system as unwanted, pathogenic guests.

A. Ideologies

Ideology or, better, ideologies are the first culprit. Given the nature of the system and of its leaders’ education and mental horizon, Marxism occupies a special place. I am referring here to those few thousand cadres — led by a core of few hundred people — who took their own brand of Marxism very seriously and informed with it most of the system they founded (even though very often the most they could do was to lay upon this system a light veneer of something somehow resembling Marxism).

Now, even in its *bona fide*, pre-1917 version, Marxism was an *ideology* in the marxian sense, i.e. a fictitious, reassuring, self-gratifying and self-explanatory construction and, at the same time, a deceptive lens reproducing a distorted image of reality, especially of the reality of such an “atypical” country — from classical Marxism’s point of view — as the former Tsarist empire. The reference here is to A.O. Hirschmann’s intelligent remarks about the tricks played by the adoption of Western intellectual categories on the “Third World” intellectuals applying them to their own countries.⁶⁶ It goes without saying that the problems raised by the application of Marxism grew hand in hand with the progressive coming of age and diffusion of Stalin’s peculiar, quite simplistic and very primitive version of it.

Let us take as an example the secret police or the party *svodki*. They were basically answers to a pre-ordained set of questions, elaborated by central organs in Moscow. It seems fair to presume that, at least up to the years 1922-1923, those who prepared these questions did belong to the Marxist group mentioned above. And in fact one is immediately struck by the vulgar positivism — typical of a certain *fin-de-siècle* Marxism — which inspires them. The leading concept is to have local officials describe the moods of the various groups in the population and their evolution on the basis of the changes in the economic situation, not a bad idea *per se*, but a very limited one. What is more, this has to be done on the basis of some very easy, self-explanatory categories, like the famous *kulak*, *seredniak*, *bedniak* (poor, middle and rich peasants). We thus have, as early as 1919 and 1920, VChK reports that start saying: the *bedniak* is with us, the *kulak* hates us and the *seredniak* — obviously — oscillates, and then continue by saying that the entire

66. A.O. Hirschmann, *Underdevelopment, obstacles to the perception of change and leadership* (1967) now in Id., *A bias for hope* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971).

countryside is united against the communists and completely under the influence of the *kulak*.⁶⁷

Very soon, the presence of yet other ideologies began to be felt. As Terry Martin remarks, the reports on ethnic conflicts and tensions in Central Asia differ substantially according to the nationality of their authors.⁶⁸ And in 1919, the continuation — actually the expansion — of *perlustratsiia* was justified with arguments that had very little to do with the officially prevailing revolutionary doctrine. According to official instructions, among the letters to be confiscated — i.e. among those considered dangerous and thus passed to the secret police — there were letters written in unknown languages, maliciously portraying the nature of the Soviet state, containing explicit sexual expressions and so on and so forth, in a list that had at its core a very authoritarian idea of the state and that could have been signed, with but a few problems, by most reactionary officials of any old regime. I think it is safe to assume that a similar mentality was shared by many of those who, on the basis of these letters, then started to write periodic reports to the “competent authorities.”⁶⁹

Let us now turn to the unexpected consequences of what we may call the regime’s official lie, i.e. the conscious and active building of a mythological image of reality befitting the regime’s ideology, *desiderata* and foreign relations’ needs. As the Rosta (the Tass predecessor) dispatches of the 1918 summer extolling the popularity of the much hated poor peasants committees (*kombedy*) in the villages show us, this parallel “truth” was built almost immediately, and anyway much sooner than I, for one, believed.⁷⁰ As surprisingly rapid was its penetration in the secret reports directed to the top leadership of the regime, which one would have imagined free from such nonsense. The VChK *svodki* of the Civil War years show for example extremely interesting contradictions. I already mentioned those relating to peasant behavior. Even more interesting is the initial use of quotation marks when qualifying those days’ peasant revolts as “*kulak*” or as “banditry.” We even find expressions like “banditry (that is peasant insurrections),” while Antonov, the leader of the single, greatest post-revolutionary peasant revolt is one day called a bandit and another the leader of a huge peasant revolt.⁷¹

Very soon, however, these contradictions tended to disappear and official discourse — perhaps an appropriate term at least in this case — took over even in

67. A. Graziosi, “Stato e contadini...,” *art.cit.*: 472 and Id., “Collectivisation, révoltes paysannes et politiques gouvernementales à travers les rapports du GPU d’Ukraine de février-mars 1930,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 35, 3 (1994): 437-472.

68. T. Martin, “The OGPU and the politics of information,” paper presented at the AAASS annual meeting, Boston 1996.

69. V.S. Izmozik, *Glaza i ushi rezhima. Gosudarstvennyi kontrol’ za naseleniem Sovetskoi Rossii v 1918-1928 godakh* (SPb, 1995): 51.

70. *Ibid.*: 7

71. V.P. Danilov, T. Shanin, eds, *Krest’ianskoe vosstanie v Tambovskoi gubernii v 1919-1921 gg. Antonovshchina. Dokumenty i materialy* (Tambov, 1994); V.P. Danilov, A. Berelowitch, eds, *Sovetskaia derevnia glazami VChK-OGPU-NKVD. Dokumenty i materialy. 1: 1918-1922 gg.* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1998).

secret documents.⁷² We are thus left with a big question mark. Why did this happen, against the very interests of a leadership that was presumably interested in knowing the “truth”? And why so quickly?

The ignorance, the low cultural level of most new local officials did of course play a role. We are dealing here not with the Marxists who prepared the long lists of questions but with the newly promoted people — very often of popular extraction — who were called to answer them. Evidently, it was much easier to do so by resorting to prefabricated models (*kulak*, *seredniak*, *bedniak*, for instance) or even to articles published in local newspapers, than to seriously think about the local situation, and personally put together original answers whose non-conformism could, by the way, often cause serious problems.

We are confronting here one of the powerful factors pushing towards the rapid standardization and the leveling of many secret reports to official propaganda, namely the bureaucracy’s well-known tendency to conform to preordained models and to what we may call “problem-free discourse” (in his contribution Blitstein speaks of a “formal-bureaucratic style organized on the basis of the catchword of the day”).

Far from being a Soviet phenomenon, this is of course a universal one. Yet the Soviet conditions of the 1930s did make it more extreme. The presence of a despot, and the frequency of bloody purges, did generate a more powerful push to conform. It may be added that the despot in question did want the “truth.” Obviously, however, nobody was going to risk annoying or irritating him with unexpected news, so that the degree of falsity increased even more, thereby fueling the despot’s rage, which in turn made people even more afraid, subservient and false in the most classic vicious circle. To my knowledge the best description of this phenomenon is that which Mao’s doctor left us in a book which should be part of the compulsory reading list for anybody interested in despotic systems and their way of working.⁷³ Coming back to the USSR, by 1930 even someone like Balitskii, the much feared and very tough head of the Ukrainian secret police who in 1919-1920 had written vivid and open reports on the Ukrainian rebellious countryside, was writing reports that, although still informative, were much more carefully worded and composed.⁷⁴

The end products of such behavior were secret documents like a 1933 one extolling the love of miners for the new pneumatic drills, the very drills they were daily smearing with excrement as everybody who cared to know knew very well.⁷⁵ But already during the Civil War years (a time in general of far better reporting) *sovershenno sekretno* (top secret) documents were produced praising and vaunting

72. In his contribution Silvio Pons thus describes the phenomenon: “In general, a strong continuity emerges between the official public language and the language used in most parts of the archival documents in our possession, which is often highly formalized.”

73. Li Zhisui, *The private life of chairman Mao. The memoirs of Mao’s personal physician* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994).

74. A. Graziosi, “Collectivisation, révoltes paysannes...,” *art. cit.*: 447.

75. RGAE, f. 7297 (NKTP)/s. ch., op. 38, d. 43; A. Graziosi, “Stalin’s antiworker ‘workerism,’ 1924-1931,” *International Review of Social History*, 40 (1995): 240.

the peasants' love for the communes. This in a moment in which the hatred against them was reaching unprecedented heights, rapidly striking the very word out of the acceptable political vocabulary.⁷⁶

However, the most important factor at play in the rapid contamination of secret reporting by the official lie, and in this lie's pervasive diffusion within the very top of the political system, was perhaps another, i.e. the difficulty for a regime and a leadership which pretended to be socialist, to seriously face and bear the *real* secret of its ferocious anti-popular origins and nature. These anti-popular features were much stronger than I could have ever imagined. Reading through the secret police reports of the Civil War years one finds himself confronted with scenes which are difficult to classify and perhaps belong in those medieval times in which foreign invaders enforced the payment of a tribute out of an enserfed people, times made famous by the Robin Hood legend. To give an idea of what was happening in the country it is necessary to quote at length. The following is, for example, an excerpt from a VChK report written in February 1922, when officially the NEP was well under way. Interestingly enough, it reads like a denunciation, and we may presume that in a way it was such, though in essence it was not, since — as hundreds of similar reports show — the “excesses” it describes were accepted, standardized practices implemented all over the country with the blessing of a self-proclaimed communist center.

“The excesses of the requisition troops [says the document] are reaching in the province [Omsk] absolutely unbelievable dimensions. Everywhere arrested peasants are kept in cold granaries, beaten with whips, threatened with shooting. The peasants, in fear, take refuge in the woods. The 156th requisition company and the 3rd requisition detachment called a general meeting of peasants from several villages. The peasants that did show up were attacked by the cavalry and beaten with whips and unsheathed sabers. Those who had not paid the tax in kind in full were chased around the village and trampled upon by horses. Then they were put naked in cold granaries. Many women were beaten until they lost consciousness, buried naked in the snow, raped [...]”⁷⁷

It was, among other things, to cover up this secret that *konspiratsiia* — i.e. the set of rules created to protect the bolshevik underground from the Tsarist secret police — was *expanded* and *reinforced* after 1917, and not abolished as one might have believed given the socialist, popular pretenses of the new government.⁷⁸ Its leaders knew very well and very soon — after the spring of 1918, let us say — that

76. A. Graziosi, *Bol'sheviki i krest'iane na Ukraine, 1918-1919 gody* (Moscow: AIRO-XX, 1997):159-160.

77. *Sovetskaia derevnia...*, *op. cit.*: 573. On the problem of state violence against peasants see also A. Graziosi, *The great Soviet peasant war. Bolsheviks and peasants, 1918-1933* (Cambridge, MA, 1997).

78. I discuss these problems in *The great Soviet peasant war*, *op. cit.*: 35-36. See also *Stalinskoe Politbiuro*: 73-82. The role of Stalin in strengthening the *konspiratsiia* in 1919 has already been mentioned. It is also discussed in J. Bone's contribution to this issue of the *Cahiers*, which includes precious data about the *konspiratsiia* evolution in the 1920s.

theirs was a most unpopular regime, but this was — as I said — a secret that was not easy to bear. The temptation to believe one's own lies was thus very strong. It is for example striking to see someone like A.G. Shlikhter — the man in charge of the “bacchanalian” requisitions in Ukraine (1919) and Tambov (1920) and thus partly responsible for the two largest antibolshevik peasant revolts — state that the Bolsheviks were not responsible for the beginning of the Civil War and the resort to terror and, *in the same internal document*, call for the introduction of Civil War and its above-mentioned, related policies in the villages. Given Shlikhter's personality — he seems to have been a decent person with a Polanyian passion for redistributive systems — I am inclined to believe that he was lying to himself as well as to his comrades.⁷⁹ Years later, one of the cadres sent in the early 1930s to the countryside to enforce collectivization and procurements in famine areas frankly admitted that “*in order to live with ourselves we had to smear reality out of recognition with verbal camouflage* (italics mine — AG).”⁸⁰

Of course some of the original leaders, people like Lenin, Trotskii and Stalin were strong enough to bear the truth and intelligent enough to ask for it, even though, as I surmised above, in the wrong way and with the wrong method. Yet the system as such, and many of its leaders, soon developed a taste for its own official lie. And while Trotskii and Stalin got very angry when fed with complacent reports, some of their contemporaries and most of their followers actually asked for it. To get the point, it is enough to read the reports that an intelligent man like Gorbachev wrote for Brezhnev.⁸¹ Or recall the famous story of Solzhenitsyn's surprise when, after 1991, he asked to see the secret debates which preceded his banishment. He was expecting to find the “truth” behind the official lies on his activities. He discovered instead that, at least according to the official record, the *Politbiuro* discussed his case in terms that were not too different from those used in the press campaigns mounted against him.⁸²

The Soviet top leadership thus ended up feeding on its own propaganda. This compounded the above mentioned consequences of the multiple levels of secrecy. Inevitably the system grew more and more inefficient. Nor could it be otherwise since its center became blinder and blinder, gradually losing its capacity to see in a more or less objective way and thus to act in a more or less rational way. We are not far from the truth when we say that the Soviet state was the victim of its own lies

79. A. Graziosi, *Bol'sheviki i krest'iane na Ukraine*, op. cit.: passim.

80. These are Victor Kravchenko's words and this is the complete sentence: “I could no longer escape the tormenting knowledge of the tragedy in the famine areas. We communists among ourselves always steered around the subject or we dealt with it in high-flown euphemisms of party lingo. We spoke of the ‘peasant front’ and ‘kulak menace,’ ‘village socialism’ and ‘class resistance.’ In order to live with ourselves we had to smear reality out of recognition with verbal camouflage.” In *I chose freedom* (New York, 1946).

81. N. Werth, G. Moullec, eds, *Rapports secrets soviétiques: la société russe dans les documents confidentiels, 1921-1991* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994): 261-262. As we shall see however, once in power Gorbachev expressed strong dissatisfaction with the reliability of information which the center was receiving.

82. T. Martin, “The OGPU and the politics of information,” *art. cit.*

and built its own trap, a trap still capable of capturing the careless historian. As we shall see in one of the next sections, a very similar process also took place in things economic and was compounded by what could be called bureaucratic behavior.

B. Bureaucracy's characteristics, interests and cultures

We already met with these problems more than once, but dealt with them only indirectly. Given their complicate nature and importance, they deserve a careful analysis rather than the following cursory treatment, but — as usual — I will be happy if these lines help raise the problem.

We are first of all confronted with the well-known bureaucratic tendency to “pretty-up” records, a tendency that seems capable of infecting any human being once he or she is given official responsibilities. One needs only remember what I wrote about the minutes of faculty meetings. If this is true, how and up to which point are we to trust the Soviet bureaucratic records⁸³ even once we have discounted the manipulations operated upon them?

These were not minor, by the way. We may recall those effected at the very top by the personal secretariats of this or that leader obeying the orders of their masters and pursuing their interests. In another of my Italian inquiries, I asked a former member of the governing body of Italy's largest trade union, the CGIL, to comment upon the records left by this body's meetings. It seems that the secretary of the general secretary personally reviewed all the minutes in order to make opponents look silly and ridiculous. But of course the CGIL minority had its own publications, and many of its leaders ended up writing memoirs, so that we can get a more or less accurate idea of their positions.

The personal convictions and preferences of those writing the minutes made themselves felt as well. In yet another of my probes, I asked a member of the Italian Communist Party *Politbiuro* about the minutes of the meetings of the 1960s, when two powerful factions — left- and right-wing — confronted each other. It emerged that a person with strong “right-wing” leanings was then in charge of keeping the *Ufficio politico* minutes, something that did have a major impact on their production. Later on, I discovered that the first detailed notes of the Soviet *Presidium* meetings, taken by Malin under Khrushchev, were probably affected by the same problem. Still later I found out that at the end of 1923 Trotskii, Radek and Piatakov officially

83. Many of the contributors to this issue of the *Cahiers*, like Silvio Pons and Peter Blitstein, discuss the problem. Garthoff has pointed out the “several paragraphs of self-congratulatory reassurances” which seem to squeeze reality out of even top secret reports (R.L. Garthoff, “The KGB reports to Gorbachev,” *art. cit.*). Valentinov recalls that already in the 1920s, newspapers systematically operated “*ochen' bol'shie smiagcheniia*” in the published texts of top leaders' speeches (N. Valentinov, *op. cit.*: 105, 117). In principle, a knowledge of the vocabulary of *smiagchenie* would allow us to at least partially reinsert life in the reports. Very often, however, it is not sufficient to replace expressions like “serious procurements problems” with famine. The entire texts should be “translated” and this is a far from simple or problem-free operation.

protested against the behavior of Nazaret'ian, the Stalin-appointed secretary of *Politbiuro* meetings who prepared those meetings' official protocols.⁸⁴

My Italian friend also confirmed the existence and the strength of the mentioned tendency to "improve" official records: very little trace of the often acute conflicts between the two factions is left. What is more, these conflicts were often expressed in cryptic terms, so that if one ignores the meaning of what were then extremely loaded expressions and seem now banal words, not different from the others, the entire sense of those days' debates is lost.

But this has always been true in history, one is tempted to say. Yes, but in the Soviet case — 1929 to 1953 let us say — we have almost no way of knowing which were those politically charged words, the opposition — if it existed — could not express itself, very few, if any, wrote good memoirs, and protagonists are by now dead and cannot answer our questions. Minutes and other official records had, moreover, a crucial importance as direct instruments of power (in their protest against Nazaret'ian, for example, Trotskii, Radek and Piatakov stressed that *Politbiuro* protocols were the documents through which the party was ruled). We can thus presume that their direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious manipulation reached huge proportions. And we do not have the usual tools to measure them.

The 1920s are of course, again, exceptional. As we just saw, at least the party opposition then had the possibility to voice its views, and even that to edit the minutes of its representatives' interventions at CC meetings before these were printed. Yet even those days' records can be quite tricky. Always thanks to the existence of an opposition, we know today that during the 1920s, often under Bukharin's benevolent eye, Stalin's henchmen like Nazaret'ian, Safarov and Iaroslavskii openly falsified records. In their travel to *Pravda* the results of party meetings, the resolutions they voted, etc. could and did get completely disfigured, and when the opposition leaders protested it was usually their informers that lost their jobs.⁸⁵

We have then to take into account the "corporate" interests of the various bureaucratic agencies, as compounded, and corrected, by the personal ones of their members.

In the USSR more than anywhere else, inter-bureaucratic conflicts did cause major distortions in the documents those very bureaucracies produced. In December 1924 for example, Felix Dzerzhinskii asked his deputy, Menzhinskii, to be more careful in the preparation of the *svodki* the OGPU prepared for party leaders, recommending in particular that these *svodki* present a better image of OGPU work (the implications are obvious). The reason for it was clearly stated: the OGPU was then under attack. Krylenko and his powerful allies among moderate leaders, with Bukharin in the forefront, were asking the *Politbiuro* to curtail the political police's special powers and to transfer them to the normal legal apparatus.⁸⁶

84. RTsKhIDNI, f. 323 (Kamenev), op. 2, d. 64. See also L.D. Trotskii, *Stalinist school of falsification*, op. cit..

85. Nazaret'ian, then also in charge of the *Pravda* bureau dealing with party affairs, was accused by Trotskii, Radek and Piatakov of "conscious and malicious alteration of the text of official documents" (RTsKhIDNI, f. 323, op. 2, d. 64).

86. *Bol'shevitskoe rukovodstvo. Perepiska...*, op. cit.: 297-298, 302-306.

Similar stories could be said about the documents produced by the Labor Commissariat and the Trade Unions in their fights against the VSNKh (and vice-versa, of course), about those exchanged by the *Narkomfin*, the *Gosbank* and VSNKh in their incessant polemics about industrial credit, etc. In other words, the phenomenon was a *general* one, and remained such till the collapse of the system. In 1985, for instance, Gorbachev felt the need to formally protest with the KGB against “the impermissible distortions of the factual state of affairs in messages and informational reports sent to the Central Committee of the CPSU and other ruling bodies.”⁸⁷

This state of affairs extended to the exchange of documentation between local and central organs. In politically tense situations, powerful local leaders went as far as formally setting up committees charged with controlling the information sent to Moscow. Ordzhonikidze for example did it to stop the flood of reports denouncing to the center the extreme brutality with which he was repressing the Georgian revolt of August 1924.⁸⁸ At a more general and more innocent level, each and every apparatus asking a superior body for a decision or for a decree (*prikaz*) solving this or that problem in its favor, did present a biased documentation. This has happened and still happens in hundred of countries the world over. The problem is that in the USSR of the 1930s no more or less free press was there to denounce these special interests, and we are today relying precisely on the documents produced by the various bureaucracies to guide our search for the Soviet past. The above mentioned materials attached to various points in the *Politbiuro* or the SNK *ordres du jour* should for example be read bearing these considerations firmly in mind.

As I said, distortions produced by personal interests compounded those originating from group ones. The military are the perfect example: as early as 1919, Trotskii was furious because of reports in which the Reds were always winning and the enemy always suffered major losses, even when not even a shot was exchanged.⁸⁹ According to the reports on the suppression of the *Antonovshchina* at the end of 1920, there was not a day in which Antonov did not suffer a major defeat. Yet month after month the revolt grew, and new troops had to be called in to quell it. The most pathological case was however Voroshilov. As Antonov-Ovseenko described in an accusatory tone in angry telegrams, he utterly lied about his role in the defeat of Hryhoryiv. A few months before, in January 1919, he had gone as far as falsifying the signature of Piatakov — then the head of the Ukrainian government — under a *prikaz* which appointed him and his friends to the head of the newly formed Red Ukrainian Army. Piatakov wanted to bring him to court, but Voroshilov ended up with all the medals he could dream of.⁹⁰

87. R.L. Garthoff, “The KGB reports to Gorbachev,” *art. cit.*: 226.

88. M. Wehner, “Le soulèvement géorgien de 1924 et la réaction des Bolcheviks,” *Communisme*, 42-44 (1995): 156-169.

89. Unfortunately, I lost the precise reference to Trotskii’s beautiful quotation on these problems.

90. V.P. Danilov, T. Shanin, eds, *Krest’ianskoe vosstanie v Tambovskoi gubernii v 1919-1921 gg...*, *op. cit.*; A. Graziosi, *Bol’sheviki i krest’iane na Ukraine*, *op. cit.*

The military example was soon followed by industrial leaders, from brigadiers up to factory directors. The need to prove that one had “fulfilled the plan” in order to avoid punishment and the desire for the bonuses awarded to those who “over-fulfilled” it, plus the propensity for the accumulation of as many hidden resources as possible in a system which was never able to solve its supply problems, pushed all those working in industry — workers included — to create “united fronts” at the brigade, shop and factory level. Their cement was precisely the common interest in systematic lying. Later on, with a term perhaps originated in the GULag archipelago, where this kind of lying was a life-or-death question, this pervasive collective behavior came to be known as *tufta*.⁹¹ We open here a new chapter of great importance.

C. The economic and other data

Economic data raise specific problems. Yet these are capable of illuminating some of the fundamental traits of the Soviet system as well as some of the reasons accounting for its eventual demise. I am not referring here to the obvious biases and inaccuracies common to all and every economic data, in the West as in the USSR.⁹² Nor to the banal ones produced by the just mentioned personal interests of industrial employees or by the *raison d'état* which, for example, pushed the Soviet leadership to systematically hide or falsify, during the 1920s, the data about state budget, inflation or the level of *Gosbank* reserves.⁹³ Even the many problems linked to the wider and wider diffusion of the secrecy principle at the end of NEP when, in B. Wolfe's words, “a darkness concerning the real economic facts descended not only on the people but even on the would-be planners,”⁹⁴ are not the goal of these pages.

I have in mind a much more precise question, namely the absence or, better, the reduction to a minimum in the Soviet system of economics in the “misesian” meaning of the word, and the effects of this absence. As it is well known, in 1920 Ludwig von

91. The people in charge of the industrialization drive received almost daily information about the falsity of the reports they were getting from the factories, and repeatedly tried to at least reduce the phenomenon, often resorting to harsh measures. See for example the collection of NKTP *Prikazy* in RGAE, f. 7297, op. 1. Years later however, the problem was still there (see J. Berliner, *Factory and manager in the USSR* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957): 160-206); Jacques Rossi, *The GULag handbook* (London: Overseas Publications, 1987): 414, and of course Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the life of Ivan Denisovich* and *GULag Archipelago*.

92. O. Morgenstern, *On the accuracy of economic observations*, 2nd revised edition (Princeton 1963).

93. RTsKhIDNI, f. 670 (Sokol'nikov), op. 1, d. 11 for the real data about the state budget in the first quarter of 1923-1924, when the military and the OGPU absorbed approximately 35% of state revenues; *Ibid.*, d. 19 for an interesting exchange of letters in December 1922 between Stalin, Sokol'nikov and Piatakov concerning the appropriateness to publish data about inflation; GARF, f. 5446/s, op. 55, d. 1866 for Iurovskii's 1928 protests against the new and dishonest way of calculating *Gosbank* reserves.

94. See Wolfe's introduction to N. Valentinov's *Novaia ekonomicheskaja politika i krizis partii*, op. cit.: xii, and his essay “The great black out” in *An ideology in power* (Stanford, 1969). Bone's contribution contains valuable information about the evolution of economic secrecy at the end of the 1920s.

Mises pointed to a series of theoretical problems with many very practical consequences, affecting the non-market, “socialist” economies. The article had a huge impact, among economists of course but even, I believe, on the Soviet leadership (there is evidence suggesting that Trotskii and his collaborators knew about it, developing very strong, if temporary, pro-market feelings. We also know that in 1945 the Mises papers were judged interesting enough to be transferred from Vienna to Moscow). After WWII, however, the very power and apparent stability of the Soviet system seemed to suggest that Mises had been wrong after all, as Lange seemed to have proved, and his points were more or less forgotten.⁹⁵

In fact Mises’ position had been very extreme: he had gone as far as denying the very possibility for such a system to exist even in the medium run. That is why after 1945 the emergence of a victorious USSR was seen as closing the question. Yet later events vindicated if not the extremism, the essence of Mises’ position (I would add that a more correct observation of past events would have yielded the same results).⁹⁶

As we know, the key question is the absence of *meaningful* prices, capable of indicating the relative scarcity of the myriad of goods existing in a developed society. Even during the NEP, when a labor market and a market for consumption goods did exist, there was no market for capital. This meant that investments were “blind.” Actually, the Soviet leadership pretended it could control them better by virtue of the superiority of the plan. In fact, as I tried to show elsewhere, this was one of the main reasons for the hastening of the economic crisis of the NEP.⁹⁷

After 1929, markets were compressed as far as humanly possible. This generated what I believe to be a *theoretical* — meaning a fundamental — impossibility to answer some basic questions relating to the history and the development of the Soviet economic system except in a very rough, intuitive way. In other words, the secret data we are finding today *are not* the key to the solution of the problems which have plagued the students of the Soviet economic “experiment” for decades.

The obvious example is that of the reconstruction of the size and evolution of the Soviet national income. The endless disputes surrounding the various efforts waged in the West should have suggested that some basic problem was at hand. And the

95. L. von Mises, “Die Wirtschaftsrechnung im sozialistischen Gemeinwesen,” *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften*, 47 (1920), republished by F.A. Hayek in the famous collection *Collectivist economic planning* (London: Routledge, 1935) and recently by The Ludwig von Mises Institute (Auburn, AL, 1990). See also *Alle radici del XX secolo europeo*, my introduction to the Italian edition of Mises’ *Nation, Staat und Wirtschaft* (Vienna, 1919; Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1994). G. Jagschitz and S. Karner, *Confiscated Austrian documents: Austrian findings in the Russian special archives* (The Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Research into the Consequence of War, 1996).

96. An interesting parallel could be made with Kennan’s theory of containment, based on the hypothesis that the Soviet system was doomed by its inner contradictions (Kennan did not see the economic ones, however) and that it was therefore sufficient, once good care had been given to the problem of containing its aggressive actions, to wait for its demise. In the face of the Soviet system’s apparent vitality under Khrushchev, Kennan himself came to criticize his earlier views. Yet these have been vindicated by later developments.

97. A. Graziosi, “‘Building the first system of state industry in history.’ Piatakov’s VSNKh and the crisis of the NEP, 1923-1926,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 32, 4 (1991): 539-580.

fact that the lonely Jasny, in spite of his formal mistakes, could have produced — on the basis of his uncommon common sense and understanding of Soviet reality — better results than those of the entire Bergson school, with its statistical sophistication and its large funds, was even more indicative.⁹⁸

Yet and perhaps unavoidably, various Western agencies and scholars have continued to produce at times ridiculously precise estimates, often plagued by the special interests of their compilers. A Yale economics professor, who advised the Soviet government at the end of the 1980s, told me of his surprise when he discovered that the Gorbachev people — having lost faith in their own figures — were then relying in their economic calculation on CIA data, something Mises would have certainly loved. Given the interests of the American industrial-military complex, however, these data were grossly overestimated — up to 100% if we are to believe some observers. We can imagine the consequences. By the way, this should teach us not to take at face value the information about the supposed economic collapse of the Eastern European economies after 1989-1991. The value of the previous statistics is abysmally low,⁹⁹ and observers always prefer to look at what they already know to be there. Of course, many iron and steel mills and other factories have been closed, but one is tempted to ask if the shutting down of a big factory that had been consuming huge amounts of resources to produce things of very dubious value could indeed be counted as a loss for the national income — or should have been instead put in the plus column. After all to stop producing at a loss is in itself a gain — though of course nobody can deny the human suffering involved in these readjustments (suffering that should be however imputed to the old system, rather than to the effort to exit the no longer viable situation it created).

But let us go back to history. And let us turn to the supposed economic growth of the 1930s.¹⁰⁰ What do we really know about it? We know that something big was

98. See Alec Nove's "Introduction" to J. Degras, ed., *Soviet planning. Essays in honour of Naum Jasny* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964) and N. Jasny, *To live long enough. The memoirs of Naum Jasny, scientific analyst* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1976): 107-133. Jasny also wrote a very interesting "Note on rationality and efficiency in the Soviet economy," published in three installments in *Soviet Studies*, 12 (1961) and 13 (1962).

99. At a Eurostat meeting in Luxembourg, Professor Peter von der Lippe — the author of a report to the German Parliament — maintained for instance that the degree of economic data falsification in the DDR surpassed human imagination. The head of the Central Committee economic department decided not only what to publish but also what to feed to the DDR economic bureaucracies. He followed some general precept: the DDR economy was to be always "developing"; export was always to grow and always to be larger than import; productivity was always to increase, etc. Not surprisingly, according to professor Lippe, at the beginning of the 1980s even DDR statisticians were convinced that their country had surpassed Great Britain and Italy.

100. R.W. Davies, M. Harrison, S. Wheatcroft, eds, *The economic transformation of the Soviet Union, 1913-1945* (Cambridge — New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) is a honest attempt to reconsider the question in the light of new evidence. G.I. Khanin, *Dinamika ekonomicheskogo razvitiia SSSR* (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1991) is the most interesting Russian estimate of Soviet economic growth. According to Khanin, "Soviet national income had by 1985 multiplied the level of 1928 not by 84.4 times, as official statistics would have it, but by only 6.6 times" (in O.A. Westad, "Secrets of the Second World," in *Symposium*: 259-71). Always according to Khanin, during the first five-year plan the economy actually declined by 20%.

built in that decade, of course, and we know that very high prices were paid for it. At the end, the new state got what it wanted: a powerful, more or less up to date industrial-military system capable of producing quality products in at least a few key areas: let us remember that Soviet tanks proved better not only than the laughable Italian tin cans (something my friends under the spell of the modern and modernizing features of the Fascist regime and of its state industry should perhaps keep in mind) but also of their much more serious German counterparts.

Yet I believe it is safe to maintain that at the end of the 1930s, in spite of the prices paid and of the effort provided, the real national income of the country was not much greater than in 1928, perhaps even lower. Wages were barely 60% of what they had been then; the income of the rural population (still 70% of the total) had collapsed; production for self-consumption had followed suit (we cannot certainly compare what the peasants miraculously got out of their small allotments with what they got in the 1920s out of their farms...); small production (artisans, handicraft, etc.) had been compressed, etc. Of course, there was now a big state sector producing iron, steel, coal, tanks, tractors, airplanes, etc. But the cost of these products was basically unknown, their final utility dubious (if not for the state and for the sake of its survival),¹⁰¹ and it may well be that already then this sector was producing at a loss, a loss made up with the huge resources of the land and the sacrifices imposed upon its inhabitants.

I just said that the real prices of these new products, and thus the economics of the new industrial system, were — and remain — a *terra incognita*. At the same time, its leaders did try to know about relative scarcities and, in spite of Mises, they did develop some rough and ready instruments which allowed them to at least get some sense of the direction in which they were going. In other words, they did try to see the reality surrounding them and even if they did not have a good compass, they had what was needed to navigate, at least for a while, and in a (very treacherous) way. What we find today in the Soviet economic archives are often the products of these instruments.

On one hand, there are the data about physical output: how many tons of coal or iron or how many trucks had been produced, etc. Evidently a byproduct of the lack of reliable prices, the preference the regime accorded to these physical units was probably also grounded in ideology. In the name of the pretense to directly know “real” reality, Soviet Marxism questioned the very scientific character of statistics and probabilism. As it has been observed, “it was assumed that under socialism the study of probabilities associated with statistics was no longer necessary — planning would deal with firm records, not statistical uncertainties.” That’s why in the 1930s the very name of the major statistical organ, the Central Statistical Administration (TsSU) was changed into Central Administration for National Economic Accounting (TsUNKhU).¹⁰²

101. As much as we like the idea that this survival implied the crushing of nazism, we have to admit that this is not an economic argument, nor a valid one from the point of view of — let us say — a Ukrainian peasant in the early 1930s.

102. R.W. Davies *et al.*, eds, *Economic transformation...*, *op. cit.*: 28-29.

Such physical units did of course have, and continue to have a meaning: a huge truck factory producing 100 trucks a month instead of the planned 1,000 did say something to the central leadership then and to us today. And so does the fact that in two years that factory started to produce 800 trucks a month, if not the 1,000 that had been hoped for. But physical output does not give us — and it did not give Soviet leaders — any idea about the quality of what was being produced. Above all, it does not say anything about its cost structure: it may well have been that those trucks were produced at a loss, so that any increase in their production was actually damaging the economy. The same applies to coal: in the absence of credible relative prices, nobody can assure us that it was not an economic mistake to dig and burn more coal rather than investing more in electrical power.

These physical units went into the compilation of the “material balances” used to distribute scarce resources among the different industries and factories requiring them. They were a sort of primitive input-output tables by which the central administration kept track of the way important resources were used and tried to assure as harmonious a development as possible of the industrial system. On their basis calculations were made about how much coal, iron, steel and how many workers and turret-lathes were needed to produce a certain amount of trucks, steam-hammers, bricks, etc. which in turn were used to produce other things, including more iron, steel, turret-lathes, etc. The system did furnish some guidance, but had severe transient and permanent, self-compounding problems.

The former were linked to the primitive state of Soviet accounting practices in the 1930s. By 1934 material balances for heavy industry included a few scores of products. They were heroically and almost single-handedly produced by Palei, a brilliant Jewish accountant from Kiev who headed in the 1930s the NKTP material balances sector and whose elaborated notebooks we can today read in RGAE. But even a few hundred products would be a ridiculous figure in a world in which a single car needs hundreds, if not thousands, of components, and there are dozens of different grades and kinds of steels. Disequilibria were therefore the norm rather than the exception, and what is striking is the capacity of industrial leaders to achieve what was achieved given these conditions, rather than their failures.

The self-compounding problems derived from a simple fact: the physical units entering the material balances tables had all the shortcomings mentioned above, so that in the long run the result of endless calculations involving economically unsound data could only lead the economy to a quagmire.

Not having credible prices, but haunted by the problem of the relative productivity of various productions, the central economic administration resorted to yet another method: in order to assess the growth of productivity, it started to compare the physical quantities of energy, steel, iron, labor, etc. entering into the production of a single product and their variation over time. The assumption was that if most of them decreased, the overall productivity of the system improved. The hypothesis is a reasonable one, and up to a certain point it could indeed work. But in the long run, the ignorance of the relative cost of the different factors of production

(of the different kinds of energy, for example) and of their evolution could not but lead to growing margins of error, rapidly compounding each other.

Another favorite method used to estimate productivity was the carrying out of very big, systematic inquiries about labor, working time utilization and labor conditions. These investigations, started already during the years 1920-1921, were repeated on a much larger scale during the years 1924-1925 and again during the years 1934-1935. They were evidently influenced by Scientific Management procedures and by the Marxist *idée fixe* of labor as the real producer of all value.¹⁰³ Stop-watches were widely used and the massive data produced by these inquiries are indeed very interesting and useful. Yet they can tell us very little about the real economic value of the production upon which this labor was expended. Again, then, the Soviet leadership did devise methods to understand if and how fast it was getting what it was interested in getting, but was rather in the dark as far as the *economic* value of this is concerned. Their position therefore, was not much different from that in which we find ourselves today.

Finally, there were the investigations of the various *sektory proverki ispolneniia* (the offices controlling the execution of directives), which soon developed into a sort of internal police, charged with discovering the “truth” about this or that situation. The fact is that at least the best Soviet administrators knew they were being fed false information, even though they tended to believe that this depended more on the malice of their subordinates than on the nature of the system they had built.

A crucial question thus concerns what they were able to see or, better, what they did see, and what kind of actions were spurred by these distorted images. Clearly, the many self-delusions experienced by the Soviet economic leadership in the 1930s — during the years 1928-1929, in the 1930-1931 winter, during the years 1934-1935 — were produced by a combination of factors which certainly included the Marxism (but not only)-derived ideologies then prevalent. In the middle of the decade, for example, the conviction that a state-industry system could be much more productive than the capitalist one, did contribute to the great expectations that pushed the NKTP top leadership to embrace stakhanovism against its very cadres, thus paving the way for Stalin’s destruction of the once powerful commissariat and of its leaders.¹⁰⁴ Yet the data these people were fed were not extraneous to this incapacity to see — should we say approximate? — reality, to the construction of very distorted and misleading images of it.

Today, we run the risk of falling into the same trap: far from being the “truth,” the secret data we are eventually discovering can mislead us precisely as they mislead those men, who — by the way — were far from stupid. Another big wave of conflicting, ill-considered estimates may thus be in the offing and we may find ourselves walking into the steps of our predecessors, whose endless feuds on the size of the Soviet national income have been recalled earlier. Again, this does not

103. A. Graziosi, “At the roots of Soviet industrial relations and practices. Piatakov’s Donbass in 1921,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 36, 1-2 (1995): 95-138.

104. I discuss these points at the end of my “G.L. Piatakov...,” *art. cit.*

mean at all that we should refrain from using those data. But we should quickly learn what can be asked of them.

Another major problem derives from yet another of the Soviet economic archives' riches. I am thinking of the countless *prikazy* issued by each major economic administration. The NKTP for instance, emanated each year about 1,500-2,000 of them, including secret ones. To these central *prikazy* we have to add those issued by subordinate administrations enjoying that *pravo prikazyvat'* which remained through the years one of Soviet bureaucracies' most coveted rights. After 1932, a majority of these *prikazy* remained secret and we are finding them today together with the materials on which basis they were issued (letters raising this or that question, complaints, documents attesting to local crisis or to sudden requests coming from the Kremlin, etc.).¹⁰⁵

This means that we can see which problems emerged and how they were solved. In other words, we can today write a good administrative history — i.e. a history of how the economy was governed — also in the field of “economic construction.” It is for example possible to reconstruct in a credible way the history of the industrializers' victory, of how the state ended up getting something it had very much wanted (if not precisely what it had planned to get), distinguishing the various stages and the problems linked to each one of them — at least from the point of view of the system's builders. And we can outline in a more or less precise way the emergence and solidification in the 1930s of new social hierarchies, from the employees of the industrial military complex with their growing privileges¹⁰⁶ down to *spetspereselentsy* and GULag dwellers.¹⁰⁷

As in the case of the political leaders, we can also sketch — but only indirectly — the evolution of the mentalities of these builders. But a convincing human portrait will probably continue to elude us — let me just recall what I have written about Piatakov in the 1930s — and I strongly doubt that we'll ever be capable of writing a real economic history of this crucial period.

Things are much better with more controllable, relatively harder data like the demographic ones. In fact, contrary to meaningful prices, which can only be the result of market forces and are therefore a very delicate social construction, easily altered by a multitude of factors, the fact that somebody is born or died is an undeniable “reality” which, at least in our century, has been generally physically registered somewhere. This means that while it is of course possible to tamper with

105. The normal NKTP *prikazy* ranged from 979 in 1932 to 2,041 in 1936. In the latter year more than 1,200 *rasporiazheniia* were also produced. After 1932, a growing percentage of these ordinary *prikazy* were not published in the Commissariat's official bulletin. Always in 1932, there were more than 200 secret and top secret *prikazy*. In RGAE, f. 7297, op. 1 and f. 7297/s. ch., op. 38.

106. See for example E. Osokina, *Ierarkhiia potrebleniia* (Moscow, 1993) and Id., *Za fasadom "stalinskogo izobiliiia"* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1998).

107. See V.N. Zemskov's many articles, like “Zakliuchennye, spetsposelentsy, ssyl'noposelentsy, ssyl'nye i vyslannye,” *Istoriia SSSR*, 5 (1991): 151-162 and “Zakliuchennye v 1930-e gody,” *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, 4 (1997): 54-78 or O. Khlevniuk, “Prinuditel'nyi trud v ekonomike SSSR,” *Svobodnaia mysl'*, 14 (1992): 73-84.

demographic data, and in fact tampering with them has been one of the favorite pastimes of states and regimes the world over, within acceptable margins of error it is generally possible to know the “truth.” It has not been surprising, therefore, to discover that the Soviet leaders had more or less reliable information about the evolution of the situation even in a critical period like 1932-1934 (whether they accepted it or not is of course another story, as the history of the 1937 census is there to witness).¹⁰⁸

The distortions and biases we face in this field thus derive from very specific factors, first and foremost the above mentioned behavior of the Soviet leaders, who were often not interested in knowing unpleasant truths and persecuted those who — in the name of state interests — tried to disclose them. Demographers, however, seem today capable of surmounting this obstacle. A second factor is linked to the above mentioned mistrust for probability laws and statistics. Such primitive beliefs did damage the statistical apparatus and therefore the data it collected and we are now dealing with. There is then the specific problem presented by the data concerning nationalities, which are particularly troublesome because of both state manipulation and the subjective quality of the decision to belong to this or that nationality, a decision that prevailing conditions — persecution or privileges for instance — may of course change. But these are problems that we find everywhere, especially in multilingual territories like those of Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁰⁹

The last factor is instead specifically Soviet and is linked to the disorganization and the chaos of the 1930s. A few examples will suffice: we know that in 1930-1931 hundreds of thousands of families self-“dekulakized” themselves before being hit by the state. Their members fled to the cities, often on forged documents. They were joined by hundreds of thousands of other illegal residents: peasants fleeing the famine, deported “*kulak*” who had been able to escape from their place of exile, a very common phenomenon up to 1934, etc. The data about urban population, on whose basis ration cards were issued, thus became extremely tricky, especially in new cities like Magnitogorsk. When in 1933 internal passports were reintroduced, the authorities thought that it had 250,000 residents. However, only 75,000 were counted, something attesting not only to the unreliability of the then current estimates but also to the dimensions of the illegal world. It was later calculated that at least 35,000 people had decided to leave in order not to disclose their unlawful position.¹¹⁰

A different, yet similar problem, is presented by the correct assessment of the victims of the 1932-1933 famine. Though we now know much more than before, it seems that we shall never be able to go beyond a certain degree of approximation

108. A. Blum, *art. cit.*; *Naselenie Rossii v 1920-1950-e gody* (Moscow, 1994); N.A. Aralovec, “Poteri naseleniia sovetskogo obshchestva v 1930-e gody: problemy, istochniki, metody izucheniia,” *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, 1 (1995): 135-146.

109. See for example R. Pearson, *National minorities in Eastern Europe, 1848-1945* (London, 1983).

110. N. Werth, G. Moullec, eds, *Rapports secrets soviétiques...*, *op. cit.*: 45-46; S. Kotkin, *Magnetic mountain: Stalinism as a civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 72-105.

because of the nomadic nature of most of the Kazakh population — which still lived in a “pre-statistical” era — and of the relative permeability — and “pre-modern” nature — of the Soviet-Chinese border, which made it possible for at least some of these nomads to flee the famine by emigrating.¹¹¹

A last example relates to the great purges. According to official documents, approximately 700,000 people were shot during the years 1937-1938. It now seems that the figure was produced by summing up the quotas then distributed by the center. However, as the very investigations ordered by Stalin in 1939 clearly show, local “excesses” were considerable in spite of the good will of local executioners, who for very good reasons strove to respect Stalin’s order but precisely in so doing found themselves killing a few extra people, and then hiding the fact from Moscow. According to Oleg Khlevniuk, it is therefore possible that the above mentioned figure is underestimated by 10 to 15%.¹¹²

Statisticians and demographers, however, are used more than historians to reason in terms of margins of errors and know the importance of establishing them, so that there is hope for the future. On the other hand, it is enough to recall the endless polemics about the victims of the 1932-1933 famine, or of the 1921-1922 one, to enter into a sober mood. Demographers and statisticians too are human beings and up to now Soviet history has provided us with countless examples of apparently intelligent people passionately defending completely absurd positions. From this point of view, Soviet history seems to be an exceptionally valuable teacher of our limits, gullibility, blindness and propensity to believe the unbelievable and should thus perhaps become an obligatory element in the formation of any professional historian.

3. The people

The most serious lacuna, the most important problem that the Soviet system has left to its historians is perhaps the relative paucity of autonomously produced documents we are today finding amidst the enormous mass of bureaucratic papers that form the bulk of its legacy. If it is true that what we are called to write is after all the history of real human beings, and not just that of “decision-making” or of “economic building,” the problem is a particularly tragic one and it is an indirect confirmation of the extraordinary level of statism which distinguished the Soviet “experiment.”

This problem concerns the papers of the quickly disbanded and forbidden private organizations as well as private individuals.¹¹³ There are no archives of independent

111. A. Blum, *Naître, vivre et mourir en URSS, 1917-1991* (Paris: Plon, 1994); N.A. Aralovec, “Poteri naseleniia...,” *art. cit.*

112. O. Hlevnjuk, “Les mécanismes de la ‘Grande Terreur’ des années 1937-1938 au Turkménistan,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 39, 1-2 (1998): 197-208.

113. For the problems raised by the documentation concerning nationalities, the reader is referred to Terry Martin’s and Peter Blitstein’s contributions.

cooperatives, trade unions, clubs, ethnic or regional associations, societies of mutual assistance, small and large businesses, religious groups, etc. And there is a much smaller amount of private archives. Exceptions do exist: the Orthodox church has for example its records, and a few individuals did leave their papers to the state archives or kept family archives, but the situation cannot be compared with that of any other European country in the 20th century or in any previous, modern period. Of course, the scale of this void varies according to the different stages of Soviet history. We always had countless private sources — produced by both individuals and organizations — for the Civil War period. New ones are today emerging from the former Soviet archives, like the fascinating documents produced by the peasant insurgents in Tambov or on the Don which have been recently found in secret police and local archives.¹¹⁴ At least for this period therefore, we can only blame ourselves for the poor quality of some of our historiographical production.

But in a matter of years most of these organizations had been suppressed and most of the individuals silenced or forced to speak through the regime's channels, thus observing very specific rules and precautions. The secret police archives are now releasing a few, moving leaflets distributed in the late 1920s — when the émigré newspapers and the émigré community still received some real letters from home, and some people were still able to leave the country. But this is already a comparatively very limited amount of material. Then, year after year, it continued to decrease until WWII opened a new, but little studied, period of relative plenty which quickly came to an end with Stalin's triumph.

Also true, personal letters are a rare occurrence. City dwellers quickly learned that their correspondence was opened and controlled, and thus started to write less and in very allusive tones. The perhaps less informed (and perhaps victorious-feeling) peasants did continue to write the "truth," at least up until collectivization and dekulakization taught them, in much harsher terms, the lesson learned by urban people ten years before. We have, however, just tantalizing fragments of their correspondence. We know for example that when collectivization came, the 5,000 men of the Novocherkassk garrison received thousands of letters every day telling them of the situation back home and asking them to turn against the regime.¹¹⁵ However, these letters were intercepted by the military censorship which included brief excerpts from them in its periodical reports on the "moods" of the soldiers and then seemingly proceeded to destroy the originals. We know for sure that already during the years 1918-1919 there was an order to destroy the letters seized every other year. This because, as in Tsarist times, according to the existing Constitution,

114. V.P. Danilov, T. Shanin, eds, *Krest'ianskoe vosstanie v Tambovskoi gubernii v 1919-1921 gg...., op. cit.*; V. Danilov, T. Shanin, eds, *Filipp Mironov. Tikhii Don v 1917-1921 gg.* (Moscow: Demokratia, 1997).

115. V. Izmozik, "Voices from the 1920s: private correspondence intercepted by the OGPU," *The Russian Review*, 2 (1996): 287-308; A. Romano, N. Tarchova, eds, *Krasnaia Armia i kollektivizatsiia derevni v SSSR, 1928-1933. Sbornik dokumentov* (Naples, 1997). According to the VChK *svodki* peasants wrote such things already during the years 1919-1920. See V.P. Danilov, A. Berelovitch, eds, *Sovetskaia derevnia...., op. cit.*, and also D'Ann Penner's essay in this issue of the *Cahiers*.

the *perlustratsiia* was an illegal state activity, carried out on a secret basis. “It exists secretly” (*sushchestvuet konspirativno*) was the expression used in official documents which tell us something about the new regime’s consciousness of its own unpopularity.¹¹⁶

Not surprisingly therefore, after we started working on a collection of documents informally called *Letters from below*, we quickly realized that such title was in fact unusable. With but a few exceptions, far from being real letters, the documents we were finding — and in huge numbers — were petitions, complaints, demands, etc., addressed to the central authorities. Their interest and historical value were not minor. Certainly, however, they were not the more or less spontaneous expressions we had been hoping for. We thus decided to re-frame and re-title the project, which yielded valuable information, for instance about the relationships between part of the population and the local authorities but not — if not indirectly — about the evolution of the Soviet people’s mentalities and feelings.¹¹⁷

As Matthew Lenoe rightly points out in his contribution, similar problems exist for the letters addressed to Soviet newspapers. Very often written by minor officials or by correspondents who received “instructions on appropriate themes and languages,” these letters — writes Lenoe — “do not represent, except in very distorted forms, their authors’ private aspirations, opinions or beliefs. Bolshevik party leaders and officials constructed the practice of letter-writing, soliciting letters from their subjects, setting the agenda for their correspondence, coaching them on acceptable ways to address power [...]” That’s why, Lenoe concludes, these letters “have much greater value as direct windows on the everyday functioning of Soviet society, the instruments of power and the ways in which agents of the Soviet state acted to shape the public identity of their subjects.”¹¹⁸

At least for the 1920s, perhaps better insights in the world of Soviet subjects can be gathered from the transcripts of local meetings at which, as D’Ann Penner shows, up to 1928 peasants did sometimes voice their feelings and opinions (but we do have reports stating that in other meetings the same peasants sat in silence — *sidiat kak peshki i molchat* are the precise words).¹¹⁹

In the dearth of good sources on popular mentalities, what we might call “juridical” sources could prove very valuable and the good use to which Golfo

116. V.S. Izmozik, *Glaza i ushi rezhima...*, *op. cit.*: 51.

117. A. Livshin *et al.*, eds, *Pis'ma vo vlast'...*, *op. cit.* An abundance of similar material can be found in Italian archives, particularly in the files of the Duce’s private chancellery.

118. If this is true, as I tend to believe, then extreme care should be the rule in using them. This is not always the case in the growing literature on such documents, which includes S. Fitzpatrick, “Supplicants and citizens: public letter-writing in Soviet Russia,” *Slavic Review*, 1 (1996): 78-105; Id., “Signals from below: Soviet letters of denunciation of the 1930s,” *Journal of Modern History*, 4 (1996): 831-866; the various contributions to the special issue on letters to the Soviet authorities of *Russian History/Histoire russe*, 1-2 (1997); the already quoted A. Livshin *et al.*, eds, *Pis'ma vo vlast'* and S.V. Zhuravlev *et al.*, eds, *Golos naroda. Pis'ma i otkliki riadovykh sovetskikh grazhdan o sobytiakh 1918-1932 gg.* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1997).

119. A. Livchine, “‘Lettres de l’intérieur’ à l’époque de la Nep. Les campagnes russes et l’autorité locale,” *Communisme*, 42-44 (1995): 95-114.

Alexopoulos puts them in her essay is a good proof of it. It is reasonable to presume that the records on divorces, thefts, different kinds of personal conflicts, etc. could prove also revealing. On the other hand, documents like the proceedings of interrogatories or the confessions extracted from normal people, present us with the same problems raised by the interrogatories and “confessions” of former party leaders. We know that the political police — and we may imagine that the practice was not foreign to the militia — started to extract false confessions during the Civil War years, and the phenomenon exploded after 1928. The documents we are finding thus tell us at least as much about the investigators’ goals and mentalities as about those of the unfortunate people signing them.

As far as criminal statistics are concerned, David Shearer showed how unreliable they are at least for the 1930s: the Novosibirsk *prokuror*, for instance, then daily complained about the unregistered arrests carried out by the secret police (let us recall what has been said about the “excesses” committed during the great purges and the attempts to hide them from the center).¹²⁰ During collectivization but also in Civil War years, arrests and even executions were carried out also by simple party members and members of this or that special *troika*. We are dealing here once more with the above mentioned impossibility for a bureaucratic system to record illegal procedures, which we know however to have been at times exceptionally widespread.

In conclusion, in spite of the documents that do exist and which we do have to use, we basically find ourselves *spying* on the lives of the Soviet citizens through the reports written by the various bureaucracies charged with controlling them, the political police first of all.

In this field documents are not wanting. Quite to the contrary, the historian of the Soviet “laboring classes” has today at his or her disposal the incredible amount of materials produced by the many state organisms charged with surveiling, disciplining and punishing these classes. The USSR may not have been a totalitarian state. But it certainly has been the paragon of the police state.¹²¹

Among these materials are the by now famous *svodki*. Both at our Yale meeting and at the symposium on regional archives held a few weeks later in Toronto, the question of their use raised lively discussions.¹²² Such discussions will probably

120. D. Shearer, “Crimes and social disorder in Stalin’s Russia,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 39, 1-2 (1998): 119-148 and Id., “Crime, perception of crime and the problem of social reality in Russia. Reflections on sources and what they can tell us,” a paper presented at the Yale meeting which we were unfortunately unable to publish.

121. On Tsarist traditions see V.S. Izmozik, *Glaza i ushi rezhima...*, *op. cit.* and Jonathan Daly, *The watchful state: police and politics in late Imperial Russia, 1896-1917* (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1992).

122. Both Lesley Rimmel’s paper (see this issue of the *Cahiers*) and Jeffrey Rossman’s one, unfortunately unavailable for publication, centered around the *svodki* problem, which was also addressed by Matthew Lenoe. For the Toronto meeting (*State and society in the Stalin era through the prism of regional archives*) of June 1997 see The Stalin Era Research and Archives Project (SERAP) *Bulletin*, 3 (1998). Nicolas Werth was to my knowledge the first to raise the *svodki* problem in his “Une source inédite: les *svodki* de la TCHÉKA-OGPU,” *Revue des Études slaves*, 66, 1 (1994): 17-27.

continue and *svodki* do deserve a special treatment.¹²³ As I said earlier, they were basically periodical compilations of answers to a pre-defined list of questions, elaborated by the regime's central organs (in the case of the VChK, these lists included at the beginning approximately 50 queries, but the number could and did greatly vary). Their aim was to reconstruct the "moods of all the groups in the population" (*nastroeniia vsekh grupp naseleniia*) and the action of the factors — the economic ones in the first place — influencing their evolution. In addition, they had to give information about all the events that were presumably of some interest to the center, including the activities of real or presumed enemies of the regime.

Svodki were produced at three or four levels: at the bottom of the pyramid were the district (*uezd*) ones. On their basis province (*guberniia*) and at times republican *svodki* were compiled. Then Moscow centralized the provincial ones and on their basis produced central *svodki* that could also be 100 or 200 pages long.

We can get a rough idea of their quantity by a simple operation: the political police alone kept producing biweekly and later monthly and annual central *svodki* for decades. Most of these documents often contained scores and even hundreds of pages. We are thus dealing with at least scores of thousands of pages just considering the central, regular, secret police *svodki*. But the same organization also generated monthly, weekly and, in crucial moments, even daily *svodki* devoted to special problems, like collectivization, the workers' situation, the nationalities problem, etc., if and when the central leadership was interested in such matters. And different bureaus of the secret police produced different series of documents. We know for example that in the first years of the regime there were at least three regular series of VChK-OGPU *svodki*: the most important one, brought out by the Information department (*InfoOtdel*), the military one, produced by the Special department (*OsoboOtdel*) and that circulated by the *perlustratsiia* office, first under military control but soon given to the political police.

It must be added that other organizations at first competed to win the right to secretly inform the center and then continued to produce, though on a minor scale, a more or less steady flow of *svodki* addressed to the Soviet leadership.

Confirming the primacy of the armed forces in any new state organization, the army was the most important of them. Thanks to WWI, in 1917 it could vaunt an already well-developed apparatus for the gathering and the elaboration of information that switched its allegiance to the new regime with but very little friction (the story of how the *perlustratsiia* bureaucrats advertised and eventually sold their services is

123. See V.P. Danilov, A. Berelowitch, "Les documents des VChK-OGPU-NKVD sur la campagne soviétique, 1918-1937," *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 35, 3 (1994): 633-682; M. Wehner, "Die Lage vor Ort ist unbefriedigend," *Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung* (1994): 64-87; V.S. Izmozik, *Glaza i ushi rezhima...*, *op. cit.*; S. Davies, *Popular opinion in Stalin's Russia. Terror, propaganda and dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge — New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); P. Holquist, "Information is the alpha and omega of our work: Bolshevik surveillance in its paneuropean context," *Journal of Modern History*, 69 (1997): 415-450; Id., "Anti-Soviet *svodki* from the Civil War: surveillance as a shared feature of Russian political culture," *The Russian Review*, 3 (1997): 445-450; T. Martin, "The OGPU and the politics of information," *art. cit.* I deal at length with *svodki* in my "Stato e contadini..." *art.cit.*

exemplary). The Bolsheviks injected the system with their passion for organization and information. If up to the end of 1917 the army reports were but a few pages long, in 1918 the political commissar of the 6th army was trying to enforce the production of two parallel series of *svodki*, each based on a list of approximately 40 questions. Very soon, the army information services were centralized under the PUR (Political Directorate) that, while losing control over the *perlustratsiia*, remained a major source of secret information for the leadership.¹²⁴

By 1918, the party also was trying to produce regular *svodki* at various levels (district, province, republics, center). In spite of the repeated efforts of the central leadership — conducted after 1919 by Stalin himself (a further confirmation of his replacing Sverdlov as Lenin's deputy in the party already by that year) — this production was often quite irregular. It was however copious — I used for example the party *svodki* in my work on 1919 Ukraine — and it continued also after the secret police had become the prime source of secret information to the leadership. During the years 1920-1921, for instance, the party was producing a monthly, central *svodka* articulated over 36 questions and compiled on the basis of the “inferior” *svodki* received from the provinces. By the time of the NEP, however, both party and army documents had acquired a more specific character and related basically to the moods prevailing among soldiers and party members, even though, of course, general questions were treated.¹²⁵

More or less regular *svodki*, or other kinds of regular reporting, were also produced at various times by the state (VTsIK) and the government apparatuses. The former, by the way, seemed to be able to generate documents of a superior human quality, at least in the 1930s. This is a personal impression, which could be explained by the hypothesis that relatively more former members of the disbanded socialist parties found employment in the state administration rather than in the secret police, in the military or in the Bolshevik party.¹²⁶

Finally, all sorts of other organizations of some importance produced their own series of *svodki*: the commission to fight banditry during the Civil War years, possibly the trade unions, surely the major Soviet newspapers, etc.

The first thing to remember when dealing with central, republican and regional *svodki* is the fact that they are compilations of compilations. This means that all sorts of distortions and biases may have entered them at the different stages of their construction. I do not refer here just to the role of external or from-above pressures, like the one recalled earlier, administered by Dzerzhinskii, but to the variables

124. A. Romano, N. Tarchova, eds, *Krasnaia Armiiia...*, *op. cit.*; A. Romano, *Potere sovietico e contadini in uniforme. L'Armata rossa e la collettivizzazione delle campagne (1928-1933)*, Tesi di dottorato, Università di Torino, 1998.

125. At the *orgbiuro* meeting of April 22, 1919, for instance, Stalin proposed to develop a standard set of questions (*krug voprosov*) and to demand local party organs to answer them (in V.S. Izmozik, *Glaza i ushi rezhima...*, *op. cit.*: 20-30); A. Graziosi, *Bol'sheviki i krest'iane na Ukraine*, *op. cit.*: *passim*.

126. See for example the VTsIK *svodki* on collectivization and the 1932-1933 famine in N. Werth, G. Moulec, eds, *Rapports secrets soviétiques...*, *op. cit.*: 148-159.

which presided over the quality of the information received and the selection of some — and not other — information at the moment of the compilation. A tentative list of such variables should include the quality of the informers, who very soon started to work on “piecework,”¹²⁷ the personal preferences and curiosities of the compilers; their desire to show that a region was calm, or that a particular province was not, perhaps to embarrass an enemy; the desire to get more attention from Moscow; fatigue and the need to finish something quickly before going home, etc. Incidentally, let us recall that very often very uneducated people had to answer every week annoyingly long lists of complicated questions (what influenced the mood of the workers in a city, or of peasants in the surrounding countryside, etc.) in a limited amount of time. It is easy to imagine how this must have been often done. Copying and resorting to the easy “truths” of the propaganda must have been a widespread habit, as I wrote when discussing the penetration of the official lie.

We must then take into account the sensibility of the central leadership, under whose influence the lists of questions were prepared and which therefore determined what the *svodki* were going to care about. It seems for example that while the existing church hierarchies and their behavior did arouse the interest of the powers-that-be, popular religion did not.¹²⁸ We thus have very little information about the latter, as is the case with all the phenomena which the center did not judge relevant enough and about which, therefore, questions were not asked (such phenomena did of course made extraordinary appearances, but only on extraordinary occasions).

We must also consider the interests of the compilers as individuals and as bureaucratic and political or regional lobbies, remembering that strange, almost paradoxical “laws” are known to influence reporting.¹²⁹

Once all this has been said and the many complaints of Soviet leaders about the poor quality of the information they received are remembered, it must be stressed that most of the scholars that have worked with *svodki* tend to agree on their basic reliability.¹³⁰ I do share this opinion but I also believe it to be true in particular for

127. Lenoé reminds us that according to Izmozik, in 1924 the OGPU had about 10,000 regular informers throughout the Soviet Union including 518 in Moscow. Two years later, according to Agabekov, informers in Moscow had grown to 10,000. The KGB annual report for 1967 disclosed that the organization had approximately 167,000 agents in its internal network (R.L. Garthoff, “The KGB reports to Gorbachev,” *art. cit.*: 235).

128. N.A. Krivova, *Vlast' i Tserkov' v 1922-1925* (Moscow: AIRO-XX, 1997); N.N. Pokrovskii, S.G. Petrov, eds, *Politbiuro i Tserkov', 1922-1925* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1997).

129. During his brief tenure as a minister, Tocqueville had for example the opportunity to notice that a seemingly inverse law ruled the police reports to the government. The more the latter was felt to be secure, the more the police would underline the dangers threatening its existence, in order to win its benevolence. The reverse would apply to weak governments, which were showered with reassuring reports about their future. In A. de Tocqueville, *Souvenirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

130. See for example D'Ann Penner's and Lesley Rimmel's contributions to this issue of the *Cahiers*. R.R. Reese (“Red Army opposition to forced collectivization, 1929-1930,” *Slavic Review*, 1 (1996): 24-45) shares this opinion, as well as Sarah Davies, Andrea Romano, Jeffrey Rossman, Markus Wehner and Nicolas Werth. Of course, all of these authors also underline the necessity to carefully deal with such documents.

the reports written *in those extraordinary periods* like 1918-1922 or 1928-1933 in which few, powerful factors brutally ruled the destiny of both the individuals and the country. It is no accident that these are also the years to which our attention was immediately drawn. When for example I went through the 1918-1922 *svodki*, I was overwhelmed by the feeling I was understanding what was happening in the country in a new way, which mighty forces were at play, which moods and behavior they determined. But as the very Civil War years prove beyond any reasonable doubts, even in these exceptional cases police reports cannot replace spontaneously produced documents, letters, diaries, memoirs, etc.

The problem grows worse in the case of normal years and with the progressive stultification of the Soviet bureaucratic production, including that of the police. It is furthermore gradually compounded by the above mentioned rarefaction of autonomous sources. Extraordinary events did generate new and particular flows of information — like those derived from the participation of foreign workers and engineers in the industrialization drives, the presence of many foreign communists among the victims of the purges, the giant exodus of refugees generated by WWII —¹³¹ but this information does not uniformly cover the history of the country and can but very partially and often one-sidedly compensate for what is missing.

Analyzing the question by groups of problems, I believe it is possible to maintain the following. As far as material, living conditions are concerned, we can outline a more or less believable picture of the situation and of its evolution over the years for each one of the major groups in the population. In fact, serious and reliable work had been produced on these issues during the 1950s, at least as far as industrial workers were concerned.¹³² We still have to deal with relatively ample margins of error, of course: we know that in 1932 industrial wages were anywhere between 30% and 50% of the 1928 level, with great regional and industrial variations. And we know that by the mid-1930s they had recuperated another 20% to 30% of that level. Yet this is already something and future research will improve our knowledge, even though a serious evaluation of peasants' real incomes will probably prove more difficult.

131. I mention a number of foreign workers' accounts in my " 'Visitors from other times': Foreign workers in the prewar *piatiletki*," *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*, 29, 2 (1988): 161-180 and "Foreign workers in Soviet Russia, 1920-1940," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 33 (1988): 38-59. After WWII, the information generated by the mass of displaced persons was sometimes carefully and scholarly gathered, for example by the rightly famous Harvard oral history project. In other cases, the victims themselves were able to publish collections of testimonies, like *The black deeds of the Kremlin. A white book*, vol. 1 (Toronto, 1953) and vol. 2 (Detroit, 1955). In other instances, these testimonies were used to compile books like the *Livre blanc sur les camps de concentration soviétiques* (Paris, 1952), etc.

132. S. Schwarz, *Labor in the Soviet Union* (New York: Praeger, 1952) and J. Chapman, *Real wages in Soviet Russia since 1928* (Cambridge, MA, 1963) are just two outstanding examples. Their findings are today often confirmed and refined by the work of scholars like Elena Osokina.

The problem becomes more serious when we consider the reactions of the population's various layers to the initiatives and policies of the state. However, since this state consistently asked over the years to be informed about them, we do have a considerable data base of information in this sphere.¹³³

The situation becomes almost desperate if it is the history of *mentalités* and their independent evolution that we are after, that is if we want to reconstruct the lives and the thoughts of real human beings and not of caricatures animated only by the actions of the powers-that-be. A good example is again provided by popular religion. According to many fascinating clues the 1930s and the 1940s seem to have been decades in which millenarian movements and sectarianism flourished. The fact is perfectly consistent with the impact of forced industrialization, collectivization, social and cultural uprooting and degradation in a country with strong religious feelings, many sects and a weakened church deprived of the possibility to control and regiment the spiritual life of its flock. Yet apparently Moscow was not much interested and it may well be that we shall never be able to write a *satisfying* history of these movements (needless to say I hope to be proven wrong).¹³⁴

In spite of quasi-heroic efforts and relative successes, like those of D'Ann Penner, the risk of having no choice but to write administrative history is therefore inherent not just to a now almost forlorn discipline like economic history. The system's, and its records' bureaucratic-administrative nature surreptitiously push even historians who had started with quite different aims and intentions toward a state-centered history of decrees and reactions to decrees .

On the other hand, if we ignore the archives, their peculiarities, and those of the Soviet system, we risk writing an extremely superficial and unbearably trivializing — even from a moral point of view — history of what was a very specific and very tragic human experience. The Soviet urbanization of the 1930s thus becomes almost indistinguishable from that which took place in other, more “normal” countries. And the peasants who moved to Soviet cities in that decade are treated like those who moved to New York at the turn of the century: they too are “negotiating,” preserving rural mores and ties, singing their songs, etc. All of which is of course true, but concurs to form what I believe a dramatically misleading image of the real lives of people who were not even allowed to leave us their own records. Let us remember what our more fortunate colleagues studying Italian or Polish immigrants in America do have: the papers of

133. However, one should always remember what professor Confino told me when I asked him how reliable a portrait of Kropotkin and his activities abroad the *Okhrana* reports outlined: had he trusted only this kind of papers, he would have ended up with a completely disfigured and largely false picture. See M. Confino, *Anarchistes en exil. Correspondance inédite de Pierre Kropotkine à Marie Goldsmith, 1897-1917* (Paris: Institut d'études slaves, 1995).

134. N. Werth, G. Moullec, eds, *Rapports secrets soviétiques...*, *op. cit.*: 273-341; M.V. Shkarovskii, ed., “Istinno-pravoslavnye v Voronezhskoi eparkhii, 1927-1947,” *Minuvshee*, 19 (1996): 320-356; “Iz tainikov spetssluzhb,” *Arkhiv Urala*, 1 (1995) (many thanks to Peter Holquist for signaling these two titles); the various entries on religion in I.A. Kondakova, ed., *Otkrytyi arkhiv* (Moscow, 1997).

hundreds, thousands societies, unions, clubs, countless letters and memoirs, etc. It is on this basis that people like Znaniecki built their great works.¹³⁵ And let us compare it with what we have for their ill-starred Soviet counterparts. Can we really infer from the lack of sources that their experience was a “normal” one? Or can we just trust what the police reports tell us which is, anyway, already a step forward? I think that in both cases we too, as historians, would be among the system’s victims.

I have very little to say about what could be called the Soviet intermediary social layers for the simple reason that we know very little about them. This applies in particular to the medium and small local officialdom, and to their subordinates: millions of people that, as Moshe Lewin rightly remarked, were at the same time an essential component of the state and a relevant part of Soviet “society.” Yet the mass of documents these people produced does provide us with a relevant source for the study of the evolution of both their mentalities and ideologies. And the endless complaints against these little and medium officials, coming from both the top and the bottom of the system, do open important perspectives on their behavior and their practices, often described also in various kinds of *svodki*. One must however confess that, in spite of its scientific importance, a study of the Soviet petty officialdom does not present itself as particularly attractive, something which may help explain the sorry state of our knowledge in this field.

More is known about intellectuals, famous ones in particular. The activities of the latter had been already more or less well documented, and new letters, texts and papers are appearing in rapid succession.¹³⁶ Yet it is enough to turn our attention to minor *intelligenty* to discover a situation much similar to the one described above, this being, by the way, also a consequence of the fact that these minor “intellectuals” and those little officials and state employees very often were the same people. Taken together they formed a sort of rudimentary and fast evolving Soviet “public opinion.” The existence of such a thing has often been denied, yet I think it is safe to maintain that it existed and played a certain role as early as the 1920s, a role that greatly decreased in the following decade but which kept gradually growing ever since victory in WWII. This growth was of course a distorted one (it suffices to recall that most of this “public opinion” did directly depend on the state for survival), but if we compare the second post-war Soviet developments with the great 1914-1945 disaster I think that the phenomenon cannot be denied.

However, though it would be wrong to deny its existence, and though this group left us a much bigger share of “autonomously” produced documentation, at least in comparison with the other layers of the population, we must always remember that

135. T.I. William, F. Znaniecki, *The Polish peasant in Europe and America* (New York, 1974; 1st edition 1918).

136. D.L. Babichenko, ed., “*Literaturnyi front.*” *Istoriia politicheskoi tsenzury, 1932-1946 gg.* (Moscow: AIRO-XX, 1994) and Id., “*Schast’e literary.*” *Gosudarstvo i pisateli, 1925-1938 gg.* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1997); V. Prystajko and Ju. Shapoval, eds, *Mikhailo Hrushevs’kyi i HPU-NKVD* (Kiev, 1996); V. Chentalinski, *La parole ressuscitée... op. cit.*; the new editions of previously unavailable works by Babel’ et al.

it lived in very peculiar conditions, directly affecting the way that documentation was produced. And if we compare this production with that of this group's Western counterparts, we cannot but be struck by its paucity and distortions. We know, for example, that during the Civil War years the consciousness that letters were often opened was widespread. Therefore, fewer letters were written, and in those that were written certain topics were either treated in aesopic ways or not treated at all. Besides, as I noted above, at least in the first years of the regime the correspondence that the regime did open and control was afterwards destroyed. So that in this case too we are left with documents of dubious, at best ambiguous nature, "selected" in a very biased way.

Furthermore, if we recall the importance of rumors in Soviet society, and the fact that — at least as far as the state repressive behavior was concerned — even the wildest ones often turned out to seem, with hindsight, accurate predictions,¹³⁷ it becomes legitimate to ask what is the real value of documents like private diaries, especially those kept in the 1930s. Fear, internal censorship, the "captive mind" factor, ideological constraints, the desire to build documentary evidence of one's own loyalty to the regime and to the "father of the peoples" must have played no minor roles. This makes me skeptical about the efforts to use this kind of sources, even though their more sophisticated and intelligent versions do tell us something.¹³⁸

In conclusion: some possible remedies

It is first of all necessary to always keep in mind the fact that, besides general problems, there are those specific to each stage in Soviet history: for example, if in 1917-1928 the presence of several organized opposition groups to the regime and many foreign observers does greatly facilitate the critical analysis of official documents, for the two following decades the situation is decidedly worse: lacunae can be filled and biases corrected only with great difficulty and never in a satisfactory way.

For the post-1953 years — and possibly, but only up to a certain point, even for the immediately previous ones — there is the possibility to resort to oral history projects, which could then serve as tools of triangulation with documentary sources. But we need systematic, well organized projects, not sporadic, ill-conceived attempts or — even worse — well-meaning but politically-driven projects that would probably produce not only very biased results, but also much less information than they could given the energy and the enthusiasm poured into them. From this point of view, it would not be a bad idea to collectively define our priorities and then try to launch at least one or two projects, remembering that unfortunately our primary

137. See my "Stato e contadini..." *art.cit.*: 502-503.

138. J. Hellbeck, ed., *Stepan Polubnyi. Tagebuch aus Moskau, 1931-1939* (Munich: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, 1996); Id., "Factories of the Soviet self: diaries from the Stalin era," a paper presented at the Yale conference which we were unable to publish; V. Garros *et al.*, eds, *Intimacy and terror: Soviet diaries of the 1930s* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

sources of information — especially for the most problematic years — are rapidly disappearing.

On the other hand, especially after 1956, the growing normalization of the regime, the new émigré waves, etc., greatly facilitates our task.

However, the most powerful tool we have for each period remains, no doubt, our critical consciousness: we have to assess the situation in each specific case and for each specific source, evaluating the quality of the material that the leadership of the country produced (correspondence, *prikazy*, *protokoly*, reports, minutes, etc.), that of the material with which it was fed (*svodki*, preparatory materials, economic and statistical data, reports of various kinds, etc.), and that of the papers more or less spontaneously produced by the various layers of the population. In each one of these cases we should know which are the questions that can be legitimately posed to these documents, and which are those that it would be naive to believe they could answer. And we should arrive at an evaluation of the margins of error for each kind of document and for each kind of data. In the future we will of course refine them, but today we need a solid starting point.

In doing so, we should always remember that — as Stalin's suspicions, Trotskii's complaints about military reporting, and Piatakov's incessant demands to the NKTP *sektor proverki ispolneniia* clearly indicate — at least in its original, strong incarnation, the Soviet center possessed this critical consciousness in a very developed form.¹³⁹ I am not implying that we should follow Stalin in his anti-bureaucratic, paranoiac deliriums, undoubtedly a primary source of the great trials. Yet let us remember that the huge mass of false and complacent reports were indeed a “real” and major factor in the unleashing of Stalin's murderous obsessions.

The reference to the *sektor proverki ispolneniia* is there also to indicate that we have to carefully look for the regime's self-critical tools and use them. As we have to use to our advantage the bureaucratic *dublirovanie* which caused so many complaints: as I said earlier, the SNK materials can be used as partial substitutes for the *Politbiuro*'s and the STO minutes can provide us with a convincing picture of the policy conflicts which took place at the SNK meetings. But the plurality of bureaucratic organisms is of decisive importance also from another point of view: given the one-sidedness of each bureaucracy's reporting, and the biases caused by its interests, we should as a rule refrain from using — in each specific case — documents originating from a single bureaucratic apparatus. In particular, the documents of the “enemy” should always be consulted. In other words, we should use the different bureaucracies as — poor — substitutes of different political and pressure groups.

139. “To know the situation down to the smallest detail, to know the situation better than everybody else, not to trust either words or paper reports” was the motto of Onisimov, Bek's *Novoe naznachenie* hero, modeled after one of Stalin's great industrial administrators. Paradoxically but understandably enough, the same *méfiance* towards the documents produced by the Soviet system was shown by the last of its strong leader, called to preside over the system's disintegration. See R.L. Garthoff, “The KGB reports to Gorbachev,” *art. cit.*

The necessity to use the papers of more than just one bureaucratic organization leads us to the very important point raised by Terry Martin in his contribution. Special attention should be paid to the need to have at least some papers from a “hard-line” bureaucracy in our documentary base. It is also absolutely necessary to know the various levels of secrecy and which topics they included. From this point of view, the list Jonathan Bone publishes and comments on in his essay is an invaluable contribution to our field and should be consulted by anybody willing to do research in Soviet history.

As far as *svodki* are concerned, given their compilatory nature, we should always look for information concerning their compilers, and their interests, at each and every level of their formation. And it would not be a bad idea to reconstruct, let us say twice for each year, the genesis of a central *svodka*, by looking at some of the “inferior” *svodki* that went into its construction and thus get at least an approximate idea of the criteria and the pressures ruling the selection of materials and information.

Old sources should not be forgotten: without reading foreign diplomatic documents,¹⁴⁰ without going through the newspapers and journals of different kinds put forth in the West by the various groups opposing the Soviet regime; above all, without reading the reports, papers and memoirs of travelers, foreign workers and engineers, émigrés and refugees of all kinds, former communist leaders and fellow travelers, we shall not only risk serious embarrassments (after all large parts of the documents relating to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact were published in 1948, and this is far from being an isolated case).¹⁴¹ We will lose a crucial opportunity to approximate “the past as it really was.” In spite of all the archives that are now opening, and in spite of all the problems these kinds of sources do of course raise, how can we do without Ante Ciliga and Victor Serge, Boris Souvarine and Babette Gross, Viktor Kravchenko and Alexander Barmine, Gustav Hilger and J. Scholmer, Fred Beal and Dante Corneli?¹⁴² In fact, we cannot, and those who do, do so at their own risk.

The same applies to the best part of the old scholarship. Like the old sources — and like the new ones — it too has its problems, of course. But it is often steeped in that ideological and psychological climate which was an essential part of those times and whose feeling — essential for any reconstruction of the period — we are

140. I am for example convinced that, because of their exceptional quality, Italian diplomatic reports will probably remain the best body of sources on the 1932-1933 famine. See A. Graziosi, ed., *Lettere da Kharkov* (Torino: Einaudi, 1991).

141. R.J. Sontag, J.S. Beddie, eds, *Nazi-Soviet relations, 1939-1941. Documents from the archives of the German Foreign Office* (Washington, DC, 1948).

142. A. Ciliga, *op. cit.*; V. Serge, *Memorie di un rivoluzionario, op. cit.* B. Souvarine, *Stalin. A critical survey of Bolshevism* (New York: Longmans, 1939); B. Gross, *Willi Münzenberg..., op. cit.*; V. Kravchenko, *I chose freedom, op. cit.*; A. Barmine, *One who survived* (New York: Putnam's, 1945); G. Hilger, *Incompatible allies. A memoir history of German-Soviet relationships, 1918-1941* (New York, 1953); J. Scholmer, *Vorkuta* (London, 1954); F. Beal, *Word from nowhere* (London, 1938); D. Corneli, *Il redivivo tiburtino* (Milan, 1977). The list could of course continue.

rapidly losing. Moreover, why should we repeat with great fanfare what Merle Fainsod wrote forty years ago after looking at the Smolensk archives ?

*Università degli studi di Napoli Federico II
Via Cintia (Monte Sant' Angelo)
IT-80126 Napoli*

*Istituto Universitario Europeo
Badia Fiesolana
Via dei Roccettini, 9
IT-50016 San Domenico
e-mail: anbruna.graz@mclink.it*