

The “Great Terror” of 1937–1938 in Georgia: Between the Two Reports of Lavrentiy Beria

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Abstract

In implementing the “Great Terror” in Georgia, Beria used Stalin’s directives to serve his own personal needs as well. This article lays out the key events launching the repressions in Moscow and then shows how they were carried out on the ground in Georgia.

Chronology of Events in the USSR

Historians use the term “Great Terror”¹ to unite a series of repressions and political persecutions that unfolded in the Soviet Union in the period between 1937 and 1938. This historical phenomenon is also known as the “Great Purge”, “Mass Terror”, and “Yezhovshchina”. Before examining the events in Georgia, it useful to recall a brief chronology of events in Moscow:

July 2, 1937: The Politburo passed a resolution “On anti-Soviet Elements” and on July 3 sent a telegram to secretaries of the regional organizations of the Party. The directive, signed by Stalin and Molotov declared: “The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) orders all the secretaries of regional and territorial organizations and all regional, territorial and republican members of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) to deal with all kulaks and criminals who returned to their residences so that the most hostile of them immediately be arrested and shot. These cases should be administratively handled through the NKVD Troika; whilst the remainder, the less active, but still hostile elements have to be resettled and sent to the districts designated by the NKVD. The CPSU requires the local authorities within five days to present to the Central Committee the composition of the Troika and the number to be shot as well as the number to be exiled”. This telegram, began preparations for the so-called “Kulak Operation.”

On July 16–20, 1937: The People’s Commissar for Internal Affairs of the USSR N. I. Yezhov and his deputy, M. P. Frinovsky held a meeting of heads of central and regional organs of the NKVD devoted to planning and implementing the “Kulak Operation.”²

On July 31, 1937, the Politburo approved NKVD USSR order No. 00447 “Concerning the operation for repressing former kulaks, criminals and other anti-Soviet elements”, which set out the objective of defeating “anti-

Soviet elements” and determined the composition of the “operational Troikas” for expediting the processing of these cases. The composition of the Troikas typically included: the Commissar, or head of the NKVD, the Secretary of the Party organization and the public prosecutor of the republic, state or province³.

The USSR Terror Machine

Sentences were imposed in absentia, i.e. without calling the defendant, and without the participation of either a defense lawyer or prosecutor, and the sentences were not subject to appeal. The Troikas enforced death sentences with “the mandatory preservation of secrecy regarding time and place.”

For each region of the Soviet Union quotas were set for the “First Category”—to be shot—and the “Second Category” imprisonment in a camp for a period up to 8–10 years. According to the order, the operation had to last 4 months, during which the plan was to shoot 75,950 persons, and to imprison into camps 193,000 persons (for a total of 268,950 persons)⁴.

The duration of the operation was repeatedly extended. At the request of the regions, new and additional “quotas” were provided. The operation, which was supposed to last only four months, continued until the end of 1938. Until now the debate about the numbers of victims who suffered during “the Great Terror” continues. Official Soviet statistics, which were submitted to Khrushchev in the form of a memorandum by the Special Department Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR on the number of arrested and convicted by the OGPU-NKVD in 1930–1953 indicated a total figure of 1,344,923 prisoners, of whom 681,692 were executed.⁵ Of course, these data cannot be considered com-

1 This term became widespread following the publication of British historian R. Conquest’s “The Great Terror” in 1968.

2 Bol’shoi terror: 1937–38. *Kratkaya khronika* [The Great Terror: 1937–1938. A Brief Chronicle], compiled by N.G. Okhotin and A.B. Roginsky. *Journal “Index of Dossier on Censorship”*, <http://index.org.ru/journal/26/ter26.html>

3 OPERATIONAL ORDER OF THE PEOPLE’S COMMISSARIAT FOR INTERNAL AFFAIRS OF THE UNION S.S.R. No. 00447. AP RF, 3-58-212, l. 55–78, <http://www.memo.ru/history/document/0447.htm>

4 OPERATIONAL ORDER OF THE PEOPLE’S COMMISSARIAT FOR INTERNAL AFFAIRS OF THE UNION S.S.R. No. 00447. AP RF, 3-58-212, l. 55–78, <http://www.memo.ru/history/document/0447.htm>

5 Memorandum of the Special Department Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR on the number of convicts for the NKVD

plete because they do not include the thousands who were deported, or killed in the process of investigation and during exile.

The Nature of the Terror

In this quick overview, it is important to mention the different approaches and interpretations which are widespread in historical circles explaining the mechanisms and nature of “the Great Terror.” German researcher Manfred Hildermeier gives four different interpretations of the events. The first view emphasizes the relationship between communist ideology and the terror—this perspective implies that the terror was developed as a major part of communist ideology. The second view develops the concept of totalitarianism, in which the responsibility for carrying out the great purge falls on Stalin. Supporters of the third option (the revisionists) are inclined to the idea that the overall task of deporting millions of people and the mass terror could not be carried out by the will of one man, and suggest that an impulse for violence spread by inertia through the middle and lower layers of society, growing like a snowball. Finally, the fourth option assumes the compatibility of the “totalitarian” hypothesis about Stalin and the “revisionist” continuation of the logic of terror, in the dynamics of power struggles in the middle and lower levels of society⁶.

Local Implementation in Georgia

“The Great Terror” is distinguished by the centralization of the mass repressions, but this does not mean that the repressive operations of 1937–1938 were not accompanied by a certain amount of spontaneity and local “initiatives”. In order to more holistically understand the real mechanism underlying the functioning of the “Great Purges” we must study not just the top (namely the main office of the Central Committee), but the bottom, where the criminal directives of the center and Stalin were actually implemented, and where the various social, human, nomenklatura and national characteristics of specific regions shaped how the directives from above were carried out. For us it is interesting to use this approach in studying the logic of developments in the Georgian SSR, where the “Great Terror” of the 1930s had its own “unique” features.

On May 15, 1937 the Tenth Congress of the Communist Party of Georgia discussed the report of the First

Secretary L. P. Beria. At the time of this discussion, the wheel of repressions was not yet fully turning.

Beria’s extensive report can be divided into two central parts. The first part of the report discloses the existence of a “Trotskyist-spy-wrecking-terrorist center.” Here the discussion focuses on the well-known case of Budu Mdivani (Chairman of the Supreme Economic Council, the People’s Commissariat of Light Industry, and First Deputy Chairman of People’s Commissars of Georgia) and other top party workers of Georgia—Mikhail Okudzhava, S. Kavtaradze, M. Toroshelidze N. Kiknadze, S. Chikhladze, and G. Eliava. This group of old Bolsheviks was accused of trying to restore the capitalist system in Georgia. Their case is linked with the Trotsky-Zinoviev bloc (center), and they are accused of trying to use “biological weapons”, among other charges. It should also be noted that the group of Mdivani was accused of attempting to murder Stalin, while Beria himself was not alleged to be “a target of the terrorists.” The case of B. Mdivani was a part of the larger campaign against the old party elite and there is reason to believe that in this case, Stalin and Ordzhonikidze had personal motives and interests.

It is also impossible not to notice one interesting excerpt from Beria’s report. Summarizing findings for the units of the Georgian Communist Party, the Secretary of the Central Committee pointed out that despite the fact that “we should fight all forms of counter-revolution, we must at the same time act wisely, in order to avoid falling from one extreme into another. A blanket approach to all former nationalist and Trotskyists, some of which by chance happened to be in their ranks but abandoned Trotskyism a long time ago, can only damage the cause of fighting with real Trotskyites, wreckers and spies.”⁷ It is obvious that at this stage of building the repressive machine, Beria did not unconditionally accept one of the main ideas of the “Great Terror”—that there are no former opponents of the system.

The second part of the report is devoted to reviewing the situation among Georgian literary and theatrical groups. After briefly noting the fact of the self-imposed breakdown of various intellectual groups (“Blue horns”, “Academic”, “Lefovists”, “Arifioni” etc.—the elite of literary and academic circles in Georgia) Beria points out that “there are certain individuals among Georgian authors and artists who should reconsider their ties with the enemies of the Georgian people ... They should seriously think about it and draw all necessary conclusions for themselves. For example, Paulo Iashvili, who is now 40 years old, it’s time to mature ... Serious reconsid-

in 1937–1938. December 11, 1953 Copy. SARF, http://www.rusarchives.ru/evants/exhibitions/xxconvention_exp.shtml

6 S. Kroitsberger [Creuzberger] et al. (eds.), *Kommunizm, terror, chelovek: diskussionnye stat'i na temu "Chernoj knigi kommunizma"* [Communism, Terror, Man: Articles on “The Black Book of Communism”], pp. 29–32, Izdatel'stvo “Optima”, Kiev 2001.

7 Former archive of the Communist Party of Georgia—Archive Administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, 2nd Division. Fund no. 14, no. 11 Description, Case no. 21. pp. 113.

eration of their behavior would not hurt Gamsakhurdia, Javakhishvili, Mitsishvili, Shevardnadze, and even some others. I have listed the writers who should know that the attitude of our Party and Soviet power toward them depends on their future behavior and how quickly they change.⁸

In these threatening messages, Beria gives a final warning to the famous Georgian figures. Backing up his threat with real actions, Beria at the same time informs the audience that the director of Rustaveli Theatre, “the fascist wrecker”, Sandro Akhmeteli had been exposed. For all those who knew about the difficult relationship between Beria and Akhmeteli,⁹ it was a clear signal that now Beria embodied Soviet power in Georgia, and that he alone had the right to decide over life and death. The events that unfolded later demonstrated that those persons who had been warned by the First Secretary did not have time “to consider” his “suggestions”—Iashvili was driven to suicide; M. Javakhishvili, N. Mitsishvili and D. Shevardnadze were shot, as were many others. This report clearly shows that Beria not only carried out the direct orders of the center, but also solved his personal problems—strengthening his internal position and achieving his personal goals¹⁰.

It is interesting that immediately after this report, the main party newspaper Pravda, in its issue for May 22, 1937, criticized the Tenth Congress of the Georgian Party Organizations due to its lack of sharpness and misunderstanding of the clarification concerning the importance of the March plenary session of the Central Committee and the report of Stalin. In his report to Stalin, Beria complained that the bad review for this Congress was ordered from Moscow: “T. Mezin (the correspondent) received a telegram from the editors of Pravda signed by T. Nikitina requiring him to prepare a sharply critical review of the Congress.” In his correspondence with Stalin, Beria, argues that the 10th Congress of the Communist Party of Georgia had taken into account the importance of new policies and defied many enemies of the Party and the Trotskyists¹¹.

It is difficult to say whether this negative article in the Pravda was a hint from Stalin himself on tightening repressions in the Georgian Soviet Social Republic, or the result of some backroom intrigue, but it is a fact that Beria prepared his second report more “thoroughly”.

Carrying Out the Great Terror

Sixteen days after the May Congress in Moscow the first list of persons subject to trial by the Military Collegiums of the Supreme Court of the USSR were sent out to the regions. The first Georgian list, dated May 31, 1937 and signed by Stalin and Molotov, pointed out 139 people for the “First Category”—(to be shot) and 39 for the “Second Category” (10 years imprisonment). The list included defendants from the case of Budu Mdivani and Akhmeteli. Simply looking at these “Stalin lists”¹² makes the extent of the terror in Georgia clear. An examination of the lists for the USSR as a whole in 1937–1938 shows that out of the 38,679 names on them, 3,485 were from Georgia (the third largest number from all the union republics after the Russian SFSR and the Ukrainian SSR)¹³.

If “Stalin’s lists” were mainly focused on cleansing the party and the nomenklatura apparatus, as well as extinguishing people from the “free professions” (e.g. Titsian Tabidze), the allocation limits for Special Troikas primarily concentrated on repressing ordinary citizens. It should be noted that in this area, the Georgian leadership “showed its best side.”

Preparations for the realization of the main phase of the Great Purge began well in advance. Following up on the Politburo’s July 2 order entitled “On Anti-Soviet Elements”, on July 8, 1937 the Communist Party of Georgia sent for approval to Yezhov and Stalin the names of the Special Troika (Deputy People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs—Avksenti Rapava, the Prosecutor of the Republic—Illarion Talakhadze and the Head of the Republican Militia—Shalva Tsereteli), as well as the preliminary lists of individuals who had been designated for the first (1,419 people) and second (1,562 people) categories. These figures do not include former members of the anti-Soviet parties (2,000 people)¹⁴.

8 Former archive of the Communist Party of Georgia—Archive Administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, 2nd Division. Fund no. 14, no. 11 Description, Case no. 21, pp. 82–83.

9 Akhmeteli publicly offended L. Beria, placed his pictures with Stalin in the theater without agreeing with Beria, refused to return the favorites of Beria, Khorava and Vasadze, to the theatre and moved from Tbilisi to Moscow after being disgraced, etc.

10 We have a lot of information about the relationship between Beria and Akhmeteli, especially the case of rehabilitation of the group of the Rustaveli Theatre—“Akhmeteli Case”—L. Avalishvili, G. Kldiashvili—The Archival Bulletin no. 1, 2008 April. Journal of the Archive Administration of the MOIA.

11 Appendix to the Archival Bulletin no. 3, Fall 2008—correspondence between L. Beria and J. Stalin (1937). The Journal of Archive Administration of MOIA.

12 Lists of people convicted under the personal sanction of Stalin and his closest associates in the Politburo of the CPSU and sentenced to different types of punishment; the vast majority were shot. For the first time these lists were published in 2002 on CD, prepared by the Memorial Society and the Archives of the Russian President, <http://stalin.memo.ru/images/intro.htm>

13 Information on the number of people sentenced to death by Military Collegiums of the Supreme Court of the USSR in 1937–38 comes from lists which are stored in 11 volumes in a Special Sector of the Central Committee of the CPSU <http://stalin.memo.ru/images/note1957.htm>

14 RGASPI, f. 17, op. 166, d. 588, l. 36 (copy of the document provided by the society “Memorial”)

On July 31, 1937, an order from Yezhov established an official quota for Georgia for the first category—2,000 people, and the second category—3,000 persons¹⁵. We want to immediately point out that despite the fact that the order of Yezhov did not allow exceeding limits set without special permission from the center, it gave local leaders the opportunity to transfer prisoners from one category to another¹⁶.

Immediately upon the receipt of Order No. 00447, full-scale mass terror, touching all sectors of society, erupted in Soviet Georgia. From the correspondence of Stalin and Beria, it can be seen that the latter regularly informed the Center about the ongoing repressive actions. For example, in a memorandum dated August 29, 1937 describing the show trial of the party-leaders in the Sighnaghi District, Beria wrote to Stalin¹⁷: “The process played an exceptionally important role in raising the awareness of the broad masses of workers about counter-revolutionary, sabotage, and subversion by enemies of the people.” Mass terror in Georgia drove people to the extreme. Anticipating arrests, some people were not able to withstand persecution and chose to commit suicide. For example, Tengiz Zhghenti, the Secretary of Georgia’s Central Election Commission, or the former Secretary of the Adjarian Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia Artemije Geurkov (accused of “Lominadzevshina” Geurkov followed the example of Beso Lominadze)¹⁸. Paulo Iashvili, a prominent Georgian poet, committed suicide. Regretting that he did not have a chance to execute him, Beria ordered that the poet be buried as an enemy of the people.

Six months after the May Congress of the Communist Party of Georgia, and only three months after the start of the active phase of the “Great Terror”, on October 28, 1937, Beria presented a report at the plenary session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia “about the wrecking of dangerous organizations in Georgia and activities to combat the effects of sabotage.” In this extensive report, he fairly scrupulously described all the “work” that Georgian security officers conducted in terms of fighting “anti-Soviet elements.” Beria informed in detail the surviving participants of the plenum about the scale of the purges, underlining that on the ideological front a “counter-revolutionary, spy, terrorist” group of famous Georgian

writers headed by M. Javakhishvili had been uncovered. During the resulting purge, the 61 NKVD officers were arrested. Almost all members of the former leadership of the autonomous republics were declared as malignant enemies of the people that “turned out to be spies, most of whom had gone abroad for study or for business trips.”¹⁹ In addition some universities and schools were accused of being open to anti-Soviet elements among the teachers and students.

It is worth mentioning as well the part of the report in which Beria describes the actions of the so-called military center and preparations for an armed insurrection. Without going into detail, it is still necessary to highlight several pieces of evidence provided by Beria in his report. The first such evidence was given by N. Eliava who reported that “the number of insurgent organizations that are willing to speak out at the request of the nationalist center reached approximately 10,000 people.”²⁰ The second piece of evidence from S. Stepanov highlights that the rebel organization recruited 3,124 people. Afterwards, Beria reports that some of the people (129) had already been convicted and that their testimonies “confirmed the overall picture of the preparation of rebel units in these areas. The case is being investigated further.”²¹ It is not difficult to understand that in a short time, the Central Committee of Georgia will require additional quotas from Moscow for a special Troika.”

In the final part of his report, the Secretary of the Central Committee informs the audience about the role of Sergo Ordzhonikidze in exposing the group of former party leaders of Georgia and the Caucasus, headed by Mamia Orakhelashvili. It is interesting that Beria, when speaking about connections between Ordzhonikidze and the “enemies of the people” refers only to the testimony of convicts and himself does not mention the mistakes of Ordzhonikidze. The report ends without providing the missing statistical data about the enemies of the people arrested on 1 September 1937 and a promise to bring the work already underway to an end.

Overall Estimates

Unfortunately, even now it is difficult to judge the real scale of repressions in Georgia. According to preliminary estimates, during two years of the “Great Purges,” a Special Troika sentenced to death more than 10,000 persons. In Beria’s secret report to Stalin on October

15 OPERATIONAL ORDER OF THE PEOPLE’S COMMISSARIAT FOR INTERNAL AFFAIRS OF THE U.S.S.R. No. 00447. AP RF, 3-58-212, I. 55-78, <http://www.memo.ru/history/document/0447.htm>

16 Ibid.

17 Appendix to the Archival Bulletin no. 3, Fall 2008—Correspondence Between L. Beria and J. Stalin (1937). The Journal of Archive Administration of the MOIA.

18 Ibid.

19 Former archive of the Central Committee of Communist Party of Georgia—Archive Administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, 2nd Division. Fund no. 14, no. 11 Description, Case no. 49. pp. 171

20 Ibid. page 43.

21 Ibid. page 146

30, 1937, he stated that in 1937 more than 12,000 people were arrested, of which 7,374 (5,236 people by the Troika) were convicted at the end of October 1937. In this report, complaining about overcrowding of prisons, Beria asked Stalin to resolve the issue with an acceleration of the process of repression and to delegate functions of the court of military collegiums to the local authorities (to the Troika or the Supreme Court of Georgian SSR)²².

It seems that Beria had taken into account lessons of the May Congress, and proved in the first order to Stalin his readiness to deal ruthlessly with his enemies, and to strictly abide by the orders of the senior management. Beria and his team (Goglidze, Kobulov, Mamulov, Tsereteli, Rapava and others) exceeded the plan for the “Great Terror.” They fought their way to the top and in this way, combined the interests of Moscow with their personal interests.

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22 Appendix to the Archival Bulletin no. 3, Fall 2008—Correspondence Between L. Beria and J. Stalin (1937). The Journal of Archive Administration of MOIA.

Repressions in 1930s Soviet Armenia

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Abstract

One of the characteristics of Soviet history is the mass political repression that began in Russia in 1917 when the Bolsheviks came to power. Soviet power was established in Armenia at the end of 1920 following the collapse of the First Republic of Armenia (May 1918–November 1920). Where goals and implementation methods are concerned, Armenia’s repressions were generally conducted in accordance with standards developed and tested in Moscow.

Three Waves of Repressions

Armenak Manukian, author of the first studies examining the history of repression in Soviet Armenia during the prewar years, identifies three basic stages in their development. The first wave of repressions took place in 1921–1922. At that time, 1,400 former officers who served during the First Republic, were arrested and deported to Ryazan, among them prominent generals like Tovmas Nazarbekov and Movses Silikov. The second wave took place in 1929–1933 during the process of forced collectivization: 5,615 people were repressed, mostly rural inhabitants, of whom 104 were sentenced to death. The beginning of the next mass campaign of repression is associated with the name of a famous political figure from those years, the director of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the Communist Party of Armenia, Nersik Stepanian, who was arrested in May 1936 on charges of counterrevolutionary nationalist-Trotskyite activity. This arrest marked a turning point: up to that

moment, the first secretary of the Communist Party of Armenia Aghassi Khanjian had been able to resist the demands of the Transcaucasian Regional Committee of the Communist Party (Zakkraykom), led since October 1932 by Lavrentiy Beria, to persecute intellectuals and political elite. A month later, on July 9, 1936 in Tbilisi at a meeting of the Bureau of the Zakkraykom it was Khanjian’s turn to be criticized for nationalism on the grounds that he did not fight against right-Trotskyite forces and protected N. Stepanian. On the same day, according to the official version, he committed suicide; but according to the rumor that was later confirmed by Nikita Khrushchev to the Twentieth Party Congress, Khanjian was shot either by Beria himself or by Beria’s henchman.

In terms of goals and methods, Beria’s policies as the first secretary of the Zakkraykom precisely copied Stalin’s policies that were implemented throughout the Soviet Union. In asserting his personal and abso-