THE FATE OF THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION

ILLIBERAL LIBERATION, 1917–41

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Cover image: Soviet poster commemorating the October Revolution of 1917,
showing a worker shattering his chains. The poster also shows symbols of democracy,
socialism and freedom. (© Photo by Michael Nicholson/Corbis via Getty Images)

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CHAPTER 5
THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE LATE 1930S SOVIET DEMOCRACY CAMPAIGNS: ORIGINS AND OUTCOMES

Yiannis Kokosalakis

In February 1935, the Central Committee (TsK) of the All-Union Communist Party issued a statement announcing that it had instructed its prominent member and head of government V. N. Molotov to address the Seventh Congress of Soviets with some recommendations regarding necessary amendments to the country's constitution. These would be directed at democratising the Soviet electoral system and reforming the USSR's institutions to reflect the social transformations it had undergone since the initiation of the First Five-Year Plan (FYP). Over the following months, a commission composed of the party's greatest luminaries and headed personally by Stalin drafted an entirely new constitution extending the suffrage to previously disenfranchised groups and providing for secret, multi-candidate elections. At the same time, in 1936 a public discussion campaign unfolded through all major press outlets, encouraging Soviet citizens to read, discuss and comment on the draft. Nevertheless, in December 1937, a mere week before the first elections to be held under the new constitution, *Pravda* announced that communist candidates would run in the elections in a single bloc with non-partyists, effectively reneging on the party's earlier commitment to contestability. Moreover, instead of a turning point for socialist democracy, the year 1937 has since become synonymous with political violence as the campaign of repression initiated in the end of the preceding year reached its crescendo in the mass NKVD operations of late 1937.

Because of the combination of these facts, traditional scholarship regarded the introduction of a new constitution as a propaganda move on the part of the Soviet leadership, intended to present a more positive image to its own people and the public opinion of foreign democratic states, within the context of a deteriorating international environment.[1] Revisionist historiography offered an alternative interpretation, which nevertheless still posited ulterior motives behind the campaigns. Highlighting the amount of effort put in by party leaders in developing the draft constitution, as well as the fact that democratization campaigns were initiated along similar lines within the trade-union and Communist Party apparatuses, revisionist scholars argued that promoting public participation was amongst the genuine intentions of the Soviet leadership. Democratization was pursued by the centre with the intention of channelling popular anger against powerful regional officials or oppositionists lurking within the state and

party apparatus. It was only after losing control of the process that the leadership applied the brakes on the campaign and reverted to the status quo ante.[2]

This chapter ultimately offers a different interpretation arguing that the decision to introduce a new constitution, as well as the attendant party and trade-union initiatives, is best seen as a return to the institutional experimentation of the early years of Soviet power. Much as in the immediate post-revolutionary period, the party leadership attempted to develop political structures consistent with its communist ideological worldview, within which popular participation in the running of the state had always been a central goal. In both cases, considerations of security and political stability drove the leadership to moderate its reform agenda. It will be shown that these retreats were followed by inward-focused attempts to promote political participation amongst the party rank and file, as a substitute for the more ambitious goal of involving the whole people in the business of government.

The argument will proceed in three parts. First, an account will be given of Lenin's early reflections and subsequent discussions amongst the Bolsheviks regarding the appropriate relationship between party, state and society, with a focus on the role played therein by the concept of democracy. It will be shown that the settlement on the one-party system was followed by an attempt to make the party more closely linked and more representative of the Soviet citizenry. Second, the framing and conduct of the campaigns of the late 1930s will be examined in order to demonstrate their connection to earlier attempts at institutional development. Finally, it will be shown that while the soviet campaign fizzled out, attempts to reform the functioning of the Party apparatus continued. In 1939, the 18th Party Congress adopted new Rules, strengthening the institutional standing of primary party organizations (PPOs) and maintaining the commitment to multicandidate elections. Significantly, these did take place and continued thereafter until the German invasion in 1941.

Origins: From commune-state to party-state

Written in hiding, Lenin's pamphlet on *The State and Revolution* engaged with the ideas of Marx and Engels to consider the role of the state during the course of and after the victory of a socialist revolution, thus addressing an important gap in Marxist theory. The essence of Lenin's argument was that state power was an organized form of coercion serving to enforce the rule of one social class over another. In bourgeois society, the state guaranteed the exploitative power of capitalists over the working class. Thus, in liberal democracies, working people may be free to elect representatives, but ultimately policy will be determined by the interests of the owners of capital.

Denouncing liberal constitutionalism as a sham, the Bolshevik leader outlined his vision of a polity modelled on the Paris Commune, where working people would run their own affairs according to a simple system of elected and recallable delegates. Although to establish this system it would be necessary to employ coercive measures against members and agents of the capitalist class, the victory of the socialist revolution

would eventually render state power obsolete, by abolishing the rule of the few over the many.[3]

The State and Revolution proposed a system of direct democracy that largely dismissed the necessity of organized bureaucracies as a relic of the era of class exploitation. Lenin insisted that in order to achieve this enormous social transformation, the existing state apparatus would have to be 'smashed' rather than simply taken over by the proletariat. Nevertheless, he argued, the modern state performed a number of administrative and accounting functions that the new revolutionary authority would have to reproduce and in that respect, it would be possible for workers to make limited use of the existing institutional structures of governance. To support this claim, Lenin relied on a distinction, drawn by Marx, between a lower and a higher phase of communism.[4]

In the first phase, the task of the proletariat was to destroy the power of the capitalist class by smashing the core of its state apparatus in the form of the army, police and the upper echelons of the civil service. At the same time, workers would have to further develop the administrative-accounting functions of state power, democratizing them through the active involvement of the broad masses in the daily business of public administration and accounting over the production and distribution of goods. It was only after 'the vast majority' of society had successfully assumed the tasks of 'governing the state' that the highest phase of communism could begin. There would no longer be a need for a distinct apparatus to make and enforce decisions, these powers having been dispersed amongst the population as a whole. The state would thus 'wither away'.[5]

In writing *State and Revolution*, Lenin established two fundamental principles in Soviet political thought. First, state power was defined as inherently coercive and class-based. To the extent then that the working class would maintain a state apparatus after coming to power, it would be to repress social elements that undermined its rule. Second, democracy was conceived as being central to the revolutionary process. However, Lenin's vision of democracy had little to do with the notion of individual citizens choosing between proposed political alternatives. Instead, Lenin understood democracy as the ability of citizens to collectively supervise and exercise state power. These ideas would exert strong influence over the conduct of the democratization campaigns of the late 1930s.

The proletariat as a class remains the chief political subject throughout *State and Revolution.* Lenin remained silent on the place of specific political formations in the new order, including that of his own Bolshevik Party. The issue was first seriously broached in an article titled *Will the Bolsheviks Hold State Power?* written weeks before the October uprising. Responding to critics suggesting that the Bolshevik programme was mere posturing in the context of the crisis gripping the Russian Republic, Lenin restated his views on the soviets as the kernel of the workers' state.[6] But in a crucial passage, he argued the following:

> We know that every unskilled labourer, every kitchen-maid cannot right now join in state governance. In this we agree [with other parties]. But we differ […] in that we demand an immediate break with the prejudice that only the rich and

> bureaucrats from rich families can run the state. […] *Conscious workers must lead*, but they are able to draw into the task of governance the masses of toilers and the oppressed.[7]

Several pages later, Lenin added that 'workers have formed a party of a quarter million people to take control and set in motion the state apparatus in a planned manner.'[8] He thus qualified the argument set out in *State and Revolution* with the idea that the transition to the kind of participatory governance envisioned therein would have to be led by the most politically conscious of workers organized as a party, that is the Bolsheviks. The key task of this leadership would be to 'demonstrate to [toilers] in practice that they themselves need to set about […] distributing bread, all food, milk, clothing, accommodation.'[9]

Lenin's article foreshadowed two fundamental traits of the Soviet political system: leadership by the Communist Party and a social conception of citizenship emphasizing the provision of welfare rights as a fundamental aspect of the Soviet social contract. These principles underlay one of Lenin's most candid statements on the increasingly authoritarian direction taken by the early Soviet state after the October Revolution.

His pamphlet on *The Immediate Tasks of Soviet Power* was published in April 1918, a month after the signing of a peace treaty with Imperial Germany, as the civil war was rapidly gathering pace. Asserting that having 'conquered Russia from the rich for the poor' workers had to 'learn how to govern Russia', Lenin went on to argue that the pressing task facing the Soviet state was the elementary 'maintaining of sociality' by providing for public order and rudimentary economic growth in the disintegrating country. He declared 'accounting, no skiving, economising, no stealing, being disciplined' to be the slogans of the day, denouncing those who opposed them as 'lackeys of the bourgeoisie' who 'thrive on destruction and brutalisation'.[10]

The significance of the *Tasks* lies in the recognition of the need for organized hierarchies and coercion as tools of governance beyond the suppression of the 'tiny minority of exploiters' outlined in *State and Revolution*, thus marking a considerable retreat from the commune-state ideal described in this earlier work. 'The construction of socialism requires orderly organisation, but this requires coercion in the form of dictatorship. There is no plausible outcome for Russia other than a dictatorship by [White general] Kornilov or the proletariat.'[11] Lenin went on to define dictatorship as 'iron authority […] ruthless in its suppression of exploiters as well as hooligans', thus recognizing in the state a tool of public order as well as class struggle.[12] It was the task of the communist party to grasp this necessity: 'take leadership of the exhausted masses and lead them on the […] path of labour discipline.'[13]

Lenin thus laid the intellectual groundwork for the subsequent institutional form of the Soviet state. At the same time however, Lenin warned against the dangers of 'bureaucratism', arguing that it would be necessary to complement the 'dictatorship' with comprehensive development of Soviet democracy in the sense of the 'harshest of controls from below,' as well as his earlier recommendations for recallable deputies and popular involvement in the affairs of state.[14]

The common thread running through Lenin's writings is a social conception of citizenship that consisted in the right to have one's needs met and participate in the process by which this is achieved. Although the election of representatives had a place in Lenin's vision, it was only one component of his concept of democracy, which did not permit political alternatives to the construction of socialism. These principles found their legal expression in the Constitution of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) adopted by the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets in July 1918. Incorporating a Declaration of the Rights of the Labouring and Exploited Peoples, the Constitution introduced social provisions such as access to education and equal civil rights for all nationalities, while explicitly depriving 'all individuals and groups of rights which could be used to the detriment of the revolution'.[15]

Although the 1918 Constitution did not provide for single party rule, this became a fact following the failed coup launched by the Left Socialist Revolutionaries in July. Having ruled in coalition with the Bolsheviks until March 1918, the Left SRs had been the only other all-Russian party supporting Soviet power after October. Their dissolution following the suppression of their attempt to seize control of Moscow left the Bolsheviks in sole charge of the Soviet state apparatus. Over the next few years, Lenin's party extended its power over the former Empire by routing its enemies on the battlefield and employing a combination of coercion and co-optation to neutralize the splintered groups supporting the Soviets in the periphery.[16]

In the extreme conditions of total war and without a legal opposition to act as a check on their power, the Bolsheviks were able to ignore the Constitution's provisions for accountability, establishing a long-lasting pattern of untrammelled executive power. Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks also made sustained efforts to attract workers and peasants to the soviets as a means for the resolution of local conflicts and the provision of services. This policy allowed the Bolsheviks to build a coalition of poor peasants and ethnic minorities that gave the Red Army an edge over its enemies in the countryside, deciding the civil war in its favour.[17]

Single-party rule over a state apparatus accommodating public participation in its structures thus proved to be a winning strategy for Bolshevism. It is unsurprising therefore that the institutional architecture of the Soviet state was never seriously challenged from within the party's ranks. Despite the emergence of no less than four internal oppositions during the 1920s, none of the challengers disputed the party's monopoly on state power. What was at stake in these struggles was the way the party related to its working class and peasant constituencies.

The first of these conflicts reached a head in the Party's Tenth Congress in 1921, when delegates from the Workers' Opposition and Democratic Centralist factions argued that the lack of separation between state and party was threatening to depoliticize the latter by transforming it into an appendage of the administrative apparatus. According to the oppositionists, communists should avoid relating to the broader masses by administrative channels, seeking instead to attract them to the socialist project by sharing their concerns and addressing their needs in practice. They did not however consider the

legal existence of other parties as a desirable alternative. What vexed the oppositionists was the perceived distance that separated the Bolsheviks from the masses.[18]

Subsequent attempts to oppose the party leadership launched by Trotsky, Zinoviev and Bukharin were centred on economic policy and the extent to which this strengthened or undermined the party's relationship with workers and by extension, the prospects of socialism in the USSR. Although arguments around democracy were raised in the polemics exchanged during these power struggles, they remained within the boundaries of social citizenship and participatory administration set by Lenin and did not challenge single-party rule.[19]

Similarly, oppositionists criticized bureaucratic practices like the broad powers of appointment and co-optation enjoyed by local and central secretaries, as well as their ability to suppress dissent by controlling meeting agendas and access to the press. Nevertheless, none of the opposition leaders succeeded in articulating a political alternative consistent with the institutional limitations of the emerging party-state. At the same time, they hesitated to reject these outright, thus becoming vulnerable to accusations of recklessness and political dishonesty. Throughout the decade, Stalin and the central leadership were able to argue that the conditions that had led the party to its current mode of operation – including security threats and the low educational levels of members – were still in place. Aware of this, the opposition was thus acting in bad faith and threatened the very prospects of the full democratization it promoted.[20]

What is more, the leadership seemed to share many of the democratic instincts of their opponents in so far as these did not threaten the stability of the party apparatus. The idea of being closer to the masses was reflected in the mass recruitment campaign launched by the party in 1924. The 'Lenin Levy' swelled the party's ranks with industrial workers and succeeded in re-establishing its presence amongst the country's proletariat after the civil war.[21] The leadership launched several initiatives to provide new recruits with the skills necessary to participate in party life, including literacy classes and political education activities. Over the same period, attempts were made to provide channels for participation in public affairs by the broader masses, with 'production conferences' and factory newspapers becoming regular features of daily life in industrial enterprises throughout the country.[22]

Thus, the leadership could reasonably claim that its policies were laying the ground for the future democratization of the party and state apparatuses, albeit not at the speed demanded by oppositionists. This view was eloquently argued by district party secretary Martemian Riutin in a substantial *Pravda* article on 'The Party and internal party-democracy.' Riutin argued that the party's careful approach was yielding results, reflected in increased percentages of workers in responsible posts following recent elections at Moscow's party-cells. In his view, this demonstrated the following:

> Our internal party democracy rests on party unity and grows out of this unity. The more monolithic our party is, the more boldly we will implement […] internal party democracy. In contrast, the more attempts there are to shake the unity of our party ranks the more obstacles will be placed in the path of internal party

> democracy. In practice [the] opposition leads not to internal party democracy, but to its weakening and debasement.[23]

The first years of Soviet power therefore saw the Bolsheviks retreat from Lenin's early vision of a self-governing commune-state, first to the idea of the need for some sort of tutelage and subsequently to a hard-headed acceptance of the reality of dictatorial power. Following victory in the civil war, concerns regarding the bureaucratization of the party and its separation from the class it claimed to represent were addressed by broadly successful campaigns to attract large numbers of workers to the ranks and train the new recruits in the principles of Bolshevism. The following decade, the party leadership would re-examine the constitutional foundations of the USSR under very different conditions.

Process: Mass discussion, elections, repression

In the years between the end of the power struggle within the party and the launching of the democratization campaigns in the mid-1930s, the USSR was transformed from an agrarian economy with rudimentary industry and an extensive private sector to an industrial power where the state owned and directed most economic activity. The sheer scale of the industrialization process as well as the violent repression of recalcitrant officials and peasants who resisted collectivization gave the First FYP the character of a military campaign, with one historian of the period describing it as 'the march for metal'.[24]

With the party leadership facing a series of acute crises culminating in the famine of 1932–3, the First FYP was not a period conducive to theoretical reflection and institutional experimentation. However, by the time the 17th Party Congress convened in January 1934, conditions in the country had begun to improve, with agriculture recovering and the Second FYP already under way committing significant resources to the production of consumer goods. The leadership had weathered the storm and Stalin was able to address Congress delegates in a tone that was both triumphant and conciliatory. In his report on behalf of the TsK, the general secretary announced that the First FYP had made the socialist state-sector dominant in the economy, eliminating private capital and leaving co-operative collectivized agriculture as the only major economic activity not under state control.[25] This, he argued, had demonstrated in practice the correctness of the leadership line, leading most former oppositionists to repudiate their views and become loyal to the TsK. The party was 'united like never before.'[26] Its primary task from now on would be to overcome the 'remnants of capitalism' in the economy and in the 'conscience of people'.[27]

Molotov's address to the February 1935 Congress of Soviets regarding the need to amend the USSR's constitution was therefore made against the backdrop of the successful construction of the foundations of a socialist economy and society proclaimed the year before. Shortly after Molotov's announcement, *Pod Znamenem Marksizma (PZM),*

the country's main philosophical journal, led with an editorial on 'The New Era in the Development of Soviet Democracy.' The article linked the plans for constitutional revision with the successful completion of the substance of the tasks set by the 1918 Constitution of the RSFSR, namely the elimination of classes and the suppression of exploiters.[28] Citing Lenin's articles on the nature of revolutionary state power, the unnamed author went on to argue that the distinguishing trait of the Soviet state was that unlike states in the capitalist world, it was not a force alienated from society and standing in opposition to it. 'The Soviet apparatus does not stand above the masses, but merges with them.'[29]

To be sure, any resident of the Soviet countryside who had experienced collectivization knew that this merging was not a bloodless process. However, in addition to using state repression to pursue its objectives in the countryside, the party had also employed a combination of methods to rally the rural poor to its cause.[30] Thus, the message of the editorial was that having successfully wielded state power as a weapon to eliminate exploitative classes, the popular masses could now turn it into a channel of participation in public affairs. Similarly, an article on 'Legislation in conditions of proletarian democracy' appearing the same year in the jurisprudential review *Sovetskoe Gosudarstvo (SG)* highlighted the convocation of conferences of collective farmers and industrial workers to offer feedback on the implementation of laws. According to the author, public consultation was a fundamental element of the socialist legislative process, a manifestation of the diffusion of state power amongst the people Lenin had advocated in his revolutionary writings.[31]

At the same time as Soviet intellectuals were reintroducing the subject of socialist democracy into public discourse after a decade-long hiatus, the party leadership was developing a draft of the constitution that would give the appropriate legal form to the core institutions of the socialist state. Scholars who have studied the drafting process have stressed the time devoted to it as a sign of the seriousness with which the leadership viewed the project. From its first meeting in June 1935 to the release of the final Draft Constitution for public discussion on 12 June 1936, the drafting commission produced five drafts meticulously examined and edited personally by Stalin.[32] The topics considered by the commission covered standard constitutional provisions such as the separation of powers and delineation of jurisdictions, but also a number of issues arising from the Bolsheviks' social conception of citizenship, including a broad range of welfare rights that were eventually incorporated into the final draft.[33] Significantly, the drafting process also saw the first attempt to establish a legal basis for the party's ubiquitous social presence. Like the 1924 Constitution then in force, the first working drafts included no mention of the Bolsheviks or any other party. It was by Stalin's personal edit that an article mentioning the party was included in the Soviet fundamental law.

Article 126 guaranteed citizens' rights to voluntary association in, among others, trade-unions, youth organizations and sports clubs, in the interests of promoting the 'organisational initiative and political activity of the popular masses.' It continued as follows: 'The most active and conscientious people amongst workers and toilers unite in the communist party, the vanguard of toilers in their struggle for the victory of communism and the leading force of all toilers' organisations in the USSR.'[34] Stalin

thus came up with a legal formula which captured all of the basic parameters of Lenin's thinking and Bolshevik practice regarding the relationship between state, society and the party in socialism. The state was constitutionally obliged to promote various forms of activism, leadership of which was assigned to the Communist Party, which was thus established as a mediating institution between society and the state. In the final draft released for public consultation, the slightly indeterminate term 'communist party' was dropped for the official name All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and the segment on its leadership edited to extend to 'state as well as social organizations', thus formally transforming the country's ruling party into an essential feature of its institutional architecture.[35]

Despite being a significant development in law, the formalization of one-party rule attracted little attention in the mass discussion that followed the publication of the Draft Constitution of the USSR in June 1936. Instead, both in press coverage and the thousands of public meetings organized by party and other organizations, the main theme of the campaign was the extensive democratization of the Soviet state made possible by the successful construction of socialism.[36] This was reflected in the electoral system set out in Chapter XI of the Constitution, which provided for secret, direct and universal elections to the soviets, rescinding the exclusion from suffrage of priests, former white officers, kulaks and other hostile classes in force since 1918.

Stalin publicly indicated the importance he attached to electoral reform on several occasions. In an interview with the American journalist Roy Howard, he predicted that competitive elections would lead to very 'lively' campaigns. Multi-candidate elections would place a weapon in the hands of the people against incompetent and corrupt officials. 'Have you improved housing conditions? Are you a bureaucrat? Have you helped to make […] our lives more cultured?' would be only some of the criteria by which the General Secretary expected the Soviet people to judge their candidates.[37] Several months later, Stalin addressed the 8th Congress of Soviets stressing the strength of socialism in the USSR and dismissing reservations about the introduction of universal suffrage. Former kulaks and Whites were now too weak to threaten Soviet power and any gains they might make were certain to be due to the Party's own failures.[38]

In his interventions Stalin was essentially arguing directly from Lenin, framing elections as a form of participation in administration and provision of services, rather than contests between competing political projects. Similarly, his insistence that former class enemies had been rendered powerless echoed Lenin's prediction that the need for coercive measures would recede as the first phase of communism progressed.

The following year, party intellectuals picked up this line of argument, further elaborating on the significance of the coming elections. Throughout 1937, major journals carried several articles extolling the virtues of the Soviet political system over bourgeois parliamentarism. Writing for *SG*, the legal scholar R. Vol'skii argued that the new Constitution represented the realization of the universalist aspirations expressed in the 1776 Virginia Declaration of Rights and the 1789 French revolutionary Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. In contrast to the capitalist world, where democracy was limited in practice by exclusion from the suffrage based on race, sex and property

qualifications, the USSR was argued to be the first country to extend full, substantive political rights to the entirety of its population.[39] Along similar lines, an editorial of *PZM* provided a broad review of undemocratic practices in parliamentary systems ranging from the United States to Japan, including gerrymandering, aristocrat-dominated upper chambers and colonial exploitation. According to the editorial, the formal abolition of all democratic rights by fascist dictatorships was but the extension of these practices to their logical conclusion.[40]

The electoral dimension of democratic politics was therefore a central element of the way in which the Constitution campaign was framed by the party leadership. It is on this stark contradiction between the public commitment of the leadership to extensive democratization of the Soviet political system and the ultimate decision to conduct uncontested elections that the interpretation of the Constitution as a propaganda exercise has been based. There is, however, no documentary evidence to support this view. Instead, as J. Arch Getty has demonstrated, the archival record suggests that Stalin was personally committed to the elections as a way to streamline the state apparatus and curb the power of regional leaders. The General Secretary sprung the prospect of contested elections on local party bosses at the June 1936 TsK Plenum which met to discuss the Constitution draft. The document appears to have shocked TsK members so much that Stalin's speech on the draft was met with dumbfounded silence.[41] Over the next months, the regions showered the centre with reports of reenergized political activity by kulaks and other counter-revolutionaries seeing the coming elections as an opportunity to strike against Soviet power. Stalin insisted on going through with the elections and the conflict reached a head in the February–March 1937 TsK Plenum.

Famous as a prelude to the third Moscow Trial due to its condemnation of Nikolai Bukharin, the plenum was equally remarkable for the stark way in which it demonstrated the breakdown in the relationship between the centre and the regions. Rather than walking-back from its elections goals, the leadership doubled down on the offensive, with Leningrad regional secretary and close Stalin ally Andrei Zhdanov announcing that the principle of multi-candidate, secret-ballot elections would be extended to the party, in order to break-up 'family-circles' of corrupt officials.[42] Apparently spontaneously, trade-union head Nikolai Shvernik suggested that a similar democratization campaign be extended to the Soviet trade-union apparatus.[43]

By the summer of 1937, a combination of international developments, NKVD reports and regional leaders' manoeuvring appears to have convinced Stalin that the Soviet Union was facing a grave security threat. The mass operations unleashed against former kulaks and foreign nationals led to hundreds of thousands of arrests and executions, a scale of violence reminiscent of the civil war and dekulakization.[44] At the same time, the party, soviet and trade-union democratization campaigns were exposing large networks of corruption that implicated most of the country's regional leadership. By the time mass repression was wound up in early 1938, almost all of the party's regional secretaries had been arrested.[45]

There is no space here to examine the full range of factors behind the violence of 1937–8. It is worth remembering however that a decade earlier, Stalin and his allies had

shielded regional leaders from the opposition's scathing critiques of their methods of rule. That Stalin was now responding to similar accusations from the base with violence against local party bosses suggests that he believed their power was no longer serving the interests of the Soviet system.

There is much to recommend the interpretation of the democratization campaigns as an attempt by Stalin to reassert control over the party-state apparatus. Nevertheless, had power dynamics been Stalin's only motivation for the campaigns, we would expect these to fizzle out after the regional cliques had been destroyed. Indeed, it was during this period that the decision to conduct the Soviet elections as single-candidate confirmation affairs was made.[46] This, however, was not the end of the story.

Outcomes: The 18th Congress and new party rules

On 19 January 1938, *Pravda* published a TsK resolution bearing the wordy title 'On the mistakes of party organisations regarding expulsions of communist from the party, on the formal-bureaucratic treatment towards the expelled from VKP (b), and on measures for the elimination of these faults.' The directive attacked 'false vigilance' as 'counter-revolutionary in substance', an enemy tactic intended to spread panic and destroy honest cadres. Denouncing 'slander' and 'mass expulsions' as a form of 'wrecking in party organizations,' the resolution issued a three-month deadline for the completion of all outstanding appeals and listed ten measures to be immediately taken against 'over-vigilance', including the provision that none of the expelled should lose their jobs before their appeal process was over.[47]

Viewed against the backdrop of the mass repression unleashed the previous year, the TsK resolution was a signal that the leadership was applying the brakes on the campaign. At the same time, the condemnation of 'over-vigilance' increased the pressure on incumbent functionaries, for whom false accusations had been a reliable means of deflecting criticism.[48] Although the leadership was careful not to indicate that the hunt for enemies was over, criticism of slander remained a central theme in *Pravda* editorials and reporting throughout the year, with the second-page column on 'party life' carrying almost daily reports of individual cases of honest communists wrongfully denounced by careerist bureaucrats.[49] Another round of party elections announced in late March ushered in a renewed torrent of critical articles in *Pravda* and the regional press, this time regarding the failure of local organizations to organize electoral contests in line with the provisions set by the TsK in its February-March plenum the previous year, while at the same time ensuring the meaningful participation of the rank and file in the entire process.[50]

The following year, electoral accountability and members' rights became the main pillars of a new phase in the party democratization campaign. In January 1939, a TsK plenary session finalized the agenda for the party's 18th Congress held in March. Among the main items was a report by Andrei Zhdanov on the updating of the party's governing statues, the Party Rules. Published in *Pravda* in early February, Zhdanov's

theses proposed a range of changes to the Rules, framed as a response to far-reaching transformations in Soviet social structure. Key among these was the strengthening of the status of PPOs, the return to the principle of electability of all responsible posts, the abolition of differential recruitment procedures depending on social origin and most strikingly, the declaration that mass party purges were no longer acceptable practice.[51]

Following the publication of Zhdanov's proposed amendments to the Rules, the TsK initiated an extensive discussion on the text. District committees were instructed to organize meetings and return detailed reports of the recommendations made by the rank and file.[52] Regional and central party press outlets reported closely on the progress of the consultation amongst the grassroots, often attacking local organizers who failed to elicit sufficient engagement.[53]

Articles published in *Pravda*'s pre-Congress bulletins indicate that members responded actively to the TsK initiative. Several pieces were published recommending concrete measures to safeguard members' rights, including making the unjust application of disciplinary measures a disciplinary offense in itself.[54] Many contributors also offered suggestions for a further clarification of the powers of PPOs vis-à-vis state administration.[55] Nevertheless, despite the customary praise heaped upon the leadership in many of the contributions, most pieces took issue with at least some aspect of the proposals.

Although entrenching members' rights and democratizing the apparatus were invariably applauded as political goals of the utmost importance, the relaxation of recruitment standards proposed in Zhdanov's theses attracted the suspicions of several communists. Opposition to the abolition of differential recruitment was strong enough that three Leningrad party secretaries had to pen a joint article defending it.[56] A worker from a Kiev factory suggested that recommendations for new members should come from communists with at least five years in the party, rather than the three stipulated in the draft. One Klimovich wrote against the amendment of the definition of a member from someone who has 'mastered the Party programme' to someone who accepts it.[57] On a similar note, V. Shelomovich, head of the Moscow City Party Committee agitprop department, argued that the Rules should mandate that cadres in elected posts be well versed in theory, strong knowledge of Marxism-Leninism making the difference between good leaders and petty bureaucrats.[58] At the same time, other contributors offered a diametrically opposite view, recommending even more drastic relaxations in recruitment practices, such as shorter candidacy periods and the abolition of the category of 'sympathizers' in favour of an expanded candidate membership.[59]

The discussion of Zhdanov's theses was the most extensive public self-reflection the party had engaged in since the debates of the 1920s. Communists from all over the USSR were writing to *Pravda* to weigh in on a debate that was substantially similar to those of more than a decade earlier. Underlying the public dialogue was the old theme of the appropriate relationship between the party and broader Soviet society. The leadership had proposed a reduction of the distance between the vanguard and the masses, eliciting apprehension amongst some communists while being viewed as insufficiently bold by others.

Party leaders underscored the deep significance of the proposed Rules changes in their speeches at the 18th Congress, explicitly linking the amendments with the social transformations reflected in the 1936 Constitution. Stalin began the delivery of the TsK report with a grim assessment of international affairs in the context of the 'second imperialist war already in progress,' stating bluntly that war was 'in the order of the day.'[60] The grave security threat facing the USSR was thus introduced as the backdrop of the General Secretary's address. This lends particular significance to the fact that, in addition to a detailed overview of the country' economic progress during the Second FYP, Stalin devoted a large part of his report to 'theoretical questions'. First amongst these was the question of the state and its purpose in socialism.

Stalin declared that it was now time for the party to engage with the fundamental questions posed by Lenin in *State and Revolution* and continue the theoretical work that the venerated leader had left unfinished. He offered an overview of the history of the Soviet state which he divided into two phases. First, from the October Revolution to the 'liquidation of exploitative classes,' when the main function of the socialist state was to defend against imperialist aggression and to put down the resistance of the dispossessed bourgeoisie and its allies. The second phase of Stalin's schema was that initiated by the successful completion of the First FYP and crowned by the adoption of the 1936 Constitution. State power in the second phase was chiefly applied to the organization of the socialist economy and national defence. 'The function of military repression within the country' had already 'withered away', with imperialist encirclement being the only factor preventing the rest of the state apparatus from following suit. The repressive arm of the state was now turned primarily outwards rather than inwards, even though agents of hostile foreign powers could be recruited amongst the remnants of the liquidated exploiter classes.[61]

Given Stalin's close involvement with the mass operations of the previous years, the extent to which he was truly convinced that threats to the Soviet state were now mainly external is questionable, although it is possible he believed that the last round of repression had finally broken the back of home-grown counter-revolution. Whatever the case, the significance of Stalin's speech lies in that it provided an overarching theoretical framework for the institutional experimentation the leadership had engaged in since the Constitution drafting process. Reaching back to the founding text of Marxist-Leninist state theory, Stalin essentially argued that the first phase of communism identified in the *State and Revolution* was coterminous with the construction of socialism, achieved in the USSR after the success of the First FYP. With exploiting classes liquidated and the lines between workers, collectivized peasants and highly skilled personnel ('intellectuals') becoming blurred, the objective conditions had been put in place for the transition to a classless society even though the ultimate prize of the withering away of the state remained some way off.

Stalin thus placed all of the political campaigns of the previous years within a single narrative. The Constitution, democratization and the campaign against 'over-vigilance' were nothing less than aspects of the maturation of communism in the USSR. These themes were further expanded on by responses to Stalin's speech by other Party

luminaries, including secret police chief Lavrentii Beria who railed against the habit of misperceiving incompetence as sabotage.[62]

One week later, Andrei Zhdanov delivered his report on the 'changes to the Rules of VKP (b),' grounding his argument on the same premises as Stalin. According to the Leningrad secretary, the successful completion of 'the world-historical tasks of the construction of socialism and the defence of the gains of victorious socialism from capitalist encirclement and its agents in the USSR demanded from the Party a radical restructuring of party-political and organisational work.' Zhdanov went on to remind Congress delegates that changes in the Rules had always accompanied radical developments in the country's political life, such as the introduction of NEP, the beginning of industrialization and its successful completion.[63] All of the major changes proposed were dictated by the progress of Soviet society towards communism.

Thus, Zhdanov argued, the abolition of differential recruitment reflected the fact that there were no longer any classes hostile to socialism in the USSR. It would be absurd for the party to put so much effort to liberate the working class, only to penalize those of its members who had risen to prominent positions in industry. Similarly, party purges were to be forbidden in the future because those hostile elements that did exist within the party were no longer representatives of a broader social challenge to working-class power, but rather petty traitors and foreign agents who had to be individually discovered and prosecuted.[64]

The full democratization advocated by Zhdanov's theses was similarly grounded in the social transformations of the past few years. The introduction of direct, secret and equal elections to the soviets was a step in the greater involvement of the masses in the running of the state. However, Zhdanov went on to add that in order for the party to lead this process it was necessary that its organizations themselves would first:

> [I]mplement fully in their internal affairs the fundamentals of democratic centralism, that all Party organs become electable, that criticism and self-criticism are developed […] to their full extent, that accountability of Party organisations before the Party rank-and-file becomes fully activated.[65]

Zhdanov thus framed the party democratization campaign as both an extension of its soviet precedent and a precondition for its successful long-term implementation. He then went on to remind Congress delegates of the February–March 1937 TsK plenum, which had exposed the fact that regional leaders had been 'violating Party Rules with impunity' to avoid accountability before their organizations. The leadership had initiated the party democratization campaign precisely to remedy this situation. According to Zhdanov, the success of the campaign had been demonstrated by the fact that the renewal rate in the composition of party committees after the internal elections of 1938 ranged from 35 per cent to 60 per cent.[66]

The political signal of Zhdanov's speech could not have been missed by the members of the party elite in attendance. The senior Bolshevik was indicating that the leadership had no intention to restore the status quo following the decimation of the preceding

two years. To be sure, the abolition of the purge suggested a more predictable manner of conducting disciplinary affairs in the future, but Zhdanov's insistence on accountability before the rank and file was a sign that the leadership remained unwilling to shield its subordinates from grassroots pressure. Instead of a one-off strike to debilitate specific regional power networks, the campaign was an attempt to permanently recast the internal dynamics of the apparatus.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the seriousness with which Stalin and his allies regarded the campaign lies in the fact that they never backtracked on their commitment to multicandidate elections. Archival records from Zhdanov's own Leningrad region indicate that contests took place shortly after their announcement at the February–March 1937 Plenum and continued doing so until the German invasion of 1941.[67] In some of the smaller organizations, such as those on the ships of the Baltic Fleet, finding enough candidates often turned out to be a challenge, with nominees ending up on the ballot against their will in order to comply with the multi-candidate rule.[68] In very large organizations, elections were much more complicated affairs. As per the new Rules, these held their own delegated conferences to elect their leading organs, thus having to conduct multi-tier contests. The 3,000-member strong PPO of the enormous Kirov machine-building plant conducted three such conferences in the period 1938–41, in which all leading posts were elected individually in contested elections.[69]

Conclusion

In the introduction to his monograph on the political thought of Joseph Stalin, Erik van Ree made a rather counterintuitive point for a Western audience. When, in his various pronouncements, Stalin described the USSR as the most democratic country in the world, he was not only being honest, but also factually correct. This is because Stalin's concept of democracy was derived from the Marxist-Leninist ideological canon and therefore encompassed a variety of conditions not usually associated with the term in Western liberal thought, but present in the Soviet Union.[70] The preceding pages have offered an interpretation of the democratization campaigns launched in the mid-1930s that is in line with this view.

The contours of Bolshevik thought on socialist state–society relations were set by Lenin in 1917, when he developed a notion of citizenship as welfare and democracy as participation. Single-party rule was not inherent in this framework, but it was incipient in the notion of communists as the most politically advanced workers guiding society through an objective world-historical transition. After the Bolshevik monopoly of power had become a fact during the civil war, none among themselves challenged this outcome. The party, it was assumed, would have to lead the fight against counter-revolution and keep the economy running until society matured into the commune envisioned by Lenin.

Introducing a new Constitution in 1936 was an attempt to pick up again the thread of institutional experimentation and do away with some of the more embarrassing practices of Soviet public administration while revitalizing the bonds between party,

state and society. Stalin's decision to codify in law the party's control over the state indicates that he believed that the conditions that had led to one-party rule were still in place. It seemed possible however to take some steps towards the commune ideal by reforming the state. Just like the civil war had forced Lenin to retreat from some of his more utopian views in favour of authoritarian rule, a combination of security concerns and regional recalcitrance led Stalin to decide against pushing through with the most substantial of the proposed reforms, contested elections to state organs.

Instead, the leadership launched a campaign of violence against counter-revolutionaries in the country and competing power centres within the apparatus. At the same time, Andrei Zhdanov headed a campaign to democratize the party mirroring that of the Constitution. In this case, the reforms were more substantial than cosmetic, with elections taking place on several occasions and the party attempting to make itself more representative of Soviet society by abolishing class-based recruitment barriers. Once again, the leadership responded to the frustration of its revolutionary plans by reforming the party itself.

This is not necessarily inconsistent with previous scholarly interpretations of Stalin's motivations for the campaigns. However, these must be seen as contingent, rather than necessary. Having initiated the project, Stalin plausibly tried to use the Constitution to gain good will abroad. It is nevertheless difficult to sustain the argument that diplomacy was his main motivation, given that the party campaign offered little advantages in that direction and the Soviet press continued to denounce liberalism as the antechamber to fascism. Similarly, there can be no doubt that democratization was used as a cudgel with which to crush regional elites but again, the continuation of the party campaign after 1938 is harder to explain on this basis alone.

Instead, the democratization campaigns are best viewed as an ambitious political project inspired by Marxist-Leninist ideology, a major aspect of which foundered on security threats and perceptions thereof. What this chapter has shown is that although not spectacular, the campaigns did have some appreciable effects on the functioning of the Soviet party-state.