

Iryna Ramanava

The “Lepel Case” and Regional Show Trials in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) in 1937

I.

In 1937 and early 1938, the Soviet Union endured a wave of several hundred regional show trials. The first of these was held in the Lepel district of the BSSR (further: Belarus) in March 1937.¹ Leading administrative figures in the regions, village councils and collective farms were to stand accused of flagrant abuses of power and recourse to violence against the toiling peasantry. For the needs of the moment, the term “toiling peasantry” embraced

- 1 These trials are discussed in: Sheila Fitzpatrick, ‘How the Mice Buried the Cat. Scenes from the Great Purges of 1937 in the Russian provinces’, *Russian Review*, 52/3 (1993), 299-320; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (Oxford, 1994), 286-312; Roberta Manning, ‘Massovaya operatsiya protiv “kulakov i prestupnykh elementov”: apogee Velikoi chistki na Smolenshchine’, in Evgenii V. Kodin (ed), *Stalinizm v rossiiskoi provintsii: smolenskies arkhivnye dokumenty v prochtenii zarubezhnykh i sovetskikh istorikov* (Smolensk, 1999), 230-54; Roberta Manning, ‘The Great Purges in a Rural District: Belyi Raion Revisited’, in John Arch Getty and Roberta Manning (eds), *Stalinist terror: New Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1993), 168-97; Michael Ellman, ‘The Soviet 1937 Provincial Show Trials: Carnival or Terror?’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53/8 (2001), 1221-34; Evgenii V. Kodin, *Smolenskii naryv* (Smolensk, 1999); Viktor P. Danilov and Roberta Manning (eds), *Tragediya sovetskoi derevny: Kollektivizatsiya i raskulachivanie. V 5 t. Dokumenty i materialy*, vol. 5, 1937-1939 (Moscow, 2004); Nicolas Werth, *Terror i besporjadok* (Moscow 2010); Nicolas Werth, ‘Provintsial’nye pokazatel’nye protsessy v SSSR vo vremya “Bol’shogo terrora” 1937-1938’, in *Sudebnye politicheskie protsessy v SSSR i kommunisticheskikh stranakh Evropy: sravnitel’nyi analiz mekhanizmov i praktik provedeniya: materialy rossiisko-frantsuzskogo seminaru (Moskva 11-12 sentyabrya 2009 g.)* (Novosibirsk, 2010), 131-44; Julie Cassiday, ‘Marble Columns and Jupiter Lights: Theatrical and Cinematic Modeling of Soviet Show Trials’, *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 42/4 (Winter 1998), 640-60, 656; and others.

not only collective farm labourers, but also individual farmers (who had not joined collective farms) who, until recently, had been classified as “kulaks” or pro-kulak elements. Being identified as real or potential enemies of the Soviet regime, there was to be no place for them in socialist society.

It seemed as if Stalin was squaring up to the ordinary peasant. Arrests and convictions in affairs similar to the “Lepel case” were made in the spring and summer of 1937, primarily in the border areas. The second stage came in autumn 1937 and winter 1938; now the scenario changed somewhat, with the local leaders being accused of violating the rights of farmers. In parallel, the NKVD, under the fateful Order No. 00447, was conducting its most extensive operation in terms of the number of victims, the main categories for such repression being “former kulaks” and anti-Soviet elements. Clearly, as these two campaigns were conducted simultaneously, they inevitably, mutually added fuel to the other’s fire.

Finally, the designation “Lepel case” became something of an appellative term. The leaders of the USSR often used it in their speeches and articles during the years of the Great Terror, during the Moscow trials of the right-Trotskyite centre, it was used again in the 1950s in connection with the role of Georgy M. Malenkov in the organisation of mass repressions in Belarus.

Moscow was forced to take note of the Lepel district in December 1936 when reports began to trickle out of sabotage activities in the run up to the USSR’s population census.² Here, in two rural municipalities (Staiskii and Pyshnyanskii), approximately two hundred and thirty people refused to answer the questions of census officials, almost all of whom belonged to individual farmers’ families. The investigation determined that they were all “dissenters who had vowed silence”, who considered (participation in) the census akin to being branded by the devil, and therefore called for the census to be shunned by all possible means, and to avoid any contact whatsoever with representatives of the Red Dragon of power in general. The NKVD made arrests among these counter-revolutionaries and dissenters; the alleged disseminators of anti-Soviet rumours and propaganda were made to stand trial, a show trial, in their district centre. The fact that a counter-revolutionary organisation aimed at sabotaging the activities of the Soviet regime and conducting anti-Soviet agitation was operating in the border region was reported in the Central Committee of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party of the Soviet Union (further: the CPSU) and to Stalin personally.³

2 The census was conducted on the night of 5 to 6 January 1937.

3 Iryna Ramanava, ‘Klyaimenne Chyrvonaga drakona: Usesayuzny perapis nasel’nitsva 1937 goda i yago traktobouka u syalyanskim dyskurse’, *Arche*, 3 (2012), 246-62.

The fact that these events took place in a border area was deemed to be absolutely unacceptable; such a region, in light of the measures which had been taken previously, had to be exemplary in all respects.⁴ It turned out that the Soviet administrative and Party organs had not undergone proper training on the eve of the census. In fact, all of their work with the population at large might be summed up in the bureaucratic language of the time as “crude administration” and a “massive violation of revolutionary legitimacy”.⁵ It was found that during 1935, in that same area, the People’s Court had imposed various penalties on some six hundred and thirty people, part of them were arrested and convicted for failing to settle their liabilities regarding statutory public levies; in 1936, the figure was four hundred and sixty-three. The levies that had been imposed took no account of the true capacities of peasants to meet the demands put upon them; but failure to pay and comply resulted in the imposition of huge fines, the non-payment of which, in turn, led to the confiscation of every asset and the total ruin of private farmsteads. Moreover, expropriations were accompanied by verbal and physical abuse and bullying.

Thus, instead of simply eliminating “counter-revolutionaries”, the authorities took note of their miserable situation caused by the wrong and inappropriate actions of their district leaderships. Naturally, this made it possible once again to shift the blame from the centre to the periphery. It now appeared that the population had boycotted the census mainly because of the local authorities who, instead of reaching out to the people in an effort to explain and educate them, paid more attention to defaults in settling tax liabilities or other statutory public levies. Moreover, the authorities carried out their putative duties “in violation of revolutionary legitimacy.” This is the essence of what came to be known as the “Lepel case”.

II.

The “Lepel case” became something of a model and *cause celebre* throughout the Soviet Union. The decision of the Central Committee of the CPSU of February 8 in the “Lepel case” highlighted the failure to engage in party political work in the border regions of Belarus. On February 18, the Belarusian Central Committee adopted the following resolution: responsibility for “the gross distortion of Soviet laws and direct wilfulness in respect of a number of individual and collective farms” in the Lepel district was laid at the door of

4 For measures to consolidate the border regions see: Iryna Ramanava, ““Zona”: Belaruskae pamezhzha pa savetski bok dzyarzhaunaga kordonu u 1930 gady’, *Spadchyna*, 1-2 (2001), III-35.

5 NARB (National Archive of the Republic of Belarus). F. 4-p. Op. 21. D. 983. L. 34.

the senior leadership of the republic because it was noted that a similar situation existed in other areas. In this regard, members and candidate members of the Belarusian Central Committee were seconded to all border areas; they were to hold closed party meetings and report on the shortcomings in the work of the Belarusian Central Committee and Council of People's Commissars in the governance of the border regions and districts, and they were to identify all cases deemed to be akin to the situation in Lepel.⁶

In accordance with the decision of the Central Committee of the CPSU of February 22, the following were indicted: the Chairman of the Lepel Regional Executive Committee, Semashko; the Secretaries of the Lepel district committee Party, Pantsegel and Yushkevich; the Head of the Financial Department, Rusanov; the District Commissioner of the Grain Harvesting Committee, Mikhailov; the Chairman of the Staiskii Village Council, Gaisenak. Members of the Republic's leadership – Secretaries of the Belarusian Central Committee B Nicolay Gikalov⁷ and Daniil Volkovich,⁸ the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars BSSR, Nicolay Goloded⁹ – were accused of “a lack of socio-political work and political blindness.” Control and responsibility over the execution of the resolution of February 22 were jointly entrusted to the Deputy Chairman of the Party Control Commission subordinated to the Central Committee of the CPSU and at the same time to Yakov Yakovlev, the Head of the Agricultural Department of the Central Committee.

On March 4, 1937, an open show trial began in Lepel. Events in the area were reported by the allunion newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestia*. Items in *Pravda* took the form of informational news reports, as signals to initiate work on uncovering analogous cases in other areas. The series of articles in *Izvestia* evinced a different approach.¹⁰ Here the authors, the Tur brothers, created a whole series of caricatures of Soviet petty tyrant-managers: everyone who was involved in the case was asked the same question about the bounds of what is acceptable, or, more precisely, about their absence.

The script of the entire proceedings was simple: bad local chiefs violated Stalin's Constitution, abused power, overburdened and maltreated the peasants. This was recognized by Stalin and he stood to protect them.¹¹ Local

6 NARB. F.4-p. Op. 1. D. 10979. L. 28.

7 Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of BSSR from 18 January 1932 to 18 March 1937.

8 Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of BSSR from 3 August 1934 to 10 June 1937.

9 Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars BSSR from 1927 to 1937.

10 *Izvestiya* (March, 6-11, 1937).

11 Fitzpatrick, *How the Mice Buried the Cat*, 299-320; Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization*, 286-312.

leaders were made to stand trial, and the peasants stood witness as the main accusers. Leaflets detailing the facts of the mass violations of revolutionary legitimacy in the Lepel district were sent to all regional and district committees throughout the USSR – for information and so that appropriate action might be taken locally. Similar cases to that in Lepel were found in all seventeen Belarussian districts that were investigated.

Prison terms for those convicted in Lepel were moderate – from six months to two years. For similar cases in the Shyraevsk district of the Odessa region, sentences were tougher.¹² The question of the “Lepel case” was again considered at the March Plenum of the Belarussian Central Committee, at which the recommendation of the Central Committee of the CPSU of March 14, to appoint Vasily Sharangovich as First Secretary in Belarus, was announced. In his speech, Sharangovich stressed that the excesses that had been uncovered were not merely matters relating to workers in those places, but staff in positions of power in the central apparatus had to be vetted. At the same Plenum, the Chairman of the Belarussian Council of People’s Commissars, Goloded, and the Chairman of the Belarussian Central Election Commission, Alexander Chervyakov,¹³ were accused of opportunistic right-wing mistakes in the past.¹⁴

To analyse and investigate these “subversives”, Moscow dispatched to Minsk two eminent figures: Deputy Chairman of the Party Control Commission of the Central Committee of the CPSU and concurrently Head of the Agricultural Department of the Central Committee, Yakov Yakovlev, and the Head of the Department leading Party organs of the CPSU, Malenkov.

Yakovlev had been appointed Head of the Commission established by the Central Committee’s Politburo to look into the results of the “Lepel case”. He was responsible for a wide range of measures, including overcoming cultural backwardness in the border areas. Upon arrival in Belarus, Yakovlev made a point of visiting the Lepel district personally.

Eight days after their stay in Belarus, Malenkov and Yakovlev presented Stalin a draft resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU “On the

12 ‘Sud nad vinovnikami bezzakonij v Shirayevskom rajone: Odesskaya oblast’, *Pravda*, (June 15, 1937).

13 Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of BSSR from 1924 to 1937.

14 On June 14, 1937, Goloded was summoned to Moscow and arrested, and on June 21 the Belarussian People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs, Berman, reported to the People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs of the USSR, Yezhov, that during the investigation, Goloded had committed suicide by jumping from the fifth floor window of the NKVD’s building. After a series of accusatory speeches, organized against him during the XVI Congress of the Communist Party of Belarus (10-18 June 1937), Alexandr Chervyakov committed suicide on 16 June 1937.

leadership of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Belarus.” The draft was approved on June 27, 1937. In accordance with their resolution, the First Secretary of the Belarusian Central Committee, Sharangovich, Second Secretary Deniskevich, and Deputy of the National Committee of Belarus Nizovtsev, were removed from their posts as enemies of the people. Their cases were transferred to the NKVD. The same day, Yakovlev was appointed First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Belarus.¹⁵

Yakovlev and Malenkov stage-managed the so-called firing squad at the July Plenary Session of the Belarusian Central Committee in 1937. Deficiencies in the development of agriculture, mass discontent and peasant protests against the tax policy, the failure of numerous enterprises to achieve their targets, could all be put down to the counter-revolutionary actions of the anti-Soviet underground, whose goal was to separate Belarus from the Soviet Union together with the defeat of the USSR in any future war. Needless to say, this Plenary Meeting became an interrogation session of District Secretaries and Chairmen of District Executive Committees, who were called to the podium to deliver their reports. Of the twenty-four speakers at the Plenum, twenty were arrested and executed.¹⁶

According to the resolution of the Plenum, the Party organisations were invited to focus their efforts and make their priority the quick and decisive liquidation, indeed, the merciless deracination of destructive Polish agents, wreckers and saboteurs.

A. Volkov¹⁷ and A. Levitsky¹⁸ were appointed first and second Secretaries of the Belarusian Central Committee; it was they who were given the task to carry out this brutal elimination. After the Plenum, the Belarusian purge began – of its Central Committee, its Council of People’s Commissars, its Central Executive Committee, the People’s Commissariats, and its district organisations.

In the wake of the “Lepel case”, it also became necessary to eliminate the consequences of excesses and violations of revolutionary legitimacy in rela-

15 Chairman of the Central Committee of the Belarus Communist Party from 29 June to 8 August 1937. On 12 October, during proceedings of the Plenum of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (October session, 1937), Yakovlev was arrested.

16 *Reabilitatsiya: kak eto bylo: Dokumenty Prezidiuma TsK KPSS i drugiye materialy* (Rehabilitation: What it Was Like: Documents of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPSU and other materials) in 3 vol. Vol. 2 (February 1956 – beginning of the 1980s) (Moscow, 2003), 312-3.

17 Chairman of the Belarusian Central Committee from 11 August 1937 to 18 June 1938.

18 Chairman of the Belarusian Central Committee from 11 August 1937 to 30 March 1938.

tion to toiling peasants. Probably, this step was made with the aim of calming the individual farmers (so called “kulaks”), who had recently been freed from the stigma of being “disenfranchised” (“*lishenec*”) and were very soon to take part in the first general election by secret ballot, which they were promised by the world’s “most democratic” constitution, the Constitution of 1936.

On August 2, 1937, the CPSU and the Soviet Belarusian Council of People’s Commissars adopted a decree “On assistance to collective farmers of the Belarusian SSR and on the elimination of the effects of sabotage in the structure of collective farms. On assistance to the collective farm peasantry of Belarus and on the liquidation of the consequences of wrecking in collective farms”. According to this decree, farmers had to be provided with plots of land in accordance with the established norms (0.5 hectares per farm). It was found that more than a third of them had significantly less.¹⁹ It appeared that justice had been done: now collective and individual farmers were allowed to freely graze cattle on forest land belonging to the state; this was of local significance, and the cultivation of land in 1938 was reduced by some 300,000 hectares. Also, shortfalls in meat, milk and potato quota supplies, and arrears in payments for Machine and Tractor Station (MTS) services, were written off. The milk delivery plan for collective farms was reduced by half – to fifty five litres a year per cow.²⁰ Significant benefits were given to individual farmers upon joining collective farms.²¹

It was stressed that this decision was taken on the initiative of Comrade Stalin. All Party and government organisations were ordered to hold discussions in all collective and state farms, with individual farmers and “the entire Belarusian people, and resolve to immediately execute the decree”.²² In turn, the local government units reported to the centre that the decree had been “greeted by the working masses of Belarus with great enthusiasm and had caused a huge rise in productivity among farmers with a rising tide of individual peasants joining collective farms and an intensified hatred of enemies of the people, the gang of national fascists and agents of foreign fascist states active in Belarus.”²³

Clearly, the decree was intended to have a mobilising effect – to engender a mass desire to form collective farms. In Soviet Belarus, there were still more than 100,000 farms running on an individual basis. However, by September

19 By 7 October of the same year, according to official data, 38,300 hectares of adjoining land had been transferred to 245,000 collective farms (NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 11033. L. 144).

20 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 11033. L. 341-2.

21 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 11033. L. 342-3.

22 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 12099. L. 337.

23 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 12099. L. 337.

1, 1937, only 1,925 such farms (just a few in each area) had joined up with collective farms.²⁴

On the basis of this decree (dated August 2, 1937), all cases of those convicted in 1934-1937 for failure to fulfil their statutory obligations to supply natural produce and make monetary payments were put under review; likewise subject to review were cases of violations of forestry rights and regulations, and the unilateral seizure of land by collective farmers and individual farmers. The ensuing review of cases resulted in the release from custody of those wrongly convicted "of misappropriating agricultural and collective farm assets".²⁵

On August 3, 1937, all secretaries of district and regional Communist Party committees and the Central Committees of all member soviet socialist republics were sent a directive (signed by Stalin), which reported on the "subversive activities of *enemies of the people* in the agricultural economy, whose activities were aimed at undermining the collective farms and arousing dissatisfaction with the Soviet government among collective farmers, through abuse of the system and thereby making a mockery of it." This directive noted, in particular, that local leaderships were mistaken in thinking that the elimination of sabotage might be carried out only by the secret procedures of a range of NKVD organs, and that farmers need not be mobilized to combat sabotage. In accordance with this directive, it was incumbent upon each district to organise two to three show trials against enemies of the people, parasites, who had infiltrated the district organs of the Party, and government and land agencies.²⁶ Those found guilty were to be sentenced to death. Stalin emphasised that sabotage was destroying the collective farm economy and inciting farmers against the Soviet regime.

Regional show trials became an integral part of the mass operations of 1937-1938,²⁷ creating a political climate of fear and hysteria on the ground.

In early December 1937, with the implementation of the resolution of the Central Committee and the Belarusian Council of People's Commissars of August 2, 1937, a sharp increase in collective farm membership was

24 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 11033. L. 343.

25 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 21. D. 1719. L. 3.

26 *Lubyanka: Sialin I Glavnoe upravlenie gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti NKVD: Arkhiv Stalina: Dokumenty vyschikh organov partiinoi I gosudarstvennoi vlasti 1937-1938*, (Moscow, 2004), 298.

27 Most of the show trials held in the regions took place in a relatively short period – between autumn 1937 and winter 1938, which chronologically coincided with the peak of operations conducted by Order No. 00447, which officially began on August 5, the main victims of which were the peasants. In this Belarusian operation, 24,209 people were convicted, of whom 6,869 were sentenced to death; Marc Junge, Genadij A. Bordyugov, and Rolf Binner, *Vertikal' bol'shogo terror* (Moscow, 2008), 522.

reported in Belarus, as enemies of collective farms were unmasked at public meetings.²⁸

However, the district show trials were not limited to collective farms and district leaderships. On September 10, 1937, Stalin's and Molotov's directive landed on the doormats of local authorities stating that "each district and each region should hold between two and three show trials of parasites so as to protect the harvest" with those accused being sentenced to death.²⁹ On October 2, Stalin and Molotov adopted a directive "on sabotage and show trials in the field of animal husbandry". It put forward the demand to "organise in each republic, district and region, three to six open show trials involving peasant masses with wide coverage in the popular press."³⁰

The script of the "Lepel case" served as the basis of the show trials, but the script was now revised in accordance with the requirements of the day.

In the course of the campaign and during the trials themselves, a huge amount of evidence of violence against the peasantry was collected: confiscation to the point of complete destruction, the use of physical intimidation (beatings, torture, hanging by the legs from the ceiling), the use of weapons, night raids, etc. But now, in another serious accusation against the local authorities, came the resolution of August 2, which they had ignored, being that they had disregarded the allocation of land to the peasants.

Local leaders knew that the individual peasant with his own plot of land (who by force of habit was still called a kulak) had no place in the new society. They were also aware that the percentage of collectivisation was growing not only due to individual farmers joining the collective farms, but also because of the reduction of the overall number of private farmers as a whole. This meant that all methods were now deemed acceptable.

Here is a fairly typical description of how the campaign was carried out: "The seizure of the assets and property of individual farmers was akin to the utter destruction and annihilation of their farms. Prior to all this, no inventories of the assets or property of individual farmers had been drawn up; without any rulings or decisions on the part of the village councils, they literally seized the properties of individual farmers in their entirety, their movables, buildings, livestock, feedstuff, agricultural equipment, tools, clothing, footwear, domestic inventory, linen. In some cases, individual farmers had their shoes forcibly removed and their shirts torn off their backs and taken away; likewise, the doors of their houses were taken off their hinges and taken away, fence posts were cut down and fences smashed ... The smashed

28 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 11033. L. 344.

29 *Tragediya sovetskoj derevni*, 452.

30 *Tragediya sovetskoj derevni*, 486.

pieces of buildings, usually without being sold or paid for, were transported to the yard of a collective farm where they disappeared in a matter of seconds, at the hands of all who were willing to grab a piece; cattle were transferred to collective farms without compensation, and clothing and food supplies were in part stolen and in part, without any acknowledgement or thought of the inventory, seized and transferred to cooperatives and sold off to anyone who wished to have them."³¹

All the accused, as evidenced by the available case materials, were indeed guilty of the charges laid against them. Moreover, the facts appearing in the materials demonstrate outstanding adroitness in escalating violence in the countryside. Out in the villages, regional Soviet agriculture and collective farm leaders behaved like an army of occupation in hostile territory.

Thus, the "Berezinsk case" illustrated, for example, that the failure of the collective farmer Trofim Filichenok to fulfil the requirement of the chairman of the village council (soviet) to sell to the state over three quintals of grain over and above the previous delivery quotas, and payments that had already been made, led to the utter ruin of Filichenok's property. A group of village council workers appeared at night at his property, broke all the locks, and ransacked all the buildings. Without any grounds for so doing, they confiscated 40 kg of flax fibre, 8 kg of hemp, cow hides, 3 bags of grain, 1½ pounds of clover seed. Filichenok's wife was beaten as she attempted to protect the contents of a chest. As a result of the incident, taxes amounting to a further 900 roubles were imposed upon the Filichenok farm with the demand that they be paid within 24 hours. On the same night, a similar seizure of property took place at the abode of the collective farmer Timofei Nekhai. Severe beatings of collective farmers took place and the female collective farmer Podolyako Evdokiya was beaten by the collective farm chairman with such force that she "fell ill with lung disease". The secretary of the village council, Dmitrov Nikolai, and a member of the village council, Slabko Nikifor, brutally beat Stepan Zhukovsky, an individual farmer, until he was covered in blood because he refused to go with them to the village council. The chairman of the village council, Shishenok, decided to help himself to a horse while at the homestead of the individual farmer Markevich for no reason. At the time, the horse was carrying firewood. Attempts to protect his property ended when Shishenok struck Markevich on the head with an axe and took his horse.³² At the end of 1935, the head of the district NKVD department, Fedorovich, arrived in the village of Belavichi together with five or six Red Army soldiers armed with rifles to eliminate the failure in harvest-

31 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 21. D. 1053. L. 6-10.

32 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 13232. L. 19-22.

ing flax. He ordered all individual farmers to convene. But not a single man came to the meeting and, out of fear, they hid in the woods. Threats and insults were then directed at their wives.³³

The number of examples extended and continued throughout these and all other areas.

In the course of their investigations and trials, former leaders, now the accused (who were not “broken” by months of brutal interrogation), usually chose the same line of defence: without denying the crimes of which they were accused (abuse of power, brutality, extortion), they refused to admit that they acted with counter-revolutionary intent³⁴ and blamed their immediate superiors (“who had forced them to act in this manner”) or that they were misguided perpetrators (“who misunderstood their tasks and overdid matters in attempts to implement them”). And so, even if the accused pleaded guilty to some specific charges, they denied hostile collusion, resorting to beatings and threatening to use weapons.

Now, however, such behaviour of representatives of the district, Soviet administrative and collective farm authorities qualified as actions commissioned on the instructions of saboteurs, traitors and Polish spies to disrupt the organisational and economic consolidation of the collective farms, to foster bitterness among collective and individual peasants against the Soviet regime.

Since in the course of investigations and trials the prevailing view was that the district leaders were enemies, spies and traitors, the logical verdicts in such matters, in accordance with the Criminal Code at the time, was the imposition of the ultimate penalty, namely execution (as, incidentally, also recommended by Comrade Stalin in his decision of August 3, that two or three accused people should be executed in each area).

The “Lepel case” acquired fresh status when, in September 1937, the NKVD “uncovered” and arrested “a whole array of spies and saboteurs” in that district, among them the Head of the Lepel district NKVD department, Ermolaev. Also “it was established” that the Lepel trial, which took place in 1937, was not the result of negligence on the part of the former leaders of the area, a charge on which they were tried, but rather the result of a right-wing, anti-Soviet sabotage organisation in Belarus.³⁵ Participants in the affair were exposed, most notably the Secretary of the Regional Executive Committee, Semashko, and sentenced to death.³⁶

33 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 13232. L. 28-9.

34 Werth, *Provintsial'nye pokazatel'nye protsessy v SSSR*, 141.

35 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 21. D. 1410. L. 57.

36 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 21. D. 1410. L. 57

Whole tiers of regional organisations were liquidated in the course of the campaign: in Belynichi and Rudensk, all members of the district authorities were expelled from the Party and arrested on the authority of Central Committee representatives; whole district committees were locked up with the keys being handed over to the district NKVD authorities. The same thing happened in Liozno, where the key was given to the guard. Immediately after a meeting of Party activists in the town of Bobruisk, the second Secretary of the Belarusian Central Committee, A. Levitsky, and B. Berman of the NKVD, arrested seventeen district officials (including the public prosecutor, the chairman of the District Executive Committee, persons responsible for procurements) in the course of one night.³⁷ In some areas, not only were all members of the Party organisation arrested, but also the regional executive committee – thus, in some districts, Bolshevik and Soviet power and rule were simply eliminated!

Trials and proceedings abounded aplenty in an endless stream, one after another, accompanied by resounding publicity in both the national and local press.

The Belarusian show trials were held in no less than sixteen districts;³⁸ in similar cases different sentences were received by leading figures in at least twenty-five regions of Soviet Belarus; in some areas the entire composition of several leaderships was arrested. In general, in the period 1934-1937, throughout Belarus, more than five hundred village council chairmen and three thousand collective farm chairmen were brought to court.³⁹

The means employed to organise such regional show trials can be deduced from the materials and case files of the Dubrovno district.⁴⁰

In only a matter of days after the arrest of Myshalov, the Secretary of the District Committee, the former deputy prosecutor of Belarus, Zakharin, and the investigator of particularly important cases, Altshuler, arrived in Dubrovno. The two of them had studied the register of party members of the district staff and on that basis selected their nominations for show trials and exemplary punishment. One candidate deemed to be suitable for such treatment was the former commissioner of the Committee for Requisition of Grain, Samulevich. He was born in Poland and had served in the Polish

37 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14689. L. 5-6.

38 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14647. L. 59-79.

39 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 21. D. 1015. L. 136, 144.

40 The National Archives of the Republic of Belarus in the fund of the Special Board of the Supreme Court has only two volumes of the five-volume case relating to the Dubrovno area and a separate case relating to the Secretary of District Committee, Myshalov. There are no materials whatsoever relating to courts of other regions. However, the available data, though limited, are rather representative. (NARB. F. 188. Op. 1. D. 3200 b; D. 3202 a).

army as an ordinary conscript. The fact that he had not worked in this field for more than two years was of no avail.⁴¹ The registration card of Radziwinowicz, Director of the MTS, recorded that he descended “from some hereditary landowner”. Materials were updated at the Bureau of the District Committee; in respect of the check on the MTS, materials that had already been discussed almost a month previously served to let Radziwinowicz off with only a reprimand at the time.⁴²

During the investigations and court proceedings it was found to be an established fact that, during the period 1935-36, a counter-revolutionary band of saboteurs, meaning the above-mentioned Myshalov, Samulevich, Radziwinowicz, and the former District Finance Department manager, Bragin, were found guilty of aiding and abetting such activities; the chairmen of the village councils and collective farms of Drebezava, Orlov, Kirpichenko and Grischenkova were deemed to have been guilty of “counter-revolutionary sabotage aimed at the destruction of collective farms, to create antagonism between collective and individual farmers, to provoke and foment disaffection between Party and working peasantry ranks.”⁴³

The show trial held in the Dubrovno district court lasted from November 28 to December 2, 1937 with sixty three people summoned as witnesses.⁴⁴ On December 1, a rally of workers, employees and tractor drivers of the Dubrovno MTS was held. Those present at the rally “sent a message of rebuke and cursed the enemies of the people who were guilty of sabotage and counter-revolutionary activities in each area of socialist construction” in the district, and demanded that the Special Board of the Supreme Court of the BSSR sentence “vile traitors ... to be shot”; they also undertook to increase productivity, promised “to intensify Bolshevik revolutionary vigilance to even higher levels at every job site, to identify and expose the remnants of counter-revolutionary elements and to eliminate the consequences of sabotage.”⁴⁵ It is clear that these propaganda clichés were the work of a trained hand, of one accustomed to writing such reports. But obviously, the existence of such sentiments cannot be denied.

By verdict of the Special Board of the Supreme Court of the BSSR on December 2, 1937, the following sentences were delivered: the first secretary of the district committee, Solomon Myshalov, and the chairman of the Committee for Requisition of Grain, Joseph Samulevich (both under Article 69 of the Criminal Code of the BSSR – anti-Soviet activity) – death sentences;

41 NARB. F. 188. Op. 1. D. 3202 a. L. 238 -240.

42 NARB. F. 188. Op. 1. D. 3202 a. L. 235-37.

43 NARB. F. 188. Op. 1. D. 3202 a. L. 2.

44 NARB. F. 188. Op. 1. D. 3202 a.

45 NARB. F. 188. Op. 1. D. 3202 a. L. 60.

the Director of the MTS, Nikonor Radziwinowicz, (under Article 69 of the Criminal Code of BSSR) – twenty years imprisonment and disenfranchisement for five years. T. F. Grishchenkov (Article 196.1 of the Criminal Code – Abuse of power) was sentenced to three years in a labour camp without disenfranchisement; N. F. Kirpichenko (Article 197.b – Abuse of power, and Article 196.1 of the Criminal Code of BSSR) – sentenced to five years in a labour camp, with disenfranchisement for three years after serving his sentence; N. N. Bragin on Article 69 of the Criminal Code was acquitted by the court, but on the basis of Article 196.1 of the Criminal Code was sentenced to ten years in a labour camp with disenfranchisement after serving his sentence of five years; the chairmen of village councils Yefim Orlov and E. Drebezov (Under Articles 196.1 and 197 b. of the Criminal Code of the BSSR) were sentenced to ten years in a forced labour camp, each with disenfranchisement after serving his sentence for five years. The verdicts were classified as final and non-appealable.⁴⁶ But they were revised three more times.

Subsequently these purges reached the judiciary and prosecutors themselves, who were accused of the same criminal activities as the district managers, namely, "active anti-Soviet activity, as expressed in the application of mass illegal repressions of workers in town and country"; they had "violated revolutionary legitimacy with the aim of causing disaffection on the part of workers, and simultaneously had also dismissed and halted cases against enemies and saboteurs."⁴⁷ Their links with the Trotskyists and Polish Intelligence were "established". In a period of three months, district committees and organs of the NKVD "exposed as enemies of the people together with those associated with them" eleven district public prosecutors and twelve judges. The cases of Glezerov and Silverstov as well as of Kudelsky and Sukhanov were transferred to the NKVD. This begs the question as to whether there is a need to check all the personnel selected by them.⁴⁸

III.

The carnival of district show trials⁴⁹ was in full swing, but suddenly the January Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU (1938) raised the

46 NARB. F. 188. Op. 1. D. 3202 a. L. 145.

47 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 21. D. 1389. L. 304.

48 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 21. D. 1015. L. 136, 144.

49 These trials were described as a carnival by Sheila Fitzpatrick, see Fitzpatrick, 'How the mice buried the cat'; Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*; however, numerous researchers do not agree with such an analysis, for example, Ellman, 'The Soviet 1937 Provincial Show Trials: Carnival or Terror?', 1121-233.

question of the dangers of such trials. A review of cases began; sentences were reduced and some trials, as prosecutor Novik noted, “those who were of importance”, were altogether aborted.⁵⁰

In November 1938, after the resolution of the Belarusian Council of People’s Commissars and the Central Committee of the CPSU “On the arrests, the prosecutor’s supervision and conduct of the investigation”, which actually meant curtailing massive repressive actions, the problem was reformulated. The “Conclusions of the Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of the BSSR on the acceptance and transfer of cases to the Prosecutor’s Office of the BSSR” (1939) stated as follows: “The Prosecutor’s Office of the BSSR adopted the provocative practice of instigating a number of cases against leading Party and local *soviet* (council) workers, who were arrested without justification and accused of counter-revolutionary crimes.”⁵¹ The apparatus of both the Prosecutor’s Office and the Supreme Court as well as the entire vertical chain of judicial and prosecution authorities were required, in accordance with this resolution, to engage in an immediate purge of hostile elements.

Otherwise, if initially judges and prosecutors had been involved and were complicit in the “violation of revolutionary legitimacy in order to cause disaffection on the part of working people”, now their colleagues in this profession were accused of “the provocative practice of instigating proceedings against leading Party and local *soviet* workers”. NKVD officers were also accused of making groundless arrests of district leaders.⁵²

On June 18, 1938, P. Ponomarenko was sent in from Moscow to take over as Secretary of the Belarusian Central Committee. On February 7, 1939, he addressed a memorandum to the Central Committee of the CPSU on the work of the Supreme Court and judicial organs of Belarus, which accused the Supreme Court and the Prosecutor’s Office of inaugurating proceedings on a massive scale, on the basis of provocative material against Party and local *soviet* workers. He noted that “often, honest Party and local *soviet* employees were condemned to death and shot for excesses in relation to individual farmers, on the basis of the evidence of individual farmers whose hostile activities were later exposed.”⁵³ Ponomarenko described the Chairman of the Supreme Court of the BSSR, Obushkevich, as guilty of the failure to take steps to eliminate the after-effects of the damage that was wrought thereby, and stated that as a result of the activities of Obushkevich, the Supreme

50 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14774. L.11.

51 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 21. D. 1722. L. 3.

52 The former head of the NKVD Senno Gordeev was sentenced to ten years in a labour camp on May 11, 1939. NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 21. D. 1807. L. 78-86.

53 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14637. L. 175.

Court appeared to be clogged up with hostile and suspect elements.⁵⁴ In addition, Biksan, who worked as his deputy, was arrested; he was a Latvian, a foreigner who, “according to all material evidence, had been exposed as a member of a counter-revolutionary nationalist organisation”.⁵⁵

On July 26, 1939, the Belarusian Central Committee examined the case of the Prosecutor of the Belarusian SSR, S. Novik. Ponomarenko noted that Novik, who had worked alongside B. Berman and A. Nasedkin – former NKVD leaders, who had been unmasked as enemies of the people – was himself also responsible for the provocation and instigation of cases.⁵⁶ But Ponomarenko particularly stressed the harm resulting from the conduct of district show trials: “... surely we should not have held such show trials at a time when we had embarked on establishing discipline in the countryside ... All these show trials merely served to do was to intimidate people, to wipe out swathes of staff from the district organisations, frighten people so that they would no longer work with individual farmers, and they failed to require the fulfilment of state obligations.”⁵⁷

In his defence, Novik made an exceedingly important comment: “The mass arrests were mostly instigated by the military prosecutor’s office, because most arrests in Belarus were made on the basis of Article 68 “For espionage”.⁵⁸ However, the fact that Novik found himself in the service of Berman and Nasedkin was deemed to have been established.⁵⁹

On August 5, 1939, Novik wrote to Ponomarenko that he was not guilty because the majority of criminal cases against the district’s employees after the famous “Lepel case” had been initiated prior to his arrival in Belarus.⁶⁰

In his communications with the Central Committee of the CPSU in Moscow, Ponomarenko reported that the former leadership of the Republic was guilty of a mass cull of the district staff. So, in a report dated June 7, 1939, he wrote that “the so-called regional show trials” were conducted in Belarus on the direct instructions of the Central leadership of the Belarusian Communist Party.⁶¹ In his memorandum of July 3, 1939, Ponomarenko portrayed this process as a shift in the tactics of the enemies of the people in the ranks of the Party and Soviet leaders in Belarus: first, by their policy they sought to engender bitterness among individual farmers and peasants (by impos-

54 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14637. L. 175.

55 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14637. L. 176.

56 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 21. D. 1501. L. 1.

57 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 21. D. 1501. L. 2.

58 NARB. F. 4. Op. 21. D. 1501. L. 31.

59 NARB. F. 4. Op. 21. D. 1501. L. 48.

60 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14774. L. 10.

61 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 21. D. 1522. L. 1, 3, 4.

ing excessive tax burdens, by violating the law, destructive activities, etc.) and after the decision of the Central Committee of the CPSU in respect of the “Lepel case”, they changed tactics and went in the direction of creating privileged conditions for individual peasants in comparison with those of collective farmers (restitution of property, financial compensation, restoration of former land-use boundaries, non-payment of arrears, transport work hire preferences, work in regional enterprises).⁶² This led to the fact that the rural masses, fearing reprisals, generally ceased “to work with individual farmers”.⁶³ According to Ponomarenko, such a calculation was made on the grounds of a call from the ranks of collective farmers favouring the restoration of individual farming. In evidence, he noted that in early 1938, individual farmers consolidated their farmsteads, and the growth in collectivisation had almost come to a halt.⁶⁴

Now Ponomarenko stressed that among those arrested were honest Party members, totally dedicated Party and local council officials whose “errors or failures in the performance of tasks in practice had resulted in charges of sabotage and espionage ...”⁶⁵ Thus, actions that a little earlier had been denounced as “sabotage” were now deemed to be “errors or failures in the performance of tasks” by Ponomarenko.

Then he announced the following figures: twenty-four district party secretaries had been expelled from the Party and removed from their work; thirty-two secretaries of the district committees of the Party had been simply removed from their work with the imposition of various Party penalties; about thirty-five district committee secretaries had been arrested (here he noted that in their vast majority, they had already been fully rehabilitated). Approximately fifty chairmen of district executive committees had been removed from their positions and arrested (the majority had been released and rehabilitated). A significantly greater number of district heads of land and financial departments had been arrested. Those arrested also included agronomists, directors of MTSs, heads of District Agricultural Sections, district commissioners belonging to requisitions committees, scientists, etc.

Authorized members of the Central Committee, Zemtsov, Aksyonov and others, who conducted local raids and organized the campaign, were declared slanderers and provocateurs.⁶⁶

Next, Ponomarenko described the mechanism of “revelations” and “exposure” at meetings of the Bureau of the Central Committee: “Communi-

62 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14689. L. 1.

63 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14689. L. 2.

64 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14689. L. 3.

65 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14689. L. 4.

66 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14689. L. 5.

nists, ... whose guilt was not confirmed in any way, were asked the following questions: How much had they received from (enemy) intelligence? Who recruited them? Who did they recruit? Had they belonged to a counter-revolutionary organisation for a long time?”⁶⁷ He concluded: the enemy infiltrated the NKVD “by hiding behind sensational revelations, had carried out abominable work” – and this had resulted in the persecution of innocent people.⁶⁸

A number of ongoing cases against district leaders were halted⁶⁹ and cases which had already ended were made subject to review.⁷⁰ Actions previously classified as subject to sanctions under Article 69 of the Criminal Code were now reassigned to Articles 196-1 and 197 of the Criminal Code, etc. Death sentences were commuted to imprisonment, and terms of imprisonment were reduced. Thus, on January 17, 1938, the Judicial Review Board of the Supreme Court of the USSR reviewed the cases of the Dubrovno district leadership which resulted in Myshalov’s and Samulevich’s death sentences being commuted to fifteen and ten years’ imprisonment respectively. The case of Radziwinowicz was reviewed on May 15, 1938, and the sentence was reduced from twenty to five years in prison.

On December 14, 1939, following a protest on the part of the Prosecutor of the USSR against the verdict of the Special College of the Supreme Court of the BSSR of December 2, 1937, the case was reviewed by the Judicial Chamber for Criminal Cases of the Supreme Court of the USSR. It was established that those convicted, namely Myshalov, Samulevich and Orlov, had “abused their official positions ... but in fact there was no evidence that Myshalov had committed the aforementioned crimes for counter-revolutionary reasons. Therefore, his actions should come under Article 196-1 of the Criminal Code of BSSR.” The behaviour of Samulevich, Orlov and Radziwinowicz was now explained by reference to the extremely difficult circumstances in which they had to work, and their sentences were deemed to have been extraordinarily excessive.

As a result, their sentences were reduced once more – Myshalov’s to ten years, Samulevich’s and Orlov’s to five years each, and Radziwinowicz’s to three years. Kirpichenko was released on June 25, 1939, ahead of schedule (in accordance with the pronouncement of the Judicial Board adjudicating on criminal cases of the Belarusian Supreme Court on June 14, 1939).⁷¹ He had

67 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14689. L. 6.

68 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14689. L. 6.

69 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 21. D. 1722. L. 3.

70 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14689. L. 3.

71 NARB. F. 188. Op. 1. D. 3202 a.L. 296.

served twenty-two months of his three year sentence.⁷² Bragin (incarcerated in Forced Labour Camp No. 105 for construction workers) was released, after serving his sentence, on October 25, 1940;⁷³ Myshalov was sentenced to a term in Sorokolag further in the Minsk stage of proceedings on August 8, but died on November 28, 1938, never having reached his destination.⁷⁴

In his memorandum to the Central Committee of the CPSU of July 3, 1939, Ponomarenko confirmed what he said regarding the letters of Communists to the Central Committee (without specifying who they were or the subject of their correspondence) that “the former leadership of the Central Committee and its working practices raised serious concerns”, and wrote that he personally had serious misgivings about the former Second Secretary, Levitsky, on the basis of whose orders and those of Berman, Volkov had acted. “Suffice it to say that all cases that were decided by the Central Committee were agreed in advance with the former leadership of the NKVD.”⁷⁵

The “Lepel case” in the broadest sense had once again served its purpose: Ponomarenko had something to indict his Central Committee and NKVD predecessors with. When the wave of purges began to lap at the doors of the NKVD, its employees were also accused of making unnecessary arrests of district leaders and “by using physical force against detainees, had extracted from them fictitious testimonies, and instigated explicitly provocative investigations.”

IV.

It seems that it was a vicious circle: local authorities were accused of hostile activities which they carried out on the instructions and under the control of their superiors in Minsk.

In my opinion, researchers underestimate the following fact: by 1937, the peasantry was still a force to be reckoned with even if collectivization was all but completed. In addition, clandestine religious associations and “kulaks” (wealthy peasant farmers), who had returned from exile, constituted centres of incipient opposition or, at least, the authorities wielded this idea quite intensively during the repressions.

The “Lepel case” that began as a refusal to give the information required in the census of 1937 and which led to a nationwide suppression of local officials carrying out the will of the Party and a complete change of the top

72 NARB. F. 188. Op. 1. D. 3202 a. L. 298.

73 NARB. F. 188. Op. 1. D. 3202 a. L. 318.

74 NARB. F. 188. Op. 1. D. 3202 a. L. 303, 306.

75 NARB. F. 4-p. Op. 1. D. 14689. L. 8.

leadership in Belarus was remembered again some twenty years later. On that occasion, the "Lepel case" became the focus of attention due to Malenkov's role in organising mass repressions in Belarus.

Nicolay M. Shvernik stated in his memorandum addressed to Nikita S. Khrushchev concerning the part played by Malenkov in organising repressions in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic dated May 12, 1958, that on the instructions of the Central Committee of the CPSU, the Committee of Party Control investigated the communications of leading officials of the Belarusian Central Committee on the anti-party activities of Malenkov. In addition it had investigated the facts relating to the destruction of Party and local council cadres in Belarus by Malenkov in 1937, when he was head of the ORPO (the Department of Governing Party Organs, of the Central Committee of the CPSU), and also in subsequent years. He also went on to report: "The fact that Malenkov exploited any negative phenomenon in the life of Belarus to deceive the Party, is clearly evidenced by the so-called 'Lepel case', regarding which, in February 1937, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) established that in the Lepel border area, infringements of the legal rights of collective farmers and individual farmers had come to light as a result of the excesses of the local authorities, and as a consequence of erroneous directives emanating from Narkomfin (the People's Commissariat of Finance), and the Requisitions Committee. These directives were repealed by Politburo decision; farmers were offered assistance, perpetrators were punished for their excesses. However, Malenkov, contrary to the decision of the Politburo, presented the 'Lepel case' as the result of hostile actions of Polish agents, and, on those grounds, carried out mass arrests in all border areas."⁷⁶

Overall, from the moment of Malenkov's and Yakovlev's arrival in Minsk, right up to November 1938, the NKVD arrested almost 55,000 people in Belarus, of whom more than 27,000 were executed.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ *Reabilitatsiya: kak eto bylo*, 312.

⁷⁷ *Reabilitatsiya: kak eto bylo*, 319.