Citizen Manipulation of the Stalinist Purges

The Stalinist Purges in the Soviet Union were a time of political repression, severe censorship, and large-scale persecution that took place from 1934-1938 throughout the First and Second Five-Year Plans.\(^1\) During this time, the constant threat of an omnipresent secret police gave rise to a pervasive cloud of paranoia that hung over the general population. The purges were orchestrated by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin as a means to consolidate power, achieve total state control over society, and quash potential opposition to his authority. This was a response to fears that widespread resentment of the regime in society would fuel former Bolshevik opposition. High profile political opponents such as Lev Kamenev, Gregory Zinoviev, and Nikolai Bukharin, whom he identified as being threatening to his authority, were quickly and systematically exterminated. On a lower level, even common citizens who dared to express any dissatisfaction with Stalin, the Soviet government, or the Communist Party could be tried for sedition and labeled a traitor to the state. Under the purges, Soviet government and secret police repressed dissatisfied peasants, deported ethnic minorities, and made irrational arrests of millions of citizens who were then sent away to prison camps. Stalin justified his actions by labeling these victims *antiysovietskie elementy*, “anti-Soviet elements” and *vragi naroda*, “enemies of the people.”\(^2\)

Meanwhile, ordinary citizens also participated in these campaigns, feeding off each other’s fear and paranoia for personal gains in the form of *donosy*, which can be

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\(^2\) Ibid., 211.
translated as denunciations. These citizens were known as seksot, a shortened form of the Russian term sekretnyi sotrudnik, meaning secret informer. Although the original purpose of the purges was to eliminate opposition through political repression, Soviet citizens participated by turning the purges into a tool to further their self-interests at the expense of others, whether for career advancement, personal agenda, or self-preservation by denunciations.

Soviet citizens used the purges as a tool for career advancement. An example of this can be seen in a letter written in 1930 to the Communist Party by a group of workers in Narkomtorg, who oppose and are jealous of a coworker’s new position as chief engineer in a Kazakh industrial complex. The workers complain that their coworker, Citizen Gar, is incompetent. They denounce his professional qualifications, claiming that he was the leader of a Bolshevik opposition group and relied on opposition party connections to attain the job that he was not professionally qualified for. In the letter they take advantage of the paranoia of the purges by focusing more on his political background than his professional background, detailing his anti-Bolshevik involvement and citing other Bolsheviks who agreed that Citizen Gar did not truly have Bolshevik interests at heart. They use this to appeal to the party, hoping that by casting Gar’s past in a dubious light during the dangerous times of the purges, his reputation would be tainted and his position compromised by their accusations. This would then aid their chances at advancing their own careers, at the expense of their coworker.

In addition to career advancement, citizens used the purges to achieve their personal agendas at the expense of others. One example of this is a letter written under a

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fictional female name, Ponamareva, to the People’s Commissar of the Workers, condemning multiple employees from the company, Narkomfin. It focuses mainly on a woman named Aleksandra Prokofievna Sviderskaia, whom the writer attacks as being a White Guard supporter working in a position that was unfairly given to her by a higher up man of prominence named Korolyov. The letter denounces both of them as adulterers, and accuses them along with several other named affiliates as White Guardists who sabotaged Soviet authority, organized groups against the government, engaged in suspicious business, committed adultery, and took bribes. The letter is written under a fictional name which allows the writer to remain anonymous at the expense of others in order to promote her (or his) own agenda. Additionally, the fictional Ponamareva requests that Narkomfin purge the company of all the named employees. It is quite possible that the letter was an act of revenge by a scorned lover, or a manifestation of ill will between the writer and the employees. In this way citizens used the purges to effect a personal vendetta.

Similarly, letters from Stepan Mukhartov to a major newspaper were written with the purpose of promoting a personal agenda at the expense of another. In the first letter written in April 1936, Mukhartov gives an account of his sister’s unfortunate relationship with an abusive suitor that ended in her demise when she committed suicide. The Mukhartov family and the suitor went to court. The Rzhev People’s Court sentenced suitor Nikolai Rudochenkov to a four-year stay in prison, but the grieving family felt this was an unjust ruling on the behalf of their daughter. Unsatisfied by the outcome of the trial, they wrote their first letter to a local newspaper called “Krest’ianskaia gazeta.”

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4 Fictional writer Ponamareva, Document 36 in ibid, 89–90.
5 Stepan Mukhartov, Document 76, in ibid, 173-5.
Established by the state, the "Krest’ianskaia gazeta" was one of the major newspapers aimed at a peasant audience. As Mary Buckley states in her article “Krest’ianskaia Gazeta and Rural Stakhanovism”, the newspaper held a “crucial political role in liaising with the party, Soviets, ...and NKVD in passing on information for investigation.” Thus ‘Krest’ianskaia gazeta’ came to be seen as responsive to complaints, as initiating actions which could generate outcomes.” In the hopes that the newspaper would investigate the court and notify the proper authorities to mete out punishment, Mukhartov tried to further his personal agenda by writing the letter with a political spin in which he denounces the judge and the investigator as corrupt politicians.

In the second letter written in May 1936, Mukhartov once again asks the newspaper for an investigation of the alleged corruption, further elaborating on the political crimes by painting his sister’s case as a social injustice in which the judicial system misused power against the lower classes. He continues the letter by stating that the local Rzhev People’s Court should be removed from power and punished accordingly in order to restore justice for the lower class. At the expense of Rudochenkov, it can be seen that Mukhartov uses the purges as a tool to promote his personal agenda, which was to avenge what he felt was an unjust ruling regarding the punishment of his sister’s suitor.

The Soviet population also used the purges to further their self-interests at the expense of others by seeking self-preservation through the denunciation of other citizens. In this context, denunciation can be defined as “spontaneous communications from individual citizens to the state containing accusations of wrongdoing by other citizens or

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7 Stepan Mukhartov, Document 77, in ibid, 175-6.
officials and implicitly or explicitly calling for punishment.”8 Citizens reasoned that by denouncing someone, it would not only deflect any state attention from them but also give the patriotic impression of looking out for the interests of the government. By denouncing another individual, a citizen could thus potentially save him/herself from the consequences of the purges. A letter written in 1938 from a boy named L.S. Tsel’merovsky to the Presidium of Supreme Soviet illustrates this practice of denunciation.9 The boy, whose father was exiled for being a malcontent, writes to the Presidium asking for the reinstatement of his Soviet citizenship and rights. He pleads with the Presidium not to deem him guilty just by association, and makes clear that even if his father was a traitor, he was not. He elaborates that he spent most of his life in Leningrad, was educated in a Soviet school, has Soviet spirit, and wants to serve in the Red Army. By writing to the Presidium and denouncing his father, Tsel’merovsky seeks the reinstatement of his own citizenship at the expense of his father.

These examples suggest that often enough Soviet citizens participated in the purges as a way of furthering their self-interests at the expense of others. This could be to advance their own careers, which the group of workers from Narkomtorg accomplished by incriminating their coworker in the hopes of receiving better job positions. Another reason citizens took part in the purges was to push their personal agendas, which were usually motivated by such reasons as jealousy and revenge. This is apparent in the case of the anonymous writer who called for the purging of specific adulterous Narkomfin employees as well as in the case of the grieving Mukhartov family, who felt that the

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judge who ruled in their daughter’s case should be removed from office and punished. Finally, as in the case of Tsel’merovsky’s letter disowning his father, citizens took advantage of the purges by denouncing other citizens for the sake of self-preservation.