

## Nikita Petrov's "Kliukva"<sup>1</sup> – The Prison Murders of Radek and Sokol'nikov

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### Abstract:

Nikolai V. Petrov, a Russian journalist, historian, and officer in the "Memorial" Society, claims that Joseph Stalin had Karl Radek and Grigory Sokol'nikov murdered in prison in 1939. They had been defendants in the January 1937, Moscow Trial. The present article draws upon primary documents from former Soviet archives to show that Petrov is lying. There is no evidence that Stalin connived to have Radek and Sokol'nikov murdered. The article concludes by exposing an abortive plan by the "Memorial" Society to make disagreements with its own anti-Stalin views incompatible with public employment. This exposes "Memorial" as an anticommunist organization that uses human rights work as a cover.

### Introduction

Nikita Vasil'evich Petrov is the author of books on the history of the USSR during the Stalin period. Petrov is a prominent figure in public discourse about the Stalin years and about the USSR generally. The organization that employs him, the "Memorial" society, has published or aided in the publication of volumes of documents from former Soviet archives. Petrov's work (with German historian Mark Jansen) on the career of Nikolai Yezhov, People's Commissar of the NKVD during the bloody "Great Terror," or Yezhovshchina, of massive extralegal executions in the USSR in 1937-1938, is of value as a source of quotations from primary documents that remain inaccessible. His works on the GULAG and his two biographical dictionaries on NKVD employees are also useful.

But Petrov's own interpretations of documents and his assertions generally show a profound and uninterrogated anticommunist bias. Petrov lacks any dedication to objectivity, an essential prerequisite for good historiography. This is true of the article under discussion here.

In early 2012 Petrov published a book titled *Executioners. They Carried Out Stalin's Orders* ("Palachi. Oni vypolniali zakazy Stalina"). It was published by *Novaya Gazeta*, the thrice-weekly newspaper which has frequently featured Petrov's articles. The subject of the present study is one of the chapters of this book titled "Stalinist Order: How Sokol'nikov and Radek Were

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<sup>1</sup> "Kloiukva" means "cranberry" or "tall tale."

Murdered.”<sup>2</sup> This chapter is the same as the text of an article in *Novaya Gazeta* on May 6, 2008,<sup>3</sup> with two additional paragraphs and some brief biographical sketches of NKVD men.

I have chosen to examine the specific article in question because it is one whose sources can be checked. In this case we are not left to either “believe” or “disbelieve” Petrov. Thanks to published documents from former Soviet archives, it is possible for any careful reader to see that Petrov’s article is grossly falsified.

### Dramatis Personae

A prominent Bolshevik, during the 1930s Karl Radek was a clandestine oppositionist and supporter of Leon Trotsky. In 1936 Radek decided that he could no longer support Trotsky’s conspiracy with Nazi Germany against the USSR. He claimed he was on the point of denouncing Trotsky’s conspiracy but was arrested before he could do so.

Grigory Sokol’nikov, also a prominent Party member and oppositionist, participated in the anti-Stalin conspiracy. Both Radek and Sokol’nikov were on the secondary, or “parallel” leadership of the conspiracy and were sentenced to prison terms at the January 1937 Moscow Trial.

Ivan Serov headed the KGB (Committee for State Security, formerly the NKVD) under Nikita Khrushchev from 1954 to 1958. Lobov and Ovchinnikov were officers in the NKVD in the 1930s.

Nikita Khrushchev was First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) from September 1953 until October 1964. Khrushchev organized a broad attack on Joseph Stalin accusing him of a great many serious crimes. Khrushchev’s motive was probably to legitimate his sharp political disagreements with Stalin-era CPSU policies.

No evidence has been produced to prove Khrushchev’s accusations against Stalin. Many have been refuted. Yet Khrushchev-era allegations of crimes by Stalin are still accepted as truthful by anticommunist scholars like Petrov and in the popular and semi-popular media.

Early in his article Petrov makes the following statement:

It has been **irrefutably proven** that Stalin was personally behind the murders.

“Irrefutably proven” is a bold claim. It virtually dares the reader to try to verify Petrov’s thesis that Stalin was personally responsible for Radek’s and Sokol’nikov’s murders. The present article does precisely that. It shows that Petrov’s claim is false by checking the assertions he makes in this article against primary sources now available. Doing so enables us to affirm that Petrov has deliberately misled – lied to – his readers.

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<sup>2</sup> Radek and Sokol’nikov were defendants in the Second Moscow Trial of January 1937. Both were sentenced to imprisonment.

<sup>3</sup> “Stalinskii zakaz. Kak ubivali Sokol’nikova i Radeka.” (“Сталинский заказ. Как убивали Сокольников и Радика.”) At <https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2008/06/05/37790-stalinskiy-zakaz-kak-ubivali-sokolnikova-i-radeka> Accessed 05.29.2023.

Petrov's article ends by reprinting the relevant part of a report by General Ivan Serov, at the time the chief of the KGB.<sup>4</sup> We begin our study by examining Serov's statements in light of evidence now available. This section is followed by a close examination of Petrov's own claims. At the end we draw some basic conclusions about Petrov, his employer the "Memorial" society, the politicized nature of the study of Soviet history, and the need for historical objectivity.

### **Serov's lies**

Serov's report dated June 29, 1956, is comprised of twelve paragraphs. We begin by discussing the assertions in each paragraph. Next we examine in depth those claims of Serov's concerning which we now have independent evidence.

### **Overview of Petrov's essay**

Serov cites no evidence to support his fact-claims. He claims that "[d]ocuments in the KGB archive suggest. . . ." We note that Serov doesn't claim that the "documents" prove anything, but merely "suggest. . . ." Serov cannot prove Lavrentii Beria and Bogdan Kobulov planned to murder Radek and Sokol'nikov. Neither can Petrov, as we shall see.

Second to sixth paragraphs: Petrov gives no evidence to support Serov's claims about Kubatkin and Sharok or about Sokol'nikov's murder. Serov claimed that Sokol'nikov was murdered by a fellow prisoner named P.M. Kotov but cites no evidence that Kotov was really Lobov. We evidently have a quotation from a transcript of an interrogation of Kotov, relating how he argued with and then killed Sokol'nikov. No evidence is cited of the involvement of Kubatkin, as Serov alleged.

In the seventh paragraph we evidently have a quotation from the report of Radek's death at the hands of a Trotskyite named Varezchnikov. Serov does not claim Varezchnikov was really "Stepanov." Serov cites no evidence that Arnol'd or Stroilov, defendants in the second Moscow Trial of January, 1937, ever "renounced their confessions." Serov also lies about the shootings at the Orlov prison in September 1941. We examine these claims below.

The concluding paragraphs concern former NKVD man Ovchinnikov. We study them in detail below in light of primary sources now available.

### **Ovchinnikov**

Serov wrote:

The fate of the former chief of the Prokop'evsk town section of the NKVD Ovchinnikov, with whom Arnol'd was in touch, is of some interest in this regard.

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<sup>4</sup> "Iz Spravki Predsedatelia KGB pri SM SSSR I.A. Serova." («Из Справки Председателя КГБ при ЦМ СССР И.А. Серова»), *Palachi* 50-53. Also published in N. Petrov, *Pervyi predsedatel' KGB Ivan Serov*. Moscow: "Materik" 2006, 313-315.

In December 1940 Ovchinnikov was sentenced by the Military Tribunal of the Western Siberian District to 10 years imprisonment. While in custody he told his fellow inmates about the falsification of the case against Arnold and announced his intention to write a statement about this.

On March 24, 1941, without any additional evidence, Ovchinnikov's case was reviewed and he was sentenced to death by shooting by the Military Tribunal.

We now have several primary source documents concerning Ovchinnikov. They permit us to determine that Serov is lying here.

- A. The report of the trial and death sentence of Ovchinnikov, dated March 24, 1941.<sup>5</sup>
- B. A brief review of his case dated December 19, 1955.<sup>6</sup>
- C. A review of Ovchinnikov's case dated January 6, 1956. This is almost certainly the review available to Serov himself.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, we have:

- D. A memoir about Ovchinnikov's crimes from one of his victims, L.I. Medvedeva, written down in May 1989 in Tomsk.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, we have a statement about Ovchinnikov in the work of two highly anticommunist and anti-Stalin researchers, Marc Junge and Rolf Binner, in their work *Kak Terror Stal 'Bol'shim'* ("How the Terror Became 'Great'").<sup>9</sup> Junge and Binner cite repression statistics from Tomsk, where Ovchinnikov was chief of the NKVD in 1937-1938, to demonstrate the massive illegal repression and murders of which Ovchinnikov was guilty and for which he was tried and executed after Beria took over as People's Commissar of the NKVD.

As Serov reported, Ovchinnikov was tried and convicted on December 2, 1940, and sentenced to 10 years (Doc. B.). Serov may have taken them from this very document, as the date and sentence are not given in Doc. A.

Document A. gives the fullest details about Ovchinnikov. Among his crimes as chief of the Tomsk city NKVD he had been convicted of many instances of torture, forcing false confessions, false arrests, false imprisonment, and falsifying evidence leading to death sentences against innocent people.

Document A. relates the fact that Ovchinnikov was sentenced under article 193-17 b. of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR – "abuse of his official position under exceptionally aggravating

<sup>5</sup> "Kopia prigovora v otnoshenii I.V. Ovchinnikova." *Bol' liudskaia. Kniga pamiati repressirovannykh tolichei*. Tomsk: Izdatel'stvo tomskovo universiteta, 1999, 150-152.

<sup>6</sup> In A.V. Bol'shakova ed., *1935-1937 gg. Koveier NKVD. Iz khronika 'bol'shogo terrora' na Tomskoi zemle. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov*. Tomsk – Moscow: Volodei, 2004, \, 358.

<sup>7</sup> Bol'shakova, ed., 359-360.

<sup>8</sup> "Iz vospominanii byvshei zakliuchennoi I.I. Medvedevoi o nachal'nike Tomskovo gorotdela NKVD I. Ovchinnikova." Bol'shakova ed., 386-389.

<sup>9</sup> Moscow: Airo-XX, 2003, 36.

circumstances,”<sup>10</sup> which permitted imposition of the death sentence. Ovchinnikov was sentenced to death on March 24, 1941 and shot on May 19, 1941.

The review of Ovchinnikov’s case dated January 6, 1956, details his connection with Arnol’d and Shestov (another defendant in the Second Moscow Trial), and repeats the summary of his crimes. It adds that he engaged in “anti-Soviet agitation among the other prisoners” while awaiting trial. The review document states that Ovchinnikov had confessed his guilt “in part” but that the court also possessed witness and documentary evidence against him.

According to Document B., dated three weeks before Document C., Ovchinnikov was sentenced on December 2, 1940, to 10 years in a correctional camp and again on March 19-24, 1941, to death. This review makes it clear why there were two trials. In the first Ovchinnikov was convicted under article 58-10 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR, while on March 19-24 1941 he was convicted under article 193-17 b. Article 58-10 dealt with “espionage,” including giving or gathering state secrets to other governments, counterrevolutionary organizations, or private persons. Unless it entailed exceptionally serious consequences for the state, it required a sentence “not less than three years.”<sup>11</sup>

So Ovchinnikov was tried twice for different offenses and was executed after his second conviction. Documents A. and C. mention only the latter, death sentence. This disproves Serov’s statement that

In December 1940 Ovchinnikov was sentenced by the Military Tribunal of the Western Siberian District to 10 years imprisonment. ... On March 24, 1941, **without any additional materials** [i.e., evidence], Ovchinnikov’s case was reviewed and he was sentenced to death by shooting by the Military Tribunal. [Emphasis added, GF]

Serov claims that the second trial was not in fact a trial at all but simply a “review” to punish Ovchinnikov for threatening “to write a statement” about the fact that the case against Arnol’d was supposedly “a falsification.” This is false, as we have seen. Documents B. and C. make it clear that the March 1941 court action was not a “review” but a new trial, and that “additional evidence” was indeed brought forward for the new charge.

The NKVD-KGB information about Ovchinnikov’s atrocities is independently corroborated by Document D., Medvedeva’s account of 1989 written during the Gorbachev years, when the search was on for “horrors” carried out during Stalin’s time, and published in Tomsk itself in 2004. No one at either time had any motive to disprove any Khrushchev-era attack on Stalin – quite the contrary.

We include Medvedeva’s account here for the sake of completeness. By itself, without any corroboration, it might be considered unreliable given the passage of more than fifty years between

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<sup>10</sup> “Zloupotreblenie sluzhebnyum polozheniem pri osobo otiagchaiushchikh obstoiatelst’vakh.” (“Злоупотребление служебным положением при особо отягчающих обстоятельствах”).

<sup>11</sup> Article 58 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR, 1926 version, at [http://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Статья\\_58\\_Уголовного\\_Кодекса\\_РСФСР/вариант\\_1926\\_года](http://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Статья_58_Уголовного_Кодекса_РСФСР/вариант_1926_года).

the events described and the writing of her memoir. But it is consistent with the information from the official documents we have about Ovchinnikov.

Junge and Binner have this to say about Ovchinnikov.

To how high a degree the operation according to order No. 00447 marks a boundary in the history of the catastrophic year 1937 is shown by the following arrest statistics and sentences in Tomsk and its region, where the chief of the NKVD was I.V. Ovchinnikov, one of the most brutal security officers during the Great Terror.<sup>12</sup>

Is it credible that a person like Ovchinnikov would have threatened to write a report about a falsified case? He himself had falsified many cases, causing the imprisonment and deaths of many innocent persons. This was the conclusion not only of the NKVD tribunal in 1941, but of the KGB review of January 1956.

The conclusion is inescapable: Serov was lying. Ovchinnikov was executed after a second trial on additional charges. It is simply not credible that he would have complained about false charges against Arnol'd.

Serov unquestionably had access to the 1941, 1955 and 1956 documents and more. Therefore, Serov deliberately lied about the Ovchinnikov – Arnol'd situation. There is also no reason to credit Serov's claim that Arnol'd had retracted his confession. We will see this confirmed again when we discuss below the Orlov Prison executions of September 1941.

### **Kubatkin's and Sharok's careers**

Neither Kubatkin nor Sharok “had worked up to this time as ordinary employees of the NKVD apparatus,” as Serov claimed. We have our evidence for this from Nikita Petrov's own two books on the NKVD: *Kto rukovodil NKVD 1934-1941. Spravochnik* (Moscow: “Memorial” Association, 1999 (Petrov 1999));<sup>13</sup> and *Kto rukovodil organami gosbezopasnosti 1941-1954. Spravochnik*. Moscow: “Memorial,” 2010 (Petrov 2010).

Kubatkin is listed in the earlier volume. According to the account in Petrov's own book, by 1939 Kubatkin was a rising star in the NKVD. He had not been a *riadovoi*, a rank-and-file officer of the NKVD, since 1930. In May 1939 he had already been assistant to the chief of the special division of the Odessa oblast' division of the GPU<sup>14</sup> (1934-5); chief of the Frunze *raion* division of the NKVD (Odessa oblast'); chief of the UGB<sup>15</sup> of the UNKVD<sup>16</sup> of Odessa oblast' (1936 - March 1937); student at the central school of the NKVD of the USSR from March to August 15, 1937; chief of the 1st section of the 4th division of the GUGB<sup>17</sup> NKVD USSR after August 15, 1937; chief of the section of the 4th division of the GUGB of the 1st directorate of the

<sup>12</sup> Mark IUnge, Rol'f Binner. *Kak terror stal 'bol'shim'... Sekretnyi prikaz No. 00447 i tekhnologia ego ispolnenii*. Moscow: AIRO-20, 2003, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> Available online on the “Memorial” site at <http://www.memo.ru/history/NKVD/kto/index.htm>

<sup>14</sup> State Political Directorate, under the Peoples Commissariat of Internal Affairs, the NKVD.

<sup>15</sup> Directorate of State Security.

<sup>16</sup> Local Directorate of the NKVD.

<sup>17</sup> Main Directorate of State Security.

NKVD of the USSR 1938-1939; and secretary of the party committee of the GUGB of the NKVD of the USSR from 1939 until June 1939.<sup>18</sup>

A short career biography of Sharok is given in the second of Petrov's volumes on NKVD personnel. Sharok was not an "ordinary employee of the NKVD apparatus" either. At the time of Sokol'nikov's and Radek's murders Sharok was assistant chief of the 1st division of the 2nd section of the GUGB of the NKVD of the USSR (November 1938 to October 5, 1939).<sup>19</sup>

Kubatkin and Sharok received promotions during 1939: Kubatkin to chief of the directorate of the NKVD of Moscow oblast' in June 1939; Sharok to assistant commissar of the NKVD of the Kazakh SSR (Republic) on October 5, 1939. There is no indication that these promotions had anything to do with the murders of Sokol'nikov and Radek. Moreover, strictly speaking, Serov did not in fact claim that they had. Serov wrote only that "shortly after" the murders ("вскоре после этого") they were given new appointments. But this is not true either. Sharok's promotion in October 1939 cannot be described as "shortly after" the murders. And if these promotions were related, why did Sharok's come four months after Kubatkin's?

We know Serov was lying when he described Kubatkin and Sharok as "ordinary employees of the NKVD." Serov's report presents no evidence for any of his other assertions about this supposed "plan."

### **The Orlov prison executions of 1941**

In his report Serov wrote:

Others convicted in this same case – Stroilov and Arnol'd – who had also renounced their confessions, were held in the Orlov NKVD prison until the autumn of 1941. On September 11, 1941, they were sentenced in absentia by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR, without any basis at all, and were shot together with a number of other prisoners.

Arnol'd and Stroilov were not singled out at all, much less for supposedly "renouncing their confessions." They were among 170 prisoners previously convicted of serious crimes who were shot on September 11, 1941, at the Orlov prison for continuing anti-Soviet activity as the German armies advanced. We know this was the charge from the documents published in an official Gorbachev-era Communist Party journal in 1990.<sup>20</sup>

Beria, commissar of the NKVD, had been informed by the heads of the directorate of prisons, Bashtakov and Nikol'skii, that at least 76 of the prisoners were carrying out anti-Soviet agitation and planning to escape, with the advance of German troops (Orel was occupied by the Germans on October 3, 1941). On September 8, 1941, the Plenum of the Soviet Supreme Court

<sup>18</sup> Kubatkin, Piotr Nikolaevich. At <http://www.memo.ru/history/NKVD/kto/biogr/gb261.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Sharok, Grigori Fiodorovich. In Petrov 2010, 919-920.

<sup>20</sup> "Tragediia v medvedevskom lesu. O rasstrele politzakliuchennykh Orlovskoi tiur'my." ("The tragedy in the Medvedevsk woods. The shooting of political prisoners of the Orlov prison.") *Izvestiia TsK KPSS* No. 11, 1990, pp. 124-131.

met, reconsidered Arnol'd's case in which he was charged under Article 58-10 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR (he had originally been convicted of violating Articles 58-8 and 58-11 and received a sentence of ten years), and resented him to be executed.

We know that subversive activities were in fact going on in the Orlov prison. Dr. D.D. Pletnev, sentenced to 25 years imprisonment at the Third Moscow Trial of March 1938, mentioned those activities in a letter, one portion of which has been published. On January 15, 1941, in a letter to Voroshilov, Pletnev complained about his prison conditions and stated:

I am growing numb from the cold and the lies that surround me, among pygmies and worms who are carrying on their subversive work.<sup>21</sup>

The final sentence in this letter fragment of Pletnev's confirms in part Beria's allegation of later that same year – that some prisoners in the Orlov Prison were engaging in “subversive” activity.

The 1990 article confirms that Arnol'd was convicted in absentia on September 8, 1941, along with the others. It proves that there was a legal basis for their re-sentencing to death – their subversive activity – and that Arnol'd and Stroilov were not executed for “retracting their confessions” or, indeed, for anything related to their trial. Other Moscow Trial defendants were among those executed at the same time.<sup>22</sup>

Serov cites no evidence that Arnol'd or Stroilov had renounced their trial confessions, and Petrov did not find any.

### **Serov's lies during Khrushchev's time**

Matthew Lenoe gained access to many documents related to the investigation of the Kirov assassination and the Khrushchev-era attempt to blame it all on Stalin. According to Lenoe:

. . . the Khrushchev supporters in charge of the investigation, including KGB chief Ivan Serov, sought to collect as much material as possible incriminating Stalin. This is what Khrushchev wanted, so that he could discredit his political rivals...

The 1960-1961 investigation run by the Party Control Commission (KPK) was aimed explicitly at inculpating Stalin in the Kirov murder. (7-8)

Lenoe reveals that Serov destroyed some evidence and withheld other evidence in order to construct a false scenario of Kirov's murder (591-2):

If the official charges in the first two trials – that former Zinoviev supporters / 592 / had conspired to murder Kirov – were entirely bogus, then the indictments in all of the succeeding show trials collapsed. . . . But if there was some truth to the charge that Zinovievites conspired to kill Kirov, then that preserved the possibility of arguing that the latter charges were also valid, at least in part. Therefore, Serov and

<sup>21</sup> *Izvestiia TsK KPSS* No. 1, 1989, p. 119, col. 2.

<sup>22</sup> These include S.A. Bessonov and Kh. G. Rakovsky (3<sup>rd</sup> Moscow Trial).

Rudenko...chose to make a clear-cut argument that Nikolaev had had no relationship at all with the ex-Zinoviev supporters convicted in the trial of the "Leningrad Center."

It appears that Serov or his boss had thought through this strategy, to deny any connection at all between Nikolaev [the assassin of Kirov – GF] and the Zinovievites, even before the "Secret Speech." On January 27, 1956 the KGB destroyed central records on the case file "Svoiak," the all-union surveillance operation against the Zinovievites. It seems likely that "Svoiak" contained more evidence than Serov wanted Molotov to see, either of counterrevolutionary talk among former Zinovievites and/or of Nikolaev's connections with the accused in the "Leningrad Center." Serov concealed other evidence of connections between Nikolaev and the ex-Zinovievites Kotolynov, Antonov, and Shatsky. The excerpts from Nikolaev's diaries that he released to the Molotov commission in April 1956 contained no references to these men. But we know from later releases of data that Nikolaev did mention all three in his diaries. Serov presumably feared that Molotov would construe such connections as evidence of criminal conspiracy.

At the same time the Molotov commission was debating these issues, Rudenko, Serov, and KPK officials were already taking actions based on the assumption that the charges in the show trials were false....

Serov's report (595-599) is full of outright lies. We will cite only a few of them here. Serov:

On March 13, 1938 the Military Collegium...found Bukharin, Rykov, Yagoda, and other accused...guilty in carrying out the villainous murder of S.M. Kirov....

This statement of Serov's is a lie. The court's verdict says nothing of the kind. Bukharin and Rykov were convicted of entirely different crimes. Iagoda was convicted only of "giving special instructions to his accomplices working in the Leningrad Administration of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs not to hinder the perpetration of the crime."<sup>23</sup>

Serov claimed:

Yagoda in essence recanted his earlier testimony with regard to the participation of the Rightists in the murder of Kirov... Rykov and Bukharin, who supposedly made the decision to carry out this terrorist act, ... categorically denied.... (Lenoe 598)

This is false, as Serov had to know. Iagoda did not deny but rather confirmed the role of the Rights in Kirov's murder. Anyone who reads the trial transcript can see that Iagoda only denied that he himself had played any active role in, or had specific prior knowledge of, the plot to kill Kirov. Iagoda did insist, however, that he had given instructions to his subordinates not to hinder any such attempt as might be made. That is, Iagoda denied he was an accomplice to the murder, but agreed

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<sup>23</sup> *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet "Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites" Heard Before the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the U.S.S.R. Moscow, March 2-13, 1938...Verbatim Report.* Moscow: People's Commissariat of Justice of the U.S.S.R., 1938, pp. 796-7.

that he was an accessory. During the trial Prosecutor Vyshinskii and Iagoda argued at some length over precisely this issue.<sup>24</sup> As for Rykov and Bukharin, neither of them was charged with making the decision to kill Kirov.<sup>25</sup>

### Lobov lied

Serov's report on the Radek-Sokol'nikov murders states that P.M. Lobov was one of the participants. However, neither Serov nor Petrov offer any direct testimony by Lobov to this effect. Even if they had done so, however, that testimony could not be accepted, for Lenoe establishes that Lobov lied during the 1950s and 1960s – no doubt because Serov insisted he do so.

According to Lenoe, in 1956 Lobov's testimony was in accord with the conclusions of the March 1938 Moscow Trial. But by 1960 Lobov was giving false testimony that supported Party Control Commission member Ol'ga Shatunovskaia's preconceived idea that Stalin had been behind Kirov's murder:

Another witness deployed by Klimov was P. M. Lobov, who had murdered Grigory Sokolnikov in 1939 for Beria.<sup>26</sup> Lobov's post-Stalin testimony showed extensive embellishment and grew more florid over time. Thus, in 1956 he testified that at the Kolyma labor camp Zaporozhets had told him that Nikolaev had been taken into custody once and that Yagoda had ordered him freed.... In 1960 Lobov went much farther, stating that he had personally interrogated Nikolaev, who intimated that he had high-level connections. He also claimed that at Kolyma Zaporozhets had told him that Stalin himself had ordered Nikolaev's release. This was precisely the smoking gun that Shatunovskaya and the other investigators needed to accuse Stalin of Kirov's murder. **Lobov delivered this evidence, which he had not mentioned in 1956, very conveniently for the KPK [Party Control Commission] in October 1960.** (622-3; emphasis added, GF)

Lenoe concludes that Lobov's testimony is unreliable:

Against this is the unanimous testimony of credible Leningrad NKVD officers who survived the Terror (credible meaning minus P.M. Lobov and P.P. Petrovsky)<sup>27</sup>....

### Serov's report: conclusion

Serov's report is a falsification. We can confidently assert that because every statement in it that can be verified, when cross-checked against other evidence we now have, is false.

The only primary source evidence quoted in Serov's report are statements from NKVD reports that Sokol'nikov was murdered by Kotov and Radek by the Trotskyist Varezchnikov.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 577. See the detailed discussion of Yagoda's testimony in Furr, *The Murder of Sergei Kirov*, Chapter 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Report of Court Proceedings* 798-9.

<sup>26</sup> Lenoe's "evidence" for Lobov's murder of Sokol'nikov is the same report by Serov that we are examining here.

<sup>27</sup> Lenne, 678.

Neither Serov nor Petrov cites any evidence that Kotov was really Lobov. Evidently even Serov did not claim that Varezchnikov was really an NKVD man named I.I. Stepanov, as Petrov does.

With the collapse of Serov's report as evidence that Stalin had Radek and Sokol'nikov murdered the main prop supporting Petrov's article has been destroyed as well. However, Petrov adds yet more details to the story, so we will proceed to study what he wrote.

### **Petrov's lies**

Besides appending Serov's article to his chapter in his book Petrov also reprinted it in his own book on Serov in 2008. Here Petrov makes additions of his own to the story. Most of them are also falsehoods, like Serov's. The rest of this article examines them.

### **Stalin's "vengefulness"**

Petrov states:

But could Stalin leave his critics and opponents of many years alive? His vengefulness has become legendary.

Petrov provides no evidence that Stalin was "vengeful" either in this instance or at any time. Nor does he refer to anybody else's evidence. This appears to be an example of "weasel words," of implying something that is not actually stated, since the sentence "His vengefulness has become legendary" is not quite an assertion that Stalin was, in fact, vengeful – only that he is assumed to have been such.

### **A commission formed immediately after the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress ...**

Petrov states:

The investigation into the circumstances of the murder of Radek and Sokol'nikov began immediately after the 20th Party Congress, when a commission to study the materials of the "Moscow Trials" of 1936-1938 was formed. In the KGB archive all the materials connected with the trials were taken up and studied. The Commission's conclusion was unequivocal: all the show trials of 1936-1938 were falsified.

This is not true. The commission referred to is the so-called "Molotov Commission." As we have seen, Lenoë discusses in some detail how Serov, Khrushchev's man, withheld evidence from and lied to Molotov.

However, despite Serov's withholding of evidence the Molotov Commission did not conclude that "all the show trials of 1936-1938 were falsified" as Petrov claims. On the contrary, its report of December 10, 1956, did not reject the verdicts of any of the Moscow trials! The report refused to review the cases of the major defendants in the Moscow Trials. Though the report accepted some of the criticisms that Khrushchev's men, aided by Serov, vigorously promoted, it

explicitly refused to reconsider the three Moscow Trials of 1936, 1937 and 1938. The commission's report concluded as follows:

The Commission has arrived at the conclusion that there are no grounds for reviewing the cases concerning Bukharin, Rykov [1938 Trial], Zinov'ev, Kamenev, Evdokimov [1936 Trial], Piatakov, Radek [1937 Trial], Rakovskii, Iagoda, Krestinskii [1938 Trial], Sokol'nikov, Serebriakov [1937 Trial], Zalutskii, Safarov [sentenced in 1935 in connection with the Kirov murder], Bakaev and I.N. Smirnov [1936 Trial], since for many years they led an anti-Soviet struggle directed against the building of socialism in the USSR. In relation to the others convicted in these trials the Commission considers it possible to review the cases relative to each of them personally.<sup>28</sup>

It is not clear how Petrov thought he could get away with such an obvious falsehood. The Molotov Commission is well known, at least to historians of the period. Its final report is even available online.<sup>29</sup>

### The testimony of Fedotov and Matusov

Petrov writes:

When they were called before the Central Committee of the CPSU in 1961 the former leading workers of the secret political division of the GUGB NKVD P.V. Fedotov and Ia. N. Matusov explained things thus:

“...The operational NKVD division of the political isolators sent their reports about the behavior of Radek and Sokol'nikov and persons like them directly to Beria personally, who either sent them or reported about them to Stalin. The workers of the division knew this both from Kobulov and by the sense, as I seem to remember it, of his written directives concerning the reports of the political isolators.”

In addition, both Fedotov and Matusov confirmed that “the murders of Radek and Sokol'nikov were carried out on Stalin's order.” (Palachi 44-45.)

It may be that Fedotov and Matusov did say something like this. But we know that Serov and the Shvernik Commission were not looking for the truth, but to support Khrushchev's preconceived position that everybody was innocent. (We discuss the Shvernik Commission briefly below).

Even if genuine, this is hearsay at best. Neither Fedotov nor Matusov was in a position to know what Beria did with any reports sent to him or what Stalin did or did not order. In any case,

<sup>28</sup> RKEB 2, 207. Identifying information in square brackets is mine.

<sup>29</sup> At [https://web.archive.org/web/20230410133051/http://www.perpetrator2004.narod.ru/documents/kirov/Molotov\\_Commission\\_Memo.doc](https://web.archive.org/web/20230410133051/http://www.perpetrator2004.narod.ru/documents/kirov/Molotov_Commission_Memo.doc). The standard print reference for this document is *Reabilitatsiia. Kak Eto Bylo. Fevral' 1956 – nachalo 80-kh godov*. T. 2. Moskva: “Materik,” 2003, 204-207. (RKEB-2)

no testimony should simply be “believed” even if it is not hearsay, as this is. Would Petrov advocate “believing” the testimony of the defendants at the Moscow Trials?

Fedotov, Matusov, and other former NKVD-KGB employees had plenty of motive to say whatever Serov wanted them to. Khrushchev had overseen the trial and execution of a number of KGB men who had worked under Beria and had refused to tell Khrushchev’s investigators what they wanted to hear.

### **Stalin’s inscription on a drawing**

Petrov writes:

Later, during the 1940s, Stalin made an indirect admission and actually indicated the motives for Radek’s murder.

The inscription, apparently in Stalin’s hand, says:

Radek, the lousy redhead. If he had not pissed against the wind, if he had not been bad, he would be alive. J. Stalin

Or,

Radek, lousy redhead, if you had not pissed against the wind, if you had not been bad, you would still be alive. J. Stalin

Objectively speaking, Stalin’s words here could never be interpreted as an admission of anything except, perhaps, some lingering affection for Radek. They could just as easily be evidence that Stalin regretted Radek’s death! This inscription only demonstrates that Stalin knew Radek was dead and blamed it largely on Radek himself.

### **Radek’s alleged denunciation of the Moscow Trials**

According to Petrov

Of course Radek spoke with his cellmates about the fact that all the “Moscow Trials” were a fiction.

Petrov cites no evidence, even of a hearsay nature, to support this statement. Even if he did, that would not mean that Radek really did so, much less that the Trials were actually a fiction.

Evidence from the Trotsky Archive and other sources make it clear that the trials were not a fabrication by the Stalin leadership at all. A few examples:

- We know that the “bloc of Rights and Trotskyites” really did exist, because Trotsky and Sedov wrote to each other about it in letters preserved in the Harvard Trotsky Archive.<sup>30</sup>

Not incidentally, this also proves that the Gorbachev-era “rehabilitation” reports and related documents are false, since they deny the existence of the “bloc of Rights and Trotskyites” which we know did exist.

Moreover, the Gorbachev-era Soviet party leadership knew this too. We know this for certain because Arch Getty’s article noting the proof of the bloc’s existence was translated into Russian and published in the Communist Party journal *Voprosy Istorii KPSS* in 1991.<sup>31</sup>

- At the 1937 Moscow Trial Radek told the precise truth about the letter he claimed he had received from Trotsky in the early months of 1932. We know this because the return receipt of this letter to Radek noting the date of delivery is preserved in the Harvard Trotsky Archive.<sup>32</sup>

It is very unlikely that the only true statements made by trial defendants were precisely those we can now verify independently. This suggests that other statements made during that trial by Radek, at least, may be true as well.

- Thanks to the work of the late American researcher Alvin Coox we have other non-Soviet evidence of the Right-Trotskyite and the military conspiracies. Coox interviewed former officers of the Japanese army who had been assigned to work with NKVD defector General Genrikh S. Liushkov, who deserted to the Japanese army across the Manchurian border on June 13 1938. In his published articles, written while he was working for the propaganda section of the Japanese army, Liushkov denied the existence of the conspiracies. But he confirmed the existence of these same conspiracies privately to his Japanese handlers. They in turn reported this to Coox, who was baffled by it.<sup>33</sup>

### “A document from the archive of the Shvernik Commission”

This document basically only adds to Serov’s report the detail that, supposedly, the Trotskyist Varezhnikov was really

... I.I. Stepanov, former commandant of the NKVD of the Checheno-Ingush ASSR, who had been arrested in February 1939 for serious crimes in his job. In November of the same year, at Beria’s order, Stepanov was released from arrest. In the decree about the closing of his case it is stated that he had carried out “a special task of importance to the government.” (Palachi 46)

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<sup>30</sup> This discovery was made by Trotskyist historian Pierre Broué in 1980. See Pierre Broué, “Trotsky et le bloc des oppositions de 1932.” *Cahiers Léon Trotsky* 5 (Jan-Mar 1980), pp. 5-37. I discuss it in *Trotsky’s ‘Amalgams’* and *Trotsky’s Lies*.

<sup>31</sup> Dzh. Arch Getty (Getty), “Trotskii v izgnanii.” *Voprosy Istorii KPSS* 5 (1991) 72-83.

<sup>32</sup> Discovered by Arch Getty. See his article “Trotsky in Exile: The Founding of the Fourth International.” *Soviet Studies*, vol. XXXVIII, no. 1, January 1986, 24-35.

<sup>33</sup> See Alvin D. Coox, “The Lesser of Two Hells: NKVD General G.S. Lyushkov’s Defection to Japan, 1938-1945.” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 11, 3 (1998) 145-186 (Part One) 11, 4 (1998) 72-110 (Part Two).

There is no evidence – not even hearsay evidence -- to support any of the statements here.

The Shvernik Report itself contains false information designed to help Khrushchev blame Stalin for various crimes. For example, it states: “No ‘Anti-Soviet Right-Trotskyite Bloc’ existed in reality...,” when we know, thanks to the Trotsky-Sedov correspondence in the Harvard Trotsky Archive, that such a bloc did indeed exist.<sup>34</sup> The Shvernik Commission does not mention Varezchnikov-Stepanov in its brief discussion of the Radek-Sokol’nikov murders but only refers to unnamed “specially sent persons from among the number of former NKVD workers serving sentences for political or job-related crimes.”<sup>35</sup>

Petrov states:

The rank-and-file participants – Stepanov and Lobov – were rewarded by their freedom.

Once again Petrov gives no evidence to support this statement. According to a report by employees of the Soviet Procuracy dated June 14, 1990 Lobov was sentenced in 1939 to 3 years exile in Kazakhstan. This is a penal sentence, not “freedom.”<sup>36</sup>

There is no entry for either Lobov or Stepanov in either of Petrov’s lengthy books on the personnel of the NKVD. According to Petrov, Stepanov had been commandant of the NKVD of the Checheno-Ingush ASSR. This position was prominent enough to qualify him for an entry in these large volumes. Lobov’s role in the Kirov case should have qualified him for an entry too. We should recall that Petrov also omitted Ovchinnikov from these works. Yet Ovchinnikov had been head of the Tomsk NKVD.

The very brief biographical note on Stepanov that Petrov gives on page 53 of “Palachi” simply states that he was “incarcerated between February and November 1939.” Petrov gives no source for this information. Nor does he give any reason for excluding Stepanov’s biographical sketch from his two volumes.

As for Lobov, Petrov’s short biography of him on the same page stops at his two-year sentence in 1935 and then skips to 1961, when he was “called to the Central Committee of the CPSU to give an account.” A two-year sentence in January 1935 would mean that Lobov was free by 1937 and so could not have been “rewarded by his freedom” in 1939. In any case we already know that Lobov was not rewarded but exiled in 1939. Petrov’s story falls apart at every turn.

Petrov must have had some source for this biographical information on Stepanov and Lobov. So why did he not include them in one of his two books? We have already determined that the available information about Ovchinnikov disproves Serov’s report.

Therefore, it cannot be an accident that Petrov omits Ovchinnikov, a significant figure in the NKVD, from his two bulky volumes while Petrov’s short biographic note on Ovchinnikov

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<sup>34</sup> RKEB 2, 630.

<sup>35</sup> RKEB 2, 568.

<sup>36</sup> RKEB 3, 468.

(also on page 53) stops with 1938, the year *before* the murders of Radek and Sokol'nikov. Might it also be the case that the full details of Stepanov's and Lobov's biographies contradict Petrov's story, as in the case of Ovchinnikov?

### **Petrov's false conclusion**

In both his *Novaya Gazeta* article and his more recent book Petrov makes the following bold claim:

It has been irrefutably proven that Stalin was personally behind the murders.<sup>37</sup>

The present article has established that Petrov's statement is false. In reality the opposite is true: there is no evidence whatever to support Petrov's claim. A statement that is unsupported by any evidence must be considered unproven. A statement that is based on falsified evidence must itself be considered false.

Our conclusion is therefore inevitable: Stalin was not guilty of the murders of Sokol'nikov and Radek. This tale is a fabrication by Khrushchev-era investigators, led by Serov, who were constructing this and many other false accusations against Stalin. This falsehood has been perpetuated by Petrov for the same purpose: to slander Stalin.

In this article we have exposed the falsehoods in Serov's report. Petrov could have done the same thing. Indeed, had he so chosen Petrov could have done it quicker and better, since he has much better access to archives and primary sources. But rather than perform the historian's duty of verification Petrov chose to compound Serov's lies with yet more falsehoods of his own invention.

### **Petrov and the "Memorial" society**

Petrov has ignored the evidence in order to falsely accuse Joseph Stalin of two murders. It is ironic that Petrov is guilty of what he and other anticommunists accuse Stalin of doing.

The goal of historiography and historians is to discover the truth about the past, as established by the best evidence and reasoning. Dishonest historians begin with a preconceived conclusion and then search for anything that might pass as evidence in support of that preconceived conclusion. They are propagandists attempting to disguise themselves as historians so their readers will mistake what they are reading as an attempt to discover the truth.

Everyone has preconceived ideas and biases, especially concerning subjects they know a lot about. Historians have them too. So do researchers in the natural sciences. Therefore, like scientists, historians must strive to compensate for their biases and preconceived ideas. Historians must strive for what in the sciences is called objectivity.

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<sup>37</sup> "Было неопровержимо доказано, что за убийством стоял лично Сталин." ("Было неопровержимо доказано, что за убийством стоял лично Сталин.")

Objectivity has been called “an ideology of the distrust of the self”<sup>38</sup> – of one’s own biases and preconceived ideas. Therefore a historian must compensate for her own subjectivity by such practices as the following:

- trying hard to find evidence that contradicts one’s own preconceived ideas and biases;
- giving such evidence an especially generous reading, forcing oneself to consider the possibility: “I may be mistaken”; “my preconceived idea may be wrong”; “the truth may well be disillusioning for me”;
- regarding with a special degree of questioning and doubt that evidence that tends to support one’s own preconceived ideas and biases.

Understood in this way, the method of doing objective research can be mastered. It is open to everyone. One will never be perfect but with diligent practice one can become very good at being objective.

Those who call themselves historians but do not strive to be objective: to question their own preconceived ideas; to remain devoted to discovering and reporting the truth even when that truth contradicts their own cherished ideas – they are not really historians at all. They are publicists for some cause who, like anticommunists and Trotskyists, have adopted the guise of historian the better to deceive their readers. What they write is not history but “propaganda with footnotes.”

Petrov is one of these. This has important consequences for all of us who read what he writes. Nothing Petrov writes should be accepted, even provisionally, as true. On the contrary: we must see his work for what it really is: a strained attempt to shore up his own preconceived ideas while disguising it as an attempt to discover the truth.<sup>39</sup>

### “Memorial”

Petrov is a top official in the Russian Memorial Society; he was appointed its vice-chair in 1990. His prominence as a leader of the Memorial Society accounts for his frequent appearance in the news media and his columns in *Novaya Gazeta*, a newspaper devoted to attacking communism and Stalin and jointly owned until his death by Mikhail Gorbachev and billionaire Aleksandr Lebedev.

“Memorial” is an organization devoted to the spread of anticommunist falsehoods. An example of “Memorial’s” dishonesty is its long list “Victims of Political Terror in the USSR.”<sup>40</sup> Here is one entry:

Vaganov Aleksandr Mikhailovich

<sup>38</sup> Michael Schudson. *Discovering the News. A Social History of American Newspapers*. New York: Basic Books, 1978: 71.

<sup>39</sup> Petrov has equated the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany several times, e.g. on “Radio Svoboda” on August 24, 2009. “Radio Svoboda” = “Radio Liberty,” a propaganda outlet of the United States Government.

<sup>40</sup> “Zhertvy politicheskogo terrora v SSSR” («Жертвы политического террора в СССР») at <http://lists.memo.ru/>

Born 1886, Perm' guberniia; Russian; lived in the city of Perm'.  
 Arrested October 3, 1919.  
 Sentenced: October 31, 1919.  
 Sentence: Case dismissed for lack of evidence.  
 Source: Memorial Book of Perm' oblast'.

A.V. Vaganov was arrested during the bloody Civil War, jailed for four weeks, then acquitted. What makes him a “victim of political terror”?

Evidently “Memorial’s” list is intended to be as long as possible, enabling anticommunists to impress others by telling them of this huge number of “victims of communist terror.”

## Evidence

Persons found guilty of a crime are not normally considered to be “victims.” Yet the only way to ascertain whether or not the charges against an arrested person were credible is to study the evidence. But “Memorial’s” list does not bother with evidence.

Although this evidence about repressed persons is often available “Memorial” does not discuss it. A few examples:

- Sergei Bondarenko, a member and historian of “Memorial,” begins his book *Lost in Memory* with the 1938 arrest of his great-grandfather Aleksandr Smirnitsky who was convicted – of what, he does not tell us – and was released in 1946. In 2016 Bondarenko obtained Smirnitsky’s investigation file, including the evidence against him and witness testimony. But rather than discuss this evidence Bondarenko expects his readers to just assume that Smirnitsky was innocent.
- In 1955 Vladimir Pyatnitsky, a founder of Leningrad “Memorial,” received documents on his father, Iosif (Osip) Pyatnitsky. He has published the “rehabilitation” documents. They contain no evidence at all that his father was innocent. He has also reproduced some of the large amount of evidence of his father’s guilt. Nevertheless, Vladimir Pyatnitsky continued to assert that his father was a “victim of Stalin.”<sup>41</sup>

## “Memorial” proposes an anticommunist “purge”

In 2011 “Memorial” posted a proposal on its website for a program to “de-Stalinize” Russia. In true Orwellian language the proposal is titled “A proposal for the establishment of a society-wide state-society program ‘Concerning the commemoration of victims of the totalitarian regime and national reconciliation.’”<sup>42</sup> This proposal is an attempt to make a far right-wing position on Soviet history official state policy. Here is one of its provisions:

<sup>41</sup> See the discussion in Grover Furr and Vladimir L. Bobrov, *Trotsky’s Comintern Conspiracy – The Case of Osip Pyatnitsky*. Kettering, OH: Erythros Press & Media, LLC, 2024.

<sup>42</sup> Predlozheniia ob uchrezhdenii obshchenatsional’noi gosudarstvenno-obshchestvennoi programmy ‘Ob uvtkotchenii pamiati zhertvy totalitarnogo rezhimi I o natsional’nom premireanii.’ (Предложения об учреждении

“Prilozheniie 8” (Appendix 8):

8.2. Принять официальное постановление о том, что публичные выступления государственных служащих любого ранга, содержащие отрицание или оправдание преступлений тоталитарного режима, несовместимы с пребыванием на государственной службе.

8.2. [It is essential...] To pass an official decree to the effect that public statements by a state employee of any rank that contains a denial or justification of the crimes of the totalitarian regime is incompatible with remaining in government service.

The Memorial Society wants all Russian civil servants to be “free” only to repeat Memorial's version of history! “Memorial” blames the USSR for “totalitarianism” while they demand that every public employee in Russia call the USSR “totalitarian” or lose their jobs!

The Memorial version of history is a falsification. Only falsehood requires the policing of opinions. Whatever “Memorial’s” human rights activities are, they also serve as a cover for anticommunist propaganda.

Their proposal to the Duma is useful insofar as it has exposed them for what they are. Only the most right-wing capitalist organizations would support the restrictions on free speech that “Memorial” unblushingly proposes. During the height of the Red Scare in the USA of the late ‘40s and ‘50s many employees had to take a “loyalty oath.” “Memorial’s” proposed legislation goes beyond “loyalty oaths” to police statements made on and off the job. What happened to “human rights”?

If “Memorial” were an honest organization it would not include persons arrested and then released for lack of evidence against them among the “victims of political terror.” Nor would it propose that all government employees who made any public statement that disagreed with “Memorial’s” view of the Soviet past be fired. It would insist that its members, like Nikita Petrov, support their findings with evidence.

“Memorial” is similar to other ideological anticommunist, pro-capitalist organizations, in that none of them are interested in the least in the truth, but rather in producing propaganda to falsely smear the communist movement. Nothing published by or under the auspices of the “Memorial” society should be assumed to be true.

### **Why the lies?**

Nobody lies when the truth is on their side. If the “Memorial” society were truly interested in human rights, they would also be concerned with the rights of those who do not agree with their, “Memorial’s,” interpretation of the Soviet past, and would defend the rights of those persons rather than trying to silence them with the fear of losing their jobs.

If anticommunists – and, it must be said, some who consider themselves communists, like Trotskyists – had honorable goals they would not repeat lies like that of the “Holodomor” (“Death by Hunger,” the allegation of a Soviet-generated famine in 1932-33) or claim that the Moscow Trials and the “Tukhachevsky Affair” (the 1937 arrest, trial, and execution of military leader Mikhail N. Tukhachevsky and other top military commanders) were all frame-ups against innocent men, when all the evidence we possess today points in precisely the opposite direction – that the famine of 1932-33 was the result of natural causes and the trial defendants were guilty of at least those crimes to which they confessed.<sup>43</sup>

Petrov wants Stalin to “look bad.” But Petrov is unable to find evidence that Stalin was, in fact, “bad.” We can state this with confidence because if he had such evidence Petrov would not have to resort to the kind of lies and fabrications that we have exposed in the article under discussion here. This practice is unfortunately all too common in the field of Soviet history.

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Grover Furr has written and co-authored many books on Soviet history of the 1930s. They are listed on his home page (<https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furr/g/>) and on a separate sheet (<https://tinyurl.com/sixteenbks>). He is in the English Department at Montclair State University (New Jersey).



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