



**The NKVD Mass Secret  
Operation n° 00447 (August  
1937 &#8211; November  
1938)**

*Werth, Nicolas*

*Monday 24 May 2010*

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## A. Context

In 1992, the discovery in the Soviet archives of the NKVD's secret operational order n° 00447 of July 30, 1937, has drastically changed our perception of Stalin's Great Terror (Conquest, 1968). Up to this point, the frenzied era of Stalinist repression had primarily been viewed as a massive political purge targeting the communist political, military, economic and intellectual elites, a process which Nikita Khrushchev had briefly exposed in his famous Secret Report to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on February 24, 1956. But the Great Terror in fact had two sides: a public side and a hidden one.

The public side was that of the show trials – the famous Moscow trials (August 1936, January 1937 and March 1938) of the Old Bolsheviks – but also that of the hundreds of less well-known provincial trials of local officials (Werth, 2005). All these trials were more or less successfully staged political theater and, in Annie Kriegel's words, a formidable mechanism of social prophylaxis. Show trials unmasked conspiracies and singled out scapegoats. The public side of the Great Terror was also the promotion of a new elite, younger, better-educated, and more obedient, brought-up in the strict Stalinist spirit of the 1930s. In light of newly-opened archives, it has been established that the purging of the Soviet elite was, however, no more than the visible tip of the iceberg: accounting for approximately 100,000 convictions out of a total of 1,550,000 convictions on political grounds. Over half of the condemned (800,000 persons) were executed, the remaining 750,000 sentenced to a ten-year term in the Gulag labour camps.

The hidden side of the Great Terror was that of the NKVD operational orders, made in compliance with top-secret Politburo resolutions. These were completely hidden transcripts, not meant for circulation or discussion in the Communist Party, State or society. These documents are the most important newly released sources for understanding the mechanisms and implementation of the mass secret repressive operations which constituted the core of the Great Terror: more than 90% of the victims were trapped in one of these operations (McLoughlin and McDermott, 2003). These operations (a dozen of them have been identified) were a form of social engineering intended to rid the country once and for all of the entire gang of anti-Soviet elements who undermine the foundations of the Soviet State (in the words of Nikolai Ezhov, the Head of the NKVD, in the preamble of Order n° 00447).

The largest secret mass operation was launched by the NKVD secret operational order n° 00447 Concerning the punishment of former kulaks, criminals and other anti-Soviet elements. The categories targeted included former kulaks, deported in previous years, who have escaped from labour settlements, members of anti-Soviet parties, former tsarist officials, church officials and sectarian activists [&], bandits, recidivist thieves and swindlers, contraband smugglers and other criminals including those already in camp or in labour settlements but continuing their criminal activities. All these anti-Soviet elements were to be broken down into two categories. People ascribed to the first category (defined as particularly active and vicious) were to be immediately arrested and, after swift consideration of their case by an extra-judicial three-man commission (*troWka*) specially set up for the purpose, shot. People ascribed to the second category (less active anti-Soviet elements) were to be immediately arrested and sentenced by the same *troWka* to ten years of forced labour in the Gulag camps. Order n° 00447 then proceeded by establishing, for every region and republic, round-number quotas of persons subject to punitive measures in the first and in the second category. The highest quotas concerned Moscow and its region (35,000, of whom 5,000 were to be shot), western Siberia (17,000, of whom 5,000 were to be shot), southern Urals (16,000, of whom 5,500 were to be shot), Leningrad and its region (14,000, of whom 4,000 were to be shot). Ukraine had a quota of 28,800 (of whom 8,000 were to be shot). The total figures amounted to 269,100 persons, of whom 76,000 were to be killed. In fact, although initially planned for four months, Operation n° 00447 (referred to as the Kulak Operation in NKVD circles) lasted over 15 months (from August 1937 till

mid-November 1938): approximately 767,000 persons were condemned, of whom 387,000 (just over one half) were shot (Junge and Binner, 2003; Danilov, Manning, Viola, 2006; Werth, 2009).

Two important features of this mass crime should be underlined at this stage:

a) The round-number quotas of Order n° 00447 were characteristic of the figure mania which had spread throughout the USSR in every sector of the economy, politics and social life during the 1930s. In matters of repression and social engineering, they were not unprecedented. On February 1, 1930, Genrikh Iagoda, the Head of the State Security, issued the secret Order n° 44/21 giving, for each region and republic of the USSR, round-number quotas of dekulakization and defining different categories of kulaks (rich peasants considered to be hostile to the Soviet regime). Kulaks of the first category 60,000 individuals in the initial phase of the operation defined as particularly vicious and engaged in counterrevolutionary activities were to be arrested and, after consideration of their case by a *troika*, transferred to labour camps or executed if they put up any sign of resistance. Kulaks of the second category 120,000 families defined as showing less active opposition, but nonetheless arch-exploiters with an innate tendency to destabilize the Soviet regime, were to be arrested and deported with their families to special settlements in remote regions of the country (Siberia, Kazakhstan, Urals, far North). In the course of the different dekulakization campaigns (1930-1932), over 300,000 persons were sent to labour camps and 2,200,000 persons deported (Danilov, Manning, Viola, 2001).

b) Order n° 00447 was the culmination of a decade-long radicalization of policing practice against a wide range of social outcasts. From 1930 onwards, fear of social disorder resulting from the upheavals of forced collectivization, famine, massive and the uncontrolled migration of millions of peasants into towns, became the major obsession of party and police authorities. The newly created passport system (1933) for town dwellers enforced social quarantine on major cities; hundreds of thousands of anti-Soviets, former people and socially harmful elements were rounded up, expelled, or deported. These elastic categories included a wide range of people such as persons with no definite place of work, persons caught in urban areas without a proper residence permit, persons who had left the special settlement they had been assigned to, speculators, persons having ties with the criminal world, etc. Among these outcasts, ex-kulaks were the largest group. According to police statistics, as many as 600,000 ex-kulaks had fled from the places they had been deported to. For the NKVD, these elements were, in the words of Ezhov, the chief instigators of every kind of anti-Soviet crime and sabotage. The context of an impending war gave the mass operations of 1937-1938 their particular ruthlessness: the threat of war shaped Stalin's perception of marginal and politically suspect populations as the social basis for an uprising in case of invasion. These potential recruits for a mythical fifth column of wreckers, terrorists and spies were to be preventively eliminated (Hagenloh, 2000; Shearer, 2003).

## **B. Decision-Makers, Organizers and Actors**

Although Nikolai Ezhov signed the Order n° 00447, its instigator was Stalin himself. On July 2, 1937, Stalin sent a top-secret letter to all regional party secretaries (with a copy to NKVD regional chiefs) ordering them to present, within five days, estimates of the number of kulaks and criminals that should be arrested, executed or sent to camps. As First Secretary of the Moscow Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev wired to Stalin, on July 10, 1937: 41,305 kulak and criminal elements have been posted in Moscow and Moscow region. Police material allows us to allocate 8,000 of them to the first category, and the remaining 31,305 to the second category. Produced in a matter of days, these figures roughly matched those of suspect individuals already under police surveillance, although the criteria used to distribute the kulak and criminal elements among the two categories are not clear. The quotas allocated by Order n° 00447 were generally based on these estimates. However, as soon as the Kulak Operation was launched (August 5,

1937), regional party and NKVD bosses, eager to show their zeal, demanded an increase in the quotas. Recently declassified top-secret correspondence between Stalin, Ezhov and regional party and NKVD leaders reveals, in chilling bureaucratic transcripts, the development of a dynamic leading to a huge overfulfillment of quotas (Junge and Binner, 2003). Planned orders from the center plus bureaucratic reflexes spurred local officials, many of whom had just recently been promoted, to anticipate and surpass the desires of superiors further up the hierarchy and the directives that arrived from Moscow. Already at the end of August 1937, Stalin and Ezhov were assailed with numerous requests for the initial quotas to be raised. The execution or the ten-year confinement in camps of thousands of people was ratified in short Politburo resolutions (signed by Stalin) drafted as follows: Approve the proposal of the Altaï territory Party Committee for a supplement of 4,000 in the first category and of 4,500 in the second category . But supplements were not only the result of demands from below. The largest new allowances were distributed by Stalin and Ezhov on their own initiative: on October 15, 1937, for example, the Politburo passed a secret resolution increasing the number of people to be repressed by 120,000 (63,000 in the first category and 57,000 in the second category ); on January 31, 1938, Stalin ordered a further increase of 57,200, 48,000 of whom were to be executed. To keep up the pace, police organized sweeps and round-ups of markets or railway stations where marginals and other social outcasts were likely to be found. In order to carry out a growing number of arrests, the UGB (State Security) units approximately 25,000 functionaries were supplemented by ordinary policemen, sometimes by Party or Komsomol (Young Communist League) members. Every unit had a casework minimum of arrests to perform but also of confessions to extract in order to unmask conspiracies . Uninterrupted interrogation for days on end and merciless beatings were widely used to force prisoners to confess their alleged counter-revolutionary crimes. In order to speed up the procedure, prisoners were often forced to sign blank pages of the pre-printed interrogation folios on which the interrogator later typed up the confession, the contents of which were scrutinised by the UGB commanding officer. If the prisoner s statement did not adhere to the general line of the prosecution scenario, the head of the Security Police inserted his own fantastic screenplay, and had the forgery re-typed for signature by the defendant. Some UGB units brought this rationalisation to a fine art, setting up what they themselves called a sector for spare parts : a model protocol was copied by a pool of typists; the interrogating officer then filled in the prisoner s data and, from case to case, marginally changed the circumstances of the wrecking activities and their instigators (McLoughlin and McDermott, 2003). Once the culpability of the arrested considered proved, the files were transmitted to the *troWka*, who pronounced the verdicts in the absence of the accused. During a half-day long session, the *troWka* (which comprised, as a rule, the regional party first secretary, the chief of the regional NKVD and the regional procurator) went through several hundred cases, delivering either a death sentence or a ten-year sentence to the Gulag labour camps. Death sentences were immediately enforceable. The sentence was not even announced to the condemned, and relatives were simply told that the arrested person had been sentenced to a ten-year term in a labour camp with no right to correspond. The executions were carried out at night, either in prisons or in a secluded area run by the NKVD and located as a rule on the outskirts of major towns. Tens of mass execution and mass burial places have been found during the past fifteen years (the special shooting ranges of Butovo, near Moscow, Levachovo, on the outskirts of Leningrad, Bykivnia near Kiev, Sandormokh, in Karelia, Vinnitsa, in Ukraine, etc).

## C. Victims

Order n° 00447 directed the NKVD regional chiefs to report every five days on the numbers of people arrested, sentenced by *troWki* and executed. The FSB (State Security) archives have kept hundreds of such reports and 36 summaries addressed by the Statistical Department of the NKVD to Ezhov and to Stalin. By September 30, 1937 (that is less than two months after the start of the mass operation), 248,000 persons had already been arrested, 143,000 of them already condemned, of whom 83,600 had already been executed. By January 1, 1938, 575,000 persons had been condemned, of whom 258,000 had been executed. When Operation n° 00447 was finally stopped, on November 17, 1938, by a secret directive signed by Stalin, over

767,000 persons had been condemned, of whom 387,000 had been executed (Jansen and Petrov, 2002). These figures reflect the secret police central authorities' accountancy; however, they do not include either deaths under torture or during preliminary investigation, or what the NKVD men called, in their jargon, non-ratified execution supplements. An inspection carried out, in Turkmenistan, in early 1939, just after the end of the Great Terror, by special envoys from Moscow revealed for example that the local NKVD had, without informing the central NKVD administration, overfulfilled the quotas of individuals to repress in the first category – that is, to execute – in spite of the fact that central authorities in Moscow had already increased threefold the initial quotas (Khlevniuk, 1998). Taking into account these practices, A. Roginski and N. Petrov consider that the total number of people condemned in the course of the Kulak Operation, is close to 820,000, of whom 437,000 to 445,000 were executed. Unfortunately, NKVD statistics are not very loquacious about the sociology of the victims, split up into three arbitrary groups: ex-kulaks, criminals, other anti-Soviet elements. Only local studies based on an extensive investigation of the victims' cases can provide a rough sociology of the people trapped in Operation n° 00447. Many of the victims appear to have been on index-cards, catalogues of suspects assembled over the years by the NKVD. The following categories were systematically tracked down: ex-kulaks deported to special settlements, former tsarist civil servants, former officers of the White Army, participants in peasant rebellions, members of the clergy, persons deprived of voting rights, former members of non-bolshevik parties, convicted criminals and various socially harmful elements. But many were also arrested at random in police sweeps, or as a result of denunciations or simply because they happened to be relatives, friends or just acquaintances of people already arrested. Some groups of the population were particularly vulnerable. The orthodox clergy, including active parishioners, was decimated: 85% of the 35,000 members of the clergy were arrested, condemned or executed. Particularly vulnerable to repression were also the so-called special settlers (*spetsperesentsy*) who had been deported in previous years to inhospitable parts of the country (Siberia, Urals, Kazakhstan, far North). They were under permanent police surveillance and constituted a huge pool of potential enemies to draw on. At least 100,000 of them were arrested in the course of the Great Terror. Criminals, thieves, violators of the passport regime and many other social outcasts already in custody, but not yet tried also provided victims to fill the ever-growing quotas. In Moscow, for example, nearly one third of the 20,765 persons executed on the Butovo shooting range were charged with a criminal offence. However, many of the victims did not belong to categories stigmatized by the regime: tens of thousands of railwaymen, workers, kolkhoz peasants and engineers were arrested in the course of the Kulak Operation. Many of them just had the misfortune of working in, or near, important strategic factories, railway or building sites, where, as a result of frantic rhythms and plans, many work accidents had occurred in previous years. In 1937-1938, the NKVD reopened these cases and systematically ascribed them to sabotage or wrecking (Werth, 2009).

One should mention a last category of victims of Order n° 00447: political prisoners already serving a sentence in the Gulag camps. One sub-operation targeted the most vicious and stubborn anti-Soviet elements in camps; they were all to be put into the first category – that is shot. Order n° 00447 decreed 10,000 executions for this contingent, but at least three times more were shot in the course of the secret mass operation, the majority in March-April 1938 (Junge and Binner, 2003).

## D. Witnesses

The main characteristic of the mass operations were their absolute secrecy: no more than a hundred high party and NKVD officials received a copy of Order n° 00447; all the other executants were given oral instructions on how to proceed with the operation. The *troWki* sat behind closed doors, the accused was absent and without any defender. The obsession with secrecy went so far as not to inform the condemned person nor his relatives of the death sentence passed on him. The instructions issued on August 4, 1937, on the eve of the launching of Operation n° 00447, to the NKVD regional chiefs, emphasized the need to

ensure that there is absolute secrecy concerning time, place and method of execution. Immediately on receipt of this order you are to present a list of NKVD staff permitted to participate in executions. Red Army soldiers or ordinary policemen are not to be employed. All persons involved in the work of transporting the bodies and excavating or filling in the pits have to sign a document certifying that they are sworn to secrecy (McLoughlin and McDermott, 2003). Nevertheless, some NKVD chiefs not only infringed these regulations, but invited colleagues to attend the wedding – a coded expression, in NKVD circles, to designate executions. Except for those who were forced to testify during the limited purges of the NKVD apparatus after the end of the Great Terror (it goes without saying that these testimonies should be subjected to strong historical criticism), very few witnesses such as people living in the neighborhood of the NKVD shooting ranges – for example, left testimonies on this secret mass crime.

## E. Memories

The mass operations of 1937-1938 remained shrouded in secrecy for over half a century, until the beginning of the 1990s. Two and a half years after the end of the Great Terror, Soviet society was confronted with the Nazi invasion. The murderous cataclysm of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) in the course of which over 20 million Soviet citizens were killed and the collective sufferings of a whole nation at war deeply buried the secret, unspeakable and thus strictly individual memory of the arrest and disappearance of loved ones and relatives during the Great Terror. As the Soviet writer and veteran of war, Viktor Nekrassov, wrote in 1990: Victors were not to be judged. We excused Stalin for everything! Collectivization, 1937, the mass terror and the defeats of 1941 . Only a handful of prisoners, sentenced in 1937-1938 to a ten-year sentence were released in 1947-1948. Most of those who had survived the terrible war years in the Gulag (the mortality rates were as high as 20% in 1942 and 1943) were given a second ten-year term.

Only after the death of Stalin did hope come back for the relatives of the repressed. In 1954-1956, special commissions were set up in order to review the cases of individuals condemned for counter-revolutionary crimes and serving their sentence in camps or labour settlements . Approximately 450,000 political prisoners were released, but no more than 4% of them were duly rehabilitated. Among the released, how many were survivors of the 1937-1938 Great Terror? Less than 100,000 out of the 750,000 ascribed to the second category. The return of the survivors brought about a stream of letters sent to the Procuracy or the KGB (State Security) by relatives of those who had vanished between 1937-1938. The question of how they should be answered was discussed at the highest level of the Party and the State Security. On August 24, 1955, Ivan Serov, the newly appointed Chief of the KGB, directed, in a secret instruction to the State Security staff, not to inform the relatives of persons sentenced to the death penalty of the sentence (&) and tell them that the condemned was sentenced to a ten-year term in camp and had died at a date which will be arbitrarily fixed in the lapse of time between 1937-1938 and 1947-1948 (Artizov et al., 2000). The Procuracy and the KGB slowed down all the demands for revision. Less than 8% of the demands were examined in 1957; 6% in 1958 and under 5% during the following years. The few rehabilitated persons approximately five to ten thousand per year in the late 1950s and early 1960s – received neither a moral, nor a material compensation for all the time they had spent in camp (except a two-month wage calculated on the basis of their last salary before arrest, the latter being assimilated to a breach of work contract !). Not a single NKVD torturer who had extracted false confessions from the victims was brought to justice. After Khrushchev's fall, in October 1964, the rehabilitation process came to a complete stop for nearly twenty years. The memory of the Great Terror survived only in the private sphere. Only with the *perestroika* ( restructuring ) launched by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1986 did the tragic events of 1937-1938 begin to re-emerge in the public sphere. In September 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev set up a special commission in charge of inquiring into the mass crimes committed by the Stalinist regime (Artisov et al., 2003). Considering the growing flood of rehabilitation demands which threatened to engulf the whole judicial

apparatus (since the beginning of *perestrojka*, over 100,000 demands for rehabilitation had arrived at the Procuracy), the commission proposed, in September 1988, a general rehabilitation of every Soviet citizen who had been condemned by the infamous *trojki* or by any other extra-judicial authority appointed by Stalin and his team. On January 16, 1989, a law abolished all the sentences delivered by special jurisdictions under the Stalin regime. However, the archives related to the political mechanisms of the repression remained closed to historians and members of civic rights associations, such as Memorial. Only after the fall of the Soviet regime, in December 1991, were they allowed to conduct archival research on the mass repressive campaigns of the Stalinist era and on the Great Terror in particular. Thus, a team of historians from Memorial discovered, in June 1992, Stalin's secret instructions on the launching of the mass operations and the NKVD operational orders of 1937-1938. The testimony of an NKVD official put these historians on the track of the Butovo shooting range. Excavations carried out in 1997 established, sixty years after the Great Terror, that it was a place of mass burials, and probably of mass executions too (although medical experts were uncertain whether the corpses were thrown into the graves immediately after their death, or from eight to ten hours after) (Golovkova, 1999). At the same time, Memorial historians and activists decided to start a meticulous work establishing, in local and central State Security archives, an exhaustive list of the victims of the Stalinist repressions, and in the first place, of the Great Terror of 1937-1938. Since the mid-1990s, several hundred memorial books (*knigi pamiati*) have been published. These books list standard biographic data concerning the victims (date of birth and place, profession, nationality and place of residence). They often also provide information concerning social origin, education, Party membership, previous convictions as well as the date of arrest, sentencing (including the article of the criminal code, the sentence itself and the sentencing body) and execution. A drawback of these books is that they almost never include those convicted as ordinary criminals (which they were not). Many of the memorial books also include extensive valuable documentary materials from local and central KGB archives, as well as autobiographical memoirs from survivors. A complete collection of these memorial books can be found in the library of the Moscow branch of Memorial (the website [www.memo.ru](http://www.memo.ru) has an extensive list of these *knigi pamiati*).

## F. General and Legal Interpretations of the Facts.

Long before the opening of the Soviet archives, the Great Terror had provoked a number of debates about the amplitude, the mechanisms, the reasons and the purpose of these mass purges. In the 1950s American scholars proposed a structural explanation of the Great Terror: as a totalitarian system Stalin's regime had to maintain its citizens in a state of fear and uncertainty, and recurrent random purging provided the mechanism (Brzezinski, 1958). At the end of the 1960s, Robert Conquest published the first detailed account, which was to become a classic reference, on the Great Terror (Conquest, 1968). This work emphasized Stalin's paranoia, focused on the Moscow show trial of Old Bolsheviks, and analyzed the carefully planned and systematic destruction of the Leninist party leadership as the first step toward terrorizing the entire population. In the mid 1980s, John Arch Getty, an American historian of the revisionist school contested Conquest's interpretation, arguing that the exceptional scale of the purges was the result of strong tensions between Stalin and regional Party bosses who, in order to deflect the terror that was being directed at them, had found innumerable scapegoats on which to carry out repressions, demonstrating in this way their vigilance and intransigence in the struggle against the common enemy. Thus, far from being a planned and long-term project revealing the growing paranoia of an all-mighty dictator, the Great Terror turned out to be a flight into chaos (Getty, 1985). In spite of their fundamentally different approach, historians of both schools focused on party purges, repression of real or imagined oppositionists, show trials of party leaders, elimination and replacement of political, intellectual, economic or military elites, and struggle between the center and regional party cliques. Neither of them studied, mainly because of the scarcity of information on the subject, the mechanisms, organization, implementation of mass arrests and mass executions, or the sociology of the victims, who represented a much wider group than party elites or intelligentsia. Thus, the Great Terror of 1937-1938 in the Soviet Union solidified in popular and academic

memory as Stalin s attack on political and social elites, as the Great Purges .

This has been fundamentally challenged since the opening of the soviet archives, the discovery of the NKVD operational orders and other top-secret Politburo documents. Scholars now insist on the hidden side of the Great Terror, interpreting it as a crucial moment or rather the culmination of a vast social engineering campaign started at the beginning of the 1930s (Hagenloh, 2000; Shearer, 2003; Werth, 2003). In the light of recent research, the qualification of Great Purges seems incorrect to characterize this murderous outburst of violence. The extreme diversity of the victims makes difficult any legal qualification of this crime, which appears to be in a class of its own: 800,000 people executed in secret (over half of them under Order n° 00447) by means of a bullet in the back of the head after a pretence of justice; this over a period of sixteen months, at a rate of 50,000 executions per month or 1,700 per day for nearly 500 days. Let us therefore content ourselves with a minimalist classification: the Great Terror was one of the worst and largest mass crimes carried out by the Stalinist State against one per cent of its adult population.

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## **C- Website**

Website of the Memorial Society: <http://www.memo.ru>