The Butovo Shooting Range

A- Context

The Yezhovshchina or Stalin’s Great Terror, as it was called by American historian Robert Conquest (Conquest, 1968), took place mainly between 1937 and 1938 and, for the most part, was organized on the basis of the operational orders of the NKVD (the People’s Commission for Internal Affairs), then headed by Commissar for Internal Affairs, Nikolai Ivanovich Yezhov (for biographical references see Jansen Petrov, 2002 or Getty Naumov, 2008).

Political repression against Stalin’s former and potential political opponents had already begun following the aftermath of the murder of Leningrad party organization boss and Politburo member, S. M. Kirov on December 1, 1934 (proceeded by the first trial against Kamenev and Zinoviev in 1935 and the Moscow show trials, 1936-1938). However, the Great Terror was far more than a mere act of large-scale political repression, and therefore had a more direct goal than subjugation: it was a moment of social engineering during which the Stalinist group intended to definitively reshape Soviet society and put an end to the social disorder that the transformational Stalinist project had caused previously. Consequently, after a relative relaxation of societal repression in the past few years, the Stalinist regime went ahead with a large-scale attack on its perceived enemies.

These operations, which were to last from the very end of July 1937 until the first days of November 1938, were carefully organized during the whole month of July by the highest Soviet authorities (Stalin, Yezhov and his staff). The main violence was organized by a dozen operational orders (prikazy) given by Yezhov. First was order 00447 that was directed against all the well-known enemies of the regime, who had often been repressed in the past: the kulaks and other former “opponents” (Socialist-Revolutionaries (SR), White army officers, priests...). It was completed by a series of prikazy on “national operations” that targeted the border minorities from the Soviet Union (Martin, 1998). These are orders 00439 (on Germans), 00485 (on Poles), 00486 (on wives of “enemies of the people”), 00593 (on Kharbintsy and Japanese spies), 00693 (on immigrants in the USSR), and five others (on Latvians, Finns, Greeks, Romanians and Estonians). It should be noted that bringing these operations together is not a post-factum scientific reconstruction by historians, but was evident in the official documents of the NKVD (Werth, 2006). At the heart of this operation was the aim, explicitly noted in order 00447, to put an end “once and for all” to the presence of enemies in Soviet society. The operation therefore had to be a maximal one and wipe out all remnants of the former social order that had been persecuted hitherto.

The methods were very characteristic of the Stalinist Terror and reminiscent of the way the dekulakization of the countryside had been organized. Quotas of people to be arrested had been drawn up in July. The victims were to be organized into two categories, the first included the “most active and hostile elements”. These people were to be judged by a troika (an extra-judiciary organ composed of the regional head of the NKVD, the regional secretary of the party and the regional prosecutor) and if condemned (but in the text of the order, there was almost no possibility that they would not be condemned) were to be shot immediately. The second category concerned the “less active but nevertheless hostile elements,”. Those included were to be arrested and sent to a camp for “eight to ten years”. Prison was envisaged only for the “toughest”.

The whole month of July can be characterized by what Nicolas Werth has called “a dynamics of the quotas” (Werth, 2006: 20). A meeting of the Politburo (Political Bureau, the supreme organ of the Communist Party) at this time noted that “former kulaks and criminals who returned back home after their punishment were the main instigators of anti-Soviet crimes”, it was decided to send a telegram to regional authorities asking them for a census of these people and an estimate of the number to
shoot or to exile. A back-and-forth game began between the center and the regions to establish the quotas. These were written down many times, not only on July 30 in order 00447. It was therefore not uncommon for the regional heads of the NKVD to ask (once, twice or more!) for an augmentation of their quotas. The authorizations were given personally by Yezhov, Stalin or Molotov (Junge, 2003; Werth, 2006)

For the national operations the system was a little different as there were no quotas, although people were still divided into two categories (one to be shot, the other to be sent into camps). At the end of the “instruction”, a short summary of each case was written down. Every ten days the summaries were transmitted to a commission of two men (called the dvoika): the regional head of the NKVD and chief prosecutor) for verdicts. These were, in turn, validated in Moscow by Yezhov and Vyshinsky.

The official end of operations was November 17, 1938. The Central Committee of the Party and the government (Sovnarkom) of the USSR issued a text condemning the “defects and perversions” of the action of the NKVD during the years 1937-1938 and therefore forbade “all sorts of mass operations” and dismantled the troiki and dvoiki. Yezhov, the master of these operations (he entered Stalin’s Kremlin office 278 times during these two years, spending a total of 833 hours and 45 minutes there) was crushed by the end of 1938. He had been forced to accept a nomination as People’s Commissar for Water Transportation in April 1938 and resigned from his job in the NKVD on November 23, 1938. He was arrested on April 10, 1939 and shot on February 6, 1940. In the wake of his fall and of the nomination of L. P. Beria as People’s Commissar for Internal Affairs, most of the cadres of the NKVD were also purged.

The precise end result of these operations is difficult to establish, but the total of the condemnations is estimated at roughly 1,300,000 of which 700,000 were sentenced to death, most of the others were sentenced to ten years in the camps (document translated in Werth, 2006: 143). The national operations were far more violent as three quarters of those arrested were sentenced to death. For order 00447, the proportion of those executed was “only” one in two.

B- Decision-Makers, Organizers and Actors

Local (district) divisions of the NKVD were the first stop in the process of repression during the “mass operations”. People arrested were brought into these headquarters where they were interrogated and tortured until they signed full confessions (see Vatlin, 2004 for a thorough description of their work). Once the dela (cases) were closed and the culpability of the arrested considered proved, the files were transmitted to the so-called troiki and dvoiki, who pronounced the verdicts in the absence of the accused. As M. Semenov, head of a militia’s troika later testified, “during an evening, we used to go through up to 500 files, and to pronounce verdicts for several people in a minute” (Golovkova, 2004).

The composition of the troika for the Moscow region was validated by the Politburo, alongside quotas for arrest, on July 10, 1937. The three officials were Stanislav Frantsevich Redens [1] (NKVD), Konstantin Maslov (prosecutor), and Nikita Khrushchev (who was sometimes replaced by Volkov). Redens was later (from January 20, 1938) to be replaced by Leonid Zakovsky [2] who came from Leningrad. Zakovsky headed the Moscow regional NKVD for two months: from January 20 to March 28, 1938. During that time, 4,975 persons were shot (i.e. almost 24% of the total population) in the Butovo Shooting range. The same people were members of the dvoika for the Moscow region. The successive heads of the troika were Vassili Karutsky (who committed suicide in May 1938), Vladimir Tsesarsky and Alexander Zhurbenko.

It was to be hard enough discovering where the killings actually took place in Moscow City and the surrounding region during the Great Terror as none of the official acts indicated the place of implementation. At the end of the 1980s, following the publication of two texts by the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR and the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR called “On additional means of restoration of fairness to the victims of repression, that
took place during the 1930s, the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s", under pressure from individuals and social organizations such as Memorial, the Soviet authorities began to look for these places. The former Ministry of Security (MB) ordered a thorough investigation that, thanks to the testimonies of former NKVD officials on retirement, led to the Butovo shooting range, a former stud farm that belonged to a Moscow landlord, Ivan Leontievich Zimin, before the NKVD took control of it at the beginning of the 1930s.

During the elaboration of operational orders 00447, it was clearly required that regional sections of the NKVD find special and secret places where the verdicts were to be implemented. In the Moscow region, it was the new head of the administrative and economic section of the NKVD, I. Berg, who was charged with finding such places. In the whole region, five places of mass burials of victims of political repression are officially registered (Golovkova, 2004: 5), two of which are in the center of Moscow, the Yauza hospital (used from 1921-1926) and the Vagankov cemetery (1926-1935). The Donskoy crematorium was also used to incinerate the bodies and the ashes were probably also buried there. During the Great Terror, the two known places are Butovo and, not far away from there, Komunarka, where the most important political prisoners where shot (Bukharin, for example).

The reality of Butovo as a place of mass burials was duly established by partial excavations carried out during the summer of 1997 (Golovkova, 1999: 5-16). Nevertheless, they could not establish with absolute certainty that Butovo was the place of execution as medical experts were only able to establish that the corpses were thrown into the graves “either immediately after their death, either from 8 to 10 hours after” (Golovkova, 1999: 14). Furthermore, a few of the orders implementing the acts mention that some executions would take place in Moscow prisons such as Butyrka.

The technology of mass killings is mostly unknown. The executions took place in strict secrecy, vigilantly maintained for years after. The limited extent of the forensic searches of Butovo nevertheless allowed experts to establish that moats were made with the use of excavators, probably of the Komsomolec type. Some bullets were also found suggesting that people were killed with 7.62mm rounds from “Nagan” type revolvers, TT guns and “Degtyarev” machine guns. This has also been confirmed by archival documentation (Golovkova, 2004: 14).

Most of what we know was found in the files of the perpetrators which were opened when they were charged during the post-Yezhov purges of the NKVD. Most of these testimonies confirm the existence of a “special zone”, although not directly. When people were actually killed is also a question that remains unanswered. On the basis of the implementation acts it is possible to construct a table, as reproduced in most of Butovo’s books of memory (the bloodiest day may have been February 28, 1938 when 562 people were killed). However, it seems at least as likely that executions happened on a more regular basis, and that they were formally regularized only post-factum.

The acts of execution were signed by eight NKVD officials (Golovkova, 2004: 397), who consequently bore the responsibility for the process and organization of the mass murders: M. I. Semenov (August 1937 - June 1938, eleven months), I. Ya Il’in (October 1937 - July 1938, ten months), I. D. Berg (December 1937 - July 1938, eight months), P. I. Ovchinnikov (June - October 1938, five months), A. T. Koryavin (August - September 1937, three months), S. I. Lebedev (August - September 1937, three months), I. I. Shigalev (August - October 1938, three months), S. V. Lozhkin (October - November 1937, two months). Researchers (Golovkova, 2004: 90) working on the Butovo Shooting range were also able to uncover the names of some of the executioners as Petr Maggo and the brothers Shigalev, for example. Golovkova describes them as “not very young, officers, members of the party VKP(b)”, they received only a “first education” and seem to be very affected by their job. Golovkova also notes that they were all decorated for their jobs at the end of 1937. She also insists on the fact that none of them “lived until the old days”.

C- Victims

When working in the archives of the former NKVD, a group of historians and activists were able to construct a list naming 20,761 victims. It is difficult to be certain that they are all the victims of
Butovo, first of all for the reasons mentioned above (places of execution are not mentioned on the official acts), but also because some of the files may have been destroyed (Golovkova, 2003: 311).

One stunning characteristic is the fact that the victims were overwhelmingly male, 19,903 out of 20,761 (95.86%). Despite operational order 00486 of August 15, 1937 requiring that wives and family members of “enemies of the people” had to be arrested and were frequently deported (Werth, 2006: 30-31). Actually, the task of studying the gender aspects and consequences of the Great Terror in detail remains. The great majority of the victims were between 25 and 50 years old (i.e. their dates of birth are between 1887 and 1912), but there were also 18 persons older than 75 and 10 of those executed were 15 years old and younger. (Golovkova, 2003: 302)

A more detailed study of the victims of Butovo allows us to understand why the Great Terror has to be understood in far broader terms than it used to be when it was described as simply the repression of political and social elites. Most of the victims of Butovo were actually simple soviet citizens, sometimes already on the margins of society: more than 85% of the victims were not members of the party (13,043 out of 15,101 for whom this information is provided). The bulk of those executed whose occupation is provided (15,269) were workers, then functionaries and peasants (6,944, or 45.4%). Some 923 of those targeted were even designated as being “without precise occupation”. Looking at levels of education further confirms these conclusions, more than half of the 15,101 are said to have a “low” level of education (nishchee). (Golovkova, 2003: 302-311)

The victims of Butovo were representative of the victims of the Yezhovshchina as a whole. As they were explicitly targeted by the mass operations, it is not surprising to uncover the relatively high number of national minorities. Persons of more than 60 different nationalities were executed at Butovo (including for example 26 Italians and 162 Hungarians). The bulk of the established non-Russian victims were Latvians (1,325, or 6.38%), Poles (1176, 5.6%), Ukrainians (755, 3.6%) and Germans (649, 3.1%). Jewish people were traditionally distinguished as a nationality in the Soviet Union and accounted for 878 of the victims (4.1%). (Golovkova, 2003: 304)

Whole families were also destroyed by the terror. In some small villages in the Moscow region up to 18 people were arrested. For example, the Presnov family in Krylatskoe was almost entirely killed for having rented a room to a collaborator with the German Embassy (Vatlin, 2004: 169-174). Alexander Vatlin, who studied their fate carefully, establishes that “we can say with no doubt that the majority of the 20,761, lying in the earth of Butovo are peasants or come from peasant families” (Golovkova, 1998: 14).

The dynamics of the Great Terror led to an increasing range of possible victims. The first to fall were people already monitored by the NKVD and who had files under their names, the operational order was clearly aimed at these “former people” (byvshie lyudi), and they were relatively easy to spot. Priests and religious observers undoubtedly belonged to this category, but there were also former political activists, former aristocrats (the former President of the State Duma F. Golovin was shot on December 10, 1937, so was the former Governor of Moscow V. Dzhunkovski). But once these “former people” were arrested, the continuing development of the operations demanded increasing arrests. P. Tikhachev testified how in 1937 he was sent during the daytime to check the house books (where all the inhabitants were written down) of the Moscow houses and to note the addresses with foreign names in them. The following night these people were arrested (Golovkova, 1999: 348).

Two of these “groups at risk” deserve to be take particular notice of: almost 10 per cent of the victims (1,996 or 9.6%) also came from the Dmitlag, a system of Gulag camps dedicated to building the Moscow-Volga canal. After the arrest of Yagoda, former head of the NKVD, and especially after the inauguration of the Canal (on July 15, 1937), the mass character of arrests became conspicuous as if “the direction took into consideration the fact that during the dismantling of the camp it was less expensive and easier to get rid of some ‘human ballast’ than to send them to other camps” (Golovkova, 1998: 40).

Another of the peculiarities of Butovo is that 935 of the victims were killed for their religious faith, (304 of them had been sanctified by the Russian Orthodox Church in the previous few years). Most of them were simple priests, but there were also some monks and even high-ranking hierarchs such as Archbishop Serafim, the Metropolitan of Leningrad. He was shot on December 12, 1937, almost an
invalid, he was killed on a stretcher. This relatively high number of religious victims was going to be very important for the future of Butovo, where the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is now playing a major role. (Rousselet, 2007; Nérard, 2008)

D- Witnesses

As the main characteristic of the Great Terror was its absolute secrecy, there were almost no witnesses to the mass killings which took place. The Shooting range was closed to all kinds of curious outsiders by a high wooden fence, still in place today. Testimonies of people living in the neighborhood are scarce. The MB even kept the names of the three men who were allowed to explore the Butovo Shooting range at the beginning of the 1990s secret. The only witnesses and therefore our main sources of information were the perpetrators themselves as they were forced to testify during the following purges against them, following the fall of Nikolai Yezhov. It goes without saying that these documents should be the subject of historical criticism.

E- Memories

Butovo was rediscovered at the beginning of the 1990s. The first people returned to Butovo on June 7, 1993 at a time when Russian society, hit by the economic crisis, was already losing interested in its Stalinist past. On October 10, 1993 a sober plaque of rose granite was inaugurated, prepared by activists with the help of sponsors, it was authorized by a formal decision of the Moscow City government. The text was neutral: “In this place of the Butovo shooting range, several thousands of people were, in 1937-1938, shot in secret and buried. May their memory be eternal.”

Eventually, it was the presence of orthodox hierarchs among the victims that played a crucial role in the memorialization of Butovo. Alerted by the granddaughter of Serafim, Alexis II, the then Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch expressed his interest in Butovo and the desire to pray there for the victims. For his visit (that he was actually forced to cancel), a wooden cross was erected and blessed in 1994 in the presence of the Mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov. An orthodox community organized by some relatives of the victims began to build a church that was actually inaugurated next to the North-Western entrance of the Shooting range in 1996. The lack of interest shown by the political authorities, and on the part of Russian civil society, led to the territory of the Shooting range being given to the ROC in 1995 for “exploitation without limits”.

A decisive intervention in 1996 by the Patriarch and the Moscow Mayor stopped the proposed construction of residential buildings, which had already begun in the nearest neighborhood of the former place of executions. This marked the definite involvement of the Church in Butovo. From that moment on, the ROC played an essential role in constructing the Shooting range as a place of memory and in telling the memory of Butovo.

From this point Butovo was galvanized and organized. Most of the material support was provided by Moscow City. The eight-volume books of memory, including scientific articles and a list of all the victims of Butovo, with a brief biography of each one, were published with Moscow City money. In 1998, it was with the same source of funding that the road between the former Shooting range and the nearest highway Varshavskoe shosse had been renovated. A shuttle bus, linking the Polygon with the nearest metro station has also been organized with Moscow City funding. Furthermore, in 2005-2006, the site of the Shooting range was totally reconstructed: soil has been drained, some trails have been developed to allow easier access on foot, lawns have been maintained and tumuli have been elevated on the places of established mass graves.

Nevertheless, the public authorities remain in the background: it is the ROC, the orthodox community of Butovo and the Butovo Memorial Center, a center for “scientific memory” headed by Igor Garkavy and created in 1992, that are staging the memory of Butovo. They are producing what
may be referred to as a universal discourse within an orthodox frame.

The site itself is, at first glance, almost an empty semantic space. It seems to be (and is for the most part) a natural space for meditation and the expression of grief. Actually, there are very few signs, but they all lead to a sort of univocal interpretation of Butovo: the history of Butovo is only explained on two panels, next to the entrance. The only commemorative signs are the first plaque erected in 1993, the cross and the wooden church, and the list of the 935 victims killed for their faith, but no mention of the other 19,826 victims (with the exception of two plaques: one for the Korean and the other for the Hungarian victims, but they are very hard to notice). The building of a large stone church a few meters away from Butovo reinforces this feeling.

This discourse, made of concrete signs, is also complemented by an intellectual construction. Whereas the crucial role of the ROC is always mentioned, it is made clear that Butovo is the place of a “national catastrophe”. All officials in Butovo speak relatively open-mindedly, especially with respect to other religions, they always remind visitors of the execution of Jewish, Muslim and others at Butovo. All the orthodox signs on the Butovo Shooting range are mainly interpreted as a manifestation of national tradition (that goes far beyond a narrow expression of orthodox domination). Several texts thus recall the importance of traditions as the “churches-on-the-blood” in Russian history or mass graves as they were used in medieval Russia (Garkavyj, 2006). The final layer of this discourse is about constructing Butovo as a Russian Golgotha, a symbol of the tragic history of the ROC during the twentieth century (Rousselet, 2007).

This orthodox discourse in and on Butovo was a source of violent conflicts, particularly between the church and the first activists at the origin of the rediscovery of Butovo. This was especially so in the case of Mikhail Mindlin, a former prisoner of the Gulag camps in Kolyma, described as the man “thanks to whom Butovo became known” by the priest of the orthodox community Kiril Kaleda. Other associations, such as Memorial, do not accept this version. One of its harshest critics is Natalia Ogorodnik of the association “Memoria Pamjat”. She strongly contests the idea of the Russian Golgotha, arguing that people were not shot there but in Moscow. For her, it is only a mass grave. They deny the right of the Orthodox Church to speak in the name of all (Rousselet, 2008).

Whereas the conflict was and still is occasionally harsh, it has to be noted that the place of Butovo in the national memory is not as important as it might have been. The history of the Stalinist regime is becoming a blurred one in Russian social memory, Butovo is hardly known in Russia. With the notable exception of the religious celebrations held by the Patriarch every year, the visits to and interest in Butovo is very low. The place is often empty and there are few visits by school children. The visit of the then president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, accompanied by the Patriarch on October 30, 2007 may yet change this, but the status and knowledge of Butovo in Russian society is still very weak.

F- General and Legal Interpretations of the Facts

The interpretation of the events of the Stalinist Great Terror have long been disputed inside the historical field, there are primarily two opposing schools which dispute the degree of centralization in the process and the role of Stalin. The “totalitarian” school argues that Stalin managed a carefully planned extermination of the old-Bolsheviks: the murder of Kirov on December 1, 1934 was its first event and the Moscow show trials its climax. Robert Conquest and his foundational book, The Great Terror: Stalin’s purges of the 1930s is the best example of such works (Conquest, 1973). On the other side, scholars such as John Arch Getty, author of Origins of the Great Purges, belong to the “revisionist school”, arguing that the roots of the Great Terror are to be found in the autonomy of the regional elites and the fact that the repression spiraled out of control (Getty, 1985). Getty also insists that there existed divisions between Soviet officials between hard-liners and partisans of a softer nature.

Both these interpretations have been fundamentally challenged since the opening of the archives. Scholars now insist on the hidden side of the Great Terror, interpreting it as a moment of “social
engineering” (Werth, 2006). These global interpretations are not really challenged in the historical field and the Great Terror seems not to be as hot an issue as other disputed events, the Famine in Ukraine and the Soviet Union, 1932-33, for instance.

Nevertheless, some historians, even if sources are not freely available, are still working on the history of the Great Terror, but their efforts are now concentrated on the establishment of the mechanisms of the Great Terror, the way it was really organized, the way the quotas were established, the way the arrests were conducted. If the central role of Stalin and Yezhov as organizers seems to be well documented, the way the Terror was orchestrated at the regional and local levels remains unknown.

Butovo’s case nevertheless poses an intense problem: that of the tensions in the articulation between particular communities, discourses and historical works. The interaction of historians and activists is characteristic of Butovo. The works on the memory of Butovo were a remarkable opportunity for the expansion of historical knowledge. The archives of the repression, the personal files of the victims, these previously unavailable archives were opened to researchers for the establishment of the books of memories. Some historians took the opportunity to combine their political and social commitments by revealing the names of victims of the Stalinist Terror, as well as to write history. In Butovo’s books of memory, alongside articles of commemoration and popularization, one can find articles written by professional historians on different aspects of the Great Terror in Butovo. Alexander Vatlin even published a short monograph based on these materials on the Terror in the Kunstevo district near Moscow (Vatlin, 2004). The use of history to legitimate the presence of the ROC is another aspect of this interlacing as may be shown in the works by Igor Garkavy on the “Churches-on-the-blood” (Garkavy, 2006) or by the organization of numerous conferences by the Butovo Memorial Center on the traditions of mass burials in Russia (Nérard, 2008; Rousselet, 2007).

The almost total absence of historical presentation at the site of Butovo (with the recent exception of a small museum opened in the grounds of the newly-built stone church) proposes a totally different approach towards the past than, for instance, in Oradour-sur-Glane (France) where people have to go through the museum in order to enter the village.

Finally, the relative importance of the historic discourse in the interpretation of the Great Terror in Butovo and in Russia in years to come is still an open question.

G- Bibliography

Articles


Books


JUNGE, Marc, BINNER, Rolf STEPANOV, A., 2003, *Kak terror stal 'bol' shim': sekretnyj prikaz no. 00447 i tekhnologija ego ispolnenenija*, [How the terror became 'great': secret order n° 00447 and the technology of its implementation], Moscow: AIRO-XX.


Book Chapters


Translated into English


Websites

Website of the Butovo Center: https://martyr.ru/ [3]

Website of the association in conflict with the ROC and its presence in Butovo: http://www.memoria-pamyat.ru


More