

Revelations from the Soviet Archives: Internal Workings of the Soviet Union (Library of Congress)

The following materials on life in the Soviet Union—chronicling reports on agriculture and instructions to and from various members of the Soviet leadership—are drawn from a recent exhibit of this name created by the Library of Congress.¹ All materials, except where underlined, come directly from the LoC.

“Letter to Bolshevik” [on life in a gulag. December 14, 1926].

To the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the All-Union Communist Party

We appeal to you, asking you to pay a minimum of attention to our request.

We are prisoners who are returning from the Solovetsky concentration camp because of our poor health. We went there full of energy and good health, and now we are returning as invalids, broken and crippled emotionally and physically. We are asking you to draw your attention to the arbitrary use of power and the violence that reign at the Solovetsky concentration camp in Kemi and in all sections of the concentration camp. It is difficult for a human being even to imagine such terror, tyranny, violence, and lawlessness. When we went there, we could not conceive of such a horror, and now we, crippled ourselves, together with several thousands who are still there, appeal to the ruling center of the Soviet state to curb the terror that reigns there. As though it weren't enough that the Unified State Political Directorate [OGPU] without oversight and due process sends workers and peasants there who are by and large innocent (we are not talking about criminals who deserve to be punished), the former tsarist penal servitude system in comparison to Solovky had 99% more humanity, fairness, and legality. [...]

People die like flies, i.e., they die a slow and painful death; we repeat that all this torment and suffering is placed only on the shoulders of the proletariat without money, i.e., on workers who, we repeat, were unfortunate to find themselves in the period of hunger and destruction accompanying the events of the October Revolution, and who committed crimes only to save themselves and their families from death by starvation; they have already borne the punishment for these crimes, and the vast majority of them subsequently chose the path of honest labor....

If you complain or write anything ("Heaven forbid"), they will frame you for an attempted escape or for something else, and they will shoot you like a dog. They line us up naked and barefoot at 22 degrees below zero and keep us outside for up to an hour. It is difficult to describe all the chaos and terror that is going on in Kemi, Solovky, and the other sections of the concentrations camp. All annual inspections uncover a lot of abuses. But what they discover in comparison to what actually exists is only a part of the horror and abuse of power, which the inspection accidentally uncovers. (One example is the following fact, one of a thousand, which is registered in GPU and for which the guilty have been punished: THEY FORCED THE INMATES TO EAT THEIR OWN FECES. [. . .])

¹ <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html#secr>

We are sure and we hope that in the All-Union Communist Party there are people, as we have been told, who are humane and sympathetic; it is possible, that you might think that it is our imagination, but we swear to you all, by everything that is sacred to us, that this is only one small part of the nightmarish truth, because it makes no sense to make this up. We repeat, and will repeat 100 times, that yes, indeed there are some guilty people, but the majority suffer innocently, as is described above. The word law, according to the law of the GPU concentration camps, does not exist; what does exist is only the autocratic power of petty tyrants, i.e., collaborators, serving time, who have power over life and death. ...

Letter of April 9, 1932, from Feigin to Ordzhonikidze (a close friend of Stalin's), about conditions on the Kolkhozes (collective farms)

Dear Sergo [Ordzhonikidze],

.... I have driven around several collective farms [kolkhozes] ...but everywhere there was only one sight—that of a huge shortage of seed, famine, and extreme emaciation of livestock....I think we should undertake all measures to increase private ownership of livestock by the kolkhoznik or else there is no way out of the present periodic shortage of products.

...The situation is such that there is not enough seed in the kolkhozes. There is no way that we will be able to fulfill the plan for grain production, and the shortfall ...will probably be 15-20 percent. Besides this, horses are quite emaciated, a significant number of them have already died, and in addition, the people do not have provisions.

....—[T]he peasant's attitude.... is utterly bad in light of the famine and the fact that they are losing their last cows through contracting--as a result the kolkhoznik has neither bread nor milk. I saw all this with my own eyes and am not exaggerating. People are starving, living on food substitutes, they grow weaker, and naturally, under such circumstances, their mood is hostile. I have not seen such an attitude as is now found in the villages, due to famine and the loss of the last cows and sheep through contracting, in a long time. I will inform you of the facts that substantiate this when we meet. Upon arriving in Moscow, I will try to see Stalin and inform him, or if he cannot spare the time, I will write him a letter.

It seems that you told me in 1926-27 when the opposition was making quite furious attacks on the Central Committee that Stalin sees farther than the rest of you. This is undoubtedly so and was substantiated during the period from 1923 on and especially since the establishment of the five-year plan. But in order for him to see beyond everyone, one must, with absolute objectivity, relate to him those facts which are based on reality. I will attempt to do this upon my arrival in Moscow, and I will tell him what I have seen with my own eyes. Maybe I am drawing incorrect conclusions, but I acquainted myself thoroughly with the factual situation and it seems to me that it is utterly imperative that Stalin take up this matter.

Take care. Feigin

....At the same time I am sending you the doctor's statement on the famine in peasant families and in turn I corroborate that I observed a similar situation.

Dr. Kiselev's memorandum of March 25, 1932, about those conditions.

TO THE HEAD OF THE WESTERN SIBERIA REGIONAL BOARD OF HEALTH Comrade TRAKMAN.

Copy to POKROV REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE ALL-UNION COMMUNIST PARTY (Bolsheviks), REGIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE and RUSSIAN COMMUNIST LEAGUE

...From my observation of 20 homes ..., I found only in one home, that of a Red Army veteran, a relative condition of nourishment, some flour and bread, but the rest subsist on food substitutes. Almost in every home either children or mothers were ill, undoubtedly due to starvation, since their faces and entire bodies were swollen.

An especially horrible picture of the following families: 1) The family of Konstantin Sidel'nikov who had gone to trade his wife's remaining shirts, skirts, and scarves for bread. The wife lay ill, having given birth 5 days earlier, and 4 very small children as pale as wax with swollen cheeks sat at the filthy table like marmots, and with spoons ate, from a common cup, hot water into which had been added from a bottle a white liquid of questionable taste and sour smell, which turned out to be skim milk (the result of passing milk through a separator). Konstantin Sidel'nikov and his wife are excellent kolkhozniks—prime workers, experienced kolkhozniks.

2) Iakov Sidel'nikov has 2 children and elderly parents, both 70, living in one room, but they eat separately; that is, the elderly obtain their own food substitutes with their savings; the son, Iakov Sidel'nikov, with his own; they hide their food substitutes from each other outside....). The elderly in tears ask: "Doctor, give us death!"

3) Filipp Borodin [‘s] wife lies ill on the oven, 3 children sit on the oven, they are as pale as wax with swollen faces, the one-and-a-half year old sits pale by the window, swollen, the 9 year old lies ill on the earthen floor covered with rags, and Filipp Borodin himself sits on a bench and continuously smokes cigarettes made of repulsively pungent tobacco, cries like a babe, asks death for his children.

....two days ago he and his family ate two sickly piglets thrown out of the common farmyard. ... Borodin swears at the children: "The devils don't die, I wish I didn't have to look at you!" Having objectively investigated the condition of Borodin himself I ascertain that he (Borodin) is starting to slip into psychosis due to starvation, which can lead to his eating his own children.

.... in several homes (2) on the table there were gnawed bones from a sickly horse. According to the explanations of the kolkhozniks, they themselves prepare food in the following manner: they grind sunflower stems, flax and hemp seeds, chaff, dreg, colza, goosefoot, and dried potato peelings, and they bake flat cakes.

In reporting the above-related to the Pokrov Regional Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), Regional Executive Committee, Russian Communist League, and to you, as

the regional health inspector and doctor of the Pokrov region, I beg of you to undertake immediate measures to help the starving and to notify me of the practical measures taken....

Regional health inspector—doctor—KISELEV

The next document is an order from Lenin to communists in Penza, August 11, 1918, demanding that they publicly hang at least 100 kulaks and confiscate their grain, to set an example.

...To Comrades Kuraev, Bosh, Minkin and other Penza communists

Comrades! The revolt by the five kulak volost's must be suppressed without mercy. The interest of the entire revolution demands this, because we have now before us our final decisive battle "with the kulaks." We need to set an example.

1. You need to hang (hang without fail, so that the public sees) at least 100 notorious kulaks, the rich, and the bloodsuckers.
2. Publish their names.
3. Take away all of their grain.
4. Execute the hostages - in accordance with yesterday's telegram.

This needs to be accomplished in such a way, that people for hundreds of miles around will see, tremble, know and scream out: let's choke and strangle those blood-sucking kulaks.

P.S. Use your toughest people for this.

TRANSLATOR'S COMMENTS: Lenin uses the derogative term kulach'e in reference to the class of prosperous peasants. A volost' was a territorial/administrative unit consisting of a few villages and surrounding land.

[The following undated letter to Stalin from Maxim Gorky, a Soviet writer, discusses necessary cultural changes]

...It is furthermore imperative to put the propaganda of atheism on solid ground. You won't achieve much with the weapons of Marx and materialism, as we have seen. Materialism and religion are two different planes and they don't coincide. If a fool speaks from the heavens and the sage from a factory—they won't understand one another. The sage needs to hit the fool with his stick, with his weapon.

For this reason, there should be courses set up at the Communist Academy which would not only treat the history of religion, and mainly the history of the Christian church, i.e., the study of church history as politics.

We need to know the "fathers of the church," the apologists of Christianity, especially indispensable to the study of the history of Catholicism, the most powerful and intellectual

church organization whose political significance is quite clear. We need to know the history of church schisms, heresies, the Inquisition, the "religious" wars, etc. Every quotation by a believer is easily countered with dozens of theological quotations which contradict it.

We cannot do without an edition of the "Bible" with critical commentaries from the Tubingen school and books on criticism of biblical texts, which could bring a very useful "confusion into the minds" of believers...

Our youth is very poorly informed on questions of this nature. The "tendency" toward a religious disposition is very noticeable—a natural result of developing individualism. At this time, as always, the young are in a hurry to find "the definitive answer."

Here is a letter of March 19, 1922, from Lenin via Molotov to members of the Politburo, outlining a brutal plan of action against the "Black Hundreds" clergy and their followers, who were defying the government decree to remove church valuables (purported by the government to be used to fund famine relief). Lenin proposed the arrest and quick trial of the insurrectionists in Shuia, followed by a ruthless campaign to shoot a large number of the reactionary clergy and bourgeoisie and urged that removal of valuables from the richest churches and monasteries be finished quickly.

Copy To Comrade Molotov. Top Secret. For members of the Politburo. Please make no copies for any reason. Each member of the Politburo (incl. Comrade Kalinin) should comment directly on the document. Lenin.

... We must pursue the removal of church property by any means necessary in order to secure for ourselves a fund of several hundred million gold rubles... we must do whatever is necessary. But to do this successfully is possible only now. All considerations indicate that later on we will fail to do this, for no other time, besides that of desperate famine, will give us such a mood among the general mass of peasants that would ensure us the sympathy of this group...

the Politburo will give a detailed directive to the judicial authorities, also verbal, that the trial of the insurrectionists from Shuia, for opposing aid to the starving, should be carried out in utmost haste and should end not other than with the shooting of the very largest number of the most influential and dangerous of the Black Hundreds...

I think that it is advisable for us not to touch Patriarch Tikhon himself, even though he undoubtedly headed this whole revolt of slave-holders. Concerning him, the State Political Administration [GPU] must be given a secret directive that precisely at this time all communications of this personage must be monitored and their contents disclosed in all possible accuracy and detail. ...

... the removal of property of value, especially from the very richest lauras, monasteries, and churches, must be carried out with ruthless resolution, leaving nothing in doubt, and in the very shortest time. The greater the number of representatives of the reactionary clergy and the reactionary bourgeoisie that we succeed in shooting on this occasion, the better because this

"audience" must precisely now be taught a lesson in such a way that they will not dare to think about any resistance whatsoever for several decades.

Lenin.

Letter from Lenin to Gorky, Sept. 15, 1919

What a tragedy, you're thinking! What an injustice! Intellectuals in prison for several days or even weeks just to prevent the massacre of tens of thousands of workers and peasants!

...The intellectual forces of the workers and peasants are growing and getting stronger in their fight to overthrow the bourgeoisie and their accomplices, the educated classes, the lackeys of capital, who consider themselves the brains of the nation. In fact they are not its brains but its shit.

I told you, "You let yourself be surrounded by the worst elements of the bourgeois intelligentsia , and you give in to their whining. You hear and listen to the wail of hundreds of intellectuals about their "terrible" incarceration lasting several weeks, but you do not hear or listen to the voices of the masses...."

Best regards, [signed] Yours, Lenin.

The death toll from the 1932-33 famine in Ukraine has been estimated between six million and seven million. According to a Soviet author, "Before they died, people often lost their senses and ceased to be human beings." Yet one of Stalin's lieutenants in Ukraine stated in 1933 that the famine was a great success. It showed the peasants "who is the master here. It cost millions of lives, but the collective farm system is here to stay."

RESOLUTION OF THE COUNCIL OF PEOPLE'S COMMISSARS OF THE UKRAINIAN SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLIC AND OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY (BOLSHEVIK) OF UKRAINE ON BLACKLISTING VILLAGES THAT MALICIOUSLY SABOTAGE THE COLLECTION OF GRAIN.

In view of the shameful collapse of grain collection in the more remote regions of Ukraine, the Council of People's Commissars and the Central Committee call upon the oblast executive committees... to break up the sabotage of grain collection, which has been organized by kulak and counterrevolutionary elements; to liquidate the resistance of some of the rural communists, who in fact have become the leaders of the sabotage; to eliminate the passivity and complacency toward the saboteurs, incompatible with being a party member; and to ensure, with maximum speed, full and absolute compliance with the plan for grain collection.

SECRETARY OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY
(BOLSHEVIK) OF UKRAINE - S. KOSIOR.

6 December 1932.