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# POWs and Purge Victims: Attitudes Towards Party Rehabilitation, 1956–57

MIRIAM DOBSON

IN 1954, Sophia Spitz initiated a correspondence with her former colleague, the leading Old Bolshevik, Elena Stasova.<sup>1</sup> A German Communist, Spitz had arrived in Moscow in 1934 and worked with Stasova, until a false denunciation in 1937 led to five years of exile in Kazakhstan. Rehabilitated as early as 1953, she asked for Stasova's help in navigating the red tape that prevented her from drawing a personal pension. From her letters, it seems Spitz's life after legal rehabilitation was still arduous, lonely and isolated. Increasingly, Spitz came to believe that reinstatement into the party was the only way her life would have meaning once more.

In the autumn of 1955 she excitedly announced to Stasova that she had written to the Central Committee (CC): 'I want to tell you that I can't stand by on the sidelines any more. I must be in the party once more and again bear the distinguished title of member of the Communist Party.'<sup>2</sup> Worried that Stasova might question her delay in addressing the party, Spitz explained in detail the emotional distress she had experienced over the last few months, especially as legal rehabilitation had brought on a nervous breakdown, the result of years of extreme stress. She wrote:

For nineteen years my soul has burnt. And then when salvation came, the organism didn't hold out, and I found myself in hospital. The spiritual death-throes have passed [*dushevnaia agoniia otoshla*], and now I want to live and with all my strength to catch up with everything that I lost, with all my soul and burning love to deserve the title of member of the party, our dear [*rodnoi*] party.

Spitz presented her story of exile and rehabilitation as one of death and rebirth, in which full resurrection could only happen with the party's

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<sup>1</sup> The correspondence began when Spitz asked Stasova for information concerning her employment in the 1930s which the authorities required to assess her pension. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (hereafter, RGASPI), f. 356 (E. D. Stasova, 1887–1973), op. 2, d. 41 (Correspondence with S. E. Spitz).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 6.

re-acceptance. In all this, she cast Stasova as her confessor. ‘Elena Dmitrevna!’, she wrote, ‘Please forgive me for writing so much, and forcing you to read what is in my soul.’<sup>3</sup>

Spitz thus voluntarily re-entered the rituals that gripped the party in the 1920s and 1930s. She urged Stasova to collaborate in what Igal Halfin has labelled the ‘communist hermeneutics of the soul’, and by which he means ‘the complex ritual of words and deeds that permitted the Party to determine who was worthy to belong to the brotherhood of the elect’.<sup>4</sup> Spitz was not alone in wanting such rituals renewed (this time leading to re-admission to the brotherhood instead of expulsion).<sup>5</sup> The sister of Ia. B. Gamarnik wrote to Khrushchev in 1954 asking for the party to re-examine not just the case itself, but her whole being (for she too was a victim of repression): ‘I understand that anything written by me cannot serve as evidence, but I know that you are able to verify my whole life [*proverka vseï moei zhizni*], and it is this that I’m begging you to do.’<sup>6</sup> Rather than fearing re-trials and renewed interrogation, several petitioners implored the authorities to recall them, and to read their souls — to borrow another purge victim’s terms — ‘in the light of truth’ (*v svete pravdy*).<sup>7</sup>

In the wake of Stalin’s death, they had reason to be hopeful. Recognizing that order in the Gulag was increasingly difficult and costly to maintain, several members of the ruling elite were keen to inject dynamism back into Soviet system, and the task of downsizing the massive Gulag complex began by the end of March 1953.<sup>8</sup> This process of sifting the camp population brought to the regime’s attention

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial*, Cambridge, MA, 2003, p. 7. See also, Michel Foucault, ‘About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth’, *Political Theory*, 21, 1993, 2, pp. 198–227.

<sup>5</sup> Spitz’s return to the party was made yet more difficult by the fact she was a member of the German party. She was told that the only way to be reinstated was to make the journey to Germany, but she was too ill to embark on this, and well into the mid-1960s was still writing petitions asking for party rehabilitation.

<sup>6</sup> Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishchei istorii (hereafter, RGANI), f. 5, op. 47, d. 89, ll. 32–33, reproduced in A. Artizov, Iu. Sigachev, I. Shevchuk, B. Khlopov (eds), *Reabilitatsiia: Kak eto bylo. Dokumenty prezidiuma TsK KPSS i drugie materialy, Mart 1953–fevral’ 1956*, Moscow, 2000, pp. 182–83. This volume also contains a short synopsis of Ia. B. Gamarnik’s life.

<sup>7</sup> Tsentral’nyi arkhiv dokumental’nykh kolleksii Moskvyy, f. 85 (Personal files of N. I. Kochin), op. 1, d. 491, ll. 16.

<sup>8</sup> As Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg Khlevniuk have persuasively demonstrated, by the early 1950s some members of the Politburo had become frustrated with the status quo and were already nurturing plans for how they could improve the running of the country, even though they knew that their ideas could not be put into practice until the leader was dead. They suggest that both Beria and Malenkov were aware that policy shake-up was needed in agriculture and the Gulag, but were impotent faced with Stalin’s opposition to any significant change. Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg Khlevniuk, *Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945–1953*, Oxford, 2004, chapter 5.

many cases of injustice, and this seems to have acted as spur to further investigation and reform; petitions like Spitz's were read at the highest level.<sup>9</sup> The legal rehabilitation of purge victims began as early as 1953, and over 700,000 Soviet citizens convicted of counter-revolutionary crimes were legally rehabilitated by the end of the decade.<sup>10</sup> Legal rehabilitation meant that the person was not only set free (as with the amnesties), but also that the charges laid against them were declared groundless. Party rehabilitation went one step further still. With their party cards returned to them, the repressed saw their reputation fully cleared: they could be Bolshevik heroes once more.

Most had to wait until the 20th Party Congress in February 1956 for party rehabilitation to become a realistic possibility, however. Khrushchev's Secret Speech, delivered on the last night of the congress, projected a radically new image of the purge victims, using letters some of them had written to Stalin from prison. For example, Khrushchev quoted from R. I. Eikhe's letter to Stalin:

If I were guilty of even a hundredth of the crimes they're pinning on me, I wouldn't dare to address this dying letter to you, but I haven't committed a single one of the crimes I am charged with, and there has never been a shadow of baseness on my soul. I have never in my life told you even a half-word of untruth, and now, with one foot in the grave, I am also not lying to you.<sup>11</sup>

With Eikhe's soul presented as clean and pure, Eikhe seemed a martyr about to die for the cause. So too with M. S. Kedrov, whose petition Khrushchev also cited:

To die in a Soviet prison labelled a despicable traitor of his country — what can be more terrible for an honourable person [...] I believe that truth and justice will triumph. I believe, I believe.<sup>12</sup>

Both letters resonated with their authors' courage and faith in the Bolshevik cause and in using them, Khrushchev invited the party

<sup>9</sup> For detailed discussion of the nature of the Gulag returns, see Miriam Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer: Citizens, Zeks, and the Soviet Community after Stalin* (hereafter, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer*) unpublished book manuscript, particularly introduction, chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>10</sup> Between 1954 and 1960, 892,317 counter-revolutionary cases were reconsidered and decisions over-turned and amended. Of these 715,120 were granted full rehabilitation. The documentation does not specify how many of these were posthumous rehabilitations. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (hereafter, GARF) f. 7523, op. 95, d. 109, l. 11. Marc Elie notes that these figures do not include a further 16,849 who had been rehabilitated by the commissions of 1954 and 1956. See Marc Elie, 'Les anciens détenus du Goulag: libérations massives, réinsertion et réhabilitation dans l'URSS poststalinienne, 1953–1964', unpublished PhD dissertation, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, 2007 (hereafter, 'Les anciens détenus du Goulag'), pp. 346–47.

<sup>11</sup> 'O kul'te lichnost i ego posledsvitiakh: Doklad pervogo sekretaria TsK KPSS tov. Khrushcheva XX s'ezdu Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuzu 25 Fevralia 1956 goda', *Doklad N. S. Khrushcheva o kul'te lichnosti Stalina na XX s'ezde KPSS: dokumenty*, Moscow, 2002, pp. 51–119 (p. 75).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

to bask in the heroism and self-sacrifice that they had displayed. Men once vilified as 'enemies of the people' were now lauded as the revolution's true heroes, and the party was likewise heroic in its admission of previous error. As such, these former enemies merited readmission to the Party, albeit in many cases posthumously. In the five years following Khrushchev's Secret Speech, 30,954 Communists were rehabilitated into the party, possibly about three-quarters of them living.<sup>13</sup>

*Ezhovshchina* victims were not, however, the only ones to have suffered under Stalin. In fact over half of the 30,954 people readmitted into the party came from a rather different cohort: they were men who had been taken as prisoners of war by the Germans. Upon repatriation after the war, these men had been treated with an enormous level of suspicion: serviceman, who had either escaped capture by breaking out of encirclement or who had been released from captivity, were investigated by special NKVD camps, and many had to wait years to be allowed home.<sup>14</sup> Of the 1,836,000 Soviet POWs who returned to their homeland, Mark Edele has calculated that 16 to 17 per cent were sent to penal battalions, and a further 16 to 17 per cent found themselves victims of the Gulag system.<sup>15</sup> Whilst this meant that two thirds of former POWs were not explicitly punished, many continued to experience discrimination, including difficulties finding and retaining work. Over a hundred thousand party members were expelled for this reason (though no criminal charges were laid against them).<sup>16</sup> By 1961, 16,223

<sup>13</sup> RGANI, f. 6, op. 6, d. 1165, ll. 1–15, 30–32, 40, reproduced in A. Artizov, Iu. Sigachev, I. Shevchuk, B. Khlopov (eds), *Reabilitatsiia: Kak eto bylo. Fevral' 1956–nachalo 80-kh godov*, Moscow, 2003 (hereafter, *Reabilitatsiia: Kak eto bylo. Fevral' 1956–nachalo 80-kh godov*), pp. 354–65 (p. 355). Documents, including this one, often do not stipulate the proportion of the rehabilitations awarded posthumously. However, records from the Party Control Commission suggest that in Moscow in 1956, forty-five out of 196 party rehabilitations were posthumous. This proportion might, however, not be typical. See RGANI f. 6 (Committee of Party Control), op. 6 (reports, references, verbatim accounts, protocols), d. 6, l. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Pavel Polian, 'The Internment of Returning Soviet Prisoners of War after 1945', in Bob Moore and Barbara Hatley-Broad (eds), *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace: Captivity, Homecoming and Memory in World War II*, Oxford and New York, 2006, pp. 123–40 (p. 126–27).

<sup>15</sup> Mark Edele, 'A "Generation of Victors?" Soviet Second World War Veterans From Demobilization to Organization, 1941–1956', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, 2004 (hereafter, 'A "Generation of Victors?")', pp. 83–90. For similar figures, see also V. P. Naumov and L. E. Reshin, 'Nezakonchennoe srazhenie Marshala Zhukova: O reabilitatsii sovetskikh voennoplennykh, 1954–1956gg.', *Istoricheskii Arkhiv*, 3, 1995, 2, pp. 108–27 (hereafter, 'Nezakonchennoe srazhenie Marshala Zhukova') (p. 108). These figures do not include repatriated civilians, an even bigger contingent that brings the number of returnees from the West to over five million. See also V. N. Zemskov, 'Repatriatsiia sovetskikh grazhdan i ikh dal'neishaia sud'ba (1944–1956 gg.)', *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, 1995, 5, pp. 3–13.

<sup>16</sup> RGANI, f. 6, op. 6, d. 1076, ll. 1–18, 20–22, 29–35, 39, reproduced in Artizov et al., *Reabilitatsiia: Kak eto bylo. Fevral' 1956–nachalo 80-kh godov*, pp. 252–68 (p. 264).

of these men had had their party cards returned.<sup>17</sup> Although they never enjoyed quite the acclaim as the purge victims did in Khrushchev's Secret Speech, the former POWs also saw their status publicly revised. For example, in August 1957, the USSR Supreme Soviet granted the award Hero of the Soviet Union to M. P. Deviatayev, a pilot whose exploits included not only outstanding flying missions and air battles, but also escape from a POW camp.<sup>18</sup> Later, two films extolled the bravery of the POW: the hugely popular 1959 production, *The Destiny of Man*, told of a POW who broke free from Nazi captivity, while Grigorii Chukhrai's 1961 film, *Clear Skies*, also portrayed the discrimination and prejudice its POW-hero received upon returning back home.<sup>19</sup>

In the years 1956 to 1957 party rehabilitation was thus sought by different groups amongst Stalin's outcasts. Although both purge victims and POWs saw their difficulties alleviated by the process of de-Stalinization, their cases were not treated identically. Focusing in particular on one region of the RSFSR, this article traces the process of rehabilitation using the records preserved by the Vladimir *obkom* (the regional party committee).<sup>20</sup> In the wake of the Secret Speech, purge victims were the first to be readmitted to the party in Vladimir, though the courts' decision to overturn a legal sentence was not necessarily a guarantee of successful party rehabilitation. The rehabilitation of POWs followed, but was more equivocal still. This local case-study shows that even if the leadership intended rehabilitation as a means to restore faith in the party and to re-ignite enthusiasm for the revolutionary cause, revisiting the purges and the war often raised difficult questions in the localities.

<sup>17</sup> RGANI, f. 6, op. 6, d. 1165, ll. 1–15, 30–32, 40, reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 354–65 (p. 363).

<sup>18</sup> For the honours awarded to a former POW, see *Pravda*, 17 August 1957, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Both films received positive reviews in the press, though it was *The Destiny of Man* that seemed to touch viewers' hearts the most deeply. It was a huge box-office success, with almost 40 million viewers in 1960. For positive reviews of the films, see *Izvestia*, 22 February 1959, p. 4; *Izvestia*, 8 December 1959, p. 4; *Pravda*, 21 April 1961, p. 6. The figures for viewers are taken from an internal memo from the Cultural Section of the Central Committee reproduced in *Ideologicheskie komissii TsK KPSS. 1958–1964: Dokumenty*, Moscow, 1998, p. 258. For detailed discussion of the films mentioned, see Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw*, New York, 2000, pp. 88–91, 118–121, and Denise J. Youngblood, 'A War Remembered: Soviet Films of the Great Patriotic War', *American Historical Review*, 106, 2001, 3, pp. 839–56. The two films are: *Sud'ba Cheloveka*, directed by Sergei Bondarchuk, 1959, USSR and *Chistoe Nebo*, directed by Grigorii Chukhrai, 1961, USSR.

<sup>20</sup> The files used are in the forms of protocols from the sessions of the Vladimir oblast' *biuro*. As protocols (rather than minutes of the meeting), they do not record the discussions that must have accompanied each case, only the result. However, for each case there is normally over a page of commentary, explaining the person's biography and the reasons for approving or rejecting the plea for rehabilitation.

*Rehabilitation in Vladimir*

By the 1950s Vladimir, located 190 km east of Moscow, was a city of some 150,000 inhabitants. With a large tractor factory built during the war, Vladimir was now a growing industrial centre, as well as the administrative capital of the oblast'.<sup>21</sup> Vladimir makes an interesting focus for an examination of the rehabilitation process, for exile and prison are particularly associated with both city and province. In pre-revolutionary times prisoners sent into Siberian exile travelled from Moscow though Vladimir on a road popularly known as 'Vladimirka', and both before and after 1917, the city housed one of the most significant prisons outside of Moscow.<sup>22</sup> In the Soviet era, moreover, several cities in the oblast' became notorious for their large *ex-zek* populations. Located just over 100km from Moscow, Murom and Aleksandrov housed many former prisoners and social marginals who were forced to reside outside of the capital and its immediate suburbs; both would experience significant unrest during the Khrushchev era.<sup>23</sup>

Many of the tasks facing the Vladimir leaders on a daily basis were, however, the same as for any regional party administration, including matters of discipline within the party ranks. Members of the *biuro* (bureau) of the Vladimir oblast' party organization normally met on a monthly basis to rule on membership questions, including rehabilitations, expulsions and warnings. Before the 20th Party Congress, the Vladimir *biuro* approved relatively few cases of rehabilitation.<sup>24</sup> When the *biuro* met on 24 January 1956, a month before Khrushchev's Secret Speech, the members considered just one case, that of Nikolai M., a sixty-year-old who had been a party member from 1928 until 1940 when he was excluded for violating workplace discipline. In December 1953 he had written a petition to the Party Control Commission (hereafter KPK) asking to be reinstated. The KPK decided that if he had support from the primary organization his request could be approved: in April 1955 a general meeting of all party members at his *kolkhoz* voted in favour of his readmission, as did the local district committee (*raikom*) in December 1955. It was now up to the *biuro* to give the final seal of approval: he was readmitted to the party, though the years in which he had been expelled were not allowed to count towards his

<sup>21</sup> In 1959 the city population was 154,000. See A. M. Prokhorov (ed.), *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia*, 3rd edn., Moscow, 1971.

<sup>22</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps*, London, 2003, p. 484.

<sup>23</sup> Vladimir A. Kozlov, *Mass Uprisings in the USSR: Protest and Rebellion in the Post-Stalin Years*, trans. Elaine McClarnand MacKinnon, Armonk, NY, 2002, pp. 193–214.

<sup>24</sup> In a brief study of party rehabilitation in Kalinin oblast' (now Tver'), Marc Elie found a similar pattern: in 1953, three-quarters of applications for party rehabilitation were rejected, where as four-fifths were approved by 1956. See 'Les anciens détenus du Goulag', p. 379.

party service.<sup>25</sup> Although he was the proud holder of a party-card once more, his record remained blemished.

It was not until two months after the Secret Speech that the pace of rehabilitation began to accelerate. On 18 April 1956, the *biuro* met again, and this time considered the cases of four purge victims who had recently been legally rehabilitated. They heard, for instance, the case of an Old Bolshevik, Marta V., a Latvian worker who had joined the party in 1906. In 1938 the Special Board (Osoboe Soveshchanie) had sentenced her to ten years' imprisonment as a member of an anti-Soviet, nationalist organization devoted to espionage and sabotage. On 6 December 1955 she had been rehabilitated by the legal system, and she was now readmitted to the party, with a break (*pereryv*) marked from 1938 to 1956.<sup>26</sup> The *biuro* also gave party rehabilitation to Fedor S. who had worked as a factory foreman until he was arrested in 1948 for anti-Soviet activity and sentenced to ten years by the Vladimir oblast' court. Now working as a joiner at the same factory, he asked to be readmitted to the party and his petition was approved, again with a break (*pereryv*) marked on his party record.<sup>27</sup> (Ironically, perhaps, the same meeting saw an expulsion in addition to these rehabilitations. Grigorii V., a pensioner who had criticized the Secret Speech, defended Stalin, and called Khrushchev a *kukuruza* (a sardonic reference to 'maize') lost his party card, showing that the process of de-Stalinization did not remove the party's commitment to ensuring ideological conformity within its ranks.<sup>28</sup>)

On 9 May 1956, the CC issued an important instruction regarding rehabilitation: it ruled that when members were readmitted to the party, their membership should date from the first entry into the party and should not in fact record a break (*pereryv*).<sup>29</sup> From June 1956 onwards, the Vladimir *obkom* largely followed this order. The following two years, from mid-1956 to mid-1958, would prove to be the most active in terms of party rehabilitation.<sup>30</sup> In this period, many *Ezhovshchina* victims were readmitted to the party, some posthumously, often on the request of a wife, others as a result of their own petitions.<sup>31</sup> In all such cases, party service was counted from the date of first entry into the party.

<sup>25</sup> Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Vladimirskoi oblasti (hereafter, GAVO), f. p-830 (Vladimir obkom), op. 3, d. 148 (Protocols of the *biuro* sessions), l. 54.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 273.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 303.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 276.

<sup>29</sup> RGANI, f. 3, op. 14, d. 22, l. 126, reproduced in Artizov et al., *Reabilitatsiia: Kak eto bylo. Fevral' 1956-nachalo 80-kh godov*, p. 86.

<sup>30</sup> The pace of rehabilitation noticeably slows by the second half of 1958 and by the beginning of 1960 there would be months when no rehabilitation cases at all were considered. See GAVO, f. p-830, op. 3, dd. 387, 389, 515, 638.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, d. 269, ll. 42–48.



In the first few months after the Secret Speech those being rehabilitated were mostly victims of the waves of repressions that hit the country in 1936 to 1938 and 1948 to 1949, but as already indicated these were not the only ones affected by the process of de-Stalinization. In April the CC created a commission headed by Marshal Zhukov to study the issue of POWs.<sup>32</sup> Two months later, the commission reported on its finding, stating:

Soviet fighters who were taken prisoner maintained their loyalty to the motherland, behaved courageously and staunchly bore all the burdens of captivity and the Hitlerites' scorn. Risking their lives, many of them escaped from captivity and joined partisan forces to fight the enemy, or broke back through the frontline to join Soviet forces.

The document stated that to be taken prisoner was not a crime and their treatment a 'gross violation of Soviet legality' and 'massive arbitrariness'. The de-Stalinizing rhetoric of the Secret Speech was thus extended to include wartime injustices. The commission not only proposed extending an earlier amnesty to allow the release of former servicemen still serving sentences for surrender to the Germans, but also called for a review of cases with a view to legally rehabilitating those whose surrender had been unavoidable. Party organizations, soviets and workplaces were urged to end discrimination and to ensure that former POWs be given work according to their speciality and allowed to enrol at universities and colleges. The commission wanted the Minister of Culture and Minister of Defence to be charged with preparing books, brochures, films, newspaper articles and plays depicting the heroic feats of people who had been taken prisoner and bravely escaped to join the partisans. In terms of party rehabilitation the report was also significant: party *obkoms* were to review cases in which POWs had been expelled from the party.<sup>33</sup> The commission's proposals were brought into force by a CC decree of 29 June 1956.<sup>34</sup>

It was a further six months before the Vladimir *biuro* would hear its first POW case. In December 1956 the *biuro* awarded rehabilitation to a soldier captured by the Germans in World War Two, though — in contrast to purge victims — it still recorded a break in the man's party record.<sup>35</sup> Over the following months there would be many

<sup>32</sup> APRF, f. 3, op. 50, d. 510, l. 10, reproduced in Artizov et al., *Reabilitatsiia: Kak eto bylo. Fevral' 1956–nachalo 80-kh godov*, p. 73.

<sup>33</sup> For a full list of the commission's recommendations, see APRF, f. 3, op. 50, d. 511, ll. 23–43, reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 114–18. For thoughtful reflection on the limitations of the commission's proposals, see V. P. Naumov, 'Sud'ba voennoplennykh i deportirovannykh grazhdan SSSR. Materialy komissii po reabilitatsii zherty politicheskikh repressii', *Noviaia i noveishaia istoriia*, 1996, 2, pp. 91–112.

<sup>34</sup> RGANI, f. 3, op. 14, d. 37, ll. 4, 60–65, reproduced in Artizov et al., *Reabilitatsiia: Kak eto bylo. Fevral' 1956–nachalo 80-kh godov*, pp. 129–32.

<sup>35</sup> GAVO, f. p-830, op. 3, d. 150, ll. 266–67.

such cases. In May 1942, for example, Ivan Z. had found himself on occupied territory and encircled by the enemy. Fearing rumours that Germans executed card-carrying Communists, he buried his party documents before being taken prisoner.<sup>36</sup> He was sent to Germany where he remained until the end of the war. After repatriation he returned to Kiev oblast' in 1946, managed to locate the spot where he had buried his party documents, recovered them and brought them back to party authorities in Vladimir oblast'. Despite such efforts, he was excluded from the party.<sup>37</sup> Petr S.'s story was similar. He had joined the party in 1938 and served in the Red Army during the war: finding himself on occupied territory, he buried his party card in a bottle in the ground before being captured and sent to work in Germany. In 1948 he returned to the site, dug up the ticket, and submitted it to the party, but again to no avail.<sup>38</sup> Over the course of 1957 both men were readmitted to the party, though their records both marked a break (*pereryv*) between their expulsion and their re-admission. While victims of Stalinist political terror in 1936 to 1938 were now being rehabilitated with their service to the party counted from their first entry into the ranks, former POWs though readmitted, saw their records retain this *pereryv*. It implied that there had indeed been a reason for their absence during those years; their rehabilitation was half-hearted. Not all cases were approved for rehabilitation. A party member since 1942, Dmitrii K. claimed that he had destroyed his party card before being taken prisoner by the Germans. At the workshop for the disabled where he worked, the primary party organization supported his readmission to the party, as did the *gorkom* of Kol'chunin, but the *obkom biuro* remained suspicious, alleging that K.'s story had inconsistencies, in particular with regard to the date his card had been destroyed.<sup>39</sup>

To get a sense of the distribution of the number of readmissions and refusals over the course of 1956 to 1957, let us compare the records of two sessions of the Vladimir *obkom biuro*, one in the autumn of 1956, the second in the spring of 1957. In September 1956, the *biuro* met twice and in the course of the meetings approved readmission into the party of fourteen people. All of them had been convicted of counter-revolutionary crimes, but recently granted legal rehabilitation: twelve of the fourteen cases dated from the years 1936 to 1938, the other two from 1947 and 1948.<sup>40</sup> These were the high-points of Stalin's political

<sup>36</sup> On the practice of burying party cards see Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870s–1990s*, Cambridge, 1998, p. 265.

<sup>37</sup> GAVO, f. p-830, op. 3, d. 270, l. 62.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, d. 269, l. 194.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, d. 269, l. 181.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, d. 150, ll. 41–94.

terror identified in Khrushchev's Secret Speech, and for these victims the chance of rehabilitation seems extremely high, all of them seeing their party service restored from their first entry into the party without a *pereryv*. POWs were not as yet seeing their cases reviewed (if in fact they were submitting petitions).

At the session of 16 April 1957, ten rather more diverse cases were considered:

Case	First Exclusion	Decision Regarding Party Rehabilitation
1	1938 (shot)	Membership posthumously restored from 1906 (no break)
2	1937	Membership restored from 1924 (no break)
3	1939	Membership restored from 1926 (no break)
4	1937	Membership restored from 1928 (no break)
5	1944 (10-year sentence)	Membership restored from 1919 (no break)
6	Excluded for falling into captivity in 1942	Membership shows break 1942–56
7	Excluded for falling into captivity in 1942	Membership shows break 1942–57
8	1938	Rehabilitation refused
9	1942	Rehabilitation refused
10	1937	Rehabilitation refused

There were thus five successful cases in which the supplicant had been convicted for counter-revolutionary crimes and spent time in the camps, with four of these dating from the late 1930s; all had their party membership restored without a break.<sup>41</sup> Two cases involved former POWs, who had not been convicted of any political crime but had nonetheless lost their cards in the immediate post-war years: their party rehabilitation was approved, though in both cases their records still marked a break (*pereryv*).<sup>42</sup> Three cases were refused, and thus warrant further examination.

The first concerned a neighbourhood procurator (*raionnyi prokuror*) who had been expelled from the party by his primary organization in 1937 accused of improper sexual relationships with his subordinates, bribe-taking, drunkenness and failing to carry out party tasks, leading to a conviction in 1938 for discrediting Soviet power and abusing his position. Although the date and nature of his arrest might mark him

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, d. 269, ll. 253–55, 268, 273–74.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, d. 269, ll. 259–60, 270.

out a victim of the *Ezhovshchina*, the fact that he had not as yet been legally rehabilitated prevented the *biuro* from approving this case.<sup>43</sup> The second refusal concerned a man who had been cleared of rumour-mongering during wartime. His plea for party rehabilitation, however, was turned down on the grounds that he had all the same written anonymous letters which, though not a criminal offence, was behaviour deemed unworthy of a Communist.<sup>44</sup> The third, a victim of 1937, had been fully cleared of the crime for which she had been convicted — spreading slander — but the *biuro* ruled her return to the party inadmissible on the grounds that she had earlier hidden her social origins, which included links with aristocracy and the emigration of 1917.<sup>45</sup>

This third case was perhaps the most surprising, as few legally rehabilitated *Ezhovshchina* victims were refused re-entry into the party in 1956. Yet by 1957, such decisions, while not common, were certainly not unheard of. In some cases, the *biuro* decided that the actions that originally led to arrest and conviction under article 58 might not constitute a crime as such, but they might still render the individual unworthy of membership to this exclusive brotherhood. The line seemed to be that even if they were not involved in any kind of criminal conspiracy, party members might have been rightfully expelled from the party for hiding class origins or for earlier political affiliations.

Several such petitions were refused in 1957. Mikhail Sh., for example, had been expelled from the party in 1937 when the *obkom* discovered he had failed to disclose his service in the White Army, and then arrested. Sh. had died in prison in 1940, and it was his wife who now fought to clear his name. Even though the legal system had recently cleared him of his 1938 conviction for counter-revolutionary activity, the *biuro* decided that he had nonetheless breached party trust by attempting to cover up his past.<sup>46</sup> Nikolai G. was also refused readmission.<sup>47</sup> Having joined the party in 1917, this worker had become the director of a shop in the city of Aleksandrov by 1935, the year he was excluded from the party as a result of the *proverka*. His earlier links with one of the leaders of A. G. Shliapnikov's Workers' Opposition and his covert correspondence in the 1920s with a Trotskyist named Malikov first cost him his party card, and then led a year later to a prison sentence for counter-revolutionary activity. This conviction had now been overturned, but the *biuro* endorsed the party's 1935 decision, deciding

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, d. 269, ll. 255–56.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, d. 269, ll. 278–79.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, d. 269, ll. 272–73.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, d. 270, l. 88.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, d. 269, l. 39.

that if his links with the Workers' Opposition and the Trotskyists had proved sufficiently dubious for the 1935 party *proverka* to remove his card, he remained suspect in 1957.<sup>48</sup> Karl M., a man of German nationality now in his late fifties, was also refused readmission to the party on the grounds that he had hidden a previous political affiliation, namely his early membership to a youth SR (Socialist Revolutionary) movement. In addition, he had falsely claimed to have taken an active part in the 1917 revolution and hidden the fact that his father had owned a brick factory until 1904 and had possessed three homes.<sup>49</sup> In the new political mood, such offences might not warrant imprisonment or exile, and they did not make the perpetrators 'enemies of the people', but they might not be suitable candidates for party membership.

In one case, past membership of another political party did not preclude readmission to the communist brotherhood. Il'ia B., born 1886, was a member of the SR party from 1905 until soon after the revolution, but as he had always honestly disclosed his past and had no further contact with the SRs after 1918/19, he was allowed his party card back in June 1957.<sup>50</sup> The key seems to have been honesty: as in the 1930s, the party was now engaged in the task of re-interrogating these men and women to find out about the nature of their past heresy and the truth of their relationship towards the party now.

What patterns can be discerned? The most striking tendency is the distinction made between POWs and purge victims. Former POWs never saw their party record cleared as fully as many *Ezhovshchina* victims did, with the break marked on their party records continuing to cast a shadow over their reputation. The second pattern worthy of note is a shift between 1956 and 1957. In the second half of 1956 virtually all victims of 1936 to 1938 had been rehabilitated. In 1957, the vast majority of such cases were still being approved, but the *obkom biuro* was slightly less keen simply to follow the courts' decisions. The legal convictions, particularly those produced by the Special Board, might be overturned as unlawful and arbitrary acts, but this did not necessarily invalidate the party's own checking mechanisms. Even if the subsequent arrests and convictions were unlawful, the party checks of the mid-1930s had, the *biuro* seemed to imply, sometimes rightly identified unsuitable and dissimulating party members in the years running up to the Great Terror.

<sup>48</sup> The *proverka* (verification of party documents) was initiated in May 1935 in an attempt to bring order to regional party files and to trace missing and lapsed members. The process was continued in 1936 with the *obmen dokumentov* (exchange of party documents), whereby old dog-eared cards were to be replaced and unsuitable members expelled. Chris Ward, *Stalin's Russia*, London, 1993, p. 111.

<sup>49</sup> GAVO, f. p-830, op. 3, d. 270, l. 198.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 171-73.

*Instructions from Moscow*

In its treatment of *Ezhovshchina* victims, the Vladimir *obkom biuro* was acting roughly in keeping with the signals sent out by the centre. In February 1956, Khrushchev had presented them as heroic martyrs, but in 1957, although the CC continued to promote rehabilitation, the picture was slightly less bright. In December 1956 the CC had sent a document to all party organizations, encouraging them to engage in increased political work with the masses, and to take a firm line against ‘hostile elements’ (*vrazhdebnye elementy*). The letter warned of an increase in ‘enemy activity’, which it blamed primarily on the Hungarian uprising and such foreign influences as Voice of America, the BBC and Radio Free Europe, though it also pointed the finger at returnees from the camps. The letter explained:

Party organizations do not always take into consideration the fact that a significant number of people have recently returned from places of imprisonment, either as a result of amnesty or rehabilitation, or because their sentence was over. Most are now carrying out productive work, are actively engaged in social and political life, and conscientiously fulfil their civic duties. However there are also those amongst the returnees who have taken a spiteful stance towards Soviet power, especially amongst the former Trotskyists, right opportunists, and bourgeois nationalists. They form groups around anti-Soviet elements and politically unstable people, trying to renew their hostile anti-Soviet activity. Party organizations should increase their educational work amongst those who have been amnestied and rehabilitated.

Towards those who did seek to carry out anti-Soviet activities, the party should be decisive and take action ‘just as we have always taken action against those who are our enemies’.<sup>51</sup> These suspicions regarding former political prisoners suggested that the heroic status they had enjoyed in February 1956 was now rather less certain.

In April 1957, the KPK reported on its work. It had in fact readmitted to the Bolshevik ranks 99 per cent of the 2323 *Ezhovshchina* victims whose cases it had considered over the preceding twelve months. Yet despite this high rate of readmission, the report advised caution:

Not all of those legally rehabilitated conduct themselves correctly. There are cases where individuals who have been reinstated in the party began to express anti-Soviet views. This was particularly the case during the notorious events in Poland and Hungary.

Several examples were included as illustration, including the case of P. I. Pishal’nikov and A. M. Guber. After rehabilitation, Pishal’nikov

<sup>51</sup> RGANI f. 3, op. 14, d. 88, ll. 48–59, reproduced in Artizov et al., *Reabilitatsiia: Kak eto bylo. Fevral’ 1956–nachalo 80-kh godov*, pp. 208–14 (pp. 213–14).

criticized Soviet agricultural policy, praised British civil liberties, and argued for free speech. In a letter to the CC, he wrote: 'When I was in exile, I felt morally better: I knew that there was nothing that I could do. Now I am rehabilitated, reinstated into the party, I am so suppressed by bureaucrats, I can't make a squeak.' He was expelled from the party again. Guber, invited to join the 1 May celebrations in 1956, answered: 'If you send me to the demonstration, I'll go with a banner saying "Give the rehabilitated back everything you took off them".' His membership was now under review once again.<sup>52</sup>

The report seemed to be warning that not all those who were cleared of the charges laid against them were in fact suitable people for the noble title of Communist. As in Vladimir, party officials suggested that the political record of some returnees made them unworthy of party membership. The KPK had thus refused to readmit people who had links with the opposition in the 1920s, citing the examples of M. Ia. Kruchevskii, member since 1917, who had joined the Trotskyist opposition in 1926 and even printed Trotskyist literature, and M. S. Pesochin, a member since 1917, who had signed opposition platforms in the years 1927 to 1928. Although the unlawful behaviour of the NKVD in the late 1930s might be condemned, the KPK suggested that the party's own sifting had rightly identified and rejected some unsuitable party members. In both Moscow and Vladimir, therefore, there was a subtle shift over the course of 1956 to 1957. Although the vast majority of the *Ezhovshchina* victims would still be approved in 1957, legal rehabilitation did not ensure readmission to the party. Political errors, however long ago, might still disqualify a person from party membership.

With regard to the issue of POWs, however, we find real divergence between the centre and the regions. Although in his Secret Speech Khrushchev had not bestowed on POWs the same attention as purge victims, the CC correspondence suggested that they too should be considered as victims, and even on occasion as heroes. The message from the CC in the summer of 1956 was that former POWs were as deserving of heroic status as *Ezhovshchina* victims. Marshal Zhukov had spoken of their courageous behaviour and their staunch forbearance in the Nazi camps. And yet in practice, Vladimir *obkom* was still distinguishing between the two categories of rehabilitation petition and readmitting the POWs to the party on far less favourable terms. In cases involving POWs, the party record still marked a *pereryv*. This distinction could in part be explained by the wording of the CC instructions. It stated that 'when readmitting to the party people who are fully cleared of the

<sup>52</sup> RGANI f. 6, op. 6, d. 1076, ll. 1–18, 20–22, 29–35, 39, reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 252–68 (p. 255–56).

charges laid against them' they should not show any break.<sup>53</sup> In fact, the POWs were not cleared of charges, because charges had never been laid in these cases; they had simply been expelled from the party under a cloud of suspicion even if cleared by the filtration camps. It seems, however, that the differentiation that the Vladimir party was making between purge victims and POWs was not just the result of bureaucratic ambiguity, but — according to leading party officials in Moscow at least — a sign of ingrained hostility towards POWs in the provinces.

In addition to reporting on the rehabilitation of purge victims, the KPK report of April 1957 also condemned the attitude of regional party organizations towards former POWs. After praising the good work the KPK had been doing to reinstate POWs into the party, it stated:

However it should be noted that until this time there are cases of excessive caution, when — without any good reason — the party organizations refuse party rehabilitation to people who were expelled as a result of their time in captivity or on occupied territory, even though they are completely trustworthy and hardworking people deserving of readmission to the party.

It went on to provide an example of this excessive caution. Curiously enough, the case in fact came from Vladimir oblast', and was quite similar to the case of Dmitrii K. described above. A former POW named A. I. Zakharov wished to be readmitted to the party and his claim was supported by the primary organization where he worked and by the Murom *gorkom*. When the case was forwarded on to the Vladimir *obkom*, however, it was refused. Despite the lack of any evidence of incorrect behaviour by Zakharov during his time in captivity and despite the good reports from his workplace, the *obkom* decided that they should refuse him because he had been out of the party for such a long time.<sup>54</sup>

The KPK expressed particular concern that only a very small number of workers and collective farmers amongst former POWs were appealing for reinstatement in the party, though they had constituted a very large proportion of the POW contingent. The KPK argued that additional measures needed to be taken to familiarize the grass-roots party organizations with the CC decrees of 1956 aimed at easing the rehabilitation of POWs.<sup>55</sup> According to the KPK, therefore, there was a marked failure on the part of the local party organizations to

<sup>53</sup> RGANI, f. 3, op. 14, d. 22, l. 126, reproduced in *ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>54</sup> RGANI, f. 6, op. 6, d. 1076, ll. 1–18, 20–22, 29–35, 39, reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 252–68 (p. 265).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*



implement the full rehabilitation of POWs that was intended by the CC decree of June 1956.

### *Conclusion*

This article uses the records from Vladimir *obkom* to trace the rehabilitation record in one oblast' of Soviet Russia in the wake of the Secret Speech. It suggests that rehabilitation was not automatic. Most *Ezhovshchina* victims saw their appeals approved, and their full party service recognized, but rehabilitation was not guaranteed, even for those whose convictions had been overturned. Earlier deceptions of the party might no longer be considered a state crime, but they still disqualified the culprit from membership in the brotherhood, just as they had in the *proverka* and *obmen dokumentov* of the early and mid-1930s. The party was not simply following the legal decisions and overturning unlawful sentences but also trying to identify the truthful, committed and pure heroes that party lore would have the Bolsheviks be.

The second argument is that the regions might have been less ready to follow Moscow's lead with regard to POWs than they were with purge victims. By the spring of 1957, the Party Control Commission in Moscow was frustrated with some regions' failure to respond to the initiatives launched the previous summer and their ongoing reluctance to recognize fully the victim status of those captured by the German forces during World War Two.

Such attitudes were not in themselves new. Mark Edele's study of war veterans suggests that regional authorities already displayed significant hostility towards former POWs in the late Stalinist period, even when Moscow urged them otherwise. Many were unable to find stable employment, or were sacked for no reason other than local officials' suspicions. In these years, the repatriation administration (attached to the Council of Ministers in Moscow) received increasing numbers of letters from people who had lost their jobs simply because they had been in German imprisonment. A memo from the leaders of the repatriation administration to the CC in July 1949 described their frustration: responding to petitions from POWs unfairly dismissed from their employment, they would frequently instruct the local authorities to re-hire the worker, but were simply refused.<sup>56</sup> They were seemingly unable to break down this ingrained resentment towards former POWs.

How do we explain the hostility of local authorities both in the late Stalinist years and in 1956 to 1957? In Vladimir there may have been specific factors — namely the region's difficulty in coping with the legacies of the Stalinist Gulag — that made the authorities particularly

<sup>56</sup> Edele, 'A "Generation of Victors?"', pp. 171–76 and pp. 397–408.

hesitant when dealing with rehabilitation matters. Yet this does not explain the caution regarding POWs specifically. Here we must look to broader factors, in particular to the meanings attached to war. According to Amir Weiner, ‘the war superseded other foundational myths, such as the civil war and the collectivisation of the countryside, which were increasingly viewed as distant, irrelevant, and in some cases, too controversial because of their traumatic legacy’.<sup>57</sup> In the construction and dissemination of these new myths, those who had themselves experienced the war played a key role. Weiner argues that the ‘hegemonic status of the myth of the war’ was not only the result of state propaganda and policy, but also reflected the strength with which the myth was articulated in the localities, particularly by ‘the peasant-soldiers, for whom the war turned into an autobiographical point of reference and point of departure’.<sup>58</sup>

The myths of the war, and their importance for the post-war party elites, help us to understand the decisions regional party authorities made regarding rehabilitation, for war veterans represented a considerable force in local party structures.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps these men believed the rehabilitation of former POWs somehow detracted from their own glory. Although the Khrushchev era witnessed attempts to revisit the subject of war and to allow for discussion of trauma and pain, as well as heroism, there may have been resistance to the revision of war myths, especially amongst those who had built their career in its immediate aftermath. (The extent to which a broader Soviet public harboured similar suspicions towards former POWs is uncertain and a subject warranting further study.)<sup>60</sup>

What seems certain, however, is that the 1950s were disorientating years. A diverse range of Stalin’s outcasts, including criminals, émigrés, Vlasovites, collaborators and deported social and ethnic groups, as well as purge victims and POWs, were all promised some kind of reprieve. Transformed into enemies, outsiders and marginals, during the long years of Stalin’s rule, they were now the beneficiaries of a range of

<sup>57</sup> Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution*, Princeton, NJ, 2001, p. 8.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>59</sup> Weiner’s study of post-war Vinnitsa demonstrates that veterans were an important force in party and governmental structures. Although Edele qualifies this picture, he agrees that veterans were an important group in the leadership of local party organizations. *Ibid.*, pp. 43–81; Edele, ‘A “Generation of Victors?”’, pp. 269–90.

<sup>60</sup> Jeffrey Jones’s work on the occupied city of Rostov suggests that in the aftermath of war citizens shared the regime’s hatred of active collaborators, but were generally far more sympathetic to returning POWs and repatriated citizens. In his conclusion, Jones predicts popular support for Khrushchev’s relaxation towards these groups, though his study stops in 1948. Jeffrey W. Jones, ‘“Every Family Has Its Freak”: Perceptions of Collaboration in Occupied Soviet Russia, 1943–1948’, *Slavic Review*, 64, 2005, 4, pp. 747–70.

policies intended to re-integrate them into the Soviet community once more.<sup>61</sup> These initiatives were, however, difficult and contested. Not everyone welcomed such change, perhaps fearing it might in some way cast a shadow over their own stories. Some even feared a reversal of fates: the rehabilitation of one group of outcasts, they worried, might mean the identification and punishment of a new cast of enemies.<sup>62</sup> While the difficulty in re-integrating purge victims into society has already attracted some scholarly attention, this article suggests that they were not the only group whose return would prove problematic during the Khrushchev era.<sup>63</sup> The place of terror in the Soviet past was of course highly problematic, but evidence from 1956 to 1957 suggest that the myths of war were also fragile, and potentially a source of tension as much as of pride.

<sup>61</sup> On the difficulties concerning the release and re-integration of criminals, see Miriam Dobson, “‘Show the Bandits No Mercy!’: Amnesty, Criminality and Public Response in 1953”, in Polly Jones (ed.), *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinisation: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, London and New York, 2006, pp. 21–40; for legislation concerning the changing status of émigrés and different groups of alleged collaborators, see the documents in Naumov and Reshin, ‘Nezakonchennoe srazhenie Marshala Zhukova’; on the problematic return of Ukrainian nationalists, see ‘The Empires Pay a Visit: Gulag Returnees, East European Rebellions, and Soviet Frontier Politics’, *Journal of Modern History*, 78, 2006, 2, pp. 333–76; on special settlers, see V. N. Zemskov, *Spetsposelentsy v SSSR*, Moscow, 2005, chapter 4.

<sup>62</sup> Dobson, *Khrushchev’s Cold Summer*, chapter 3.

<sup>63</sup> For exploration of the purge victims’ return and their place in late and post-Soviet society see, in particular, Nanci Adler, *The Gulag Survivor: Beyond the Soviet System*, New Brunswick, NJ, 2002, and Kathleen Smith, *Remembering Stalin’s Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR*, Ithaca, NY, 1996.