

THE WEAPON OF CRITICISM

The Tunnels of Cu Chi

Tom Mangold and John Penycate
 Hodder & Stoughton
 London 1985
 (also available in French:
Les tunnels de Cu Chi
 Albin Michel; Paris 1986)

There are few examples of heroism more telling than that of the Vietnamese people's just struggle against U.S. aggression. One of the merits of Mangold and Penycate's work *The Tunnels of Cu Chi* is to rekindle memories (for those of us old enough to remember) or present a first picture of the unbelievable courage, self-sacrifice and ingenuity that the men and women of Vietnam demonstrated. To a certain extent such a picture shines through *despite* the intentions of the authors, who attempt a "balanced" and "two-sided" account of a war whose reactionary character on the part of U.S. imperialism and just character on the part of the oppressed who took up arms makes any such attempt at bourgeois objectivity derisory.

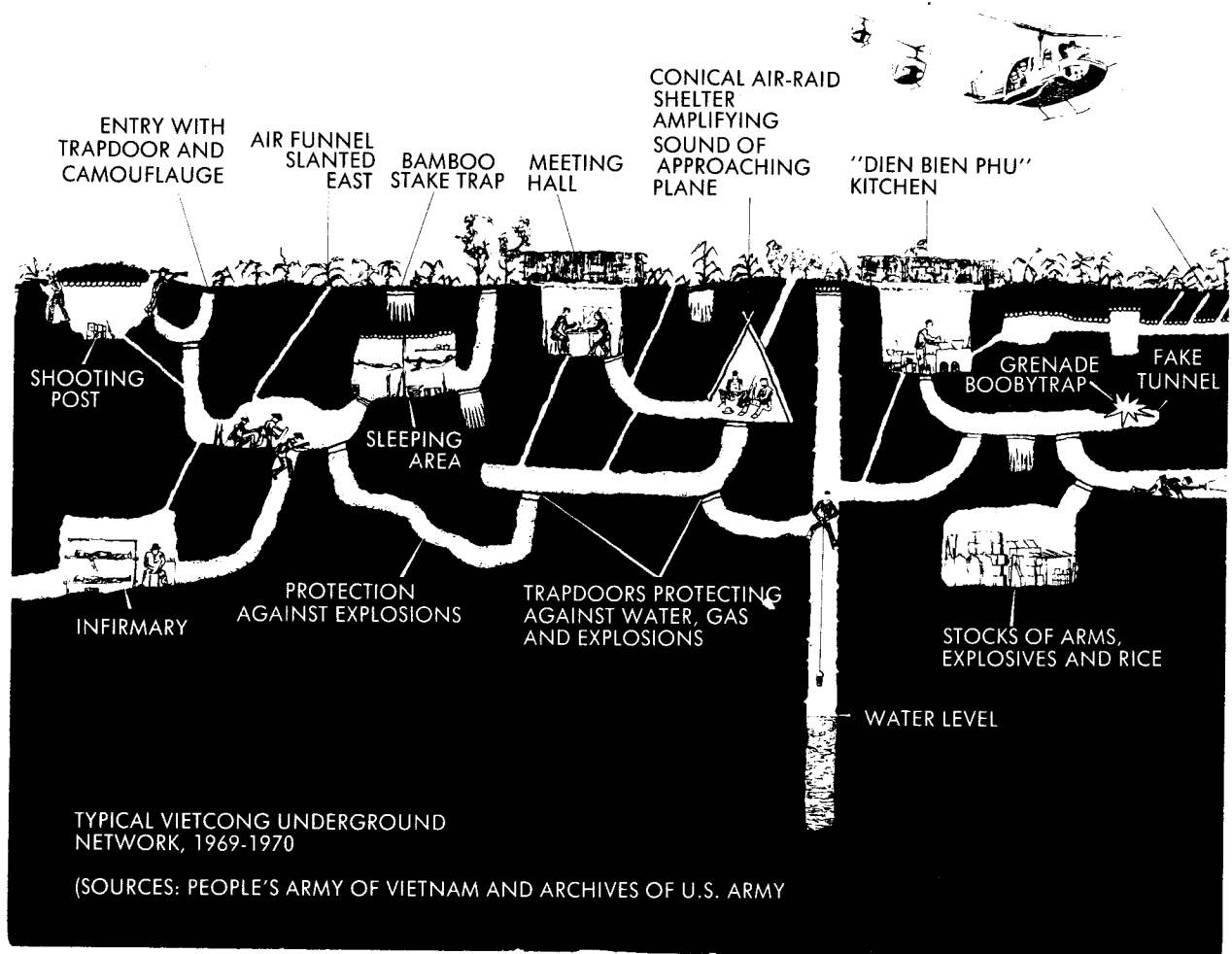
The Tunnels of Cu Chi is a lively account based mainly on interviews with the participants of the war waged by the National Liberation Front (NLF) against the U.S. army in one particular area of Vietnam near Cu Chi, located less than forty kilometres from what was then Saigon, the capital of the puppet South Vietnamese regime. As its title implies, the book examines in particular the "tunnel warfare" waged by the NLF in the area which bordered a region known to the U.S. during the war as the "Iron Triangle." Tunnel warfare is a form of combat that is suited to the weak in their struggle against a stronger, highly armed and technically superior force. The ability to conduct tunnel warfare depends upon the overall character of the war itself: without relying upon the masses the NLF would never have been able to construct a network of tunnels that were almost three hun-

dred kilometres long in the region of Cu Chi alone; similarly, only a just, revolutionary cause could motivate men and women to endure the hardship of living and fighting underground for months and years at a time.

The region of Cu Chi was long a stronghold of the NLF. Because of its proximity to Saigon the U.S. army spared no effort in trying to control the area. A huge U.S. base housing an Army division was constructed near the village of Cu Chi. Huge expanses of land were bulldozed, burned and sprayed with pesticides. The authors report that wells in the area were systematically poisoned by U.S. soldiers who threw the corpses of dead animals into them. Villagers were herded by force into the infamous "strategic hamlets." Those who escaped were considered fair game for attack by artillery fire and bombs or the Cobra helicopters that flew low to the ground machinegunning everything that moved. Pilots returning to their bases were encouraged to drop any remaining explosives or napalm on Cu Chi. Yet despite this incredible barbarism the U.S. imperialists were *never* able to "pacify" Cu Chi and it remained a strong hold of the revolutionary forces throughout the war. In fact, at the height of the U.S. presence, in 1969, the NLF was able to carry out a daring raid *inside* the Cu Chi base, destroying a great deal of military equipment.

Cu Chi is located on the southern edge of the plain that extends from the Mekong River Delta in the south to the highlands to the north and west. Except for some forests, the region does not have any particular favourable geographical features for waging guerrilla war. It does have a concentration of the peasantry. The authors refer to Cu Chi (at the beginning of the war) as a "densely populated agricultural area" consisting of both rice fields and rubber and coconut plantations.

Tunnel warfare was a key means by which the NLF utilised the positive factors (above all, the support of the population and, linked to this, the sense of self-sacrifice of its fighters which resulted from the fact that they were fighting for a revolutionary cause) to neutralise the



Book Illustration

negative factors — the overwhelming superiority of the U.S. in weaponry and technology. While the tunnels might seem to be a defensive measure (and they certainly did have that aspect), they were above all a means and method for *combatting the enemy*.

Even the term “tunnel” is somewhat of a misnomer. In fact, they were really labyrinths of firing posts, dormitories, kitchens, storage rooms, even hospitals and conference rooms all constructed at different levels underground and connected to one another and to the surface through an ingenious system of passageways and trap doors. In Cu Chi, some tunnels reached within a kilometre of the U.S. base itself and played a vital role in the daring attack referred to earlier. Other tunnels joined networks housing NLF command centres.

Bit by bit the imperialist army

became aware of the importance of the tunnels in the NLF war strategy and therefore tried to come up with new weapons and methods to neutralise them. Most of their high tech weapons proved completely unsuited to this kind of warfare because of their unwieldiness.

In the last analysis, as Mao pointed out, people not weapons, determine the outcome in war and all the technology available to the U.S. could not change the fact that their soldiers were thoroughly hated by the people, demoralised and incapable of acting out of any noble interest. While the men and women of the NLF endured incredible hardship living in caverns, the American soldiers enjoyed a comfort never before seen in history of warfare. Their base at Cu Chi was equipped with movie theatres and swimming pools and supplied by daily convoys of lorries filled with amenities aimed

at reminding the soldier of the “American Way of Life” he was supposed to protect. Usually the Americans would be transported back to the base by helicopter after a busy day of burning villages and murder.

Tunnel warfare also led to a close hand-to-hand combat that favoured those fighting for a revolutionary line. One story, not recounted in the book, illustrates this. A Black GI descended into a tunnel when he heard the unmistakable sound of a bullet being chambered. He turned his head expecting to get a final glimpse of the person who was about to kill him. He found himself face-to-face with an NLF fighter who told him in English, “our fight is not with you Black man.” This GI never picked up a rifle again!

The tunnels were dug using hand shovels and simple baskets to evacuate the dirt. The latter was no

simple matter as evidence of fresh soil would invite certain U.S. attack. The peasants of the area who did most of the tunnel construction also had to carry and distribute the dirt a considerable distance from the tunnels themselves. The entrances to the tunnels were disguised with foliage or sometimes (before the U.S. had devastated the area) would exit into a barn. There would always be multiple ways out of the tunnel in case the enemy stumbled upon an entrance. The tunnels were constructed using only earth and clay, sometimes reinforced with bamboo. Nevertheless the walls were so hard many of the U.S. soldiers were convinced they were made of cement! Their strength, their depth underground (sometimes several metres) and their intricacy made them very difficult to destroy. Simply throwing a handgrenade in the tunnels caused little or no damage and the NLF would soon be able to return. But the typical GI would rarely dare venture into one of the NLF tunnels, even though the only sure way to destroy them was by actually going in and placing explosive charges.

To try to solve this problem the U.S. army developed special elite groups known as "tunnel rats" whose task was to neutralise the NLF's underground warfare. The authors euphemistically refer to the "mixed motivations" of these rats; even their own deliberately charitable portrait reveals a vicious band of psychological misfits and pathological killers. Sometimes when these rats went underground, they would be ambushed or booby trapped. The authors report that one group of women guerrillas would wait until a GI stuck his head and arms through a trap door leading from one level to another, and then would spear him through the neck with a sharpened bamboo stick.

These rats' most successful weapon however, seems to have been the poison gas, including tear gas, which is usually deadly when used in a small, confined area with no ventilation. (Interestingly, the authors never mention that the use of any gas in warfare is outlawed by the Geneva Convention.) Although poison gas remained a serious pro-

blem throughout the war, even this barbaric weapon was resisted to a large degree by the system of tight seals leading from one passageway to another and ingenious methods of using water to filter the air.

An even more deadly challenge to tunnel warfare came from the B-52 carpet bombings the U.S. began conducting systematically around Cu Chi in April 1969, when it ceased using these B-52s to bomb the North. These bombs blasted enormous craters that did destroy many of the tunnels that the U.S. had been unable to wipe out in five years of war.

The *Tunnels of Cu Chi* makes no pretext of being an overall history of the Vietnam War, but in passing makes some interesting observations about some of the war's broader military and political features. The authors attempt to draw a firm line of distinction between the NLF and the "North Vietnamese," which would give credence once again to the bugaboo of "invasion from the North," but clearly, the struggle of the people of Vietnam, north and south, constituted a single historical process.

The changes in some of the military features of the resistance after 1970 that the authors describe (in particular, a greater reliance on conventional warfare and a corresponding diminution of the role played by the local NLF guerrillas) seem to be less a result of the entry of regular North Vietnamese soldiers into the war in the south than a negative development in the political-military line guiding the conduct of the war as a whole. The authors touch on the Tet Offensive which marked a radical shift in Vietnamese tactics away from the idea of protracted war aimed at whittling away the enemy's strength. Of course, the Tet Offensive did indeed spectacularly demonstrate the vulnerability of U.S. imperialism and helped strengthen anti-war sentiment in the U.S. itself. But the cost to the NLF was very high: according to Pencyate and Mangold, more than 40,000 NLF fighters were killed during the Tet Offensive, including a very high percentage of their cadre. According to the authors, rank and file guerrilla fighters were

left leaderless and often demoralised when the immense sacrifices of the offensive failed to achieve quick victory as had been promised. It seems that the Tet Offensive was part of an overall strategy aimed at seeking a negotiated settlement (which finally occurred). With this kind of a political line it is not surprising that, in the last few years of the war, the Vietnamese leadership put increasingly less emphasis on mobilising the masses of peasants and encouraging them to continue along the path of arming themselves with the weapons of the enemy.

Despite the tragic fact that the heroism and sacrifice of the Vietnamese people was increasingly betrayed by a centrist and ultimately revisionist political line on the part of the Vietnamese leadership, the Vietnam War remains not only a source of inspiration for today's revolutionary communists but also a treasure chest of experience, positive as well as negative, of carrying out revolutionary warfare. The experience of the NLF in waging tunnel warfare on a grand scale will undoubtedly prove to be very valuable in the period ahead.

A.S.

Origins of the Great Purges

J. Arch Getty

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There are few subjects in modern history so thoroughly (and deliberately) distorted as the 1930s period of class struggle in the Soviet Union. The mountain of memoirs and studies aimed at denouncing Stalin and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, whether written by Trotskyites and social democrats, bourgeois liberals or avowed nostalgics of Tsarism like Solzhenitsyn, all have in common one very central point: vilifying and slandering the dictatorship of the proletariat and trying to wipe out the immense prestige that the socialist system won during that tumultuous decade. In the face of this orchestrated campaign one cannot help but welcome the appearance of a book by J. Getty which sets out to

“reconsider” the Soviet party of 1933 to 1938, the period often referred to (and as Arch Getty points out, incorrectly) as the “purges.”

Professor Arch Getty is not a Marxist historian, nor has he broken with all of the prevailing prejudices about this subject. He feels obliged, for example, to make a gratuitous and unfounded reference to “the monstrous crimes of Stalin” even though — and perhaps because — his work would tend to argue against such a view. Nevertheless, by applying the methods of the modern historian — especially reliance on primary sources together with a healthy disrespect for the “testimony” of those who have the most to gain from a distortion of history — Getty succeeds in demolishing a number of myths concerning the “purges” so widely held that they have long been considered almost sacrosanct.

Who, for example, cannot recall the often repeated charge that the “purges” were directed against the “Old Bolsheviks,” that is to say, the original followers of Lenin? Getty musters a convincing set of statistics to demonstrate that nothing of the kind was the case. Many have accused Stalin of having organised the assassination of S.M. Kirov in 1934 because of the latter’s support for more “moderate” policies and in a Machiavellian attempt to lay the basis for suppression of the opposition. Getty shows that Kirov was thoroughly identified with the same political line as Stalin and cites a very interesting and damning statement by Trotsky. “Trotsky, writing three years after the assassination, called Kirov ‘a clever and unscrupulous Leningrad dictator, a typical representative of his corporation,’ and maintained that terrorist attacks like the killing of Kirov by the ‘younger generation’ ‘have a very high significance.’” This should give food for thought to those who dismiss as preposterous the charge that Trotsky and his cohorts were involved in criminal counter-revolutionary activity!

Getty’s greatest service, however, is his recreation of the general atmosphere prevailing at the time of the “purges” and fairly insightful description of the “victims”. The

commonly held stereotype of a tight-knit bureaucracy thoroughly beholden to Stalin and anxious to crush on his behalf any trace of dissent does not conform to the facts that Getty convincingly presents.

Most of Getty’s work is based on a meticulous study of the Party archives in Smolensk, the capital of the Western Region (*Oblast*) of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR), a region with a population of 65 million bordering the Ukraine on one hand and the Leningrad and Moscow regions on the other. Getty also read *Pravda* and other central Party documents. What comes through in Getty’s account is a picture of a central leadership which is itself divided on a series of outstanding questions but is nevertheless committed to a policy of energetically unleashing the workers and peasants — and the rank and file of the Party — to, as Mao was to put it later in relation to China, “achieve faster, better and more economical results in the construction of socialism.”

It is also clear that in trying to carry out this line Stalin and the leadership of the CPSU encountered a great deal of resistance. First, from among certain sections of the Party leadership itself (or former Party leadership) such as Trotsky and Bukharin who argued, either openly or simply in essence, that it would be impossible to construct a genuine socialist economy in the Soviet Union. Getty confirms, again relying on the writings of Trotsky himself, that an oppositional bloc had indeed been formed between Trotsky and the followers of Bukharin as the Soviet leadership was to later claim.

But the opposition to Stalin’s policy of vigorous socialist construction based upon the collectivisation of agriculture and the rapid development of industry was not only from amongst leading oppositional figures in Moscow. The revolution had also to contend with the horrible force of habit, the inertia that still marked rural life, the fact that, even if the bulk of the population supported the Soviet regime, only a minority was won to the cause of communism. In addition, the Soviet Union was embarked upon a pro-

gram of crash industrialisation yet was extremely lacking in trained scientific and technical personnel and those that did exist were, more often than not, conservative elements who generally opposed the line of going all out to develop a socialist economy. Far from being the totalitarian, all-controlling machine that anti-communists like to portray, Stalin’s Party was a still relatively small organisation based upon the proletariat in the cities which faced great difficulties in leading socialist construction in the country as a whole. The archives of the Western Region show that in many areas there was only an average of one party member for every two collective farms!

Within the Party itself there were a number of obstacles to the implementation of Stalin’s line. Getty shows an often sharp contradiction between the regional and local officials and the central Party apparatus, as well as the contradiction between the leadership and the led in the region itself. Again with the aid of documents, Getty points out how resistance from lower and middle-level Party organisations was often able to bury the central directives in red tape.

Getty shows that the *target* of the “purges” was, in fact, the Party bureaucracy itself. The term purge (*chistka*, to cleanse) was originally applied to periodic movements launched by the Soviet Party, the first of which took place in 1921. As the name implies, the goal of the *chistka* was to “purify” the Party by removing those unworthy of Party membership. In the period 1929-1931 Party membership more than doubled as the doors were thrown open during the great battle of the collectivisation of agriculture and the first Five Year Plan. It is not surprising that amongst the million-plus new members there were more than a few who had joined for dubious reasons, to which must be added those Party members who degenerated. The relative privileges that accompanied the title of Party member also made it unlikely that many such elements would quit the ranks of the Party organisationally of their own accord, even if they had long ago abandoned its ideological

stance. It is, therefore, not the least surprising that around 18 percent of the membership of the Party was “purged” in 1933. Getty cites the following criteria that was to govern the 1933 *chistka*:

1. Alien class, hostile elements who try to deceitfully demoralize the Party.
2. Double dealers, who deceitfully undermine Party policy.
3. Violators of discipline who fail to carry out Party decisions and who are pessimistic about the “impracticality” of Party measures.
4. Degenerates who merged with and do not struggle against kulaks (rich peasants), loafers, thieves, etc.
5. Careerists and self-seekers who are isolated from the masses and disregard the needs of the people.
6. Moral degenerates whose unseemly behavior discredits the Party.

It is clear that the *chistka* was conceived as part of a movement aimed against bureaucracy and sought to involve the masses. Local and factory newspapers (and, interestingly, wall newspapers) were called upon to explain the reasons for the purge. Party meetings at which each member would be examined were to be open to non-Party people who were called upon to raise their criticisms and the official purge announcement called for “open and honest self-criticism by Party members.”

Lest one try to argue that all of the above was merely a smokescreen to hide something more sinister, the official directives seem to have been translated into practice. An important eyewitness account by Anna Louise Strong entitled *The Stalin Era* describes a number of these mass “purge meetings” marked by vigorous and uninhibited criticism of Party officials by rank and file members and non-Party workers. (It is unfortunate that Getty does not refer to Strong’s account. Written right after Khrushchev’s attack on Stalin, *The Stalin Era* remains one of the most important non-Soviet sources. The credibility of the book is all the more reinforced given the fact that Anna Louise Strong herself had been falsely accused and imprisoned for espionage.)

Given the nature and goals of the *chistka* it is not surprising that it (and subsequent “purges”) met with different forms of resistance by bureaucratic elements in the Party leadership. Getty suggests some forms of this resistance — either trying to carry through the *chistka* in a closed-door manner, away from the masses or (as the Chinese revolutionaries were to put during the Cultural Revolution) “aiming the spearhead down” — that is trying to divert criticism of themselves with wholesale expulsions of rank and file members. Although the Central Purge Commission had specifically warned against it, 70,000 members including many workers and peasants, were thrown out for “passivity.”

The central leadership of the Party, however, said that a majority of these people were actually “staunch Party people.” In fact, a great many expulsions pronounced at the local level were later overturned upon appeal.

Getty also examines a series of other “purges” that came after the 1933 *chistka*: the Verification of Party Documents (or *proverka*) in 1935 and the 1936 Exchange of Party Documents (*obmen partiidokumentov*). These movements were originally aimed at restoring order to the Party’s membership records and, in the process, weeding out the non-negligible number who had fraudulently obtained Party membership cards. The conduct of the *proverka* also seems to have been an important realm of struggle. In 1935 the central leadership found it necessary to directly criticise the Western Region authorities for bureaucratic obstruction of the *proverka* and called on the rank and file to carry out criticism.

Far from being aimed at the political opposition the purges (and here we are talking specifically about the aforementioned mass movement and not the subsequent trials) seem to have been an effort to address real problems of the organisation, composition and functioning of the Party *separated to a large degree from the ongoing struggle over political line*. The period under study was, after all, a period of intense class struggle in the Soviet Union that was

concentrated in the two-line struggle in the Party itself — the struggle over industrialisation and collectivisation, the struggle with Bukharin, the fight to further proletarianise culture, the important Stakhanovite movement aimed at shattering the stranglehold of bourgeois experts on technique, and so on.

There was ideological confusion on the part of Stalin and the Soviet leadership concerning the nature of the class struggle in socialist society. Stalin did not understand the material base within the socialist economy itself for the emergence of a new bourgeoisie and thus saw only the remnants of the *old* exploiting classes and world imperialism as a danger for capitalist restoration. Although both of these sources did indeed contribute to the eventual overthrow of proletarian rule in the USSR it was the newly engendered bourgeoisie, represented politically by Khrushchev and his clique, that played the central role in the counter-revolution.

Stalin never ceased to wage class struggle, but his metaphysical view of socialist society itself (his inability to understand the contradictions) meant that he often did not understand *how* to carry out the class struggle. When one reads, for example, the six criteria for the 1933 *chistka* cited above one notes that the target definitely seems to be bourgeois elements but there is little further clarity. In fact, one is reminded of the statement attributed to Mao’s close comrade Chang Chun-chiao, “what is the use of criticising foxes when the wolves are in power?” In other words, it is correct and necessary to criticise the bourgeois elements and the rightists in the party but what about “the leading persons in the Party taking the capitalist road” that Mao warned against?

The seemingly contradictory statements and attitudes that Getty cites from Stalin (alternating calls for more vigilance and opposition to local bureaucracy with concerns about “excesses,” etc.) are mainly a result of Stalin’s own lack of clarity on the vital problems of the socialist revolution. As Mao put it in a warning to the Chinese Party shortly before his death: “you are making

socialist revolution but you don't know where the bourgeoisie is. It is right in the communist party."

Getty senses that Stalin's launching of the slogan "cadres decide everything" in 1935 has important political significance, but Getty's own limitations keep him from getting to the heart of the matter. Stalin specifically put forward the slogan "cadres decide everything" in opposition to the previous slogan "technique decides everything" which he viewed as outdated. Stalin links this slogan to a criticism of bureaucrats who had learned "to value machinery" but that failed "to value people, to value workers, to value cadres." This important recognition of the decisive role of man in constructing socialism, however, was also separated to a large extent from politics — as if bureaucracy was simply a question of *method* and not of *line*. This kind of understanding seems also to have weakened Stalin's efforts to combat bureaucracy during the purge movements. It is interesting in this respect to contrast Stalin's slogan "cadres decide everything" with the slogan Mao and the Chinese revolutionaries were to insist upon during the Cultural Revolution: "the correctness or incorrectness of the political and ideological line decides everything." It seems that the parallel construction of the two quotations is hardly accidental.

Getty relegates to an Epilogue what is commonly understood as the "purgés," that is, the arrests and trials of opposition Party leaders and the widespread removal of middle-level officials after 1937. Again Getty argues that the *Yezhovshchina* (or time of Yezhov, the Party leader responsible for state security) "was not the result of a petrified bureaucracy stamping out dissent and annihilating old radical revolutionaries. In fact, it may have been the opposite. It is not inconsistent with the evidence to argue that the *Yezhovshchina* was rather a radical, even hysterical, *reaction* to bureaucracy. The entrenched officeholders were destroyed from above and below in a chaotic wave of volunteerism and revolutionary puritanism."

In fact, the *Yezhovshchina* does

appear to have been, in general, aimed at the same targets as the previous purge movements. In this case, however, a particular effort is made to connect the political opposition with different forms of criminal activity, particularly espionage and sabotage. Much of this is to be explained by the prevailing international tension right on the eve of the Second World War which Getty sloughs off as a factor (again, Strong's account is better on this point). It is certainly true that terror is an aspect of any dictatorship, including the dictatorship of the proletariat, and that under certain conditions this aspect may take on more prominence. Nevertheless, the *Yezhovshchina* seems to have been, at least in large part, an effort to *substitute* terror for a more thorough and deeper going struggle against the bourgeois line that sought to restore capitalism. Not surprisingly, many Party officials sought to protect themselves by accusing others. Within months the situation was way out of control and Stalin and the Central Committee were forced to take stringent measures, including the arrest of Yezhov himself. Getty calls this a hypocritical effort on Stalin's part to shift the blame to others. Actually it is once again the sometimes clumsy and contradictory actions of a great leader who was striving to wage class struggle and bring about communism but was not clear on the nature of the very enemy he was combatting.

The Origins of the Great Purges is a very useful examination of Soviet society in the 1930s. The author's avowed effort to take "a political" approach to the problem is useful, but, unfortunately, he remains wedded to an outlook and method which often lead him to pick up on secondary factors while ignoring the essence of the matter. He talks of the contradictions between the "centre and the periphery" or between "moderates and radicals" but misses the conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie! Getty's combination of often insightful observations with a non-class (which we know to mean bourgeois) approach is revealed in the last paragraph of his work:

"The radicalism of the thirties did not last. Although ritualized *kritika/samokritika* (criticism/self-criticism) became a regular Party practice, it would never again have the impact it did in 1937. Although politics in the thirties were often populist and even subversive, the exigencies of World War II combined with the practical demands of running an increasingly complicated economy meant that radicalism and anti-bureaucracy would fade and be replaced with a new respect for authority. In the thirties, Stalin was a populist muckraker, and his image, as Avorkhanov remembered, was of someone who hated neckties. The real petrification of the Stalinist system set in during and after the war, when commissariats became ministries, when the Party leader became premier, and when the man who hated neckties became the generalissimo."

A.S.