The repression of chaos

Legal, economic and cultural repression in the early Soviet Union

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**Rim Aarden**

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Cover image: *Prisoners on Their Way to Solovetsky Special Purpose Prison Camp*, 1927, <http://www.orlandofiges.info/section10_RevolutionfromAbove/TheGulagandEconomicGrowth.php>.

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**Abstract**

This thesis analyses the relation between the social context of the early Soviet Union and the repressive policies that were implemented. The Central Communist government made use of legal, economic and cultural repression with the intention of controlling Soviet society. The central argument in this thesis is that the instigation and intensification of repression was often related to a perceived or present sense of chaos or disorder. The Bolshevik party did not hold a position of unchallenged authority in the early years of the Soviet Union and often acted out of suspicion and paranoia. Social disorder was therefore referred to as a new form of class war, partly because it could jeopardize the power of the communist regime. By analyzing all these aspects of repression, this thesis will provide an answer to the question: How were different forms of repressive policy connected to the social context of the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1941?

After social disorder was appointed the new class war, all individuals seen as threats to social order or the socialist ideal state were attacked with repressive measures. These threats encompassed a wide variety of different groups within Soviet society. Wealthier citizens, members of the old regime, petty thieves, other socialists, ethnic groups, religious believers and political opposers all became victims of the repressive policies. By eliminating these factors from Soviet society, the government hoped to create a unified socialist state that was under their complete control. The use of visual and textual propaganda aided the implementation of such policies. Campaigns were set out to rally support for initiatives such as collectivization or state atheism. The success of these policies was varied and differed depending on region and time. Throughout the years of the early Soviet Union, it does, however, become apparent that both legal and economic repression proved more successful in fulfilling the desired effect of the government than cultural repression.

By looking more closely at the social context present before the implementation of repressive policies, a connection between the two can be found. Analyzing the reactive nature of repression can help us understand the process of large-scale, top-down repression. In order to conduct this research, several sources and theoretical works of literature were consulted. Memoirs, posters, tables, letters and reports show the motives and results of the different repressive policies.

This thesis will discuss three different forms of repression using similar patterns. This makes it possible to compare certain aspects of these forms of repression and highlight their similarities and differences. In all chapters the motives, ways of implementation, groups targeted and results are discussed separately. The first chapter will focus on legal repression and the use of the Gulag system as a political tool. The second chapter discusses economic repression by looking at matters such as the planned economy, rationing and collectivization. In the third chapter, cultural repression and the policies of nationalization and Russification will come forward.

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# Introduction

In 1918 Stalin described the formation of the Soviet Union not as “forced unification” but as a “voluntary and fraternal union of the working masses of all nations and peoples of Russia.”[[1]](#footnote-1) While this might have been his original vision, the eventual political reality of the early Soviet Union proved very different. Mainly because different nationalities or ethnic groups did not become part of the Soviet system voluntarily but were forced to adjust to the vision of an ideal socialist state. The Central Committee of the Soviet Union controlled most of the political choices and was conveniently situated in the Kremlin in Moscow. While Stalin talked of voluntary cooperation, early Soviet policy involved various forms of widespread repression. These repressive policies were often a response to perceived or present chaos and disorder amongst Soviet citizens. The newly formed Communist government was far from unopposed and feared a takeover of their position of power or widespread rebellion.[[2]](#footnote-2) In order to successfully shape the new socialist state, the government demanded that all citizens should partake in creating this new ideal society. When an individual or group diverted from this chosen path, they would often encounter the workings of the different levels of repression.

This thesis will attempt to uncover the dynamics of repression in the Soviet Union and seeks to answer the question: How were different forms of repressive policy related to the social context of the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1941? The definition of repression that will be used in this thesis is that of Christian Davenport. This definition is fitting since it does not necessarily specify repression as a violation of laws or as a response to an existing threat.[[3]](#footnote-3) Davenport instead describes political repression as: the restriction of civil liberties and the violation of rights of personal integrity with the intention of limiting the repressed citizens political participation and social standing.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the literature on Soviet repression, the focus often appears to lie with one specific form of repression. Anne Applebaum, for example, thoroughly discusses legal repression in her work *Gulag: A History*, but refrains from combining this with economic or cultural repression.[[5]](#footnote-5) Similarly, David Shearer introduces an innovative vision of responsive repression and the importance of social context, without highlighting how this is applicable to all aspects of Soviet society.[[6]](#footnote-6) Where Moshe Lewin and Terry Martin do create compelling cases for the relation between the governments drive for control and the economic and cultural policy, they fail to acknowledge the relation to the repression of opposition.[[7]](#footnote-7) This thesis will refrain from focusing on one aspect of Soviet society and instead discuss three major forms of repression. Through the analyzation and comparison of these different repressive policies, a solid argument can be made for the reactive nature of repression and the relation to social context.

The timeframe this thesis focuses upon starts in 1917 with the start of the Bolshevik take-over of power and spans until the moment Stalin comes into full power in 1941. At the start of the War with Germany, Stalin became Premier of the Soviet state, which resulted in him obtaining complete dictatorial control. By focusing on this timeframe, this thesis does not discuss only the policy of either Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) or Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) but shows the continuation and fractures of both administrations. This makes the research in this thesis more focused on repression as a reaction to social context instead of a study of totalitarian politics. Understanding the perception of unrest and how this translated to different forms of repression makes it possible to see the entire process surrounding these policies and not only their devastating outcome. By framing repressive policies in this manner, they stop being simple characteristics of communist rule and can be understood as reactive measures executed with political intentions. The relevance of this thesis is therefore that it provides another perspective on a much debated subject, creating the possibility of a broader discussion on communist policy.

By specifying this focus, this thesis conducts an historical study of the political processes surrounding repression and the formation of policy. In order to do so, this thesis makes use of a number of diverse primary sources that are both textual and visual. A varied selection of different voices is included, such as the memoir of a Gulag employee, propaganda posters and extracts from reports and letters written by both government officials and Soviet citizens. This allows this thesis to analyze repression on all levels of society as well as the run-up to, and results of, the repressive policies. The theoretical sources used in this thesis are divided between more general works of literature that provide context or overview, and articles that give a more local or in-depth understanding of the policy choices. These secondary works often include English translations of Russian primary sources, making them important tools that are necessary to understand the reactions and motivations of government officials.

The forms of repression that this thesis will discuss are those of legal, economic and cultural repression. The first chapter discusses legal repression, which constituted all forms of the criminalization of uncontrollable social or political behavior. Related to this form of repression is the expansion of the Gulag camp system and the way it was deployed as a tool of deterrence. In the second chapter, the focus will be on the manner in which repression was exercised through economic policies. By manufacturing groups such as the kulaks and the disenfranchised, the government decided who were able to survive within Soviet society and who were not. In connection to the economic policy, this chapter will discuss the famines of 1921 and 1932 and their relation to the repression of opposition. In the third chapter, the differences between member states and between certain belief systems in the Soviet Union will come forward through the discussion of cultural repression. The policies of the nationalization and Russification of other nationalities are both discussed in this chapter. Additionally, a focus on the forceful implementation of ideological aspects of communist rule, such as state atheism, comes forward.

Within all chapters there will be a focus on the same four aspects of repression, creating the possibility of a clear comparison between the three forms of repression. After first outlining the certain type of repression that is being discussed, there will be a focus on the motivation the central government had for implementing this specific form of repression. Secondly, the propaganda used during the implementation of repressive policies will be discussed. Thirdly, an overview will be given of the groups that were targeted by this type of repression. Finally, the results that this repression had on Soviet society and the official perceptions of its success in enforcing government control will be discussed.

# 

# Chapter 1: Legal repression and the Gulag system

*He who has not been there will get his turn. He who has been there will never forget it.*

*-* Soviet proverb about the Gulag camps[[8]](#footnote-8)

One of the most visible forms of repression in the Soviet Union was the legal prosecution of socially unwanted individuals. By arresting or executing all who opposed the Communist party or who caused any form of supposed unrest, the government controlled the population to an extreme. Citizens could even be arrested for as much as listening to a politically colored joke.[[9]](#footnote-9) Entire waves of people entered the Soviet prison system because of deviating political convictions, petty crime or alternate belief systems. The penalties given to citizens who did not act in line with Communist beliefs varied from short-term imprisonment to life sentences, banishments or executions. The citizens that were arrested and sentenced ended up in prisons that were commonly referred to as Gulag camps.[[10]](#footnote-10)

These camps were spread out all over the soviet union and were said to re-educate dangerous elements of society by hard physical labor.[[11]](#footnote-11) The word Gulag has instead for many become a synonym for concentration camps employing slave labor that frequently resulted in the death of prisoners. Versions of the Gulag camps already existed under Czarist rule in the seventeenth century. However, after the Russian revolution, a more widespread and organized version came into existence that Lenin used to detain ‘unreliable elements of Soviet society’. These camps were, however, often improvisationally created and could exist of cellars or empty churches overflowing with prisoners.[[12]](#footnote-12) Stalin eventually ‘modernized’ the camps by creating larger camps that were present in every region of the Soviet Union and became part of the industrialization tactics. By 1929, the secret police took control of the Soviet penal system and moved the Gulag camps away from judicial establishments. People could be accused, arrested and detained without any form of trial.[[13]](#footnote-13) It is estimated that during the reign of Stalin around 18 million people have been detained in the Gulag camp and at least 1.6 million did not live to see the end of their sentence.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Amongst historians a discussion has arisen regarding the intentions of the government in relation to the Gulag camps. Steven Barnes is convinced that the Gulag camps were not created to punish with hard labor but that imprisonment was a “slow and steady march towards death.”[[15]](#footnote-15) While the living conditions and number of deaths within the camps surely suggest the intention of a certain degree of elimination, it is also likely that the forced labor was partly used instrumentally. Anne Applebaum for example writes about how the Gulag camps played a central role in Soviet economy. She says Stalin believed the Gulag camps and the accompanied slave labor to be critical for the economic growth of the Soviet Union.[[16]](#footnote-16) In contrast to Applebaum’s vision, David R. Shearer views legal repression as a response to criminality and disorder in Soviet society.[[17]](#footnote-17) While this position within the debate was very innovative, it excluded the substantial amount of political repression that was also present within these legal policies. This chapter will hence focus on all intentions the communist government expressed for imposing their legal policies. By doing so, the combination of instrumental, social and political motivations will be discussed, in contrast to the focus on separate aspects of Soviet society. By discussing the motivations, targets, propaganda and impact of legal repression, it will become visible how the government used hard punitive measures with the intention of pacifying opposition or social unrest.

## Social disorder and petty crime: motives for repression

When Lenin first came to power in 1917, he was far from a position of unchallenged authority. Ill preparation and a bloody civil war threatened the power of the new Bolshevik government. In order to regain control, any intellectual or political opposition as well as those believed to belong to the bourgeoisie, were targeted and arrested. During this initial formation of the Soviet Union, experimental policy changes and the use of excessive violence was common. It was amongst these political developments, that the first Soviet labor camps came into being. Lenin had already constructed plans of ‘obligatory work duty’ for the wealthy bourgeoisie prior to the civil war but aggravated these plans in reaction to anti-Bolshevik resistance. Everybody considered a ‘class enemy’ could be detained in a labor camp and soon the improvisational camps were overflowing with prisoners.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Another rapid growth in the camp system occurred during the early years of the 1930s, when once again social disorder in the Soviet Union rose drastically. Due to the rapid industrialization and the failure of collective farming, many were affected by hunger and displacement. As a result, many pulled towards the cities in the hope of finding food or shelter. Local authorities could not cope with organizing these large groups of displaced people and soon crime rose.[[19]](#footnote-19) This kind of social disorder hindered the central government in executing their political and economic plans, causing Stalin to strike down on petty criminality with force. He defined social disorder as another form of class war that threatened the security of the state. With this new vision, controlling social disorder became a political priority instead of a separate problem, making the disciplining of offenders a crucial and urgent task of the state police.[[20]](#footnote-20) The belief that social disorder threatened the state became apparent in a letter Stalin wrote in 1932 to Lazar Kaganovich, a Politburo member and close subordinate:

Outrages are happening on the railroads. State employees on the routes are raped and terrorized by hooligans and homeless children. Organs of the TO GPU [transport police of the OGPU; RA] are asleep. (That’s a fact!) This outrage can no longer be tolerated. Call the TO GPU to order. Force them to keep order on the lines. Issue a directive to the TO GPU to place armed personnel on the lines and to shoot hooligans on the spot. Where is the TO GPU? What is it doing? How can c. Blagonravov [chief of the TO GPU and deputy head of the Commissariat of Transport; RA] tolerate such anarchy and outrage?[[21]](#footnote-21)

This letter discusses criminality on the train tracks and shows how Stalin and consequently the Communist Party were convinced that the Soviet Union was consumed by chaos. The call for police to strike back shows how the necessary response was thought to be a show of force. And surely, as a response to Stalin’s outrage, the policy regarding petty crime and ‘hooliganism’ was intensified.

Vyacheslav Menzhinsky, who at the time was the head of the ‘Joint State Political Directorate’ or the OGPU, made sure to regularly send reports to Stalin discussing the punishments the police had issued to repress social disorder in the Soviet Union.[[22]](#footnote-22) In one of these reports sent in 1932, Menzhinsky gives an overview regarding the number and nature of theft convictions. “In August, of the number of convicted, 43 persons were sentenced to the highest measure of social protection—to execution, 86 persons to 10 years, 17—to 8 years, 61—to 5 years, the others to 3 years and less.”[[23]](#footnote-23) This report not only shows that citizens got the death sentence for stealing but also that this penalty was referred to as ‘the highest measure of social protection’. The choice of phrase clearly refers back to the supposed chaos that was present in the Soviet Union and the conviction of party officials that punitive measures would result in social order. By using the word ‘protection’ it appears as if the repression is issued in favor of Soviet citizens and not as an attack on their freedom. This report also shows us how the central government framed small time criminality in such a way that it was seen as a threat to the Soviet Union.

## The official story and early release: implementation of repression

Propaganda was present in every aspect of Soviet life. The message of the government was shared at school, work, the media but also within the Gulag camps. Propaganda in the camps informed the prisoners that they could be eligible for early release but only if they “denounced their shameful past”, showed exemplary behavior in daily life and contributed greatly to mass social labor. In contrast, authorities also made clear that if one was to continue denying the ideals of the socialist state, they would be treated with the hardest measures.[[24]](#footnote-24) A reason these threats were so successful in repressing prisoners during their time in the Gulags, is the fact that many did not know how long their sentence would be. What they were systematically reminded of, however, was that insubordination would lead to a longer sentence.

After the fall of the Soviet Union it became apparent that Gulag administrations contained detailed personal files of all prisoners, including their political beliefs and the possibility of their redemption.[[25]](#footnote-25) This shows that one of the concerns of the government was also whether the prisoners could be indoctrinated enough to be part of Soviet society again. If those with other political tendencies were, after years of hardship and indoctrination, prepared to support communism, they might be released. Those who were committed to their ideals and prepared to stand by them, however, would often not see the outside again. This shows how the Gulag system was another tool used to effectively influence the behavior of Soviet citizens. Because prisoners were subjected to constant propaganda in the camps, in combination with having to face the fear of another sentence, most kept silent upon their release.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Someone who believed the carefully constructed story about the camps but was eventually confronted with the reality of the Gulag, was Fyodor Vasilevich Mochulsky. His memoir is one of the few existing memoirs written from the point of view of a prison employee instead of a prisoner and the first to be translated into English. In this memoir, Mochulsky describes his path from being a student of engineering to becoming the boss of multiple Gulag divisions. He describes how he viewed the arrests and the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, or NKVD, before he began working in the Gulag system and how this perception was greatly influenced by government propaganda:[[27]](#footnote-27)

My friends and I, who were born around 1918, were all exposed our whole lives to Soviet propaganda, which portrayed the GPU-NKVD as a necessary part of our government. This propaganda surrounded us as I studied in school in Minsk in the 1930s, as I worked as a lathe operator at a Moscow factory, and as I spent ﬁve years at the Moscow Institute of Railroad Transport Engineering. We all believed that the NKVD was an organization that vigilantly guarded the interests of the country from external and internal enemies. Even the press and radio reports detailing the conspiracies and the sensational trials of the “enemies of the motherland” did not cause us to doubt this.[[28]](#footnote-28)

This excerpt from the memoir shows how propaganda was a part of every educational institution and was crucial in shaping the opinions of citizens in regard to the necessity and righteousness of the Soviet legal system. The widespread propaganda made sure to portray those arrested for political missteps or petty crime as ‘enemies of the motherland’ and as such make them into outcasts of society. Mochulsky describes that while often arrests did not make sense, life went on and the belief in government institutions would soon be restored[[29]](#footnote-29).

## The uncontrollable and the faithful: targeted by repression

We have seen how the penal system focused on socially unwanted factors within Soviet society, differentiating from small time criminals to opposers of the new political order. Due to the ever changing laws and criminal offenses, a wide variety of people have entered the Gulag system during the existence of the Soviet Union. Those deviating from the new set norms were taken out of society and punished with the intention of creating a controllable society. The specific groups that were targeted by legal repression changed regularly throughout the early years of the Soviet Union.

When Lenin first started to attack the groups he believed to be most fervent in opposing him in 1918, he created a criminal code on which arrests could be based. He saw labor camps as a special kind of punishment for ‘class enemies’ who he believed to deserve harsher punishment than criminals and murderers. In the early Soviet Union the outlines for what constituted a class enemy were left mostly undefined, causing the sentencing of prison sentences and capital punishments to happen largely at random. The decentralization of the legal system gave policemen and soldiers who executed the arrest, the power to decide who was guilty. The groups mainly targeted in these first years of the Soviet Union were the bourgeoisie, representatives of the old Czarist regime, but also any other group of socialists.[[30]](#footnote-30) All these groups were possible threats to the shaky hold on power that the Bolsheviks had managed to obtain. The vagueness of the term ‘bourgeois class enemy’ becomes apparent when taking into account that it could describe anyone from a banker to a merchant's wife.[[31]](#footnote-31) After these early arrest waves of class enemies and political adversaries, Lenin continued to prosecute groups that he believed to be enemies of the socialist state. In a telegram Lenin sent to the commissars of Penza in 1918 he called for “mass terror against the kulaks, priests and white guards” and for the “unreliable” to be “locked up in a concentration camp outside the town.”[[32]](#footnote-32) The persecution of kulaks, or wealthy farmers, and that of the clergy and other religious believers will be discussed more at length in the chapters below.

After Stalin took control of the Soviet Union, the number of arrests kept growing at a fast pace with peaks of much larger arrest waves. In his work *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn writes that he recognizes three main waves in the constant flow of arrests. The first is between 1929 and 1930 when fifteen million peasants were driven into the taiga and the tundra. Solzhenitsyn believes that due to the illiteracy of the peasants few sources of this exist and hence, this wave is often ignored. The most acknowledged wave, which is now often referred to as ‘The Great Terror’, took place between 1937 and 1938. According to Solzhenitsyn, a lot of documentation from this period exists since this is when people who had an education, position or party membership were arrested and shipped off to the Gulag system. Eventually, the last big wave occurred between 1944 and 1946, as a result of wartime paranoia. However, since my focus is on the early Soviet Union I will not go into more depth in regard to this wave.[[33]](#footnote-33) Research conducted after the publication of Solzhenitsyn’s account of the Gulag system support his claims of three major arrest waves with the one of 1937 and 1938 being the largest.[[34]](#footnote-34)

## Fear and pacification: results of repression

Mochulsky describes those released from the Gulag camps by writing: “Most of them were broken morally and physically for the rest of their lives.”[[35]](#footnote-35) For many, this brokenness stopped them from voicing any more opinions on political change. Even if they dared, the constant surveillance and strict censorship restricted the publication of stories about the camps during the existence of the Soviet Union. While there was some underground publishing, it was only after the fall of the Soviet Union that a considerable body of memoirs, poems and stories about the Gulag camps were officially published.[[36]](#footnote-36) Memoirs such as the one written by Mochulsky, for example, were only published after the 1990s.

The constant surveillance was also the reason so many feared to share their discontent regarding the government or to express their alternating beliefs. If the Committee for State Security, or KGB, found as little as a satirical joke concerning Stalin or the Communist Party, one could face ten years in the Gulag camps.[[37]](#footnote-37) And while not much concrete information was known, the people knew that few left the Gulag unbroken. The fear of being arrested and subsequently disappearing in the Gulag system dominated Soviet society.[[38]](#footnote-38) People severed all ties with those arrested and also refrained from making new bonds out of suspicion and the threat of betrayal. This social disintegration following the growth of the Gulag system made sure to destroy individuality and eliminate large-scale resistance.[[39]](#footnote-39) During the prosecution of citizens in the end of the 1930s, there was a special focus on eliminating independent people who did not follow blindly.[[40]](#footnote-40) The removal of these possible opposers, in combination with the fear of arrest, resulted in a certain amount of pacification amongst the Soviet population. Those who did speak out, ended up in the Gulag system, where they were silenced by the use of strict surveillance and after their potential release by the use of censorship.

## Conclusion

In this chapter it became apparent that the intentions of the legal policy in the early Soviet Union was to repress social disorder and political opposition. It has come forward that the central government feared that opposition or rebellion might take away their position of power. This was reflected in the punitive measures that the government issued in regard to social disorder and political opposition. The Bolshevik party used Gulag camps to punish and ‘re-educate’ opposing individuals, both under the rule of Lenin and of Stalin.

This fear of chaos amongst the Soviet population became visible in the way petty crime was portrayed as a threat to state security and how executing thieves was seen as the highest form of social protection. The group of people that was defined as a threat to state security, and therefore as enemies of the state, contained many different ‘offenders’. Under the label of ‘class enemy’ or ‘bourgeoisie’ many entered the Gulag system. Amongst these enemies of society were also those with different political or personal ideals making them dangerous for the aspired unity under communist ideals. The government justified the extensive use of the Gulag system and the systematic arrests by consistent and large-scale propaganda. By repressing all stories covering the reality of the camps and silencing former prisoners, the Gulag system became a mysterious but ominous threat looming over Soviet society. This threat pacified a large share of the citizens of the Soviet Union and diminished the initiatives for large-scale opposition or rebellion. Since the motivation behind the legal policies was to regain social control and squelch opposition before it could lead to rebellion, this can be considered as a fulfillment of the government's aspirations.

# Chapter 2: Economic repression and famine

*Honorable Comrade Stalin, is there a Soviet government law stating that villagers should go hungry?* - Ukrainian village authority[[41]](#footnote-41)

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Legal repression was not the only tool through which the government sought to reach the ideal socialist society. The Soviet economy for instance, was also used to exert top-down repression. After the two revolutions in 1917 and during the following civil war that lasted until 1920, a highly centralized economic system arose that is also referred to as ‘war communism’. This meant that the state was in complete control of all forms of industry and production with the only exception of the growing illegal trade sector. After the civil war, a new policy was set up under the supervision of Lenin, it was called the New Economic Policy or NEP. This new policy led to the Soviet Union becoming a mixed economy between 1921 and 1929, where the state owned all large-scale production but some measure of private business was possible. At the end of the 1920s, Stalin’s administration transformed the economy back into a ‘centralized state administrative system’ where all forms of economic behavior were administratively or coercively controlled.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Similar to the revolution of 1917 and the following civil war, communist economic policy also seemed to resemble a violent campaign. Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) believed that a militarization of the economy, using forced labor brigades and requisitioning, would stabilize the crisis in the early Soviet Union. Similarly, Stalin argued that military tactics used in the civil war could be applicable to the economy. These military tactics meant the formation of confiscation committees and the arrest or execution of all ‘counter-revolutionary’ factors. Here it becomes visible once again that when those in power felt a sense of chaos residing in society, they responded with repression in order to regain control. Economic repression was therefore linked to military sentiments that were successful in creating order during the civil war.[[43]](#footnote-43)

The economic policy that the Bolsheviks had implemented at the very start of their rule in 1917, redistributed grain away from the countryside and towards factories, the army or export. The confiscation of harvest was organized by local requisitioning committees called *komnezamy.* Those appointed to organize the collection of grain decided that the interests of the state must always come before the welfare of local inhabitants. The few farmers that were able to stay independent, responded to the economic policy by planting dramatically less, knowing that most of their crop would be confiscated once it had been harvested. Combined with an ongoing drought and a lack of able-bodied men to work the fields, this resulted in a catastrophically diminished harvest in 1921.[[44]](#footnote-44) Since there were no surplus storages of grain to fall back on due to the confiscations, millions perished. This marked the first large-scale famine of the Soviet Union and it would last until 1922. [[45]](#footnote-45)

The second famine happened under the rule of Stalin. His five-year plans regarding the Soviet economy declared that the central government aspired to industrialize at hyper speed and would do so by collectivizing agriculture. Crucial to this plan was removing the kulaks, or richer peasants, from Soviet society. These farmers were stripped of their land and property and later exiled or executed. The land confiscated from these farmers would be combined into enormous collective farms that peasants would be forced to work at. The anticipated economic success, however, did not occur. The chaos of the arrests and deportations of the kulaks, in addition to the confiscation of almost all harvest and the failure of the collective farms, left peasant production at an all-time low in 1932.[[46]](#footnote-46) Ukraine was hit especially hard by the increasing hunger, the ban on railway travel for peasants and the Soviet refusal of international aid. Trapped in a barren Ukraine, peasants died by thousands in refugee camps and in the streets. This famine of 1932 and 1933 that mainly ravaged the countryside of Ukraine is commonly referred to as the Holodomor.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Within the literature on these famines, historians have put forward different opinions regarding the role of the government in these tragedies. The research that has been done on economic repression in the early Soviet Union, is mostly divided between a more political and a more economical focus. Works by Anne Applebaum or Norman Naimark, for example, especially focus on the famines and the political choices that led to the death of millions.[[48]](#footnote-48) It is also in their books that the question whether the famines can be considered as genocide come forward. A completely different method of research is exercised by Hoover and Chossudowsky, who have mostly paid attention to the economic aspects of the policy changes and concern themselves less with the question of genocide.[[49]](#footnote-49) So while the scholars with a political focus mostly see the economic policy as a tool to gain political control, those with an economic focus see matters such as rationing and requisition separately from political motivations. In this chapter, the economic policy will be discussed both as an aspect of the creation of an ideal communist economy and as a form of political repression. By controlling production and livelihood, the state could break down opposition and create a sense of social order.

This chapter will start by explaining why the central government chose to respond to the crisis in the early Soviet Union with a militarized economic policy and why this unsuccessful policy was later continued and intensified. Following this, the specific groups of Soviet citizens that were targeted by this economic policy will be discussed, which will show the political objectives these economic policies could encompass. Afterwards, the way this economic policy was implemented and justified with the use of propaganda will be discussed. Finally, this chapter will reflect upon the results of this economic policy and whether it was successful in gaining the desired order and control for the central authorities. By discussing all these aspects of economic repression, the strategic motives that were present behind these economic policies will become visible.

## State employment and collectivization: motives for repression

The Gulag camps were a way to seclude certain political opposers from society, but exercising full economic control made it possible to punish entire regions for disobedience or belonging to a certain group. The Russian and Soviet history expert Moshe Lewin mentions how ‘nationalization’ of the economy made the state into the owner, planner and direct manager of the Soviet economy. As a result of this, the government became the sole employer of nearly all citizens. Because the government was not dependent on prices or markets and did not have to adhere to a constitution, a high level of independence from society arose. This gave the government unlimited power in controlling citizens as employees without any workers rights.[[50]](#footnote-50)

The initial idealistic vision of the *kolkhoz*,or collective farms, was that the project would be

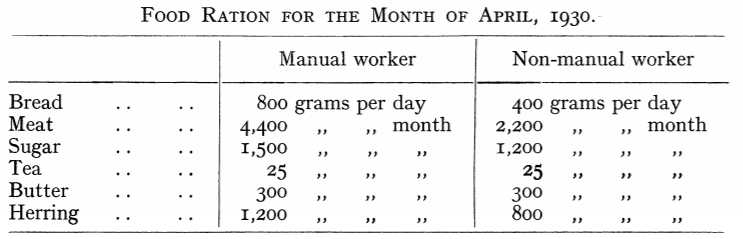
fueled by the voluntary participation of peasants. However, the resistance of peasants in giving up their land and livestock fueled a more forceful and violent approach from local party members all over the Soviet Union. Due to the formation of a ‘political economy’ and the lack of separation between economy and state, unproductive or low-quality production could be seen as a crime against the state. As such, opposition to economic policy – like refusing to join a collective farm or giving up property – was often labeled as anti-state behavior.[[51]](#footnote-51) The diffusing line between law and economics caused the criminalization of every form of economic independence or opposition.[[52]](#footnote-52)

In 1929, the Central Committee decided that in order to speed up the process of collectivization, cadres would be sent into the villages to implement the policy. Volunteers from Russian or local cities would form brigades that were at first meant to persuade and later force peasants to give up their property and join collective farms. They were inspired by propaganda, the ambition to move up higher in the party or the genuine belief that collectivization would create a prosperous ideal state. Food shortages had been blamed on the inability or unwillingness of peasants to adapt to communist life, making them the scapegoat of the failure of the Soviet economic policy so far.[[53]](#footnote-53) One of these urban volunteers, Nadya, showcases this revolutionary devotion in a letter addressed to an American socialist:

I am in villages with a group of other leaders organizing the farmers. It is a tremendous job, but we are making amazing progress. It would do you worlds of good to be with us and watch us draw the stubborn peasants into collectivization. Contrary to your “prophecies,” the farmers are yielding to our persuasion. They are joining collectivization and I am confident that in time not a single farmer will remain on his own land. We shall yet smash the last remnants of capitalism and forever rid ourselves of exploitation. Come, join us. See with your own eyes what is happening, how we are rebuilding the Russian villages. The very air here is afire with a new spirit and a new energy.[[54]](#footnote-54)

This letter shows how the conviction of the righteousness and success of collectivization was very much present within the minds of early volunteers of the collectivization. Nadya truly believed that she was saving the ‘stubborn peasants’ from capitalist exploitation by making sure “not a single farmer remained on his own land.” While capitalist forces were surely removed from the agrarian system, this faith in collectivization eventually proved misplaced, seeing as it led to the famine that took the life of millions.

Away from the countryside, in the urban areas of the Soviet Union, Soviet citizens received food not by their own limited production but by distribution of the government. During the years of war communism, rationing was implemented to support the war economy and create a certain matter of egalitarianism amongst the workers.[[55]](#footnote-55) Due to food shortages, rationing was introduced in all Soviet cities once again with the implementation of the first five-year plan of Stalin in 1928. This time, however, the obtainable food would be divided on the basis of class. The rationing system consisted of four rates that translated to different ration quantities and qualities. A distinction was made between cooperative and non-cooperative labor resulting in the unequal distribution of the scarce food available.[[56]](#footnote-56) Furthermore, the state also increased the prices of food sold separately from the rationing, making it impossible for those excluded from the system to survive.[[57]](#footnote-57) As seen in the table below, a manual worker with a high productivity in state-owned industry would receive up to double the rations of a non-manual worker:

[[58]](#footnote-58)

The rationing system was a way to control Soviet citizens by the threat of taking away the sustenance they needed for themselves and their family to survive. In order to receive the largest possible share of the obtainable food, someone had to perform hard physical labor in state owned industries and keep silent. When comparing this to the means of survival in a Gulag camp, some similarities can be found. It is therefore not surprising that prisoners often did not refer to Soviet society as “freedom” but as the “big prison zone”.[[59]](#footnote-59)

## Scapegoats and cover-ups: implementation of repression

Aspirations to reform the countryside and the peasant society were around since the formation of the Soviet Union. While during the 1920s campaigns for a worker-peasant alliance were still active, these were broken down with the introduction of collectivization. As opposed to creating an alliance with the peasants, the new goal became to persuade them into cooperating with the economic policy of the central government.[[60]](#footnote-60) The central government carried out a widespread propaganda campaign that was meant to break down opposition that arose as a response to collectivization and the requisitioning of property. The radio, newspapers and magazines in every corner of the Soviet Union were heavily influenced by socialist propaganda. During rallies or collectivization meetings the word ‘kulak’ was used as a synonym for everything bad in society: ‘kulak’ became a swear word and a symbol used to alienate the people that were awarded the categorization. Through this campaign, kulaks were supposed to become the true enemy of the Soviet people, not the repressive state itself.[[61]](#footnote-61) Propaganda was used to point out a scapegoat for the constant food shortages and the lack of promised economic success. A poster that was published with this exact intent is depicted below:



‘Away with Kulaks! (1920)[[62]](#footnote-62)

The text in the top right corner is attributed to Lenin and reads: “The kulaks are most bestial, brutal and savage exploiters, who in the history of other countries have time and again restored the power of the landlords, tsars, priests and capitalists.” The bold letters in the bottom of the image read: “Away with kulaks!”[[63]](#footnote-63) This poster thus puts down kulaks as greedy and selfish people who have kept all the food to themselves and gotten fat in the process. In a time where hunger was present in almost all parts of Soviet society, this was considered an act of treason.

While the policies of collectivization, requisition and kulak alienation were widely propagated by the central government, the story of what followed these policies was not. Partly during the famine of 1921 and completely during the famine of 1932, the reality of the famines was kept away from the public by forbidding newspapers to publish the stories. It even went as far as the central government denying that the famine had ever occurred from 1933 onwards. Local archives were destroyed and data were changed in such a manner that it appeared as if people had not died of starvation.[[64]](#footnote-64) The Welsh journalist Gareth Jones, who was the first to publish his findings regarding the Holodomor in the west, wrote: "By the time Western journalists were allowed back into Ukraine in the autumn of 1933, the worst of the famine was over and a new crop was being harvested".[[65]](#footnote-65)

## Kulaks and the socially harmful: targeted by repression

As seen in the propaganda poster we discussed previously, the government portrayed kulaks as the new enemy of the state. This ‘social group’, which was largely a fabricated invention, was supposed to encompass all richer peasants who had made themselves guilty of capitalist behavior. The economic definition of a kulak was, however, not very rigid and soon evolved into more political or social varieties. The government had to explain how poor peasants still opposed collectivization even though they did not qualify for kulak categorization. This created the possibility for the central government to call every opposing peasant a kulak. When someone was defined as a kulak, the local authorities were thereby justified to confiscate their property and possessions, after which they could exile or execute the peasant in question. As a result of this possibility, the term ‘kulak’ was used for a wide variety of people. Ethnic minorities could be kulaks even without owning land and a peasant owning a pig when his neighbors had none could be a kulak too.[[66]](#footnote-66)

A group that could sometimes overlap with the kulaks, but which was targeted more within

urban communities were the *sotsvredelement* or socially harmful elements. These were all the people living in the Soviet Union who were thought to work against the formation of the ideal socialist economy. Their inability to conform to communist ideals caused them to be defined as unproductive parasites of Soviet society and spreaders of the ‘anti-Soviet virus’. They were often disenfranchised, which meant they were stripped of their rights and were no longer true citizens of the Soviet Union. It also meant that they could not work in state-owned businesses or receive rations. The disenfranchised were therefore not only repressed on economic grounds but also punished with economic repercussions.[[67]](#footnote-67) Campaigns against this newfound class enemy already started in the 1920s but were intensified during the 1930s. This can be seen in the way government officials began describing the unemployed, homeless and indigent as ‘social parasites. In a speech Stalin held in 1933, he made sure to politicize the assault against the socially harmful by making “un-organized” elements into “anti-Soviet counter revolutionaries” who could be arrested for posing a danger to the regime.[[68]](#footnote-68) Such claims were comparable to the way the execution of petty criminals was described as “the highest form of social protection.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

## Peasant rebellion and instrumental use: results of repression

The implementation of collectivization was met with extensive opposition and rebellion amongst the peasant population. The traditional notion of certain Western scholars such as Moshe Lewin and R. W. Davies that the peasants reacted passively towards the collectivization is easily contradicted by looking more closely at the peasant rebellions of 1930.[[70]](#footnote-70) The initial protests were mostly peaceful and consisted of peasants speaking out at collectivization meetings or writing letters to higher ranking party members in the hope they felt differently than the local authorities. When this failed and economic repression continued, the opposition turned violent. Activism ranged from vandalism to the lynching of local officials, but it was present in all outskirts of rural society. In 1930 alone, 13,000 riots involving two million participants were recorded, leaving the central government with a desperate need for regaining control of the countryside.[[71]](#footnote-71)

While no definite proof has been found that confirms the famines were deliberately orchestrated with the intention of squashing peasant rebellion, many scholars have suggested its coincidental success. The regions that suffered most under the famines of 1921 and 1932, such as Southern Ukraine, also proved to have been the regions that had been most active in the peasant rebellions. By depriving these regions of famine relief and making use of local grain requisition officers, communities fell apart. Starvation made the search for food and survival a priority over the armed struggle.[[72]](#footnote-72) That the famines were used instrumentally by the Communist government to further other political ideals, is something most scholars are in consensus about. Instrumental use of the first famine becomes visible in a letter written by Lenin in 1922, addressed to Vyacheslav Molotov, who would later become Stalin’s trusted second secretary:

Now and only now, when people are being eaten in famine-stricken areas, and hundreds, if not thousands, of corpses lie on the roads, we can (and therefore must) pursue the removal of church property with the most frenzied and ruthless energy and not hesitate to put down the least opposition.[[73]](#footnote-73)

What this confidential report implies is not only that the government top was very much aware of the extent of suffering happening in the countryside, but also that instead of offering aid they felt it was an opportunity to take more from the peasant communities. Lenin acknowledged that the famine would leave those afflicted weak and the possibility of organized opposition at a minimum.

In the cities, rationing was a highly effective system for the repression of uncontrollable factors in society. Giving compliant citizens enough sustenance in a time of hunger made it appealing for Soviets to work and live according to the ideals of the government. On the other hand, the inability to survive without the favor of the government made it possible for the regime to control many forms of disorder with the threat of withholding rations.

## Conclusion

In this chapter it became clear that the economic policy in the early Soviet Union was used to repress uncontrollable subjects and a large share of the peasant population. By creating a planned economy with the state as sole employer, the government controlled the citizens' means to live. The economic policies were implemented with the use of propaganda that blamed kulaks and other ‘parasites of society’ for the hunger and lack of economic success. By spreading this message through campaigns and posters, the government hoped to justify their violent attack on these groups. Since the term ‘kulak’ was rather fluid it was possible to strip anyone that opposed the new system of all their rights and property. Similarly, in the urban areas uncontrollable citizens were defined as socially harmful elements and thereby stripped of their rights and opportunities. Instead of the kulaks and the *sotsvredelement,* it was the grain requisitioning and collectivization that were mostly to blame for the devastating famines of 1921 and 1932. After famines arose, most stories about what was happening were suppressed and proof was destroyed. The central government also used the hunger and chaos present during the famines instrumentally to further other communist ideals.

What these findings have shown is that the economic policy was both successful and unsuccessful in creating the desired order and control in the early Soviet Union. In the countryside the policy of grain requisitioning and the collectivization of farms was met with a number of large-scale peasant rebellions. After the spread of famine however, the opposition was broken down by the search for food and the subsequent falling apart of communities. This was also visible in urban areas where dependence on the government was created through rations that redistributed scarce products on the basis of class and good behavior. By controlling the economy completely, the central government could control Soviet citizens.

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# Chapter 3: Cultural repression and the control of nations

*It goes without saying that a nation, like every historical phenomenon, is subject to the law of change, has its history, its beginning and end.* - Stalin (1912)[[74]](#footnote-74)

In the first twenty years after the formation of the Soviet Union, Lenin and Stalin made known that they believed in the importance of diversity in regard to nationality and culture. They even went so far as to call those not actively reinforcing their own nationality ‘politically immature’ and as having “abnormal attitudes.”[[75]](#footnote-75) By pushing member states to develop their own nationality while actively participating in Soviet politics, the government hoped to unify the Soviet Union. During a meeting of the Central Communist party in Belarus in 1925, the plenum cited Stalin on this matter:

“The essence of the national question in the RSFSR is how to extinguish the de facto backwardness (economic, political, and cultural) of some nations, which they inherited from the past, and to provide the possibility for backward people to catch up with central Russians in terms of state, cultural, and economic conditions.”[[76]](#footnote-76)

The meeting was focused on *korenizatsiia* or indigenization, meaning the assimilation of different cultures within the Soviet Union by emphasizing the importance of different ethnic groups and their relation to Soviet politics. Stalin’s quote shows how non-Russian member states were considered “backward” and could only reach Russian standards by evolving into national components. The choice of words and the conviction of the justness of their policy could, to some extent, be compared to western imperialism and colonial thinking. The historian Dominic Lieven makes this same comparison by writing: “Russian demographic and even to some extent political developments fit the overall pattern not just of the expansion but also of the contraction of Europe.”[[77]](#footnote-77) Comparably, oppressed groups of the Soviet Union were often unwelcoming to these indigenization policies which meant they resulted in unrest and opposition.[[78]](#footnote-78)

The switch in cultural policy by Stalin in the 1930s can be linked to the social unrest that followed the indigenization policies. Terry Martin, a professor of Russian history, described the change of attitude from the government as: “a shift from a moderate policy of national concessions in the 1920s to a repressive policy in the 1930s featuring ethnic deportations, national terror, and russification.”[[79]](#footnote-79) The Russification that Martin refers to entails both the creation of a monoculture and the repression of all forms of cultural expression that were not in line with the new Soviet culture. Nationalistic expressions, tribal traditions and minor languages or dialects were forbidden. Where the removal of religion from society had been an important political ideal for the communist party from the beginning, all other forms of cultural expression were also deemed illegal from the 1930s onwards.[[80]](#footnote-80) The ethnic deportations and national terror that Martin mentioned, occurred during the period at the end of the 1930s that is now commonly referred to as ‘The Great Terror’. This shows how the policy of the government and the measure of repression that was exerted, was directly related to the experience of internal crisis or unrest. When the policy of nationalization proved unsuccessful in creating the desired order, the policy changed dramatically in another, more repressive direction.

While a number of works have been written on the repression of culture and nationality in the Soviet Union, few discuss both the continuity and change regarding the policies fully. For example, Yuri Slezkine makes a strong case by showing that both Lenin and Stalin were supporters of national acknowledgement, but neglects to discuss the drastic turn the policy took in the 1930s.[[81]](#footnote-81) Terry Martin also fails to highlight this change but he does make a more extensive case for his perception of the apparent continuity of the policy.[[82]](#footnote-82) While Per Anders Rudling provides a very clear overview of the transitional process, his research is exclusively focused on Belarus, making it less applicable to understanding the process in the whole Soviet Union.[[83]](#footnote-83) This thesis will therefore discuss both the continuity and sudden transition of the cultural policy, with a focus on the whole Soviet Union.

To understand the motives behind the cultural and national repression, this chapter will begin by focusing on the intentions of the central government in regard to the cultural policy. Sources such as letters and articles written by government officials will provide an impression of the political motives behind these policies. In order to understand how the Bolshevik party first celebrated cultural diversity and later prosecuted it, an overview of the propaganda used to implement these policies will be given. This will also indicate the number of different nationalities, ethnicities and cultures that were targeted by these repressive policies. By discussing how these cultural policies were received amongst different Soviet citizens, it will become visible what the results of this form of repression were. Eventually, this chapter will analyze whether the policies were successful in regard to the government's intentions. By doing so, this chapter will show how cultural repression was used both during the years of cultural celebration and during the creation of a monoculture.

## Trust of the masses and ethnic control: motives for repression

One of the main intentions of the nationalization policies was to create loyal Soviet citizens who linked their own national sympathies to broader Soviet nationalism. By strengthening and allowing nationalism amongst member states, the central government hoped to legitimize their rule and, as a result, would face less opposition.[[84]](#footnote-84) Important for understanding this vision is realizing that only national form was allowed, not national content. Language and some domestic arrangements could be freely exercised, but not aspects such as religion or traditional celebrations. These kinds of cultural expressions were made illegal since they could not coincide with communist ideology. On the other hand, Lenin expressed that he believed the use of the member state’s mother tongue was necessary to spread communist ideals. In order to rally support for the socialist cause, he believed it was necessary to adapt to local circumstances. Native teachers and officials had to address their ‘own’ in their national language and convert them into socialists.[[85]](#footnote-85) Both Lenin and Stalin agreed that opposition was almost exclusively fueled by minorities being denied the right to speak their own language, not by any other forms of cultural repression. By allowing them to speak their mother tongue, they believed to win the trust of the different nationalities.[[86]](#footnote-86)

Terry Martin discusses the reasons for the seemingly paradoxical co-existence of nation-building and nation-destructing government actions. He starts with describing how the nation-building policy of the 1920s was already laced with ethnophilia. The central government wanted to exclude certain ethnic minorities in order to avoid national ethnic conflict. Different dispersed ethnicities, like the Jews and the Gypsies, had to be brought together in compact agricultural settlements that could be more easily controlled. While Martin does not go into more detail in regard to the origin of this ethnophilia, a solid argument can be made for a connection with the central government’s fear of losing control over Soviet society. Unidentified or dispersed groups were harder to control and therefore perhaps more prone to creating chaos or unrest. The ethnophilia of the 1920s eventually transitioned to Russian xenophobia in the 1930s. Uprisings in different member states and ongoing guerilla warfare at the borders of the Soviet Union, made the government fearful of non-Russian regions. The OGPU mentioned in their rural reports how in the second half of 1922, there were fourteen cases of long-term armed political bands which had over a hundred members.[[87]](#footnote-87) Similar to the response regarding the uprisings associated with collectivization, which featured in Chapter 2, the Central Communist party again imposed aggressive repression to regain control.

## Symbolism and surveillance: implementation of repression

The way in which the policies regarding nationalism and culture changed was also visible in the propaganda that the government issued. At first, the government invested heavily in projects that had to ‘celebrate’ diversity amongst nationalities and cultures. By doing so, the central government denounced the idea of a unity of workers that was often considered a universal socialist ideal. As mentioned in the beginning of this thesis, Stalin described the formation of the Soviet Union in 1918 not as “forced unification” but as a “voluntary and fraternal union of the working masses of all nations and peoples of Russia.” An example of the propaganda accompanying such claims is the following poster:



*Long live the fraternal union and the great friendship of the peoples of the USSR!* (Elkin, 1938) [[88]](#footnote-88)

The sentence underneath the image says: “Long live the fraternal union and the great friendship of the peoples of the USSR!” while the words of the flag read “Hail great Stalin.” The combination of these slogans makes this poster a fitting example of the early nationalization policies of the Central Communist government. It shows the conviction that nationalism would create trust and loyalty towards the Soviet government. Where this poster makes use of positive phrasing and imagery, most propaganda at this time used negative symbolism in order to portray unwanted forms of cultural expression. Lenin for example often used excessive negative symbolism in his attack on religion by referring to it as the “most dangerous abomination” or the “most revolting infection.”[[89]](#footnote-89)

As opposed to the propaganda campaign regarding cultural celebration, very limited propaganda accompanied the ethnic deportations and national terror that arose at the end of the 1930s. National operations that had to round up all diaspora national minorities were mainly conducted in secret. The fact that this period is commonly known as ‘The Great Terror’, in combination with the totalitarian nature of the Soviet government, suggests that the widespread violence of 1937 and 1938 was used instrumentally to repress the population with fear.[[90]](#footnote-90) As seen during the civil war, the Bolshevik party did not shy away from using terror to force people into submission. However, at the end of the 1930s, the violent operations were supposed to be conducted in secret and with the main intention of eliminating all alien or dangerous groups from Soviet society. As Robert Conquest writes, these intentions of secrecy were not always successful and the arrests did instigate a level of fear in the Soviet population.[[91]](#footnote-91) The suspicion of the Central Communist government that non-Russian citizens had ties with foreign elements created high levels of paranoia. When this was combined with the already present insecurity regarding the loyalty of the population, excessive violence erupted that targeted national and ethnic minorities.[[92]](#footnote-92) This shows how the idea of internal or external threats motivated the government to attack its own population with mostly disguised but nevertheless very real violence.

## Ethnicities and former heroes: targeted by repression

The policy of nationalization created enemies amongst both ethnic minorities and Russian-speaking citizens living in different member states. Per Anders Rudling mentions how many groups in the 1920s were forced to use the language the government decided was their mother tongue. Jewish citizens for example had to speak Yiddish and send their children to Yiddish schools, even if this resulted in lower levels of education.[[93]](#footnote-93) Besides ethnic minorities, Russian-speaking citizens in different member states also struggled under the indigenization policy. Every party member working in a government function had to master the newly appointed national language in a matter of months. Besides government offices, most workplaces also conducted business in Russian up until the policy change, causing many workers to face difficulty when they proved unable to speak the newly appointed national language. The inability to adjust, as well as any form of opposition to the policy, was punished.[[94]](#footnote-94) The communist leader of Belarus, Alyaksandr Krynitski, responded to the opposition by saying: “Belarusization is the most important task, since it affects the majority of the population of our republic— the peasantry, the most culturally and economically backward majority.”[[95]](#footnote-95) It is striking that Krynitski again uses the word ‘backward’ earlier used by Stalin, but now to describe the peasantry instead of all non-Russian states. The nationalization policies appear to be ways to target the masses that were not yet under complete communist control, with the eventual goal of shaping them into willing communist Soviets.

It was only after these techniques proved unsuccessful in fulfilling the intentions of the Central Communist party and opposition grew, that the policy changed drastically. In the 1930s this became widely visible with the deportation and extermination of a number of Soviet ethnicities and nationalities. Between 1935 and 1938, the Poles, Germans, Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Koreans, Chinese, Kurds and Iranians suffered this faith. The next step in this policy started in 1937, when a large number of diaspora nationalities were labelled ‘enemy nations’. As a result of this label, they were not only forcibly relocated but actively targeted for arrest and execution. Their nationality or ethnic identity made them enemies of the state and they were treated as such.[[96]](#footnote-96)

Besides the targeting of ethnic groups, individuals active in nationalistic projects also became victims of the control-driven policy changes of the 1930s. The Ukrainian terror of 1933 shows how mainly national communists, Ukrainian cultural specialists and immigrants of West Ukraine were targeted. National communists were a group many deemed safe from prosecution before the terror, due to their party membership and often lengthy service in government functions. However, they were arrested for charges such as exaggerating the importance of nationality or combining Bolshevism with nationalism. The group of Ukrainian cultural specialists mainly consisted of teachers and specialists in the field of nationalities policy. The ones that were appointed in the previous decade to create distinct national cultures were now prosecuted for doing exactly that.[[97]](#footnote-97) Presumably, this dramatic shift can be attributed to the previous policy’s lack of success as well as the remaining opposition within member states.

## Opposition and independence: Results of repression

The nationalization policy of the 1920s had a number of enemies who actively opposed the choices of the government, meaning that the results of cultural repression ran counter to the expectations of the government. Industry and trade union leaders for example, strongly disagreed with the policy and sometimes refused to implement it.[[98]](#footnote-98) As mentioned before, national minorities that were marginalized by having to adjust to the nationality they were assigned, also opposed the policy of indigenization. Additionally, the development of nationalism in the member states often showed less beneficial to the justification of Soviet authority than the government had expected. By allowing the existence of nationalistic expression, opposition to oppression was able to take shape. The Ukrainian writer Mykola Khvylovyi can serve as an example of this type of opposition. In his works he calls for a modernist Ukraine with links to Europe instead of the Soviet Union. Khvylovyi writes how Ukraine was seen as a mere region instead of an independent nation and how it was referred to as ‘little Russia’.[[99]](#footnote-99) The process of nationalization made it possible for writers of nationalistic works such as these to directly reach their audience, in some oppressed nations perhaps for the very first time. The growing demand for works in the national language due to the policy prioritizing these publications, made it possible for anti-Russian works to spread at a high pace.[[100]](#footnote-100)

The central government also faced difficulty with eliminating certain forms of unwanted cultural expression from society. The campaign against religion for example proved unsuccessful due to the existence of substantial religious traditions in most member states that were ingrained in every aspect of life. Folklore contained religious stories, jokes and songs that could evade censorship due to its oral nature. The belief that the Bolsheviks and everybody that cooperated with them would be punished by God, dominated the rural areas. Opposition to atheist campaigns therefore often turned violent and a number of government campaigners were assaulted or murdered.[[101]](#footnote-101)

A surprising aspect of the policy of nationalization in the 1920s, is the cultural repression of the majority of the Soviet population, namely: Russian citizens. Soviet citizens of Russian descent had to downplay any form of nationalistic expression. The central government believed that too much national expression from Russians would make the newly annexed nations feel oppressed and that this could lead to rebellion. A crucial result of the policy changes regarding cultural expression in the 1930s, is that Russian culture was rehabilitated. Where the nation-building policy of the 1920s had taken away Russian national self-expression, it was now boosted. In 1932 the Politburo issued a decree saying all paperwork in governmental offices, newspapers, journals and any form of education had to be switched from the national language to Russian.[[102]](#footnote-102) The switch in language in combination with other forms of Russification were met with resistance from other national groups. While the secretary of Soviet Nationalities remarked that all citizens should be welcoming to “natural assimilation” and that this would lead “to the formation of a single nation with a single language.” many did not agree.[[103]](#footnote-103) The Chechens for example refused to give up their language or customs even after being forcibly relocated to a heavily controlled area.[[104]](#footnote-104) Their resistance was characterized by open demonstrations, desertion from the Red Army and violent rebellion.[[105]](#footnote-105)

## Conclusion

In this chapter it became apparent that the motives behind different forms of cultural repression were driven by a desire to control, at first by gaining trust and loyalty, later by the violent attack on deviating factors within society. Cultural repression thus bears significant similarities in process and scope to its legal and economic counterparts. However, a key difference with these other forms of repression is the seemingly tolerant nature of the initial policy and the manner in which political ideals were turned around so drastically. Propagating nationalism in the different member states was meant to portray the Soviet Union as a form of voluntary unification and justify Russian rule. However, the frustration of the government regarding the criticism and opposition this policy received, eventually led to a less tolerant and more violent policy.

The ethnic deportations and mass executions of The Great Terror were not meant to frighten the population into submission but to eliminate all possible threats from Soviet society. These threats soon encompassed all of those who were active in the previous indigenization policy, members of diaspora minorities and those connected to religion. While the intention was to repress all opposition and regain control over society, this was not completely achieved. The nationalization policy had left space for the spread of nationalistic ideas and sentiments that would not bow down to Russification. Additionally, the religious tradition in most member states was thoroughly established in folklore and oral culture, creating a belief system that atheist propaganda could not penetrate.

When considering that the main objective of the cultural repression during both policies was gaining control over the different member states, the continuation of opposition could be seen as the failure of this form of repression. Where legal and economic repression were also frequently met with opposition, these policies were eventually often more successful in eliminating these opposing factors from society. By taking away freedom or livelihood, opposing individuals were eliminated. Cultural factors, as the continuation of religious devotion has shown, were much harder to expunge from all aspects of Soviet society. It was through this obstacle that the ideal of a single nation with a single language which only had faith in socialism, was not realized.

# Conclusion

For a large number of Soviet citizens, life under communist rule was neither voluntary nor beneficial. As this thesis has shown, a wide variety of top-down repression was implemented with the intention of creating a well-oiled socialist state where every citizen followed the orders of the government. By analyzing the distinct policies of repression this thesis has tried to answer the question: How were different forms of repressive policy connected to the social context of the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1941? What was visible in all three policies – legal, economic and cultural – is that repression was often a reaction to a perceived or actually present growth of opposition to the communist regime. Where other authors, such as Anne Applebaum and Terry Martin, have acknowledged the repressive policies only as a mere characteristic of Soviet rule, this thesis has shown that they were a reaction to the government's perception of chaos in the Soviet Union.

Government officials reacted violently to any perceived social disorder or opposition. Individuals deviating from the image of an ideal socialist citizen, were labeled as class enemies, traitors or dangerous elements. The individuals or groups that were awarded these labels ranged from petty thieves, wealthier farmers and the unemployed to political opposers, other nationalities and religious believers. Repressive measures were put in place with the idea of eliminating these groups from Soviet society and creating a unified and controllable population. In order to do so, the central government used different forms of visual and textual propaganda. Posters, magazines and campaigners had to spread the ideals of the top and make them the ideals of every person within the borders of the Soviet Union. The success the repressive policies and their accompanying propaganda campaigns had, was varied. Both legal and economic repression proved more successful than cultural repression in gaining the desired control and order for it could more easily exterminate opposing factors from society.

The implementation of legal repression was a reaction to both political opposition and the sense of social disorder. Uncontrollable individuals were defined as ‘class enemies’, traitors or ‘bourgeoisie counter-revolutionaries’. Social disorder became a new form of class war and hard punitive measures referred to as ‘the highest form of social protection’ were used to regain control. By sentencing opposing individuals or groups to imprisonment in Gulag camps, they were removed from Soviet life and upon their return often too scared to speak out again. Because the central government controlled the narrative surrounding the camps, they remained a mysterious but pacifying threat hovering over Soviet citizens. This meant that for a large part, legal repression was successful in fulfilling the desire of the Bolshevik party to control disorder and opposition within the Soviet Union.

Economic repression was used to make Soviet citizens dependent on the government for their livelihood and survival. Policies of grain requisitioning and collectivization plummeted the Soviet Union into two famines that caused millions to perish. The famines in many cases resulted in the falling apart of resistance or armed opposition and were used instrumentally by the government to further other political ideals. By being in control of close to all forms of business, production and agriculture, the government could redistribute scarce goods based on class or political behavior. Citizens that were considered troublemakers or unfit to contribute to society were defined as ‘parasites’ and made outcasts of society. While the economic policy in the countryside was met with extensive opposition, the famines eventually crushed these rebellions. Both the policies in urban areas and the ones in the countryside show the desire of the government to control unreliable factors with economic means. With the exception of peasant rebellions, this form of repression thereby seems to have been largely successful in achieving this vision.

Cultural repression was present both in the policy of cultural celebration and in the later policy of Russification. Where at first national groups were forced into a constructed identity, they were later coerced to adjust to Russian language and Soviet culture. The latter went hand in hand with violent attacks on ethnic and national groups that were distrusted and seen as possible disruptive agents. Both the celebration and tearing down of nationality was meant to create loyal Soviet citizens. However, both policies mostly had the opposite effect. The fortification of nationality left space for defensive nationalism to form and spread, which contributed to the opposition that arose in response to the policies of Russification. Forms of cultural expression proved difficult to expunge from Soviet society and the attempts made were met with extensive opposition. This shows how cultural repression was unable to create the loyal and controllable citizens the Government hoped to form.

By looking at the entire process of repression in the early years of the Soviet Union, this thesis has been able to show the accumulating measure of repressive policies and the social context they were reactions to. The effect of these measures on a local level, however, is something that has not been discussed elaborately. In exception of some excerpts, this thesis mainly tells the story of the intentions, reflections and responses of the central government. Interesting additional research could be conducted that looks into the experiences of the ones that were targeted by these repressive policies. Further research may build on the conclusions of this thesis with the use of a new perspective that shows the effect of these three forms of repression on a local level.

By going back to the intentions and reflections of the government, an interesting change can be seen when comparing the ideological statements of the first years of the Soviet Union to the eventual political reality. The “voluntary and fraternal union of the working masses of all nations and peoples of Russia” that Stalin spoke of in 1918, proved unable to obtain.[[106]](#footnote-106) Only through the combination of legal, economic and cultural repression, did the Central Communist government obtain a sense of social order and political control. It therefore appears that the “forced unification” that Stalin opposed in 1918, is the very thing he constructed in reality.

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13. Ibid*,* XVI. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid*,* 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Applebaum, *Gulag*, xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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19. Shearer, *Stalin and the Lubianka*, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Shearer, *Stalin and the Lubianka, 124.* [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid*, 125*. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. OGPU is the translation of the Russian name of the Joint State Political Directorate: ОГПУ. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Shearer, *Stalin and the Lubianka, 128*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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29. Ibid*,* 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Other groups of socialists that were arrested at this time were: Mensheviks, Anarchists and Social revolutionaries. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Applebaum, *Gulag*,5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
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37. KGB is short for the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti,* which translates to ‘the Committee for State Security’. ; Barnes, *Death and Redemption,* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 488. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
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43. Applebaum, *Red Famine*, 58-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. In Ukraine and Russia about a third of all young men had been mobilized to fight in the first world war. Additionally, large parts of the male population had joined one of the sides fighting in the civil war. This left most villages with a diminished male population because many men did not return from battle. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Applebaum, *Red Famine*, 58-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Norman M. Naimark, *Stalin’s Genocides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. The Ukrainian word *Holodomor* comes from the word hunger (holod) and the word exterminate (mor).; Naimark, *Stalin’s Genocides*, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Applebaum, *Red Famine*.; Naimark, *Stalin’s Genocides*. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
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51. Ibid, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
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56. Ibid, 145-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid, 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Hoover, *The Economic Life of Soviet Russia*, 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Applebaum, *Gulag*, xxix. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
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63. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Applebaum, *Red Famine*, xxvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
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66. Applebaum, *Red Famine*, 124-125. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Chossudowsky, ‘Rationing in the U.S.S.R.’, 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. David R. Shearer, *Policing Stalin’s Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924-1953* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009),60-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Quoted from the head of the OGPU, Vyacheslav Menzhinsky, in chapter 1 of this thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin*,4. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin*,3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Applebaum, *Red Famine*, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. ‘Translation of Letter from Lenin - Revelations from the Russian Archives’, web page, Library of congress, accessed 10 February 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
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