
The Show Trials

The main charge against all the victims in the Show Trials was that they had been involved in 'the united centre', a complex conspiracy aimed at the destruction of the Soviet State and its leaders and masterminded by the exiled Trotsky. State Prosecutor Vyshinsky's aggressive and sarcastic interrogations usually concluded with the demand 'that dogs gone mad should be shot – every one of them!' In this extract Vyshinsky is questioning a witness during the trial of 'the Anti-Soviet bloc of Rightists and Trotskyites' in 1938. Isaak Zelensky was a member of the Party Central Committee from 1931–7. As Chairman of Consumer Co-operatives he had been in charge of the distribution of food.

Vyshinsky: . . . but how did matters stand with the butter?

Zelensky: We don't sell butter in the rural districts.

Vyshinsky: I'm not asking what you sell. You were above all selling the main thing – your country. I am speaking about what measures were taken by your organisation to disrupt trade and deprive the population of prime necessities. Apart from sugar and salt, do you know anything concerning butter? . . . Were there any cases when members of your organisation connected with the butter business threw glass into the butter?

Zelensky: There were cases when glass was found in butter.

Vyshinsky: Glass was not 'found', but thrown into the butter. You understand the difference: thrown into the butter. Were there such cases, or not?

Zelensky: There were.

Vyshinsky: For what purpose? To make it 'tastier'?

Zelensky: That is clear.

Vyshinsky: Well, that is organised wrecking and diversive activities. Do you admit that you are guilty of this?

Zelensky: Yes.

Zelensky subsequently received the death sentence.

Source

Conquest, R. *The Great Terror*, Macmillan, London, 1968, pp. 389–90. He attributes it to 'Report of the Court Proceedings in the case of the Anti-Soviet Bloc of Rightists and Trotskyites', English edition, Moscow, 1938.

41 A political trial, 1937

Evgenia Ginzburg was a university teacher and a member of the Communist Party. She was arrested and then tried for espionage and terrorism, under article 58 of the Constitution of the USSR. One of the charges was that she had been connected with a plot to kill Kirov, the Secretary of the Leningrad Communist Party, who had been murdered in 1934. Actually, the murder had been carried out on Stalin's orders. In truth, Mrs Ginzburg's worst crime had been to keep quiet and not join in unfair criticisms of the people she worked with. In this passage she describes her seven minute 'trial', and the verdict, which had been decided beforehand. In the end she served eighteen years in labour camps and prisons and was not set free until after Stalin's death.

A The trial of Evgenia Ginzburg

Now my hour had come. The military tribunal of the Supreme Court – three officers and a secretary – sat facing me across the table; I stood before them, flanked by two guards . . .

'You have read the charge sheet?' the chairman asked in a voice of unutterable boredom. 'You plead guilty? No! But the evidence shows . . . Thumbing through the thick file, he muttered: 'Here's witness Kozlov, for instance. . . .'

'Not Kozlov – Kozlova* a woman. And a despicable woman at that.'

'Kozlova, yes. And there's Dyachenko.'

'Dyakanov . . .'

'Yes. Well they both state . . .'

But what it was they stated the judge was too pressed for time to say. Breaking off, he asked me:

'Any questions you wish to ask the court?'

'Yes I do. I am accused under section 8 of Article 58. This is a charge of terrorism. Will you please name the political leader on whose life you believe I made an attempt?'

Taken aback by the preposterous form of my question, the judges said nothing. They looked in reproachful silence at the tiresomely inquisitive woman who was holding up their work. At last, the grey-haired one mumbled:

'Don't you know that Comrade Kirov was killed in Leningrad?'

'Yes. But it wasn't I who killed him, it was someone called Nikolayev. And I've never been in Leningrad in my life. Isn't that what is known as an alibi?'

'Are you a lawyer or something?' snapped the judge. 'No I'm a teacher.' 'Then don't split hairs. All right, you've never been to Leningrad. But he was killed by people who shared your ideas, so you share the moral and criminal responsibility.'

'The court will withdraw for consultation', grunted the chairman and all the performers of the ritual stood up and wearily stretched their limbs.

I looked at the clock again. They couldn't even have had time for a cigarette: within two minutes they were back in their seats, the chairman with a large sheet of paper in his hand. It was good thick paper covered with a closely typed and neatly laid out text. The typing must have taken at least twenty minutes. This was the verdict . . .

' . . . To ten years maximum isolation in prison, with loss of civil rights for five years . . .'

Ten years! The air grew light and warm. Ten years! That meant Life!

From E. Ginzburg, *Into the Whirlwind*, Penguin, 1967.

*only women's names end in 'a'

① Borris Pasternak describes the setting up of a concentration camp in his historical novel DR. ZHIVAGO.

We were unlucky. We were sent to just about the worst of the punitive camps. There were very few survivors. Our arrival to begin with. - We got off the train. - A snow desert. Forest in the distance. Guards with rifles, muzzles pointing at us, wolf-dogs. At about the same time other groups were brought up. We were spread out and formed out into a big polygon all over the field, facing outwards so that we couldn't see each other. Then we were ordered down on our knees, and told to keep looking straight in front on pain of death. Then the roll-call, an endless, humiliating business going on for hours and hours, and all the time we were on our knees. Then we got up, and the other groups were marched off in different directions, all except ours. We were told: "Here you are. This is your camp" - An open field with a post in the middle and a notice on it saying: 'Gulag 92 Y.N. 90' - that's all there was... First we broke saplings with our bare hands in the frost, to get wood to build our huts with. And in the end, believe it or not, we built our own camp. We put up our prison and our stockade and our punishment cells and our watch towers, all with our bare hands. And then we began our job as lumberjacks. We felled trees. We harnessed ourselves, eight to a sledge, and we hauled timber and sank into the snow up to our necks. For a long time we didn't know there was a war. They kept it from us. And then suddenly there came the offer. You could volunteer for front-line service in a punitive battalion, and if you came out alive you were free. After that, attack after attack, mile after mile of electrified barbed wire, mines, mortars, month after month of artillery barrage. They called our company the death squad. It was practically wiped out. How and why I survived I don't know. And yet - imagine - all that utter hell was nothing, it was bliss compared to the horror of the concentration camp and not because of the material conditions but for some other reason... the war came as a breath of fresh air, an omen of deliverance, a purifying storm.

② Alexander Solzhenitsyn who spent eight years in camps for making derogatory remarks about Stalin, describes a working party setting out.

As usual, at five o'clock that morning reveille was sounded by the blows of a hammer on a length of rail hanging up near the staff quarters. The intermittent sound barely penetrated the window-panes on which the frost lay two fingers thick...

Two powerful searchlights swept the camp from the farthest watch-towers. The border lights, as well as those inside the camp, were on. There were so many of them that they outshone the stars...

There were escort-guards all over the place. They flung a semi-circle round the column on its way to the power-station, their tommy-guns sticking out and pointing right at your face. And there were guards with grey dogs. One dog bared its fangs as if laughing at the prisoners...

The chief of the escort recited the "morning prayer", which every prisoner was heartily sick of:

"Attention, prisoners. Marching orders must be strictly obeyed. Keep to your ranks. No hurrying, keep a steady pace. No talking. Keep your eyes fixed ahead and your hands behind your backs. A step to right or left is considered an attempt to escape and the escort has orders to shoot without warning. Leading guards, quick march"...

Solzhenitsyn describes the food in a camp:

Shukhov... stirred the cold skilly, taking a quick look to see what kind of a helping they'd given him. An average one. They hadn't ladled it from the top of the cauldron, but they hadn't ladled it from the bottom either... The skilly was the same every day. Its composition depended on the kind of vegetable provided that winter. Nothing but salted carrots last year, which meant that from September to June the skilly was plain carrot. This year it was black cabbage. The most nourishing time of the year was June, then all vegetables came to an end and were replaced by groats. The worst time was July: then they shredded nettles into the pot.