“Cleansing” the Soviet Far East, 1937-1938:

John J. Stephan

“I have a bright, buoyant feeling when recalling the summer of 1937 in the Far East.” Valentina Khetagurova

“Life in the Far East is joyful!” proclaimed Dal’kraikom secretary Lavrentii Lavrentiev in 1936. During the next three years, life in Dal’krai was indeed emblazoned with symbols of joyous renewal. Catchwords such as “perestroika” and “inner party democracy” greeted the eye and ear. Far Easterners hailed the “Stalin Constitution,” welcomed nubile Khetagurovites, applauded quota-busting Stakhanovites, and swelled with pride at “stalinskiye sokoly” (“Stalin falcons”) soaring across the North Pole. They flocked to vote unanimously for the “unbreakable bloc” of party and non-party candidates for the Supreme Soviet. They thronged to glimpse the surviving half of “Ilf and Petrov.” They basked in the praise of a prominent French communist. They savored the USSR’s international prestige when a squadron of the United States Navy called at Vladivostok.

Private terror lurked behind public euphoria. Death stalked party secretaries, chairmen of city and rural soviets, OKDVA and Pacific Fleet officers, chekists, railway officials, factory managers, collective farm chairmen, engineers, journalists, agronomists, scientists, writers, and teachers. Tens of thousands of peasants, including the bulk of the Chinese and Korean communities, were forcibly relocated. A half century later, physical losses were still being tabulated. The moral costs of massive complicity in these events cannot be measured.

The origins of the “Great Terror” that peaked during the yezhovshchina (1936-1938) are complex and controversial. Much eludes illumination and will probably continue to do so despite growing accessibility of archives. Insights into the process of terror in the Soviet Far East, however, can be gleaned from a variety of documents, memoirs, and studies published in the former USSR since the advent of glasnost, as well as from Japanese archival sources, including records of the South Manchurian Railway Company (Mantetsu) deposited in at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Repression hit the Far East especially hard. Proximity to Japan, together with the cohesiveness and durability of regional elites, led the central party and security organs to “cleanse” (“ochistit” in the contemporary vernacular) Dal’krai with exceptional thoroughness. Unable to establish tight control over Dal’krai by political-administrative means during 1928-1936, and obsessed by the specter of conspiratorial separatism, Stalin and his associates annihilated the Far Eastern cohort and balkanized the Far East, effectively making these vast and richly endowed territories politically and economically
dependent upon the Center while severing their historically-based ties with Asia-Pacific neighbors.

Fall of Gamarnik, September 1936 - May, 1937

Yan Gamarnik, who simultaneously held the posts of Special Plenipotentiary to the Far East, Deputy Defense Commissar, and Head of the Army’s Main Political Administration, made his last trip to Dal’krai in September 1936. Accompanied by OKDVA commander Vasilii Blücher and OKDVA political commissar Lazar Aronshtam, he reviewed Transbaikalian units at Chita, consulted with Dal’krai kom secretary Lavrentiev at Khabarovsk, attended OKDVA maneuvers at Voroshilov (Ussuriisk), and called upon Pacific Fleet commander Mikhail Viktorov at Vladivostok. He seemed to be under considerable strain and just before leaving warned Blücher that the latter’s young wife was an NKVD “plant.”

When Gamarnik returned from the Far East to Moscow in October, he found himself engulfed in a rising tide of sycophancy and fear attending newly appointed NKVD commissar Yezhov’s orchestrated trial and execution of Kemerovo engineers. The media reverberated with uncommonly strident Stalinist hyperbole. Pravda carried florid panegyrics from Dal’krai kom secretary Lavrentiev, Pacific Fleet Commander Viktorov and Kamchatka obkom secretary Orlov. Gamarnik made himself conspicuous by voting at a Central Committee Plenum against opening an investigation of Bukharin and Rykov and by interceding with Stalin on behalf of former Commissar of Heavy Industry Piatakov on the eve of the latter’s trial.

Stalin started to move against Gamarnik inferentially toward the end of 1936 when Yezhov opened an investigation and began picking up people with whom the special plenipotentiary to the Far East and deputy defense commissar had worked. On 15 January 1937, Lavrentiev was removed as Dal’krai kom secretary and replaced by a Latvian Old Bolshevik, Yosif Vareikis, who had met Gamarnik in Khabarovsk in 1925.

During the first four months of 1937, Stalin and Yezhov gradually closed in on Gamarnik. At his trial in January, Radek implicated Gamarnik’s friend Vitovt Putna as a Japanese agent. At the February-March Central Committee Plenum, Stalin said that Piatakov, on whose behalf Gamarnik had interceded barely a month earlier, had plotted with Japan to detach the Primorye from the USSR. Following the plenum, associates of Gamarnik in the OKDVA were dismissed, and the NKVD arrested civil war veterans with whom he had ties since the 1920s. While Yezhov unravelled Gamarnik’s Far Eastern networks, the press launched a vilification campaign against the Army Political Administration which Gamarnik headed. By the end of April, Pravda was describing the Far East as full of spies and warning soldiers to beware of hidden enemies who lurked within the Red Army.

Gamarnik was doomed when, after the NKVD had “exposed” an anti-Stalin conspiracy within the Red Army on 8 May, he refused to sit in
judgment of Marshal Tukhachevskii, Uborevich, and five other senior commanders.²² Gamarnik was thereupon dismissed as deputy defense commissar and his closest Far Eastern associates (Aronshtam, Mezis, Sangurskii, Lapin, Pshenitsyn) were arrested.²³ On the afternoon of 31 May, Blücher and former Dal’krai kom secretary Lavrentiev visited Gamarnik (convalescing from diabetes) in his apartment and told him that he’d been dismissed that morning as head of the Army Political Administration. As the visitors left, Blücher noticed Yezhov’s operatives waiting outside.²⁴ When the chekists moved in, Gamarnik committed suicide or was murdered.²⁵

The following day, 1 June, Pravda’s back page carried a five-line item sandwiched between notices of a football match and the opening of a swimming pool:

Former CC VKP(b) member V. B. Gamarnik, caught up in ties with anti-Soviet elements and evidently fearing exposure, committed suicide on 31 May.

Before the week was out, Gamarnik was being denounced as a traitor, a coward, a Trotskyist lackey, and fascist spy.²⁶ One of two leaders of the Far Eastern cohort had been removed, constituting the first step in the “cleansing” of Dal’krai.

“A State of Semi-War,” March - June 1937

In March 1937, as Vareikis set off to take up his post as secretary of the Far Eastern party organization, Stalin told him that Dal’krai was in a “state of semi-war.”²⁷ Vareikis took the words literally. Once in Khabarovsk, he attacked regional officials for “lack of vigilance,” among them Dal’krai ispolkom chairman Grigorii Krutov, a close associate of Gamarnik. Vareikis warned that Krutov’s “tolerance of internal enemies” had allowed “Trotskyist-Japanese agents” to sabotage the regional economy.²⁸

While Vareikis undermined Krutov, a special NKVD mission from Moscow arrived in Khabarovsk and demanded why Far Eastern NKVD chief Terentii Deribas had not organized political trials of the 200 railroad officials arrested in late 1936. Deribas complied (trials were held at Svobodnyi, Khabarovsk, and Vladivostok during May, yielding 200 death sentences), but he had already been tainted with “lack of vigilance.”

News of Gamarnik’s “treason,” reaching Khabarovsk in the midst of the 12th Far Eastern Party Conference on 1 June, traumatized Dal’krai kom. Gamarnik’s erstwhile comrades desperately tried to distance themselves while others, scenting blood, pointed accusingly at Krutov, who was summarily dismissed as Dal’krai ispolkom chairman and expelled from the party.²⁹

The Tukhachevskii affair convinced Stalin and Yezhov that Dal’krai was in the grip of a “Far Eastern Parallel Rightist-Trotskyist Center” embracing the region’s military, political, economic, and cultural elite.³⁰ Trusting
neither Vareikis nor Deribas, Stalin dispatched NKVD commissar Vsevolod Balitskii and party enforcer Matvei Shkiriatov to initiate a more vigorous prosecution of hidden enemies in regional party and state organs. Both arrived in Khabarovsk before the end of June. Balitskii arrested Krutov, some district party secretaries, and former Chinese Eastern Railroad employees but left Deribas alone.

During June, the vigilance campaign acquired its own momentum “from below,” putting local party and state leaders on the defensive. At meetings and mass rallies, crowds roared their approval of the execution of senior Red Army commanders. Resolutions were passed reviling Gamarnik and Tukhachevsky as “vile creatures” (gady) and “abject jerks” (zhalkiye merzautsy) and sent “militant greetings” to that “tireless sentinel of socialism, Stalinist Comrade Yezhov.”

Chekists who did not keep pace with the witch hunt incurred suspicion. Deribas fell victim to an enterprising colleague who gained access to the imprisoned Krutov and persuaded him to implicate thirty “co-conspirators” of Gamarnik. When Deribas objected, the informant sent the accusations directly to Moscow. In the meantime, Balitskii was recalled to Moscow after less than twenty days in the Far East.

Enter Liushkov, July - August 1937

In July 1937 the Far East presented Moscow with a spectacle of external and internal threats to state security. Border porosity belied rhetoric about “frontier under lock and key.” On 2 July, five days before the outbreak of a Sino-Japanese undeclared war, Japanese and Manchukuoan units sank an NKVD patrol boat on the Amur. Meanwhile, after Yezhov’s operatives in Moscow had extracted names of Gamarnik’s Far Eastern “co-conspirators,” Stalin and Yezhov also moved at this time to replace Deribas with a Yezhov protégé Genrikh Liushkov. According to his own testimony, Liushkov received instructions directly from Stalin on the eve of his departure for the Far East in July. The general-secretary told him that Dal’krai needed a thorough “cleansing” of Gamarnik’s connections in the OKDVA, party, and collective farms. Liushkov should find out to what extent Far Eastern chekists had become involved in Gamarnik’s treason. Dangerous elements should be neutralized. Blücher was to be placed under surveillance.

During the late summer and autumn of 1937, Liushkov and his chekists from Rostov cut a broad swathe through Dal’krai. He arrested and extracted confessions from Deribas and his assistants Zapadnyi-Kessel’man and Barminskii. He prepared lists of “enemies of the people” in each walk of life. Repression worked its way through obkom, gorkom, and raikom secretaries, Komsomol secretaries, kolkhoz chairmen, agronomists, and engineers, and former Mensheviks. Far Eastern Railroad party committee member Anna Lebedeva, the only woman to storm White positions at the
Battle of Volochayevka in 1922, was arrested in September and shot the following year. Dozens of repatriated Chinese Eastern Railroad employees were shot in Khabarovsk on 21 January 1938.

Stalin had warned Liushkov that Vareikis was “not reliable,” thereby marking the recently appointed Dal’krai party secretary as a candidate for repression. Desperate to prove his loyalty, Vareikis wrote Stalin on 8 September that he had uncovered a “regional Trotskyist-Rightist-Japanese spy center” and that “over 500 spies have been shot.” Such zeal did not prevent Vareikis from being ordered to Moscow on 30 September. He was arrested at a small station outside the capital on 9 October.

Expulsion of East Asians

Moscow’s support of China’s war of resistance against Japan did not exempt Dal’krai Chinese from deportations and forced relocation. Of about 35,000 Chinese in Dal’krai at the beginning of 1937, Liushkov arrested 11,000 and deported 8,000 between August 1937 and May 1938. All Chinese domiciled in Vladivostok or within 60 miles of the frontier were forcibly relocated. An ethnic group associated for over a thousand years with the region, constituting 13% of its population in 1911, made up less than 1% of its inhabitants in 1939.

Dal’krai’s approximately 200,000 Koreans, many of whom were refugees from Japanese rule, had every reason to be loyal to the Soviet regime, yet their ethnicity and concentration around the Posyet frontier zone had from the 1920s made them suspect as cat’s-paws for a Japanese takeover of the Primorye. Moreover, there is evidence that the Kwantung Army did infiltrate Koreans into Dal’krai. Koreans had been relocated earlier but never before on such a large scale (an estimated 160,000) or with such brutality (2,500 were arrested and hundreds were shot or died in transit). In September 1937, each community was given six days to pack portable property and to choose between resettlement within the USSR and deportation to Manchukuo. The vast majority opted for the former and were put in boxcars bound for Central Asia. On 20 December, Pravda announced that the Central Committee had expressed gratitude to Liushkov for fulfilling an important assignment “in the field of transport.”

Of those Koreans who remained, some were enlisted to help the NKVD detect Japanese spies. During 1940 and 1941, Communist Korean partisans were allowed to enter the Primorye to avoid a Japanese anti-bandit campaign in Manchukuo. Among the refugees were Kim Il-sung and his wife Kim Chong-suk, who on 16 February 1942 gave birth to Kim Jong-il on Soviet soil.

Isolating Blücher, July 1937 - June 1938

Blücher continued to enjoy both official prestige and genuine popularity through 1937 and into 1938. In December 1937, he led the Far Eastern
delegation to the Supreme Soviet and was elected to the Supreme Soviet presidium. On 23 February (Red Army Day), he was awarded an Order of Lenin. A laudatory article on him by Konstantin Paustovskii appeared that month in Novyi mir. In May, he was nominated as a candidate for the RSFSR Supreme Soviet, and he continued to appear in public in Khabarovsk during June.

Beneath a veneer of public honors, Blücher was gradually isolated. From the middle of 1937 until the summer of 1938, 4,000 OKDVA officers and military commissars were arrested, among them virtually all of his closest associates. The OKDVA itself ceased to exist on 1 July, being renamed the “Far Eastern Front” (DVF).

Stalin waited until after the Bukharin-Rykov trial (March 1938) before moving directly against Blücher. In April, an assassination attempt on the Navy Commissar in Vladivostok gave Stalin grounds to dispatch Army Political Administration head Lev Mekhlis and NKVD Border Guard chief Mikhail Frinovskii to the Far East. They arrived in Khabarovsk in mid-June, each on a special train filled with their own armed cadres. Liushkov was not at the station to greet them, for he had decided to remove himself from harm’s way by ordering an “inspection” of the frontier near Posyet and, on the night of 12-13 June, walking into Manchukuo. Aside from dooming two dozen chekists who were charged with complicity, Liushkov’s deflection indirectly hastened Blücher’s destruction.

Destruction of Blücher, August - November 1938

Blücher’s last month in the Far East (mid-July to mid-August 1938) coincided with a complex interaction of domestic and external forces. As Mekhlis and Frinovskii “cleansed” regional cadres, Soviet-Japanese forces clashed where the borders of Manchukuo, Korea, and the USSR met. If Stalin and Voroshilov had been waiting for a chance to settle accounts with Blücher, they found it in the interstices of bureaucratic and border conflicts.

Without consulting Blücher, Frinovskii had NKVD troops occupy a ridge of hills running between the Tumen River and Lake Khasan during the second week of July. The pogranichniki dug in along the crest of which Changkufeng formed a high point. Alerted to the NKVD deployment, Blücher sent a commission to the area and on 24 July remonstrated with Frinovskii for violating the Manchukuo frontier.

The NKVD occupation of Changkufeng had not escaped the attention of the commander of a unit of the Korean Army deployed across the Tumen. Although the ridge lay (according to Japanese maps) within Manchukuo, the Korean Army bore responsibility for defending this narrow wedge of territory along the left bank of the lower Tumen. After making several protests to the NKVD troops dug in on the ridge, the local Japanese commander concluded that the intruders would have to be dislodged by force. Korean Army headquarters in Keijō (Seoul) and Tokyo neither permitted nor prohibited the
use of force but ruled out air and artillery. In the early hours of 31 July, three battalions crossed the Tumen River, drove off NKVD forces, and dug in. Any counterattack could come only along exposed corridors north and south of Lake Khasan.70

Blücher found himself confronted with a military (how to expel the Japanese) and a political (how to deal with Mekhlis and Frinovskii) dilemma. Recapturing the ridge overlooking Lake Khasan would have to be carried out by OKDVA (DVF since 1 July) and NKVD troops acting in concert, an unpromising exercise. Frinovskii showed no inclination to put chekists under Blücher’s command. To make matters worse, Stalin and Voroshilov telephoned Blücher on 1 August and ordered him to liquidate without delay enemy positions above Lake Khasan. Ominously, Stalin asked the Far Eastern marshal whether he really wanted to fight the Japanese.71 Blücher thereupon instructed his new chief of staff Grigory Shtern72 to attack immediately. Shtern’s assault on 2-3 August was repulsed with heavy losses, whereupon Blücher joined Shtern at Posyet and on 6 August launched a massive air and ground assault that left both Soviet and Japanese troops on the ridge. On the same day (6 August), Blücher’s portrait and name were absent from an anti-Japanese mass demonstration in Khabarovsk.73

Summoned to Moscow by Voroshilov on 16 August to give an account of the Lake Khasan fighting, Blücher appeared before Stalin, Voroshilov, Molotov, and Frinovskii on 31 August.74 Voroshilov and Frinovskii charged him with gross incompetence “bordering on conscious defeatism.”75 As Stalin remained silent, someone said that “enemies of the people” had hidden behind him while subverting the Far Eastern armed forces. Ordered by Voroshilov to Sochi to await “work fit for a marshal,” Blücher cabled his wife and brother (a captain in the Far East air force) to join him on the Black Sea. “Work fit for a marshal” turned up on 22 October when NKVD operatives arrested Blücher and his wife at Sochi and took them to Moscow. At Lefortovo Prison, in an interrogation personally supervised by Beria, Blücher was accused of being a Japanese agent since 1921. Savagely tortured, he expired on 9 November.76

Blücher became a non-person rather than an object of public vilification such as Gamarnik. Young weathercock Yury Zhukov77 praised the Far Eastern marshal in a book printed on 15 July 1938, then removed all references to him in a revised version appearing two and a half months later.78 Following Blücher’s disappearance, rumors circulated that he had been sent back to China to help Chiang Kai-shek against Japan. Chiang inquired about his former military advisor and was informed by Stalin that Blücher had been executed “for succumbing to the charms of a Japanese woman spy.”79

Balkanization and Beneficiaries

Far Eastern administrative unity underlay institutions such as the OKDVA and Dal’kraikom as well as for the emergence of Gamarnik and
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Blücher. Stalin carved up Dal’krai to exorcize the specter of separatism.80 On 4 September 1938, the Far Eastern Front (DVF) was divided into three separate armies each directly subordinate to Defense Commissar Voroshilov. On 20 October, Dal’krai was dissolved and reconstituted as two administrative districts each reporting directly to Moscow: Khabarovsk krai and Primorski krai, each with its own party organization and state organs at Khabarovsk and Vladivostok respectively.81 Into the Far East came a new generation of Stalinist functionaries, exemplified by the late Nikolai Pegov.

In September 1938 Pegov, then a 33-year-old student at the Moscow Industrial Academy, was summoned to the Central Committee and informed that he had been appointed first secretary for the Far Eastern region and should immediately proceed to Khabarovsk after collecting 500 communists from the Moscow party organization. When he asked how he’d finish his studies, Pegov was told: “Your work will be your diploma.”82 During the next few days, Pegov managed to recruit a few dozen communists, including his brother. All were young and exhilarated by their new responsibilities. “Our whole life then,” he recalled in 1982, “was illuminated by sunshine, joy, and happiness.”83 Pegov’s experience was replicated by thousands of komsomoltsy, army and navy personnel, engineers, and geologists who flocked to the Far East during 1938-1939, drawn by ideals, romance, and careers. A new generation took over from purged incumbents. Locals as well as newcomers found ample scope for ambition while Beria’s cadres “cleansed” Yezhovian holdovers in the regional NKVD. As Valentina Khetagurova nostalgically recalled a half-century later: “Oh, life just percolated in the Far East in’37!”84

One eloquent symptom of opportunity was Far Eastern party ranks, which swelled from 24,885 on 1 January 1938 to85 56,776 on 1 January 1941.86 By 1939, the Far East had the highest percentage of party members in the population of any region in the USSR,87 a circumstance attributable not only to the concentration of troops, sailors, frontier guards and labor camp personnel but to the massive influx of party cadres from the Center.

Ideological perestroika in the Far East centered around a history of the party popularly known as the Short Course and commonly ascribed to Stalin.88 Fully 70% of Far Eastern party members claimed to have read the Short Course during 1938-1941.89 It formed the core of the curriculum at Khabarovsk’s Pedagogical Institute and Higher Party School, established in 1938 and 1939 respectively on the ruins of local higher education. By relieving readers of the burden of thought (and of personal responsibility for collective acts), the Short Course promoted what Anastas Mikoyan hailed as the “Stalinist style of work.”90

The 18th Party Congress (10-21 March 1939), attended by forty-three Far Eastern beneficiaries of “cleansing,”91 celebrated the “Stalinist style of work” under a freshly constituted Central Committee including Mekhlis, Pegov, Mikhail Gvishiani (Beria’s man in the Primorye), and Shtern.92 Speeches by Far Easterners exuded exhilaration. Pegov praised liquidation of “the
Trotskyist-Bukharinite band [that] sought to give the Primorye to fascist employers." Shtern thanked Comrade Stalin for ridding the Red Army of "black traitors of the motherland, foreign spies, Trotskyist-Bukharinite beasts" who had "crawled into responsible posts even in the Far Eastern Army, in contact with their Japanese and other foreign patrons. You and I destroyed this heap of filth – Tukhachevskiis, Gamarniks, Uboreviches and swine like them."94

Shortly before his own arrest in 1941, Shtern told his wife that had it not been for the civil war he would have become a historian.95

Costs

In the spring of 1939, Andrei Zhdanov96 toured Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, and Nakhodka to assess the results of "cleansing." What he saw was not encouraging. The Far East had met none of its five-year plan targets.97 Production indices for industry, fisheries, and forestry in 1938 were below 1935 levels.98 Construction of the Baikal-Amur Railroad (BAM) ground to a halt.99 Far Eastern agriculture suffered irreparable losses. Repression of rural party secretaries, soviet chairmen, agronomists, and Machine-Tractor Station personnel compounded the damage wrought by forced collectivization. The expulsion of Chinese and Koreans removed the region's most productive cultivators.

The magnitude of the human toll in the Far East during 1937-1938 is unlikely ever to be known.100 According to Liushkov, from 200,000 to 250,000 people were repressed (of whom 7,000 were shot) during his ten-month sojourn in Dal'krai (August 1937-June 1938).101 His estimates did not include deaths the Northeastern labor camps. Nor do his figures include the victims of his predecessors (Deribas, Balitskii) and successors (Mekhlis, Frinovskii) who were active during the first half of 1937 and the last half of 1938 respectively. On the basis of a recent estimate that 30,000 people were shot in Far Eastern prisons "in the time of Stalin" (i.e. 1929-1953),102 one can hypothesize that about 15,000 of these perished during 1937-1938.103 Assuming that about 200,000 were repressed in the Far East during 1937-1938, that would constitute 8% of Dal'krai's population (2,338,095 in 1938), a significantly higher percentage than for the USSR as a whole.104

The disproportionately high mortality of Far Easterners is suggested by party statistics. Of 1,956 voting delegates to the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934 from all parts of the USSR, 1,108 were arrested.105 Of thirty-two Far Eastern delegates to Seventeenth Party Congress, none appeared at the 18th Party Congress in 1939.106 Of 139 candidate and full members of the Central Committee in 1934, ninety-eight were shot. All Far Eastern members and candidate members of the Central Committee in 1934 were shot or committed suicide. Far Eastern party membership, 44,909 on 1 January 1933, fell to 27,730 by 1 January 1937 and to 24,885 in 1938.107 According to a Japanese source, more than one quarter of Far Eastern communists were purged during
1936-1939. Of 28 members of the Dal’kraikom bureau in 1935, only four were alive in 1940. All delegates to the Twelfth Far Eastern party conference (May-June 1937) were eventually repressed. No Far Eastern region first secretary between 1923 and 1938 escaped the juggernaut. The fates of obkom, gorkom, and raikom secretaries remain to be illuminated, but obkom turnover rates in 1937-1938 are ominously high.

Repression gutted the Far Eastern armed forces. According to Liushkov, 1,200 officers and political commissars and 3,000 junior officers were arrested between July 1937 and May 1938. In 1938 alone, the OKDVA lost 40% of its regimental officers, 70% of its division and corps officers, and over 80% of its staff and department heads.

Virtually all members of Far Eastern cohort formed during and after the civil war were liquidated. These included Blücher’s associates during his leadership of the People’s Revolutionary Army (NRA) in 1921-1922 (Lapin, Pokus, Postyshev); partisan leaders Mel’nikov and Zverev; party leaders Trilisser, Shishlyannikov, Pshenitsyn, and Volskii; and Dal’kraikom first secretaries Kubiak, Perepechko, and Lavrentiev. Former Dal’sovnarkom chairman and president of the Far Eastern Republic Krasnoshchekov was shot on 26 November 1937, a fate shared by other Far Eastern Republic officials such as Boris Shumiatskii, Vladimir (“Bill”) Shatov, Boris Skvirskii, and Yakov Yanson.

In 1989, a Khabarovsk woman asked why everyone was wailing about party and government big shots and saying nothing about ordinary victims of repression. Terror cut down thousands of nameless “little people.” Old timers in Vladivostok recall how the NKVD hauled corpses at night to dump in mass graves near Egersheld Cemetery. Reports have surfaced about a Far Eastern Katyn between Khabarovsk and Vladivostok.

Fate of the Far Eastern Intelligentsia

Although it was recently announced that Osip Mandelshtam expired in the suburbs of Vladivostok, little is known about Far Eastern writers, editors, journalists, scholars, and poets who succumbed in the 1930s. Who has heard of Leonid Reshetov, the “Far Eastern Radek?” Or of Vasily Kim and Kharim Tsoi? Or Tikhoekeanskaja zvezda editors Shatskii and Shver? Or the eight founding editors of the region’s leading literary journal? Intellectuals who had sojourned in the Far East during the civil war and intervention were especially vulnerable to “Bolshevik vigilance,” contact with foreigners in 1918-1922 marked them as potential spies and traitors in 1937-1938. Abstention from politics did not save Sergei Tretiakov, founder of the Vladivostok literary group Tvorchestvo. Nor did service in the Far Eastern party underground spare the popular writer Viktor Surovkin or composer of the Far Eastern partisan anthem, Pyotr Parfyonov.

“Cleansing” gutted higher education and science. All twelve Far Eastern party schools and the Communist Agricultural School in Khabarovsk ceased
“Cleansing” the Soviet Far East, 1937-1938:

to exist in 1937. In Vladivostok, the Far Eastern State University and the Far Eastern Branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences closed in 1939. In Birobidzhan, the Pedagogical Institute shut down. A projected encyclopedia of the Soviet Far East was scuttled. Cosmopolitan ties, whether of a Birobidzhan immigrant-scholar or the director of Vladivostok’s Interklub proved fatal. Fluency in Chinese or Japanese constituted *prima facie* evidence of espionage. Had Vladivostok Japanologist Evgenii Spalvin not succumbed to a twisted intestine in Harbin in 1933, he would likely have shared the fate of fellow Orientalists such as Konstantin Kharnskii and Oskar Tarkhanov. Zotik Matveev, librarian of the Far Eastern State University and of the Far Eastern Branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences, was arrested in November 1938 and died in custody six months later. When the Far Eastern State University was closed in 1939, priceless orientalia in the Vostochnyi Institut were consigned to a basement, from where they were dispersed to collections in Moscow, Leningrad, Kazan, and Alma Ata, carried off for personal use, or burned. The personal archives of the celebrated naturalist, explorer, and director of the Khabarovsky Museum of Regional Studies, Vladimir Arseniev, did not escape depredation.

Complicity and Memory

“Cleansing” of Dal’krai could not have taken place without massive complicity. Citizens from all walks of life publicly repudiated and privately betrayed neighbors, colleagues, and relatives. There was no shortage of role models. Newspapers bristled with letters and resolutions from factory and collective farm workers, miners, teachers, mariners, soldiers, famous writers, scientists, and explorers vilifying whomever had just been exposed as a “wrecker,” “traitor,” or “Trotskyist swine.” Motives for such behavior varied from person to person but included patriotism, ambition, envy, spite, and fear with fear predominating. No one was immune, for good behavior was no guarantee of innocence. Hadn’t Comrade Stalin himself said: “the true wrecker from time to time works well in order to win trust of those around him so that he can continue his wrecking?”

Some Far Easterners refused to become either victims or accomplices. One openly declared that the authorities should shoot Kaganovich rather than innocent people. Scientists on Chukotka raised their hunting rifles when NKVD operatives came to arrest one of them, and the chekists retired to fill their quotas elsewhere. Thousands made themselves scarce, losing themselves in larger cities or working in mines and logging camps where authorities didn’t inquire closely about antecedents.

The opening of party, army, and KGB archives will permit historians to illuminate bureaucratic mechanics and individual fates. Whether new documentation exacerbates or exorcizes the unaired question of mass complicity remains to be seen.
Notes

1 This essay, a chapter in "The Russian Far East: A History" (forthcoming), is a revised, updated, and abridged version of "Cleansing Dal'krai: 1937-1938," written during 1989-1990. The author is grateful to Professor John Erickson and to Robert Conquest for their helpful comments upon the original draft and would also like to thank Dr. Nikolai Aleksandrovich Bilim of the Khabarovsk Pedagogical Institute and S. Nikolaev for their criticisms of the same draft, a Russian translation (by Valery Slyusarev) of which was serialized in the Khabarovsk newspaper Tikhookeanskaia zvezda from 23 November to 2 December 1990 under the title "Chistka Dal'krai, 1937-1938."


3 Far Eastern Region Party Committee. Dal'krai is an acronym for Dal'nevostochnyi krai, official appellation for the Soviet Far East from 1926 until 1938. Dal'krai boundaries roughly followed those of the Priamur governor-generalship (1884-1917) and the Far Eastern Republic (1920-1922) with some exceptions, including: 1) the Chita and Sretensk districts of Transbaikalia were detached from Dal'krai in 1930, 2) the Far Northern Construction Trust or Dal'stroi, founded in 1931 to develop the Kolyma River Basin, extended Dal'kraikom jurisdiction from the Okhotsk seaboard into Yakutia.


5 Young women flocking to the Far East in response to an exhortation by Valentina Khetagurova, who had come from Leningrad as an 18-year-old komsomolka in 1932 and married an upwardly mobile army officer. Khetagurov's "Girls! Come to the Far East!" was published in Komsomol'skaia pravda on 5 February 1937 and attracted 70,000 respondents, 27,000 of whom made their way to woman-scarce Dal'krai during the next four years.

6 Well-known satirists. Ilya Ilf died on 13 April 1937. Petrov toured Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, Komsomolsk, Birobidzhan, and Magadan in August and September, 1937.


8 The battleship Augusta and four destroyers led by Asiatic Fleet Commander Harry E. Yarnell called at Vladivostok from 28 July to 1 August 1937. Kemp Tolley, Caviar and Commissars (Annapolis: U. S. Naval Institute, 1983), pp. 253-256; Andrei Kalachinskii, "Amerikanskaia eskadra v sovetskom Zolotom Roge," Vechernii Vladivostok. 29 April 1990: Mantetsu, Hokuman keizai chôsajo,
“Cleansing” the Soviet Far East, 1937-1938:


10 Veterans of the revolution and civil war in Siberia and the Far East, who under the leadership of OKDVA commander Vasili Blücher and Special Politburo Plenipotentiary to the Far East Yan Gamarnik (former Dal’kraikom secretary) formed the nucleus of Far Eastern political, economic, and intellectual leadership.


13 Pravda. 11 November 1936.


24 Bliukher (1990), p. 79.


30 “Interrogation of General Liushkov,” Reel #4, frame 0976.

31 Balitstii had been working in the Ukraine since 1933.

32 Matvei Shkiriatiot (1883-1954). Worked in VKP(b) central control commission from 1922. Served as Yezhov’s deputy (1937-1938) supervising prophylactic operations in the provinces.


36 Pravda. 28 June 1937.

37 Pravda. 13 June, 14 June 1937.


40 On 30 May 1937, Pravda carried a report on Far Eastern frontiers by writer Nikolai Pogodin who quoted a border guard as saying: “They write ‘frontier under lock and key’ but here it’s wide open. You can walk in or out.”

41 On 29 June, border guards had occupied two disputed islands about 70 miles downstream from Blagoveschensk: Senui (Kanchatzu) and Bolshoi (Kinabokko). On 30 June three Soviet patrol boats opened fire on the Manchukuo shoreline. During 3-5 July, on orders from Moscow, both islands were evacuated. Hayashi Saburō, Kantōgun to kyokutō Sorengun (Tokyo: Fūsō shobō, 1974), pp. 106-109.

42 One of the involuntary “informants” appears to have been Far Eastern Air Force chief Al’bert Lapin. Arrested while resting in Kislovodsk on 11 May 1937, Lapin was taken to Moscow where under torture he incriminated a number of OKDVA officers. Transferred to a Khabarovsk prison, Lapin committed suicide on 21 September. Letter to author from Aleksandr Al’bertovich Lapin, 5 March 1991.

43 Liushkov had served as a political commissar in the civil war and entered the Cheka in 1920, serving in Germany and in Moscow. After Kirov’s assassination, he handled the investigation of Zinoviev for the former oppositionist’s trial in January 1935. By 1936, he was deputy chief of a secret political department within the NKVD. At the beginning of 1937, he was working in Rostov. On 3 July 1937, Liushkov was awarded an Order of Lenin and shortly thereafter was appointed chief of the NKVD in the Far East. Alvin D. Coox, “L’Affaire Lyushkov: Anatomy of a Defector,” Soviet Studies, vol. 19, No. 3 (January 1968), pp. 407-408. Robert Conquest, Inside Stalin’s Secret Police: NKVD Politics 1936-39 (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1985), p. 24.


For the *yezhovshchina* on Sakhalin, see Aleksandr Ivanovich Kostanov, ed. *Istoriiia bez 'belykh piaten'* (Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk: Ispolkom sakhalinskogo oblastnogo soveta narodnykh deputatov, 1989). For the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, see *Organizatsiia KPSS Evreiskoi Autonomnoi oblasti*. 1934-1985 (1986), p. 29.

Pyotr Listovskii, *Dal'krai* Komsomol secretary was arrested and shot in 1937. Suturin in *Tikhookeanskaia zvezda*, 4 April 1989. His successor Cherniavskii met a similar fate.

Such as Vasily Anisimov (1878-1938), member of the Far Eastern Republic's Constituent Assembly (1920-1922).


*Kyokutō Shiberiya yōran* (Dairen: Mantetsu Chōsabu, 1941), p. 345.


According to an Indian working with the Kwantung Army in Xinjing during 1937-1938, his employers set up a school at Xinjing in 1936 to train Koreans for espionage and political agitation within the Posyet Korean National District. A. M. Nair, *An Indian Freedom Fighter in Japan* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1985), pp. 141-146.


*Pravda*. 15 December 1937.

"Cleansing" the Soviet Far East, 1937-1938:

Soviets V. K. Bliukhera (Khabarovsk: Khabarovskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1990), p. 287.


67 Former Pravda editor who replaced Pyotr Smirnov (Gamarnik’s successor) as head of the Red Army Political Administration in December 1937.


69 Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal, No. 1 (1990), p. 86.


72 Shtern had arrived in Khabarovsk wearing an Order of Lenin awarded him a few days earlier by Voroshilov.


75 “Prikaz narodnogo komissara oborony Soiuza SSR No. 0040,” Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal, No. 1 (1990), pp. 84-85.

77 Zhukov became an editor of *Prawda* in 1946 and a member of the CPSU central committee in 1976. From 1982 to 1987 he headed the Soviet Committee for the Defense of Peace.

78 Iurii Zhukov, *Granitsa* (Moscow: Khudozhlit, 1938), and Zhukov, *Kak my bili iaponskikh samurai* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1938).


82 Nikolai Mikhailovich Pegov (1905-1991), Far Eastern and then Primorye party secretary (1938-1947).


90 Mikoyan speech on the twentieth anniversary of the state security organs, quoted in *Dvadtsat’ let VChK-OGPU-NKVD* (Moscow: Ogiz, 1938), p. 37.
The names of Far Eastern delegates are listed in Appendix I of Stephan, "The Russian Far East: A History."


Pravda, 16 March 1939. Shtern's speech, without the last sentence quoted above, appears in XVIII s"ezd VKP(b): Stenograficheskii otchet (1939), pp. 231-236.

Shtern was arrested on 7 June and executed on 28 October 1941. Krasnaia zvezda, 6 August 1988.


Dal'krai plan targets for 1937 and actual levels reached (in parentheses):
- population: 2.8 million (2 million)
- land under cultivation: 2.3 million hectares (1 million)
- electric power: 400,000 kilowatts (150,000)
- steel: 500,000 tons (none)
- fish: 800,000 tons (350,000)
- oil: 800,000 tons (460,000)
- coal: 6.5 million tons (4.75 million).

Kyokutô Shiberiya yôran (1941), p. 9.


The figures included 190,000 deportations (mainly Koreans and Chinese) and 60,000 arrests (35,000 Russians, 11,000 Koreans and Chinese, and significant numbers of Ukrainians, Jews, Hungarians, Germans, Latvians, and Lithuanians. Hayashi Saburo cites Liushkov as giving the figure 200,000 repressed, including 7,000 shot. Hayashi (1974), pp. 116-117.

V. Kulikov, chairman, Khabarovsk branch of “Memorial,” Ogonek, No. 10 (March 1990), p. 3.

This ratio is derived from that given by KGB Major-General Aleksandr Karbainov in an interview in Sansei shimbun. 25 April 1990, cited in

104 Using the figure of 4-5 million victims for 1936-1939 advanced by Roy Medvedev (Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism. Revised and expanded edition edited and translated by George Shriver. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, p. 455), the percentage would be just over 2% for the USSR as a whole.

105 N. S. Khrushchev, Doklad na zakrytom zasedanii XX s'ezda KPSS (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1959), pp. 17, 18.

106 Appendix I of Stephan, “The Russian Far East: A History” lists Far Eastern delegates to the 17th (1934) and 18th (1939) party congresses.


108 Kyokutō Shiberiya yōran (1941), p. 79.

109 Dal’krai-kom bureau members were Lavrentiev (first secretary), Samoilev (second secretary), Vernyi (third secretary), Rychev, Vol’skii, Yolk, Kaplan, A. Kim, Kossior, Krutov, Meretskou, Blücher, Aronshtam, Sangurskii, Tairov, Tarkhanov, Fedko, Petrov, Putna, Pshenitsyn, Pashkovskii, Rozenblitt, Slinkin, Smolin, Firsov, Flegontov, Khavkin, and Shabalkin. Mantetsu, Harbin jimusho, “Kyokutō chihō chūō to kikan no soshiki,” 23 April 1935, in SMR/DLC. Meretskou, Petrov, Flegontov, and Shabalkin were alive in 1940.


112 “Interrogation of General Liushkov,” frame 0982.


114 Appendix C of Stephan, “The Russian Far East: A History” contains biographical data on 64 leading members of the cohort, none of whom survived.


116 Organ of Soviet rule in the Far East from December 1917 until August 1918.
“Cleansing” the Soviet Far East, 1937-1938:


122 A. Suturin in Tikhookeanskaia zvezda, 8 April 1989.


124 Na rubezhe founding editors were I. Shatskii (editor-in-chief), E. Brui, V. Kim, P. Kulygin, O. Erdberg, I. Shabanov, G. Petrov, and N. Potapov, the last two of whom survived. Te Men Khi, head of Na rubezhe’s Korean section was shot in 1938. Priamurskie vedomosti, 12 February 1991.


126 Bondarenko (1990), pp. 141-147.

127 Among Tarkhanov’s many pseudonyms was “O. Tanin,” widely known among American and European students of modern Japan as co-author of Military and Fascism in Japan (New York: International Publishers, 1934), with an introduction by Karl Radek.


129 Established in 1899 and absorbed into the Far Eastern University in 1920.


131 After Arseniev’s widow was arrested in 1937, his daughter handed over 270 files to authorities. Eighty-one survived and are kept in the Primorye Branch of the USSR Geographical Society (from 1990 restored to its original name – Society for Study of the Amur Region). Anna Ivanovna Tarasova, Vladimir Klaudievich Arsen’ev (Moscow: Nauka, 1985), pp. 72-73, 306; Tatiana Matveeva, interviewed by Afanasy Serdyuk in Dal’nevostochnyi uchenyi, No. 50 (14-20 December 1989).

132 Letters and telegrams denouncing Tukhachevskii and Gamarnik were signed by among others well-known “Far Eastern” writers such as Aleksandr Fadeyev and Pyotr Pavlenko, by USSR Academy of Sciences President Vladimir Komarov (former head of its Far Eastern Branch), and by the polar explorer Dmitrii Papanin. Pravda, 12, 16 June 1937; Izvestiia, 12 June 1937: Literaturnaia gazeta, 15 June 1937.


136 Amir Khisamutdinov’s forthcoming study of repression of the Far Eastern intelligentsia in 1937-1939 is based on archival materials.