CHAPTER 12

Exile, Arrest and Prison

The party’s so-called Congress of Victors (the Seventeenth Party Congress) in January–February 1934, which celebrated a large harvest and the completion of several large industrial projects, witnessed leading former oppositionists unite in praise of Stalin. Sergei Kirov, Leningrad party secretary, was a popular figure at the congress, but his assassination later that year led to a new, intensified campaign of repression against former oppositionists. Before 1991, many Western historians suspected that Kirov emerged at the congress as a moderate rival to Stalin, providing Stalin with a motive to kill Kirov later that year and unleash a final campaign against his old rivals, Zinoviev and Kamenev, as well as their supporters. Newly opened archives have not yielded information to prove the hypothesis that Kirov threatened to supplant Stalin, but instead have supported the contention that there were no radical and moderate factions in the Soviet leadership in the 1930s.¹

Two exiles and two sets of arrests, interrogations and periods of imprisonment frame Shlyapnikov’s personal and political life in this chapter, for which sources largely come from secret police archives. Not among those who attempted to redeem their political careers at the 1934 congress, Shlyapnikov, perhaps due to his intransigence, was subsequently ordered to depart Moscow for work in the far north. His experiences that year drove him to reflect, in his diary and personal correspondence, not only upon his personal fate, but also upon the changes that Stalinism had wrought on the working class and the party. He felt that Soviet socialism fell far short of the standard of his dreams, yet he maintained hope that socialism based on workers’ initiative would eventually prevail in the USSR and other countries. The criticisms he privately expressed in 1934 served as evidence for the NKVD case against him in 1935–7, upon the conclusion of which he was executed. The Great Terror of 1936–8 spiralled outward to encompass not only communists like Shlyapnikov, but entire social and ethnic categories, resulting in two and a half million arrests and around six hundred and eighty-two thousand executions. Archives have yielded much data about the numbers of people involved, Stalin’s role in guiding the terror, the NKVD’s implementation of it, the responses of ordinary

people and Gulag operations, yet there are still unilluminated aspects of this complex and confusing event.²

Memoirs published in the West before the collapse of the USSR and documents released subsequently provide diverse perspectives on the Great Terror. Evgenia Ginzburg survived arrest, interrogation and forced labour in the harsh Arctic north to write a two-part memoir, Journey into the Whirlwind and In the Whirlwind, describing the arbitrary, mad brutality of the Great Terror, but the archetype of the Old Bolshevik who perished in those years is the character Nicholas Rubashov, in Arthur Koestler’s novel, Darkness at Noon. Interrogators employed the logic of party loyalty to persuade him to confess to outlandish crimes at a public trial. Koestler called Rubashov a ‘synthesis’ of the Old Bolsheviks who confessed in the 1936–8 show trials. These included Bukharin, Radek, Zinoviev, Kamenev and several dozen others.³ Koestler’s compelling depiction of Rubashov’s psychological transformation convinced many that it represented how all Old Bolsheviks felt towards their party.

Casting doubt on Koestler’s depiction, Stephen F. Cohen contended that Bukharin employed ‘double-talk’ and ‘veiled allusions’ to subvert charges at his trial. Yet, historicising Koestler’s literary approach, Igal Halfin argued, in his study of Leningrad University during the terror, that: ‘A radical instrumentalization of their subjectivities rendered Party members selfless’. Without a sense of self, one could carry out any measures the party deemed necessary. Halfin relied for evidence on the published show-trial testimonies of the Old Bolsheviks and unpublished confessions by younger communists. Given the apparent solidity of his case and the rich store of documents released from archives, historians subsequently have shifted their attention towards the mass nature of the terror, although Wendy Goldman’s recent book on the repression in Moscow factories returns focus to the individuals’ motives to resist or facilitate escalating terror.⁴

This chapter introduces evidence that Old Bolshevik responses to terror were more complex than Halfin allows. Thousands of Old Bolsheviks who perished in the terror never came to public trial. Shlyapnikov and other key figures tried on the case of the Moscow Workers’ Opposition did not confess because they did not regard self-slander as in the party’s interest. Under interrogation, Shlyapnikov employed logic and denial to contest the 1935 charges of anti-Soviet agitation and counterrevolutionary organisation and the charge of

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² Goldman 2011 provides an excellent summary of the Terror and its historiography in her introduction and first chapter.