

To the Editor:

In his article "Purge and Politics in the Periphery: Birobidzhan in 1937" (*Slavic Review*, Spring 1993), Robert Weinberg has a clear purpose. He is trying to "rehabilitate" the so-called revisionists, led by J. Arch Getty, who propounded a theory some years back about the pluralism of Soviet politics during the stalinist purges. Getty and his followers attempted to show that purges were not orchestrated by Moscow, but to a large extent were generated "from below." These revisionists also argued that the purges were in some way beneficial because they allowed for expression of the will of the rank and file, thus encouraging democratic tendencies. Not surprisingly, such theories, buttressed by modish political science jargon, outraged many historians, both here and in the Soviet Union, because they diminished the historical significance of one of the darkest and most tragic episodes in Soviet history.

Many of us assumed that, with the revelations from the recently opened archives (which have more than confirmed the traditional western estimates on the nature and dimensions of the purges), the revisionists would give up their cause. Alas, we were wrong. We now have in Robert Weinberg's article yet another attempt to flog the Getty school's interpretation of the purges, this time based on archival materials. In chronicling the demise of the party chief of Birobidzhan in 1937, Weinberg argues that it was the party rank and file who spurred on the purges in Birobidzhan and that the center did not have complete control or direction of the process. Moreover, the "campaign" against the party leadership there had a beneficial effect: "Not only did it allow disgruntled activists, particularly those with opportunistic bents and scores to settle, to vent steam and accuse their superiors of poor work and leadership, but it also provided a sense of *empowerment* [my italics] to party members who were given the opportunity at the party conferences in May and June to engage in scathing criticism of Khavkin and his 'artel'."

I doubt very much that the party members who spoke out against the leadership in Birobidzhan felt "empowered" in the spring of 1937. If Weinberg had spent more time in the central party archives in Moscow or had read the archival materials that have been published in the central media over the past years (including the orders from Yezhov to regional party leaders setting quotas for arrests), he might have understood that the criticisms expressed by lower party members were hardly spontaneous. That would have simply been unthinkable at a time when no one dared utter an independent thought. Indeed, though the naive outsider might have gained the impression from reading the local press and the reports from party meetings that the sudden flurry of denunciations was genuine, most people realized at the time that the whole thing was orchestrated by Moscow. To speak of "mobilizing public opinion" and "campaigns from below" when describing the stalinist purges in any locality is to misunderstand the very essence of the stalinist system.

As part of my own research on Lavrentii Beria, who was Georgian party chief during the purges, I studied Georgian newspapers for the entire purge period, as well as secret transcripts from the Georgian party plenums and reports from the bureau meetings (available in the party archives). I found no indication that local officials were acting on their own initiative or that the denunciations by the rank and file were anything other than feigned hysteria, whipped up on orders from Moscow.

As for the theory that the Moscow leadership was not in complete control because they left Khavkin dangling for several months before arresting him, it was standard procedure to do this. Indeed this happened to countless victims, both at the national and regional levels. Such capricious and seemingly arbitrary behavior on the part of the Stalin leadership helped promote the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. It kept regional leaders like Beria, who came close to being arrested on orders from Yezhov, quaking in their boots.

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Professor Weinberg replies:

Nowhere in my article do I suggest that Stalin and the leadership in the Kremlin were not responsible for the bloodbath of the Great Terror. Nor do I suggest that the purges encouraged "democratic tendencies" and were indicative of political pluralism. In fact, I never use the word "spontaneous" to describe the actions of the Birobidzhan Party's rank and file in attacking Khavkin. On the contrary, I make it clear that the rank and file were reacting to the cues and prompting of Stalin and Zhdanov after the February–March 1937 plenum and that Khavkin's fate was intimately tied to that