

The Road to *Stalin's Witnesses*

Seeking Truth through Fiction

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In November 1936, shortly after returning with his family from Washington, where he had played the role of an *Izvestiia* correspondent, veteran Soviet intelligence officer Vladimir Romm found himself locked up in the bowels of the Lubyanka. He and four other “witnesses” would soon take the stand at one of the most notorious show trials in history. Presented before diplomats and correspondents from around the world, their coerced testimony helped corroborate the equally false confessions of the accused, sending top Communists to the executioner and leaving Stalin the undisputed leader of the USSR.¹

Based on extensive research in North American, European, and Russian archives, interviews with descendants, and secondary sources, my novel *Stalin's Witnesses* is a fictionalized yet historically faithful account of how the lives of four Soviet citizens and one German expatriate came to intersect in a Moscow courtroom some three-quarters of a century ago. A third-person narrative chronicles Romm's life and work from the late tsarist era through the 1937 Moscow show trial. We perch on his shoulders as he agitates for socialism; navigates the treacherous shoals of the revolution; serves as a Soviet correspondent/spy in Japan, Europe, and the United States; and, as his career reaches its zenith, unexpectedly becomes a victim of the Great Terror. In a parallel thread, Romm's fictional prison diary conveys how authorities gained the cooperation of witnesses and accused, yielding a scenario so persuasive that it convinced Western leaders, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt and U.S. Ambassador Joe Davies, that leading members of the Party had conspired to topple Stalin and abandon the USSR to Germany and Japan.

¹ There were three Moscow show trials, in 1936, 1937, and 1938. Romm testified against the famous communist journalist Karl Radek, one of the two main defendants in the 1937 trial. The other was George Piatakov, a leader of Soviet industry.

Stalin's Witnesses is intended, in part, as supplementary reading for university courses. Toward that end, a factual appendix, "A Little Bit of History," reports on the aftermath of the trials. To help readers distinguish between what is real and what was invented, the novel includes a detailed author's notes section that identifies significant deviations from fact and provides references to source materials.

The Back Story

It may seem unusual for a criminal justice instructor in early 21st-century America to explore these issues, particularly in the form of historical fiction. As in most such journeys, the best explanation is personal. My mother, Bella, a Polish Jew, was liberated from a concentration camp by Soviet troops. So even at the height of the Cold War, when "drop" drills were a weekly classroom ritual and the Evil Empire was supposedly about to plunk the big one on our heads, I could not get angry at the inscrutable Reds. My high-school classmates idolized Salinger, but my literary hero was Dostoevskii. Salvation through degradation. Magnificent!

In 2000, while teaching in the Criminal Justice Department at California State University Fullerton, I pursued my long-standing interest in Soviet justice by designing an elective course about the Moscow show trials of 1936, 1937, and 1938.² Neither a historian (my Ph.D. is in criminal justice) nor a Russian speaker, I tried to find another faculty member with whom to share the class. Alas, the ranks of Soviet-era experts on campus proved thin, so in the end I went it alone.

Falsification was the lifeblood of Stalinism. Eager to please their superiors, secret policemen built careers on bringing in "counterrevolutionaries," and the more the merrier.³ While the Great Terror is an admittedly extreme example, I knew from personal experience that pressures to make arrests and gain convictions can distort justice even in a democracy. My hope was that the course would also have some comparative value.⁴

² Course description at www.jaysclasses.com/Syllabi/Russia/Terror/terror.html (all site addresses accessed 26 March 2014).

³ See, e.g., Paul R. Gregory, *Terror by Quota: State Security from Lenin to Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁴ I had retired after a law-enforcement career that was spent mostly as a federal agent. My dissertation, completed during a break in government service, focused on pressures to produce arrests. Its findings are summarized in "Production and Craftsmanship in Police Narcotics Enforcement," *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 13, 4 (1985), online at www.policissues.com/Quantity_and_Quality.pdf. For a recent work about similar phenomena, see John A. Eterno and Eli B. Silverman, *The Crime Numbers Game: Management by Manipulation* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2012).

Most of my students had little exposure to world history and were unlikely to know about the show trials. Considering their needs, Peter Kenez's highly approachable *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End* was used to convey the historical context, and selected chapters from Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* were assigned to cover the "investigations" and trials.

My students were taking the class to satisfy an upper-division electives requirement. All were close to graduation, and several were about to embark on law-enforcement careers. I badly wanted to reach them but suspected that lectures and discussion would not be enough. How could the injustices of the Soviet era—and by extension, the potential for mischief in any system—be made so palpable that they would never forget? An experiential component seemed essential.

During the first half of the semester, we took a conventional approach, reviewing key events from the tsarist era through the revolution and the Great Terror. The rest of the term was devoted to preparing a half-hour dramatic reenactment of the show trials, using a script I wrote that collapsed the three trials into one. Students took on the roles of the accused and their families, while another faculty member and I portrayed Stalin and the prosecutor Andrei Vishinskii (in a more recent production, students took on these roles as well). After lots of fine-tuning and many rehearsals, our class performed "A Machine of Terror" for the campus community.⁵ Participants said that they found it a memorable experience. One of those most affected was me.

From a Class to a Novel

Much has been said and written about the trials. Their construction by state authorities was what interested me most, and I found the best "record" to be the official transcripts, which the Commissariat of Justice helpfully translated into English and published in book form.⁶ Reading through the transcript of the 1937 trial, I stumbled across the five "witnesses." In addition to Romm, there was Dmitrii Bukhartsev, whose last posting was as *Izvestiia* correspondent

⁵ Script available at www.jaysclasses.com/Syllabi/Russia/Terror/terror.html#Scripts. For a partial list of the show trials mentioned in class, see www.jaysclasses.com/Syllabi/Russia/Trials/trials.html.

⁶ The official account of the 1936 trial is mostly a summary, with some excerpts from testimony. Accounts of the 1937 and 1938 trials are purportedly verbatim transcripts. See *The Case of the Trotskyite–Zinovievite Terrorist Centre* (Moscow: People's Commissariat of Justice, 1936); *The Case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Centre* (Moscow: People's Commissariat of Justice, 1937); and *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet Block of Rights and Trotskyites* (Moscow: People's Commissariat of Justice, 1938).

to Berlin; Leonid Tamm, an industrial engineer; Vladimir Loginov, a mid-level bureaucrat; and Alex Stein, an expatriate German electrical engineer.

A little bit of detective work uncovered some unusual details. At my request, Siarhei Khomich, a Belarusian academic, examined the files on Romm, Bukhartsev, and Loginov, each a party member, at the Russian State Archive of Sociopolitical History. He looked through official personnel documents, detailed biographies, records of their postings, evaluations of their performance, memoranda detailing disciplinary and other official actions, and, in the case of Romm and Bukhartsev, letters from their spouses to the Party asking for their (rehabilitated) husband's pensions.⁷ While Loginov seemed like a typical apparatchik, both Romm and Bukhartsev turned out to be intelligence officers, working mostly under the guise of journalism. Romm had traveled widely, with assignments in Japan, Germany, France, Switzerland, and finally the United States, where he reported to the highly regarded Ambassador Aleksandr Troianovskii, who had also been his superior in Tokyo.

Of course, not every class can end with a play. As I became increasingly familiar with Romm and Bukhartsev, I came to believe that a book that analyzed the 1937 show trial from their perspectives could prove nearly as immersive. In 2002, Siarhei and I joined forces to write a nonfiction work that would use the witnesses to cast a personalized, insider light on the trials. That called for more research, and I spent the better part of a year assembling a proposal that melded accounts of the trials with information gathered about the witnesses from Russian, French, German, Swiss, and North American archives.

Responses from university and specialist presses began trickling in. All but one felt that a text that focused on the trials was unlikely to be commercially viable. However, several editors complimented our coverage of the witnesses. By then, I had become especially intrigued with Romm. A scion of the Romm printing house of Vilna, the preeminent publisher of Jewish religious texts in 19th-century Eastern Europe, he was well educated and fluent in several languages. During his postings, Romm had made friends with several notable Westerners, including Allen Dulles, the future U.S. spymaster.⁸ Romm's thinly veiled purpose and his frequent comings-and-goings alarmed French and Swiss security and immigration officials, whose internal memoranda are replete with speculation about Romm's activities. A Swiss surveillance log, for

⁷ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi sotsial'no-politicheskii arkhiv (RGASPI). Romm: f. 589, op. 3, d. 3570. Bukhartsev: f. 589, op. 3, d. 2132. Loginov: f. 17, op. 100, d. 1127.

⁸ Romm wrote Dulles a parting letter when he and his family sailed back to Russia (Allen W. Dulles Papers, Princeton University, letter from Vladimir Romm to Allen Dulles, Box 49, Folder 4).

example, noted that the presumed Soviet spy was having an affair with the secretary to the U.S. legation to the Geneva Disarmament Conference.⁹

Bukhartsev was no less fascinating. A trained economist who switched to the secret services in mid-career, he seemed, if anything, to be more a hard-core spy than Romm. In one of the slickest intelligence coups of the prewar period, Bukhartsev performed what would be his last assignment while posing as an *Izvestiia* correspondent in Berlin: recruiting Martha Dodd, daughter of the U.S. ambassador to the Reich, as a Soviet agent. While her sometime lover, the hapless Soviet attaché Boris Vinogradov, languished in the Lubyanka, Martha began passing on everything that came across her father's desk to her new Soviet friend.¹⁰

The file on Loginov, the third of my five witnesses, indicated that, like Romm, he had once favored Trotskii. When Stalin's arch-nemesis lost the battle for supremacy, many of his supporters, including Loginov, were exiled. Loginov's file contained a lengthy, self-critical mea culpa that he used to gain reinstatement.¹¹

Tamm was not a party member, so other than the circumstances of his arrest there was little about him in the records. His surname, though, matched that of a Nobel laureate, and descendants of the famous Soviet physicist Igor' Tamm confirmed that Leonid was the renowned scientist's younger brother. After Leonid's arrest, Igor' was reportedly summoned by the secret police, but at the last moment his interrogation was canceled. He went on to lead the team that designed the Soviet hydrogen bomb.¹²

Alex Stein, the expatriate, also had an interesting background. Born into a German family in Latvia, he switched to the German side during the Great War, fought against the Red Army in the Baltics, and earned German citizenship. Then came the worldwide depression. An electrician by trade, Stein was among the scores of unemployed Europeans recruited to help expand Soviet industry. Stein began work in 1932. Four years later, while on his second tour, he and other German workers were arrested. They were forced at the 1937 trial to falsely testify that they had been saboteurs. Stein

⁹ France: Center des Archives contemporaines, cote 19940505/886. Switzerland: Bestand Polizeiwesen 1848–1930, BAR E21, Dossier no. 9374, 1930–1933.

¹⁰ Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *The Haunted Wood* (New York: Random House, 1999), 40–44. Vinogradov was recalled to Moscow and imprisoned for refusing to recruit his intended fiancée. Bukhartsev was then sent in. He succeeded.

¹¹ RGASPI f. 17, op. 100, d. 1127.

¹² Interview by Sjarhei Khomich with Irina Tamm and Leonid Vernskii (Moscow, 2 April 2002). Igor' Tamm helped prove the existence of Cherenkov radiation, emitted by particles traveling faster than the speed of light. See Nobelprize.org., "The Nobel Prize in Physics 1958," www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/physics/laureates/1958.

was then expelled to Germany and promptly arrested by the Gestapo. In a detailed confession he admitted he had lied at the trial and—worst of all—defamed the Führer. He then disappeared.¹³

Having acquired so much meaty content, but with only one publisher even mildly interested in a nonfiction account, I decided to write a novel. Thankfully, there were plenty of examples. Russian literature has a rich tradition of conveying history through fiction, and my shelves bulge with works that bring to light the Orwellian predicaments of citizens and party officials who were caught in the maelstrom of the Great Terror.¹⁴

Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940) is perhaps the best known. Based loosely on the 1938 Moscow show trial, it conveys in poignant detail the struggles of Rubashov, a loyal Communist whom authorities force, through physical and psychological means, to falsely confess and implicate others. Koestler, a political prisoner under Franco, set his entire novel in prison.

Victor Serge, who was repeatedly arrested under Stalin and finally deported to Europe, also wrote from personal experience. His richly detailed *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* (1948)—reportedly inspired by the Kirov affair—begins with the murder of a fictional communist leader by a disaffected loner. Security officials seize on the killing as evidence of a wild conspiracy, advancing their careers as they expose counterrevolutionary plots, while, not incidentally, clearing the decks of nettlesome old Bolsheviks, who always seem to be getting in the way.

Anatolii Rybakov's expansive *Children of the Arbat* (1987) follows the travails of ambitious young servants of the Soviet state during the period of the Great Terror. In his detailed, mind-boggling narrative, Rybakov describes the inner Party's ideological squabbles, and even takes us deep into the mind of the "Great Leader" as he coolly mulls over whom to advance and whom to suppress. How could Rybakov so artfully straddle fact and fiction? One reason might be that he spent three years in Siberian exile during the 1930s.

Rybakov, Koestler, and Serge all wrote from personal experience. Their works, while technically fiction, occupy a unique sociopsychological space,

¹³ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (AA/PA), f. R104563.

¹⁴ Consider, for example, Anatolii Rybakov, *Children of the Arbat*, trans. Harold Shukman (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988); Andrei Platonov, *Happy Moscow*, trans. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler with Angela Livingstone, Nadya Bourova, and Eric Naiman (London: Harvill, 2001); Victor Serge, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1950); Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate: A Novel*, trans. Robert Chandler (New York: Harper and Row, 1985); Grossman, *Everything Flows*, trans. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler with Anna Aslanyan (New York: New York Review Books, 2009); Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, trans. Daphne Hardy (New York: Macmillan, 1941); and Francis Spufford, *Red Plenty* (London: Faber, 2010).

featuring characters and circumstances that resonate with authenticity. So when I am asked if making up stories is a good way to convey history, I point to these as examples of “yes.”

Writing *Stalin's Witnesses*

Though my approach had shifted from nonfiction to a novel, the original purpose remained the same: to illuminate how the horrible injustices of the trials came about. Yet three-quarters of a century had passed since prosecutors, witnesses, and accused gathered in the Hall of Columns in the Trade Union building to put on their very big shows. If my students were any guide, these events—actually, the whole of the Soviet era—had long faded from memory.

The witness Vladimir Romm, an exceptionally well-traveled servant of the Soviet state, seemed an ideal tour guide to the interwar period. I decided to track his personal and professional activities from his childhood in Vilna through the revolution, Stalin’s ascendancy, and the years of the Great Terror, weaving fiction between facts to convey what took place in a manner that I hoped would prove interesting and enlightening.

While Romm’s party autobiography glossed over his family’s heritage as publishers in Vilna, he did mention, perhaps self-servingly, that as a youngster he helped his older brothers carry out their duties in a Socialist Revolutionary cell. That comment inspired the narrative’s opening scene, which finds nine-year-old Vladimir ferrying messages for revolutionaries in Vilna, a hothouse of opposition to the tsar.¹⁵

Romm’s autobiography indicates that his father spent time in prison during the late tsarist era, apparently for consorting with the Bund. Stalin and his future show trials prosecutor Vishinskii were also in and out of prison during this period for agitating against the tsarist autocracy. This coincidence presented an ideal opening. An invented scene finds Stalin and Vishinskii in prison discussing revolutionary politics with Romm’s father, when a passing guard (who is likely hedging his bets) offers a polite nod. His courtesy amuses Vishinskii:

“Isn’t it amazing? If I was them, I’d shoot the lot of us!”

Stalin chuckled. “You, shoot someone? That would be the day! You’d dig up some obscure law, spend hours twisting it for justification, and in the end order a subordinate to have someone else go do it.”

“Of course, but only if a Comrade Judge signed the paperwork!”¹⁶

¹⁵ Romm joined the Socialist Revolutionaries in his late teens. He switched his allegiance to the Bolsheviks during the Civil War (RGASPI f. 589, op. 3, d. 3570).

¹⁶ Julius Wachtel, *Stalin's Witnesses* (New York: Knox Robinson Publishing, 2012), 38. Vishinskii’s ruthlessness was legion. See Arkady Vaksberg, *Stalin's Prosecutor: The Life of Andrei Vjshinsky*, trans. Jan Butler (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991).

Romm's account of his activities before joining the Party includes the startling admission that he was in Arkhangel'sk during the Civil War, when Allied forces helped Socialist Revolutionaries establish an insurgent regime. This inspired a fictionalized account that depicts Romm's dalliance with the Socialist Revolutionaries, his eventual disenchantment and return to Vilna (where party records indicate he joined the Communist Party of independent Lithuania), and an invented episode that depicts him preparing a Red Guard detachment for Vilna's occupation by the Red Army.

Romm began his intelligence career at the end of the Civil War. For the next 15 years, he served mostly overseas, with extended stints in Berlin, Paris, Tokyo, Geneva, and finally Washington, usually under cover as a foreign correspondent. Romm's assignments coincided with important historical events, offering ample opportunities to insert him into fictional but plausible roles. In this way, I transformed the narrative into a fictionalized chronicle of the correspondent/spy's career.

For example, in 1923 French and Belgian forces invaded the Ruhr. Party files indicate that at the time Romm performed unspecified "intelligence work" in Berlin and Paris. This provided an opening to send Romm on a fictional information-gathering trip to Essen, in the heart of the conflict, and embroil him in a real-life confrontation between German civilians and French troops. Romm is next depicted helping a known associate, Moishe Stern, prepare a communist insurrection in Hamburg. While there is no evidence that Romm was involved, Stern in fact did organize the ultimately failed uprising, giving ammunition to the opponents of Trotskii, the wild-eyed adventurer reportedly behind the mess.¹⁷

Romm was a member of the Soviet delegation to the 1932–34 Geneva Disarmament Conference, led by Commissar for Foreign Affairs Maksim Litvinov. As best is known, that is where Romm first met Allen Dulles and journalist/author John Whitaker, whose book-length reportage mentions Romm in some detail.¹⁸ *Stalin's Witnesses* capitalizes on Romm's presence at the conference, blending fact and fiction to illuminate the ideological and economic quarrels that brought Germany and Japan into their improbable alliance.¹⁹

¹⁷ For more about the failed revolt, see Chris Harman, *The Lost Revolution: Germany 1918 to 1923* (London: Bookmarks/Socialist Workers Party, 1982); Conan Fischer, *The German Communists and the Rise of Nazism* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991); and Raymond Leonard, *Secret Soldiers of the Revolution: Soviet Military Intelligence, 1918–1933* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999).

¹⁸ John Whitaker, *And Fear Came* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 85–86.

¹⁹ For a refreshingly candid guide to the ups and downs of the conference, see *A Brief History of the League of Nations* (New York: League of Nations Association, 1934).

There were many important events that I wished to mention. Yet not all involved Romm. Determined to remain true to his party autobiography, I followed two “rules” for inserting him into the action. Was he at least within shouting distance of what took place? If so, would a Soviet spy have had a plausible role to play? Answering “no” to either required special scenes featuring real and/or invented characters; what is more, since the narrative had taken on the flavor of a chronicle, it all had somehow to be connected with Romm. For example, I covered forced collectivization by describing the fate of Romm’s fictional lover. She and her husband, owners of a prosperous Ukrainian farm, are arrested by party hacks and branded kulaks. Another fictional character with a recurrent role is Romm’s remorseful colleague in the secret police, who tries to escape the madness by transferring to the militia, where he becomes embroiled in the investigation of the assassination of party leader Sergei Kirov. Disgusted with frame-ups, he tries to do the right thing but is rudely pushed aside by People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) officers who are eager to portray the assassination as part of a counterrevolutionary conspiracy.

No matter how well imaginary persons may be drawn, I felt that including real-life characters could offer special insights into major historical events and the actions and motivations of their participants. *Stalin’s Witnesses* lends fictional voices to a host of well-known figures, including Ambassador Aleksandr Troianovskii; Karl Radek, a former Trotskyite whose testimony Romm corroborated; *New York Times* Pulitzer-Prize-winning correspondent Walter Duranty, whose embarrassing legacy (he denied the famine in Ukraine) still haunts his former paper; William Bullitt, America’s first ambassador to the USSR, a veteran diplomat whose disparaging view of Stalin greatly annoyed F.D.R.; and Joe Davies, a foreign policy naïf who replaced Bullitt and soon became one of Stalin’s great fans.²⁰

As the narrative neared completion, I realized that despite action sequences and some snappy dialogue, *Stalin’s Witnesses* was by no means a light read. Romm also remained somewhat of an enigma. To help readers connect with the witnesses in a more intimate way, I crafted a fictional prison diary that Romm purportedly kept while waiting to testify. This journal, whose entries are interleaved into the main narrative, conveys Romm’s thoughts in the first person. Through the diary we also learn about the measures taken to

²⁰ Davies and his socialite wife spent a small fortune remodeling the U.S. ambassador’s mansion in Moscow. With Stalin’s approval, they also had their yacht brought to Leningrad for recreational use. For a revealing look at tensions between the Foreign Service and the White House during the time of Stalin, see Dennis J. Dunn, *Caught between Roosevelt and Stalin: America’s Ambassadors to Moscow* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998).

assure the witnesses' cooperation by Vishinskii and his notorious interrogator Georgii Molchanov (who would soon come to his own unexpected end), and listen in as witnesses and accused express their fears, doubts, and rationales for going along with the prosecutor's diabolical scheme.

And still I wasn't done. My publisher was in the later stages of editing the manuscript and found the novel's initial ending annoyingly abrupt: Romm testifies and is not heard from again. Meanwhile, I happened to connect with Romm's stepdaughter, now residing in Austria. Her mother—Romm's wife Galina—was exiled to Siberia soon after Romm's conviction. After her release she was interviewed by a Russian historian who was writing a book about survivors of the Gulag.²¹ Galina reportedly said that she visited her husband after he testified, apparently shortly before his secret trial and execution. (Since there was no protection against self-incrimination, Romm's show-trial testimony was used against him.) The newly discovered information presented an opportunity to bring the novel to a dramatic and more satisfying conclusion.

But I quietly worried. *Stalin's Witnesses* was putting plenty of words into the mouths of real people, many of whom had suffered greatly. While that might be justified by the need to alert a contemporary audience to the injustices of the trials, would fictionalizing a final meeting between husband and wife step over the line? In fact, where should this "line" have been drawn in the first place? Literature and the cinema have been criticized for "dumbing down" our culture in multiple ways, including by mindlessly commingling history and fiction. Was I contributing to the problem? My goal had been to provide students with an engrossing and informative experience. Fiction was not my first choice. Yet as I warmed to the task, careful dollops of creative license allowed me to infuse the lives of the witnesses, about whom relatively little was known, with a richness and a meaning that might have otherwise been lacking.

Stalin's Witnesses could not have been written without the fabulous groundwork laid by historians who spent decades meticulously sorting through the events of the Great Terror. To be sure, my psychologically nuanced, personality-driven approach is different. Yet given the care that the novel takes to accurately portray historical events, I am confident that it will find its place on bookshelves alongside more conventional works. As these words go to press I will be in the classroom, using *Stalin's Witnesses* in tandem

²¹ Tamara Pavlova Milutina, *People of My Life* (Tartu: The Crypt, 1997), 384–87 (online in Russian, *Liudi moei zhizni*, with a preface by S. G. Isakov, at www.sakharov-center.ru/asfcd/auth/?t=page&num=1318).

with Kenez's *History of the Soviet Union*. Hopefully the result will be synergy rather than confusion!

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