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Informers and the State under Late Stalinism

Informant Networks and Crimes against “Socialist Property,” 1940–53

JAMES HEINZEN

Every Soviet citizen has the moral duty to inform the organs of power about all known instances of the theft of state and socialist property.

—B. A. Kurinov

The talebearer shall defile his own soul, and be hated by all.

—Ecclesiasticus 21:31

In the years between the start of the Great Patriotic War and the death of Stalin, the Soviet regime used informant networks in the Party’s efforts to eradicate a veritable epidemic of crimes against state property, bribery, and profiteering in scarce goods.¹ The focus of this article is the recruitment and deployment of average Soviet people as informants to expose or prevent a variety of “non-political” crimes, mainly the theft of state property. Little is known about the informant network charged with unearthing these transgressions during and after the Great Patriotic War. Scholars have not yet noted the degree to which the nationalization of the economy, together with an ideology that urged the population to defend state property as “the people’s wealth,” required a large informer network. The historian Robert

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¹ This article defines an informer as a person who reports law violations or misconduct to an agent or official of the government. The terms “informer” and “informant” are used interchangeably. The first epigraph is taken from B. A. Kurinov, *Ugolovnaia otvetstvennost’ za khishchenie gosudarstvennogo i obshchestvennogo imushchestva* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo iuridicheskoi literatury, 1954), 111–12.

Gellately has noted, “No police force in modern European history has been able to function without the cooperation or participation of the population in its efforts.”² In the Soviet Union after World War II, the Stalinist regime regarded the matter of marshaling that popular cooperation as both critical and quite problematic.

This study has emerged from a larger project on corruption and anti-corruption campaigns in the Soviet 1940s–60s. Despite robust interest in official corruption and “shadow” markets in the former Soviet Union, scholars have not paid much attention to the phenomenon as it existed in this period, with some important exceptions.³ Although the present article is not a detailed study of the forms of corruption or the regime’s attempts to combat it, it is clear that in many ways people used their official positions or the resources at their disposal to enrich themselves or gain material benefit at public expense (the classic definition of corruption).⁴

Apart from regular police work, the primary tool for uncovering crimes against state property and official crime was the deployment of secret informants (*osvedomiteli*, *rezidenty*, and *agenty*, known collectively as *agentura*). After examining police strategies for using informants, this study explores

² Robert Gellately, “Denunciations in Twentieth-Century Germany: Aspects of Self-Policing in the Third Reich and the German Democratic Republic,” *Journal of Modern History* 68, 4 (1996): 966.

³ Crime among party officials in the 1930s has received more attention, notably in Peter H. Solomon’s excellent study of the Stalinist legal system: *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). In another compelling monograph, *Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obshchestvo: Politika i povsednevnost’, 1945–1953* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2000), Elena Zubkova briefly refers to perceptions of a growing postwar crime wave in the 1940s, arguing that the population exaggerated the growth in crime. She mentions crimes by officials only in passing. Cynthia Hooper has argued that, in marked contrast to the more effective control “from below” of the 1930s, party leaders after the war smothered public and intra-party discussion—and stifled prosecution—of high-level abuses by the *no-menklatura* (“A Darker ‘Big Deal’: Concealing Party Crimes in the Post-Second World War Era,” in *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between Reconstruction and Reinvention*, ed. Juliane Fürst [London: Routledge, 2006], 142–63). Paul Hagenloh has written about the creation of undercover informant networks for combating speculation in the 1938–41 period (“Policing Speculation after the Great Terror,” unpublished paper delivered at the Southern Conference of Slavic Studies, Roanoke, VA, March 2004). In his perceptive *Crime and Punishment in Soviet Officialdom: Combating Corruption in the Political Elite, 1965–1990* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), William Clark uses the periodical press to discuss the 1970s and 1980s; the study focuses on scandals at the highest levels of the Communist Party. In the background section, the book skips the Stalin period completely, jumping from the 1920s to the early 1960s. Jeffrey Burds has described the informant network organized to fight Ukrainian partisans in West Ukraine in “Agentura: Soviet Informants’ Networks and the Ukrainian Underground in Galicia, 1944–48,” *East European Politics and Societies* 11, 1 (1997): 89–130.

⁴ This definition is paraphrased from Susan Rose-Ackerman, *Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences, and Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 91.

what the police regarded as the strengths and weaknesses of this network, in addition to their explanations for its limitations. Finally, the study considers why the network was less effective than its organizers intended, and why its actions provoked certain unexpected outcomes.

A critical part of the Stalinist law-enforcement system after the war, this network of informants has not yet been analyzed in detail by scholars, largely because records describing its activities have not been available. Due to the understandable lack of memoirs by admitted informants, and the reluctance of the regime to acknowledge their existence, the historian is dependent on available archival materials produced by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and the police, particularly those units that supervised informants. The present study uses materials produced by OBKhSS (Ordel bor'by s khishcheniem sotsialisticheskoi sobstvennosti i spekulatsiei), the Ministry of Internal Affairs' "Department for Combating the Theft of Socialist Property" within the regular police force (GUM). This MVD agency was charged with unearthing a variety of "crimes against socialist property." The major primary source for this study is material and data produced by OBKhSS. Unfortunately, access to much archival material, including all files of individual informants or particular cases, is still restricted. We do have, however, multiple internal reports discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the networks. In addition, archival material from the collections of the USSR Procuracy, the USSR Ministry of Justice, and leading party and state agencies contribute to the picture. Taken together, this material offers a unique opportunity to study the functioning of one informant network involved in the postwar campaign to protect state property.

The regime's concern with protecting state property was rooted in several factors, including an ideology that placed great emphasis on the role of "socialist property as the foundation of the Soviet economy," crises of production and distribution, and the special role of the Soviet functionary as the interface between regime and population. Space does not allow for a detailed discussion of the campaigns designed to combat crimes against state property. National campaigns mobilized the police, the legal agencies, and the press to root out and punish theft of socialist property, bribery, and embezzlement.⁵ Under the June 1947 *ukaz* that punished the theft of socialist property, more than a million people were arrested, convicted, and sentenced to lengthy terms in penal camps and colonies.

Scholarship on informants in Soviet history has focused largely on those accused of having committed crimes against the state (known variously as "political crimes" "counterrevolutionary crimes," "anti-state crimes," or

⁵ See James Heinzen, "A 'Campaign Spasm': Graft and the Limits of the 'Campaign' against Bribery after the Great Patriotic War," in *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between Reconstruction and Reinvention*, 123–41.

“anti-Soviet crimes”).⁶ This study, by contrast, focuses on the network of informers charged with uncovering ordinary, “non-political” offenses and, in particular, crimes against state property or the economy, which were tried in regular courts.⁷ Alleged “counterrevolutionary” crimes committed by nationalists or other “traitors,” purportedly seeking to undermine or to weaken the foundations of Soviet authority or its institutions, are the most commonly discussed by scholars. After the war, such “political” crimes were not prosecuted as vigorously as they had been in the 1930s—those convicted under article 58 accounted for only a small proportion of all criminals. In the immediate postwar years, the protection of state property re-emerged more strongly as a central theme in official ideology. The question of crimes against state property thus grew in importance for law enforcement. According to statistics compiled by the Supreme Soviet, about 120,000

⁶ On the 1930s, see Paul Hagenloh, “Police, Crime, and Public Order in Stalin’s Russia, 1930–1941” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 1999). For an overview of the administrative history of political policing in the 1920s, see Stuart Finkel, “An Intensification of Vigilance: Recent Perspectives on the Institutional History of the Soviet Security Apparatus in the 1920s,” *Kritika* 5, 2 (2004): 299–320. For the example of secret police supervision of one prominent Ukrainian academic in the 1920s, see Iurii Shapoval, “The Mechanisms of the Informational Activity of the GPU-NKVD: The Surveillance File of Mykhailo Hrushevsky,” *Cahiers du monde russe*, 42, 2–4 (2001): 207–30. On state practices of surveillance and information-gathering in the early years of Soviet power, viewed in a comparative framework, see Peter Holquist, “‘Information Is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work’: Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Perspective,” *Journal of Modern History* 69, 3 (1997): 415–50.

⁷ The question of the degree to which theft of state property was regarded by some people as a “political” or counterrevolutionary crime lies outside the parameters of this article. To be sure, certain party officials placed extraordinary pressure on the Ministry of Justice, the Procuracy, and the Supreme Court in 1947–48 to punish defendants with great severity. Rhetoric trumpeting the need to defend state property, and thereby to prevent harm to the interests of the socialist state, surrounded the campaign. In late 1952 and early 1953, renewed attention focused especially on politicizing “organized” and “large-scale” theft of state property. As Peter Solomon and others have pointed out, the language treating “political crime” in the 1926 RSFSR Law Code was so vague that nearly all crimes could be considered “counterrevolutionary.” Article 58 defined a “counterrevolutionary” crime as “any action directed toward the overthrow, subversion, or weakening of the power of worker–peasant soviets ... or toward the subversion or weakening of the external security of the USSR and the fundamental economic, political, and national achievements of the proletarian revolution.” At any time, and for any reason, authorities could temporarily politicize nearly any crime (Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin*, 28). This “temporary politicization” of the theft of state property occurred with the promulgation of the August 1932 law (the prosecution of which had all but died out by 1933) and the 4 June 1947 decree, which was highly politicized for approximately one year. Nevertheless, there were a number of distinctions between the 4 June 1947 decree and political crimes. Theft of state property was handled by the regular police force and prosecuted by procurators in regular courts. The prosecution of property crimes did not bear the hallmarks of “political” cases or trials. Public perceptions of state property and its theft in the Stalin era are an important topic that awaits further research.

people were convicted in 1946 for “counterrevolutionary crimes” by special courts (military tribunals, transport courts, and labor-camp courts) and regular courts; 527,000 were convicted for the theft of state or personal property. With the exception of 1949, at least five times as many people were convicted of property crimes as of “counterrevolutionary” crimes each year until 1953.⁸ The role of informants in exposing these non-political crimes became proportionally much more significant than before the war.

The present article does not examine spontaneous denunciations, typically made by letter, such as those discussed in the work of Vladimir A. Kozlov and Sheila Fitzpatrick.⁹ Those denunciations often contained elaborate ideological, patriotic, or personal justifications for the act of turning in some “enemy” of state or people. Such one-time informants typically wrote voluntarily to authorities about a particular incident on which they had eyewitness information.¹⁰ Nor does this study examine informers who served a “surveillance” function, informing the regime about the “mood” of a given population, typically by passing on tidbits overheard in public places or at work. In the case of information-gathering about the population’s morale or opinion about a certain policy, the authorities did not intend to press charges or follow up with criminal investigations. The materials discussed here, on the other hand, concern information passed orally by a more-or-less permanent network of informers during face-to-face meetings with police supervisors. Unlike the denunciations analyzed by Fitzpatrick, Kozlov, and Cynthia

⁸ Statistics compiled by the Supreme Soviet for the years 1940–55, reprinted in *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2004), 1: *Massovye repressii v SSSR*, 611–12.

⁹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Signals from Below: Soviet Letters of Denunciation of the 1930s,” *Journal of Modern History* 68, 4 (1996): 831–66; V. I. Kozlov, “Denunciation and Its Functions in Soviet Governance: A Study of Denunciations and Their Bureaucratic Handling from Soviet Police Archives, 1944–1953,” *Journal of Modern History* 68, 4 (1996): 867–98. These articles are part of a special issue of *Journal of Modern History* devoted to practices of denunciation. The introduction to this issue, by Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, defines denunciations as “spontaneous communications from individual citizens to the state (or to another authority, such as the church) containing accusations of wrongdoing by other citizens or officials and implicitly or explicitly calling for punishment” (747).

¹⁰ In two important articles, David Shearer has argued that in the Soviet case individual denunciations and informant networks were less important in 1930s policing than scholars have believed. See David R. Shearer, “Social Disorder, Mass Repression, and the NKVD during the 1930s,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 42, 2–4 (2001): 505–34; and especially Shearer, “Elements Near and Alien: Passportization, Policing, and Identity in the Stalinist State, 1932–1952,” *Journal of Modern History* 76, 4 (2004): 835–81. Yet with the end of the Great Purges and mass operations in 1938, and continuing during the war, there was a renewed emphasis on direct surveillance, as police and party policy moved away from hauling in certain categories of people during mass police sweeps, focusing instead on regularizing police procedures and operations. Policing again regained its classic focus on investigation and informant networks. Economic crime again became a major focus of police investigation. OBKhSS’s informants and investigative apparatus emerged as critical elements in strategies for attacking property crimes, speculation, and crimes by officials.

Hooper,¹¹ the information passed on to authorities by informants typically was not offered spontaneously. Rather, the police harvested information in regular, secret meetings with informants. This informant network usually required an ongoing, personal relationship between the police supervisor and the informant. No letters of denunciation from informants are contained in the accessible archives. Only surviving materials produced by the police, such as reports, instructions, and correspondence, are available. One might argue that this variety of face-to-face informing was less dramatic than many of the spectacular denunciations that historians have analyzed. Yet, considering the growing proportion of cases of property and official crime after the war in relation to the number of cases of “political offenses” (against which most denunciations were lodged), informing in the late Stalin period may have played a role in law enforcement equal to that of denunciations.

After the famous 17 November 1938 instruction by Sovnarkom and the Central Committee ordered a halt to the “mass operations” and mass denunciations from below, the role of informers in regular law enforcement grew.¹² The instruction ordered the NKVD and the Procuracy to locate criminals on the basis of individual crimes rather than under presumption of guilt by association. In this environment, the importance of informers grew sharply in the 1940s and 1950s, as evidence collected and verified by the police and the procuracy became more significant in arrests and prosecutions of individuals for particular violations of the criminal statutes.

This article also begins to explore a dimension of the Soviet case that has not yet been investigated: the informants who, while officially counted as part of the network, often did not provide information as expected. The scholarly emphasis on “denunciations”—the unsolicited and enthusiastic offering of damaging information—may minimize the frequency with which people who witnessed “crimes” (in this case, crimes against state property) apparently chose, for a variety of reasons, to remain silent or in other ways failed to live up to the expectations of their supervisors.

The Mission of OBKhSS

OBKhSS was charged with rooting out, with the help of informants, several crimes that resulted in “material or financial damage to state interests,” and in particular the theft of socialist property. Such crimes were prosecuted primarily under two categories of the 1926 RSFSR Criminal Code (including later amendments to the code) and under special *ukazy* (decrees). A small proportion of the crimes that OBKhSS was to expose was what the RSFSR Criminal Code labeled “crimes by officials” (*dolzhnostnye prestupleniia*,

¹¹ Cynthia Hooper, “Terror from Within: Participation and Coercion in Soviet Power, 1924–1961” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2003).

¹² The instruction, signed by Stalin and Molotov, is reprinted in *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, 1: 305–8.

sometimes translated as “professional/white-collar crimes”). Convictions for crimes committed while one was acting in one’s official capacity rose sharply during and immediately after the war.¹³ The most serious crimes by officials included the offering and solicitation of bribes (*vziatochnichestvo*), embezzlement (*rastrata*), misappropriation (*prisvoenie*), and abuse of official position (*zloupotreblenie*).¹⁴

The primary responsibility of OBKhSS, however, was to uncover “crimes against state or social property,” most typically the theft of state property. “Theft of socialist and social property” (*raskhishchenie sotsialisticheskoi i obshchestvennoi sobstvennosti*) fell into the section of the Criminal Code labeled “crimes against state property.” The expression “socialist and social property” covered state property, and that of collective farms, trade unions, clubs, and other so-called “cooperative organizations.” Before 1947, these crimes were covered in the Criminal Code by article 116, which covered embezzlement and misappropriation; by article 162, which covered theft and pilfering of state property; and by the law of 7 August 1932. A weapon used against desperate peasants during the famine that followed collectivization, the 1932 law created minimum sentences of ten years for theft of state property (at that time referring mainly to the theft of grain and animals from collective farms), with capital punishment as a possible sentence in particularly heinous cases. Convictions peaked in 1933, then quickly trailed off.¹⁵ After the war, all cases of theft of state and social property, including embezzlement and misappropriation, were subsumed under the draconian *ukaz* of 4 June 1947.¹⁶ The *ukaz* established sentences from a minimum of 7 years to a maximum of 20 years for theft of state property. The harshest penalties applied to

¹³ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF) f. 9492 (Ministerstvo iustitsii SSSR), op. 2, d. 49, l. 245. The law recognized as “officials” all persons who were employed in permanent or temporary office in all political, social, and economic organizations of state, including managers of factories or social organizations, collective- and state-farm chairmen, and union officials.

¹⁴ GARF f. 8131 (Prokuratura SSSR), op. 38, d. 299, ll. 8–13. See GARF f. 9492, op. 2, d. 44, for a variety of cases of bribery. See also Heinzen, “A ‘Campaign Spasm.’” Article 109 of the Criminal Code treated “abuse of official position.” Prosecutors commonly applied this article to an action committed by officials with criminal intent while in performance of their duties. Article 109 tended to serve as a catchall, a dumping ground for charging officials with crimes resulting in material loss to the state that did not fit neatly into other articles of the Criminal Code. See, for example, a July 1952 report by the head of the department responsible for supervision of police organs, a certain Sverdlov, to Deputy Procurator General Khokhlov (GARF f. 8131, op. 32, d. 941, l. 305).

¹⁵ Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin*, 124–25.

¹⁶ On the 1947 campaign against theft of socialist property, see especially Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin*, 410–12; Yoram Gorlizki, “Rules, Incentives, and Soviet Campaign Justice after World War II,” *Europe–Asia Studies* 51, 7 (1999): 1245–65; and Gorlizki, “De-Stalinization and the Politics of Russian Criminal Justice, 1953–64” (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1992).

repeat offenders, group offenses, or thefts in especially large quantities (the death penalty had been abolished a few weeks earlier).

The extreme disruption of supply and production led to an increase in cases of the buying and reselling of goods in short supply at inflated sums above the official prices, a type of profiteering known as “speculation” (article 107 of the Criminal Code). On occasion, employees traveling on official business took the opportunity to buy up scarce products and resell them upon their return. Such profiteering was often aided by the distribution of bribes to purchase the silence or cooperation of supervisors, co-workers, or law-enforcement personnel. In some cases, groups of officials and other employees stole goods such as cloth and equipment from factories. Covering up the crimes with forged documents and well-distributed bribes, they sold goods on the black market with speculators as intermediaries. During the 1946–47 famine, for example, officials at slaughterhouses bribed veterinarians to condemn breeding stock and then sold the meat to speculators who unloaded it at markets.¹⁷

Annual convictions by the regular courts for theft of state property in this period ranged from about 180,000 unionwide in 1952 to more than 454,000 at the height of the campaign against theft of state property in 1947.¹⁸ Inside party ranks, abuse of office and theft of socialist property were also commonly punished infractions; between 1946 and 1951, approximately 180,000 people were expelled from the Communist Party for such violations.¹⁹ Among expelled party members, theft of state property represented the largest proportion of the 15 categories of infractions that could result in expulsion. In these years, between 27 percent and 31 percent of expelled party members had been removed for abuse of office or theft of state property.

Employing the media, workplace agitation, and education, the regime after the war urged the Soviet population to be “vigilant” against property crime of all types. Social condemnation of the informer has been widespread in many societies, and the Soviet law-enforcement system, like many others, tried to overcome the population’s mistrust of informers. While in the

¹⁷ GARF f. 9415 (Otdel bor’by s khishcheniiem sotsialisticheskoi sobstvennosti i spekulatsiei), op. 5, d. 95, str. 16. On the “informal” but legal private sector in this period, see Julie Hessler’s important *A Social History of Soviet Trade: Trade Policy, Retail Practices, and Consumption, 1917–1953* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004)—reviewed in *Kritika* 7, 2 (2006): 371–78. Hessler’s work is less concerned with how various products found their way to the markets (often a result of theft from workplaces, aided by bribes and illegal transport) and the officials involved in this activity.

¹⁸ Statistics from the Department of Court Statistics of the Supreme Court of the USSR. Reprinted in *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, 1: 613. Military tribunals convicted 24,372 people for theft of state property in 1947 (*ibid.*, 618).

¹⁹ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI) f. 6 (Komitet partiinogo kontroliia pri TsK KPSS), op. 6, d. 25, ll. 2–3.

1930s the regime incited subjects to report “wreckers,” fascist spies, and other “counterrevolutionaries,” thieves of state property in all their guises became a central target in the late Stalin years. The regime singled out embezzlers, pilferers, speculators, and their protectors in the bureaucracy as particularly nefarious criminals. The 1936 Constitution called state property “sacred and inviolable” (language borrowed from the August 1932 edict on the theft of state property), and this quasi-religious terminology took on new meaning after the catastrophe of the war. Party authorities attempted to create a public environment in which average people would not only respect state property as “the people’s wealth,” but would actively defend it from those who would abscond with it or enable its theft. Individuals, the press trumpeted, should report anyone whom they witnessed stealing or embezzling state property or taking bribes to enable or cover up such activity.²⁰ In 1948, USSR Minister of Justice K. P. Gorshenin, echoing an April 1926 speech by Stalin, sounded this note encouraging informing about the theft of state property: “Such a struggle must be the business of all Soviet people. Comrade Stalin teaches us this.”²¹ This task demands “the creation of an atmosphere of contempt and hate by all of society toward all thieves of the people’s property.”²² The regime sent messages that those who report crimes to the police contribute to the preservation of the people’s wealth, protect social stability, improve living standards for average people, and ultimately accelerate society’s transition from socialism to communism. Tremendous pressure from above was also placed on the courts and Procuracy to assign the maximum sentences to thieves of state property.

In this context, the “failure to inform” (*nedonesenie*) became a serious crime. One rarely discussed article of the 4 June 1947 *ukaz* on theft of socialist property established penalties of 2–3 years in prison or 5–7 years banishment to distant areas for individuals who failed to report theft or preparations for large-scale or repeat offenses they had observed. This article effectively criminalized a sizable proportion of the population who had witnessed such activities but chose not to report them.²³ The fact that the regime punished

²⁰ See G. N. Aleksandrov, “Otvetstvennost’ nedonositelei po ukazam Prezidiuma verkh-nogo soveta SSSR ot 4 iunია 1947 g.,” *Sotsialisticheskaia zakonnost’*, no. 7 (1950): 26–33. On 15 December 1952, *Pravda* reported about family members who failed to inform authorities about the thieving and embezzling activities of their relatives. *Pravda* argued that these family members who failed to inform should themselves be punished.

²¹ Gorshenin, *Sotsialisticheskaia zakonnost’ na sovremennom etape*, 16.

²² Ibid., 18. In his study of East Germany and the Third Reich, Gellately highlights a “denunciatory atmosphere” “in the cultural and social context of an interventionist system that fostered instrumentalist relations between citizens and regime” (Gellately, “Denunciations in Twentieth-Century Germany,” 949).

²³ According to the Ministry of Justice, 3,688 people were convicted in 1948 for *nedonesenie* under article 5 of the 4 June 1947 *ukaz* on theft of socialist property. In 1949, that number declined slightly, to 3,483. It reached 708 in the first quarter of 1950 (GARF f. 9492, op.

the failure to inform indicates that many people were not reporting crimes of their own volition.

The Informant Network: Organization and Size

Created within the NKVD in March 1937, OBKhSS played the primary role in uncovering cases of bribery, embezzlement, theft of socialist property, speculation, and other crimes in the economic distribution system. OBKhSS was placed under the jurisdiction of the regular militia, which was in charge of curbing social disorder and regular, non-political crime. Political crime was left to the OGPU/GUGB, which in turn dissolved its Economic Department and no longer pursued economic crime.²⁴ Local NKVD (renamed MVD in 1946) administrations contained OBKhSS branches in cities and rural areas all over the country.

The MVD and Procuracy leadership both singled out the organization of effective networks of secret informants as crucial for rooting out or, better yet, preventing crime. Every annual report of OBKhSS during the 1943–53 period emphasizes the need to expand the work of the informant network. When OBKhSS leaders planned their attack on crimes against state property, they looked to the informant network first. The deployment of informants to thwart crime or, failing that, to uncover the deeds after the fact, was called *operativno-profilakticheskaia rabota* or *agenturno-operativnaia rabota*.

The organization of the informant network that OBKhSS mobilized was similar to other networks, such as those reporting information about the intelligentsia and those suspected of political crimes. There were two levels to the permanent informant network.²⁵ At the lowest level were the so-called *osvedomiteli*, or informants. These people reported information to the police in the course of their regular lives. This group, operating at the grass roots, constituted by far the largest of the three levels. *Osvedomiteli* provided the police with what was called “primary evidence.” Based on this information, dossiers (*delo-formuliary*) were created.

This pool of police informants seems to have represented a cross-section of the general population. They included white-collar personnel such as

2, d. 63, l. 34). “Failure to inform” is best understood in the context of Soviet legal theory, which held that passive behavior or inaction, if in the form of a conscious failure to inform the proper authorities (whether the police or one’s direct supervisor), is itself a criminal act. Before the publication of the 4 June 1947 *ukaz*, failure to inform about theft of state property did not take a specific legal shape. A criminal’s relatives were not exempt from the obligation to inform. See also Aleksandrov, “Otvetsstvennost’ nedonositelei,” 26–33.

²⁴ For a discussion of the creation of OBKhSS, see Shearer, “Social Disorder, Mass Repression, and the NKVD,” 527–28; and Hagenloh, “Policing Speculation after the Great Terror.”

²⁵ This description of the informant network is taken from several OBKhSS documents, cited below, and from a 1935 letter of Nikolai Ezhov to Stalin describing the network of informants in the political police (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii [RGASPI] f. 671, op. 1, d. 118, ll. 3–10).

bookkeepers, accountants, and managers, as well as unskilled or semi-skilled labor such as cleaning personnel, clerks, waiters, chauffeurs, and night watch staff. (There are no data, unfortunately, on the sex or age of informants.) The informants in this disparate cohort were linked by their ability to undertake surveillance of people with opportunities for criminal activity. Located at thousands of workplaces in every part of the country, informers ultimately constituted something of a social subgroup that cut across class, professional, and occupational boundaries.

The second tier of the network, the so-called *rezidenty*, were drafted from among the “most active” and “reliable” *osvedomiteli*. In the late Stalin period, the total number of *osvedomiteli* stood at approximately 18 to 30 times the number of *rezidenty*.²⁶ *Rezidenty* cooperated with the MVD while simultaneously keeping their regular jobs. The *rezidenty* worked as intermediaries between the operations staff of the police and the *osvedomiteli* themselves; in principle, no police employee associated directly with the *osvedomiteli*. Each informant was tied to a certain *rezident*, and the MVD received information from the informants through that *rezident*.

A parallel informant network was the *agentura*. This was a network of undercover police “agents” who were mobilized for a temporary assignment, usually after the police received a tip, to investigate either a certain enterprise or an entire industry or branch of the economy in a specific area. This system operated without *rezidenty*. An *agent* worked undercover inside a certain workplace or agency. The agent reported to an OBKhSS supervisor (*operupolnomochennyi* or *operativnyi rabotnik*), usually in the Operations Department (*operativnoe upravlenie*) or Investigations Department (*rozysk*) of OBKhSS. Agents in the *agentura* network were pressed to recruit undercover informants inside the workplace. These informants would work to uncover a certain scheme or to clean out a certain enterprise or branch of industry, and then disband. In all informant networks, agents and residents were responsible for ensuring that trustworthy informants were located, recruited, and groomed and that they actively provided useful information to the police.

A brief case study of one *agentura* operation can highlight the actions of the *agenturnaia set'*. According to a 1953 report from the MVD's Glavnoe upravlenie militsii (GUM), information came to the attention of MVD officials in January that led them to believe that bribery, embezzlement, and theft of state property were pervasive among employees of the Main Circus Administration (Glavnoe upravlenie tsirkami).²⁷ Moscow had instructed the local militsiia in several locales visited by the traveling circus (including Krasnoiar, Krasnodar, and Rostov oblast) to investigate, but they came up

²⁶ GARF f. 9415, op. 5, d. 98, str. 7; d. 95, str. 5; d. 100, str. 4.

²⁷ “Orientirovka,” *ibid.*, d. 87, ll. 223–26.

empty-handed. How did the MVD react to the scandal? They recruited and deployed secret informants to uncover the criminals.

An investigation determined that between 1948 and 1952, employees of the circus had been operating an elaborate scam. The perpetrators obtained blank tickets illegally from movie theaters. They stamped the tickets with the name of the circus and hid them for safekeeping in the elephant's cage. When the box office opened each evening, those involved in the scheme retrieved the fake tickets, mixed them in together with the genuine tickets, and sold them to the audience. Preliminary data revealed that the scam netted more than 1.5 million rubles. The thieves distributed among themselves the proceeds from the sale of the phony tickets, reserving a portion of this money to pay bribes to officials in the Main Circus Administration and its local branches. These payoffs guaranteed the traveling circus the most popular routes and venues. Bribes also secured the best animals for the circuses. This would ensure the circus's popularity on its tour; guarantee big, enthusiastic audiences; secure the highest possible ticket sales; and increase their own illicit gains. According to the arrested suspects, this type of operation was common in many other circuses and traveling zoos around the Soviet Union.

Normal auditing procedures failed to uncover the scheme. The police sent in an *agenturnaia set'*, agents charged with recruiting secret informants, whose job was to penetrate the criminal groups and report back to the police. In the city of Dnepropetrovsk alone, the operation resulted in the arrest of 11 people for grand theft, including bookkeepers, a cashier, printers, and the chief of the Zoological Department of Animal Exhibits. Once the perpetrators were arrested, this informant operation was dissolved.

To be sure, the statistics reported in OBKhSS documents, like all statistics produced by the Soviet bureaucracy, must be used with some caution. Data on the number of active informants, for example, which OBKhSS reported to superiors in the MVD, may have been inflated as local police forces reacted to pressure from above to recruit more informants. One finds the occasional complaint that the police are recruiting based on "quantity, not quality."²⁸ There are, nevertheless, reasons to believe that the figures are generally accurate. The primary reason is that the MVD's preoccupation with the informant network and high levels of crime against state property led to pressure on lower levels to report more precisely. Multiple sources and channels of information enabled those toward the top of the hierarchy to interpret the statistics that local agents or police supervisors may have exaggerated. Moreover, periodic audits of local police informant rolls led to the annual removal of tens of thousands of informants who no longer contributed

²⁸ See, for example, the letter from the chief of GURKM NKVD SSSR, Police Inspector Galkin, of October 1940 (*ibid.*, I. 65).

information. Thus, although the figures should be used with a certain degree of care, there is reason to believe that they approach some semblance of accuracy.

During the first months of the German invasion, the Soviet informant network nearly evaporated. Tens of thousands of informants and *rezidenty* were drafted into the army, died at the hands of the Germans, or were evacuated to the east. The police had to regenerate the network almost from scratch. As one OBKhSS official wrote, "In fact, at that time the informant apparatus had to be completely created anew."²⁹ According to MVD documents, OBKhSS authorities achieved this reconstruction very quickly. On 1 January 1942, about 42,000 informants were listed as part of the OBKhSS network. Massive recruitment took place in the second half of 1942 and 1943. Indeed, by January 1944 the size of the informant network reached over 140,000 people, more than tripling in the course of two years.³⁰

What explains the quick rebirth and accelerated growth of the informant network during the war?³¹ Clearly, part of the answer is that informants again became active in reoccupied lands as the Red Army drove out the Germans.³² Yet reoccupation by itself cannot explain the rapid growth. Amid the wartime crime wave, instructions issued by NKVD SSSR in February and July 1943 called for the expansion of a "mass" informant network for fighting economic and official crime, greatly increasing both its size and scope.³³ These orders represent a major turning point in the evolution of the informant network. Before 1943, OBKhSS had been responsible for the ambitious, but still relatively limited, missions of fighting speculation and counterfeiting, as well as combating theft in trade agencies, industrial co-operatives, banks, and food-collection organizations. During the war, the theft, counterfeiting, and misuse of ration cards and the mass resale of goods had become prevalent, especially on bases and in stores and dining rooms. Speculation and theft also became common in consumer cooperatives, warehouses, industrial cooperatives, food enterprises, and collective farms. The OBKhSS mandate included orders to reduce crime in all these areas. The new 1943 orders, however, vastly expanded the duties of OBKhSS, making it responsible for detecting and preventing theft and bribery in "all objects of the economy." OBKhSS was now charged with several additional, highly ambitious tasks, including the exposure of criminal activity in all supply,

²⁹ Ibid., d. 91, l. 6.

³⁰ Ibid., l. 8.

³¹ For an overview of the wartime economy, including industrial and agricultural output, supply, and distribution, see John Barber and Mark Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front: A Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II* (London: Longman, 1991).

³² GARF f. 9415, op. 5, d. 91, l. 2 ff.

³³ Ibid., d. 93, l. 7; MVD *prikazy* of 13 February 1943 (no. 00316) and 22 July 1943 (no. 001020).

trade, construction, and industrial enterprises in the union—taking a key role, together with the Procuracy, in safeguarding state property throughout the Soviet economy. The informant network was to be the leading weapon of the police in the struggle.³⁴ According to OBKhSS, informants provided enough data to launch 98,400 cases in 1943.³⁵

The rapid expansion of the OBKhSS informant network during and immediately after the war can be seen as a legacy of the wartime conditions that produced these *prikazy*. Profound and lingering shortages created lucrative opportunities to those who would offer scarce services or deal in shadow markets. In the immediate postwar years, shortages remained while vast reconstruction projects continued to fuel opportunities for pilfering and graft.

The experience of the network during the war also highlights a central quandary inherent to the regime's dependence upon informants drawn from among the population. The Stalinist informant network ultimately was subject to the same seismic demographic shifts and catastrophes that affected the general population. When the state drafted or evacuated populations, police informants were also drafted or evacuated. They were, at least temporarily, of little or no use. When thousands died in the famine of 1946–47, a portion of the informant network died with them. And when large numbers of prisoners were amnestied from the Gulag (both after the war and, later, in 1953 when about 1.5 million inmates were released) tens of thousands of prison informants were swept out of the penal camps and colonies, much to the chagrin of the camp authorities who relied on their information.³⁶ The same powerful forces that shaped Soviet life buffeted the informant network.

According to MVD reports, over 200,000 informants operated under OBKhSS supervision by 1945. Amid the wave of theft and “profiteering” that accompanied the 1946–47 famine and the general postwar chaos, that number jumped to 286,000 by the beginning of the following year.³⁷ This total does not include informants involved in uncovering counterrevolutionary offenses, or offenses in the military, or crimes against persons. (No figures are available for informants involved in these areas of policing. It is possible, of course, that there was some overlap among these cohorts of informants.)

³⁴ Ibid., op. 3, d. 820, l. 23.

³⁵ Ibid., op. 5, d. 91, l. 12. One OBKhSS report noted that even as the informant network grew in 1942–43, the amount of crime remained about the same. The report attributed this to the fact that much of the “criminal element” already had been drafted or imprisoned. Moreover, the women left at the home front were less likely than men to participate in large-scale or organized criminal activity (ibid., l. 23).

³⁶ James Heinzen, “Korrupsiia v Gulage: Dilemmy chinovnikov i uznikov,” in *Gulag: Ekonomika prinuditel'nogo truda*, ed. L. I. Borodkin, Paul Gregori [Gregory], and O. V. Khlevniuk (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2005), 157–73; also published as “Corruption in the Gulag: Dilemmas of Officials and Prisoners,” *Comparative Economic Studies* 47, 2 (2005): 456–75.

³⁷ GARF f. 9415, op. 5, d. 93, ll. 8, 10.

OBKhSS supervisors were not satisfied with these totals, however. One noted in 1945, "The quantity of the current informant network still cannot be considered sufficient."³⁸ He urged that the police deploy more informants in venues where risk of crime was greatest, including retail stores, dining rooms, warehouses, trade agencies, auditing bureaus, and supply organizations.

By September 1951, the total number of OBKhSS informants had nearly doubled from the level at war's end, to more than 380,000. More impressive, perhaps, this figure represented an explosive ninefold increase since 1942. Even after the campaign that accompanied the June 1947 *ukaz* on theft of socialist property had ended, and arrests associated with the campaign had dropped back to pre-June 1947 levels, the number of informants continued to increase in each of the four years between 1948 and 1951 (the last year for which data are available). Moreover, figures describing (and lamenting) the high levels of turnover among informants demonstrate that, during the course of a given year, many more informants had been part of the network than the figure for any one date would indicate. If one includes the approximately 80,000 informants culled from the network over the course of 1950, for example, the total number of informants on the rolls at some point during that year exceeds 450,000, rather than the nearly 377,000 officially on OBKhSS lists on 1 December 1950. Between 1942 and 1951, the size of the network grew each year; every informant excluded from the rolls was replaced.

Why did the number of informants continue to grow until at least 1951, even after arrests declined following the campaign accompanying the June 1947 *ukaz*? Comments recorded in 1951 provide part of the answer. OBKhSS officials wrote that there were not enough informants to keep up with the "enormous growth of the economy."³⁹ A consequence of the economic expansion was a surge in opportunities for thieves of state property and white-collar criminals in particular. One OBKhSS leader expressed concern that the crime rate was growing together with the economy. The police simply could not hope to control crime without a massive influx of informants into the new enterprises springing up around the country. Reports indicate that by the late 1940s, police were becoming convinced that the amount of large-scale, well-organized criminal activity was, if not growing, then holding steady amid conditions that were ripe for crime to continue to prosper.⁴⁰ A 1949 report noted that "Organized groups of thieves and speculators operate for an extended time without being punished; in the majority of instances, major [*krupnye*] criminals are revealed only after significant material damage

³⁸ Ibid., I. 10.

³⁹ Ibid., op. 3, d. 820, I. 24. A 1950 report argued that, in those enterprises where the potential for economic crime was especially high, the number of informants should increase by two or three times.

⁴⁰ Ibid., I. 21.

has already been done to the state. The prevention of large and organized crimes is not guaranteed. The underworld of speculators is also uncovered only poorly. The situation is even worse with bribery.”⁴¹

The Network's Strengths and Limitations

OBKhSS and MVD authorities complained about shortcomings in the informant network throughout the period. (Some of these complaints are discussed below.) Nevertheless, law enforcement clearly valued the network. The significance of the network is reflected in the large number of criminal cases initiated by OBKhSS as a result of informants' tips. According to data reported to the MVD, for example, OBKhSS initiated more than 301,000 cases unionwide in 1946, and 244,000 were completed. Approximately 353,000 people were “brought to responsibility” (*privlecheny k otvetstvennosti*, or had criminal proceedings initiated against them, including criminal charges, indictments, or fines). The majority of these cases were brought on the basis of “official data,” meaning regular police work rather than information reported by informants. Nevertheless, about 28 percent of these 1946 cases initiated unionwide, or about 84,000 cases, were brought on the basis of tips coming from informants. Cases generated by the informant network resulted in nearly 100,000 people being “brought to responsibility” in 1946.⁴² In 1948, 34.2 percent of cases initiated by OBKhSS, or more than 125,000 cases, were launched as a result of reports from informants. OBKhSS data show that between 1945 and 1948, OBKhSS initiated at least 360,000 cases on the basis of informants' tips.⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., op. 5, d. 95, str. 10. This proportion ranged from 0.4 percent of cases in the Lithuanian SSR and 8 percent in Orel oblast, to 56.3 percent in the Azerbaijani SSR and 41.7 percent in Gor'kii oblast.

⁴³ Data taken from annual reports of OBKhSS: GARF f. 9415, op. 5, d. 95, l. 10 (for 1945–46); d. 98, l. 13 (1947); and d. 100, l. 13 (1948). A brief comparison with the two major German informant networks of the 20th century, those run by the Gestapo and the Stasi, is apt here. Unlike the Gestapo, OBKhSS did not have trouble finding criminals on its own, even without informants. In an evaluation of the relative effectiveness of this informant network, this ability stands as one sign of its success. OBKhSS was not as dependent on informers as the Nazis seem to have been. About two-thirds of OBKhSS cases came from sources other than informers, as opposed to only 25–40 percent of the Gestapo's cases. Information that the Gestapo gathered was typically offered voluntarily by the population. Indeed, the Gestapo complained of being swamped by voluntary denunciations (many of which were false). See Gellately, “Denunciations in Twentieth-Century Germany,” 951. The cases that Gellately analyzes, however, were all overtly political, whether the race cases or the foreign-radio cases. The cases discussed in this study were not “political” crimes as defined by the Criminal Code, and OBKhSS would not have handled them if they had been. By way of contrast, OBKhSS itself sought out information about property and official crime, in a manner more similar to that of the Stasi, which was actually rather suspicious of unsolicited information. Like the Stasi networks, OBKhSS channels for gathering information

Even as the police received tips that led to hundreds of thousands of arrests, it is also the case that OBKhSS leaders consistently noted a number of telling flaws in the system. OBKhSS leaders frequently complained that the informant network was ineffective in critical ways.⁴⁴ The MVD was dissatisfied both with aspects of the informant network itself and with those who supervised it. First, there was concern that many informants were, in fact, not forthcoming with useful information. As audits indicated, individuals were often listed as active informants on official rolls when in fact they had fallen out of touch (*vnesviazii*) with their supervisors, offering no useful information. A complaint about the Leningrad oblast informant network stated that “either the overwhelming majority provides nothing or they provide useless material.”⁴⁵ A 1947 audit of the OBKhSS unit in Krasnoiarsk krai noted that, of 256 agents and informers, 46 percent had reported no information whatsoever during the previous three months. Thirty percent of agents and informants in Stalingrad oblast were “inert.”⁴⁶ In other cases, the proportion of what was called *ballast* (or dead weight) was larger. During the first half of 1948, only 12 of 117 informants in Gor’kii oblast, Bogogorodskii raion, had delivered information that exposed and led to charges against criminals.⁴⁷

Each year, OBKhSS removed from the lists approximately one-fifth to one-third of the informers in the network because they no longer provided useful information.⁴⁸ In 1940, 38 percent of all informants were culled as dead weight.⁴⁹ In 1948, over 64,000 informants and *rezidenty* were struck from the lists. OBKhSS lamented this “enormous turnover.”⁵⁰ Some informants would lose touch with handlers for simple reasons, of course. They died, were drafted, retired, switched jobs, moved, or fell ill. It is also likely

were institutionalized and highly regulated, even bureaucratized. One is struck by how the OBKhSS description of its own informant network resembles typical Soviet discourse about bureaucracy, including language emphasizing the need for efficiency, timeliness, and rationality, while deploring turnover and communication breakdowns.

⁴⁴ For a 1948 comment that the quality of the informant network “has been extremely unsatisfactory for several years,” see GARF f. 9415, op. 5, d. 98, str. 5–6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, d. 87, ll. 65–66.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, d. 98, str. 9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, d. 100, str. 7.

⁴⁸ This figure can be compared to a figure of approximately 10 percent of Stasi informants who were dropped from the rolls each year (Gellately, “Denunciations in Twentieth-Century Germany,” 955). A 30 December 1945 NKVD *prikaz* ordered the removal of incompetent agents and informants (GARF f. 9415, op. 5, d. 95, str. 5 [*prikaz* of NKVD SSSR no. 001558]).

⁴⁹ GARF f. 9415, op. 5, d. 88, l. 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, d. 100, str. 7. According to David Shearer, several of these criticisms—including the high rates of turnover and the low quality of informants—echoed complaints made by Ezhov and Genrikh Iagoda about NKVD networks between 1935 and 1939 (Shearer, “Policing Stalin’s Socialism: Crime, Social Order, and Repression in the Soviet Union, 1928–1953,” unpublished book manuscript).

that some OBKhSS employees, under pressure to fulfill quotas, simply placed names on lists randomly in order to inflate totals. Many people officially on lists apparently never agreed to be informants in the first place.

In other cases, police handlers were blamed for failing to cultivate their informants. The assumption in such cases was that informants were eager to assist authorities about cases of wrongdoing, but that handlers failed to draw out or use that information. MVD chiefs often blamed OBKhSS officials for failing to maintain good relations with informants, or for neglecting and even showing contempt toward them.⁵¹ Moreover, blame for the poor quality of informants often fell directly on the OBKhSS recruiters, whose unsatisfactory work resulted in drafting weak, incompetent, or untrustworthy informers. As one report put it in 1948: "Many operational employees of OBKhSS and chiefs of police organs approach the recruitment of new informants without thinking, and even irresponsibly, as a result of which the agent-informant network is swollen with people who are incapable of fulfilling the tasks they are given and people who cannot be trusted."⁵²

In other instances, however, exclusion from the rolls was a result of informants' failure to report useful information. Frequently, informants did not share information with their supervisors when asked to do so. They chose to remain out of touch with supervisors, never or rarely supplying OBKhSS with incriminating information about criminal activity that they witnessed. Others provided false information, frustrating their OBKhSS supervisors. Interestingly, there is no evidence in these materials that any person who refused to inform was punished in any way, nor are contingencies for doing so discussed. They appear to have simply been deleted from the rolls of informers.⁵³

In internal reports, OBKhSS credited tips from informants for catching tens of thousands of criminals. Nevertheless, investigators also were critical of informants for rarely disclosing information that would unearth the larger, organized criminal groups. Complaints were rife that informants were primarily exposing criminals undertaking *petty* theft and malfeasance of office; such small-scale crime was a lower priority for the police.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, most major criminals went undetected. Schemes perpetrated by organized groups netted tens or hundreds of thousands of rubles in complex plots that often involved bribery, embezzlement, and theft. Yet OBKhSS authorities emphasized the great difficulties involved in using informants to infiltrate the most damaging groups of criminals. One OBKhSS chief protested that organized criminal groups only came to the attention of the police when

⁵¹ GARF f. 9415, op. 5, d. 100, str. 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, str. 6.

⁵³ Research on the Stasi has drawn the same conclusion. See Catherine Epstein, "The Stasi: New Research on the East German Ministry of State Security," in *Kritika* 5, 2 (2004): 321–48, here 323, 336.

⁵⁴ See complaints in GARF f. 9415, op. 5, d. 95, l. 11–12; op. 3, d. 820, l. 21.

their activities expanded to the point where they had become highly visible and had already done “significant material damage.” By that time, special informants were no longer necessary to unearth them.⁵⁵ Pressure to uncover large “criminal conspiracies” expressed an ongoing, paramount concern in this period: to defend state property from wholesale plundering.

After 1947, the conviction that the most ambitious criminals had become more skilled than the police was pervasive in MVD discussions. OBKhSS leaders observed that crackdowns after the war had actually forced criminals to become more adept at concealing their activities. After the harsh penalties imposed by the June 1947 *ukaz* on theft of socialist property, “thieves, bribe-takers, and speculators,” in the words of one OBKhSS report, “act more carefully, assume more clever methods of stealing socialist property and covering the tracks of their crimes.”⁵⁶ Police appear to have grown frustrated that criminals were able to adapt to changing circumstances more quickly than the police themselves. As a consequence of severe penalties, authorities noted that criminals were moving to the “deep underground” (*glubokoe podpol’e*). As the OBKhSS annual report for 1948 states, although OBKhSS methods for revealing crime were improving, “the methods of theft and speculation have also changed. In tandem with our strengthening repression and improving our methods of struggle, criminals have adopted more clever techniques of theft and speculation and have moved into the deep underground, which has complicated the struggle against them to a significant degree.”⁵⁷ Criminals organized themselves defensively in such a way that their groups could not be infiltrated. Another report noted that many OBKhSS officials were not up to the challenge: “The basic mass of OBKhSS cadres ... are not prepared to penetrate the criminal designs of thieves and speculators in a timely fashion, in order to uncover all the criminals’ tricks and counteract their skillful designs.”⁵⁸

“The Criminal Element”

From the available documents, it is impossible in most cases to discern the factors motivating an individual to agree to become a police informant.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ibid., op. 3, d. 820, ll. 22, 110.

⁵⁶ Ibid., l. 22.

⁵⁷ Ibid., op. 5, d. 100, l. 2. Officials repeated this sentiment in 1951, lamenting that thieves, bribe-takers, and speculators had become more cautious and clever (ibid., op. 3, d. 820, l. 22).

⁵⁸ Ibid., op. 3, d. 820, l. 144. The civilian police force (*militsiia*) was transferred from the MVD to the MGB in October 1949. In April 1943, the NKVD had been divided into two independent commissariats: a smaller NKVD, responsible for non-political policing, prison administration and management, the passport system etc., and the new Commissariat of State Security (NKGB), responsible for investigating political crimes. Each was renamed “ministry” in 1946, earning the new names MVD and MGB. The two ministries were recombined on 10 March 1953.

⁵⁹ The literature on popular participation in communist regimes, including informing and denunciations, includes Jan T. Gross, “A Note on the Nature of Soviet Totalitarianism,”

In the material examined here, the police did not record reasons why informants chose to report suspicious activity. With rare exceptions, these records provide little insight into *why* people cooperated with the police.⁶⁰ One motive is clear, however. Many people were essentially blackmailed into becoming informants when they were themselves taken into custody. In exchange for freedom or favorable consideration in connection with a pending criminal charge, they were sent back to their workplaces as informants, expected to turn over information about suspicious behavior or about the activities of groups with which they had been involved.⁶¹ The MVD urged police to recruit more informants on the basis of “compromising material,” reasoning that such informants would agree to snitch on their partners in crime, exposing organized networks for the purpose of self-preservation. One report written in 1946 complained that in the Ivanovo city OBKhSS department, only 29 of the 197 secret informants “were recruited on the basis of compromising materials.” The report went on to criticize the fact that several agents working undercover as accountants were recruited *not* because they had been caught associating with the “criminal element,” but “merely” because of their qualifications as bookkeepers.⁶²

To detect the more tenacious conspiracies, authorities decided to accelerate recruiting efforts among the “criminal element,” a strategy that intensified during the war. Observing that information about the larger criminal schemes did not often come from “orthodox” sources, OBKhSS leaders argued that informants should be drawn from among actual speculators, thieves of state property, and employees accused of official crimes. Amid postwar crackdowns on theft of state property, OBKhSS leaders urged agents to recruit informants from criminal circles more energetically as a way of

Soviet Studies 34, 3 (1982): 367–76; Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Kotkin, “The State—Is It Us? Memoirs, Archives, and Kremlinologists,” *Russian Review* 61, 1 (2002): 35–51. Most recently, Hooper, “Terror from Within,” Fitzpatrick, “Soviet Letters of Denunciation,” and Kozlov, “Denunciation and Its Functions in Soviet Governance,” discuss motivations on the basis of numerous letters of denunciation. It is not clear whether some people informed because they regarded theft of state property as a “political” crime that undermined the foundations of Soviet society and that had “political” consequences. This question deserves further research.

⁶⁰ Similar to the Gestapo (as Gellately recounts it), OBKhSS does not seem to have cared much about what motivated people to denounce others, as long as they were providing accurate information. For OBKhSS, the key was obtaining information that would lead to arrest and conviction; how and why it reached them seems to have been of little interest to the police. Gellately's samples indicate that only 25–30 percent of individual denouncers in the Third Reich evinced any political or ideological (“systemic-loyal”) motivation (“Denunciations in Twentieth-Century Germany,” 944).

⁶¹ See, for example, GARF f. 9415, op. 5, d. 127, l. 50.

⁶² *Ibid.*, d. 93, ll. 10–11.

infiltrating elaborate organized criminal groups that often included officials. Central reports criticized local OBKhSS offices for failing to locate informants from within criminal circles. Indeed, one “honest” bookkeeper at Dining Room no. 5 in Voronezh oblast was considered to be a worthless informant, because his “honesty and uprightness meet with unfriendly relations on the part of many co-workers who serve above him.”⁶³ One report called agents “cowardly” for failing to venture into the criminal underworld. An OBKhSS report from 1947 noted that “police organs and, in particular, OBKhSS agencies still do not have a sufficient quantity of qualified agents capable of uncovering the deep criminal underground.”⁶⁴

Concerns developed, however, about this expanding relationship with informants drawn from the “criminal element” who were coerced to cooperate. Doubt about the reliability of these informants was common. Not surprisingly, such informants often did turn out to be untrustworthy. Reports state that many informants were “double-dealers” who gave “disinformation” to the authorities and were “merging with the criminal element.”⁶⁵ Moreover, OBKhSS officials observed by 1948 that informants were often using their relationship with the police as protection to pursue new illegal activities. In the words of one report, “In a series of cases, thieves, bribe-takers, and speculators constituting the informant network of OBKhSS are sheltered by their connections with the police organs, have committed crimes without being punished, and thus discredit the police organs.”⁶⁶ By 1953, the MVD took steps—albeit small ones—to address this concern. In a burst of wishful thinking, the MVD issued an order allowing the recruitment of criminals as informants only if they had “completely confessed the crimes they had committed and renounced all criminal ties.”⁶⁷ Judging by the gripes of supervisors, such pledges hardly guaranteed good behavior. In other cases, according to OBKhSS chiefs, informants with criminal backgrounds frequently came under the influence of the people upon whom they were supposed to be informing, “slipping back onto the criminal path.”⁶⁸ Surreal situations were thus created whereby the police had to recruit a new layer of informers to inform on the *existing* informers.

MVD authorities also expressed concern about the failure of OBKhSS employees to “maintain the conspiracy”—that is, to protect informants’ identities. Informants were vulnerable to many types of risk, including social

⁶³ Ibid., d. 87, l. 67.

⁶⁴ Ibid., d. 95, str. 8.

⁶⁵ OBKhSS employees could “converge” with criminals, as was the case in Riazan’ oblast in 1952 (ibid., d. 124, ll. 11–13).

⁶⁶ For example, ibid., d. 100, str. 6.

⁶⁷ “Obzor nedostatkov i oshibok, dopuskaemykh некотorymi organami militsii v rabote s agenturoi” (ibid., d. 127, l. 217).

⁶⁸ Ibid., l. 219.

ostracism, job loss, or violence. Yet authorities cited numerous ways in which handlers compromised informants' confidentiality. One police supervisor summoned agents and informants to secret meetings using uncoded, open postcards, which he sent to informants' apartments and workplaces. At other times, police supervisors would meet an informant (or discuss one by name) in a public place such as a park or a restaurant, making no effort to disguise their police affiliation, and inadvertently reveal the informant's status. The MVD had a term for such blunders: *raskonspiratsiia*—the conspiracy falls apart.⁶⁹

Ultimately, this use of the language of conspiracy can provide insight into law-enforcement officials' view of fighting crime: the struggle of one conspiracy (the regime—a conspiracy in power—together with its imperfect allies, the informants) against an almost infinite number of relatively small but often impenetrable and highly damaging criminal conspiracies. One occasionally gets the sense that the regime believed that, in the competition to eradicate these types of crimes, at least, it was losing the struggle.

Failure to Inform

The state's dependence on informants drawn from the general population for information about damage done to state interests, including the malfeasance of its own administration, posed problems for the regime. Of course, many people could be counted on to report, and they did so for a variety of reasons described above. But it is worthwhile to speculate that other variables were also at work, and that these complicated the regime's quest for reliable information. Since the collapse of communism and the partial opening of police records in the former Soviet bloc, scholars have become increasingly interested in practices of denunciation. This study attempts, at the least, to begin a discussion of a related but almost wholly ignored group of people: those who *did not* inform, who maintained their silence, who chose not to blow the whistle.

Several factors help explain why, despite public pressure and legislation, informers sometimes chose not to provide the authorities with information that would uncover criminal activity. As noted above, some may have been afraid that the "conspiracy" protecting their identity would somehow be ruined by police incompetence, and this concern certainly may have served as a disincentive to cooperate with authorities.⁷⁰ Other potential informants chose to remain silent because they came to believe that the possible consequences of disclosing information—harassment or losing one's job—were more harmful than the potential gains.⁷¹ Informing,

⁶⁹ Ibid., I. 52. This document cites several similar examples.

⁷⁰ See, for example, *ibid.*, II. 219–20.

⁷¹ For an example of these substantial risks on a unique stage, see Heinzen, "Korrupsiiia v Gulage."

after all, often involved extraordinary risks. As long as one had to continue to work in a certain enterprise, employees might remain silent from a fear of reprisals, including concern about being reported for some infraction themselves. J. M. Montias and Susan Rose-Ackerman observed in a 1981 article: "When everyone depends in a complex way on everyone else, no one may be willing to expose others for fear that he will only end up harming himself. This is particularly likely to be true for corrupt behavior where there are no impartial observers, and the only witnesses to the breaking of rules are the briber and the bribee."⁷² As Joseph Berliner pointed out, many forms of enterprise-level impropriety undertaken by managers to fulfill plans implicated almost all employees of that enterprise.⁷³ Turning in a manager who paid bribes to obtain scarce materials through (or around) a cumbersome bureaucracy could damage the chances that the informants themselves would receive their share of the enterprise's bonus. Many potential informants were also in a position to obtain bribes or other gains derived from the illegal activities of co-workers.

The degree to which co-workers were obliged to one another on a "moral" or "friendly" basis in reciprocal relationships also may have discouraged employees from reporting to authorities about the dubious actions of others.⁷⁴ This could include party members, bound together by privilege or a shared community of belief. A 1952 report of the Party Control Commission (KPK) lamented that when party members *were* caught in misdeeds, it was rarely because another party member had turned them in. They were typically nabbed, rather, as a result of criminal investigations undertaken by the Procuracy and the civilian courts.⁷⁵

In other instances, informants may have simply believed that the behavior they witnessed, though labeled "criminal" by the regime, did not rise to the level of an act that deserved punishment by the authorities. Popular perceptions of the theft of socialist property or bribery cannot be examined in depth here.⁷⁶ Many potential informants, however, may have considered

⁷² J. M. Montias and Susan Rose-Ackerman, "Corruption in a Soviet-Type Economy: Theoretical Considerations," in *Economic Welfare and the Economics of Soviet Socialism: Essays in Honor of Abram Bergson*, ed. Steven Rosefielde (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 62.

⁷³ Joseph Berliner, *Factory and Manager in the USSR* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 182–206.

⁷⁴ In one example, OBKhSS complained that managers in the trade administrations conspired with inspectors and lower-level employees to cover up thefts (GARF f. 9415, op. 5, d. 100, str. 26–27).

⁷⁵ "Otchet o rabote partkollegii KPK pri TsK VKP(b) za period posle XVIII S"ezda VKP(b)" (RGANI f. 6, op. 6, d. 6, l. 8).

⁷⁶ Bribery in the late Stalin period is examined in James Heinzen, "The Art of the Bribe: Corruption and Everyday Practice in the Late Stalinist USSR," *Slavic Review* 66, 3 (2007): 389–412.

some of what they witnessed to be simple *blat* transactions—favors based on a web of informal, personal relationships that harmed no one. In many cultures, the lines separating “gifts,” “favors,” “tips,” and “bribes” are quite porous.⁷⁷ Other potential informants may have felt that some “crimes” that they observed should carry no stigma or penalty. They may have believed that certain actions were undertaken only for the purpose of survival by the weak in the face of a powerful party-state that reserved privileges for a small, closed elite and which had not yet fulfilled its oft-repeated promise to provide abundance to all Soviet subjects.⁷⁸ As R. W. Davies has pointed out in a 1997 reappraisal of the state of the literature on the Soviet Union: “Throughout the Stalin years, nearly all dissidents, party and nonparty, criticized the regime not because it failed to emulate Western capitalism, but because it failed to live up to socialist ideals.”⁷⁹ Some people may have regarded many of the petty economic crimes they witnessed as normal coping mechanisms that enabled average people to solve difficult problems in an environment of poverty and frequent injustices, both small and great. Similarly, many informants may have shared what, by most accounts, was a common sentiment that, while theft from an individual was reprehensible, there was nothing wrong with taking from the state. The popular *pogovorka* of the time is appropriate in this context: “If you don’t steal from the state, you’re stealing from your own family.”⁸⁰ Thus it may be true that, while some witnesses chose to denounce criminals “in the name of justice”

⁷⁷ See, for example, Rose-Ackerman, *Corruption and Government*, 92–102. Alena Ledeneva has produced excellent sociological work examining *blat* in Russia in the last two decades of the 20th century (*Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking, and Informal Exchange* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998]). See also Sheila Fitzpatrick’s investigation of *blat* practices in the 1930s in her “Blat in Stalin’s Time,” in *Bribery and Blat in Russia: Negotiating Reciprocity from the Middle Ages to the 1990s*, ed. Stephen Lovell, Alena V. Ledeneva, and Andrei Rogachevskii (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan, 2000), 166–82. For a comparison with the late tsarist period, see Catriona Kelly, “Self-Interested Giving: Bribery and Etiquette in Late Imperial Russia,” in *ibid.*, 65–94.

⁷⁸ Raymond A. Bauer, Alex Inkeles, and Clyde Kluckhohn noted in 1956 the persistence of certain types of “adjustive, informal mechanisms,” including theft and bribery, and the state’s apparent willingness to abide them (*How the Soviet System Works* [New York: Vintage, 1956], 91–93).

⁷⁹ R. W. Davies, *Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era* (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan, 1997), 185.

⁸⁰ A tolerant attitude among average workers toward the theft of state property was noted by the émigré lawyer Boris A. Konstantinovskiy in 1953 in his *Soviet Law in Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 19. It is revealing that the regime issued two decrees the same day: one punishing theft of *socialist* property, and another punishing theft of *personal* property. The two decrees may have served to reinforce this distinction in people’s minds.

(as Vladimir A. Kozlov has observed), others chose to remain silent “in the name of justice.”⁸¹

Conclusion

The most developed historical literature addressing informant networks in European dictatorships examines the cases of the Gestapo and, even more so, the East German Ministry of State Security, commonly known as the Stasi. Though not wholly comparable, Robert Gellately's work on denunciations in the Third Reich and in East Germany forms a useful comparative framework.⁸² Thanks to laws providing extraordinary access to the records of informants and the informed-upon alike, the case of the Stasi offers the best view to date of an informant network in a communist state. The networks in the two countries were not identical: the Stasi was mainly concerned with setting its informants against the intelligentsia, potential émigrés, and other persons whom the police perceived as a *political* danger to the regime. The present study focuses on informants who were to expose those profiting *materially*, irrespective of either real or alleged political orientation. Parallels did exist, nevertheless. In the words of Catherine Epstein, despite its reputation for omniscience and omnipotence, “The Stasi, it turns out, was often surprisingly inefficient, ineffective, and even counterproductive. As scholars have learned, it performed numerous state functions, but its power remained circumscribed. It dispatched hordes of snoopers, but it often had great difficulty controlling its informants.”⁸³

Like denunciations, the activities of informers occupied “a kind of intermediate space between the society ‘below’ and the state or the authorities ‘above.’”⁸⁴ This cohort of informants represents a case study in the interaction between a regime that was dependent on the population to advance one of the critical elements of postwar ideology, the protection of state property, and a Soviet population with a complex relationship toward officialdom and notions of state property.

By the final years of Stalin's reign, one notes in OBKhSS reports growing frustration with the informant network and the great challenges to the elimination of abuse of state property. This study highlights some of the dilemmas inherent to a system of governance that was at least partly dependent upon a vast though not wholly reliable network of ordinary people for revealing the many varieties of property crime, including the

⁸¹ Kozlov, “Denunciation and Its Functions in Soviet Governance.”

⁸² Gellately does not distinguish, however, between denunciations to the authorities about political “crimes” and informing on non-political acts. In fact, the Nazi-era racial and foreign-radio cases that Gellately examines all concerned explicitly “political” violations.

⁸³ Epstein, “The Stasi,” 322.

⁸⁴ Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, “Introduction,” *Journal of Modern History* 68, 4 (1996): 751.

corrupt activities endemic to its own bureaucracy. The limitations of the network provide insight into the deepening patterns of “everyday corruption” that remained an entrenched part of the Soviet social, legal, and political systems until the collapse of the USSR (and beyond). This article has begun to explore the uneasy interaction of state power and common people in protecting “the people’s wealth.”

Even after the 1947 campaign against theft of state property had subsided, and convictions for property and official crimes had dropped by about two-thirds, the informant network continued to grow. The fact that the informant network expanded indicates that, despite its flaws, the regime regarded it as a critical feature of law enforcement. Although we must exercise caution in discussing the absolute number of informants, it is clear that in relative terms the network greatly expanded between the start of the war and late 1951. The growth of the network must be understood in the postwar conditions of a quickly expanding economy, an apparent epidemic of theft of state property by much of the population (including self-enriching crimes by officials), and concern about a socialization that had failed to inculcate Soviet subjects with respect for “socialist property.” At the same time, police supervisors concluded that a significant proportion of the network was either “dead wood” or “double-dealers” who did not provide accurate information (or disappeared from sight). Despite questions about aspects of the network, however, the MVD clearly depended on it to find criminals. Tips disclosed by informants led to the convictions of hundreds of thousands of people for property and official crimes during the war and in the late Stalin period.

Yet, for a whole range of reasons, many people chose not to inform the police about the improper or illegal activities they witnessed. I would argue, however, that one should not confuse the unwillingness or reluctance of some of the Soviet population to inform on their neighbors with a conscious “resistance” to socialism, the Soviet state, Stalin’s leadership, or anything else. It seems clear that many people could simultaneously believe in the promise of Soviet socialism *and* steal government property without compunction or guilt. Others could offer or accept bribes in the interest of achieving social justice or gaining access to scarce goods, yet still believe in the brilliance of Stalin’s guidance or in Soviet socialism’s superiority to capitalism. We can tentatively argue, however, that, for all its apparent success in convincing Soviet subjects of the moral, social, and economic superiority of socialism, the regime failed to inculcate into subjects and officials alike an abiding respect for the basic idea that the protection of state property was as worthy a goal as protecting one’s own belongings. This represents a fundamental failure of the Soviet system. “Socialist property” never translated into “our property”; the state was never seen as owned by

all the people. In this understanding of the “state” and “its” property, we recognize attitudes that contributed to the blossoming of the extralegal economic activity and official corruption that emerged full-blown in the Brezhnev era.

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