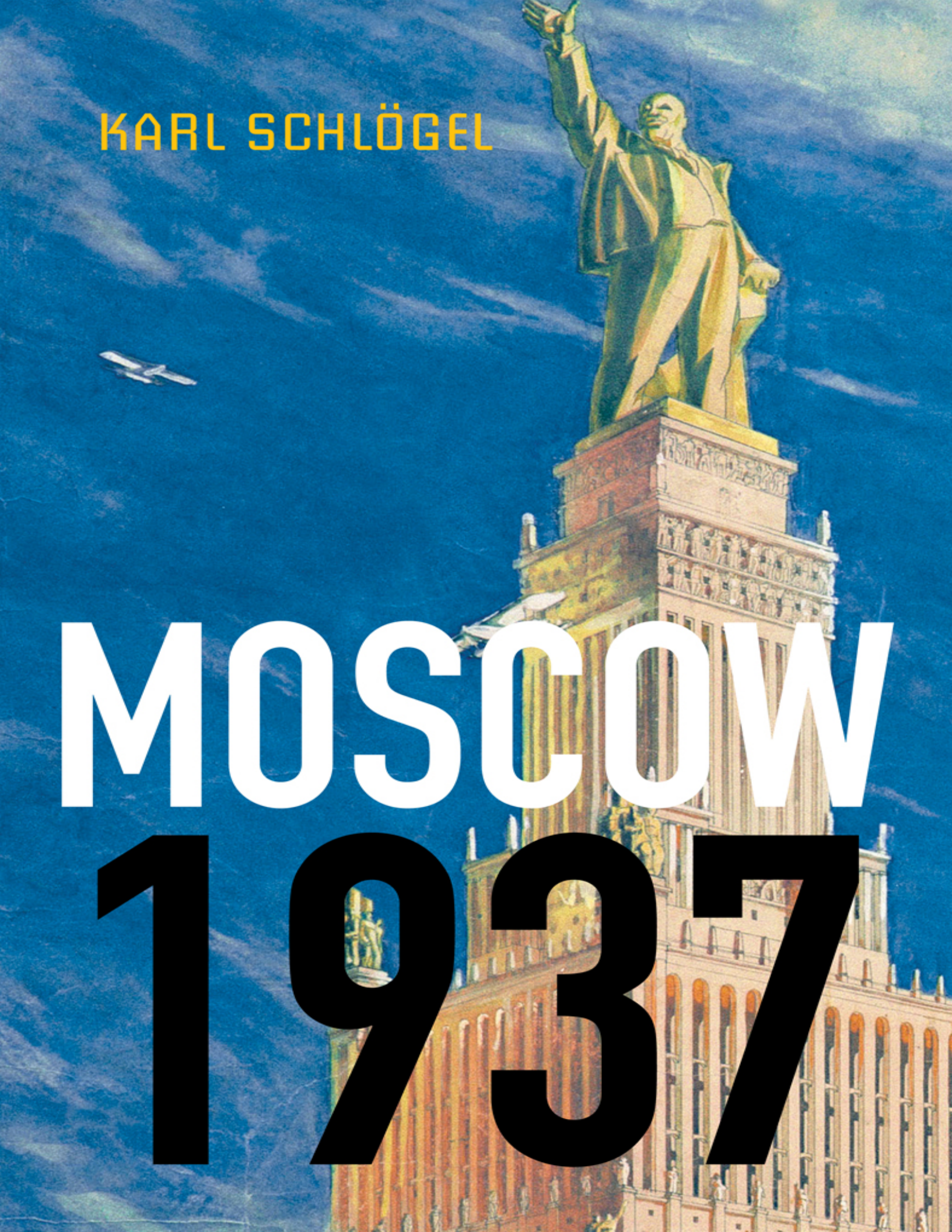
KARL SCHLÖGEL



MOSCOW 1937

Moscow, 1937

For Anya, our Muscovite, and for the indomitable members of Memorial

Moscow, 1937

Karl Schlögel

Translated by
Rodney Livingstone

polity

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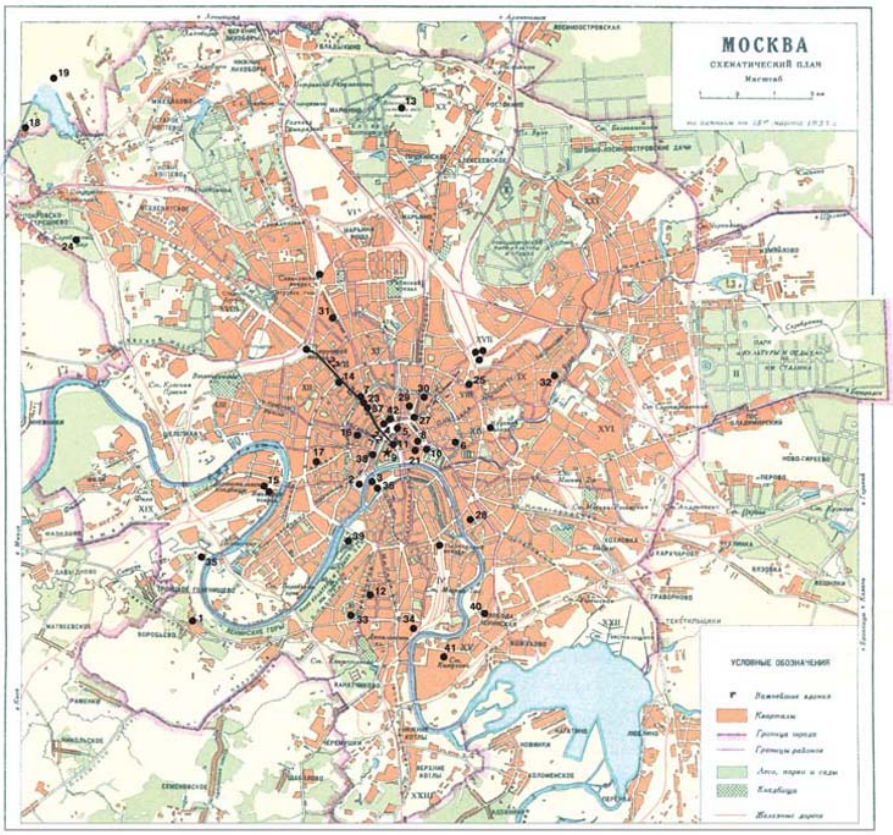

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Preface

Ever since my first encounter with the world of Soviet Russia, and indeed ever since I began to think politically, I have known that I would write this book. It is not possible to talk about Russia in the twentieth century, and even present-day post-Soviet Russia, without coming up against the caesura invoked by the term ‘1937’. All lines of inquiry in my previous writings – whether they focused on St Petersburg as a laboratory of modernity, the Russian experience of exile in Berlin between the wars, or the rebirth of Russia after the demise of the Soviet Union – somehow or other and at some point or other inevitably led back to the time and place of the radical and irreversible rupture in the third decade of the twentieth century.

I was still at school, at the beginning of the 1960s, when I heard Yevgeny Yevtushenko recite his poem ‘The Heirs of Stalin’. Even for people unfamiliar with the whole history, the verses gave expression to something sinister, ominous and opaque that must never be allowed to recur, a catastrophe that had befallen a people and a nation. This was repeated over the years and developed into a leitmotif. In the circle of acquaintances to which I subsequently belonged in Moscow there was no one whose family did not contain a victim: relatives that had disappeared, children who did not know when and where their fathers had been shot, and families scattered throughout the Soviet Union during those years. The traces of violence, misfortune and arbitrary rule were everywhere to be seen. And yet, right to the very end of the Soviet Union, there were no memorials

to commemorate the dead and to give the collective trauma a public face.

In West Germany and West Berlin, where I began my studies, there could be no question of a lack of information or a general silence on the subject. Long before Alexander Solzhenitsyn's monumental 'attempt at an artistic depiction' of the Gulag Archipelago, there were major accounts of it. We need think only of Alexander Weissberg-Cybulski's report on his odyssey through Stalin's prisons, of Arthur Koestler's response to the shock produced by the Moscow show trials in his novel *Darkness at Noon*, of the shattering memoirs of Evgenia Ginzburg and Nadezhda Mandelstam. Robert Conquest's account of the Great Terror had likewise appeared as early as 1969 and was soon followed by Roy Medvedev's insider's view of the history of Stalinism.

Nevertheless, the historic catastrophe and the human tragedies of the Soviet Union never received the attention and interest that might have been expected from a public that had been exposed to the horror of the crimes of National Socialism. The asymmetry was very striking. A world that had taken to heart such names as Dachau, Buchenwald and Auschwitz had trouble in memorizing names like Vorkuta, Kolyma or Magadan. People had read Primo Levi but not Varlam Shalamov. Thus Stalin's victims died a second death, this time in people's memories. They vanished in the shadow of the crimes of the century committed by the Nazis; they were lost to view by the side of the countless victims in the Great Patriotic War. They fell by the wayside in the ideological skirmishes of the Cold War, in which a fact could not be accepted as true if the applause came from the wrong side, and where after 1945 the swiftly restored anti-totalitarian consensus against communism frequently blinded the public to the fact that education about their own totalitarian past was far from comprehensive. The victims of that other collapse of civilization disappeared finally behind the wall of silence

that had fixed the division of Europe for half a century. In this way, no sooner was the question of the victims of Stalin's dictatorship broached than complex rationalization processes led to a curious lack of interest and even indifference.

However, Moscow in 1937 is one of the key settings of European history. It is not situated somewhere or other but on a fault line of European civilization. The dead of 1937 are the contemporaries of a 'century of extremes' that knows no frontiers. This is why Moscow in 1937 must form part of our mental processes when we inquire into the meaning of the twentieth century for European civilization.

This became clear at the latest by the time of the demise of the Soviet Union, since that demise has been accompanied by a fundamental struggle to recapture our historical memory. The Soviet topography of terror was charted for the first time; for the first time the names and portraits of hitherto nameless victims were published and memorials were erected. This process is far from complete, and will only be completed if and when in the not too distant future Lubianka, that symbol of infinite contempt for human beings and murderous violence in the centre of Moscow, is transformed into a museum and a place of remembrance.

It must be said that this book is a latecomer when you consider the vast stream of sourcebooks, memoirs and new research on this subject. But in fact it may actually have come too soon, if we remember that it involves disentangling one of the most perplexing knots of recent European history. If its publication has taken so long in my own case, this is not because of any intellectual inhibition on my part, but rather because of the helplessness I felt in the face of a historical event in which all simple distinctions and causal relationships seem to evaporate. Never before have I felt so strongly that language fails to do justice to the monstrous events of the age. Never before have I been as acutely conscious of the limits of historical discourse as in

the present endeavour to bring together the extremes of the terror and the dream in a synchronous narrative. But one must perhaps have been rendered speechless in order to be at all able to start work on this labour of reimagining the past.

Karl Schlögel
Berlin, spring 2008

Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed their suggestions, criticism and support to the writing of this book. Since it was very long in gestation, I could almost express my gratitude under the title ‘Years, People, Life’. It is in the nature of the case that the people with whom I have discussed the subject of ‘Moscow in 1937’ have not just been other professional academics. A number of them had been affected by the events of that year, either personally or through their family. Many of them had been in thrall to the topic for the whole of their lives. It is to these people that I owe the most important debt.

Mikhal Reiman introduced me to Yuri Bukharin and Anna Larina at the beginning of my stay in Moscow in 1981, and – as was commonly the case in Moscow – I was handed on from one person to the next. In that way I met Larissa Bogoras-Tan, Anton Antonov-Ovseenko and other dissidents and children of the ‘enemies of the people’. I came to know a large number of children who had lost their fathers in 1937 through the family of Iuri Aikhenwald, his wife Valeriia, and their acquaintances. Natalia Smirnova and Kostia Rytsarev have helped me to understand what it meant to live in exile in Kazakhstan. Later on, I met General Petr Grigorenko, whose military career began in 1937 but who was forced to pay for his contribution to de-Stalinization with imprisonment in a psychiatric institution and enforced exile. Conversations with Natalia Gorbanievskaia, Leonid Plyushch, Vladimir Maximov, Boris and Liudmila Vail, Lusya Bonner, Andrei Siniavskii and Petr Abovin-Egides in Paris and

elsewhere in the Russian diaspora have convinced me that, without an understanding of what happened in 1937, Russia can never regain its intellectual and moral health. I met Lev Kopeliev and Raissa Orlova during their exile in Cologne, and the conversation almost always returned to those years, which also feature centrally in their memoirs. From a very different vantage point, but no less insistently, Aleksandr Zinoviev made a great impression on me at a time when he was living in Munich. Later, soon after the end of the Soviet Union, came journeys to the actual places where the horrors had taken place, and I met historians, clue-seekers, archivists and museum people belonging to the new Russia. I am thinking here above all of the Solovki prison camp, of Leningrad/ St Petersburg and the White Sea–Baltic Sea Canal, as well as my friends in Memorial, Venyamin Yoffe, Irina Flige and Yuri Brodsky, the archaeologist and archivist of the Solovyetsky camp. I feel the very greatest admiration for the achievements of Arsenii Roginskii and his Memorial colleagues in Moscow in the recent past. Their indefatigable labours are in my view the very essence of a strong, self-confident and self-critical Russia, and the future will belong to them. Ever since our first meetings in Yuri Levada's seminars in the early 1980s, the never-ending dialogue with Lev Gudkov had become an inexhaustible source of learning and reflection on Russia's destiny in the twentieth century.

A completely different approach emerged via friends from the period of the Prague Spring and later Czechoslovak exile. I had met a number of the accused and witnesses from the Czech show trials – Arthur London and Eduard Goldstücker – and their first historian – Karel Kaplan – and I was able to benefit from long conversations with them. In addition, the topic of the 1930s – as mediated via Lukács – was constantly present in conversations with György Konrad, János Bak and István Rév. The first sketch of a *histoire totale* of Stalinism as civilization took place in a seminar in summer 1993 at the University of Konstanz. It

must have been a stimulating experience, since it gave rise to two remarkable studies by Susanne Schattenberg and Katharina Kucher, to both of whom I am greatly indebted. A turning point came when I first read and then met Sheila Fitzpatrick. Her impressive life's work has created a new foundation for research into Russian history. I admire her persistence and the courage with which she presented her pioneering studies in quick succession at a time when this was not done without risk. Our meeting in Konstanz and the workshops organized at Harvard and Chicago with Michal Geyer were a great experience for me and a happy one. I should like to express my thanks to Michael Hildermeier, whose major conference on Stalinism before the Second World War at the Historical Institute in Munich I was privileged to attend, and who followed my studies after that with benevolent scepticism. Wolfgang Hardtwig gave me the opportunity to present my talk on utopia as emergency thinking to his history seminar, also held at the Historical Institute.

The most important studies on Stalinism in recent years have been presented by a new generation of historians. Their heads are free of the gun-smoke of the battles of the last years of the Cold War, now long since past; they have seized the historical opportunity and taken on the heavy labour of trawling through the archives. I have profited greatly from the work of Jörg Baberowski, Klaus Gestwa, Lorenz Erren, Malte Rolf and Jan Plamper and learned much from conversation with them. I would meet Gábor Rittersporn and Jochen Hellbeck wherever opportunity offered – in Berlin, New York and Solovki (on Solovetsky island in the White Sea). I wish to thank Nicolas Werth for conversations about problems of presentation whose solution concerned us both. I am grateful to Wladislav Hedeler, who was kind enough to respond to the many questions of a novice in this field. I am full of admiration for the persistence and thoroughness with which he completed

his standard work, but equally for the earnestness with which he went about preserving the memory of Stalin's forgotten victims. With Gerd Koenen, with whom I share some of the experience and insights into Party communism gleaned during the Red Decade of 1967–77, I have discussed time and again the enigmas that have held us in thrall probably ever since the publication of Merleau-Ponty's *Humanism and Terror*. It is scarcely a matter of surprise that my own views are close to those expressed in his fascinating study *Purge as Utopia*. In that book too, as also earlier on, Helmut Fleischer was intellectually present with his constant *ceterum censeo* with regard to the 'historicizing of communism'.

This book would not have been possible without my two year-long visits to two different institutions. My year spent in 2005–6 at the Historical Institute in Munich not only enabled me to be drawn once again into the magic circle of the Bavarian capital but also to grapple with the massive literature on the subject. The Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences (SCASSS) in Uppsala provided a tranquil and yet stimulating environment in which I discovered that the experience of Moscow in 1937 was by no means as alien and incomprehensible in the regions of the world from which the other fellows had come as I might have imagined to start with. I have had a number of opportunities to give papers on different aspects of my research: at the University of Toronto, at Bard College, New York, at universities in Stockholm and Uppsala, at the Free University of Berlin, in Göttingen, and at my old *alma mater*, Konstanz. In my year in Munich, there could have been no better people with whom to discuss narratological problems than Hans Magnus Enzensberger (on the 'scandal of simultaneity' or the persistence of the non-contemporary in the contemporary world) and Rüdiger Safranski (on 'the adventures of the dialectic'). I am grateful to Bazon Brock not only for his unexpected encouragement to persevere

with a particular line but also for pointing out the importance of the term ‘constellation’, which opened up new ideas for me.

The first readers of the entire manuscript were Michael Hagemeister and Anne Hartmann. I am endlessly grateful for their comments and suggestions and can only hope that the result does not disappoint them. I found the assistance of Oksana Bulgakova and Dietmar Hochmuth extremely valuable, and felt particularly grateful to them for not only sharing with me their uniquely intimate knowledge of the history of Soviet film but also telling me about cinematic rarities without which my account would have been significantly the poorer. I wish to thank Professor Sebastian Lentz and Dr Konrad Großer of the Leibniz Institut für Länderkunde in Leipzig for their marvellous achievement in producing the maps that are so essential to enable the reader to picture the space in which the events described took place. Heidrun Hotzan, Jan Musekamp, Charlotte Steinke and Markus Wolf, my colleagues at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt an der Oder, deserve much of the credit for converting my manuscript into a text that could be submitted to the publishers. I should like to express my gratitude to them for their thorough and conscientious work. As in previous years, Tobias Heyl at Hanser Verlag was a dependable guide during the production of the book. I am grateful to Michael Krüger, the publisher, for his over-generous confidence in me. He managed to disperse my anxieties that this time I might not possess the stamina needed to bring this project to a timely conclusion. I must thank my wife, Sonja Margolina, for having borne the stress associated with this journey to the end of the night for so long and with such patience.

Needless to say, the author retains the responsibility for any shortcomings that have survived in the text despite his very best efforts.

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Translator's Note

Transliterating Russian names and words is always a sensitive matter. In this book I have used a modified version of the Library of Congress system. Even so, although I have aimed at a certain consistency, I have not achieved this throughout. To quote Nicholas de Lange, a translator from a different language, 'I have sometimes surrendered to the claims of familiar usage.' Thus 'Gorki' has been rendered as 'Gorky' and 'Ezhov' as 'Yezhov'. I am most grateful to Anna Zaranko for going through the entire text and ensuring a uniform practice. The challenge posed by a German text so profoundly permeated by Russian terms and references is one I would not have been able to meet without the efforts of my wife Krystyna Livingstone, who went beyond the call of duty in reading through the entire text and painstakingly correcting my somewhat amateurish renderings. I am deeply grateful for her help in this and for rectifying countless other slips and errors. However, her contribution went well beyond correcting my mistakes and the collaboration gradually developed into a joint venture. Karl Schlögel's German text is steeped in both traditional Russian culture and the Russia of the Soviet era. Russian resonances and echoes that might easily be overlooked pervade the entire book. As a translator in her own right, Krystyna was better able than I to respond to a myriad of almost subliminal meanings and bring them to the surface. I am greatly in her debt.

Rodney Livingstone
Southampton, April 2012

Introduction

Introductions are opening statements, not summaries or anticipations of what is to come. ‘Moscow, 1937’ is a historical symbol in Kant’s sense, a code word for one of the greatest historical catastrophes of the twentieth century. In the minds of millions of Soviet citizens the ‘accursed year 1937’ was a synonym for countless human tragedies. 1937 and 1938 are significant death dates. Human lives were abruptly cut short in 1937.[1] It sent shock waves through the entire nation that could be felt far beyond its frontiers. In a single year some 2 million people were arrested, approaching 700,000 were murdered and almost 1.3 million were deported to camps and labour colonies. That was a hitherto inconceivable increase in suffering even in a country that had already experienced huge losses of life. In the First World War and the subsequent Civil War, Russia had lost around 15 million people and up to another 8 million from starvation arising from the collectivization process. But the numbers of those arrested, sentenced and shot in 1937–8 represented a quantum leap, an excess piled on excess.[2]

What makes the year 1937 so terrible, however, is not merely the number of victims. Few of those who were persecuted and killed knew why they had been singled out for this fate. The allegations and accusations were incredible and fantastic, and even more fantastic was the fact that the accused repeated and reproduced them in their confessions. This was the case with prominent revolutionary leaders, statesmen and diplomats known the world over, as well as

technical experts and managers sorely needed by the country to help with reconstruction. They were all supposed to have conspired to organize uprisings and assassinations, built up spy networks and been involved in wrecking activities in factories, mines or research institutes. But, within a short time, those who had carried out the sentences found themselves in the dock and were transformed from active participants into victims. The central question that scholars have focused on to this day, and will probably continue to focus on, is why all these events took place, what was their underlying rationale.[3] But in the past attention has concentrated on the trials of the prominent leaders belonging to the 'old guard', whereas now, ever since the publication of the documents relating to the so-called mass operations during 1937 and 1938, it has become evident that the Great Terror was directed primarily against ordinary people who did not belong to the Party, but who were singled out on the basis of social and ethnic criteria and systematically butchered.[4]

Since then, an enormous and, indeed an almost overwhelming, number of studies has appeared on this subject.[5] Vast resources have become available since the demise of the Soviet Union and the resultant opening of the archives, and these have made it possible to reconstruct the course of events on new foundations. The documents and files of major government and Party authorities have been opened to researchers, so that internal debates and records of opinion-forming and decision-making processes can be reconstructed. Whereas previously we were forced to rely on estimates and guesswork, statistics kept by individual authorities now allow us to make more accurate calculations. Comprehensive source materials permit us to analyse the national mood, the perceptions of Party or government agencies, and methods used to resolve conflicts between the centre and the provinces.[6] Fundamental studies of the functioning of important

administrative authorities have been published.[7] Last, but by no means least, the names, numbers and life stories of hundreds of thousands of victims have been traced, documented and published.[8]

Research on the history of ‘Stalinism as a civilization’ has made great strides, thanks above all to the opening up of new sources: memoirs, diaries, films, and works on iconography and architecture.[9] However many spectacular documents are still to emerge – and some are certain to make their appearance in one context or another – they are unlikely to change the main thrust of the discoveries brought to light by the ‘archival revolution’ up to now. The sources that have been edited in recent years will keep a whole generation of historians busy.

The basic idea of the present work is quite straightforward. It sets out to bring together whatever records should have belonged together from the standpoint of history and life experience but which have been separated by the demands of the division of labour operating in historical research. My starting point is not yet another new thesis about the nature or dynamics of ‘Stalinism’, but an attempt to capture, as in a prism, the moment, the constellation, that contemporary witnesses to the events of the time always deemed ‘historically significant’. For this purpose it was necessary to research and reconstruct events as and where they happened. Taken together, these events constitute the nodal point that brings all the threads together, the fissures opening up where the lines of development break off and the constellation in which mighty tensions are released. This procedure is in conformity with the classical unities of time, place and action. Events are reconstructed in the order in which they took place and the space in which they were enacted. History ‘takes place’ not simply in time, not merely as a sequence of events unfolding in turn, but in a specific space, a locality. Everything that happened in Moscow in 1937 was

acted out on a very narrow stage, frequently not just within a short space of time but also in one and the same place. The historical location, time and action all belong together, and historiography must follow suit and bring together once more ‘what fashion had kept asunder’. This gives rise to a time–space continuum that best corresponds to the historical reality.[10] It makes possible the writing of history as synchronous history.

In order to be able to think of place, time and action together and to present them as such, Mikhail Bakhtin coined the term *chronotope*. Bakhtin, incidentally, lived close to Moscow in 1937 and was himself an observer of the events described here.[11]

Such a synchronous history presents great problems, but more importantly it also offers great benefits for whose sake it is worth taking almost any risk. Its greatest advantage lies in the tacit coercion involved in tying events down to a concrete location. A history that is tied to a particular time or space implicitly acknowledges the synchronicity of the non-synchronous, the coexistence and co-presence of the disparate. The location guarantees complexity. The stereoscopic all-round view is designed to bring events together; it is better suited to the disparate nature of the world than is a strenuous, concentrated tunnel vision. By taking in everything ‘at a glance’, it grasps the relationships that elude a more specialized but also more limited mode of perception. An all-round view sensitive to time and space sets relationships in motion that are paralysed by a more concentrated method which focuses on particular points. However, for a period such as the 1930s, which is itself an epoch of extremes encapsulated within an age of extremes, the idea of a *histoire totale* is the most appropriate approach, even if it is never fully attainable. The principal effort that has to be invested in such a history aspires to discover a way, a form, in which extremes can be contemplated simultaneously. Mastering the difficulties

inherent in that effort is a problem of far greater magnitude than any difficulties thrown up by the source materials. The greatest challenge stems not from the absence of sources, but in most cases from their overwhelming plenitude and their inexhaustible profusion.

We have to make use of everything that helps us, as the products of a later generation, to enter into a world from which we are excluded in the nature of the case and the direct experience of which we have been spared. Our view is that there is no set of sources, no genre and no perspective that might not enable us to shed light where previously darkness had reigned. The available sources might include decrees, diaries, newspaper articles and town plans; exhibition guides might be as illuminating as reports of arrests or records of executions. No perspective, no angle of perception is to be excluded. We should ignore the viewpoint of neither the foreign tourist nor that of the agricultural migrant escaping to the city, neither the schoolchild looking forward to the start of the new term, the newspaper reader tackling his crossword puzzle nor the later confession of a 'special duties officer'. Herodotus is still the best teacher when it comes to grasping the nature of complex experiences.

But of itself this does not offer much assistance in helping us to understand what a 'synchronous narrative' might look like. In the present case, some methods and models are more obvious than others. I have in mind here Walter Benjamin's '*flâneur*', Sergei Eisenstein's aesthetics and his use of *montage*, and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the *chronotope*. What we can learn from Benjamin is not only what history can achieve by way of a 'materialist physiognomy' but also how productive *flânerie* can be as a mode of knowledge. Nevertheless, in writing this book we have also been forced to recognize that, in the Moscow of the 1930s, Benjamin's *flâneur* would have been something of an anachronism. He would scarcely have been able to