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Purge and Politics in the Periphery: Birobidzhan in 1937

Robert Weinberg

Recent scholarship on the purges and Great Terror has contributed immensely to our understanding of the stalinist political system that emerged in the mid-1930s. Research by J. Arch Getty and Gabor Rittersporn, among others, has challenged the totalitarian perspective that views the Terror as part of a grand scheme designed by Stalin to silence his opponents in the Party and government, establish his personal dictatorship and coerce society into unquestioning submission.¹ Instead, these historians emphasize the limits of power and control wielded by the national leadership which found itself at times frustrated in its efforts to impose its will on both society and regional party organizations. They conclude that the “cleansing” of the Party and government was the partial product of a conflict between national and subnational officials, with initiative from below sometimes playing as important a role as central directives in fueling the purges. Among the merits of this research is that it shifts our attention from national elites to regional functionaries, pays close attention to the daily functioning of local politics and distinguishes among the phases of the purge phenomenon. Getty’s and Rittersporn’s conclusions are drawn from careful readings of the Smolensk Archives; studies of the purges in other locales would undoubtedly shed additional light on this tragic period in Soviet history.

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1. See J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and idem, “Party and Purge in Smolensk: 1933–1937,” *Slavic Review* 42, no. 1 (1983): 60–79 and the following works by Gabor Rittersporn: “Soviet Politics in the 1930s: Rehabilitating Society,” *Studies in Comparative Communism* 19, no. 2 (1986): 105–28; “Rethinking Stalinism,” *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 11, no. 4 (1984): 343–61; “Société et appareil d’Etat soviétique (1936–1938): contradictions et interférences,” *Annales E.S.C.* 34, no. 4 (1979): 843–67; “The 1930s in the Longue Durée of Soviet History,” *Telos*, no. 53 (1982): 107–16; *Simplifications staliniennes et complications soviétiques: Tensions sociales et conflits politiques en URSS, 1933–1953* (Paris, 1988); “Staline en 1938: Apogée du verbe et défaite politique,” *Libre*, no. 6 (1979): 99–164; “L’Etat en lutte contre lui-meme: Tensions sociales et conflits politiques en URSS, 1936–1938,” *Libre*, no. 4 (1978): 3–38. Graeme Gill’s recent *The Origins of the Stalinist Political System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) offers an excellent historiographical overview in his introduction.

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This study focuses on an area some five thousand miles to the east, on Birobidzhan, the capital of the Jewish Autonomous Region (JAR) located along the Chinese border in the Soviet far east. Materials from recently opened party archives in Moscow and Birobidzhan throw into relief the dynamics of the purges in the JAR and add to our understanding of a purge in the making, especially regarding how one ranking party official was swept into the maelstrom of the Great Terror. The specific purge examined here is that of Matvei Pavlovich Khavkin, the First Party Secretary of the JAR, who fell victim to security forces sometime in fall 1937. Examination of the fate that befell Khavkin clarifies the roles played by national and local pressures and personalities in generating the attack on him, and reveals the tensions and conflicts animating political life in the JAR. Study of Khavkin's purge demonstrates that local political developments took on a life of their own, despite the fact that national events and policies gave birth to and subsequently helped shape them.

Matvei Khavkin had a career that was typical of those Jewish workers who joined the bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party before the revolution.² Born in 1897 in the shtetl town of Rogachev (near Gomel) in White Russia, Khavkin became a tailor's apprentice at age eight in order to help support his family. Influenced by an older brother who was a revolutionary, he joined the political underground in 1913 and the bolsheviks in 1916. For the next two years Khavkin was in charge of bolshevik activities in his home town and, after the bolshevik seizure of power, he moved to Gomel where he helped establish the Soviet regime. He became involved in work for the Cheka and in 1919 set off for the Polish front, only to be captured by enemy forces. Khavkin managed to escape from prison in Warsaw, however, and found his way to Brest-Litovsk where he distinguished himself as a member of the Revolutionary Committee and military commander. Towards the end of the civil war he helped carry out a party purge in the town of Klinty (not far from Minsk) and from 1922 to 1924 he served as a party secretary and member of the soviet in Gomel province.

His superiors in the Party decided to send Khavkin to a higher party school in 1925 as a reward for his efforts. After finishing his course of studies, he spent the next several years overseeing the work of the secret police in Gomel province and the Russian Republic. A 1926 report from party leaders in Gomel states that Khavkin showed "initiative and organizational capabilities" and had "correctly implemented the party line" during his years in the region. In 1928 he was assigned to Kazakhstan where he was chair of the Party Control Com-

2. Material on Khavkin's life is taken from a 1992 exhibit on the stalinist repressions at the Museum of the Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidzhan. See also *Tribuna*, no. 9(178) (15 September 1934): 8-9; S. Iakubson, "Sud'ba iz 'zabytoi pravdy,'" *Birobidzhanskaia zvezda* (28 October 1989); *Organizatsiia KPSS Evreiskoi Avtonomnoi Oblasti, 1934-1985: Khronika* (Khabarovsk, 1986), 23.

mission and responsible for a purge in 1929–1930. For his work he was given the rank of Honorary Chekist and awarded the Order of the Red Banner. He was then appointed first secretary of the party organization in Smolensk city, a post he held until 1934 when the Central Committee, at the behest of Lazar' Kaganovich and Viacheslav Molotov, decided to transfer him to the newly established JAR as a member of the Party's Organizational Committee. His appointment as first party secretary became official at the First Party Conference of the JAR, held in June 1935. Stalin reportedly quipped after meeting Khavkin in 1934, "This Jew is smarter than most."³

Organized settlement of the territory that would become the JAR had begun in 1928 when the government designated it as the national territory of Soviet Jews.⁴ Given the inflated expectations of the initial five-year plans, officials had grandiose plans for the JAR. However, a host of social, political and economic obstacles worked against mass settlement of the region by large numbers of Jews. By 1937 they comprised only about 20,000 of the approximately 120,000 residents of the JAR. As party chief, Khavkin was responsible for overseeing the overall development of the JAR but, like many counterparts throughout the Soviet Union, he had little success in mobilizing the forces of the Party, government and society to meet the targets set by government planners in industry, agriculture, housing and culture.

Khavkin's 1937 elimination as party chief in the JAR should be seen in the larger context of the series of internal purges that the Party had conducted within its ranks after the 1933–1934 expulsion of 22 percent of the party's national membership.⁵ That purge found party members "undesirable" because they undermined and violated party policy, lacked the requisite moral rectitude, or were politically passive, class-aliens or guilty of careerism. Local purge officials were cautioned not to subject rank-and-file members to interrogations of sophisticated questions about the party program and history; they were instructed to reduce to candidate status but not to expel members who lacked sufficient levels of political and ideological education.⁶ The responses from party members in the JAR in fall 1933 reveal that many com-

3. Quote taken from the exhibit on the purges at the Museum of the Jewish Autonomous Region.

4. See Solomon Schwarz, *The Jews in the Soviet Union* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1951) and idem, "Birobidzhan: An Experiment in Jewish Colonization" in *Russian Jewry, 1917–1967*, eds. Gregor Aronson, Jacob Frumkin, Alexis Goldenweiser, et al. (London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1969), 342–95; Nora Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917: Paradox of Survival* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), vol. 1, chap. 13; Henri Sloves, *L'Etat Juif de l'Union Soviétique* (Paris, 1982); and Chimen Abramsky, "The Biro-Bidzhan Project, 1927–1959," in *The Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917*, 3rd ed., ed. Lionel Kochan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 64–77, for useful overviews of the JAR from its inception to the end of the 1930s. The most comprehensive account is provided in Hebrew by Jacob Lvavi, *Jewish Colonization in Birobidzhan* (Jerusalem, 1965).

5. Getty, "Party and Purge in Smolensk, 1933–1937," 69.

6. Getty, *The Origins of the Great Purges*, 48–57.

munists were not only utterly ignorant of the intricacies of party ideology but even of major current events. For example, more than a handful did not know who Stalin was! Several responded to the question, “Who is Comrade Stalin?” with the disingenuous but honest, “A person.” On the whole, members who were deemed “politically ignorant” were reduced to candidate status; such candidates for party membership lost that status. However, members were expelled who were found guilty of poor party work, such as failure to implement party directives and rudeness to subordinates, or of concealing a checkered political past (e.g. fighting for the whites or not admitting former membership in the Bund or a Zionist organization).⁷

The next efforts of the national political leadership to rid the Party of members considered undeserving of party cards occurred in conjunction with the “verification and exchange of party documents campaign” in 1935 and 1936. Not only were the personal and work lives of communists once again subject to party scrutiny, but political reliability in the sense of holding (or once holding) trotskyite or zinovievite views intruded into the purge process. Thus, party activists were expelled for shoddy record keeping, not maintaining complete and accurate membership lists, as well as for drunkenness, “moral depravity” and shirking of party responsibilities. Some rank-and-file members were disciplined for not being able to read and write, others for having lost their party cards, while others were accused of insufficient party vigilance, trotskyism, ties with foreign elements, and white guardism. According to party documents, some 217 party members in the JAR were expelled by spring 1937 as a result of this campaign; and a recent article by a member of the Party Control Commission in the JAR states that some 400 full and candidate members were purged from the mid-to late 1930s.⁸

Khavkin’s troubles began after the February–March 1937 plenum of the Central Committee at which, among other things, Stalin and Andrei Zhdanov called for self-criticism at party meetings and raised the specter that party leaders themselves could be suspect. As Getty points out, rank-and-file members in the Smolensk region responded to the national leadership’s message to be more vigilant by, in the words of a *Pravda* editorial, engaging in “severe” and “pitiless” criticism of local leaders.⁹ In the JAR Khavkin found himself the target of

7. See *Partiinyi arkhiv obkoma KPSS Evreiskoi Avtonomnoi Oblasti*, f. 6, op. 1, d. 43. Hereafter cited as PAOEAO.

8. F. Sachuk, “Vozvrashchennaia chest’,” *Birobidzhanskaia zvezda* (4 March 1990): 2 and PAOEAO, f. 1, op. 1, d. 16, 127–31 and 143–45, and d. 21, 33–34. See also the papers of the *Otdel rukovodiashchikh partiinykh organov* of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union at the *Rossiiskii tsentr khraneniia i izucheniia dokumentov noveishei istorii* in Moscow, especially f. 17, op. 21, d. 5403, 9–19, d. 5432, 174 and 182–182 ob., d. 5547, 60–61, 95–110 and 179, d. 5549, 93–97, 157 and 161, and d. 5550, 52–56, 60, 75–76, 95–97, 101, and 131–32. Hereafter cited as CC-ORPO.

9. Getty, *The Origins of the Great Purges*, 149–50.

a vociferous campaign waged by local party members to strip him not only of his post as first party secretary but of his party card as well.

At one of a series of meetings, held from 29 March to 1 April by Birobidzhan party activists, Khavkin revealed that he had concealed from the Party that he had been a member of the trotskyite opposition in 1923. His admission came in the midst of accusations by party members (who apparently took the speeches and resolutions of the February–March plenum to heart) that he had stifled inner party democracy and suppressed criticism of his failings as an administrator. In particular, Khavkin was held responsible for underfulfillment of the plan on housing and settlement of migrants. He was also charged with being “arrogant” and “conceited,” promoting obsequiousness and encouraging pomp and circumstance designed to glorify him as leader of the JAR. One indicator of Khavkin’s control over party members is revealed in the telling statement of one candidate member to the *obkom* (*oblastnyi komitet*, the leading party institution in the JAR): “If I am not correct, then only the first secretary of the *obkom* can correct me.” Or, as Khavkin reportedly responded to a group of critics at an early April meeting of party activists, “Don’t forget that I still have the final word.”¹⁰

The heated exchanges at these meetings stirred up party members in the JAR, whose behavior may also have been energized by news of a meeting between Khavkin and Georgii Malenkov who, as head of the Central Committee’s Department of Leading Party Organs (*Otdel rukovodiashchikh partiinykh organov*) supervised the purges and had summoned the JAR’s first secretary to Moscow in March. Alexander Suturin, a journalist who has devoted his recent endeavors to the study of the purges in the Soviet far east, suggests that Malenkov told Khavkin he was disappointed with the results of the “verification and exchange of party documents” campaign in the JAR.¹¹ Khavkin’s admission of a trotskyite past may have been a response to this barely disguised threat and an attempt to save his political career, if not his life. Reports of the meeting may have prompted speculation among local JAR activists that Khavkin was already in hot water and therefore a legitimate target for attack.

When the *obkom* held a plenum several days later on 6 April, it decided to “dismiss” (*sniat'*) Khavkin as party secretary and instructed the primary party organization to review his membership. However, the *kraikom* (*kraevoi komitet*, leading party organization of the Far Eastern Territory, headquartered in Khabarovsk and immediately superior to the *obkom* of the JAR) informed the plenum that its action violated

10. *Tribuna*, no. 8(229) (30 April 1937): 5 and 7; *Tikhookeanskaia zvezda* (8 April 1937 and 9 May 1937).

11. It is unclear upon what evidence Suturin bases his conclusion regarding the conversation between Khavkin and Malenkov. A. Suturin, *Delo kraevogo masshtaba* (Khabarovsk, 1991), 122 and idem, “Bez viny vinovatye,” *Birobidzhanskaia zvezda* (12 May 1989).

party rules since it could not dismiss Khavkin without the preliminary approval of the *kraikom*. The *obkom* was annoyed with the *kraikom*'s position but nonetheless agreed to reformulate its resolution to read, "It is impossible for Khavkin to remain at work as first secretary"; it then requested the *kraikom* to resolve the issue of the "immediate dismissal" (*nemedlennoe sniatie*) of Khavkin as first secretary.¹²

The plenum found Khavkin guilty of encouraging "toadyism, pomposity, political arrogance and intrigue" and urging communists to "attack each other." Moreover, "a widely developed sense of family loyalty and cliquishness (*semeistvennost'*) has led to an absence of collegiality in the *obkom*, the burying of inner party democracy, the isolation of the *obkom* from the party masses and the loss in taste for party work." Khavkin surrounded himself "with his own people" whom he had brought from Smolensk and "who zealously groveled to create a stifling atmosphere in which comrades brave enough to criticize Khavkin were persecuted." This state of affairs, according to the plenum, contributed to a lack of party vigilance that was responsible for the dismal record of the Party to meet the goals of increased settlement and economic development.¹³

Criticism of Khavkin intensified in April and May, with grievances against him appearing in both a prominent regional newspaper and national journal. *Tikhookeanskaia zvezda*, the major party daily of the Far Eastern Territory published in Khabarovsk, paid careful attention to developments in neighboring Birobidzhan and kept its readers abreast of the accusations lodged against Khavkin at various meetings held by the Party in the JAR. By its publication of articles condemning Khavkin's style of leadership and political errors, the paper played a crucial role in mobilizing opinion against Khavkin. For example, the 11 April issue reported that Khavkin had plotted against Semen Kremer, the secretary of the Komsomol in the JAR, because Kremer had learned about Khavkin's "trotskyite past." According to this account, when Kremer denounced Khavkin to party superiors in Moscow and Khabarovsk, the JAR leader instructed his cronies in the *obkom* to manufacture evidence damning Kremer as "an accomplice of the trotskyites"; Kremer was expelled from the Party as a result of these machinations. *Tikhookeanskaia zvezda* also reported that the Russian- and Yiddish-language dailies in the JAR worked closely with Khavkin to conceal the mistakes of his leadership and suppressed all criticism of the *obkom*.¹⁴

National airing of the accusations against Khavkin took place on the pages of *Tribuna*, the journal published by the Society for the Agricultural Settlement of Jewish Toilers in the Soviet Union (*Obshchestvo*

12. CC-ORPO, f. 17, op. 21, d. 5552, 60; PAOEAO, f. 1, op. 1, d. 22, 17.

13. PAOEAO, f. 1, op. 1, d. 23, 3–5.

14. *Tikhookeanskaia zvezda* (11 April 1937, 26 April 1937 and 9 May 1937). See also PAOEAO, f. 1, op. 1, d. 22, 9–13 for additional material on Kremer's struggle with Khavkin.

po zemel'nomu ustroistvu trudiashchikhsia v SSSR). *Tribuna* began publishing articles critical of Khavkin at the end of April. Like *Tikhookeanskaia zvezda*, it reported the denunciations of Khavkin and contended that his “trotskyite proclivities” were responsible for the dismal state of affairs in the JAR. Thus, it was no surprise that enemies of the people had escaped detection as long as they did. *Tribuna* repeated the complaint of a supplier of essential consumer items, Kogan, who was kept busy attending to Khavkin’s demands for frequent banquets and dinners despite severe shortages of kerosene, salt and matches. *Tribuna* also published details about Khavkin’s “trotskyite activities” in 1923: not only did he belong to “an anti-party group” but he delivered “trotskyite speeches” and even was sent from Moscow to Gomel to conduct “trotskyite agitation.” Interestingly, *Tribuna* frequently couched its attack on Khavkin in language designed to resonate among its primarily Jewish readership. For example, his control of the *obkom* was likened to the authoritarian control of the elders in the *kahal*, the traditional Jewish community council; in another article critical of certain aspects of cultural work in the JAR, Khavkin’s leadership style was likened to that of an “insulted shtetl synagogue elder.”¹⁵

Members of the Party at the highest levels in Moscow had evidently been closely following developments in the JAR and were in possession of materials forwarded by the *kraikom* after the 6 April *obkom* plenum. On 10 May the Politburo resolved to accept the suggestion of the Far Eastern *kraikom* to “relieve” (*osvobodit'*) Khavkin of his position as first secretary of the JAR. The Politburo also “brought Khavkin under the jurisdiction” or “put Khavkin at the disposal” (*otozval ego v rasporiiazhenie*) of the Central Committee.¹⁶ It is crucial to note the difference between the demand of the *obkom* to dismiss (*sniat'*) Khavkin from his responsibilities and review his party membership and the Politburo’s decision to relieve or release (*osvobodit'*), which was a less severe punishment. Party personnel were periodically relieved of their posts while they were reassigned, with no stigma attached to the action. But to be relieved of one’s post and at the same time put at the disposal of the Central Committee indicated that it was not clear whether one was going to be reassigned or left languishing while one’s future was decided by party superiors. In practice, the Politburo essentially responded that no decision had been taken regarding Khavkin and left open the possibility that he might be given another assignment. During the first half of 1937 to be relieved and put at the disposal of the Central Committee was a much more lenient punishment than to be dismissed, which usually entailed that one’s career was finished and that one was likely to be arrested. In addition, the Politburo’s assertion of its authority over the dispensation of Khavkin (“place him under the jurisdiction of the Central Committee”) suggests that it felt that

15. *Tribuna*, no. 8(229) (30 April 1937): 4–8 and no. 11(232) (15 June 1937): 3–5.

16. CC-ORPO, f. 17, op. 3, Protokoly Politbiuro, ed. khr. 987, 44.

his local opponents might ignore its decision and continue to stalk him. Clearly the Politburo had not yet determined Khavkin's fate; indeed, one could conclude that it was trying to shield him.

The decision of the Politburo quickly reached party officials in Khabarovsk who approved the resolution at a meeting four days later. However, the punishment meted out to Khavkin did not placate those party activists who were critical of him. They continued their attack and even turned their attention to Iosif Vareikis who, as head of the Party in the Far Eastern Territory, was held personally responsible for the *kraikom's* "toothless" and "liberal" decisions. Several in attendance at the meeting expressed their annoyance that the "strict reprimand" (*strogii vygovor*) given to Khavkin was not recorded in his personnel file. P. G. Moskatov, representative of the Party Control Commission in the Far Eastern Territory, whose responsibilities included supervising the purges, expressed his displeasure with the *kraikom's* failure to adopt stricter measures against Khavkin. Yet, despite charges of embezzlement and other crimes, on 20 May the *kraikom* approved Khavkin's request for an all-expense paid vacation at a resort.¹⁷ The fact that Vareikis and the *kraikom* were following a Politburo directive and therefore were without choice did not deter their critics who continued to clamor for Khavkin's purge at the Second Party Conference of the JAR (21–26 May) and the Twelfth Party Conference of the Far Eastern Territory, held in late May and early June.

At the Second Party Conference delegates from throughout the JAR elaborated on the accusations that had already been lodged against Khavkin since early April. For example, speakers noted that Iosif Liberberg, who had been purged as head of government in the JAR in August 1936, and Khavkin each knew that the other was a trotskyite and that they competed with each other for political supremacy in the JAR. Khavkin was condemned for "major political mistakes . . . and anti-state activities, and for the systematic perversion of party decisions and principles of bolshevik leadership." All the deficiencies and shortcomings of life in the JAR were attributed to Khavkin, whose trotskyite proclivities helped the enemies of the Soviet Union. Khavkin routinely forced people to sign false denunciations of those whom he considered a threat to his power and authority. Moreover, his "1923 mistake was not an accident," as Fedor Stasiukov, head of the Department of Leading Organs in the JAR, asserted. Finally, Khavkin supposedly had kept his trotskyite literature with a relative in Moscow for safekeeping until fall 1936.¹⁸ The conference concluded that Khavkin must be expelled from the Party and brought up on criminal charges. One conference resolution stated that the "*kraikom* is not heeding the voice of our

17. CC-ORPO, f. 17, op. 21, d. 5439, 7–9 and 121; *Tikhookeanskaia zvezda* (2 June 1937); Suturin, *Delo kraevogo masshtaba*, 122–24 and idem, "Bez viny vinovatye," *Birobidzhanskaia zvezda* (19 May 1989).

18. PAOEAO, f. 1, op. 1, d. 21 and d. 22 for the stenographic account of the conference. The quotes are from d. 21, 28 and d. 22, 21, respectively.

organization. . . . The *kraikom* must review its decision and appeal to the Central Committee. It must expel Khavkin from the Party and turn him over for trial.”¹⁹ Chief Inspector of the Party Control Commission in the Far Eastern Territory, Beliaev, lent his weight to the attack on Khavkin and the *kraikom* when he noted that, as of early April, “it was clear to every party member that Khavkin could not remain as party secretary one more day.” He insisted that it was also “clear to the party masses but not to the *kraikom*, which did not bother to send anyone to check on the charges against Khavkin,” that, as a trotskyite, he should be expelled and prosecuted. Beliaev also criticized Vareikis for ordering in April a halt to attacks on Khavkin; the obvious implication was that the party chief of the Far Eastern Territory was protecting a trotskyite. In an effort to apply pressure on higher party authorities and embarrass Vareikis, he concluded:

Khavkin is a *nomenklatura* worker of the Central Committee, but if the *kraikom* were aware of the real situation in the JAR and the full picture of Khavkin’s crimes, then it would have already had the sanction of the Central Committee to expel Khavkin from the Party and bring him to criminal responsibility. This is what the district party groups want. If only the *kraikom* would listen to the party masses as the Central Committee and Comrade Stalin demand. It is only unclear to the *kraikom* that Khavkin cannot be in the Party. Khavkin remains as party secretary . . . and all this has disoriented the *obkom* and caused confusion. I am sure that the *kraikom* will reconsider its decision and do what it must

Beliaev then declared, “Personally I will not rest until Khavkin is expelled from the Party.”²⁰

The Far Eastern Territory Party Conference held immediately after the JAR’s conference did not resolve the issue of Khavkin but only provided another venue for attacks on him and the *kraikom*.²¹ However, it also offered Vareikis the opportunity to rebut those who had been challenging his political judgment. In his closing remarks to the conference, he reasoned that if Khavkin employed “trotskyite methods” in his work, then he had to belong to a trotskyite organization and engage in espionage and sabotage because “trotskyites are conspirators, spies and saboteurs who now use only these methods.” Vareikis conceded that Khavkin was guilty of concealing his past from the Party until 1937, but he also argued that Khavkin was not a trotskyite since not one of his accusers had offered evidence of his being a spy.²² Vareikis’s speech succeeded in shifting the attention away from Khavkin by playing upon the spy hysteria that had already been whipped

19. PAOEAO, f. 1, op. 1, d. 21, 20.

20. PAOEAO, f. 1, op. 1, d. 22, 17–18. See also CC-ORPO, f. 17, op. 21, ed. khr. 5381, 217–21 and ed. khr. 5385, 182–83.

21. For the stenographic account of the conference, see CC-ORPO, f. 17, op. 21, ed. khr. 5381–5386.

22. CC-ORPO, f. 17, op. 21, ed. khr. 5382, 200.

up by a recent article in *Pravda* warning about espionage in the Soviet far east.²³

Despite all the fireworks at the various party meetings in the JAR and Far Eastern Territory from April to early June, the critics of Khavkin did not succeed in stripping him of his party card. The campaign against him ceased for the duration of summer and into fall 1937 when his political fate was finally determined. Available sources do not allow us to determine with precision when he was arrested by the security police but existing evidence indicates that he probably fell into the clutches of the NKVD in the aftermath of the arrest of Vareikis, who was seized in early October in connection with the purge of the Red Army.²⁴ Revived attacks on Khavkin and his “protector” Vareikis began to appear on the pages of *Tikhookeanskaia zvezda* in mid-October, which suggests that the party leadership may have finally decided what to do with him. On 11–12 October a plenum of the *obkom* of the JAR resolved that it “considers it utterly impermissible that a clear enemy of the people, former secretary of the *obkom* Khavkin, remains free” and still retains his party card. According to a speech at the Third Party Conference of the JAR in 1938, the NKVD had uncovered evidence of a “counterrevolutionary organization under Khavkin” in September/October 1937. The *obkom* requested the *kraikom* to turn over all material about the “enemy activities of Khavkin” to the Central Committee which should expel him from the Party and bring him up on criminal charges. It was not until late December 1937 that party organizations in the JAR expelled Khavkin from the Party as an enemy of the people, but by then he was already behind bars.²⁵

Khavkin languished in prison until January 1941 when, after three military tribunals, he was given a sentence of fifteen years under article 58.7 of the criminal code for undermining the economy for counterrevolutionary purposes. By this time a series of interrogators had subjected him to countless beatings which resulted in a loss of several teeth and an injury to his spine. He was sent to a labor camp where his childhood apprenticeship as a tailor made him indispensable to the prison guards who depended on him to sew tunics for them. This skill, along with his ability to organize clothing production for the camp, enabled him to survive the rigors of camp life until the early 1950s when he was released from the gulag. He was then exiled to Kazakhstan where he again helped organize a clothing workshop, a service for which he received in 1955 a certificate (*pochetnaia gramota*) honoring his contribution to local industry. In early 1956 Khavkin’s sentence was overturned and he was permitted to return to Moscow where he was given an apartment and invited to rejoin the Party. In

23. I thank John Stephan for the information about the article in *Pravda*.

24. D. D. Lappo, “Stoikii leninets (Stranitsy zhizni i deiatel’nosti I. M. Vareikisa),” *Voprosy istorii KPSS*, no. 11 (1963): 100–5.

25. *Tikhookeanskaia zvezda* (16 October 1937 and 17 October 1937); PAOEAO, f. 1, op. 1, d. 23, 19 and d. 37, 12–13; Suturin, *Delo kraevogo masshtaba*, 125.

an ultimate display of irony, Khavkin was awarded the Order of Lenin in 1967. He died sometime in the 1980s.²⁶

What does this brief account of Khavkin's travails reveal about the purge process in general? First, it points out the difficulty in determining the relative weights to be assigned to central party authorities and local party activists when considering attacks on a particular person. On the one hand, the fact that the Central Committee and Politburo apparently had no firm and set plan in April and May 1937 regarding the fate of Khavkin does not necessarily mean that he was removed from his post as first party secretary only as a result of local pressure. The possibility exists that the inner sanctum of the Party was planning to move against Khavkin as early as March but did so only incrementally, in fits and starts. Before summer 1937, when arrests and executions reached their crescendo, it was not unusual for individuals targeted by Moscow to be stripped of their posts and remain free while a case was manufactured against them. Indeed, some regional party secretaries remained in their posts despite denunciation by Stalin and other Politburo members.²⁷ Such a policy could explain why Khavkin remained at liberty even though his political star had begun to fall: his relatively lenient punishment may not have been the result of the center lagging behind the periphery but the consequence of Moscow plotting in a calculated manner each successive move against a regional party leader.

There are several problems with this interpretation, however, not the least of which are the lack of substantiation and the preponderance of evidence which leads to another conclusion. The failure to arrest and execute Khavkin and others at the first sign of suspicion may have reflected indecision and even a lack of agreement among party leaders regarding the purges themselves. While leaders in Moscow may have initiated and encouraged the witch-hunts to ferret out class enemies, the existing materials on the JAR strongly indicate that the center lagged behind the periphery in calling for his purge. Even though it is difficult to ascertain what those Central Committee members responsible for overseeing the purge of *nomenklatura* officials were doing behind the scenes, their action regarding Khavkin suggests that the party leadership was taken by surprise by his confession and had no detailed list of individuals to be purged. Pressure from below targeted individuals for denunciation, particularly after the February–March 1937 plenum unleashed rank-and-file members and actively solicited their criticism of superiors. Khavkin's survival is a clear sign that confessions of one's past "political crimes" did not automatically translate into signing one's death warrant, at least in spring 1937.

Getty and Rittersporn conclude that the center responded to cues and pressures from the periphery as much as it tried to control events

26. Iakubson; Exhibit at the Museum of the Jewish Autonomous Region.

27. See Rittersporn, "Soviet Politics in the 1930s," 118; Getty, *The Origins of the Great Purges*, 178.

in the far-flung reaches of the Soviet Union. What we know about the reaction of Khavkin's enemies at the various party meetings and conferences in May and June buttresses their conclusions that the denunciation of superiors from below was more than a facade designed to provide the appearance of rank-and-file power and influence.²⁸ To be sure, Khavkin's political fate ultimately depended on the decision of the purge commissions, security forces and Politburo, but the vociferous condemnation of Khavkin and Vareikis by those displeased with the Politburo decision underscores the fact that many rank-and-file party members took seriously the injunction of the February–March plenum to unmask and depose party officials (including those appointed by the center) through denunciation and criticism. Despite the fact that the hands of Vareikis and the *kraikom* were tied by the decision of the Politburo, Khavkin's detractors, including representatives of the Central Committee's Party Control Commission and Department of Leading Party Organs, remained undaunted in their thirst for the purge. Surely they knew that someone in Khavkin's position could be removed only by a decision emanating from the very top of the Party; nonetheless, they continued their campaign in the hope that higher party organizations would accede to pressure.

Another conclusion to be drawn from this examination of Khavkin is that the purges depended in no small measure on the successful mobilization of the rank and file against entrenched local party machines. Michael Gelb argues that the verification campaign "reflected the populist face of Stalinism" by "eliciting mass participation in political life."²⁹ A major argument found in recent research is that the national elites depended on the rank-and-file membership in their campaign to assert central control over obdurate regional officials who refused to implement directives of the Central Committee and who had set themselves up as mini-potentates ruling with the help of local cliques or "families" of dedicated assistants.³⁰ In the case of the JAR, Khavkin's close circle of associates (termed an "*artel*" by his detractors), whom he had brought with him from Smolensk, also fell victim to the security forces by the end of 1937: of the 51 members of the JAR's *obkom* in mid-1937, only six retained their membership one year later.³¹

28. In his recent book *Stalin in Power*, Robert Tucker, who is hardly sympathetic to the views of Getty and Rittersporn, agrees that the February–March plenum was designed to stir up the rank-and-file membership against its immediate superiors. However, he views the plenum as a cynical maneuver by Stalin, with little or no connection to the struggle between the national and regional leaderships that animates the approaches of Getty and Rittersporn. See Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), chap. 17, especially 459 and 464–65.

29. Michael Gelb, "Mass Politics Under Stalinism: Two Case Studies." John Strong, ed., *Essays on Revolutionary Culture and Stalinism* (Columbus: Slavica, 1990), 188–89.

30. See the sources listed in note 1.

31. PAOEAO, f. 1, op. 1, d. 21, 4–5 and d. 37, 3.

But the fact that many of Khavkin's second lieutenants remained at their posts even after their boss was stripped of his position and were arrested only when Khavkin himself was is evidence that the JAR was not yet targeted in spring 1937. The pronouncements and policies of the national leadership certainly provided the opportunity for the grassroots campaign against Khavkin but the available sources do not support the conclusions that a "hit" list existed and the purge of the Party in the JAR was predetermined. The failure in the spring of Malenkov's envoys to have Khavkin arrested is strong proof that the Central Committee had not yet determined his fate, notwithstanding the protestations of officials such as Moskatov and Beliaev who were supervising the purges in the JAR at the behest of the center. There is no doubt that these representatives of the Central Committee were targeting Khavkin but neither they nor Malenkov at that time evidently had the upper hand in determining the fate of the JAR's first secretary. Despite the evidence mounting against Khavkin in April and May, which was collected by emissaries of the Central Committee itself, the Politburo nonetheless chose to deal with Khavkin in a lenient manner, suggesting splits within the party leadership regarding the organization, implementation and targets of the purges in the first half of 1937.

The Khavkin affair served purposes other than rooting out suspected class enemies and unseating ensconced political cliques. Despite the personal tragedies that befell many party members in the aftermath of the February–March plenum, the campaign did have a beneficial effect. Not only did it allow disgruntled activists, particularly those with opportunistic bents and scores to settle, to vent steam and accuse their superiors of poor work and leadership, but it also provided a sense of empowerment to party members who were given the opportunity at the party conferences in May and June to engage in scathing criticism of Khavkin and his "*artel!*" All sorts of resentments, frustrations and complaints came to the fore when party activists, either seeking to advance their careers or merely acting out of a desire for self-preservation as the maelstrom of the purges swirled all around them in the Soviet far east, were encouraged to criticize their superiors. The stenographic reports of the Second Party Conference of the JAR and the Twelfth Party Conference of the Far Eastern Territory contain dozens of speeches by managers of factories, collective farms, schools, construction sites and the like who placed responsibility for all the shortcomings and failings of socialist construction in the JAR on the doorstep of Khavkin. It is little wonder that everybody connected with the Party's effort to manage all aspects of social, cultural and economic life in the JAR sought to lessen their own responsibility for abysmal conditions by shifting blame to a confessed trotskyite. This sense of being able to influence local affairs while escaping personal responsibility was translated into greater rank-and-file support for Stalin and the central leadership, who benefited from the willingness of party members to blame an individual local leader rather than the stalinist system itself. The campaign of criticism and denunciation also served

the national leadership's interests by shifting the spotlight from its failed policies to supposed "enemies of the people" who were seeking to destroy the Soviet Union from within. It kept all party members guessing as to who, as a result of association with Khavkin or one of his associates, might be the next victim.

What role did the peculiarly Jewish nature of the JAR play in the purge process? That is, did it matter that Khavkin and others were Jewish? Examination of party materials in archives in Birobidzhan and Moscow indicates that, for the most part, in the JAR one's ethnicity had little or no impact on whether one fell victim to the Great Terror. If the purge was designed to eliminate Jews from the ranks of the Party in the JAR, then we might expect fewer Jews at subsequent party conferences; however, the percentage of Jews attending party conferences in the JAR remained constant at about thirty percent between 1935 and 1938.³² Khavkin and his associates were targeted not because they were Jewish but because they were politically suspect. Nonetheless, past involvement in Jewish political causes, such as membership in the Bund or a Zionist organization before or just after the revolution, was sometimes used against party members in the mid-1930s, who found themselves accused of "counter revolutionary trotskyite, bourgeois nationalist activities." This was particularly if they concealed this information from the purge commissions.³³

Purge victims also found that association with Iosif Liberberg, whose involvement with Jewish concerns was a significant factor in his downfall as head of the JAR's government, could be used against them. In 1928 Liberberg helped found the Jewish Cultural Institute in Kiev and then moved to the JAR when it was formally established in 1934. He was later accused of trotskyism and bourgeois nationalism for attempting to establish the JAR as the center of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union. He was also accused of replacing Russian workers in one factory with Jews because he allegedly believed that Jews should occupy important positions in the JAR.³⁴ One party member who worked closely with Liberberg was purged because in 1934 he had advocated the russification of Yiddish, hardly a sign of blind commitment to Jewish causes. As the purge commission concluded, "This harmful position was the result of a lack of faith in the development of the Yiddish language and Yiddish culture in a proletarian dictatorship."³⁵ And in Khavkin's case, the party chief's working relationship with Liberberg was twisted into evidence of his political unreliability and failure to weed out trotskyites.

32. CC-ORPO, f. 17, op. 21, d. 5538, 14–15 and d. 5539, 16; PAOEAO, f. 1, op. 1, d. 21, 24.

33. CC-ORPO, f. 17, op. 21, d. 5547, 95, and d. 5552, 38.

34. *Tribuna*, no. 9 (230) (15 May 1937): 3–7; CC-ORPO, f. 17, op. 21, d. 5550, 58; *Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Evreiskoi Avtonomnoi Oblasti*, f. 75, op. 1, d. 63, 1; PAOEAO, f. 1, op. 1, d. 11, 58, d. 15, 15, and d. 21, 75; Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 125.

35. CC-ORPO, f. 17, op. 21, d. 5551, 97–98.

Finally, to end on a tragi-comic note, perhaps the most glaring example of someone falling victim because of his or her Jewishness was Khavkin's wife, Sofia Pavlovich, who was accused of trying to poison Lazar' Kaganovich with homemade gefilte fish when he came for dinner in 1936 while inspecting the JAR. She was arrested along with Khavkin, sentenced to a labor camp and eventually ended up in a mental hospital.³⁶

In conclusion, lack of detailed information about the decision-making process in the Politburo, especially in the case of the Great Terror, makes it difficult to know what, if anything, the party leadership in the Kremlin was planning to do with Khavkin. Stalin and his closest associates encouraged a generalized rank-and-file attack on local party leaders and it was no coincidence that party activists in the JAR began criticizing Khavkin in the wake of the February–March plenum. Therefore culpability for the purges belongs to the Kremlin. But contrary to the conclusions of investigators like Alexander Suturin, who stresses that initiative, direction and guidance from Moscow explain the targeting of Khavkin and other purge victims, the available materials concerning the purges in the JAR suggest that Moscow was not yet focused on Khavkin in spring 1937.³⁷ Ultimate responsibility for what happened in the JAR and throughout the Soviet Union during the Great Terror resides in the Politburo and especially with Stalin, but understanding the course of specific purges requires that we take into account local events and personalities. More specifically, careful attention must be paid to the interaction between the center and the periphery and how news and information about events in the JAR influenced decision making in Moscow. Thus, local circumstances helped determine Khavkin's fate as did the machinations of party leaders behind the walls of the Kremlin.

36. Exhibit at the Museum of the JAR.

37. Suturin writes that "the first steps in beginning to unmask enemies" in the JAR did not occur as a result of "initiative from below, but from massive pressure from above." See "Bez viny vinovaty," *Birobidzhanskaia zvezda* (12 May, 1989).