

УДК 94(470)«1938/1941»:930,049.32

DOI 10.28995/2073-0101-2020-4-1273-1279

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“I Was Arrested and Imprisoned Altogether Undeservedly...”: Stalin’s Chekists in the Grip of
“Socialist Legality”

Abstract

The article reviews the third, final publication in the documentary series “Echo of the Great Terror,” dedicated to the purge campaign in the ranks of the NKVD. In total, the book compiled by historians A. Savin, A. Teplyakov, and M. Junge includes more than 300 documents that form two sections of the collection. The first section contains self-describing narratives created by security officers and their family members during the NKVD purge campaign, the second one includes sets of heterogeneous documents reconstructing the general context. The reviewer

notes that the most interesting part of publication is that which presents ego-texts, since they allow us to see the “cleansing of the cleaners” through the eyes of the Chekists themselves. According to the reviewer, their “letters to power” (petitions, statements, appeals, suicide notes) and autobiographies should not be classified as classical ego-documents. Belonging to the category of so-called “provoked ego-documents,” they in no small part reflected the authors’ desire to adhere to “correct” rituals, rhetoric, and symbols of their political era. Striving to dissociate themselves from incriminated violations of “socialist legality,” Stalin’s Chekists used various self-justifying models or combinations thereof. But the reviewer is of the opinion that the most important thing reflected in Chekists’ messages was their willingness to search for and find enemies, even in their own ranks. It was this willingness, the reviewer concludes, that was the basis of the group professional identity of the Chekist strata and it directly correlated with the positive Soviet identity in general. Thus, ego-documents published in the book capture the fact that Soviet society and its elite was subject to complex processes of isolation and self-determination of “small” social groups, the status of which was determined by their proximity to and inclusion into power.

Keywords

Archival documents of the Stalin era, letters to power as a historical source, Great Terror, purge of the NKVD, ego-documents, “letters to power,” models of self-advocacy

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Grant information

This article has been prepared with financial support from the Russian Science Fund (project no. 19-18-00221).

Submitted 11.05.2020, published (for citation):

SURZHIKOVA, N. V. “Ya arestovan i zaklyuchen pod strazhu sovershenno nezasluzhenno...”: Chekisty Stalina v tiskakh “sotsialisticheskoi zakonnosti” [“I Was Arrested and Imprisoned Altogether Undeservedly...”: Stalin’s Chekists in the Grip of “Socialist Legality.” In Russ.]. IN: Vestnik arhivista / Herald of an Archivist, 2020, no. 4, pp. 1273-1279. doi 10.28995/2073-0101-2020-4-1273-1279

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Полностью материал публикуется в российском историко-архивоведческом журнале ВЕСТНИК АРХИВИСТА. Ознакомьтесь с условиями подписки [здесь](#) .