What is red, has Stalin’s name in its title and a portrait of Stalin on its cover? This design pattern is so common in Russian history that its scholars would make no mistake in answering: a new book on Soviet history of the Stalinist period. Published by the Södertörn University and edited by the prominent Swedish scholars of Soviet history Andrej Kotljarchuk and Olle Sundström, *Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Stalin’s Soviet Union: New Dimensions of Research* is not a biography of Stalin, but rather a collection of micro-historical studies of ethnic and religious groups in the Soviet Union. Yet, as we know from Walther Benjamin, aesthetics is inseparable from politics, and the choice of the cover and title alludes to the totalitarian theory, an interpretation of the Soviet Union as an exemplary dictatorship that used coercion and terror to make its population modern, disciplined and homogeneous, which acts as the overarching conceptual framework of the volume. As a result, new dimensions of research based on in-depth studies of different Soviet communities in the Stalinist period stand next to interpretations that reduce historical experiences of these communities to the Great Terror. In other words, the title of the book is somewhat misleading: it is not so much about ethnic and religious minorities in the USSR between late 1920s and early 1950s (a period that fits the definition of «Stalin’s Soviet Union»), but has a much narrower focus on 1936–38, when these minorities became targets of the NKVD operations.

The volume is divided into three parts – «National Operations of the NKVD. A General Approach,» «Ethnic Minorities in the Great Terror. Case Studies,» and «Religious Minorities under Soviet Repression.» The first part provides the historical context for the works published in the two other parts. It opens with the article «The Great Terror. New Dimen-
sions of Research» by Hiroaki Kuromiya that discusses the role of international espionage and political provocation by Soviet authorities as factors leading to the Great Terror. Kuromiya suggests that Stalin was influenced by the Japanese system of «total espionage» during the Russo-Japanese War, and that the Great Terror was, at least partially, an attempt to build a system of «total counter-espionage,» an argument that he summarizes in a statement that «Stalin’s logic was to kill a hundred people in order to catch the one possible spy among them» (p. 40). Yet, for example, Stephen Kotkin in his recent biography of Stalin, which provides the most detailed account of the dictator’s life published so far, finds no evidence that the Great Terror was in any way informed by Stalin’s desire to imitate the Japanese intelligence operations and methods.1 Kuromiya’s prioritization of the foreign threat also tends to downplay the class and power dynamics in Soviet society and politics as driving forces of the repression campaigns, which is the focus of the next contributor to the volume, Andrei Savin. In his article «Ethnification of Stalinism? Ethnic Cleansings and the NKVD Order No 00447 in a Comparative Perspective,» Savin examines a question that has recently re-emerged in the works of scholars such as Jörg Baberowsky and Timothy Snyder, but has long been posed in national historiographies of the Great Terror in Poland, Ukraine and some other nations2: To what degree did the national operations of the NKVD reflect an ideological shift from class to ethnicity in Soviet politics? Using materials from Soviet Siberia, Savin concludes that ethnicity and nationality had never been a sole factor determining the logic of repressive actions in Soviet ethnic communities. The last contribution in this section, «’He who Is not with Us Is against US.’ Elimination of the ‘Fifth Column’ in the Soviet Union, 1937–1938» by Victor Dönninghaus, repeats a fairly common thesis that the NKVD operations against Western minorities, such as Germans, Poles and Finns, were fueled by perceived threats from their respective nation states. This is a rare example of a statement that most scholars of Stalinism agree on, so it is not exactly clear what is a «new dimension of research» here. Dönninghaus also comes to a conclusion that the national operations of the NKVD showed the priority of ethnicity over social factors. This argument has a structural discrepancy that I will discuss at the end of this review, as it is shared by several other contributors to the volume.

Andrej Kotljarchuk’s article «Propaganda of Hatred and the Great Terror. A Nordic Approach» opens the second part of the volume. Kotljarchuk suggests that the NKVD operations against various ethnic groups in the USSR were prepared by a campaign in Soviet mass media that incited hatred of targeted ethnic groups among Soviet audiences. He draws the evidence from Soviet newspapers, which, indeed, provide a substantial corpus of texts accusing foreign nations and their intelligence services of espionage and subversion against the USSR. However, an argument that these publications represented a media campaign against specific ethnic groups disregards an important distinction between a foreign government and a foreign population or diaspora that Soviet propaganda never


failed to make. Stalin himself very carefully maintained this distinction even during the crisis years of the World War II, as for example in his famous Order of the Day No 55 to the Red Army (February 23, 1942) where he claimed: «It would be ludicrous to identify Hitler’s clique with the German people.»³ Soviet propaganda did attack «bourgeois nationalists» among northern ethnic groups, as Kotljarchuk shows in his sources, and the practice of labeling people as nationalists was very arbitrary (virtually anyone could be classified as one), yet it was never total («anyone» did not translated into «everyone») in contrast to the anti-Semitic campaign in Nazi Germany, to which Kotljarchuk alludes in the very first sentence of his text. To put it differently, the objects of propaganda campaigns in Soviet newspapers seem to be too specific to call it a «propaganda of [ethnic] hatred» as such.

The next article, «Nation-Building by Terror in Soviet Georgia, 1937–1938» by Marc Junge and Daniel Müller, conceptually overlaps with Andrei Savin’s contribution to the volume under review. Junge and Müller use an impressive range of primary sources to show how the regional leadership of Soviet Georgia used the purges as an instrument of biopolitics, or, in their own words, «a systematic and violent disciplining, subjecting and marginalization of nationalities» (p. 149). Through a skillful use of statistical data on repressions in Georgia the authors show how misleading the term «ethnic repressions» might be when applied to the NKVD operations of 1937–1938, since it highlights only one factor (ethnicity) behind the purges whereas, in fact, there were many. In a stark contrast to their contribution, Eva Toulouze in the next article «A Long Great Ethnic Terror in the Volga Region. A War before the War» argues that the Soviet authorities perceived the «Finno-Ugric ethnicity» (a term that Toulouze uses unproblematically despite its unconventional character) as a threat to the progress of socialism; in the conclusion to her article, Toulouze claims that «Finno-Ugrianness… was seen as a menace to Stalinist power» (p. 168) and «ethnicity was dangerous as such» (p. 169). This claim, however, remains unsubstantiated as the evidence used by the author is limited to repressions against one narrow socio-cultural group: local Mari and Udmurt intelligentsia accused of fostering nationalism during the 1930s. Repressive as their trials were, one can hardly characterize them as «systematic attacks against ethnicity» (p. 153). The author also disregards a vast body of research literature on nationalities policy in the pre-World War II USSR that discusses, among other things, the background and reasons of repressive campaigns against political and cultural elites in Soviet regions (that were not limited to the Finno-Ugric people of Russia), including some of the most fundamental research works in this field.⁴ In the end, «a long great ethnic terror,» according to the evidence used in the article, was limited mainly to the Soviet language policy, which was a manifestation of state violence, yet barely targeted «Finno-Ugrianness» as such.


Oksana Beznosova’s article, «The Ukrainian Evangelicals under Pressure from the NKVD, 1928–1939,» is the first contribution in the third, and final, part of the volume, which is focused on religious minorities. Using sources from three Ukrainian archives, Beznosova shows how Soviet security bodies put an increasing pressure on religious communities in Ukraine, which first translated into repressions of leaders and later of many parishioners. Since religiosity ranked high on the list of Soviet vices, the NKVD operations of 1937–1938 resulted in arrests and executions of many Evangelical men, although most of the repressed were charged with crimes other than religious activities (p. 190–191).

Another contribution to this part, «The Cultural Bases in the North. Sovietisation and Indigenous Resistance» by Eva Toulouze, Laur Vallikivi and Art Leete, examines this particular institutional and cultural phenomenon of early Soviet history, an attempt to educate Arctic communities of Soviet Russia in the spirit of Soviet culture through a network of specialized organizations that were in many ways similar to colonial outposts established and maintained by the Hudson’s Bay Company in Arctic Canada. Acting as instruments of modern power, Soviet cultural bases institutionalized such disciplinary techniques as schooling, medical and veterinary care, and propaganda. Unsurprisingly, their civilizing mission was often met with tacit and sometimes open resistance by local communities.

Two last articles look at the history of shamanism during the Stalinist period and beyond. Oksana Bulgakova and Olle Sundström’s contribution «Repression of Shamans and Shamanism in Khabarovsk Krai, 1920s to the early 1950s» is a comprehensive and deeply researched history of the Soviet efforts to suppress local religious beliefs and practices through education, propaganda, coercion and repression. The authors show how religious and social categories were often conflated in the Soviet struggle against shamans, and how the vast distances and lack of reliable staff made this task all the more difficult. One of their most interesting discoveries is that shamans were not generally singled out as targets during the Great Terror, and the practicing of shamanism continued into the 1950s. In the end, as the last contribution to the volume, «Where Have the Amur Region’s Shamans Gone?» by Yana Vishchenko, shows, it was the process of socio-economic change in local communities, rather than state violence, that brought the end to traditional practices of shamanism in the Far East. It took the spread of new institutions, occupations, and forms of livelihood and knowledge during the late Soviet era to deal a crushing blow to shamanism.

*Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Stalin’s Soviet Union* provides interesting perspectives on the NKVD operations of the late 1930s in minority communities. At the same time, its topic is so broad and complex that the authors of the contributions have not come to a single conclusion whether ethnicity and religiosity were the main factors fueling these NKVD operations, or whether they were only parts of more complex equations in Stalinist disciplinary techniques of population management. I tend to agree with the authors expressing the latter point of view, not just because it is substantiated by a more comprehensive body of evidence, but also because even the most ferocious national operations of the NKVD (including the Polish Operation) did have an evident, yet generally overlooked social component in their implementation. Research on genocide and ethnic cleansings has long accentuated that such campaigns target the victimized ethnic or racial groups in their entirety, disregarding of gender or age. In fact, women often become the most targeted...
group, as the cases of Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda demonstrated; and neither do the perpetrators spare children, as we know from the terrifying practices of the Holocaust. It is a peculiar characteristic of the NKVD operations that they were structured along gender and age lines: neither women nor children were targeted *en masse*, unlike in many other genocidal campaigns of the twentieth century. This observation suggests that social categories remained at the forefront of the Great Terror even in the national operations of the NKVD.