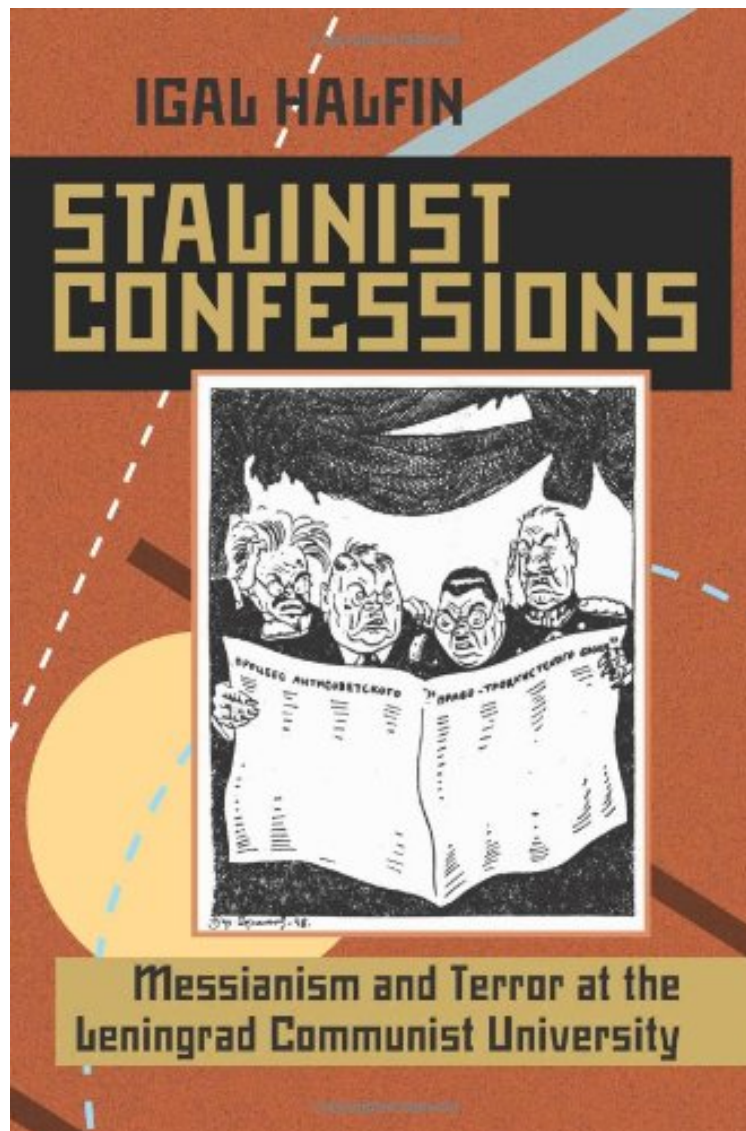


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Stalinist Confessions: Messianism and Terror at the Leningrad Communist University (Pitt Russian East European)

Igal Halfin

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Igal Halfin : Stalinist Confessions: Messianism and Terror at the Leningrad Communist University (Pitt Russian East European) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Stalinist Confessions: Messianism and Terror at the Leningrad Communist University (Pitt Russian East European):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A provocative and important history of the Purges and Terror

By D. Ruscitti
In Stalinist Confessions, Igal Halfin sets an ambitious agenda: he seeks to reshape how scholars understand the purges and accompanying arrests and terror of high Stalinism. Halfin, a lecturer at Tel Aviv University who has already written extensively about opposition, identity and terror, approaches the broad topic through a close examination of the Leningrad Communist University. By narrowing his research to the one institution, Halfin can devote extensive attention to single cases and trials. He uses discourse analysis of these cases to unearth exciting conclusions about the changing roles of identity and language during the Purges. Discourse analysis is not a new tool; indeed, historians have even used it to examine the Purges before. Halfin's application is particularly innovative because he uses it to understand why the Party and the NVKD brought certain criminal charges against purged members, and how these changing charges reveal the internal logic of the Purges. Halfin argues that previous scholars, while looking for the roots of the Terror's excess, have become reliant on explanations that reduce the experience to madness and a desire to assert or maintain power. By taking the dialogues between interrogated and interrogators seriously, Halfin understands the purges and terror not as a move towards madness, but as a product of a changing view of communist identity. This intriguing approach is sometimes hampered by Halfin's insistence on viewing the Purges within a religious inquisitorial framework. In addition, he is held back by his own limited focus on Leningrad Communist University. Still, Stalinist Confessions illustrates the important role language played in both creating and maintaining the Purges and Terror. Halfin begins his analysis in the early 1930s. In these years, he notes, loyal communist focused their dialogues with rank-and-file Oppositionists on redemption and reintegration, implying Oppositionists could return to the Party if they were willing to repent. Through these cases, he demonstrates that in these years, specific activities made someone an Oppositionist but not necessarily a counterrevolutionary. After Kirov's assassination, the process slowly changed. Prosecutors could now bring new charges of intent, such as premeditated malice, along with charges about concrete actions. Halfin argues that, taken together, charges about actions and intent imply the Party and NVKD now treated Oppositionists as inherently evil and counterrevolutionary, incapable of being redeemed. The label Oppositionist became an unchanging identity marker. Interrogators now viewed claims of repentance as trickery. Halfin still considers the interrogations of the purged Party members as a type of dialogue, albeit one designed to produce a specific final result of a 'true' confession. Halfin presents these later interrogational dialogues as comparable to religious inquisitions. In both cases, he notes, the sin of the accused is the rejection of truth. By using a comparative framework, Halfin can explore concepts such as the increasingly permanent implications of the term 'Oppositionist,' as well as the growing demand for denunciations. Still, the inquisitorial comparison can prove problematic. For example, Halfin never explains how the idea of the communist soul fits into Marxism's historical materialism. The universalizability of Halfin's ideas is also questionable. The historical subjects he examines are academics, well trained in Party doctrine and Marxist ideology. They might, therefore, be more inclined to engage in political discussions with their interrogators, therefore creating the dialogues that are so crucial to Halfin's theories. As interesting as Halfin's findings from Leningrad Communist University are, if Halfin wishes to apply them to the wider historiography of the purges, he needs to address the unique aspects of his specific cases. He needs to further explore why, for example, the students and professors of Leningrad Communist University were purged at a significantly higher rate than other communists in the city. With better contextualization, historians will be able to add to Halfin's significant contribution. These deficiencies should not obscure the brilliant conclusions Halfin reaches in the monograph. Halfin's analysis wisely focuses less on the truth of the accusations than on the reasons for levying them. Ignoring the lack of veracity in the Purges and Terror may appear initially to be disquieting. Halfin's approach, however, allows him to innovatively approach the question of communist identity in high Stalinism, and examine how it solidified into moral, dichotomized categories. Halfin's provocative and important text is worth the attention of Soviet historians, as well as any scholars interested in an inventive approach to discourse analysis.

1 of 4 people found the following review helpful. **The Relatively Indiscriminate Nature of the Great Purge (1934-1939)**
By Jan Peczkis
This work details how the Soviet totalitarian state labeled people "enemies" and dealt with them. One characteristic feature of this book is the reprinting of many relevant Soviet-era political cartoons, complete with translations of the Russian. This work also emphasizes biographical details. For instance, Genrikh Iagoda (Yagoda) was head of the NKVD. In the late 1930's, Yagoda was successively succeeded by Nikolai Ezhov (Yezhov) and then by Lavrentii Beria (Lavrenti Beria) as head of the NKVD. (e. g., p. 224). Year-by-year statistics are provided for the indictments and executions during the Great Purge. (p. 399). According to the figures cited by Halfin, a total of 2,029,557 Soviet citizens were indicted and 688,647 executed. It is possible that the NKVD, like the Nazis, included the use of poison gas in mass executions. On one hand, no Soviet document mentions use of poison gas. On the other hand, a number of NKVD officials testified of the use of trucks converted into mobile gas chambers, with the truck exhaust being routed into the compartment which held the prisoners. (p. 463). Let us now consider some of the internal contradictions in Communist ideology which are alluded-to by Halfin: The different manifestations of Soviet leftist radicalism were, in essence, not very different from each other. Halfin writes: "It was sometimes difficult to distinguish between a populist and a Social Democrat, a Bolshevik and a Menshevik, a Stalinist and a Trotskyist--after all, they professed the same revolutionary values, spoke the same Marxian language, adhered to the same emancipatory project." (p. 3). [These

facts contradict modern leftists who try to dichotomize "Trotskyites" and "Stalinists", etc.]. Now who was the "revolutionary" and who was the "counterrevolutionary?" Halfin comments: "The carnivalesque logic of the Great Purge is evident in every field...As the purges progressed, the NKVD's snares captured huge numbers of its own investigators...20,000 NKVD employees were shot in 1936-1938...The higher one was in the Party hierarchy, the better were one's chances of being arrested." (p. 425). Since time immemorial, Communists have labeled those who disagreed with them as fascists and Nazis. Interestingly, Soviet cartoons went as far as calling Trotsky a fascist and Nazi supporter. (p. 347). It is also interesting to note that, for all the Communist rhetoric about the "working class", this was in actuality an ideological/propaganda construct. Halfin comments: "The Communist party was the party of the proletariat, but proletarian was a way of thinking, not a station in life to which one was born. Every individual who assumed the proletarian perspective could become a member of the Party (and, inversely, workers with bruises on their hands were barred entrance if their consciousness was not ripe)." (p. 372).

During Stalin's Great Terror, accusations of treason struck fear in the hearts of Soviet citizens—and lengthy imprisonment or firing squads often followed. Many of the accused sealed their fates by agreeing to confessions after torture or interrogation by the NKVD. Some, however, gave up without a fight. In *Stalinist Confessions*, Igal Halfin investigates the phenomenon of a mass surrender to the will of the state. He deciphers the skillfully rendered discourse through which Stalin defined his cult of personality and consolidated his power by building a grassroots base of support and instilling a collective psyche in every citizen. By rooting out evil (opposition) wherever it hid, good communists could realize purity, morality, and their place in the greatest society in history. Confessing to trumped-up charges, comrades made willing sacrifices to their belief in socialism and the necessity of finding and making examples of its enemies. Halfin focuses his study on Leningrad Communist University as a microcosm of Soviet society. Here, eager students proved their loyalty to the new socialism by uncovering opposition within the University. Through their meetings and self-reports, students sought to become Stalin's New Man. Using his exhaustive research in Soviet archives including NKVD records, party materials, student and instructor journals, letters, and newspapers, Halfin examines the transformation in the language of Stalinist socialism. From an initial attitude that dismissed dissent as an error in judgment and redeemable through contrition to a doctrine where members of the opposition became innately wicked and their reform impossible, Stalin's socialism now defined loyalty in strictly black and white terms. Collusion or allegiance (real or contrived, now or in the past) with "enemies of the people" (Trotsky, Zinoviev, Bukharin, Germans, capitalists) was unforgivable. The party now took to the task of purging itself with ever-increasing zeal.

"Halfin's work focuses on one institution, the Communist University in Leningrad, through the maelstrom of the Great Purges. Through one discrete social and political setting, Halfin provides a "thick description" of the Great Terror, from student party cells to party leaders' dachas to the execution rooms in the basements of NKVD buildings. At its core, this book examines the procedures of the purge and what it meant to its participants on both sides of the interrogation table. This is a seminal study and a major contribution to understanding one of the most disputed and puzzling events in modern history."—Peter Holquist, University of Pennsylvania