

The Number Before the Name

Cross-Domain Analysis · ☞ Soviet Terror × 🇨🇳 Cultural Revolution × 🇨🇳 Beijing 1989 · 1,468 pages indexed across three books

The one idea

If a state decides how many before it decides who, it is running terror — whatever the statute says.

Legality cannot be the test, because all three of these operations were lawful inside their own system at the time. Sequence can be the test, and it is checkable from the paperwork.

Why the legal test fails here

All three cases were domestically legal. Prikaz 00447 was a lawful NKVD order. The Cultural Revolution's campaigns were conducted under Central Committee directives. Beijing in June 1989 was carried out under a declared state of martial law.

So a definition of terrorism that turns on legality classifies none of them as terrorism, and that is a failure of the definition rather than a finding about the events. This is exactly the objection raised against the cyber framing in Lesson 13: the label arrives after the act and is chosen by the actor's own legal system.

What the three cases actually share

In none of the three did the violence follow from an investigation. In all three, guilt was allocated before the evidence existed. They differ only in **how the authorship was concealed**.

Case	How it was pre-authorised	Where authorship was pushed
Soviet terror, 1937–38	Explicit numeric quota, signed, "no cause was given"	Nowhere — the paperwork admits it, and was kept internal
Cultural Revolution, 1966–68	Enemy named, criteria deliberately omitted, exemplary local practice promoted	Downward, to local governments; bans issued with no penalty attached
Beijing, June 1989	Marksmen pre-positioned under martial law; "at what point, not whether"	Outward, to foreign media and "rioters", via sustained propaganda

The Soviet case is the cleanest because it is the most honest. A quota is a number without a name attached, written down and signed. Nothing has to be inferred.

The Chinese 1966 case is the most instructive because the gap is the instrument. The centre supplied the category and withheld the criteria, so the definition was produced locally, by whoever benefited from producing it — and the finding that there was "no evidence of any punishment during or immediately after any mass killing" shows the prohibitions were addressed to the record, not to the perpetrators.

The 1989 case shows the same structure compressed into one night. Pre-positioned marksmen are a quota expressed as a deployment.

The test this yields

Ask three questions of the documents, in order.

1. Was a quantity fixed before the individuals were identified? (a number, a category with no criteria, or a capability pre-positioned)

2. Did the authorising body attach a penalty to its own stated limits?
3. Was the civilian effect the objective, or a by-product of a military objective?

Two of three is sufficient. All three of these cases return three of three.

Where it leaves the Lesson 13 disagreement

Lesson 13 records a disagreement with the claim that cyber operations are not legally terrorism.

The argument there was that deliberately degrading civilian capability — forcing a country to spend its energy and money on repair — in service of somebody's political agenda is terrorism by effect, whatever the statute books say.

This analysis supports that, and narrows it into something testable. The discriminator is not how much damage was done, and not what it was called afterwards. It is whether the harm to civilians was allocated in advance, as a quantity, before any individual was shown to deserve it.

A ransomware campaign that selects hospitals by sector rather than by conduct satisfies condition 1 in exactly the way an arrest quota does. The target count is set first. The names are filled in afterwards by whoever happens to be reachable. That is the same instrument at a different scale, and the legal question of whether a body was produced is the weakest part of the test, not the strongest.

The honest limits of this

This is a test for a pattern, not a verdict machine.

It will flag lawful mass actions that most people would not call terrorism — conscription quotas, internment, some sanctions regimes. That is the cost of a test that does not defer to the actor's own law, and it should be stated rather than hidden.

The claim is therefore narrow on purpose, in Brook's style. Quantity-before-identity is a necessary feature of organised terror against civilians, and it is observable in the record. It is not by itself sufficient to convict, and the three questions above are a reading instrument, not a statute.