

What They Actually Did to Stay in Power

Lesson 20 · Part 2 · the top four findings for each side, in plain language · swept across all 11 collections, 4,257 chunks
· key terms in ****bold****, each defined where it first appears

First, the answer to "was it illegal?"

Mostly no — and that is the finding, not a let-off.

Neither regime broke its own legal system. Each one **built a second system beside it**, so the courts stayed intact and simply stopped being where decisions happened.

The Soviet version was openly announced. Solzhenitsyn describes the **troikas** — *panels of three officials who passed sentences behind closed doors, with no trial* — as being "**created to bypass the courts permanently**. In the beginning they even flaunted it proudly... Not only did they not conceal the names of the members; they publicized them."

The Chinese version was left illegal and never prosecuted. From November 1966 the Central Committee banned "unauthorized detention stations, unauthorized trial courts, and unauthorized arrests and beatings" as a "violation of state law and party discipline." But "the official policy did not carry any real punishment... **there is no evidence of any punishment during or immediately after any mass killing.**"

One made the shortcut legal. The other left it illegal and declined to notice. The effect was identical.

China — the top four

C1 · The Cultural Revolution was a move to keep power, not a mistake

The Great Leap Forward — *Mao's 1958 crash programme to industrialise and collectivise farming* — produced a famine that, in Branigan's words, "**killed as many as 45 million.**"

The part that answers this lesson's question: "Mao's control of his party had been weakened by his **Great Leap Forward**," and he was reined in by pragmatists including Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. His answer was "a dual campaign to **re-establish his absolute authority** and remake China's soul, harnessing the masses to override the [Party]."

Plainly: he was losing an argument inside his own party, so he went around it to the public. The Cultural Revolution is a retention tactic with a death toll, not a policy that went wrong.

C2 · The targets were decided before anyone was investigated

In the **Anti-Rightist campaign** of 1957 — *a purge of people who had criticised the Party after being invited to* — the authorities at Qinghua University "**arbitrarily identified 571 rightists**, many of whom were faculty members." *Arbitrarily* is the source's own word. A second round followed in 1959.

And the previous opening is why. The **Hundred Flowers** movement of 1956 had invited criticism and then punished those who offered it. By 1966, officials were "bearing in mind the out-of-control result of the Hundred Flowers movement" and therefore "**demanding absolute control of the movement by identifying the targets and determining the format of each struggle meeting.**"

Plainly: an earlier opening that escaped their control is the reason the next one arrived with a cast list already written.

C3 · The violence came from new offices, not from old grievances

The Party's story about **land reform** — *the redistribution of landlords' property in the 1940s–50s* — is that peasants acted on long-standing class hatred.

A village oral history "**challenges the standard party narrative** that emphasizes intense class hatreds as the catalyst." In Yangjiagou there was "considerable multi-class harmony"; the Ma landlords dominated, but "**the villagers appreciated their many welfare and security services.**" The conclusion: "**It was not class hatred that motivated the murder of Ma Zhongtai.**" The killing and his wife's suicide were "**directly related to the formation of revolutionary committees**" — the same pattern Yang Su found across southern China.

Plainly: the killing tracked who had just been handed local power, not who had been wronged.

C4 · The reckoning was staged, and only the losers were tried

At the **Gang of Four** trials — *the 1980–81 prosecution of Mao's closest radical allies after his death* — one defendant's objection is the finding. The cadres running the trials "had joined the Cultural Revolution too – **where were their charges?** And where was the evidence against him? **No victims were named, no specific battles cited.**" His verdict: "**All the law and the courts were just fake.**"

And Branigan's own line: "The elite Red Guards – like Teacher Bian's killers – **never had to face judges.**"

Plainly: a show trial of four people closed the subject for everybody else.

Russia — the top four

R1 · The shortcut around the courts was a published institution

The **troikas** are the single clearest item in the whole corpus. *Three officials, closed doors, no trial, a sentence.* Created, in Solzhenitsyn's words, "**to bypass the courts permanently**" — and the membership was advertised.

Plainly: they did not need to break the law, because they had built somewhere the law did not reach. This is why "was it illegal?" is the wrong test for either regime.

R2 · The quota came before the crime

Stalin's arrest orders from 1937 listed "**quotas of people to be arrested (no cause was given).**" **First category** meant *death*; **second category** meant *eight to ten years in the camps*. The instrument was **Prikaz 00447** — *the NKVD order that set the regional numbers*.

And subordinates asked for more. The Armenian NKVD: "We ask permission to shoot an additional 700 people." Stalin, in his own hand: "**I raise the number of First Category prisoners in the Krasnoyarsk region to 6,600.**"

Plainly: the state decided how many before it decided who. That one sentence is the test this whole series keeps returning to.

R3 · Whole nations were moved, and the camps were not the worst of it

Entire peoples were deported — **Chechens, Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars, Poles, Balts, Ukrainians**. Beyond them sit the "**special exiles**" — *millions legally forbidden to leave their assigned villages*, who were forced labourers, Applebaum notes, "even though they did not live behind barbed wire."

And the scale correction that matters: the mass murders of 1937–38 "**mostly took place outside the camps.**"

Plainly: the Gulag is the part that was written down, not the maximum of what happened.

R4 · The cover-up was a separate crime, and it worked for fifty years

At **Katyn** in 1940, thousands of Polish officers taken during the 1939 occupation of eastern Poland were shot. The Germans found the graves in April 1943 and announced it. Fitzpatrick's two words on the accusation: "**So it was**" — "although Soviet propagandists vigorously denied it and pinned the blame on the Germans, and **many on the Allied side wanted to believe them.**"

The duration is documented, not estimated. Applebaum records that the fiction held "for the subsequent fifty years" — "**Russian President Boris Yeltsin admitted Soviet responsibility for the massacre only in 1991.**" She also notes that in the early 1990s one of the men who carried out the Katyn massacres was still alive.

Plainly: the lie outlived the men who told it — **barely**. Denying a massacre for half a century is its own act, and it is the same instrument as the Chinese archive closures — which is why this series treats the cover-up as a third category rather than an afterthought.

The one sentence that covers all eight

In every case the number or the category was fixed first, and the people were filled in afterwards.

571 rightists identified arbitrarily. A grain target set without knowing what the villages had. A struggle meeting with its targets pre-assigned. 6,600 in Krasnoyarsk. Nations deported whole. **Not one of these began with a finding about a person.**

So the usable test is not legality, because both regimes could write the law. It is the one from Lesson 13: **was the harm allocated before anybody was shown to deserve it?** All eight findings return yes.

Honest limits

This is a sweep of eleven books, not a complete history.

There is no coverage of the 1990s or 2000s on either side, nothing substantial on Xinjiang, and nothing on Ukraine after 2014. **Absent here means absent from these eleven books** — not absent from history.

The Holodomor is deliberately not in the top four, and the reason should be stated. The **Holodomor** — *the 1932–33 Ukrainian famine* — is argued by the Ukrainian government to have been a deliberate plan to kill Ukrainians. Fitzpatrick, the only source for it in this corpus, **argues against that reading:** "the results were equally devastating in southern Russia and Kazakhstan. It seems unlikely that Stalin actually wanted to kill peasants"; he wanted maximum grain "consistent with its peasant producers surviving until the spring sowing," and "**the trouble was that nobody knew what that amount was,**" while he "**refused to listen when told that the peasants had no more hidden reserves.**"

It is left out because the corpus only holds one side of a live scholarly dispute, not because the question is settled. Her verdict on the official excuse is worth keeping either way: the Party blamed collectivisation's "excesses" rather than collectivisation, "**but the excesses were part of the package.**"

"45 million" is a relayed range, not a measurement — and it attracts the same precision objection Lesson 21 makes of the Gulag total. Published estimates for the Great Leap famine span roughly **15 to 55 million**, depending entirely on what baseline death rate is assumed.

One whole category is missing on purpose. Acts illegal under *international* law — aggressive war, the 1939 partition of Poland, forced population transfer — need sources this corpus does not contain.