EXPLAINING HISTORY · CASE FILE · THE FORGOTTEN TWENTIETH CENTURY

EVERYDAY STALINISM

How ordinary people lived in Stalin's Russia

Companion to the Explaining History video · Nick Shepley · November 2026

THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

STALINISM FROM THE QUEUE

Sheila Fitzpatrick's *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times* (1999) looks at the Soviet 1930s from below. For most of the Cold War, Western scholars, working without access to Soviet archives and within the 'totalitarian' model, studied the regime from the top. Fitzpatrick, a leading 'revisionist' social historian, used the archives opened after 1991 (complaint letters, petitions and secret police reports on popular mood) to show how city people actually lived: in a shortage economy of queues and rationing, in communal flats measured by the square metre, through *blat* (connections and favours), by writing to the authorities, and finally under the Terror of 1937–38. Her picture is of people living *inside* the system, not simply under it, with beneficiaries and believers as well as victims.

This Case File gathers the sources behind the video: a timeline, the voices we quoted with page references, the corrections made while checking the script, and suggestions for further reading.

TIMELINE

FROM THE FIVE-YEAR PLAN TO THE TERROR

1928	Stalin launches the first five-year plan: crash industrialisation, with almost everything put into heavy industry.
1929–33	Forced collectivisation of agriculture. Millions move to the towns; the urban population roughly doubles between the 1926 and 1939 censuses.
1931	Private (artisan) shoemaking banned (Fitzpatrick, p. 45).
5 Dec 1931	The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow is blown up to make way for the Palace of Soviets, which was never built.
27 Dec 1932	Internal passports and compulsory residence registration (*propiska*) introduced in the big cities.
1932–33	Famine in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and other grain regions.
1 Jan 1935	Bread rationing abolished; other food rationing ends in October 1935.
31 Aug 1935	Aleksei Stakhanov's record shift in the Donbas: a reported 102 tons of coal.
17 Nov 1935	Stalin at the first Stakhanovite conference: “Life has become better, comrades; life has become more joyous.”
27 Mar 1936	Some individual trades (shoe repair, tailoring and others) partly re-legalised (Fitzpatrick, p. 44).
30 Jul 1937	NKVD Order No. 00447 sets regional quotas for arrests and executions. Mass operations begin on 5 August.
Nov 1938	The mass operations are halted; Nikolai Yezhov is removed as NKVD chief (he was shot in 1940).

1940	Petr Gattsuk of Novgorod writes to Andrei Vyshinsky asking for *blat* to be made a crime (Fitzpatrick, p. 62).
1991	The collapse of the Soviet Union opens the archives.
1999	*Everyday Stalinism* is published by Oxford University Press.

IN THEIR WORDS

THE VOICES IN THE VIDEO

Every quotation in the video is taken from *Everyday Stalinism* (Oxford University Press paperback), with the page number. Ellipses mark words left out.

"arms linked (so that nobody can jump the queue) … like convicts."
A CITIZEN OF KIEV, complaining about the all-night clothing queues, late 1930s. p. 45.

"Every Russian who lived through the 1930s has horror stories about shoes."
SHEILA FITZPATRICK, p. 45.

"[The space norms were] engraved on every big-city-dweller's heart."
SHEILA FITZPATRICK, on the "square metres", p. 46.

"Not to have blat, that's the same thing as having no civil rights … better to use just a little blat and you will at once get your apartment."
PETR GATTSUK, letter to Andrei Vyshinsky, 1940. p. 62.

"The key-word, the most important word in the language, was blat."
EDWARD CRANKSHAW, British journalist, writing of the late Stalin period. Quoted on p. 62.

"Soviet citizens were great writers of complaints, petitions, denunciations, and other letters to the authorities."
SHEILA FITZPATRICK, p. 175.

"a room or a little apartment where I can build a personal life … as necessary to me as air."
A 36-YEAR-OLD LENINGRAD WORKER who had lived five years in a corridor, writing to Molotov. p. 47.

"Someone has been incorrectly evicted from an apartment, someone was refused an apartment to which he had undoubted right, someone was fired from an institution, blamed for offences he did not commit."
A SOVIET COMMENTATOR, mid-1930s. p. 175.

"Comrades, I am forty-five years old, but I have been alive for only eighteen years."
A VETERAN WORKER at a Stakhanovite congress, 1935. p. 75.

"It was as if I was carried into a new, fairytale world. No, not 'as if.' Before me had really opened a new world of happiness and reason, and it was the great Stalin who led me into that world."
PASHA ANGELINA, Stakhanovite tractor driver. p. 75.

"I had an unshakable faith that my existence between these old walls was merely a preparation for life. Life, properly speaking, would begin in a new and sparkling white house."
RAISA ORLOVA, remembering her youth in 1930s Moscow. p. 69.

"The only thing that existed for us that year was Spain, the fight with the Fascists."
ALEKSEI ADZHUBEI, a schoolboy in 1937. p. 69. Fitzpatrick adds: "Terror was not a part of this picture."

"We send out a lot, but the goods don't arrive."
ANASTAS MIKOYAN, supply minister, to the secret police, early 1930s. p. 45.

> *"On the right-hand side of the corridor, there was a big reddish brown seal on the third door from the lobby. … Those seals that jumped into your eyes appeared on many doors on every floor of our building over the winter of 1936–37."*
>
> ELENA BONNER, on the Hotel Lux, Moscow. p. 210.

> *"You'd do better to say goodbye to the children."*
>
> THE NKVD DETECTIVE searching a Communist woman's flat. p. 210.

> *"I left my son sleeping, fool that I was."*
>
> A COMMUNIST WOMAN, arrested months after her husband Grishka. p. 210.

CHECKED AND CORRECTED

FACT-CHECK NOTES

We check every on-screen fact before publishing. These are the claims we changed or qualified while making the video.

Opening context	An ad-libbed line said extreme shortages ran from the end of the Civil War to the five-year plans in the mid-1930s. Cut: the 1920s (NEP) were years of relative supply; the crisis began with the first five-year plan in 1928, which is what the video now says.
The queue	The hook first said people queued all night for shoes. Fitzpatrick's all-night queue was outside clothing stores; changed to "clothes".
Kalinin	A slip called him the "former" head of state. He was the formal head of state; re-recorded.
Living space	Figures taken from Fitzpatrick (p. 46): Moscow 5.5 m² per person in 1930, just over 4 m² by 1940; Krasnoiarsk 3.4 m² in 1933 (rounded to "three and a half" in the narration).
The Terror	Numbers given as ranges from the regime's own records: about 1.5–1.7 million arrests and 680,000–700,000 executions in 1937–38. Some historians think the true figures were higher.
Stakhanov	His 102-ton record is described as "reported" and staged, as historians generally agree it was organised.
Stalin's 1935 line	Translations vary ("Life has become better, and happier too" is another). The words are from his speech of 17 November 1935.
Yezhov	Removed in November 1938 and executed in 1940.
Quotations	Every quotation was checked against the printed page, and the page is shown on screen. One passage (an unattributed description of a communal room) was dropped because its author could not be confirmed.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

WHERE TO GO NEXT

The book

Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

Reviews and context

J. Arch Getty, review, *London Review of Books*, vol. 22 no. 5. Lewis Siegelbaum, review, *Slavic Review*, vol. 58 no. 4 (1999).

Nicolas Werth, "The NKVD Mass Secret Operation n° 00447 (August 1937 – November 1938)", Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence, 2010.

Seventeen Moments in Soviet History (soviethistory.msu.edu): primary texts on rationing, the Stakhanovites, labour discipline and the mass operations.

Further reading

Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization*, 1994.

Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, 1995.

Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*, 2007.

Elena Osokina, *Stalin's Quest for Gold: The Torgsin Hard-Currency Shops and Soviet Industrialization* (Cornell, open access).

THE OPEN QUESTION

Was Stalinism held up mainly by fear, or by people who found ways to live with it? Tell us in the comments under the video.

IMAGE CREDITS (VIDEO)

All archive photographs from Wikimedia Commons, public domain: Magnitogorsk works, 1932; grain requisition in the Kuban, 1933; signing on at Magnitogorsk, 1932; Basseina Street and Khreshchatyk, Kiev, 1930s; a Torgsin shop, Moscow, 1931; canteen building, Magnitogorsk; special settlers' barracks, Magnitogorsk, 1932; a Stakhanovite's flat, Magnitogorsk, 1936; Komsomol members, Magnitogorsk, 1932; Kurskaya metro station design, 1935; demolition of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, 1931; near the Lubyanka, 1930s; Tverskaya Street, 1935. No book text or covers are reproduced beyond short quotations for review; the book is credited by title, author and year.