

ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE: ARMENIANS LOOK BACK AT THE STALIN TERROR. Produced and directed by Zareh Tjeknavorian. Narrated by Eric Bogosian. 1998; black and white and color; 58 minutes. Distributed by Armenian General Benevolent Union.

This film effectively weaves together documentary footage of the Stalin era, with English subtitles, interviews in Armenian with the survivors of Stalinist persecutions as well as with former informants and KGB agents, with English voiceovers and narrator Eric Bogosian's comments and analysis, which provide the necessary historical backdrop. The contrast between the old black and white footage and the more recent color interviews and contemporary scenes adds to the film's impact.

A scene from Joseph Stalin's funeral procession in Moscow, 1953, opens the film. "Stalin is no more," announces a gloomy voice. Thousands of people with somber faces, some wiping away tears, wait patiently in Red Square for their turn to pay their last respects. The beloved leader of the people is dead. Then the scene switches to Yerevan, Soviet Armenia, where the chagrin is no less. "Under Stalin, Armenia was the microcosm of the hope, faith, and betrayal of the Revolution": the narrator's statement sets the tone, and the story begins.

"The death of one man is tragedy. The death of millions, only statistics." This statement by Stalin, cited in the film, had come true. Stalin's death was a tragedy for the Soviet people, but his persecution and extermination of millions of men and women remained a dry statistical figure in history books. From the early 1930s until Stalin's death, an estimated twenty-five million people were sent to gulags. Some were exiles; others "volunteered" to work in horrible conditions in gold, chrome, and coal mines. They were the "proud" builders of the pillars of Stalin's socialism.

In the film, the ex-prisoners and the sons and daughters of those who did not return speak one by one. Each one has his or her own story about being informed on and arrested. Some remember who informed on them; others do not. None know why they were labeled as an "enemy of the people" and prosecuted. Being a child of an "enemy of the people" was even tougher. Everyone would avoid you. The schoolmaster discriminated against the prisoners' children and set them apart. "By demanding that people take a hand in their own destruction, Stalin made all of society an accomplice in his crimes," the film's narrator maintains.

Interviews with former inmates, men and women whose faces speak of the terror they lived, are inter-

spersed with scenes of labor camps and footage of Stalin's speeches addressed to thousands of excited and cheering audiences. Where was the truth buried? Was it in the faces of the enthusiastic followers and believers in Stalin, those who worshipped him and mourned his death with such sincerity, or in the decrepit faces of the survivors of Stalin's prisons and gulags, who lost the flower of their lives in these horrible places?

"Hiding behind a smoke screen of innocence, Stalin used the secret police known alternately as the Cheka, NKVD, and KGB to lead the witch hunt," and the method worked. The revolution was fetishized. The war against capitalism was deemed the ultimate goal of the Soviet Union, and Stalin knew very well how to use people's sentiments, their sense of belonging and identity. "Stalin demanded conformity. Stalin was the State. To be against him was to be against Revolution."

The interviews slowly evolve into those of World War II veterans. Over twenty million Soviets died during the war. They were the heroes; but those who survived in the enemy's camps and returned to their country fell under suspicion. They were regarded as traitors, as agents of the enemy, and persecuted. Chekist officers, instead of family members, greeted them on the border.

Stalin also suspected that ethnic minorities could rise against him and began to displace them. Thousands of Armenian families, those who had immigrated to Soviet Armenia after World War II with such enthusiasm and zeal, were also persecuted and exiled to southeastern Siberia. Their stories are presented as another facet of Stalin's terror.

The title Zareh Tjeknavorian chose for his film appears over a scene of destalinization: the dismantling of Stalin's huge statue hovering over Yerevan. This epigrammatic juxtaposition repeats again when the scenes of hardship in the labor camps follow Stalin's cheered and applauded speech in his days of peak glory, his promise to protect the Soviet people, "the working class, the peasants and intelligentsia."

But what is Stalin to the Armenian in the streets of Yerevan today? Significantly, the question is posed to passersby and the footage is inserted at the beginning of the film. For the new generation, Stalin and Stalinism mean almost nothing; for the older generation, they are things of the past not even worth talking about. But for some, Stalin is a source of indomitable pain, anger, and frustration, a dreadful memory that refuses to die. This film puts a human face on Armenia's victimization under Stalin's reign of terror.

The film is highly recommended for classroom use at the high school level and above as an effective tool to teach that portion of the history of the Soviet Union.

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