

To what extent were the purges caused by stalin's paranoia essay



To what extent were the Purges caused by Stalin's paranoia? Daniel Johnston Stromness Academy SCN: 062114657 Introduction J. Arch Getty says that "The Great Terror of the 1930s in the Soviet Union was one of the most horrible cases of political violence in modern history"[i] but was this political terror a result of Stalin's own paranoia or a necessity to maintain control in Soviet Russia?

Robert Service argues that " Nowadays, virtually all writers accept that he [Stalin] initiated the Great Terror"[ii] however historians are careful to acknowledge that Stalin's paranoia is not the only factor in the creation and continuation of the Purges and the Great Terror. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Stalin's paranoia did play a vital part. But there are other factors that need to be taken into consideration when referring to the purges that were not linked to Stalin's paranoia.

Most of these factors do link back to Stalin however but not directly because of his paranoia, more his obsession with gaining and maintaining absolute power in Russia. Stalin's wider personality needs to be considered. In addition, there were economic problems that led to external opposition to the party meaning that strict control was necessary in order to maintain power as a majority of the population did not agree with the implementation of collectivisation and the Five Year Plans in the 1930s. The instability in the cities may also have been a contributing factor as the purges helped quell the violence.

The NKVD may have also used the purges to further its own position in Russian society which allowed for the continuation of the purges. It can also

be argued that the purges were necessary for the progression of communism. Stalin was obsessed with maintaining his position of power and by purging the party internally he was able to eliminate any potential enemies. The totalitarian view of the purges is that Stalin's personality was central to the way the purges were carried out and the extent to which they were carried out.

However the revisionists take the view that Stalin's personality and paranoia is not a sufficient enough reason for the cause of the purges. But just how significant are the other factors? Was Stalin's paranoia the driving force in the creation of the purges, or was Stalin merely pushed by his obsession with power? Words 372 Economic Problems There was a great deal of opposition to Stalin's economic policies in the 1930s, and it can be argued that this forced Stalin to consider ways in which to combat it. In fact R.

Manning asserts that " The economy of 1936-41 and the Great Purges are inexorably linked"[iii]. Collectivisation and the Five Year Plans created a lot of tension within the general populace. Stalin had to take steps to try and deal with the problems and purged anyone who resisted his ideas. There was a great resistance to and hatred of Collectivisation because the peasantry did not want to have large collective farms controlled by the state so they resisted through various means such as destruction of harvest and grain hoarding.

Due to Collectivisation not being that successful during its first years, Stalin needed to find a scapegoat, someone he could blame. He therefore identified a class of " Kulaks", who were apparently holding back the other workers

through monopolising the best land and cheapest labour. In reality they were merely peasants who may have bought an extra cow or had a bit more land than some of their neighbours. Stalin claimed that this class had to be broken in order for Russia to continue modernising. Because of this the Kulaks were purged brutally.

Alec Nove argues “ What is quite clear is that collectivisation went hand in hand with dekulakisation, and dekulakisation with blind robbery”[iv]. By 1st July 1930 over 320, 000 households, which was about 1. 5 million people, had been purged or deported[v]. However the Kulaks were not the only ones to be purged as Alec Nove states “ It is also clear that persons who were not Kulaks at all were arrested and deported”[vi]. Therefore this aspect of the Purges was not due to Stalin’s paranoia but to obsession with making Russia a leading country.

The industrial workers also had to be kept in line. Many of the workers and managers complained that the Five Year Plans were unreasonable and would not be achieved. Stalin labelled any resistance to the Five Year Plans “ as sabotage”. A series of public trials took place showing that resistance to industrialisation plans would not be tolerated no matter how skilful you were in your job. However Stalin may have shot himself in the foot as most of these show trials were used against the industrial experts rather than the regular labourers allowing for “ quantity over quality”.

Words 407 This is yet another example of how the purges were not entirely due to Stalin’s paranoia as he was, this time reflecting his obsession with protecting Russia from the threat of invasion. Another factor that shows that

the purges may have been carried out for economic reasons is the benefits they had for the government, as it was able to provide both scapegoats and a slave workforce. As production levels were levelling off and the Five Year Plans were falling behind schedule Stalin needed to take action to find scapegoats and ways to increase productivity.

It can be argued that Stalin made use of the purges to create a slave labour force within the Gulags. This slave workforce allowed Stalin to build large projects and provide a much needed income so that the government could buy in more western technology and build up industry. Corin and Fiehn agree by stating that “ Stalin needed the money that these industries earned from foreign exports to buy in western technology”[vii]. It is a known fact that Stalin enjoyed massive projects, which was sometimes called gigantomania, but these projects would cost a lot to hire workers.

So the slave labour force of the gulags could build them, for example the White Sea Canal project and the Palace of the Soviets (which was never built). However it is debatable whether these “ slaves” really produced enough of an income for Stalin to be useful, as many died in harsh conditions and there were others that were not fit to provide a decent amount of labour. It is therefore unlikely that Stalin used the purges simply to gain a slave workforce. Overall the economic issues that faced Russia most definitely forced Stalin and his government to take drastic action.

The purges undoubtedly provided Stalin with scapegoats for the problems facing collectivisation and industrialisation. In a way it spurred on the workers and peasants to not complain about the system. Stalin’s need to

address these economic problems was one factor that explains the purges. Stalin did play a role in purging the workers and peasants but it was not his paranoia that pushed him to make these decisions, it was his obsession with making Russia great no matter what the cost. Words 374 Problems within the Party

There were many problems with the party itself which Stalin recognised and he used the purges as a solution for these problems. The local party branches were thought to be the most corrupt and out of touch with the central government and were readily denounced by their fellow Bolsheviks. These fellow Bolsheviks used the purges to get themselves into new positions with better privileges. Stalin believed that the party had been infiltrated by fascist spies and corrupt officials. J. Arch Getty states “ Members denounced leaders [and each other] for dubious class origins, long forgotten sins and current misdeeds. [viii] He agrees that these fellow Bolsheviks denounced each other for reasons that were not betrayal of the state. It was made clear that no-one was safe from these purges as even Politburo members Zinoviev and Kamenev were put on a public show trial, therefore sending the message that no-one regardless of rank and revolutionary pedigree was safe. The show trials were most definitely driven by Stalin’s paranoia. The third show trial for example consisted of men who had presided over the previous show trials, they were charged with ridiculous offences. It is interesting to note how Yagoda was put on trial as it shows how Stalin no longer trusted those who presided over the first show trials. The show trials also allowed for Stalin to remove any dissent towards his leadership within the party, it allowed him to remove any opposition

towards him and to scare the general population as well. Lower level party members were also encouraged to inform on the higher ranking members, this eventually led to a rush of accusations which got out of hand and developed a momentum of its own allowing the purges to continue. This created a party utterly loyal and dedicated to Stalin personally even if over one million party members were purged (a third of the party).

Stalin did not only want to stop opposition to the party but to justify to everyone that the terror was necessary to keep Russia safe from enemies both from within and without. This shows why he used show trials to show everyone the consequences of opposition and to justify prosecution. Overall the internal party problem was a major factor for the use of terror to maintain control by Stalin because it allowed him to create a completely loyal communist party. Words 396 Social Instability In the main industrial cities, there was much disruption and dissent amongst the workers.

The Five Year Plans had already caused a lot of distress to workers as Stalin was strict about targets not being met. Society had become unstable as a result of the Five Year Plans, mass urbanisation and violence in overcrowded, unsanitary cities. Mass urbanisation had brought a large workforce to the cities but this was followed by violence and social tension. Because of this there was a lot of hostility towards the communist party which was beginning to worry the government. M. Lewin describes this as a “quicksand society”[ix] which describes just how unstable the attitudes were towards the leadership.

Stalin, it can be argued, resorted to the purges to prevent criticism of the leadership. The totalitarian viewpoint would be that Stalin used the purges to control the general population which I agree with, however the revisionist viewpoint would be that the centre used the purges to try and gain control of the chaos but it spiralled out of control and created a momentum of its own. I believe that the social instability within the main cities from mass urbanisation and the dissent that the Five Year Plans created contributed to the continuation of the purges as the leadership and Stalin needed to find a way to control the chaos.

However I do not believe that this was the work of Stalin's paranoia but Stalin doing what he believed as necessary to keep order. The NKVD There are those that would argue that the NKVD operated on their own during the purges to maintain a purpose and to strengthen their own position. It is believed that the intensity of the purges was due to the NKVD wanting to establish itself as one of the most powerful institutions in Russian society. By continuing the purges they convinced Stalin that he still had enemies that needed to be purged. This allowed it to continue its work and gave them a purpose.

Revisionist historians would argue that the NKVD was full of internal divisions and many units acted on their own initiative whereas totalitarian historians argue that the NKVD acted through the orders from the government[x]. The murder of Sergei Kirov undoubtedly initiated the Great Purges, but it is debated who was actually responsible. Words 387 There are those who believe that it was the NKVD under the order of Stalin, J. Lewis and P.

Whitehead argue that “ It has been irrefutably proved that the murder of <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-were-the-purges-caused-by-stalins-paranoia-essay/>

Kirov was organised through Stalin through Yagoda and the NKVD”,[xi] however Russian Scholar and politician A.

Lakoviev states that “ L. V Nikolayev planned and perpetrated the murder alone”[xii]. By looking at it in this respect it shows that Stalin may not have been directly responsible for the purges. But without the murder of Kirov the purges might not have happened as Stalin would have found it difficult to justify his actions. I believe that some parts of the NKVD acted on their own, continuing the purges for their own gain. As historians Corin and Fiehn say “ Some units, especially in areas outside of Moscow, operated on their own fiefdoms”[xiii], I believe the NKVD did act more like a mafia outside of

Moscow using the purges to their own advantage. Progress of Communism There are those that have stated that the purges were not of Stalin’s doing but of the communist system itself and that the purges were necessary for the evolution of communism. Many historians believe that the purges were a result of the communist system itself and that it was just the historical progression needed to keep communism going and to make sure it did not revert to the old regime. Conquest is one of these historians that argue that the purges were at the core of the nature of the Bolshevik regime and were necessary to keep it in power[xiv].

However Deutscher argues that it was a creation by Stalin and for his own uses to further assert his own authority and Richard Sakwa agrees with Deutscher on this issue. However one thing is for certain is that the purges did stop the system from reverting to the old regimes under the Tsar and the provisional government. Historians have argued that the purges were also

used by Stalin for a selective genocide of the Russian population to create a new Soviet race – ‘ Homo Sovieticus’ – that would create a new bright future for Russia.

An example of this is the case of Engelshina Cheshkova, a seven year old girl whose parents were killed and exiled. Yet, as a woman, she cried when Stalin died, upset as her daughter would not be able to see Stalin[xv]. By using the terror and purges Stalin hoped to make a race of people entirely devoted to him even if he had killed people close to them. Words 428 This was of Stalin’s own doing and he believed that with the right loyal population, Russia could become a world super power for many decades.

By looking at the purges in this way it is easy to see that if Stalin was using the purges for a selective genocide it was not due to his paranoia but his obsession with making Russia great. Overall the fact that the purges were a logical progression for communism is a key factor to the use of the purges under Stalin because it was essential to the system to help it survive and counter revolutionary attempts. Obsession and Paranoia Historian A. Nove asks “ how can one avoid the conclusion that it was Stalin’s decision to purge the party and society of what he regarded as suspect and unstable elements”[xvi].

Stalin’s personality is the major factor that contributed to the purges; it is evident that he did make many of the decisions to kill people both within the party and outside of the party. In a photograph from the time of the purges Stalin is shown signing death warrants[xvii]. From this evidence it can be argued that Stalin was the instigator of the purges. There are those that

would argue that Stalin's decisions to purge certain aspects in society was, to some extent, justified, however I believe that his paranoia definitely pushed the purges far further than necessary.

It can be argued that the murder of Kirov was the start of Stalin's purges and allowed him to initiate the purges. During the Communist Party's 17th Party congress Kirov was proven to be more popular than Stalin. However Kirov was quite conveniently assassinated, therefore removing one of Stalin's main rivals. The murder of Kirov could not be traced directly back to Stalin but it is widely believed he had a hand in it because he was able to take full advantage of it. If Stalin was responsible, was it his paranoia that drove him to order Kirov's assassination.

Even though Kirov was proved to be more popular than Stalin and was secretly offered the position of General Secretary, he declined as he was still a devoted follower of Stalin. Olga Shatunovskaya who recalled the events stated " When Stalin found out [that some delegates had approached Kirov to ask him to become General Secretary in Stalin's place] he decided to remove him"[xviii]. If this was the reason why Stalin murdered Kirov then his paranoia is evident. By killing someone as devoted as Kirov, Stalin's paranoia is shown as at this point Kirov did not pose a threat. Words 432

However Kirov's murder did allow for Stalin to justify the Great Purges, which were initiated soon after his death, which could show Stalin's obsession with power rather than paranoia. The death of Kirov and the wide belief that it was Stalin's doing does not necessarily show Stalin's paranoia but it does explain another way in which Stalin was responsible for the purges. Robert

Conquest states that “ The one fundamental drive that can be found throughout is the strengthening of his own position”[xix], and I agree as Stalin was trying to gain absolute power as is evident with Kirov’s murder.

However Stalin’s need for control of the party may have been a mix of his paranoia and obsession with power. By purging the party he was able to remove any political opponents that he had, this would have been his obsession that drove him, however the extent that he took the purges to in regards to the party would definitely suggest that he was paranoid and saw enemies everywhere. Whilst gaining control of the party Stalin was able to make people fully aware that he had the power to take – or give – anything.

It is believed that Stalin’s relationship with his wife is important with regard to the terror that commenced afterwards. It is believed that she took her own life after voicing her opinions on the party purges and collectivisation to Stalin, who then shouted abuse at her. Stalin was cruel to his wife, being cold and violent. Both these factors appear to indicate that Stalin’s wife committed suicide. Most historians agree that the suicide made Stalin more paranoid and less likely to trust others. Stalin’s daughter explains how things had changed catastrophically: “ Something had snapped inside my father”[xx].

Robert Thurston proposes that Stalin’s wife’s death occurred at the same time, filling Stalin with hatred and a desire to project his guilt over her death onto others[xxi]. The purging of the party can be referred as a mixture of Stalin’s paranoia and his obsession with power as some of the purging that was carried out did seem logical but taken to the extreme. The purging of

the party allowed for Stalin to remove any political rivals, such as Zinoviev and Kamenev who were part of the leading troika after Lenin died.

However paranoia did affect Stalin's decisions as he purged over a million members of the party. Paranoia also played a part in the purging of Bukharin. Words 412 When Bukharin was given his death sentence he wrote a note to Stalin saying " Koba, why do you need me to die? "[xxii], by using Stalin's revolutionary name it shows just how close Bukharin and Stalin used to be. It is clear that Bukharin and Stalin were close and by condemning Bukharin, Stalin shows clearly how paranoid he had become. Not satisfied with the cleansing of his own party, Stalin also found it necessary to purge the Red Army.

Paranoid at the idea that the army was secretly planning a military coup, Stalin is believed to have used a double agent who worked with both Stalin and Hitler to take advantage of the paranoia raging in the Soviet Union. This led to the June 1937 purge of eight top Red Army commanders charged with conspiracy against their homeland with Germany. These commanders consisted of Marshall Tukhachevsky and various leaders of the Red Army. All were convicted and executed for their supposed crimes. Nearly 30, 000 members of the Soviet armed forces were purged, about half of all the army's officers.

The purging of the Red Armies top commanders when war was close at hand truly shows just how paranoid he had become. However the purges can arguably be caused by Stalin's obsession with gaining and maintaining power as an example of this is the Ryutin incident. Ryutin wrote a 200 page

document criticising Stalin, both Ryutin and his followers were purged. Lynch believes that as Stalin grew older his paranoia grew and was why the purges grew more intense and less selective which he showed by saying “ As he grew older Stalin became still more suspicious of those around him. [xxiii]. Lynch’s point is valid because as Stalin grew older fewer and fewer people were exempt from the purges. Even right up to his death Stalin was organising a purge for doctors. Overall Stalin’s paranoia was certainly a major factor towards the use of terror and purges to control the state

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Conclusion As more information on Russian history is being discovered, it is now more widely believed that Stalin himself was the main reason for the creation and continuation of the purges however it is necessary to accept that he was not the only reason.

His paranoia may have influenced his decisions in regards to the Purges, however it is difficult to know what was an action based on paranoia or an action that may have been necessary for his consolidation and continuation of power in Russia. There are those who would argue that Stalin was merely one man and could not have continued the purges to the extent that they got to. There were certainly people in Russia who believed the propaganda that that the Purges were necessary to make Russia great again, and to remove the enemies of the people.

The economic problems facing Russia forced Stalin to consider extreme ways with dealing with it; these options were rejected by many of the population so the government needed to blame someone. So the Kulaks were purged.

The Purges can be justified by the problems within the party as Stalin did have political opponents that opposed his absolute rule; because of this

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many of the old Bolsheviks were put on public trial and killed. There are those that would argue that the purges were caused by communism itself in the sense that it was necessary for the continuation and evolution of communism.

Stalin may also have been attempting to make a race of Russians entirely devoted to him. I however believe that most of these factors do link back to Stalin in some way; although it may not necessarily be due to his paranoia rather his lust for power. It is obvious that his paranoia played a part in the creation of the purges but his obsession for power outweighed his paranoia; Robert Service states that “ The Great Terror would not have taken place but for Stalin’s personality and ideas. ”[xxiv] I agree partly with this statement as it was Stalin’s paranoia that created the purges but only to some extent, not fully.

It was a mix of his lust for power and paranoia that drove him to actively cleanse Russia of those he believed to be traitors. Bibliography Chris Corin and Terry Fiehn, Communist Russia under Lenin and Stalin, 2002 Donald Rayfield, Stalin and his Hangmen , 2004 J Arch Getty, The Origins of the Great Purges, 1985 Alec Nove, An Economic History of the U. S. S. R, 1969 Robert Conquest, The Great Terror, 1992 Steve Phillips, Stalinist Russia, 2000 Michael Lynch, Stalin’s Russia 1924-53, 2010 Robert Thurston, Life and Terror in Stalin’s Russia 1934-41, 1996 R. Service, A history of the Twentieth Century Russia, 1997 ————— [i] J Arch Getty, The Origins of the Great Purges, p153 [ii] Michael Lynch, Stalinist Russia, 1924-53 pp 77, Quoted from Robert Service [iii] R. Manning, “ The Soviet economic Crisis of 1936-40 and the Great Purges, in J. Arch Getty and R. Manning (eds) Stalinist Terror-New <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-were-the-purges-caused-by-stalins-paranoia-essay/>

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