

The soviet state under stalin



The crisis of modernisation: from indirect to direct mobilisation* The emergence of the Stalinist machine opened up new approaches to the underlying problem of backwardness. By the late 1920s a very different situation made available to the government a third strategy – to tackle the peasantry head on and take what was necessary by force as it had during the period of War Communism. The precondition of this was the strengthened ruling group and a powerful and ruthless leadership.*

Strategies of direct mobilisation appeared once more on the Party's agenda, with Stalin as their main sponsor.

* By 1929 the Stalinist machine provided the spine of such a system. And the emergence of Stalin as undisputed leader gave the system a unity and decisiveness it lacked during the power struggle. Meanwhile the other organs of the coercive machinery were the army and police which had a decade of relative stability to grow their traditions.* As leader of such a group, Stalin was in a position to pursue the twin goals of industrial growth and military power more ruthlessly than any other Russian ruler.

During the 1930s he showed that he possessed both the will and ability to do so. Introduction of Collectivisation and Industrialisation (Five Year Plans)A Social Revolution* In 1929 the Soviet Government launched a final assault on the capitalist countryside. NEP men and kulaks were expropriated, and the remaining peasants were formed into collective farms headed by government appointed directors. Collectivisation and dekulakisation were the beginnings of a 'revolution from above' which within a few years had completed the social revolution that begun in 1917. Once it was completed,

there were no longer any classes living off the ownership of property; all members of Soviet society lived from wage labour.

* Since the proclamation of the Stalin constitution in 1936, the Soviet Government has recognised the existence of only two classes- the proletariat and the peasant and also the Soviet intelligentsia a larger group than its tsarist counterpart, for it includes all categories of white collar workers, from scientists to artists to clerks.* The revolution from above did not merely destroy the old order. It also established the institutions that have characterised Soviet society ever since. These were: collective and state farms; a planned economy geared for rapid industrial growth; and a centralised political system headed by the General Secretary, supported by the secret police and controlling a rigidly censored communications system.

* Built a huge and powerful fiscal system, and coercive machinery strong enough to contain the vast social pressures it generated. Collectivisation* The many problems facing the Soviet Government all turned in the last resort on the fiscal problem – that of extracting more resources from society in order to pay for the modernisation of the army and economy. As the peasants made up almost 85% of the population the problem in essence was to extract more labour and resources from the peasantry.* By 1928 neither of the major strategies considered in the 1920s seemed adequate (Bukharin vs. Trotsky).

Stalin conceived a third strategy which contained elements of both right and leftwing strategies, but applied them with a brutality that would have appalled most participants in the debates of the 1920s.* Problems with the

NEP began to accumulate rapidly from 1926-27. The procurement crisis of December 1927 – the direct result of these shifts in policy – threatened to undermine the economic logic of the entire Bukharinite strategy. Instead of placing more grain in the marketplace, peasants marketed less grain in order to put the prices up.* The answer was in Lenin's final articles ' On Co-operation'.

It was to collectivise agriculture – collectivisation. The peasants would slowly give up small scale private agriculture, and join together in large, collective farms, which would enjoy all the advantages of modern technology and large scale production.* When the number of collective farms expanded the kulaks would find themselves isolated, and less and less able to compete with the collective farms. Private enterprise would be squeezed out of the rural sector, and at the same time agricultural productivity and the living standards of the majority of peasants were steadily increasing.

* The peasantry were reluctant to join collective farms. By 1928, 97% of the area under the crops was still farmed by individual peasant households.* The commitment to mass collectivisation: Stalin argued for advance. Stalin urged party officials to seize hoarded surpluses of grain. Stalin travelled to the Urals and western Siberia to urge Party officials to secure hoarded grain by force if necessary. His solution to the procurement crisis therefore became known as the (above).

In short it was a sort of dress rehearsal for a coercive solution to the whole complex problems under the NEP.* In the short run the Urals Siberian method was a success. By the spring of 1928, grain procurements were

satisfactory. By the summer, it was clear that squeezing the peasants would lead them to cut down the amounts they sowed and diminish the grain surpluses.

* The Urals Siberian method had broken the smychka, it had broken the peasantry's trust in the government. And the government was determined not to retreat.* On Nov. 7 1929, he published a famous article called the 'Great Turn'. He ordered an all out drive to collectivise agriculture, expropriate the richer peasants, and abolish the private sector in the countryside.

The party officials and government who for the past two years had visited villages to collect grain now reappeared, but this time to organise whole villages into collective farms. The policy of systematically eliminating the richer peasants was known as dekulakisation. In this way the government tried to divide the peasantry the better to rule them.* It succeeded in imposing its will partly because of the strategic weaknesses of all peasantries – their illiteracy, their geographical dispersion, and their inability to coordinate resistance.* By Feb. 1930 the Government was claiming that 50 percent of peasants had joined collective farms.

An easing of pressure during the springtime sowing led to a temporary decline in numbers. By July collective farms included only 24% of peasant households and commanded 34% of sown area, and 90% and 94% sown area in July 1936. By 1936 collectivisation was effectively complete, and rural capitalism had been destroyed.* As a result of collectivisation, the 25 million small peasant farms of the 1920's had been replaced by three new

institutions: collective farms, state farms, and machine tractor stations.* The impact of collectivisation: The government claimed that collectivisation had the support of most poor and middle peasants.* The reality was that collectivisation was resisted, not just by the minority of kulaks but the majority of peasants.

And their resistance, which often took violent forms, turned mass collectivisation into a virtual civil war between the ruling group and the country's peasants. Peasant resistance took many forms. There were direct attacks on Party officials or army units as they went about the task of collectivisation. Many peasants hid their stocks of grain in the ground. Vast numbers slaughtered their cows, pigs, poultry and even horses rather than see them turned over to a collective farm.

The Party defined all who opposed the collectivisation as enemies of the Soviet regime. The term kulak itself expanded in meaning and was coined to all peasants who opposed the regime even if they were not wealthy.* Such uncertainty and chaos in the spring of 1930 that there were serious fears that sowing would be impossible. It may have been this that induced Stalin to slow down the pace. Collective farms he said must not be made by force and must rest on the active support of the masses. Party officials reacted quickly, and pressure on the peasants was eased, but not diminished.

* The results of collectivisation: A HUMAN AND ECONOMIC DISASTER FOR THE PEASANTRY – For the majority of the peasants and for the economy as a whole, collectivisation was a disaster. Total grain production declined and did not return to the 1928 levels until the late 1930's. The peasants' slaughter of

almost half their livestock was a catastrophe for an agricultural country and condemned a whole generation of Russians to a meatless diet. Rather than giving livestock to collective farms, peasants killed their animals.

In five years, 46% of cattle, 46% of horses and 65% of sheep were lost.*

Materials standards of living declined sharply in towns, but even more in the countryside so much so that Alec Nove wrote: “ 1933 was the culmination of the most precipitous peacetime decline in living standard known in recorded history.”* But while grain harvests declined, state procurements rose. And in the Ukraine and Volga provinces and imposition of higher grain procurement quotas, at a time when total harvests had declined, created a famine in winter 1932-33. Recent estimates suggest that 4-6million may have died in these man-made famines. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of kulaks were forced into labour camps, and conditions in the camps were such that large numbers died of hunger or overwork or from brutal camp discipline.

* During the collectivisation years, over 5 million kulaks officially deported to Siberia, while several million were reportedly departing from their homelands.* A FISCAL VICTORY FOR THE GOVERNMENT – In the early 1930's, procurements and exports increased. In other words, the proportion of agricultural produce at the disposal of the government increased. Where as procurements and exports accounted for 15% of the harvest in 1926, by 1933 they accounted for almost 35%.

In 1933, the gain was magnified by the low prices the government had to pay and one stage it resold it for four times the amount it paid to the farmers.* Although in the short run the kolkhozy had failed as farms, they

had succeeded as fiscal devices – as extractors of resources. And the basic reason is straightforward. Instead of dealing with 25 million independent farms, the state now dealt with about 250, 000 collective farms each of which was headed by a state appointed chairman.

* Once it had broken the peasantry, the government could afford some modest, but significant, concessions. A crucial concession allowed the collective farm peasants to retain a small plot of land for their own private use and to sell the produce at free market prices.* From the government's point of view, the real achievement of collectivisation was that at last it gave the Soviet state direct control of the rural sector and thereby greatly increased its fiscal capacity. Collectivisation was the fiscal advance necessary to secure for the Soviet government the sort of power over the countryside that the tsarist government had in its height. Direct mobilisation through the massive use of coercion offered a solution to the problems of the 1920s.

Industrialisation* The first three Five-Year Plans: The commitment to rapid industrialisation was made in the late 1920's, before the Party really knew how its targets would be achieved. As Communists, the Party leaders had always assumed that, in the long run, a communist economy would be planned. Instead of abandoning the production and distribution of goods to either arbitrary will of individual capitalists or the blind control of market forces, these vital matters would be planned by society as a whole.* But the Government did not commit itself firmly to a long term plan of industrial development until the late 1920's.

Gosplan, the body that has ever since been responsible for drawing up long term plans, was set up in 1921 (after the Supreme Council of National Economy – the body responsible for the nations economy – was eradicated), and its mainly non-Bolshevik economic staff began to explore some of the problems of long-term planning. The political decision to adopt a long-term plan was taken in 1927. At the same time the government embarked on a number of projects such as the TurkSib railway and the Dnieper hydroelectric dam. The first five year plan, which was to run from the end of 1928, was thus prepared in two drafts; an optimal and more modest version.* In reality the plans did little more than set arbitrary targets. As Stalin became more impatient with slow rates of growth under NEP, careful planning gave way to the demands of politics.

Instead of a ‘planned’ economy running according to carefully formulated plans, there appeared a ‘command’ economy, running according to the orders and priorities of the government. As collectivisation had showed, however the political will and determination to fulfil these targets, whatever the cost now existed. As a result, the first three Five-Year Plans (1928-1940) was astonishingly successful in some crucial areas.* HOW RELIABLE ARE SOVIET STATISTICS – Statistics for this period are unreliable.

Nevertheless, whatever the figures one uses, the rates remain remarkable compared with those for other countries.* ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE FIRST THREE FIVE-YEAR PLANS – The Soviet victory over Nazi Germany during the Second World War demonstrated that these changes could be translated into military strength.* First there was an immense increase in the capacity of Soviet economy to produce industrial goods. Total industrial production

increased by 160% in a mere twelve years; production of individual sectors of heavy industry, such as iron, oil and electricity, increased even more rapidly. Secondly, industrial growth was accompanied by a rapid increase in the size of the urban population and the paid workforce, i.

e. in the size of the proletariat by 262%. Thirdly, industrialisation significantly altered the international economic ranking of the Soviet Union. Table 10. 5 shows that Soviet industrial growth was particularly spectacular when compared with the major capitalist economies that had suffered during the Great Depression. Soviet gross national product, according to these figures, almost tripled in size in nine years; no other major economy came close to even doubling output.

By 1937 the Soviet Union had twice the production power of the major European powers.* These figures alone, combined with the Soviet military achievement in the Second World War, indicate that, somehow or other, the Soviet Union had solved the fundamental problem of industrialisation and overcome the military weaknesses inseparable from economic backwardness.* Agriculture production barely rose at all, and livestock remained below the 1928 level until the 1950s.* While the total production of consumer goods rose, average consumption levels per capita, a crude measure of living standards declined. So did the quality of the diet and of housing, as well as the level of real wages.* Why was industrial growth so rapid?: LABOUR: MAKING PEOPLE WORK HARDER – According to Christian, there clearly were gains in the productivity of labour.

* The government invested heavily in education during the 1930s, and the educational level of Soviet society rose sharply. Between 1928 and 1940, the number of high school students increased from 169 000 to 811 000. The rate of literacy rose as well, from 51% in 1929 to 81% in 1940, as a result of mass literacy campaigns aimed mainly at the young. However, despite these changes, production methods remained wasteful and inefficient.

* Figures suggest that people worked harder, and the government was getting more work out of Soviet citizens than before. Between 1928 and 1937, the participation rate increased at an astonishing rate, from about 57% to about 70%. These facts reflected two trends in this period of industrial growth. The first was a vast influx of peasants into the towns to find wage-work.

Their arrival transformed the industrial working class, lowering its levels of skills and experience, and weakening traditions of working class solidarity. The second trend was a vast increase in the number of women in the wage-earning labour force. During the Second Five-Year Plan and the Great Patriotic War, women provided most new recruits to the urban workforce. Declining real wages were the main lever that forced women into the paid workforce, for families found they could no longer live on a single income.

As a result of these changes, the percentage of women in wage-earning employment increased from 27% in 1932 to 35% in 1937.* Christian: “ Clearly, the industrialisation drive succeeded at least in part because Soviet citizens (particularly Soviet women) were working harder than before. They produced more because they worked harder.”* How did the government do

this? In the countryside, collective farms forced their members to spend much more time and labour supplying the government with cheap grain. But collectivisation also drove many peasants off the land and into the towns.

Between 1928 and 1932, 8.5 million of the 11 million who joined the urban workforce were peasants. And once in the towns, they were locked in by the reintroduction of internal passports. The passports gave the government centralised control over where people lived and worked, and enabled them to tie workers either to the town or the countryside, as proletarians or peasants.* Demand for labour was so high, that in 1929, unemployment stood at 1.

7 million, while in 1931 it had dwindled to almost nothing. Without the 'economic whip' of unemployment, the government had to find other ways of disciplining the workforce. With government support, managers fined workers, threatened to deprive them of living quarters, or took away their ration cards after the reintroduction of rationing in 1929.* The introduction of piecework tied wages closely to actual productivity- workers were paid not by their labour but to how much they produced.* Between 1938 and 1940 more ferocious penalties were introduced for indiscipline at the workplace due to threats/the existence of war. Workbooks were introduced, which included a complete record of an employee's career and behaviour; workers could lose health and maternity rights if they arrived late for work.

In 1940 June (as Hitler invaded France) the right to leave work was abolished all together. In addition, average hours of work were increased from 7 to 8 hours a day and a six week day became the norm.* Incentives for increased

productivity began to rise, as did wage differentials. Model workers received better wages, higher status, better housing and special allocations of consumer goods. The material rewards for success grew, and so did the penalty for failure. National campaigns encouraged workers to over fulfil the work norms they were called.

* RESOURCES: DIRECTING RESOURCES FROM CONSUMPTION TO INVESTMENT – The government’s economic programme succeeded largely because more resources were made available for investment- not because existing resources were used more productively. The percentage of national income devoted to capital investment rose from 19% in 1928 to 30% in 1932.* Some figures suggest that total capital increased faster than total output between 1928 and 1940. This means that the efficiency with which capital was used actually fell in this period. This reflects the immense wastage of the early years of the industrialisation drive. Plants were built before machinery was ready to use them.

Peasants wrecked machines they did not understand.* By the mid 1930s, the profit the government made on resales of grain and other produce extracted through compulsory procurement quotas accounted for one third of the budget, illustrating the importance of collectivisation to the industrialisation drive. It is now clear however, that resources did not flow from countryside to town. On the contrary, there was a vast flow of money and resources in the opposite direction.

Peasants found an important source of income by selling produce they grew on their private plots, which sold at high prices in the towns. In addition, the

government was forced to invest heavily in agriculture simply to replace the number of livestock killed during collectivisation.* By the late 1930s the collective farms worked extremely effectively as a way of pumping resources from the countryside to the government.* The USSR industrialised at the expense of both town and countryside, at the cost of a decline in consumption levels and living standards of both the proletariat and the peasantry.

In both areas, declining consumption levels released resources for investment. The resources that fuelled industrialisation came from the consumption fund of Soviet society as a whole.* In the 1930s and 1940s the USSR invested very little in housing (as opposed to a lot in the 1920s), diverting funds into heavy industry instead. As a result, the housing conditions of Soviet citizens declined drastically.

In Moscow, in 1935, 6% of renting families occupied more than one room, 40% had a single room, 24% occupied part of a room, 5% lived in kitchens and corridors, 25% lived in dormitories. Conditions in provincial towns were often far worse.* INNOVATION? – Productivity increased in many areas and there was plenty of innovation. Whole new industries appeared as the Soviet Union began to produce its own machine tools, synthetic rubber, high-grade cements and steels.* These new industries depended at first on foreign models and foreign expertise, but it was mainly Soviet engineers and scientists who adapted foreign models to Soviet conditions. Sometimes they improved on them, particularly in weapons technology such as the T-34 tank or the Katyusha rocket launcher which were some of the finest military equipment in the world.

Indeed, Soviet engineers and scientists were themselves amongst the best in the world.* The educational level of the workforce also rose rapidly. Between 1928 and 1941 the number of trained engineers rose from 47 000 to more than 900 000.* However, in a command economy, to produce and introduce new technologies, the planners had to make a special effort. By 1935 the Soviet Union spent 0. 6% of national income on organised research and development, while the USA spent only 0.

35%.* The Stalinist ‘ engine of growth’: By 1928 Stalin and many other Party members had concluded that the half-and-half policies of NEP could not work. In 1929, they dismantled the capitalist engine of growth altogether, eliminating the Soviet Union’s last capitalist entrepreneurs and suppressing market forces. That left one alternative: the engine of growth of the pre-modern world, similar to the strategy of Peter the Great.* According to David Christian, “ In the short run, the Stalinist strategy (of extensive, not intensive growth) achieved much. But in the long run it was bound to fail because it was too wasteful of resources.

” This is because under an extensive growth strategy, measuring costs is less important than achieving a particular level of output. Enterprises did not pay for their capital resources, but lobbied for them from the government planners. Eventually, such an economy was bound to run out of resources.* The Stalinist strategy succeeded for several decades, but only because it enjoyed some specific advantages. First, the techniques it borrowed from abroad gave a sharp boost to productivity. Second, it ruled the largest country in the world, meaning that vast human and material resources were available if it could mobilise them.

Finally, Russia's autocratic traditions made it easier to build a state capable of mobilising resources on the heroic scale necessary for rapid industrialisation. Stalinism as Totalitarianism* Resistance: INTERNAL ENEMIES – Measuring resistance to the Soviet government is not easy. During the early 1930s the government took over control of all forms of communication, and used this monopoly to hide evidence of all conflicts except those it chose to publicise itself. It even managed to hide most of the evidence of peasant resistance to collectivisation.* Nevertheless, resistance was widespread and dangerous. Part of the evidence comes from the sheer scale of coercive effort the government made during collectivisation, knowing perfectly well that it was fighting a virtual civil war against the peasantry.

Stalin himself saw collectivisation as the critical struggle of his career, implying that collectivisation had been even more terrible than the war with Nazi Germany.* After 1933, however, there is no more evidence of large scale resistance. However, there was plenty of hidden conflict, measured by the huge apparatus of police, labour camps and terror that the government erected to contain conflict.* EXTENAL ENEMIES – The government was also acutely aware of the hostility it faced from foreign capitalist powers, and Stalin never forgot that foreign armies invaded the USSR during the Civil War.

He understood that if it was to survive, the Soviet Union would have to deal with the military challenge from foreign capitalism. As early as 1931 he told Soviet industrial managers that the main task of the industrialisation drive was to build up a modern defence establishment.* The government's

awareness of the hostility it faced within and outside the Soviet Union forced it, and helped it, to build the coercive machinery and the habits of discipline and unity it needed to survive.* The coercive machinery: police and labour camps: To cope with the growing dangers at home and abroad, the government built up huge coercive machinery. Externally, its main weapon was the Red Army. Internally, its main weapon was the secret police.

* There was a long tradition of secret police agencies in Russia, but never had the secret police flourished as they did under Stalin.* Lenin set up the first Soviet secret police agency, the Cheka, in December 1917 which flourished during the Civil War, and changed its name to the GPU under the NEP, losing much of its size and its right to try and sentence at will.* With the end of the New Economic Policy, the role of the secret police expanded again, as it was ordered to deal with new enemies – NEP men, members of the old intelligentsia, ‘bourgeois wreckers’, and most of all, kulaks and enemies of collectivisation. It set up the ominous precedent of secret police involvement in Party affairs.

* But it was dekulakisation that generated most of the work for the secret police during the first five year plan, when the secret police expanded hugely in numbers and influence. The secret police supervised and carried out the deportation of 5 million kulaks. Forced labour, supervised by the secret police, began to play a substantial role in the industrialisation drive. The prison camp population controlled by the secret police increased from about 30 000 in 1928, to more than 500 000 by 1934.

* In 1930 the government established a special institution within the police to supervise the labour-camp population. This was the Main Administration of Corrective Labour Camps (Gulag). As Gulag's empire grew, conditions within the camps deteriorated. The work-load increased; food rations declined in quality and quantity; discipline became more brutal; and more and more camps appeared in areas of extreme cold. By the mid-1930s, conditions in labour camps were so harsh that many prisoners did not expect to live out their full term.

* In 1934 the secret police and the Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) were merged. The NKVD was put in charge of all prisons, and all police and frontier guards, and all aspects of state security. All the institutions of internal coercion were now united under a single organisation.* On hearing of the Kirov murder (1934), Stalin left for Leningrad by train. Before leaving, he issued a decree on new judicial procedures for dealing with terrorism, which was published in Pravda before the politburo saw it.

Two days later, the party bosses in the Politburo lamely accepted Stalin's illegal order. In this way, Stalin proved something of momentous importance: he could safely take basic political decisions on his own, and ignore the Party high command. The so called Kirov decrees were to remain in force for twenty years and they gave the NKVD the new powers necessary to conduct the purge that Stalin was preparing to launch.* From then on, political opponents could be removed simply to closed trials followed by execution within days. Stalin decided to launch a new purge of Party members to eliminate dissidents.

Originally, such purges had meant little more than expulsion from the Party, but in the atmosphere of the 1930's, they came to mean something much more ominous.* The political system in the early 1930s: THE PARTY IN THE LATE 1920s – After the removal of Stalin's last serious rival, Bukharin, Stalin emerged as undisputed leader of the Communist Party and the Soviet Government. His power rested on bureaucratic support/power exercised through the Party. Through the Secretariat of the Central Committee, he controlled the more important appointments to the Party. His power also rested on support within the Party, the government, the police and the army.

The brutal and energetic policies he advocated appealed particularly to younger, less educated Party members, most of who had joined the Party since the 1917 revolution. By 1929, his power was immense, and the first signs of the Stalin cult were emerging.* THE IMPACT OF COLLECTIVISATION – Collectivisation reinforced the party's traditions of unity and discipline by creating an atmosphere of intense crisis.* DISSENT WITHIN THE PARTY – After the completion of collectivisation and the first Five-Year Plan, many Party members felt it was time to call a halt.

At the upper levels of the Party, even among Stalin's closest followers, many were unhappy about the events of these years. However, analyzing the extent and significance of opposition to Stalin is difficult because public expression of dissent was prohibited, driving much discontent underground. Christian: “ Party members colluded in public displays of unity at formal ceremonies and in unanimous votes in public Party meetings. At the same time, they engaged in furtive conflict behind closed doors.”* The best known

attempt to limit Stalin's powers in the early 1930s is associated with the name of M.

Riutin. An army officer from Siberia, who joined the Bolsheviks in 1914, Riutin became famous as a guerilla fighter for the Communists during the Civil War. In the late 1920s he supported the Rightists, and in 1930 he criticized Stalin's policies in a personal interview with the leader. For this Stalin had him expelled from the Party and arrested.

However, within months he was released and reinstated as a Party member. In 1932, he circulated a document addressed to all Party members, in which he criticized Stalin's policies. Riutin was arrested along with others that supported his views. Stalin called for his execution.

However, several members of the Politburo opposed Stalin, and Riutin received a ten-year prison sentence instead. Stalin got revenge in 1937, when he had Riutin and his family shot.* By 1934 when the 17th Party Congress met, there were hints that others hoped to limit Stalin's powers or even remove him from office. According to Anastas Mikoyan, who was to join the Politburo in 1935, almost one-quarter of the deputies voted against Stalin's election to the Central Committee. Stalin learnt about this and insisted on recording only 3 hostile votes.

In addition, it was largely known by this time that Lenin had wanted to remove Stalin.* However, it was extremely dangerous to oppose Stalin's leadership, and many were unable to voice their opinions openly. Impact of Purges, Show Trials and 'the Terror' on the Communist Party and Soviet society
Terror and Stalin's Rise to Domination: 1934 to 1939* The Kirov

murder and its aftermath: Before 1934, the police had only limited powers of arrest and sentence. In law, at least, the secret police could not yet carry out death sentences. With the murder of Kirov on 1 December 1934, the position of the secret police changed radically.

Kirov became a candidate member of the Politburo in 1926, and a full member in 1934. Though there is no firm proof, Christian believes that indirect evidence suggests that Stalin may have organised the murder. Amongst other details, Khrushchev pointed to the “ Unusually suspicious fact that when the Chekist assigned to protect Kirov was being brought for interrogation on 2 December 1936, he was killed in a car accident in which no other occupants of the car were harmed.”* After this event, Stalin issued a decree on new judicial procedures for dealing with terrorism, known as the Kirov Decrees.

The Pravda published it even before the full Politburo saw it. The crisis atmosphere in which the Party found itself deprived Party leaders of the will to oppose Stalin’s personal authority. They had allowed Stalin to take decisions of fundamental importance without getting the agreement of the Politburo. By 1937 they no longer had the power to rein him in.

* The Kirov Decrees allowed the police to arrest political dissidents, try them in secret, and execute them immediately. It arrested thousands of dissidents soon after, including Kamenev and Zinoviev. Stalin launched a simultaneous purge of Party members. This marked a sharp rise in the influence of the police, and as Stalin now controlled the police, it also marked a sharp increase in the leader’s power.* Defeat of the opposition and decline of the

Party: By 1934 there had emerged a small nucleus of officials directly responsible to Stalin. N.

I. Yezhov was to lead the secret police during the great purge, a private Secretariat headed by A. N. Poskrebyshev, allowing Stalin to communicate directly with the police and other government agencies without going through the Party bureaucracy. In the early 1930s Yezhov headed the records and assignment department of the Central Committee, which kept records on the careers of all Party members, and assigned them to new jobs.

* The aftermath of the Kirov assassination showed that Stalin could now order the secret police to arrest members of the Party. These changes marked a revolution in the political structure of Soviet Russia, for Stalin could now bypass the Party if he chose to do so.* The clearest sign of the reduced authority of the Party was the irregularity with which its main institutions now met. Party congresses had been annual or biennial events in the early 1920s.

Then the gaps began to widen until the 18th Congress met after a 5year gap, then the 19th after a 13 year gap in 1952. The Central Committee also ceased to meet regularly, as with the Politburo. Stalin would call individual members of the Politburo together for specific tasks, leaving other members in the dark.* However, Stalin avoided the mistake of elevating the police in place of the Party.

On the contrary, the great purge ended in 1938 with a purge of the secret police and the execution of its leader, Yezhov. Stalin no longer depended on any single institution. He could now manoeuvre freely between the various

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institutions of power that dominated Soviet society.* The Great Terror: 1936 to 1938: Between 1936 and 1938, Stalin launched what has come to be known as the Great Terror during Yezhov's reign as head of the NKVD.

To foreigners, the visible sign of the purge was a series of carefully staged show trials whose defendants (under the influence of unjust means) publicly confessed to various crimes against the Soviet state. Christian: " Their confessions wove a melodramatic tale of intrigue and treachery, involving foreign governments, and coordinated by the arch-villain, Trotsky."* At the time, most observers did not know that the police got their confessions using torture and threats to defendant's families.* At the first trial, in August 1936, the prosecution accused Zinoviev, Kamenev and other prominent old Bolsheviks of plotting with Trotsky to murder Party leaders.* After confessing to most of the charges, the defendants were shot.

The trial was accompanied by campaigns in the papers and the paper published thousands of letters, purporting to come from ordinary Soviet citizens, demanding that the accused be executed for treachery.* Many other trials were held, and the purge of the secret police marked the end of the worst period of the pre-war purges. Stalin apparently decided that the disruption caused by the purges was beginning to outweigh any advantage he might gain from them. However, the legal and institutional machinery of the purges remained in place and Stalin used it sporadically to the end of his life.

* Stalin feared that the most dangerous opposition to his own authority was likely to come from these older, more established sections of the Soviet elite

who had joined during the Civil War or throughout the 1920s. The abolition of the once prestigious Society of Old Bolsheviks in 1935 was an ominous sign of what was to come. But Stalin's hostility to the old Bolsheviks was already clear to many insiders like G. I. Petrovski. Many prominent members from this era were killed and at least 200 000 Party members died between 1936 and 1939, though some estimates have put the figure much higher.

Other sectors also suffered. The purge of the army saw 65% of the upper command removed, including 3/5 marshals, 13/15 generals, and 62/85 corps commanders.* But these figures give little idea of the impact of the purges at the lower levels of Soviet society. The press and radio helped create an atmosphere of general paranoia. Public statements encouraged people to look for and denounce enemies, wreckers, possible spies, or even people whose relatives had been class enemies.

In a frenzy of denunciations, the purges expanded to include relatives, friends, and casual acquaintances of those arrested at first and finally to include arbitrary victims as police were under pressure to fulfil quotas for a certain number of arrests.* Counting the cost: How many people were arrested and executed during the purges? In 1990 Soviet researchers who had used KGB archives claimed, with what seems excessive precision, that between 1931 and 1953 government tribunals sentenced 3 778 234 people, of whom 786 098 were executed. Almost 700 000 of those died in 1937 and 1938, at the height of the purges. At present, these are the best estimates available, according to David Christian. However, we can be certain that many more died unrecorded, so these count as low estimates.

According to Robert Conquest, for example, 7 to 9 million people were arrested between 1936 and 1938, and that between 1 and 2 million were shot. In addition, a million people a year died from the terrible conditions of prison camp life, out of a total 8 to 12 million people. Altogether, Conquest estimates that 12 million people may have died in the camps post purge. If the 7 million or so he estimates to have died during dekulakisation and the 1933 famine are added to these figures, the Stalinist period appears to have accounted for about 20 million casualties.

* According to David Christian, based on archival evidence, he suggests that in the late 1930s and 1940s, between 2 and 4 million lived in labour camps or as exiles in labour settlements. Christian: “ Death rates in the [labour] camps were high, but, except during the war, they were probably not as high as the 10% per annum that Conquest regards as the normal rate. Recent archival research suggests that death rates in the camps reached 10% per annum only in 1939, and again during WW2. At other times, they ranged from 3. 5% to almost 7% per annum.”* In addition, Christian contradicts Conquest, in saying that far fewer died during the purges of the late 1930s than during collectivisation and the collectivisation famine of 1933.

Despite the fact that the purges were seen as the height of Stalinist repression, this was mainly due to the fact that they were a far greater shock to the Soviet elite.* Explaining the terror: BUILDING A LOYAL RULING ELITE: THE VIDVIZHENTSY – The simplest explanation of the purges sees them as a product of Stalin’s determination to remove all possible rivals and opposition.