

# An analysis of the moscow show trials and stalin's soviet union

[Business](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The soviet show trials were the manifestation of totalitarianism. Show trials are a public display of many key features typically found in a totalitarian dictatorship. Unlike a court room trial where debate and the introduction of evidence is definitive in a case's outcome, the defendant is already considered guilty of a crime by the state, has no legal rights and is purposely humiliated and ridiculed in order to undermine their political power.

By having the show trials, Stalin established the legitimacy of his totalitarian regime. These purges of political ideologies in the Soviet Union achieved its intended goal of strengthening the power of the state and removing threats to Stalinism as an ideology. They were necessary for Stalin's brand of totalitarianism; it did not have an actual consistent ideology and strayed from Marxist-Leninism. Had his lies and lack of actual knowledge of the fundamental principles of the ideology become exposed it would undermine his entire regime and this could not be allowed. The Moscow Trials were intended to invoke the government's absolute monopoly on political consciousness by any means necessary. Simply put, the totalitarian regime thrives off of the psychological effects of public displays of violence against enemies of the state.

None are safe from its ferocity; even those members of society innocent of committing crimes against the regime but simply do not support its motives and therefore remove themselves from the movement are still unsafe. The strength of Stalin's totalitarian regime was extracted from the essential elements of totalitarianism. He retained this strength by using the show trials as a mechanism of control over the population he governed. They are several critical features required within a nation in order for totalitarianism to

<https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-of-the-moscow-show-trials-and-stalins-soviet-union/>

succeed as a legitimate political regime. The most pertinent of them would be a large population where the majority was the apolitical, underachieving, and civically dissatisfied (for whatever reason) mass that had not developed a political identity. This group of politically dysfunctional members of society effectively revolutionized the political landscape once they became involved.

The political institutions in place in the Soviet Union were not the mechanism they chose to express themselves politically and therefore the old model for the party system was rendered obsolete. They found that acts of violence can successfully influence the political system. Being unaccustomed to normalized forms of political activism and due to the groups sheer size, the masses could easily invent justification of their actions. Arendt qualifies the actions of the mass very well by saying “ the masses... stand outside all social ramifications and normal political representation. ” (314) This segment of the population can be turned into a virulent political force under the rule of a despotic leader, which is precisely what happened during Stalin’s totalitarian rule in the Soviet Union.

By changing the power holding status quo, the masses set the stage for the rise of the next feature of Totalitarian regimes. Stalin and the Bolsheviks successfully deconstructed the social stratification of Russia by eliminating the environment where an individual’s unique experiences could influence the political system and the only way one could realize their ability to actively participate was through the selfless support for the regime. Arendt) Through the creation of a massive bureaucracy which was centralized under his rule, he began the process of class liquidation by redistributing property

amongst landowners, the bourgeoisie, and the peasant class, as these classes would be the easiest to subject to political humiliation as they had the least access to violence as a means of political action. All those considered to be politically threatening to the new Soviet order were killed or sent to labor camps. The subsequent new class that arose out of this purge was one united in a common interest of supporting the party.

The peasants stood to lose their newly gained political consciousness if they didn't support it, and they felt strongly against that happening. This became an important tool for Stalin's totalitarian regime. That combined with the removal of familial bonds and community facilitated an environment where the only facet of life that could be depended on was the state. (Arendt)

Unfortunately, the only thing you one could depend on the state for was the protection of members of the party whose political record shows no anti-Stalinist sentiments. The soviet population lived in a state of fear and turmoil that was designed to maintain the power of the regime and worked with devastating success.

The lack of consistency in daily life created an atmosphere needed to establish a totalitarian movement. The next major liquidation of the social hierarchy came during the Moscow Trials. One must wonder, why would a leader allow something like a Show Trial to occur during their regime? Stalin clearly had one goal in mind during these trials, and it was the elimination of all credible individuals who could be potential threats to his totalitarian regime- and he did so with incredible efficacy. Using a combination of propaganda espoused by his party minions such as Yezhov (tucker 61) an

increasingly all-encompassing political ideology, and an unrivaled monopoly of violence, Stalin managed to put almost every member of the Bolshevik regime on trial for various crimes against the government, including those whom had previously held roles in the show trials. The general consensus during the Show trial assumed Stalin's innocence and ignorance regarding the entire fiasco; which goes to show the extent to which he had developed a positive cult of personality around himself and his goals as a leader.

Stalin was very involved in the process of the Moscow Trials, often taking part in every step in the process of the trials up until the actual court date while maintaining an image to the public of ignorance regarding the outcomes of the trials. (Tucker, pg 54) Part of this was due to the fact that none of the individuals who went on trial were spared and the process was carried out with careful methodology, preventing Stalin's name to ever be brought into the political foray surrounding the purges. He developed the trials to maintain the ideological solidarity of his regime. The purpose of the First Show Trial was to begin purging the military bureaucracy of the old party elite that had been appointed during Lenin's time, effectively clearing the way of any political obstruction to Stalin's absolute power and remove threats to the state ideology. The purges indicated that Stalin had very little problem deceiving anyone, including himself if need be.

The trials certainly developed a conspiratorial motive which, which was unique to Stalinist Soviet Union and not found in any of the other nations in the Soviet bloc. This motive intensified as the trials went on, continuously reaching deeper into Stalin's paranoid consciousness for justification. The

1952-1953 show trial based on the Doctors' Plot was attributed to Stalin's personal anti-Semitic beliefs, but still are concurrent with the idea of eliminating all threats to his regime. Robert Tucker offers a brilliant insight on the formation of the later purge trials: What unfolds before us in the trial, then, is a gigantic texture of fantasy into which bits and pieces of falsified real history have been woven along with outright fiction. It forms an elaborate unified system in the sense that everything hands together in a coherent, logical, and internally self-consistent whole. The master theme running through it all and giving it a dramatic unity is the anti-Soviet conspiracy.

(tucker 62) This characterizes the nature of the Moscow Show Trials which Stalin devised as mechanism of political power. The legitimacy of such acts is questionable, but the reason behind them are clear: a clear monopoly on violence, propaganda and official party ideology which made crimes against the regime punishable by death. A political agenda with propaganda directly benefitting and representing a segment of society previously ignored and apathetic poses a significant threat to the political system of a nation, and it is precisely what we saw in the aftermath of WWI in Europe. Almost every government was fundamentally shifted with the introduction of organized political action from the members of society least likely to participate in government and this movement was led by the leaders of the masses who actively shaped its political identity and as a consequence, its members. The difference between the regimes which came to be in most Eastern European nations in the aftermath of WWI was the failure of the totalitarian or fascist

movements to become the accepted political regime. A reason for this political phenomenon could simply be the result of a smaller population.

One of the initial points made in this paper is how population size in conjunction with demographics affects the political landscape of a nation. This can be related to the Polish dictatorship where complete semi-totalitarianism with one-party rule became the regime in place. Unlike Poland, Russia's immense size and large population is an enormous territory for one to have to administrate, therefore displays of absolute power was an efficient way to incite fear into the hearts of its inhabitants. Coincidentally, a desire for a previously unorganized segment of the population to become political due to discontent as was seen in Germany could lead to the development of a totalitarian regime which could be monopolized upon by a leader such as Hitler for a totalitarian regime to form. Russia's political atmosphere combined with its population played an integral role in the rise of totalitarianism.

Russia has been plagued by a history of inadequate political leadership and corrupt political institutions to the discontent of millions of its citizens. During the aftermath of WWI, the conditions were appropriate for the foundation of totalitarianism and a leader came along who had the audacity and cunning to turn what was a Marxist-Leninist regime into something entirely different from what Lenin had intended it to be. Regardless, Stalin still engineered his own unique regime founded on an ideology of constant fear and uncertainty.

Works Cited Koestler, Arthur, and Daphne Hardy. *Darkness at Noon*.

New York: Scribner, 2006. Print. Getty, J. Arch, and Oleg V. Naumov. The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939.

New Haven, Conn: Yale UP, 1999. Print. Radin, Max. " The Moscow Trials: A Legal View. " Foreign Affairs October 16.

1 (1937): 64-79. JSTOR. Council on Foreign Relations. Web. 17 Oct.

2010. ; lt; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20028828>; gt;. Arendt, Hannah. " The Origins of Totalitarianism.

" Web. Oct. 2010. Tucker, C. Robert. " The Soviet Political Mind.

" Web. Oct. 2010.