

What were the purges? essay



Purges refer to “cleansing out”. Purges regularly took place in Russia especially when the leaders wanted to reshape the party or exercise more control. Three phases in the purges of 1930's can be identified-1.

Chistka of 1932-35. 20% of the party was expelled non-violently. 2. Show trials.

Prominent old Bolsheviks were publicly tried and executed. 3. Mass terror from 1937-38. Many were executed, many died in Soviet labor camps. There was a clear difference between the Chistka and Mass terror.

What sort of opposition to Stalin had developed before 1934? 1933- Communist party was unpopular- rapid industrialization, forced collectivization and the famine. The peasants, urban workers, priests, industrialists, traders etc were not happy. There were upheavals and unrests. Some of the party members had been disturbed by the methods employed to push the industrialization. The party was in dissent.

They found it hard to get the local party secretaries and members to implement their policies. Thus a chistka was launched and 22% of the members were removed. There was also opposition to Stalin's leadership. A former Moscow secretary, Ryutin, circulated a documentary which was critical of Stalin. Stalin wanted the death penalty for him but was stopped by some members of the politburo, reminding him that he was still subject to the majority of the politburo.

There were some others inside the party who were forming opposition. Stalin wanted to treat them the same way as the outside people- to imprison or

execute them but the majority of the politburo would not support it. At the 17th party congress, a split occurred between Stalin and other leading members of the politburo such as Kirov over the grain procurement. The title of general secretary was done away with and Stalin and Kirov were both the title of Secretary of Equal Rank.

Stalin was not secure as a leader. The Kirov Murder Mystery Kirov was murdered by Nikolayev. His murder triggered the purges. Stalin instructed for the first arrests. Thousands in the Leningrad party were purged.

There is no proof for to suggest that Stalin planned it. But his motives are clear, to get rid of a rival and to use this to get rid of opposition. Nikolayev was disgruntled by the party but there is also a story that his wife was having an affair with Kirov. The motives of the NKVD are not clear. It is possible that they thought or had been told that Stalin wanted Kirov murdered.

Also, probably they did not want the terror to be relaxed unlike Kirov. The Great Purges 1000's of people, old Bolsheviks, Trotskyites, oppositions to Stalin were arrested. Some were put on trial. The accused confessed and were executed the next day.

Show trials took place. In the show trials, Bukharin, Zinoviev, Kamenev and others were executed. Most people confessed because they were worn down by the torture and interrogation. They were all arrested on ludicrous charges with false evidence. In the spring of 1937, Stalin made it clear that he thought traitors and spies had infiltrated the party. He encouraged party

members to criticize and denounce those in higher levels, resulting in a flood of accusations.

The purges were not restricted to the party only. The politburo passed a resolution condemning 'Anti soviet elements' in July 1937. They were scientists, writers, artists, musicians, managers and administrators. A quota system was applied.

A media campaign to encourage people to criticize people was started. In 1937, Stalin claimed that the army was plotting to overthrow him. He had confessions beaten out of them and were then executed. Many soviet citizens died in prison, either shot or dying from torture.

Those who did not die were sent to labor camps. The labor was used to make large scale projects. Many died in labor camps. Stalin called a halt to the terror towards the end of 1938. The purges were destabilizing Russian society.

In 1940, a hitman on Stalin's orders killed Trotsky. Almost all the old Bolsheviks had been wiped out. Stalin blamed the NKVD for the excesses of the terror. The victims-
* Leading Party members* Senior military officers*
Managers, engineers and scientists* People related to those who had been purged* Party and state leaders* NKVD* Peasants and industrial workers
Interpretations of the Great Purges
Very little evidence about the purge was released. Few documents are there some still have not been opened. There are two views on the purges- the totalitarian and the revisionist.

The totalitarian view dominated during the cold war and was challenged by the revisionist view in the 1970-80's. Totalitarian line- "intentionalist", top down view Robert Conquest, Roy Medvedev, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. This line believes that Stalin was the planner and architect of the purges and exercised personal control over arrests. He used the purges to establish control over the party or as a terror mechanism to control the people. His personality was central to the way the purges were carried out.

He wanted to get rid of old Bolsheviks who might threaten his leadership.

The NKVD simply carried out orders from the top. Revisionist Line- "decisionist" J. Arch Getty, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Graeme Gill and Roberta Manning Stalin is responsible for the terror and started it but his personality is not a sufficient explanation for the scale and form of the purges. He did not exercise personal control and was not aware about what was going on in some areas. The centre used the purges to gain control but the purges spiraled out of control and gained a momentum of their own.

Stalin did not have a master plan to the purges. The machinery was not well organized; people were selected at random, denounced or implicated. Terror was from below and above. The NKVD was riven by internal divisions and some units began acting on their own initiative. How far was Stalin's personality responsible for the Great Purges? Stalin's personality* Deeply suspicious of others, paranoid* Vindictive and vengeful Killing of former comrades* Crude and brutal, violent* Limited ability but unlimited ambitions- Inferiority complex Violence of terror against party members and people causing him problems* View of himself as the hero of the revolution, alone who could take Russia to socialism, therefore could not be thwarted Had to

get rid of the Old Bolsheviks who knew his limitations and intellectual superiors. Many also believe that Stalin thought he was acting in the interest of the party.

At the end of the process, Stalin emerged as the dictator of the USSR with supreme control over the party and a populace subservient to the leader and the party. Historiographies J. Arch Getty- Members denounced leaders and each other for dubious class origins, long forgotten sins and current misdeeds. The party officials even resorted to filling positions with politically safe employees of the NKVD. W. G.

Krivitsky- Stalin knew that other ranking generals only reluctantly supported him and were popular when his prestige was the lowest. He felt no certainty that they would continue to recognize his totalitarian authority. G. Gill- People hoped to gain leniency for themselves or their families by cooperating with the NKVD.

Thus they were willing to denounce others to the security organs. R. Conquest- 20 million were killed in the purges between 1937-38. The purges were Stalin's personal achievement. It led him to absolute power.

R. Manning- The purges are linked to industrialization. When things went wrong, there was a subconscious temptation to seek scapegoats. A. Bullock- Purges were caused due to Stalin's narcissistic personality, his psychological need to confirm and reassure and his belief that he was a genius marked out to play a unique historical role. S.

Cohen- Stalin wanted to get rid of the old Bolsheviks because they remembered everything in Bolshevik history and knew that Stalin was not the Lenin of today.