

Joseph stalin's great terror



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The Great Terror occurred in the years 1936 to 1938 and it effectively destroyed all potential and actual opposition to Stalin's rule over the Soviet Union.

Stalin ruled over the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s to his death in 1953. Stalin used the murder of Sergey Kirov, who was the Bolshevik Party's leader in Leningrad, as a pre-text to launch the Great Terror, however there is substantial evidence which potentially could point at Stalin having arranged the murder of Kirov, although many historians can't fully agree on Stalin's involvement.

Some of this substantial evidence includes the fact that Kirov had become more popular than Stalin and this alongside the fact that Kirov was good at his job and was good looking meant that as many people suspected he would succeed Stalin after Stalin's death, he may have become too big a threat to ignore. Stalin's use of terror is significant since it destroyed any opponents' chance of opposing him and therefore solidified his rule in the Soviet Union.

Historians disagree on the extent which Stalin as an individual, was the most important cause however they do not disagree that it was a factor. One historian, Steve Phillips, argued in his book 'Stalinist Russia' that it is definitely Stalin's personality and therefore Stalin as an individual who was the most important cause of the Great Terror. Robert Gellately, who wrote 'Lenin, Stalin and Hitler' argued that economic policies influencing the famine and the peasants who were starving and potentially could have begun an uprising against Stalin due to the lack of grain and the forceful nature of the

collectivisation being implemented in farms and on the peasants in the Soviet Union. J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov argued that it was Stalin who started the Great Terror but also argued that it should also be considered amongst the other factors influencing the situation at the time, and he was the biggest reason for the cause of the great terror.

Altogether, factors for the cause of the great terror, also known as the purges, include the use of the NKVD, the opposition to economic policies which was a debate in the Soviet Union at the time and Stalin's personality. Stalin's personality was a factor in the Great terror, since it is argued that it was his paranoia which led to the death of most of his opponents and which led to the deaths of over 15 million people who were either rumoured to have or did actually criticise either Stalin himself, or his regime. Phillips states that the purges have been seen as evidence of Stalin's paranoia.' Phillips believes that the purges have been clear evidence of Stalin's mental state, and how that affected him in his leadership of the Soviet Union.

Stalin's paranoia led to the eventual purging of Red Army and the Military Maritime Fleet which three out of five of the marshals, from the army, and 13 of 15 admirals from the Military Maritime Fleet being purged. The way Stalin was able to execute the Great Terror in this fashion is through the Show Trials'. The show trials were a way for Stalin to essentially eliminate those he labelled as enemies of the state' in a way that was public with foreign journalists being invited to the Moscow show trials. They are called the show trials because that is all they were, simply a show in which some of Stalin's potential rivals were placed on trial in public, however often evidence was

obtained from prisoners in NKVD camps which immediately puts a doubt on the legitimacy of the evidence.

For those who were placed on trial and it became a show trial' a guilty verdict at the end of the trial was inevitable. It is arguable that Stalin's paranoia was prominent in the way he was so pleased when he gained a signed confession since it must have been as if his own paranoia had been noticed or had been verified. Stalin's paranoia could be seen in something he told Khrushchev 'I trust nobody, not even myself'. Phillips points out that psychological evidence of mental instability is difficult to prove but it is true that Stalin's behaviour became increasingly erratic as he got older.

Apparently after the death of Stalin's second wife Nadezhda in 1932, who shot herself after a public spat with Stalin, Stalin himself became more and more reclusive withdrawing to a country villa outside Moscow.

Steve Phillips also points out that to the foreign observer, the purges seem to be evidence of the increasing paranoid tendencies of Stalin as he saw threats to his own authority in even the most unlikely of places. All of this combined and it wouldn't be surprising for Stalin's mental health to have declined and for his paranoia to have taken hold and therefore when Kirov is murdered, whether or not it tipped Stalin over the edge, it was significant and it eventually ended with Stalin's power never being threatened since he had created this loyalty through fear which enabled him to rule over the Soviet Union until his death in 1953. In 'Lenin, Stalin and Hitler' Robert Gellately says that very simply it was 'terror which was used in the 1930s to maintain Stalin's dominant position and undermine opposition.' Since this was the action which Stalin took when faced with a famine in the Soviet

Union which spiralled out of control until it became a chance for Stalin to secure his rule in the Soviet Union.

It can be said that Stalin never felt like his rule was secure until Leon Trotsky was murdered in August 1940, in the Moscow show trials Trotsky was sentenced to death regardless of the fact that he was expelled from the party in 1929 and was exiled from the Soviet Union, however although the show trials are famous for forced confessions being used as evidence, Stalin didn't need to do this for Trotsky, since Trotsky himself actually had been acting against Stalin, since his expulsion from the Soviet Union was travelling the world gathering up support against Stalin until his assassination in 1940, despite the purge being over since 1938, this gave Stalin the final reassurance that he had a firm grip of power. The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, usually abbreviated to the NKVD, was established in 1934 and was Stalin's secret police service, which would carry out the Great Terror on his orders. The NKVD undertook mass executions of citizens, political leaders and other so called enemy of the state' they most commonly did so through a method of the Gulag' which essentially was a forced labour camp. People were so fearful of a knock on their door during the night and being carted away to their deaths by the NKVD which routinely did night raids in order to take people away with minimal resistance.

Citizens were encouraged to tell on others with in some cases, children telling the NKVD about their parent's actions. The few who survived in the terrible conditions of the NKVD prisons would later write about the brutal regime they experienced. The NKVD also would interrogate until they had names of any men who worked or helped the person in their crime'. And if

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psychological torture didn't work, then the NKVD often would turn to the person's family, in 1934, Stalin signed a decree that the family of the person was guilty in their own right. This law essentially meant that any children over the age of 12 could be executed for the crimes of a parent, if not executed then they potentially faced a sentence in the gulags which were being built across the Soviet Union. There was also a law enacted in 1934 as stated by Robert Gellately in *Lenin, Stalin and Hitler* who points out that due to this law investigative agencies were to speed up the cases and not wait to consider the possibility of a pardon. The NKVD was permitted to execute immediately.' This brought terror to a lot of people as all small parts of Democracy had been itself purged from the Party.

One member of the NKVD stated that given the time, he could get anyone to sign a confession that they were the king of England'. For Stalin a signed confession was vital, since it provided him with something to parade amongst the people as proof for the said person's treasonable behaviour and therefore limited significantly the amount of people who could argue against the amount of people who were being wrongfully convicted of crimes, or against anyone they knew personally who had been wrongfully convicted, since the person practically admitted to the crime. Given the secrecy of the work which the NKVD did there are no clear figures to the number of people that were arrested by the NKVD.

It is not surprising that once the purge started in the party that it spilled over into the rest of the country leading to large scale paranoia in which everyone represented a potential suspect, except Stalin himself who was careful that no suspicion would fall on his head since if someone doubted Stalin publicly

in any way they may have found themselves labelled as an enemy of the people' and forced to work in the Gulag. The first victims of the Great Terror were the old Bolsheviks which included people such as Bukharin. And then it was the government officials and then the military officers, which also included the NKVD its self since as Steven Phillips says 'It was useful for Stalin to ensure that the terrorists themselves were kept in line.' This shows the extent which Stalin was willing to go, in order to secure his rule that the ones who were enacting the Great Terror, also became the victim of the Great Terror. The opposition to economic policies which Stalin was faced with was also a significant factor which can be used to explain why Stalin started the Great Terror. Most of the people who opposed Stalin in his five year plan to industrialise the Soviet Union, ending up dying with both members of the Right and Left falling victim to the Great Terror.

Phillips states that there was justifications for the use of terror in terms of dealing with the growth of opposition to economic policies. The left and right opposition had attacked the economic policies of Stalin with the right doubting about the idea of forcible collectivisation of agriculture and the left being critical of the concentration of power in Stalin's hands, this alongside party officials such as Pyatakov and Radek who had criticised the targets of the five-year plan as being unattainable and the red army officers who had been concerned about the impact of the collectivisation on peasant morale, due to this rising opposition against Stalin he had to take action. This essentially is why he purged party officials alongside any outspoken citizen who criticised him or the Soviet Union in any way. The five year plan was essentially a plan to increase the economy of the Soviet Union through

industry and it did so successfully with improvements up and down the country to everything from the heavy industry areas to the railways to the introduction of childcare which enabled mothers to aid in the plans success.

Collectivisation was a policy introduced to transform traditional agriculture and reduce the economic power of the peasants who under collectivisation were forced to give up their smaller farms in favour of large collective farms. This was done in part to aid the process of industrialising the Soviet Union and in order for rapid industrialisation immediate forced collectivisation was needed. Larger farms were favoured due to the increase in crops which could be grown and an increase in the amount of crops which could be produced. Steve Phillips says that clearly due to the amount of people who were disagreeing with Stalin that a threat to the policies was urgently needed if the revolution was to survive. And as Steve Phillips points out that there was perhaps a sense of urgency which justified the purges, as necessary measures in order to safeguard the revolution. This shows the state that the Soviet Union had gotten into with many people protesting against the ideas that Stalin wanted to implement, and for Stalin to keep his Dictatorship over the Soviet Union secure, due to the rising tensions which potentially could have become another revolution but instead of against the Tsar it would have been against Stalin himself, he had to go to such extremes to keep everyone in the country silent and it was a successful fear campaign that killed over 1 million people.

Robert Gellately in *Lenin, Stalin and Hitler.*' argues that the collectivisation and industrialisation policies of the Stalin revolution had up rooted society' this shows these historians views on how the collectivisation policies were a

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significant trigger for Stalin to start the Great Terror since there were uprisings and it potentially could have reached a point where it would have started another revolution. Not only did having the Great Terror squash any opposition to the economic policies Stalin wanted to introduce but it actually allowed Stalin to implement them with minimal fuss since the people were under the watchful eye of the NKVD which essentially meant that, anyone who wasn't helping the country in any way, either this is through not farming or potentially talking bad about Stalin, was labelled an enemy of the country' and was shipped off to the Gulag which meant that many rich peasants who perhaps owned the farms, were almost scared into submission with the threat of death.

For Stalin himself, there were perhaps many reasons for the causes of the purges however the biggest reason for the great terror, has to be Stalin's own personality and his breakdown before he started to implement the great terror. The main reason that Stalin's personality itself was a cause is as he was an extremely paranoid person, which was only made worse by worsening mental health after the suicide of his second wife, was a trigger for the Great Terror was the fact that he signed a lot of death warrants and started it, also it was him who ordered the NKVD to start the purge on the rich peasants who got labelled as the enemy of the people.'