

What happened during the great terror?

People



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One of the definitive factors of Stalin's Russia is the mass array of terror he cast over his nation during his tyrannous reign which was fuelled by purges of people from all walks of life; this stemmed from kulaks on the collectivised farming to ' saboteurs' in the industrial aspects who were said to be at fault for un met quotas. Stalin held his country in peril, but for what reason?

Ultimately it can be regarded as a disproportionate amount of fear and suspicion blinding Stalin in extenuating paranoia thus leading to the terror seen in the years from 1936-39. Although this is not the full reason, it must also be taken into account the economic difficulties and external threats faced at the time, so Stalin's fear is not the full reason to the extent of the terror.

Notably, in 1936 Stalin declared the Soviet Union was in " a state of siege" which lead to his progressive terrorising of the Soviet Union. The key origin of the terror that unfolded is often remarked as the murder of Kirov on the 1st of December 1934. Stalin was said to become suspicious of others and is likely to have feared for himself after the death of this highly regarded member of the central committee because it could indicate that someone was attempting to overthrow him.

This fear of losing his power is to and extent accountable for the terror which took place, in particular the purges of the party because these are likely to be the people who wanted his position so he would have been suspicious that these were the one that wanted him dead and therefore they had to be cleansed- this, if true it would be a driving factor because Stalin wanted more than anything to maintain his power. However, it has been postulated that the murder of Kirov was an elaborate plot devised by Stalin.

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Kirov was said to at times receive more applause than Stalin in meetings, this demonstrates that Kirov was highly popular and because he opposed the speed of industrialisation and extreme measures of party discipline Stalin may have not wanted him to be impressionable on other party members, which he clearly was exemplified by him receiving more applause than Stalin a man who was clapped where ever he went.

So overall it appears rather apparent that whether the murder was or was not organised by Stalin fear was a fore frontal element which drove him to the terror as Kirov portrays how he thought of party members may change ideas of others over his so he had to therefore eradicate them hence accounting for the terror which transpired. Although this cannot be fully noted as simply as fear because relating back to the fact Kirov received more applause could show that his death and the purges were a result of Stalin's irrational jealousy of others and not fear, he wanted to ensure he remained top and was jealous of any who even mirrored in the slightest his appraisal.

Contrary to jealousy, a factor which heightens the portrayal that fear and suspicion were the driving force is the rise of fascism at the time. In March 1936, just before Stalin sprung his terror on the party and military, Hitler reoccupied the demilitarised zone of the Rhineland and much to Stalin's disarray his supposed western allies did nothing but idly stand by. This may have created fear in Stalin and alarmed him of the fascist threat spiralling into him attempting to liquidate not only his external but also his internal enemies.

Combined with this it has been postulated that he was haunted by the fate of Nicholas II who had been brought down by a mixture of internal and external enemies, with this in his mind Stalin would not want to suffer the same fate hence we see how he would have been fearful of this possibility. Supporting this is the fact that in August 1936 Zinoviev and Kamenev were pulled out of prison and put on a show trial, accompanied by 14 other oppositionist group members in the party.

From this we can deduce that suspicion was a driving factor in Stalin's motivation for the purges because he was obviously mindful of the past which led to him to prevent it from happening- and this meant the terror which he unleashed on the party to prevent this and also on the military to prevent the new force of fascism seeing to his downfall (so yet again mindful of the external threats fuelled by his fear).

In agreement with this idea is the fact that from members of the central committee in 1934 by 1938 70 percent of them were dead, if we link this back to the as fore mentioned idea that Stalin planned the murder of Kirov, we see an undisputable depiction of Stalin's terror unleashed on the party and because of the former it was fuelled by his fear and contrite of potential downfall at the hands of others and he did see an apparent threat in the form of members such as Kirov.

In stark contrast, it cannot be regarded that Stalin's fear and suspicion were the sole contributor to the extent of the terror; Stalin's very personality is notably a dominant factor to the outbreak of the terror. Stalin's cult of personality refers to how he dominated every aspect of Soviet life, he was no

longer a leader but an embodiment of the nation itself- communism was now what Stalin said and did.

One famous Russian politics of the time Khrushchev who went on to lead the soviet union during the cold war and who had worked with Stalin stated that “Stalin is hope, Stalin is expectation.... Stalin is our victory”. From this account it begins to enlighten us to how Stalin must have been a rather self-absorbed man, this is displayed by firstly on Stalin’s 50th birthday in 1929, a huge all day parade and celebrations were held where tanks and soldiers were deployed to march through the streets and on may day celebrations planes flew overhead with portraits of Stalin.

Through this depiction of how his cult of personality presented him as this man who highly thought of himself it presents how he idealised himself as the hero of the revolution, a genius who alone could take Russia forward to socialism and effect the transformation of the country, and who therefore could not be thwarted.

Not only do these ideas contrast such that he was fearful, because as he thought of himself in such prestige and being so powerful he had no reason to fear and consequently this could not have been the reason for his terror, but it also provides an explanation to why he had to get rid of the Bolsheviks who knew that he was not this all-encompassing hero, because they would still have Lenin’s testament in their minds where Stalin was denounced by the man the Russian people saw as a God, so they would not accept him in the light he saw himself and may try to thwart him therefore this led to his purges because he wished to maintain this cult of personality which resembled him as a demi God and it was in such interests security that he

purge the party of either those who may disagree or those mindful of times of the power struggle where the testament was revealed.

However, Stalin's personality is said to account for his suspicion which may have led to the terror as he was described as being deeply suspicious, verging on paranoia. Referring back to Khrushchev he reported that Stalin was ' a very distrustful man, sickly suspicious, seeing everywhere about him " enemies", " double dealers", and " spies". Combining with this, the suicide of his wife on the 8th November 1932 which will have convinced him even more that those around him would betray him because the women closed to him has resorted to killing herself which he will have seen as her rejecting his ideals and thus betraying him, it meant his personality became deeply suspicious.

So although his personality does partially portray ideas that it was Stalin's own ego which fuelled the terror, there was definitely an element of suspicion because of past events and how his peers regarded it as being natural to his personality. Alternatively, the terror can also be seen to mimic the cunningness Stalin showed at the time of the power struggle where he outwitted his opposition and thus eliminate them leading him to gain control of the communist party. First off this can be shown by the fact he wished to keep the party under his full control so he could therefore carry out his policies and edicts without question, keeping the party in a constant state of insecurity (who would be arrested or denounced next?) was a way of keeping control.

This can be seen most by the nomenklatura around the central committee: allowed Stalin to keep his lieutenants guessing about whom he would adopt

as 'his people'. So the purges of the military allowed for this, so through this it shows Stalin's cunningness being a reason for the purges because he used them to keep those higher up in line. However, yet again this can be seen to also mirror the fact in how Stalin felt threatened by the growing opposition to him in the 1930's thus it portrays how fear is still a root element to the purges because despite his cunningness being apparent it still all comes back down to his fear as being the intrinsic reason for the terror.

Contradicting this still is how Stalin's cunningness and intellect can be seen to have instigated the purges because of the economic difficulties the Soviet Union faced at the time. Production figures from the five year plans were beginning to level off and fall behind schedule, there had been a bad harvest in 1936 (just before the start of the terror) and Stalin's management of the economy had been criticised heavily. Stalin through the purges of the people adopted scapegoats for these failings and allowed him to pin problems on so called 'wreckers'. Thereby Stalin was also able to shake up managers and workers which made them work much harder as they did not want to face accusation - this tied in with the Stakhanovite campaign of 1936.

The terror allowed Stalin to increase workers to be more productive and encourage them to be Stakhanovite's and demand more tools and materials to increase production rates, Through this we can see how the terror amongst the workers was fuelled by Stalin's cunningness to manipulate the workers into working much harder and reeking greater results for Russia, so it would seem that part of the reason for the terror is in fact drawn from Stalin's intellect and cunningness supposed to the fear and suspicion that

drove the purges in other sectors. Overall Stalin's fears and suspicions heavily contributed to the terror within the USSR from 1936-39. It was the fear of losing control of the party to numerous factors such as fascism and rejection of his ideology which led him to purge the party and military.

Although the purge of the workers is prominently a result of Stalin's cunningness to manipulate them in order to gain greater results in an attempt to meet his five year plans, it is the suspicion which we saw evident after the murder of Kirov that led him to purge his own party first of all and the fear of external and internal threats which led him to purge the military. In conclusion fear and suspicion heavily contributed to the extent of the terror from 1936-39 as it is so evident from the party and militarily, but it still must be acknowledged that it was not the sole reason as Stalin did cause some terror amongst workers as a result of his intellect not fear, however overall the major factor which led to the most influential and majority of purges was in fact his fear and suspicions that dwelled with his personality and led to vindictive paranoia.