

# Stalins role in the purges of the 1930s history essay



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“ Blind chance rules a man’s life in this country of ours. Fear by night, and a feverish effort by day to pretend enthusiasm for a system of lies, was the permanent condition.”[1]NKVD officer, who found himself suddenly placed under arrest.

There are very few people who are informed about Stalin’s USSR who would claim that he had no involvement in the purges of the 1930s. This was a period of terror as the quotation above intends to show, a systematic and organised mission to rid the Soviet Union of people who posed a threat to Stalin’s leadership or Communism. As McDermott states Stalin’s over-all responsibility for the purges is now a non question, instead this essay sets out to evaluate Stalin’s role in the design and implementation in the purges. Through the analysis of the totalitarian view and the revisionist view this essay will attempt to come to a conclusion whether Stalin was in control of the purges. Was he as Tucker suggests the ‘ terror’s director general’[2]or was he a ‘ relatively weak and panicky leader responding ad hoc to events as much as he initiates them.’[3]

The debate surrounding the purges has created a wealth of debate among Historians and academics. As a result the term ‘ purge’ has come to mean a wide variety of things. The Communist Party define the purge or chitska as “ the periodic screenings of the ranks of the party.”[4]Clearly this is a process not just confined to Stalin’s era. Indeed the communists had used terror since the Civil War in 1917 to implement their will. Under Stalin violence was initiated on a mass scale to enforce collectivisation, however it was only when he attempted to cement his position and modernise the country in the 1930’s that the two (violence on a mass scale and terror) were brought

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together. This considered, the term ' purge' is too broad to analyse properly and therefore I intend to focus this essay on Stalin's role in this period of increased violence, beginning with the murder of Kirov in 1934 and ending with the Great Terror in 1939 although reference to events before this may be necessary.

The Revisionist school of thought, although existing for a while, has mainly grown out the increase in source material available due to the period of Glasnost (Late 1980's) under Gorbachev and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union (1989). This has created a retrospective view of the purges, looking to review the situation highlighting the chaotic nature of Soviet rule and the bottom up nature of some reform. This is a direct challenge to the argument put forward by those of Totalitarian persuasion who argue that the purges were an outcome of the nature of the Communist Party and were controlled by the General Secretary, Stalin. This viewpoint is to a large extent based on the memoirs of those who suffered at the hands of the purges or were in the Communist Party. The evocative images presented within these sources has created a cult of personality of Stalin that he was in control if not totally responsible then completely aware of the events that took place 1934-1939.

This essay will critically examine the arguments of advocates of both these schools of thought. Through the analysis of source material and events which took place during the period 1934-1939 and using the death of Sergei Kirov as a specific comparison for the two theories, this essay will attempt to draw a rounded conclusion as to the role Stalin played.

Totalitarian historians such as Conquest, Tucker and Suny argue that the period under Stalin was one of central control. Policies and reform were created at the top and implemented without complaint due to the state of fear people had lived in all their lives. This was not a new system of rule however. The structure and ideology of the Bolshevik revolution had laid the foundations for a totalitarian leadership. Robert Tucker suggests in *Stalin in Power* that Stalin's period of rule was merely a continuation of an 'autocratic, centralized, bureaucratic regime which had existed since the nineteenth century.'<sup>[5]</sup> This centralized state of rule was confirmed through the strength of Bolshevik ideology. Chris Ward writes that 'since Bolshevism's leaders embodied the 'truth'...they were always right.'<sup>[6]</sup> If these source examples are seen to be accurate then it would seem logical that in this centralized state where direction came from the top, that Stalin was indeed paramount to the design and implementation of the purges in the 1930's.

Stalin's removal of all political opposition is staggering. Of the 139 members and candidates of the Central committee elected at the congress of victors in 1934 98 were arrested and shot (mostly between 1937 and 1938). Perhaps more shocking is the statistic that only 59 out of the 2000 delegates that met at the 17th party congress in 1934 met at the 18th party congress in 1939. This shows a clear objective, to ensure the 'bosses' total control and move the party elite away from the idea of shared leadership, which had been a feature of the party in the 1920's, towards a party in which Stalin could trust and manipulate the members. The creation and implementation of the show trials in 1936 were a deliberate means to remove opponents

within the party whilst creating a belief amongst the people that socialism was under threat. Stalin's attendance at many of these trials shows the extent to which he was involved in the elimination of the party elite. Suny suggests that 'the dictator's ambition and morbid suspiciousness'[7] was to blame, and this does go some way to explaining the climate of fear and paranoia which existed and therefore why it was necessary to remove the old Bolsheviks and eventually to carry out the great terror.

However to what extent did Stalin pre-plan the purges? There is some truth in Getty's claims that the purges were not the result of long term planning or of a 'well prepared and long-standing Master design'[8] as some totalitarian supporters suggest. This said it would be incorrect to view the increase in victims of the purges (1937) as ad hoc or Stalin 'blindly lashing out at perceived threats.'[9] The NKVD order issued by the Politburo in July 1937 can be seen as an example that the hierarchies of the CP including Stalin were targeting a specific group of people (namely the Kulaks, criminals and other anti-soviet elements[10]) and as McDermott highlights it suggests a certain amount of premeditation. Furthermore this cannot be seen as the first use of extreme violence by Stalin. Repression had been a tool of Stalin for some time shown by his demand for the execution of the engineers in Shakhty (1928) and his more fervent intent to 'eliminate the Kulaks as a class.' Again McDermott provides a strong argument suggesting that the 'framework of mass terror was already in place before the Great Terror in 1937.'[11] Stalin therefore would appear to be in control of the purges. His previous use of terror to suppress opposition during the five year plans and

collectivisation would seem to suggest that the purges were a continuation of policy to suppress possible threats by a regime in control.

Oleg Khlevniuk makes a strong argument that Stalin was in complete control of the purges. Describing it as ' unquestionable an action directed from the centre, planned and administrated from Moscow.' [12] We have already discussed Stalin's paranoia with opposition. Khlevniuk , however, suggests that in 1936 Stalin had a genuine fear of a fifth column emerging. The purges therefore were a planned and calculated strike against anyone who may form a threat. Stalin's actions were almost certainly influenced by the growing Nazi party and their aggressive foreign policy. In order to prevent ' double dealers' in a war which must have seemed likely it was necessary to remove all threats. Khlevniuk goes further suggesting that Stalin was aware and even wished for the excesses that would emerge as a result of the great purges. It seems acceptable to believe that Stalin would have known the fear the arrests would create and the loyalty that would emerge as a result. Here lies some historiographical debate. Was this a continuation of policy or a result of a wave of fear? Khlevniuk sees the massive increase in arrests of 1937 as a sudden change in policy compared to the relative calm of 1933-1936. Indeed except for the chitska following Kirov's murder (1934) the aggressive policies which came to represent 1937 and onwards were absent. This would surely suggest that the great purges were not pre-planned and Stalin was to a certain extent lashing out in fear. In contrast ' David Shearer puts forward the view that the Great purges were the culmination of the regimes attempt to police society in the 1930's.' [13] Instead of a sudden attack it was a planned policy escalation by the centre to remove those who

threatened the CP. Other historians such as Roberta Manning disagree with this, preferring the opinion that the ' Communist party's tendency to believe any threat'[14]combined with the conspiracy of spies operating within the USSR led to a rapid change in policy, namely the great purge.

The use of published memoirs and oral testimonies (on which the totalitarian theory uses a great deal) although useful does create great scope for biased works. Indeed the totalitarian model is to a certain extent damaged by this. Many totalitarian historians were writing during the height of the Cold war where Anglo-American feelings towards the USSR were at their most hostile. At this point very few historians had spent time in the Soviet Union failing to gain an adequate understanding of Communism and as a result a tendency emerged that Western scholars wanted to portray Stalin's regime as tyrannical. Similarly, Eastern scholars writing at the time wished to emphasise the benefits of the purges in removing enemies of the state, perhaps due to censorship or fear of writing anything different. This reliance on primary sources can be seen to be detrimental to the totalitarianist interpretations. Due to the lack of information available to academics there works often focused on the top-down elitist nature of the CPSU and as a result fail to provide a balanced analysis of the purges.

Thus far this essay has examined the idea of the CP being a centrally organised organ implementing policy on a controlled state from above. Within which Stalin played a dominant role. However at this stage several questions exist. This theory assumes that there was no input from the citizens of the USSR which is debatable. Furthermore it assumes that the CP was the efficient machine that the totalitarians suggest which again is <https://assignbuster.com/stalins-role-in-the-purges-of-the-1930s-history-essay/>

debatable. We have just seen several historians' views of how the great terror began, through fear of opposition. Does this provide an acceptable answer? Perhaps not, with the massive numbers of victims it is difficult to see how a directive from Stalin could lead to the deliberate arrest, exile and execution of so many. A large number it would seem without political motive. The revisionist school of thought takes the argument that although Stalin was instrumental he was not the 'director general.'

Indeed studies 'of economic, intellectual and political topics in the Stalin years have emphasized the fragmentation, indecision and internal struggles within the leadership.[15]Getty emphasises this by suggesting that 'in general researchers on the 1920's and 40's have been struck by the ad hoc and voluntarist nature of Stalinist policy.'[16]With the benefit of the newly opened Soviet archives theories which highlight the chaotic nature of the CP and the bottom-up nature of some reforms are gathering weight. It should be mentioned that Stalin's role in the execution of key Bolsheviks (Bukharin, Rykov, Zinoviev, Trotsky and Kamenev) in order to cement his position within the Soviet Union are not being questioned. In this area the revisionists seem to echo the totalitarian arguments. However Stalin does not always seem to have been the man making final decisions. Just as Hitler wished Germans to 'work towards the fuehrer' Stalin appears to have given his lieutenants 'policymaking powers as well as executive ones.'[17]The post-modernist approach of Chris Ward is very persuasive in arguing that the friction which existed between Moscow and local party officials was a key feature in shaping Stalinist policy. This takes the focus away from the centralized system we have discussed to the existence of so called 'mini-



Stalin's'[18]where local government officials made decisions and implemented policies separate from Moscow. This new focus on the role played by local actors supports Getty's claim of a fragmented party. Going further Getty suggests that for local leaders ' persecution was a tool of rural administration.'[19]If this is the case then it would appear local leaders shaped the purges a great deal, taking control away from Stalin and the CP.

It is unusual in any society for everyone to be loyal and act in accordance with the wishes of the leader. Stalin's USSR was no different. Throughout this period local officials ' helped create and shape the operation'[20]perhaps leading to the opinion that policy may not have been entirely top down. Getty is of the opinion that Stalinist policy was more often unleashed rather than administrated, and that these quickly descended into chaos. This view is a long way from Suny's belief of Stalin's ' absolute grip on power.'[21]Getty does not mean to make little of Stalin's role in the purges, as mentioned it is in no doubt that he wished these to go ahead as his telegram to local officials in July 1937 advising them to deal with criminals existing within the provinces shows. However Getty does show another side to the Soviet system, one of chaotic decision making where no-one was really sure what Stalin wanted. In this system it is difficult to see how the great terror could have been planned a long time in advance by Stalin.

As mentioned the totalitarian model fails to acknowledge the role of citizens during the great purge (1937-1939). An area of contention revisionist historians such as Sheila Fitzpatrick are keen to publicise. Fitzpatrick has received a huge amount of criticism for her theory of ' upward mobility.'

However this theory provides a very interesting opinion, which to a certain <https://assignbuster.com/stalins-role-in-the-purges-of-the-1930s-history-essay/>

extent helps to explain the climate of denunciation which existed in 1937. She suggests in Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union that Stalin's policies carried genuine support. Indeed in the Soviet Union there was large number of ambitious youths and as Hosking states ' Doubtless many of them were envious of their seniors. The purges opened for them dizzy opportunities. A simple donos (denunciation) sufficed.'[22]This quotation throws a spanner in the totalitarian works. This information suggests that Stalin's will wasn't imposed but by a proportion accepted. Of course it is understandable that in any situation certain people will benefit but Fitzpatrick's argument demotes Stalin to as Gleason suggests an ' ordinary leader,'[23]which can be dangerous. It would appear that the Great terror had a dynamic of its own, one Stalin couldn't fully control. Indeed Hosking again hints that the process of denunciation was out of control. The fear of being denounced was enough to ensure that ' no party or NKVD official would run the risk of being accused of ' lack of vigilance.'[24]Surely this suggests that although Stalin and the hierarchies of the CP may have initiated or suggested a purge it was the subsequent state of fear that led to the great terror. A climate of denounce before you were denounced existed.

However one does need to be very careful when discussing these arguments. As Fitzpatrick and Getty found many people strongly criticised these opinions putting them on a similar level to holocaust deniers. As Kenez suggests, ' revisionists deny the significance of the terror and absolve the leadership from responsibility to mass murder.'[25]However this shouldn't be seen to be the case, the revisionist debate which we have looked at doesn't put the responsibility of the purges in the hands of the party members or for

that matter with the NKVD. As we have seen they fully acknowledge the role of Stalin with the downfall of the old Bolsheviks and their opinion that division and chaos existed within the USSR doesn't lessen the role of Stalin. Despite this the comment of Stalin being classed as an 'ordinary leader' is dangerous. Revisionists have been accused of not focusing on Stalin's role enough in the past and this should be taken into account when studying revisionist documents.

The murder of Sergei Kirov on is one of the most recognised events in the build up to the terror of the late 1930's. The assassination of such a prominent member of the central committee has caused an ongoing debate; was the murder a result of a disaffected former party member or was it ordered by Stalin in response to Kirov's increasing popularity? The murder provides an opportunity to directly compare the arguments of both the revisionist and totalitarian schools of thought. Kirov's murder is often seen as the start of the period of intense terror as Martin McCauley dramatically states in *Stalin and Stalinism* 'it set in motion a chain of events which resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of people.' [26]

Just like many events which occurred during Stalin's leadership the murder of Kirov is shrouded in uncertainty. On the 1st December 1934 Leonid Nikolaev shot Kirov outside his office in the Smolny, in Leningrad. Although no one at the time, or for that matter the immediate years, after accused Stalin of the murder a strong suggestion has emerged highlighting Stalin's involvement.

Totalitarian historians such as Geoffrey Hosking argue that Nikolaev was 'probably acting on instructions from Stalin.' [27] This argument is strongly supported by the assassins arrest prior to the murder, where he was apprehended and released by the NKVD with the revolver, a pass into the building and a map detailing Kirov's movements. Though not conclusive evidence it does seem strange to allow Nikolaev to go free without charging him. Furthermore a motive exists due to Kirov's threat to Stalin's leadership. Sergei, the main political rival to Stalin had made significant gains in support made apparent by the results of the 17th party congress (1934). [28] More poignantly Kirov had been approached by members of the party to stand for the post of general-secretary, which he reported to Stalin. With this blatant threat of opposition and Stalin's previous use of terror to remove such threats it is understandable to believe that Stalin wanted to get rid of Kirov. Furthermore the reforms brought in immediately after the murder to speed up investigations, trials and sentencing would suggest that Stalin was using the murder to further his own objectives. Conquest supports this view suggesting that 'to kill Kirov would remove the immediate obstacle, and at the same time create an atmosphere of violence in which enemies...could be wiped out.' [29]

Again the historiographical debate continues with revisionists fervently opposing the view that Stalin either ordered or was aware of the assassination plot. Immediately after the murder the actions of the party strongly suggest surprise and panic. Stalin's quick reaction to speed up the investigation merely reflects the surprise of the event and the climate of fear and paranoia which existed at the time. Getty suggests that the measure

was not surprising and it would have seemed 'incongruous if the leadership had not acted in such a way.'[30]Furthermore Getty provides interesting evidence in the form of a list of people who fail to accuse Stalin. Khrushchev, one of the names, could have easily have levelled the blame at the 'boss' under his process of de-Stalinization. Trotsky as well fails to accuse Stalin, instead suggesting the attack was carried out by 'miss-guided oppositionists.'[31]The failure of both of these critics to implicate Stalin with the murder of Kirov would seem to suggest his innocence.

The Totalitarian view that the murder allowed Stalin to sweep away further opposition can be countered by the time delay between the murder of Kirov and the first show trial two years later. If Stalin had planned the assassination then the trial and execution of Kamenev and Zinoviev followed by the other old Bolsheviks would have occurred much sooner. The large elapse in time would suggest that the murder of Kirov caught Stalin by surprise and was therefore unable to capitalise immediately.

From the evidence presented the revisionist interpretation of events leading up to and following the murder of Kirov in 1934 seems more likely, although due to lack of information one cannot be certain of Stalin's innocence. This case study has provided a direct comparison between the two schools of thought and the general patterns of what each suggest occurred in the 1930's. One key theme that has emerged is the use of unreliable material. Totalitarian theorists mainly writing before the wealth of source information made available in the 1980's rely too heavily on third hand evidence and gossip. Revisionists on the other hand writing with the benefit of time

produce a more retrospective view which is more realistic and rounded and as a result more useful to the historian.

Although this debate has failed to produce any new conclusions it has highlighted the conflicted arguments on the role of Stalin in the purges of the 1930's. Through the analysis of both the revisionist and totalitarian schools of thought it is clear that a great deal of uncertainty still exists. However recent revisionist works provide a much more rounded and persuasive argument as to Stalin's role. As stated at the beginning of this essay it remains undeniable that Stalin was central in the creation of the state of fear and terror which existed in the 1930's. However as the revisionist theory shows too much weight has been given to the idea that the totalitarian nature of the USSR made the purges inevitable. It is difficult to agree with the totalitarian view that the murder of Kirov and the great terror was pre-planned. Despite terror and violence being consistently used during this period the great terror appears to have been a dramatic change in policy caused by the fear of internal and external opposition. The revisionists avoid getting bogged down in the top down nature of politics within the USSR and as a result are able to see the significance of the role of the citizens in the purges and the chaotic leadership which existed within the politburo. Both of which were out of Stalin's control. Therefore whilst the revisionist argument isn't without fault it uses a much great range of sources to broaden traditional views and create new areas for debate, and as a result provides a clearer understanding of Stalin's role in the purges.