

# Chapter 10

## The Terror

Source 1



Source 2

He [Stalin] helped draft the indictments of Marshal Tukhachevski and his fellow military defendants...and personally ordered death sentences for them. [Indeed he signed numerous death sentences, including a record 3167 on 12 December 1938.]...He sponsored the persecution of his enemies' innocent family members. In the fall of 1937, he approved a plan to summarily shoot tens of thousands of 'anti-Soviet elements' and to establish target figures for the shootings by province.

Arch Getty 'The politics of repression revisited', in *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, 1993

◀ Stalin with six year old Engelsina Chezkova. Engelsina's father was shot as a spy and her mother died after being denounced as 'an enemy of the people'.

### Think about

- Why was this picture often reproduced in the USSR?

### Introduction

By the end of the 1930s images of Stalin were to be seen everywhere throughout the Soviet Union. Source 1 is a famous image of the *vozhd* (the boss) as he was known at the time. Cities had been renamed in his honour, for example Stalingrad and Stalino. His birthday was celebrated as a major national event. The press and the propaganda machine of the State produced from 1935 onwards 'a saturation of visual images of Stalin physically close to the people' (S. Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*). Much evidence points to the fact that Stalin was both genuinely respected and popular amongst many ordinary people, not simply members of the Communist Party.

However, in Source 2 Arch Getty lists some examples of Stalin's known personal involvement in the murder of his own people. In 1937–1938 alone perhaps as many as 1 million Russians were shot without proper trial, many drawn from the ranks of the party but also including some more senior figures. Others were investigated and 'purged' from the party. Many former leaders of the party were subjected to staged show trials in which they confessed to 'impossible' crimes, such as the murder of Lenin and plotting to overthrow the USSR with Germany and other capitalist countries. For some historians these two images of Stalin are easy to explain. While patiently destroying his own enemies and establishing a personal dictatorship, Stalin tried to maintain the support of the population by a propaganda campaign, presenting himself as the benign father of the nation.

### Key questions

- Why were there repeated purges in the Communist Party?
- Was there real opposition to the regime in the 1930s?
- Who killed Sergei Kirov?
- Why did the regime put on trial some of its leading figures?
- Why did the 'great purge' happen in 1937–1938?
- Who was responsible for 'the purges'?

### Why did the party purge its members?

Purging, expelling unsuitable members from the party, was not a new phenomenon in the time of Stalin's leadership of the USSR. As we have seen in earlier chapters, party members enjoyed considerable benefits; membership was the only way individuals could hope to have any influence on the policies of the government either at local or national level. Inevitably, therefore, the party attracted many people who were not really committed Communists. Trotsky had called these people 'radishes,' red on the outside but white inside. Since it was accepted that the party had a historic role to play in the development of communism, not only in Russia but also throughout the world, the leadership had to ensure that its members were loyal, committed and set a suitable example to the rest of the population. The first major purge (*chistka*) of the party had happened in 1921, when the Civil War had been won but the party still faced opposition in the country. One-quarter of party members was expelled at this time.

Historians fundamentally disagree about what purging was about. For some, purging was ridding the party of undesirables, lazy members, drunks etc. For them, this was simply good housekeeping. Others think that purging was one of the methods Stalin, like Lenin before him, used to rid himself of critics, potential rivals and their supporters. It is possible, of course, that both these views might be correct!

### Note

The word 'purge' is not recognized in Russia. Instead the Russians describe these events as '*chistki*,' (singular *chistka*) literally cleansings.



## Stalin's purges

The 1924 Lenin Enrolment (begun after his death) brought about a great expansion of the party. The CPSU under the NEP had accepted some measure of capitalism. In 1928 the policy of the government changed, and the attack on *kulaks* and *nepmen* began; the class war was sharpened. It was not surprising, in view of this radical change of direction, that it should be accompanied by another purge of the party. This also of course coincided with the final defeat and removal from influence of the leaders of the Left, Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev, as well as the first attacks on the Right, Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky.

The *chistka* of 1928–1930 was run by local party branches. Each member had to justify his membership after a process of self-criticism before his colleagues.

### Source 3



As a result, about 11 per cent of members were 'cleansed' from the party. Evidence of dissent within the party surfaced in 1932. Therefore, in 1933 the party began a second *chistka*, which was to last two years. This time it was administered from Moscow by a Party Control Commission under Politburo member Kaganovitch, a sign of the importance with which the party viewed the matter. Here Victor Kravchenko describes the purge procedure he experienced in 1933:

### Source 4

The Commission members sat behind a red-draped table on a platform decorated with portraits of Politburo members and slogans; a bust of Stalin, banked with flowers, held the most prominent position. The Communist to be examined was called to the platform. He handed over his party card to the Chairman and began a recital of his life history. It was a political and spiritual strip act ... It was always better to bring up errors yourself.... 'concealing' anything from the party compounded the gravity of the crime concealed. After the confessional, the purgee was questioned by members of the Commission and by people in the audience. He was reminded of omissions and tricked into contradictions. Comrades spoke up in his favour or against him.

Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom*, 1947

### Note

CPSU is The Communist Party of the USSR.

### Think about

- ▶ What impression does this photograph give of the atmosphere in a local *chistka* meeting?

◀ A *chistka* on an Uzbek collective farm in 1930.

### Think about

- ▶ What was Kravchenko's opinion of the purge procedure?

NB. Kravchenko fled the USSR in the Second World War and wrote his book in exile.

- ▶ Does this procedure seem to you unfair?

### Think about

- ▶ What does Source 5 suggest was the Central Committee's main concern in the *chistki*?
- ▶ Does this source support the view that the *chistki* were primarily intended to remove political enemies?

### Source 6

Non-political reasons	76%
Being spies or linked to spies	1%
Being Zinovievites	3%
Being former White Guards or <i>kulaks</i>	20%

### Activity

- 1 How do you think this continuous purging appeared to a rank and file party member?
- 2 How do you think the purges appeared to a member of the Party Control Commission?

### Source 7

Dinner for the workers  
First course – kerosene soup  
Second course – fresh moss  
Third course – suede pudding

Sign in the Kirov works in  
October 1935

### Timeline

#### 'Industrial' trials 1928–1934

Shakhty	1928
'The Industrial Party'	1930
Mensheviks	1931
Metro-Vickers	1933

By 1935 a further 20 per cent had been ejected from the party. But this process also showed that local records were in a total shambles, so the party ordered that all party documents should be checked again. The 1935 Party Plenum (a full meeting of the Central Committee) allowed new admissions into the party, which it had earlier stopped:

### Source 5

...as long as such a shameful chaos prevails in the registration of party members, until order has been established in our party house...In so doing the plenum of the Central Committee once again warns all party organizations...that in admitting each new member the party rules are to be strictly observed, and that bearing in mind the errors revealed during the verification of party documents, the party ranks are not to be clogged up with persons who have been admitted at random.

In 1936, as a last attempt to restore some kind of order, all party members were required in person to exchange their cards for new ones. While this process was taking place, hundreds of party officials were examined and many expelled. Moscow obviously did not believe that these officials were carrying out their orders.

This resulted in 9 per cent more party members being ousted. The reasons given are instructive (see Source 6).

This meant that about 40,000 party members had been expelled for political opposition, past or present. How many of these were real critics of the regime in the 1930s is very much open to question. The Party Control Commission called on all members to be more vigilant, and to check future would-be members more closely.

## Was there real opposition to Stalin's authority?

Historians are divided as to whether there was real, organized opposition or whether this existed only in the lurid imaginings of Stalin and his police.

There was widespread grumbling about the regime. Given the harshness of collectivization and the Five Year Plans, it would have been amazing if it had been otherwise. We have seen earlier that those attempting to force peasants into the collective farms were sometimes met with violence. However, this opposition was episodic and at a low level; it was not directed at the central government, though it obviously worried the party leadership.

## Industrial sabotage

There was a series of industrial trials, in which engineers and technicians were charged with sabotage and wrecking. The first and most famous of these was the Shakhty trial of 1928. More than 50 were arrested and put on trial for alleged sabotage and spying in the Shakhty mines in the Ukraine. The only evidence was the prisoners' own confessions. Events in the courtroom revealed that these had been gained only after severe pressure. Eleven were sentenced to death, though six had their sentences commuted for co-operating with the police. As we saw in the previous chapter, in 1933 the government made it a criminal offence for a factory to produce substandard goods and imprisoned managers and directors of plants as a result. Those responsible were accused, as in the Shakhty trial, of sabotage and wrecking.



Do these arrests and the later industrial trials provide us with evidence of real opposition? Certainly at a time when the Soviet Union was pushing to meet new and impossible targets in production, persecuting 'bourgeois experts' does seem counter-productive. It now seems clear that these trials were designed for propaganda purposes – to ensure vigilance, to inspire greater efforts and to unite the people behind the regime. It is perhaps more indicative of the state of mind and anxieties of the leadership than an indication of Soviet reality.

### Political opposition

The 1920s had been a time of division and dispute from the Politburo right down to the rank and file members. By 1930, however, all the former members of Lenin's Politburo other than Stalin had been squeezed out. They had all since recanted their former views and been to some extent rehabilitated. Only Trotsky remained a distant threat, living in exile. On the face of it there seemed a greater degree of solidarity within the party than at any time since 1917. Did the realities inside the party match up to this apparent atmosphere of calm and shared ambitions for the future?

Since Trotsky's exile in January 1929 he had not remained silent on Russian affairs. He began his own Russian magazine, the *Bulletin of the Opposition*, copies of which found their way into Russia. The *Bulletin* was strongly critical of the regime and of Stalin, and was read by the Politburo. In November 1932 the *Bulletin* carried a top secret Soviet report on the USSR economy. Trotsky still had many former political friends and supporters inside the Soviet Union – and in the upper echelons of the Communist Party. We now know that Trotsky was still in touch with some of them. His son, Lev Sedov, acted for him in Berlin and in 1932 wrote to his father that an anti-Stalin bloc had been set up, explaining 'it embraces the Zinovievites, the Sten-Lominadze group and the Trotskyites'. Trotsky himself wrote to the Politburo asking to be readmitted into the USSR, threatening agitation inside the party if he was not.

In 1932 OGPU, the secret police, discovered another attack on the direction of policy and of Stalin in particular. 'The Riutin Platform' was a 200 page document which was secretly passed around amongst some of the party leaders. In it Riutin, a former member of the party Central Committee, attacked the forced collectivization programme and demanded more openness and toleration in the party. The document, properly called 'Stalin and the Crisis of the Proletarian Dictatorship', claimed to be the manifesto of the League of Marxists-Leninists.

#### Source 8

A regime of unheard of terror and colossal spying, achieved through an extraordinarily centralized and ramified gigantic apparatus, concentrating in its hands all the material resources...this is the main basis of Stalin's dictatorship...[Stalin] has placed himself on a pedestal like an infallible pope and cannot admit either the criminality of his policies or even the slightest mistake...The most evil enemy of the party and the proletarian dictatorship, the most evil counter-revolutionary and provocateur could not have carried out the work of destroying the party and socialist construction better than Stalin has done...the leadership of Stalin must be finished as quickly as possible.

#### Note

##### The Politburo in 1924

Bukharin, Kamenev, Stalin, Rykov, Trotsky, Zinoviev

#### Note

Lominadze had been regional secretary for the Trans-Caucasus, but was expelled from the Central Committee for 'right-opposition'. He committed suicide in 1935.

#### Think about

- ▶ What did Riutin mean by 'socialist construction'?
- ▶ Why might many in the leadership of the party have been shocked by this document?

NB Consider what was happening in the USSR at the time.

### Biography

#### Sergei Kirov

Kirov was head of the Azerbaijani Central Committee in 1920. He became a candidate member of the USSR Central Committee in 1922 and a full member in 1923. In 1926 he became First Secretary of the Leningrad Party after Zinoviev's removal and a Politburo member. He voted against the death penalty for Riutin in 1932. Some said he had good looks and charisma as well as liberal views.

#### Further reading

The evidence about Kirov's death and events that followed is contradictory. Thurston, in *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia*, 1996, gives a thorough and interesting analysis of the evidence.

#### Think about

- ▶ Why did the NKVD link Trotsky with Zinoviev and Kamenev?

Clue – look back at the events of the 1920s in Chapter 8.

In 1934 there are some indications of further resistance to Stalin's authority. According to some sources, pressure was put on Kirov to take over Stalin's post as General Secretary of the Communist Party. It is argued that Kirov was a moderate in the party leadership and opposed the worst excesses of collectivization and the Five Year Plans. When he declined the offer, the Congress then abolished the post of General Secretary, making Stalin one of four secretaries. When the elections were held for the party Central Committee, allegedly 166 out of over 1200 delegates did not vote for Stalin. This was allegedly covered up by destroying the offending ballot papers.

### Kirov's assassination?

On 1 December 1934 the CPSU was thrown into a frenzy of anxiety. Outside his office in the party headquarters at the Smolny Institute in Leningrad, Politburo member and Leningrad party boss Sergei Kirov was shot dead. The assassin was immediately apprehended, Leonid Nikolaev, a disgruntled party member. How had he managed to evade the strict security surrounding party leaders? Was he acting alone or with others?

Stalin acted with great speed on hearing of the assassination. A decree was announced on 1 December giving the NKVD sweeping powers to deal with 'terrorist organizations and terrorist acts':

#### Source 9

##### Emergency decree summary

- 1 Investigations to be completed in 10 days.
- 2 Military tribunals to try the suspects.
- 3 No defence or prosecution lawyers allowed.
- 4 No appeals were permitted.
- 5 Executions were to be carried out immediately.

Stalin went by overnight train with senior figures from Moscow to Leningrad, and personally interrogated Nikolaev. The assassin was shot without trial, and Kirov's bodyguard was killed in a traffic accident while being taken for questioning. The NKVD announced the existence of a Trotskyite centre in Leningrad. Party members were ordered to guard against Trotskyites and Zinovievites. Many were arrested and deported from Leningrad, some of them Kirov's closest supporters. Zinoviev and Kamenev were arrested in January 1935 and charged with organizing a 'Moscow Centre' to murder Kirov. They pleaded guilty to 'political and moral responsibility,' though denying any involvement in the murder itself, and were sentenced to long prison sentences. In 1935 the Society of Old Bolsheviks and the Society of Former Political Prisoners were both disbanded. Both these organizations enjoyed considerable status in the CPSU.



## Who killed Kirov?

The death of Kirov is a key incident for understanding events in the USSR in the 1930s. If Stalin was behind the murder of one of his closest associates, the view that Stalin was the main motive force behind all the other deaths of the decade seems plausible.

If on the other hand Kirov, a member of the Politburo, was assassinated by a malcontent in the party, then perhaps the purges in the party and country appear logical and justified. The evidence is not absolutely conclusive. What do you think?

### Source 10

The latest attempt to come to grips with the Kirov assassination was the work of Yakovlev's Politburo Commission ...the working team concluded that 'in this affair, no materials objectively support Stalin's participation or NKVD participation in the organization and carrying out of Kirov's murder.' The team's report opened some rather large holes in the popular version. According to oral tradition, Leningrad NKVD Deputy Chief Zaporozhets had approached Nikolaev, put him up to the crime, and provided the weapon and bullets. It now seems Zaporozhets had not been in Leningrad for months before the killing and that he never met Nikolaev. Nikolaev had owned the revolver...since 1918...he had purchased the bullets used in the crime legally...Nikolaev was not detained three times while carrying a gun and following Kirov. Actually he had been stopped only once...A frustrated *apparatchik* [civil servant] with delusions of grandeur and lifelong chronic medical problems, Nikolaev wrote in his diary that he wanted to be a great revolutionary... Anyone with a party card could be admitted to the third floor [of the Smolny HQ – Nikolaev had one]. Neither the bodyguard nor his closest collaborators expected Kirov to come to Smolny that day; he had telephoned and said he was staying at home. Kirov arrived unexpectedly and ran into the...assassin, who was in Smolny...to secure a pass to the upcoming party meeting. The assassin and his victim met by accident in Smolny; Nikolaev was not stalking Kirov.

Arch Getty, *The Politics of Repression Revisited*, 1993

### Source 11

Kirov, a member of the Politburo and virtual dictator of North Russia, fell dead... Stalin and Voroshilov rushed to Leningrad. According to stories circulated in Party circles, Stalin personally supervised the intensive cross-examination. No outsider, of course, could know what he learned, but from his subsequent behaviour it can be surmised that Stalin was alarmed to the point of panic.

Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom*, 1947

### Source 12

Kirov was an obstacle, and he represented a mood hostile to any increase in Stalin's power...Stalin's decision was that Kirov had to be killed...Nikolaev had made two previous attempts to get suspiciously close to Kirov, had been arrested and found to have a revolver in his briefcase, and had then been released. On 1 December, Nikolaev was able to get, with his revolver (and cartridges from the local NKVD sports club), into the third floor of the Smolny Institute in Leningrad, where Kirov worked. He waited for some hours. When Kirov arrived, his personal bodyguard Borisov was detained at the front door, and Kirov was unprotected when the assassin fired. Borisov was to be killed in the back of a truck by two NKVD men two days later, when they brought him to testify at the inquiry into the crime. The Leningrad NKVD chiefs were given short sentences for 'criminal neglect' of their duties. They were shot in 1937–1938.

Conquest, *Stalin, Breaker of Nations*, 1993

### Source 13

Kirov, was among those who inspired and carried through the notoriously ruthless measures against the peasants and the wiping out of the *kulaks*. The Kem and Murmansk coasts, with their prison camps, were under his jurisdiction. Furthermore, he was in charge of the construction of the Baltic-White Sea Canal... It looked at first the continued terror was only a belated and exaggerated aftermath of Nikolaev's shot.

Nikolaevsky, *Letters of an Old Bolshevik*, allegedly based on conversations with Bukharin in Paris, 1936

### Think about

- ▶ What are the key points made by Conquest? Which are specifically refuted by Arch Getty?
- ▶ What does Arch Getty imply about Nikolaev's character and motives? How does this differ from Conquest's view?

### Source 14

Kirov used to live in our house. He was one of us, an old colleague and a friend. Kirov spent the summer of 1934 with us. He was closer to us than any of his colleagues, and my father needed him. I will never believe that my father was involved in his death. Wouldn't it be more logical to link his killing with the name of Beria? (Beria was a prominent member and later head of the NKVD.)

From *20 Letters to a Friend* by Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter. Much of her teens was spent with Stalin in his dacha (holiday home) where she met all the senior party figures. This book was written in 1963, 10 years after her father's death.

### Source 15

I am guilty of nothing, nothing, nothing before the party, before the Central Committee and before you personally. I swear to you by everything that is sacred to a Bolshevik. I swear to you on Lenin's memory. I cannot even imagine what could have aroused suspicion against me. I beg you to believe my word of honour. I am shaken to the depths of my soul.

Zinoviev to Stalin, 1935

### Source 16

#### SECRET

#### THE FACTS

1. The villainous murder was committed by the Leningrad group of Zinoviev followers calling themselves the Leningrad Centre.
2. Ideologically and politically, the Leningrad Centre was under the leadership of the Moscow Centre of Zinoviev followers, which apparently did not know of the preparations for the murder of Comrade Kirov.
3. ...These two centres constituted one entity, being united by one common worn-out, jaded Trotsky-Zinoviev platform.

Letter from the Central Committee January 1935 to all party organizations. The letter also urged party leaders to read it to their groups and discuss its contents.

### Source 17

I must be blind. I have reached the age of fifty but have never seen this 'centre' of which it appears I have been a member.

Kamenev in his trial in 1935. He was accused of being a member of a 'Moscow Centre'

### Source 18

The November issue of *Za Rossiyu* the White Guard newspaper of Belgrade...deliberately called for the removal of Kirov in Leningrad, as well as Kaganovitch in Moscow, observing of Stalin that he was too well guarded; a specific incitement to murder which is said to have been repeated in other journals of the emigrés [Russian exiles].

From *Soviet Communism* by S. and B. Webb, 1935 (British visitors to Russia in 1934)

### Source 19

300 NKVD workers in Leningrad were fired or transferred to other work. Ezhov reported to Stalin that, although the Leningrad NKVD had in the city more than 21,000 informers controlled by 2000 special informers, it was incompetent...Although in the two-and-a-half months following the assassination 843 former Zinovievists were arrested in Leningrad, most of them were exiled to remote regions.

Arch Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, 1999

### Activity

- 1 The view that Stalin had Kirov murdered is based on the idea that Kirov was more liberal, and therefore more popular in the party – a rival to Stalin's authority. Is this view supported by Sources 11, 13, and 14?
- 2 For what reasons may some historians find these sources unreliable?
- 3 How did Stalin and the Politburo react to Kirov's death? Did they use it for their own political ends?
- 4 Read through all the sources and the background.

Draw up a balance sheet of all the evidence suggesting Stalin was behind Kirov's death, and of all the evidence suggesting he was not. Discuss or debate your own conclusions with those of other students.

Is there enough evidence for us to be sure what really happened?



## ■ Activity

**Who killed Kirov?**

Look at what two different authors have to say on this subject. Present a short talk to members of your group, using at least once image (eg spidergram, table etc), in which you compare and make judgements about the views of the historians you have read. Use this as the basis of a group discussion.

**A relaxation of tension?**

The years 1934–6 were successful years economically for the USSR. Many of the new plants were now producing goods. Rationing of food was ended in 1935, which was a very popular measure. The rural famine was over. The 1934 Party Congress was nicknamed 'The Congress of Victors', because so much progress toward socialism had been made. The number of arrests also declined:

**Source 20****Arrests by Security Police 1930–1936**

	All crimes	Counter-Rev crimes	Executions
1930	331,544	266,679	20,201
1931	479,000	344,700	10,651
1932	410,000	196,000	2,738
1933	505,300	283,000	2,154
1934	205,000	90,000	2,056
1935	193,000	109,000	1,229
1936	131,168	91,127	1,118

In 1935 the party decided to introduce a new constitution, one that was more fitting for a socialist society where there were no longer any class differences. The most prominent member of the committee drafting the constitution was Bukharin, now apparently completely rehabilitated. The 'Stalin Constitution', introduced in November 1936, made the USSR appear the most democratic state in the world, giving to all the right of employment at a time when millions were unemployed in Europe and the USA. Freedom of religion, the press and assembly were all guaranteed. Even ex-kulaks and priests were given back the right to vote. This calmer period did not last long.

**The show trials**

In August 1936 Zinoviev and Kamenev with 14 others were put on trial again for complicity with Trotsky in plots to kill Stalin and other members of the Politburo. Out of these, 14 confessed, including Kamenev and Zinoviev. In these confessions, obtained by promising the accused their lives if they were 'helpful', other old comrades were mentioned and implicated in their plots. These others included Rykov, Tomsky, Piatakov and Bukharin. All the accused were found guilty, after a hate campaign in the press and newsreels, and shot shortly afterwards.

The sad story is told of Zinoviev begging for his life on his knees before his executioners. This was apparently re-enacted to Stalin at a dinner for the secret police. He was so delighted with the performance that he asked to see it again, but had to beg it to stop because he was laughing so much.

No sooner was the trial over when in September 1936 Stalin and Zhdanov, on holiday together by the Black Sea, sent a telegram to the Politburo (Source 21).

**KEY SKILLS**

## ■ Think about

- ▶ Why did the security police arrest so many between 1930 and 1933?

**Quotation**

People will have more room. They can no longer be pushed aside

Bukharin, quoted in B. Nikolaevsky, *Letters of an Old Bolshevik*, 1936

## ■ Biography

**G.L. Piatakov**

Born 1890.  
1915 edited *Kommunist* magazine.  
1924 opposed NEP; close to Trotsky.  
1931–6, Deputy Commissar for Heavy Industry.  
1937 executed.

## ■ Biography

**G. Yagoda**

Joined Cheka in 1920.  
Deputy Head of OGPU at time of Riutin Platform 1932.  
Head of NKVD 1934–36. (This replaced OGPU.)

**Source 21**

We deem it absolutely necessary and urgent that Comrade Ezhov be nominated to the post of People's Commissar for Internal Affairs. Yagoda has definitely proved himself to be incapable of unmasking the Trotskyite-Zinovievite bloc. The OGPU is four years behind in this matter.

In January 1937 a second show trial followed. Piatakov's wife pleaded with him to plead guilty to save the life of their child. He pleaded guilty. Here is an excerpt from the verdict against them:

**Source 22**

In 1933, in accordance with direct instructions given by the enemy of the people, L. Trotsky...there was formed in Moscow...an underground parallel anti-Soviet Trotskyite centre...The principal aim...was to overthrow the Soviet power...and to restore capitalism and the power of the bourgeoisie by means of wrecking, diversive, espionage and terrorist activities to undermine the economic and military power of the Soviet Union...The enemy of the people, L. Trotsky, undertook...to liquidate State farms, to dissolve the collective farms, to renounce the policy of industrialization of the country and to restore...the social relations of capitalist society.

## ■ Think about

- ▶ Do you think party leaders believed these charges?
- ▶ How might the verdict against Piatakov be useful to historians today?

**Note**

Ordzhonikidze had been, since 1932, Commissar for Heavy Industry, a key role in the Five Year Plans.

All the accused were found guilty. Radek and another of the accused were sentenced to imprisonment, but the rest were condemned to death – not however before they had all implicated Bukharin and others in their plots. Shortly after the trial Piatakov's boss, Politburo member Ordzhonikidze, died, probably having committed suicide. Ordzhonikidze's brother had already been shot by the NKVD and he himself is known to have had several long telephone calls with Stalin before his death. His death was announced to the world as a heart attack, presumably to save the party embarrassment.

The last of the three major show trials was held in Moscow in March 1938. The accused included Bukharin, Yagoda, and Rykov. Their colleague Tomsky had committed suicide when he was first linked to the investigation. Bukharin admitted his guilt in court in order to save his wife and children, but spent the trial refuting all the specific accusations made against him. Vyshinsky, the State Prosecutor, concluded his summing up with this statement:

**Source 23**

Our whole country is awaiting and demanding one thing. The traitors and spies who were selling our country must be shot like dirty dogs. Our people are demanding one thing. Crush the accursed reptile. Time will pass. The graves of the hateful traitors will grow over with weeds and thistles. But over us, over our happy country, our sun will shine with its luminous rays as bright and joyous as before. Over the road cleared of the last scum and filth of the past, we, with our beloved leader and teacher, the great Stalin, at our head, will march as before onwards and onwards, towards Communism.

Bukharin and the other accused were shot. Bukharin wrote a final letter to Stalin asking for mercy, but curiously also admitting that he had attended a meeting in 1932 when some of his younger followers had talked about Stalin's death!



## Why the *Ezhovschina* – the ‘Great Purge’?

The period between the second and third show trials mentioned above saw a surge in the numbers arrested, imprisoned and shot. Mass graves located across the USSR testify to the number of victims. This period, the ‘great Purge’ has been called by Russians the ‘*Ezhovschina*’, the Ezhov phenomenon, after the head of the NKVD 1936–1938.

In February 1937 a full meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party met in Moscow. It must have been a difficult meeting for it lasted 11 days, much longer than the usual 4 or 5. The main point of dispute was how to deal with opposition in the party and with Trotskyites in particular. Speaker after speaker described their success in weeding out Trotskyites in their own districts. Stalin believed, however, that many in the party were protecting members from criticism and attacked the ‘families’ in the local parties as follows:

### Source 24

What does it mean if you drag a whole group of pals along with yourself? It means you’ve acquired a certain independence from local organizations and, if you like, a certain independence from the Central Committee.

Zhdanov put forward a conciliatory view that members needed better education and that secret elections would put a stop to corruption and nepotism. Molotov and Ezhov wanted a more aggressive policy towards suspected oppositionists. No final resolution, however, was published. It was during this meeting that Bukharin was denounced and expelled from the party. The Central Committee agreed finally to set up a special commission of five Politburo members to investigate opposition within the party and to act on its behalf.

When the meeting dispersed, the NKVD moved quickly. It first fell on the army leadership. Trotsky had, of course, been Commissar for War, so many leading officers had enjoyed his confidence. April and May saw the arrest of many generals, including Marshal Tukhachevski, the hero of the Civil War. They were accused of plotting with foreign powers, especially Germany, to overthrow Stalin. Physical torture was certainly used. For example, Tukhachevski’s ‘confession’ was splattered with blood. By December 1938 the leadership of the Soviet armed forces had been devastated. Only two out five marshals remained in place and about two-thirds of senior officers had been arrested or shot. The precise impact on the armed forces is disputed. According to Thurston only 6.9 per cent of officers in the army in 1936 were dismissed but not re-appointed by 1940. Other estimates have been as high as half of the officer corps removed permanently. Whatever the figures, the USSR’s international situation, with Hitler successfully flouting the Versailles peace terms and Germany’s rapid rearmament, was growing more desperate each month. In this light the attack on the Red Army seems difficult to explain, unless the leadership genuinely thought there was a plot being hatched to threaten the Communist regime in the USSR.

It was not only the Red Army that was affected. The Politburo legalized torture in August 1937, just after receiving a report from Ezhov that he proposed to arrest over 250,000 before the year’s end. Targets were set for each district. 28 per cent would be shot; the rest were to be detained.

The targets for these arrests and executions were laid down by the Politburo – returning *kulaks* and political prisoners who were inspiring sabotage and other

### ■ Biography

#### Ezhov

His nickname was the ‘bloody dwarf.’ He was rumoured to have shot his former boss Yagoda personally. In March 1939 he was arrested by his own former employees and disappeared.

### ■ Think about

- ▶ What does this suggest Stalin believed was wrong with the CPSU?

### ■ Historical debate

The so-called ‘Generals’ Plot’ has caused another disagreement between historians. Thurston suggests there is evidence supporting the idea of a plot. Segeev maintains that the plot was a fiction of the Germans to create instability in the Red Army. To others it was simply all an invention of Ezhov or Stalin to purge the army of possible oppositionists.

‘anti-Soviet’ crimes. Ezhov added to the list priests, former members of political parties, nationalists, former Whites and so on. Was there a pattern to the arrests? It seems to have hit party members most savagely – particularly those in the higher and middle ranks. Only about 3 per cent of the delegates to the 1934 Party Congress were elected to the Party Congress in 1939. Only 16 out of 71 members of the 1934 Central Committee were alive in 1939.

### Source 25

#### Arrests and executions 1936–1938

	Total arrests	Arrests for counter-revolutionary crimes	Convictions	Executions
1936	131,000	91,000	275,000	1118
1937	936,000	779,000	791,000	353,000
1938	639,000	593,000	554,000	329,000

Was this all a sinister plot by Stalin to remove everyone who might even pose a possible threat to his authority? According to Stephen Cohen, speaking on the ITV documentary series *Stalin*, the arrests were almost arbitrary. ‘No one was guilty, therefore no one was innocent’. According to some authorities the whole Russian people lived under the threat of arbitrary arrest. Thurston, however, argues that many groups were almost totally unaffected by the ‘great purge’. According to Service, however, ‘The impact of the Great Terror was deep and wide and was not limited to specific political, administrative, military, cultural, religious and national groups’.

## Was Stalin personally involved in the purges?

There can be little doubt that Stalin was involved in the show trials and the purges. Before the trials the interrogators reported to Stalin each day on the ‘progress’ they were making with their investigations. Stalin said to a NKVD official in July 1936:

### Source 26

Now then, don’t tell me any more that Kamenev, or this or that prisoner, is able to withstand that pressure. Don’t come to report to me until you have in this briefcase the confession of Kamenev!

At the trial of Bukharin Stalin was momentarily revealed by a trick of the light while secretly listening behind a curtain to the proceedings in the courtroom. Source 2 showed how many death sentences Stalin approved personally. A scribbled note to Ezhov at about the same time says simply, ‘Shoot all 138 of them’.

However, it must also be true that, of the million or so shot by the NKVD during the *Ezhovschina*, few of the victims can have been personally known to Stalin. Although Stalin signed the documents which authorized mass killings, others selected those sent to their deaths. The NKVD in each area was set a quota for arrests and executions. At the very least there were many thousands within the police system and within the party who were deeply involved in the arrests and the killings.

### Cross reference

You will find more on this historical debate in Chapter 12.

### ■ Think about

- ▶ What can we learn about Stalin’s role in the trials from Source 26?
- ▶ What can we learn about his attitude to the accused?



## Document exercise: images of Stalin

## Source A



A painting entitled 'Unforgettable moment'.

A cartoon published by Russian exiles in France in 1939.

## Source B

## Poem by Lebedev-Kumach 1937

And so – everywhere. In the  
workshops, in the mines,  
In the Red Army, the kindergarten  
He is watching.  
You look at his portrait and it's as if he  
knows  
Your work and weighs it;  
You've worked badly – his brows  
lower.  
But when you've worked well, he  
smiles in his moustache.

## Source C

## Pravda describes the 7th Party Congress in January 1935

At 6.15 Comrade Stalin appears. All the delegates rise as one man and greet him with a stormy and prolonged ovation. From all parts of the hall come the shouts of 'Long live the Great Stalin', Long Live our Vozhd'. A new outburst of applause and greetings. Comrade Kalinin...reminds the audience that it is Comrade Stalin who is 'the instigator, inspirer, and organizer' of the whole gigantic work of the Soviet Union. A new storm of applause passing into an endless ovation.

## Source D



## ■ Examination-style questions

## 1 Comprehension in context

What image of Stalin is presented in Source A?

## 2 Comparing the sources

To what extent do Sources B and D present a similar image of Stalin?

## 3 Assessing the sources

How useful would Source C be to a historian studying Stalin's role in the USSR?

## 4 Making judgements

Using the sources and your own knowledge in your answer, would you agree that Stalin was genuinely popular in the USSR in the 1930s?

Prisoners building the Belomor Canal in 1933.

## ■ Think about

- Were conditions in the gulag much worse than those Russians suffered outside?

## ■ Think about

- Why was Shukhov content with his day?
- What image does Solzhenitsyn present of gulag life in this excerpt?
- Shukhov is a fictitious character. Does this affect the usefulness of the book to historians?

## ■ Further reading

*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* can be taken as a simple description of the life of a gulag inmate. It can also be seen as a metaphor for Stalin's Russia as a whole.

## Life in the gulags

In 1939 almost 3 million people were in labour camps (gulags) in the USSR. Life in the labour camps is perhaps best described in the novels of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who spent eight years in them. A grinding routine of hard physical work in extreme temperatures, a struggle simply to survive another day seemed to be the norm.

The labour camps produced most of Russia's gold and much of its timber. Prisoners were also involved in building the new cities and transport links.

## Source 27



## Source 28

Shukhov went to sleep fully content. He'd had many strokes of luck that day: they hadn't put him in the cells; they hadn't sent the team to the settlement [where there was no cover from the subzero temperature]; he'd pinched a bowl of kasha [a kind of porridge] at dinner; the team-leader had fixed the rates [of work] well; he'd built a wall and enjoyed doing it; he'd smuggled that hacksaw blade through; he'd earned something from Tsezar in the evening; he'd bought that tobacco. And he hadn't fallen ill. He'd got over it.

A day without a dark cloud. Almost a happy day.

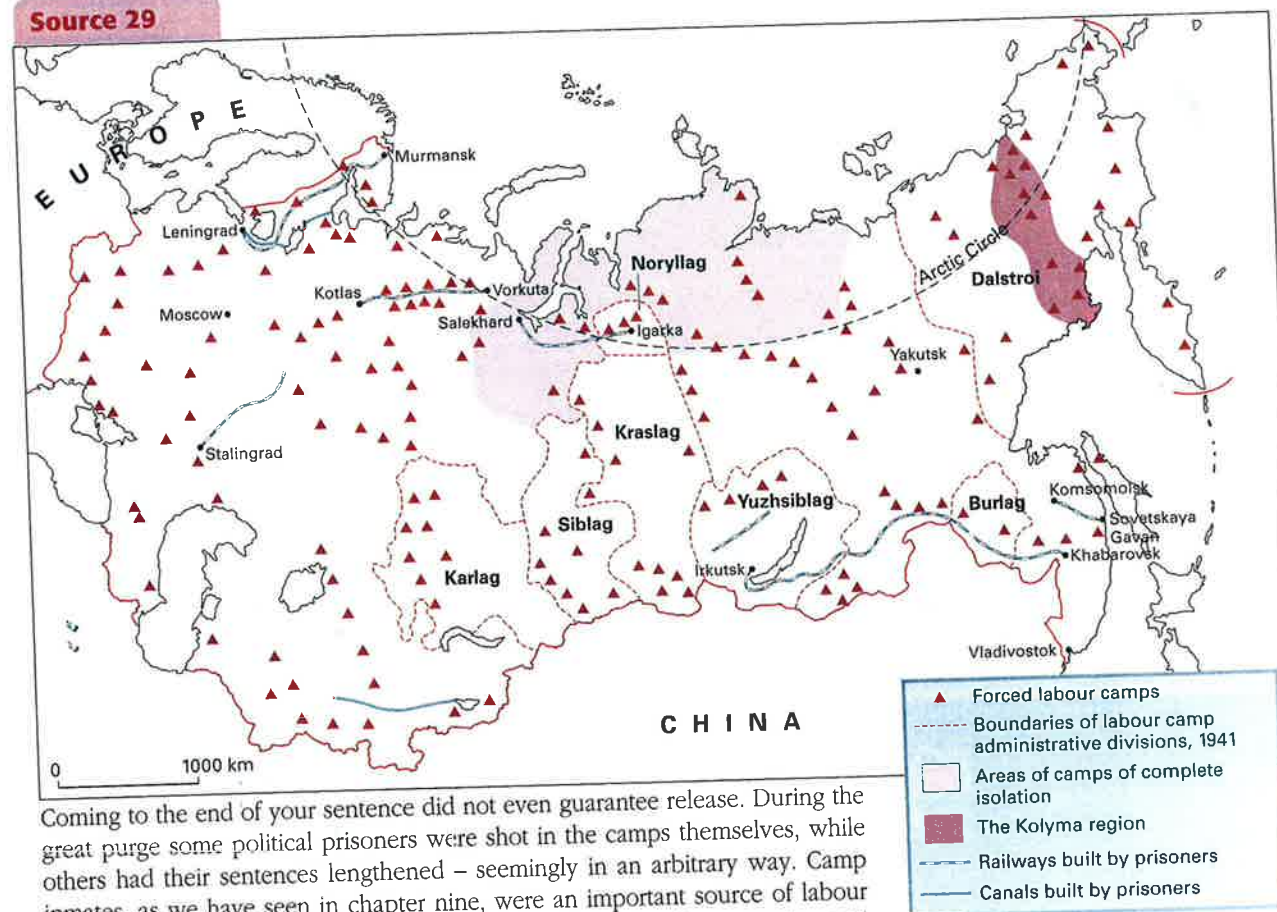
There were three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days like that in his stretch. From the first clang of the rail to the last clang of the rail.

The three extra days were for leap years.

The end of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a novel written by A. Solzhenitsyn who himself spent many years inside gulags



Source 29



Coming to the end of your sentence did not even guarantee release. During the great purge some political prisoners were shot in the camps themselves, while others had their sentences lengthened – seemingly in an arbitrary way. Camp inmates, as we have seen in chapter nine, were an important source of labour in the more desolate regions – in the gold mines of Kolyma, for example – and in many of the vast construction works of the Five Year Plans. Life expectancy must have been very low, especially for the ‘politicals’ who seem to have been most harshly treated. It is important to remember that many of the inmates, whose bodies were wrecked by this savage regime, in a former life had been intellectuals, writers, engineers etc. At a time when the whole of the country was involved in trying to bring about ‘socialist construction’, this was perhaps not the best use of their talents.

### ‘Normality’ is resumed

In April 1939 Ezhov, the principal agent in the ‘great purge’ was himself arrested. This is now seen as a signal for the end of the wave of arrests and executions. Ezhov was replaced as head of the NKVD by his deputy Beria.

In March 1939 the first Party Congress since 1934 met. Stalin set the new tone:

Source 30

It cannot be said that the cleansings were not accompanied by grave mistakes. There were unfortunately more mistakes than might have been expected. Undoubtedly, we shall have no further need to resort to the method of mass cleansings. Nevertheless, the cleansings of 1933–36 were unavoidable and their results, on the whole, were beneficial.

This marked an end to the waves of mass arrests. Quotas for arrests were abandoned and thousands released from the gulags. Many more were restored

### Timeline

#### The Terror

1928 Shakhty	Engineers
1928 Collectivization	Kulaks
1928 Chistka	Local party members

### Further reading

- J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the great Purges*, 1985  
 S. F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Russian Revolution*, 1974  
 R. Conquest, *Stalin: Breaker of Nations*, 1993  
 R. Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, 1990  
 R. Daniels, *The Stalin revolution*, 1990  
 R.W. Thurston, *Life and terror in Stalin's Russia 1934–41*, 1996  
 D. Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, 1991  
 C. Ward, *Stalin's Russia*, 1993

### Quotation

1937 was essential. Remnants of various kinds of enemies still existed, and in view of the fascist threat, they might have united.

Molotov, Foreign Minister in the 1930s, in an interview in 1970

- Do you think this Molotov quotation is a reliable source for us today?

to their party membership and positions. Amongst the last to suffer were some of the secret police who had carried out the purges, Ezhov himself being shot in 1940. In truth party purges never really stopped; they simply continued at a slower pace and were resumed after the war with even greater intensity. From the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939, the government had other preoccupations, although Hitler did not attack the USSR until 1941.

### Activity

‘The terror’ is a complex issue. One good way to master it is to draw up a timeline of the main events like the one begun in the margin. Start with the Shakhty Trial and end with the outbreak of war on 1 September 1939. Mark on all the important events in this chapter, and any you can remember from the previous one, and state which groups in the USSR were affected by each. Also mark on periods when the situation seemed to become calmer. Does your timeline suggest the terror was a continuous phenomenon? Does it suggest these events were part of a planned campaign?

### Conclusion – Why did the terror happen?

We have seen that the terror had many different aspects – the industrial trials, the political show trials, the cleansing of the party and the *Ezhovschina*, a process of arrests and executions which went far beyond party members. Why these events took place is still argued between historians. The term ‘the purges’, used by some historians to describe all these events, assumes that all of these different phenomena are in some way connected. They are seen as part of a sinister programme by Stalin to establish a personal dictatorship in the USSR, and to remove anyone either in the past, present or future who presented/might present a threat to that dictatorship. According to this view, the Russian people and members of the Communist Party themselves at the time were totally cowed into submission, terrified that any random remark would lead to their own arrest, imprisonment or worse. A good example of this point of view is reflected in the novel *Children of the Arbat* by A. Rybakov.

Another western view is to blame the Stalinist excesses on Lenin. He set up the first camps and he urged ruthlessness at every stage after the revolution. Stalin was simply solving problems in the way that Lenin had begun. Stalin was Lenin’s truest disciple. Alternatively others place the responsibility on Marxist theory. Dictatorship was what all Marxist theoreticians were led to expect after the revolution.

‘Revisionist’ historians reject this view of Stalin’s decisive role in the 1930s. They argue that this ‘totalitarian’ explanation is too simplistic, and depends largely on deterministic history – that is that the events of the 1930s were in some sense predictable and the logical outcome of previous situations and thinking. For them ‘the purges’ are a series of unconnected events, which do not have a simple logic to them. Instead they are the result of the chaos which prevailed in the USSR. They represent not the calculated methods by which a totalitarian government dominated its people, but instead the weakness of that government and its total failure to control even its own followers, let alone those who were opposed or apathetic towards politics.

Many historians fall between these two viewpoints. The ‘facts’ of the case have been interpreted to support both points of view. This debate is the focus of part of Chapter 12 of this book.