

Stalin's Terror?

Geoffrey Roberts

Kirov with Stalin and his daughter in 1934. Kirov's death prompted Stalin into action

Stalin believed the Great Terror was necessary to protect socialism from its enemies, but the ease with which he carried it out was indicative of his power

Socialist Revolutionaries

A Russian socialist party which primarily focused on the peasantry to carry out the revolution. It outnumbered the Bolsheviks in 1917 in terms of supporters and voters but was outmanoeuvred in the October Revolution.

old Bolsheviks Members who had joined the party before 1917.

NKVD The acronym was derived from the Russian for People's Commissariat (that is Ministry) for internal Affairs. It was applied to the secret police at that time. Originally, they were known as the Cheka and later as the KGB.

During the 1930s, Soviet society was engulfed by a maelstrom of politically-driven repression and violence where millions of people were expelled from the ruling Communist Party, dismissed from their jobs, arrested, imprisoned or executed.

Mass repressions were nothing new in Soviet history. The Bolshevik regime was founded on the 'Red Terror' of the civil war that followed the 1917 Russian Revolution. The first Soviet show trial was staged in 1922 when leading **Socialist Revolutionaries** were accused of subversive activities. In the late 1920s and early 1930s the Bolsheviks waged a violent campaign against peasant opposition to the forced collectivisation of Soviet agriculture.

EXAM LINKS

AQA 1H Tsarist and Communist Russia, 1855–1964
AQA 2N Revolution and dictatorship: Russia, 1917–53
Edexcel Paper 1, Option 1E Russia, 1917–91: from Lenin to Yeltsin
Edexcel Paper 2, Option 2C.2 Russia in revolution, 1894–1924
Edexcel Paper 3 Option 38.1 The making of modern Russia, 1855–1991
OCR Y249/Y219 Russia, 1894–1941
OCR Y318 Russia and its rulers, 1855–1964
WJEC Unit 3, Part 10 Changing leadership and society in Russia, 1881–1989

Anatomy of Terror

Stalin's terror, or the 'Great Terror', as it is often called, had three main components. Firstly, purges of the party's membership. Between 1933 and 1935, some 20 per cent of members were expelled or excluded on grounds they were corrupt, careerist, apathetic or opponents of Stalin's leadership of the party. Secondly, in 1936–8, a series of public trials of **old Bolshevik** leaders who were convicted of sabotage, assassination plots, and conspiracy to overthrow the socialist system.

Thirdly, the so-called 'Yezhovshchina' of 1937–8. Named after **NKVD** head, Nikolai Yezhov, this was a period of intense mass repression that targeted party and state officials, as well as so-called 'Kulaks' or rich peasants, and 'subversive' elements among ethnic groups living along Soviet frontiers. More than 1.5 million people were arrested by the security police, and some 700,000 executed for political crimes.

Many more died in prison but the Gulag — the Soviet system of prisons, labour camps and places of confinement — was nowhere near as deadly as Nazi extermination camps. Eighty per cent of Gulag inmates were eventually released while only twenty per cent of prisoners survived incarceration by the Nazis.

The military purge

The most extraordinary episode of the Terror was the arrest of **M. N. Tukhachevsky** and seven other Soviet generals in May 1937, who were falsely accused of plotting to overthrow Stalin's government. Tukhachevsky and his colleagues were executed, as were several thousand other officers, in an extensive purge that lasted until the end of 1938. Among those who perished were 3 marshals, 16 generals,

15 admirals, 264 colonels, 107 majors and 71 lieutenants. By the time the purge had run its course, 34,000 officers had been dismissed from service, although 11,500 of them were later reinstated.

'What regime liquidates colossal numbers of loyal officials?' asked Stalin biographer, Stephen Kotkin. 'What great power has ever executed 90 per cent of its top military officers?' World history, he noted, 'had never before seen such carnage by a regime against itself'.

'Intentionalists versus 'decisionists'

One explanation of the Great Terror is that it was primarily Stalin's doing: a series of actions designed to rid the party and the state of those he saw as enemies. This 'intentionalist' explanation of the terror chimes with the view that Stalin was a megalomaniac, and a cruel, bloodthirsty and paranoid personality.

The intentionalist approach to understanding the Terror has been criticised by historians who argue that mass repression was the incremental and unintended outcome of a series of ad hoc decisions designed to overcome various economic, political and social crises of the Soviet system, notably a constant crisis of governance — the difficulty central authorities had in imposing their will on regional and local party organisations. According to these 'decisionist' historians, Stalin was a central actor in the unfolding drama, but the script of the Terror was written at the grassroots level of society and the party as well as by the communist leadership.

The more historians have delved into the Soviet archives the more apparent it has become that while the decisionists capture the contradictions and complexities of the Soviet policy-making in the 1930s, the intentionalists are right to identify Stalin as the key architect of the terror. He took all the important decisions and drove the process forward, his goal being to protect the Soviet system from what he saw as a dire threat from an unholy alliance of internal and external enemies.

Architect of Terror

In the early 1930s Stalin was seemingly positive about the threat posed by his internal enemies. At the 17th party congress in January 1934, he told delegates that 'the anti-Leninist group of **Trotskyists** has been smashed and scattered. Its organisers are now to be found in the backyards of bourgeois parties abroad.'

Stalin was shaken from his complacency by the shooting of Leningrad party secretary Sergey M. Kirov in December 1934. He rushed to Leningrad to personally interrogate the perpetrator, Leonid Nikolaev. On the way he drafted a draconian decree that abrogated the rights of those accused of terrorism and streamlined their prosecution, conviction and execution. This became the legal basis for thousands

of summary shootings during the ensuing campaign of state-sponsored terror.

Suspicious linger that Stalin himself organised the killing because Kirov was a popular alternative leader within the party, but there is no hard evidence to support such a supposition. Besides, Stalin had his own conspiracy theory: Kirov was a victim of a plot led by Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, opponents of Stalin's during the post-Lenin leadership struggles of the 1920s. On 29 December, Nikolaev and thirteen alleged associates were executed. In 1935, hundreds of former Zinovievites were rounded up and the scope of the investigation was broadened to include former Trotskyists.

Trials and killings

In August 1936 Stalin staged a public trial of Kamenev, Zinoviev and fourteen others accused of leading a 'United Trotskyite-Zinovievite Centre'. All sixteen defendants were found guilty and executed while co-conspirators Leon Trotsky and his son, Lev Sedov, were sentenced to death *in absentia*.

In January 1937, Stalin arraigned members of an 'Anti-Soviet Parallel Trotskyist Centre'. Mostly former Trotskyists, these defendants were accused of treason, espionage and wrecking (sabotage), and also of aiming to seize power after the USSR was defeated by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. In their testimony the accused implicated the former leaders of the so-called **Right Opposition** to Stalin — **Nikolai Bukharin** and Alexey Rykov. They were expelled from the party in March 1937, paving the way for their arrest, and the staging a year later of the third and last of the Moscow show trials — the trial of the 'Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites'.

Trotskyists Followers of Leon Trotsky (1879–1940), Stalin's arch-enemy, who believed that the revolution in the USSR was being strangled by bureaucracy manipulated in his own interests by Stalin.

Right Opposition A group within the party in the 1930s who argued that the pace of industrialisation and revolutionary transformation should be slowed down. Its leading spokesperson was Nikolai Bukharin (1888–1938).



It is hard to credit that Stalin actually believed the absurd charges levelled against these former members of the Soviet political elite or that he gave any credence to the fantastical confessions upon which they rested.

In their analysis of the Great Terror, J. Arch Getty and Oleg Naumov distinguish between Yezhov, who truly believed in the existence of the enemies he hunted down on Stalin's behalf, and Bukharin, who chose to serve Stalin by falsely confessing to being one. Stalin seems to have been a hybrid case. For him the conspiracy against Soviet power was as real as it was for Yezhov but he must have known the show trials were a sham, albeit a necessary one.

The Purge intensifies

The February-March 1937 plenum of the party's central committee set the scene for a general purge of Soviet polity and society when Stalin told the meeting they had underestimated the dangers of 'capitalist encirclement', notably the penetration of the USSR by numerous imperialist wreckers, spies, diversionists and killers.

On 2 June 1937, Stalin addressed the country's Military Council about the existence of a military-political conspiracy against Soviet power. According to Stalin its political leaders were Trotsky, Rykov and Bukharin; its military core, the High Command group led by Tukhachevsky. The chief organiser of this conspiracy was Trotsky, who dealt directly with the Germans, while Tukhachevsky's group acted as agents of the German military, which controlled them like 'marionettes and puppets'.

Stalin was also perturbed by the subversive activities of deported peasants who had been deprived of their property during the forced collectivisation drive. In July 1937, the Politburo directed local and regional party leaders to draw up lists of anti-Soviet 'kulaks and criminals' 'so that the most dangerous

KEY FIGURES

Mikhail Tukhachevsky (1893–1937)

Trained as an officer in the Tsarist army during the war but fought for the Bolsheviks in the civil war and became a Bolshevik hero. He rose to become Chief of Staff of the army and Marshal of the Soviet Union, noted for developing the Russian strategic theory of deep operations, a version of blitzkrieg.

Sergei Kirov (1886–1934)

A leading member of the Communist Party and head of the party in Leningrad, a post in which he succeeded Grigory Zinoviev. He was a close ally of Stalin.

of them can be arrested and shot'. At the end of that month the Politburo approved an NKVD proposal to repress nearly 300,000 kulaks and criminals, including more than 72,000 summary executions. The stated rationale for this 'mass operation' was that anti-Soviet elements were involved in extensive crime, sabotage and subversion. By the end of the operation, the NKVD had exceeded its target for arrests by 150 per cent and for executions by over 400 per cent.

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936 reinforced Stalin's fears concerning the interaction of foreign and domestic threats. General Franco's military mutiny against the elected Republican government was supported by troops and munitions from fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Stalin was convinced that Franco's military successes were partly the result of sabotage and subversion by 'Fifth Columnists' operating behind the front lines. He feared there was a similar **fifth column** in the USSR: 'They want to turn the USSR into another Spain', he told the Military Council.

Trotsky's murder

Trotsky, who had been expelled from the Soviet Union at the end of the 1920s, was assassinated by a Soviet agent in Mexico in August 1940. Stalin himself edited the official party newspaper *Pravda's* article about his death. He changed the headline from 'Inglorious Death of Trotsky' to 'Death of an International Spy' and added this sentence: 'Trotsky was a victim of his own intrigues, treachery and treason. Thus ended ingloriously the life of this despicable person, who went to his grave with "international spy" stamped on his forehead.'

Stalin's orchestration of the Great Terror was an awesome demonstration of his power within the

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 Why did the Great Terror take place?
- 2 What does the Great Terror tell us about Stalin's personality and power?
- 3 Did the Great Terror strengthen the USSR?

fifth column A term coined in 1936 by Franco-supporting General Mola in Spain who claimed that in addition to his four military columns advancing on Madrid, a fifth column of supporters within would guarantee his victory.

Trotsky dies in hospital in Mexico City, 21 August 1940



Soviet system, as was the ease with which he was able to end it. In summer 1938, the Politburo took steps to curb arrests and executions and curtail the activities of the NKVD, including getting rid of Yezhov, who was himself arrested and executed. At the 18th Party Congress in March 1939, Stalin declared victory over the enemies of the people and an end to mass purges.

Ideology of Terror

The key to understanding Stalin's seemingly irrational actions in the 1930s is his ideology. He believed that the more successful Soviet socialism became, the more the agents of capitalism would strive to sabotage and overthrow it. The notion that the USSR was under siege by capitalist states allied with internal opponents of the Bolsheviks was originally Lenin's and dated back to the period of civil war and foreign intervention from 1918–21.

Crucial, too, was Stalin's dogmatic belief that the party was always right. If its policies failed, that was because they had been obstructed or subverted by enemies within the system. Stalin would surely have agreed with Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro's comment that while socialism had many defects and shortcomings, 'these deficiencies are not in the system, they are in the people'.

RESOURCES

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For Stalin, mass terror was necessary to protect socialism from its internal and external enemies at a time of rising international threats that were leading to a new world war which would embroil the USSR and endanger its very existence.

Geoffrey Roberts is emeritus professor of history at University College Cork and a Member of the Royal Irish Academy. His latest book is *Stalin's Library: A Dictator and His Books*, Yale University Press (2022).

Using this article in your exam

EXAM FOCUS



Modern Russian history is one of the most popular A-level and IB topic areas. Integral to this is the rule of Stalin. However, this particular period and individual is seldom treated in a balanced manner in basic textbooks and monographs. Geoffrey Roberts' article should prove invaluable to students as it dispels some misconceptions about this complex period of time in Russia. In particular:

- It stresses how repression was not new in Russia and was in existence during tsarist rule as well during that of the communists.
- The 'Terror' is dissected into three components, illustrating the need to be specific about the term and not to over-generalise.
- A comparison is made with repression in Nazi Germany to put Stalin's Terror in perspective.
- Reference is made to the most recent bibliographic research on Stalin by Kotkin; this poses some interesting questions about the intent behind Stalin's purge of the Russian military.
- Explanations or 'schools of thought' are summarised to show how different historians can reach contrasting conclusions about why the Terror came about.
- Issues concerning the lack of evidence are raised, particularly about the role of Kirov; historians should always be able to show an awareness of the gaps in narratives due to the lack of reliable information.

An examination question on this topic might appear in the following form:

'Stalin was the most repressive leader of Russia in the period from 1855 to 1964'. How far do you agree with this view?