

## STALIN - PURGES

### **Control and elimination of opposition:**

- Authoritarian control through terror
- Secret Police (CHEKA 1917, OGPU 1922, NKVD 1934)
- Labor Camps (from 1918... at 1930 GULAG)
- Propaganda
- Censorship
- State control of education
- State control of arts and sciences
- Cult of the leader
- Only one political party

### **The Purges - Great Purges (1934) 1936-38:**

*What is it?* Millions of Russians; in the Communist Party, the Army, the Arts and sciences... were arrested and either sent to labor camps or shot...

*The Purges were unique;*

- Because of their magnitude and the fact that they involved all social groups
- Because there was no evidence that the victims were a danger
- Because punishment was both erratic and arbitrary ranging from death to prison. Sometimes the latter was followed by reinstatement (like the airplane designer TUPOLEV)
- Because of the "show trials" held - at which fantastic confessions were made

*Legality was ignored* even the rule that Party members on the Central Committee could be removed only by 2/3 vote by the Central Committee (in fact some members were shot even without a trial). Lenin tried to preserve legality. He rejected torture to extract information. In 1920 Lenin ordered that prisons should not be punitive. Stalin specifically authorized "*physical pressure...*"

Many Russians remained convinced that Stalin did not know what was happening. In Russian the Great Purge is called "*Yezhovschina*" - Yezhov's thing after Nikolai Yezhov, Chief of the Secret Police NKVD 1936-1938.

## STALIN'S ELIMINATION OF OPPOSITION

1924-1927 The removal of opposition when Stalin came into power. This opposition was usually expelled from the party or they lost their position.

1928-1932 First Five Year Plan (FYP). Trial against "*bourgeois*" engineers, technicians and administrators accused of sabotaging the plan! Sometimes secret trials, sometimes show trials and

sometimes no trials at all... The accused generally confessed, even to crimes they had not been accused of. They were then either imprisoned or shot. So why did they confess?

- Sometimes the confession was extracted by torture
- Sometimes the confession was extracted by threats to the prisoners' family or by promises of leniency...

1932

The *Ryutin Affair*. The rightist party member Ryutin wrote a document calling for;

- The end of the forced collectivization
- Rehabilitation of defeated Oppositionists (including Trotsky)
- Dismiss Stalin!

Several prominent communists signed this document... The trial against Ryutin was in September 1932. Stalin wanted Ryutin executed - the Politburo refused to go that far. He was instead expelled from the Central Committee together with Kamenev, Zinoviev and 17 "others"

**1932-1933**

**FAMINE...**

1932-1934

During this period nearly one million members were expelled from the Party. They were often referred to as Ryutinists...

1934

By 1934 things started to improve. Many wanted to slow down the drive towards industrialization and they wanted to improve the relations with the peasants. Sergei Kirov, the Leningrad Party leader, was a spokesman for this group at the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. At this Congress;

- The Congress abolished the post of General Secretary - instead four secretaries were elected (Stalin, Kirov, Kaganovitch, Zhdanov)
- Kirov received more votes than Stalin when votes to the Central Committee was counted (nearly all 1225 delegates voted for Kirov, but over 300 did not vote for Stalin at all... )

Later 1934 (December 1<sup>st</sup>) Kirov was assassinated (shot in the back outside his office...). A "mysterious person" named Leonid Nikolayev was the assassinator. Several theories about who was behind Lionid Nikolayev exist;

- Stalin
- The extreme left
- NKVD
- "Just" Nikolayev

No matter who was behind it - **Stalin used it!** The same evening the Presidium of the Soviet Union issued a decree that gave NKVD extra-ordinary powers;

- The indictment was to be handed to the accused one day before the trial
- Limited investigation of crimes to 10 days

- Rapid execution without appeal
- So thousands of people were arrested within the coming weeks
- Several hundreds were trailed
- Over one hundred Party members were executed

They were accused of a plot to overthrow Stalin and the Communist Party. Most of the accused belonged to the old "Leftist Opposition, the Leningrad Opposition, and the United Opposition. Zinoviev and Kamenev were arrested in January 1935.

Together with 17 others they were sentenced to 5-10 years of prison. Several NKVD members from Leningrad were also trailed and imprisoned...

Due to the improving economic situation and the work on a new Constitution the purges were slowed down in the middle of 1935. A year later - summer of 1936 they started again. This is the start of the "**Great Purge**"...

1936 New accusations against Zinoviev, Kamenev and 14 other leading Communists came up. They were now accused of organizing a counter-revolutionary conspiracy and plotting to kill Stalin and other Politburo members. This was the "**FIRST SHOW TRIAL**" - it was open to the press and broadcasted on the radio... In this trial they were also accused of planning to murder Lenin (these plans were made at a hotel that had been demolished years before the date when the plans were made... and one of the accused, Smirnov, was in jail when the plot was done). 14 of them admitted their guilt - all 16 were found guilty and shot!

1937 In January 1937 the "**SECOND SHOW TRIAL**" was held. 17 leading members of the Communist Party were accused of plotting with Trotsky in league with Nazi Germany and Japan. They planned (according to the State Prosecutor) to carry out assassinations, terrorist activities, sabotage of industries and spying. Several confessions were made and 13 of them were executed.

After this trial the Central Committee met and decided to step up the Purges (this decision was taken by Stalin, Molotov (Foreign Minister), Yezhov (Head of the NKVD) and Andrei Vyshinsky (State Prosecutor).

1938 In March 1938 the "**THIRD SHOW TRIAL**" was held. Accused were Bukharin, Rhykov and 19 other Party members. They were accused of being members of a "Trotskyist-Rightist" bloc, responsible for industrial sabotage, weakening the Red Army, spying, attempts to restore capitalism, etc.... Most of them confessed (but Bukharin refused!). Bukharin, Rhykov and 16 others were found guilty and shot!

The Purge was now reaching its peak ("*The Great Terror*" or "*Yezhovshchina*"). First the purges mostly hit the Party members but after mid-1937 they included other groups as; administrators, specialists (like engineers, railroad workers etc....) and the Red Army!

In May 1937 was Marshal Tukhachevsky (Chief of General Staff and one of the Deputy Commissars for Defence) and Gamarnik (Head of the Red Army's Political Commissars and also one of the Deputy Commissars for Defense) arrested!

Marshal Tukhachevsky was executed in June 1937 (Gamarnik committed suicide). By the end of 1938;

3 out of 5 Red Army Marshals had been executed

14 out of 16 Red Army Commanders had been executed

8 out of 8 Admirals had been executed

60 out of 67 Red Army Corps Commanders had been executed

136 out of 199 Red Army Divisional Commanders had been executed

221 out of 397 Red Army Brigade Commanders had been executed

...and all together 35 000 officers were executed or imprisoned. This was about 50% of the entire Officer Corps... Also 11 out of 11 Deputy Commissars for Defense were executed and 75 out of the 80 members of the Supreme Military Council...

March 1939 - at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress Stalin announced that "mass cleansings" were no longer needed and he also admitted that some "mistakes" had been made. Later 1939 Yezhov, the Head of NKVD, was accused of being a British Agent. He was executed. This ended the mass arrests and several thousand Gulag prisoners were released. Even more people were rehabilitated in their jobs and the Party... Though, some cleansing continued. Now under the new Head of NKVD - Laurenti Beria!

## **THEORIES ABOUT THE GREAT PURGES**

1. **Totalitarian theories** - This theory focuses on the role of Stalin and his position as dictator of the Soviet Union. Some say Stalin launched the purges as a "*rational*" response to the circumstances of the 1930's, others that he suffered from some form of mental illness that led to irrational and extreme action.
2. **Revisionist theories** - More recent some historians claim that genuine opposition that posed a threat to Stalin's position existed! Getty - There was a "*Trotskyist-Zinovievist*" plot! Rittersporn - NKVD and local party bosses were out of control and used the purges for personal gains...