

# 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

1922-1924      May 1922 – Lenin had his first stroke! This restricted him to participate in politics. The question that now came up was – Who was going to take over after Lenin? The most important members of the **POLITBURO** were **Trotsky**, **Zinoviev**, **Kamenev** and **Bukharin**. Trotsky seemed to be the most likely candidate, but several older members resented Trotsky. Zinoviev and Kamenev had the same ideas as Trotsky, but they deeply disliked him. In December 1922 they turned to Stalin – who had control over the Party appointments and organization (General Secretary of the Communist Party). In December 1922 Lenin wrote a “**POLITICAL TESTAMENT**”. Just a few days later Lenin had his second stroke. The triumvirate between Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev was set up. They

opened up the old Party Records to the Central Committee and took out old letters where Lenin expressed disagreements with Trotsky (and his group of intellectuals – these letters came from the period before Summer 1917). After this they started a “*whispering campaign*” against Trotsky.

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 “*Ryutinites*”...

**NKVD:** In the years 1933-1934, as an accompaniment to the purges, Stalin centralized all the major law enforcement agencies:

- The civilian police
- Labor Camp commandants and guards
- Border and security guards

All these were put under the authority of the NKVD, a body which was directly answerable to Stalin.

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 extraordinary 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
- Thousands of people were arrested within the coming weeks
- Several hundreds were trialed
- 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**"...

## **GREAT PURGES 1936-1938**

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),

- 1938 Yezhov (Head of the NKVD) and Andrei Vyshinsky (State Prosecutor). 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!
- 1937-1939 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...

WWII

Then World War II broke out and we can see a different pattern in the Purges. Stalin rehabilitated the Orthodox Church which blessed the work of "our government". They condemned traitors and excommunicated them (expelled them from the Church). In 1943 the Church got to elect a new Patriarch. By 1945 24,000 churches were reopened and 74 bishops were back in office... Stalin re-introduced privileges of higher military ranks. The military also got much more influence in the Party. 1941 - 15% and in 1945 - over 50%!

**ORDER NO 270** (August 1941). "Those who surrender to the Germans shall be destroyed by all means available and their families deprived of all benefits" – "Deserters should be shot on the spot and their families arrested"

1945-1953

**Stalin punished Russian minorities:** Among some non-Russians there had been sympathy for the Germans. In Lithuania there had been a rebellion, the Ukrainian anti-Soviet partisans had killed the Red Army General Vatutin and an anti-Soviet army had been formed under General Vlasov. Stalin was swift and brutal in his response. From Lithuania 280,000 people were deported between 1946-1949. The allies handed the Vlasovite army back to Soviet after the war. General Vlasov was hanged on a meat hook at the Red Square. Groups like the Volga Germans and the Crimean Tartars were also deported to the east under terrible conditions. Many died during the trip and several more in the work camps which was the final destination.

**Stalin broke up institutions with power...**

- GKO = State Defence Committee
- Church
- Military leaders were downgraded (Marshal Zhukov was sent to the Odessa military district and he lost his position in the Central Committee)
- Politburo, Secretariat and the Orgburo elected new members in 1946. Stalin controlled them well by just let smaller groups meet and discuss different issues, never the full bodies...
- Some demobilization. Returning Russian POW was sent to Siberia! Why? Stalin feared that they might turn against him and that they might contaminate the people with their experience... Every POW was regarded as having let the country down!

**New purges:** About 100,000 members per year were expelled up to 1953. The claustrophobic atmosphere of the late 1930's returned...

**The "Leningrad Affair":** This was the framing and execution of leading Leningrad and Soviet officials (like Rodionov; Prime Minister and Voznesensky; leading economist) in 1949. The reason for these executions is still unclear.

**Anti-Semitism:** One group that was badly criticized were the Jews. Jewish theaters and journals were closed down and Jewish intellectuals were arrested. Molotov's wife was Jewish and she had been forced in exile. Molotov didn't dare to discuss this with Stalin...

**The "Doctor's Plot":** The news about this plot was published in Pravda in January 1953. The medical specialists, mostly Jewish, were accused of cooperating with US Jewish organizations. They planned according to Pravda to wipe out the top Soviet leadership. The campaign was dropped when Stalin had a stroke and died in the beginning of March 1953



## Lenin's General Staff of 1917

STALIN, THE EXECUTIONER, ALONE REMAINS



RYKOV  
Shot



BUKHARIN  
Shot



SVERDLOV  
Dead



STALIN  
Survivor



ZINOVIEV  
Shot



KAMENEV  
Shot



TROTSKY  
In Exile



LENIN  
Dead



KOLLONTAI  
Missing?



URITSKY  
Dead



KRESTINSKY  
Shot



SMILGA  
Shot



NOGIN  
Dead



DZERZHINSKY  
Dead



BUBNOV  
Disappeared



SOKOLNIKOV  
In Prison



LOMOV  
?



SHOMYAN  
Dead



BERZIN  
?



MURANOV  
Disappeared



ARTEM  
Dead



STASSOVA  
Disappeared



MILIUTIN  
Missing



JOFFE  
Suicide