

The Purges Under Stalin

The period from 1934 to 1938 is called the Great Terror because of the widespread campaign of arrests, known as *purges*, used by Stalin to take complete control of Soviet society. The term *purges* refers to the systematic arrest and murder of millions of Soviet citizens to eliminate opposition to Stalin. During the Great Terror, the Communist Party falsely accused millions of Soviet citizens of committing crimes against the government. For example, leading members of the Communist party were convicted of conspiring with enemy states to overthrow the USSR, while factory workers were charged with being anti-Communist or of sabotaging production in their workplace. The Communist party and Stalin's secret police, called the NKVD, arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and killed millions of supposed traitors in order to carry out Stalin's will—the elimination of all potential opposition to his power and hence the purging, or purification, of Soviet society.

The most public example of the purges were the three Show Trials in 1936, 1937, and 1938. In these public trials, high-ranking Communist party officials were charged with fabricated traitorous acts, such as attempted assassination of Stalin or sabotage of national industry. They were arrested by the secret police, imprisoned, and tortured until they agreed to confess to crimes they never committed. Then, after confessing in dramatic, nationally broadcast trials, the accused were executed. By the end of the last trial in March 1938, Stalin had eliminated many of the old Bolsheviks (early party leaders), one half of all military officers, and over half the high-ranking party officials. He even killed Genrikh Yagoda, former head of the secret police, who had planned much of the arrests, torture, and murders of the early purges. The Communist party used these show trials to create scapegoats to take the blame for failed economic policies, thus deflecting criticism from the party.

The trials also created an atmosphere of fear and suspicion that allowed the party to purge citizens from all sectors of Soviet society. By 1937 everyone knew at least one person who had “disappeared” in the night after the appearance of the dreaded black cars of the secret police. The secret police used nearly any tactic to create fear and suspicion: factory workers were killed just to intimidate their co-workers, children turned in their parents for talking against the government at home, people made up lies about other people so that they could get better jobs or homes, and anyone who knew an alleged traitor immediately became a suspect.

The victims of mass arrest without trial from 1934 to 1938 probably number two to three million, of whom as many as one million were executed outright. Taken together with the peasant victims of collectivization in the early 1930s, when arrest, exile, and starvation occurred, the total number of victims of Stalin's policies by the late 1930s numbered some 15 million, according to scholarly estimates. Stalin's policies had created an atmosphere of terror in the USSR.

1. The period from 1934 to 1938 in the USSR is known as the _____ .
2. Define the term purges. What was their purpose?
3. What role did the NKVD, or secret police, play in the Great Terror?
4. In what way did the Show Trials benefit the Communist Party?
5. Approximately how many people fell victim to the Great Terror and Stalin's failed socialist policies?
6. In what ways are the Reign of Terror and the Great Terror similar?