

# How did Stalin control the USSR?

**D**uring the 1930s, Stalin extended his control of the Communist Party and of the people of the Soviet Union. The machinery of state terror had been put in place in the early 1930s to push through the industrialisation and collectivisation drives. In the mid-1930s Stalin instituted the purges, which for the first time applied terror to the Communist Party itself. Stalin removed the old Bolsheviks from power and repressed other potential sources of opposition in the party, replacing them with an élite, the *nomenklatura*, who had a vested interest in supporting him. Terror was also applied to other sections of the population: anyone who showed signs of dissent or was critical of the regime was liable to arrest and imprisonment in the Gulag, the vast system of labour camps throughout the USSR.

At the same time Stalin, through the cult of the personality, was projected as a god-like leader. He alone could lead the people through present troubles to a glorious society – a socialist society – in the not too distant future. Stalin was feared but he was also loved. Chapter 14 looks at the causes of the Great Terror in the 1930s and considers Stalin's responsibility for the huge numbers who were killed. Chapter 15 examines the cult of the personality.

## ACTIVITY

Terror, secret police and labour camps provide us with some of the most dramatic and enduring images of the Soviet Union in the 1930s: the knock on the door in the middle of the night . . . sleep deprivation and interrogation . . . show trials . . . hard labour in freezing conditions, or execution. A human tragedy on a huge scale lies behind these images. Read the case studies on pages 247–248.

- 1 For each case study explain:
  - a) who the subject of the case study is
  - b) what happened to him or her
  - c) why you might be surprised that they were treated in the way they were.
- 2 What do you think these case studies show about what was happening in the USSR in the 1930s?
- 3 Draw up a list of questions that you would like to find the answers to – for example, how could it be that a party leader was purged?

## PARTY LEADER

You have already met Nikolai Bukharin, the leading theorist of the right and the 'favourite of the whole party'. Although ousted by Stalin in the power struggle of 1929, he continued to work hard for the party. He edited *Izvestia* and was a major contributor to the 'Stalin Constitution' of 1936. But he was not safe. Arrested in February 1937, he was imprisoned for a year before becoming the 'star' of the third great show trial in March 1938. According to Sir Fitzroy McLean, a British diplomat, Bukharin dominated the proceedings in a most extraordinary way. Although forced to plead guilty, he showed his intellectual and moral superiority over Vyshinsky, the chief prosecutor. McLean adds that, by mistake, a flashlight revealed that Stalin was watching the proceedings from behind dark glass.

Before he was arrested, Bukharin wrote a 'last letter' dedicated to the future generation of party members, insisting that his young wife Anna Larina memorise it. In it he denounced the NKVD as the 'hellish machine [which] can transform any Party member into a terrorist or spy' and protested his innocence. He told Anna Larina that she was young and would live to see history clear his name. She did, but she had to wait 50 years: Bukharin was not REHABILITATED until 1988. Anna Larina herself spent twenty years in labour camps and in exile and did not see her baby son again until he was 21. Bukharin's disabled first wife was arrested in 1938 and interrogated at intervals until March 1940, when she was shot. Other members of her family were shot, disappeared or died in prison.



**SOURCE 1** 'Koba, why do you need me to die?' Bukharin wrote in a note to Stalin after the death sentence was pronounced on him. (Koba, meaning 'the Indomitable', was Stalin's revolutionary pseudonym. Its use here is a sign of how close Bukharin and Stalin had once been.) Two days later, Bukharin was shot.

**SOURCE 2** Anna Larina, Bukharin's wife

## NKVD

The name of the secret police from 1934 to 1943.

## REHABILITATED

Reputation restored. No longer treated as a traitor.



## DAUGHTER OF A PARTY OFFICIAL

Seven-year-old Engelsina Cheshkova was bored, sitting with her bunch of flowers at a party meeting in 1936. So she got up and wandered towards the platform. Stalin picked her up, cameras clicked, and Engelsina became famous. A statue was erected in Moscow based on the picture: 'Thank you, Comrade Stalin, for my happy childhood.' But it did not turn out to be so happy. In December 1937, her father, a minor party official, disappeared. Engelsina, who was now 'the daughter of an enemy of the people', wrote a letter, dictated by her mother, to Stalin asking for help; she did not link her father's arrest with Stalin. The letter led to the arrest of her mother, who died in exile in Turkestan. Engelsina never saw her father again. Despite this, the adult Engelsina cried when she heard of Stalin's death because her eight-month-old daughter would never see Stalin alive – such was the effect of the cult of Stalin in the Soviet Union.

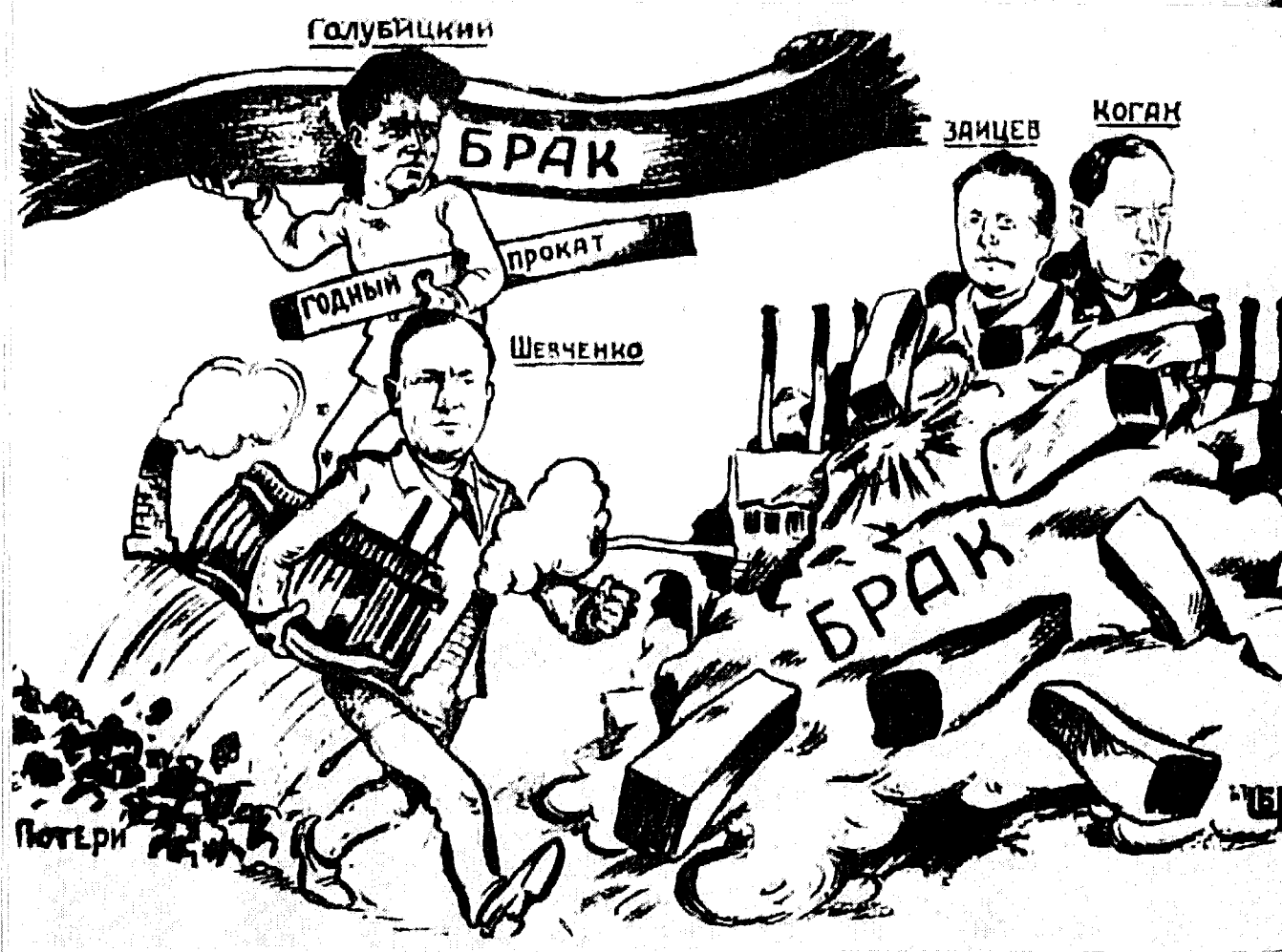
**SOURCE 3** Stalin with Engelsina Cheshkova, 1936



**WORKER AND MANAGER**

You have already met the Stakhanovite Ogorodnikov, who worked in the steel mill in Magnitogorsk and had been praised as a hero of socialist labour. He had been refused entry to the party on the basis of his ex-kulak past and was soon to find himself caught up in the purges of the late 1930s. His boss at the mill, Golubitsky, seems to have resisted the scapegoating of subordinates when there were regular machine breakdowns at the plant, which were probably caused by Stakhanovites trying to break work norms. However, in doing so (or for other reasons), he incurred the resentment of the Procurator (Head of Justice in Magnitogorsk) who used the breakdowns to accuse Golubitsky of wrecking. Testimony from those below Golubitsky was needed and Ogorodnikov and two others were arrested and tortured in 1937. Golubitsky was arrested in March 1938, convicted in July 1938 and shot. Ogorodnikov was executed too, going from hero to villain in just two years.

**SOURCE 4** A cartoon published in the *Magnitogorsk Worker*, the city newspaper, in September 1936. It shows factory bosses, including Golubitsky (top left), with piles of unusable products



## 14

## How far was Stalin responsible for the Great Terror?

**CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

At the end of the First Five-Year Plan there was a great deal of hostility towards the Communist government and concerns within the party about the breakneck speed of industrialisation. There were growing signs of opposition to Stalin and a possibility that he would be replaced as leader. Then, in December 1934, Sergei Kirov, a leading member of the Politburo, was murdered. This triggered the wave of purges and terror, which reached its peak in 1937 and 1938. Thousands of members of the Communist Party were accused of being involved in conspiracies against Stalin and the party leadership. They were arrested and imprisoned or executed. The terror also engulfed other sections of the population, including the armed forces. Historians disagree about the causes of the purges and terror and the extent to which Stalin was personally responsible for them.

- A** What do we mean by the purges? (pp. 250–251)
- B** What sort of opposition to Stalin had developed before 1934? (pp. 252–253)
- C** The Kirov murder mystery (pp. 254–257)
- D** The Great Terror (pp. 258–266)
- E** Interpretations of the Great Terror (pp. 267–268)
- F** How far was Stalin's personality responsible for the purges and the Great Terror? (pp. 269–275)

NB Great Terror or Great Purges? Both of these terms are used by historians to cover the period of mass terror in the Soviet Union in 1937–38. According to Sheila Fitzpatrick, in *The Russian Revolution 1917–1932*, the term 'Great Purges' is a Western term, not a Soviet one. There was no public way to refer to it at the time; in private it was referred to as '1937'. Robert Conquest and other historians call this period the 'Great Terror'. Recent research has shifted the emphasis from elite and party victims to non-Communist victims who were, in numerical terms, a vastly larger group. The term Great Terror is therefore used more often than Great Purges and so in this second edition the authors have chosen to use it. You will, however, find references to the Great Purges in some of the sources.