

A What do we mean by the purges?

FOCUS ROUTE

Make notes on the different sorts of purge. Make sure that you understand the differences between them.

The word 'purge' refers to 'cleaning out' or 'cleansing' an organism of impurities. The first purge of the Communist Party took place in 1918 and there were periodic purges or *chistki* (cleansings) throughout the 1920s. These usually took place at times when the leaders were seeking to exercise more control over the party or reshape it, as in the Lenin Enrolment of 1924 (see page 188). The party often took in more members (lowering entry standards) during periods of crisis such as the Civil War and collectivisation, and shed what it saw as undesirable elements when the crisis was over. But a *chistka* was, by and large, a non-violent process. Party members were required to exchange their party cards for new ones or to verify their party documents. In this process, people were refused new cards: they were expelled but not usually arrested.

After the murder of Sergei Kirov at the end of 1934 this changed. From 1936 and particularly in 1937–38, many old Bolshevik leaders were disposed of, the party was purged ruthlessly and violently, and other groups in society were swept up in the 'cleansing' process. This later period is called the Great Terror.

We can identify three phases in the purges of the 1930s:

- 1 The *chistka* of 1932–35 in which over twenty per cent of the party were expelled non-violently as part of a clearing-out process after collectivisation.
- 2 The show trials which saw prominent old Bolsheviks publicly tried and executed.
- 3 The Yezhovshchina, named after Yezhov, the head of the NKVD, which was a period of mass terror from 1937 to 1938 when thousands of party members, state officials, members of the armed forces, industrial directors, professionals and other sections of society were denounced, arrested and imprisoned. Many were executed; many more died in Soviet labour camps.

THE USE OF TERROR

Lenin used terror and class warfare to crush opposition. Stalin extended the use of terror and class warfare in the early 1930s to push through the Five-Year Plans. Millions of kulaks or 'class enemies' were killed or sent to labour camps. Many workers and engineers, accused of sabotage and wrecking, were sent to the growing Gulag. Government organisations, like Gosplan, were purged of Mensheviks and the old bourgeois intelligentsia.

But Lenin and other Communists made a distinction between the methods to be used against opposition from outside the party and those for dealing with disagreements and opposition inside the party. There was a clear understanding that terror should not be used on party comrades. In the Great Terror, Stalin unleashed terror *inside* the party, which then engulfed an enormous number of people in the wider society.

■ Learning trouble spot

Why join the Communist Party?

Some Russians joined the party not for ideological reasons but for the considerable advantages and privileges that came with the party card. Party members could often get larger rations and access to scarce consumer goods. In some areas, belonging to the party gave members power over other groups. People were expelled from the party for all sorts of reasons such as drunkenness, corruption and not being an active member.

■ 14A Timeline of the purges

1932	Signs of opposition to Stalin's leadership. Ryutin, who had denounced Stalin as the 'evil genius of the Russian Revolution', was expelled from the party but not executed.
1932–34	Purge of 'undesirable elements' – mainly the more illiterate and inactive of the new working class and peasant recruits: 22 per cent of the party were expelled.
1934 February	Seventeenth Party Congress. Several provincial delegates urged Kirov to take over as General Secretary.
1 December	Murder of Kirov.
1935–36	Purge of the party resumed, with the focus now shifting to men who held more important posts. An 'exchange of party cards' led to half a million members being expelled.
1935 January	Zinoviev and Kamenev arrested.
1936 August	The first show trial, involving Zinoviev, Kamenev and fourteen others.
September	Yezhov replaced Yagoda as head of the NKVD.
1937 January	The second show trial, involving Radek, Pyatakov and fifteen others.
May	The purge of the Red Army began.
June	Tukhachevsky and leading army officers were shot.
July	NKVD Order No. 00447 against 'anti-Soviet elements'; social cleansing set in motion.
August	National sweeps began against ethnic minorities in border areas.
1938 March	The third show trial involving Bukharin, Rykov, Yagoda and eighteen others.
December	Beria replaced Yezhov as head of the NKVD.
1939 March	Eighteenth Party Congress. Stalin declared an end to the 'mass purges'.

THE STALIN CONSTITUTION OF 1936

As one of the worst periods of political repression in the history of the USSR was initiated, Stalin published the most 'democratic' constitution in the world (passed 5 December 1936). The rights it enshrined included:

- freedom from arbitrary arrest
- freedom of speech and the press
- the right to demonstrate
- respect for privacy of the home and personal correspondence
- employment for all
- universal suffrage for over-eighteens, free elections and secret ballots.

It was a hollow and cynical piece of propaganda since at that very time such rights were being systematically abused. However, the Constitution made it clear that all these rights were subordinate to the interests of the working classes and it was the role of the Communist Party to decide what those interests were. Also, only Communists could be put up for elections. So one-party dominance was assured.

The Constitution was written by a team headed by

Bukharin and Radek, who were both to perish shortly afterwards in the purges. It was intended largely for international consumption, to show Communist sympathisers that the Soviet state was a democratic one at heart and provided the chief hope for the future of the world. Other important sections of the Constitution proclaimed that:

- the Soviet Union was a federal state with eleven autonomous republics
- ethnic groups would have local autonomy within the republics
- the old Congresses of Soviets were to be replaced by the Supreme Soviet, a single legislative body, filled by elected representatives from the Soviet republics
- the Council of the People's Commissars would continue as the chief executive authority
- the Soviet state embraced equality for all and joint ownership of the means of production.

Stalin claimed that his constitution was 'proof that socialism and democracy are invincible'.

■ 14B Who were the victims?

Leading party members

Khrushchev states that 98 out of 139 (70 per cent) members of the Central Committee elected at the Seventeenth Party Congress were arrested and shot. Of the 1966 delegates to the Congress, 1108 were arrested. This was the congress which favoured Kirov over Stalin.

Senior military officers

These included:

- Tukhachevsky, Chief of the General Staff, and seven other generals – all heroes of the Civil War
 - all eleven war commissars and three out of five marshals of the USSR
 - all admirals commanding fleets and their replacements
 - all but one of the senior commanders of the air force.
- In all, 35,000 officers were either imprisoned or shot – although over 11,000 were reinstated by the middle of 1940.

Managers, engineers and scientists

A high proportion of managers at all levels were purged. The railways were particularly hard hit. Leading physicists and biologists were arrested.

People related to those who had been purged

Colleagues, subordinates, relatives, wives, children, friends and associates.

Party and state leaders

In every national republic within the USSR, party and state leaders were charged with treason or bourgeois nationalism. In Georgia, two state prime ministers, four out of five of the regional party secretaries and thousands of lesser officials lost their posts.

NKVD

Yagoda, head of the NKVD, was arrested in 1937. According to figures given by D. Volkogonov in *Stalin* (1988, p. xxiv) more than 23,000 NKVD men perished at the end of the 1930s.

Mass terror 1937–38

- By far the largest group of all: kulaks, workers and various social marginals (recidivist criminals, the homeless, the unemployed, all those who deviated from Stalinist social norms)
- Anyone with contacts abroad, such as Comintern agents, diplomats, foreign trade officials, sportsmen
- Former Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries
- Priests, members of religious groups and people holding unorthodox views of any sort
- People in the media, artists and historians.

National minorities

National minorities in Central and Eastern Europe were singled out but also Koreans, Chinese and Afghans.

How many were killed in the terror?

It is notoriously difficult to calculate the number of people killed in the terror when the evidence is full of gaps and inconsistencies. For instance, the results of a census taken in the Soviet Union in January 1937 were suppressed and the census organisers were shot as 'a serpent's nest of traitors in the apparatus of Soviet Statistics' who had exerted themselves to diminish the numbers of the population of the USSR. Also, the NKVD burned much of their archive as the Germans approached Moscow in 1941. Another problem is that historians calculate the number of victims over different periods of time and include peasants and workers repressed during collectivisation and the industrialisation drive of the early 1930s.

■ 14C Estimates of the number of victims of the Stalinist regime

Wheatcroft and Davies (1994) estimate that 10 million people died between 1927 and 1938. They believe that around 8.5 million of these died between 1927 and 1936, mostly from famine.

Dmitri Volkogonov claims that around 7 million people were executed between 1929 and 1953, with another 16.5 million imprisoned.

Estimates of victims of the Great Terror 1937–38 by Robert Conquest (1990):		Arrests	7–8 million
		Executions	1–1.5 million
		Population of camps	7–8 million
		Died in camps	2 million
	1932–1933:	Famine	7 million
	1929–1953:	Deaths (total)	20 million

FOCUS ROUTE

Draw spider diagrams to represent the position of different historians on the purges. You could call one diagram the 'totalitarian view' and another 'revisionist views'. But do look carefully at the Learning trouble spot below.

■ Learning trouble spot

A word of warning: pigeon-holing historians

As we have mentioned in earlier sections of this book, you should be very careful about putting historians into pigeon-holes and thinking that certain groups of historians all hold the same views on a particular topic. The two lines of thought identified in Charts 14E and 14F represent the broad positions in this debate, but there is a great deal of variation and many different views, especially among the revisionists. Some revisionists ascribe a great deal of importance to the influence of Stalin's personality on the terror.

E Interpretations of the Great Terror

There has been a vigorous debate between historians over the explanation of the Great Terror. The process that led to so many arrests and executions is not clear. Few documents were released under the Soviet regime and certain key archives, such as those of the KGB, have still not been opened. Those archives that have recently become available have provided a vast amount of information reflecting different experiences in different parts of the former USSR. So views might change as more archive material is examined and more becomes available.

Much of the debate between historians centres around:

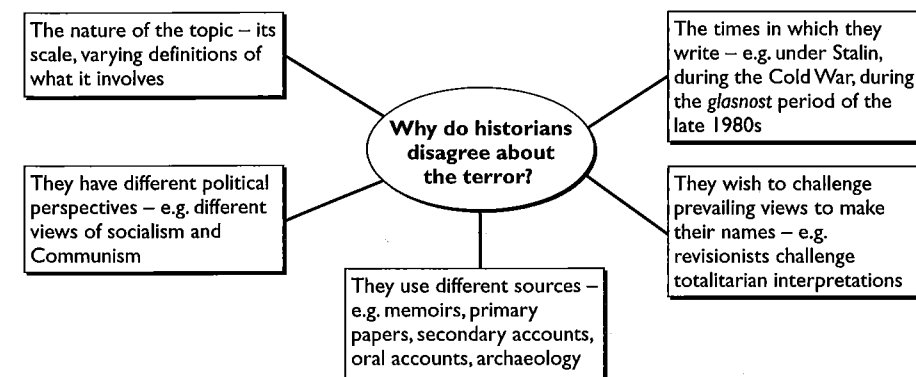
- the role of Stalin in the terror and the extent of his personal control of the process
- the extent to which his actual personality shaped the terror.

The debate has been dominated by two broad approaches, outlined in Charts 14E and 14F (page 268).

Why do historians disagree about the terror?

The terror is a very political topic. It is not surprising that the 'totalitarian' view of the terror – that it was masterminded by an evil puppet master – should have been predominant in the Cold War period. Historians in the West wanted to demonstrate that it was a system where the leadership exercised totalitarian control over an unwilling population. However, the emergence of a new generation of historians in the 1970s and 1980s, who were not so anti-Soviet, and changes within the USSR itself, led to the totalitarian view being challenged. There are a number of reasons why historians disagree about the terror and these are summarised in Chart 14D. There has been an acrimonious debate over the use of sources.

■ 14D Why do historians disagree about the terror?



Debate over sources

In the context of the terror there has been an acrimonious debate over the use of sources. J. Arch Getty has criticised Western accounts that have relied on sources such as memoirs and accounts by people who fled the Soviet Union. He says they have a political bias that makes them unreliable and they are bound to attack Stalin as the central agent of terror. He places his emphasis on the use of archival records and official documents.

Other historians, including Alec Nove and Robert Conquest, accept that personal accounts should be treated with caution but make the point that archival materials and official reports can also be unreliable; officials simply reported what their superiors wanted them to hear. They maintain that oral history and memoirs are indeed valuable sources.

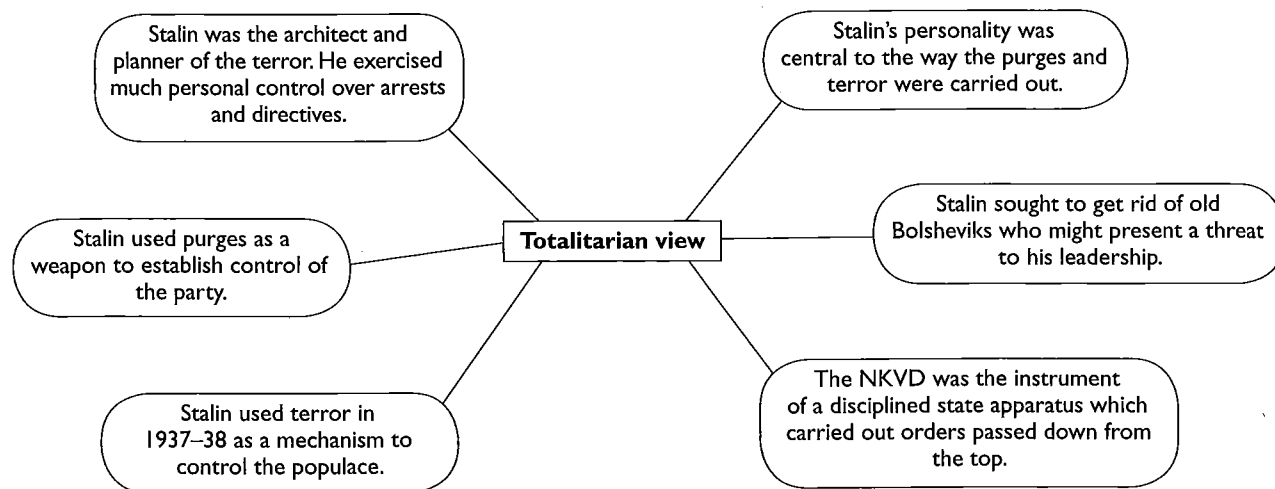
■ 14E The totalitarian line

The totalitarian view has predominated in the West since the Second World War. It is sometimes called:

- the 'top down' view of the terror, because instructions were given by those at the top and carried out by those below, or
- the 'intentionalist' interpretation, because Stalin intended to kill his opponents and increase his personal power.

The prime exponent of this line in the West is Robert Conquest whose book, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (1990) sets out the

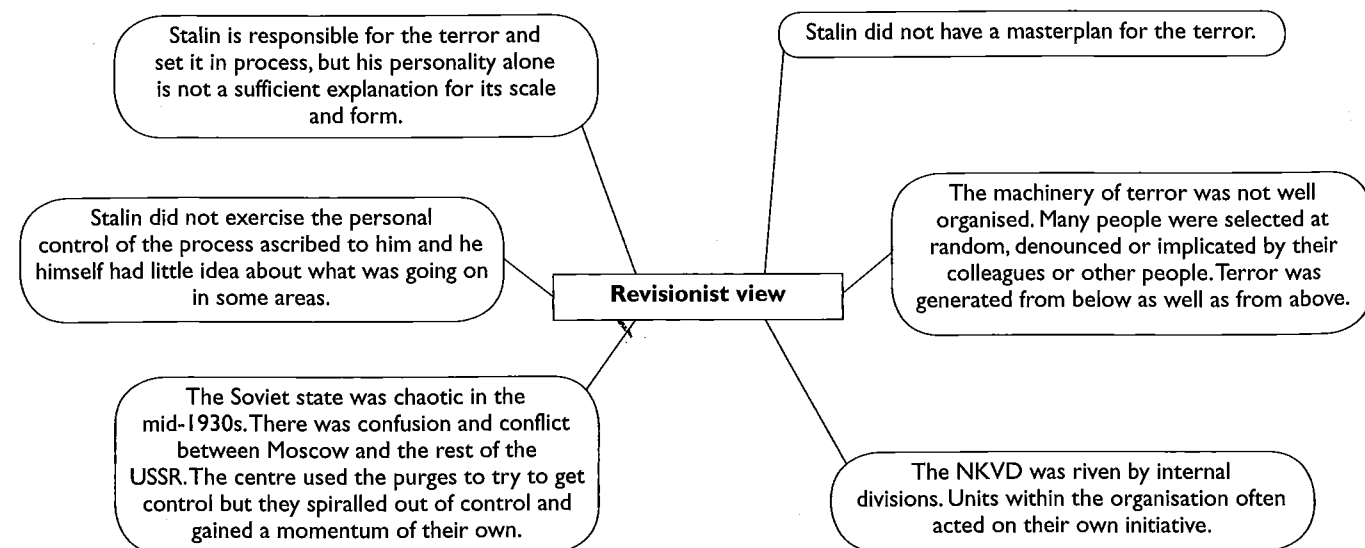
case clearly with much supporting evidence. This view is also shared by liberal historians who were dissidents in the old Soviet regime, such as Roy Medvedev and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. But while Medvedev distinguishes between Lenin and Stalin, seeing the latter as the evil director of the terror, Solzhenitsyn sees a direct connection to the methods used by Lenin. He sees the terror of the 1930s as an escalation of the institutions (secret police, labour camps) put in place by Lenin.



■ 14F The revisionist line

The totalitarian view has been challenged by revisionist historians from the 1970s onwards. This view is sometimes called 'decisionist' because it sees the terror as the result of decisions made by the Communist leadership in reaction to a series of crises in the mid-1930s. J. Arch Getty, in his book *The Origins of the Great Purges* (1985), put the most extreme case of the revisionists,

seeming to take a lot of responsibility for the purges away from Stalin. He argues that focusing on Stalin alone has, for too long, provided simple and convenient interpretations when the real story is much more complicated. Other historians who have taken a revisionist or decisionist line on the terror are Sheila Fitzpatrick, Graeme Gill and Roberta Manning.



F How far was Stalin's personality responsible for the Great Terror?

ACTIVITY

You are going to use this activity to help you to prepare for a major essay with the title 'How far was Stalin's personality responsible for the Great Terror?'

- 1 Read Sources 14.29–14.35. Decide how important each historian feels that Stalin's personality was to the Great Terror or the Great Purges and where each of them fits on the five-point scale below. Justify your choice by a brief reference to each source.

Absolutely central	Important	One of a number of factors
1	2	3
		4
		5

- 2 Make a list of the factors mentioned as causes of the terror.
- 3 Choose two sources which show markedly different interpretations of the terror. Explain how they are different.

SOURCE 14.29 R. Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, 1990, pp. 69–70

The one fundamental drive that can be found throughout is the strengthening of his own position. To this, for practical purposes, all else was subordinate. It led him to absolute power...

He carried out a revolution which completely transformed the Party and the whole of society. Far more than the Bolshevik Revolution itself, this period marks the major gulf between modern Russia and the past... It is true that only against the peculiar background of the Soviet past, and the extraordinary traditions of the All-Union Communist Party, could so radical a turn be put through. The totalitarian machinery, already in existence, was the fulcrum without which the world could not be moved. But the revolution of the Purges still remains, however we judge it, above all Stalin's personal achievement.

SOURCE 14.30 J. Arch Getty, *The Origins of the Great Purges*, 1985, p. 205

Western scholars have remained hypnotised by Stalin's cult of personality, and their obsession with him has led to studies of the Great Purges period that provide no detailed investigation of the political and institutional context. Rather than placing these events in these contexts, scholars have often discussed the Great Purges only against the background of Stalin's personality and categorised Stalinism simply as the undisputed rule of an omniscient [all-knowing] and omnipotent [all-powerful] dictator. Contradictions and confusion are seen as manifestations of Stalin's caprice, and too often the political history of the Stalin period has merely been the story of Stalin's supposed activities.

SOURCE 14.31 A. Nove (ed.), *The Stalin Phenomenon*, 1993, p. 32

No doubt there were rivalries and conflicts within the apparatus, and it is certainly useful to try to examine the relationships between elements of the apparatus and segments of society. But how can one avoid the conclusion that it was Stalin's decision to purge the party and society of what he regarded as suspect and unstable elements – even if one can accept that orders might have been distorted by [those who carried them out]? One is struck by the number of references to arrest plans, which zealous locals sought to fulfil or overfulfil. However, the whole process was set in motion from the top, and we do have the known telegram sent by Stalin and Zhdanov demanding the appointment of Yezhov to replace the apparently too lenient Yagoda.

SOURCE 14.32 R. Manning, 'The Soviet Economic Crisis of 1936–40 and the Great Purges', in J. Arch Getty and R. Manning (eds), *Stalinist Terror – New Perspectives*, 1993, pp. 140–41

In this way, the economic problems of 1936–41 and the Great Purges appear to be inexorably linked. The industrial showdown, which set in at a time when the USSR could least afford it, when a two-front war without allies seemed to be the Soviets' inevitable fate, shaped the course of the Great Purges at least as much, if not more so, as the terror in turn influenced the operation of the economy. When plans went awry, when deprivations, instead of disappearing, became more severe, when promised improvements in food supply did not materialise, the subconscious temptation to seek scapegoats became irresistible.

ASSESSING THE DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

Source 14.29 Robert Conquest is the British author of *The Great Terror*, first published in 1968, with a second edition, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, published in 1990. This is a standard work on the subject. Conquest is regarded by some as a 'cold warrior'. He follows the 'totalitarian' line.

Source 14.30 J. Arch Getty, an American, is the leading revisionist historian on this topic – he attacks the 'totalitarian' view. He is a decisionist historian who concentrates on institutional rather than ideological, personal or social factors.

Source 14.31 Alec Nove (1915–94) was Russian-born – his father was a Menshevik. His family left the USSR for Britain in 1924. An expert on Soviet economic policy, he wrote extensively on Stalin and Stalinism.

Source 14.32 Roberta Manning, an American, is the mentor of J. Arch Getty with whom she worked closely and edited *Stalinist Terror – New Perspectives* (1993). She is a revisionist historian on Stalin.

Source 14.33 Stephen Cohen, a revisionist historian and biographer of Bukharin, sees a marked difference between the Leninist state and the Stalinist state. He suggests that Stalin led Soviet Russia along the wrong path and feels they would have done better to stick with Bukharin and the right.

Source 14.34 Isaac Deutscher (1907–67), a Polish Communist, was expelled from the party in 1932 because he was the leader of the anti-Stalinist group. He moved to England and became a journalist and historian. As well as his biography of Stalin, he wrote a three-volume biography of his hero, Trotsky.

Source 14.35 Alan Bullock was a distinguished liberal British historian, the author of *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (1991).

SOURCE 14.33 S. Cohen, quoted in Thames TV documentary *Stalin*, 1990

Ultimately you cannot explain the great terror against the Party without focusing on Stalin's personality. For some reason Stalin had a need to rid himself of the old Bolshevik Party, the Party that remembered everything of Bolshevik history and knew in its heart of hearts that Stalin was not the Lenin of today. He had to rid himself of this party and he did. By the end of the thirties, it was a completely different party demographically, most of its members had joined since 1929. The older league had gone, there were a few tokens left but almost to a man/woman they were dead.

SOURCE 14.34 I. Deutscher, *Stalin*, rev. edn 1966, pp. 372–74

But why did Stalin need the abominable spectacle [in 1936]? It has been suggested that he sent the men of the old guard to their deaths as scapegoats for his economic failures. There is a grain of truth in this but no more. For one thing, there was a very marked improvement in the economic conditions of the country in the years of the trials. He certainly had no need for so many scapegoats; and, if he had needed them, penal servitude would have been enough – Stalin's real and much wider motive was to destroy the men who represented the potentiality of alternative government.

The question that must now be answered is why he set out to reach this objective in 1936? Considerations of domestic policy can hardly explain his timing. Widespread though popular dissatisfaction may have been, it was too amorphous [lacking focus] to constitute any immediate threat to his position. The opposition was pulverised, downtrodden, incapable of action. Only some sudden shock ... involving the whole machine of power might have enabled it to rally its scattered and disheartened troops. A danger of that kind was just then taking shape; and it threatened from abroad. The first of the great show trials, that of Zinoviev and Kamenev, took place a few months after Hitler's army had marched into the Rhineland ...

... In the supreme crisis of war, the leaders of opposition, if they had been alive, might indeed have been driven to action by a conviction, right or wrong, that Stalin's conduct of the war was incompetent and ruinous. At an earlier stage they might have been opposed to his deal with Hitler ... It is possible they would have then attempted to overthrow Stalin. Stalin was determined not to allow things to come to this ... It is not necessary to assume that he acted from sheer cruelty or lust for power. He may be given the dubious credit of the sincere conviction that what he did served the interests of the revolution and that he alone interpreted those interests aright ...

SOURCE 14.35 A. Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives*, 1991, pp. 496–97

I have already suggested the two most important features of Stalin's psychology. The first was his narcissistic personality, characterised by his total self absorption ... and his conviction that he was a genius marked out to play a unique historical role. The second was the paranoid tendency which led him to picture himself as a great man facing a hostile world peopled with jealous and treacherous enemies engaged in a conspiracy to pull him down, if he did not strike and destroy them first ...

Throughout his life Stalin had a psychological need to confirm and reassure himself about both those beliefs – about his historic mission and about the truth of the picture he had formed of himself in relation to the external world ... The same obsession which had provided the drive to defeat his rivals and match Lenin's revolution with his own now nerved him to outdo his predecessor by freeing himself from the constraints of the party and becoming the sole ruler of the Soviet state.

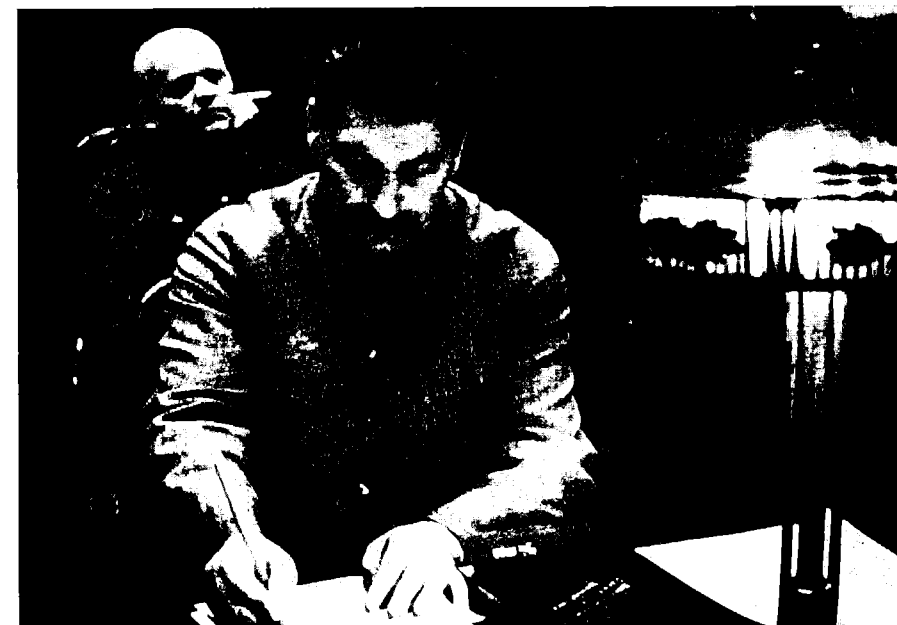
Even more striking is the coincidence between Stalin's second psychological need ... and his political aim, in the years 1934–9, to destroy the original Bolshevik Party created by Lenin and replace it with a new one, maintaining a façade of continuity but in fact remaking it in his own image.

TWO STORIES ABOUT STALIN

1 He was supposed to have said: 'To choose one's victims, to prepare one's plans minutely, to slake an implacable vengeance, and then to go to bed ... there is nothing sweeter in the world.'

2 There was a caged parrot in the room in the Kremlin where Stalin often paced back and forth, smoking his pipe while he thought things out and spitting from time to time. Once, the parrot imitated him spitting. Stalin was furious, reached into the cage and killed the parrot with one blow to the head from his pipe.

SOURCE 14.36 Stalin in a photograph believed to show him signing death warrants



SOURCE 14.37 Two of Stalin's sayings

One death is a tragedy, a million is a statistic.

If there is a person, there is a problem; no person no problem.

What reasons have been put forward for the terror?

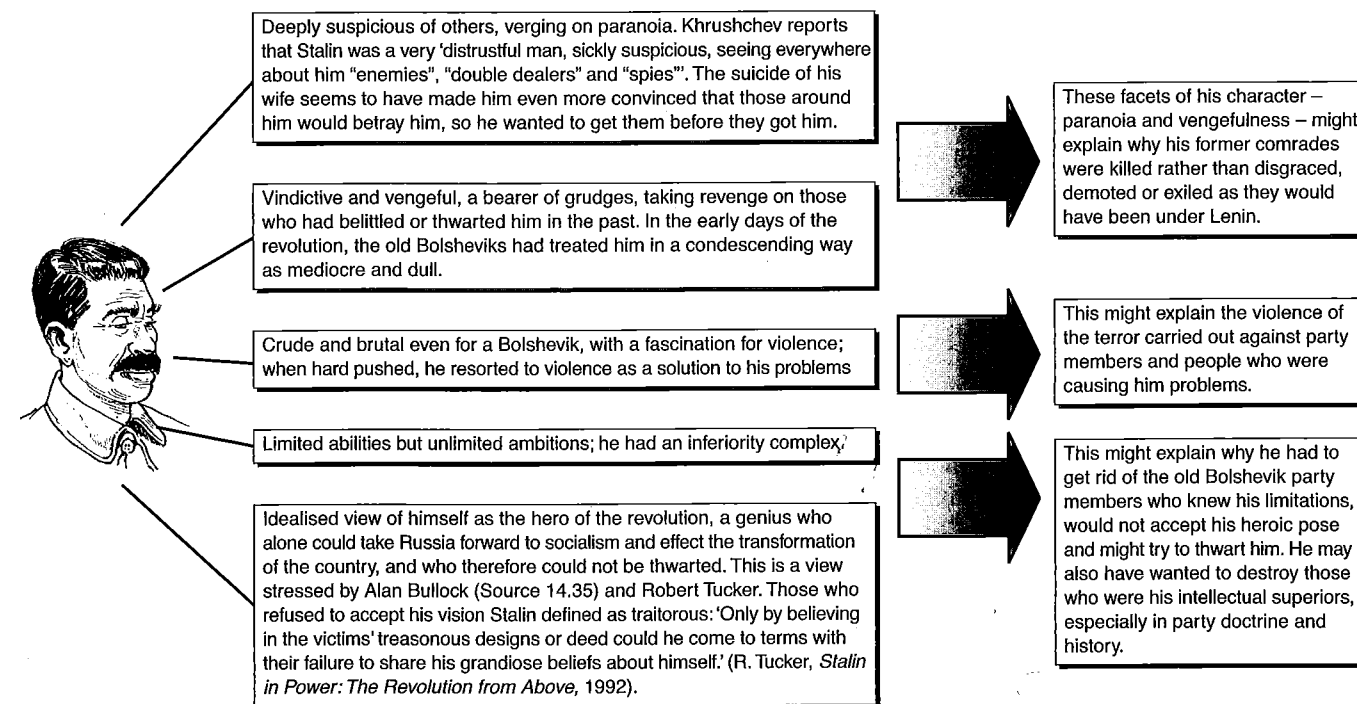
In this section we look at Stalin's personality and motives, and also at other reasons that have been put forward to explain the form the terror took.

The vast majority of historians accept Stalin's responsibility for the terror. He was at the centre of the decision-making process and cannot be absolved. However, some revisionists argue that focusing on Stalin alone has for too long provided simple interpretations when the real story is more complicated.

The role played by Stalin

A number of historians argue that Stalin's personality was the driving force behind the terror, and that without him there would have been no Great Terror in the form it took – for example, old Bolsheviks would not have been humiliated and executed. Chart 14G outlines the role that they think his personality played in the Terror.

14G What role did Stalin's personality play?



CONTROL OF THE PARTY

By 1939 the party had 1,589,000 full members (in a population of nearly 170 million). Only 8.3% had joined before the end of 1920; 70% had joined after 1929.

A comparison between the Party Congresses of 1934 and 1939:

- In 1934 81% of delegates had joined the party before 1920
- In 1939 19% of delegates had joined the party before 1920
- At the 1939 Congress, unlike 1934, there was no debate, criticism or discussion. It was, in Leonard Schapiro's words, 'a cowed and servile assembly'.

By 1939, 318 out of 385 regional party secretaries had been repressed and the overwhelming majority of secretaries of party committees all over the country were under 40, owing their education and advancement to Stalin. For them the revolution and civil war were little more than a legend.

Stalin's motives

No one is suggesting that the purges were just a symptom of a dysfunctional personality. Many historians and commentators like Khrushchev believe that Stalin thought that he was acting in the interests of the party and the revolution. He thought that his removal or the reversal of his policies would be disastrous for the Soviet Union. We can identify several interrelated motives that have been suggested for his actions:

- Stalin felt threatened by the growing opposition to him in the early 1930s. He reacted to this by eliminating all possible rivals so that no one could form an alternative government.
- Stalin was determined to be in a position of absolute power:
 - a) He wanted to bring the party under his total control so that they would carry out his policies and edicts without question. Keeping the party in a constant state of insecurity (who would be arrested or denounced next?) was a way of keeping control. This was particularly true of the *nomenklatura* around the Central Committee: it allowed Stalin to keep his lieutenants guessing about whom he would adopt as 'his people'.
 - b) He wanted control of the people; the terror crushed opposition and any critics.
- By the late 1930s, Stalin was convinced that there was a good chance of war. He wanted to remove anybody who might oppose his foreign policy. He also did not want to allow anybody to slow down the pace of industrialisation because the Soviet Union would need weapons and armaments to fight the war. It was essential to make the revolution safe from external threats.

Other reasons for the terror

But do Stalin's personality and his motives fully explain the terror? Revisionist historians and others have suggested a variety of other reasons for the scope of the terror and the way it escalated out of control. These do not exclude Stalin but see him and his lieutenants as reacting to situations, rather than as the protagonists setting everything in motion. They also see the terror as being generated 'from below'. The categories below have been devised for clarity but they are closely interrelated.

Problems within the party

The central party in Moscow was having real problems controlling the party in the regions and the localities. J. Arch Getty argues that on a local level political administration was marked by sloth and inertia. Also, edicts from the central party sometimes conflicted with other demands. The local party often did not want to 'find' kulaks because they were valuable men in the community. In industrial towns, local party bosses wanted to reach their production targets and so did not want to purge specialists. Party leaders reacted to this in two ways:

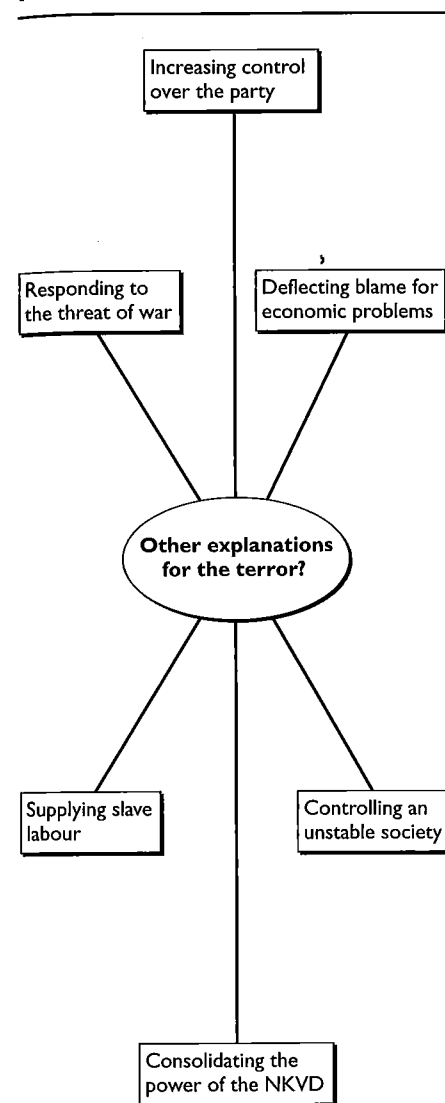
- They used coercive tactics, like the show trials, to create an atmosphere in which nobody in the party felt safe and everyone was therefore more likely to obey orders.
- They encouraged the lower levels of the party to criticise those higher up. This led to a rush of accusations which got out of control and developed a momentum of their own.

Economic difficulties

In the mid-1930s production figures were levelling off and the Five-Year Plans were falling behind schedule. There was a downturn in the Soviet economy after 1936 as a result of technical problems, Stalin's management of the economy and a bad harvest in that year. This led to two responses by Stalin and the élite that contributed to the spiralling growth of the terror:

- The leadership needed to find scapegoats (amongst managers as well as workers) for these economic failures. Roberta Manning has argued (Source 14.32 on page 269) that difficulties were seen as being due to enemy sabotage and wrecking.

14H Summary: other reasons for the terror



Learning trouble spot

Coercion and mobilisation

In response to both the problems in the party and the problems in the economy, the Communist leadership used the dual approach of coercion and mobilisation. Coercive techniques involved the show trials, arrests, imprisonment and the threat of the labour camps, which all induced fear and therefore compliance. Mass mobilisation involved getting those at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy to criticise those above, to shake up officials and managers, make them more active and encourage their greater compliance with instructions from the centre.

- Stalin wanted to shake up managers and economic administrators, so encouraged criticism from below – attempting to 'mobilise the masses'. Workers were only too happy to identify managers and officials as the cause of their problems. What started as a genuine groundswell of grass-roots criticism of officials then got out of control in the heady, whipped-up atmosphere of the Great Terror.

This was tied in with the Stakhanovite campaign of 1936. The motive behind this was not only to encourage workers to be more productive but also to persuade would-be Stakhanovites to put pressure on their managers by demanding tools and materials to raise their production rates. Managers who did not respond were branded as wreckers by the workers.

Social instability

The disruption caused by the Five-Year Plans had created a terribly unstable society. Mass urbanisation had created social tension and violence in the overcrowded cities which lacked basic facilities and services. There was a great deal of hostility in the cities and countryside towards the Communist Party and the government was worried about the loss of control in the 'quicksand society' (M. Lewin). The government resorted to the terror of the purges to stifle criticism of the leadership, to control people and to keep them working. The campaign encouraging people to criticise officials (see above) was intended to deflect criticism and antagonism from the government.

The position of the NKVD

Some historians argue that the NKVD conducted the terror with such vigour because it was in the interests of the NKVD as an institution. Within the NKVD there were divisions and power struggles. Some units, especially in areas outside Moscow, operated their own fiefdoms, like a mafia, and used the terror to their own advantage. There may also have been a view that any slowdown after the rigours of enforced collectivisation and the First Five-Year Plan might make the NKVD appear less indispensable, but the terror would raise their profile and allow them to become the leading institution in the Soviet system. This is the argument of those who state that the NKVD was responsible for the murder of Kirov. The target fulfilment mentality (see Source 14.19 on page 265) contributed to the increasing number of victims. Forced confessions led to further denunciations.

The Gulag

By condemning vast numbers of people to the Gulag, the terror provided slave labour to carry out dangerous work such as logging and gold-mining in inhospitable regions. Stalin needed the money that these industries earned from foreign exports to buy in Western technology.

External threats

The prospect of war looked increasingly likely after Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. This increased enormously the pressure to develop an armaments industry based on heavy industry. Therefore an unwilling people, already suffering from the impact of the First Five-Year Plan, had to be pushed to even greater efforts. The terror was a mechanism to do this. Deutscher in Source 14.34 (page 270) also sees the threat of war as a spur to Stalin to purge the opposition who might interfere with his war plans. Anxiety about the security threat posed by ethnic minorities in Soviet border areas was behind the 'national sweeps' of 1937–38.

A final comment

It is still difficult to reach a final conclusion on the terror. Any explanation is likely to include a mix of the various factors mentioned here although it is a question of how much weight is given to them. Views are changing as more evidence, archival and oral, is coming into the public domain and more records become available. The records of the KGB – if they are ever released – will be of particular value. It is interesting to note that Arch Getty, in the light of new archival evidence, has revised his views in his book, with Oleg Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–39* (1999).

CASE STUDY: THE PURGES IN SVERDLOVSK

This case study is based on the work of James Harris ('The purging of local cliques in the Urals region 1936-7', in S. Fitzpatrick (ed.) *Stalinism: New Directions*, 2000, pages 267-71). He examined new archive material on Sverdlovsk, a large industrial centre and showed that the purges did not have a uniform cause.

Members of the regional party leadership had ensured an excellent standard of living for the ruling clique – large apartments, special access to consumer goods, high salaries – provided they remained loyal. Those who caused trouble or would not carry out instructions would lose these privileges. By 1935, all key positions were in their control; even the local NKVD man was a member of their inner circle. When faced with problems in fulfilling excessively high economic targets for the First Five-Year Plan, they manipulated the production figures, hid deficiencies in projects under construction, and found scapegoats outside the clique to explain underfulfilment.

But when it came to the Second Five-Year Plan, with more realistic targets, deficiencies could not be hidden because all the enterprises were supposed to be up and working. Poor management and machine breakdowns meant that there was serious underfulfilment as production fell. To make matters worse, a new NKVD man replaced the old one as the Great Terror got underway and there were demands to search for 'enemies everywhere'. The cosy coping mechanism had broken down.

The result was an avalanche of accusations, denunciations and incriminating information as members of the clique tried to save themselves. But each arrest led to further arrests as the NKVD followed the threads of the conspiracy. The use of terror grew in momentum and ferocity.

He now acknowledges that the 'fingerprints of Stalin' are all over the terror and that he played a central role in planning and executing it, although he still maintains that it did not happen as part of a master plan but rather as the response by Stalin and the Soviet élite to changing circumstances in Russia (see Source 14.39). However, as a result of research into recently opened archives, many historians identify Stalin as the chief mover, agent and director of the terror and link it clearly to his personality and his intentions – the outcomes he wanted to achieve.

SOURCE 14.38 R. Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia*, 1997, pp. 210-11

The Great Terror would not have taken place but for Stalin's personality and ideas. He it was who directed the state's punitive machinery against all those whom he identified as 'anti-Soviet elements' and 'enemies of the people'. Among his purposes was a desire to use his victims as scapegoats for the country's pain; and in order to sustain his mode of industrialisation he also needed to keep his mines, timber forests and construction sites constantly supplied with slave labour. It was probably also his intention to take pre-emptive measures against any 'fifth column' [internal dissidents] operating against him in the case of war. These considerations, furthermore, fitted into a larger scheme to build an efficient Soviet state subservient to his personal dictatorship – and to secure the state's total control over society. Such was the guiding rationale of the Great Terrorist.

SOURCE 14.39 J. Arch Getty and O. V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-39*, 1999, p. xiii

In spite of some misreadings and misunderstandings of earlier work, Stalin's guilt for the terror was never in question. We can now see his fingerprints all over the archives. Although he approved suggestions and draft documents from others as often as he launched his own initiatives, he played the leading role in the terror. But even with the new documents, the role remains problematic and hard to specify... Stalin worked assiduously toward the goal of enhancing his power and centralizing authority in Moscow... But even in Stalin's office, there were too many twists and turns, too many false starts and subsequent embarrassing backtrackings to support the idea that the terror was the culmination of a well-prepared and long-standing master design. Stalin was not sure exactly what kind of repression he wanted or how to get it until rather late in the story. He seems not to have decided on wholesale massacre until early in 1937.

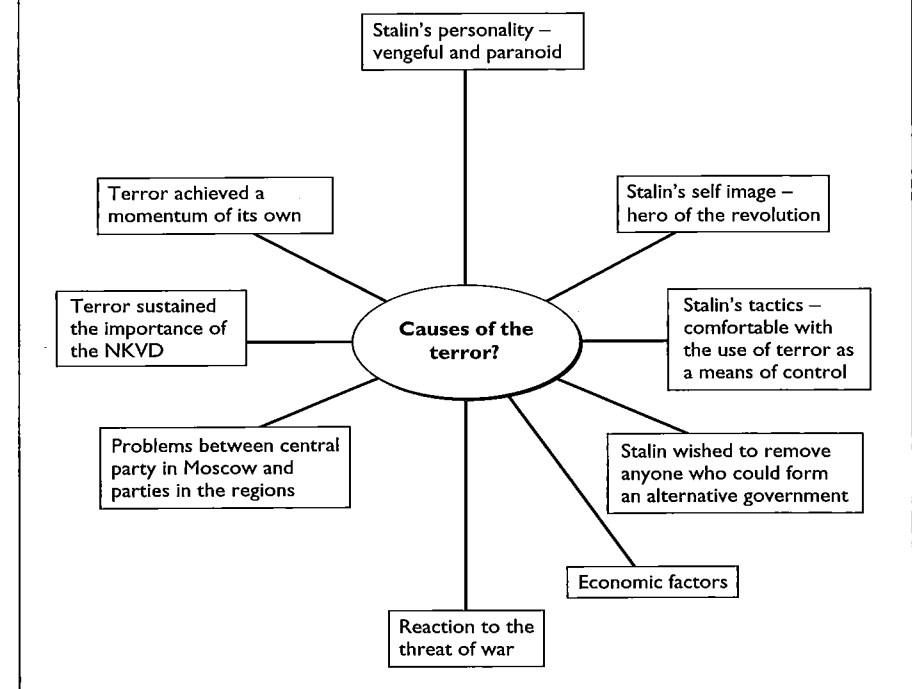
ACTIVITY

Write an essay to answer the following question: Was Stalin's personality much the most important factor in explaining the Great Terror?

This kind of essay invites a number of responses:

- a 'Yes' answer in which you argue that Stalin's personality was central to the terror and set out the evidence that supports your view
- a 'Yes but...' answer in which you argue his personality was important but suggest there were other reasons
- a 'No' answer in which you suggest there were a variety of reasons for the terror. This answer does not exclude Stalin as a central player: you are saying that his other motives were more important than motives of personal vengeance, fuelled by paranoia and his own self-image. Or, you might want to argue that Stalin's role has been exaggerated.

You may wish to distinguish between the treatment of the old Bolsheviks in the show trials and the wider purges that drew in many thousands. You will probably want to give more weight to some factors than others. The diagram below may help.

**KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER 14****How far was Stalin responsible for the Great Terror?**

- 1 There was a difference between the earlier purges (*chistki*), which were non-violent, and the purges and show trials, which used terror against the party.
- 2 Terror had been a consistent feature of the Stalinist regime from its beginning.
- 3 There was marked opposition to Stalin before 1934 and at the Seventeenth Party Congress.
- 4 It has been argued that the murder of Sergei Kirov triggered the Great Terror.
- 5 Old Bolsheviks from both the left and the right wings of the party were disposed of in a series of show trials.
- 6 The party was purged from above and from below when members were encouraged to criticise and denounce others.
- 7 Mass terror engulfed other sections of the population who represented the bulk of those repressed. NKVD Order 00447 led to a campaign of 'social cleansing'. Millions died, or were imprisoned or deported.
- 8 Terror was used to deal with the instability caused by the 'quicksand society' and resolve the difficulties caused by impossibly high economic targets which were explained away as sabotage.
- 9 At the end of the process, Stalin emerged as dictator of the USSR with supreme control of a party that had been moulded by him and a populace that was, in the main, subservient to the leader and the party.