

Stalin's use of terror derived from his childhood and reflected his maladjusted personality

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Summary: Stalin used terror throughout his long period as the ruler of the USSR. The policy derived, in part, from Lenin's practices and from those of the Tsars, as well as from wider European history, but it also owed much to Stalin himself. He decided that harsh punishment was necessary to support rapid industrialisation and to eliminate possible rivals; but terror also stemmed from his peculiarly suspicious, violent and vengeful personality. Nevertheless, he failed to control the terror, which generated a momentum of its own and, in the end, it helped to undermine the Soviet system.

Questions to consider

- ♦ In what respects did Stalin's use of terror derive from the policies of Lenin and the tsars?
- ♦ What logical reasons were there for the use of terror in Stalinist Russia?
- ♦ To what extent did the use of terror stem from Stalin's personality?
- ♦ How did terror under Stalin generate a momentum of its own?



The young face of the later terrorist. Stalin, aged 15

STALIN'S TERROR REACHED ITS PEAK IN 1936-8, when it is sometimes called the Great Terror. It encompassed major show trials in 1936, 1937 and 1938, a less-public trial of military leaders in 1937, purges of the Communist Party in which hundreds of thousands of party members were arrested and shot, and the systematic imprisonment and execution of potential 'enemies' according to predetermined quotas that was launched in summer 1937. Three infamous men headed the Ministry of Internal Affairs (NKVD) during these years: G.G. Yagoda (1934-6), N.I. Yezhov (1936-8) and L.P. Beria (1938-45). Yagoda died in 1938, Yezhov in 1940 and Beria, too, was executed but under Khrushchev in 1953.

There is no doubt that terror was a strong feature of Stalin's rule in the late 1930s, but it should not be forgotten that the regime already had a track record of using coercion to achieve its objectives. Notably, the policy of collectivisation, launched in late 1929, which involved the consolidation of the peasantry into collective and state farms, was also carried out with extreme violence; and during the first five-year plan (1928-32), there were also show trials of industrialists and potential political opponents. Furthermore, terror was much used in Stalin's later years: deserters were shot in tens of thousands during the war; a rigid culture of conformity was quickly re-established after the war; and the number of inmates in labour camps reached its peak in 1950 (approximately 2,800,000). Terror, then, was a central feature of Stalin's rule throughout his years in power.

Precedents

Some people attribute the terror to Stalin himself. Two of Stalin's successors, Nikita Khrushchev (1953-64) and Mikhail Gorbachev (1985-91), blamed Stalin himself for the worst features of Soviet rule. In their view, the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917 had been a healthy first step in creating an ideal communist society, and it was only Stalin's personality cult and ruthlessness that had pushed the revolution off course. They called for a return to Leninist principles. Yet Khrushchev and Gorbachev chose to overlook the fact that it was Lenin himself who instituted many of the mechanisms of terror and gave arbitrary rule an ideological justification: the secret police, the 'Cheka' (later the NKVD), was set up in December 1917; indiscriminate intimidation and murder took place during the 'Red Terror' of 1918; there was systematic violence against the peasantry during the Civil War in a policy known as 'war communism'; and the mechanisms of the one-party state, which Stalin used to his advantage, were set up under Lenin. Stalinism, then, owed a lot to Leninism.

Stalin's terror also had longer-term roots: tsarist Russia was autocratic, just as the Soviet Union was, even if the tsars and the Bolsheviks understood the world very differently and employed different levels of repression; and, like the Soviet state, the tsarist regime had a powerful secret police (known as the *Okhrana*), which was accustomed to spying on the population. Stalin's

rule can even be considered - as American historian Robert Tucker has suggested - a throwback to earlier patterns of absolutism: cruelty and repression accompanied the modernisation programme that took place under Peter the Great (1689-1725); and the regular purging of enemies was a feature of the reign of Ivan the Terrible (1533-84).

There were European as well as Russian roots of the terror. Cynicism about human life was a feature of all the inter-war dictatorships, suggesting that the origins of terror were partly to be found in a wider European context. Doubtless, the First World War contributed to the brutalisation of the Continent. There were also intellectual roots to the terror. Already in the nineteenth century many intellectuals were advocating the abandonment of traditional moralities. The German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, rejected religion, and popularised the qualities of daring, hardness and willpower. In Karl Marx's materialism, morality was defined as a vehicle of class interest. Beyond these philosophies, the European revolutionary tradition, going back to the Jacobin Terror of the French revolution and beyond, contained seeds of violence. The doctrines of radical nationalism and class war, and the rejection of the idea of the sanctity of the individual associated with Christianity, all contributed to the building of an intellectual climate where violence could be considered acceptable.

External and internal threats

However, while the Stalinist terror clearly had roots both in Leninism and in Russian and European history, there were certain events of the Stalin period itself that contributed to Stalin's habitual use of terror. Stalin constantly emphasised the threat to the USSR from external enemies. In 1927, there was a war scare with Britain that prompted him to emphasise threats to Soviet security. In February 1931, in a speech to economic managers, Stalin declared that Russia was 50-100 years behind the advanced countries and that it needed to catch-up within ten years or it would not survive. The accusations levelled at the defendants during the show trials of 1936-8 increasingly emphasised threats from abroad. Indeed, in his memoirs the Soviet Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, argued that the terror of 1937 had been necessary in order to stamp out potential subversion at home in case war should break out. The deteriorating international situation thus gave Stalin's terror a justification.

Stalin's terror can also be explained in terms of the regime's internal power struggles. A credible explanation for terror was simply that Stalin wanted to get rid of his rivals. At the 17th Party Congress in January 1934, there had been talk of replacing Stalin with the Leningrad party chief, Sergei Kirov. Kirov was assassinated in mysterious circumstances in December 1934, and - although the evidence remains inconclusive - Stalin has often been accused of being responsible for the murder. It is certainly intriguing that a large number of those who attended the 17th Party Congress were removed and shot in subsequent years. Kirov's assassination led to mass arrests in Leningrad, the power base of Stalin's former rival, G.E. Zinoviev. Zinoviev, along with another

TIMELINE

Stalin's Terror

1928-32	First five-year plan
1929	(Autumn) Launch of full-scale collectivisation
1934	(Jan) 17th Party Congress (Dec 1) Assassination of Kirov.
1936	(July) Outbreak of Spanish civil war (Aug) First major show trial (defendants included Kamenev and Zinoviev) (Sept) Appointment of Yezhov as head of NKVD
1937	(Jan) Second major show trial (June) Trial of military leaders (July 30) Operational Order No 00447
1938	(Mar) Third major show trial (defendants included Bukharin and Yagoda)
1939	(Aug) Nazi-Soviet Pact
1940	(Aug) Assassination of Trotsky in Mexico

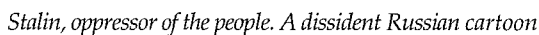
prominent party leader, Lev Kamenev, was one of the defendants in the first major show trial in August 1936; another influential party leader, Nikolai Bukharin, was the most prominent of the defendants at the third major show trial in March 1938.

The desire to catch-up with the West was one of the main reasons for the introduction of the five-year plans that were launched in 1928 in which the government set highly ambitious targets for the industrialisation of the country. Stalinist 'modernisation' meant trying to condense processes of development that in other countries had taken decades or even centuries into just a few years. The Stalinist state assumed that impossible targets could be achieved through willpower alone; 'there are no fortresses that the Bolsheviks cannot storm' was one of the slogans of the time.

Industrialisation

This constant emphasis on the need for modernisation was also a cause of terror: any deviation from the state's agenda had to be met with the utmost harshness. As Stalin saw it, the urgency of the Soviet Union's international predicament meant that no delay could be countenanced. Stalin's letters to Molotov up to and during collectivisation reflected a deep impatience; they were filled with suggestions that policy needed to be carried out 'immediately', and that people should be punished 'immediately' for failing to fulfil orders. 'Wreckers' had to be removed. This applied to social groups as well as individuals: hence, Stalin's policy of 'eliminating the kulaks as a class' during collectivisation and, later, the wholesale deportation of national groups, such as the Chechens and the Volga Germans, to Siberia during the Second World War.

Yet the policy of rapid industrialisation itself created many of the problems that the regime had to grapple with. For example, factories that were given orders from Moscow to manufacture a certain number of products, often found that they did not have adequate supplies and could only resolve the problem by fiddling the figures or resorting to 'black market' dealings. Of course,



Stalin's mind-set

Although Stalin partly owed his attitude to terror to the Bolshevik Party, his upbringing was likely a source of it, too. Stalin's father was a brutal man who drank heavily and beat his son. Is it possible that, as with many of the Nazi leaders, Stalin's paranoia had its roots in an unhappy relationship with his father? Such psychological conjecture, even if it can be overdone, has its place. Whatever the root, Stalin was a man who held grudges, and who saw himself as an avenger. In his youth he

The current fashion for believing that the public and private life of a person can be separated is thus hard to maintain when looking at Stalin. Indeed, the model of the Shakespearean tragedy, where a country suffers for its leader's character weaknesses, has much to recommend it when looking at Stalinism. Both in his personal and his political life, Stalin distrusted people and had a tendency to resort to violence. He habitually appealed to the worst in the people around him; indeed, he once said that he preferred people to follow him out of fear rather than conviction because fear was a more reliable emotion. At one level, this all suggests that Stalin was a very hard man. However, at another level, it points to a leader who found it very difficult to deal with reality; his way of handling difficult situations was to get rid of people. The tendency to be suspicious of people was something in Stalin that could be exploited. In her memoirs, Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva, suggested that her father became a victim of the flattery and deviousness of Beria, the Georgian leader who succeeded Yezhov. According to Svetlana, Stalin 'could be led up the garden path' by someone of Beria's craftiness.

The terror was fuelled by fear. Even at the highest level, people were sometimes drawn into the web of terror for fear for their own lives or those around them. The wives of Molotov and the Soviet president, Mikhail Kalinin, were for a time kept in labour camps while Molotov and Kalinin were working for Stalin. Yezhov instructed one of his deputies to choose as NKVD interrogators people who had some sins in their past that could be used to keep them in line. Khrushchev recalled in his memoirs that some of the lists of people to be shot during the terror were passed around the Politburo for

everyone to sign; all the signatories thereby became complicit in the criminality. Not speaking out against terror was often tantamount to becoming complicit; consciences were thereby deadened, and potential opposition to the regime stymied.

Terror justified

In the Stalinist ethic, the individual could be sacrificed for the sake of the State. In a speech in 1945 celebrating the victory over Nazism, Stalin paid tribute to the contribution of ordinary people, terming them '*vintiki*', which can be translated as 'cogs'. Stalin saw people as 'cogs' rather than as human beings: as means to ends. The doctrine that the ends justify the means was certainly widely accepted. Violence could be justified if it was for the sake of a happy future. In Mikhail Romm's feature film, *Lenin in 1918* (1939), Stalin pointed to a young girl and said, 'See for whose sake we must be merciless towards our enemies.' Terror was thus presented as necessary for securing the happiness of future generations. Through such propaganda, people were helped to justify to themselves their complicity in terror. Musical comedy films such as Georgii Aleksandrov's *The Circus* (1936) and Ivan Pyreev's *The Tractor-Drivers* (1939) helped to create a 'feel-good' factor about creating a communist society that distracted people from the harsh realities of what the regime was doing. The famous political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, writing about the Holocaust, talked of the way in which the Nazis used 'language games' to hide the reality of what they were doing to people; the Stalin regime did the same.

At the same time, many people were not aware of the extent of the terror. The tight system of censorship, supervised by Glavlit, meant that people did not have access to independent information. Moreover, they often lived in isolated mental worlds. Stalin was no exception. His recently-published correspondence with Politburo chief, Lazar Kaganovich, points to a man who was obsessed with work and who received information about the country primarily through party sources. In this sense, Stalin was himself a prisoner of the system that he ran. Of course, people sometimes chose isolation because it was safer. The Soviet industrialist who defected to the US dur-

Words and concepts to note

Eschatological: relating to ultimate things, especially death and judgement.

Glavlit: The Main Administration for Matters of Literature and Publishing.

NKVD: The People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs.

Politburo: The Communist Party's main decision-making body.

Stymied: thwarted, frustrated.

ing the war, Viktor Kravchenko, recalled that he 'learned at last to blot out disturbing knowledge'. Those who benefited from Stalinism, of whom there were many, doubtless had particular reason to turn a blind eye.

Results

Stalin's policy of building a powerful industrialised state was relatively successful in the short-term; indeed, the country turned into a superpower after 1945. At the same time, the methods he used created fundamental, long-term problems for the country. Terror frightened the population and suppressed creativity; it helped to cement a political system that was based on arbitrary personalised rule, in which new thinking was not welcome and radical reform very difficult. It also undermined the ideological appeal of Soviet socialism. Although Khrushchev rejected Stalin's personality cult, he never really questioned the system itself. The country stagnated under Leonid Brezhnev (1964-82), and Gorbachev's attempts to reform it in the late 1980s led to its collapse.

FURTHER READING: Svetlana Alliluyeva, *Twenty Letters to a Friend*; Philip Boobbyer, *The Stalin Era*; Feliks Chuev (ed), *Molotov Remembers*; Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror*; John Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning (eds) *Stalinist Terror*; Lars T. Lih et al (eds), *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*; Barry McLoughlin and Keven McDermott (eds), *Stalin's Terror*; Simon Sebag-Montefiore, *Stalin: Court of the Red Tsar*; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*; Robert Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary and Stalin in Power*; Dmitri Volkogonov, *Stalin*.

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