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Question: To what extent were the purges of the 1930s the most important reason for Stalin's consolidation of his power to 1939?

Stalin, the Man of Steel, was born in Georgia from a working-class background and trained for the priesthood until he became a Marxist and revolutionary. He was arrested several times and sentenced to internal exile but returned to Petrograd in 1917 to join Lenin and the other Bolshevik revolutionaries. He helped to defeat the Whites in the civil war but did not play an important role until he was appointed General Secretary of the Communist party in 1922. This was to be crucial in his rise to supreme power after Lenin's death in 1924. As party Secretary, he could appoint local officials and influence the choice of delegates to the party conferences. It is likely that Lenin did not fully trust Stalin and would have removed him from his position but he died before he could do so.

From 1924 to 1929, Stalin was clever enough to secure power in the Soviet Union and outwit Trotsky, his main rival. He was supported by Kamenev and Zinoviev, two prominent and experienced Bolshevik leaders, but he used Bukharin to remove them from power once they had helped him to discredit Trotsky. Until 1929, his main aim was to discredit Trotsky. Only Lenin had been more important than Trotsky in the 1917 October Revolution and Trotsky's leadership of the Red Army against the Whites in the civil war was crucial. In 1929, Stalin succeeded in forcing Trotsky to leave the USSR but his animosity continued. Those whom Stalin later purged were often accused of being followers of Trotsky or Trotskyites. Trotsky himself was murdered in Mexico in 1940 by a Stalinist assassin.

The purges of the later 1920s were followed and even exceeded by the purges of the 1930s. The murder of Kirov, a supporter of Stalin, in 1934 sparked a series of show trials and secret arrests and executions. It is very possible that Kirov was killed on Stalin's orders to provide an excuse to carry out large-scale purges. The victims were rarely outright critics of Stalin. Some, like Kamenev, Zinoviev and Bukharin had been his associates. Others were less prominent members of the Communist party who had gained their positions through Stalin's approval. Almost three-quarters of the Central Committee in 1934 were executed in the next five years. Many other minor officials perished. The purges went beyond the party. Stalin also purged the officer ranks of the Soviet military. Members of the secret police, the NKVD, were executed. As the purges spread, many ordinary people believed that their only hope of survival was to denounce others, even if they were innocent. The purges helped to consolidate Stalin's hold on power but their extent and ferocity went beyond this. Many, perhaps most, of the victims did not present a direct or indirect threat to Stalin. Nor did Stalin count the cost. The armed forces were severely weakened by the purges and this might have contributed to the early defeats in the war



Stalin at the height of his powers, victor in peacetime and war, 1945
against Hitler. However, the extreme use of terror
prevented even mild criticism of Stalin.

The reasons for the purges are unclear. A few members of the party might have had some sympathy with Trotsky or distrusted Stalin while some military leaders might have been suspicious of him but their numbers were small and did not justify the scale of the purges. It is possible that Stalin was afraid of the rise of Hitler's Nazis and wished to unify the USSR against any threat from Germany. Hitler certainly saw Communists as a powerful enemy. However, there is no evidence of Nazi sympathisers in the USSR and Stalin's fears were exaggerated. It is also possible that he saw the military

as a rival to his party within the Soviet Union. Again, there is no proof of significant plots against him by officers. The most important result of the military purges was that Soviet defences were weakened in the early years of the war against Hitler.

There were also other reasons why Stalin consolidated his power. He ended the New Economic Policy (NEP) of Lenin which allowed a limited amount of private enterprise. Therefore, all aspects of the economy as well as of government came under Stalin's control. It has been said that 'virtually every citizen became an employee of the State' and therefore directly or indirectly an employee of Stalin.

Collectivisation of agriculture and reforms of industry in the Five Year Plans were important economically but they also had a political importance because they made sure that Stalin remained in power.

The extermination of the kulaks might be seen as an economic purge. It could be argued that Lenin's NEP had been unsuccessful because agricultural production was low. Famine was frequent and agricultural methods were backward. But Stalin's decision to collectivise farming and the industrial changes in the Five Year Plans resulted in considerable hardship to workers. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of people were executed or sent to gulags as forced labour. There was some increase in production, although it is difficult to be exact about the extent because of unreliable figures, but the brutality of the methods also emphasised Stalin's power to control so many people and to impose such extreme policies.

Education and propaganda were used to enhance Stalin's importance. His responsibility for the terror and purges was hidden and the government conveyed the idea that Stalin was kind and fatherly. He was said to be concerned only for the best interests of citizens. He was praised as being responsible for all of the gains that were published in official but unreliable statistics. When government figures showed that production increased, they seemed to justify the leadership of Stalin. Workers were encouraged to claim that they were inspired by Stalin, and their claims were widely reported in the only official newspapers that were available. History books for children and adults were rewritten to exaggerate Stalin's importance in the 1917 Revolution. Stalinist ideas were conveyed on the radio and in newspapers. The arts were firmly controlled. Many of these methods were also used by Hitler in Germany

but one difference is that, unlike Hitler, Stalin rarely appeared in public and he was not an effective orator. It has been claimed that Stalin's control has been exaggerated and that apathy, inefficiency and waste, expectably in the regions that were farthest from Moscow, undermined the practical extent of his power. This might be true but these limitations never threatened the consolidation of his power.

Nobody shared power with Stalin, nor could he be deterred from the most extreme actions. Therefore, the purges of the 1930s were the most important reason for Stalin's consolidation of his power to 1939.

Examiner's comments

Emma's answer was given 70 marks out of 90 (Band B).

Good points:

- ♦ Almost all of the argument is directly relevant.
- ♦ Most of the answer focuses on the key period.
- ♦ The answer explains issues rather than tells a story.
- ♦ There is a sound variety of points, most of which are linked to the question.
- ♦ The answer considers alternative explanations such as education and propaganda.
- ♦ The brief comparison with Hitler is effective. Comparisons can be useful but make sure that they are short.

The ways that the answer could be improved:

- ♦ The introduction is accurate but is not linked directly to the question. Does it matter that Stalin first trained for the priesthood? The end of the first paragraph is closer to the question. Can you write a better introduction that avoids unnecessary background?
- ♦ The question asks whether the purges were the most important reason for Stalin's power. The end of the answer asserts that this was true but it would have been improved if it had explained why they were most important. Why were they more important than the alternative reasons? Explain your priorities clearly.
- ♦ The paragraph that explains the reasons for the purges is generally relevant but could have been linked directly to the question. Check your plan!

Russell Williams, latterly Lecturer, University of Gloucestershire, is an AS/A Level Chief Examiner.



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