

THE GREAT PURGE

1936-38

During 1936-38, Josef Stalin unleashed a period of political repression and terror known today as the Great Purge. Hundreds of thousands of people, including many of the highest-ranking Soviet officials, were accused of treason and shot.

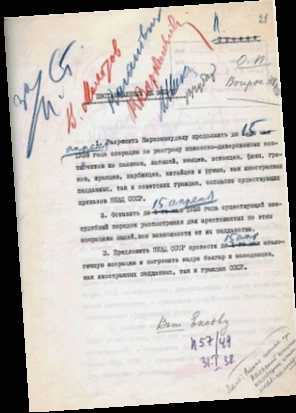
After his wife's suicide in 1935, Stalin became paranoid of opposition, especially from Old Bolsheviks and powerful Communist Party leaders. He began to suspect the loyalty of those close to him, and to see plots and threats everywhere. Between 1936 and 1938, he ordered massive numbers of arrests and executions.

The NKVD. In 1936, Stalin appointed Nikolai Yezhov as head of the NKVD (secret police). Yezhov and Stalin together set quotas for arrests and executions. Projected estimates of 177,500 people exiled and 72,950 executed were met and then surpassed. Stalin authorized torture, and personally signed 357 lists authorizing executions of 40,000 people. While reviewing one list, Stalin supposedly muttered to himself, "Who's going to remember all this riff-raff in ten or twenty years' time? No one. Who remembers the names now of those Ivan the Terrible got rid of? No one!"

NKVD troikas streamlined the legal process. These three-person commissions investigated crimes, read confessions, and sentenced people to death or imprisonment, all without a trial. Death sentences were carried out immediately, at night, either in prisons or on the outskirts of major cities.

The Show Trials. Between 1936 and 1938, three highly publicized trials took place in Moscow that set the stage for the terror. The accused were all famous, high-ranking Communists; they included former Politburo members, world-respected Marxist Nikolai Bukharin, a former premier, and even the former head of the NKVD. The charges were outrageous: collaborating with foreign spies, working to restore capitalism in the Soviet

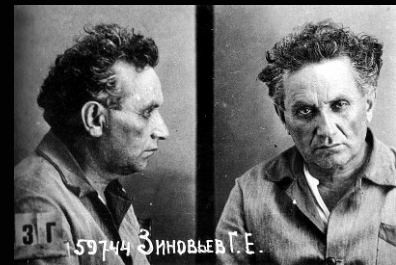
A list from the Great Purge signed by Stalin, and others: Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Mikoyan, and Chubar.



Nikolai Yezhov, whom Stalin appointed to be head of the NKVD in 1936, was responsible for carrying out the Purges. He is shown here Stalin, Voroshilov, and Molotov, inspecting the White Sea Canal. Yezhov later became a victim to the Purges himself. This image was later altered to remove Yezhov completely.



Grigory Zinoviev (L) had been one of leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. He sat on the first Politburo, along with Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin, and served as longtime head of the Communist International.



Zinoviev was arrested and tried along with 15 others at the first Moscow show trial in 1936. Under the NKVD's "persuasive methods," Zinoviev confessed to the charges, upon Stalin's word that he would not die. The defendants were found guilty on August 24, 1936, and executed the next day.

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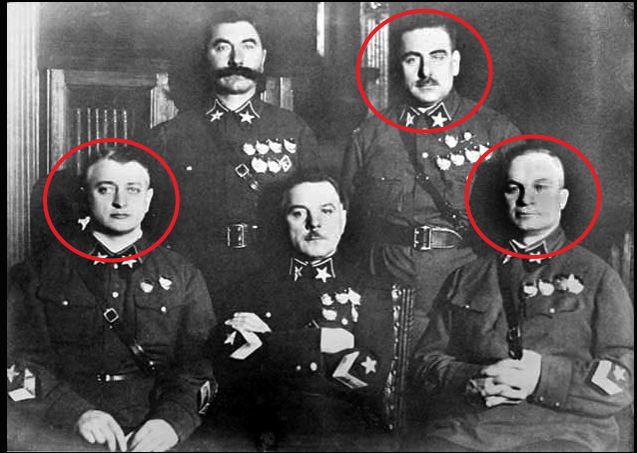
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Union, scheming to assassinate Lenin, Stalin, and others, and conspiring to break up the USSR and parcel it out to Great Britain, Japan, and Germany. The world was fascinated watching Lenin's inner circles confessing to treason. One defendant confessed, retracted, and confessed the next day with a dislocated shoulder. All were convicted, and most were shot.

Mass Arrests & Executions. After the second Moscow trial, mass arrests and executions broke out. The NKVD stormed homes at night and arrested many people, primarily men, charging them with treason, collaborating with foreign spies, and planning to overthrow the government. A surprising number of people confessed, owing to the NKVD's persuasive tactics, including psychological pressure, torture, beatings, simulated drowning, sleep deprivation, and threats to prisoners' families. During interrogations, the NKVD wanted to know, "Who recruited you to spy?" and "Who did you recruit?" Neither question made sense to the innocent. But leniency was promised if the accused would denounce others, and many did to try to save their own lives.

A number of different groups were specifically targeted. These include:

Military Leaders. The Red Army and Navy were among the first group targeted. Even though war with



Three of these five Soviet Marshals (equivalent to 5-star generals) from this 1935 photo were killed during the purges. (L to R): Mikhail Tukhachevsky, Semyon Budyonny, Kliment Voroshilov, Vasily Blyukher, and Aleksandr Yegorov.

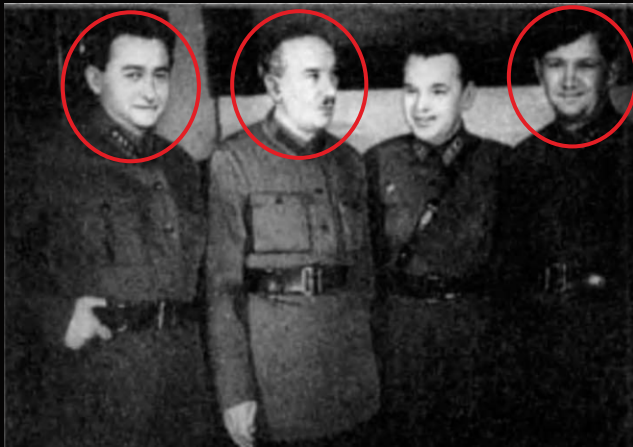
Germany was eminent, Stalin eliminated most of the highest-ranking officials: three of five marshals (five-star generals), 13 of 15 army commanders (three- and four-star generals), eight of nine admirals, 50 of 57 army corps commanders, down through the ranks. Hein was an enlisted soldier, but one of the early victims arrested in 1936, probably because of his German ethnicity.

"Ex-Kulaks and other Anti-Soviet Elements." In 1937, NKVD Order No. 00447 made it legal once again to target kulaks (wealthy peasants). These were the largest group persecuted, with 670,000 people arrested and 375,000 executed, more than half of all executions in the Soviet Union during this time.

Poles. 143,810 were arrested, and 111,100 were executed, according to records. Only 85,000 of them were truly ethnic Poles; the others were "suspected of being Polish."

Germans. "Special settlers" from the Volga, Ural, Dnieper, and Siberian regions made a huge group of those persecuted; and, as Germany loomed large as a foreign enemy, the Germans in Russia were naturally suspected of divided loyalties. Around 100,000 of them were arrested during the Great Purge.

Early Communist Leaders. Most of the early communist leaders were purged. Of the six members of the original Politburo from the 1917 October Revolution,



Perpetrators and Victims. A picture from 1934, showing three NKVD chiefs responsible for mass terror, who were themselves then executed: Yakov Agranov, Genrikh Yagoda, an unknown gentleman, and Stanislav Redens.

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four were executed, and Trotsky was forced into exile and assassinated in 1940.

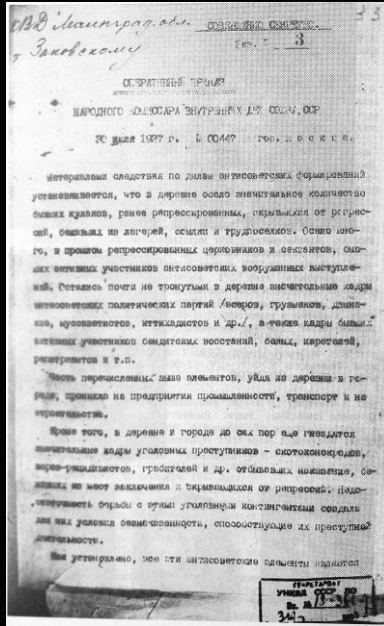
The Intelligentsia. Thousands of writers, intellectuals, scientists, and artists were imprisoned and died in labor camps. Twenty-seven astronomers disappeared during the Purges, after their research on sunspots was judged un-Marxist. Thousands of pastors and religious leaders were imprisoned, and nearly all the churches closed.

The End of the Purge. In 1938, even Yezhov, the head of the NKVD through this period of terror, was removed from office; he was later tried and executed. In November, 1938, a decree suspended arrests and death sentences and officially ended the Great Purge.

The Purge secured Stalin's power, if only by killing off all potential rivals. Censorship was everywhere, and a cult centered around Stalin emerged. People were afraid to be critical, or even silent, so propaganda posters, statues, pictures, and continuous praise for Stalin and his regime were everywhere. History textbooks were rewritten to erase "purged traitors" from history, and to make Stalin the



The Purge gave rise to the "cult of Stalin." People praised him excessively for fear of being considered disloyal.



NKVD Order No. 00447, marking "Ex-Kulaks and other Anti-Soviet Elements" as targets. This document made lawful the persecution of over a million people.

hero of the Revolution. Mass arrests and exiles continued until Stalin's death, although on a smaller scale, and once World War II began, Stalin focused on eliminating Germans, Poles, and war prisoners.

After Stalin's death, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1956 denounced the Purge as an "abuse of power." He recognized that many of the victims were innocent, by means of confessions extracted by torture, and many have been officially rehabilitated posthumously.

Death toll. According to the Soviet archives opened in the 1990s, the NKVD arrested 1.5 million people in 1937-38 and shot nearly 700,000 of them, an average of nearly 1,000 executions a day. Between 3 and 12 million were sent to labor camps.

Because the Soviets sometimes hid the numbers they killed, the exact death toll is hard to calculate. During WWII, the Germans discovered mass graves in Vinnytsia, central Ukraine, that contained 10,000 bodies, all of which had been shot in 1937-38 with .22 caliber bullets at the base of the neck. These victims had all been sentenced to "ten years without the right of correspondence," leading many to think that numbers killed during the Purge may be much higher than the records show. More mass graves have been discovered. The Butovo firing range near Moscow, contains more than 20,000 Purge victims, and mass graves at Kurapaty (Belarus) and Bykivnia (Ukraine) may contain up to 200,000 victims.

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Nikolai Bukharin had been a Russian Bolshevik revolutionary, Soviet politician, editor of the Communist Party newspaper, *Pravda*, and widely-known author on Marxist revolutionary theory. He had worked with Lenin and Trotsky in exile, and been a strong ally of Stalin's throughout the 1920s. He was arrested in 1937, and charged with conspiring to overthrow the Soviet state. In the highly publicized "third show trial," Bukharin was convicted. He was executed in 1938.

Bukharin with Stalin in 1928.



Rocket engineer **Sergei Korolev** was arrested in 1938, accused of "deliberately slowing down the research." Korolev was tortured, tried, and sentenced to death. Fortunately, the Purge was waning, and he received reduced charges. He spent several months in a gold mine in the Kolyma area and lost most of his teeth from scurvy before returning to Moscow in 1939, where he worked in a penitentiary for intellectuals. Losing some of the best minds through the Purge slowed advancement in the field.



Pianist **Khadija Gayibova** enjoyed holding musical "salons" for writers, artists, musicians, and academics. Many guests were foreign visitors. The Soviet government became suspicious of her parties, and arrested her and her husband in 1938 for espionage and counter-revolutionary activity. After a 15-minute court hearing, she was sentenced to death by a firing squad.

More Victims of the Purge



Poet **Osip Mandelstam**, a Polish-Jew, was arrested for the first time in 1934 for publicly reading a poem that criticized Stalin. He tried to retract. Over the next few years, Mandelstam wrote "Ode to Stalin," and several other poems to honor the dictator. In 1938, Mandelstam and his wife received a government voucher for a vacation near Moscow. Upon arriving, he was arrested and sentenced to five years in a correction camp. He smuggled a note out, asking his wife for warm clothes. He wrote: "Only in Russia is poetry respected, it gets people killed. Is there anywhere else where poetry is so common a motive for murder?" He died from cold and hunger that same year.



Theatre director, **Vsevolod Meyerhold**, was arrested in 1939, and his wife was stabbed to death in their Moscow home. During interrogation, Meyerhold confessed that he worked for Japanese and British intelligence agencies. He described later how the NKVD captors secured his confession: "The investigators began to use force on me, a sick 65-year-old man. I was made to lie face down and beaten on the soles of my feet and my spine with a rubber strap... For the next few days...they again beat my red-blue-and-yellow bruises with the strap and the pain was so intense that it felt as if boiling water was being poured on these sensitive areas. I howled and wept from the pain..." Meyerhold was executed in February, 1940. In 1955, the Soviet Supreme Court declared him innocent posthumously.