

A.) Stalin's personality

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.

Deeply suspicious of others, verging on paranoia, Khrushchev reports that Stalin was a very 'distrustful man, sickly suspicious, seeing everywhere about him 'enemies', 'double dealers' and 'spies'. The suicide of his wife seems to have made him even more convinced that those around him would betray him, so he wanted to get them before they got him.



Vindictive and vengeful, a bearer of grudges, taking revenge on those who had belittled or thwarted him in the past. In the early days of the revolution, the old Bolsheviks had treated him in a condescending way as mediocre and dull.

Crude and brutal even for a Bolshevik, with a fascination for violence; when hard pushed, he resorted to violence as a solution to his problems.

Limited abilities but unlimited ambitions; he had an inferiority complex.

Idealised view of himself as the hero of the revolution, a genius who alone could take Russia forward to socialism and effect the transformation of the country, and who therefore could not be thwarted. This is a view stressed by Alan Bullock (Source 7) and Robert Tucker. Those who refused to accept his vision Stalin defined as traitorous: 'Only by believing in the victims' treasonous designs or deed could he come to terms with their failure to share his grandiose beliefs about himself.' (R. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above*, 1992)

These facets of his character – paranoia and vengefulness – might explain why his former comrades were killed rather than disgraced, demoted or exiled as they would have been under Lenin.

This might explain the violence of the terror carried out against party members and people who were causing him problems.

This might explain why he had to get rid of the old Bolshevik party members who knew his limitations, would not accept his heroic pose and might try to thwart him. He may also have wanted to destroy those who were his intellectual superiors, especially in party doctrine and history.

C.) 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:

- These 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.

B.) 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 *nomenclature* 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.

E.) 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 was intended to deflect criticism and antagonism from the government.

H.) 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 effort. The terror was a mechanism to do this. Deutscher in Source 6 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.

F.) 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 or triad gang, 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 contributed to the increasing number of victims. Forced confessions led to further denunciations.

G.) 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.

D.) 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 elite 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 4) that difficulties were seen as being due to enemy sabotage and wrecking.
- 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.