

How Far was Stalin's Personality Responsible for The Purges?

Complete the following work on separate sheets of paper

1. Read sources 13.29-13.35. What is the main point of each quote?
2. Decide how important each historian (in the seven sources) feels that Stalin's personality was to the Great Purges by placing them on the three-point scale. Explain your choices by using direct quotes from the sources. Follow the method outlined below.

Stalin's Personality was Absolutely Central to the Purges 1	Stalin's Personality Was Important to the Purges 2	Stalin's Personality Was One of A Number of Explanations for the Purges 3
<p>Source 13.29 R. Conquest: believes that the Purges were, "...above all Stalin's personal achievement." Also, "the one fundamental drive that can be found throughout is the strengthening of his own position."</p>		

SOURCE 13.29 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 13.30 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 13.31 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 13.32. 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 inextricably linked. The industrial slowdown, 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 13.29 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 13.30 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 13.31 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 13.32 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 13.33 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 13.34 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 13.35 Alan Bullock is a distinguished liberal British historian, the author of *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (1991).

SOURCE 13.33 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 13.34 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 13.35 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.