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STALIN'S PURGES

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Stalin's Purges

Joseph Stalin gained power in the Soviet Union in 1928 by spreading his doctrine of attaining socialism in one country (MacKenzie, p. 472). To do that, Stalin believed that he had to rapidly industrialize the Soviet Union and make it self-sustaining. For industrialization to be successful, Stalin believed that it was essential for farms to be collectivized because with Russia's struggling economy, he needed to have access to a cheap food source to ensure that workers in the factories were fed so that they could accomplish his goals (Ibid, p. 481). As this paper will demonstrate, Stalin launched the purges as a means to help modernize the Soviet Union by eliminating obstacles that he thought conflicted with his vision, and in turn, make the Soviet Union a world power, which would then result in his real goal of becoming a glorified Soviet icon.

Collectivization of farms was essential to provide cheap food to workers in the cities who were creating industrial goods in the factories. However, peasants, living in the countryside received no incentives to enter into collectives. As a result, Stalin began forced collectivization (MacKenzie, p. 483). But, in a deceitful manner, he gave the impression to the Central Committee that it was only "rich kulaks" who resisted entering collectives, when in fact it was most of the peasant farmers at large (Ibid). Many peasants responded to forced collectivization by burning down their farms and destroying their supplies to avoid entering collectives. Some peasants even moved into the cities where they took jobs in factories in order to avoid entering collectives (Clements, p. 267). But unfortunately, because many of these peasants were unskilled, they were arrested and charged with being saboteurs when machines broke down (Ibid).

As a result of the resistance to collectivization and the destruction of farms, Stalin was faced with the problem of not having enough grain to feed the workers in the factories. As a result, Stalin then turned to requisitioning grain from the Ukraine. This in turn created widespread famine in the Ukraine by leaving them with a shortage of food and effectively killing thousands of people (MacKenzie, p. 464). The grain he requisitioned served to subsidize Stalin's industrialization because he was able to sell the grain abroad, not to mention that it eliminated many of those who opposed him in the Ukraine.

Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party Sergei Mironovich Kirov believed that Stalin should have offered more incentives to the peasants to enter into collectives. His view gained popularity in the Politburo and Party leaders jumped at the chance to offer Kirov a nomination to replace Stalin as first secretary. But Kirov refused. Nevertheless, Kirov had become dangerous to Stalin and had to be eliminated. Soon after Kirov had declined the nomination, on December 1, 1934, he was shot to death (Ginzburg, p. 4). Stalin was intent on keeping his position as first secretary so that he could fulfill his goal of industrialization. Stalin thought that industrialization was the key to make the Soviet Union a world power, and by making the Soviets a world power, he believed its citizens would praise him as a great leader and hero for all time. (McCauley 107).

Members of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, known also as the N.K.V.D., were the henchmen that carried out Stalin's wishes. Stalin justified the purges that ensued by claiming, "as long as capitalist encirclement exists, there will be wreckers, spies, diversionists, and murderers in our country, sent behind [Soviet] lines by agents of foreign states" (MacKenzie, p. 465). However, many of the people that were accused of being against him were really scapegoats that were used to instill a system of fear and terror into the Soviet Union. Stalin

believed that fear and terror were necessary to instill nationalistic pride in Soviet citizens, and he thought that by spreading propaganda that there were people who were trying to wreck his “good cause,” people would blindly support him. Stalin also wanted to make people believe that the capitalist countries, which surrounded the Soviet Union, were trying to ruin the social experiment of Communism that Stalin was trying to achieve. Stalin believed that nationalism was the key to gaining support for his vision. Those who did not support the nationalist view were considered to be against the state and therefore called “Trotskyist saboteurs.” By fall 1935, the N.K.V.D. was arresting anyone who had ever opposed Stalin (Ginzburg, p. 17). This especially included all of the old Bolsheviks of bourgeois origins who were brought into the party by Lenin. Stalin tried to create a new Bolshevik order manned by people unquestioningly loyal to him (Ibid, p. 42).

People were often arrested for speaking or writing anything that even resembled criticism of the Stalin regime (Mandelstam in McCauley, p. 111). But very often people were condemned for failing to condemn or report anyone who spoke or wrote something against the party line. The chairman of the Bureau of Party Political Control believed that not reporting criticism of the state to authorities was a way of showing “tolerance toward anti-Party elements [which] leads objectively to disloyalty (Ginzburg, p. 15). To avoid being arrested, people turned in their parents, friends, and neighbors. These “good Samaritans” who turned in people believed that they would be spared, but they were wrong.

The people who were arrested were first sent to prisons, where they were tortured into confessing to numerous false accusations of counter-revolutionary activity (Ginzburg, p. 63). Along with the confession, they were coerced into signing a list of people accusing them of imaginary crimes. Those people were then arrested. Warders in the prisons found it unpatriotic

when some prisoners refused to confess and repent, especially those charged with treasonable offenses to the party (Ginzburg, p. 67). As a means to get confessions, warders used “threats, bullying, [proclaimed countless] false accusations, and [for those who continued to hold out on signing] detention in punishment cells [followed]” (Ibid, p. 74). These coercive and abusive techniques were usually conducted while prisoners were suffering from “deprivation of sleep [from being kept awake for days at a time with] a bright light shining right in their eyes” (Mandelstam in McCauley, p. 113). Many prisoners signed confessions just so that they could get some sleep. However, whether a prisoner confessed or not, they were still found guilty in show trials. Then, in accordance with the law of December 1, 1934, the day that Kirov was murdered, the sentence was “carried out within twenty-four hours of its being pronounced” (Ginzburg, p. 167). Those convicted of lesser crimes, those that were non-political, were sentenced to serve in concentration camps where they were forced to do work for the state. Most political prisoners found themselves placed into solitary confinement cells in prisons (MacKenzie, p. 477). Throughout the purges, labor camp prisoners were responsible for building the White Sea and Moscow-Voga canals, double tracking the Trans-Siberian Railway, and gold mining in the frigid Kolyma region (Ibid, p. 467). These were projects that helped to make the Soviet Union a great power.

By 1937, Stalin intensified the purges dramatically to eliminate any remaining “anti-Soviet elements (Stalin in McCauley, p. 118). Stalin also wanted to increase the suffering that the prisoners felt. To fulfill his wishes, warders began using “physical torture [to speed up the process of getting confessions, leaving people with] beatings of the most primitive kind” (Mandelstam in McCauley, p. 113). But the intensification of the purges did not stop with further punishment to the prisoners. It also extended to the purgers the chief of the N.K.V.D.,

Iagoda, was purged and replaced by Yezhov (MacKenzie, p. 465). Prisoners felt that the purgers were now getting a taste of the system they had created. By February 1937, every region and nationality in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics claimed to have an equal amount of “enemies of the people” (Ginzburg, p. 25).

By July 1937, the purges with continuing intensity led to more charges and accusations that not only were false, but also absolutely preposterous. Many people who were arrested justified their own arrest by claiming that it had been a mistake, and they continued to believe that there were real “enemies of the people” being arrested. Soviet civilians and prisoners often responded to headlines in newspapers, which reported on high-end Communist officials being arrested by saying, “How cunning he must have been to get away with it for so long” (Ibid, p. 44). But many prisoners who believed they had been mistakenly arrested reasoned that the mistake occurred because of flaws in the bureaucratic system (Ibid, p. 159). Some of those “mistakes” included people who were accused of being spies for simply marrying or having any association with a foreigner (Ibid, p.161). But many prisoners continued to believe that Stalin did not know about the “illegal” arrests that were going on and focused their anger at the secret police, which had arrested them (Ibid, p. 283).

The year 1937 saw Red Army leaders charged with the treasonous crime of spying against their government. But even Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov did not truly believe this. However, he justified the imaginary crimes because he believed that “at the decisive moment [in a war] they could not be depended on” (McCauley p. 121). Molotov believed that the Army leaders could turn against the government and side with the enemy (Germany) because of opposition to the purges. He also justified the purges at large, saying that they helped to instill patriotism and loyalty in Soviet citizens, which helped to keep them united behind Stalin (Ibid).

But maybe World War II French resistance leader, General Charles de Gaulle put it best when he said that Stalin “was consumed by a desire for power. [He] was trained by a life of plots to conceal his faculties and nature, to do without illusions, pity or sincerity, [and] to see in every man an obstacle or a danger, [and] to him everything was manoeuvre, mistrust and obstinacy” (Ibid, p. 94).

Then, by mid-1939, after a new Politburo meeting, Yezhov was purged and subsequently replaced by Beria as chief of the N.K.V.D. Shortly after Beria was named chief of the N.K.V.D., all political prisoners who were jailed were sent to work in labor camps. Beria believed that having prisoners in jails was counter-productive, especially because the number of prisoners had risen drastically after 1937 and they were not contributing to the society (Ginzburg, p. 255).

For the most part, Stalin’s purges were very productive for the state. They created free labor at a time that the Soviet economy was in shambles thanks to the failures in forced collectivization. The work that was accomplished in labor camps put Russia on the road to modernization, which was the goal of Stalin’s five-year plans. But to do that, Stalin had to sacrifice the lives of millions of people (MacKenzie, p. 477). But perhaps millions more could have been killed by the Germans in World War II if Russia did not industrialize and modernize? The people who were purged accomplished tasks that people would not have accepted money to accomplish, while allowing industry to flourish. Stalin’s strong, industrial drive helped the U.S.S.R. to become a more self-sustaining, more powerful, and a proud nation. Stalin led the “backwards” Soviet Union to become the number two power in the world, behind the United States. Like many Americans, citizens of the former Soviet Union, especially those who had relatives that were not affected by the purges, turned their heads away from the negatives and the damage that their country had done to its own citizens and instead chose to take the patriotic

view and look at the positive gains that were left behind for the new generation to wonder and marvel about.

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