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Understanding the Purges

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Understanding the Purges

A senior thesis submitted to
The Department of History
College of Arts & Sciences

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for a Bachelor of Arts degree in History

by

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ABSTRACT

How could Stalin reasonably justify within himself killing millions of people in a nation that he simultaneously wished to glorify? This is the basic question that will be explored in this thesis. What was Stalin's reasoning, motivation, and purpose for sending so many to the Gulags? There has to be a better answer than "because he was bloodthirsty killer". This was the basic motivation for the decision to explore this topic. How can a man that forcefully took the Soviet Union from a nation of poverty and peasants to nation that would be considered a world superpower for decades to come be dismissed as a lunatic? There was something missing. This thesis is a balancing act of attempting to understand the logic of Stalin without unintentionally justifying it. Use of proper sources also became a balancing act during the writing of this thesis as Western sources of information are strongly biased (largely due to Khrushchev's era of de-Stalinization and anti-communist sentiment), along with the fact that Soviet sources are full of conspiracies, lies, and cover-ups. Even Soviet photos cannot be used as evidence as many of them were doctored in order to fit Stalin's narrative. This thesis will be an attempt to help the reader better understand what was really going on during the purges and in doing so the reader will make their own decision as to whether Stalin was an inevitable product of communism, or simply a bloodthirsty lunatic.

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NOTE

It is important to mention that in many of my citations page numbers are not referenced.

This is because mainly digital copies of books were used with no page numbers provided.

Some digital copies provide page numbers but those numbers could be changed by simply changing the size of the tab on the computer, providing an inaccurate page reference.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of Joseph Stalin is one of the most unlikely and unprecedented events in recent history. Other 20th century dictators had attributes and skills that put them in favorable positions to rise up and become leaders of their respective political parties. Hitler was a charismatic speaker and a decorated war hero and he used this to become the face of the Nazi party. Iosif Vissarionovich Djugashvili on the other hand was the son of a washerwoman and an illiterate cobbler who abused him.¹ He was born in an obscure Georgian village and grew up studying for priesthood. Stalin also had a withered arm, a scarred face from smallpox, and an unnaturally high-pitched voice to go along with a strong Georgian accent. How did this man become the dictator of the largest nation in the world, and more importantly, how did he justify within himself the slaughter and enslavement of millions of people? Soviet archives offer many differing points of view when attempting to answer these questions. Through the writings of Trotsky, one may conclude that Stalin, although dim witted, was able to acquire his power and influence through bureaucratic manipulation and brute violence. Other historians such as Simon Sebag Montefiore may offer a portrait of the dictator as a youthful rabble-rouser, poet, and pamphleteer.² The general consensus on the mystery of Stalin's rise to power is that he did not create the Soviet dictatorship through mere trickery. Nor did he do it alone. He was helped by a close circle of equally dedicated men, as well as thousands of fanatical secret policemen.³

¹ Applebaum, Anne. "Understanding Stalin." *The Atlantic*. October 15, 2014. Accessed July 22, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/11/understanding-stalin/380786/>.

² Applebaum, Anne

³ Applebaum, Anne

To understand the brutal policies and constant purges of Stalin, it is necessary to start a few years prior during his early life. Stephen Kotkin is a history professor at Princeton and is considered the most accomplished writer about Stalin's pre-politics life. In his book *Stalin*, he dismisses all blame on Stalin's rough upbringing as the cause for all the violence that was to come. He argues that nothing about Stalin's early life was particularly unusual for a man of his age and background. Sergei Kirov, a member of Stalin's inner circle, grew up in an orphanage after his alcoholic father abandoned the family and his mother died of tuberculosis. Grigory Ordzhonikidze, another crony, had lost both his parents by the time he was 10. The young Stalin, by contrast, had a mother who, despite her background, was ambitious and energetic, and mobilizing her extended family on her talented son's behalf.⁴ Kotkin also argues that Trotsky's accounts of Stalin being dim are biased and false. Young Stalin was a standout student in the late 19th century. By the age of 16, he had made his way into the Tiflis seminary, the highest rung of the educational ladder in the Caucasus. His teachers had described him as "quiet, but very gifted".⁵ Stalin would eventually drop out of school and join the world of revolution that was building up in Russia at the time.

In the moments leading up to the revolution, Stalin was in his late 30's and had nothing to show for his life. He had no money, no permanent residence, and no profession other than writing articles for illegal newspapers.⁶ He had absolutely no training in statecraft and no experience managing anything at all. The success of the 1917 revolution is the key to understanding the brutality of Stalin's future policies. In the mind

⁴ Applebaum, Anne. "Understanding Stalin." *The Atlantic*. October 15, 2014. Accessed July 22, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/11/understanding-stalin/380786/>.

⁵ Applebaum, Anne

⁶ Applebaum, Anne

of Stalin, the unlikely success of the revolution validated in his mind the communist ideology and its tenuous existence seemed to countenance “any means necessary” behavior. He was deeply convinced that class enemies would constantly arise on the path to socialism and that they had to be ruthlessly rooted out or the revolution would drown in backsliding and counter-revolutionary spirit. He would also learn during the Russian Civil War that brute force was a highly effective method of accomplishing one’s goals. This success of the Bolshevik revolution helped Stalin to become very methodical in his approach to policy and politics. The early success of communist ideology resulted in Stalin always seeking further guidance in the communist ideology no matter the cost. Right after the revolution, this belief in core ideology led the Bolsheviks to outlaw private trade, nationalize industry, confiscate property, and seize grain and redistribute it in the cities. These were all policies that required mass violence to implement.⁷

Correct ideology for Stalin was more important than practical reality. Kotkin quotes: “Although some of these policies, including forced grain requisitions, were temporarily abandoned in the 1920s, Stalin brought them back at the end of the decade, eventually enlarging upon them. And no wonder: they were the logical consequence of every book he had read and every political argument he had ever had. Stalin was neither a dull bureaucrat nor an outlaw but a man shaped by rigid adherence to a puritanical doctrine. His violence was not the product of his subconscious but of the Bolshevik engagement with Marxist-Leninist ideology.”⁸ This ideology offered Stalin a deep sense of certainty in the face of political and economic setbacks. If policies designed to produce

⁷ Applebaum, Anne. "Understanding Stalin." *The Atlantic*. October 15, 2014. Accessed July 22, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/11/understanding-stalin/380786/>.

⁸ Applebaum, Anne

prosperity created poverty instead, an explanation could always be found: the theory had been incorrectly interpreted, the forces were not correctly aligned, or the officials had blundered. In his mind the ideology was correct without question. Whenever things did go wrong, a certain “enemy” of the communist party would be blamed throughout the rule of Stalin. This was a lesson he learned from Lenin during his early years during the Russian revolution.

The constant validation of the communist’s “struggle” against the bourgeoisie and counterrevolutionaries created a sense of legitimacy and morality in the cause that Stalin was fighting for.⁹ This pattern would repeat itself throughout Stalin’s life. Time after time, when faced with a huge crisis, he would use extralegal, “revolutionary methods” to solve it which he felt to be fully justifiable given what he saw as the extralegal methods of capitalism to create and maintain inequality. Sometimes the result would prolong and deepen the crisis. But if he was sufficiently ruthless, all opposition eventually melted away. A future example of this would be Stalin’s announcement of his decision to collectivize Soviet agriculture. Enacting that policy would require the displacement, the imprisonment, and eventually the orchestrated starvation of millions of people, and it resulted in Stalin’s complete domination over the Soviet Union.¹⁰ Obviously there were limits to his ability to dispel reality. The cold hard reality of the German threat came bearing down on him in 1941 despite all his efforts to bludgeon any and all internal opposition.

⁹ Applebaum, Anne

¹⁰ Applebaum, Anne. "Understanding Stalin." *The Atlantic*. October 15, 2014. Accessed July 22, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/11/understanding-stalin/380786/>.

The rise of the peasant Georgian into a position of dictatorship over the world's largest nation was an unprecedented and unpredictable one. Soviet archives are difficult to navigate and there are many differing accounts on the man himself. The one thing that is clear is that Stalin was not dim as was said by Trotsky. He was uneducated and knew it. Because of this, he used the strengths and skills that he did have to work his way up the political ladder and quietly put himself into positions that were favorable to him. Through sheer determination and a deep belief in the communist ideology he was able to grasp power after the death of Lenin and make the necessary moves in order to keep it for a thirty-year reign. The uneducated Georgian that nobody paid attention to was crafty enough to seize power, brutal enough to maintain it, and wise enough to surround himself with a team that was fiercely loyal and capable of maintaining and industrializing the world's largest nation. This thesis will attempt to better understand the most infamous aspect of the reign of Stalin: the purges. How did the public view the purges? How did communist party members view the purges? What was the role of the NKVD in the purges? And most importantly, how did Stalin justify the necessity of such violence and brutality?

PART ONE

Growing up in the West it is easy to discount any human being that commits murder on a mass scale as insane or irrational. As one studies Stalin, it becomes clear that he was neither. And in its way, the idea of Stalin as a rational and extremely intelligent man, bolstered by an ideology sufficiently powerful to justify the deaths of millions of people, is even more terrifying.¹¹ Stalin was living proof that an idea can easily be the most powerful force on this planet, and that we are often at our worst when we are convinced that we are doing the right thing. These ideas that he developed a belief in at an early age would become the defining explanations for a seemingly unexplainable rise in power and a brutal dictatorship resulting in mass purges of the party and civilians.

Understanding Stalin's early life is crucial in understanding his actions as a dictator. During the pre-revolution years Stalin made slow progress in the party hierarchy. His jobs included committing bank robberies in order to fund party activities and committing small scale political assassinations. His first big political promotion came in February of 1912 when Lenin assigned him to serve on the first central committee of the Bolshevik Party. Stalin would also work for the newly founded Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda* during this time.¹² While editing for the newspaper he briefly advocated Bolshevik cooperation with the provisional government of middle-class liberals that had succeeded to uneasy power on the last tsar's abdication during the February Revolution. But under Lenin's influence, Stalin soon switched to the more-militant policy of armed

¹¹ Applebaum, Anne. "Understanding Stalin." *The Atlantic*. October 15, 2014. Accessed July 22, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/11/understanding-stalin/380786/>.

¹² Hingley, Ronald Francis. "Joseph Stalin." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. February 26, 2018. Accessed July 22, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Stalin>.

seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.¹³ The influence of Lenin is key in understanding the enigma that is Stalin.

Active as a political military leader on various fronts during the Civil War of 1918–20, Stalin also held two political posts in the new Bolshevik government, being commissar for nationalities (1917–23) and for state control (or workers' and peasants' inspection; 1919–23). Wrestling with the complexity of the nationality question was how he made his early mark on the party. Essentially, as one of the few non-Russians within the inner circle he became the token ethnic minority and hence supposedly the expert on the topic. His ideas were crude to the extreme – basically just crushing the nationalities or moving them around as power politics dictated. But it was his position as secretary general of the party's Central Committee, from 1922 until his death, that provided the power base for his dictatorship. This was a seemingly minor position but one that enabled him to oversee and manipulate party appointments. He filled the key leadership positions with friends and anybody who swore loyalty to him, while working behind the scenes to forge alliances within the Politburo itself.

Lenin, who was by now on his death bed and participating less in government, grew suspicious of Stalin. The Bolshevik leader became critical of Stalin's personal qualities (a view famously expressed in Lenin's political testament). Stalin was aware of Lenin's high position in the party so he publicly pledged obedience and loyalty, while working behind the scenes to undermine and isolate the current Bolshevik leader.¹⁴ Along with heading this committee, he was also a member of the powerful Politburo and many

¹³ Hingley, Ronald Francis. "Joseph Stalin." Encyclopædia Britannica. February 26, 2018. Accessed July 22, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Stalin>.

¹⁴ Hingley, Ronald Francis

other interlocking and overlapping committees.¹⁵ All of this quiet, behind the scenes activity of Joseph Stalin during the years following the revolution show his true ambition of outmaneuvering his also brilliant rivals Trotsky and Zinoviev. Although the two rivals were aware of Stalin's intense political activity, they discounted him because of his thick Georgian accent and scarred face. Between the three, he was considered the uneducated, dirty work specialist. This was a fatal error in the case of Trotsky and Zinoviev.

Stalin's use of alliances is key to understanding his motives for future policies. After the death of Lenin, Stalin took a lead role in giving public commemorations, organizing his funeral, and ordering that his body be placed on public display. Stalin also immediately formed a three-way alliance with Kamenev and Zinoviev in order to ensure that Trotsky would be in the minority when it was time to appoint a new leader.¹⁶ With the support of his three-way alliance and all of the comrades he had been appointing to high positions over the years, Stalin effectively took control of the Bolshevik party. Soon afterward Stalin joined a new alliance with Nikolay Bukharin and Aleksey Rykov in an effort to gain full political power for himself without having to share it with Kamenev and Zinoviev.¹⁷ His two former allies were made into party enemies and anybody who was accused of being associated with them was severely punished. Stalin's new allies were soon accused of being not in support of a "socialism in one country" policy that Stalin was pushing.¹⁸ This was important because it went against core Marxist teaching

¹⁵ Hingley, Ronald Francis

¹⁶ Life in USSR under Stalin." History Learning Site. Accessed July 22, 2018. <https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/modern-world-history-1918-to-1980/russia-1900-to-1939/life-in-ussr-under-stalin/>.

¹⁷ Hingley, Ronald Francis. "Joseph Stalin." Encyclopædia Britannica. February 26, 2018. Accessed July 22, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Stalin>.

¹⁸ Russia - Transformation and Terror." Portugal - FAMILY AND KINSHIP RELATIONS. Accessed July 22, 2018. <http://countrystudies.us/russia/10.htm>.

and foreshadowed the start of an estrangement from orthodox communism and an embrace of Stalinism. It also directly opposed the views of Leon Trotsky. Party higher ups (who were put into influential positions by Stalin himself) predictably supported Stalin, and Bukharin and Rykov were ousted out of the Soviet Union. All four former allies were sent to Siberian labor camps and Stalin was left alone with full control of the country.¹⁹

Although Stalin had the final say on any given question during his rule, he surrounded himself with a very effective team from the late 1920's until his death in 1953. Sheila Fitzpatrick wrote a book called *On Stalin's Team* to overturn the idea that Stalin led the Soviet Union independently and was surrounded by simple yes-men that were fully under his control. Fitzpatrick begins her introduction with a quote that sets the theme for the rest of the book: "When Stalin wanted to temporize in dealing with foreigners, he sometimes indicated that the problem would be getting it past his Politburo. This was taken as fiction, since the diplomats assumed, correctly, that the final decision was his. But that doesn't mean that there wasn't a Politburo that he consulted or a team of colleagues he worked with. That team (about a dozen persons at any given time, all men) came into existence in the 1920's, fought the opposition teams led by Trotsky and Zinoviev after Lenin's death, and stayed together, remarkably, for three decades, showing a phoenixlike capacity to survive team threatening situations like the Great Purges, the paranoia of Stalin's last years, and the perils of the post-Stalin

¹⁹ Joseph Stalin." Weimar Republic. February 19, 2015. Accessed July 22, 2018.
<https://alphahistory.com/russianrevolution/rise-of-stalin/>.

transition”.²⁰ The climate in the early Soviet Union was turbulent but this core group of men were able to stay together for 30 years. This is no small accomplishment.

If Stalin truly had all of this power, why did he keep a team around? The simple answer is because he preferred it that way. They ran massive industries and large sectors of government. Stalin had full trust and confidence in the abilities of these men and would frequently bestow onto them large projects and responsibilities. Important issues and decisions were always discussed as a group and Stalin was known to listen to and take advice from this team. Although the final say was always Stalin’s, he would rarely go against the advice of his team.²¹ Also important to note is that by surrounding himself with a committee and delegating responsibilities out to men he trusted, Stalin was always able to create a scapegoat when things went wrong. Also important to note is that things did not even have to go wrong for Stalin to need a scapegoat. A common theme in this thesis will be Stalin demanding a purge of some specific group of people, and then accusing the NKVD leader for being an enemy of the people for carrying out his orders. This Central Committee included Molotov, Kaganovich, Mikoyan, Voroshilov, and Andreev. They were there from the beginning and stayed until the very end of Stalin’s rule. This was the group that would take over the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin and create a “collective leadership” government that would soon fail and be taken over by Khrushchev. This core group of men were highly respected by Stalin and were able to survive his wrath and yet he pitted them against each other constantly, humiliated them

²⁰ Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *On Stalins Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

²¹ Grishkevich, Timothy. *On Stalins Team Book Report*. Concordia University, 2018.

on an almost daily basis, and even had Molotov's wife thrown in the gulag for being Jewish in the early 1950s. It wasn't all sunshine and daisies.

In 1928 Stalin abandoned Lenin's semi-capitalist New Economic Policy in favor of full on state-organized industrialization under a series of five-year plans. This was in a way a brand-new Russian revolution whose effects would be far more devastating than the one in 1917 and showed another shift in ideology from communism to Stalinism. This shift is crucial in the attempt to understand the reasoning behind the purges. The plans of rapid industrialization and collective farming would fall most heavily on the peasantry as it resulted in the seizure of all privately-owned farmland and livestock.²² An estimated 25 million households were forced to uproot their farms and turn it over to the new collective farms. The peasants that did not cooperate were arrested and executed in massive numbers. Millions of others were sent to Soviet labor camps called Gulags to live out the rest of their lives in atrocious conditions.²³

Collectivization caused a great famine in the Ukraine. Stalin's new policy resulted in the seizure of all privately-owned farmlands and livestock in a country where 80 percent of the people were traditional village farmers. Among those farmers, were a class of people called Kulaks by the Communists. They were formerly "wealthy" farmers that had owned 24 or more acres, or had employed farm workers.²⁴ The whole term was intentionally left ambiguous so that anyone could effectively be dubbed a kulak. The whole thing was basically fabricated in order to come up with a reason to try and get

²² Hingley, Ronald Francis. "Joseph Stalin." Encyclopædia Britannica. February 26, 2018. Accessed July 22, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Stalin>.

²³ The History Place - Genocide in the 20th Century: Stalin's Forced Famine 1932-33." The History Place - Triumph of Hitler: Burning of Books. Accessed July 22, 2018. <http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/genocide/stalin.htm>.

²⁴ The History Place

people into the collectives. It was said that that only way to drain the power of the insidious kulaks was to enter the collectives where the state would bring them to heel. But since collectivization was so unpopular as it was a rotten deal for the peasants, any grumbling could conveniently just be blamed on the nebulous category of kulaks who were subsequently destroyed. Stalin always held a strong belief that any counterrevolution against the Soviet Union would begin with Kulaks. Declared "enemies of the people," the Kulaks were left homeless and without a single possession as everything was taken from them, even their pots and pans. It was also forbidden by law for anyone to aid Kulak families. Some researchers estimate that ten million persons were thrown out of their homes, put on railroad box cars and deported to "special settlements" in the wilderness of Siberia during this era, with up to a third of them perishing amid the horrifying living conditions. Men and older boys, along with childless women and unmarried girls, also became slave-workers in Soviet-run mines and big industrial projects.²⁵

Industrialization was far less disastrous in its effects and was successful enough to earn praise from individuals such as Adolf Hitler, H.G. Wells, and George Bernard Shaw (who in fact only saw some of the model factories that actually worked and gushed about them).²⁶ Stalin was successful in rapidly industrializing a country that was made up of a vast majority of peasants and farmers. Although his methods were brutal, he was able to accelerate the progress of the Soviet Union at an unprecedented scale. It is fair to mention

²⁵ The History Place - Genocide in the 20th Century: Stalin's Forced Famine 1932-33." The History Place - Triumph of Hitler: Burning of Books. Accessed July 22, 2018. <http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/genocide/stalin.htm>.

²⁶ Hingley, Ronald Francis. "Joseph Stalin." Encyclopædia Britannica. February 26, 2018. Accessed July 22, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Stalin>.

that this was only because he was starting from such a low base. Percentage growth may look great but it still paled in comparison to west and was terribly inefficient. The Soviet Union quickly became a major military and economic power. When there were failures during industrialization, Stalin was known for having grandiose show trials where he would intimidate citizens into confessing to imaginary crimes. It was vital to always have somebody to blame in order to preserve the idea that communism was not the problem.

Show trials would be the precursor of a period called the Great Purges of the Soviet Union. In late 1934, just when it seemed that the most brutal periods of collectivization and industrialization had passed, Stalin launched a new campaign of political terror against the very communist party members who had brought him to power.²⁷ This was done in order to tame the communist party and to get rid of any and all competition to Stalin. Stalin began liquidating party bosses, industrial managers, military leaders, and high government officials. The purges were done on filmed mock trials and the end result was commonly public execution. Stalin used the show trials of leading Communists as a means for expanding the new terror. In August 1936, Zinoviev and Kamenev were taken to court to repeat fabricated confessions, sentenced to death, and shot. In June 1937, Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, at the time the most influential military personality, and other leading generals were reported as court-martialed on charges of treason and executed.²⁸

²⁷ Hingley, Ronald Francis. "Joseph Stalin." Encyclopædia Britannica. February 26, 2018. Accessed July 22, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Stalin>.

²⁸ Hingley, Ronald Francis.

PART TWO

In the West, the public perception of Stalin and the Terror lingers from the period immediately after the dictator's death in 1953. His successor, Nikita Khrushchev, wanted to limit the power of the feared Soviet political police. But he also wanted to communicate to the Soviet political elite that they would not be blamed for the violence of the Stalin era, though they had been deeply and directly involved. He wanted to undercut his rivals who were all Stalin lackeys like himself. However, he had no desire to undercut the soviet system itself as obviously he was standing atop of it. Undercutting Stalin would hopefully, in his mind, undercut his rivals but not jeopardize the system as the man was now dead. Khrushchev blamed the Terror on Stalin and his "cult of personality", and historians in the West followed his lead due to the ideological biases inherent in the Cold War. They presented Stalin as a bloodthirsty, paranoid, political opportunist determined to secure total power over all other considerations. Although these descriptions are true, they dismiss any notion of the idea of Stalin being a human capable of thought, reason, and fear.

If Stalin's main goal was to build socialism, why was so much terror necessary? The simple answer is fear. Most Bolsheviks, Stalin included, believed that the revolutions of 1789, 1848, and 1871 had failed because their leaders hadn't adequately anticipated the ferocity of the counter-revolutionary reaction from the establishment.²⁹ They were determined not to make the same mistake. The Soviets created elaborate systems for gathering information on external and internal threats to their revolution. But those systems were far from perfect. The system portrayed threats as far more imminent and

²⁹ Richardson, Rosamond. *Stalins Shadow: Inside the Family of One of the Worlds Greatest Tyrants*. New York: St. Martins Press, 1994.

real than was actually warranted. For example, the Bolsheviks spent much of the 1920s and 1930s anticipating invasion from coalitions of hostile capitalist states — coalitions that did not exist. Other perceived threats were also exaggerated beyond all proportion: scheming factions, disloyal officials, wreckers, saboteurs.³⁰ Although the coalitions were not real at the time, it is important to understand that there had been a pretty extensive coalition against them in the Russian Civil War so there was certainly some history behind their concerns.

Many of these "threats" were products of Stalin's overambitious plans. He had demanded 100% fulfilment of production targets that could not be met, and he and his colleagues in the Kremlin misinterpreted the lack of production as evidence of counter-revolutionary conduct because in their mind the plan and the leadership were 100% solid so if things didn't work out it was the people's fault as they weren't sufficiently committed or were anti-revolutionary. The resulting violence massively weakened the USSR, but the ultimate victory of Soviet forces in World War II seemed to justify the terror in the eyes of the leadership. The following Cold War seemed to justify the view that the capitalist world would stop at nothing to undermine Soviet power and the idea that enemies were afoot. Even today the Russian people still view Stalin as a great and necessary figure in Russian history. The end always justified the mean. This was a view held not only by Stalin, but by most Russian people and it shows by the way they revere Stalin to this day. The Russian people were quite aware that the purge had left them fatally exposed and the whole house almost collapsed in 1941. They also knew damn well that Russia had won the war because of their capacity for sacrifice and toil. It was

³⁰ Rybin, Aleksej T. *Next to Stalin: Notes of a Bodyguard*. Toronto: Northstar Compass Journal, 1996.

the leadership, however, that pushed the line of the purges being a key to victory by removing internal threats. They just had enough weight and pressure to get people to go along with it.

During the second half of the 1920s, Joseph Stalin set the stage for gaining absolute power by employing police action against opposition within the Communist Party. This tactic had previously been used only against opponents of Bolshevism, not against party members themselves. The first victims were Politburo members Leon Trotsky, Grigori Zinoviev, and Lev Kamenev, who were defeated and expelled from the party in late 1927. Stalin then turned against Nikolai Bukharin, who was denounced as a “right opposition,” for opposing his policy of forced collectivization and rapid industrialization at the expense of the peasantry.³¹

The murder of Sergei Kirov on December 1, 1934, set off a chain of events that directly resulted in the Great Terror of the 1930s. Kirov was a leading member of the Politburo and the leader of the Leningrad party apparatus. His concern for the welfare of the workers in Leningrad and his skill as an orator had earned him considerable popularity. Some party members had even approached him secretly with the proposal that he take over as General Secretary.

It is doubtful that Kirov represented an immediate threat to Stalin's omnipotence, but he did disagree with some of Stalin's policies and Stalin had begun to doubt the loyalty of members of the Leningrad apparatus. In need of a pretext for launching a broad purge, Stalin evidently decided that murdering Kirov would be beneficial on many fronts.

³¹ Applebaum, Anne. "Understanding Stalin." *The Atlantic*. October 15, 2014. Accessed July 22, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/11/understanding-stalin/380786/>.

The murder was carried out by a young assassin named Leonid Nikolaev.³² Evidence from newly released post-Soviet Union archives indicates that Stalin and the NKVD planned the crime.

Stalin then used the murder as an excuse for introducing brutal laws against political crime and for conducting a witch-hunt for alleged conspirators against Kirov. Over the next four-and-a-half years, thousands, maybe millions of party members and others were arrested—many of them for being allegedly involved in the vast plot that supposedly lay behind the killing of Kirov. From the Soviet point of view, his murder was the crime of the century because it paved the way for the Great Terror.³³

By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so centralized and the people so fearful of punishment that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Lots of people snitched out their neighbors or even family or friends to the secret police. They were, for a multitude of different reasons, willing to go along with the purge. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union throughout World War II and until his death in March 1953. But was it really all this simple? Is this common, summarized version of the full story all there is to know as to what motivated the tyrant? Most importantly, how was terror on this scale accomplished with seemingly no opposition at all?

New research that surfaced after the end of the Cold War offers a common theme that Communist central officials gave orders of repression from the top which were then taken to the extreme by the population and regional officials. Moreover, these orders met

³² Conquest, Robert. *Stalin: breaker of nations*. Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 2002.

³³ "Revelations from the Russian Archives Internal Workings of the Soviet Union."

an unfortunate perfect storm of circumstances with famines in the early 1930's, a harsh economic climate, and foreign scares by the late 1930's. Central warnings of "an enemy within" played into long held fears and animosity amongst the peasantry and working classes, leading to numerous atrocities.

Long held beliefs about the purges contribute as evidence of Stalin having no aim in his motives. Khrushchev contributed to this with his secret speech and it was the common understanding in the US for decades. Cold War animosities certainly led many to want this to be true.

Much of the new-found truth about the purges come from J. Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning as they set out to reevaluate the era of Stalinist terror using archives from the former Soviet Union in 1993. The scholars raise the question about how much of the purges were fueled from above or below, the efficiency or inefficiency of the state in this process, and the relative influence of state and society.³⁴ Although these scholars do not quite label themselves as "revisionist historians," they present evidence that challenge the often widely accepted notions by authors that Stalin was "an omniscient and omnipotent demon" who orchestrated every fine detail of the purges of the 1930's. These sources along with others will be used in order to seek the source and motivations of the purges in hopes of better understanding them while debunking the myth that Stalin was a clueless mass murderer.

The Great Purge began under NKVD chief Genrikh Yagoda, but reached its peak between September 1936 and August 1938 under the leadership of Nikolai Yezhov. In Russian historiography, the period of the most intense purge, 1937–1938, is called

³⁴ Getty, John Arch., and Roberta Thompson. Manning. *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Yezhovshchina (literally, "Yezhov phenomenon", commonly translated as "times of Yezhov" or "doings of Yezhov"), after Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, who was executed a year after the purge. Yezhov played a key role in driving the terror in his efforts to maintain his own power as well as please Stalin. Yezhov created conspiracies and took great care in informing Stalin of the so-called conspiracies. "Yezhov bears great personal responsibility for the destruction of legality for the falsification of investigative cases"³⁵. This finding directly challenges previous notions among Stalinist era scholars that Stalin himself orchestrated the purge and micro-managed its implementation. Although it is true that Stalin enabled the purges to happen, archival correspondence between Stalin and Yezhov indicate that Stalin actually became concerned that there were too many expulsions and that the terror was being taken too far.

Soviet society by the mid 1930's existed in an "atmosphere of contradictory initiatives"³⁶. Although Stalin was cruel, there was no "careful plan of terror," nor was Stalin "a master planner." Some central authority officials were expelled from the party "for being too fierce" in hunting for so called enemies of the state. The defining of the Kulak class itself took on different dynamics in various villages, leading some villages to get carried away in accusing and expelling one another. Many peasants simply sought revenge for past wrongs committed by various village members, thus labeling them kulaks. The People's Commissariat of Justice actually "condemned the dekulakization of middle peasants"³⁷.

³⁵ Getty, John Arch., and Roberta Thompson. Manning. *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Communist Party practices and the dekulakization propaganda campaign drove the citizenry to actively seek out the enemy within. This was exacerbated by the poor economy. Because the central authority set nearly impossible production quotas for the country side, regional leaders as well as local peasants sought people to blame and accuse of “wrecking.” State policies brought out deep-rooted animosities amongst peasants in various villages. The masses were often suspicious of office-holding bureaucrats as well as next door neighbors. They knew that they couldn’t vent their frustration on the state for fear of being crushed so they vented on those that they considered safer targets – people on the fringes who could be labeled as kulaks. So here we see society turning on itself but only because the state has justified such behavior. This example shows just how complex terror of this sort is. It is not exactly top down violence being imposed from the government on the citizenry, but it also isn’t just citizens turning on each other as they wouldn’t have done so without the state giving the ok. Stakhanovism (a system designed to raise production by offering incentives to efficient workers) further divided society and played into the hysteria of finding the enemy of the state within society. Workers, jealous over the hard work of another worker, would often turn in superiors and each other to state authorities. Many of those who were purged had Jewish names, indicating a tinge of “anti-Semitism fueling the purges”³⁸. This implies that the anti-Semite policies of the Soviet Union actually stemmed from the citizens and not just Stalin himself. The result of these purges led to a decrease in labor discipline as well as a decline in industrial production.

³⁸ Getty, John Arch., and Roberta Thompson. Manning. *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Numerous communist managers were arrested and executed for “wrecking” in late 1937. Dozens more communists and non-communists alike were also arrested, tortured, and/or executed within the country during the purges of the late 1930’s. Manning believes that this increase in executions and witch hunts was a product of external issues that “created a tense political culture”³⁹. The already tenuous political, social and economic climate was amplified by German expansion in Europe as well as Japanese expansion on Russia’s far eastern frontier. These issues made organizations such as the NKVD work more diligently to find “enemies within”, real or not.

Researchers have recently been using novel quantitative approaches by utilizing Soviet Moscow phone books from 1937-38 to challenge the purge numbers of Solzhenitsyn (*The Gulag Archipelago*). By using new approaches to determine the actual number of disappearances during the purges, it has been found that the numbers are well below previous Cold War researchers. An example of this was the analysis of the Gulag system in the late 1930’s. New methods show experts that the population was roughly 4-5 million, quite contrary to the commonly believed 25 million. But are these numbers any more reliable? The system went to great lengths to cover up death rates. There was a census in 1937 and Stalin didn’t like the numbers as they showed a catastrophic drop in population so the heads of the census bureau were killed. Stalin had promised an explosion of population due to better living conditions and a surplus of food supply. Due to his own brutal actions this promise was broken. Moments such as these show a side of weakness from Stalin. A lack of ability to foresee certain outcomes of his own paranoid

³⁹ Getty, John Arch., and Roberta Thompson. *Manning. Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

actions. Numbers aside, this is not a justification of the purge. Simply a novel way of looking at them in an effort to understand the way Stalin worked.

The Great Purge is best defined as a period of intense political turmoil inside of the Soviet political party, although it also spread to the military and other segments of the population. The purge of the military included hunting down anti-government elements, Nazi sympathizers, Trotskyites, bourgeois nationalists, and corrupt careerists inside the Soviet Red Army. Along with a few top officials, many lower officers were demoted and removed, even arrested. It would be fair to say that one often hears that “Stalin sacked half of all his military leadership which weakened the defense capabilities of the USSR”⁴⁰.

Year	1937	1938	1939
Total number of military leaders	144,300	179,000	282,300
Number of leaders removed	11,043	6,742	205
Leaders removed (%)	7.7%	3.7%	0.08%

In reality, the number of Soviet military leaders kept increasing during the course of rising tensions in Europe and Soviet war preparations. The number increased from 144,300 to 282,300 within the years leading up to the war. It is visible that the purge of the military reached its height in 1937 with 7.7% of the army leaders being removed. It is also important to note that 30% of all those that were removed were reinstated at the outbreak of war. 7.7% is not much. compared to the “50-75%” that most basic google searches will proclaim. In reality, there were most likely real Fifth Columnists (any group

⁴⁰ Getty, John Arch., and Roberta Thompson. Manning. *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

of people who undermine a larger group from within, usually in favor of an enemy group or nation) and unreliable elements in the army which were crucial that they be removed. This is simply to help understand what Stalin was paranoid about and the reason for his military purges, not a justification. 7.7% still meant that thousands of leaders were removed, and many were removed unjustly. And although the number of military leaders steadily increased, quality of leadership decreased. Many veteran leaders who were removed were replaced with inexperienced party puppets and this showed in 1940 and 1941.

It is important to elaborate on the removal of Fifth Column elements from the military. Fascist/Nazi coup attempts had been occurring all around the world during the 1930's. Stalin's fear of the same occurring in his nation was not simply unjustified paranoia. A few examples of this are the Lapua Movement in Finland in 1932, the Business Plot in the USA (which failed miserably but still struck fear into Stalin) in 1933, the National Union of Greece in 1933, a failed Nazi coup attempt in Austria in 1934, the Spanish Civil War in 1936, and Brazil in 1937⁴¹. There were pro-Nazi elements in most allied countries before the outbreak of the war. Experts who have simply brushed the military purges off as another bout of Stalin's paranoia have failed to understand the type of climate that he was existing in. Military coup's and Nazi collaborators were truly a threat during the period of the purges. Fascism was a genuinely popular movement that had high support all over the world. The purges can be seen in light of needing to shore up the communist position and Stalin's authority in the face of an overwhelming and popular surge of fascism worldwide.

⁴¹ "The Failed Coup That Led To Hitler's 'Mein Kampf'." NPR. January 14, 2016. Accessed March 26, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2016/01/14/463028807/the-failed-coup-that-led-to-hitlers-mein-kampf>.

Mainstream sources of information will claim that the purges were ordered by Stalin in order to crush dissent but often make no effort in explaining the type of dissent. There was dissent within the administration itself. There was dissent from Lenin's old crew who didn't like the direction Stalin was heading. There was dissent from those in society who didn't like having their land and livestock confiscated (Ukrainians). Crushing dissent wasn't his *primary motivation* for the purges, but to say that they were not carried out with a mindset of crushing dissent is foolhardy. The purges mainly consisted of removing internal enemies, Nazi sympathizers, Trotskyists, and bourgeoisie elements. It mostly targeted the state and the bureaucracy itself.

Another complication in the purge was the Yezhovshchina, the terror initiated by the NKVD chief Nikolai Yezhov. The leader of the NKVD was himself a suspected anti-Soviet conspirator. First-hand accounts released after the death of Stalin revealed that Yezhov protected the real conspirators in plots against the standing government to the best of his abilities while also arresting and even executing many innocent people to create popular distrust and hatred towards the government. The interrogation of Yezhov in April of 1939 revealed some of these conspiratorial ambitions: "All this was done in order to cause widespread dissatisfaction in the population with the leadership of the Party and the Soviet government, and in that way to create the most favorable base for carrying out our plans."⁴² Enemies hiding within the party also expelled many fellow members to create distrust and hatred towards the party and the government: "We endeavored to expel as many people from the party as possible. We expelled people when there were no grounds for expulsion. We had one aim in view- to increase the number of

⁴² Rybin, Aleksey T. *Next to Stalin: Notes of a Bodyguard*. Toronto: Northstar Compass Journal, 1996.

embittered people and this increase the number of our allies.”⁴³ Again, it is important to note that he probably made these comments as he was being tortured. He was also desperately trying to save his family at this time as well and would probably have said anything to take the heat onto himself and hopefully get his family a lighter sentence.

It would seem a more logical explanation to all this is that Stalin and many others didn't like the bureaucracy in place and used the purges to clean house and get a new generation of leaders in place. This type of trial against Yezhov follows exactly in the patterns of Stalin to blame all wrongs on a scapegoat of some kind. He most likely saw that the violence of the recent purges had created great unrest within the bureaucracy and the population and created this ploy in order to keep his own hands clean. For Stalin the end always justified the means, and if the means were brutal in nature he would find a scapegoat to take the blame. In this case, the blame fell upon Yezhov. Stalin used the death of Kirov as an excuse to start the massive purge against anybody he viewed as a threat to his own power and the communist agenda. After the purge had cooled off, he put all blame onto the Yezhov plot. The period of 1936-1938 also would fall into the common theme of Stalin giving an order that was taken too far by his officials in an effort to impress him and to keep their jobs (and lives). It is very possible that Stalin indeed gave the order for a massive purge to begin, but Yezhov simply took it to the extreme.

Stalin responded to this obvious tension within the party by urging caution and trying to limit the amount of expulsions. Stalin himself quoted: “It was necessary to hunt down active Trotskyites but not everyone who had been casually involved with them. In fact, such a crude approach could only harm the cause of the struggle with the active

⁴³ Getty, John Arch., and Roberta Thompson. Manning. *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Trotskyist wreckers and spies. Each case of expulsion from the party for connections with the former oppositions should be dealt with carefully.”⁴⁴ In the end, many expulsions were found to be unjustified and many members were allowed back to their positions. In the majority of cases examined by modern researchers, 40-60% of those thrown out of the party were reinstated⁴⁵. But were they reinstated while alive or years after their death when the political climate changed? Khrushchev had many people who were killed in the purges reinstated as part of his de-Stalinization program. This is important to note in order to clarify that this is not a justification, but an attempt to understand the political climate in which Stalin was operating in.

In 1938, Yezhov’s actions were publicly exposed and he was removed from power and sentenced as a traitor. Journalist Edgar Snow wrote about the purge, or more accurately, the Yezhovshchina: “The sadistic Yezhov, who for a time ruled a state within a state, was chiefly responsible for these outrages. By Yezhov’s own account his hirelings faked thousands of documents and so mixed up the records that it was impossible to tell a genuine dossier from a bogus one. Curiously the public does not seem to blame Stalin for having permitted such a Frankenstein to develop, but instead gives him credit for having cleaned up the Yezhov gang and brought the secret police back under full control of the Politburo.”⁴⁶ Another speech by Stalin during the height of the Yezhovshchina further proves his own concern at the violence with which certain actions were being carried out: “Expulsions based on heartless attitude have alienated party members and therefore served the needs of the party’s enemies. These bitter comrades could provide additional

⁴⁴ Thurston, Robert W. *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia: 1934-1941*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Snow, Edgar. *The Pattern of Soviet Power*. Bombay: Thacker, 1946.

reserves for the Trotskyists because the incorrect policy of expulsion creates those reserves. It is high time to put a stop to this outrageous practice comrades.”⁴⁷ The key in this situation is that Stalin allowed the Frankenstein to develop. He allowed the context in which people like Yezhov could become monsters. He enabled them and only stopped it when it became a threat to his own power as it did in 1938. Stalin is merely expressing this sentiment to make him look like the good and wise leader all the while he is the one who enabled Yezhov to commit the acts that he did. While true that Yezhov took things too far, Stalin provided the platform for this to be possible. This is important to understand as it is how the purges were understood and justified in the minds of the party leaders.

Stalin and the Politburo tried to stop the NKVD from committing excesses. The central committee issued a decree that limited the NKVD’s powers. They were worried that the excessive actions of the NKVD would create mass resentment among the population. The decree was described as such: “ON DISCONTINUING THE MASS EXPULSIONS OF PEASANTS: All mass expulsions of peasants are to cease at once. Only persons accused of counterrevolution, terroristic acts, and sabotage may be taken into preventive custody. The organs of the NKVD are to obtain the prior consent of the Central Committee before making arrests, except in cases involving terroristic acts, explosions, arson, espionage, defection, political gangsterism, and counter-revolutionary antiparty groups.”⁴⁸ In 1937 and 1938, Stalin and company attempted to contain radicalism and counter-revolution through press articles, speeches, revised electoral

⁴⁷ Getty, J. Arch. *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

⁴⁸ Getty, John Arch., and Oleg V. Naumov. *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

plans, and deglorifying the police.⁴⁹ The fact that they had to take such measures shows their lack of control over certain events. It also helps to show the sources of Stalin's paranoia without simply brushing it off as "insanity". Stalin was scared of the unintended consequences of what he himself had unleashed, again showing his occasional lack of foresight in his own policies.

A dialogue between Stalin and Yezhov was uncovered in post-Cold War documents that further helps to understand the purges. In June 1936, Stalin interrupted Yezhov at a Central Committee meeting to complain about so many party members being expelled:

Yezhov: "Comrades, as a result of the verification of party documents, we expelled more than 200,000 members of the party."

Stalin: "Very many."

Yezhov: "Yes, very many, I will speak about this..."

Stalin: "If we expelled 30,000 Trotskyists and Zinovievists, it would be a bigger victory."

After the meeting Stalin wrote a letter to regional party secretaries complaining about their excessive "repression" of the party members. This letter led to a national movement to reinstate expelled party members. Stalin was genuinely concerned that too many members had been expelled because such large numbers of disaffected former members could become an embittered opposition⁵⁰. This interaction gives the western world a glimpse into the mind of Stalin. It was not a softening of the heart that made him oppose

⁴⁹ Getty, J. Arch. *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

⁵⁰ Getty, John Arch., and Roberta Thompson. *Manning. Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Yezhov's purges, but a concern that the vast amounts of expelled members would eventually form their own opposition. Stalin's greatest fear was opposition, and understanding this is key to understanding the purges of the 1930's. This obviously then raises the question of why would he initiate all this when he would have had to have realized that it would simply get him to this problem? He was many things, but a stupid man was not one of them. These events play into the common theme that Communist central officials gave orders of repression from the top. These orders were then taken to the extreme by the population and regional officials in an effort to impress Stalin. The dialogue between Yezhov and Stalin shows that Stalin intended for 30,000 to be purged, while Yezhov took it to the extreme with 200,000 purged which obviously concerned Stalin.

In 1938 Stalin and the Politburo finally became so concerned with Yezhov that they appointed Lavrentiy Beria as the NKVD's second in command to keep an eye on him. By the fall of 1938 Yezhov's leadership of the NKVD was under steady fire from various directions. The regime responded officially on November 17th in a joint resolution of the Sovnarkom (The Council of People's Commissars) and the party Central Committee. This document went to thousands of officials across the USSR in the NKVD. This was direct acknowledgement from Stalin that grotesque mistakes and injustice had occurred. "Real enemies of the people had penetrated the security police and the judicial system and had consciously carried out massive and groundless arrests"⁵¹. This serves as an example of Stalin's methodology in maintaining power. Massive purges were conducted in order to consolidate his own power and remove all opposition. When he felt

⁵¹ Thurston, Robert W. *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia: 1934-1941*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

secure, Yezhov was called an enemy of the state and executed. Russian media would spin this in order to make Stalin look like a hero who had uncovered this massive plot and saved the Soviet Union. It is also important to note that although Stalin did initiate the purge to remove opposition, Yezhov truly did take it too far in terms of sheer body count even in the eyes of Stalin.

Lavrentiy Beria at a closed joint session of the Central Committee and the Central Control Committee of the party held in the fall of 1938 declared that if Yezhov were not a deliberate Nazi agent, he was certainly an involuntary one. He had turned the central offices of the NKVD into a breeding ground for fascist agents. Although this statement was most likely propaganda designed for the public, it is true that Yezhov bears great personal responsibility for the destruction of legality and for the falsification of investigative cases⁵². Airplane designer Yakovlev recalls the following in his memoirs: “In the summer of 1940 Stalin said these precise words in a conversation with me: “Yezhov is a rat, in 1938 he killed many innocent people. We shot him for that.””⁵³ It is possible that Stalin truly held this belief. He gave an order that was taken too far to the extreme by the NKVD. Stalin wanted 30,000 purged, so Yezhov purged 200,000. The numbers are simply used for illustration only, taken from the famous dialogue of Stalin and Yezhov.

It came to be believed (most likely falsely) that Yezhov, as a member of the right-wing conspiracy, was involved with foreign powers. During interrogation in 1939, Yezhov confirmed that in 1935 he had indeed gone to Vienna to be treated for pneumonia

⁵² Getty, John Arch., and Roberta Thompson. Manning. *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

⁵³ Medvedev, Roy Aleksandrovich, and George Shriver. *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

by Dr. Noorden. He confessed to having used the visit for contacting the German intelligence service.⁵⁴ It is quite obvious that this was confessed under torture and must be taken with a large grain of salt. As Stalin and Beria were on his trail, Yezhov and his group began hastily thinking of ways to save themselves. Yezhov testified that after arrests began within the NKVD he, together with his close comrades, made plans to commit a putsch. Yezhov's close friend Dagin was to execute the plan but was arrested a couple days before the set date of the putsch. The plans quickly collapsed. Yezhov's comrades who were also interrogated after being arrested confirmed the existence of these plans and also added that Stalin himself along with Molotov were on the list to be murdered in the putsch. These plans were further confirmed by a number of accomplices and witnesses⁵⁵. It impossible to know the truth in this situation as most confessions were made under torture.

Understanding the Yezhovshcina makes it easier to understand the purges as a whole. Rather than blaming everything on "bloodthirsty Stalin", it becomes clear that there are many more aspects to the story than previously believed. The general operations, to crush and destroy enemy elements, conducted by the NKVD in 1937-1938, during which investigations and hearing procedures were simplified, showed numerous and grave defects in the work of the NKVD and prosecutors. The security apparatus used the purges to try and shore up its own position in the soviet hierarchy to a degree that maybe even Stalin didn't want. Agents consciously deformed Soviet laws, conducted massive and unjustified arrests and at the same time protected themselves by further

⁵⁴ Jansen, Marc, and Nikita Vasilevič Petrov. *Stalins Loyal Executioner: Peoples Commissar Nikolaj Ezhov, 1895-1940*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2002.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

separating the secret police from the Central Committee. The culmination of all of these scandals and anti-party activities resulted in a final written resolution from Molotov and Stalin titled: “THE COUNCIL OF PEOPLE’S COMMISSARS AND THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE RESOLVES: To prohibit the NKVD and prosecutor from conducting any massive arrest or deportation operation. The Central Committee warn all NKVD and prosecutor office employees that the slightest deviation from Soviet laws and from Party directives by any employee, whoever that person might be, will result in severe legal proceedings.”⁵⁶ This resolution was highly classified and was not made available to the public, showing that it was not simply propaganda taking the blame off of Stalin, but a genuine concern from the dictator at the growing power and independence of the NKVD. By the end of 1938 Stalin removed Yezhov, disavowed his excesses, ordered the arrest of the purgers, and released a number of those who were falsely arrested. It is important to note that this was not done out of kindness but out of a fear of a massive opposition movement from the hundreds of thousands of officials who were removed from their party positions.

It can be argued that Stalin and the Politburo, if truly unhappy about the purges of 1937-1938, could have stopped them at any time. Molotov, when asked the same question by a reporter, responded to the accusation: “We lacked resources and insufficient oversight was exercised. There were deficiencies and mistakes. The major deficiencies were that the security agencies had been left without due oversight by the party during certain periods. The negligence was not purposeful. These errors were largely caused by the fact that at certain stages the investigations fell into the hands of

⁵⁶ Getty, John Arch., and Oleg V. Naumov. *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

people who were later exposed as traitors guilty of heinous, hostile, antiparty acts.”⁵⁷

There are truth and lies in this quote. The first section about lack of oversight by the party over the NKVD was true. Again, the NKVD used the purges to better its own position in the soviet hierarchy to a degree that began to concern Joseph Stalin. The second section of the quote falls directly under the common theme of the rule of Stalin. Yezhov was called a traitor and took the full blame of the purges. Molotov was simply covering for himself and other powerful party members. Yezhov did truly behave in a way that was unacceptable in the eyes of Stalin. The denunciation of Yezhov as a “foreign infiltrator” of the NKVD was most likely done to show the public and members of the party that the everlasting hunt for “internal enemies” was a very real one that could create serious consequences for the Soviet Union.

A difficult concept to attempt to understand without unintentionally justifying the purges is the fact that not everybody affected was innocent. An example of this is the anti-Soviet Fifth Column. The destruction of the anti-Soviet Fifth Column was necessary because of the impending war with Hitler. To say that all the repressions were unwarranted is not completely correct. Far too many innocent human lives were taken in this period, but one must also understand that there was a sufficiently high number of enemies in the country after the revolution: dissatisfied people, political criminals, ordinary criminals. Police records from the period also show a spike in banditry going on in the country. Lazar Kaganovich, one of Stalin’s top officials, revealed in an interview the importance of cleansing the Soviet Union of the Fifth Column: “The Fifth Column

⁵⁷ Čuev, Feliks, V.M Molotov, and Albert Resis. *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics: Conversations with Felix Chuev*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007.

was at our doorstep. Without destroying them we could not have won the war.”⁵⁸ If the Fifth Column had not been dealt with in this period, the Soviet Union would have most likely faced the same fate in the war as Norway, Czechoslovakia, and France. This is possibly how Stalin sincerely viewed the situation in the Soviet Union and used this fear in order to justify the purges in his own mind.

Many will argue that even a majority of the Fifth Column was fabricated and that Stalin used this threat to arrest anyone he deemed necessary. The most famous example of a false Fifth Column accusation was Mikhail Tukhachevsky. He was a leading military leader and theoretician from 1918 to 1937 and contributed to the modernization of Soviet armament in the 1930's. In 1937 he was arrested and his interrogation and torture were directly supervised by Yezhov. After severe torture Tukhachevsky admitted (falsely) to treason and was executed along with the rest of his family. Until Nikita Khrushchev's Secret Speech in 1956, he was considered a traitor and a Fifth Columnist. Although Tukhachevsky's prosecution is almost universally regarded as a sham, Stalin's motivations continue to be debated. In his 1968 book “The Great Terror”, British historian Robert Conquest accuses Nazi Party leaders Heinrich Himmler and Heydrich of forging documents that implicated Tukhachevsky in an anti-Stalinist conspiracy with the Wehrmacht General Staff, to weaken the Soviet Union's defense capacity. These documents, Conquest said, were leaked to President Edvard Beneš of Czechoslovakia, who passed them to Soviet Russia through diplomatic channels. This is a direct example of the Nazi Fifth Column activity that Stalin so feared. Unfortunately, Stalin got the

⁵⁸ Chuev, Feliks Ivanovich, and Feliks Ivanovich Chuev. Kaganovich; Shepilov. Moskva: Olma-Press, 2001.

wrong guy, but the existence of Fifth Column elements within the Soviet Union cannot be denied.

To further elaborate on this point and in order to better understand the fear of the Fifth Column through the eyes of Stalin and why they justified violent purges, it is crucial to understand what had happened in the three previously mentioned nations. French Minister of Aviation Pierre Cot writes in his book “Triumph of Treason” about the fate of France in the war: “The Fascists had their own way in the country at large and in the Army. The anti-communist agitation was a smoke screen behind which was being prepared the great political conspiracy that was to paralyze France and facilitate Hitler’s work. The most efficient instruments of the Fifth Column were Weygand, Petain, and Laval as they had seized power amid the confusion of the collapse. They hastened to suppress all political liberties, gag the people, and set up a fascist regime.”⁵⁹ American ambassador Joseph E. Davies elaborates on this Fifth Column activity at the outbreak of war: “Hitler’s march into Prague in 1939 was accompanied by the active military support of German organizations in Czechoslovakia. The same thing was true of his invasion of Norway. There were no Sudeten Henleins, no Slovakian Tisos, no Belgian De Grelles, no Norwegian Quislings (all names of Fifth Column groups) in the Russian picture. All of these trials, purges, and liquidations, which seemed so violent at the time and shocked the world, are now quite clearly a part of a vigorous and determined effort of the Stalin government to protect itself from not only revolution from within but from attack from without. They went to work thoroughly to clean up and clean out all treasonable elements within the country. All doubts were resolved in favor of the government. There were no

⁵⁹ Cot, Pierre, Sybille Crane, and Milton Crane. *Triumph of Treason*. Chicago: Ziff-Davis Pub., 1944.

Fifth Columnists in Russia in 1941- they had been shot. The purge had cleansed the country and rid it of treason.”⁶⁰ This is not a justification for the death of thousands, but it is crucial in the attempt at understanding why Stalin gave such brutal orders. 1936-1938 saw two events happening simultaneously, the height of the purges in the Soviet Union and the rise of Germany as an aggressive and unpredictable military power. Hitler gave open speeches about how the Slavs were an inferior race and that Russia was Germany’s future living space. Soviet participation in the Spanish Civil War greatly influenced the growing tension between Stalin and Adolf Hitler. Nazi–Soviet relations were tempered by Hitler's personal hatred for communist ideology and for wanting to expand German territories. It is possible that these events were not coincidence, but simply Stalin increasing terror in order to crush the will of any type of dissent within his own country in preparation for war with Germany. The paranoia that Stalin must have felt during this period cannot be brushed off as mindless.

Contrary to popular belief, the purges intensely targeted the bureaucracy itself and not so much the general public. The axis Fifth Column in Russia was necessarily destroyed but unfortunately at the cost of many innocent victims. The purge was a hysterical and paranoid reaction to very real threats and very real enemies. Many modern researchers, 14 used in this thesis alone, all seem to place the death toll of the purges at around 700,000. This figure also includes those wrongfully killed by Yezhov. The purge was the final expression of vicious class struggle in the aftermath of the revolution and the civil war.

⁶⁰ MacLean, Elizabeth Kimball. Joseph E. Davies: Envoy to the Soviets. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992.

PART THREE

From the beginning of their regime, the Bolsheviks relied on a strong secret, or political, police to safeguard their rule. The first secret police, called the Cheka, was established in December 1917 as a temporary institution to be abolished once Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks had consolidated their power.⁶¹ The original Cheka, headed by Felix Jujinski, was empowered only to investigate “counterrevolutionary” crimes. But it soon acquired powers of on-the-spot justice and began a campaign of terror against the chosen classes and enemies of Bolshevism. Although many Bolshevik party members viewed the Cheka with disgust and spoke out against its crimes, *its continued existence was seen as crucial to the survival of the new regime*. Lenin was always very clear that the revolution would be no tea party and that death squads would be essential. The police apparatus was a vital component in keeping the revolution alive and Stalin utilized it fittingly.

Once the Civil War (1918–21) ended and the threat of domestic and foreign opposition had cooled, the Cheka was disbanded. Its functions were transferred in 1922 to the State Political Directorate, or GPU, which was initially less powerful than its predecessor. Oppression against the population was decreased (fair to mention that this had a lot to do with the fact that Lenin had a stroke). But under Joseph Stalin, the secret police again gained vast powers and in 1934 was renamed the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or NKVD. No longer subject to party control or restricted by law, the NKVD became a direct instrument of Stalin for use against the party and the country

⁶¹ Kotkin, Stephen. *Stalin. Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928: Paradoxes of power, 1878-1928*. 2014.

during the Great Terror of the 1930's, although as was previously discussed the organization often got out of hand to extents that even concerned Stalin himself.

The Soviet system of forced labor camps was first established in 1919 under the Cheka, but it was not until the early 1930s that the camp population reached significant numbers. By 1934 the Gulags had several million inmates. This was the direct result of the chaos unleashed by the first Five Year Plan. Prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals, along with political and religious dissenters.⁶² The Gulag, whose camps were located mainly in remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, *made significant contributions to the Soviet economy in the period of Stalin*. Gulag prisoners constructed the White Sea-Baltic Canal, the Moscow-Volga Canal, the Baikal-Amur main railroad line, numerous hydroelectric stations, and strategic roads and industrial enterprises in remote regions.⁶³ Gulag manpower was also used for much of the country's lumbering and for the mining of coal, copper, and gold.⁶⁴ How was all of this seen in the eyes of Stalin and others as justifiable? He always felt that without crash industrialization, the Soviet Union would get swallowed up by the predatorial capitalist powers. So any means necessary had to be employed to develop soviet industry to the point where it could stand on its own and stand up to the West. This in a way was how he ultimately justified the purge. That the Soviet Union had to be a pure beacon or it would get deluged so millions of people who were either on the fence or supposedly against the Soviet regime had to be crushed to knock out any hint of a Fifth Column.

⁶² Rayfield, Donald. *Stalin and his hangmen: the tyrant and those who killed for him*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Stalin constantly increased the number of projects assigned to the NKVD, which led to an increasing reliance on its labor. The Gulag also served as a source of workers for economic projects independent of the NKVD, which contracted its prisoners out to various economic enterprises.⁶⁵ This is in no way a justification of enslaving millions of Russians. It is simply being discussed as a way of understanding why the Gulag system existed and the purpose it served in the eyes of Stalin. Russia had just been embarrassed in the first World War and its lack of industry and technology showed. Lenin and Stalin understood that in order for the communist revolution and the Soviet Union to survive, they needed to make immense leaps in industry. Stalin viewed the Gulags not just as a source of labor for fun architectural products, but as an absolute necessity in a time when tensions in Europe were beginning to grow and Russia's industrial production was still insufficient to compete in any type of sector. The end would always justify the means for Stalin, even if it meant enslaving millions in order to protect the communist revolution.

⁶⁵ Rayfield, Donald. *Stalin and his hangmen: the tyrant and those who killed for him*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005.

PART FOUR

In November 1927, Joseph Stalin launched his “revolution from above” by setting two extraordinary goals for Soviet domestic policy: rapid industrialization and collectivization of agriculture. His aims were to erase all traces of the capitalism that had entered under the New Economic Policy and to transform the Soviet Union as quickly as possible, without regard to cost, into an industrialized and completely socialist state.⁶⁶

Stalin's First Five-Year Plan, adopted by the party in 1928, called for rapid industrialization of the economy, with an emphasis on heavy industry. It set goals that were unrealistic—a 250 percent increase in overall industrial development and a 330 percent expansion in heavy industry alone. All industry and services were nationalized, managers were given predetermined output quotas by central planners, and trade unions were converted into mechanisms for increasing worker productivity. Many new industrial centers were developed, particularly in the Ural Mountains, and thousands of new plants were built throughout the country.⁶⁷ But because Stalin insisted on unrealistic production targets, serious problems soon arose. All of this is going to create a lot of instability that would threaten Stalin's power. This in turn, at least to Stalin, was the underlying threat that needed rectification through terror. The idea that his policies were bad was clearly unthinkable to him so he unleashed the hounds on real and perceived enemies.

The First Five-Year Plan also called for transforming Soviet agriculture from mainly individual farms into a system of large state collective farms. The communist regime believed that collectivization would improve agricultural productivity and would

⁶⁶ Khlevniuk, O. V., and Nora Seligman Favorov. *Stalin: new biography of a dictator*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

produce grain reserves sufficiently large to feed the growing urban labor force. This was seen as essential as they couldn't just go on the world capital markets to raise all the necessary capital to fund all this industrialization. They had to get cheaper food at the expense of the peasants' livelihoods. The anticipated surplus was to pay for industrialization. Collectivization, which would increase agricultural mechanization, was further expected to free many peasants for industrial work in the cities and to enable the party to extend its political dominance over the remaining peasantry who in many of the leadership's minds had grown overly powerful.⁶⁸ These plans were made with absolutely no remorse or concern about working conditions, hours, and safety of the peasants. Much like the Gulags, the Five-Year Plans turned out to be absolute meat grinders for the peasantry who were also seen as enemies themselves. The justification of the brutality of these plans is also similar to that of the Gulags. The Soviet Union was surrounded by enemies and it was necessary to accelerate industry to make the nation a force to be reckoned with.

The belief that enemies were surrounding the nation stemmed from the Russian Civil War. When the war broke out, the Allied powers openly backed the anti-communist White forces in Russia. Britain and France openly attempted to organize a coup that would overthrow the Bolshevik regime in 1918. President Woodrow Wilson sent 13,000 American soldiers to aid the anti-Bolshevik effort. Canada, Australia, and India created a joint force and also aided the anti-Bolshevik effort in the Russian Civil War. Japan, concerned about their northern border, sent the largest military force, numbering about 70,000. Italy, Romania, Greece, Poland, China, and Serbia also sent forces and aid to the

⁶⁸ Rayfield, Donald. *Stalin and his hangmen: the tyrant and those who killed for him*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005.

White forces. To say that Stalin's fear of threat from other nations was simply paranoia would be foolish. Stalin's entire understanding of the world stood on a foundation that was built in the revolution and the Civil War.

Forced collectivization of the remaining peasants, which was often fiercely resisted, resulted in a disastrous disruption of agricultural productivity and a catastrophic famine in 1932-33. Although the First Five-Year Plan called for the collectivization of only twenty percent of peasant households, by 1940 approximately ninety-seven percent of all peasant households had been collectivized and private ownership of property almost entirely eliminated.⁶⁹ Forced collectivization helped achieve Stalin's goal of rapid industrialization, but the human costs were incalculable. Stalin considered the loss of human life a fair price to pay in order to achieve his goals for the Soviet Union.

The kulaks were originally the richest independent farmers, risen from the peasantry. Lenin had condemned them as class enemies, "bloodsuckers, vampires, plunderers of the people and profiteers, who fatten on famine."⁷⁰ Stalin, wishing to collectivize even more, expanded the official definition of "kulak" to any peasant owning land or livestock. Any peasant selling surplus goods on the market could be labeled a kulak. In practice, any peasant who did not provide grain to quota, especially the artificially high quotas of 1929-1933, was labeled a kulak. Not appearing to be starving was taken as evidence of hoarding. Why such venom and how did this all tie into the mindset of the purges that there were class enemies all around. Essentially this grudge goes back to 1905 and the Stolypin reforms under the Tsar. Some farmers had used these

⁶⁹ Khlevniuk, O. V., and Nora Seligman Favorov. *Stalin: new biography of a dictator*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.

⁷⁰ Steven Rosefielde. *Red Holocaust*. Routledge, 2009.

reforms as a chance to modernize and become more productive by pulling out of the peasant communes. This didn't go over well with other peasants, usually poorer ones, and they didn't forget. Neither did the communist leadership, who can't be said to have had much love for the peasants more generally.

PART FIVE

To end this thesis an attempt at understanding Stalin himself will be made. His upbringing and experiences pointed him in a brutal direction. This does not mean that he was a sociopath, but he existed in a world where violence was the norm not the exception so we shouldn't be surprised that he often chose violent means. Again, this doesn't justify such actions, but helps put them in context. Stalin gradually turned into a brutal person and understanding his past is the key to understanding his personality. Turn back the clock before all of the Five-Year Plans and purges to 1898, when a 20-year-old Stalin's relations with seminary officials became increasingly hostile. He refused to bow to the inspector, who complained to the Board of Supervisors. An entry in the Seminary's records states that in the course of a search of the fifth-grade dormitories, "Iosif Dzhugashvili tried several times to enter into an argument with seminary officials, expressing dissatisfaction with the repeated searches of students, and declaring that such searches were never made in other seminaries." What the record book fails to mention is that Koba (Stalin) was directly responsible for the search. Koba tried to induce some of his fellow students to drop out of the Seminary and join the revolutionary underground⁷¹.

Stalin had attachment problems with his mother. According to some sources Stalin's mother had an affair with his God father Yakov Egnatashvili and Stalin's real father was not Vissarion Djugashvili the cobbler. Stalin's mother used to work in David Pismamedov's house. Pismamedov was a Jewish businessman in Gori and some residents suspected an illicit affair between David Pismamedov and Stalin's mother Yekaterina Geladze⁷².

⁷¹ Brackman, Roman. *The Secret File of Joseph Stalin: A Hidden Life*. London: Frank Cass, 2002.

⁷² *Ibid.*

In Georgia—illegitimacy has long been considered a disgrace and the ultimate insult among Georgians with their traditions of family ties, kinship and honor. When young Stalin heard these rumors, he became offended. The roots of Stalin’s anti-Semitic feelings may have started from these personal embarrassments. It is also important to note that anti-Semitism was deeply entrenched in the Russian empire and in the caucuses in specific. While not justifying such hatred, it certainly can’t be seen as something specific to Stalin. It was instilled from the cradle as it was for most people.

Stalin was a lowkey anti-Semite. Although in 1930 Stalin publicly stated that anti-Semitism is an extreme form of racial chauvinism, he took a number of measures to suppress Jewish people in the Soviet Union. After this defection Stalin’s personal secretary Boris Bazhanov revealed that Stalin made crude anti-Semitic outbursts even before Lenin’s death, indicating that Stalin, from his earliest days as a seminary student in Tiflis, demonstrated anti-Semitic feelings⁷³.

One of the most bizarre aspects of Stalin’s anti-Semitism was its explosion precisely at a time when he was pursuing a policy of support for a newborn State of Israel. He hoped to turn Israel into a Soviet satellite similar to the “Popular Democracies” he was setting up in Eastern Europe. Stalin even established the Jewish autonomous oblast in 1934⁷⁴ and he was rejected by the Israelis, who chose to side with the West. In classic Stalin fashion he ended up persecuting Jews in the “Doctor’s Plot” after the war. This may have stemmed more from his hate for intellectuals as they were part of the bourgeois elements that he tried hard to eliminate from the Soviet Union. However, his

⁷³ Colombo Telegraph. "Joseph Stalin - Psychopathology Of A Dictator." Colombo Telegraph. June 01, 2014.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

anti-Semitic feelings were clearly evident throughout his life. Stalin arrested Molotov's Jewish wife Polina Zhemchuzhina for her greeting in Yiddish to the first Israeli ambassador to Moscow- Golda Meir at a Kremlin reception. He invented "Delo Vrachey" (Doctors' plot) and arrested prominent Jewish doctors like Dr. Kogan, Feldman, Ettinger, Vovsi, Grinstein, Ginzburg, and many others. He had a plan to deport all the Soviet Jews to Birobidjan in Siberia in the early 1950's⁷⁵ but he was having a hard time getting a new hangman that would be committed enough. It seemed clear that Beria was not going down the rabbit hole as he was protecting Molotov's Jewish wife. He was also not stupid as he saw what happened to all the rest of Stalin's hangmen. Stalin died before all this could be put into reality and the whole Doctor's Plot was summarily dropped.

During the period of the purge's, intellectuals were exposed to severe hardships. Stalin executed countless Jewish intellectuals who were academics, writers and poets active in various cultural realms. It is difficult to tell if this stemmed more from his lowkey anti-Semitism or hate for intellectuals. The Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky became disillusioned with Stalin's repressions and committed suicide in 1930. Stalin banned Boris Pasternak's novels and poems. Pasternak's partner Olga Iwinskaja who was an editor at "Novy Mir" magazine was arrested in 1949. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (The Gulag Archipelago) was arrested in 1945 and sent to a Gulag. Stalin also banned genetics research in the Soviet Union. The famous Semitic geneticists –Professor Vavilov, Professor Koltsov, and Professor Serebrovski were removed from the academia⁷⁶.

⁷⁵ Colombo Telegraph. "Joseph Stalin - Psychopathology Of A Dictator." Colombo Telegraph. June 01, 2014.

⁷⁶Medvedev, Roy Aleksandrovich, and George Shriver. *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989..

Stalin felt intimidated by the presence of intellectuals and men with charismatic personality. He deliberately kept people with weak personalities in his inner circle. Although the high-ranking officials feared Lavrentiy Beria, he was not largely respected and they used to spread rumors about his sexually deviant behaviors. Lazar Kaganovich was a loyal Stalinist and blindly followed Stalin's orders. Nikita Khrushchev was considered an ill-mannered peasant from Ukraine. Stalin often ridiculed Vyacheslav Molotov and sometimes called him an idiot. Mikhail Kalinin often became the laughing stock of the inner circle due to his senile diminished behavior. Although Kliment Voroshilov was a Civil War hero, sometimes Stalin used to verbally abuse him⁷⁷. Among the inner circle Stalin behaved with an exaggerated pride often embarrassing and degrading others while simultaneously depending on them to get things done.

Josef Davrichewy, the son of Gori's police chief, claims in his memoirs that "Stalin's illegitimate birth was gossiped about in the neighborhood – that the real father of the child was Koba Egnatashvili... or my own father Damian Davrichewy". This could not have helped Beso (Stalin's father), whom Davrichewy calls "a manically jealous runt", already sinking into alcoholism. Stalin gradually distanced himself from his mother and hardly visited her. When Stalin got angry he often used derogatory names to insult her. Stalin's mother Yekaterina died in 1937. Stalin did not attend the funeral and he only sent a wreath⁷⁸.

Young Stalin had a negative self-image and was plagued by an inferiority complex. His face was badly scarred by smallpox. He had a defect in his left arm. The

⁷⁷ Robins, Robert S., and Jerrold M. Post. *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997.

⁷⁸ Brackman, Roman. *The Secret File of Joseph Stalin: A Hidden Life*. London: Frank Cass, 2002.

left arm was shorter than the other and it was half-paralyzed. The toes on his left foot were fused together due to a congenital defect. He was 165 cm tall and looked shorter than that. Expert psychologists hypothesized that Stalin had a “basic inferiority complex⁷⁹.” Concordia University professor Joel Davis commented that there is “no need to psychoanalyze a dead man”, but understanding this one condition really helps to explain certain decisions he made all throughout his life. It also helps to remind that Stalin was a human. Early life and certain physical defects can have a massive effect on a person and it would be simply stubborn to ignore this in a quest to somehow understand the logic and thought processes that Stalin used to justify his purges of the party and the nation.

In his character Stalin lacked empathy. When his first wife Ekaterina Svanide (Stalin called her Kato) died of typhus, Stalin was emotionally devastated. After this heartbreaking event Stalin became emotionally numbed and said to his friends “my last warm feelings for humanity have died”. This emotional numbness became the central feature of his character. After Kato’s death Stalin became aimless. He abandoned his first-born infant child Yakov Dzhugashvili and began to chase revolutionary activities. Stalin organized a number of armed robberies to raise funds for the Bolsheviks. Gradually he was turning into a brutal person. Some unofficial reports claim that Stalin cold-bloodedly killed people in armed robberies. After he came into power Stalin wiped out most of his old gang members. This action erased his criminal history from the records. Stalin was arrested for revolutionary activities and exiled to Siberia. There he

⁷⁹ Colombo Telegraph. "Joseph Stalin - Psychopathology Of A Dictator." Colombo Telegraph. June 01, 2014.

experienced awful human conditions which further deteriorated his emotional wellbeing. He managed to escape in 1904⁸⁰.

Stalin worked with the Bolsheviks but unlike Lenin or Trotsky, Stalin had no profound theoretical knowledge in Marxism. Stalin was famously weak in his Marxism on a personal and interpersonal level. He was not a revolutionary hero either. However, he was a pragmatic activist and was highly manipulative. Stalin was able to win Lenin's trust. He had organizational skills and worked with an iron will. He knew the importance of terror in achieving goals and defending the Revolution, a talent that Lenin put high stock on. He said that a revolution without firing squads was impotent. Stalin also used ruthless measures during the Russian Civil War⁸¹. The success of using brutality in the Civil War is an obvious indicator of the methods he would believe are best when he finally came to power.

The American journalist and socialist activist best known for his first-hand account of the Bolshevik Revolution "Ten Days that Shook the World" John Reed once gave a brief introduction about Stalin. Reed concluded: "He's not an intellectual like the other people you will meet. He's not even particularly well informed, but he knows what he wants." In 1922, Stalin became the Secretary General of the Party. Stalin was rude, intolerable and had a bad temper. Lenin denounced him when Stalin verbally abused his wife Krupskaya. Lenin demanded an apology from Stalin that he never received. Shortly before his death in 1924 Lenin wrote to the Central Committee that Stalin must be removed from the post of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR and be

⁸⁰ Colombo Telegraph. "Joseph Stalin - Psychopathology Of A Dictator." Colombo Telegraph. June 01, 2014.

⁸¹ Brackman, Roman. The Secret File of Joseph Stalin: A Hidden Life. London: Frank Cass, 2002

replaced by another who was “more loyal, more courteous, and more considerate of comrades, less capricious.” But this decision was overruled by Stalin with the help of his supporters in the Politburo. As the General Secretary Stalin could control the party members. He controlled the influx of new party members and only let people who would be loyal to him in the party. He also had an intimate knowledge of how the levers of power in the soviet system worked and how things got done or didn’t get done. This allowed him to put his own supporters into place and establish himself a strong base for support⁸².

Trotsky was an intellectual and respected by the party members. Trotsky had demonstrated his loyalty to the revolutionary cause during two stints of imprisonment and exile under the tsar. He played a role in the 1905 Revolution as vice-chairman of the first St. Petersburg Soviet. During the October Revolution of 1917 Trotsky directed much of the power seizure in the Russian capital while serving as chairman of the Bolshevik majority Petrograd Soviet. Trotsky created the Red Army from the Red Guards. He was the Commissar for War and one of the outstanding orators⁸³. Stalin’s jealousy and insecurity grew vastly and he saw Trotsky as a potential threat. After Lenin’s death it appeared that it was Trotsky who had the biggest aspirations on becoming the new leader. Stalin feared him and what would happen if he came into power. Together with Kamenev and Zinoviev, Stalin formed a “triumvirate” in order to put pressure on Trotsky. Stalin hated Trotsky’s use of former Tsarist officers in his division of the Red Army. In December Stalin proposed his concept of “Socialism in one country” in order to launch

⁸² Brackman, Roman. *The Secret File of Joseph Stalin: A Hidden Life*. London: Frank Cass, 2002

⁸³ Kotkin, Stephen. *Stalin. Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928: Paradoxes of power, 1878-1928*. 2014.

an attack on Trotsky.⁸⁴ Trotsky and even Lenin felt that the revolution in the Soviet Union couldn't survive unless it spread to more industrialized countries like Germany. It needed the support of large proletariat movements and the resources that more developed countries could provide. Stalin believed that the Soviet Union could do it alone. The failure of revolutionary movements in places like Germany and central Europe after WWI in 1919 deeply undercut Trotsky's arguments and Stalin was able to undercut him.

After Lenin's death Trotsky's position became vulnerable. As Trotsky's political prowess decreased, Stalin began to diverge from Zinoviev and Kamenev, and began to develop a new alliance with Bukharin. Trotsky was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1929 and later he was assassinated in 1940 in Mexico on Stalin's orders. When Trotsky's death was confirmed, Stalin wrote an editorial for Pravda, headed "The Death of An International Spy". Stalin declared that Trotsky "was finished off by the same terrorists whom he had taught to murder from behind a corner" and that he had "worked for the intelligence services and general staffs of England, France, Germany, Japan..." and that having "organized the villainous murders of Kirov, Kuibyshev, Maxim Gorky, he became the victim of his own intrigues, betrayals, treason, evil deeds..."⁸⁵ Sounds quite familiar to the accusations given to Yezhov in 1939. These early events in the life of Stalin help to show how certain patterns in his life began to develop and help to better understand why certain actions were taken during the purges of the 1930's. Stalin had previously experienced success using these manipulative and brutal methods and continued to do so throughout his rule.

⁸⁴ Kotkin, Stephen. Stalin. Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928: Paradoxes of power, 1878-1928. 2014.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

When Kirov emerged as a new member of the communist party it might have threatened Stalin's rule. Sergey Kirov was a young popular Bolshevik. He was the Leningrad Party chief. Astoundingly Stalin became very close to Sergey Kirov. Kirov spent time in Stalin's dacha drinking and dining together. Stalin showed a great affection towards Kirov. In 1934, Kirov was assassinated by a lone gunman. Many suspected Stalin behind the assassination. Apparently, Stalin benefitted by Kirov's murder. Kirov's death gave him a vast opportunity to hunt down his rivals. Immediately following the death of Kirov, Josef Stalin unleashed one of the greatest political purges in history. This information coupled with the fact that Stalin may have seen Kirov as a political rival, as well as the strange circumstances surrounding the assassination, has led many to assert that Stalin played a role in the murder⁸⁶ further proving his immense fear of charismatic figures within the party.

Stalin arrested two prominent Politburo members, Zinoviev and Kamenev, on false charges. They were tortured heavily by Stalin's Secret Police. Kamenev and Zinoviev confessed that they were the key conspirators behind the murder of Sergey Kirov. During the interrogation Zinoviev could not bear the physical and psychological anguish and went in to an acute stress reaction as he reportedly cried uncontrollably. Although Stalin gave them a personal assurance that their lives would be spared, both were shot in 1936⁸⁷. Stalin's hunt was not over. Mikhail Tomsky, who was the leader of the trade union movement committed suicide in 1936. Mikhail Tukhachevsky –the former Red Army chief-of-staff was arrested in 1937 and shot. Sergo Ordzhonikidze –

⁸⁶ Khlevniuk, O. V., and Nora Seligman Favorov. *Stalin: new biography of a dictator*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.

⁸⁷Ibid..

Commissar for Heavy Industry ended his life in 1937 as a result of forced suicide instigated by Stalin. The Politburo member Jānis Rudzutaks was accused of Trotskyism and espionage for Nazi Germany and was shot in 1938. Stalin purged thousands of Red Army Officers. Some of them were active participants of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and heroes of the Russian Civil War⁸⁸. Stalin felt intimidated by the presence of men with charismatic personality. He deliberately kept people with weak personalities in his inner circle and consistently eliminated those who became popular. This is important in understanding why Stalin often purged popular party members for seemingly no reason.

Aleksandr Orlov –the Ex NKVD officer wrote the famous book “the Secret History of Stalin’s Crimes” about the view that Stalin’s envy of all the old Bolshevik leaders may have been a large part of his motivation to destroy them. Stalin’s behavior in the power struggle was ambiguous. It might well be that his sudden change in policy, especially on the economic policy, was due to the social and economic developments and constraints, and his own opinion. However, it seems that Stalin operated tactically, rather than ideologically, and his moves were mainly intended to play out his competitors against each other. He placed himself in the center of the debate, initially proposing moderate views⁸⁹.

The Revolutionary intellectual Nikolai Bukharin once stated: “Stalin is a Genghis Khan, an unscrupulous intriguer, who sacrifices everything else to the preservation of power.”⁹⁰ Bukharin was a major figure in both the political and philosophical

⁸⁸ Rayfield, Donald. Stalin and his hangmen: the tyrant and those who killed for him. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005.

⁸⁹ Orlov, Aleksandr Mikhailovič. Tajnaâ Istoriâ Stalinskih Prestuplenij = The Secret History of Stalins Crimes. New York: Bamboo Books, 2012.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

development of Marxism. Undoubtedly Stalin felt jealous of Bukharin's charisma. In his paranoid mind Stalin perceived Bukharin as an imminent threat that had to be eliminated. Bukharin stood for what he called "socialist humanism", socialism with a human face, socialism with an open mind, socialism with an honest voice, socialism with an outstretched hand. He advocated a more evolutionary path to socialism, an opening of a process where a society would grow into socialism, where those who questioned might be persuaded and not necessarily coerced or executed, where theoretical questions were settled by theoretical debates and not by accusations of treason, purges of editorial boards and disappearances in the night. But Stalin had a different view on social construction and he twisted Marxism for his own advantage⁹¹. This could have been for selfish ambitions, or out of his previously discussed concerns that there were enemies at the gates and there was no time to "convince" the Russian people into doing what he knew was necessary.

After Kirov's death Bukharin's days were numbered. Stalin wanted Bukharin dead. Stalin played with Bukharin expressing admiration and affection, all the while scheming against him, jealous of his intellectual acuity and all-round popularity and vengeful against any alternative to his absolute authority. They lived and worked in close proximity to each other, first in exile and later in the Metropol and Kremlin. After Stalin's wife Nadya committed suicide, Stalin asked Bukharin to change apartments with him, as the memory was too painful. Bukharin was soon arrested in that same bedroom. The case of Nikolai Bukharin was set during the last of the Moscow Show Trials. Prior to his false confession Bukharin was severely tortured and intimidated. Several times Stalin

⁹¹ Rayfield, Donald. Stalin and his hangmen: the tyrant and those who killed for him. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005.

visited the Show Trial to observe his friend being physically and mentally shattered⁹². Stalin's inferiority complex is further proved by his hate for charismatic figures within the Bolshevik Party, and it is clearly shown here in the execution of Bukharin.

After the Moscow Show Trials, the whole history of the revolution was rewritten. Books of Bukharin, indeed of all the purged, disappeared from libraries. Photographs were doctored to erase their presence from seminal events. Before facing the death penalty Bukharin sent a small note to Stalin: "*Koba zachem tiblye nushna maya smerth* (Koba, why do you need my death?)" But Stalin was unemotional. After Stalin's death this small note was found on his desk. He may have kept it as a trophy⁹³.

Stalin encountered series of identity crisis throughout his life probably due to insecurities that vastly affected him. In his youth he adopted the name Koba (a Georgian fictional hero) then Stalin (man of steel), Thavarish Stalin (Comrade Stalin), Vileki Stalin (Great Stalin), Nash Vilekei Voshd (Our Great Leader) and finally Otsa Narodov (Father of the Nation). He was troubled by his Georgian heritage while ruling the Russian masses. He spoke Russian with a thick notable accent. Stalin used numerous methods to inflate his personality via the Soviet media. His defensive high self-esteem created a new cult in the Soviet Union. He launched anti-religious campaign against the Russian Orthodox Church. Stalin's picture replaced God's image and he became a Demigod. He destroyed churches and religious monuments to proliferate the Cult of Stalin. A torrent of portraits, posters, statues, films, plays, songs, and poems galvanized the Soviet population and inspired leftist activists around the world⁹⁴.

⁹² Robins, Robert S., and Jerrold M. Post. *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997.

⁹³ Montefiore, Simon Sebag. *Stalin: the court of the Red Tsar*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Stalin often felt grave emptiness inside maybe due to his inferiority complex. Boredom and monotony struck him vigorously. Very rarely would he leave Moscow and most of the time he stayed in his dacha in Kuntsevo surrounded by the same people almost all the time. In such a tedious environment he was determining the destiny of millions of people. Sending them before a firing squad or sending them to a labor camp gave him immense sense of power and control internally and externally. He felt omnipotent supremacy within himself⁹⁵. It is also true that Stalin was terrified of assassination attempts and liked to be in places and with people where he felt in control.

Stalin was an impulsive character. As described by Khrushchev: “sudden impulses decided large-scale public projects such as the building of canals or momentous political decisions such as the postwar partition of Germany. Associates would be suddenly summoned and meetings would be ended abruptly or the agenda switched at the whim of Stalin. Without regular meetings of the governing bodies Khrushchev noted, “the government virtually ceased to function. Stalin often postponed for months dealing with critical problems that needed to be solved urgently.”⁹⁶ The notion that Stalin was impulsive reinforces the earlier point as to how he often failed to foresee results of certain actions in the 1930’s.

Stalin’s personality traits were known to professionals as early as 1927. The Great Russian Psychologist Vladimir Mikhailovic Bekhterev (1857–1927) was ordered to examine Josef Stalin in December 1927 during the First All-Russian Neurological

⁹⁵ Montefiore, Simon Sebag. *Stalin: the court of the Red Tsar*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014.

⁹⁶ Hachinski, Vladimir. "Stalin's Last Years: Delusions or Dementia?" *The Canadian Journal of Chemical Engineering*. July 27, 2007.

Congress in Moscow⁹⁷. Vladimir Bekhtarev found psychopathology in Stalin. Bekhterev said only one word “paranoiac”. Vladimir Bekhtarev’s diagnosis of Stalin was paranoia. After making this diagnosis Bekhterev had less than 24 hours to live. He died mysteriously and without a post mortem his body was cremated. His family members suspected foul play. It is important to note that most of these archives were only released conveniently during the wave of destalinization unleashed by Khrushchev and as such has a clear axe to grind. This is not saying that Stalin was a nice guy, but clearly there was a real incentive to paint things in the worst possible light.

Although many experts commented on Stalin’s mental status, his skills and achievements cannot be overlooked. The sheer scale of Stalin’s achievements and institutionalized terror has prompted some authors to label him as a paranoid megalomaniac. Whatever the merits of this diagnosis, his undeniable accomplishments and the rationality of many of his actions cannot be explained by the workings of a disturbed mind. The fact that such a mind could find such great outlet in this system says a lot about what Lenin had helped create. Stalin used brutal but effective measures during the Russian Civil War defeating the White Army. In the early stages he would become one of the trusted men of Lenin. He was manipulative and had the convincing power to form allies with Politburo members isolating Trotsky. After dealing with Trotsky he targeted remaining Politburo members eliminating all possible threats for power. Stalin’s unmatched craftiness demonstrates his eagerness to achieve his goal⁹⁸.

⁹⁷ Kesselring, Jürg. "Vladimir Mikhailovic Bekhterev (1857–1927): Strange Circumstances Surrounding the Death of the Great Russian Neurologist." *European Neurology* 66, no. 1 (2011): 14-17. doi:10.1159/000328779.

⁹⁸ Montefiore, Simon Sebag. *Stalin: the court of the Red Tsar*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014.

Ironically Stalin became an internationally recognized figure. He was considered as one of the great Marxist pragmatists by radicals. The ideas of Stalin were not confined to the borders of the USSR. They exerted a decisive influence on countries “liberated” by the Red Army from German fascism and Japanese imperialism after World War II. The fact that the Stalinist version of Marxism-Leninism played an important role in the formation of the North Korean ideological system was confirmed by Kim Il Sung in his speech delivered on the occasion of Stalin’s death in March 1953⁹⁹. Stalinism influenced Mao Zedong notably. Mao’s 1953 First Five-Year Plan followed the Soviet model. The Cambodian communist revolutionary Pol Pot used Ukrainian Holodomor type genocide in Cambodia, deporting the people of Phnom Penh in to the killing fields¹⁰⁰.

When Stalin came in to power the Soviet Union was a barely developed nation consisting of a majority of peasants. He transformed the country into a nuclear superpower. He pushed the Soviet Union into the Space Age. He did many things that an unsound mind could not even comprehend. To discount this man as a bloodthirsty lunatic is frankly impossible. Simultaneously Stalin had a mind of a murderer. Stalin was allegedly involved in many murders on a personal basis even before the October Revolution. He meticulously planned the assassination of Leon Trotsky in 1940. After the Moscow Trials it was inevitable that Stalin would make a desperate effort to kill Trotsky. Trotsky was the man Stalin feared and hated most. Envy, hate and desire for revenge play a large role in his make-up¹⁰¹.

⁹⁹Getty, John Arch., and Roberta Thompson. Manning. *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

¹⁰⁰ Colombo Telegraph. "Joseph Stalin - Psychopathology Of A Dictator." Colombo Telegraph. June 01, 2014.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Stalin could disconnect himself from warm human emotions. Stalin's ability to psychologically cut himself off from individuals who had once seemed to be close to him was one of the sources of his cruelty. He drove his second wife Nadia Allilueva to commit suicide. He had shallow feelings for his son Yakov from his first marriage. When Yakov became a POW during the Battle of Smolensk in 1941, Stalin did not make any attempt to release or comfort him. Yakov committed suicide at the Sachsenhausen death camp in 1943. Stalin's attitude towards his other children affected them detrimentally. Vasily Stalin died of chronic alcoholism. Svetlana Allilueva defected to the West in 1967.¹⁰² It is fair to note that Svetlana might also have left because she was angry with Khrushchev for publicly denouncing her father and was fearful that Stalin's rules for dealing with family members would be applied to her. Stalin was a self-centered person and an isolated character who had no value in friendships. He could harm his close associates without any personal feelings. One aspect of Stalin's cruelty was to reassure personally some of his colleagues and subordinates that they were safe to the extent of toasting their "brotherhood," and then having them arrested shortly afterward, sometimes the very same day. After removing Yagoda, Stalin appointed Yezhov as the NKVD chief showing him friendship and brotherhood. He was known as Stalin's faithful friend. In December 1938 Yezhov was removed and accused as an enemy of the people. Yezhov was shot in 1939.

Stalin was troubled by fear of conspiracy and feelings of victimization. He saw enemies everywhere. He suspected Red Army Marshal Vasily Blyukher was a Japanese spy and he was killed in 1938. He thought the Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov was

¹⁰² Khlevniuk, O. V., and Nora Seligman Favorov. *Stalin: new biography of a dictator*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.

an American agent. He constantly accused Beria for being an English spy. He thought that his personal physician, Doctor Vinogradov, was an agent of British intelligence. As Khrushchev recalled, Stalin “instilled in us all the suspicion that we were all surrounded by enemies¹⁰³”. The roots of this have been discussed. Stalin was a product of the revolution and Civil War. There were truly enemies all around at the time and that fear never left Stalin. Trotsky intensely documented Stalin’s unstable moods and mood swings. According to Trotsky, Stalin had unpredictable moods. Lazar Kaganovich, one of the main associates of Joseph Stalin, remarked “he was a different man at different times ... I knew no less than five or six Stalin’s¹⁰⁴.” In many chilling accounts Stalin was also known to be a charming and persuasive person.

Stalin ruled the Soviet Union creating mass fear and anxiety. From the top government officials to the ordinary peasants and laborer’s, everybody lived under constant fear and tension. Soviet mass media publicized the names and addresses of the people who were charged with espionage, sabotage and being involved in anti-Soviet activities. These enemies of the state were publicly denounced. This social havoc was similar to the European Witch Craze of the 14th to 17th Centuries. People became suspicious of their neighbors, friends, and even family members. Anybody could betray anyone at any time.

Scapegoating became one of Stalin’s major political tactics. Stalin controlled everybody through fear—fear of death, fear of torture, fear of exile. His belief that everyone was plotting against him contributed to him forcing “confessions” out of many

¹⁰³ Kotkin, Stephen. *Stalin. Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928: Paradoxes of power, 1878-1928.* 2014.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

innocent people; he felt that if he had a scapegoat, then he was closer to eliminating the prospect of his defeat¹⁰⁵.

When a paranoid leader becomes chief of state his paranoia infects the nation. The Soviet people experienced this phenomenon with Stalin. Stalin injected profound fear and anxiety in to the Soviet society during his reign. One in twenty Soviet subjects would be arrested. People lived with mistrust and disbelief. Social connections and social ties disintegrated. People feared to tell anecdotes; they feared keeping diaries, visiting friends etc. Widespread confusion and fright prevailed in the Soviet society during the Stalinist era and it impacted the later generations. Stalin demonstrated shallow sentiments, emotional numbing, deep mistrust, paranoia, suspicion, intense rage and urge to seek revenge. The thirst for revenge was stronger than Stalin. In Party circles the story is often mentioned how Stalin one evening in 1923 in Zubalovo said to Dzerzhinsky and Kamenev: “to choose the victim, to prepare the blow with care, to slake an implacable vengeance, and then to go to bed...there is nothing sweeter in life.” Stalin never forgave anyone¹⁰⁶.

Experts indicate that the origins of Stalin’s paranoia probably lie in his roots in Georgia. Many of his ruthless, brutal features are better explained as those of a “Caucasian chieftain” rather than deriving from a dogmatic Marxism¹⁰⁷. In any normal democratic society Stalin would have ended up in prison. Violence was ordinary in the caucuses- they operated in a brutal and savage world, it was viewed as necessary and

¹⁰⁵ Rayfield, Donald. *Stalin and his hangmen: the tyrant and those who killed for him*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005.

¹⁰⁶ Brackman, Roman. *The Secret File of Joseph Stalin: A Hidden Life*. London: Frank Cass, 2002.

¹⁰⁷ Robins, Robert S., and Jerrold M. Post. *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997.

common and it was being imposed by tsars very often. Violence was institutionalized. They would more readily turn to violence and Stalin was a clear product of the region and culture that he grew up in. Communism needed to be brutal to survive counter revolution and reform. Forces against them were violent which in turn justified their use of violence. The peasant Georgian was a perfect fit for a role that required absolute brutality in order to keep the revolution alive.

Stalin is often dismissed as a lunatic. Khrushchev called him a lunatic and Western media did the same. This thesis was inspired by constantly hearing these accusations but simultaneously seeing the immense progress and advancements that the Soviet Union made during his reign. When Stalin came to power the Soviet Union was a barely developed nation where peasants and poverty were the norm. He transformed the country into a nuclear superpower. He pushed the Soviet Union into the space age. He did many things that a lunatic could never comprehend. This is not a justification of his horrifying actions, but an attempt to better understand how this paradox may even exist. How can a lunatic have pushed a third-world power into a world superpower in an unfathomable amount of time? He always felt that without crash industrialization, the Soviet Union would get swallowed up by the predatorial capitalist powers. Any means necessary had to be employed to develop soviet industry to the point where it could stand on its own and stand up to the West. This in a way was how he ultimately justified the purge.

The man was a product of the Caucasus. The region operated in a brutal and savage world. Violence was common and viewed as necessary as it was imposed by the Tsars very often. Stalin saw how effective this method of control can truly be. Stalin also

grew up reading the works of Lenin such as “What is to be done?”. This foundational reading for any communist revolutionary advocated the importance of brutality to survive counter revolution and reform. Lenin warned the young Stalin that the forces against them would be violent so they had to be violent too. Stalin then survived the revolution and the Civil War. He saw massive amounts of infiltration and spy activity during this period. There were real conspiracies at work. He saw first-hand that the rest of the world would always oppose the communist cause as nearly all developed world powers assisted the opposing side during the Civil War. This betrayal would burn within him until his final days. The fear of external and internal threats stemmed from this period and would later fuel the purges of the 1930’s. Stalin needed no convincing that there were enemies everywhere, he saw it himself during his early life. When one understands these aspects of the dictator, he immediately becomes even more terrifying. He was more human and reasonable than we think. Stalin was shocked in 1941 because he thought that Hitler would be reasonable just like him. Stalin was a man who thought rationally and believed that Hitler would too.

There was genuine reason for his paranoia and understanding his past helps to better understand his seemingly unreasonable actions in the 1930’s. Stalin understood that the Soviet Union needed to be forced into this as they did not know what was best for them. He always believed that he knew what was best and people would only understand after they were (brutally) shown. He also understood that the closer that he got to communism, the more class enemies would arise. The end would always justify the means for Stalin. He believed that the terror in the 1930’s would quickly be forgotten after the Soviet people would see the resulting prosperity in the future.

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