

Stalin's Great Terror: Origins and Consequences

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I would like to thank the organisers of this meeting for giving me the opportunity to speak to such a large gathering at this major university in Australia. Today I will be talking about some of the most tragic events in modern history – events about which many books and articles have been written, but about which there is much that is enigmatic and misunderstood. These historical phenomena are sometimes referred to as the Great Purges, or the Great Terror, or sometimes simply as 1937. They have few analogies in history.

Of course the twentieth century has seen no small amount of mass terror and even genocide directed against civilian populations. In Hitler's concentration camps more people died than in Stalin's camps and prisons. During World War I, in the space of a few days, more than a million Armenians were killed.

These instances of ethnic genocide usually were not accompanied by demagoguery which was as sophisticated as in the Soviet Union. In most cases the victims were not forced to confess to horrendous crimes which they had never committed.

Our country, Russia, saw three civil wars in the space of 20 years and then was forced to bear the burden of a world war.

The first civil war unfolded from 1918 to 1920. It was a war in which the revolutionary masses rose up against those who, with the help of foreign interventionists, were trying to retain their privileges.

This civil war had much in common with other civil wars following revolutions in other countries. For instance, there is very much in common between the Russian civil war and that which unfolded in the 1860s in the United States. Trotsky found so much in common between the Russian and American civil wars that he intended to write an entire book devoted specifically to this question.

The second civil war to which I am referring lasted approximately six years from 1928 to 1933. It took the form of violent, forced collectivisation unleashed by the Stalinist clique against the peasantry as a whole and turned into a virtual nationwide civil war.

There are many parallels for this civil war. For instance, there was the Vendée uprising of the peasants against the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century.

But for the third civil war, the phenomena we refer to as the Great Purges, it is impossible to find an appropriate historical analogy.

Never before in history were hundreds of thousands of people torn away from their apartments, thrown into prison, subjected to torture, made to confess to crimes, and then either exterminated or sent to concentration camps. It is no surprise that today, even 60 years after the Great Terror, it is difficult for many people to address these questions calmly.

Not long ago at my lectures in England I came up against many different opponents. One old English Stalinist told me that any talk about the Great Terror was just an example of bourgeois propaganda. He heaped praise upon Stalin whom he felt had saved England during World War II.

To justify his praise of Stalin he said that 27 million people had died in the Soviet Union during that war. I answered by noting that 27 million people was approximately half the population of Great Britain at that time. I then asked him what would he say about Churchill if, on the eve of a war, he had wiped out the flower of the nation, including many of the officer corps, and as result of his outrageous blunders the country lost almost half its population.

Another opponent at my London lecture, a Ukrainian nationalist, asked why I paid so much attention to the terror which was directed largely against the Bolsheviks, but ignored the terror against the Ukrainian people, which he said killed 15 million people.

Here we have a typical example of how anti-communists attempt to greatly exaggerate the victims of the Great Terror. Solzhenitsyn for example gives the figure of 60 million people who supposedly perished in the camps and in the prisons.

If you walked around Moscow today during the pre-election campaign you would find similar figures at various stands set up by pro-Yeltsin forces. They display posters which say "don't forget the communists destroyed 60 million people in our country". These figures, which exaggerate the number of victims by about 12 times, are supposed to arouse the population.

And of course by comparison the number of people who have died in the war unleashed by Yeltsin in Chechnya is insignificant. And by comparison, the shelling of the Russian Supreme Soviet at the White House in October 1993 is insignificant. Only about 1,000 people died in the course of that action.

The Yeltsin forces say that if the communists come back to power they will launch a terror which will sweep away tens of millions of people. These figures are cited even though in the 40 years after Stalin died in 1953 there were virtually no political executions in the Soviet Union. The day after Stalin died, the new wave of terror he had been preparing was stopped by his successors and a process of mass rehabilitations was begun.

Most people ignore whom the terror was directed against. Reliable figures show that during the entire period of Soviet history, approximately four million people were accused and convicted of crimes against the state. Of those, approximately 700,000 to 800,000 were shot.

These figures are staggering by any measure, but we have to supplement them with other figures. For instance, approximately one half of the total victims were thrown into prison during a two-year period – 1937 and 1938. During those two years over six times more people were shot than during the entire remaining period of Soviet history.

The second feature of the Great Terror is that its major targets were communists. Of the two million people who were repressed during that two-year period, over half of them were members of the party at the time of their arrest.

Moreover, at the beginning of the Terror there were approximately one and a half million people who had earlier been in the party, but had been

expelled for belonging to various oppositions. Very many of these people were arrested and exterminated during the Great Terror.

There is another myth about the Great Terror which is both supported and spread by many different political tendencies. You can find this myth in Krushchev's secret report on Stalin's crimes delivered to the 20th Party Congress in 1956, or in the works of open anti-communists such as Robert Conquest and Solzhenitsyn.

This myth says that virtually the entire population of the Soviet Union was reduced to a stunned silence by the terror, and either said nothing about the repression, or blindly believed in and supported the terror. This myth also claims that the victims of the repression were completely innocent of any crimes, including opposition to Stalin. They were, instead, victims of Stalin's excessive paranoia. Since there was no serious opposition to the regime of Stalin, according to this myth, the victims were not guilty of such opposition.

In order to refute these myths one simply must turn to various dossiers and case histories which have recently come to light and been published.

For example there is the case of the world-renowned physicist and future Nobel laureate, Academician David Landau. It would seem that this young physicist and scholar, who was busy with his own work, not a member of the party and seemingly uninvolved in politics, would have been guilty of nothing and therefore arrested without any foundation.

Recently the dossier of his case was published. During the investigation Landau was presented with an anti-Stalinist leaflet which he had helped to reproduce and was getting ready to distribute. The communist Kopets, who was a colleague of Landau, admitted to having written the leaflet. He arranged for it to be reproduced and attracted Landau and other students and physicists into this conspiracy. They intended to distribute the leaflet at a May Day demonstration in 1938.

Recently many examples of such leaflets have been published. They were written by people we know little about, but people who wrote from a consistent communist position, and who called for a struggle against Stalin and his clique because they had betrayed socialism. The content of these leaflets can only be interpreted as a call to overthrow the existing political system, or to be more precise, Stalin and his clique.

Of course these are isolated incidents, but prior to the unleashing of the Great Terror there was a much more widespread, more serious, and well-organised opposition to Stalinism as a regime which had veered ever more widely away from the ideals of socialism.

This battle against Stalin began back in 1923 with the formation of the Left Opposition. The inner party struggle unfolded in ever sharper form throughout the 20s.

Thousands and thousands of communists took part in this opposition, openly in the early days and then, after opposition groups were banned, in illegal underground forms against the abolition of party democracy by the Stalinist party clique.

They spoke out against forced collectivisation and the erroneous methods of industrialisation which were leading to great deprivation for the vast majority of the Soviet people. They spoke out against the growing system of privileges and social inequality. The bureaucracy had usurped political power from the working class and was consolidating its position and privileges.

A significant change took place in the level of opposition in 1932 when it became clear that the adventurist policies of the Stalinist leadership had led the country to an extremely sharp economic and political crisis.

At that time in 1932, not only the old opposition groups became more active, but they were joined by layers of newly-formed opposition groups. Among those perhaps the most interesting is the so-called Riutin group.

Riutin was an old Bolshevik who underwent a very complex evolution. During the 1920s he was a fervent Stalinist but by 1930 he came to the conclusion that he had been wrong on many points and that a new struggle had to be taken up against the Stalinist bureaucracy. He sought ways of

uniting with the Left Opposition, with Trotskyists.

The Riutin group published a document of more than 100 pages called the Riutin platform. It exposed both the economic and political crisis throughout the country on all basic questions. Stalin and his clique feared this document so much that they refused to distribute it to members of the Central Committee who were discussing Riutin's expulsion. The Central Committee proceeded to condemn Riutin and vote against the platform without having read it.

At the same time, thousands of Trotskyists who had not capitulated remained in exile or in prison throughout the country. Among them were many prominent party members. Two choices stood before each of these oppositionists. Either they could sign a letter of capitulation and return into the fold of the bureaucracy to secure positions – or they could refuse to sign such declarations and remain languishing in prison camps or in exile in the furthest reaches of the Soviet Union.

It is interesting to note that dozens and dozens of oppositionists in exile were brought back into Moscow when the first Moscow Trial was being prepared in 1936. Not a single one of them who had refused to sign a letter of capitulation agreed to give false testimony. For that reason, they were not included in the first Moscow Trial, but were murdered during the secret pre-trial interrogations.

It is significant that in 1932 many representatives of different opposition tendencies began to discuss the need to form a united anti-Stalinist bloc to overthrow Stalin's leadership and carry out new policies.

The Riutin platform stated that by now all the previous differences which had existed in the Party paled before the new dividing line which pitted communists against each other. Either you were for the Stalinist clique and the crimes it was committing against the people, or you were for returning the party to Lenin's principles of socialism by driving out the Stalinist clique.

Ivan Smirnov, one of the former leading members of the Left Opposition who had formally capitulated and then returned to opposition activity, went on an official business trip to Berlin in 1931. He established contact with Trotsky's son Leon Sedov and began to discuss the need to coordinate efforts between Trotsky and his son in Mexico and Europe and the newly-formed opposition bloc consisting of old and new tendencies in the Soviet Union.

Although many members of these opposition tendencies were arrested at the end of 1932 and in early 1933, not a single one of them gave information about the formation of this single united anti-Stalinist bloc. Only in 1935 and 1936, when a new wave of arrests followed the murder of Kirov in December of 1934 and many people were subjected to the worst tortures, did the secret police, the GPU, find out about the existence of the united bloc from 1932. This was one of the main factors which drove Stalin to unleash the Great Terror.

When we look back now upon the Moscow Trials we can see that 90 percent of what was said by those put on trial was a fantastic conglomeration of lies. They confessed to being agents of the Gestapo, spying for foreign governments, conducting sabotage, etc. But about 10 percent of what was alleged was true. They did try to establish contact among themselves and fight for the overthrow of Stalin's clique.

The Great Terror was caused not only by Stalin's increasing fear of the growing communist opposition in the Soviet Union. It was also tied up with serious foreign policy issues. Stalin became more and more alarmed at the growing influence of Trotsky's ideas as he gathered more supporters in the movement to found the Fourth International.

Stalin signing a death warrant

Although all the official communist parties abroad remained completely subservient to the Comintern, which was in turn manipulated by Stalin, nevertheless more opposition Trotskyist groups grew up in virtually every country in support of the Fourth International.

In the archives of the Comintern one can find many documents, largely prepared for internal use, which testify to the fact that the opposition had major influence in almost every country, that often it exerted strong influence in the trade unions and the socialist parties, and that its numbers were reaching several thousand in some countries.

In Spain, where the outcome of the civil war would help determine whether there would be a second world war, there existed a powerful Marxist party, the POUM; although it broke from the Fourth International, it did carry out consistent anti-Stalinist policies. Stalin's fear that the Fourth International might increase its influence and become a threat to the Stalinised Comintern in many countries forced him to conclude that he must unleash the Great Terror. It swept away thousands of victims, not only in the Soviet Union but abroad.

We should never forget that at that time, about half the regimes in capitalist Europe were either fascist or semi-fascist totalitarian regimes. Many communists, socialists and democratic-minded people fled from these countries and sought political asylum in the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union there were tens of thousands of foreign communists and communist sympathisers, almost all of whom perished during the Great Purges.

There are many accounts of how terrible the lives of these political emigrants were in the Soviet Union, even if they came from bourgeois democratic countries. For instance, Audrey Blake, the wife of a leading Australian communist, wrote that in the 1930s all foreign information was blocked and any discussion of Trotsky's ideas was anathema.

I had a chance to meet with many surviving former communists in the United States who said that all Trotskyist literature was banned. The fear of their leaders was so great that they refused to allow them to read such material. However the consequences of the Great Terror cannot simply be measured by the murder and arrest of thousands and thousands of victims in the Soviet Union, of people extremely dedicated to the October revolution and to socialism. It goes beyond that.

When the news of the Great Terror reached the west, thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people, recoiled in horror before the ideas of socialism. Under other circumstances, they would have been prepared to take part in the communist movement, the greatest international political movement in world history. But they were repulsed by what they saw and the ideas of socialism became discredited in their eyes.

Those leaders who survived the Great Terror in the various communist parties had largely degenerated, and were bound to Stalin because they had taken part in the persecution of their own comrades.

Among those who played a very foul and ignoble role in the 1930s are those who to this very day are respected as fighters against Stalinism.

Among these is Imre Nagy, the Hungarian communist leader who played an important role in the leadership of the Hungarian uprising in 1956. Documents have emerged which show that Nagy was in the Soviet Union as a political emigrant starting in 1929. By 1930, he had become a

paid agent of the NKVD, and due to his denunciations, dozens of Hungarian, German and other communists were arrested.

Although there is no direct evidence that shows that Tito, the Yugoslav communist, was a paid agent of the NKVD, many documents show how enthusiastically he carried out the purges of the Trotskyists in the Yugoslav communist party. In Moscow alone over 800 Yugoslav communists were arrested.

In 1939 Tito returned to Yugoslavia as head of the party and demanded that the purge be continued and deepened. He entrusted this task to other communists, including Milovan Djilas.

Djilas, who became a famous dissident in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, does not mention his role in the purges in his memoirs but he does relate the following interesting incident. In 1942 at the height of World War II, an old Yugoslav communist was arrested. He had survived the 1937 purges only because he had refused to go to Moscow. He subsequently published a book called "The Balance of the Soviet Thermidor", in which he described the persecution of Yugoslav and other communists in Moscow. Djilas relates that although this man was arrested on Tito's orders and severely tortured and beaten, he refused to admit to being a foreign spy.

If we talk about the consequences of the Great Terror in the Soviet Union and abroad what we can say is that the Bolshevik type of consciousness virtually disappeared.

This type can be characterised by adherence to the ideals of socialist equality, social justice and internationalism and the refusal to allow one's high position in the party to result in privileges for oneself. It can also be characterised by a willingness to sacrifice for the cause.

If it had not been for the Great Purges it would have been very difficult for Stalin to pursue the extreme changes in political line which he carried out. The vast majority of those who fell victim in the Great Terror were raised and trained in the genuine spirit of anti-fascism. If they had remained alive, if they had not been exterminated, it would have been much more difficult for Stalin to sign the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact in 1939. And if not for that pact, World War II might not have begun in the same way.

If those who perished in the Great Terror, true internationalists, had not been killed, Stalin would have found it very difficult, if not impossible, to unleash the anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union which practically became official government policy after World War II.

A whole wave of people sometimes referred to as the new recruits or the newly chosen of 1937, began to rise to high posts in the party, economy, government and the military. They occupied leading posts of which they had never before dreamed.

The people who occupied these positions had no ties to Bolshevism and no ideological adherence to Marxism. As a result they proved to be extremely susceptible to the crudest forms of corruption which corroded the body politic in the USSR. These people remained in power in the Soviet Union for almost 50 years. And they cultivated a new generation of absolute cynics who were completely indifferent to the moral and ideological life of the nation.

The existence of such people in positions of power, directing the intellectual life of the country, helps to explain why they so easily managed to shatter the existing system over the last 10 years. First they cracked the ideological shell of society, then they destroyed it politically.

Up until now, history has shown that when there is a sharp transformation of the social structure, this change is reflected in the personnel which occupy leading positions of power. In Russia and the many republics of the former Soviet Union, however, that has not been the case. Those who head the regimes in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltics and many other former republics are those who were former members of the party nomenklatura, the old party bureaucracy and elite. To call these people Bolsheviks or Leninists is a complete mockery of the truth.

What characterises them is a complete lack of ideological principles,

coupled with a nationalist orientation which is extremely hostile to the ideals of Bolshevism.

So, although it happened decades ago, the consequences of the Great Terror are still being felt in our country and in the 15 new states which have formed in the ruins of the Soviet Union; and all of these nations are facing catastrophic conditions.



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