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- [ABOUT GUIDED HISTORY](#) • | [FOR STUDENTS](#) • | [JEWISH HISTORY](#) • | [EUROPEAN HISTORY](#) |
- [RUSSIAN HISTORY](#) • | [LAW AND RELIGION](#) • | [OTHER TOPICS](#) • | [DIGITAL ARCHIVES](#) |
- [DIGITAL HISTORY TOOLS](#) • | [OTHER RESOURCES](#) |

The Great Purge of Stalinist Russia

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Stalin and Yezhov

picture via Wikipedia

Introduction

The Great Purge, also known as the Great Terror, marks a period of extreme persecution and oppression in the Soviet Union during the late 1930s. While previous purges under Stalin involved the persecutions of kulaks (wealthy peasants), Nepmen (people who engaged in private enterprise during the New Economic Policy of the 1920s), clergymen, and former oppositionists, the Great Purge is characterized by imprisonments and executions not only of these usual suspects but of Communists leaders and party members, members of the Red Army, and the Intelligentsia in great numbers. The Great Purge instituted a new type of terror in which the boundaries of those oppressed were practically nonexistent – any stain on the record, including mere association with a perceived enemy, brought one under suspicion of the NKVD, the Soviet secret police. So-called enemies of the people were charged with treason, wrecking, espionage and more. There were strong anti-elitist attitudes and persecution against those who practiced favoritism, bullied subordinates, developed their own “cults of personality,” and inappropriately used state funds.

The Great Purge began with the assassination of Sergei Kirov, whose 1935 murder by Leonid Nikolayev is suspected to have been ordered by Stalin. Kirov, though a faithful Communist, had a certain popularity in the party that threatened Stalin’s consolidation of power. Kirov’s death triggered three important, widely publicized show trials of prominent former Bolsheviks in Moscow and ultimately fostered the climate of terror during the Great Purge. The party began purging itself of undesirables as tension and suspicion mounted rapidly. It has since been determined that Denunciation of enemies was encouraged and surveillance was tightened. Hundreds of thousands were executed or died in Gulag during this period of oppression. In the summer of 1938 Nikoli Yezhov was released as head of the NKVD as the excesses of the Purge were being realized and coming to an end, but many in Gulag were not released until the end of Stalin’s leadership.

Historical Context

Robert, Conquest. *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*. New York City: Oxford University Press, 2007.

This book updates the information supplied by Conquest’s previous *The Great Terror: Stalin’s Purge of the Thirties*, which first made comprehensive information about the Purge accessible to the public due, to new information being provided Glasnost policy in the 1980s which allowed greater freedom of information and the opening of the Soviet archives. There exists some discrepancy among historians as to the exact death toll (Conquest puts it at 20 million, which some claim is much higher than the actual number), but his work remains the most comprehensive assessment of the Great Purge to date.

Hiroaki, Kuromiya. *The Voices of the Dead: Stalin’s Great Terror in the 1930s*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

This book reconstructs the lives of some of the hundreds of thousands who were killed during Stalin’s Purge through information provided by the declassified Soviet archives. It details the lives of Vera Emel’ianovna Goroshko, who was executed for

her romantic involvement with a Polish diplomat; Sigizmund Karlovich Kvasnevskii, who despite his efforts to elude arrest by cooperating as a police informant, was tried for espionage and executed; Marina Vladislavovna Al'bova who was shot without any evidence presented against her; and many more haunting tales. Kuromiya gives faces and names to statistics, humanizing those who were tragically affected by the Purge. She opens her work with "The dead cannot speak. Can one retrieve their voices?"

Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*. New York City: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Fitzpatrick's book outlines the impact that Stalinism imposed on everyday life throughout the 1930s. The final chapter deals specifically with the Great Purge and the unique effects this oppression had on Soviet society in everyday dealings. She describes how everyday behaviors came under suspect, fostering a climate of suspicion and fear. The book is filled with excerpts from memoirs and diaries that provide a base for further research on the topic.

Charter of the Cyber-USSR, "Flattering Soviet Cartoon of N.I. Yezhov." Accessed May 2, 2013. <http://www.cyberussr.com/rus/ye-ctn.html>.

The following picture shows Nikolai Ivanovich Yezhov, head of the NKVD during much of the Great Purge, crushing a reptilian creature with three human heads and a Swastika tail, "enemies" of the Soviet Union. His period as head of the NKVD is sometimes called "Yezhovshchina," or "the Yezhov era."



"Yezhov, Gloves of Steel"

Lebedev-Kumach, Vas. Music Index for the Cyber-USSR, "Pesnya Bojcov NKVD (Song of the NKVD Fighting-men)." Accessed May 2, 2013. <http://www.cyberussr.com/rus/sg-dir.html>.

The following lyrics from an issue of *Pravda* in 1937 is an example of the propaganda the Communist party employed during the Great Purge. It glorifies the "fighting men" of the NKVD in their heroic journey to "defend our Soviet country in the Yezhov manner."

PESNYA BOJCOV NKVD

SONG OF THE NKVD FIGHTING-MEN

Nam respublika velela	The republic told us
Ne smykat' orlinyx glaz.	Not to close our eagle eyes.
My — bojcy Narkomvudela	We are the fighting men of the NKVD
Pomnim rodiny prikaz.	We remember the Motherland's command.
My ot chernoj sily vrazh'ej	We defend our country
Berezhem stranu svoyu.	from the dark power of the enemy.
Dnem i noch'yu — my na strazhe,	Day and night, we are on guard,
Dnem i noch'yu — my v boyu.	Day and night, we are in battle.
<i>Pripev:</i>	<i>Refrain:</i>
Vrag — umen, my umnej,	The enemy is smart, we are smarter,
Vrag — silen, my sil'nej,—	The enemy is strong, we are stronger,—
Ves' sovetskij narod nam pomozhet	The entire Soviet people helps us
Vrazh'i kogti srubit',	To chop the enemy's claws,
Vrazh'i zuby spilit',	To cut down the enemy's teeth,
Vrazh'i gnezda ognem unichtozhit'!	To destroy the nests of the enemy with fire!
—	
Budut slavoyu svetit'sya	The firm letters Ch.K.
Bukvy tverdye CheKa.	will shine with glory.
Znamya gordoe chekistov	A strong hand will hold
Derzhit krepkaya ruka.	The proud banner of the Chekists.
My Dzerzhinskogo zavety	We will hold Dzerzhinsky's precepts
V serdce plamennom xranim,	in our flaming heart,
My svoyu stranu Sovetov	We will defend our Soviet country
Po-ezhovski storozhim.	In the Yezhov manner.
<i>[Pripev]</i>	<i>[Refrain]</i>
—	
E^j, vragi! V lichinax novyx	Hey, enemies! You can't hide
Vam ne spryatat' zlobnyx lic,	Your malicious faces in new masks,
Ne ujti vam ot surovyx	You cannot escape from our stern
Ot ezhovyx rukavic!	Ezhov grip of steel!
Ne prolezt' polzuchim gadam	Crawling reptiles cannot slither
K serdcu rodiny tajkom, —	Stealthily to the heart of the Motherland, —
Vsex otkroet zorkim vzglyadom	Our untiring people's commissar
Nash nedremlyushchij narkom.	discovers all with a sharp-eyed glance.

*[Pripev]**[Refrain]*

—

My — zashchita millionov,	We are the defense of millions,
My — zashchita vsej strany	We are the defense of the whole country
Ot predatelej, shpionov,	From traitors, spies,
Podzhigatelej voiny.	Inciters of war.
Diversantam — net poshchady!	To saboteurs, no mercy!
Nash otryad — nepobedim, —	Our unit is unconquerable, —
Krov' po kaple, esli nado,	If necessary, we will give our blood
My narodu ot dadim!	Drop by drop to the people!

*[Pripev]**[Refrain]*

—

*[Povtorenie nachala]**[Repetition of the beginning]*

Nam respublika velela	The republic told us
Ne smykat' orlinox glaz.	Not to close our eagle eyes.
My — bojcy Narkomvnudela	We are the fighting men of the NKVD
Pomnim rodiny prikaz.	We remember the Motherland's command.
My ot chernoj sily vrazh'ej	We defend our country
Berezhem stranu svoju.	from the dark power of the enemy.
Dnem i noch'yu — my na strazhe,	Day and night, we are on guard,
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*Pripev:**Refrain:*

Vrag — umen, my umnej,	The enemy is smart, we are smarter,
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Vrazh'i gnezda ognem unichtozhit'!	To destroy the nests of the enemy with fire!

— **Vas. LEBEDEV-KUMACH.**

The Kirov Murder and the Moscow Show Trials

Lenoe, Matthew E. *The Kirov Murder and Soviet History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.

This book by historian Matthew Lenoe assembles multiple investigations and official documents of the Kirov murder, which set the Great Purge in motion. This massive assemblage reexamines Stalin's role in the famous assassination.

Conquest, Robert. *Stalin and the Kirov Murder*. New York City: Oxford University Press, 2010.

This book also by Robert Conquest, author of *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, was the first comprehensive examination of the role Stalin played in the Kirov murder. It not nearly as extensive as Lenoe's work on the subject, but it provides clear and concise information about the case and Stalin's part in the matter. It is an excellent source for basic background information on the subject.

Library of Congress, "Revelations from the Russian Archives: Repression and Terror: Kirov Murder and Purges." Last modified July 22, 2010. Accessed May 2, 2013.
<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/repk.html>.

Nikolai Bukharin, member of the Soviet politburo and Central Committee and editor-in-chief of *Pravda* newspaper was the central victim of the Moscow show trials. A former supporter of Stalin's Bukharin came to oppose the excesses of his leadership and was arrested for the murder of Kirov. The following transcript involves Bukharin defending his allegiance to the Soviet cause and his condemnation of terror.

GRIGOR'EVA-KHATUNTSEV, Nikitina
[stenographer]

...

BUKHARIN. Let me relate to you how I explained this matter. Comrade Mikoian says the following: On the most basic question, he, Bukharin, has differences of opinion with the party: In essence, he stuck to his old positions. This is untrue. In no way have I stuck to my previous positions — not on industrialization, not on collectivization, [and] not on village restructuring in general. But with regards to stimuli in agriculture, this question was not clear to me until the matter came round to the legislation on Soviet trade. I consider the entire problem, as a whole, was resolved after the introduction of laws on Soviet trade. Prior to this, this problem, very important but not all-embracing, was not clear to me. When this matter became pertinent to product turnover in [illegible] and Soviet...

[intervening pages of transcript missing]

KHATUNTSEV-VASIL'EVA, F-va
[stenographer]

I would like to make one more remark. Apparently Mikoian has said: How, then, are you not responsible, as you say, for

[illegible] this whole “school” sits? I do bear responsibility for this. But the question involves the degree of responsibility; it is a matter of the quality of this responsibility. During the process of confrontation [and cross-examination], I told Kaganovich that I am responsible for the death of Tomskii because, in 1928-29, had I not headed up groups of rightists, it is possible that Tomskii’s fate might also have been different. I bear responsibility for this fact. However, it is necessary to establish the degree and nature of this responsibility. Responsibility for what transpired with these youth over an indefinite number of years qualitatively and quantitatively differs from, let’s say, the responsibility of a person who orders another person to do something and that person carries out the order. I am not shifting responsibility from myself; more than anyone else, I accept the gravity of this responsibility. However, I would like to say that the measure of responsibility, the characterization of this responsibility, is absolutely specific in nature, and it should be expressed as I have expressed it here.

[intervening pages of transcript missing]

[...] two people? This is an obvious lie. How could Kulikov offer two versions in answer to this absolutely and exceptionally terrible question? How could Sokol’nikov advance two ideas at the same time?

(VOICE: Rozit, Slepkov, and others mention this).

BUKHARIN: In what regard about this? If one speaks “generally” in this way, nothing at all is said: It is the same as when a student is asked where Moscow is on the map, and he immediately covers the whole map with the palm of his hand.

Regarding the Riutinskii platform. It was presented by Ezhov as one of the top-priority issues requiring deliberation. This is very understandable from the point of view of constructing an indictment. The Riutinskii platform (if you could prove that I have any connection to it) would be a real treasure, because of its concern with the most crucial moments in the struggle with Soviet power, its concern with terror, and [illegible], etc., etc. I studied the vast number of pages of [material?] especially from the angle of the Riutinskii platform. Nonetheless, I feel that it is necessary here to look closely at this matter which, after all, is in testimony. Astrov testifies that the authors were Rykov [...]

[intervening pages of transcript missing]

[...] Errio did not see; it is even there, they say, that I maintained contact with Skrypnik (for a right-wing deviation, I would have to be linked to the positions of Skrypnik); it has been established, they say, that I stand for a democratic republic and,

at the same time, it is known that I spoke about it, let's say, at an assembly, and a whole series of other things. I cannot answer all these questions separately, since it would require too much time, so I'll take only the fundamental ones.

I'd like to say a few words about terror. Comrades, the question of membership in the party seems to me simply to be naive: if a person takes the terrorist point of view against the leadership of the party, then the question as to whether he may be a party member is a naive question.

I have absolutely no relationship with terror, not by a single word or thought. When I hear these things, it seems to me that the conversation concerns other people; perhaps I am sitting here and hearing about another person. I do not understand how I can be charged with such an accusation; to me this is absolutely incomprehensible [and] I look on this as "a sheep looking at new gates" [i.e., I feel totally lost in foreign territory].

POZERN: These are not "new gates"—that's the problem.

BUKHARIN: To your way of thinking, perhaps they are not new gates, but then I'm not a sheep either. [intervening pages of transcript missing]

*ALTAEVA-PRIGORNAIA, Petrakova.
[stenographer]*

STALIN: You should not and do not have the right to slander yourself. This is a most criminal thing.

MOLOTOV: That which you have stated concerning the famine is simply an anti-Soviet thing.

VOICES FROM THE ROOM: A counterrevolutionary thing!

STALIN: You must come around to our position. Trotskii with his disciples, Zinov'ev and Kamenev, at one time worked with Lenin, and now these people have negotiated an agreement with Hitler. After this, can we label such things as shocking? Absolutely not. After everything that has happened to these gentlemen, former comrades, who have negotiated an agreement with Hitler, a sellout of the USSR, there is nothing surprising in human affairs. Everything has to be proven and not [just] replied to using exclamation points and question marks.

MOLOTOV: And anti-Soviet matters should not be engaged in.

MOLOTOV: Let us call a recess, comrades.

“Footage from Infamous Moscow show trial ” Posted June 28 2009.

Web, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFB9G1HINXI&feature=player_detailpage)

[v=nFB9G1HINXI&feature=player_detailpage](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFB9G1HINXI&feature=player_detailpage).

The following clip shows footage from one of the Moscow trials, including the indictment and public reaction to the convictions. Head prosecutor Andrey Vyshinsky references a “fifth column” of enemies, traitors, and spies that seek to undermine the Soviet Union and that must be crushed. He says, “let the verdict be heard like thunder, like a fresh, purifying thunder storm of Soviet justice.”



Life in Gulag

**“Prisoners at Work.” Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives, Item #33
(accessed May 02 2013)**

The following picture shows a normal day of labor in the Soviet Gulag.



Prisoners at Work

Alexei Andreevich Merekov, "Frost." Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives, Item #215 (accessed May 02 2013)

The following was painted at a Gulag camp in Kolyma. It represents the harsh living conditions of the prisoners during brutal Russian winters.



“Frost”

“A group of soldiers of Primorskaia army in the fights at Lake Chasan, Mongolia. 1938.” Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives, (accessed May 02 2013)

The following 1938 picture shows a group of soldiers stanced for execution.



"Soldiers Taking Aim"

Solzhenitsyn, Alexander. *The Gulag Archipelago*. New York City: Basic Books, 1997.

This book written by a Gulag survivor is a three volume assemblage of the terrors of life in Gulag based on the personal testimonies of survivors. The reference to an archipelago in the title compares the camps with a chain of islands, distant and unknown to those who have never been. Solzhenitsyn attempts to bridge the gap of understanding through his portrayal of Gulag camp life. *The Gulag Archipelago* shocked the Western world with its vivid portrayal of the injustices of Gulag. Upon the publication of the first volume, Solzhenitsyn was arrested for treason and exiled from the Soviet Union.

Applebaum, Anne. *Gulag: A History*. New York City: First Anchor Books, 2004.

In her work, Applebaum outlines the entire history of Russian Gulag from its conception during the Russian Revolution of 1917 under Lenin and expanded under Stalin to its demise after the Glasnost period. Applebaum outlines Gulag camps as an economic and political institution, but also gives more personal accounts of the lives of prisoners and the way the camps influenced their everyday relations and behaviors.

Kerber, L.L. *Stalin's Aviation Gulag: A Memoir of Andrei Tupolev and the Purge Era*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996.

Kerber's memoir of his experiences with Andrei Tupolev tells one of the more bizarre stories of Soviet Gulag. Tupolev, head developer of Soviet aviation and aircraft design, was arrested and imprisoned in 1937. However, Tupolev was not held in a normal Gulag; he was held with many other aviation engineers in a special prison known as a sharaga and ordered to continue his work under the watchful eye of the NKVD. Kerber describes daily life in the strange institution of sharaga.

Literature

Trifonov, Iueii. *House on the Embankment* . Unknown, 1983.

“House on the embankment” was the name of a Russian compound that housed many of Stalin’s elite and was situated across from the Moscow Kremlin. In this novel, Trifonov details through two different narrators the lives of various residents, who come and go as arrests of prominent Communists become a major feature of the Purge. Trifonov actually lived in the house on the embankment as a child. His father was executed and his mother spent eight years in Gulag.

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