The Purges

There is no single explanation for the Purges. The argument is that Stalin was a totalitarian dictator who was the main planner and architect behind the purges. The structuralist school on the other hand believe that the situation was a consequence of Bolshevik theory. One key piece of evidence in favour of this is the Pravda article “dizzy with success” which suggests that the purges spiralled out of Stalin’s control.

Stalin and the Bolsheviks used terror as a method of securing political control in communist Russia. This was after Lenin had deceased when all the front men in the party had fought it out to become the authoritarian ruler. Stalin had won the battle and he used terror to secure his position as leader. Their use of terror to gain control was clear in a period called the purges, where thousands of people from the public, army and party where murdered to enforce Stalin’s position as leader of Russia. Stalin set the NKVD to carry out these purges, also known as the “great terror”, and the power of the NKVD was led by three people over the course of Stalin’s reign; Yagoda, Yezhov and Beria.

One cause of Stalin’s Great Terror was terror economics. For example, Stalin wanted to deflect blame for the failures of the 5 Year Plans, therefore the Great Terror would allow him to blame others for supposedly sabotaging his “perfect plans.” He also wanted to get rid of his enemies; Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev and saw this as an opportunity to blame these for economic failings. Finally, those accused of ‘wrecking’ the 5 Year Plans could be used as cheap slave labour for building projects such as Magnitogorsk. This shows how terror economics led to the Great Terror because Stalin could use it as an excuse to divert blame for failings of the 5 Year Plans and achieve his economic aims.

Another cause of Stalin’s Great Terror was paranoia. It is certain that Stalin was suspicious and showed signs of paranoia. The Purges then became almost inevitable as a man of Stalin’s nature assumed power, as he distrusted almost everyone and genuinely feared a plot against him. However, once the Purges had begun, the effect just continued and became bigger, as each person feared for their own lives, they tried to save themselves by denouncing others. Just as Stalin’s nature led to the Purges, growing from Bolshevism, Yezhov’s nature led to the Yezhovschina growing from the Purges. Stalin did not initiate the Purges because of a desire to make economic scapegoats or unify the country in foreign policy opinion, but whilst the Purge occurred he seized these opportunities. Had it not been for Stalin’s paranoia the Purges would never have occurred.