The Great Terror

And the reign of Stalin
Key Concepts

- **Terror**: use of fear either to control the population or to keep opponents quiet.

- **Great Purges**: term used to describe the wave of terror which Stalin used to remove enemies.

- **Show Trials**: Public trials of leading enemies of the state. Proceedings were filmed so as to be used as propaganda.

- **Enemy of the People**: The term used to describe those who were victims of the purges.
Key Concepts

- **Yezhovschina**: The most violent stage of the purges from 1936-1938, named after Yezhov- the head of the NKVD at the time.

- **Gulag**: Labour camps in the Soviet Union run by the secret police.

- **Left Opposition**: Those who supported the call for ‘Permanent Revolution’ and wanted to abandon the NEP (Trotsky, Kamenev, Zinoviev)

- **Right Opposition**: those who wanted to keep the NEP and criticised the Five Year Plans (Bukharin)
The Purges

- Use of terror became a central part of the soviet regime during the 1930s.

- A series of show trials were held which saw former leaders accused and then executed.

- By early 1930s there was an extensive state machinery of terror.

- There was a Party Secretariat that collected information on citizen/officials and a secret police known as the OGPU until 1934 (NKVD thereafter) who ran the labour camps.

- Therefore an apparatus was in place for dealing with opposition when it arose.
The Purges

- Trigger of the purges: murder of Kirov in 1934.
- Opposition to Stalin’s policies had started to grow with the launch of the first Five Year Plan and collectivisation in 1928.
- Although majority of the right wing had been demoted/ dismissed in 1929, many still believed and began to verbalise that conflict with peasantry should be avoided (especially with unrest starting in 1932)
- Kirov put forward the idea of a more conciliatory approach in the Politburo- this posed a threat to Stalin’s policies.
The Purges

- Stalin mistrusted Kirov, due to his popularity and due to his position as Party leader in Leningrad, Kirov’s powerbase was the former centre of opposition that had supported Zinoviev.

- This likely why Stalin orders the death of Kirov.

- The official explanation was that Kirov was murdered by an assassin who was a member of an opposition group led by Kamenev and Zinoviev.

- As a result of this both Zinoviev and Kamenev were arrested, brought to trial and were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.
Purge of the Left

- During 1935 and 1936 there was a wave of denunciations and arrests of members of the Left.

- Show trials were a prominent feature of the period.

- NKVD forces false confessions leading to the individual’s demise as well as forcing the incrimination of other party members, despite the impossibility of their involvement in accused crimes.

- Tomsky, Bukharin and Rykov all suffer this same fate.
Purge of Party Officials

- In 1937 the purges see a change in emphases as show trials dealt with accusations of wrecking and sabotage in industry.

- Party officials Radek and Pyatakov were accused of working for Trotsky and foreign governments to undermine the Soviet economy.

- Their real crime was probably criticising the Five Year Plans or for having referred to errors in economic policy (Pyatakov).
By 1938 the machinery of terror was ready to strike against former leaders of the Right.

Tomsky had committed suicide before being brought to trial, but Bukharin and Rykov were accused of forming a ‘Trotskyite-Rightist Bloc’ crime to which they both confessed.

There was no evidence to support this, however, there was evidence to suggest that the Right had expressed opposition to the Plans.

Bukharin had written an article ‘Notes of an Economist’, which made clear his criticisms of Stalin’s economic policy.
Purge of the Red Army

- Red Army also faces a purge of personnel
  - 3/5 marshals
  - 14/16 army commanders
  - 37,000 officers
  - All naval admirals

- Reason for this was due to ‘links with foreign countries’, though most likely was due to an opposition to collectivisation.

- Peasantry made up most of the rank/file members were experiencing discontent due to collectivisation.
Purge of Secret Police

- With the purges, the amount of work generated for the secret police grew, as did their influence.
- To ensure they posed no threat to Stalin, they themselves were purged.
- In 1938 Yagoda (head of NKVD) was shot, he was replaced by Yezhov (AKA Bloody Dwarf) oversaw the most excessive phase of the purges 1936-38
- In the first 6 months, Yezhov had purged 3000 of his own personnel
- The ‘Yezhovschina’ came to an end when Yezhov himself was dismissed in 1938, his arrest in 1939 was partly due to Stalin’s need for a scapegoat for the excesses of the purges which were coming to an end.
Purge of Secret Police

- Although the higher levels of the party suffered most, there were purges at the local levels too.
- Kulaks, bourgeois experts and Nepmen were all considered class enemies.
- Children turned in family members with ‘capitalist tendencies’
- It is only since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the opening of archives that the true scale of the purges can be assessed.
NKVD Archives

- A rise in Gulags of 500,000 detainees in the period between 1937-39
- 2/3 of the 1.3 million inmates in 1939 were either political criminals or socially harmful.
- At least 250,000 people executed, rather than sent to camps.
Stalin and the Purges

- Stalin’s enemies saw the purges as evidence of his paranoid tendencies.
- He mistrusted everyone— even his own family!
- To Trotsky, the purges were evidence of Stalin’s betrayal of the revolution and his creation of a personal dictatorship.
Viewing:

- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azijw3LttUU