

Case Study: Show Trials

The situation:

- The Purges/ the Great Terror was currently underway as Stalin was paranoid about opposition
- Excuse for it: assassination of **Kirov**, a popular party member who received more votes than Stalin at a party congress – his death probably ordered by Stalin
- NKVD arrested millions of Russians, mostly innocent
- Informers everywhere – children spied on parents
- Old Bolsheviks targeted most viciously, along with provincial party leaders, members of minorities, industrial managers, former industrialists, religious people
- Majority of people went to Gulags
 - 476 camp complexes, most famous was Kolyma – huge, over 100 camps
 - Used prisoners as slave labour to build public work schemes
 - Huge death toll – estimated between 15 – 30 million
 - Not clear as information was hidden

Purpose of trials:

- They were trials of former high-ranking Communists – ‘Old Bolsheviks’
- Used as propaganda
- Used to establish complete domination and eliminate any threats
- Used as scapegoats for failures during the Five-Year Plans

General format of trials:

1. Defendants accused of ridiculous crimes
 2. Confessed guilt and found guilty – verdicts decided before trial
 3. Proceedings publicised internationally and nationally
 4. Majority were shot
- Lawyer was **Vyshinsky** – vain, witty, intelligent, and completely obedient (ex-Menshevik)

First Show Trial – The Trial of the Sixteen (Kamenev and Zinoviev)

- Kamenev, Zinoviev, and 14 other leading Bolsheviks put on trial
- Interrogated by NKVD before trial to produce required confessions
- Wore old, ill-fitting clothes and were guarded by armed NKVD
- Many foreign journalists and diplomats present
- Accused of:
 - Taking part in conspiracy organised by **Trotsky**
 - Killing Kirov
 - Attempting to kill Stalin
 - One defendant confessed to being involved in Kirov’s murder while he was in prison
 - The accused named other Bolsheviks in their evidence
- Verdict:
 - Vyshinsky dramatically called for death penalty
 - Death had been pre-decided, and defendants said they deserved it
 - All 16 were shot soon after and their property confiscated

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- Soviet newspapers applauded it and encouraged further purges
- Reaction in the West:
 - Many people were doubtful of the trials, including British
 - US and other diplomats approved of the trials and said they were legitimate
 - Communist parties in Europe attacked any criticism of the trials, seeing them as a step forward for communism
- Mention why they may have confessed – torture, families threatened

Second Show Trial – Trial of the Seventeen

- Pyatakov and Radek most prominent, the rest were leading figures in industrialisation drive
- Charges and confessions:
 - All defendants very eager to confess
 - Conspiring with anti-Soviet Trotskyites
 - Spying for Nazi Germany and Japan
 - Some defendants Jewish
 - Confessed to ordering assassinations at a hotel that had already been demolished
- Radek imprisoned (where he died soon after), most others shot

Third Show Trial – Trial of the 21

- Bukharin, **Krestinsky**, Rykov, **Yagoda** (former chief of NKVD)
- Accusations:
 - Murdering Kirov
 - Unsuccessfully trying to assassinate Lenin two decades previously
 - Plotting to assassinate Stalin and other Bolshevik leaders
 - Conspiring to wreck the economy and country's military power
 - Spying for Britain, France, Japan, Germany
 - Ex-Commissar for Agriculture and head of collectives blamed for failure of collectivisation
- Krestinsky initially said he was not guilty, but after a night with the NKVD he changed his mind completely
- Most confessed, all shot bar 3 minor figures

Purge of Red Army:

- Between 2nd and 3rd show trials, Stalin purged the military to remove any officers whose loyalty was in doubt to avoid military takeover
- 50% of officers shot – most leadership in the army was now gone
- Army was now left considerably weaker

Overall Results:

- Only 2 left of original 15-man Bolshevik gov – Stalin and Trotsky
- Stalin was absolute ruler and there was now an atmosphere of terror throughout USSR
- Warning to party members that they could be targeted, reminder to citizens that traitors were everywhere