New Economic Policy (NEP)—A program spearheaded by Vladimir Lenin that allowed limited market activity. The program, observed in the 1920s, is often associated with a period of relative freedom and cultural experimentation in the Soviet Union. Stalin put an end to NEP in 1928, even though Lenin had predicted that it would have to last much longer.

Gulag—The name given to the network of prisons and work camps throughout the Soviet Union where criminals and political prisoners were sent. In Russian, GULAG is an acronym that stands for “Main Camp Administration.”

NKVD—The Soviet secret police from 1934-1946. It was largely responsible for carrying out the purges and repressions of the 1930s. The NKVD replaced the Cheka and was followed by the KGB.

After consolidating power in the late 1920s, Joseph Stalin began implementing sweeping policy changes in the Soviet Union. In the 1930s Stalin began jailing political enemies en masse and carrying out a campaign of terror against certain Soviet citizens deemed enemies of the party. Known as the “Great Terror” or the “Great Purge,” the Soviet secret police arrested millions of people, including government officials, scientists, artists, and writers. Hundreds of thousands were executed or died while in labor camps throughout the country in the purges of 1936-1938.

STALIN TIGHTENS HIS GRIP ON THE SOVIET UNION

The 1920s were remembered as a time of relative freedom and experimentation in the newly formed USSR. Vladimir Lenin’s New Economic Policy, a retreat from orthodox Marxism, allowed a degree of private trade, and artists and writers flourished in the country’s major cities. NEP was meant as a temporary measure to revive the economy after the devastation of the Russian Civil War and failed attempts at collectivization.

As Lenin’s health declined, the Soviet leadership began to split into factions, with members of the Politburo jockeying to become Lenin’s successor. Following his death in 1924, the founders of the Soviet Union formed competing alliances due to disagreements over Lenin’s New Economic Policy and other leadership questions. Through shrewd deal-making, Joseph Stalin emerged the strongest central figure in the power struggle over the Communist Party, sideling other potential successors such as Leon Trotsky. By 1927 Stalin was firmly in control of the party.

Upon becoming the clear leader of the USSR, Stalin began installing loyalists to leadership positions and expelling opponents, including many of Lenin’s former allies. Leon Trotsky, once the second-most important theorist of Soviet dogma after Lenin, was exiled to Central Asia in 1928 and then forced to leave the USSR in 1929. He was assassinated in 1940.

Stalin began reversing Lenin’s New Economic Policy and forcibly collectivizing farms throughout the country, leading to a devastating famine in 1932-1933. He also further tightened restrictions on freedom of expression and implemented a more conservative social policy.

Stalin was known for demonizing anyone he saw as a threat, labeling them Trotskyites and counter-revolutionaries. Thousands were expelled from the Communist Party in the early 1930s. In 1936, however, expulsions accelerated, and perceived opponents were no longer simply ejected from the party but were also arrested and in many cases executed.
THE GREAT PURGE—1936-1938

In December 1934 Sergei Kirov, a high-ranking member of the Communist Party, was assassinated in Leningrad. His murder was likely orchestrated by the NKVD at the orders of Stalin, who used the event as a pretext for implementing a number of repressive laws and launching a massive investigation to identify so-called “saboteurs” and “enemies of the people” throughout the party.

In 1936 a series of show trials was held in Moscow. Prominent founders of the Soviet Union and leading members of the Communist Party were convicted of counter-revolutionary activity and executed. The show trials launched a frenzy of arrests, during which hundreds of thousands of people—government officials, party bosses, and members of the military leadership—were detained and executed or sent to forced-labor camps.

More than a third of Communist Party members died during the purges. More than half of the Central Committee was killed. Eighty-one of 103 of the highest-ranking military leaders were executed, a process that crippled the Soviet Union’s ability to defend against Nazi soldiers when Germany invaded in 1941.

Ordinary citizens were affected as well. As the terror spread across society, people were coerced into denouncing their friends, coworkers, and even family members in an attempt to save themselves. Those arrested were often tortured and forced to sign documents confessing to extraordinary crimes and conspiracies. They were labeled enemies of the people and sentenced to death or hard labor.

Millions were sent to prison camps between 1936 and 1938. Many of the camps were located in the far reaches of Siberia or the Russian Far East, where conditions were extreme. Hundreds of thousands died while in Gulag prisons.

The purge strongly affected the USSR’s intelligentsia—academics, artists, musicians, writers, and scientists. Many of the country’s famous writers and artists were arrested and killed, even those who had supported the Bolshevik Revolution. In 1938, near the end of the purge’s most intense period, the head of the NKVD, Nikolai Yezhov, was himself arrested and executed.

Intelligentsia—Refers to a class of society that was well educated and usually employed in non-physical labor. Artists, writers, academics, teachers, and others in professions that engaged culture and politics were generally considered part of the intelligentsia. The Great Purge heavily affected the Soviet intelligentsia and changed the cultural landscape.

Number of Victims—It is unknown exactly how many people fell victim to Stalin’s purges. Estimates of those who died range from 600,000 to 3 million. According to official records, more than 1.5 million people were arrested and nearly 700,000 were shot. However, historians note that Soviet records are unreliable.


Nikolai Yezhov—The head of the NKVD from 1936 to 1938. Yezhov oversaw Stalin’s purges. The period is sometimes referred to as the Yezhovshchina. Yezhov became a victim of the purges when he was dismissed in 1938 and accused of anti-Soviet activity. He was executed in 1940.

More resources for educators are available on the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies website.

QUICK FACTS

USEFUL LINKS
CIA World Factbook:
BBC Country Page:
National Geographic:
Kyiv Post English
Why did Stalin decide to launch the Great Purge? What did he hope to accomplish?

How did the purge affect Soviet society? Discuss the short-term and long-term effects of the Great Purge.

Why was Stalin able to consolidate power? How was he able to carry out the massive campaign of repressions during the 1930s?

What is the legacy of Stalin in the former Soviet Union today? Discuss how Soviet citizens and citizens of those countries today view Stalin’s rule.

DE-STALINIZATION AND REHABILITATIONS

The policy of mass execution largely ended by late 1938, but political arrests and repressions continued until Stalin’s death in 1953. Millions remained in prison, and family members were often unable to find out whether their imprisoned relatives were alive. Many were informed that their loved ones had been sentenced to 10 years without the right of correspondence, although many had actually been killed.

Nikita Khrushchev, who came to power in the 1950s following Stalin’s death, reversed many of the most repressive policies. During a secret speech to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Congress in 1956, Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s purges and his cult of personality. He then began a process of “de-Stalinization” and many Gulag prisoners were slowly released.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, many victims of the purges were “rehabilitated,” a process that meant that the former prisoners were allowed to reclaim their lives and status. However, many were rehabilitated posthumously, since they had been executed during the purges.

Some prominent figures, such as Leon Trotsky, were never rehabilitated. Others were granted amnesty but not rehabilitation.

Conditions at the prisons were largely unknown to the outside world and to those who were unaffected by the purges. Word spread of the brutal conditions when accounts began appearing in the underground press, known as samizdat. One such work, The Gulag Archipelago, written by former prisoner and dissident writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, became an influential book abroad for its graphic account and circulated in the underground literary scene of the Soviet Union for decades.

Nikita Khrushchev denounced the purge and began a process of de-Stalinization in the 1950s.

DISCUSSION IDEAS

Why did Stalin decide to launch the Great Purge? What did he hope to accomplish?

How did the purge affect Soviet society? Discuss the short-term and long-term effects of the Great Purge.

Why was Stalin able to consolidate power? How was he able to carry out the massive campaign of repressions during the 1930s?

What is the legacy of Stalin in the former Soviet Union today? Discuss how Soviet citizens and citizens of those countries today view Stalin’s rule.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


“Eternal Memory: Voices from the Great Terror.” — 1997 documentary.

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CIA World Factbook:

BBC Country Page:

National Geographic:

Kyiv Post English

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