**SOURCE 1 – R. Conquest, The Great Terror: A Reassessment, 1990, pp. 69-70**

The one fundamental drive that can be found throughout is the strengthening of his own position. To this, for practical purposes, all else was subordinate. It led him to absolute power...

He carried out a revolution which completely transformed the Party and the whole of society. Far more than the Bolshevik Revolution itself, this period marks the major gulf between modern Russia and the past... It is true that only against the peculiar background of the Soviet past, and the extraordinary traditions of the All-Union Communist Party, could so radical a turn be put through. The totalitarian machinery, already in existence, was the fulcrum without which the world could not be moved. But the revolution of the Purges still remains, however we judge it, above all Stalin’s personal achievement.


Western scholars have remained hypnotised by Stalin’s cult of personality, and their obsession with him has led to studies of the Great Purges period that provide no detailed investigation of the political and institutional context. Rather than placing these events in these contexts, scholars have often discussed the Great Purges only against the background of Stalin’s personality and categorised Stalinism simply as the undisputed rule of an omniscient [all-knowing] and omnipotent [all-powerful] dictator. Contradictions and confusion are seen as manifestations of Stalin’s caprice, and too often the political history of the Stalin period has merely been the story of Stalin’s supposed activities.


No doubt there were rivalries and conflicts within the apparatus, and it is certainly useful to try to examine the relationships between elements of the apparatus and segments of society. But how can one avoid the conclusion that it was Stalin’s decision to purge the party and society of what he regarded as suspect and unstable elements – even if one can accept that orders might have been distorted by [those who carried them out]? One is struck by the number of references to arrest plans, which zealous locals sought to fulfil or overfulfil. However, the whole process was set in motion from the top, and we do have the known telegram sent by Stalin and Zhdanov demanding the appointment of Yezhov to replace the apparently too lenient Yagoda.


In this way, the economic problems of 1936-41 and the Great Purges appear to be inexorably linked. The industrial slowdown, which set in at a time when the USSR could least afford it, when a two-front war without allies seemed to be the Soviets’ inevitable fate, shaped the course of the Great Purges at least as much, if not more so, as the terror in turn influenced the operation of the economy. When plans went awry, when deprivations, instead of disappearing, became more severe, when promised improvements in food supply did not materialise, the subconscious temptation to seek scapegoats became irresistible.

**SOURCE 5 – S. Cohen, quoted in Thames TV documentary Stalin, 1990**

Ultimately you cannot explain the great terror against the Party without focusing on Stalin’s personality. For some reason Stalin had a need to rid himself of the old Bolshevik Party, the Party that remembered everything of Bolshevik history and knew in its heart of hearts that Stalin was not the Lenin of today. He had to rid himself of this party and he did. By the end of the thirties, it was a completely different party demographically, most of its members had joined since 1929. The older league had gone, there were a few tokens left but almost to a man/woman they were dead.

But why did Stalin need the abominable spectacle [in 1936]? It has been suggested that he sent the men of the old guard to their deaths as scapegoats for his economic failures. There is a grain of truth in this but no more. For one thing, there was a very marked improvement in the economic conditions of the country in the years of the trials. He certainly had no need for so many scapegoats; and, if he had needed them, penal servitude would have been enough – Stalin’s real and much wider motive was to destroy the men who represented the potentiality of alternative government.

The question that must now be answered is why he set out to reach this objective in 1936? Considerations of domestic policy can hardly explain his timing. Widespread though popular dissatisfaction may have been, it was too amorphous [lacking focus] to constitute any immediate threat to his position. The opposition was pulverised, downtrodden, incapable of action. Only some sudden shock… involving the whole machine of power might have enabled it to rally its scattered and disheartened troops. A danger of that kind was just then taking shape; and it threatened from abroad. The first of the great show trials, that of Zinoviev and Kamenev, took place a few months after Hitler’s army had marched into the Rhineland...

…In the supreme crisis of war, the leaders of opposition, if they had been alive, might indeed have been drive to action by a conviction, right or wrong, that Stalin’s conduct of the war was incompetent and ruinous. At an earlier stage they might have been opposed to his deal with Hitler… It is possible they would have then attempted to overthrow Stalin. Stalin was determined not to allow things to come to this... It is not necessary to assume that he acted from sheer cruelty or lust for power. He may be given the dubious credit of the sincere conviction that what he did served the interests of the revolution and that he alone interpreted those interests aright...


I have already suggested the two most important features of Stalin's psychology. The first was his narcissistic personality, characterised by his total self absorption… and his conviction that he was a genius marked out to play a unique historical role. The second was the paranoid tendency which led him to picture himself as a great man facing a hostile world peopled with jealous and treacherous enemies engaged in a conspiracy to pull him down, if he did not strike and destroy them first...

Throughout his life Stalin had a psychological need to confirm and reassure himself about both those beliefs – about his historical mission and about the truth of the picture he had formed of himself in relation to the external world... The same obsession which had provided the drive to defeat his rivals and match Lenin’s revolution with his own now nerved him to outdo his predecessor by freeing himself from the constraints of the party and becoming the sole ruler of the Soviet state.

Even more striking is the coincidence between Stalin’s second psychological need... and his political aim, in the years 1934-9, to destroy the original Bolshevik Party created by Lenin and replace it with a new one, maintaining a façade of continuity but in fact remaking it in his own image.


The Great Terror would not have taken place but for Stalin’s personality and ideas. He it was who directed the state’s punitive machinery against all those whom he identified as ‘anti-Soviet elements’ and ‘enemies of the people’. Among his purposes was a desire to use his victims as scapegoats for the country’s pain; and in order to sustain his mode of industrialisation he also needed to keep his mines, timber forests and construction sites constantly supplied with slave labour. It was probably also his intention to take pre-emptive measures against any ‘fifth column’ [internal dissidents] operating against him in the case of war. These considerations, furthermore, fitted into a larger scheme to build an efficient Soviet state subservient to his personal dictatorship – and to secure the state’s total control over society. Such was the guiding rationale of the Great Terrorist.
In spite of some misreadings and misunderstandings of earlier work, Stalin’s guilt for the terror was never in question. We can now see his fingermarks all over the archives. Although he approved suggestions and draft documents from others as often as he launched his own initiatives, he played the leading role in the terror. But even with the new documents, the role remains problematic and hard to specify... Stalin worked assiduously toward the goal of enhancing his power and centralising authority in Moscow... But even in Stalin’s office, there were too many twists and turns, too many false starts and subsequent embarrassing backtrackings to support the idea that the terror was the culmination of a well-prepared and long-standing master design. Stalin was not sure exactly what kind of repression he wanted or how to get it until rather late in the story. He seems not to have decided on wholesale massacre until early in 1937.