

The Great Terror: Possible Theories and Explanations

What motivated the Terror?

1. Stalin's megalomania and paranoia
 - a. fed by Ryutin platform (see Sakwa, 199-200)
 - b. Kirov's popularity
2. Economic expediency and rationality
 - a. how to obtain gold and other raw materials from difficult-to-access locations
3. Political necessities
 - a. fear of war and Third Column spies within Russia
 - b. belief in reeducation through work and hard labor
4. Chaos theories
 - a. people denounced other people in an increasing spiral violence
 - b. vendettas and lack of control over little Stalins

Why Did the Party and People Submit?

1. Cult of the leader – blind following of Stalin
2. Cult of the party – the party must be right
 - a. we must follow the party because the party is on the side of History
3. Culture of blame built into the Revolution
 - a. voluntarism -> fear of wrecking
 - b. who is guilty?
 - c. powerful role of propaganda among an uneducated population
4. Culture of force and militancy from the Civil War and from the underground before 1917
 - a. Stalin on Bolsheviks (see readings in Sakwa)
 - b. peasant willingness to use force against "others"/outsiders (though not against one's own)
 - c. poverty and zero-sum mentality: if I denounce you, I can get your apartment
5. Culture of passivity in Russian history; absence of political experience
6. Absence of restraining systems
 - a. no free press, no adequate legal defense
 - b. Terror as an auto-immune disease
7. Fear and terror
 - a. atomization and fear of authorities; defenselessness
 - b. anonymity in the cities



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Leaders of the NKVD 1934-1941
(from the [Memorial Society](#) Webpage)

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