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Death and Vengeance Behind Every Corner: The Great Purge and the Psychology of Joseph Stalin

Under Joseph Stalin's rule of the Soviet Union, the Purges, or "repressions" as they are now known in Russia, led to the direct and indirect deaths of an estimated twenty million people through starvation, executions, and forced labor camps. As the uncontested dictator of the Soviet Union for nearly twenty-five years, Stalin made no attempt to gain popular support among his nation but enforced his interpretation of communist-socialist rule by means of unremitting oppression and terror. Why did he utilize such vindictive measures? Was it his absolute aversion to any authority and ruthless insistence on total control at all times? This paper explores Stalin's mental state through his personal documents, political actions, and psychological indicators throughout his life. The Purges concluded when Stalin died, demonstrating that he was the key to the violence, not an inherent product of the circumstances or historical repetition, and that his clinically-unwell mind may have instead been the culprit.

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The Great Purge and the Psychology of Joseph Stalin

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PSU Challenge Modern European History

St. Mary's Academy

3 April 2023

"A neurosis-driven person can indeed rise up to the top of a political system, even a well-defined and heavily bureaucratized system. People with some afflictions even seem to thrive there."[1] Iosif (Joseph) Vissarionovich Ozhugashvili Stalin[2] was originally a Bolshevik Revolutionary and later became the second leader of the Soviet Union. His rise to power occurred quickly, rising from general secretary after the 1917 October Revolution to the most powerful man in the Communist Party. Under his rule, the Purges, or "repressions" as they are now known in Russia, led to the direct and indirect deaths of an estimated, though widely debated, twenty million people.[3] The Purges began in 1924, when Stalin used the murder of a party leader as pretext to launch a state-organized bloodshed due to a supposed threat. It began as a bloody retribution against the defeated political opposition, the Bolsheviks, but became a self-induced disease within the people of the Soviet Union.[4] Stalin's exact motives are highly debated, but his actions are well-recorded. Stalin claimed that he had discovered a dangerous conspiracy of anti-Stalin communists and began killing or imprisoning any suspected party dissenters. However, the majority of Stalin's targets during the purge were civilians, military officers, and anyone that he happened to view as a threat to his political control.

Many political studies of Stalin's motives concur that his violence and destruction was simply following the course of Soviet history, but psychology and anthropology researchers disagree.[5] Stalin's identity was so closely linked to the U.S.S.R. that he considered an enemy of

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[1] Raymond Birt, "Personality and Foreign Policy: The Case of Stalin," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (December 1993): 622, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3791377.
[2] Stalin (Ста́лин): loosely translates to "man of steel," was one of his many self-chosen epithets, most commonly-used name to address him now
[3] John Arch Getty, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–1939*. (New Haven, CT: *Yale University Press*, 2010), 243.
[4] James von Geldern, "The Great Terror," *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, 2002, https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1936-2/the-great-terror/.
[5] John Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 3.

the state to be his own personal enemy, deserving of the most brutal punishment.[6] Stalin's actions were not just those of a passionate dictator; they were the actions of a deranged and uncompassionate person. The Purges concluded when Stalin died, demonstrating that he was the key to the violence, not an inherent product of the circumstances or historical repetition, and that his clinically-unwell mind may have instead been the culprit, as demonstrated by both political actions and psychological indicators.

On November 7, 1917, members of the Bolshevik political party seized power in the capital of Russia, Petrograd (now St. Petersburg), which ultimately led to a Bolshevik victory in the Russian Civil War that followed. The Soviet Union was established in 1922, signaling the end of the tsarist government and start of the republic. The communist policies of the Bolshevik Party, led by charismatic lawyer, Vladimir Lenin, appealed to the majority: working class Russians.[7] Stalin's practical experience made him useful in Lenin's Bolshevik Party leading up to the 1917 October Revolution, though he played no direct part.[8]

Stalin ascended party ranks from an unmotivating revolutionary speaker, to a protest leader, to the general secretary of the Communist party. He ended as Lenin's right-hand-man, and soon became the most powerful man in the Soviet Union. When Lenin, leader of the Soviet Union, died in 1924 under questionable circumstances, Stalin fought for succession and declared himself dictator in 1929.[9] Some members of the former Bolshevik party questioned his authority, leading to diversified interests amongst Soviet leaders. By the mid-1930s, Stalin believed anyone with ties to Bolsheviks or Lenin's former government was a threat to his leadership and needed

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[6] Birt, "Personality and Foreign Policy," 607.
[7] "Nov 7, 1917 CE: October Revolution," National Geographic Society, Accessed November 20, 2022. https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/october-revolution.
[8] Issac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1949), 34.
[9] Ibid, 56.

to go.[10] Stalin was well known to be self-conscious, desiring the destruction of those who had seen his weaker self, such as the Bolshevik revolutionaries that had witnessed a hesitant and clearly undereducated Joseph Stalin.

The first event of the Great Purge was the infamous murder of Sergei Kirov, a prominent Bolshevik leader who had gained major support from those in the Party Congress who disagreed with Stalin's policies. He was a tough party boss, but rumors had spread that he wanted to relax the pressures instigated by Stalin.[11] Stalin's policies included forced collectivization and rapid industrialization at the expense of the peasantry. Major famines, especially in Ukraine, ensued as a result of the extreme required quotas, and Stalin's second wife, Nadezhda Alliluеva, is believed to have committed suicide in 1932 as a means of protest against the famines.[12] Kirov was assassinated at Communist Party Headquarters on December 1, 1934 by Leonid Kikolayev, who is believed to have been ordered by Stalin. Stalin famously appeared at Kirov's funeral, to the shock of the Soviet people who suspected his part in the death, and was a pallbearer, controlling Kirov's movements even in death.[13] It is doubtful that Kirov represented an immediate threat to Stalin's predominance, but he did disagree with some of Stalin's policies, and Stalin had begun to doubt the loyalty of members of the Leningrad apparatus. This was the first introduction of draconian measures against supposed political crime.[14] After the murder of Kirov, Stalin claimed that he had discovered a dangerous conspiracy of anti-Stalinist Communists and began killing or imprisoning any suspected party dissenters, including the original Bolsheviks.[15]

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[10] Chloe Arnold, "The Great Terror: Seventy Years Later, Stalin's Image Softening," RadioFreeEurope, August 13, 2007, https://www.rferl.org/a/1078135.html.
[11] Alec Nove, *Stalinism and After* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 44.
[12] Ibid, 46.
[13] Irina Anatol'evna Filge, "Nikiforova, St. Petersburg," Orlando Figes, September 24, 2005. http://www.orlandofiges.com/interviews/pdf/Nikiforova1.pdf.
[14] *Revelations from the Russian Archives: Inner Workings of the Soviet Union*. Original Documents. Library of Congress, Exhibitions. https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/intn.html#skip_menu (Accessed October 23, 2022).
[15] Arnold, "The Great Terror: Seventy Years Later."

There were four key trials from 1936 to 1938: the Trial of the Sixteen was the first in December 1936; the the Trial of the Seventeen in January 1937; then the trial of Red Army Generals, including Marshal Tukhachevsky, in January 1937; and finally, the trial of the Twenty-One in March 1938. The implication is that the trials served not only the political symbolic function of rationalizing the Great Purge but, at the same time, the psychological function of rationalizing Stalin's own paranoid tendency.[16] These show trials were held in Moscow, to serve as examples for trials happening elsewhere in the country, conducted by the secret police. Stalin manipulated and fabricated evidence through the discrimination of various ethnic, religious, and economic groups to prove the existence of, in his own words, "enemies of the people" who "posed such a serious threat that they had to be physically destroyed."[17] There was some opposition to these drastic measures, but Stalin immediately ceased it with a vicious speech which contained the words: "when the head is off one does not mourn for the hair."[18] Stalin seemed to consider all of these people to simply be the necessary sacrifice for the inevitable success of Communism. Even those who were "double-dealing"[19] were considered to be threats to national security and subject to execution.

Under Stalin's rule, the secret police again acquired vast punitive powers and was renamed the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) in 1934. *Troikas*[20] were used to try enemies of the people. According to Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov, a minor Soviet official during the Purges, NKVD officers would try several people in a minute, and hundreds in a day.[21]

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[16] Robert C. Tucker, *The Great Purge Trial* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1965), XXVIII.
[17] Hiroaki Kuromiya, *The Voices of the Dead: Stalin's Great Terror in the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale University, 2016), 254.
[18] Nove, *Stalinism and After*, 43.
[19] "Double-dealing" (двойная сделка): public compliance and private (or even internal) doubt
[20] *Troika* (тройка): a three-person panel, charged and convicted people of counterrevolutionary crimes, during Purges were usually only secret police officials. Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin, *Stalin's Terror of 1937-1938: Political Genocide in the USSR* (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 2009), 414.
[21] Rogovin, *Stalin's Terror of 1937-1938*, 27.

Leonid Zakovsky is recorded as saying, while training a new NKVD officer, "Your job is to learn [the script] by heart, and to remember well all the questions and answers which might be given at the trial…Your subsequent fate will depend on the course and outcome of the trial."[22] No longer subject to party control or restricted by law, the NKVD became a direct instrument of Stalin for use against the party and the country during the Great Terror of the 1930s. Through *troikas*, the secret police directly defied the U.S.S.R. Constitution, which states in Article 111: "In all courts of the U.S.S.R. cases are heard in public, unless otherwise provided for by law, and the accused is guaranteed the right to be defended by Counsel."[23] The NKVD became the most powerful and feared Soviet institution under the control of Stalin; their target was to be Stalin's adversaries.

The "Fifth Column" was a term used by Stalin to describe those he sought out, the supposed enemies of the people and saboteurs of his efforts. It started with members of the Bolshevik party, political officials, and military members but expanded to peasants, artists, scientists, intellects, writers, foreigners, and then on to ordinary citizens. This also made families liable to crimes committed by a father or husband. Children as young as twelve years old could be imprisoned or executed for the crimes of a family member.[24,25] Police interrogators routinely forced spouses to incriminate one another and used threats of harm against a spouse or child to extract confessions of guilt.[26] According to an interview with Marksena Mikhailovna Nikiforova, whose parents had fallen victim to the Purge, "You see, it was a completely different world back then… people then had a completely different upbringing… Despite everything [i.e. all the propaganda], they obviously realized that the repressions were wrong, and they never asked me about those things. Everyone in my block of flats knew [about my parents' arrest], but they

[22] Rogovin, *Stalin's Terror of 1937-1938*, 212.
[23] "Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," Marxists Internet Archive, December 5, 1936, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1936/12/05.htm.
[24] Arnold, "The Great Terror: Seventy Years Later."
[25] Filge, "Nikiforova."
[26] Kuromiya, *The Voices of the Dead*, 198.

would never refer to it in any way."[27] Silence was seen as the best policy during the Purges because people never knew if their neighbor or childhood friend might be a government informer or turn against them under torture.[28]

Millions of people died unnatural deaths in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. The vast majority of those executed in the Great Purge were not famous but rather ordinary Soviet citizens: workers, peasants, homemakers, teachers, priests, musicians, pensioners, ballerinas, beggars. They were all targeted by a series of special-operations orders issued by the NKVD and directed against specific groups of people such as ethnic minorities (Poles, Germans, Koreans, Latvians, Chinese, and Greeks), the de-kulakised,[29] the clergy, criminals, those with foreign connections, and others. While reading an execution list, Stalin once said, "Who's going to remember all this riffraff in ten or twenty years time? No one. Who remembers the names now of the *boyars*[30] Ivan the Terrible got rid of? No one."[31] Stalin's lack of pity or compassion for his people is demonstrated by his cruel actions toward the everyday citizens of the Soviet Union. His behavior is quite atypical for a neurotypical person, suggesting that much more lay beyond the surface of Stalin's political actions.

Stalin was additionally threatened by the growing strength and power of the Red Army and saw military leaders as potential political threats to his absolute control of the Union. In 1937, he became convinced of a coup and executed three hundred thousand of its believed members in the span of only a few years.[32] Eighty-one out of one hundred three Soviet generals

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[27] Filge, "Nikiforova."
[28] Ibid.
[29] *Kulak* (раскулачивание): a derogatory term for prosperous farmers who were disinherited when agriculture was collectivized and left penniless and starving; Stalin saw them as the enemies of communism
[30] *Boyar* (Боя́ре): a member of the old aristocracy in Russia, next in rank to a prince
[31] Kuromiya, *The Voices of the Dead*, 5.
[32] "Joseph Stalin: National hero or cold-blooded murderer?" *BBC Teach*, Accessed November 29, 2022, https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/joseph-stalin-national-hero-or-cold-blooded-murderer/zhv747h.

and admirals were killed during the Purges.[33] The intentional deaths of his own soldiers is now seen as a power play that resulted in the consolidation of Stalin's power in the U.S.S.R. Because he was not subject to the expertise of his military officers, Stalin was granted even more direct power over all facets of the Soviet Union. Stalin saw even his inferiors as eventual threats to his power, displaying his inability to gauge risk and danger, both on a personal and national scale. However, these deaths led to the loss of almost the entire command system of the Red Army, making fighting the successive wars, such as the Russo-Finnish War in 1929 and the first months of Soviet involvement in World War II, much more challenging.[34] Many of the people that were captured and punished during the Great Purge, including military personnel, were kept in labor or concentration camps.

Gulag[35] labor camps were first established in 1919, though they did not reach significant numbers until the early 1930s when they were used to hold the many Purge victims. These camps were mostly located in remote Siberia and the Far North. Gulag prisoners constructed the White Sea-Baltic Canal, the Moscow-Volga Canal, the Baikal-Armurman railroad line, numerous hydroelectric stations, as well as strategic roads and industrial enterprises in remote regions.[36] Gulag manpower was also used for much of the country's lumbering and for the mining of coal, copper, and gold.[37] The discovery of this cheap source of labor was exploited by Stalin's administration while attempting to create the impression of a successful economy as the Great Depression raged in the United States and Europe.[38] In the Gulags, there was never enough food

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[33] "Joseph Stalin: National hero or cold-blooded murderer?"
[34] "Stalin's Purge and Its Effects on World War II," Guided History: Boston University, Accessed November 30, 2022, https://blogs.bu.edu/guidedhistory/russia-and-its-empires/ethan-hartshorn/.
[35] Gulag is an acronym for the Russian phrase (when written in the Russian Latin alphabet) "Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei," or Main Camp Administration. It has become the most common phrase in English when referring to Stalin's labor camps.
[36] *Revelations from the Russian Archives*.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Nove, *Stalinism and After*, 81.

rations or clothing, but there was an abundance of working hours, bad weather, and abuse from guards. Here, Stalin is specifically believed to be responsible: he personally authorized torture and beatings, and many sources attribute a quote to him along the lines of "Prisons and camps are too soft… They should not be a *kurort*."[39] Stalin also did not maintain a loft distance between himself and the punitive process: he personally scrutinized lists of those who had been arrested—according to records, hundreds of thousands of pages—and personally scrawled the sentence they were to receive beside their names, most often, "death penalty."[40] According to Tatiana, who had been a young girl in the Gulags, entire families were allotted one hundred forty grams of bread per day (equivalent to perhaps four slices), causing her infant brother to starve to death, along with so many others.[41] Years later, it was finally confirmed by the government in question that nothing was ever done to deserve these harsh punishments.

The non-existence of the great "counter-revolutionary conspiracy" was admitted by the Soviet Union, in the 1960s, when thousands of pages of documents from the era were released.[42,43] Stalin's own needs, both political and psychological, instead of the needs of the Soviet system, underlay the events of 1937 to 1938 in the Republic. Stalin was not only the absolute ruler, but those deaths occurred chiefly because he relentlessly willed them and was a skillful enough manipulator to make others do his bidding, just as Adolf Hitler perpetuated the "final solution" during the Holocaust.[44] Stalin was in such a position as to have a bureaucratized terror machine firmly in place and capable of eliminating all whom he deemed enemies in machine-like fashion: denunciation, torture, trial, execution.[45] Stalin was able to turn the

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[39] *Kurort* (Курорт): a vacation center. Nove, *Stalinism and After,* 56.
[40] Roman Brackman, *The Secret File of Joseph Stalin: A Hidden Life* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), XII.
[41] James Bartholomew, "Life in a Gulag," *The Spectator*, May 20, 2017, https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/life-in-a-gulag/.
[42] Tucker, *The Great Purge Trial*, XXIV.
[43] *Revelations from the Russian Archives*.
[44] Tucker, *The Great Purge Trial*, XXVIII.
[45] Birt, "Personality and Foreign Policy," 616.

authoritative institutions of the U.S.S.R. into extensions of his own personality disorders through deceptive methods.[46]

As his adversaries among the Soviet people kept growing, Stalin needed a way to keep the Republic under his firm control, yet it is quite clear that there never was a true international conspiracy against Stalin in the way that he portrayed it.[47] Instead, Stalin used the illusion of a conspiracy to disguise the fact that the Socialist revolution was not turning out as he had planned. This can be seen through Stalin's utilization of photo editing, which he used to create propaganda and rewrite events in the way that he saw fit. After Leon Trotsky, a leading Communist Party figure, mounted a failed opposition to Stalin's leadership, he was exiled to Siberia. Stalin didn't stop with exile; he purged the memory of Trotsky by erasing him from all official photographs, media and records.[48,49] Millions of people were starving to death in Ukraine, rebels against the socialist order still existed, and beggars remained social parasites. Someone must be to blame.[50] Stalin once toasted at a private banquet, "[We] will destroy anyone who, by his deeds or his thoughts – yes, his thoughts – threatens the unity of the Socialist state. To the complete destruction of all enemies, themselves and their kin."[51] Despite this array, there remains no evidence that Stalin's great efforts ever led to the death of a single spy or enemy of the state.[52] "Why? What for?" was often asked by prisoners to each other, scratched in the walls of "black ravens,"[53] and inscribed in the coaches of prison trains as they questioned what they had done to

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[46] Birt, "Personality and Foreign Policy," 611.
[47] Ibid, 617.
[48] "The OG of Photoshop: The Fabrication of Photographs in Stalin's Soviet Surveillance State," *Comrade Kyiv*, July 3, 2022, https://comradekiev.com/blog/fabrication-photographs-stalin-soviet-state/.
[49] See note 67.
[50] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 22.
[51] Kuromiya, *The Voices of the Dead*, 198.
[52] *Revelations from the Russian Archives*.
[53] "Black ravens" (черные вороны): a nickname for police cars and NKVD vehicles

deserve such maltreatment.[54] Despite this, the question remains: why did Stalin choose to condemn so many innocents to suffering and death? One imperative aspect has to do with Stalin's years of youth and the later impact that they had upon the Soviet leader.

Stalin's paranoia and mental state, along with his desire for revenge, are one of the most compelling reasons for the tragedy of the Great Purge. Stalin did not have an easy life, and evidence from physicians of the time shows that he was psychologically impacted by his circumstances, leading to his violent and heartless ambitions.[55] Cultural factors highly influenced Stalin's childhood, as he grew up in Georgia during the 1870s and 1880s. The 1870s in the Russian Empire was not a very pleasant period for most people, but children especially suffered. Babies were routinely thrown into icy waters in the wintertime, left hungry and tightly bound in filthy swaddling clothes, unable to gesture or communicate. Eventually, even babies' cries would be suppressed and replaced by a "pathological desperation of the psyche."[56] Children were to be suppressed and terrorized, and parental empathy was considered to be sinful by the societal structures created through the Church and the *Domostroi*.[57] Stalin endured the same cultural standards as the rest of the region during his adolescence, visible in the abhorrent state of his nuclear family.

Stalin was born in Gori, Georgia, to parents Ekaterine and Vissarion Jughashvili, as their first surviving child, with at least two who died in infancy. Stalin's father was a shoemaker, though because of his business' failure and his likely grief over his lost children, began finding solace in large amounts of alcohol.[58] Vissarion held a strong hatred for his son, likely because he

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[54] Tucker, *The Great Purge Trial*, XXVI.
[55] See pages 12-13 on Dr. Bekheretev.
[56] Stephanie Shakhireva, "Swaddled Nation: Modern Mother Russia and a Psychohistorical Reassessment of Stalin," *The Journal of Psychohistory* 35, no. 1 (June 2007), 4. https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2007-08790-003t.
[57] *Domostroi* (домострой): a 16th-century Russian set of household rules, instructions and advice pertaining to various religious, social, domestic, and family matters of Russian society; core Domostroy values tended to reinforce obedience and submission to God, Tsar, and Russian Church
[58] Shakhireva, "Swaddled Nation."

believed his son to be a bastard, a major insult in Georgian culture. Stalin's mother is also believed to have beat him, leaving the boy the least empowered member in a nightmare cycle of abuse and alcoholism.[59] According to modern psychologist, Stephanie Shakhireva, in the *Journal of Psychohistory*, Stalin was left with many physical deformities and medical conditions after a childhood filled with heavy abuse, many illnesses, and malnutrition typical of the time and region. These included: his 5'4" stature, severely pocked face from smallpox at age four, a shorter left arm from being run over by a carriage, blood poisoning, severe dental problems, pulmonary tuberculosis, irritable colon syndrome, poliomyelitis, and cerebral ischaemia.[60,61] N. Kipshidze, the family's doctor, recalled in an interview, one incident in which Vissarion hurled the small boy to the ground, leaving him with blood in his urine for days following.[62] Stalin's childhood trauma did not cease to impact him in his years of control over the Soviet Union.

Stalin's behavior as an adult also conformed extremely well to the behavior expected of a paranoiac and narcissist.[63] Narcissism causes a person to develop a flawless self-identity, allowing them to be declared worthy of the love they were denied during childhood but leaving them hypersensitive to personal slights.[64] Stalin's childhood abuse from his father is a common breeder of distrust for authority figures. Paranoia causes a person to reflect the role of an aggressor whenever placed in a vaguely threatening scenario.[65] When Stalin constructed his regime, he seems to have modeled it after his childhood experiences and his seminarian training. According to an article published by the *International Society of Political Psychology*, "Many

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[59] Shakhireva, "Swaddled Nation."
[60] Ibid.
[61] Francois Retief, "Was Stalin mad?" *South African Medical Journal* 98, no. 7 (July 2008). https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18785387/.
[62] Shakhireva, "Swaddled Nation."
[63] Birt, "Personality and Foreign Policy," 611.
[64] Shakhireva, "Swaddled Nation."
[65] Ibid.

Soviet citizens, both individually and collectively, would learn first hand what it meant to take a beating from Vissarion."[66] Stalin instituted a structure of spying, cruelty, censorship, the "dark room,"[67] and a total loss of free agency.[68] This might be compared to his experiences as a childhood in a home of violence and deceit, causing him to believe that strength is proven by harm to others. As modern psychologist, Stephanie Shakhireva describes, "When a child learns within his own intimate surroundings a pattern of emotional disconnectedness, he is much more likely to have a low self-image, anti-social behavior, and a lack of concern for others."[69] All of this is not to mention Stalin's later forced education in a Georgian Tbilisi seminary ruled by Russians, further instilling in him that all power comes from the deprivation of others' freedom.[70]

For years, there was believed to be no records of any mental or psychological examinations of Stalin. With the release of further files through the collapse of the Soviet Union and the families of those involved, further data has been collected since the start of the twenty-first century. In 1927, according to medical records from Stalin's personal physician, Dr. V. N. Vinogradov, Stalin believed himself to be struggling with depression though he hid it well under extravagant and cruel displays of power.[71] His unnatural "feelings of inferiority" and other various concerns led him to seek out help in the form of Dr. Vinogradov, who recommended him to Dr. Vladimir Mikhailovich Bekheretev, who is considered amongst one of the greatest minds of psychiatry, neuropathology, and physiology.[72] Dr. Bekheretev was summoned to attend to

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[66] Birt, "Personality and Foreign Policy," 612.
[67] "Dark room" (темная комната): a room that is completely dark to allow the processing of the light-sensitive photography materials, refers to Stalin's use of doctored images as propaganda (e.g. images of him and Lenin enjoying lunch as friends, harnessing the love of the Soviet masses for Lenin)
[68] Shakhireva, "Swaddled Nation."
[69] Ibid.
[70] Due to the limited nature of this paper, this fascinating aspect of Stalin's childhood cannot be done justice. Further exploration can be done into Stalin's education, which his mother had hoped would lead to him becoming a priest.
[71] Marina Stal, "Psychopathology of Joseph Stalin," *Psychology* 4, no. 9 (September 2013). https://www.scirp.org/pdf/PSYCH_2013091614084923.pdf.
[72] Vladimir Lerner, "Vladimir Bekhterev: His Life, His Work and the Mystery of His Death," *History of Psychiatry* 16, no. 2 (June 2005): https://journals-sagepub-com.proxy.lib .pdx.edu/doi/abs/10.1177/0957154X05049611.

Stalin and after a critical examination in which only Stalin and Bekheretev were in the room, the doctor said only one word to his assistant that had waited in the sitting room: "paranoiac."[73] When Bekheretev arrived a day late to a conference of psychiatrists and neuropathologists because of his sudden diversion, he told his colleagues, "I examined one short-armed paranoiac."[74] This was a clear allusion to Stalin; Bekheretev was believed to be a candid and fearless man, but in this case, he paid for his blunt honesty with this life.[75] Many people were in positions to overhear the comments he made throughout the day of the conference, information was sent to Stalin in Leningrad, and Bekheretev was dead by poison less than twenty-four hours after he had examined Stalin.[76,77] Bekheretev's son clearly suspected that his father had not died of natural causes and demanded rights to his father's body. However, Bekheretev's son was denied justice as he was executed by shooting, his wife died in a prison camp, and their three children were sent to separate orphanages.[78] After this destruction of medical information, modern historians have been left with many questions and little concrete support of any hypotheses.

Through modern bioanalytical chemistry, however, scientists have discovered evidence that points to Stalin being treated for mental illness before his death. New EVA technology, which is strips of ethylene-vinyl acetate studded with strong cation and anion exchangers and with C8 and C18 resins, has been used to analyze the medical conditions of famous deceased writers and politicians, such as George Orwell and Winston Churchill.[79] Original books, that were studied and covered with hand-written notes by Stalin during World War II, were kept

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[73] Lerner, "Vladimir Bekhterev."
[74] Brackman, *The Secret File of Joseph Stalin*, 196.
[75] Lerner, "Vladimir Bekhterev."
[76] Brackman, *The Secret File of Joseph Stalin*, 197.
[77] Stal, "Psychopathology of Joseph Stalin."
[78] Brackman, *The Secret File of Joseph Stalin*, 197.
[79] Gleb Zilberstein, "Stalin's 'Black Dog': a Postmortem Diagnosis," *Analytical and Bioanalytical Chemistry* 412, no. 28 (November 2020). https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32876722/.

preserved in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts in Moscow. In 2020, using this chemical analysis technique and X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy, Gleb Zilberstein was able to harvest the surface material on these books and determine that there were higher than normal lithium levels present in the pages.[80] The levels were compatible with patients treated with lithium salts, commonly used to treat bipolar disorder and paranoia at the time. The historians involved in the project suspect that Stalin was being treated in an absolute secret manner, quite possibly explaining why so many of his personal physicians died without warning.[81] Doctors were not the only crowd to disagree with Stalin and face the acute consequences of such opposition.

Many of Stalin's own peers disagreed deeply with his actions and were brave enough to express so. After Stalin became the Secretariat of the Communist Party in 1922, Lenin wrote, "Comrade Stalin having become the General Secretary has accumulated enormous power in his hands and I am not sure whether he will be able to use this power with due care."[82] A year before his death, Lenin wrote a covert political testament about Stalin, saying: "Stalin is too rude, and this defect…becomes intolerable in a General Secretary. This is why I suggest that the comrades think about a way to remove Stalin…[and] appoint in his place another man who in all respects differs from Comrade Stalin in his superiority, that is, more tolerant, more loyal, more courteous and more considerate of the comrades, less capricious."[83] If the man who led the overthrow of an entire government believed that Stalin was this type of monster, then Stalin must have been truly despicable on a personal and political level. Stalin's later associates also concurred: Andrei Zandov, thought to be Stalin's inheritor, called for an end to irresponsible accusations against

[80] Zilberstein, "Stalin's 'Black Dog.'"
[81] Ibid.
[82] Nove, *Stalinism and After*, 28.
[83] Stal, "Psychopathology of Joseph Stalin."

persons and made some criticisms of the NKVD. Vyacheslav Molotov, Stalin's right hand man during the Purges, stated that it was important "to distinguish people who have made mistakes from wreckers."[84] Mikhail Kalinin, the titular head of state, tried to reintroduce the notion of proof of guilt, suggesting that what was needed was "not to look into someone's eyes or [say] who is his friend, brother, or wife, or who has been arrested, but [ask] what he has done."[85] Maria Svanidze, the sister-in-law of Stalin's first wife, who continued as a member of Stalin's social circles until her arrest during the Purge, wrote in her diary about what she observed. Around the Trial of the Sixteen in 1936, she wrote: "I never trusted [those people] and didn't hide it, but what turned out exceeded all my conceptions of human baseness."[86] Svanidze's sentiments were shared by many of Stalin's extended family and observers of his atrocities.

The Purges and the mass-murder involved came to a halt after the death of Stalin in March 1953 and the transfer of power. Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, condemned the Terror, calling it "an abuse of power" and exclaiming of the many innocents.[87] This was a major shift from the previous leadership, which had focused on breaking the spirit of the people, not telling them truths about the hidden past. Stalin instead once said, "One death is a tragedy; one million is a statistic."[88] It was not until Khrushchev's indictment of Stalin's crimes at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1953 that most of the surviving Great Purge victims were finally released.[89]

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[84] Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 217.
[85] Ibid, 217.
[86] Ibid, 216.
[87] Atem Galushko, "Politically Motivated Justice in the Former Soviet Union: Novel Concept of 'Two-Fold Constitutionalism' in Post-Soviet States," *Queen Mary Law Journal* 8, no. 161 (November 2016): 152. https://www.q
mul.ac.uk/law/media/law/docs/undergrad/14-Galushko.pdf.
[88] Stal, "Psychopathology of Joseph Stalin."
[89] Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 217.

The actions of the Purge have had long-lasting impacts on Russian and formerly-Soviet countries. A research project was jointly undertaken from 1993-1994 by a Russian psychologist, Julia B. Gippenreiter, and an American social worker, Katharine G. Baker, to determine the extent of the generational trauma induced on the families of Purge victims.[90] They found that many families had been told lies about those arrested, being told that a father was being temporarily imprisoned without contact with his family but was actually being shot immediately upon arrival to a Gulag. Children and grandchildren born after the Purge might be told that their father or grandfather died during the war, either due to a lack of information or a desire to protect the family pride. From the study's research, Baker and Gippenreiter found that many grandchildren of Purge victims were highly anxious about another government-led mass murder and even feared commitment in their daily lives. One subject described: "In the family, fear remains and also the impossibility of learning about our relatives. This had a great impact on the nervous system. All family members are closed, with heavy characters."[91] The repercussions of the Great Purges have not ended with the generations that experienced it first-handedly but have continued, adding to the deep wounds that the people of Ukraine, Russia, Poland, and many other Eastern European countries carry.[92]

Many studies of Stalin concur that this violence and destruction were simply following the course of Soviet history or economic conditions, and the Purges could have happened with any other dictator at the stern. He is often relegated as "just another Bolshevik revolutionary following in the footsteps of Lenin and Trotsky" or called a Georgian thug.[93] Biographical studies of Stalin tend to focus solely on his political actions or his attributes as a "journalist and

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[90] Katharine G. Baker, "Stalin's Purge and Its Impact on Russian Families," in *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, ed. 1 Yarl Danieli (Plenum, 1998), 403.
[91] Ibid, 415.
[92] Baker, "Stalin's Purge and Its Impact on Russian Families," 422.
[93] Birt, "Personality and Foreign Policy," 609.

agitator."[94] These studies tend to ignore the personal life and relational evidence of Stalin's life in favor of supporting their conclusions. While these types of analysis hold great value, they ignore a critical portion of the human experience, considering that even politicians are humans. Like all forms of abusive systems, Stalinism was, at its core, an emotional issue. Emotional health begins developing during childhood within the family, and everyday negative events or stressors mediate the effects of major life events on psychological outcomes.[95] If Stalin could have been replaced by another Soviet leader, why did so many of his associates disagree with his policies during the Purge, though they supported Communism and collectivization? Why did even Stalin's closest circle have to be blackmailed and coerced into aiding him in his leadership of the U.S.S.R.? Clearly, not everyone believed in the same type of union or methods of achieving such a union as Stalin himself used. Lenin was not the most sympathetic or equality-focused leader, but he killed far fewer of his own citizens than Stalin did. As to economic circumstances, only one other country reacted the same way to the Great Depression that was felt across the world: Germany. Nazi Germany is certainly not the entirety of the world, and their dictator was certainly abhorrent himself; yet even Hitler did not kill as many people as Joseph Stalin did.

Other leaders of the U.S.S.R. used police terror less, sought popular support, and tried to coerce the population instead of just killing anyone that resisted. Of course statesmen do not always speak the truth, but many others, such as Lenin, would have talked about the necessity of sacrifice instead of blandly denying that any sacrifices existed, as Stalin did during the mass starvation.[96] Other leaders, before and after Stalin, used campaigning, supplying of resources, and increased rations to encourage the population to fulfill their commands. Stalin saw empathy or compassion as weakness. Unlike other world leaders, Stalin did not maintain a lofty distance

[94] Birt, "Personality and Foreign Policy," 609.
[95] Shakhireva, "Swaddled Nation."
[96] Nove, *Stalinism and After*, 47.

between himself and the punitive process: he personally scrutinized lists of those who had been arrested and he personally scrawled the sentence they were to receive besides their names, all too frequently writing *smertnyy prigovor.*[97] Stalin's methodology is considerably unique and cannot simply be attributed to the circumstances into which he was placed; politics and psychology often go hand-in-hand. Stalin had programmed the machine and its acts are personally attributable to him.[98]

When considering Stalin's mental state, there is considerably limited source information. Although many official government documents have been released from the time of the Purge, they cannot tell historians about Stalin's condition. All that people can do now is form assumptions from Stalin's actions and conversations. Stalin himself did not keep a diary, and he purposely destroyed the medical records of many of his physicians.[99] There are no official records from any psychologists that examined Stalin, the only people that could have provided a true diagnosis of his mental capacity.[100] However, Stalin and the Soviet leadership held no shame in what they were doing and recorded all of their correspondences and decisions: the documentation on Soviet repression is full and rich, and some of the most important documents came from Stalin's desk with his trademark blue pencil. Further examination of the many documents and books in Stalin's archive is necessary to advance the current understanding of this exceptional period of time and comprehension of the man himself.[101]

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[97] *Smertnyy prigovor* (смертный приговор): death penalty. Brackman, *The Secret File of Joseph Stalin*, XXII.
[98] Nove, *Stalinism and After*, 76.
[99] Birt, "Personality and Foreign Policy," 610.
[100] A. Mark Clarfield, "The Soviet 'Doctors' Plot'—50 years on," *British Journal of Medicine* 325, no. 4378 (December 2002). https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC139050/.
[101] "Apiska Member of the Editorial Board." 1939. In *Stalin's Digital Archive*, ed. Yale University Press. Moscow: Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, 1980. https://www.stalindigitalarchive.com/frontend/sdapage. Unfortunately, I could not access this incredible resource that contains scanned documents from Stalin's personal archive. I would recommend that others examine this astonishing selection of letters, records, and annotated books if possible.

There are many negative, though inherently required characteristics of politicians, even if they are not violent dictators. These might include greed, selfishness, arrogance, and stubbornness. It is unlikely for someone to gain a position of high power without these qualities, and they do not necessarily lead to the best intentions for the people of that society. Countries may not end up with the most morally righteous or representative leader, and may instead end up with a person with self-seeking intentions and actions.

Stalin's anger at those who had wronged him in the past allowed him to carry out a great tragedy across many countries, reaching even beyond his own territory. He allowed his personal experiences to control the decisions that he made for his people. Considering that this same theme lives on in modern politics, people must be aware of the leaders that they vote into office in democratic countries, and those countries must watch over the people in other nations without true voting rights.

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