

A wide, flat landscape covered in snow under a pale, overcast sky. Several simple wooden crosses are scattered across the terrain, some standing upright and others partially buried or tilted. The scene is desolate and evocative.

# The Great Purge

Kevin J. Benoy

# Introduction

- Were it not for the Holocaust, the Soviet Great Purge might be known as history's most barbaric event



# Interpretations

## The Official Soviet View to 1956



- The closer Soviet society moved to socialism, the more desperate the class enemy became. They would do anything to hold back the building of socialism: sabotage, murder of Soviet leaders, collaboration with the secret services of Germany and Japan. As a result, the Party had to fight back. The class struggle sharpened.

# Interpretations

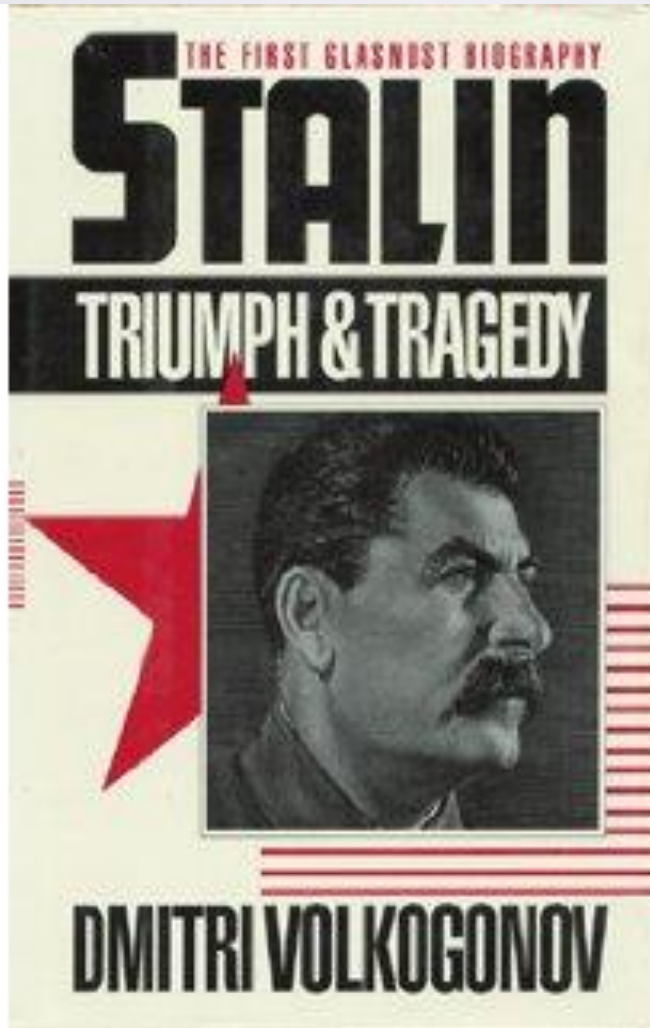
## The Soviet View from 1956 to Gorbachev

- Stalin did a good job fighting anti-party elements in the 1920s and early 1930.
- Hew was also justified in collectivization and industrialization, but owing to problems that arose in these processes and the negative influence of Beria, Stalin became isolated from the party and began persecuting its leading members who became victims of Stalin's cult of personality



# Interpretations

## Since Gorbachev & Glasnost

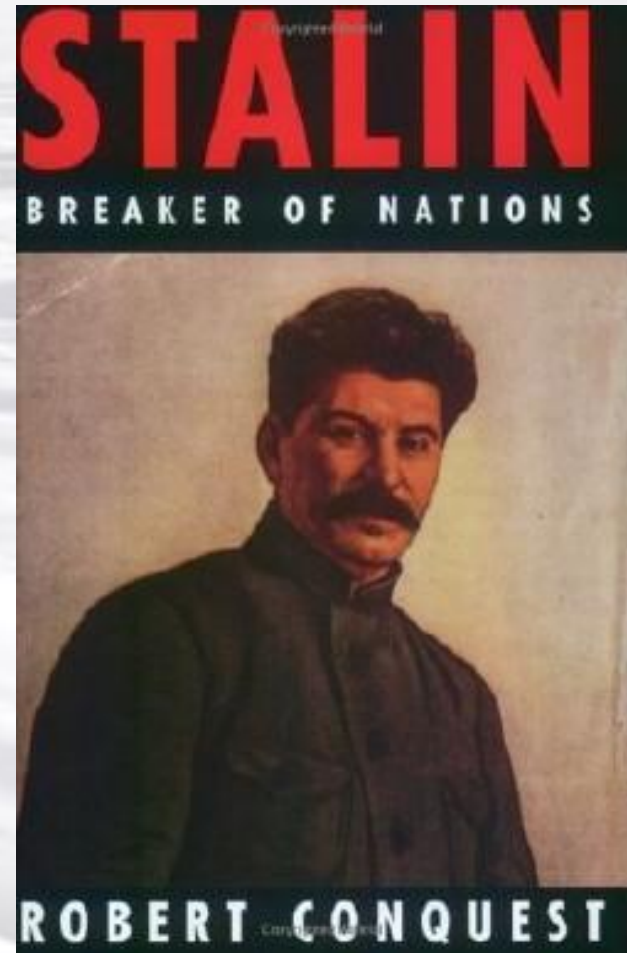


- Stalin made dreadful errors, falsely accusing Party members of crimes they did not commit.
- Post communist Russians are divided about him.
  - Some consider him a monster.
  - Others feel he may have committed excesses, but only for the greater good of the country.

# Interpretations

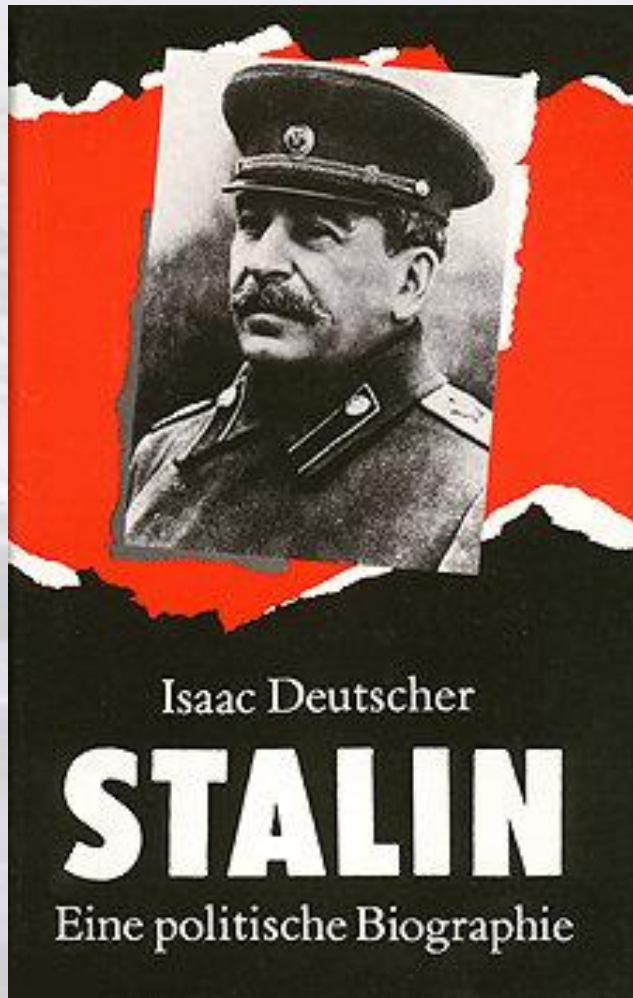
## Western Perceptions

- Some Westerners claim the purges were a manifestation of Stalin's paranoia – perhaps arising out of syphilis.
- Others say that paranoia was indeed the cause – but that it came out of a deep inferiority complex.



# Interpretations

## Western Perceptions

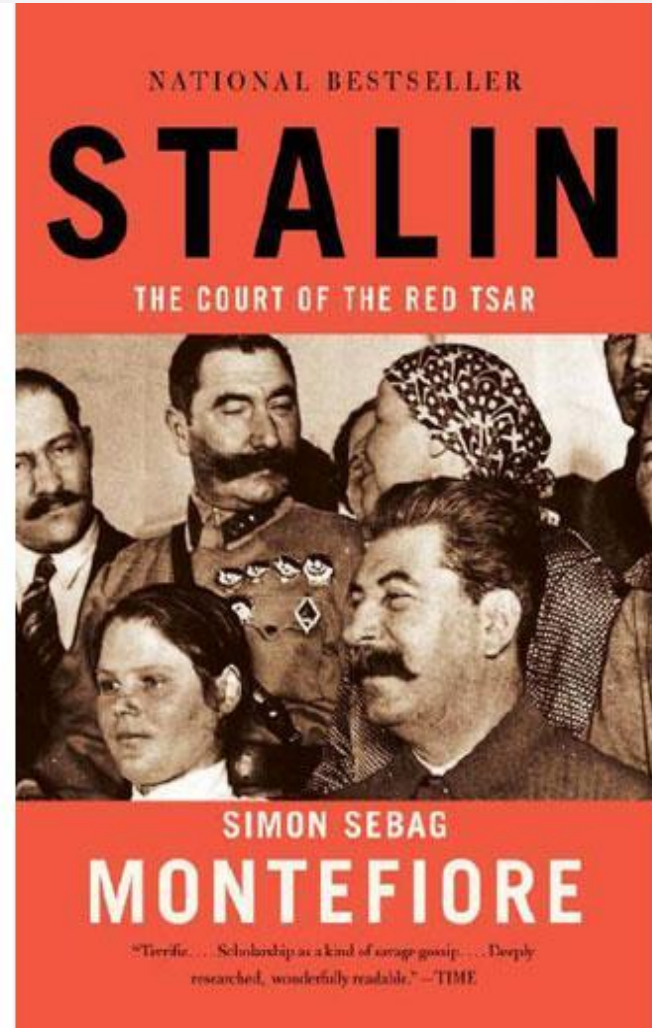


- Others see a conspiracy at work.
- The German Gestapo created havoc by producing convincing-looking documents showing Soviet leaders plotting with the Germans to overthrow Stalin – something confirmed to him by the Czech secret service.

# Interpretations

## Western Perceptions

- Still others point to the severe strains of collectivization and industrialization in the nation and in the party – even among his own followers
- At one stage he even found himself within a minority on the Central Committee and was almost ousted.
- This theory insists he turned against those who he felt betrayed him. In a secret ballot of Party members in 1934, Stalin found others were more popular than himself – including his protoge, Kirov – who Stalin then had killed.





# Origins of the Purge



- It is difficult to say exactly when Stalin decided to turn on the Party itself.
- He certainly had a pessimistic view of events and people.
- The 1932 suicide of his 2<sup>nd</sup> wife, Nadia Alliluyeva, surely had a great effect.

# Nadya's Suicide

- Even she had criticized his policies and the terror they brought.
- After a family dispute in which he publicly hurled abuse at her, she went home and shot herself.
- Stalin was badly shaken – he offered his resignation, but they did not know how to respond and he was persuaded to stay on.
- After this point he seemed to lose trust in even his closest friends.



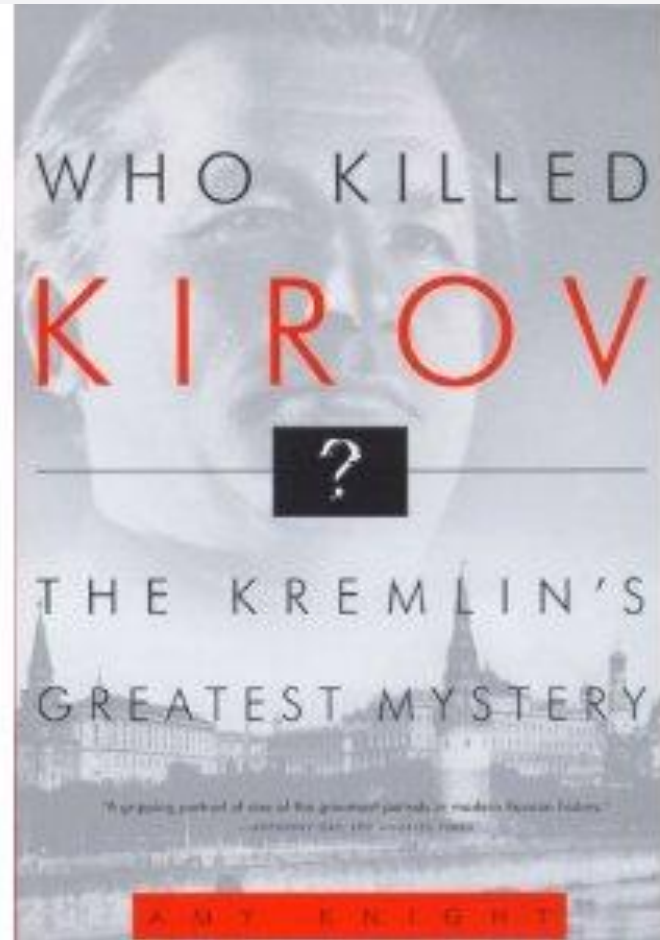
# 1934 Party Conference

- Nonetheless, there seemed no reason to act.
- Stalin announced that “there is nothing to prove and, it seems, no one to fight.”
- Had not the peasants and workers been beaten into submission?
- Even the Politburo now consisted of Stalin’s – but now some of them began to echo the concerns of the beaten opposition.



# Kirov's Murder

- Sergei Kirov, Stalin's apparent favourite, was dispatched to Leningrad to "clean up" Zinoviev supporters there.
- On December 1, 1934 he was assassinated by a supposed supporter of Zinoviev.
- Hardliner, Andrei Zhdanov, was dispatched to replace Kirov.



# Kirov's Murder



- Hundreds of “Kirov’s murderers” were rounded up and sent to Sibertia.
- Kamenev & Zinoviev themselves were sentenced to long terms for abetting the murder.
- Officially, a grief-stricken Stalin allowed a reign of terror to begin. Khrushchev, in his secret 1956 speech, hinted that Stalin ordered the murder himself.

# Purges Begin

- Arrests continued in mid 1935 and 1936, but not in large numbers.
- Stalin was more interested in the drafting of a new constitution – largely by the disgraced figure, Bukharin.



# Show Trials

- In August, 1936 show trials opened of 16 old Bolsheviks – including Kamenev and Zinoviev.
- The Defendants were all convicted and shot.



# Show Trials



- Next it was announced that the 16 implicated others, including Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky, though the Central Committee rejected the claim.
- In January, 1937 trials began for 17 lesser figures.
- The accused confessed to even the wildest claims against them and were shot.



# Show Trials

- The third series of trials proved the most dramatic and bizarre.
- The accused included:
  - All of Lenin's Politburo except Stalin.
  - Rykov, a former Premier.
  - Bukharin.
  - Tukhachevsky, ex-Chief of the General Staff.
  - Tomsy, ex-Chief of Trade Unions.
  - Trotsky



# Show Trials



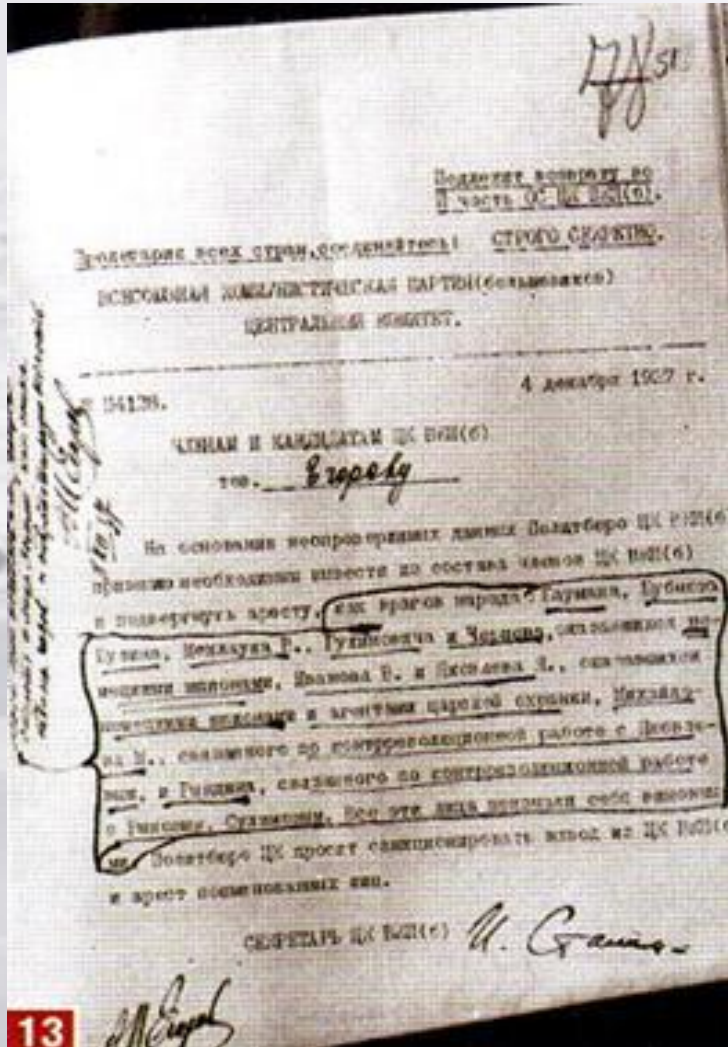
- Arrests developed momentum as the trials began.
- They did not end with the elimination of the old Bolsheviks. They included:
  - 70% of the 1934 Central Committee.
  - Most high ranking officers and 24% of the military officer corps.
  - 90% of trade union officials.
  - Most Soviet ambassadors to Europe and Asia.
  - Managers, intellectuals and Party and Comintern functionaries.

# The Purge Expands

- Arrests were not limited to Party members.
- Millions of ordinary citizens were accused.
- Historian Donald Treadgold writes: “orders went out to the secret police to arrest a certain percentage of the whole population varying slightly from district to district. It has been estimated that eight million people were arrested, and the actual total may be higher still.” To this total one must include those who Stalin eliminated by other means – through murder or suicide.



# Willing Confessions



- What astounded the outside world was the readiness of purge victims to confess to even the most ridiculous accusations.
- Independent investigations showed many charges to be “physically impossible, meeting at hotels long since dismantled, landing at airports where no such planes has landed and so forth.”