



Seventy-Five Years After Stalin's Great "Operation Kulak" Reign of Terror

Seventy-five years ago, on [August 5, 1937](#), one of the most horrific — and most ignored — episodes in human history began. "Operation Kulak" ("kulak" meaning rich peasants) was the Soviet Union's effort to repress those farmers who had a little more than other farmers (according, at least, to the definitions of the Communist Party), and who resisted collectivization. Soviet dictator Josef Stalin (pictured) had begun the development of "Operation Kulak" the previous month, when he contacted all the regional Party leaders as well as the NKVD (roughly the Soviet equivalent of the Gestapo and SS in Nazi Germany), asking each person for an estimate of the number of kulaks in their area. The NKVD issued Order 00447, which required that all kulaks and other "criminals" — members of the clergy, former officials of the Tsarist government, former party members, and former members of opposing political parties in Tsarist Russia — be either liquidated or sent to the Gulag.



The already-oppressed Russian Orthodox Church lost 85 percent of its clergy in this action. Russians who attended church services were also arrested en masse. Countless numbers of individuals not in any specific category, but who were deemed "wreckers" of the Soviet economy — engineers, railway workers, and factory managers — were also arrested. Stalin did not rely upon the NKVD or the local Communist Party leaders to find these notional culprits by themselves; instead, he told each of them how many of these anti-Soviet people were in their region and ordered that they be arrested. In October of that year, for example, Stalin directed the arrest of 120,000 of these enemies of the state.

The utter arbitrariness of Stalin's dictated numbers of regime enemies meant that many people were arrested who simply happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The NKVD conducted sweeps of markets and railway stations, arresting sufficient numbers of Soviet subjects to meet the quota. Simply being a relative of someone already arrested was often enough evidence of guilt. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's magisterial *Gulag Archipelago* recounts many heartbreaking stories of shattered lives and calculated Soviet cruelty.

Once these unfortunates were arrested, the determination of their guilt was foregone. The prisoners in the clutches of the NKVD were shoved into jail cells so crowded that the inmates had to take turns sleeping. Or, if the arrested person was put in a single cell, NKVD guards watched him around the clock



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to make sure that he never was allowed to sleep. Interrogation was by “conveyor belt” in which the arrested person was questioned constantly, often for days on end, and of course brutally beaten and tortured. The objective was not to discover anything in particular, as nearly all those arrested had done nothing at all. Rather, the goal was to coerce confessions to imaginary crimes, and often to implicate others so that they too might be arrested.

The objective of Operation Kulak was not to end the “wrecking” of the Soviet economy or to end any imagined exploitation by the kulaks of other farmers. The objective was simply to create pure terror in the minds of all subjects in the Soviet empire. And no one was immune. Premier Vyacheslav Molotov’s own wife was arrested and sent to the Gulag. (The first request Molotov made of the new Soviet leaders after Stalin died was that his wife be released.) Seventy percent of the members of the 17th Communist Party Congress were arrested and executed.

Even the NKVD itself was not spared. In early 1939, Nikolai Yezhov, who had replaced Genrikh Yagoda as head of the NKVD in September 1936, was himself arrested, tortured, and executed. Yezhov, who had arrested almost two million people as “wreckers” and enemies of the state in his brief tenure as head of the NKVD, himself confessed to the same crimes before his execution. (His wife, soon after his arrest, committed suicide.) Genrikh Yagoda, after Yezhov took his position in early 1937, had been arrested and tortured, and on Stalin’s orders, Yezhov’s successor, the odious Lavrenti Beria, also was arrested and executed after Stalin died. No one, except for Stalin himself, was immune to the stifling and real fear that Bolshevik rule brought to the nation.

The purging by Stalin extended to the GRU, Soviet military intelligence, which was intended to compete with the NKVD in penetration of the Free World. (For example, U.S. State Department official Alger Hiss, an accused Soviet spy who was convicted of perjury, was controlled by the GRU and not the NKVD — or the KGB, as it would ultimately be called.) The purging of the vast majority of military officers in the Soviet Union, which laid the way for its utter incompetence in the Winter War against Finland and the first year of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, came close to ending the Soviet empire — something that Stalin’s hack, Kliment Voroshilov, directly told Stalin during the early days of Operation Barbarossa (the code name for Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union during WWII).

The terrorizing of professional experts such as engineers insured that incredible incompetence would plague the Soviet economy for a long time afterward. The “kulaks,” whose crime was often simply having a cow or a few chickens, were the hardest working peasants, and the destruction of their agricultural work meant that the citizens of the Soviet Union for years would suffer from general malnutrition.

Most appalling was the general indifference of journalists and politicians in the West to this great reign of terror. The Ukrainian people had already suffered millions of deaths, including vast numbers of children, through Stalin’s deliberate policy of withholding food from the entire rural area of the Ukraine and closing off all exits (even while Stalin exported millions of bushels of wheat). Reporters who saw that crime largely ignored it, even through the stench of death and the silence of the countryside resembled something out of Hell. The silence in the West was deafening. Communists in America, France, and Britain still raved about the notional benefits of the new Soviet Constitution and the democratic nature of Stalin’s rule.

Ironically, historians in the West continued for decades to accept at face value Soviet claims of industrial advance (supposedly the fair price for Stalin’s terror); however, in the last 40 years many books have exposed that “advance” as a fraud. Ex-Marxist Eugene Lyon’s book *Workers Paradise Lost*



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remains an inestimably valuable resource in debunking the notion that anything good was accomplished by the Soviets.



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