



**Subject Support**

# History

Teaching the case study, *Stalin's show trials*:  
exploring causation with students

February, 2014

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# Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)

## Subject Support

### History

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### ***Stalin's show trials: exploring causation with students***

In exploring the case study, “Stalin’s show trials”, students are following a narrative of events. They are not concerned, however, merely with “ what happened ” (and, even here, there may be conflicts of interpretation) but also with why it happened. In exploring issues of causation, we have a great opportunity to develop their ability to think critically, which is one of the stated objectives of the syllabus, and an increasingly cherished aim of senior cycle education.

At previous history in-service sessions, it has been argued that some of the best ways in which students’ critical thinking can be generated include:

- the use of the enquiry-focused approach
- the use of ‘critical skills’ exercises that involve group discussion and judgement-forming

Both approaches are drawn on in the following exploration of the case study.

#### **The enquiry-focused approach**

The enquiry-focused approach involves organising a set of lessons around an enquiry question on which the teaching and learning activities are focused. It aims to give a clear focus to a series of lessons, to clarify for all concerned what the learning purposes are and to ensure that the sequence of lessons is leading to improved understanding on the part of the students.

In her book, *The Twentieth Century World* (The Historical Association, 1997), Christine Counsell outlines the rationale behind the approach. The following is an edited extract:

Choosing a sequence of interesting historical enquiries gives a clear focus to any scheme of work. This approach has a number of advantages:

- (i) It prevents a superficial run through the content and leads pupils into deeper levels of historical understanding.
  - (ii) It allows students to engage in real historical debate. Historians usually begin with a question.
  - (iii) It motivates students by giving a clear focus to their work. Identifying key questions is a powerful way of ‘sharing clarity with learners’. Teachers are thus reinforcing that the whole point of a sequence of lessons or activities is to build towards some attempt at answering the question. Some teachers who use this approach will refer to such a question in every single lesson. Pupils are constantly reminded of what they are trying to do and why.
  - (iv) Key questions can shape and limit an otherwise sprawling content.
  - (v) It encourages pupils to produce more substantial and significant outcomes at the end of a section of work.
- (pp.30-31)

## Linking your work on the case study to the National Literacy Strategy

The following quote comes from *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.8)

Traditionally we have thought about **literacy** as the skills of reading and writing; but today our understanding of literacy encompasses much more than that. **Literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media.** Throughout this document, when we refer to “literacy” we mean this broader understanding of the skill, including speaking and listening, as well as communication using not only traditional writing and print but also digital media.

The student activities set down in this resource are designed to improve students’ “capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media.”

As the literacy strategy makes clear, a key element in developing literacy is promoting students’ listening, talking, reading and writing skills, as well as their ability to critically assess visual images and other broadcast material. Some of the ways in which material from this booklet can be used to achieve this objective are as follows:

- The worksheet on the film clip encourages students to watch and listen carefully, and it includes questions designed to develop their ability to think critically.
- The questions/points for discussion that follow the sources are intended to form the basis for purposeful discussion among students and educative interaction between teacher and students. As well as promoting literacy, the teaching and learning conversation which this type of interaction underlies is a key component of all strategies for promoting assessment for learning in the classroom.
- The enquiry approach exemplified in this resource is designed to keep the learning outcomes constantly in the forefront of students’ minds. This is important in all strategies to improve literacy and is a key component of strategies for assessment for learning.
- The critical skills exercise is a type of card sorting exercise which helps to develop students listening skills and oral skills, as well as their ability to think critically.
- The importance of consolidating learning through carefully-designed written tasks is fundamental to student learning. The enquiry approach exemplified here concludes with an activity for students: “Your conclusions on the enquiry”. Also, some of the “Questions and points for discussion” set down for each step of the enquiry can be used as the basis for written task as deemed appropriate by the teacher.

### ***Stalin's show trials: a contextual overview of the case study***

Stalin's show trials were a series of political trials held in Moscow in the late 1930s under Stalin's direct control. The trials were not held in secret but were, as their title suggests, held in the open. Foreign journalists were invited to attend as the trials were intended to 'show' the guilt of the accused and have this guilt widely publicised. Political opponents of Stalin, and others whom he distrusted, were accused of criminal acts and were put under pressure to make public confessions of their alleged crimes. Standards of evidence were low and the process was designed to show the use of apparently proper, judicial procedures in dealing with so-called 'enemies of the state'. The show trials were the culmination of a process – begun following the assassination of Sergei Kirov, Stalin's right-hand man in Leningrad in December 1934 – whereby political opponents of Stalin, and all those who seemed to him to be obstructing his plans, were subject to harsh treatment and, in some cases, execution.

The broader context in which the show trials occurred is the series of 'purges' which began following the murder of Sergei Kirov, member of the Politburo and party leader in Leningrad, in December 1934. While Kirov was close to Stalin he was also seen as a potential rival – and he was prepared to voice his disagreement with Stalin when differences arose. Some historians believe that Stalin was responsible for his murder. Stalin used his murder as justification for an assault on 'enemies of the state' - people who Stalin claimed were betraying the revolution of October 1917 and threatening the economic reforms that were underway. It is no coincidence that those targeted included the Bolshevik Party Old Guard – men such as Kamenev, Zinoviev and Bukharin – who were seen as potential threats to Stalin's power. Many were demonised by being linked to Trotsky, Stalin's exiled rival. Over the years that followed, many ordinary people experienced arrest, imprisonment and sometimes execution as Stalin sought to eliminate any traces of disloyalty or opposition. In 1937-1938, the army and navy were heavily purged: those shot included three of the first five marshals of the Soviet Union, including the commander-in-chief, Tukachevsky.

The first show trial, in August 1936, followed allegations that Kamenev, Zinoviev and others had organised Kirov's murder. At the trial, Kamenev, Zinoviev and fourteen others were also accused of plotting against Stalin. All were shot on 24<sup>th</sup> August. A second show trial followed in January 1937. On this occasion a wide variety of accusations was made: sabotage, opposition to collectivisation and industrialisation, treasonable contact with Trotsky, plotting against party leaders, espionage on behalf of Nazi Germany and more. Thirteen defendants were sentenced to death. The third and final show trial – sometimes referred to as the 'Great Purge Trial' – took place in March 1938. The accused included Bukharin – who had helped Stalin draw up the 1936 constitution – and Yagoda who had been NKVD leader when the purges began. The charges were again comprehensive: these included plotting the break-up of the Soviet Union and undermining the Red Army. Bukharin was accused of attempting to seize power in 1918 and plotting to kill Lenin and Stalin. On this occasion seventeen of twenty accused were shot, including Bukharin.

Although the practice of staging show trials came to an end after Bukharin's execution, the arrest, imprisonment and murder of people perceived as opponents of Stalin continued with varying degrees of intensity. At the eighteenth party congress in March 1939, while acknowledging that some mistakes were made, Stalin stated that "Nevertheless, the cleansings of 1933-1936 were unavoidable and their results, on the whole, were beneficial." Between 1939 and 1941, there was an easing in the rates of arbitrary arrest, imprisonment and execution of internal 'enemies'. However, the prospect of war against Nazi Germany in 1941 led to new accusations of treasonable conduct and widescale NKVD action against all those who were seen as a threat to the Soviet Union's success in what Stalin now titled the 'Great Patriotic War'.

## Glossary of important terms: develop your historical literacy skills

NB: It is not necessary for students to be familiar with all of terms listed below. Some such as ‘chistki’ are included because of their use in much of the literature relating to Stalin’s show trials.

Central Committee	The second highest body of the Communist Party, composed of about 140 members in the 1930s.
Chistki	Literally, “cleansings”; used in reference to the purges of the Communist Party.
Comintern	The Communist International. The organisation of foreign Communist parties based in Moscow (1919-1943). Its purpose was to promote the expected proletarian revolution by supporting communists and left-wing socialists. Over time, it became an instrument of Stalin’s foreign policy.
Council of People Commissars / Sovnarkom	Government of USSR (until 1946), the commissars being government ministers.
Gulag	The acronym of Glavnoe Upravlenie Lageriami, the main administration of ‘corrective labour camps’ of the political police. In popular usage, the Soviet labour camp system in general
NKVD	Narodnyi Kommissariat Vnutrennykh Del: the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs which, from 1934 to 1941, included the civil and secret police.

After the 1917 Revolution, the secret police were initially known as the ‘Cheka’ (1917-1922). From 1923 until the formation of the NKVD in 1934, the secret police were known as ‘OGPU’.



<http://www.documentstalk.com/wp/nkvd>  
NKVD breastplate

Old Bolsheviks	Members of the Communist Party who had joined before the seizure of power in October 1917
Oppositionists	The term was used to describe people opposed to some aspects of Stalin's policies. Trotsky was the leader of what was referred to during the 1920s and 1930s as the Left Opposition. The term Right Opposition is sometimes used to describe the policy differences associated with Bukharin and Rykov.
Plenum	A full meeting of an organisation. Frequently used to describe meetings of the Central Committee.
Politburo	The highest body of the Communist Party, consisting of some fifteen members in the 1930s
Pravda	The title means 'Truth'. <i>Pravda</i> is a newspaper first published in 1912 which was the official organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1918 until 1991.
Proletarian revolution	Revolution by the working class against their capitalist exploiters. Marxists (followers of Karl Marx) believed that workers must unite and free themselves from the capitalist oppression of owners of industry to create a world run by and for the working class. In the Marxist view, proletarian revolution would inevitably happen in all capitalist countries.
Secretariat	The body elected by the Central Committee that was responsible for drawing up agendas for the Politburo and the general management of lower party organizations.
Yezhovshchina	Literally, 'Yezhov's time'. Also referred to as the 'Great Terror' and 'Great Purge', the period when the purges reached their climax. Victims included party leaders, army officers, scientists, writers, film directors, doctors and teachers. It peaked in the second half of 1937 and faded away late in 1938.

## Biographical notes

### Lavrenti Beria (1899-1953)



<http://russiapedia.rt.com/prominent-russians/politics-and-society/lavrentiy-beria/>

Soviet police chief, born in Georgia. He joined the Bolsheviks in 1917 and was active in Georgia during the October Revolution. From 1921 to 1931, he was a member of the Cheka and its successor, the OGPU. In 1931, he was appointed first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party. In 1938, Stalin brought Beria to Moscow to serve under Yezhov, then head of the NKVD. Soon afterwards, Yezhov was arrested and Beria replaced him as NKVD leader.

Beria was appointed deputy prime minister in 1941, by which time he had joined the Central Committee of the Communist Party. He joined the Politburo in 1946. His attempt to seize power after Stalin's death was foiled by fearful political and military leaders and he was executed for "anti-state activities" in December 1953.

### Nicholai Bukharin (1888-1938)



<http://russiapedia.rt.com/prominent-russians/politics-and-society/nikolay-bukharin/>

Russian Marxist revolutionary and political theorist, born in Moscow. Between 1905 and 1917 he was active in the Bolshevik underground; Lenin called him 'the darling of the party'. After the

February Revolution in 1917, he returned to Russia, playing a leading role in the organization of the October Revolution in Moscow.

As a member of the Politburo, Bukharin supported Lenin's New Economic Policy (N.E.P.) despite initial reservations, but he was more ambivalent towards Stalin's collectivisation programme of the 1930s. In 1937 he was arrested and expelled from the Communist Party. Brought to trial in the third Show Trial (or 'Great Purge Trial) of March 1938, Bukharin was subsequently shot along with sixteen other defendants.

Bukharin was officially rehabilitated by a board of judicial enquiry in 1987.

### **Lev Kamenev (1883-1936)**



<http://russiapedia.rt.com/prominent-russians/politics-and-society/lev-kamenev/>

Soviet politician, born of Jewish parentage in Moscow. He was an active revolutionary from 1901 and was exiled to Siberia in 1915. Freed from exile following the February Revolution of 1917, Kamenev became first Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the All Russian Congress of Soviets and, subsequently, a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

Expelled from the party as a Trotskyist in 1927, he was readmitted the following year but again expelled in 1932. Readmitted once more in 1933, he was arrested and again expelled following Kirov's murder in December 1934. Sentenced in January 1935 to five years for a share in the 'moral and political responsibility' for Kirov's murder, Kamenev was subsequently shot following his conviction at the first show trial of August, 1936. In 1988 he was officially rehabilitated, after the Supreme Court found him innocent of his alleged 1930s crimes.

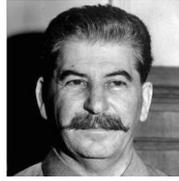
### **Sergei Kirov (1886-1934)**



Russian revolutionary and politician, born in Urzhum, 500 miles north-east of Moscow. Imprisoned on a number of occasions between 1905 and 1917 for his involvement in Bolshevik activities, he played an active part in the October Revolution and subsequent civil war, and during the 1920s held a number of leadership positions in the party at provincial level.

Kirov loyally supported Stalin and was rewarded by being appointed head of the Leningrad party organization in 1926. He became a member of the Politburo in 1930. He and Stalin became close friends.

However, Kirov's growing popularity appears to have unsettled Stalin. Stalin was also annoyed at Kirov's support for the release from prison of people who had obstructed Stalin's economic policies. At the 17<sup>th</sup> party congress in 1934, Kirov received a warm reception and was elected as a secretary of the Central Committee. Later that year he was assassinated at his Leningrad headquarters.



<http://www.biography.com/people/joseph-stalin-9491723>

Soviet leader, born near Tiflis in Georgia, his real name was Josef Vissarionovich Djugashvili. Expelled from the local seminary for ‘propagating Marxism’, Stalin joined the Bolsheviks and this led to his arrest and transportation to Siberia in 1904. In the years that followed, Stalin grew close to Lenin and Bukharin, joining the Bolshevik central committee in 1912. From an early stage, he was hostile to Trotsky.

Following the October Revolution of 1917, Stalin was appointed Commissar for Nationalities and a member of the Politburo. During the period of civil war, he organised a ‘Red Terror’ in Tsaritsyn which was subsequently renamed Stalingrad.

On his appointment as party general secretary in 1922, Stalin gradually built up a power base for himself by appointing loyal supporters to positions of responsibility. When Lenin died in 1924 Stalin was ready to seize the initiative, making the arrangements for Lenin’s funeral and gradually increasing his hold on power. In 1928, he was confident enough to push for Trotsky’s expulsion from the party and subsequent banishment.

Stalin’s economic plans to transform the Soviet Union into an industrial giant through his programme of Five Year Plans encountered opposition, particularly from better-off farmers known as *kulaks* who disliked the policy of collectivising farms. Stalin punished those who opposed his plans and mass executions became common. The disruption to the rural economy helped to cause famine. It is estimated that up to 10 million peasants died in 1932-1933, some murdered, some dying of starvation.

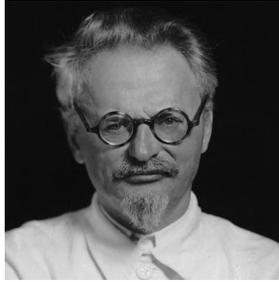
The purges of the 1930s saw Stalin targeting a succession of individuals and groups that he believed posed a threat to his power. The Moscow show trials were intended to show what would happen to those who opposed Stalin’s plans.

After the Munich Conference, Britain and France began negotiations with Stalin to prepare for a possible war with Germany. Stalin became frustrated with the drawn-out negotiations and signed a ‘non-aggression’ pact with Germany, partly with a view to delaying the invasion from Germany that now seemed inevitable.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Stalin appealed to the patriotism of its citizens to defend ‘Mother Russia’ in what became for Russians the ‘Great Patriotic War’. His alliance with Britain and France to defeat the Germans did not survive the ending of the war but left Stalin’s forces in occupation of much of Eastern Europe. Stalin’s dominant role at the conference in Potsdam in 1945 ensured that the new Soviet sphere of influence would not be overturned by his former western allies.

By the time of Stalin’s death in 1953 Europe was immersed in a new kind of conflict, the ‘Cold War’. Stalin’s ‘cult of personality’ and the brutality of his ‘purges’ were criticised by later Soviet leaders, Khrushchev (in the 1950s) and Gorbachev (in the 1980s).

## Leon Trotsky (1879-1940)



<http://www.biography.com/people/leon-trotsky-9510793>

Real name, Lev Davidovich Bronstein, Trotsky was born in the Ukraine. Aged seventeen, he was exiled to Siberia for his involvement with a Marxist revolutionary group. He escaped in 1902, joining Lenin in exile in London. In the 1905 revolution he became president of the short-lived first soviet in St. Petersburg. Following another spell of exile in Siberia, he went abroad and made his name as a revolutionary journalist and writer.

After the February Revolution of 1917, Trotsky returned to Russia and helped Lenin organise the October Revolution. Appointed Commissar for Foreign Affairs in the new Soviet government, he led the peace negotiations with Germany that resulted in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and Russia's exit from the war. In the civil war, as Commissar for War, he created a new 'Red Army' of five million men and devised the strategies that ensured the survival of the Soviet Union.

When Lenin died in 1924, Trotsky's influence declined as Stalin seized the upper hand. In 1926 he was ousted from the Politburo and over the years that followed his continuing criticism of Stalin prompted Stalin to force him into exile in 1929. While he never returned to the Soviet Union, his writings and political activities were a constant source of annoyance to Stalin, who is believed to have ordered his assassination. He was murdered with an ice pick in Mexico City in 1940.

## Andrei Vyshinsky (1883-1954)



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrey\\_Vyshinsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrey_Vyshinsky)

Soviet jurist and politician, born in Odessa. He studied law at Moscow University, joined the Communist Party in 1920 and became Professor of Criminal Law and Attorney General

(1923-1925). He was the public prosecutor at the Moscow show trials, 1936-1938.

In 1940, he was appointed deputy foreign minister under Molotov, and was permanent Soviet delegate to the United Nations, 1945-1949 and 1953-1954. He succeeded Molotov as foreign minister in 1949. On Stalin's death in 1953, he was demoted to deputy foreign minister whilst retaining his UN role until his death the following year. His *New York Times* obituary called him a "master of the vitriolic word".

### **Genrich Yagoda (1891-1938)**



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genrikh\\_Yagoda](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genrikh_Yagoda)

Soviet police chief, born into a Jewish family in Rybinsk, Russia, on the River Volga. He joined the Bolsheviks in 1907 and became a member of the presiding council of the Cheka (secret police) in 1920. He was appointed

deputy chairman of its successor organisation, the OGPU, in 1924, and from 1930 he was in charge of the system of forced labour camps in the Soviet Union. In 1934 he was put in charge of the new NKVD, into which the secret police had been absorbed.

Yagoda prepared the first of the Moscow show trials in August 1936 but was dismissed as inefficient the following month. Arrested in 1937, he became a defendant at the third show trial of March 1938 and was shot soon afterwards.

### **Nikolai Yezhov (1895-1940)**

Soviet police chief, born in St. Petersburg. He first came to prominence in 1933 as one of a small group charged by Stalin with the task of purging the Communist Party of 'undesirable elements'. In 1936 he succeeded Yagoda as head of the NKVD and expanded the policy of selective purges into a system of mass terror. The resulting bloodbath became known as the *Yezhovshchina* (Yezhov's time). Succeeded by Beria in 1938, he was arrested in 1939 and shot in February, 1940, portrayed as a blood-crazed renegade who killed many innocent people against Stalin's wishes.



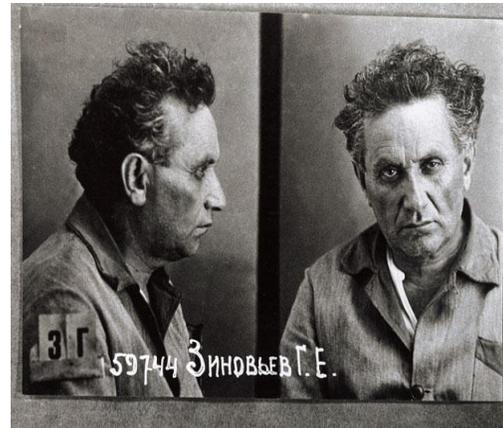
<http://www.cyberussr.com/rus/ye-bio.html>

**Grigori Zinoviev (1883-1936)**

A.



Imprisoned and interrogated



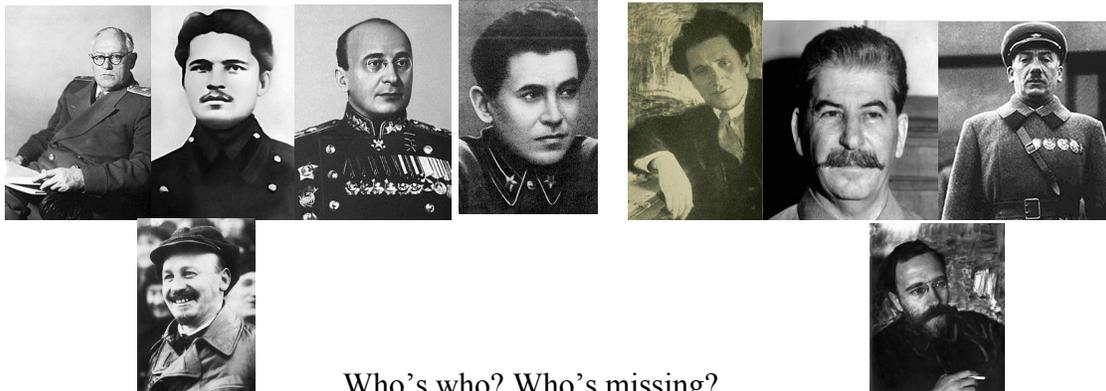
B

A: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grigory\\_Zinoviev](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grigory_Zinoviev)

B: <http://robertsteuckers.blogspot.ie/2013/06/alexandre-zinoviev-et-le-communisme.html>

Soviet politician, born in the Ukraine. From 1917 to 1926 he was a leading member of the Soviet government. A letter allegedly written by him to the British Communist Party in 1924 (and urging British communists to incite revolution in Britain) was used in the election campaign of that year to discredit and defeat Ramsay MacDonald's first Labour government.

Because of opposition to Stalin's policies, he was expelled from the Communist Party in 1926. Although reinstated in 1928, he was again expelled in 1932 due to criticism of Stalin's economic policies. Sentenced in January 1935 to ten years for a share in the 'moral and political responsibility' for Kirov's murder, Zinoviev was subsequently shot following his conviction at the first show trial of August 1936. Like some of the other victims of the show trials, he was posthumously rehabilitated in 1988.



Who's who? Who's missing?

## ***Stalin's show trials: timeline of important developments***

### **Background**

- 1924-1929 Following death of Lenin, struggle for power and for future of revolutionary socialism between Stalin ('Socialism in one country') and Trotsky ('Permanent Revolution'). Stalin's dominance was established as Trotsky was exiled to Central Asia in 1927 and expelled from the Soviet Union in 1929.
- 1928-1933 Stalin introduced the first of a series of Five Year Plans and forced collectivisation which provoked opposition from some internal party critics such as Zinoviev and Kamenev.
- 1934-1935 Murder of Sergei Kirov led to a series of purges, initially overseen by Yagoda, in which 'enemies of the state' came under attack – the most high profile being brought to trial. Victims included prominent party leaders and former leaders who were seen as a threat to Stalin's power. Kamenev and Zinoviev were amongst those sentenced to imprisonment.

### **The show trials**

- 1936 August In first show trial – organized by Yagoda, with Vyshinsky as chief prosecutor – Kamenev and Zinoviev and fourteen others were accused of terrorist activities (including plotting to kill Stalin), convicted and shot on 24<sup>th</sup> August.
- September Yagoda replaced as NKVD chief by Yezhov.
- 1937 January In second show trial, various charges including terrorism, sabotage, plotting the assassination of party leaders and treasonable contacts with Trotsky, Germany and Japan were levelled against the defendants, of whom thirteen were sentenced to death and shot. One of those who escaped execution was Karl Radek, who was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment and died in a labour camp in 1938 or 1939.
- 1937-1938 The *Yezhovshchina*: period of widespread state terror – directed by Yezhov – in which large numbers of people suffered random arrest, imprisonment in the Gulag or summary execution.
- 1938 March In third show trial (the 'Great Purge Trial'), charges against the defendants included espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union's enemies, involvement in the assassination of Kirov, and attempting to undermine socialism and restore capitalism. Bukharin was also accused of attempting to seize power in 1918 and plotting to kill Lenin and Stalin. Yagoda was accused of plotting to kill Yezhov. Of the twenty defendants, seventeen were shot, including Bukharin and Yagoda.
- December Yezhov replaced as head of NKVD by Beria.
- 1939 "By early 1939 random arrest and torture had virtually stopped. Several thousand camp inmates were released ... In the provinces wholesale shootings ceased ..." Chris Ward, *Stalin's Russia*, p.122

## MAP OF RUSSIA



<http://www.angelfire.com/ny5/famine/6.html>, downloaded 27/1/ 2014

### Notes:

1. The map is a map of modern Russia. Other states which were part of the USSR are shown separately e.g. Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan. The extent of the Soviet Union can be seen on the map below.
2. St. Petersburg was known as Leningrad from 1924 until 1991.
3. Volgograd was originally known as Tsaritsyn. In April 1925 the city was renamed Stalingrad in honour of Stalin. Officially this was to recognise Stalin's role in the defence of Tsaritsyn during the civil war. In 1961 Khrushchev's administration changed the name to Volgograd ('Volga City') as part of his plan to reduce the 'cult of personality'.
4. The 'Kemerovo Trial' of November 1936 was held in Novosibirsk. See Source 7 and Secondary Source 5 on page 27.

## MAP OF SOVIET UNION



<http://www.helensbookblog.com/2011/04/review-russian-winter-daphne-kalotay.html>

### ***Stalin's show trials: a possible line of enquiry***

If students are to understand the issues and events of the case study, they will need to explore the reasons why Stalin turned against a number of former associates and why these were brought to court in widely-publicised trials that led to their execution, in the majority of cases. An enquiry question such as the following may be helpful in this regard:

#### **Why were so many high-profile members of the Communist Party brought to trial at 'show' trials and subsequently executed between 1936 and 1938?**

One way of approaching this enquiry is to focus on the circumstances that obtained and the developments that took place in the build-up to each of the three show trials – of 1936, 1937 and 1938. The focus in each case might be as follows:

**Step 1:** What prompted the holding of the first show trial in Moscow in August 1936?

**Step 2:** Why was a second show trial held in Moscow in January 1937?

**Step 3:** What factors lay behind the holding of the 'Great Purge Trial' of March 1938?

What are the potential benefits of using these questions to focus on the subject matter of the case study?

In the pages that follow, a list of 'factors identified in commentaries' for each step of the enquiry is followed by a selection of linked primary source extracts and some secondary source extracts.

While most sources have undergone some degree of editing, teachers may need to engage in further editing of some documents to facilitate use with their own classes.

#### **A possible 'hook'**

One could begin with a YouTube film clip relating to the trials, and use this as a 'launching' point for the enquiry. A suitable clip is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OF0H2ePM5SE>

It may be helpful to use the first section of this clip (as far as 2:10) for this purpose: the second (longer) section features excerpts from a long tirade by Vyshinsky at the third trial of March 1938, and teachers may find it more fitting to use it when that stage of the enquiry is reached.

There is a transcript of the spoken content of the film clip on the next page and on the page that follows a worksheet on the content of the transcript.

## Transcript of YouTube film clip

### First section:

Stalin began to eliminate the Bolshevik old guard including friends with whom he had ruled the country just a few years before. The Moscow show trial cloaked the murders in a legal context. Among those in the dock was Gregori Zinoviev, the Old Bolshevik and comrade of Lenin's, who was also the head of the Comintern or Communist International. In 1936, he was sentenced and executed by firing squad.

Lev Kamenev an Old Bolshevik who had been with Lenin in exile, a chief editor of *Pravda*: in 1936 he was sentenced and executed.

The trials were accompanied by rabid denunciations of Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, the Gestapo. No means were spared to disgrace the condemned. Grigory Zinoviev was described as a cunning bandit. Anti-semitism was also a part of this campaign of defamation

A year and a half later Stalin eliminated another former comrade: Nikolai Bukharin, the prominent Marxist theorist whom Lenin once described as the favourite of the party. Stalin and Bukharin had worked together against Trotsky; and later against Zinoviev and Kamenev, here with Stalin on Red Square.

The relationship with Stalin began to break down at the end of the 1920s but Bukharin was given a reprieve for several more years. He was arrested in 1937.

The trial of Nikolai Bukharin and twenty others began in March of 1938. As in the other show trials the prosecution was led by Vyshinsky who represented the state and Stalin.

This trial which shocked the world was extensively filmed – yet, the accused, Bukharin, is nowhere to be seen in any of the pictures. In contrast all of state prosecutor Vyshinsky's tirades have been recorded.

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### Second section:

“Exactly one year ago Comrade Stalin analyzed deficiencies in our work and arrived at the conclusion that the Trotskyite hypocrites must be liquidated. This direction he outlined in an article he wrote in which he stated two words on the deviants, saboteurs, spies and others.

Trotskyites and Bukharinites, your honour, this whole right-wing Trotskyite bloc whose leadership is now in the dock is not a political party, it is not a political movement. This bloc has no ideological content, nothing intellectual as was the case with earlier members of this clique. Now it has sunk into the fetid ground of underground spies.

This is a fifth column, a Ku Klux Klan, which has opened the door to the enemy, who is a sniper from a secret perch, who wants to help invading enemies conquer our villages and cities, who wants to contribute to the defeat of their own country. It is clear that these so-called masters must be mercilessly crushed and destroyed.

Some of the accused, as you remember, especially Bukharin did not even make an attempt to put a good face on a bad situation. Bukharin likes to – how should I put this? - to describe himself as a theorist, a Marxist - in fact, an orthodox Marxist. Bukharin shamelessly lied back in 1918 when he broke with left wing communists. Bukharin's also telling now lies before the court. Bukharin knew of the plan to arrest Lenin, Stalin and Sverdlov – and, who knew of such a plan would also carry it out; who is prepared to use force is also prepared to commit murder.

The plot has been uncovered, the mask of treason has been torn from their faces, now and forever. Let the verdict be heard like thunder, like a fresh purifying thunderstorm of Soviet justice. Our entire country - no matter whether young or old - demand only one thing: that the traitors and spies who wanted to sell out their homeland should be shot like rabid dogs.

The masses demand only one thing: stamp out this accursed vermin.”

## WORKSHEET

### Questions on the transcript

It is recommended that the section of the film clip covered by Section A of the transcript (as far as 2: 10) be used as a hook at the beginning of the enquiry.

Teachers may wish to draw on Section B when dealing with the third show trial. In the latter part of the film clip covered by Section B of the transcript, Vyshinsky, the state prosecutor, is shown engaging in a tirade against Bukharin and his co-defendants at the third show trial in 1938.

For ease of reference, questions on both sections are provided here.

Please note that there is no direct reference in the film clip to the second show trial of January 1937.

Students may need to consult the glossary for explanations of some words used below.

#### Questions on Section A

1. What does the narrator mean by “the Bolshevik old guard”?
2. The narrator mentions “old friends with whom [Stalin] had ruled the country just a few years before”. Name two of these old friends.
3. What do you think the narrator means when he says that “The Moscow show trial cloaked the murders in a legal context”?
4. What was the role of the Comintern?
5. What was *Pravda*?
6. What is meant by “rabid denunciations”? (There is a clue in the sentence that follows.)
7. Neither Trotsky nor the Gestapo (of Nazi Germany) was on trial. Why do you think these were mentioned and condemned by the prosecutors at the trials?
8. What does the narrator mean by “anti-semitism”? If anti-semitism was used to blacken the name of some of those on trial, what does that suggest about their background?
9. Nikolai Bukharin was brought to trial in March 1938. Why was he such a highly-regarded figure within the Communist Party?
10. Who was the lead prosecutor in the trial of Bukharin?
11. Why do you think the trial was “extensively filmed”?
12. Why do you think the film focuses on Vyshinsky and what he has to say, and does not show Bukharin at any point?

#### Questions on Section B

1. Can you explain why Vyshinsky refers to Stalin as ‘Comrade’ Stalin?
2. Discuss what Vyshinsky meant by each of the following words (used to describe the prisoners in the dock and their followers): deviants, spies, saboteurs.
3. In describing the accused as a ‘fifth column’, what is the main charge that Vyshinsky makes against them?
4. What specific accusations does Vyshinsky make against Bukharin?
5. What do you think Vyshinsky means when he says: “Let the verdict be heard like thunder”?
6. What verdict does Vyshinsky expect the court to pass?

## Enquiry, Step 1

### What prompted the holding of the first show trial in Moscow in August 1936?

Among the factors identified in commentaries are:

- That show trials had become an established feature of Soviet political life: what was different about the Moscow show trials of 1936, 1937 and 1938 was that the defendants were- or had been - members of the Communist Party élite and that the charges of which they were accused allegedly posed a serious risk to the survival of the Soviet Union.
- Leading members of the party had criticised aspects of Stalin's policies and Stalin regarded this as treachery.
- Trotsky had the support of many dissidents within the Soviet Union and maintained contact with some of them (although the nature of these contacts was greatly exaggerated at the trial).
- The assassination of Kirov in December 1934 was taken as proof that followers of Trotsky and Zinoviev were guilty of terrorist acts against the Soviet state
- The personal role – behind the scenes - of Stalin.

### Relevant sources

#### Secondary Source 1

Lenin appreciated the power of show trials and was keen to use them against those who threatened the new Soviet state. In a February 1922 letter to People's Commissar of Justice Kursky ... Lenin recommended 'staging a series of model trials' that would administer 'quick and forceful repression' in 'Moscow, Piter [Petrograd], Kharkov and several other important centres'. He stressed the importance of an '*explanation* of their significance to the popular masses through the courts and the press'. Lenin understood clearly that 'the educational significance of the courts is tremendous'.

Party leaders, as well as Soviet journalists, film-makers, dramatists, and others, were quick to take Lenin's advice ... show trials became a major motif of Soviet film and drama in the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, the show trial film became a genre in and of itself, and films that focused on real or fictional show trials played to large and fascinated audiences ...

... Stalin shared Lenin's views on the powerful didactic qualities of a show trial.

pp.226-227

William Chase, Stalin as producer: the Moscow show trials and the construction of mortal threats, in Sarah Davies and James Harris (eds.) *Stalin: A New History*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

### Questions and points for discussion

1. In his letter to Kursky, what did Lenin say was to be the purpose of the proposed 'model' (or 'show') trials?
2. Discuss what Lenin meant by 'the educational significance of the courts'.
3. What kinds of people took the advice of Lenin?
4. Through what medium did show trials prove especially popular with the people?
5. What view on show trials was held by Stalin, according to Secondary Source 1?

### Source 1

The following is an extract from the ‘Riutin Memorandum’ of 1932, in which M.N.Riutin, a former party leader in Moscow, who had been expelled from the party in 1930, was strongly critical of Stalin’s policies and style of leadership:

The rule of terror in the party and the country under the clearly ruinous policy of Stalin has led to a situation in which hypocrisy and two-facedness have become common phenomena ...

Stalin is killing Leninism, [killing] the proletarian revolution under the flag of the proletarian revolution and [killing] socialist construction under the flag of socialist construction!

Extract from the ‘Riutin Memorandum’, cited in Robert W. Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin’s Russia, 1934-1941*, Yale University Press, 1996, p.16.

### Questions and points for discussion

1. What damage is Stalin doing according to Riutin?
2. According to Riutin, how have people in Russia changed as a result of Stalin’s policies?

### Secondary Source 2

Yet the show trials were not concocted out of thin air. In 1932, Trotsky and his son had indeed formed what they termed a ‘bloc’ with dissidents inside the USSR, though the two did not engage in terrorism and were not Soviet agents. Material in the Trotsky papers demonstrates that the 1936 show trial was based, albeit crudely and exaggeratedly on evidence regarding the bloc that a Soviet agent had obtained abroad. Pierre Broué, Trotsky’s recent biographer, writes that “Sedov [Trotsky’s son] always maintained contacts in Moscow”.

Robert W. Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin’s Russia, 1934-1941*. Yale University Press, 1996, p.25.

### Questions and points for discussion

1. What does the writer mean when he says that “the show trials were not concocted out of thin air”?
2. What is meant by “dissidents in the USSR”?
3. Who acted as Trotsky’s agent in keeping up contact with people in Russia who were unhappy with Stalin’s rule?

### Source 2

The following is an edited extract from Sedov, Lev (1980). *The Red Book on the Moscow Trial: Documents*. New York: New Park Publications. ISBN 0-86151-015-1. This book was first published in Russian in October, 1936. The book is currently available online at <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/sedov/works/red/index.htm>

#### Notes:

1. Lev Sedov (below) was the son of Leon Trotsky. He died in mysterious circumstances in Paris in 1938.
2. Ivan N. Smirnov, a civil war commander, had been a friend of Trotsky’s. At the time of the meeting described in this source, he headed the important Gorky auto factory. He was one of the defendants at the first show trial of 1936.
3. E.S. Holtzman, a Soviet official, was a former Trotskyist. He was a defendant in the 1936 show trial.



Lev Sedov: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lev\\_Sedov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lev_Sedov)

On August 5, 1936, Smirnov was broken. Having resisted until then even Smirnov took the path of false confessions. Describing his meeting with Sedov in Berlin, he says: "In the course of our conversation, Sedov stated his personal opinion that under present conditions only the violent elimination of the leaders of the Communist Party and the Soviet government could bring about a change in the general situation in the country." But this false testimony was not enough for Stalin. He demanded more "precise" formulations. Another week passes, and on August 13, the day before the prosecutor signed the indictment, Smirnov finally yielded: "I confess that I knew after the conversation with Sedov in 1931 in Berlin, that the directives for terror as the only means capable of changing the situation in the Soviet Union, *were his personal directives.*"

In all this, obviously there is not one word of truth. The only truth is that in July 1931, Sedov met Smirnov completely by chance, in a large department store in Berlin, the "KDV." Smirnov had known Sedov for many years. Smirnov agreed to meet with him and have a talk. The meeting took place.

During the conversation, Smirnov insisted that between Trotsky and himself, there was the following disagreement: He, Smirnov, did not share Trotsky's point of view about the necessity of conducting political work in the USSR. Smirnov thought that the present conditions in the USSR did not allow any oppositional work to be carried out. At the end of the conversation, it was only understood that if the possibility came up, Smirnov would send information on the economic and political situation in the USSR.

For more than a year, there was no news of any kind from Smirnov. It seemed that this chance meeting would have no results.

And suddenly, in the fall of 1932, a Soviet employee arriving in Berlin from the USSR looked up Sedov. This was Holtzman. He said that Smirnov, who was a close friend, had learned of his trip abroad on official matters and had asked him to visit Sedov in Berlin. Smirnov asked him to tell Sedov what was happening in the Soviet Union and give him a short letter, concerning the economic situation in the USSR. This was the only document brought by Holtzman. As far as the rest is concerned, he limited himself to verbal information on the political situation in the USSR, on the state of people's spirits, etc. His aim was to gain a close knowledge of Trotsky's point of view, his assessment of the Russian question, in particular, so as to be able to inform Smirnov.

Holtzman quickly returned straight to the USSR.

These two facts, i.e., that meetings of Smirnov and Holtzman with Sedov actually took place, are the only drops of truth in the Moscow trial's sea of lies. *The only ones! All the rest are lies, lies from beginning to end.*

## Questions and points for discussion

## Source 2

1. Discuss what the writer means when he says that Smirnov was ‘broken’.
2. What was the difference between what Smirnov confessed to on 5 August and what he confessed to on 13 August?
3. According to Sedov, what really happened at the meeting between himself and Smirnov in Berlin in July 1931?
4. According to the writer, in what way did Smirnov disagree with the views of Trotsky?
5. According to Sedov, what undertaking did Smirnov give at the end of the conversation with regard to further contact between them?
6. In describing the visit of Holtzman to Berlin in the fall (autumn) of 1932, what does Sedov say was the purpose of their meeting?
7. Discuss what the writer means by the 1936 Moscow trial’s “sea of lies”.

## Response to the assassination of Kirov

### Source 3

The following is an edited excerpt from an *Irish Times* report of 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1934.

Soviet Russia is in mourning to-day for Sergei Kirov, one of the leading members of the régime and right-man of Stalin, who was assassinated in his workroom in Leningrad yesterday by a man who burst into his study with a revolver.

The identity of the assassin has been established as Leonid Vassilievich Nicolaev, born in 1904, an ex-employee of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspection Bureau.

Kirov is the first national leader whose life has been attempted since Dora Kaplan shot at Lenin in 1918, inflicting a wound from which he never completely recovered.

Throughout the day the assassin was being subjected to a stringent examination by the Leningrad police. So far nothing concrete has resulted from these inquiries.

© *The Irish Times*

## Questions and points for discussion

1. What three phrases are used in the report to describe Kirov’s status or position within the Communist Party?
2. What do we learn about the assassin from this brief report?
3. How does the report convey the historical significance of Kirov’s murder?
4. Discuss what is meant by the assassin “being subjected to a stringent examination” by the police.

## Source 4

The following is an edited excerpt taken from the report of the court proceedings of the Moscow show trial in August 1936. In it, the prosecutor Vyshinsky links the defendants to the assassination of Kirov in December 1934. This statement was made at the morning session on 22<sup>nd</sup> August. (Note: Voroshilov was a high-ranking member of the Politburo who was close to Stalin.)

The Zinovievites followed the Trotskyites, and Smirnov in particular, who insisted on the earliest application of terror against Comrades Stalin, Kirov, Voroshilov, and other of our leaders. It was Comrade Stalin and Comrade Kirov who had smashed this dishonest opposition. It is quite understandable, therefore, that Smirnov, this consistent, fully convinced and irreconcilable Trotskyite, should concentrate all his organizing abilities on preparing the assassination first of all of the leaders of the Central Committee of our Party, the leaders of our country. Smirnov kept urging Zinoviev: Let us hurry up and kill Stalin, Kirov and Voroshilov.

Smirnov drew up and placed in the hands of his agents a concrete plan for the organization of terroristic acts. The murder of Comrade Kirov was carried out in fulfilment of this plan, for which Zinoviev as well as Kamenev, Smirnov, Mrachkovsky and Ter-Vaganyan must bear full responsibility before the land of Soviets, before the Soviet people, before the Soviet proletarian Court.

Report of court proceedings at first Moscow show trial, August 1936, *The Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre*, available at Marxists' Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/law/1936/moscow-trials/index.htm>

### Questions and points for discussion

1. According to Source 4, in what way did the Zinovievites follow the Trotskyites?
2. According to Source 4, who drew up the plan to murder Kirov and other leaders?
3. In Source 4, who else is named as being responsible for Kirov's murder?



<http://greenfyre.wordpress.com/2009/08/28/climate-deniers-demand-stalinist-style-political-show-trial/>

## Stalin's role

### Secondary Source 3

On 7 August Vyshinsky presented Stalin with the first variant of the indictment, according to which twelve people were to be tried. Stalin added the names of M.I. Lurie and N.I. Lurie to this list ...

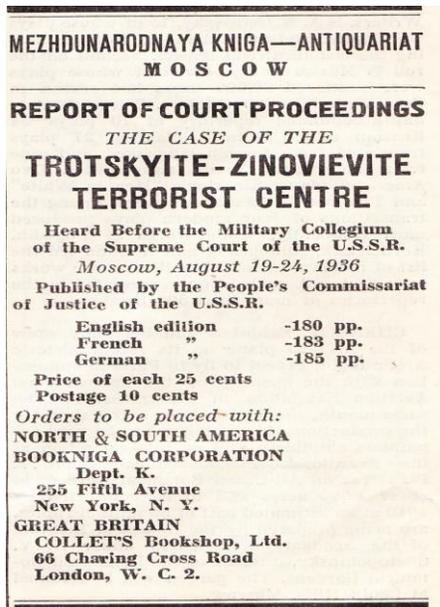
Three days later, Stalin was presented with a new variant of the indictment which now named fourteen defendants. Stalin changed this text as well and once again extended the list of the accused – this time with the names of Yevdokimov and Ter-Vaganian. Stalin made a few additions to the defendants' testimony which they were supposed to give at the trial ... Another 'imaginative' addition placed the following expression in Kamenev's mouth: "Stalin's leadership has become as solid as granite, and it would be foolish to hope that this granite will begin to crack. That means we will have to shatter it."

After he had finished the trial's preparation, Stalin was so confident of its results that he left for vacation in Sochi before the trial opened.

Vadim Z. Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*. Mehring Books Inc., 1998, pp.12-13.

### Questions and points for discussion

1. What was the role of Vyshinsky in the Moscow show trials?
2. According to Secondary Source 3, what direct role in the preparations for the first show trial of August 1936 did Stalin take on 7 August and 10 August?
3. What significance does the writer of Secondary Source 3 attach to Stalin's departure for vacation in Sochi before the trial started?



### Source 5

This is an advertisement for the published report of court proceedings at the 1936 show trial.

### Point for discussion

Why do you think this report was made available for sale in Britain, the USA and other countries?

Sourced at <http://mhill46-holdthefrontpage.blogspot.ie/2012/12/moscow-news-1936.html>. 27-1-2014

## **Enquiry, Step 2: Why was a second show trial held in Moscow in January 1937?**

The factors that prompted the first show trial remain relevant. Amongst the additional factors identified in commentaries are:

- Stalin's loss of confidence in Yagoda's ability to identify and deal with threats to State security
- Stalin's concern about a number of internal and external threats to the Soviet Union, including the formation of the Anti-Comintern Pact in the autumn of 1936 and, at home, a number of industrial accidents including the Kemerovo mine disaster.
- Putting on trial men such as Radek who were prominent party members at the time of their arrest sent out the message that even those in high places could pose a threat. Stalin called upon ordinary people to unmask enemies of the state regardless of their rank.
- The role of Yezhov

### **Source 6**

#### **Telegram from Stalin and Zhdanov (Kirov's successor in Leningrad) to the Politburo, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 1936**

We consider it absolutely necessary and urgent that Comrade Yezhov be appointed to the post of People's Commissar for Internal Affairs. Yagoda has clearly shown himself incapable of exposing the Trotskyite-Zinovievite bloc. The OGPU is lagging four years behind schedule for this task. This has been noted by all the party workers and by the majority of the representatives of the NKVD.

Cited in Chris Ward, *Stalin's Russia*. Edward Arnold, 1993, p.115.

#### **Notes:**

1. Throughout the 1930s, the NKVD's secret police section continued to be called the OGPU in everyday speech.
2. The day after the telegram was sent, Yezhov replaced Yagoda as head of the NKVD.
3. When he read this telegram at the 20<sup>th</sup> party congress in 1956, Khrushchev declared, "Stalin never met with party workers and therefore could not have known their opinions". (Cited in Vadim Z. Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*. Mehring Books Inc., 1998, p.90.)

#### **Questions and points for discussion**

1. What reason do Stalin and Zhdanov give for the replacement of Yagoda?
2. Explain the comment (referred to in Note 3) made by Khrushchev at the 20<sup>th</sup> party congress of 1956.

## Secondary Source 5

The so-called “Kemerovo Trial” ... was held on 19-22 November 1936 in Novosibirsk ... The Kemerovo Trial was the first “Trotskyist” frame-up at which the defendants were charged with sabotage.

... The main charge at the trial was that “Trotskyists” organized an explosion which occurred on 23 September 1936 at the “Central” mine, as a result of which twelve miners died and fourteen were severely injured. Workers who spoke as witnesses at the trial told how the mine’s administration had ignored elementary rules of safety technique ... This was followed by the outlining of the results of the investigation by a commission of experts ... For two weeks, members of the commission of experts did not leave the building which housed the Kemerovo branch of the NKVD; nor did they meet with a single one of the accused or officials at the mine sites. The conclusions of the experts were continually reworked under the direction of NKVD officials.

... Besides eight Soviet engineers, those on trial included a German specialist, Stikling, who was charged with ties to the Gestapo ...

Vadim Z. Rogovin, *1937: Stalin’s Year of Terror*. Mehring Books Inc., 1998, pp.95-96.

### Questions and points for discussion

1. In what city did the Kemerovo trial take place? On what dates?
2. What was the main charge made at the trial?
3. What evidence was given by workers at the mine?
4. According to the writer, how was the investigation by the commission of experts managed?
5. What was significant about the inclusion among the defendants of the German specialist, Stikling?

## Source 7

### Edited excerpt from *Irish Times* report of 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 1936

The German engineer, Herr Stickling, and his eight Russian fellow-prisoners in the trial at Novosibirsk on charges of organized sabotage, have been sentenced to death. The sentence has aroused indignation in Germany.

*Der Montag* calls the sentence “a true example of international scandal” and comments:-

“This groundless injustice shows how justified is Germany’s attitudes to the terrorists of the Soviet Union and how necessary are the warnings to the civilized world to join, for the sake of peace, in anti-Bolshevik bloc”.

© *The Irish Times*

### Questions and points for discussion

1. What sentence was passed on Stickling and the other defendants at the Kemerovo trial?
2. Discuss why *Der Montag* (a German newspaper of the time) referred to leaders of the Soviet Union as “terrorists”.
3. Discuss what *Der Montag* meant in calling for “the civilized world to join, for the sake of peace, in anti-Bolshevik bloc.”

### Secondary Source 6

While Stalin controlled aspects of the January 1937 trial, there were other realities that structured the trial and confessions that he could not control: the formation of the Anti-Comintern Pact in the autumn of 1936, the transformation of the Spanish Civil War into an international battle between fascist and anti-fascist forces, the USSR's military commitment to the Spanish Republic, the Kemerovo mine disaster (and a spate of other industrial accidents), the deepening of the USSR's economic downturn, and the onset of epidemic within the country's livestock herds. These events no doubt affected Stalin's view of the threats that the USSR faced and the nature of the threat that the January 1937 trial would reveal. P.238

William Chase, Stalin as producer: the Moscow show trials and the construction of mortal threats, in Sarah Davies and James Harris (eds.) *Stalin: A New History*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

### Questions and points for discussion

1. According to the writer, what international events affected Stalin's views of the threats faced by the USSR?
2. According to the writer, what domestic events affected Stalin's views of the threats faced by the USSR?
3. Discuss the connections that Stalin was likely to make between the international events and the domestic events.

### Source 8

#### Edited excerpt from "Report of Court Proceedings: The case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Centre-1937, Moscow, p. 574"

In 1933, in accordance with direct instructions given by the enemy of the people, Trotsky, there was formed in Moscow an underground anti-Soviet, Trotskyite center, members of which were accused in the present case: Pyatakov, Radek, Sokolnikov and Serebryakov.

In accordance with instructions received from the enemy of the people, Trotsky, the principal aim of the anti-Soviet Trotskyite center was to overthrow the Soviet power in the USSR and to restore capitalism by means of wrecking, espionage and terrorist activities designed to undermine the economic and military power of the Soviet Union, to expedite the armed attack on the USSR, to assist foreign aggressors and to bring about the defeat of the USSR.

In full conformity with this principal aim, the enemy of the people Trotsky, abroad, and the parallel anti-Soviet Trotskyite center, represented by Radek and Sokolnikov, in Moscow, entered into negotiations with certain representatives of Germany and Japan. During the course of negotiation with one of the leaders of the National-Socialist Party of Germany, Rudolf Hess, Trotsky promised in the event of a Trotskyite government coming to power as the result of the defeat of the Soviet Union, to make a number of political, economic, and territorial concessions to Germany and Japan at the expense of the USSR.

Sourced at [http://www.red-channel.de/books/1937\\_trial.htm](http://www.red-channel.de/books/1937_trial.htm), 17<sup>th</sup> January, 2014.

## Questions and points for discussion

## Source 8

According to the report of the 1937 court proceedings,

1. What action was taken in 1933 by Radek and three other named defendants, on the orders of Trotsky?
2. What instructions did Trotsky give to the members of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Centre?
3. In what negotiations did Trotsky, Radek and Sokolnikov become involved?
4. What promises did Trotsky make in the course of the negotiations?

Discuss: Why do many historians not accept the truth of all the allegations made at this and other show trials?

## Source 9

### **Joseph E. Davies, US Ambassador to the Soviet Union 1936-1938, reflects on the second show trial of January 1937**

The most extraordinary part of this trial, from a Western outlook, is that there should have been such a trial at all. The accused had all entered the plea of guilty. There remained nothing for a court to do but to hear possible pleas for clemency and to adjudge the fact and sentence the accused. But here a so-called trial was held which lasted for six days and in which presumably all proof was produced that the prosecutor could possibly adduce – from our point of view an entirely useless proceeding.

The occasion was dramatized for propaganda purposes. It was designed: first, as a warning to all existing and potential plotters and conspirators within the Soviet Union; second, to discredit Trotsky abroad; and third, to solidify popular national feeling in support of the government against foreign enemies – Germany and Japan. During the trial every means of propaganda was employed to carry to all parts of the country the horrors of these confessions. The newspapers were filled not only with reports of the testimony but also comments of the most violent and vituperative character as to the accused. The radio also was working overtime.

Edited extracts from Davies' book *Mission to Moscow* (1942), based on contemporary diary entries, dispatches and letters, are available at [www.redstarpublishers.org/daviestrials.doc](http://www.redstarpublishers.org/daviestrials.doc)

## Questions and points for discussion

1. As a 'Western' observer, what did the writer find "most extraordinary" about the trial of January 1937?
2. What does the writer mean when he suggests that the trial was "dramatized for propaganda purposes"?
3. What three propaganda messages does the writer believe the trial was designed to send out?
4. What means of propaganda does the writer mention that were used to spread what he regards as propaganda messages?

## Secondary Source 7

[At the 1937 show trial] Party members constituted a special group within the audience. Pyatakov, Radek, Serebryakov, and others had been prominent members at the time of their arrest. Their appearance in the dock sent the message that defeated oppositionists were not the only ones to pose a threat: Party leaders themselves could do so ... More so than the 1936 or 1938 trials, the 1937 trial provided a rationale and opportunity for popular participation in the repression. Stalin's use of the trial to scapegoat economic officials for the problems afflicting the economy and to legitimize popular criticisms of powerful Party members suggests how important the selection of the charges and the defendants was to the show trials' (and Stalin's) success. P.240

William Chase, Stalin as producer: the Moscow show trials and the construction of mortal threats, in Sarah Davies and James Harris (eds.) *Stalin: A New History*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

### Questions and points for discussion

1. Unlike Zinoviev, Kamenev and other defendants at the first show trial, what sort of positions were held by Radek and other defendants at the January 1937 trial?
2. According to the writer, what message was sent out by the appearance in the dock of Radek and the others?
3. Discuss what the writer means when he says that the 1937 trial provided an "opportunity for popular participation in the repression".
4. In what two ways did Stalin use the trial, according to the writer?

## Source 10

### Excerpt from Yezhov's speech at the 1936 December Plenum of the Central Committee

... the CC's directive, dictated by Comrade Stalin, will be carried out by us to the end, we will root out all this Trotskyist-Zinovievist filth and destroy them physically.

Vadim Z. Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*. Mehring Books Inc., 1998, p.101

### Questions and points for discussion

1. What position did Yezhov hold at the time of the 1936 December Plenum of the Central Committee?
2. Who are the "CC" mentioned by Yezhov?
3. Discuss Yezhov's use of the term, "Trotskyist-Zinovievist filth".
4. Discuss: In what ways did Yezhov carry out his threat to "destroy them [supporters of Trotsky and Zinoviev] physically"?

### **Enquiry, Step 3: What factors lay behind the holding of the ‘Great Purge Trial’ of March 1938?**

The factors that prompted the first and second show trials remain relevant. Amongst the additional factors identified in commentaries are:

- The decision taken at the 1937 February-March Plenum of the Central Committee to expel Bukharin and Rykov from the Party and to turn their case over to the NKVD.
- Trotsky’s telegram to the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party in June 1937, in which he called for a change of direction and a review of the previous show trials.
- Stalin’s fear of enemies seems to have increased in 1937 as leading army officers were arrested and tried.
- In an atmosphere of increasing fear and tensions, the ‘terror’ expanded and became ‘great’, under Yezhov’s direction. This is the period of *Yezhovshchina* (the ‘Yezhov’ period), also known as the ‘Great Fear’.
- Fear of war increased in the Soviet Union, as Japanese aggression threatened the Soviet Far East, the Spanish Nationalists gained the upper hand in the civil war, Germany became increasingly aggressive and annexed Austria and Anglo-French appeasement policies made Soviet security agreements with the Western powers look unlikely.

#### **Source 11**

#### **Edited excerpt from Stalin’s report to the deliberations of the 1937 February-March Plenum of the Central Committee**

Trotskyism had ceased to be a political tendency in the working class as it had been seven to eight years ago. Trotskyism had turned into a frenzied and unprincipled band of wreckers, saboteurs, spies and assassins, acting on the orders of the intelligence services of foreign states. In the struggle against contemporary Trotskyism, what we now need is not the old methods, not the methods of discussion, but new methods, the methods of uprooting and routing.

Cited in Vadim Z. Rogovin, *1937: Stalin’s Year of Terror*. Mehring Books Inc., 1998, p.289

#### **Questions and points for discussion**

1. Discuss: According to Stalin, what changes had taken place in ‘Trotskyism’ during the 1930s?
2. According to Stalin, in “the struggle against contemporary Trotskyism”, what methods were now needed?

## Source 12

### Excerpts from Stalin's contributions to the deliberations of the 1937 February-March Plenum of the Central Committee and from the wording of the final resolution drawn up by a (35 man) commission of the Central Committee

Stalin

[Proposal]: Not to send them to trial but to send the case of Bukharin and Rykov to the NKVD

... Of course, the feelings of indignation over the anti-party and anti-Soviet activity of Bukharin and Rykov, as well as their behavior here at the plenum during the discussion about them, was very great ...

From the final resolution

[These facts] indisputably suggest that the political fall of Comrades Bukharin and Rykov is neither accidental nor unexpected.

Cited in Vadim Z. Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*. Mehring Books Inc., 1998, p.228-229

### Questions and points for discussion

1. What did Stalin propose should be done with the case against Bukharin and Rykov? Discuss what was likely to happen to Bukharin and Rykov as a consequence of this.
2. According to Stalin, much indignation was felt towards Bukharin and Rykov. What reasons does he give for this?
3. According to the wording of the final resolution, what was the attitude of the Central Committee towards the evidence against Bukharin and Rykov?

### Secondary Source 8

The historian Simon Sebag Montefiore describes the vote at the February-March Plenum, 1937, and the arrest of Bukharin.

'Does anyone wish to speak, Andreyev asked. 'No. Are there any other proposals besides the one made by Comrade Stalin? No. Let's vote ... All those against? None. Any abstentions? Two. So the resolution carries with two abstentions – Bukharin and Rykov.' The two, who had once ruled Russia alongside Stalin, were arrested as they left the Plenum. Bukharin took that one step that was like falling a thousand miles: one minute, he was living in the Kremlin, with cars, dachas and servants. The next minute, he was passing through the gates of the Lubianka, handing over his possessions, being stripped, having his rectum checked, his clothes returned though without belt or shoelaces, and then being locked in a cell ...

Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2003, p.193.

### Questions and points for discussion

1. Who were the only two members of the Central Committee to vote against the final resolution at the February March Plenum, 1937?
2. Discuss what the writer means when he says, "Bukharin took that one step that was like falling a thousand miles".

### Source 13

#### Trotsky's telegram to the leadership of the Communist Party, June 1937

Stalin's policies are leading to a crushing defeat, both internally and externally. The only salvation is a turn in the direction of Soviet democracy, beginning with a review of the last trials. In this endeavour I offer my full support.

Cited in Vadim Z. Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*. Mehring Books Inc., 1998, p.487

#### Questions and points for discussion

1. What damage was being done by Stalin's policies, according to Trotsky?
2. What did Trotsky say was the "only salvation"?
3. Was the leadership of the Communist Party likely to accept Trotsky's offer of "full support"? Discuss the reasons for this.

### Secondary Source 9

The historian Robert W. Thurston describes the arrest of leading army officers, including Marshal Tukachevskii, one of the best-known officers in the Soviet Union

... several officers being held and tortured by the NKVD named Tukhachevskii as a plotter against the government ... A new round of arrests among such men began in mid-May; Tukhachevskii was finally taken into custody on May 22. On a single day, a military court made up of other high officers tried eight men in camera. Found guilty of treason and espionage, all were executed the next day. Pp.50-51

Robert W. Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941*. Yale University Press, 1996.

#### Questions and points for discussion

1. In what circumstances did fellow army officers make accusations against Tukachevskii?
2. What accusation against Tukachevskii was made by these officers?
3. Discuss ways in which the trial of Tukachevskii differed from the show trials.



Photo: Voroshilov, Molotov, Stalin and Yezhov. 1937,

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Voroshilov,\\_Molotov,\\_Stalin,\\_with\\_Nikolai\\_Yezhov.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Voroshilov,_Molotov,_Stalin,_with_Nikolai_Yezhov.jpg)

## The 'Great Fear'

### Source 14 (edited)

Ida Slavin describes the arrest of her father, Ilia, a leading figure who had joined the Bolsheviks in 1921. Ida had just celebrated her sixteenth birthday with her family. The date was 5<sup>th</sup> November, 1937. The NKVD arrived at 1 a.m.

I was suddenly awoken by a bright light and a strange voice, telling me to get dressed quickly. An NKVD officer was standing at the door. He led me into Papa's office. There was Papa, sitting on a stool in the middle of the room, looking suddenly much older. Mama, my brother and his pregnant wife sat with me on the divan.

Looking around my father's office, the NKVD officer (I shall always remember his name: Beigel) would sigh from time to time: 'What a lot of books you have. I am a student and I don't have this many books.' Leafing through the books, he would stop whenever he found one with an inscription to my father, pound his fist on the table and demand in a loud voice, 'Who is this author?'

Then Beigel told me to bring my German textbook. He turned to an article by Karl Radek at the end of the textbook. With a grand gesture Beigel tore the pages out of the textbook, lit them with a match, and said, 'Be thankful that this thing has been destroyed and that I don't have to take you away with your daddy.' I was too frightened to say anything.

Cited in Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*. Penguin Books 2008, p.246

### Questions and points for discussion

1. What was the "strange voice" that Ida Slavin heard when she was awoken at 1a.m. on the night of 5<sup>th</sup> November, 1937?
2. Discuss why Ida's father, Ilia, looked "suddenly older".
3. Did Beigel approve or disapprove of the fact that Ilia Slavin had a lot of books? Suggest a reason for this.
4. Discuss why Beigel pounded his fist on the table whenever he saw a book with an inscription to Ilia Slavin.
5. Discuss why Beigel tore pages from Ida's German textbook and burned these.
6. Why did Beigel tell Ida, "Be thankful that this thing has been destroyed"?

## Source 15

Aleksandr Karpetnin, a former NKVD operative who was himself arrested in 1938, recalls his training in the recruitment of informers.

You would look for people who had something suspicious in their background. Let's say a woman whose husband had been arrested. The conversation would go like this:

'Are you a true Soviet citizen?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Are you ready to prove it? Everyone says they're good citizens.'

'Yes of course I'm ready.'

'Then help us. We won't ask much. If you notice any anti-Soviet acts or conversation, let us know. We can meet once a week. Beforehand, you should write down what you noticed, who said what, who was present when they spoke. That's all. Then we'll know that you really are a good Soviet citizen. We'll help you if you have any problems in work. If you're sacked or demoted, we'll help you.'

That was it. After that the person would agree.

Cited in Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*. Penguin Books 2008, pp.262-263

### Questions and points for discussion

1. According to Source 13, what kind of people did the NKVD recruit as informers?
2. What did potential recruits have to do to prove that they were 'good citizens'?
3. What offers of help did potential recruits receive from their NKVD contact?
4. The book by the historian, Orlando Figes, from which this testimony is taken is called, *The Whisperers*. Discuss or research the reasons for this title.

## Secondary Source 10

By March 1938, there was ample reason for Soviet leaders to fear war. Japanese aggression in the Soviet Far East and in China, the Spanish fascists' victories over the army of the Spanish Republic and the International Brigades, Germany's increasingly menacing policies and its occupation of Austria, and the anaemic reaction of Western powers to these events and the failure of the Soviet efforts to achieve collective security provided sufficient cause for concern in Moscow ...

The 1938 trial 'proved' that the defendants had served many masters for many years ... Germany, Japan, Poland, and England were presented as the most active enemies of Soviet power ... these men sought the large-scale 'dismemberment' of the USSR.

William Chase, Stalin as producer: the Moscow show trials and the construction of mortal threats, in Sarah Davies and James Harris (eds.) *Stalin: A New History*. Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp.243-244

### Questions and points for discussion

1. The writer says that the Soviet leaders had good reason to fear war by March 1938 and he gives a number of reasons for this. What are these reasons?
2. Which 'masters' were the defendants at the 1938 show trial accused of serving?
3. The charges at the trial said that the defendants had wished to bring about the large-scale 'dismemberment' of the USSR. What does this mean?

## Source 16

### An American cartoonist's view of the show trials, 1938



<http://shantisathianstalin.wordpress.com/source-c/source-h/>

**Point for discussion:** What is the 'essential message' of this cartoon?

## POSTSCRIPT

## Source 17

### The Nazi- Soviet Pact, 1939: a cartoon by American cartoonist, Herb Block



<http://www.johndclare.net/RoadtoWWII8.htm>

### Points for discussion

1. People all over the world were shocked when the Soviet Union signed a pact with Nazi Germany in August 1939. Why was this so?
2. Discuss the likely reaction of victims of the show trials to this development.

## AFTERMATH

### The fate of Yezhov

#### Source 18

A



Photo: Voroshilov, Molotov, Stalin and Yezhov. 1937

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Voroshilov,\\_Molotov,\\_Stalin,\\_with\\_Nikolai\\_Yezhov.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Voroshilov,_Molotov,_Stalin,_with_Nikolai_Yezhov.jpg)

B



<http://www.executedtoday.com/2012/02/04/1940-nikolai-yezhov-terror-namesake/>

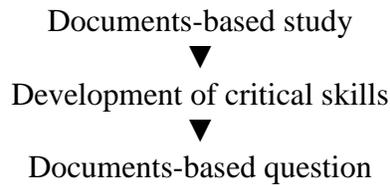
#### Note:

Version A of the photograph shows Vorishilov, Molotov, Stalin and Yezhov together in 1937. After Yezhov was himself shot in 1940 (see biographical note on page 13) Version A of the photograph was suppressed and Version B was used in its place.

#### Point for discussion

1. Why do you think Yezhov's image was removed from the photograph?
2. Do you know of any other example in Stalin's Russia where a photograph was 'doctored' or interfered with for a similar purpose?

## A critical skills exercise



The documents-based study is “ the primary means of developing their skills in working with evidence ”. (S.5)

The documents-based question, “ will test candidates’ ability to interrogate, correlate and evaluate a particular body of evidence ”. (S.15)

### Rationale for card sorts

In a card sort, cards with text (single words, phrases, sentences) are grouped or ranked according to particular criteria. Card sorts are good in helping students to make connections and form judgements. By having the text on cards, students can move them around, group them and, when necessary, change their minds. This approach promotes discussion and collaborative learning.

The intention of the critical skills exercise on the pages that follow is to illustrate in a practical and active manner the type of critical skills that the documents-based study is designed to develop. Essentially, the purpose of the exercise is to encourage students to THINK by discussing snippets of evidence and making judgements on their import by deciding whether they support or oppose the given proposition. The PLAY element is important and the exercise should be an engaging one for students. The intention is not to come up with answers that are either ‘right’ or ‘wrong’: much of the value of the exercise is in the process itself. That said, it should be possible to reach consensus in most cases and to clarify misunderstandings – where these arise – in the process.

In literacy development, such approaches can play a pivotal role as students engage together in purposeful reading and discussion of text and are active participants in the learning process.

### What is involved in the critical skills exercise

Each group of 4-5 students is given an A4 sheet with the proposition at the top of the page and two columns headed: **Agrees** and **Disagrees**. Each group is also given an envelope containing 8 short documentary extracts – each on its own small strip of paper or cardboard – and the task is to discuss with each other the appropriate column in which to place each extract. When each group has reached its conclusions, the outcome of the exercise is discussed in a whole group setting.

**Proposition: Stalin's show trials were motivated by a desire to protect the Soviet Union from internal and external enemies**

Place each of the source extracts in the appropriate column, depending on whether you think it agrees or disagrees with the above proposition. If the group cannot agree on whether a particular extract agrees or disagrees with the proposition, place it along the dividing line in the middle and wait to hear what other groups have to say about the extract.

Agrees	Disagrees

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Source A</i></b></p> <p>We were obligated by a desire to ensure that in time of war there would be no fifth column. If Rykov and Zinoviev joined the opposition during war, there would have been a cruel struggle and colossal losses. Everyone would have been destroyed.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Source E</i></b></p> <p>You asked if I heard about the trial of Piatakov on the radio. I heard it all – and now I understand that my own downfall is entirely due to those scoundrels the Trotskyists – they tried to destroy our [Soviet] Union.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Source B</i></b></p> <p>Zinoviev and Kamenev, veterans of the Revolution and Lenin’s first comrades-in-arms are shot like mad dogs. As always, the same techniques shared by Hitler and Robespierre: ideological differences are called a conspiracy.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Source F</i></b></p> <p>We have uncovered ties between the Zinovievists with Trotsky’s foreign counterrevolutionary organization, and systematic ties with the German fascist secret police (Gestapo). No mercy, no leniency for enemies of the people who have tried to deprive the people of its leaders.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Source C</i></b></p> <p>The trial sums up the results of the struggle against the Soviet state by people who spent the whole of their lives behind masks, who deceived the Party in order to do their black work of treachery.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Source G</i></b></p> <p>As the trial has gone on, it has become more and more impossible to discover the grains of truth or to understand the mental processes of the accused who wallow in confessions of treason.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Source D</i></b></p> <p>The indictment charges that a parallel centre was organised in 1933. Its task was to direct espionage and organise wrecking and terrorist activities for the purpose of undermining the military strength of the Soviet Union and accelerate an armed attack upon the country by assisting foreign powers.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Source H</i></b></p> <p>The accusations levelled against him are denied by Trotsky.          “I can demonstrate to the whole world that the Moscow trial is an act of hate. I only ask for a brief period of time for the accusers to become the accused.”</p>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Source E</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Molotov</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Cited in Orlando Figes, <i>The Whisperers</i>, Penguin Books, 2008, p.239</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Source A</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Pavel Vittenburg, a biologist who spent many years in labour camps</p> <p style="text-align: center;">From a letter to his wife Yevgeniia in February 1937 cited in Orlando Figes, <i>The Whisperers</i>, p.276</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Source F</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Pravda</i> 12 September, 1936</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Cited in Vadim Z. Rogovin, <i>1937: Stalin's Year of Terror</i>, Mehring Books Inc, 1998, p.14</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Source B</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Stefan Zweig</p> <p style="text-align: center;">In a letter to fellow writer, Romain Rolland after the 1936 show trial,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Cited in Vadim Z. Rogovin, <i>1937: Stalin's Year of Terror</i>, Mehring Books Inc, 1998, p.42</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Source G</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Editorial in <i>The Manchester Guardian</i> (edited)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">25 August, 1936</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Source C</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Andrey Vyshinsky (edited)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">At the 1938 show trial</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Source H</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The Irish Times</i> (edited)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">20 August, 1936</p> <p style="text-align: center;">‘From Reuter’s correspondent’</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Source D</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The Observer</i> (edited)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">24 January, 1937</p> <p style="text-align: center;">‘From our own correspondent’</p>

## Historians' views about Stalin's show trials

### Secondary Source A

There is no indication that the Moscow spectacles provoked widespread personal fear of the authorities. And why should the trials have done so? They involved former high party officials and a few prominent physicians, not ordinary people. Even at provincial show trials, the defendants were officials. Ordinary peasants, surely to their delight, played a prominent role in accusing the defendants and complaining loudly in court about their abuses. P.144

Robert W. Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941*. Yale University Press, 1996.

### Secondary Source B

By 1934, Zinoviev and Kamenev were politically bankrupt. There is no evidence that they had any significant following in the central committee or the party at large. Bukharin, Rykov, Tomskii and other former Right Oppositionists were thoroughly marginalized. Trotsky could be discounted: despite the occasional smuggled letter he was of no significance. But in the frenzied atmosphere of the times they all appeared to pose an enormous threat, an alternative to the fragile unity coalescing around Stalin. Their utter ruin seemed necessary if the regime was to be saved and its policies secured ... . P.144

Chris Ward, *Stalin's Russia*. Edward Arnold, 1993.

### Secondary Source C

The pattern laid down during this era of Soviet history still guides action within the Soviet sphere – 'trials' in which accusations of unbelievable duplicity are spliced with bizarre 'confessions'. Not merely have the Moscow Trials never been publicly repudiated, but the various trials after the Second World War, in the Soviet satellites especially, and the routine charges of complicity in worldwide conspiracies sporadically levelled at various rivals or opponents of ruling factions within the regime, are clearly modelled on the events of the thirties in the Soviet Union. P.viii  
Joel Carmichael, *Stalin's Masterpiece: The Show Trials and Purges of the Thirties – the Consolidation of the Bolshevik Dictatorship*. St. Martin's Press, New York, 1976.

### Secondary Source D

Stalin played an active and direct role in the formulation and execution of show trials. But it bears repeating that the Moscow show trials, like all show trials, were complex undertakings that depended upon a large cast of devoted or compliant characters to be successful ... Between a person's arrest and a trial, there were depositions, interrogations, confrontations with accusers or witnesses, confessions, the compilation of evidence and dossiers, and the various administrative and judicial preparations for the trials. These were essential to the success of a trial and to conveying its legitimacy to the citizenry. Many Soviet leaders and citizens shared Stalin's views on the perceived dangers that threatened the USSR. Their beliefs enabled them to play active and reliable roles in organising or publicising the trials. Pp.231-232

William Chase, Stalin as producer: the Moscow show trials and the construction of mortal threats, in Sarah Davies and James Harris (eds.) *Stalin: A New History*. Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp.226-248

### Secondary Source E

The language of these trials was as obscure as hieroglyphics and could only be understood in the Aesopian imagery of the closed Bolshevik universe of conspiracies of evil against good in which 'terrorism' simply signified any doubt about the policies or character of Stalin. All his political opponents were *per se* assassins.

Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2003, p.193.

### Secondary Source F

The main defendants at the show trials, being sophisticated political figures could not help but realise what a risk the organisation of such trials entailed for Stalin. Without doubt, Stalin himself and his cohorts were also well aware of the risk involved. The renunciation of “confessions” at a court session might break up the entire grandiose provocation and weaken the Great Terror as a whole. For this reason the preparation of the open trials was conducted with a painstaking selection of a few individuals from hundreds of possible defendants. p.166

Vadim Z. Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*. Mehring Books Inc., 1998.

### Interrogating the historians

Our enquiry has focused on the question:

*Why were so many high-profile members of the Communist Party brought to trial at 'show' trials and subsequently executed between 1936 and 1938?*

1. Which of the historians mention the role of Stalin in the organisation of the show trials?
2. Which of the historians suggest that the trials were designed to remove people who were seen as a threat to Stalin's régime?
3. Which historian argues that the show trials were complex to organise and depended on large numbers of people besides Stalin agreeing with the action undertaken? According to this historian, what belief did these people share with Stalin?
4. Which historian suggests that the trials involved a risk on Stalin's part? What was that risk? How was the risk minimised?
5. Which historians emphasise the popular interest in and support for the show trials? Is any explanation for this offered? Explain your answer.
6. Which historian suggests that the trials were based on a simplistic, 'good v. bad' idea of reality? Explain his view.
7. Which source was published before the end of the Cold War? What is your evidence for this? What statement that he makes is no longer altogether accurate given statements made by Russian courts since 1985? (You may need to check the biographical notes on some of the victims to help you with this.)
8. With regard to the enquiry question above, which of the historians make comments that are directly relevant to this question? In each case, explain how the comment is relevant.

## Your conclusions on the enquiry



Based on the evidence you have encountered in the course of the enquiry, draw up

- (a) a list of what you think are the TWO most important reasons for the holding of the first show trial in August
- (b) a list of what you think are the TWO most important additional reasons why a second show trial was held in January 1937
- (c) a list of the TWO most significant developments that lay behind the holding of the ‘Great Purge Trial’ of March 1938

Make your case in a written report, devoting one paragraph to each of the reasons identified. In a concluding paragraph, give your judgement – based on the evidence you have read – in relation to the enquiry question: *Why were so many high-profile members of the Communist Party brought to trial at ‘show’ trials and subsequently executed between 1936 and 1938?*

OR

Now that we have looked at a wide range of evidence on the reasons for the show trials of 1936, 1937 and 1938

- What do you think are the TWO main reasons for the show trial of August 1936?
- What do you think are the TWO main reasons for the show trial of January 1937?
- What do you think are the TWO main reasons for the show trial of March 1938?
- For each of the reasons you give, you must back up your reason with evidence from the primary sources (such as newspaper reports, film clips, diary extracts) or secondary sources (such as extracts from the writings of historians) that we have studied.