

Optimised Study Guide — Stalinist Control & the Great Terror

Optimised, exam-focused study guide for Stalinist political control and the Great Terror (Unit 3, Elective 2, Component C08-U3E2). Grounded in the 2020–2025 SCSA exams and marking keys, especially the 2022 Q7 on the key events and consequences of Stalin's Purges 1934–39. Covers the origins and stages of the Terror (Ryutin, the Kirov murder, show trials, the purge of the party, military and people, Yezhovshchina), the NKVD and gulag system, and the political, economic and human consequences. Leads with exam priorities and marking-key expectations.

The Great Terror (1934–39) was the bloody core of Stalinist control: a wave of purges, show trials and mass arrests that consumed the Party, the army and ordinary citizens alike. Exam questions ask you to know the *key events* in sequence and to weigh the *consequences* — political, economic and above all human.

The marking-key steer. The 2022 essay — *"Examine the key events and consequences of Stalin's Purges between 1934 and 1939"* — wants **both halves**: a clear account of the key events (Kirov, show trials, the three waves) *and* a developed analysis of consequences (political consolidation, a fearful compliant society, gulag labour, the military's weakening, and the staggering human toll). Don't write all narrative and no consequences.

How this content is examined

- **Essays.** "Examine the events and consequences of the Purges," or broader questions on the methods Stalin used to control the USSR (links to the social/cultural guide).
- **Source analysis.** Show-trial reports and cult-of-personality propaganda require you to explain how the regime manufactured guilt and fear.

Answer the verb. Examine = inquire into in detail — here, set out the events *and* investigate their consequences. **Assess/Analyse** versions want a judgement on significance or on which methods of control mattered most.

1. Origins (1932–34)

- **The Ryutin Affair (1932):** a Party platform criticising Stalin; in its wake, around a million "Ryutinists" were expelled from the Party.
- **1934 — the turn:** Stalin widened the purges from open opponents to colleagues, driven by paranoia. Law enforcement was centralised into the [NKVD](#) (the secret police).

2. The key events (1934–39)

- **The Kirov murder (Dec 1934).** The popular Leningrad party boss was assassinated (very possibly on Stalin's orders). Stalin used it as the pretext, issuing the **Decree against terrorist acts** and blaming "Trotskyites" — opening the floodgates.
- **The show trials.** Leading Old Bolsheviks — **Zinoviev and Kamenev** (1936), later Bukharin — were tried publicly and "confessed" to fantastical conspiracies, manufacturing the myth of an enemy within.
- **Purge of the Party.** Of the 139 Central Committee members elected in 1934, only 41 survived. Even the NKVD was purged (some 23,000 killed) — no one was safe.
- **Purge of the military (from 1937).** Civil War heroes including **Marshal Tukhachevsky** were accused of conspiracy and executed; the terror swept the army, navy and air force.
- **The Yezhovshchina (1937–38).** Under NKVD chief Yezhov, terror reached the general population through a **quota system** allocating arrest numbers to each region.

3. Consequences

- **Political:** Stalin's power over Party and state was total; potential rivals and regional bases of independence were eliminated.
- **Social:** a compliant, fearful population, bound by a culture of informing and denunciation — fear became the regime's organising principle.
- **Economic:** a double edge — terror enforced commitment to Five-Year Plan targets and the expanding **gulag** supplied slave labour for dangerous work (mining, canals), but it also destroyed expertise.
- **Military weakness:** the officer purge gutted the army's leadership and experience — exposed by the humiliating war against Finland in 1939, and a grave liability on the eve of WWII.
- **Human:** on the order of **1.5 million executions and 1.8 million arrests**; almost every Soviet family suffered loss. This human catastrophe is the consequence examiners most want weighted.

4. Historical perspectives

- **"Intentionalist":** the Terror was Stalin's deliberate, top-down design to secure absolute power.
- **"Revisionist":** the Terror also grew from below — local officials, quotas, denunciations and bureaucratic chaos amplified it beyond any single plan.
- **Rational or paranoid?** Was the Terror a calculated tool of control or the product of Stalin's pathological suspicion — or both?

5. Recurring exam question patterns & what high answers do

- **"Examine the key events and consequences of the Purges."** High answers: sequence the events (origins → Kirov → show trials → party → military → people) and then weigh the consequences across categories, ending on the human cost.
- **"Assess the methods Stalin used to control the USSR."** High answers: combine terror with propaganda, the cult of personality and cultural control (see the social/cultural guide).

Recall self-test. Can you:

- Explain the Ryutin Affair and the 1934 shift from opponents to colleagues?
- Explain how the Kirov murder was used to launch the Terror?
- Describe the show trials and why the confessions mattered?
- Sequence the three waves — Party, military, people (Yezhovshchina) — with figures and scale?
- Explain the role of the NKVD and the gulag?
- Weigh the political, social, economic, military and human consequences?
- Argue both the intentionalist and revisionist interpretations of the Terror?