

Stalin's Show Trials | Sample Answer

‘Why did Stalin conduct a series of Show Trials during the years 1936-1938 and what was their impact on the Soviet Union’ (2019)

Before the Trials

Stalin became a general secretary of the Communist Party in 1922. He used this position to build up contacts and place his loyal followers in important positions of the party. After Lenin died in 1924, there was a struggle of power between Stalin and Trotsky. Trotsky seemed most likely to succeed Lenin as he had commanded the Red Guards in the October Revolution of 1917 and he was a good organiser and public speaker. So Stalin knew he had to use clever tactics; he conspired with Kamenev and Zinoviev to marginalise the favoured Trotsky before subsequently outmanoeuvring both Kamenev and Zinoviev, assuming total power in the later 1920s, and creating a totalitarian dictatorship.

The Communist Party now controlled the press and media and used propaganda. He used secret police NKVD to put down the opposition and to control the five year plans. A cult of Stalin was encouraged. He was almost treated like a god, with posters, stamps and photographs produced, cities named after him and songs written about him. Forced industrialisation and collectivisation led to opposition from society. He needed to purge society to get rid of anyone that didn't agree with him. So after the leader of the Communist Party in Leningrad, Kirov, was assassinated in 1934, he used this as an excuse to begin the purges.

Hundreds of people in the Communist Party were arrested and ordinary Russians were arrested and disappeared in the middle of the night, sent to the gulags! Stalin was now suspicious that anybody could be opposing him, especially Trotsky. So he organised three Show Trials in Moscow as part of his great purge! They were trials of former high-ranking Communists or old Bolsheviks, used to eliminate any serious threats.

All the show trials followed a similar pattern. The defendants were accused of ridiculous crimes. They produced a written confession but the verdict was usually decided before trial. There were

no rules of evidence. The proceedings were published nationally and internationally. Majority were executed and the lawyer Vyshinsky was bullying, witty and completely obedient!

The First Show Trial

The first show trial in 1936 was called the trial of the 16. Zinoviev, Kamenev and 14 other leaders were tried. They were accused of murdering Kirov, planning to kill Stalin, working with Trotskyites and plotting with Nazi Germany. The NKVD forced confessions from Zinoviev, Kamenev by holding them in isolation and threatening their families. Once they confessed, the 16 of them had to learn of their lines for the trial. Once they were found guilty, Vyshinsky ordered the death penalty, they were shot the next morning and their property was confiscated. The soviet newspapers applauded it and encouraged further purges.

The Second Show Trial

The second show trials were in 1937 and were called the trial of the 17. The defendants were Radek, Pyatakov and 15 other Trotsky supporters. They were accused of conspiring with Germany and Japan against the Soviet Union and of wrecking and sabotaging the Five-year plans. They confessed and were found guilty, thirteen were executed and four were sent to labour camps.

The Third Show Trial

The third show trial of 1938 was also called the Great Show Trials. The accused were Bukharin, Rykov and Yagoda and eighteen others. Yagoda was head of secret police NKVD which proved that nobody was safe. They were accused of being Trotskyites, of wrecking and sabotaging the economy and of attempting to assassinate Stalin. They pleaded guilty, Bukharin pleaded guilty after they had threatened the lives of his wife and children. They were all executed except for three minor officials.

The Impacts

Stalin was now in complete charge of the Party. There were now only 2 of the original 15 man Bolshevik government. They were used as propaganda that anyone could be a traitor and completely characteristic of his totalitarian state. The show trials were also used to intensify the purges as more and more people were sent to the gulags.