Socialist Economic Development and State Terrorism in the Soviet Union

By

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Submitted to the Department of Political Science in
Fulfillment of the Requirements for Honors Notation

At

Indiana University Bloomington

May 2011

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This paper will examine the role of terror in totalitarian political systems, specifically the Soviet Union during the Stalinist and immediately post-Stalinist periods. State terrorism is defined as “widespread acts of cruelty committed by a state against its own people” (Aust). The paper seeks to determine the effects of large state terror operations in relation to the goals of the state. It will explore the goals of the Soviet government, especially its desire for economic development, and examine any links between terror campaigns and the success of the government in implementing its political goals, especially industrialization.

The dominant interpretation of the Soviet system under Stalin developed out of Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski’s study on totalitarianism, in which they identify “a system of terror, whether physical or psychic, effected through party and secret police control” (22, 1965) as a defining quality of the political system. This paper asks if this defining trait, state terrorism, actually did serve as a useful tool to meet Soviet political goals. Friedrich and Brzezinski argue that the totalitarian state’s ultimate goal is power, that “the ‘essence’ of totalitarianism is to be seen in such a regime’s control of the everyday life of its citizens...of their thoughts and attitudes as well as their activities” (16, 1965). This paper asks whether terrorism was useful for accomplishing policy goals beyond dominating society.

This paper concludes that state terrorism was a useful tool at certain points in Soviet history and counterproductive at others, depending on how it was targeted. Terror campaigns that were directly targeted at threats to the Soviet economic system, that is, anyone who preferred eating over Stalin’s vision of “progress,” were, at appalling cost in human life, effective for creating an industrial
economy under the complete control of the socialist system. On the other hand, terror campaigns aimed at the Party itself, or at the general public without much targeting at all, appear to have been counterproductive to the Soviet economic agenda. Thus, only the disturbed psychology of the individual dictator can explain these waves of repression.

The Soviet Union between 1928 and the mid-1950s is an ideal case study for an analysis of the role of terror in a totalitarian system. The concept of totalitarianism developed out of analysis of Stalinism, along with Nazism. The period between 1928 and the mid-1950s featured widely varying levels of state terrorism within the Soviet Union, although it was always present to some degree. This particular period of history also makes an ideal case study because the government published its economic goals in its Five Year Plans. Obviously these plans are political documents as much as economic, and were not especially reliable as predictors of how the Soviet economy would actually perform, but they clearly demonstrate the Soviet government’s goals, especially its commitment to rapid industrial growth. The Soviet government’s open proclamation of its desire for rapid industrialization, the length of Stalin’s reign, and the presence of multiple campaigns of mass terror with intermittent periods of less terror qualify the Soviet Union under Stalin as the single most useful case study for drawing general conclusions about the role of terrorism in a totalitarian state.

During the Stalin period, the Soviet government used state terrorism on a massive scale. This paper developed out of my puzzlement at Stalin’s Great Purge and expanded to include a variety of crimes perpetrated by the Soviet government.
This paper will attempt to interpret and categorize each wave of terror, but counted
together, Stalin’s victims number perhaps 20 million (Conquest, 710, 1971).
Government oppression on this scale appeared impractical to me, and this paper
will attempt to determine whether that oppression was actually functional for the
Soviet government.

The Soviet Union also became an industrial and military juggernaut under
Stalin. At the end of Stalin’s life, the Soviet Union had become the world’s second
greatest industrial power and possessed a huge, modern military with nuclear
weapons. Outrageous human suffering and fantastic industrial growth stand out as
two defining features of Stalin’s rule, and some sources attempt to link the two.

Theoretically, terror and industrial progress might be linked because the
Soviet government wanted to eliminate or intimidate various groups that stood in
the way of the new economic agenda. For example, in the late 1920s and early
1930s, the Soviet government saw kulaks, who owned their own land and hired
others to work it, as an obstacle to collectivization. The kulaks had resisted
government requisitioning of food and supplies as early as 1918, and their economic
clout had grown during the New Economic Policy, or NEP years, when the
government had taken a comparatively hands-off approach to the economy
following the Civil War (Medvedev, 230-231, 1991). Collectivization was critical for
allowing the government to extract a surplus from the peasantry to pay for
industrialization (Moore, 73, 1966). By arresting and shooting kulaks, perhaps the
government was able to break any resistance and begin crash-industrialization.
Perhaps the party purges of the mid-1930s and early 1950s contributed to the functioning of the Soviet system as well. Perhaps Stalin believed that by purging the party apparatus, he was keeping the Soviet Union “on its toes,” so to speak. Merle Fainsod argues that during the 1930s purge, although many Communist Party members avoided taking any initiative in the hopes of surviving the terror, others worked furiously to prove their loyalty (Fainsod, 376, 1953). The purge destroyed human capital, but it also allowed ambitious, energetic Communists to rise to positions of authority. If the purge forced Soviet society to function more efficiently, then it may actually have served the state’s interests.

As stated above, state terrorism is defined as “widespread acts of cruelty committed by a state against its own people” (Aust). To this definition I would add the proposition that terrorist acts must instill fear in the population. Therefore, acts of violence or criminally negligent policies do not qualify as terrorism if they are kept secret from the public. Only acts of violence that intimidate those not directly affected qualify. The paper will examine the Soviet regime’s abuses during the Stalin period and attempt to determine whether each major campaign qualifies as “terror” or as some other kind of oppression.

Terror involves two subcategories. In *Permanent Purge*, Zbigniew Brzezinski distinguishes between a purge, which is “applied against individuals and groups bred within totalitarianism itself,” such as Communist Party operatives, and a campaign of extermination against “elements which totalitarianism a priori marks out for destruction” (25-26). Both occurred within the Soviet Union. Purges involved prosecution of members of the Communist Party for alleged counter-
revolutionary activities, while extermination campaigns involved groups such as the kulaks, who were considered fundamentally problematic to the society the government sought to create. This paper must discuss both types of terror, while also distinguishing between them. Each type could very well affect the society differently. Finally, for the sake of simplicity, I have counted arrests and executions as roughly equivalent, as long as they were carried out in such a way that they would cause the people to fear the government.

The Soviet government pursued several primary goals throughout the Stalin period. Like any dictator, Stalin desired to maintain and enhance his own supremacy within the Soviet Union. Biographers characterize Stalin as paranoid and exceptionally power hungry, even as dictators go. According to Medvedev, “Even though he had great power, it was not enough—he wanted absolute power and unlimited submission to his will” (585, 1989). The government sought rapid industrialization in order to “progress” toward a more “advanced” (and centrally controlled) economic arrangement that might be more compatible with its interpretation of Communism, and it did so through policies that the vast majority of the population would oppose, if given the choice (Moore, 172, 1966). A modern economy also would mean a stronger military, which would add to Stalin’s personal power while enabling him to eventually spread his system to other countries.

Stalin’s personal supremacy over the Communist Party and the Communist Party’s supremacy over the Soviet Union were both firmly established by the mid-1930s at the very latest. By 1929, Stalin had outmaneuvered the “left” and “right” oppositions led by Leon Trotsky and Nikolai Bukharin, respectively. The peasantry
certainly resisted the Communist Party’s push for collectivization, but the Party had utterly broken any resistance by the early 1930s. Perhaps if Stalin himself had not had Sergei Kirov, the popular head of the Leningrad Communist Party and a potential threat to Stalin, killed in 1934, he could have plausibly believed that a campaign of assassination against Party leaders was beginning. However, if Stalin was in any way a rational actor, the desire for security could not explain his use of terror after this point. Terror could not increase security after the mid-1930s, because Stalin’s position and that of the Party were absolutely safe. The other possible exception is that perhaps Stalin feared that the military could actually rise up against him at some point. Again, this might explain Stalin’s actions against the Red Army during the Great Purge, but it cannot explain his purge of the Communist Party and ordinary citizens.

Therefore, terror had to have served another purpose, or else Stalin did not behave rationally in using it. The possibility that Stalin and his subordinates actually acted against their own interests is certainly worth considering. However, before dismissing Stalin’s use of terror as the actions of a paranoid lunatic, one must examine state terrorism’s effect on Soviet economic development.

Economic modernization is a critical aspect of Communist ideology. The ideology explains historical development through economics. The government can push its society forward and better implement Communism through economic development. The Soviet Union in the 1920s lagged behind the Western world economically, and the Party leaders sought to implement their own program of industrialization much more quickly. Therefore, there is a plausible basis for
examining a possible economic aspect of state terrorism. If state terrorism facilitated rapid industrialization, as some have suggested, then perhaps Stalin did act rationally, given the political goals he and his government had set. Or, perhaps at some points Stalin acted rationally and successfully promoted his Communist agenda through highly unethical methods, and other times Stalin lashed out on his people and colleagues to the detriment of his ideological goals.

A huge amount of literature has been devoted to the use of terror and its potential effects under the Stalinist system. In *Terror and Progress*, Barrington Moore suggests that the Soviet government used terrorism rationally to push society into compliance with the regime’s goals. According to Moore, “From the rulers’ standpoint...terror is a means to an end, a rational device, to be used ‘scientifically.’” Aside from individual instances, there is very little cruelty merely for the sake of cruelty in Soviet terror (157, 1966). Terror was actually a useful and perhaps necessary tool of governance in the Soviet Union, and while it appeared “capricious” (158) to many of its victims, it was generally used rationally. In Moore’s view, the Soviet government valued its economic agenda over the lives and well being of its constituents, and when it came to terrorism, the end justified the means.

Unfortunately, Moore does not present much data to defend his argument, and many observers object to his interpretation. Steven Rosefielde analyzes several campaigns of state terrorism in the Soviet Union, North Korea, China, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, which he groups together rather wordily as “siege mobilized terror command” political-economic systems (163, 2010). Rosefielde then
examines economic growth in each of these states during their peak periods of
terror. Regarding the Soviet Union, Rosefielde considers the period between 1928
and 1937 the most representative period of its siege mobilized terror command
system, and he compares economic growth during that period to growth during the
relatively terror-free New Economic Policy years of 1921 to 1928. Soviet GDP grew
by 16.1 percent annually between 1921 and 1928, while it grew by only 6.2 percent
annually between 1929 and 1937. Therefore, according to Rosefielde, Stalin’s
system of terror actually slowed Soviet economic growth, and was therefore
irrational, even given the regime’s goals and values.

However, Rosefielde’s analysis is problematic. Rosefielde evaluates the
political-economic systems of six countries between 1921 and 2000 over the course
of ten pages. Naturally, his analysis is somewhat shallow. For example, as
Rosefielde notes, the Soviet government pursued “superindustrialization” under
Stalin (165). Rosefielde then presents data on GDP growth as a whole, instead of the
growth rate of industrial production. If Rosefielde really wants to evaluate the
efficacy of terror on Stalin’s own terms, he should present more specific data.

Rosefielde’s analysis also groups the years from 1929 to 1937 together, as
though the government conducted one consistent campaign of terror over the entire
period. In reality, two major campaigns of bloodletting occurred between 1929 and
1937. Rosefielde does not take into account Brzezinski’s distinction between a
campaign to eliminate a supposed enemy of the Party and a purge of the Party itself.
His analysis is also problematic because the NEP followed the destruction of the
Russian Civil War, which itself immediately followed Russia’s economically
disastrous involvement in World War I. The civil war ruined the Russian economy, and the economic growth rate was naturally quite high because it started from such a low point.

Of course, Rosefielde’s hypothesis could still be correct. Perhaps mass terror, or at least some campaigns of terror, did indeed hinder the Soviet Union’s pursuit of rapid industrialization. If that is the case, Stalin did not govern rationally, at least some of the time. Robert Tucker argues that the terror of the Stalinist system had far more to do with the personality of the dictator than with any rational policy decisions. Tucker notes that many social scientists are reluctant to attribute too much historical significance to an individual actor, but he argues that Stalin was an exceptionally powerful dictator and that his personality heavily influenced Soviet policy (37, 1971). According to Tucker, the Stalinist terror was due to the irrational actions and beliefs of the individual dictator, rather than a rational tool for “forced modernization” (36).

A more detailed and focused examination of waves of repression and industrial growth will clarify how terror really functioned in the Soviet system. Moore argues that terror was a tool for implementing the government’s policy of rapid economic progress, which in the Soviet case meant industrialization. Industrialization required the extraction of a surplus from the people to invest in industry, as well as social reorganization to obtain that surplus, and send workers to the factories, mines and various construction projects. Reorganizing the people rapidly could only be done through coercion, or terror. For example, according to Moore, “for its effective functioning the system requires frequent violations of both
the spirit and the letter of the law” (157-158), such as when the government broke the landowning peasants (and quite a few other victims). Therefore, increased and appropriately targeted terror should be correlated with increased levels of industrial growth.

To evaluate terror, I will look at annual per-capita occurrences of political arrests and executions. While looking at the scale of the terror, I will also examine who was targeted. Unlike Rosefielde, I will discuss each wave of terror on its own. I rely on several sources and will use the best data available for each wave of repression. I will strive to use the most specific data I can find, and most importantly, when possible, I will use data released from the former Soviet Archives, rather than the best guesses of researchers writing during the Cold War. I will briefly discuss the war years of 1939 to 1945, but because the Soviet Union faced a series of threats from the outside, this period is fundamentally different from the rest of the Stalin era. I will therefore emphasize the war years far less than the rest of Stalin’s rule.

To evaluate potential economic consequences, I will examine industrial growth. Reliable economic data is more difficult to find than data on arrests and murders, but I have found fairly solid estimates of industrial production growth during each Five Year Plan.

Figure 1 displays arrests and executions between 1929 and 1953.
I use data from Steven Rosefielde’s informative but frustrating book for pre-war arrests and executions because it is the most specific data available (74, 2010). Other writers have different numbers. Roy Medvedev presents much higher figures for collectivization in *Let History Judge* (233, 1989), but he refers to numbers of deported kulak families, so his totals are far less specific. Rosefielde’s data is imperfect as well: he refers to “judicial repression” as an umbrella term that presumably means both executions and deportations, but he does not explicitly say
so. Regardless of whose data is used, the numbers are blurry, but the story is roughly the same. Stephen Curtois’ *The Black Book of Communism* provides good numbers for post-war arrests, but it groups together the entire post-war period. Therefore, in Figure 1 I have averaged the total post war arrests and executions across the 1945 to 1953 period, and rounded them to the nearest thousand.

Figure 2 displays annual industrial growth grouped into periods for which the data is available. For context, between 1888 and 1913, during the late Tsarist period, Russian industrial growth was around five percent per year (Nove, 12, 1969).

Fig. 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Industrial Growth Rate</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1928-32</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Bergson and Powell. (155 and appendix)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932-37</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>Ibid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937-40</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Ibid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940-45</td>
<td>-10.5</td>
<td>Ibid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945-50</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>Ibid</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3 is a graphic representation of the (lack of) correlation between arrest and execution totals (which are grouped together as judicial repression) and the industrial growth rate. For this chart I averaged yearly arrests and executions across each period for which the industrial growth rate is available, and I excluded the World War II period. I also included a “best fit” line to demonstrate that the correlation between the scale of terror and industrial growth is extremely limited, at least when terror is viewed as broadly as possible. Establishing a connection
between terror and industrial growth requires looking at each wave of terror independently and evaluating its targets.

A careful look at the data from Figures 1 and 2, and an analysis of how the terror was targeted during each period, suggests the differing consequences of each wave of terrorism. The aftermath of the first great wave of terror under Stalin included extremely rapid industrial growth, while growth slowed following the Great Purge of 1936 to 1938. Following the war, industrial growth picked up again, undoubtedly because output had bottomed out. A renewed terror campaign accompanied this growth. By the 1950s, the way the Soviet government was using
terror probably became counterproductive, at least from an economic standpoint. The gulag population swelled, as Figure 4 will demonstrate on page 19, and industrial growth declined, though not as significantly as between 1937 and 1940. Finally, following Stalin’s death, the state cut back on arrests and released much of the Gulag population. At the same time, industrial production began to grow more rapidly.

A closer look at each terror campaign can help make more sense of the data. Stalin achieved absolute supremacy within the Soviet Union by the late 1920s, and his first major terror campaign began soon after. This campaign, which first involved mass arrests and shootings in 1929, was probably linked to the first Five Year Plan. Rosefielde’s data indicates that around 200,000 people were arrested by the secret police each year between 1930 and 1933 in the dekulakisation campaign. Medvedev presents the details of the debate over how to implement collectivization in *Let History Judge*. He argues that that eventually Stalin determined that the kulaks must be crushed. Medvedev explains that, according to GPU reports, 115,231 kulak families were exiled to Siberia in the period before October 1930. In 1931, 265,795 more families were exiled. Medvedev estimates an average between four and six people per family, which gives a total between 1,524,000 and 2,286,000 people exiled from the Ukraine alone (233, 1991).

These figures, however, are a low estimate. Medvedev notes that some families were not sent to Siberia, but instead were moved to other parts of the Ukraine. Additionally, “hundreds of thousands” of less prosperous peasants “were exiled as kulak supporters.” Finally, some Cossack families were exiled as late as
1932, and the actual numbers are unfortunately unavailable. Medvedev estimates that up to one million families qualify as “dispossessed kulaks,” meaning that perhaps four to six million people could have directly experienced government intimidation (233-234, 1991).

However, the story on “dekulakisation” is still incomplete. The data is even blurrier on this topic, but millions starved to death in the Ukrainian famine of 1932-1933. Rosefielde contends that collectivization caused 8,759,000 deaths in the Soviet Union, with the vast majority resulting from starvation in the Ukraine, though he concedes that the data is questionable (37, 2010). Even if this count is high, famine deaths unquestionably number in the millions. If famine deaths are counted, the 1929 to 1933 period is the most intense period of terror in Soviet history.

Whether or not famine deaths should be counted as terrorism, however, is debatable. As defined previously, terrorism must be intended to intimidate the public. While Rosefielde and others consistently refer to the Ukrainian famine as “terror starvation” or as a “terror famine,” sources also suggest that the famine was kept secret from the general Soviet population (as well as the outside world). A secret event presumably cannot intimidate, at least outside of the population it directly affects. Regardless, the famine was a consequence of the policy of forced collectivization via terrorism. Terrorism was necessary to create the famine; the peasants would not have gone along with policies that traded lives for industry under any other circumstances.
The 200,000 farmers arrested for stealing “state property” by not turning food over to the government during the famine (Rosefielde 41, 2010) certainly do qualify as being arrested with the intent to terrorize the public.

The 1929 to 1933 terror campaign, perhaps along with the 1932-1933 famine, broke the peasantry’s resistance to collectivization. Figure 4 demonstrates the rising percentage of households collectivized between 1927 and 1939.

Fig. 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage of households collectivized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>52.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>61.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>95.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Rosefielde, 37, 2010

About two thirds of the work of collectivization was done between 1929 and 1933. Collectivization directly aided the drive for industrialization. By moving the harvest to huge collective farms, the government could more easily extract “surplus” crop and use it to fund industrialization (Chirot, 146, 1994). At great human cost, collectivization allowed the government to implement a program of socialist industrialization. Figure 2 demonstrates that Soviet industrial growth soared between 1932 and 1937, as collectivization took hold.

Rosefielde’s analysis of prewar Soviet economic growth is problematic because it does not actually evaluate the goals the Soviet government set for itself. The Soviet government consistently favored industrial production growth over agriculture and consumer goods (Zaleski, 504, 1980). The Soviet economy rarely
performed as the Five Year Plans sought, but it consistently came closer to reaching industrial goals than agricultural ones (503, 1980). Rosefielde’s data on economic growth includes declines in agricultural production, which the government was willing to tolerate, as long as it could requisition enough grain to fuel industry. During the first Five Year Plan, Stalin traded food for factories.

According to Robert Conquest, “Collectivization destroyed about 25 per cent of the productive capacity of Soviet agriculture” (Conquest, 47, 1971). At the same time, Soviet grain exports skyrocketed in the early 1930s. In 1929-1930 the Soviet Union exported fewer than 200,000 tons of grain, while in 1930-1931 it exported five million tons. Even during the famine years of 1932-1933, it exported around 1,250,000 tons of grain, which helped pay for investment in capital goods (45).

Bergson notes that the population of farmers declined in the Soviet Union between 1926 and 1939 by at least several million, presumably due to famine deaths and emigration to the cities, and that even at this point, the Soviet Union probably had “surplus” labor in the countryside (309, 1953). Agricultural production dropped significantly, but due to collectivization, the government directly controlled all of that production. Essentially, Stalin traded the lives and livelihoods of farmers for increased industrial production. Though cartoonishly evil, Stalin’s economic agenda was successful in the early 1930s.

Repression always existed on some scale in the Soviet Union, but the next wave of mass arrests did not begin until early 1935. A series of show trials of prominent Communists followed Sergei Kirov’s assassination in late 1934. Medvedev suggests that Stalin probably orchestrated the assassination of Kirov,
whose political clout threatened to eventually surpass Stalin’s (344-345, 1991). If Medvedev is correct, then after Stalin eliminated Kirov, he had little reason to fear for his own security, and the Great Terror must have served another purpose, or else Stalin did not act rationally. Some sources suggest that the mid-30s purge served to “shake up” the Communist Party and keep Soviet society “on its toes.” For example, according to Merle Fainsod, “Terror functioned as a prod, as well as a brake” (376, 1953), as the government purged itself and promoted ambitious young Communists (who were personally beholden to Stalin) to important positions. If this is the case, then perhaps the purge could have furthered the goals of the Soviet state, even as it eliminated some of its loyal operatives.

However, Figure 2 indicates that industrial growth slowed in the 1937 to 1940 period. Stalin’s purge appears to have hindered industrial development, even as Nazi Germany emerged as a serious external threat. Rather than targeting realistic enemies of the state’s agenda, Stalin targeted the state itself, as well as large swaths of the public at large, for terror. In previous years, Party purges had mostly targeted elites who posed a threat to Stalin. For example, in 1927, about 1500 Party members were expelled, including Trotsky and Kamenev, as Stalin consolidated his position (Conquest, 32, 1971). Between 1935 and 1938, at least 1.8 million people were arrested or shot. If famine deaths are not included in the count, then this was the most intense period of terror in Soviet history, and clearly affected the entirety of Soviet society. The purge included the economic planning administration, as well as “practically all factory offices and personnel” (Zaleski, 168, 1971). It also caused delays in economic planning due to turnover within Gosplan (State Planning
Industrial growth naturally lagged. The mid-1930s purge, therefore, was not a particularly effective prod, at least in economic terms.

This paper primarily seeks to evaluate the effects of state terrorism, not its causes, but Stalin’s actions in the mid-1930s warrant an explanation. Two possibilities stand out. The first is that Stalin legitimately feared some kind of conspiracy to assassinate Party leaders in the aftermath of the Kirov murder. This argument requires that Stalin himself did not have Kirov killed, which seems unlikely, but is not impossible. If this is the case, perhaps Stalin’s actions were not entirely irrational.

On the other hand, if Stalin did have Kirov murdered, his actions during the purge were clearly irrational, at least so far as the economic goals of the state are concerned. Stalin was both a committed Communist and a committed dictator. During dekulakisation, these traits complemented each other. During the great purge, Stalin’s dictatorial tendencies hindered the advancement of the Soviet economy. Robert Tucker argues that a system such as Stalinism depends very much upon the personality of the dictator. Tucker notes that many social scientists are reluctant to attribute too much historical significance to an individual actor, but he argues that Stalin was an exceptionally powerful dictator and that his personality heavily influenced Soviet policy (37, 1971). According to Tucker, Stalinist terror was due to the irrational actions and beliefs of the individual dictator, rather than a rational tool for “forced modernization” (36).
Either way, Tucker appears to be correct about the role of the Stalin’s personality, at least so far as the great purge is concerned. Stories about Stalin’s behavior during this period reveal the personal pleasure he derived from crushing his perceived enemies. Medvedev reports that Stalin personally interrogated prisoners on occasion (531). Perhaps most dramatically, Stalin toyed with his former rival Nicolai Bukharin for over a year, starting in late 1936, before finally having him shot in 1938. Medvedev describes Stalin as alternately friendly and aloof with Bukharin, and as sending police to his apartment in 1936 before calling Bukharin and telling him to “Chase them the hell out of there!” (363, 1991). The game drove Bukharin to consider suicide (362-374). Perhaps Stalin hoped that his game would ultimately convince Bukharin to make a confession, but he certainly seemed to gain a sick enjoyment from it as well.

At any rate, the period following the Great Terror was fundamentally different from the rest of Stalin’s rule. World War II was a crisis imposed on the Soviet Union (at least mostly) from the outside, and it wrecked the western part of the country. Soviet industrial production fell by 10.5 percent per year between 1940 and 1945. Domestic terror reportedly waned during the war, as the state’s energies were focused on eliminating threats from the outside, although the Soviet government carried out numerous forced resettlements of ethnic minorities (Rosefielde 81, 2010). Evaluating domestic terror’s effects based on industrial growth during this period is probably impossible, and I have excluded it from most of my analysis.
Following World War II, Stalin began another campaign of repression and terror. The war had devastated the Soviet economy, and a campaign to rebuild began as well.

In 1945 and 1946, the Soviet government regained custody of 4.2 million citizens who had spent time in German POW camps, work camps, or behind Western Allied lines. Of these Soviet citizens, 969,000 were sent to work camps or sentenced to lengthy terms in the gulag (Curtois, 231, 1997). The repression of repatriated citizens was only the beginning of a new wave of terror in the Soviet Union. In 1946-1947, a famine struck the Soviet Union and killed at least half a million people (Curtois, 231). As a result, the Soviet government passed a law treating any “petty theft” from a workplace, including theft of food from a collective farm, as a crime against the state (231-232). In late 1946, about 53,000 collective farmers were arrested for stealing food (233), and in 1947 380,000 farmers and workers were arrested under a broader law punishing any theft of state property (234). Perhaps 1.3 million people in total were convicted of stealing state property between 1947 and 1953 (234). These arrests are reflected in Figure 4, which displays the total gulag population each year between 1930 and 1953.
The gulag population rose gradually during Stalin’s rule before reaching a peak at the start of World War II and then declining during the war, as the Soviet government focused its energies almost exclusively on defeating an outside threat (many prisoners were released and sent to the front). By 1947, the gulag population had begun to grow again, in the wake of a new wave of repression. The gulag population rose during every non-war year, except for 1936-1937, when the government conducted its largest campaign of executions, rather than arrests.

The post-war oppression was accompanied by renewed industrial growth. The German invasion wrecked most of the western part of the Soviet Union, and the
extraordinary industrial growth rate between 1945 and 1950 reflects the lower starting point of industrial production following the war. The growth rate of industrial production actually surpassed that of the 1932 to 1937 period in the post-war years, if Raymond Powell’s data is correct (he acknowledges potential problems with the data and its interpretation; see Bergson, 154-155, 1963). Punishing workers and farmers for stealing from factories and farms makes economic sense even during boom times. After the war, the Soviet government chose to focus on rebuilding industry, rather than agriculture, and threatening the population with arrest, exile, or death, was a plausible method for keeping the industrial economy growing during another devastating famine.

However, the link between terror and progress, as Moore would put it, is not as solid in the post-war years as it was in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Most of the repatriated Soviet citizens who were sent to the gulag or other camps had committed no crime other than seeing the outside world. These arrests once again demonstrate Stalin’s paranoid side. The post-war terror demonstrates that a terror campaign can include rational and irrational targets at the same time.

As Figure 4 demonstrates, the gulag population continued to grow, and during Stalin’s last years it surpassed its pre-war peaks. Terror continued during this period as more workers and peasants were arrested for theft, or on suspicion of theft.

As the gulags grew in size, they became less manageable and less economically productive. According to Rosefielde’s data in figure 4, the gulag system included 1.7 million people by 1953. Curtois claims in the Black Book of
Communism that 2.75 million people were held in the gulag system and similar camps by this time (234). Either way, the system had expanded to the point where it included many prisoners who were not useful to the state. For example, Gulag prisoners included 35,000 children under the age of four by 1953 (Curtois 234). In the early 1950s, gulag prisoners became far less cooperative than in the past. Prisoners went on strike in 1951, and large prison gangs developed. Curtois also notes that by the early 1950s, “Gulag personnel now numbered 208,000” (233-234).

The rising costs of the system of terror became a drag on economic productivity. Figure 2 demonstrates that industrial growth slowed once again during the last years of Stalin’s life. The post-war relationship between terror and industrialization appears to mirror that of the pre-war years. The government used terror during a period of low industrialization and low growth, and in doing so it was able to force the population to go along with an agenda that essentially traded food for industry. Terror then became targeted against members of the population that had little or nothing to do with the economic agenda, and who posed little or no threat to the state. At this point, the terror campaign became counterproductive, unless the top priority of the state was simply to maintain and increase Stalin’s personal power. The dramatic shift in the use of terror and the economic boom after Stalin’s death in 1953 suggest that terror had been used counterproductively by the early 1950s. In 1953, shortly after Stalin’s death, the Soviet government announced that 1.2 million prisoners would be released (Curtois 241). Releasing such a huge number of prisoners would ease the strain on the gulag system and make more productive use of those released.
Theoretically, lessening the role of terrorism in the society could also be economically advantageous by restoring enough confidence to the workers and farmers that they might actually take some initiative and act independently. In his “Secret Speech” in 1956, Nikita Khruschev explained that

“In the past few years, after we managed to free ourselves of the harmful practice of the cult of the individual and took several proper steps in terms of [both] internal and external policies, everyone [has been able to see] how activity has grown before our very eyes, how the creative activity of the broad working masses has developed, and how favorably all this has acted upon economic and cultural development” (Khruschev, 1956).

Though Khruschev praised Stalin’s willingness to use force against real enemies of the state, the Secret Speech denounces Stalin’s “capricious and despotic character.” Khruschev’s words seem to agree with Tucker’s assertion that much of the Soviet terror was a function of Stalin’s personality, rather than the nature of the political system. Tucker suggests that under Khruschev, the Soviet Union entered a “post-totalitarian” period (Tucker, 35, 1971), because without Stalin and rampant terrorism, the system was fundamentally different.

The economic data from the period after Stalin’s death appears to confirm Khruschev’s assertion that workers are more productive when they feel secure enough to work independently and expose mismanagement. In the first period Powell evaluates after Stalin’s death, the years 1955 to 1958, Soviet industry grew by 11.4 percent per year. This period begins a full decade after the conclusion of World War II; by this point, Soviet industry had recovered from its war losses, which makes this rapid growth all the more impressive.

My examination of Soviet repression and industrial growth strongly suggests that terrorism had two primary functions in the Soviet Union under Stalin. In certain periods,
especially soon after he had assumed power and also to a lesser extent after World War II, terror was targeted at people who resisted or posed a threat to the state’s economic agenda. Accordingly, terrorism contributed to the success of the state’s economic agenda. During both of these periods, the government forced some of its citizens to go without food in order to direct resources to industry. Notably, the two periods of Stalin’s rule with famine deaths are the two periods with the fastest industrial growth.

At other points, especially during the Great Terror of the mid to late 1930s, and once again toward the end of Stalin’s life, terror was directed in a paranoid manner against the Party itself, as well as members of the public selected seemingly at random. These waves of terror had no useful effect beyond possibly making Stalin feel more secure, and were actually counterproductive economically. Also, the total number of arrests and executions in a given period does not seem to be correlated with industrial growth in any consistent sense. The most critical factor is how the terror is targeted, not how much terror is present.

Focused terror allowed the government to trade food and lives for industry, while terror directed at nonexistent threats hindered economic development. The Soviet experience appears to have parallels in the history of other Communist states. Rosefielde argues that attempts at “superindustrialization” failed in the USSR, North Korea, China, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos (160-169, 2010). I have argued, hopefully convincingly, that Rosefielde’s position on Soviet industrialization is flawed. However, Rosefielde is correct that terrorist campaigns often failed to achieve real economic progress.

Perhaps the closest comparison is the case of the Great Leap Forward in China under Mao. China attempted to replicate the Soviet government’s program of terror-
driven, centrally directed industrial development. The Great Leap Forward attempted to rapidly industrialize China between 1958 and 1961. China produced 5.35 million tons of steel in 1957. In 1958, Mao Zedong issued a series of increasingly unrealistic predictions regarding future Chinese steel production, which he evidently expected to more than double by the end of the year, increase to between 80 and 120 million tons by 1962, and grow exponentially to 700 million tons by the 1970s (Chirot, 193, 1994). Chirot notes that this last total was more than the entire world combined produced in 1958.

Further, Mao expected peasants to produce most of this steel in their own communities. Producing steel in farming villages with rudimentary equipment would be extremely labor intensive at best, and impossible at worst. In 1958, ninety million peasants attempted to produce steel, many by melting their own farming equipment (195). Mao either expected agricultural production to rise tremendously, as Chirot suggests (194), or he intended to trade lives for industry, as Stalin did. Either way, unknown millions (Chirot cites numbers between 16 and 40 million) died (196). Chinese steel production did in fact meet the 1958 goal of 10.7 million tons, though much of it was unusable (195-196). The Great Leap Forward only temporarily boosted industrial production, its product had much less practical an application, and it cost even more lives than the terror and famine during Soviet collectivization. In economic terms it was a total failure.

Under Stalin, the Soviet government conducted several major campaigns of terrorism that appear to have impaired the state’s ability to achieve its economic goals. Rosefielde is incorrect when he lumps every wave of Stalinist terror together, but he is correct in his evaluation of the Great Terror and much of Stalin’s post-war oppression.
China’s attempt at socialist industrialization failed, and beginning in the late 1970s, China essentially abandoned Communism. Cambodia, North Korea, Laos, and Vietnam could never hope to achieve the economic status of the much larger Soviet Union and China. Most notably, Cambodia conducted an incredibly intense campaign of terror while attempting to rapidly and completely remake its economy. Like the Soviet Union and China, in the 1970s, Cambodia attempted to collectivize agriculture, though apparently without the desire to create anything resembling a Western industrial economy.

The point, then, is that state terrorism has often been economically counterproductive. I have argued that Stalin’s political position was secure by the mid-1930s, and even if it wasn’t, it was beyond question after World War II. Mao occupied a similar, though less absolute position of strength in China in the late 1950s, as did other Communist states. Friedrich and Brzezinski’s argument that totalitarian systems tend to purge themselves when they are at their strongest seems to be valid. Furthermore, Communist states often used terrorism to their own economic detriment, suggesting that ultimately, Friedrich and Brzezinski are correct that a totalitarian state’s primary agenda is its own power. Totalitarian states demand complete conformity and loyalty, and to quote Stalin himself, “‘True conformity’ is possible only in the cemetery’ (Stalin, 1912). The Soviet goal of industrialization therefore served Stalin’s desire to accumulate more power, and at times it took secondary priority while Stalin purged the Communist Party.

When terror was targeted at enemies of the state’s economic agenda, it did in fact facilitate rapid, socialist industrialization. That it not to say that industrializing Russia required that the state murder thousands or millions or citizens. Most economies have
industrialized without large, centrally directed waves of terrorism (though workers obviously have been exploited in these economies well). However, to develop an industrial economy rapidly that complied with the state’s desire for absolute control over the society, state terrorism was absolutely necessary. Stalinist economics traded lives for industry and instilled fear to gain control. Terror created the Stalinist state and allowed economic development on Stalin’s terms. Terror then preserved the totalitarian state and increasingly centralized power until the dictator’s death. Terror and control go hand in hand, far more consistently than terror and progress, for they are the true pillars of the totalitarian system.


http://www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1956/02/24.htm


