Kirov was a murdered high up within the Party, some suspect Stalin of having caused his murder as he was a potential rival.
executions of people who had belonged to the Central Committee. The line had been crossed and many more executions were to follow. A second show trial took place in January 1957 in which Karl Radek, a well-known Trotskyite, and Pyatakov, a deputy in the Commissariat of Heavy Industry, were the main defendants. Needless to say they confessed and were found guilty.

The third and last great show trial was staged in March 1958. It was possibly the most dramatic because it involved Bukharin and he was able to make a more spirited defence of his actions. But in the end, he—along with twenty others, including old Bolsheviks like Rykov as well as the former head of the NKVD, Yagoda—confessed and was sentenced. Most were shot within a few hours. Bukharin and Rykov cursing Stalin as they died.

**SOURCE 13.11** A show trial from the 1930s

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**SOURCE 13.12** J. Arch Getty and O. V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–39*, 1999, p. 301. The authors quote this letter, which provides a good example of the sort of denunciations that flowed in after Bukharin had been named as a suspect.

**11 August 1936**

*Dear Comrade Yezhov*

I would like to call your attention to the following:

Comrade N. I. Bukharin has been travelling to Leningrad frequently. While there, he has been staying at the apartment of Ryazin, a former Trotskyite and now a counter-revolutionary. Comrade Bukharin has maintained a close relationship with him, both in person and by correspondence. The fact was uncovered at a party meeting of this institute and reported by Zhubov, who was expelled from the party as a White Guard and abettor of counter-revolutionary work.

I consider it my duty to report this to you in view of the fact that a simple friendship with a sworn counter-revolutionary is hardly possible. It is my suspicion that Comrade Bukharin was aware of Ryazin’s work and, in particular, of his counter-revolutionary activities at the Institute of the Academy of Sciences. With Communist greetings,

I. Kuchkin,

Official of the Vasilievsky Party District Committee, Leningrad

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**SOURCE 13.16** W. G. Krivitsky, *I Was Stalin’s Agent*, 1939, p. 211

They made [their confessions] in the sincere conviction that this was their sole remaining service to the Party and the Revolution. They sacrificed honour as well as life to defend the hated regime of Stalin, because it contained the last glimmer of hope for the better world to which they had consecrated themselves in early youth.

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**SOURCE 13.17** Orgbizhnikide had died and high-ranking party members pay their respects. Left to right: around the bed are his widow, Zhavoronkov, Yezhov, Stalin, Zhilinov, Kaganovich and Voroshilov

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**SOURCE 13.18** *The Strange Death of Ordzhonikidze* (1940), pages 14–15

In February 1937, Sergei Ordzhonikidze died, after an angry confrontation with Stalin in which he pleaded for an end to the terror. He was particularly upset by the proceedings against Pyatakov who had worked closely with him at the Commissariat of Heavy Industry. Apparently, Ordzhonikidze was given the choice of suicide and a state funeral or being shot with no state funeral. He chose the former and Stalin said that it must be reported that he died of heart failure. Ordzhonikidze was buried with full honours. He was the last leading Politburo member to resist Stalin’s policies. After this, the Great Terror of 1937–38 was unleashed.

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**THE RIGHTISTS**

The last big show trial featured the right wing of the Communist Party: people who had supported the NEP and opposed rapid industrialisation and forced collectivisation. Bukharin had recanted his views and worked on producing the 1936 Constitution. Trotsky, the other leading member of the right, did not wait for the show trial: once it was announced he was going to be investigated he committed suicide.

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**ACTIVITY**

Read Source 13.12 and answer the following questions.

1. In what way are Bukharin’s actions considered suspicious?
2. Why is Ryazin identified as a counter-revolutionary?
3. What is interesting about Zhubov, the reporter of the association?
4. What does this letter tell you about denunciations and the way the purges spread?
It was not only this process of association that gave the Purge its increasingly mass character. In the 1930s, there were still hundreds of thousands who had been members of non-Bolshevik parties, the masses who had served in the White armies, nationalist elements in local intelligensia, and so on. The increasingly virulent campaign for vigilance against the hidden enemy blanched the whole country, not merely the Party, in a press and radio campaign. And while the destruction of hostile elements in the party was going forward, it must have seemed natural to use the occasion to break all remaining elements suspected of not being reconciled with the regime.

**Widening the terror**

The purges were not restricted to the party. They took in all areas of society and administration (as shown in Chart 13B and page 220). There had been deportations of large social groups hostile to Communism after Kirov’s murder but arrests of oppositionists, economic officials and administrators increased dramatically from 1937 onwards.

In July 1937, Stalin ordered the purges to be extended to all of these ‘elements’, including scientists, writers and artists as well as managers and administrators. The historian Chris Ward writes: ‘An avalanche of monstrous charges, innumerable accusations, incredible scenarios and random arrests overwhelmed swathes of the population while terror, vindictiveness or simple-minded apparatus [party officials] flung denunciations at all and sundry ...’ For instance, Boris Shmelev, distinguished scientist, supposedly organised a “counter-revolutionary astronomers’ group” which engaged in wrecking, espionage and terror ‘(Stalin’s Russia, 1993, pages 120-21). Historians were particularly vulnerable and many were accused of leading terrorist groups. One leading Bolshevik mentioned at his trial that ‘he had spared no one among the historians’.

In practice, anybody could be arrested as an oppositionist. A quota system was applied to geographical areas and to public bodies. It went further than this: in July 1937, the proportion to be shot was fixed at 28 per cent, with the number being sentenced to up to ten years’ hard labour - and this was before the oppositionists had actually been arrested!

A huge media campaign was started, encouraging ordinary people to criticise party officials, bureaucrats and managers - to seek out the ‘hidden enemies’. This hampered popular dissatisfaction with officialdom and resulted in a huge number of denunciations and arrests. People were also encouraged to denounce workers and saboteurs in the workplace, so that the rest of the population did not escape either. In Let History Judge (1972), Roy Medvedev notes that over 1000 were arrested in a single factory, Conquest contends, in The Great Terror: A Reassessment (1990, page 258), that thousands of peasants, factory workers, shop girls and office clerks were swept up in the purges, although he accepts that the main target was ‘officialdom, the intelligentsia’.

Once suspected had been arrested and subjected to interrogation by the NKVD, they always came up with names of accomplices. Workmates, friends, husbands and wives, sons and daughters - all could find themselves arrested because they had connections with someone who had been accused. The victims of the terror increased exponentially.


**SOURCE 13.19** G. Gill, Stalinism, 1990, p. 32

People hoped to gain leniency for themselves or their families by cooperating with the NKVD, and were therefore willing to denounce others in the security organs. The circle of victims thereby widened.

**SOURCE 13.20** George Tsiklau, NKVD member

I asked him, Christopher Sergeevich ... tell me honestly, how many people were executed in Georgia? I told him he said 10,000 ... we overfulfilled our plan.


Individual denouncers operated on an extraordinary scale. In one district in Kiev, 69 persons were denounced by one man, in another 100. In Odessa a single Communist denounced 210 people. In Poltava, a party member denounced his entire organisation.

**ACTIVITY**

**Did the purges gain a momentum of their own?**


2. How do these sources agree/disagree with Conquest’s suggestion, in Source 13.18, of the way that the mass terror spread?


Members denounced leaders (and each other) for dubious class origins, long forgotten sins, and current misdeeds. Secretaries defended themselves and proved their vigilance by expelling and denouncing batches of rank and file members. Spetsnaz’s efforts to root out bourgeois specialists, anti-Soviet elements and class hatred re-emerged in strength against the backdrop of a full-blown war scare. Panic-stricken local party officials even reverted to filling administrative positions with politically ‘safe’ employees of the NKVD.


It was only the third of four batches who managed to keep their seats. They had not even the normal advantages of youth in their favour, for the choosing had been a very negative one. They were the men who had denounced others on innumerable occasions. They had bosed the knee whenever they had come up against higher authority. They were morally and intellectually crippled.


Stalin knew that Tukhachevsky and the other ranking generals could never be broken into the state of unquestioning obedience which he now required of all these about him. They were men of personal courage, and he remembered [that in] the days when his own prestige was at its lowest, these generals had excited enormous popularity ... He remembered too that at every critical stage of his rule - for instance, collectivisation, hunger, rebellion - the generals had supported him reluctantly, had put difficulties in his path, had forced deals upon him. He felt for some time that ... they should continue to recognise his totalitarian authority.

**Purging the armed forces**

In 1937 it was the turn of the armed forces. Stalin was convinced that he could not count on the army to follow his policies. The leaders of the army were tough and difficult to intimidate. Marshal Tukhachevsky was the hero of the Civil War, but during this period he had come into conflict with Stalin. Stalin claimed that the army was plotting to overthrow him. Tukhachevsky and other generals had confessions forced out of them (Tukhachevsky’s written confession appeared among them) and they were then executed. The NKVD then worked its way through the rest of the armed forces to devastating effect (see Chart 15B on page 220). That Stalin should risk wiping out his best commanders when the prospect of war loomed is a powerful indication of how far the terror had gone.

**Arrest and Interrogation**

Many of the arrests came at night between 11pm and 5am. NKVD officers drove around in black vehicles called ‘taxis’, collecting their unwilling passengers. A knock at the door in the middle of the night inspired fear; some people kept a packed bag ready in case the knock was for them. In Moscow a sort of black humour developed during the purges. One joke told of a husband and wife being woken in the night by a loud noise. Terrified, the husband opened the door, then cheerfully called out to his wife: ‘Don’t worry, it’s only handbills coming to rob us.’ A similar joke tells of a household being woken by bangs on the door. Eventually, one brave occupant opened it, yelling up to the others: ‘Don’t worry comrades, it’s just the fire brigade come to tell us the house is on fire!’

The reasons for arrest were arbitrary: criticising Stalin, telling a joke about Stalin, being a friend of someone who was arrested. Arrests were followed by the inevitable interrogation in which the victims were urged to confess their opposition to Stalin and involvement with counter-revolutionary groups. The theatre director Meyerhold, a prominent member of the avant-garde movement in the early Soviet Union, was forced to drink his own urine and then sign his confession with his left hand because his right arm had been broken.
Despite the pressure put on them, many Russians did refuse to confess and were executed quietly. Byulin (see page 260) was brought from prison and tortured, but he refused to take part in a show trial and so he was executed. His wife and sons were also killed.

Confessions were important. They legitimised the arrests and proved that the state was right. It was a logical strategy when there was no real evidence to prove the accused guilty. The state prosecutor, Vysheiskiy, thought a confession written by the accused looked more 'voluntary'. He said: 'I personally prefer a half confession in the defendant's own handwriting to a full confession in the investigator's writing' (see Sources 13.25 and 15.26).

Many Soviet citizens died in prison, either shot or dying from torture. Vans marked 'Mest' regularly arrived at Moscow cemeteries to deliver their loads—the naked bodies which filled the mass graves. People always knew when the female victims were Communist Party members because they had short hair. Those who did not die were sent to the Gulag, the network of labour camps that infested the USSR. Some of the most feared were in the north, in the Kolyma area, where the freezing weather made life intolerable. Relentless hard work and inadequate food and clothing killed many. Forced labour was also used on large building projects like the White Sea Canal, where it has been estimated that over 100,000 died because of the appalling conditions.

**SOURCE 13.25** Mikhail Mindlin (arrested 1937), quoted in The People's Century, BBC TV, 1996

When the interrogation began, I was asked to sign some lies about myself and some good comrades from my region. They handed me a list of 47 people. They wanted me to sign a statement—'I wouldn't. They kept me standing for five days, day and night. My legs were so swollen.**


The basic mechanism and chief reliance of the extortion artists were physical torture... several basic techniques were common...

The 'partition' or sweat room... several hundred men and women, standing close packed in a small room where all ventilation has been shut off, in heat that chokes and suffocates, in stink that asphyxiates... Many have stood thus two days... their feet are swollen, their bodies numb... they are not allowed to squat or sit. Every now and then, those who faint are dragged out into the corridor, revived and thrown back in the sweat room.

The so-called conveyor belt... examiners sit at desks in a long series of rooms, strung out along corridors, up and down stairs, back to the starting point: a sort of circle of OGPU agents. The victims run at a trot from one desk to the next, cursed, threatened, insulted, bullied, questioned by each agent in turn, round and round hour after hour. They weep and plead and deny and keep on running... If they fail, they are kicked and beaten on their shins, stagger to their feet and resume the hellish relay. The agents, relieved at frequent intervals, are always fresh and keen while the victims grow weaker, more terrified and degraded.

From the partition to the conveyor, from the conveyor to the partition, then periods in ugly cells when uncertainty and fear for one's loved ones outside demoralise the prisoner.

**SOURCE 13.27a** Baldeyev cartoon of corpses in a mass grave in a labour camp.

**SOURCE 13.27b** Baldeyev cartoon of labour camp prisoners.