Anti-Corruption Purges in the Soviet Union: Sacking and Stacking under Stalin and Gorbachev

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Abstract

Elite purges in autocracies are regularly justified in terms of fighting corruption, yet corruption researchers increasingly find that anti-corruption purges are most often used to consolidate authoritarian power. Existing studies, however, are limited in their understanding of when and why consolidationary anti-corruption purges succeed or fail. I ask why some anti-corruption purges help autocrats consolidate power while others do not. I propose that anti-corruption purges consist of two activities: promoting loyal elites (stacking) and dismissing disloyal elites (sacking). I argue that when stacking precedes sacking, autocrats are better able to use anti-corruption purges to consolidate power. I use original network and time series data from the Soviet Union to identify different patterns in autocratic uses of purges. Analytic narratives then compare Joseph Stalin’s and Mikhail Gorbachev’s anti-corruption purges to show why purges that involve stacking before sacking improve authoritarian consolidation.
Introduction

Anti-corruption purges that are anti-corruption in name only are central to authoritarian regime maintenance. Whereas democratic consolidation depends primarily on mass support, authoritarian regimes turn to alternative tools designed to consolidate power and maintain stability. One such tool is the anti-corruption purge, which allows autocrats modify the regime’s composition by dismissing disloyal elites while promoting loyal ones. Although scholarship has increasingly recognized how anti-corruption purges promote authoritarian consolidation (e.g., Gillespie and Okruhlik, 1991; Manion, 2004), why some anti-corruption purges succeed and fail remains poorly understood.

Shortly after Mohammad Bin-Salman turned Crown Prince in 2017, he imprisoned Saudi royalty and businessmen in Riyadh’s Ritz Carlton Hotel until they relinquished their positions and wealth, an anti-corruption purge that established Bin-Salman’s stability at the heights of the House of Saud. Pakistan’s Pervez Musharraf also enacted periodic anti-corruption purges during his nine-year tenure. His resignation in 2008 coincided with the aftermath of an anti-corruption purge that led to the arrest of Pakistan’s Chief Justice. Existing scholarship is ill-equipped to explain why Bin-Salman’s purge ensured regime consolidation, while Musharaff’s corruption purge resulted in regime failure. This study addresses this gap in knowledge.

I maintain that regimes anti-corruption purges consist of two consolidationary tools: sacking and stacking. Sacking entails the forcible removal of disloyal elites from power through dismissals, arrests, and assassinations under the guise of fighting corruption. Stacking entails the promotion of loyal elites. Although sacking and stacking are often used as part of the same anti-corruption purge effort, I argue that regime consolidation is more likely when stacking precedes sacking.

This study leverages the variation in anti-corruption purges in the Soviet Union to explore how
autocrats use stacking and sacking to both guarantee regime stability or place a regime on the path toward collapse. I use dynamic network data of 2,085 CPSU members in addition to time series data to demonstrate the variation in anti-corruption purges throughout Soviet history. Analytic narratives that compare Stalinist and Gorbachev anti-corruption purges support the claim that regime consolidation depends on anti-corruption purges that first promote loyal elites during stacking efforts before dismissing disloyal elites during sacking efforts, an approach that Stalin undertook. In contrast, a hasty approach undertaken by Gorbachev that simultaneously removed and promoted elites produced disastrous conditions that undermined the stability of the Soviet Union and lead to its eventual collapse.

The paper first outlines existing arguments with expectations about how stacking and sacking are used to ensure regime consolidation. It then uses descriptive network and time series data to reveal underlying patterns in the use of purges under different Soviet leaders. The final empirical section of the paper compares the approaches taken under Stalin and Gorbachev to explore their decisions in the context of anti-corruption frames and uncover mechanisms behind why different purge patterns produce different regime consolidation outcomes.

Anti-Corruption Purges and Authoritarian Consolidation

Corruption scholars generally recognize that autocrats use anti-corruption purges to consolidate political power rather than fight corruption, because corruption serves as a crucial tool of authoritarian regime maintenance. An autocrat’s support base tends to be small and concentrated among a few, powerful elites, which allows him or her to more easily gauge, reward, and ensure support (Acemoglu et al., 2004). Autocrats reward support though private goods that often reflect corrupt, transactional relationships (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005). These private goods might include monetary rewards, valuable gifts, jobs in the public and private sectors, government contracts
(Goel et al., 2016; Kang, 2002), as well as control over critical sectors of a country’s economy and infrastructure, including state-controlled media companies (Junisbai, 2011). Leaders may formally transfer these private goods to elites or ignore a culture of elite rampant theft (Dawisha, 2015; Ganev, 2013; Sharaftudinova, 2010; Zhuravskaya and Yakovlev, 2004). The benefits an autocrat receives through institutionalizing corruption often outweigh the distortionary costs of implementing such a system (Tanzi and Davoodi, 1998). Nye (1967), for instance, recognized that corruption can be used to integrate elites and improve government capacity.

Given corruption’s institutionalization in autocracies, one would not expect autocrats to engage in efforts like anti-corruption purges at all. Yet autocratic anti-corruption purges are abundant. If autocrats depend on corruption, why do they implement anti-corruption purges? Scholarship generally concludes that anti-corruption purges are divorced from the goal of reducing corruption.

Corrupt, authoritarian systems demand regeneration to prevent stagnation, and anti-corruption efforts like purges are central to that regeneration process. This regeneration process involves rebalancing the composition of the regime by promoting loyal elites to more influential positions and demoting or removing disloyal elites who threaten the autocrat’s power and the regime’s stability. In short, anti-corruption purges allow authoritarian leaders to rebalance the regime through two mechanisms: stacking and sacking.

Stacking - the promotion of loyal elites - is central to authoritarian stability. Autocrats develop extensive information-gathering mechanisms that help identify potentially loyal elites who may be recruited in the service of helping consolidate power (Darden, 2001; Guriev and Treisman, 2020). For recruited elites, the promotions and the indirect benefits of these promotions, solidified by a system of patronage and corruption, are viewed as rewards in return for their loyalty to the autocrat.
Sacking - the dismissal of disloyal elites - acts as a counterweight to stacking in the rebalancing calculation. Autocrats and their allies have extensive discretion in who they target during anti-corruption purges (Li and Manion, 2020). In China, anti-corruption purges reflect intra-elite power struggles and take on the characteristics of traditional political purges and show trials that have long been sources of regime stability (Zhu and Zhang, 2016). Likewise, anti-corruption purges can be used to reign in ineffective political elites by breaking up embedded, corrupt elite networks that undermine the regime (Lu and Lorentzen, 2016). Moreover, autocrats do not use anti-corruption purges indiscriminately. For instance, Russian mayoral anti-corruption purges tended to target mayors who are members of the opposition, are elected in ethnic republics, and perform poorly in elections (Buckley et al., 2020). Public opinion research, which shows that corruption investigations may undermine support for the regime, further suggests that anti-corruption purges are designed to affect internal regime composition (Wang and Dickson, 2020).

Although researchers treat stacking and sacking as part of a homogeneous anti-corruption purge strategy, these two pieces are, in fact, independent actions that demand separate scholarly attention. I hypothesize that when autocrats promote new elites before dismissing old elites, regime stability improves. In other words, I expect that the time-dependency of actions during anti-corruption purges is crucial to their success. Dismissing elites not only cuts them off from decision-making power but also from their sources of income and informal rewards. The consequences of these actions are inherently unstable and threaten an autocrat’s consolidation efforts. An autocrat can defend himself or herself against instability by first ensuring that a base of elite support buttresses the regime in the face of instability caused by future purges. Gradually promoting elites who are loyal to the autocrat can serve as a crucial balancing mechanism against disaffection resulting from purges.

In the next section, I use network and time series data to introduce the case of the Soviet Union and explore variations in the patterns of purges. I demonstrate that over the course of Soviet history,
leaders enacted different combinations of stacking and sacking strategies that would eventually produce divergent outcomes, namely regime consolidation and collapse.

**Soviet Anti-Corruption Purges Over Time**

The Soviet Union was a single-party, authoritarian political system. Its “vanguard Party,” the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), oversaw all aspects of Soviet life. In this hierarchical system, membership in the CPSU acted as a vehicle to a successful career and was rewarded with formal and informal privileges, including higher quality food, housing, medical care, and clothing. Immaterially, Party members were also, to some degree, protected from legal repercussions against corruption. Consequently, Simis (1982, 53) writes that, “since its inception the Soviet regime has been tolerant of the ruling elite’s improbity.”

As such, the CPSU acted as a ruling elite class, establishing what was, in effect, a system that differentiated those with access to power and excess provisions from those without these privileges. At the helm of this elite class was the General Secretary, who, starting with Joseph Stalin, served as the Soviet Union’s *de facto* political leader. General Secretaries wielded an inordinate amount of control over the country’s trajectory, though not without certain limits. For instance, Nikita Khrushchev ouster followed growing disillusionment with his agenda among CPSU elites. Still, “the rigidly hierarchical CPSU concentrated authority in the hands of the General Secretary” (Schofield and Levinson, 2008, 264), although this concentration of power waxed and waned over time (Brown, 1980, 136).

In these ways, the Soviet Union was an archetypal authoritarian country guided by corruption and informal relationships and with leaders who had the capacity to purge disloyal elites and promote loyal ones under the guise of fighting corruption. Indeed, scholars document countless anti-corruption purges throughout Soviet history (e.g., Shelley, 1996).
I leverage this variation in anti-corruption purges across time to understand autocratic uses of anti-corruption purges to consolidate their power. Specifically, I analyze time series data on CPSU member stacking and sacking in addition to network data on CPSU members. These novel data include 2,085 members of the Politburo, Secretariat, and Central Committee from the 6th Party Congress (1917) through the 28th Party Congress (1990), spanning the revolutionary years until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Formally, the Politburo was the highest policymaking body in the Soviet Union and consisted of, with very few exceptions, the Soviet leader in addition to his closest allies. The Secretariat oversaw the Party’s administration. The Central Committee represented the Party’s broader executive class. The members of these three bodies represent the Soviet elite class and the underlying source of regime stability.

In Figure 1, I trace the proportion of all Politburo, Secretariat, and Central Committee members who were added (blue) and removed (red) at each Party Congress from 1917 to 1991. Under Vladimir Lenin, the composition of the CPSU fluctuated regularly, made possible by the high frequency with which Congresses met in the period of consolidating the regime that took place between the revolution and the formal establishment of the Soviet Union in 1921.

As CPSU membership increasingly stabilized in 1924, Lenin died and a power struggle ensued that led to the era of Joseph Stalin. Despite the power struggle, Stalin did not initially remove many Politburo or Central Committee members. Instead, the early years under Stalin witnessed a period of growth in the size of the Politburo’s membership and the arrival of reliable Stalin allies like Vyacheslav Molotov and Kliment Voroshilov. Over time, however, Stalin turned his attention from promoting allies to removing potential opponents. During the Party purge in the late 1930s, the Politburo lost many of its members, some of whom, like Sergei Kirov, were assassinated. Likewise,
the Central Committee lost nearly all of its members during the late 1930s. After the purges, the Party Congress did not meet for over a decade. When it met again in 1952, Stalin showed renewed interest Party growth and the size of all three bodies grew.

Stalin’s death brought about a thaw under Nikita Khrushchev. As part of a de-Stalinization program, Khrushchev purged Stalin loyalists in all three bodies and simultaneously replaced them with those who trusted. These efforts, however, did not allow Khrushchev to sufficiently consolidate power, and the Central Committee voted to remove him in 1964. Leonid Brezhnev replaced Khrushchev and mostly left the CPSU intact. Brezhnev concentrated on Party growth and avoided removing members en masse. His decision to not upset the status quo paid off, and he remained in power for 18 years until his death.

After two short-lived elderly successors to Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected to lead the Soviet Union in 1985. His reputation as a younger reformist hinted at impending changes in the Party, yet the the degree to which these changes took effect may not have been expected. During the two Party Congresses that Gorbachev oversaw, Party reforms decimated CPSU ranks while simultaneously inflating the Party with new members. As with Khrushchev, Gorbachev’s efforts to stabilize the regime and consolidate power were unsuccessful, and the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, six years into his tenure.

Network data shown in Figures 2 and 3, as well as normalized sparsity scores in Table 1, support these descriptive analyses with additional context and noteworthy findings. The visualizations compare the relational structure among CPSU members under each Soviet leader. The complementary sparsity scores reflect how disconnected nodes (Party members) are in each network.
Figure 1: Proportion Added (Blue) and Removed (Red) in CPSU, 1917-1991
The sparsity scores are calculated as follows:

\[ s_{ij} = 1 - \frac{d_{ij}}{c_{ij}} \]

where \( c \) represents the number of elections that took place under leader \( i \) for each CPSU body \( j \).

Adjusting for the number of elections under each leader allows the function to produce an averaged sparsity score that accounts for a natural tendency in sparsity to grow with the number of elections.

Here, \( d \) is the classical network density function:

\[ d_{ij} = \frac{m_{ij}}{n_{ij}(n_{ij} - 1)/2} \]

where \( m \) is the total number of observed edges among Party members, and \( n \) is the total number of possible edges.

Party members under Lenin were closely connected to one another despite frequent changes in the composition of the Party’s leadership structure. Indeed, Lenin’s networks was among the most dense (among the lowest sparsity scores) Perhaps surprisingly, Stalin’s average network was similarly dense despite his infamous purges. In contrast, Khrushchev’s network of CPSU members was comparably sparse, indicative of how many members were removed and replaced during his short tenure as leader. Brezhnev’s preference for the status quo is also reflected in his relatively low network sparsity. Most importantly, it is perhaps under-appreciated how vast Gorbachev’s changes to the CPSU were relative to his predecessors. Gorbachev’s CPSU networks reflect a noteworthy break from the past and reveal the extent to which his efforts led to massive compositional changes in the Party. His sparsity score eclipses that of all other Soviet leaders, reflecting how aberrant Gorbachev’s manipulations were in a historical context.
Figure 2: CPSU Networks

(a) CPSU Networks under Lenin

(b) CPSU Networks under Stalin

(c) CPSU Networks under Khrushchev
This section has shown that elite purge patterns varied under Soviet leaders with some like Stalin incrementally expanding the scope of elite dismissals, while others like Gorbachev opting to promote and dismiss Party elites shortly after ascending to power. In the next section, I will compare Stalin’s and Gorbachev’s purges, examining them in the context of anti-corruption frames and showing that Stalin’s cautious approach of stacking and then sacking resulted in regime consolidation, while Gorbachev’s impatient approach of simultaneously stacking and sacking resulted in regime failure.
### Table 1: Averaged network sparsity across CPSU Congresses by leader and CPSU body

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Politburo</th>
<th>Secretariat</th>
<th>Central Committee</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lenin</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalin</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khrushchev</td>
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<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brezhnev</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gorbachev</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Higher values indicate that network is more sparse whereas smaller values indicate that the network is denser, on average.

### Comparing Anti-Corruption Purges Under Stalin and Gorbachev

Building on the descriptive data presented above, the remaining portion of the paper compares Joseph Stalin and Mikhail Gorbachev’s purges. The variation across Stalin’s and Gorbachev’s use of anti-corruption purges allows for direct hypothesis testing and an investigation of mechanisms. The previous section showed that Stalin waited to purge Party elites until later in his term, first concentrating on growing a loyal base of elite support (stacking followed by sacking). Alternatively, Gorbachev simultaneously purged and replaced Party elites. Each pattern corresponded with divergent outcomes: Stalin successfully consolidated power while Gorbachev oversaw the collapse of the Soviet Union. I place each leader’s anti-corruption purges in context to explain why Stalin’s purges succeeded and Gorbachev’s purges failed.

### Anti-Corruption Purges Under Stalin

Joseph Stalin invoked anti-corruption purges at times when people flocked to the Communist Party in hopes of furthering the development of communism and advancing their careers. As people joined the Communist Party, Stalin’s willingness to purge political opponents grew. I explore two possible mechanisms behind why Stalin began using anti-corruption purges in the midst of Party growth and argue that Party growth afforded Stalin leverage in his abilities to remove opponents, knowing that they could easily be replaced with those who were willing to obey him.
Stalin developed a devoted legion of subservient Soviet elites among the nomenklatura, the Soviet elite class. He achieved this cult-like following through a system that showered elites with material rewards at a time when others were destitute. It is through these material offerings that Stalin’s loyal cadres of elites continued to grow despite his notoriety. As the nomenklatura grew, Stalin trimmed Party ranks down to a core, loyal following on multiple occasions under the guise of fighting corruption.

Among Stalin’s central themes from the outset of his regime in the mid-1920s was a proposal to strengthen and grow the Party apparatus, a view contrary to that of some of his political opponents, such as Leon Trotsky. Indeed, Stalin often defended the continued development of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the CPSU apparatus, painting his opponents, and Trotsky in particular, as enemies of these ideas and, in turn, enemies of communism.¹ Even just days before Lenin’s death, Stalin argued, “we need not only a united Party, not only a solid Party, but a veritable Party of steel, one capable of withstanding the assault of the enemies of the proletariat, capable of leading the workers to the final battle” (Stalin, 1924). His words illustrate an intent to accelerate the development of the Communist Party.

Stalin’s initial push for Party growth was successful, and CPSU membership rose from just under half a million in 1923 to 1.7 million in 1930. By the time Stalin died, the CPSU counted 6.7 million members in its ranks. What drove the Soviet people to join the CPSU in such large numbers? One contributing factor relates to the dire socioeconomic situation in the Soviet Union. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, food supplies reached critically low levels, and Stalin’s push to industrialize the country demanded more resources than were available. The resulting collectivization drive coincided with the forced takeover of private plots of farmland in order to centralize food

¹Stalin (1926) often refers to the interdependence between the dictatorship of the proletariat and the Communist Party, writing, for instance, that “the Party without which the dictatorship of the proletariat is unthinkable.”
production. A poisonous combination of factors including the country’s technological deficiency in food production and deliberate repression against peasants led to starvation tolls in the millions throughout the Soviet Union and, most notably, in Ukraine (Lewin, 1975; Conquest, 1986).

Those who survived the famine lived a difficult life. Beginning in 1931, the average person’s workweek lasted 6 days, an improvement from a continuous, 7-day workweek in years prior. Despite long workweeks, the average worker’s wages remained low, while their superiors’ wages rose (Rossman, 2005, 138). Life at home was similarly difficult. Many lived with multiple families in communal apartments. Other less fortunate people lived in dormitory-style employee barracks, where workers shared large, basic quarters, often without plumbing. Those living in these apartments and barracks were constantly under surveillance, sharing their homes with informants who reported back to authorities about insubordinate, anti-communist behavior (Reid, 2012).

In light of these circumstances, it would have been difficult for an individual to turn down the opportunity to join the CPSU. Considering that Stalin had targeted workers for Party membership in particular, potential members had much to gain (Fitzpatrick, 1979). Party members received comparably luxurious, single-family apartments with high ceilings, thick walls, and plenty of space. The most opulent among them had nurseries, libraries, and servants’ quarters. In addition to improved living quarters, Party members had elaborate summer homes in areas reserved from the elite in the outskirts of cities. Party members also had access to high quality food, better medical care, vehicles, and specialized stores selling Western products at subsidized prices. Moreover, Party elites regularly received monetary bonuses (Harcourt, 1966) in “envelopes stuffed with money” (Central Intelligence Agency, 1986, 9).

Alongside material rewards, Party members avoided repercussions for theft and corruption so long as they supported the regime. With some exceptions, corruption was seen as permissible so long
as it served the interests of the country’s development. Heinzen (2016) (57) writes, “prosecutors generally understood that payments made ‘in the interests of production’ (to fulfill plan quotas) were not done for personal gain, and they therefore treated such payments differently than a deal motivated by self-interest.” In this way, corruption was viewed as an acceptable cost of regime loyalty.

For instance, in the face of unachievable objectives determined by bureaucrats in Gosplan, the Soviet agency responsible for country’s economic plans, firm managers skirted rules to evade the consequences of failure and receive the rewards of meeting production goals. Berliner (1952) showed how firm managers hoarded supplies, produced incorrect or low quality goods, falsified production numbers, bribed state inspectors, and made informal exchanges with other factory managers to satisfy the government’s expectations of its chaotic centralized economy. Berliner’s revelations unraveled what was thought to be a totalitarian state built upon subservience. Instead, Stalinist Russia was a teetering state built upon creative, informal arrangements, known as blat, that supplemented insufficient governance. Heinzen (2016) further shows that these informal arrangements extended to other sectors, including education, construction, and law enforcement, sectors also rarely targeted by prosecutors.

Although corruption and informal arrangements were central to the Soviet economic model, Stalin’s purges that imprisoned and killed Party members, were often framed around fighting corruption. Stalin initiated two rounds of Party purges, one from 1929–30 and another from 1933–35, both of which would eventually culminate in a third more encompassing purge known as the Great Terror (1936–38), in which millions of people were rounded up, imprisoned, and executed.

Corruption served as a pretext for Stalin’s Party purges. Shearer (1998) (121) explains, “the campaign of mass repression unleashed in the late 1930’s can only be understood in the context
of an increasingly widespread, and largely failed, attempt to subdue crime and to bring order to Soviet society,” adding that Stalin’s regime in the 1930s began treating “criminals not just as social deviants but as enemies of the state” (139). Importantly, Soviet authorities rarely, if ever, used the term “corruption” during the early Soviet years. Instead, “corruption” was replaced with other terms that referred to economic and political crimes against the state (Clark, 2016). Words such as “wrecking” referred to “all criminal cases of major conflagrations, accidents, and output of poor quality products” (Conquest, 1991, 142). Sabotage, opportunism, and double-dealing were also often used to refer to different forms of corruption and economic crimes. Anyone believed to have committed these different crimes was labeled a “counterrevolutionary,” a broad category in the penal code that encapsulated this diverse assortment of political and economic crimes.

Fine-grained data on corruption-related arrests during these years are unavailable. Still, data are available for individual years that disaggregate “sabotage” related arrests from the broader counterrevolutionary crime category. In 1946, about 6 percent of imprisoned people were imprisoned for counterrevolutionary criminal acts, where “wrecking” represented the third-largest category of counterrevolutionary inmates (after “anti-soviet agitation” and “other counterrevolutionary activities”) (Pykhalov, 2015). Some estimates suggest that economic crimes in general account for up to one-third of all counterrevolutionary crimes (Mozokhin, 2006, 321–323). In 1933, 17.5 percent of people purged were targeted for crimes related to abuse of their positions — the most common reason — and another 2 percent were purged for bureaucratism, two potential indicators that anti-corruption efforts represented a large portion of the purges (Getty, 1983, 70). In all, these data suggest officials regularly framed the Party purges around fighting corruption.

Stalin’s own words suggest his desire to frame these different CPSU purges as part of a plan to fight elite corruption. In his April 1929 speech to the Plenum of the Central Committee and Central Control Commission of the CPSU, Stalin defends his call for a purge in the Party and insists the
The wrecking activities of the bourgeois intelligentsia are one of the most dangerous forms of resistance to developing socialism. The wrecking activities are all the more dangerous because they are connected with international capital. Bourgeois wrecking is undoubtedly an indication of the fact that the capitalist elements have by no means laid down their arms, that they are gathering strength for fresh attacks on the Soviet regime.

Such statements allowed to Stalin achieve three rhetorical objectives. First, Stalin described how corruption or, more generally, “wrecking” had undermined socialism. Second, Stalin tied corruption to a global capitalist plot seeking to damage the Soviet Union, referring to corruption as an activity of the “bourgeois” class working hand-in-hand with “international capital.” Lastly, and most importantly, Stalin argues for immediate action against corrupt individuals in claiming that their strength was growing and was an immediate threat to the regime.

Stalin’s goal, however was never to eradicate corruption. In fact, corruption continued to play a central role in everyday Soviet life long after the purges (Heinzen, 2016). Instead, Stalin used these purges to eliminate political opponents and insubordinate elites in order consolidate power. Disloyalty, therefore, became grounds for removal from power and exclusion from the system of rewards at best and death at worst.

In many of his speeches, Stalin draws a clear connection between corruption and the need to eliminate his political opponents. For example, in a speech made in the throws of the second Party purge, Stalin (1933) proclaims that, “the sharp edge of revolutionary law at the present time is directed… against thieves and wreckers in public economy, against rowdies and pilferers of public property,” continuing on that those complacent with the current state of corruption must be “driven out of the Party.” Here, Stalin grounds his anti-corruption language in a legal framework while
calling for Party purges. Then in a 1937 speech calling for “liquidating” supporters of Leon Trotsky, an opposition figure who had fled the Soviet Union, Stalin (1937) states:

Wherein then lies the strength of the contemporary wreckers, the Trotskyists? Their strength lies in the Party card, in their possession of a Party card. Their strength like in the fact that the Party card gains for them political confidence and opens to them all our institutions and organizations. Their advantage lies in the fact that by possessing Party cards and pretending to be friends of Soviet power, they have deceived our people politically, abused confidence, wrecked on the sly, and revealed our state secrets to the enemies of the Soviet Union.

This statement shows how Stalin labeled his opponents as corrupt (“contemporary wreckers”) and as enemies of the state all while referring to their infiltration of the Party apparatus.

Given official treatment of corruption as a counterrevolutionary crime and Stalin’s own words that refer to his enemies as corrupt, it is clear the effort to fight corruption was less a problem of reducing a corruption and more a problem of eliminating elements threatening the stability of Stalin’s regime.

Yet, throughout much of early Soviet history, authorities largely tolerated disobedient officials, raising the question of why Stalin implemented his anti-corruption purges at the times that he did. Indeed, Stalin did not use anti-corruption purges to eliminate elites at all times. For instance, prior to 1928, the year coinciding with the initiation of the first Party purge, Stalin opted for a more cautious approach in his dealings with disloyal elites.

Why then did Stalin begin purging elites in 1928 as opposed to 1924, immediately following Lenin’s death? I argue that Stalin initiated purges as a response to the success in his effort to grow a loyal elite population that could replace subversive ones. Two possible mechanisms explain the
relationship between growth in the numbers of loyal elites and Stalin’s anti-corruption purges. One possible answer is that purges trimmed new members whose characters had been deemed unworthy of continued Party membership. The successful membership growth in the Party allowed Stalin to eliminate insubordinate new CPSU members under the guise of fighting corruption and instill loyalty among new members. Getty (1985) highlights how the Party’s doubling in size between 1929 and 1931 caused bureaucratic problems in the way of mounting paperwork and training, as well ideological problems in the way of new members having little familiarity of Soviet history and politics.

But there were far greater problems with the new members. Getty (1985) notes that Soviet authorities were particularly concerned with the corruptibility of these new elites. Party cleansing concentrated on class-aliens, double dealers, those in violation of Party discipline, degenerates, and careerists. As for the other problems that these new recruits brought with them, “local purge officials were warned not to expel large numbers of rank-and-file members on such flimsy pretexts as ‘passivity’ or simple political illiteracy,” (Getty, 1985, 50). In other words, the surplus of new CPSU members created a problem of insubordination, of which corruption was a central component.

The limitation of this answer is that while it might explain the loss of new recruits, it fails to explain why senior officials were purged during these years as well. In addition to cleansing the Party of new recruits, Stalin’s purges saw the removal of important and capable Soviet officials, such as Mikhail Tomsky, Nikolai Bukharin, Alexei Rykov, Martemyan Ryutin, and Grigory Zinoviev, among countless others who had been removed from power during the first two purges and later executed. It is unlikely that established elites presented the same kinds of problems associated with the Party’s new recruits. At best, Getty’s argument only provides part of the explanation behind

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2The word Soviet authorities used to refer to the purge during the Stalin era and in the years the followed was chistka, meaning “cleaning.”
why the recruitment drive led to mass purges.

A preferable alternative explanation accounts for how the large-scale increase in new Party members contributed to heightened Party purges in the upper echelons of elite circles as well. This explanation maintains that Stalin purged Party members because his strong support among elites gave him additional leverage over the Party’s composition that he did not have before. (Rigby, 1968) writes that between his accession to power and his anti-corruption purges, Stalin transitioned “from being the soul of caution and moderation… to intransigence itself” (113). Rigby details how Stalin accumulated power through a careful orchestration over the Party recruitment process, resulting in its rapid growth. This influx of new Party elites overwhelmed the political representation of his opponents in Party organs with individuals whose loyalties favored Stalin. Successfully altering the composition of the CPSU elite cadres gave Stalin greater leverage in making further, more radical changes.

These radical changes included elite purges that Stalin justified as an effort to wipe out corruption. As Stalin transformed from a cautious ruler to one willing to take greater risks, he began implementing vast and encompassing purges, knowing that purged individuals could be replaced with ones loyal to the regime. His careful implementation of anti-corruption purges after having first accelerated Party membership growth contributed toward a 30-year autocratic tenure the likes of which has is matched only by a few in the history of authoritarian rule.

**Anti-Corruption Purges Under Gorbachev**

By the 1980s, on the heels of the “era of stagnation,” elite corruption in the Soviet Union was not just a widespread feature of the system but had also become the topic of regular conversation and consequently disgust. In many circumstances, corruption, blat, and informal transactions had become the only way of attaining services and goods (Simis, 1982; Ledeneva, 1998). With the
exception of Yuri Andropov, who died two years after taking power, the leaders that followed Stalin rarely endeavored to acknowledge its existence despite the public’s awareness of and frustration with its endemic state.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary and initiated a series of economic and political reforms. As part of his battery of reforms, Gorbachev expressed interest in tackling corruption. In his earliest speeches, Gorbachev raised the need for “economic accountability” and restructuring “economic relations” (Battle, 1988) and denounced endemic high-level economic crimes (Central Intelligence Agency, 1985b). Additionally, expanded press freedoms encouraged media outlets to cover corruption scandals (Mickiewicz, 1999). Central Intelligence Agency reports were initially optimistic about Gorbachev’s potential to translate his rhetorical attacks into actions: “Gorbachev is gambling that an attack on corruption and inefficiency, not radical reform, will turn the domestic situation around. While a risky course, his prospects for success should not be underestimated” (Central Intelligence Agency, 1985a).

One of the centerpieces of Gorbachev’s anti-corruption effort was a rapid process designed to overhaul the composition of Party elites. In a speech on challenges facing the Party, Gorbachev (1987) explained, “I think that the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the CPSU and the government need to deal with the swollen control apparatus and undertake decisive measures to reduce and streamline its activities, ensure its subordination to the state and to national interests, and strengthen the rule of law.” The Central Intelligence Agency (1985c) circulated a “hit list” of Gorbachev’s purge targets that included key figures in the regime, such as Gosplan Committee Chairman Nikolai Baibakov. The first Party Congress under Gorbachev took place in March 1986. During that Congress, Gorbachev simultaneously stripped the Party’s ranks (about half of the Politburo, Secretariat, and Central Committee members were thrown out) and promoted a vast new cadre of elites to the highest political echelons in the country.
These purges were framed around eradicating corruption. Gorbachev’s report to the 27th Party Congress raises the importance of a “reliable barrier… needed against all attempts to extract unearned income from the social property.” That report reminds the Party that “ministries, departments and territorial bodies are not the owners of means of production but merely institutions of state administration responsible to society for efficient use of people’s wealth” (Gorbachev, 1986). More forcefully, the leaders tells members of the Party, “facts of abuses, crimes uncovered in the economic sphere in recent years, show that the existing system of control is ineffective, it is unnecessarily fragmented, wastes working hours, distracts a lot of people and funds, and most importantly - closed off to departmental and local interests” (Gorbachev, 1987). His rhetoric unmistakably connected a Party purge with rooting out corruption.

The similarities seen here between Gorbachev’s and Stalin’s anti-corruption purges are striking but hardly novel. Within one year of Gorbachev’s arrival, the Central Intelligence Agency (1986) made a noteworthy comparison that treated Gorbachev’s actions in terms of “neo-stalinism”: “Gorbachev’s approach does, in fact, have more in common with Stalin’s than either Brezhnev’s standpat approach or Khrushchev’s mercurial ad hoc management.” Yet, the document later qualifies its comparison of Gorbachev and Stalin, explaining that Gorbachev has, “moved cautiously and made efforts to gain support for his program, probably with the lesson of [Stalin’s] failures clearly in mind.”

In fact, the series of events that would unfold over the course of Gorbachev’s tenure would suggest that if there were one area where Stalin succeeded, it was in consolidating power, a lesson that Gorbachev may have benefited from. A short five years after this document was written, the Soviet Union would collapse. Meanwhile, Stalin’s regime lasted for decades.

Why did Gorbachev’s anti-corruption purges produce instability, while Stalin’s purges allowed
him to consolidate and stabilize his rule? One explanation may hold that Gorbachev faced over-
whelming destabilizing factors during his tenure that would have led to collapse regardless of his
personal actions. This list of factors include economic stagnation; the Chernobyl nuclear disaster;
as well as mass discontent, especially in the republics (e.g., Beissinger, 2002). These challenges,
however, did not entail regime collapse. After all, Stalin, too, led the Soviet Union during hardships
caused by Lenin’s economic policies, elite infighting about the future of communism and the Soviet
Union, a crippling world war, and mass starvation resulting from a collectivization program, to
name a few challenges.

Another explanation may hold that Gorbachev’s reluctance to use violence may explain why
he failed where Stalin succeeded. An extensive political science literature on violent political
repression, however, would suggest otherwise. Rather than stymie the formation of opposition
movements, violent repression may encourage mobilization and violent resistance (Rasler, 1996;
Lichbach, 1987; Moore, 1998). Instead, nonviolent forms of political repression may be more capable
at guaranteeing long-term regime survival (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Smyth, 2020; Escriba-
Folch, 2013; Guriev and Treisman, 2015). Indeed, Brezhnev’s tenure was considerably stable and
did not rely on excessive violent repression.

I maintain that Gorbachev’s failure to consolidate power can be traced to his decision to remove
elites without having first ensured a stable source of support within the elite circles. Gorbachev’s
simultaneously removed elites while promoting newcomers who would not have had sufficient
political expertise to overcome the power of the more established old guard. At the same time,
the clout of lower-level CPSU positions, in general, had subsided and overall CPSU membership
spiraled downward as Gorbachev’s tenure progressed (Harasymiw, 1991). In the midst of Gor-
bachev’s almost-unprecedented anti-corruption purges, Taubman (1987) foreshadows Gorbachev’s
problem of insufficient elite support:
After almost two-and-a-half years in power, [Gorbachev] has managed to build a personal political machine in only one of the three key organs of the Soviet state - the Party Secretariat, which administers the Party apparatus, and through it, the Government. Although the Central Committee backed Gorbachev last month, a majority of its current members were appointed before he took power and thus are not beholden to him. It is worth remembering that the last audacious reformer to serve as General Secretary, Nikita S. Khrushchev, was ousted in 1964 when the Central Committee suddenly turned against him.

Gorbachev’s miscalculations of his capacity to consolidate power transformed him into a target of elite discontent. After the 1990 CPSU Congress, Gooding (1991) wrote, that “all semblance of monolithic unity has disappeared. Here was a party deeply divided and demoralized, its members engaged in bitter feuding, its leadership the target of sustained attack.” Facing opposition from Boris Yeltsin and other pro-democracy reformers on the one hand, and hardliners who wanted to reverse recent reforms on the other, Gorbachev had upset regime’s tenuous balance of power. During the 1990 Congress, hardliner Yegor Ligachev openly campaigned against Gorbachev, appealing to members’ own self-interests and their wishes for Party stability. At the same time, Yeltsin’s bloc resigned from the Party, staging a walk-out of the Congress.

A year later in 1991, hardliners staged a coup attempt, effectively imprisoning Gorbachev in his Crimean home. Though collective action eventually brought about coup’s end, the events signaled that Gorbachev’s efforts to consolidate power had failed. The Soviet Union collapsed shortly thereafter.

Of course, Gorbachev’s leadership failures have been discussed and debated elsewhere (e.g., Brown, 1997; Zubok, 2009; Miller, 2016). The argument presented here, however, places much of the blame
squarely on his failure to anticipate the destabilizing effect of his anti-corruption purges. Unlike Stalin, Gorbachev’s mass removal of elites coincided with rather than followed attempts to stack the Party in his favor by promoting loyalists. These decisions led to Party infighting that would put the Soviet Union on a path toward collapse.

Conclusion

Anti-corruption purges are common features of authoritarian system maintenance, often used by autocrats to establish and consolidate power. Autocrats, however, differ in their use of anti-corruption purges. This paper has outlined the two central characteristics of such purges: sacking and stacking. Whereas sacking involves the removal of disloyal elites, stacking involves the promotion of loyal elites. Original network and time series data from the Soviet Union revealed how sacking and stacking are independent decisions and do not necessarily happen in any particular order.

Analytic narratives compared Stalin’s anti-corruption purges with those of Gorbachev’s and highlighted how the order in which sacking and stacking occur can have meaningful consequences for regime consolidation efforts. These comparisons demonstrated that Stalin’s efforts to stack the CPSU with loyal elites contributed toward his success in consolidating power. On the other hand, Gorbachev opted for an immediate Party reform effort that saw the simultaneous promotion and dismissal of countless elites, actions that created internal chaos that would lead to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

This study’s findings suggest how purges and anti-corruption purges, in particular, can both stabilize and destabilize authoritarian regimes. These results are informative to scholarship on authoritarian consolidation, regime stability, and the logic of authoritarian anti-corruption campaigns.
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