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Rational dictators and the killing of innocents: Data from Stalin's archives

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Abstract

We posit a rational choice model of dictatorship to explain the tendency of dictators to repress innocent citizens. This model demonstrates that, when the quality of information about regime enemies is low, a rational dictator will knowingly kill and imprison citizens who are not real enemies. We use the formerly secret Stalin archives to test this proposition against the stylized facts of Stalin's three major repressions.

Research highlights

• This paper uses data from the Soviet state and party archives to examine the rationality of Stalin's repression campaigns. • We use an eliminations model that posits the dictator eliminates enemies when the number of enemies approaches a revolution constraint. • The number of eliminations depends positively on the number of enemies and the dictator's control and varies negatively with the quality of information about regime enemies.

information about enemies. We apply this model to Stalin's three major repression campaigns: collectivization (1930–1932), mass operations (1937–1938), and national operations (1937–1945). Application of the model to the three repression campaigns demonstrates that the greatest number of "innocent" victims were repressed when the information about enemies was poorest.



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