

## How did dictators of the twentieth century make use of propaganda and terror, 1918-39?

Dictators right across the political spectrum, from communist leaders like Lenin and Stalin, to Mussolini and Hitler on the extreme right, have all utilised terror and propaganda to maintain and consolidate their power.

Ever since his defeat of Trotsky in the struggle for power in the USSR, Stalin ad relied on propaganda to maintain a firm control over the country. He created a cult of leadership around himself, as illustrate by a moniker 'Stalin' which actually means 'man of steel'. He rewrote the history of the 1917 October Revolution to present himself as the best comrade in arms of Lenin. In fact he soon surpassed Lenin in Importance, becoming known as the "fount of all wisdom". He controlled the press and the radio and used propaganda to motivate workers. For example, the 'Stakhanov Movement' deified workers like Stakanhov who produced above their quotas. They were hailed as heroes of soviet labour. Production figures were also tools of propaganda, used to impress the populous by showing that they had exceeded the production targets set by Gosplan. This helped reinforce the idea of the 'soviet miracle' i.e. that Russia was growing and thriving while the rest of the world was going through the Great Depression.

However, Stalin's use of terror was even more effective than his use of propaganda. Stalin used the assassination of Kirov in 1934 as an excuse to start a party witch-hunt. This resulted

in the famous show trials, which he used to eliminate all his political enemies and threats. Staunch Bolsheviks like Radek, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Bukharin were collectively accused of being 'rightists and Trotskyites'. They were also blamed for sabotaging the Russian economy and accused of plotting to kill Stalin. This brand of terror was particularly effective because Stalin managed to distance himself from the show trials. Instead they became known as 'yeshovchina' after the head of the NKVD. Also, the show trials were judged to be legitimate by a number of independent outsiders, which added to the atmosphere of fear and paranoia. This allowed Stalin to seize even greater control over the country.

The great purge extended far beyond the political arena. Stalin also used terror to gain complete control of the army, replacing the commander-in-chief Tuchanevsky and sending 35,000 officers (half the officer corps) to the gulag. He also targeted the Kulaks (middle class farmers) who had resisted his policy of collectivization. He also terrorised the intelligentsia, because he feared they could lead a revolt against him. Most were used as slave labour for huge projects like the White Sea canal and the Moscow underground, while others were rounded up and shot. Stalin used terror to suppress anyone who showed a glimmer of independent thought. His main agent of terror was the secret police, the NKVD who tortured people to get confessions of sedition or sabotage, and then pressed the victim for names of more 'enemies of the state'. Thus the wave of terror spread like a plague from village to village.

Other dictators showed similar tendencies. Mussolini, however did not rely on terror to the same extent, and preferred non-lethal methods of oppressing the public. He also had a secret police (O.V.R.A) and during his rule over 4000 people were exiled from Italy. Special courts

were also established to try political enemies. Mussolini's Italy was repressive but nowhere near as brutal as Stalinist Russia or Nazi Germany.

Instead Mussolini relied mainly on propaganda to maintain control. He took control of the media and encouraged the production of cheap, inexpensive radios, which he saw as the best medium to the people. The number of radios in Italy increased from 27,000 in 1926 to 1 million in 1939. This allowed huge crowd to tune in to his stirring speech and be engrossed by his cult of personality. He was known as 'Il Duce' and was held up a model statesman, father, sportsman and worker. He infused all his police with this brand of flashy propaganda For example his production policies were known as 'battles' such as the 'battle for wheat' and the 'battle for grain'. Propaganda also seeped into the education system. Children were taught that 'Mussolini was always right' and encouraged to join the Balilla. Boys were trained to be soldiers and history books emphasised the glories of Italy's past. This indoctrination created a generation almost exclusively loyal to him.

Hitler used both terror and propaganda to exercise his iron grip over Germany. His secret police, the Gestapo led by Reynard Heydrich, kept a close watch over the population for any signs of anti-Aryan activities or sympathies to the subjugated Jews. They even encouraged children to report their parents for any evidence of 'disloyalty'. Hitler set up concentration camps such as Dachau, which were first used to imprison his political opponents as well as other 'undesirables' such as homosexuals, tramps, gypsies etc.

Hitler also proved himself very adept at using propaganda to control the population. He was helped by his competent 'Minister for Propaganda and Public Enlightenment' Josef Goebbels, who kept the state media on a tight leash. He held daily press conferences to instruct news

outlets on how to 'present' certain news items. He was instrumental in developing the cult of personality around Hitler. For example, he was given the title 'der Fuhrer' and his portrait was hung in every 'loyal' household and school. Goebbels also saw the potential of new media such as the radio and cinema. Famous directors such as Leni Riefenstahl were commissioned to produce propaganda films like 'Olympia' (telling the story of the 1936 Berlin Olympics) and 'The triumph of the will' (which brought the Nuremburg rallies to the silver screen). Most importantly, Hitler and Goebbels understood the appeal of mass rallies. They designed spectacular Nuremburg rallies, featuring stirring speeches, military parades and stunning light shows. This ensured that loyal party members were sent home inspired and awe-struck, with absolute faith in the leader.

Every dictator throughout history has relied on the twin agents of terror and propaganda to some degree. This is most evident in the totalitarian dictatorships of the twentieth century.