

EUR3. Dictatorship and Democracy | Sample answer

How did Mussolini and/or Stalin use propaganda and terror to remain in power? (2015)

Dictators right across the political spectrum, from communist leaders like Lenin, to Mussolini and Hitler on the extreme right, have all utilised terror and propaganda to maintain and consolidate their power. Stalin is no exception to this. Stalin had come to power after Lenin, the Bolshevik party leader died in the 1920s. He was considered the “*outstanding mediocrity*” of the party by many older members including Leon Trotsky. This essay aims to explore the ways in which Stalin used terror and propaganda during his time as leader of the Soviet Union.

Stalin relied on propaganda to maintain a firm control over the country. He created a cult of leadership around himself, as illustrated by a moniker ‘Stalin’ which 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. Everybody had to praise Stalin, all the time. Newspapers credited him with every success. Poets thanked him for bringing the harvest. People leapt to their feet to applaud every time his name was mentioned. His picture was everywhere, and parents taught their children to love Stalin more than themselves.

Propaganda was used to ensure that Stalin’s 5-year economic plans were successful. Incentives for workers were advertised. There were bonus payments for those who exceeded targets, and holidays paid for by the state. Workers were encouraged to work harder by means of propaganda. The work of Stakhanov is an excellent example of this. He produced 102 tonnes of coal in one shift. Later he mines 227 tonnes of coal in a single shift. His exploits were published by the press and radio, and he was on the cover of Time Magazine. However, his success was a setup. He was given the best equipment and two helpers to achieve his targets. He became the Hero of Socialist Labour and the Stakhanovite movement encouraged workers to follow his success. Production figures were also tools of propaganda, used to impress the populace 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.

He 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*”. The wave of terror spread like a plague from village to village. By the end of the 1930s, the Great Terror had spread to ordinary people - anybody who looked as though they had a will of their own. Some 20 million ordinary Russians were sent to the gulag - the system of labour camps mostly in Siberia. People who had annoyed their neighbours were turned into the NKVD (the secret police) and arrested, never to be seen again.

Stalin used the Show Trials to consolidate absolute power. The show trials, also known as the ‘Moscow Trials’ were a series of propaganda trials held in Russia during the rule of Stalin. The first of the show trials took place in 1936. In this trial Stalin removes two important possible threats – Zinoviev and Kamenev. Both Zinoviev and Kamenev had helped Stalin to remove Trotsky from power before he turned against them. At a private trial, Stalin promised Zinoviev and Kamenev their lives, and the safety of their families, if they confessed to all charges and gave Stalin a list of accomplices.

However, at the public trial Zinoviev and Kamenev did not fare so well. It is probable that Stalin made it a public trial for propaganda purposes. Making this trial public showed that even strong men like Zinoviev and Kamenev would not escape Stalin’s purges. Zinoviev and Kamenev were not the only ones on trial: 14 others including a civil war hero and former ambassadors to foreign countries were also on trial. Vyshinsky was the lead prosecutor, and the NKVD were used to extract confessions from the accused. 350 spectators attended, mostly NKVD in plain clothes, foreign diplomats, and journalists. All of the accused were found guilty. They appealed for mercy, yet the following day all 16 were shot dead, along with most of Zinoviev and Kamenev’s families.

The second show trial, the trial of 17, took place in 1937. The most important defendant on trial was Radek. He was promised his life if he listed accomplices to his ‘crimes’. His testimony

implicated many others including Bukharin and Rykov – members of one of Stalin's last opposition, the 'Rightists'. The charges were much the same as those brought against those in the first trial. In court Vyshinsky called the defendants "*liars and clowns, insignificant pygmies*". The accused fell over each other to prove their own guilt. In his closing speech Vyshinsky demanded that the accused be "*shot like mad dogs*". All but four of the accused were executed. In exchange for his confession, Radek was sent to a prison camp where he was later killed by a NKVD agent.

The third public show trial, known as the Great Show Trial, took place in 1938. 21 defendants were on trial, the most important of these being Bukharin and Rykov. Bukharin was a great thinker, a Marxist theoretician, and Rykov was the former Prime Minister of Russia. They were not the only ones on trial. Kremlin doctors and people close to Stalin were also accused. The former secretary of the Central Committee, the Commissar of the timber industry, and people in charge of agriculture, finance and foreign trade were all accused. Even the NKVD were not left untouched. Yagoda who had overseen the interrogation of the first trial was himself put on trial. Many of the accused were executed. Yagoda's execution was particularly brutal. He was stripped naked, beaten, and shot. His replacement as head of the NKVD Yezhov kept the bullet. He would suffer the same fate later in 1940.

After the trials, Stalin led the public to believe Yezhov had orchestrated the show trials, thus protecting his public image. The reaction in the west was surprisingly positive. Despite the weaknesses in the evidence the US ambassador was convinced that the allegations were true. Many socialists who had visited the USSR in the 1930s were also convinced that the trials were fair. The leader of the British Communist Party called the trials "*a new triumph in the history of progress*".

Every dictator throughout history has relied on the twin agents of terror and propaganda to some degree. Stalin used propaganda and terror to secure his rule and consolidate absolute power. While his use of propaganda was important to his rise to power and the success of his economic policies, his use of terror was even more effective.