

Dictatorship and Democracy, 1920-1945 |

Sample answer

What were the main characteristics of Stalin's rule in Russia? (2012)

Stalin came to power in 1927 after a power struggle between Trotsky, Kamenev and Zinoviev. Stalin's main characteristic of his rule was conserving communism in Russia. Communism is a system of government in which private property would be abolished and the government would run the land and factories for the benefit of all. It was first introduced into Russia by Lenin and continued by Stalin, in a perhaps more aggressive approach. During his rule, to maintain communism he used absolute fear to create a totalitarian dictatorship, used propaganda to create a cult of personality around himself and established state control in the economy.

One of Stalin's characteristics was achieving his objectives through absolute fear. This can be seen in his ambitious 5-year plans when he transformed the industrial front of the economy. His aim was to make Russia self-sufficient, modernise the Soviet Union and ultimately make it a World power. In 1931 he said that the Western powers were "50 to 100 years" ahead of the USSR and warned that if they did not close this gap in 10 years the West would "crush" them. His first policy began in 1928-1933 and focused on heavy industry such as coal, iron, machinery and railways. In 1933-1938 he focused on consumer goods which were really taken over by military weapons. A huge canal was dug connecting the White sea with the Volga. The Moscow underground was built. The industrial workforce rose from 11 million to 22 million By 1939 the USSR was the 2nd largest economy in the world. But this came a huge cost to human life in Russia. Working conditions were extremely tough, particularly during the first five-year plan. Workers and managers came under pressure to meet targets if they missed a day through illness, they usually lost their jobs. Therefore many lied about their output figures. Examples

were made of those workers who exceeded targets such as Alexey Stakhanov. It claimed that in a single six-hour shift Stakhanov had dug out 102 tonnes of coal, more than 14 times his daily target, he was declared a “hero of socialist labour”. So through the use of fear and propaganda workers strived to work like Stakhanov.

Furthermore, a characteristic of Stalin’s, to create a totalitarian state was attempted in his policy of collectivism. His aim was to join all small unproductive peasant farms together to form large state-owned farms. Each “Kolkhoz” was to be run by a committee that would be monitored by the local communist party. The committees had to meet specified production targets and sell their produce at a fixed price to the state. Economically, this policy was designed to increase production but in reality, small farmers destroyed their produce and their livestock when asked to hand them over to the state, and as a result, production crashed. By 1929 less than 10% of farmers had volunteered to join the collectives. Stalin responded by using force to get the peasants to cooperate. The red army was sent to forcibly confiscate the land. Any resilience was dealt with arrests and executions. By 1930 58% of peasants farmers had joined collective farms. But the collective farms were inefficient, between 1932-1933 a famine broke out causing the deaths of 10 million people. This policy and harsh penalties furthered Stalin's control of the economy.

Stalin made effective use of propaganda to create a cult of personality for himself. To achieve this, statues of him were placed in every town and village, posters and photographs of him were hung up extensively. Streets and cities were renamed after him (the city of Volgograd was renamed Stalingrad). Music, poetry and art were used to glorify him. Stalin became present in everyday life that people were easily indoctrinated. Teachers were forced to teach children to worship Stalin as the “fount of all wisdom”. History books were rewritten to exaggerate his role in the 1917 October Revolution while any enemies to the state such as Leon Trotsky were removed from history. The media was cleverly manipulated to promote Stalin as a great leader. The use of propaganda was successful in creating a cult of personality for the ruthless Stalin.

In addition to propaganda, Stalin consistently used terror as a power consolidation tactic. During the Terror, sparked by the murder of Leningrad Communist leader Kirov, the NKVD (secret police) brutally dealt with any opponents or even suspected opponents of Stalin. This showed the extent of Stalin's paranoia. Members of this police force were anonymous and therefore people feared that they were surrounded by them. It was common for parents and siblings to turn each other into the NKVD, which illustrates the extent to which citizens were terrified, proving Stalin's use of terror to be effective. Even NKVD members were afraid of falling victim themselves or facing punishment if they failed to reach the arrest quota. Many suspects were sent to gulags (labour camps) where they faced long working hours to contribute to industrialisation. The largest gulag was Kolyma which was 6x the size of France, showing how large-scale Stalin's terror was.

One of the best examples of how Stalin achieved loyalty through absolute fear was through his notorious show trials. The show trials were used to eliminate any person seen to be a threat to the government. Stalin was a paranoid person and saw threats to his power all around him. His greatest threats were the men who opposed him on his rise to power and even the ones who sided with him. The first show trial began in August 1936 targeting Kamenev and Zinoviev and 14 others. They were being accused of plotting the murder of Kirov and Stalin. The prosecutor was Andrei Vyshinsky and having interrogating the men they were convicted of treason and shot. Stalin had publicly broadcasted the trial as an attempt to bring communism to the world stage and to illustrate to the public that no one was safe from his purges.

The second show trial took place in January 1937. Among those being accused were Radek and Putakov for being Anti-Trotskyist conspirators. The last show trial began in March 1938, Bukharin, Rykov and Yagoda (former head of the NKVD) were accused of plotting the murder of Lenin and Stalin as well as co-operating with enemies of the Soviet Union, Britain and Germany. The irony of the situation was that Yagoda was instrumental in the setting up of the Show Trials. All accused during the Show trials were executed on flimsy evidence. During the trials, Stalin began a purge on the Red army. He arrested several senior officers, including civil war hero Marshal Tukhachevsky and chief of general staff. This served to remove the threat of a military

uprising against Stalin and made sure the Red Army and NKVD were compliant with him. These horrific purges guaranteed Stalin's position and advanced his totalitarian state.

In conclusion, Stalin through his policy of state control and his ambitious and harsh economic policy did bring some positive results to the economy. It recovered rapidly and was the 2nd most industrialised country in the world. But these results came at a huge cost to human life. Through his clever manipulation using propaganda, he established a state that worshipped him and would never act against him. He furthermore used his policy of fear for his idolisation and ensured no one remained who could challenge his authority. These characteristics of Stalin's rule helped him consolidate his position as the unquestioned ruler of Russia.