

How did Stalin use propaganda and terror to remain in power?

Over the course of his rule Joseph Stalin ruthlessly used propaganda and terror to inspire craven loyalty in Russian citizens and maintain absolute power within the communist party and the politburo. Stalin saw the role of propaganda as strengthening his own totalitarian regime. He believed all mediums of communication: radio, television, newspapers, art, theatre and posters could be used to further his aims. Education in the USSR also taught communist principles and glorified Stalin's leadership. He honed a cult of personality with the USSR. This is whereby propaganda is used to portray the image of an all wise, all knowing leader. History was rewritten to cast Stalin as a hero of the November Revolution and Civil War. Street names and cities, such as Stalingrad, were named after him. Statues and posters of him were widespread. Music, art and poetry praised him as the "most learned of men" and the "fount of all wisdom". He was an equal to Lenin: "Stalin is the new Lenin of today". Propaganda was further used to promote Stalin's controversial policies of collectivisation and rapid industrialisation. The story of Stakhanov, who allegedly mined 105 tonnes of coal in one shift, appeared in Time magazine. He was lauded as a hero of socialist labour and the Stakhanovite movement encouraged others to work similarly hard for Stalin's aims and success.

Stalin's policies, however, still led to opposition and he feared a conspiracy against him. Critique by Trotsky angered him and he claimed there was a trotskyite plot to overthrow his government. He wanted to "destroy the men who might form an alternative government" and create a new class of uber loyal leaders and followers, completely consolidating his power within the USSR. In this respect, he launched the purges and the Great Terror. The early purges were aimed at critics of collectivisation and industrialisation and those who blamed Stalin for the 1932 famine. Kulaks were jailed and sent to gulags, wreckers and saboteurs of industry were imprisoned and ordinary members of the communist party were questioned and purged by Stalin. A major factor in the intensification of the purges was the assassination of Leningrad communist leader, Kirov. Though Stalin was suspicious of Kirov during his lifetime, he used his death as an excuse to purge his enemies. The assassin and 13 others were shot, and a further 100 unrelated individuals were executed by Stalin. Thousands would be expelled from the communist party in the ensuing witch hunt, lasting from 1936-1938.

This began with the first Show trial in August of 1936. Stalin wanted to both convince the Soviet public and international opinion of a genuine conspiracy and that the purges were necessary, and continue to eliminate his enemies, including the old bolsheviks who he believed were still loyal to Lenin, and thus a threat to his power. At the first show trial Kamenev, Zinoviev and 14 others were accused of assassinating Kirov, plotting to murder Stalin and conspiring with Nazi Germany. Stalin directed the trial and J. R Hingley notes: the "trial was closely planned by Stalin" and he declared Zinoviev and Kamenev were to be "given the works". The NKVD interrogated the men, first forcing confessions from minor officials which were used against more senior officials. Defendants were made to memorise lines, which were often penned by Stalin himself. The confessions proved a conspiracy and that Stalin was right. There were 3

judges, no jury and no lawyers. An audience of journalists, diplomats and ordinary citizens attended, who helped spread the wonder of, as Solzhenitsyn put it, “the expensive and dramatic production”. Vyshinsky acted as a prosecutor and we can see him prompting defendants with lines from trial transcripts: Vyshinsky asks “treason?”, Kamenev responds “you have found it.” Vyshinsky summed up the trial with the potent piece of stalinist propaganda: “I add my indignant voice of a state prosecutor to the voice of millions”, “I demand the mad dogs be shot!” The state newspaper Pravda stated the guilty verdict of the trial was “enthusiastically approved by workers”. Stalin had successfully combined propaganda and terror, inspiring awe and loyalty in the USSR and abroad.

Following the first show trial Stalin purged the main institutions of the communist party. Members were accused of being class enemies, fascist spies, plotting against Stalin, trotskyites and were “rarely found not guilty”. Stalin purged the army, including Tukachevsky, who had been commander in chief during the civil war. 35,000 were shot and jailed including most commanders and generals. The army was the last organisation that could have stopped Stalin in his reign of terror and it was now considerably weakened. In 1936 Germany and Japan signed the Anti-comintern pact, which posed an external threat to Stalin’s rule. There had also been an increase of industrial accidents in the 5 year plans. Questions of sabotage and espionage began to rise and so Stalin embarked on the Trial of 17. Radek, Pyatakov and 14 others were on trial. They were accused of being part of an anti-soviet, trotskyite center and conspiring with nazi germany to divide the USSR. Pyatakov as deputy minister during the first 5 year plan was accused of wrecking and sabotage. J.N Westwood noted that Pyatakov was a “convenient scapegoat for the shortcomings of the 5 year plan” for Stalin. Newspapers published headlines, such as: “no mercy for the trotskyite degenerates, the murderous accomplices of fascism!”

In 1937 Stalin purged the NKVD replacing its members with more sadistic officers. Stalin was unhappy with Yagoda’s (head of the NKVD) handling of the first show trial and so appointed Yeshov in his place. In the Trial of 21, Yagoda, Rykov and Bukarin and 18 others were accused of being part of an anti-soviet bloc of rightists and trotskyites, as well as wrecking, sabotage and attempting to assassinate stalin. This came in the wake of increased international tension, germany and japanese expansion, army purges and Yeshovs intensification of the purges. Stalin used this last trial to wipe away any doubt of his power in a storm of propaganda and terror. Rykov confessed the defendants aim was “first a number of economic concessions and secondly the dismemberment of the USSR”, in Solzhenitsyn’s words what had been powerful leaders, were now “doleful obedient goats” “who belated out everything they had been ordered to, vomiting all over themselves”.

The Show trials were a triumph in propaganda for Stalin. Daily reports demanded severe punishment for the accused. This created a wide spread fear of panic, linking a major conspiracy with nazi germany. British diplomats and the New York Times believed the trial was fair and legal, but as Montifiore puts it: “200,000 people were bedazzled by propaganda”. Vyshinsky’s remarks as prosecutor were particularly convincing and emotive: “ The graves of

the odious traitors will be overgrown with weeds, covered with the eternal contempt of the soviet people". Soviet history books spoke of the "trotskyite underlings" and "judas trotsky" with regard to the show trials. Indeed, Stalin's wave of propaganda and terror was so successful at consolidating his power many of those arrested "inscribed 'long live stalin' in blood on the walls of their prison". The show trials left Stalin in complete control of Russia, with ordinary Russians being so horrified by the litany of crimes committed that it prevented them questioning those crimes. Common enemies also created further unity and support for Stalin. By 1940 every single member of Lenin's politburo was dead except Stalin. He created a new generation of uber loyal leaders and he successfully concealed his role in the trials, with one newspaper saying Yeshov has "smashed the viper's nest of these vermine".

Minorities were also targeted in Stalin's purges, as he ensured loyalty would be to him and not any deity. Synagogues were closed, to "russianise" jews and poles, germans and georgians were persecuted. Trotsky was blamed for inciting much of the opposition against Stalin, thus he was assassinated in Mexico, under Stalin's orders in 1940. Terror reached all areas of soviet life, no one person or group was safe and this inspired a chronic fear in society. Quotas for arrests and executions meant that ordinary Russians were executed and sent to gulags. By 1938 7 million people were held in soviet labour camps. The purges, Yeshovchina and the show trials were all modes of propaganda and terror used by Stalin to remain in power. 1000's were expelled from the communist party and 300,000 were deemed enemies of the people, erasing any internal opposition. Stalin wiped out the entire kulak class, eliminating any opponents to his economic policies. He ensured that no institution within the USSR would ever be strong enough to bring down his totalitarian reign, and that anyone who might have led that effort was already dead. 20 million Russians were taken from their ordinary lives and 18 million went through gulags under stalin's reign. They were used as slave labour, which helped to strengthen Stalin's industrialisation efforts even in the remotest regions of the USSR. Stalin ensured that terror and propaganda loomed in every possible aspect of citizens lives, from education to work to leisure, consolidating his leadership and causing all russian citizens to feel the expectation of proving their undivided loyalty to him.