

3 Stalin's domestic policies and their impact, 1929–53

▶ **Key question:** What impact did Stalinism have on the lives of the Soviet people?

How was Soviet culture manipulated to strengthen Stalin's power?

KEY TERM

Social realism

Representational work which related directly to the lives of the people.

Soviet Union of Writers

The body which had authority over all published writers and had the right to ban any work of which it disapproved.

Arts and the media

Literature

In 1932, Stalin declared to a gathering of Soviet writers that they were 'engineers of the human soul'. Their task was essentially a social not an artistic one. They had to reshape the thinking and behaviour of the Soviet people. The goal of the artist had to be **social realism**. It is not surprising, therefore, that when the **Soviet Union of Writers** was formed in 1934 it declared that its first objective was to convince all its members of the need to struggle for socialist realism in their works. This could be best achieved by conforming to a set of guidelines. Writers were to make sure that their work:

- was acceptable to the Party in theme and presentation
- was written in a style immediately understandable to the workers who would read it
- contained characters whom the readers could recognize as socialist role models or examples of class enemies.

These rules applied to creative writing in all its forms: novels, plays, poems and film scripts. It was not easy for genuine writers to continue working within these restrictions, but conformity was the price of acceptance, of survival even. Surveillance, scrutiny and denunciations intensified throughout the 1930s. In such an intimidating atmosphere, suicides became common. Historian Robert Service notes in his biography of Stalin that 'more great intellectuals perished in the 1930s than survived'. In 1934, Osip Mandelstam, a leading literary figure, recited a mocking poem about Stalin at a private gathering of writers, which contained the lines 'Around him, fawning half-men for him to play with, as he prates and points a finger'. He was informed on and died four years later in the *Gulag*. He once remarked, 'Only in Russia is poetry taken seriously, so seriously men are killed for it.'

Stalin took a close personal interest in new artistic works. One word of criticism from him was enough to destroy a writer. The atmosphere of repression and the restrictions on genuine creativity had the effect of elevating conformist mediocrities to positions of influence and power. This was a common characteristic of totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century.

Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn

Among the most prominent of the writers persecuted under Stalin were Boris Pasternak and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Pasternak's works were regarded by the authorities as implicitly critical of the Soviet system and therefore unacceptable. His *Dr Zhivago*, a novel that later became greatly admired in the West, was refused publication in the USSR during his lifetime. Solzhenitsyn, a deeply spiritual man, was regarded by the authorities as a subversive and spent many years in the *Gulag* for falling foul of Stalin's censors. His documentary novels, such as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *The Gulag Archipelago*, which was published after Stalin's death, described the horrific conditions in the labour camps.

Theatre and film

The Union of Writers set the tone for all other organizations in the arts. Film-making, opera and ballet, all had to respond to the Stalinist demand for socialist realism. Abstract forms were frowned upon because they broke the rules that works should be immediately accessible to the public. An idea of the repression that operated can be gained from the following figures:

- In the years 1936–37, 68 films out of 150 had to be withdrawn mid-production and another 30 taken out of circulation.
- In the same period, ten out of nineteen plays and ballets were ordered to be withdrawn.
- In the 1937–38 theatre season, 60 plays were banned from performance and 10 theatres closed in Moscow and another 10 in Leningrad.

Vsevolod Meyerhold

A prominent victim was the director, Vsevolod Meyerhold, whose concept of **total theatre** had a major influence on European drama. Despite his wish to bring theatre closer to the people, his appeal for artistic liberty – 'The theatre is a living creative thing. We must have freedom, yes, freedom' – led to a campaign being mounted against him by Stalin's sycophantic supporters. He was arrested in 1938. After a two-year imprisonment during which he was regularly beaten until he fainted, he was shot. His name was one on a list of 346 death sentences that Stalin signed on one day – 16 January 1940.

Sergei Eisenstein

Even the internationally-acclaimed director, Sergei Eisenstein, whose films *Battleship Potemkin* and *October*, celebrating the revolutionary Russian proletariat, had done so much to advance the communist cause, was heavily censured. This was because a later work of his, *Ivan the Terrible*, was judged to be an unflattering portrait of a great Russian leader and, therefore, by implication, disrespectful of Stalin.

Painting and sculpture

Painters and sculptors were left in no doubt as to what was required of them. Their duty to conform to socialist realism in their style and at the same time

KEY TERM

Total theatre An approach which sought to break down the barriers between actors and audience by novel use of lighting, sound and stage settings.

honour their great leader was captured in an article in the art magazine *Iskusstvo* describing a prize painting of Stalin in 1948: 'The image of Comrade Stalin is the symbol of the Soviet people's glory, calling for new heroic exploits for the benefit of our great motherland.'

SOURCE O

Posters from the 1930s, typical of the propaganda of the time, showing Stalin as the leader of his adoring people. Poster art was a very effective way for the Stalinist authorities to spread their propaganda.

? In what ways do the posters in Source O illustrate the artistic notion of socialist realism?



'Under the leadership of the great Stalin, forward to Communism!'



Music

Since music is an essentially abstract art form, it was more difficult to make composers respond to Stalin's notions of social realism. Nevertheless, it was the art form which most interested Stalin, who regarded himself as an expert in the field. He claimed to be able to recognize socialist music and to know what type of song would inspire the people. He tried to impose his judgement on the Soviet Union's leading composer, Dmitri Shostakovich, some of whose works were banned for being 'bourgeois and formalistic'. However, the Great Fatherland War gave Shostakovich the opportunity to express his deep patriotism. His powerful orchestral works depicted in sound the courageous struggle and final victory of the Soviet people. At the end of the war, in return for being reinstated, he promised to bring his music closer to 'the folk art of the people'.

Stalin's cult of personality

One of the strongest charges made against Stalin after his death was that he had indulged in the **cult of personality**. He had certainly dominated every aspect of Soviet life, becoming not simply a leader but the embodiment of the nation itself. From the 1930s on, his picture appeared everywhere. Every newspaper, book and film, no matter what its theme, carried a reference to Stalin's greatness. Biographies poured off the press, each one trying to outbid the other in its veneration of the leader. Every achievement of the USSR was credited to Stalin. Such was his all-pervasive presence that Soviet communism became identified with him as a person.

The cult of personality was not a spontaneous response of the people. It was imposed from above. The image of Stalin as hero and saviour of the Soviet people was manufactured. It was a product of the Communist Party machine which controlled all the main forms of information – newspapers, cinema and radio, as Roy Medvedev, a Soviet historian who lived through Stalinism, later explained (see Source P).

SOURCE P

Excerpt from *Let History Judge* by Roy Medvedev, published by OUP, UK, 1989, p. 588.

Everywhere he put up monuments to himself – thousands upon thousands of factories and firms named [after] Stalin, and many cities: Stalinsk, Stalino, Stalingrad ... more than can be counted. When Stalin was encouraging the cult of his personality he and his cohorts shamelessly falsified party history, twisting and suppressing many facts and producing a flood of books, articles and pamphlets filled with distortions.

← How was propaganda used to promote the idea of Stalin as an all-powerful leader?

KEY TERM

Cult of personality A consistent use of mass propaganda to promote the idea of the leader as an ideal, heroic figure, elevated above ordinary people and politics.

According to Source P, how did Stalin promote the cult of personality?

The Stakhanovite movement

A fascinating example of distortion was the Stakhanovite movement. In August 1935, it was claimed that a coal miner, Alexei Stakhanov, had hewn fourteen