Life under Stalin’s rule

What was it like to live and work in the Soviet Union under the rule of Stalin?

The cult of Stalin

By the end of the 1940’s Stalin dominated the USSR physically as well as politically. Everyone - no matter who or where they were - knew that Stalin was the leader. They could hardly fail to know it, for walls, hoardings, whole buildings were covered with huge portraits of his face. Every shop window displayed his bust. In offices, factories and even in private homes, ‘red corners’ containing busts of Lenin and Stalin were set up. Towns and cities, rivers and canals, schools and hospitals, mountains and lakes, were named after him. Newspapers referred to him as ‘Man of Steel’, ‘Iron Soldier’, ‘Universal Genius’, ‘Shining Sun of Humanity’, ‘Granite Bolshevik’, and dozens of other similar names. Audiences at meetings applauded whenever his name was mentioned - which was often. Films, plays, poems, stories and novels celebrated every detail of his life. Stalin had acquired an almost god-like status. During the celebrations of his seventieth birthday, a giant portrait of Stalin was suspended over Moscow and lit up at night by a battery of searchlights (see opposite).

Religion

“Religion is the opium of the people”, wrote Karl Marx. All Bolsheviks believed that religion was an invention to distract the poor and oppressed from trying to remedy their situation on earth by offering them the prospect of perfect happiness after death. The attack on religion that began under Lenin, was continued by Stalin. Worship of Stalin was encouraged but religious worship was strongly discouraged. Nearly 40,000 Christian churches and 25,000 mosques were closed down and converted into clubs, cinemas, schools, and warehouses. Church bells were removed and melted down as scrap metal. In Muslim areas, women were forbidden to wear the veil and pilgrimages to Mecca were banned. Church leaders were arrested and imprisoned. Those who escaped arrest were forbidden to organise any religious activity in public. In 1930 there were 30,000 Orthodox congregations, but by 1939 only 1 in 40 churches were still functioning and only seven bishops were still active in the whole of the Soviet Union. Only 1300 mosques were still operating in 1941 as against 26,000 in 1917. The photograph above shows the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in the heart of Moscow. Stalin ordered its destruction in 1931.

To weaken the religious faith of the Soviet people, the Communist Party had set up a League of Militant Atheists back in 1924. By 1933 it had 5.5 million members, whose job was to try to turn
people away from religion. They set up anti-religious museums in former cathedrals. They burnt icons and other religious objects. They organised anti-religious propaganda campaigns. In the old capital, St. Petersburg, which was now known as Leningrad, the authorities seemed to have a macabre sense of humour. The famous Kazan Cathedral was converted into a museum of atheism.

**Education**

After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, there had been some interesting changes in teaching and learning styles. Examinations had been denounced as ‘bourgeois’ and therefore removed. Similarly activities which emphasised competition, and thus divisiveness, such as sports were downplayed. Traditional academic education was replaced by a heavy emphasis on vocational training. However, under Stalin's rule, school life and education became stricter once more. An education law of 1935 allowed teachers to use strict methods of discipline. Report cards and test marks, which had been abolished in the 1920s, were reintroduced. School uniforms were restored - including compulsory pigtails for girls. In history lessons, kings, battles, dates - especially Russian ones - became the staple diet of pupils.

The aim of education was summed up in Rule One of twenty rules of behaviour that all pupils had to learn by heart: *It is the duty of each school child to acquire knowledge persistently so as to become an educated and cultured citizen and to be of the greatest possible service to his country.*

One result of these education policies was the almost total disappearance of illiteracy. By 1939, each child spent seven compulsory years at school. Even illiterate adults were encouraged to attend school or evening classes. Thus, by 1939 illiteracy had declined to just 4% of the male and 18% of the female population. Literacy was, however, of little use if there was little to read. Pravda and Izvestia were therefore widely distributed. Stalin revealed his motives behind the literacy drive when he said, *The press should grow not by the day, but by the hour, for it is the sharpest and most powerful weapon of our people*.

Children and adults were bombarded with propaganda inside and outside of school. The young were encouraged to join party groups, the Young Pioneers, up to 14 years, and then Komsomol, until they were 28. The photograph above shows Komsomol members parading behind their band. As young Communists they were expected to set an example to their peers: party rules, for example, forbade them to smoke or drink. Most of them went on to become full members of the Communist Party. The Communist future they were told, would be theirs, but they must do their part to build it. And build it they did, volunteering for the most grandiose projects of the Five Year Plans, and for the party’s biggest prestige project in the capital – the Moscow Metro.
Children were also given idols of their own age group to admire. The statue opposite depicts Pavlik Morozov, the Young Pioneer who denounced his own father for maintaining ties with kulaks. He was murdered as a result by other members of his family.

**Culture and censorship**

The Communist Party kept a strict watch on the Soviet Union's creative artists - its writers, painters, composers, etc - to make sure that they supported the Party and the government. All writers had to belong to the Union of Soviet Writers, and members were expected to follow a policy of 'socialist realism' in their writings. This meant that novels, filmscripts, poems, plays and journalism had to deal with the lives of ordinary working people and to show the progress of Communism. The same applied to painters, composers and any other creative artist. Soviet people were therefore able to read only books that supported the ideas of Communism.

What about books that had already been written but which did not support the Party? Nadezhda Mandelstam, a Soviet writer, tells us in her memoirs, published in 1970, what happened in such cases: 'Varia... showed us her school textbooks where the portraits of Party leaders had thick pieces of paper pasted over them as one by one they fell into disgrace - this the children had to do on instructions from their teacher . . . With every new arrest people went through their books and burned the works of disgraced leaders in their stoves. In new apartment buildings, which had central heating instead of stoves, forbidden books, personal diaries, correspondence and other “subversive literature” had to be cut up in pieces with scissors and thrown down the toilet.'

**Family life**

Marriage as an institution did not at first win the favour of all Bolsheviks. During the 1920s the Soviet government had tried to weaken the family as a unit of society because it believed it exploited women. Government propaganda, as early as the 1920's emphasised the role of woman workers as well as homemakers. Wedding rings were abolished. Abortion became available on demand. Marriages were performed in brief ceremonies only in register offices. Divorce could be obtained simply by one partner in the marriage requesting it. By 1934 there were 37 divorces for every 100 marriages, while there were 154,000 abortions for every 57,000 live births in Moscow.

In 1936, in the face of growing trends of abortion, family desertion and juvenile crime, the government introduced new measures to strengthen family life. Divorce was made more difficult, abortion became a criminal offence except when it was necessary on medical grounds, and wedding rings were restored. And to try to increase the birth rate, tax exemptions were given to families with large numbers of children. Homosexuality was also banned.

Families received a range of new benefits under Stalin. There was a free health service for all, there were holidays with pay for many workers, and an insurance scheme against accidents at work. To encourage women to go back to work after giving birth, almost all factories set up crèches to care for their children. However, women still faced discrimination in the workplace, usually occupying the lower positions.
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The cult of Stalin
1. What was the purpose of the cult of Stalin?
2. List the methods used to ensure Stalin’s presence was felt throughout the USSR.
3. What kinds of names were used in reference to Stalin? What images did they convey?
4. How did the celebrations for Stalin’s seventieth birthday suggest he had assumed god-like status?

Religion
1. What did Marx mean by, ‘Religion is the opium of the people?’
2. What did Bolsheviks believe was the purpose of religion?
3. How did Stalin attack religion? How successful was this onslaught?
4. How did the manner in which the Bolsheviks and the Tsars use religion differ?

Education
1. How had the approach to education changed after the 1917 Revolution?
2. How did Stalin reverse this trend? Why do you think he did so?
3. What did Stalin believe the purpose of education was?
4. To what extent had the problem of mass illiteracy been overcome by 1939? What was the real motive for the literacy drive?
5. How did Stalin seek to control children outside of school?
6. Why were children encouraged to admire Pavlik Morozov?

Culture and censorship
1. Why did Stalin seek to control all art forms?
2. What organisation did writers have to join?
3. What was the purpose of ‘socialist realism’?
4. What happened to books that did not support the Communist Party?

Family Life
1. How and why had the Bolshevik government sought to weaken the family unit in the 1920’s?
2. Why did Stalin change party policy on the family in the late 1930’s?
3. What measures did Stalin introduce to strengthen family life?
4. How did opportunities for women improve under both Lenin and Stalin?