Inside the USSR: Stalin’s “Cult of Personality”

- Stalin promoted Russian history and culture
- Promoted a “Cult of Personality”—Stalin ordered the production and circulation of propaganda material portraying himself as a great national hero and “deity” (god-like figure).

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**SLIDE #1**

**Stalin’s Terror**

“[Joseph Stalin] gives the impression of a large and crude clay-like figure, a demon into which a demonic spark has been instilled. He was nonetheless a man who perhaps more than any other determined the course of the twentieth century.” — Robert Conquest

**Introduction**

Although Stalin would have preferred to have been remembered for his towering economic achievements, he is most closely associated with The Purge. Through a combination of terror and show trials, he succeeded in wringing out millions of his fellow communists and countrymen in the years leading up to World War Two.

By 1940 Stalin had arrested and executed almost every important living Bolshevik from the Revolution. Of 1,988 delegates to the party congress in 1934, 1,108 were arrested. Of the 132 Central Committee members of 1934, over 90 were shot. Five of the 11 found in the Politburo of 1934 were killed, many in mysterious circumstances.

Even members of the secret police were charged with treason. In 1936, Yagoda, the Head of the NKVD, was removed from post and shot. Yezhov, his successor, known as the “poison dwarf” only lasted two years before he too was killed. Lower ranking NKVD men were accused of not rounding up enough traitors, and they too were shot.

The Yezhovshchina (era of Yezhov, named for NKVD chief Nikolai Yezhov) ravaged the military as well, leading to the execution or incarceration of about half the officer corps. Three out of five Soviet marshals and one-third of the Red Army officers were arrested or shot. Outside of politics, many millions of others died in the purges.

Ordinary people too were “purged”. It is suggested that between 1934 and 1939 as many as 12 million people may have died either from execution or in the labour camps. A further 12 million were still alive in labour camps in 1959.

The key defendant, Leon Trotsky, was living in exile abroad, but he still did not survive Stalin’s desire to have him dead and was assassinated by a Soviet agent in 1940.

**Stalinist history**

- Stalin with Nikolai Yezhov
- Stalin with Yezhov removed
- Lenin and Trotsky celebrate the second anniversary of the Russian Revolution in 1917
- Lenin celebrates, but Trotsky has been airbrushed out.

Questions: Was the Terror necessary for Stalin to maintain power? Why were photos changed? (See Below)
By A. O. Avdienko, an article in Pravda, 1936

O great Stalin, O leader of the peoples / Thou who broughtest man to birth / Thou who fructifies the earth / Thou who restorest to centuries / Thou who makest bloom the spring / Thou who makest vibrate the musical chords... / Thou, splendour of my spring, O thou / Sun reflected by millions of hearts.

Montefiore, "The Court of the Red Tsar"
"On 26th October 1932, a chosen elite of 50 writers were mysteriously invited to the art deco mansion of Russia’s greatest living writer, Maxim Gorky. Ever since the late 1920’s, Gorky had holidayed with Stalin...Stalin named the Moscow Art theatre after the writer [arguing that] Gorky is a vain man. We must bind him with cables to the party’. At the party, Stalin proposed "The artist ought to show life truthfully. And if he shows our life truthfully he cannot fail to show it moving towards socialism. This is, and will be, Socialist Realism...even more than machines, tanks and aeroplanes, we need human souls”

By A. O. Avdienko, an article in Pravda, 1936

"Centuries will pass, and the generations still to come will regard us as the happiest of mortals, as the most fortunate of men, because we lived in the century of centuries, because we were privileged to see Stalin, our inspired leader. Yes, and we regard ourselves as the happiest of mortals because we are the contemporaries of a man who never had an equal in world history. Every time I have found myself in his presence I have been subjugated by his strength, his charm, his grandeur. I have experienced a great desire to sing, to cry out, to shout with joy and happiness...

I love a young woman with a renewed love and shall perpetuate myself in my children - all thanks to thee, great educator, Stalin. I shall be eternally happy and joyous, all thanks to thee, great educator, Stalin. Everything belongs to thee, chief of our great country. And when the woman I love presents me with a child the first word it shall utter will be: Stalin”
SLIDE #3

(a) Pictures

The complexity of Stalin's visual stature is that while he was portrayed as a man of the people, at the same time he is idolized as a deity. The day to day visual imagery of Stalin was probably the most important aspect in constructing his myth. The fact that Stalin could be a Georgian peasant (power derived from the people: principles of Socialism), a father figure (power derived as a protector: a replacement for the Tsar), and a deity (power derived from God: a replacement for the Orthodox church) all at once served to create the powerful "Cult of Stalin."

http://www.stlavu.edu/orkneusar/ndx2/convic.htm

What impression of Stalin does each of these posters seek to create?

SLIDE #4
THE CULT OF PERSONALITY!!

Read and interpret the lyrics of this song by the 80’s band Living Colour.

Assignment: Highlight at least four passages and explain how these lyrics demonstrate the Cult of Personality of Stalin. Use specific examples from the regimes of these two iconic dictators.

Look in my eyes, what do you see?
the Cult of Personality
I know your anger, I know your dreams
I've been everything you wanna be ohhh…
I'm the Cult of Personality
Like Mussolini and Kennedy
I'm the Cult of Personality
the Cult of Personality
Neon lights, Nobel Prize
When a leader speaks, the reflection lies
You won't have to follow me
Only you can set me free
I sell the things you need to be
I'm the smiling face of your T.V. ohh…
I'm the Cult of Personality
I exploit you; still you love me
I tell you one and one makes three ohh…
I'm the Cult of Personality
Like Joseph Stalin and Gandhi ohh…

I'm the Cult of Personality
You gave me fortune, you gave me fame
You gave me power in your God's name
I'm every person you need to be ohh…
I'm, the, Cult, of, Per, Son, Al, Ity

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“Ask not what your country can do for you…” (John F. Kennedy)
“The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself.” (Franklin D. Roosevelt)