

Stalin and the Cult of Personality
"How far was Stalin's rule based on authority rather than just naked power?"

Key Points:

- Stalin's power was largely developed through terror and violence.
- But at the same time he generated genuine devotion through propaganda.
- The USSR was divided between races and nations. To unite them, Stalin was depicted as both:
(a) God: Stalin as "Red Tsar", the father of his people;
(b) Mortal: Stalin as the pipe-smoking, overcoat-wearing "man of the people".
- The overall result was a "cult of personality" - the creation of the USSR was attributed to Lenin, its development to Stalin.

1. The Written Word



- Stalin was, according to Montefiore, "The best read ruler of Russia from Catherine the Great up to an including Vladimir Putin, even including Lenin, who had the benefits of a nobleman's education".
- Stalin's control of Soviet authors was exemplified by the First Congress of Soviet Writers (1934). Writing anything other than what the Soviet Writer's Union called for ("Have you shown us Stalin in all his magnitude?") could earn one the title "saboteur," and a trip to the Gulag!
- The man Stalin put in charge of the Congress was Andrei Zhdanov [left], who rapidly rose through the ranks to become one of the most important people in the party. Beria, predictably, hated him (he nicknamed him "the pianist" for his artistic pretensions).

(a) Poetry

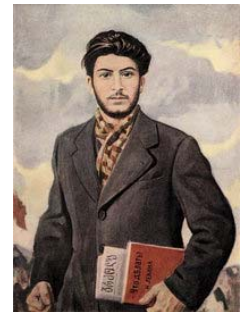
By A. O. Avdienko, an article in Pravda, 1936

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.

(b) Prose

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"

Highlight a few phrases in each of the sources above to illustrate the ways in which prose and poetry were used to develop the "Stalin Myth".

2. Visual Images

(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://it.stlawu.edu/~rkreuzer/indv2/convis.htm>



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

(b) Film

Film had played a primary role in Soviet propaganda from the very beginning. Eisenstein had developed a fast-moving editing method in film such as *Battleship Potemkin* which he called "Soviet Montage". Stalin simply developed this trend.

Leader worship was a constant theme in such films of the era.

a) **Great Citizen** (1937-1939) presents Lenin, Stalin and Kirov as the leaders of the Revolution. Kirov is assassinated by Zinovievites, helping to justify the Purges which Stalin launched after Kirov's death.

b) **Alexander Nevsky** (1938, by Eisenstein) was an anti-German piece of propaganda. Banned after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in 1939, it was re-released following the German invasion in 1941.

c) **Circus** (1936) was the story of an American woman who joins a Russian circus after being ostracised for having a baby by a black father. The Soviet audience sing a lullaby to the child which praises the "most democratic of democratic constitutions." and in a variety of languages (stressing the multiculturalism of the USSR). Ironically, the Jewish singer's Yiddish verse was cut out in 1948 when Stalin began an anti-Semitic purge!

From the autobiography of the Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko (1963)

When we talk about "the cult of personality," we should not be too hasty in accusing all those who, one way or another, were involved in it, debasing themselves with their flattery. There were of course sycophants who used the situation for their own ends...

The apotheosis of this trend was a movie which in its grand finale showed thousands of collective farmers having a gargantuan feast against the backdrop of a new power station. Recently I had a talk with its producer, gifted and intelligent man. "How could you produce such a film?" I asked. "It is true that I also once wrote verses in that vein, but I was still wet behind the ears, whereas you were adult and mature." The producer smiled a sad smile. "You know, the strangest thing to me is that I was absolutely sincere. I thought all this was a necessary part of building communism. And then I believed Stalin."

How was it possible for even gifted and intelligent people to be deceived? To begin with, Stalin was a strong and vivid personality. When he wanted to do, Stalin knew how to charm people. He charmed Gorky and Barbusse. In 1937, the cruellest year of the purges, he managed to charm that tough and experienced observer, Lion Feuchtwanger.

In the second place, in the minds of the Soviet people, Stalin's name was indissolubly linked with Lenin's. Stalin knew how popular Lenin was and saw to it that history was rewritten in such a way as to make his own relations with Lenin seem much more friendly than they had been in fact. The rewriting was so thorough that perhaps Stalin himself believed his own version in the end.

...Now that ten years have gone by [Stalin died in 1953], I realize that Stalin's greatest crime was not the arrests and the shootings he ordered. His greatest crime was the corruption of the human spirit.

How were visual images used to develop the "Stalin Myth"?

Why were so many intelligent people deceived into accepting and promoting the "Stalin Myth"?

Do you agree with Yevtushenko's sentiment that "Stalin's greatest crime was the corruption of the human spirit"? Explain your answer.

3. Conclusion

From my antipathy to any cult of the individual, I never made public during the existence of the International the numerous addresses from various countries which recognized my merits and annoyed me. I did not even reply to them, except sometimes to rebuke their authors. Engels and I first joined the secret society of Communists on the condition that everything making for superstitious worship of authority would be deleted from its statute.

- Karl Marx, as quoted by Khrushchev at the 20th Party Congress

Interactivities accompany this worksheet at www.activehistory.co.uk / 4

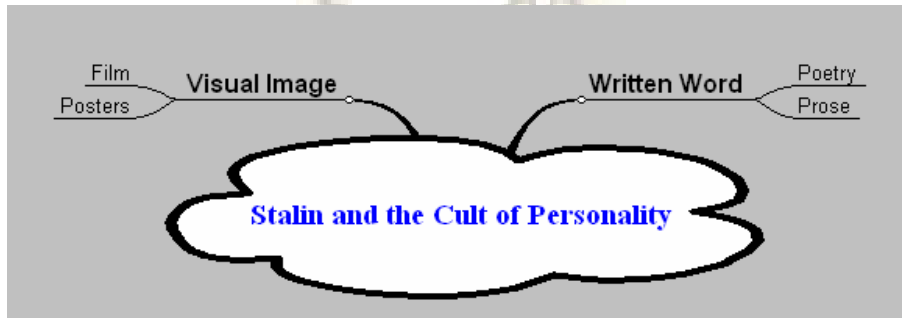
Both Marx and I have always been against any public manifestation with regard to individualism with the exception of cases when it had an important purpose; and we most strongly opposed such manifestations which during our lifetime concerned us personally.

-Frederick Engels, as quoted by Khrushchev at the 20th Party Congress

What would Marx and Engels have made of the "Stalin Cult"?

Main Tasks

1. Produce a mindmap on one side of A3 paper summarising the information in this workpack. Use colour and illustrations as appropriate. It might start off something like this:



2. Imagine you are an artist in Stalinist Russia. Your task is to produce ONE of the following:
- (a) A flyleaf for a novel (containing a title page on the front, a summary of the story on the back, reviews on the back, a biography of the author on the inside back and reviews on the inside front)
 - (b) A poster advertising a film (including a bold title, a summary of its theme, a depiction of Stalin as God / Father / Man of the People, and reviews by famous Politburo members)
 - (c) A Stalinist song (the lyrics should focus on a particularly wise aspect of Stalin's rule, and you should indicate which tune the lyrics should be sung to – this can be a modern day pop / rock song, if you like, but make it a well-known one!)
 - (d) A movie trailer for a film (see (b) above) using Moviemaker and appropriate images.