Prescribed Subject 1  The USSR under Stalin, 1924-41

Topic areas listed in the IBO History syllabus guide:

• struggle for leadership
• collectivisation, agricultural policies
• Five Year Plans, industrialisation, rearmament
• nature of the Soviet State, constitution, extent of Stalin’s power, cult of personality
• purges, impact on society
• foreign relations, USSR and Nazi Germany, Nazi/Soviet Pact

I have used italics for the headings of these topic areas and wrapped them in a text box in order to draw your attention to them, e.g.

collectivisation

Background

At the beginning of the 20th century Russia was an empire ruled by the Romanov dynasty (family). The last Russian tsar (emperor), Nicholas II, came to the throne in 1894 and ruled over a huge empire, composed of about 50 different nationalities. Russia was backward in many ways compared to Western European countries like Britain, France and Germany. It only began to industrialise properly in the 1890s and the rapid pace of industrialisation caused huge strain on Russia as industrial workers crowded into the rapidly growing cities of St Petersburg and Moscow. Russian agriculture was also very unproductive and the poverty of her peasant population led to a number of rebellions, particularly in 1905 when Nicholas II only just survived a revolution. In order to restore order Nicholas reluctantly agreed to introduce a parliament (Duma) for the first time and to legalise political parties. This pleased the middle class liberals but not the two revolutionary parties, the Socialist Revolutionaries (who were working for a peasant revolution) and the Social Democrats (who wanted a revolution based on the industrial workers). The Social Democrats had split into two groups in 1903, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks.

Nicholas II fell from power in March 1917, following a series of military and economic disasters in the First World War. Russia’s armed forces were no match for the Germans who inflicted heavy casualties on the Russian Army and occupied large parts of western Russia. Prices soared and, by February 1917, there were serious food shortages in the towns. Riots broke out in the capital, Petrograd, in February and the government lost control of it when most of the troops garrisoned there joined the rioters. Nicholas II was informed by leading members of the Duma and senior generals that they no longer had any confidence in him and so he gave up his throne in March. Russia became a republic, run by the Provisional Government, but just eight months later there was a second revolution. Lenin returned from exile in April and persuaded the Bolsheviks to oppose the Provisional Government and prepare for a second revolution. The government made the fatal decision to carry on the war and, as military defeats increased and price inflation worsened, the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917.
Over the next three years Lenin had to fight a bitter civil war against the Bolsheviks' opponents, known collectively as the Whites. The Civil War began in 1918 after Lenin made peace with Germany at Brest-Litovsk and pulled Russia out of the First World War. Trotsky, Lenin's right-hand man and Commissar (Minister) for War, built up the Red Army, which was 5 million strong by 1921. The Bolsheviks (renamed the Communist Party in 1918) won the Civil War but the country's economy was in ruins, perhaps 5 million people died in the famine of 1921, and the Party was very unpopular, partly because of the policy of War Communism which had involved seizing grain off the peasants. In 1921 Lenin ended War Communism and introduced the New Economic Policy under which the government owned the larger factories but private ownership of smaller factories was allowed and which permitted the peasants to sell their produce for private profit after they had handed the government 10% of it as a form of taxation.

By 1921 Lenin had turned Russia into a single party state after he had banned all the other political parties (see page 14 for more details). In 1922 Lenin had two serious strokes; this marked the beginning of a struggle between leading members of the Party to succeed him as leader. As a temporary measure, a collective leadership was established, comprising Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev (the so-called "Triumvirate" or "Troika"). Stalin had been a member of the Party's Central Committee since 1912 but his eventual emergence as sole leader of the Party would have been predicted by very few people in 1922. It is important to see how Stalin's own strengths, the weaknesses and mistakes of his rivals, and divisions within the Party favoured Stalin's rise.

**Struggle for leadership**

a) What were Stalin's strengths?

- he was a very able and conscientious administrator, nicknamed "comrade card-index".
- he held a range of very influential posts - Commissar for Nationalities, member of both the Orgburo (in charge of organising the Party) and Politburo (the top decision-making body in the Party) and, most importantly, from 1922, General Secretary of the Party.
- he used the General Secretaryship to create a power base within the Party, promoting and demoting his clients and opponents within the party bureaucracy. Party membership expanded enormously in the period after the Civil War, reaching 801,000 by 1925 and 1.5 million by 1929. As it grew, decision making and appointments became increasingly centralised; this allowed Stalin to wield huge influence over it.

b) What were his rivals' weaknesses?

- none could rival his influence within the Party.
- all of the other contenders for the leadership - Trotsky, Bukharin, Zinoviev and Kamenev - underestimated Stalin, the "grey blur".
- Kamenev and Zinoviev were weakened by their earlier record of hesitation at the time of the October Revolution and Trotsky was hampered by his lack of a power base within the Party, by his alienation of many in the Party on account of his arrogance, and by his poor health in the mid 1920s.
c) How did divisions within the Party benefit Stalin?

- Stalin was able to exploit to his own advantage personal rivalries among leading party members, e.g. Zinoviev and Kamenev's resentment of Trotsky.

- In the period 1922-29, the Politburo and the Party as a whole were divided over both the direction of economic policy and the question of the USSR's relationship with the rest of the world. Left Communists, e.g. Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev, opposed the continuation of the New Economic Policy, arguing it was delivering only slow growth and was an unacceptable compromise with capitalism. They favoured collectivisation of agriculture and rapid industrialisation. They also supported the idea of permanent revolution, of the USSR seeking to export communist revolution on a world-wide basis. Opposing them, Right Communists, e.g. Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky, argued that NEP was successful and must be continued; that the key to economic expansion was coaxing the peasants into co-operating with the state. Right Communists backed Bukharin's idea of Socialism in One Country; they believed that the prospects for successful communist revolution outside the USSR were very limited and attempts at spreading communism might provoke an invasion by foreign capitalist powers. Instead they advocated building up socialism within the USSR.

Round 1 of the struggle to succeed Lenin: 1924-25, Stalin allies with Kamenev and Zinoviev

- Lenin died in January 1924 and Stalin immediately established a lead over his rivals by appearing as chief mourner at Lenin's funeral, helped by Trotsky's absence which was the result of ill health and being misinformed about the funeral date by Stalin. Stalin helped create a cult of Lenin, including the decision to place his embalmed corpse in a mausoleum in Red Square, and then, more successfully than the other Party leaders, sought to stake a claim as Lenin's true heir.

- up until late 1925, Kamenev and Zinoviev, in spite of sharing similar economic policies to Trotsky's, were prepared to work with Stalin in order to prevent Trotsky becoming leader of the Party. This helped Stalin survive a real threat to his leadership hopes in the shape of Lenin's Political Testament. In this document he criticised all of the leading contenders for the leadership but particularly Stalin, whom he recommended should be removed as General Secretary. His intention was that the Testament should be read out after his death to a party congress. In May 1924 Zinoviev and Kamenev persuaded the Central Committee not to publish Lenin's Political Testament. In January 1925 Trotsky was forced to resign as War Commissar.

Round 2: 1925-1927, Stalin eliminates the Left Opposition

- at the 14th Party Congress in December 1925, Zinoviev and Kamenev fell out with Stalin. They attacked NEP and Socialism in One Country which Stalin supported. One of the key factors in Stalin's rise was his ability to gauge the mood of the Party as a whole and he realised that at this time most party members wanted a period of peace and reconstruction and supported NEP because it had allowed economic recovery to pre-war levels; consequently the 14th Congress overwhelmingly endorsed Stalin's policies.

- From the spring of 1926, Kamenev and Zinoviev joined Trotsky in the "United Opposition" to Stalin. However, Stalin's influence within the Party and his sponsorship of popular policies meant the United Opposition was isolated and all three men were removed from the Politburo in the course of 1926. In this, Stalin was
helped by the Right Communists on the Politburo - Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky - who supported NEP.

- In late 1927 Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev were expelled from the Party. Four of Stalin's close allies, e.g. Molotov, joined the Politburo in 1926, demonstrating how Stalin was able to use his powers of hiring and firing party officials to pack the party hierarchy with his own supporters.

**Round 3: 1928-30, Stalin eliminates the Right Opposition**

From the autumn of 1927, many leading members of the Party began to question the wisdom of continuing NEP because industrial growth was stagnating and the state experienced serious problems in securing enough of the grain harvest to feed the towns; in 1927 the state managed to procure only half the grain it had bought in 1926 because it had cut the prices it offered to the peasants.

- Stalin was able to exploit the arguments over NEP in order to secure the removal of the Right Opposition. He turned against NEP and eventually, by 1928/29, argued for its replacement by rapid industrialisation and collectivisation of agriculture. This was because he, like many in the Party, believed NEP could not deliver the means for the USSR to develop a modern industrial base and because he felt frustrated by the long delay in implementing socialist economic policies.

- The Right Opposition, chiefly Bukharin, advocated coaxing the peasants into selling more grain by raising grain prices but Stalin resorted to forced grain requisitioning in the winter of 1927/8. The grain procurement crisis worsened in 1928, resulting in the introduction of rationing in Moscow and Leningrad.

- The majority of the Party backed Stalin in attacking Bukharin's policies so that, in April 1929, the 16th Party Congress voted in favour of ambitious targets for the First Five Year Plan (which had been launched in 1928 and ended private factory ownership) and, in December, forced collectivisation of agriculture was announced. Bukharin was removed from the Politburo in 1929; Rykov and Tomsky in 1930.

**Collectivisation, agricultural policies**

**What were Stalin's aims and motives?**

1. The most important of Stalin's aims in collectivising agriculture was for the state to acquire greater control over the grain harvest. Collectivisation was Stalin's answer to the grain procurement crisis of 1927-28. The state itself was largely to blame; state prices had increasingly fallen behind market prices and there were few manufactured goods for the peasants to buy, so the peasantry had little incentive to part with their grain. By early 1929 the USSR was forced to import grain and introduce bread rationing. Stalin, on a tour of Siberia in late 1927, returned to the days of War Communism and forcible grain requisitioning. He seems to have been convinced he had found the national solution to the procurement crisis - this became known as “the Urals-Siberia method.”

2. Collectivisation was seen by Stalin as essential for providing the additional resources and manpower required for the rapid expansion of industry. Supporters of collectivisation argued that mechanised agriculture would not only feed the cities and
yield surplus workers for the new industries, there would also be a surplus for export to generate capital for industrialisation. The NEP was delivering only 2 million tons of grain for export in 1927, whereas even tsarist Russia in its last peacetime year had managed 10 million. Collectivisation was seen as more efficient; Russian wheat yields per hectare in 1928 were half those in Germany.

3. Many in the Communist Party were very suspicious of the peasantry as very few peasants were party members and the Party’s relationship with them had always been strained. Concentrating the peasants into larger units and imposing party members as chairmen of the collectives, with OGPU (secret police) units attached to each Motor Tractor Station, was intended to give the Party greater control over the countryside.

4. Stalin and many party members were impatient with the compromise with capitalism that NEP represented and sought to get on with constructing a socialist economy.

How was collectivisation carried out?

- 120 million people living in 600,000 villages were involved. Their 25 million holdings were consolidated into 240,000 state-controlled collective farms in a matter of months. Stalin and other communist leaders believed that it was the influence of the most well-to-do peasants, the kulak class, that held the middle peasants back from joining collectives. Therefore, Stalin declared, in December 1929, ‘a policy of liquidating the kulak as a class’. However, the term was so loose that it could be applied to any peasants resisting collectivisation.

- Forced collectivisation was imposed in the first two months of 1930. 25,000 factory workers were recruited in the cities, given two weeks’ training and sent into the countryside to carry out collectivisation. By these methods, the number of collectivised households increased threefold in just two months to 14 million. Active resistance soon flared up. OGPU (secret police) and Red Army units were called in and many peasants were arrested, deported or shot.

- Rebellion by the peasants was serious, but did not last long. One reason for the Communist Party’s success in imposing collectivisation is that a huge number of new jobs was created in the simultaneous drive for rapid industrialisation. The urban population increased by 12 million during the First Five Year Plan.

- More serious resistance took the form of slaughtering livestock. In five years, just under half of the USSR’s cattle was lost, as well as nearly half of the horses and 65% of the sheep. Soviet agriculture — and, therefore, Soviet living standards, especially the diet of Soviet citizens living in the towns — took decades to recover.

- In March 1930 Pravda (the Communist Party newspaper) carried an article by Stalin entitled ‘Dizzy with success’. Stalin blamed recent excesses on party activists. He stated that collectivisation must be voluntary. Many Western historians have seen this as a cynical manoeuvre by Stalin, although some are more inclined to stress that early collectivisation was indeed out of central control. With the temporary end to compulsion, peasants took the chance of leaving the collective farms (kolkhoz). Collectivised households fell from their March peak of 58% to 22% by October.

- Stalin responded by making some concessions, e.g. the peasants were allowed to keep small private plots of land and to own some animals. However, it was only a
breathing space, for pressure to collectivise was steadily reapplied. Peasants outside collectives were given inferior land and loaded with extra taxes.

What were the results?

1. By 1935, 90% of the USSR's arable land had been collectivised. However, most peasants still lived in the same wooden huts and used the same farming methods as before. 2,500 Machine Tractor Stations (MTS) were established in the first three years, but tractors were in short supply and poorly maintained.

2. Collectivisation did not significantly increase agricultural productivity. Grain harvests fell in the early/mid 1930s and by the end of the decade were only about 7% higher than in 1928. The peasantry had no incentive to improve productivity, which was much greater on the peasants' private plots. It seemed to many like a return to the days of serfdom. Peasants had to work a minimum number of 'labour days' each month on the collective, to prevent them spending too much time on their private plots.

3. State procurements rose dramatically. The peasantry, which had yielded to the state only 14% of the grain harvest in 1928, handed over 26% in 1931 and 39.5% in 1933. The regime ruthlessly exploited its new control devices, the Kolkhoz and the MTS.

4. The terrible famine of 1933-34 was the result of Stalin's willingness to drive living standards below subsistence level in 1933 in order to extract grain and break the peasantry. The harvest was well above famine level; starvation could have been prevented if relief operations had been permitted or if the regime had not exported vast quantities of grain. 10 million tons were exported in the preceding two years and nearly 2 million tons of grain a year continued to be exported as famine raged. Possibly as many as 5 million people in the Ukraine alone died during the famine. It has been estimated that some 6.5 million peasants died in the campaign against the kulaks – half at the time and half arrested, to die later. A centuries' old way of life for millions was destroyed.

5. Food rationing was in force between 1929 and 1935.

6. In the long term collectivisation proved a disaster. Soviet agriculture remained unproductive as peasants lacked the incentive to work harder on collectivised land. From the 1960s the USSR was obliged to import large amounts of grain from North America. The collapse of communism in the USSR at the end of the 1980s was in part a consequence of the failings of the collectivised system.

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**The Five Year Plans (1928-41), industrialisation**

What were Stalin's aims?

1. As Stalin put it, in a famous speech made in 1931, the primary aim was for the USSR to catch up within a decade with the more industrialised West; to modernise Soviet industry in order to protect the USSR from invasion by hostile capitalist powers. Russia had lagged behind the West in terms of industrialisation, having only really begun the process in the 1890s.
2. Increasingly, leading party officials had doubts about NEP on economic and ideological grounds. By 1928 NEP had allowed industrial production to recover to its pre-war level (1913) but output rose slowly in the period 1928-28 and the USSR remained far behind the USA, Germany, Britain and France. Left Communists, like Trotsky, since the early 1920s, had advocated the abandonment of NEP in favour of rapid industrialisation. By 1928 many in the Party wanted a more heroic, socialist economic policy to replace the semi-capitalist NEP.

3. The Party was sensitive to the international situation and 'capitalist encirclement'; there had been a "war scare" in 1927. In 1926 the violently anti-communist Marshal Joseph Pilsudski seized power in Poland, whilst in 1927 Britain cut off diplomatic relations with the USSR and Chiang Kai-shek's (Jiang Jieshi) Nationalists massacred the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai.

How were the Plans carried out?

- There were three Five Year Plans in the period 1928-41: 1928-32, 1933-37 and 1938-41, the third being interrupted by Hitler's invasion of the USSR.

- In 1927 Gosplan, the state planning agency, drew up an ambitious Five Year Plan. When, in 1929, the Politburo was given the final draft, containing "basic" and "optimum" targets, it decided to adopt the latter. The plan's chief emphasis was on heavy industry, where the overall production increase was set at a staggering 110%.

- NEP was ended and with it private ownership of factories was outlawed entirely.

- In order to fulfil these targets, the state acquired total control over the urban workforce. Internal passports were introduced to prevent workers from "flitting" from one factory to another in search of better conditions.

- Stalin acquired the additional manpower needed to staff the new factories by forcing millions of peasants off the land and recruiting many more women into industry. The urban population increased from 27 million to 57 million during the period 1928-41.

- The resources to pay for the plans were found by taking more grain off the peasants which was then exported to earn foreign currency with which western machinery and technicians were bought/hired. In addition, taxes were raised and living standards were depressed; living standards fell by half over the period 1928-39.

- Many of the new factories were located east of the Urals, partly because they would be safe from attack if the USSR was invaded and partly because this region was rich in mineral resources and had been relatively under-exploited prior to 1928.

- A range of "carrot and stick" methods was adopted to try to ensure managers and workers met targets. Propaganda was employed to inspire Soviet workers, Komsomol (the Young Communist League) members gave up their holidays to work on projects such as building steel plants at Magnitogorsk and the Stakhanovite movement, from 1935, (after the record-breaking exploits of the coal miner Alexei Stakhanov) encouraged workers to break production targets. From 1931, Stalin reintroduced pay differentials in order to reward skilled workers over the unskilled.
• Workers and managers who failed to meet targets risked arrest and imprisonment in the Gulag (prison camps). Prison camp labour was extensively used, e.g. over 70,000 prisoners died constructing the Belomor Canal.

What were the results?

1. Overall the plans were very successful in expanding output; estimates vary as official Soviet figures were grossly inflated but Western historians believe that Soviet industry grew at somewhere between 7% and 14% per year during this period. The USSR overtook the leading Western countries, with the exception of the USA.

2. Many historians argue that without the plans and Stalin’s refusal to allow the tempo to slacken, the USSR would not have survived the Nazi invasion of 1941. The plans enabled the USSR to outbuild and outlast Germany in the war of attrition that developed on the Eastern Front. Given that the Red Army accounted for 75% of all German casualties in World War Two, there is a case for suggesting that the FYPs were a major cause of Nazi Germany’s defeat.

3. There was a major redistribution of population from countryside to town.

4. There was a huge increase in literacy rates (from 51% of the population to 81%) as Stalin expanded education in order to create a more educated workforce.

However,

5. The success of the plans was not even. The First FYP saw many mistakes made and many projects were left incomplete; the Second began much more successfully as planners had learnt from earlier mistakes but it was disrupted by the Stakhanovite movement’s storming tactics and by the effects of the purges of the mid-1930s.

6. Targets set were quantitative not qualitative. Therefore products that were produced tended to be poor quality, e.g. thinner tyres were manufactured for speed of production but they lasted only one tenth of the time of their US competitors. The USSR caught up with the West in terms of output but not in respect of technology.

7. Stalin was obsessed with huge prestige projects - “Gigantomania” - such as the Moscow Metro, but many of these projects were badly conceived and executed, e.g. the Belomor Canal which proved of little value.

8. Centralised planning and fear of punishment stifled initiative and led to mistakes - too many of certain parts produced, too little of others.

9. Other policies of Stalin, e.g. the purges and forced collectivisation, disrupted the Five Year Plans.

10. Living standards in the USSR fell drastically; real wages fell; there was serious over-crowding in the towns. The Five Year Plans put little emphasis on consumer good production.

11. Historians are divided over whether the USSR could have caught up with the West during the 1930s without the brutal methods used by Stalin. Certainly there seems to have been opposition to Stalin’s methods from other leading members of the Party such as Riutin and Kirov and this might explain why Stalin embarked on the Great Terror of the mid to late 1930s.
Stalin's chief aim in introducing the Five Year Plans was to catch up with the more industrialised Western countries so that the USSR would be secure from foreign invasion. From 1937, alarmed by Hitler's rearmament programme, Stalin massively expanded the Soviet armed forces. In 1936 the Red Army totalled 940,000 men; by the time of the Nazi invasion in June 1941, the Red Army had grown to nearly 5 million strong. However, this huge increase meant that the Soviet government struggled to recruit and train an additional 250,000 officers. This was made worse by Stalin's purge of the Red Army officer corps in 1937-38 (see page 18 for details).

Though the Red Army fought well against the Japanese in July-August 1939 on the Manchurian-Mongolian border, it performed very poorly against the Finns in the winter of 1939-40. Stalin wanted the Finns to agree to an exchange of territory in order to push back the Finnish border that was only 20 miles from Leningrad. The Finns refused so the USSR attacked in November 1939 - about 1 million Soviet troops faced only 200,000 Finnish troops but the Red Army struggled to defeat the Finns. The Red Army was poorly prepared for fighting in winter conditions; it was over-confident and it failed to co-ordinate its use of infantry and tanks.

During the late 1930s, as in other European countries, the Soviet forces slowly adopted more modern weaponry. However, the USSR did so more slowly than Nazi Germany. By 1941 the Russians had more tanks than the Germans but only about 1500 of these were the newer KV and T-34 tanks and, of the older tanks, only about 25% were in working order when the Germans attacked.

By the time of the German invasion many of the new recruits in the Soviet forces had very little training, e.g. about one quarter of the Red Army had less than 9 months training and tank crews for the newer Soviet tanks often had only one to two hours experience of driving their machines.

**How did the Red Army respond to the German invasion of June 1941?**

The Red Army was not well prepared for the German invasion and Stalin personally made this worse by failing to respond to repeated warnings about German troop build-ups near the USSR's borders. One reason for this was that Stalin wanted to delay war with Germany for as long as possible and so refused to take military precautions which he feared might provoke a German invasion. The result of this was that the Soviet forces were taken totally by surprise by the Nazi invasion and much of the Red Army was shattered in the opening weeks of the war. The Red Army was unable to counter German blitzkrieg tactics, which involved rapid advances by massed panzer tanks covered by air support. Within 12 hours of the German attack, 1200 Soviet planes had been destroyed, most of them whilst still on the ground. By the end of 1941, 3 million Russian troops had been captured and Moscow was only saved by a combination of severe winter conditions, which an over-confident Hitler had not prepared for, and a brilliant counter-attack launched by Marshal Zhukov in December, using troops freshly transferred from Siberia; by this stage Stalin was confident that the Japanese would not attack the USSR's Far Eastern territories.
Background

(I) The State

By 1921 Lenin had created a single party dictatorship in the USSR. He had always been open about his rejection of the "bourgeois" idea of parliamentary democracy. In closing down the democratically elected Constituent Assembly in January 1918, Lenin initiated single party rule. At the end of the Civil War (1918-21) Lenin banned the other socialist parties, the Social Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks, whose relations with the Bolsheviks had been strained and, at times, outrightly hostile. In 1921 he had also expelled about 150,000 members of the Bolshevik Party, most of whom had previously been former Mensheviks or Social Revolutionaries. Lenin had also set up a secret police, the Cheka, as early as December 1917. It had conducted the Red Terror against the Bolsheviks' opponents during the Civil War. In 1921 the Cheka was abolished but it was soon replaced by another Internal security force, the GPU, later known as OGPU, and later still as the NKVD. From 1918 the soviets (elected councils at town and village levels) met very infrequently and increasingly their members were nominated from above, rather than being elected. This reduction of grass roots democracy was one of the reasons why the Kronstadt sailors rebelled against the Communist Party in February 1921.

At all levels, key posts in state institutions were monopolised by the Communist Party. At the top of the state institutions was Sovnarkom (the Council of People's Commissars), which was set up in October 1917. From March 1918 only members of the Communist Party were commissars (ministers). In theory the most powerful body in the Soviet state was the Central Executive Committee (CEC) which acted in the name of the Congress of Soviets when the latter was not in session. The CEC met less and less frequently and Sovnarkom increasingly bypassed the CEC when it came to passing laws. Communist Party members held all the places in the presidium or inner council of the CEC. The 1936 Constitution replaced the CEC with the Supreme Soviet (see page 15).

(ii) The Party

The top decision-making body of the Communist Party was the Politburo which was set up in 1919. Initially there were 5 members but it grew in size during the 1920s. From 1922 the Politburo exercised more power than Sovnarkom; this suited Stalin as he had unequalled influence within the Party and this development aided his rise to power. Below the Politburo was the much larger Central Committee (CC), about 70 members strong, which was made up of all the most important party officials. The Central Committee was elected by the Party Congress.

Up until 1921, there was considerable debate and open dissent within the Politburo and the Central Committee, and, Party Congresses saw open criticism of the leadership. Two opposition groups emerged within the Party: the Workers Opposition (who wanted more power for the trade unions) and the Democratic Centralists (who wanted more democracy within the Party). At the Xth Party Congress (1921), Lenin decided to introduce a resolution banning factionalism; once a party decision had been reached no party member could criticise it. Lenin saw this as a temporary measure at a time when the Party faced threats in the form of the Kronstadt
Rebellion and serious peasant risings. However, the ban was never lifted and Stalin used it as a weapon by which he could silence his rivals within the Party.

The 1924 Constitution

This set up the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the USSR). The Soviet state was a federation of four Republics, each with its own Republic Government, and sixteen autonomous republics which had less self-governing powers than the republics. However, the Union (federal) Government in Moscow controlled all important matters, such as economic and foreign policy, for the whole of the USSR.

The Soviet state under Stalin

The major change during Stalin's rule was that, whereas Sovnarkom was the most important institution whilst Lenin was leader, from 1922, the Politburo, the leading committee within the Party, became more influential than Sovnarkom. Essentially Stalin increased the power of the Party over the state institutions, whilst at the same time he acquired greater personal control over the Party.

He used the enlarged secret police, the NKVD, and the Purges of 1934 onwards to create a ruthless dictatorship. There had been political prisoners during Lenin's rule, but the number had been relatively small; under Stalin, the prison camps expanded. The most recent estimates put the prison camp population in the USSR in the late 1930s at about 3 million.

The Stalin Constitution, 1936

In 1936 the "Stalin Constitution" was introduced; it remained in force until 1977 when Brezhnev's constitution altered it to a limited degree. The constitution was largely the work of Bukharin and Radek before they were arrested during the Purges. On paper it made the USSR very democratic. The main difference from the 1924 constitution was the increased number of republics within the USSR (now 11). In addition to the 11 Republics, there were a number of autonomous republics and autonomous regions. However, the Union Government in Moscow continued to play the dominant role.

The constitution created a new legislative (law-making) body called the Supreme Soviet. Elections to the Supreme Soviet were by secret ballot and all Russians 18 and over were given the vote. However, this was hardly democratic because only one candidate was nominated for each place in the Supreme Soviet so voters had no choice of candidates unlike in Western parliamentary systems. The Supreme Soviet consisted of two houses, the Soviet of the Union, with members elected by electoral districts (one member for each 300,000 people), and the Soviet of the Nationalities, representing the different regions and republics within the USSR (25 members for each union republic, 11 for each autonomous republic). However, the Supreme Soviet only met for a few days a year and had no real power. The Supreme Soviet gave its approval to measures already decided on by the leadership of the Communist Party.

Essentially the new constitution was a public relations exercise, designed to convince Soviet citizens and the outside world that the USSR was a democracy. It was introduced at the height of the Purges and Show Trials by which Stalin sought to eliminate any possible opposition to his rule and to terrorise the population into obedience. The Communist Party continued to control all the state institutions.
**Extent of Stalin’s power**

**Stalin’s control over the Party**

We have already seen in the section on Stalin’s rise to power (see pages 6-8) how Stalin eliminated rivals for the leadership of the Party and how he used his position as General Secretary to promote his supporters within the Party, thus increasing his personal control over the Party. Stalin dominated all the key committees within the party hierarchy, including, at the top, the Orgburo and Politburo.

Stalin’s purges of the Party in the 1930s were motivated by a desire to eliminate any form of potential opposition, at a time when criticism of Stalin’s economic policies was circulating within the Party. Stalin used the Show Trials of 1936-38 to destroy his fellow old Bolsheviks, like Bukharin and Zinoviev, who had helped the Party into power but who had been outmanoeuvred by Stalin in the 1920s.

**What was the extent of Stalin’s power?**

**(a) the traditional view**

Traditionally historians have portrayed Stalin as the creator of the most efficient dictatorship of the 20th century. The traditional view is that, whereas in Germany Hitler had not swept away existing political institutions but had merely destroyed their democratic nature and added new Nazi ones, Lenin had destroyed Russia’s old political system entirely, creating a new set of institutions. This allowed for the creation of a more totalitarian system which Stalin took further and used to ensure that he was able to exert greater personal control over the government and people than either Mussolini in Italy or Hitler in Germany did.

**(b) revisionist views**

Recently a number of historians have revised (challenged/changed) the traditional view of Stalin’s power (historians have also recently been reinterpreting the extent to which Nazi Germany was an efficient dictatorship). They still accept that Stalin was the most ruthless dictator of modern times, and was personally responsible for forcing through the massive economic changes of the late 1920s and for the deaths of millions of Soviet citizens. What they question is the extent to which Stalin’s dictatorship was efficient.

Revisionist historians argue that Stalin, having been responsible for introducing major policy changes in the late 1920s/1930s, e.g. collectivisation and the Purges, then lost control over how these policies were put into effect. Given the vast size of the USSR and the huge number of government and party officials, Stalin found that he could not ensure that local officials carried out his policies in the way he intended. One example of this process is the way in which in 1930 Stalin called a temporary halt to collectivisation because local officials had been implementing the policy too rapidly and brutally and so had provoked a fierce response from the peasants that created chaos in the countryside. Likewise, although Stalin was responsible for initiating the Purges, the Purges went much further than Stalin had expected as local party officials and NKVD officers interpreted government instructions in the way that suited them and their view of local conditions.
**Cult of personality**

The cult of Stalin really dates from his fiftieth birthday celebrations in December 1929. The Party newspaper, Pravda, spent five days listing the thousands of organisations which had sent Stalin greetings. An official biography was commissioned for his 50th birthday, presenting him as "the most outstanding continuers of Lenin's cause and his most devoted disciple." Even former opponents like Bukharin joined in the praise for Stalin; at the Party Congress in 1934, he hailed Stalin as "the field marshal of the proletarian forces, the best of the best." He was presented as a genius. Artists and writers were expected to promote Stalin's image in paintings, statues and books. History books were rewritten to show Stalin as the key figure in the October Revolution and the Civil War.

**Stalin's Purges**

**Background**

Purges of the Communist Party had occurred before the 1930s; to some extent, this was inevitable as the Party had grown so hugely in the 1920s and many of those who had joined were opportunists, rather than committed communists. Trotsky termed them "radishes" - red on the outside but white inside. The first major purge took place in 1921 when about 25% of the Party was expelled. There had been show trials before the Terror of the mid/late 1930s; e.g. the Shakty Trial of 1928 when over 50 engineers in the Ukraine were tried for alleged sabotage and espionage.

Between 1936 and 1939 there was an unprecedented purge of the Party, accompanied by show trials of leading party members, and extensive purges of the armed forces. In addition, there were mass arrests of ordinary Russian citizens and a huge expansion of the prison camp system; in 1934 the Gulag was set up to coordinate the camp system.

**Kirov's murder, 1934**

In December 1934 the Leningrad Communist Party boss, Sergei Kirov, was murdered by Nikolaev. Historians are divided over Stalin's responsibility; some believe Stalin saw Kirov as a dangerous rival, others argue that Stalin was not involved but used Kirov's murder as a pretext for the Terror. Stalin rushed through a decree which gave the NKVD extensive powers to deal with terrorists, including the provisions that investigations be completed within 10 days and that there be no lawyers at terrorist trials. Several thousand people, mainly party members, were arrested in Leningrad.

However, the period 1934-35 actually saw a significant fall in the number of arrests by the NKVD (109,000 arrests for counter-revolutionary crimes in 1935 compared to 283,000 in 1933); this was probably because the Five Year Plans were doing particularly well in these years and rationing had been ended in 1935.
The Show Trials

1936: saw the first major Show Trial of leading Bolsheviks: Kamenev, Zinoviev and 14 other leading "old Bolsheviks" were convicted of treason and executed. They were accused of Kirov's murder and being part of a Trotskyite conspiracy against the Party and the USSR. All confessed. Andrei Vyshinsky was chief prosecutor. In September the NKVD boss, Yagoda, was arrested and replaced by Yezhov. This led onto the Great Purge or Yezhovschina, the high-point of the Terror; targets for arrests and executions were decided on by the Politburo.

1937: in August the Politburo legalised torture. 353,000 people were executed in 1937. Stalin's own personal involvement is proven by many death warrants that he personally signed. 1937 saw the second major Show Trial: "the Anti-Soviet Trotskyist Centre" were tried for conspiring with Nazi Germany. 17 leading Communists were convicted and executed. April-May saw the arrest of many leading generals, including the Commander-in-Chief, Tukhachevsky. They were accused of plotting with Nazi Germany, of conspiring to assassinate Soviet leaders and of sabotaging industry. By the end of 1938 about two-thirds of the Red Army's senior officers had been arrested or shot.

1938: saw the third major Show Trial of leading party members: 18 "Trotskyite-Rightists" were executed, including Bukharin and Rykov.

1939: Yezhov was arrested and replaced as NKVD boss by Beria. This marked the end to the wave of mass arrests and to arrest quotas. However, millions remained in the Gulag and smaller scale purges of the Party continued. In 1940 Trotsky was murdered in Mexico by a Stalinist agent.

Why did the Purges happen?

Historians have not agreed on a single explanation partly because of the cloak of secrecy surrounding the Purges; although the arrest and trial of leading "opponents" was reported in the Soviet press there was no reference made to the wider purges. Until Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" in 1956, there was no acknowledgement in the USSR that people had been falsely accused. Only under Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s did Stalin's repression receive public discussion. It is only in the past decade that Soviet archives have been opened up to foreign historians.

Some historical interpretations:-

a) Stalin used the purges to impose his authority even more firmly on the Communist Party and the USSR, thereby suppressing opposition to his economic policies and justifying failures by blaming traitors. There was certainly opposition to Stalin's leadership within the Party; in 1932 Riutin (a leading member of the Moscow Communist Party) wrote and circulated within the Party a document which was highly critical of Stalin's policy of forced collectivisation and his tyrannical grip on the Party. Stalin wanted him executed but instead the Politburo expelled Riutin from the Party. In 1934 there was an unsuccessful plot by some party members to replace Stalin as General Secretary with the popular young Leningrad Party boss, Sergei Kirov.

b) Recently a number of historians, e.g. RW Thurston, have argued that much of the impetus for the purges came from below, from young party members intent on removing older members. Furthermore, it is obvious that other party leaders must share the blame for the purges, especially Yezhov, NKVD boss (1936-1938).
c) It was the result of the Five Year Plans and the need to acquire forced labour, hence the expansion of the gulag.

d) Historians like Richard Pipes argue that the policies of Stalin were the consequence of the single party dictatorship created by Lenin and the Marxist concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

e) The USSR's international isolation and war scares, e.g. during the Manchurian Crisis of 1931-32, created a climate of fear and suspicion, which in part explains the Party's readiness to believe in fascist-capitalist conspiracies.

**The impact of the Purges**

(I) There were 2.8 million party members in 1934; by 1939 about 1 million had been expelled and perhaps 60% had been executed. Estimates vary for the number of citizens arrested. Until quite recently Western historians suggested a figure of about 8 or 9 million but the opening of Soviet archives, following the collapse of the USSR, has resulted in a re-evaluation; historians now think there were about 3 million people in the labour camps (gulag) in the late 1930s.

(II) The purge of officers meant that the Red Army's leadership was very inexperienced at the start of the war with Germany in 1941; this almost proved fatal to the USSR.

(III) The arrest of thousands of engineers and managers also undermined the performance of the Second Five Year Plan (1933-37) and the start of the Third Five Year Plan.

**Foreign relations**

Background to Stalin's foreign policy

Most countries broke off relations with Russia when the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917. Some, e.g. Britain, intervened on the White side against the Communists in the Civil War. Russia had no say in the Versailles Peace Conference. In 1919 the Russians set up a world-wide organisation of communist parties called the Third International or Comintern. Zinoviev was its first president. Through Comintern, the Russians insisted that communist parties in all countries followed their orders. Comintern worked to promote world-wide revolution.

After the Russian Civil War (1918-21), the USSR needed foreign machinery and skills to rebuild her devastated industries. So the Russian Foreign Ministry worked to persuade other countries officially to recognise the government of the USSR and to trade with the USSR. Sometimes Comintern and the Foreign Ministry found themselves pursuing conflicting aims. The Foreign Ministry only had limited success because, although in 1924 GB officially recognised the Communist government of the USSR, the USA did not recognise the government of USSR until 1933 and the USSR did not join the League of Nations until 1934.
In 1922 the USSR signed the Treaty of Rapallo with Germany. Germany, too, was isolated after World War One and was not a member of the League of Nations. The Treaty increased trade between the two countries and secretly allowed the Germans to make and test weapons, forbidden by the Versailles Treaty, in the USSR.

China in the 1920s was in a state of civil war. The government in Beijing had no authority over most of the country. In the south, the Chinese Nationalists (Guomindang or GMD) were in control; they aimed to unite China and make her into a modern state, free from foreign interference. The Chinese Communist Party (set up in 1921) was tiny. The USSR believed that the Guomindang had the best chance of uniting China and in 1923 Comintern signed an agreement with their leader Sun Yat-sen. Comintern arranged for the First United Front, an alliance between the CCP and the GMD. Comintern gave the Guomindang military help.

Comintern’s policy backfired in 1927. Sun Yat-sen died in 1925; his successor as leader of the Guomindang was Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) who hated the Communists. In 1927 he ordered their massacre at Shanghai and then went on to take control of Beijing. The USSR broke off relations with the Guomindang government of China.

Stalin looks for allies, 1933-39

Stalin was very surprised and anxious when the aggressively anti-communist Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in January 1933. Consequently Stalin tried to persuade Western states that the USSR was not bent on world revolution and might be a valuable ally against Germany.

How did Stalin try to make the USSR more secure?

- **1934** The USSR joined the League of Nations.
- **1935** The USSR signed treaties with France and Czechoslovakia, promising to support Czechoslovakia if Germany attacked Czechoslovakia.
- Through Comintern, Stalin ordered communist parties in Europe to co-operate with other socialist parties and form Popular Front Governments in order to combat the spread of Fascism; they did so in France in 1936-38 and in Spain during 1936-39.
- **1936-39** The USSR gave military aid to the Republicans in Spain but Franco's Nationalists won the Civil War.

However, in 1938 the Munich Conference, attended by Germany, Italy, France and Britain, showed how much GB and France wanted to avoid conflict with Germany. The four powers decided to hand over the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia to Germany. Stalin was not even invited to Munich, in spite of being a Czech ally, and he feared that GB and France wanted to encourage Hitler to attack the USSR and so weaken both Germany and the USSR. So Stalin stunned Europe by concluding a Non-Aggression Pact with Germany.
Why did Stalin agree to a pact with Nazi Germany?

- to gain valuable time to continue his rearmament programme.
- Stalin hoped that Germany would get tied down in a long and exhausting war with France and Britain.
- to enable the USSR to extend its territory and influence into Eastern Europe.

What were its contents?

- Hitler and Stalin secretly agreed to divide Poland between them.
- Germany gave the USSR a free hand to conquer Bessarabia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and part of Finland.

What were the results of the Pact?

- September 1939: Germany invaded Poland and, three weeks later, the USSR invaded eastern Poland. Poland surrendered by the end of October. Britain and France declared war on Germany in September.
- Winter 1939-40: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were occupied by the Red Army; the USSR demanded territory from Finland, which led to a war. The Red Army struggled to defeat the Finns (see page 13 for details). As a result of the invasion, the USSR was expelled from the League of Nations.

When did the Pact end?

- in June 1941: Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the USSR.
- Stalin had tried desperately to maintain peace with Germany, continuing to supply Hitler with vital war supplies; he ignored intelligence reports of an impending invasion. (see page 13 for details of the Red Army's response to the German invasion).

The USSR and the Far East, 1938-41

In 1938/9 there were armed clashes between Japan and the USSR in Outer Mongolia; the Japanese were impressed by the Russian Siberian troops led by Marshal Zhukov. So, in April 1941, the Japanese decided to sign a Non-Aggression Pact with Russia. Instead of expanding north at the expense of the USSR, Japan decided to expand southwards towards the colonies of Britain, France, the Netherlands and the USA. Stalin was very relieved as this agreement removed the threat of the USSR having to fight a two front war against Germany and Japan.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Stalin made General Secretary; Lenin's first serious stroke; Lenin's Political Testament drawn up</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Collective leadership of the Triumvirate: Stalin, Kamenev, Zinoviev.</td>
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<td>1923</td>
<td>Postscript added to Lenin's Testament, recommending Stalin's dismissal.</td>
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<td>1924</td>
<td>Lenin's death; Political Testament suppressed</td>
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<td>1925</td>
<td>Trotsky resigned as War Commissar; Party Congress supported NEP &amp; Socialism in One Country</td>
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<td>1926</td>
<td>United Opposition formed: Trotsky, Zinoviev &amp; Kamenev; Stalin &amp; Right Communists (Bukharin, Rykov, Tomsky) combined to expel Left from Politburo.</td>
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<td>1927/8</td>
<td>Grain procurement crisis; Stalin resorted to Urals-Siberia method</td>
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<td>1928</td>
<td>First Five Year Plan started</td>
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<td>1929</td>
<td>Trotsky exiled from the USSR; Bukharin removed from the Politburo</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Collectivisation began</td>
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<td>1932</td>
<td>Beginning of massive famine</td>
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<td>1933</td>
<td>Second Five Year Plan started</td>
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<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>17th Party Congress; conspiracy to replace Stalin as General Secretary with Kirov; Kirov's murder; mass arrests in Leningrad Party.</td>
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<td>1935</td>
<td>Stakhanovite movement launched</td>
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<td>1936</td>
<td>Stalin Constitution introduced; First Show Trial of leading party members: Trial of the Sixteen, including Zinoviev &amp; Kamenev; Yezhov replaced Yagoda as head of secret police.</td>
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<td>1937</td>
<td>Second Show Trial; the Trial of the Seventeen</td>
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<td>Purge of the armed forces, Marshall Tukhachevsky executed</td>
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<td>1938</td>
<td>Third Show Trial; the Trial of the Twenty-one, including Bukharin &amp; Rykov.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Third Five Year Plan started</td>
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<td>1939</td>
<td>Stalin ended the Great Terror; the Purges were scaled down</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Trotsky murdered in Mexico</td>
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<td>1941</td>
<td>Hitler's invasion of the USSR</td>
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