

Stalin's Reign of Terror: Censorship, Purges, Gulags, and Propaganda

Mandelstam's Poem on Stalin

*We live, deaf to the land beneath us,
Ten steps away no one hears our speeches
But where there's so much as half a conversation,
The Kremlin's mountaineer will get his mention.
His fingers are fat as grubs,
And the words, final as lead weights, fall from his lips,
His cockroach whiskers leer,
And his boot tops glean,
Around him a rabble of thin-necked leaders-
Frowning half-men for him to play with.
They whinny, purr, or whine
As he prates and points a finger,
One by one forging his laws to be fling,
Like horseshoes at the head, eye, or groin.
And every killing is a treat,
For the broad chested Ossete.*

***Ossete= A person from Osettia, a region north of Georgia in the caucuses.**

Using specific lines from the poem as evidence, identify Mandelstam's personal opinion of Stalin.

What do you believe happened to Mandelstam after publishing this poem about Stalin?

What facet (aspect) of Stalin's Reign of Terror does this fall under?

Controlling the minds of the Russian Population: Censorship and Propaganda

Censorship of the Arts and the Press

Stalin implemented restrictions on artists based on the foundations of **Socialist-Realism**. This required all artists, writers, and journalists to depict Soviet life in a positive light to promote hope in the communist future. Authors and artists normally depicted engineers, scientists, workers, and peasants as heroes of the revolution in their works. These characters were always accomplishing the impossible to achieve the goals of communism. Refusal to **conform** to Socialist Realism was met with harsh punishments.

Jewish poet **Osip Mandelstam** was imprisoned, tortured, and exiled for his work that criticized Stalin. His family was threatened with death, so Mandelstam was forced to submit to Stalin's censorship.

Russification was another aspect of censorship. Stalin continued to eliminate non-Russian culture from the Soviet Union. Stalin attempted to further remove non-Russian influence by waging a war on religion. Stalin believed that there was no place for religion in the U.S.S.R, and targeted the Russian Orthodox Church to implement national **atheism—the belief that there is no god**. Portraits of Lenin and Stalin replaced that of religious icons. The bible was replaced with texts written by Karl Marx and other communist ideology.

Priests caught teaching religious texts were considered counter-revolutionary, and received harsh punishments for their actions.

How did Socialist-Realism help maintain Stalin's control over the minds of the Russian people?

What organization did Stalin target with his policy of Russification? How did this change the process of Russification?

How did Stalin create a communist alternative to religious icons? Who were the Russian people now worshipping? Provide an example of their new "holy texts".



Analyze the propaganda image to the left. What is the message of this image? What details help you draw this conclusion?

Stalin tried to boost the Morale of the Russian people through the use of an extensive **Propaganda** campaign. He made himself look like a god-like figure. He used images and film as a tool to create a **cult-of-personality** around himself. Using modern technology, he bombarded the people with a relentless stream of images and film to promote himself, and the communist way of life. Radios and loudspeakers blared in factories and villages, and videos displayed moving images of communist victories and accomplishments. A communist newspaper *Pravda*, or “Truth” linked enemies at home to foreign agents seeking to overthrow the communist regime.



Analyze the propaganda image above. What is the message of this image? What details help you draw this conclusion?

Vicious Spies and Killers under the Mask of Academic Physicians

Today the TASS news agency reported the **arrest of a group of saboteur-doctors**. This terrorist group, uncovered some time ago by organs of state security, had as **their goal shortening the lives of leaders of the Soviet Union by means of medical sabotage**.

Investigation established that participants in the terrorist group, exploiting their position as doctors and abusing the trust of their patients, deliberately and viciously undermined their patients' health by making incorrect diagnoses, and then killed them with bad and incorrect treatments. Covering themselves with the noble and merciful calling of physicians, men of science, these fiends and killers dishonored the holy banner of science. Having taken the path of monstrous crimes, they defiled the honor of scientists.

Among the victims of this band of inhuman beasts were Comrades Zhdanov and Shcherbakov. The criminals confessed that, taking advantage of the illness of Comrade Zhdanov. Killer doctors, by incorrect use of very powerful medicines and prescription of harmful regimens, shortened the life of Comrade Shcherbakov, leading to his death.

In the first place, **the criminals tried to undermine the health of the Soviet military leadership cadres, to remove them from the power structure and thereby weaken the defense of the country**. The arrest of the criminals disrupted these nefarious plans, preventing the accomplishment of their monstrous goals.

Whom did these monsters serve? Who directed the criminal, terrorist, and harmful activity of these vicious traitors to the Motherland? What goal did they want to achieve by the murders of leading figures of the Soviet government?

It has been determined that **all participants of the terrorist group of doctors were in the service of foreign intelligence**; having sold their bodies and souls, they appeared as hirelings, paid agents.

The Soviet people with anger and indignation denounce the criminal band of killers and their foreign bosses. As for **the despicable doctors, serving for dollars and sterling, the people crush them, as loathsome reptiles**. As for the instigators of these murderous mercenaries, this they can be sure of: that retribution will not forget about them and will find out the devious road that leads to them, in order to speak its weighty word.

Summarize the article Vicious Spies and Killers under the Mask of Academic Physicians in a short paragraph.

Describe the tone of the writer. What does this say about the Pravda newspaper?

What is the goal of the Journalist who wrote this Pravda article?

Why was Stalin so interested in controlling all forms of media? How does censorship benefit his rule?

Physically Controlling the Masses: Purges and Gulags

Even though Stalin's power was absolute, he still feared that rival party leaders were plotting against him. In 1934, he launched **The Great Purge**. During this period, Stalin and his secret police known as the Cheka, systematically cracked down on old Bolsheviks, or party activists from the early days of the revolution. His net soon widened to target army heroes, industrial managers, writers, and ordinary citizens. They were charged with a wide range of crimes, from counterrevolutionary activity to failure to meet production quotas. He put these "enemies" through spectacular show trials in Moscow. Former communist leaders confessed to all kinds of crimes after experiencing brutal physical and mental torture. Their families and friends were killed or threatened. Those accused and found guilty were regularly executed or sent to Gulag labor camps. Historians agree that the total number of Russians "purged" exceeds five million.



Why are these men so willing to confess to the crimes they are accused of?

Vasile Blokhin: Stalin's Chief Executioner



Who is Vasile Blokhin? How did he rise through the ranks of the Cheka secret police?

What was Blokhin's role in the Katyn Massacre?

Why did Blokhin use a German weapon to carry out his executions during Stalin's purges?

What does the story of Vasile Blokhin say about Stalin's rule over the Russian people?

This map presents the location of Stalin's Gulags, or forced labor camps. What does the number of labor camps say about Stalin's Rule?





Task: With your group, imagine you are the architects of a Soviet Gulag during the period of Stalin's Reign of Terror. Design your own Gulag. Consider the following:

Name your Gulag:

What types of prisoners will be sent to these camps? What crimes did they commit?

What will the Gulag look like? (Fortifications, technology, guards, guard towers, etc.) Draw your Gulag on the reverse side of this page.

What measures will you take to ensure prisoners do not escape?

What resource will the prisoners be forced to harvest? How will this resource benefit mother Russia?

Label your Gulag on the map of the Soviet Union on the previous page. Why would you place your Gulag in this location? What are the benefits of this geographical location?

Illustrate the layout of your Gulag below.