

# 3 Establishment and consolidation of Stalin's rule

## Key questions

- How did the Great Purge, 1936–39, help establish Stalin's power?
- How can the Great Purge and the Great Terror be explained?
- What other methods did Stalin use to establish and maintain his power?

## Overview

- This unit deals with the methods Stalin used to establish and consolidate his power. It examines his use of terror against opponents and the roles of censorship and propaganda.
- By 1929, Stalin had defeated the left, the United Opposition and the Right Opposition, but dissent still existed within the Communist Party. Stalin feared that his opponents might work their way back into the party; in addition, once the Nazis took power in Germany in 1933, Stalin became concerned that Red Army generals might try to remove him from power.
- Problems with Stalin's economic policies caused significant criticism to emerge at the 16th Party Congress in June 1930.
- In 1932, the Ryutin Affair revealed this continuing dissent, and Stalin was further troubled when a majority of the Politburo refused to support his call for Martemyan Ryutin to be executed.
- The 17th Party Congress in February 1934 revealed continued criticism, and the growing popularity of Kirov. On 1 December, Kirov was assassinated in suspicious circumstances.
- Stalin then ordered a series of arrests and executions; after a secret trial, Zinoviev and Kamenev were given prison sentences.
- In August 1936, the first show trial was held and the Great Purge was launched; other show trials took place in 1937 and 1938.
- The Great Purge was undertaken by the NKVD (secret police), led by Genrikh Yagoda. He was replaced later in 1936 by Nikolai Ezhov, whose more extreme methods began a Great Terror. In 1937, this spread to include a purge of the officer corps of the armed forces, as well as of Communist Party officials.
- Once started, the Great Purge developed a momentum of its own. In the regions away from Moscow, local party bosses used it to further their own positions and there is evidence to suggest that ordinary people saw the punishment of middle-class experts as part of a social revolution that would give them better jobs.
- As a result of the Great Purge, several million people were arrested and large numbers were executed or sent to the Gulag.
- In 1938, Lavrenti Beria replaced Ezhov as head of the NKVD and the Great Terror began to diminish. In 1939, at the 18th Party Congress, the Great Purge was officially ended. By then, virtually all the 'Old Guard' Bolsheviks had been executed or had committed suicide.

## Timeline

**1928–30** Party purge expels thousands of lower ranking party members

**1930 Jun:** 16th Party Congress (signs of some opposition to Stalin)

**1932 Sep:** Ryutin Affair

**1933 Jan:** Smirnov's 'anti-party group' is charged with attempting to replace Stalin

**1934 Feb:** 17th Party Congress

**Dec:** Kirov is murdered; thousands are arrested

**1935 Jan:** mass arrests continue; secret trial of Zinoviev, Kamenev and 17 other members of a 'Moscow Centre'

**1936 Aug:** first show trial (Trial of the Sixteen); Great Purge starts

**Sep:** Ezhov replaces Yagoda as head of NKVD (secret police)

**1937 Jan:** second show trial (Trial of the Seventeen)

**Feb:** Bukharin is expelled from the party

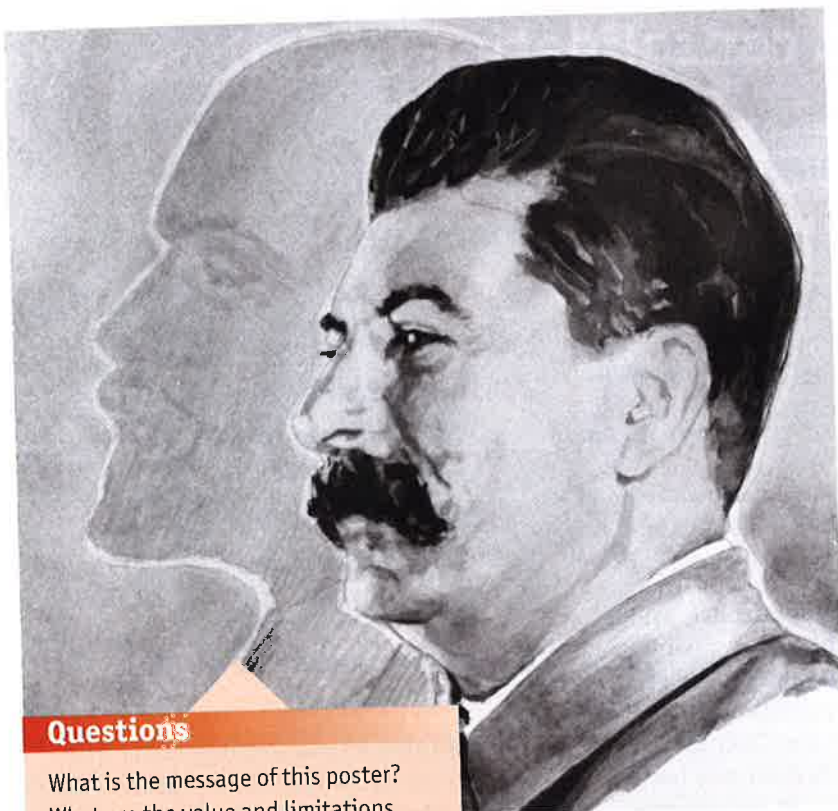
**May:** purge of the Red Army starts

**1938 Mar:** third show trial (Trial of the Twenty-one)

**Dec:** Beria replaces Ezhov as head of the NKVD

**1939 Mar:** 18th Party Congress; official end of the Great Purge





### Questions

What is the message of this poster?  
What are the value and limitations of this poster for historians trying to discover the political links between Stalin and Lenin?

**purge** In the Russian Communist Party, this term initially referred to checking the personal qualities and behaviour of party members (e.g. drunkenness, political inactivity). In such purges or 'cleansings' (*chistki*), those found guilty had their party cards taken away. Violence was not involved and former members were later allowed to rejoin if behaviour improved. Such purges took place, for example, in 1919, 1921, 1929 and 1933. The Great Purge that began in the later 1930s was a very different phenomenon, with mass imprisonment and executions.

### Questions

What was the Ryutin Affair? How did it show that Stalin was not in complete control of the Communist Party in 1932?

A reproduction of a 1936 poster depicting Stalin and Lenin

## How did the Great Purge, 1936–39, help establish Stalin's power?

### Stalin's insecurities in 1930

**Purges** had taken place in the Communist Party before Stalin's rise to power. However, they had only been used to expel those judged to be unsuitable (e.g. drunkards, careerists or those who were hostile to Bolshevik aims). During the power struggle of the 1920s, many of Stalin's opponents had lost senior posts or had even been expelled from the party. However, even these purges were not violent or as extensive as those of the 1930s.

Stalin had defeated his main opponents by 1929, but he was not totally dominant. In the late 1920s, members of the Politburo did not always support his calls for stricter action against defeated opponents. Furthermore, though removed from high office, Bukharin

still had sympathisers and supporters in the party. At the 16th Party Congress in June 1930, Bukharin was re-elected to the Central Committee. The early problems arising from mass collectivisation and rapid industrialisation (see Unit 4) created political division even within the Politburo, where only Vyacheslav Molotov and Lazar Kaganovich were uncritical supporters of Stalin. In December 1930, Sergey Syrtsov and others were expelled from the Central Committee for criticising the excesses committed under collectivisation (see Unit 4). Significantly, they had previously supported Stalin in the struggle against Bukharin and the right.

### The Ryutin Affair, 1932

More serious opposition to Stalin's policies came in 1932 when Martemyan Ryutin, a rightist, wrote a document calling for the end of forced collectivisation (see Unit 4), the rehabilitation of oppositionists (including Trotsky) and the dismissal of Stalin. The document was signed by several prominent communists. Members of the group were put on trial in September – Ryutin, Zinoviev, Kamenev and 17 others were then expelled from the Central Committee. Stalin had wanted Ryutin executed, but the Politburo refused to go that far, thus underlining the fact that Stalin did not yet have complete control. During the next two years, nearly a million party members were expelled as 'Ryutinists'.

### The 17th Party Congress, 1934

Despite these expulsions, opposition to Stalin continued after the Ryutin Affair. In January 1933, Smirnov (another leading communist) was expelled for forming an 'anti-party group' in order to remove Stalin. A major turning point seems to have been the 17th Party Congress (the Congress of Victors), which took place in February 1934.

Evidence suggests that, before the Congress began, some leading local officials asked **Kirov** (a Politburo member and the party boss of Leningrad) to replace Stalin, but he refused. However, the Congress did abolish the post of general secretary. Thus, in principle, Stalin was now no more important than Kirov, Kaganovich and Zhdanov, the three other secretaries of the Communist Party who were elected after the Congress. It is possible that Stalin himself desired this, in order to share responsibility for the economic crisis. However, the Central Committee elected by the Congress gave an indication that not everyone in the Communist Party approved of Stalin's leadership. In particular, it appears that Kirov received votes from almost all the 1225 delegates who voted, while about 300 did not vote for Stalin.

### The Kirov Affair, 1934

Kirov was known to have doubts about the pace of industrialisation and Stalin's methods of disciplining the party. In December 1934, in suspicious circumstances, Kirov was assassinated. Stalin immediately claimed this was part of a plot to overthrow him and the rule of the Communist Party.

The plot was supposedly organised by a 'Leningrad Opposition Centre', which had links with Trotsky's Left Opposition and the United Opposition. The recently reorganised **NKVD** (which had absorbed the **OGPU** in July 1934) headed by **Yagoda**, was given sweeping powers of arrest, trial and execution under a special terrorist decree passed the day after Kirov's assassination.

In the next few weeks, over 100 party members were shot and thousands of Trotskyists and Zinovievists were arrested, including Kamenev and Zinoviev himself – Trotsky was abroad, having been deported in 1929. In January 1935, Zinoviev, Kamenev and 17 others were tried and imprisoned for five to ten years. A few days later, 12 important NKVD members in Leningrad were also tried and imprisoned, and several thousand 'bourgeois elements' were then rounded up.

### The Great Purge

By mid 1935, the purges had begun to come to a halt. However, a new purge began in the summer of 1936, involving the first **show trial**, and signalling the start of what later became known as the Great Purge.

#### SOURCE A

I am guilty of nothing, nothing, nothing before the party, before the Central Committee and before you personally. I swear to you by everything that is sacred to a Bolshevik. I swear to you on Lenin's memory. I cannot even imagine what could have aroused suspicion against me. I beg you to believe my word of honour. I am shaken to the depths of my soul.

Zinoviev to Stalin in December 1934, following his arrest after the assassination of Kirov. Quoted in Volkogonov, D. (trans. Shukman, H.). 1991. *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*. New York, USA. Grove Weidenfeld. p. 277.

**Sergei Kirov (1888–1934)** Kirov joined the Bolsheviks in 1904 and was elected to the Politburo in 1930. He was head of the Leningrad Communist Party. He was a moderate and opposed some of Stalin's more extreme measures. He was assassinated in mysterious circumstances in 1934.

**NKVD** This term refers to the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, set up in 1917. In July 1934, it took over the secret police (see OGPU) and kept this responsibility until 1943.

**OGPU** This term refers to the secret police (United State Political Administration) from 1923 to 1934; from 1917 to 1922, the Cheka had been the secret police and, from 1922 to 1923, the GPU.

#### Genrihk Yagoda (1891–1938)

Yagoda joined the Bolsheviks in 1907 and the Cheka in 1917. He was put in charge of forced-labour camps in 1930 and, in 1934, the NKVD. He is suspected of having been involved in Kirov's murder and, in 1936, he supervised the first show trial. He was replaced by Ezhov after failing to get Bukharin convicted. He was arrested in 1937, found guilty of plotting with Trotsky and others, and executed in 1938.

**show trials** These were the public trials of 1936–38 in which leading communists were accused of plotting against Stalin and the Soviet Union. The interrogation methods of the NKVD (sleep deprivation, continued questioning and beatings) led to many bizarre 'confessions'.



### Nikolai Ezhov (1895–1940)

Ezhov joined the Bolsheviks in 1917 and played an active part in the November Revolution. He helped to organise the collectivisation of agriculture (see Unit 4). As head of the NKVD from 1937 to 1938, he organised the show trials against the 'Old Bolsheviks' and the purge of the armed forces. He was removed from his post in 1938 and executed in 1940.



36

### Andrei Vyshinski (1883–1954)

Vyshinski at first supported the Mensheviks but joined the Bolsheviks during the civil war. He acted as deputy state prosecutor during the show trials.

**Ezhovshchina** Literally 'the time of Ezhov', this term refers to the height of the Great Terror, from 1937 to 1938, when Ezhov was head of the NKVD.

## The Trial of the Sixteen, August 1936

The NKVD claimed to have uncovered a Trotskyist–Zinovievist counter-revolutionary conspiracy. Zinoviev, Kamenev and 14 others were accused of organising the conspiracy and plotting to kill Stalin and other Politburo members. All 16 were found guilty and executed. Bukharin and other Right Opposition leaders were questioned but were not arrested, possibly because of disagreements within the Politburo.



The first show trial, in August 1936

Stalin then had Yagoda replaced by **Ezhov**, on the grounds that Yagoda had not been active enough in exposing the full scope of the 'conspiracy'.

## The Trial of the Seventeen, January 1937

In January 1937, at the second show trial, 17 communist leaders were accused of plotting with Trotsky to carry out assassinations, sabotage of industry and spying. NKVD interrogations again produced 'confessions' that were the main 'evidence' of **Andrei Vyshinski**. This time 13 were sentenced to death.

Following the second show trial, the Central Committee met during February and March 1937. Its main business was to consider the destruction of the 'Trotskyist Conspiracy', as 'revealed' by Stalin and Molotov. Ezhov took his cue from Stalin and accused Bukharin of having known of Trotsky's 'plans'. Bukharin refused to 'confess' to this, was expelled from the party, and immediately arrested.

## The Trial of the Twenty-One, March 1938

The Trial of the Twenty-One was the last and biggest of the show trials. It focused on Bukharin and 20 others, who were accused of membership of a 'Trotskyist–Rightist Bloc'. As before, most of the accused 'confessed' to their 'crimes' – but not Bukharin. The court returned the desired verdict, and Bukharin and 16 others were shot.

## The Great Terror

By this time, the Great Purge had begun to transform into the Great Terror – or **Ezhovshchina** – as the number of denunciations, expulsions, trials, imprisonments and executions multiplied. Initially, the purges had mainly

affected party members; by mid 1937, they widened to include large numbers of administrators and specialists, including engineers and railway workers. In the years 1937–38, **almost the** entire party structure in Ukraine, from the Politburo downwards, was **purged**. In most of the other republics, high-ranking party officials were purged of 'nationalists'. Moscow even set quotas for each region as to the number of 'wreckers' they should find. Many ended up in the **Gulag**, while others were simply executed by the NKVD.

The Great Terror also spread to the Red Army. As the threat of war with Nazi Germany increased, Stalin began to worry about a military coup. Some officers or former officers had been implicated in the first or second show trials. In May 1937, Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky (chief of general staff and a deputy commissar for defence) and Yan Gamarnik (head of the Red Army's political commissars) were arrested and accused of plotting with Trotsky and foreign enemies to assassinate Soviet leaders. On 12 June 1937, Tukhachevsky and some other leading commanders were executed. The Great Terror then spread down to the lower ranks of the Red Army so that, by the end of 1938, the list of those executed included three out of the five Red Army marshals, 14 out of the 16 top commanders, and all eight admirals. Airforce officers and the military intelligence service were also badly hit. In all, about 35,000 (about 50%) of the entire officer corps were either executed or imprisoned.

The Great Terror also began to affect large numbers of ordinary people. Keen to avoid suspicion falling on themselves, many people tried to prove their loyalty to Stalin by denouncing others. Some also saw it as a way of settling scores or securing the jobs of those who were purged. By the end of 1938, most Russians were in a state of terror, reluctant to talk **openly** to anyone. It was at that point, however, that the Great Terror began to **diminish**.

### The end of the Great Terror

As early as October 1937, Stalin raised doubts about the purging of industrial workers. In December 1938, **Beria** replaced Ezhov as general commissar for state security. At the 18th Party Congress in March 1939, Stalin and Zhdanov **announced** that 'mass cleansings' were no longer needed and even admitted that 'mistakes' had been made. Later in 1939, Ezhov was accused of being a British agent, and was executed. As a result, mass arrests ended, several thousand Gulag prisoners were released and many more who had been expelled from the party and had lost their jobs were rehabilitated.

However, it is important to note that potential opponents of Stalin continued to be arrested and imprisoned or executed, although on a much smaller scale.

**Gulag** This term refers to a Soviet government agency set up in 1930 to administer the system of forced-labour camps (see page 49). Gulag is an acronym for the Russian term for the 'Chief Administration for Corrective Labour Camps'. Initially it was under the control of a special section of the OGPU, the secret police; then, in July 1934, the NKVD took over the OGPU and its Gulag administration.



Soviet Union labour camps under Stalin

### Question

Why did Stalin spread the Great Purge to the Red Army, and what was its impact?

### Lavrenti Beria (1899–1953)

Beria was an early supporter of Stalin. In 1938, he replaced Ezhov as head of the NKVD and was responsible for the elimination of Ezhov and several other NKVD officials at the end of the Great Terror. When Zhdanov died in 1948, it was thought Beria would succeed Stalin as ruler of the Soviet Union. However, when Stalin died in 1953, Beria was arrested and executed.



**glasnost** This term refers to the policy of 'openness' in the Soviet Union, begun after Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary of the Communist Party in 1985. As a result, many secret documents became available for research by both Soviet and Western historians.

### Question

What problems do historians have when trying to calculate the number of victims of the Great Purge?

38

### SOURCE B

It cannot be said that the cleansings were not accompanied by grave mistakes. There were, unfortunately, more mistakes than might have been expected. Undoubtedly, we shall have no further need to resort to the method of mass cleansings. Nevertheless, the cleansings of 1933–36 were unavoidable and their results, on the whole, were beneficial.

*Stalin reporting to the 18th Party Congress in March 1939 on the purges from 1933 to 1936. Quoted in Ward, C. 1993. Stalin's Russia. London, UK. Hodder Education. p. 119.*

## The impact of the Great Purge

### The numbers debate

Before Gorbachev and his policy of '**glasnost**', estimates of total victims of the Great Purge (imprisoned, sent to the Gulag or executed) varied from 5 million to 18 million. In 1990, however, KGB archives were made public. These gave much lower figures of just under 2 million victims. The lower figures are now taken as fairly reliable by many historians and they support lower estimates given in the past by, among others, Jerry F. Hough, Merle Fainsod and T. H. Rigby. However, some more recent evidence has led to renewed debate, with some historians favouring an upward revision of the number of victims. There is also the problem of trying to separate deaths due to the 'liquidation' of the kulaks and the famine from deaths connected to the Great Terror.

## How can the Great Purge and the Great Terror be explained?

While most historians see the Great Purge and Great Terror essentially as steps taken by Stalin, there is considerable historical debate about their nature and how they can be fully explained.

### Totalitarian theories

The orthodox or traditional views on the reasons for the Great Purge centre on the role of Stalin. They are based on his position as dictator of the Soviet Union, which was clearly established by the time the Great Purge ended. Many historians accept Stalin's responsibility for and planning of the Great Terror, but argue that it should be seen, at least in part, as a 'rational' response to the circumstances of the 1930s – i.e. serving Stalin's determination to remain as leader. Others, such as Tucker, have argued that Stalin launched the purges because he was suffering from some form of mental illness, or at least paranoia, that led to irrational and extreme action.

Trotsky himself, while continuing to attack Stalin, saw the Great Terror as a way of providing scapegoats to explain away the economic problems. He also saw it as a consequence of an inevitable paranoia resulting from the increasing isolation of Stalin and the bureaucracy from Soviet society. The historian Isaac Deutscher linked the Great Terror to Stalin's fear that, with the international

situation becoming threatening in the 1930s, the outbreak of war might lead to opponents in the party and/or the army attempting to overthrow him in a coup d'état.

Roy Medvedev has connected Stalin's 'lust for power' and his 'measureless ambition' to the huge support given to Kirov at the 1934 Party Congress. Thus the Great Purge can be seen as a deliberate and intentional action that was designed to strengthen the regime and Stalin's position within it.

## Revisionist theories

More recently, several historians have focused attention on the existence of genuine opposition that posed a potential threat to Stalin's position. John Arch Getty has suggested that there is evidence that Stalin's references to a Trotskyist–Zinovievist plot were based, at least in part, on fact. Between 1930 and 1932, middle-ranking communist officials contacted Trotsky about forming a new opposition bloc, and proposals for a new Trotsky–Zinoviev alliance were being made. However, the number of victims of the Great Purge was far greater than the number of likely oppositionists by the mid 1930s.

Some historians, such as Gabor Rittersporn, have argued that, although Stalin made crucial appointments – such as replacing Yagoda with Ezhov as head of the NKVD – the NKVD and local party bosses were often out of control in the chaos of the 1930s and frequently took matters well beyond Stalin's intentions. These historians argue that at times the Great Terror was an opportunity for rival local leaders to settle old scores. These arguments echo the structuralist debate over the nature and distribution of power in Nazi Germany.

## Stalin and Lenin

Historians such as Conquest have argued that the rise of Stalin, and the Great Terror, can be traced to the Marxist roots of early Bolshevism and in particular to Leninism. They point to the way that Lenin and the Bolsheviks frequently portrayed those who had different ideas about the 'correct line' as 'traitors' and 'class enemies'. They also point to the fact that the Bolsheviks resorted to purges of the party membership in the 1920s under Lenin, and shortly after his death. Purges took place during the civil war and as the NEP was introduced (the civil war and the NEP threatened the survival of the new Bolshevik government). In 1919 and 1921, about 15% and 25% of members respectively lost their party cards. These expulsion rates were much higher than those of the 1930s: 11% were expelled in 1929, 18% in 1933 and 9% in 1935. However, though the Cheka had used terror against opponents of the Bolsheviks in the civil war, violence had not been used against party members, even when, in 1921, factions in the Communist Party (as well as all opposition parties) had been banned.

However, Trotsky rejected the argument that Stalin and Stalinism were a logical outcome of Lenin's ideas and methods of rule. Historians such as Deutscher and Medvedev have also portrayed Stalinism as being distinct from Leninism, pointing to the fact that terror was not used against Communist Party members. In addition, the Communist Party leadership at several points in the 1930s tried to limit actions taken against various oppositions. Nor did Lenin ever try to force defeated political opponents to recant their views or make preposterous 'confessions' – such methods were only used by Stalin. Several historians also point out that, unlike the earlier purges, Stalin was attempting to create an ideologically 'pure' and monolithic party. Thus Stalin's Great Purge appears to have been uniquely violent and a clear break with Leninist traditions.

## Historical debate

The opinions of historians are still divided over the reasons for the Great Purge and Great Terror, and on the degree of Stalin's responsibility. How would you evaluate the view that Stalin's purges in the 1930s were essentially a 'rational' response – by him – to real threats from opponents and a possible war?

## Activity

Work in pairs to carry out research on the question of whether or not Stalin's Great Purge and Great Terror can be seen as merely a continuation of methods used before 1924 by Lenin. Then present your views – for and against – to your class.



## What other methods did Stalin use to establish and maintain his power?

Although terror was an extremely important method for Stalin's attempt to dominate the Communist Party and Soviet society, he also used other methods of control. Particularly important were censorship and propaganda.

### The cult of personality

As early as December 1929 and Stalin's 50th birthday, the party and the media began consciously to build up Stalin as a hero and to equate his political thinking with that of Marx and, especially, of Lenin. The newspaper *Pravda* called on the party and the people to unite around 'Lenin's most faithful and dedicated pupil and associate'. Elements of this had already emerged during the power struggle, as Stalin tried to portray himself as a true 'disciple' of Lenin, while branding all his opponents as 'anti-Leninists'. During the upheavals of collectivisation (see Unit 4), the Five-Year Plans and the purges, references were made to a 'Lenin-Stalin partnership', and it was claimed that 'Stalin is the Lenin of today'. The photographs or faces of Stalin's opponents who had been defeated in the 1920s were 'airbrushed' out, simply torn from books or blanked out with pens (see page 15).



### Theory of knowledge

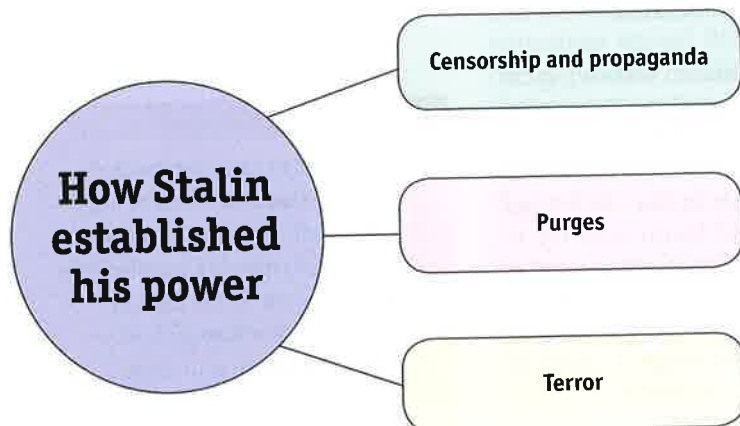
#### History and propaganda

Propaganda techniques have been employed by many leaders and parties in their attempts to achieve and/or maintain power. Consider the ways in which Stalin used posters, the arts and film to present himself as Lenin's 'rightful heir' and the 'saviour' of the Soviet 'motherland'. Were they effective and, if they were, what makes them so? Try to consider how language and emotion can be – and were – used to influence reason.

During the 1930s, a 'cult of personality' developed: Stalin was portrayed as the 'father of the nation' who had saved the Soviet Union from its enemies, and as an expert in science and culture. Posters, paintings and statues appeared everywhere, in streets, factories, offices, schools and even in Soviet homes. The media referred to Stalin in glowing terms, such as 'Universal Genius' and 'Shining Sun of Humanity'. He was credited with having made the Soviet Union the envy of the world through the achievements of the Five-Year Plans. Artists, writers and film directors were ordered to produce work in praise of Stalin and his achievements. Children were specifically targeted with this kind of propaganda in schools and the Komsomol (see page 57).

After the Second World War, Stalin moved quickly to portray himself as the one who had saved the Soviet 'motherland' and, in June 1945, he promoted himself to 'Generalissimo'. Many Soviet citizens did see Stalin as a national hero but, to counter any possible threats from the armed forces, he encouraged this 'cult of personality' by making sure he took pride of place in the victory parades.

### End of unit activities



- 1 Complete the spider diagram to show the main ways in which Stalin established his power in the 1930s, using the information from this unit and any other resources available to you.
- 2 Research and make notes on the historical arguments surrounding the view that Stalin began the purges as a result of mental illness or instability.
- 3 Produce a chart to summarise the main events and impact of the purges and show trials of the 1930s.