

# Stalin

## and the Soviet Union



### OVERVIEW

*Joseph Stalin (1879-1953), the leader of the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953, employed terror, repression, and execution to maintain his control over the Soviet people. Famine—the worst of which occurred in Ukraine—and execution, particularly within the forced-labor camp system (the Gulag), resulted in the deaths of millions of people. His purges in the 1930s decimated the political and military leadership of the country, making the Soviet Union ill-prepared for the Nazi invasion in World War II. His cruelty was staggering, and his victims numbered tens of millions of Soviet people. In addition, he led a global campaign to “socialize” the world which resulted in the deaths of countless millions world wide.*

### OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- analyze documents to determine the impact of Stalin's view of individuality
- examine and explain the causes and effects of the Ukrainian famine and the Gulag system
- empathize with the victims of the Gulag
- assess Stalin's impact

### STANDARDS:

- NCHS World History  
Era 8: 2C, 4B, 5A; Era 9: 1B
- NCHS US History Era 9: 2A

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

**How and why did Stalin limit individual liberty in the Soviet Union?**

### MATERIALS

- Teacher Resource: Poster
- Background Essay: They Will Shoot You Like a Dog
- Student Handout A: PSA: Early “Photoshop”
- Student Handout B: If the government. . .
- Student Handout C: A Letter to Our Leaders
- Answer Key (in back of book)

## CREATE THE CONTEXT

*[for homework or in class the previous day]*

- A** | Duplicate and distribute several copies of **Teacher Resource: Propaganda Poster**. On-line version can be found here:  
<http://www.globalmuseumoncommunism.org/sites/all/themes/museum/flash/hall/photoStack3d.html>
- B** | Ask students the following questions and accept all thoughtful answers:
  - How would you describe Stalin's facial expressions? What type of a person does he seem to be?
  - Describe the people in the poster. What do their facial expressions say about their attitude towards Stalin?
  - What is the overall mood or feeling of the poster? Based upon this image, would you want to spend time with Stalin?
- C** | Have students read **Background Essay: They Will Shoot You Like a Dog** and answer (or think about) the questions which follow the essay. (See the **Answer Key** for suggested responses.)

## PSA (Primary Source Activity) [10 minutes]

- A** | Briefly review the **Background Essay** to clarify any terms, concepts, or ideas. Discuss the difference between the image of Stalin derived from the poster with the image of Stalin derived from the **Essay**.
- B** | Distribute copies of **Student Handout A: PSA: Early "Photoshop"** and give students about 3 minutes, working in pairs, to discuss the possible reasons for the differences between the two photos. Help students to understand that, just as Yezhov was purged (eliminated) from the photo, so, too, were millions of people purged from Soviet society because they threatened Stalin's totalitarian regime. (Information about this and other photographic censorship can be found at [http://www.newseum.org/berlinwall/commissar\\_vanishes/index.htm](http://www.newseum.org/berlinwall/commissar_vanishes/index.htm))

## ACTIVITY A [15 minutes]

- A** | Remind students that people were purged in a variety of ways, including everything from outright execution to starvation as a result of government policies. Nowhere was there more death from famine than in Ukraine.
- B** | Distribute **Student Handout B: If the government...** Give students 5-10 minutes to complete the chart and encourage them to share their responses.
- C** | As a large group, ask students to share their thoughts and their actions. Ask students **why** they might feel and act as they predicted. Suggested responses might include: *it's not fair; the government is acting unjustly; I have a right to food and property; they can't change rules after they've been passed; I have a right to freedom of speech; the government is not treating me as an individual; etc.*

## ACTIVITY B [15 minutes]

- A** | Review with students the reasons for the Stalinist show trials as well as the conditions in the Gulag camps. Distribute **Student Handout C: A Letter to Our Leaders**.
- B** | The entire class can participate in this activity in one of two ways: Option 1: Ask for 6 volunteers, give them the text the day before, and have them take turns reading each line. Option 2: In a round-robin format, each student reads a separate line. Encourage all readers to convey the appropriate emotion as they read.

## WRAP-UP [15 minutes]

Ask students the following questions and accept all thoughtful responses

- 1** | Stalin said that “Death solves all problems.” What problems did his action in Ukraine and in the Gulag “solve”? What problems did these actions create?
- 2** | Why did Stalin limit individual liberty in the Soviet Union?
- 3** | What would prevent someone like Stalin from coming to power in the United States?
- 4** | How would you compare and contrast your view of the worth of individuals with that of Stalin?

## IMMEDIATE ASSESSMENT

- A** | One half of the class will write a letter to Stalin as if you are either a victim of the Ukrainian famine or a prisoner in the Gulag. The other half of the class will write Stalin’s response to such a letter. When the assignment is due, exchange letters and discuss your reactions.
- B** | Search a credible on-line news source (e.g., *the New York Times*, *the Wall Street Journal*, *the Washington Post*) to find an article about limitations on the rights of expression, press, assembly, or the right to a fair trial in contemporary Russia. The article should be accompanied by a brief comparison of the current restrictions with those imposed during Stalinist Russia.
- C** | Answer one (or all) of the questions posed in the Wrap Up in a well-constructed 3-4 paragraph essay per response.

### LONG-TERM ASSESSMENT

- A** | Direct students to any of these resources from the on-line Global Museum of Communism. For each source, they could a.) write a brief response to what they learned; b.) make a short presentation about what they learned to the class; c.) post a Facebook or Twitter comment about what they learned.
- Richard Pipes, *Russia Under Communism*  
(appropriate for advanced students )  
<http://soviet.globalmuseumoncommunism.org/ussr/history>
  - Timeline of the Soviet Union Under Communism  
<http://soviet.globalmuseumoncommunism.org/ussr/timeline>
  - Biography of Stalin  
<http://soviet.globalmuseumoncommunism.org/ussr/bios/stalin>
  - The Great Terror at 40  
[http://www.globalmuseumoncommunism.org/features/great\\_terror](http://www.globalmuseumoncommunism.org/features/great_terror)
- B** | Students could create a 10-slide Powerpoint presentation illustrating any one of the following:
- The Ukrainian genocide of 1933
  - The show trials of the 1930's
  - Life in the Gulag
  - *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*
- A brief annotated bibliography (what is the source for the information and/or graphic and why is it credible) should be included.

## COMMUNISM'S CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS (C3)

Students could perform an on-line search to find an article about limitations on liberties in one or more of today's communist countries.

**China**

**Cuba**

**Laos**

**North Korea**

**Vietnam**

Good sources for such articles include:

<http://www.nytimes.com/>

<http://www.humanrightsfoundation.org/>

[www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)

Students could read the article and present the results of their search as either 1.) one paragraph summary; 2.) five slide Powerpoint presentation; or 3.) Twitter entry.

(Students should note the source of their article. Wikipedia and articles written by the Communist Party as well as the governments of these countries are likely to be incomplete, inaccurate and/or biased.)



“Great Stalin: Banner of Friendship from the People of the USSR”

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**SOURCE:**

<http://www.designsdelight.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/11/poster-stalin.jpg>

# BACKGROUND ESSAY

## THEY WILL SHOOT YOU LIKE A DOG

Joseph Stalin (1879-1953) succeeded Vladimir Lenin as the leader of the Soviet Union. He ruled the Soviet Union with an iron fist for nearly thirty years. Executions, purges, imprisonment, famine, forced relocation, and other methods helped Stalin to stay in power. No government in history, with the exception of Communist China, caused the death of so many of its citizens.

“Death solves all problems,” said Stalin. “No man, no problem.” Stalin was an efficient problem-solver. Experts estimate that tens of millions of people died as a result of his actions in Ukraine; the trials and executions of 1936-1938; and the Gulag, a system of forced labor camps.

Stalin believed in the abolition of private property. Throughout the Soviet Union, he seized agricultural land owned by individuals. Then, he turned these properties into collective [group] farms. Stalin believed that collectivization would improve the nation’s overall productivity.

This policy was widely opposed throughout the Soviet Union. Ukraine was a rich agricultural part of the Soviet Union. Many resisted Stalin’s collectivization. In retaliation, Stalin increased the quota [required amount] of grain to be produced by 44%. Individuals could only receive grain after the government quota had been met. Ukrainians would have to work harder but would receive less for their efforts. Most of their crops would be sent elsewhere.

Stalin feared Ukrainian opposition both to himself and his policies. He fully supported actions leading to genocide [the elimination of a race or ethnic group.] From 1932-1933, millions of Ukrainians died as a result of the famine Stalin created. Entire communities starved to death. Individuals were imprisoned or executed for taking even a handful of grain from the government warehouses. Soviet officials stopped starving people from travelling to areas where food was available.

Some Ukrainian and other opposition leaders were sent to the Gulag. This was a system of forced labor camps throughout Russia. Many of them were located in Siberia. There, the harsh climate and the sadistic treatment of the prisoners resulted in millions of deaths. Political dissidents as well as common criminals made up the work force. They built railroads, dams, and hydroelectric plants. They dug for coal, gold, and salt. A prisoner remembered that the guards would “shoot them like dogs” if they challenged their captors.

In 1931, Stalin was asked how long he was going to go on killing people. “As long as necessary,” he responded. In the mid 1930s, Stalin began a national campaign to eliminate all opposition to his policies. People could not speak out against his policies for fear of arrest and death. They were arrested and sent to the Gulag.

The years from 1936-1938 are known as the

# BACKGROUND ESSAY

“Great Terror.” Stalin wanted to purge [eliminate] anyone who might challenge him, even former colleagues and advisors. Informants reported; evidence was manufactured; and show trials were held. Confessions were obtained through the use of torture and intimidation. All classes of society were subject to Stalin’s excesses. Like thousands of others, a theater director reported, “I incriminated myself in the hope that by telling them lies I could end the ordeal.”

By late 1938, opposition to Stalin had been eliminated or silenced. Stalin now turned his attention to international events.

In August 1939, he and Adolph Hitler agreed that their countries would never invade each other. With this guarantee, Hitler invaded Poland one week later, precipitating the start of WWII. In June 1941, Hitler betrayed Stalin and sent his armies into the Soviet Union.

Because Stalin had ordered the execution of many military leaders during the Great Terror,

the Soviet Union struggled to mount an effective defense and lost an estimated 20-30 million men during the war. Stalin was forced to look to the United States and to Great Britain to help him defeat the Nazis.

Stalin believed, “Whoever occupies the territory also imposes on it his own social system as far as his military can reach.” By the late 1940s, Stalin forcibly extended Soviet communism throughout Eastern and Central Europe. He did not honor his promise to the Allies to allow free elections throughout Eastern Europe. Instead, Stalin and his men installed puppet governments controlled by the Soviet Union. The communists seized property. They controlled the media. They suppressed religion.

Stalin’s actions presented a real threat to Western Europe and the United States. By the time of Stalin’s death in 1953, the Cold War was raging. It would last for another 36 years.

## THINK ABOUT IT

1. How many people died as a result of Stalin’s policies?
2. How did collectivization lead to genocide in Ukraine?
3. Describe life in the Gulag.
4. What was the Great Terror?
5. In your opinion, why did the Ukrainian people oppose collectivization?
6. What basic human rights were violated as Stalin purged his enemies?
7. How did Stalin extend communism throughout Europe?

# PSA: Early “Photoshop”



This photo was taken in mid-1938, when Nicolai Yezhov (right) was a trusted advisor of Joseph Stalin. Stalin grew to fear Yezhov's influence and ordered him imprisoned and ultimately executed in 1940.



This version of the photograph was published sometime after 1940.

# If the government. . .

## DIRECTIONS:

*Imagine that the government of the United States has been taken over by a dictator. Complete the chart below, predicting your thoughts and actions.*

| If the government ...                                          | What Would You Think? | What Would You Do? | What Might Prevent Your Action? |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| prevented the delivery of food and other products to your town |                       |                    |                                 |
| seized all products from all stores (including grocery stores) |                       |                    |                                 |
| refused to allow companies to buy from each other              |                       |                    |                                 |
| required that your parents immediately pay all money they owe  |                       |                    |                                 |
| deported all immigrants, both legal and illegal                |                       |                    |                                 |
| imprisoned anyone who spoke out against these actions          |                       |                    |                                 |

# A Letter to Our Leaders

## DIRECTIONS:

*This activity is based upon an actual letter written in 1926 to the highest officials of the Soviet Union. The letter was written by 3 prisoners from the Solovetsky (Solovki) forced labor camp. Read your assigned section (or listen to the other readers), thinking about why these people were imprisoned and how they were treated. On this sheet, circle the 4–5 statements which are most memorable to you*

1. We appeal to you, asking you to pay a minimum of attention to our request.
2. We are prisoners who are returning from the Solovki concentration camp because of our poor health.
3. We went to the camps full of energy and good health, and now we are returning as invalids, broken and crippled emotionally and physically.
4. We are asking you to draw your attention to your Solovki concentration camp in Kemi and in all other sections of the concentration camps.
5. It is difficult for a human being even to imagine such terror, tyranny, violence, and lawlessness.
6. When we went there, we could not conceive of such a horror, and now we, crippled ourselves, together with several thousands who are still there, appeal to the ruling center of the Soviet state to curb the terror that reigns there.
7. The Security Police, without oversight and due process, sends workers and peasants there who are, by and large, innocent.
8. People die like flies. They die a slow and painful death.
9. This torment and suffering is placed only on workers who were unfortunate to find themselves in the period of hunger and destruction accompanying the events of the Revolution.
10. They committed crimes only to save themselves and their families from death by starvation and they have been punished for these crimes.
11. Now because of their past, for whose crime they have already paid, they are fired from their jobs.

- 12.** The penniless proletariat dies from hunger, cold, and back-breaking 14-16 hour days under the tyranny and lawlessness of other inmates who are the agents and collaborators of the Security Police.
- 13.** If you complain or write anything they will frame you for an attempted escape or for something else, and they will shoot you like a dog.
- 14.** They line us up naked and barefoot at 22 degrees below zero and keep us outside for up to an hour.
- 15.** It is possible, that you might think that it is our imagination, but we swear to you all, by everything that is sacred to us, that this is only one small part of the nightmarish truth.
- 16.** We repeat, and will repeat 100 times, that yes, indeed there are some guilty people, but the majority suffer innocently.
- 17.** The word law, according to the life of the concentration camps, does not exist.
- 18.** What does exist is only the autocratic power of petty tyrants—other prisoners serving time and working with our jailers--who have power over life and death.
- 19.** Everything described is the truth and we, ourselves, are close to the grave, after 3 years in Solovki, in Kemi and other camps.
- 20.** We are asking you to improve the pathetic, tortured existence of those who are there, who suffer under the yoke of the Security Polices' tyranny, violence, and complete lawlessness.

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**SOURCE:**

*Quotes are taken from Revelations from the Russian Archives: Letter to Bolshevik  
(<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/d2presid.html>)*