

SOURCE 15.8 John Steinbeck, the American novelist, visited the Soviet Union in 1947 and wrote the following entry in his diary (quoted in M. Cullerne Brown, *Art Under Stalin*, 1991, p. 175)

Everything in the Soviet Union takes place under the fixed stare of the plaster, bronze, drawn or embroidered eye of Stalin. His portrait does not just hang in every museum but in a museum's every room. Statues of him dignify the façade of every public building. His bust stands in front of all airports, railway and bus stations. A bust of Stalin stands in every classroom, and often his portrait hangs directly opposite. In parks he sits on plaster benches and discusses something or other with Lenin. In shops they sell million upon million of images of him, and in every home there is at least one portrait of him... He is everywhere, he sees everything... we doubt whether Caesar Augustus enjoyed during his life the prestige, the worship and the godlike power over the people of which Stalin disposes.

The personality cult and the adulation Stalin received are two of the most striking features of Soviet propaganda. By the end of the 1940s, Stalin dominated the USSR physically as well as politically. His image was literally everywhere, as Source 15.8 indicates. He was presented as the heir of Lenin and the sole infallible interpreter of party ideology. He acquired an almost god-like status. The unique position Stalin attained and the power he possessed to shape the Communist state and the lives of the people of the Soviet Union are called the 'cult of the personality'.

The origins of the cult can be seen in the late 1920s, but in this period the leadership was usually portrayed as an anonymous collective body making joint decisions; few pictures of the leaders appeared in the press. In 1929, Stalin was perceived as rather cold and distant. The full-blown cult really got going around 1933–34. Praise was heaped on Stalin personally and his link with Lenin and his role in the achievements of the First Five-Year Plan were emphasised. From 1935 onwards, it was possible to speak of Stalin only in glowing terms. He was portrayed as the *vozhd* (the leader), a genius with great wisdom and even prophetic powers.

The most likely explanation for the development of the cult lay in the economic and political circumstances of Soviet Russia in the mid-1930s. The disruption and disorientation brought about by the First Five-Year Plan and the terror meant that this was a bewildering and confusing time. Former heroes were revealed as traitors; wreckers and saboteurs were everywhere. The image of Stalin reassured the people that they had a strong leader to take them through these difficult and momentous times. There was a firm hand at the helm steering the ship, someone who knew where they were going. The cult of the personality was useful in holding Soviet society together.


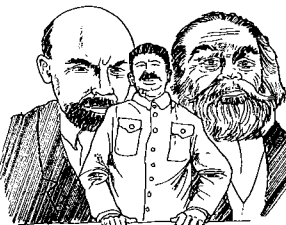


Paintings, poetry and sculpture all served the cult. At the beginning of the cult the regime did not want people to be alienated by a remote leader, so they deliberately cultivated a more popular image of Stalin. Paintings and posters stressed Stalin's humanity and his active participation in the lives of ordinary people. He is seen marching alongside workers or in the fields with the peasants, or inspecting great projects. Stalin's relationship with children was emphasised: no nursery was without a 'Thank you, Stalin, for my happy childhood' painting. As the cult developed, operas and films glorified his role in the revolution or as the chief hero of the Civil War. By the end of the 1930s, paintings show him more detached and superior. Statues show him as more monumental, an all-powerful leader; this image could not be clearer than in the statue of Stalin at the Great Soviet Exhibition in 1939. Also in 1939, an exhibition entitled 'Stalin and the Soviet People' contained pictures of his childhood showing him as a natural leader or like a young Christ explaining the scriptures (see Source 15.4, page 277).

Success in the Second World War and the defeat of the Nazis enhanced Stalin's position and fed the cult, which reached its height at the end of the 1940s. Paintings show him in god-like solitude or with Lenin, sometimes even appearing to tell Lenin what to do. Stalin had lost his role as a disciple, now he was an equal or even the master. The omnipresent images of Stalin said to the Soviet people: 'Stalin is everywhere present and watching over you; he understands your hopes and has your best interests at heart.' During the celebrations of his seventieth birthday, a giant portrait of Stalin was suspended over Moscow and lit up at night by a battery of searchlights (see Source 15.5).

FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 Use the information on pages 276–279, including Chart 15A, to produce a diagram, mapping out the development of the cult.
- 2 Make brief notes describing the devices used to establish and spread the cult.
- 3 Why do you think the cult was used by the Soviet leadership when individual adulation was against their collective code?

15A The development of the Stalin cult

| 1924–29 | ORIGINS OF THE CULT |
|---|---|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin assumes a modest image. He wants to appear as a hard-working man of moderation. • He takes on the mantle of Lenin's disciple and servant of the party. 'Stalin is the Lenin of today' becomes a commonly used phrase. • Tsaritsyn is renamed Stalingrad in his honour in 1925. |
| 1929–33 | CULT UNDERWAY |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For his fiftieth birthday in 1929, Stalin receives 350 greetings, including some from organisations that did not even exist. Stalin is portrayed as Lenin's faithful pupil and companion-in-arms. • The length of applause for Stalin at conferences gets longer. • By 1931, huge portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin appear on special occasions such as celebrations of the October Revolution. There are few individual portraits of Stalin. |
| 1933–39 | CULT FULLY ESTABLISHED |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stalin's image is used to reassure people that they have a strong leader to help them through the great disruption of the First Five-Year Plan and the confusion of the terror. • Paintings, poems and sculpture promote the Stalin cult. SOCIALIST REALIST art glorifies Stalin's role as leader. • The <i>History of the All-Union Communist Party</i> is published in 1938. History is reinterpreted in Stalin's favour. • As war looms, his image becomes more that of an all-powerful leader. |
| Post-1945 | HEIGHT OF THE CULT |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stalin's image is everywhere; his power cemented by his success as war leader. • His childhood home becomes a shrine. • Increasingly, portraits show him in god-like solitude, superior and apart. • The celebrations of his seventieth birthday are extremely elaborate, organised by 75 leading figures including the whole Politburo. There are galas and greetings almost every day from 21 December 1949 to August 1951. |

SOCIALIST REALISM

The ideological philosophy that guided Soviet literature and the arts after 1934; all creative writing and art had to celebrate the achievements of the proletariat in his struggle to make a contribution to the Soviet achievement.

STORIES ABOUT THE CULT

In his book *Stalin: Breaker of Nations* (1991, page 213), Robert Conquest tells of some of the more absurd effects of the cult:

- At a provincial meeting there was an ovation when Stalin's name was mentioned and no one dared to sit down first. When one old man could stand no longer and sat down, his name was taken and he was arrested the next day.
- When a speech of Stalin's was published on a series of gramophone records, one side of one of the records consisted entirely of applause.

Khrushchev cited the example of Stalin marking a 1948 edition of the *Short Biography* about his own life: he marked the points where he thought the praise was insufficient. Stalin wanted the following sentence to be added: 'Although he performed his task as leader of the people with consummate skill and enjoyed the unreserved support of the entire Soviet people, Stalin never allowed his work to be marred by the slightest hint of vanity, conceit or self-adulation.' (Khrushchev in his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in which he denounced Stalin. Taken from S. Talbot (ed.), *Khrushchev Remembers*, vol. 1, 1977, page 629.)

B Rewriting history



SOURCE 15.9 A famous photograph of Lenin addressing troops in 1920, with Trotsky and Kamenev on the steps to the right of the platform



SOURCE 15.10 After Trotsky's downfall, the same photograph was published with Trotsky and Kamenev painted out



SOURCE 15.11 In 1933, I. Brodsky painted the same scene on a giant canvas for the Central Lenin Museum in Moscow. Trotsky and Kamenev were replaced by two journalists. This photograph was taken for *Pravda* in 1940 and shows Red army and navy personnel staring at the work

Another significant aspect of the cult of the personality was the reinterpretation of history in Stalin's favour. In 1938, the *History of the All-Union Communist Party*, or *Short Course* as it was usually called, was published in the Soviet Union. In it, Stalin was given a much more important role in the October Revolution as chief companion to Lenin, his closest friend and disciple. Trotsky, on the other hand, was demoted to the role of bourgeois opportunist and given little credit. The other old Bolsheviks, especially Bukharin and his supporters, were designated 'enemies of the people' or were relegated to minor roles. All were dwarfed by the invincible heroes – Lenin and Stalin.

FOCUS ROUTE

Why do you think Stalin found it necessary to rewrite the history of the revolution and the development of the Soviet state in the *Short Course*? Make a note of your answer.



SOURCE 15.12 A photograph taken in April 1925 (above) and published again in 1939 (below)

The *Short Course* was not just another history book. It was *the* main history text for educational institutions across the USSR. It was the definitive version, replacing all the books that had had pages cut out or pasted over as leading Bolsheviks fell victim to the show trials and purges. According to the *Short Biography*, Stalin himself was the author of the *Short Course*. By 1948, it had sold 34 million copies in the Soviet Union and two million elsewhere.

As part of the process of reinterpretation, photographs were amended to support the new history. Stalin was added to photographs of Lenin to show that he had been his closest friend and adviser. Old 'heroes of the revolution' were airbrushed out of Soviet history. It was as if Stalin wanted them wiped from the collective memory of the period.

