

## 2 Ideology and the nature of the state

### Timeline

**1922 Apr:** Stalin becomes general secretary of the Communist Party

**1923 Feb:** triumvirs begin their campaign against Trotsky and 'Trotskyism'

**1924 Jan:** Lenin dies

**Nov:** Stalin reveals 'socialism in one country' for the first time

**1927 Nov:** Trotsky and Zinoviev are expelled from the Communist Party, and Kamenev from the Central Committee

**1936 Aug:** first show trial

**1939 Mar:** purges end; Stalin is in control

**1945 Jun:** Stalin becomes 'Generalissimo', and starts to reassert control over the party and state

**1948 Aug:** Zhdanov dies

**1949 Jul:** Leningrad Affair

**1951** Mingrelian Case

**1953 Jan:** 'Doctors' Plot'

**Mar:** Stalin dies

### Key questions

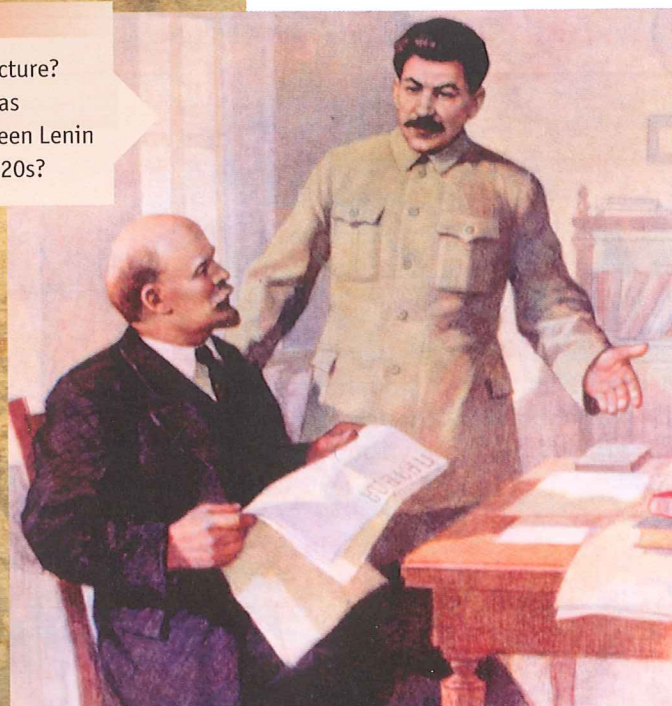
- What role did ideology play in Stalin's rise to power?
- To what extent was Stalin's ideology in line with that of Marx and Lenin?
- What was the nature of the Stalinist state?

### Overview

- This unit examines more closely Stalin's use of ideology and the extent to which it varied from, or was merely a continuation of, the ideology established by Marx and developed by Lenin. It also considers the nature of the state established by Stalin, and how it evolved until his death in 1953.
- From 1922, Lenin suffered a series of strokes. Policy differences and personal rivalries between other leading communists, which had existed before 1922, came to the fore.
- After Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev began to argue that Trotsky and 'Trotskyism' were ideologically opposed to orthodox 'Marxism-Leninism'.
- One particularly bitter ideological dispute centred on the issue of Stalin's idea of 'socialism in one country', which was supported by the triumvirs. In opposition to this, Trotsky and his supporters defended the Bolshevik belief in 'permanent revolution'.
- After the purges of the late 1930s, Stalin seemed to be in full control of the Soviet Union. However, after the Second World War, he remained deeply suspicious of potential rivals.

- At first, Stalin used the party machine to reassert his control over the military, and several top commanders were demoted.
- Stalin then virtually ignored leading party bodies such as the Politburo and the Central Committee. During the years 1945-53, occasional purges took place – but not on the scale of the 1930s.

A Soviet sketch of Lenin and Stalin in the offices of Pravda



### Questions

What is the message of this picture?  
How accurate is this message as regards the relationship between Lenin and Stalin during the early 1920s?

### What role did ideology play in Stalin's rise to power?

When Stalin began his rise to power in 1922, the Russian state had been – at least in theory – based on Marxist ideology since the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917. So, on one level, Stalin had nothing to contribute to the ideology underpinning the new state.<sup>1</sup>

However, there had been many sharp political differences between the various communist leaders over aspects of policy, theory and action. Stalin was more of a practical man than a thinker and writer; hence his main party roles before 1917 were as editor of the party newspaper, *Pravda*, and as an organiser of bank raids to obtain funds for the party. This was why, in 1922, he was appointed general secretary of the Communist Party – an essentially administrative role, which none of the other Bolsheviks thought was worth bothering with.

It was only after Lenin's death in 1924 – and really not until after 1929 – that Stalin can truly be seen as contributing to 'Marxist' ideology in his own right. However, he certainly made some use of ideology in the power struggle – especially against Trotsky. One ideological argument that played a key role in this power struggle was between 'socialism in one country' and 'permanent revolution'. All leading Bolsheviks had accepted the Marxist principle of internationalism.

After November 1917, the Bolsheviks hoped to hold on to power long enough to inspire workers in the more economically developed states, such as Germany and Britain, to carry out socialist revolutions of their own. The signs in the years 1918-20 were encouraging (especially in Germany). Bolshevik leaders in Russia fully expected that, following successful socialist revolutions elsewhere, workers' governments would be willing to give financial and technical aid to backward Soviet Russia. With this assistance, Russia might also be able to put socialism on the agenda. Although these hopes had faded by 1923, most Bolshevik leaders remained committed internationalists.

However, as Lenin became ill and the power struggle began, Stalin came up with a new ideological concept that became a weapon in the struggle against Trotsky: 'socialism in one country'.

The concept of 'socialism in one country' was not formally revealed until November 1924 – ten months after Lenin's death. It stressed the need for peace and stability and stated that, despite its backwardness and isolation, the new Soviet state could construct socialism on its own. Stalin also accused Trotsky of lack of faith in Russia and its people. These arguments were a complete reversal of Marxist and Bolshevik ideology.

In opposition to 'socialism in one country' was the concept of 'permanent revolution'. Among other things, this argued that Soviet Russia was too economically and culturally backward to be able to achieve socialism without the assistance of sympathetic, more economically advanced, states.

The theory of 'permanent revolution' had been developed from Marx by Trotsky in 1906 and, by 1917, was shared by most of the leading Bolsheviks – including Lenin. With Lenin dead, the main defender of this line was Trotsky.

### Fact

The Marxist principle of internationalism was based on the call of Marx and Engels in 1847, in their *Communist Manifesto*: 'workers of the world, unite!' They believed workers in different countries had more in common with each other than with the capitalists of their 'own' country. In 1914 at the start of the First World War, the Bolsheviks refused to support their government during the war. Instead, they called on all workers – including those in the armed forces – to begin a revolutionary class struggle to end the war and establish socialism in Europe.

### Fact

'Socialism in one country' is an aspect of Stalinist ideology that can be seen as having contributed to the rapid industrialisation of the USSR by stimulating national confidence and pride in what the Soviet people could achieve by their own efforts.



## SOURCE A

As early as 1914 Lenin's watchword was: The United Socialist States of Europe ... He and his comrades knew that the emancipation of the workers could result only from the joint efforts of many nations; and that if the nation-state provided too narrow a framework even for modern capitalism, socialism was quite unthinkable within such a framework. This conviction permeated all Bolshevik thinking and activity until the end of the Lenin era.

Then, in the middle 1920s, the fact of Russia's isolation in the world struck home with a vengeance, and Stalin and Bukharin came forward to expound 'socialism in one country'.

Deutscher, I. 1975. *The Unfinished Revolution: Russia 1917–67*. New York, USA. Oxford University Press. pp. 66–67.

## Question

Why was 'socialism in one country' considered to be such a big departure from Marxist theory?

## Questions

How important do you think the failure of revolutions in the rest of Europe was for political developments in the Soviet Union? Do you think the Soviet Union would still have turned into a one-party state if it had not been isolated after 1917?

Trotsky's opponents argued that a policy based on the concept of 'permanent revolution' would anger surrounding capitalist states and so risk further foreign intervention (such as had happened during the civil war of 1918–21). 'Socialism in one country', it was claimed, along with the 'correct' leaders and policies, would avoid this, and would give the Russian people the peace they needed after years of revolutionary turmoil and civil war.

Many new members of the Communist Party after 1924 were workers and peasants with little or no knowledge of Marxism or early Bolshevik history – these members were swayed by Stalin's arguments. Also, as was seen in Unit 1, Stalin made sure that those appointed to party posts shared his views and were loyal to him. He simultaneously removed supporters of Trotsky (and later those of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Bukharin) from their party and state positions.

Stalin also worked hard to create the idea of a 'Marxist-Leninist' orthodoxy to which, he claimed, Trotsky had always been opposed. This involved misrepresenting what Lenin and Trotsky had said in the past, exaggerating the differences between Trotsky and Lenin, and hiding the disagreements Stalin and his supporters had had with Lenin. Stalin was particularly determined to keep hidden Lenin's January 1923 *Postscript* to his *Testament*, which recommended that Stalin should be removed from his posts.

### To what extent was Stalin's ideology in line with that of Marx and Lenin?

To address this question, it is necessary to clarify the essential features of the ideology put forward by Marx, and later adapted by Lenin.

## Marx

As noted in Chapter 1 in the section dealing with *Terminology and definitions* (see page 8), and in the preceding pages, one of the essential elements of Marxism is that it is an *internationalist* movement. Marx and Engels believed that capitalism had greatly increased the productive capacities of the developed European countries and was in the process of establishing a global economy. However, capitalism's contradictions (such as periodically creating over-production leading to recessions and depressions and high unemployment) and its political reliance on individual nation states led to frequent and violent class conflicts within societies and to wars between competing capitalist states. To overcome this, Marx and Engels advocated an international working-class movement that would establish world socialism and then communism.

Marx did not believe that societies would 'inevitably' progress to socialism and communism. Although class struggle was inevitable, he said that societies could stagnate and remain stuck in an inefficient system if the lower classes were unable to overthrow their ruling class. Societies could even revert to a less advanced system if the political rulers made serious mistakes. Yet Marx also argued that, in special circumstances, a relatively backward society could 'jump' a stage – but only if that state was aided by sympathetic advanced societies. He did not believe that tsarist Russia could move to socialism on its own.

## Lenin

One of Lenin's main adaptations of Marx was his idea of democratic centralism, as stated in his book *What Is to be Done?* (1902). He argued that all members of the party should have the right to form factions ('platforms') to argue their points of view (the 'democratic' part of democratic centralism). However, the lack of democracy and freedom in tsarist Russia – which was essentially a police state – meant that the party could only operate effectively in a centralised way. For this reason, once party members had made a decision, the decision should be fully supported by all members, even if they had argued and voted against it, and even if the decision only had a majority of one (the 'centralism' aspect).

One of the leading Russian Marxists who disagreed with Lenin on the issue of party organisation from 1903 to 1917 was Trotsky, who argued that democratic centralism could allow an unscrupulous leader to become a dictator over the party. Such a possibility was increased in 1921, when Lenin successfully argued for a ban on other political parties and on organised factions within the Bolsheviks. Later, Lenin argued that these bans were just adaptations to the prevailing circumstances and that, as soon as conditions allowed, there would be a return to 'socialist norms'.

Lenin also argued that the stages of human society as identified by Marx could be 'telescoped', so that there would only be an extremely short period between the end of feudalism in Russia and the first attempts to begin the construction of socialism. This idea was based on Marx's ideas of 'permanent revolution' – that as soon as one revolutionary stage had been achieved, the struggle for the next began almost immediately. Trotsky had also come to this view as early as 1904–05 and, during the second half of the 1920s, was associated with defending 'permanent revolution' against Stalin's idea of 'socialism in one country'.

## Fact

Under Lenin, freedom of debate amongst members of the Communist Party continued at least until 1921–22. During the debates on whether to make a separate peace with Germany in 1918, Lenin faced so much opposition from within his party that he considered stepping down as leader and continuing the argument as an ordinary party member.



In fact, both Lenin and Trotsky believed that early 20th-century Russia could not succeed in carrying through any 'uninterrupted revolution' to socialism and then communism without outside economic and technical assistance. When this failed to materialise, they – along with all leading Bolsheviks – still remained committed, in both theory and practice, to the international ideals of communism. It was only after Lenin died that Stalin put forward his idea of 'socialism in one country' – until that time, no Bolshevik had ever argued that backward Russia could become socialist on its own.

### Stalin

Stalin's main contributions to, and use of, ideology were the notions of 'Marxism-Leninism' and the theory of 'socialism in one country'. Neither of these terms was used before Lenin's death in 1924. Stalin used the concept of 'Marxism-Leninism' to refer to what he described as 'orthodox Marxism', which came to mean what Lenin (allegedly) – and increasingly Stalin himself – believed about political and economic issues.

Essentially, Marxism-Leninism became the 'official' ideology of the Soviet Communist Party and state under Stalin. However, as long as the 'Old Guard' Bolsheviks existed, there were many leading communists who were fully aware of early Marxist theory, and remembered the true facts of the various political arguments before and after 1917. Perhaps significantly, Stalin had almost all of them executed during the 1930s.

Stalin's invention and use of the policy of 'socialism in one country' played an important part in the power struggle – and especially in the campaign against Trotsky and 'Trotskyism'. In fact, 'Trotskyism' was portrayed by Stalin and his supporters as a 'petit-bourgeois' ideology at odds with both Marxism and Leninism, and thus incompatible with membership of the Soviet Communist Party. Stalin and Bukharin argued that the middle-class Trotsky had no faith in the ability of Russian workers and peasants to construct socialism in the Soviet Union. In addition, Trotsky's arguments in defence of 'permanent revolution' were seen by many as threatening the alliance between workers and peasants, which was the basis of the NEP advocated by Lenin in 1921. Trotsky's ideas seemed thus to spell continued revolutionary turmoil – and even conflict with capitalist states in the future.

Many Marxists – and even some members of the Soviet Communist Party itself – believed that Stalin's ideas and practices (such as 'socialism in one country' and the later purges) were an almost total distortion of what Marx and Lenin had said and done. Many of those politically opposed to Stalin came to use the term 'Stalinism' to refer to Stalin's ideas and practices.

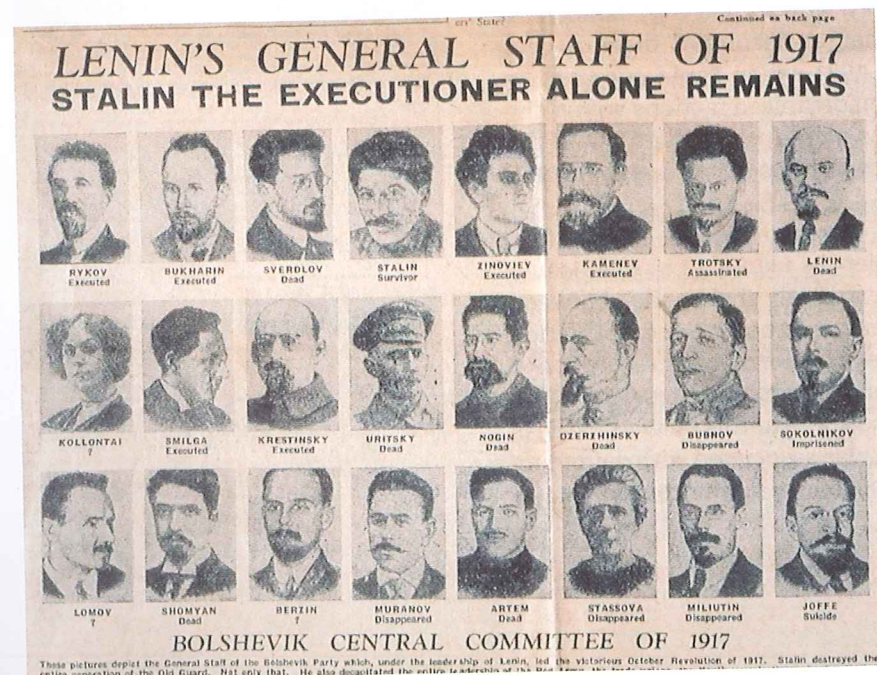
These Marxist opponents were determined to show that Stalinism was not an adaptation of Marxism but, on the contrary, a qualitative and fundamental aberration from both Lenin and Marx, and from revolutionary communism in general. In particular, they stress the way in which Stalin and his supporters rejected socialist

### Question

What is meant by the term 'Marxism-Leninism'?

**'Old Guard' Bolsheviks** These were the Bolsheviks who had been members of the party for a long time – often since the 1903 split in the RSDLP. They had played key roles in the Revolution and the civil war that followed. Many had been close to Lenin, and many knew of the existence of his *Testament* and *Postscript*, which had recommended Stalin's dismissal.

A photograph of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party in 1917, published in a journal produced by supporters of Trotsky, showing Stalin's victims



democracy in favour of a one-party state, and how Stalinism in practice placed the national interests of the Soviet Union above the struggle to achieve world revolution.

Trotskyists came to see themselves as the only true defenders of the legacy of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and thus as the only truly revolutionary Marxists (all others having turned Marxism into a reactionary and even counter-revolutionary ideology that rejected the Marxist commitment to internationalism).

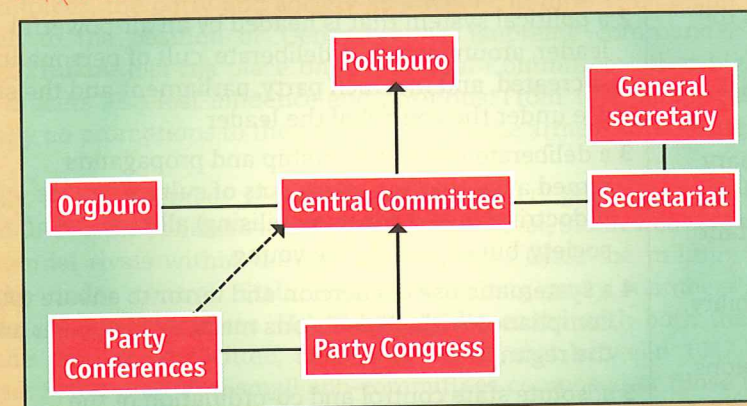
### What was the nature of the Stalinist state?

Under Stalin, the Soviet Union became in theory, as well as in fact, a one-party state. It was clearly a dictatorship by 1929 – although whether it was a dictatorship of the party or of one man (possibly with some of his closest supporters) is a much-debated point.

The use of the term 'dictatorship' can cause confusion. Some historians claim dictatorship was the logical outcome of both Marxist theory and Leninist practice. However, although Marx used the phrase **dictatorship of the proletariat** to describe the political rule under a socialist workers' state, he did not mean a harsh and repressive regime. In fact, after the **Paris Commune** in 1871, Marx added to his political views on the nature of the state and politics after any workers' revolution by saying that measures should be adopted from day one to bring about the eventual 'withering away' of the state. Marx shared this aim with the anarchists, who believed the state prevented people from governing themselves.

A regime in which the state had begun to 'wither away' was a long way from the reality that existed under Stalin. For most of the time that Stalin was in power, the structure of the Communist Party was that shown in Source B below. Although the Party Congress (and to some extent the Party Conference) was the supreme decision-making body, it was the Central Committee that ran the party between congresses. However, under Stalin, power shifted to various bodies set up by the Central Committee – the Organisational Bureau (Orgburo), the Secretariat and the Political Bureau (Politburo) – and especially to the post of general secretary. Even before the late 1920s, Stalin was the only party member with a seat on all four bodies.

### SOURCE B



Todd, A. 2002. *The European Dictatorships*. Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press. p. 38.

### Question

What do Marxists understand by the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat'?

### dictatorship of the proletariat

The term 'proletariat' refers to the industrial working class (i.e. factory and mine workers). 'Dictatorship' in this sense meant 'dominance' based on the ownership of the means of production (factories, land, mines, banks), with the dominant ideas of any class-divided society always being those of the dominant classes, who own the major means of communication. Thus Marx described the parliamentary democracy of late 19th-century Britain as a 'dictatorship of the bourgeoisie'. He believed their ownership of wealth ensured that their major interests were protected and advanced, even though ordinary people had many political and individual freedoms – including multi-party systems and the right to vote.

**Paris Commune** The Paris Commune of 1871 refers to the revolutionary provisional government that took over Paris from April to May 1871, following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71.



**Fact**  
Further historical debate results from the fact that the nature of Stalin's state underwent significant change between 1929 and 1941, as Stalin consolidated his power via the Great Purge and Great Terror (see Unit 3).

**Historical debate**  
The nature of the state under Stalin has led to several different interpretations – such as the pluralist and the totalitarian. Work in pairs to produce two charts that summarise the arguments of the two schools. Then consider the validity of the claim that Stalin was just the 'front man' for the bureaucratic élite that began to emerge after 1917. Make sure you gather specific details/events/names of historians for your evidence.

Some historians, such as David Lane, point out that the Stalinist state contained many features of Russia's tsarist and peasant past: tsarist-style autocracy and the belief in the need for an all-powerful leader; an official orthodox ideology (with 'communism' replacing religion); and the belief in a 'national community' that was transformed into the nationalist belief that the Russian people could achieve 'socialism in one country' without the need for outside help. Another important element of Stalinism was the 'cult of personality', in which Stalin was portrayed as a kind of superman who was capable of achieving anything and who was always right (see page 40).

**Was Stalin's state totalitarian?**

One of the biggest debates surrounding the nature of Stalin's state is whether or not it was a totalitarian state. Historians divide broadly into two schools of thought – the pluralist (or social) group and the totalitarian group. The pluralist group argue that the Stalinist state acted as a referee for different competing interest groups (such as managers, technical experts and the military). Fitzpatrick, for example, sees state and society under Stalinism as more dynamic than allowed by totalitarian theories, with different hierarchies and opposing interests. She sees 'revolution from below' as well as 'revolution from above'. Historians such as Graeme Gill and Leonard Schapiro put forward the totalitarian group's arguments, claiming that Stalin and the state had almost total control. These views are shown in the table below.

Some historians, such as Tucker, have tried to develop an approach that combines both elements – the 'reconstruction-consolidation' (or 'recon') approach. This sees the state as being very important but also takes account of sectional and social resistance to official policy. Many historians thus see the label of 'totalitarian' as having limited value in understanding the nature of Stalinist Russia.

**Features of a totalitarian state**

Views of Graeme Gill	Views of Leonard Schapiro
<p>Graeme Gill sees the Stalinist state as having six components:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 a personal dictatorship based on coercion, via the use of the secret police and repression</li> <li>2 a total politicisation of all aspects of life which, at the same time, weakened the political control of state and party as it was the dictator who was seen as the embodiment of the country</li> <li>3 tight political controls over cultural and artistic life</li> <li>4 a static conservative ideology which, in theory, upheld but which, in practice, replaced earlier revolutionary ideals</li> <li>5 a highly centralised economy, in which all important areas of the economy were state-owned</li> <li>6 a social structure that, while at first allowing mobility from working-class occupations into scientific, technical, administrative and intellectual professions, soon saw the emergence of a privileged élite.</li> </ol>	<p>Gill's views correspond to the features of totalitarianism as set out by Leonard Schapiro's <i>Totalitarianism</i> (1973). Schapiro identified five main aspects as central to any totalitarian regime. These are as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 a distinctive, 'utopian' and all-embracing ideology that dominates and tries to restructure all aspects of society</li> <li>2 a political system that is headed by an all-powerful leader, around whom a deliberate 'cult of personality' is created, and in which party, parliament and the state are under the control of the leader</li> <li>3 a deliberate use of censorship and propaganda aimed at controlling all aspects of culture, and at indoctrinating (at times mobilising) all sections of society, but especially the young</li> <li>4 a systematic use of coercion and terror to ensure total compliance with all decisions made by the leader and the regime</li> <li>5 absolute state control and co-ordination of the economy, which is subordinated to the political objectives of the political regime.</li> </ol>

**Theory of knowledge**

**Historical interpretations and politics**

Different historians have come up with several sharply conflicting interpretations of the nature of the Stalinist state in the Soviet Union – in particular, over whether it was totalitarian, and the degree of similarity between it and Hitler's Nazi state. Is it possible for historians to research and write history unaffected by contemporary events – such as the Cold War?

**Stalin's state after 1945**

The Stalinist state underwent some changes after the end of the Second World War. Large numbers of Soviet citizens felt proud of their system, which they believed had saved the Soviet Union and the rest of Europe from Nazi domination. Many now saw Stalin as a national hero – and he continued with his 'cult of personality'.



A portrait of Stalin produced at the end of the Second World War

However, Stalin was determined to reassert and maintain tight control of the armed forces, the party and society as a whole. In June 1945, Stalin promoted himself to the position of 'Generalissimo' (supreme commander). Marshal **Georgi Zhukov** lost his place on the Central Committee; other high-ranking army officers also lost influence and positions. From 1945 to 1953, there were virtually no promotions to the higher ranks in the armed forces.

Initially, from December 1945, in order to reassert political control over the armed forces, the Politburo met fortnightly. However, Stalin was also suspicious of potential rivals within the Communist Party. Once the military had been brought under control, Stalin excluded leading party members from the decision-making processes. He effectively dispensed with both the Politburo and the Central Committee, neither of which met between 1947 and 1952. Instead, Stalin met with small sub-committees composed of those he trusted at any particular time. The full Central Committee did not meet again until the 19th Party Congress in October 1952. Thus it would appear that it was Stalin who exercised real power, rather than the Communist Party.

**Georgi Zhukov (1896–1974)**

Marshal Zhukov oversaw the defence of Leningrad and Stalingrad, becoming deputy commander-in-chief of the Red Army in August 1942. He was the most successful Soviet general in the Second World War and led the liberation of Eastern Europe and the capture of Berlin.



**Andrei Zhdanov (1896–1948)**

Zhdanov joined the Bolsheviks in 1915 and was active during the Revolution and the civil war in the Urals. He was elected to the Central Committee in 1925 and to the Politburo in 1935. He became one of Stalin's closest advisers. From 1934 to 1945, he headed the Leningrad party; in 1946, he launched a campaign to achieve ideological 'purity', based on the idea of the world (and hence science, literature and the arts) being divided into 'two camps': the bourgeois and the socialist. This process continued until 1953 and actually intensified after his sudden death in 1948.

However, Stalin became more and more suspicious of everyone. From 1946 to 1948 the Soviet Union went through another period of repression, mostly affecting the areas of science and culture. As this was supervised by **Andrei Zhdanov**, who was one of Stalin's main advisers, this period is known as the *Zhdanovshchina* – the Zhdanov times – even though the repression actually peaked after Zhdanov's death in August 1948.

The Communist Party also suffered during this period. Stalin decided to purge the Leningrad party organisation – partly because the Leningrad party had often tried to assert its independence. In July 1949, over a thousand leading party and administrative officials were arrested, and many were executed in what became known as the 'Leningrad Affair'.

From then on, there were frequent personnel changes in the top ranks of the party, as Stalin, increasingly ill, attempted to confuse and weaken those who might be considered his successors. Further repressions took place – in 1951, there was the Mingrelian Case and, in January 1953, the so-called 'Doctors' Plot' (see page 56). Then, on 5 March 1953, Stalin died, having suffered a stroke a few days earlier.

**End of unit activities**

Stalin's use of ideology before 1929	Significance of 'Marxism-Leninism'	Nature of Stalin's state

- 1 Copy out the chart above and, using the information from this unit and any other materials available, make brief notes under the relevant headings.
- 2 Produce a chart, divided into two columns, to summarise the different political and ideological positions put forward by Stalin and Trotsky during the 1920s. Then write a short summary stating whether you think the views of Stalin or Trotsky were closest to the views of Marx and Lenin.
- 3 Carry out further research about the different historical views concerning the nature of the Stalinist state before 1941. Then, on an A3 piece of paper, produce a mind-map or diagram summarising each different historical interpretation. Remember, where relevant, to include the names of associated historians.
- 4 Try to find out about the Mingrelian Case (1951) and the 'Doctors' Plot' (1953). What do these events tell us about the nature of the Stalinist state after 1945?

**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