

The cult of the personality

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter looks at the growth of the cult of the personality from the 1920s through to the end of the 1940s, when it was at its height. Stalin's image dominated the Soviet Union and he was seen as an omnipotent leader whom people should love and revere. The cult was not just about personal adulation of Stalin. It was also a response to a rapid period of change in the Soviet Union when many Russians were bewildered and confused about what was going on. The Stalin cult provided an image of purpose and solidity, giving people confidence and faith that someone could lead them out of their troubles to the good society.

- A** How did the cult of the personality develop? (pp. 230–233)
- B** Rewriting history (pp. 234–235)
- C** How did Russians react to the cult? (pp. 236–238)

A How did the cult of the personality develop?

ACTIVITY

- 1 The images in Sources 14.1–14.6 each carry a different message about Stalin. For each one, explain:
 - a) the message it is designed to convey to the Russian people
 - b) how you reached your interpretation.
- 2 a) What impression of Soviet Russia and of Stalin does Prokofiev's ode (Source 14.7) create?
 - b) What are the religious overtones of this ode?
- 3 Does the fact that images of Stalin appeared everywhere, as described by Steinbeck in Source 14.8, prove that Stalin attracted genuine adulation?



SOURCE 14.1 A painting from 1926 showing Stalin addressing industrial workers

SOURCE 14.2 Stalin at the Helm, a poster from 1933



SOURCE 14.4 Grzelishvili's painting, *Comrade Stalin in his Early Years*, 1939



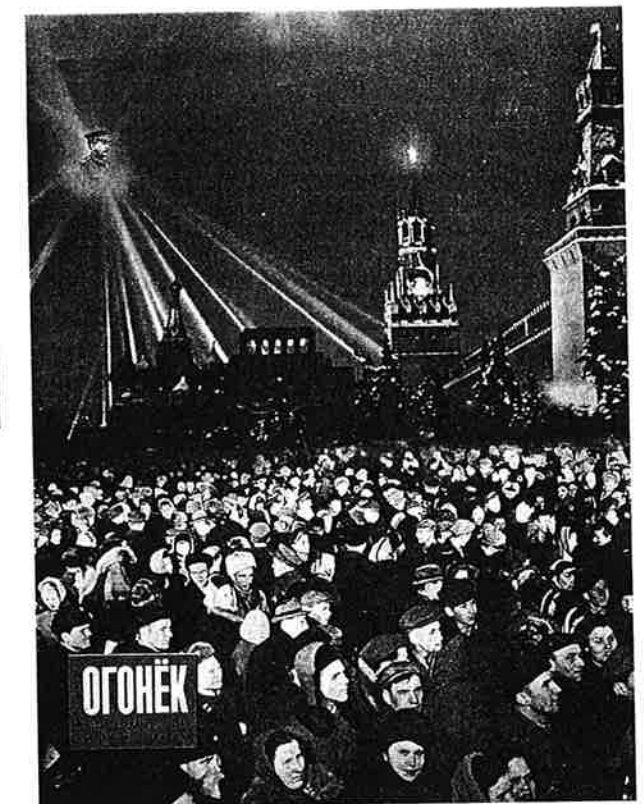
SOURCE 14.6 A painting by Kibrik: *On 24 October Lenin Arrived at Smolny During the Night*. In *Totalitarian Art* (1990), I. Golomstock points out that Lenin is motioning Stalin to go ahead of him, symbolically showing him the way to the bright future



SOURCE 14.3 A 1937 photomontage of Stalin surrounded by a sea of children's faces



SOURCE 14.5 The cover of *Ogonyok* magazine, December 1949, showing Stalin's godlike image projected into the sky, as part of the celebrations for his seventieth birthday



SOURCE 14.7 Ode to Stalin on his sixtieth birthday by the composer Prokofiev, 1939

*Never have our fertile fields such a harvest shown,
Never have our villages such contentment known.
Never life has been so fair, spirits been so high,
Never to the present day grew so green the rye.
O'er the earth the rising sun sheds a warmer light,
Since it looked on Stalin's face it has grown more bright.
I am singing to my baby sleeping in my arms,
Grow like flowers in the meadow free from all alarm.
On your lips the name of Stalin will protect from harm.
You will learn the source of sunshine bathing all the land.
You will copy Stalin's portrait with your little hand.*

SOURCE 14.8 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 14.8 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 purges 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 14.4, page 231).





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 14.5).

FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 Use the information on pages 230–233 and Chart 14A on page 233 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?

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.

14A 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 purges.• 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.

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. Talbott (ed.), *Khrushchev Remembers*, vol. 1, 1977, page 629.)

FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 Account for the relative success of the cult – why do you think it worked with the Russian people?
- 2 What conclusions can you reach about whether the adulation Stalin received was genuine? Make notes of your answers.

C How did Russians react to the cult?

Stalin received adulation on a scale and intensity that few leaders have known and, according to Robert Service, he had a 'craving for adulation' (*A History of Twentieth-Century Russia*, 1997, pages 250–51). Although the cult was a carefully contrived propaganda campaign, it does not seem that the adulation was entirely manufactured. Service maintains that genuine enthusiasm for Stalin was limited until the end of the 1930s when the mass indoctrination campaign reached its peak. Such enthusiasm as had been aroused was then heightened by the grave threat to the Soviet Union presented by the war. Robert Thurston, the revisionist historian, is convinced that the people believed that the show trials were genuine and that Stalin was rooting out wreckers and saboteurs. They believed that Stalin was their true guide and the person who cared for them. Only this, he claims (in *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia 1934–41*, 1996), can account for the huge affection that people had for Stalin. Testimony from people who lived through the Stalinist period after 1945 seems to support this view, but it is more difficult to assess before 1939.

Sarah Davies, in her book *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent 1934–41* (1997), identifies three ways in which people reacted to the Stalin cult. They viewed Stalin as:

1 Benefactor. Many, including Stakhanovites, some soldiers and the young intelligentsia, had reason to be grateful to Stalin because they had acquired power and status despite often humble origins. Khrushchev, who followed Stalin as leader of Russia, was an example of such a person. Stalin was admired as the prime agent in achieving the astounding changes brought about by industrialisation and collectivisation. A letter from one woman said: 'I live very well and I think that I will live even better. Why? Because I live in the Stalin epoch. May Stalin live longer than me! ... All my children had and are having education thanks to the state and, I would say, thanks to the party, and especially comrade Stalin, for he, along with Lenin, opened the way for us simple people ... I myself, an old woman, am ready to die for Stalin and the Bolshevik cause.'

2 Traditional defender of the people. In this Stalin played a role very similar to that of the tsars. Millions of petitions and letters were sent to him and other Communist leaders asking for help against misfortunes or the actions of local officials or bureaucrats. As in tsarist times, criticism was directed against local officials while the leaders were praised. Letters often began with cult-style greetings: 'Dear comrade Stalin! Our beloved *vozhd*, teacher and friend of the whole happy Soviet country'. Stalin and other leaders were often referred to as 'uncle' or seen as 'like a father'. The petitioners affirmed their loyalty while criticising the actions of the regime's agents on the ground. This was in line with Stalin's own message that officialdom was riddled with corruption and that the great father, Stalin, was on the people's side. It seems that this populist aspect of the cult was in tune with people's traditional ideas.

3 Charismatic leader. According to Davies, Stalin was perceived as a demi-god possessing superhuman abilities and superhuman wisdom. This was reflected in the icons and symbols of the *vozhd* that appeared in houses and in processions, very similar to the honouring of saints in the Christian tradition. Statues and images of Stalin abounded (see Source 14.8 on page 232), as did references to him as the 'sun' or the 'man-god' (see Source 14.13 on page 238). How far ordinary Russians actually believed this is difficult to say, but it does seem that this charismatic aspect of the cult was a significant feature for a large number, especially after the Second World War.

There was, of course, a substantial section of the population – intellectuals, experienced party members and workers – who were aware of the absurdities of the cult. There was active criticism, particularly early on, about the way Stalin had been elevated to some sort of mystical status. Some workers in the mid-1930s objected to the incessant declarations of love for Stalin. Many in the party felt that this was not how Lenin would have acted and still favoured collective leadership of a more anonymous nature – the dictatorship of the party, not an individual. Such criticism was less likely to be expressed after the purges got underway. But there is evidence that by 1938 the excessive propaganda was becoming counterproductive and that people were becoming cynical. Sarah Davies gives the following examples from 1938:

- a leaflet ridiculing the Supreme Soviet, where the 'people's elect' were allowed to shout out 'Hurray' a thousand times in honour of the *vozhd* and his stooges
- an anonymous letter from a Communist supporter complaining about the use of Stalin's name: 'Everything is Stalin, Stalin, Stalin. You only have to listen to a radio programme about our achievements, and every fifth or tenth word will be the name of comrade Stalin. In the end this sacred and beloved name – Stalin – may make so much noise in people's heads that it is very possible that it will have the opposite effect.'

However, even amongst those who did not like him, and there were very many, there was often respect and even admiration. There was a feeling that Stalin was a great leader in the Russian tradition, like one of the great tsars such as Peter the Great. He was tough and he was hard but he had achieved a great deal, industrialised the USSR and made it into a great world power that other countries respected. And on his death in 1953, there were many who wept, even those whose relatives had suffered persecution or died under his rule. The cult of the personality may not always have had a lot of depth, but it had penetrated all areas of Soviet society and played an important role in popularising Stalin and bringing solidity, confidence and coherence to that society during a period of rapid change and instability.

SOURCE 14.11 J. Lewis and P. Whitehead, *Stalin: A Time for Judgement*, 1990, pp. 66, 121, quoting two Russians who grew up in the 1940s

Alexander Avdeyenko

Looking back on my life, I now see that period as one of sincere enthusiasm, as genuine human happiness ... It would have been impossible for a common mortal to withstand the onslaught of Stalin, of the apparatus which was Stalin's, or the pressure which was put on people's reason, heart and soul. Day and night radio told us that Stalin was the greatest man on earth – the greatest statesman, the father of the nation, the genius of all time ... Man wants to believe in something great.

Pavel Litvinov

Stalin was like a god for us. We just believed he was an absolutely perfect individual, and he lived somewhere in the Kremlin, a light always in his window, and he was thinking about us, about each of us. That was how we felt. For example, somebody told me he was the best surgeon. He could perform a brain operation better than anyone else, and I believed it. I knew that he was busy with other things, but if he wanted to do it he would be better.

ACTIVITY

Sources 14.12 and 14.13, one a poem from 1917 and the other from 1936, give us some insight into how attitudes changed from the time of the October Revolution to the era of the Stalinist state.

- 1 a) What is the message in the first poem?
- b) How does the poet put over his message?
- c) Why might this be a poem you could march to?
- d) What insight does it give us into how some people might have felt in 1917?
- 2 a) What is the message in the second poem?
- b) What images of Stalin does the poet create?
- c) How does this message compare with the one in the first poem?
- d) What does it suggest about the way in which people viewed how Communism moved forward?
- 3 Are these poems useful for historians of this period?

SOURCE 14.12 Extracts from a poem by V. Kirilov, a young proletarian in 1917. Young Communists chanted or marched to poems like these

*We are the countless, awesome legions of Labour...
Our proud souls burn with the fire of revolt...
In the name of our Tomorrow we shall burn Raphael,
Destroy museums, trample the flowers of art.
We have thrown off the heavy crushing legacy...
Our muscles crave gigantic work,
Creative pangs seethe in our collective breast...
For our new planet we shall find a new dazzling path.
We love life, its intoxicating wild ecstasy,
Our spirit is tempered by fierce struggle and suffering.
We are everybody, we are everything, we are the flame and the victorious light,
We are our own Deity, and Judge and Law.*

SOURCE 14.13 Extracts from 'Song About Stalin' by M. Izakvosky, 1936. This is a typical poem from the late 1930s

*For the sake of our happiness
He marched through all storms.
He carried our holy banner
Over our enormous land.
And fields and factories rose,
And tribes and people responded
To the call of our leader.*

*He gave us for ever and ever
Youth, glory and power.
He has lit the clear dawn of spring
Over our homes.
Let us sing, comrades, a song
About the dearest person,
About our sun, about the truth of nations,
About our Stalin let's sing a song.*

KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER 14 The cult of the personality

- 1 In the cult of the personality, Stalin was presented as a god-like figure, omniscient and omnipresent.
- 2 The cult was at its height at the end of the 1930s. Images of Stalin on posters and paintings, in books and as statues were everywhere in the Soviet Union.
- 3 Stalin enjoyed this adulation and encouraged the view of himself as a great hero of the past. He had history rewritten to reflect this view.
- 4 The cult also served an important purpose: it gave the Russian people a sense of confidence in troubled times – Stalin would see them through to a better society.