

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?