

‘Great Stalin’: The Leadership and Legacy of Joseph Stalin, the Great Terror, and the Cult of Personality

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Process Description

Over the summer prior to this contest year, I was introduced to Joseph Stalin by my brother, who recommended researching him for my National History Day project. I was instantly intrigued, and began viewing sources related to the topic. I finally decided to focus on Joseph Stalin's leadership during the Soviet Great Terror, as his involvement during this period was significant and left a convoluted legacy that I desired to investigate further.

While researching, I visited my local and school libraries, also visiting the Minneapolis Central Library. I was granted the opportunity to gather sources at the Wilson Library within the University of Minnesota. I also conducted an interview with Thomas Wolfe and Alexis Pogorelskin, professors of history, to gain another perspective for my research. Additionally, I had the opportunity to interview Adam Hochschild, author of *The Unquiet Ghost: Russians Remember Stalin*, Hiroaki Kuromiya and James Harris, Soviet history experts who have authored several books regarding Stalin, and Thomas de Waal, an expert on former Soviet states.

Upon beginning my research, I believed that all Soviet citizens harbored negative opinions of Joseph Stalin. In examining various perspectives of life in the Soviet Union under Stalinist leadership, I discovered that, contrary to my initial belief, many people admired and supported Stalin, primarily because of his strong cult of personality, which developed an environment where praise of the leader was necessary to avoid suspicion from the Soviet government or even one's friends and family. This unreserved support was also achieved for legitimate reasons, implying that Joseph Stalin contributed to his country positively, which I was unaware of prior to conducting my research on the leader.

My topic relates to the theme of 'Leadership and Legacy' because Joseph Stalin, through his leadership, instigated the purges of millions of his own citizens, which left a legacy of fear and repression in addition to weakening various sectors of Soviet industry. Stalinist leadership also tarnished the reputation of communism, leading to many abandoning the movement. The Soviet Union did become a more efficient and industrialized country as a result of Stalin's guidance, and all of these factors led the legacy of Stalinist leadership to become quite convoluted and open to interpretation.

My topic is significant in history because Joseph Stalin, through his leadership, achieved an unprecedented degree of success, though at extreme human costs, which both improved and weakened his country. Individuals from a variety of countries observed this type of leadership, which molded, and continue to mold, the leadership of others. Russians also continue to debate and struggle with Joseph Stalin's legacy.

During his leadership of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin manipulated his power to crush dissent, wielding an influential propaganda machine to promote his positions. Though many of these positions negatively impacted Soviet society and industry, it was not until after his death that the destructive nature of Stalin's atrocities came to light. Despite a legacy of tyranny and repression, many Russians admire Stalin for the control and stability his leadership offered.

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