

Religion under Stalin

“Religion is the opium of the people”, wrote Karl Marx. All Bolsheviks believed that religion was an invention to distract the poor and oppressed from trying to remedy their situation on earth by offering them the prospect of perfect happiness after death. The attack on religion that began under Lenin, was continued by Stalin. Worship of Stalin was encouraged but religious worship was strongly discouraged. Nearly 40,000 Christian churches and 25,000 mosques were closed down and converted into clubs, cinemas, schools, and warehouses. Church bells were removed and melted down as scrap metal. In Muslim areas, women were forbidden to wear the veil and pilgrimages to Mecca were banned. Church leaders were arrested and imprisoned. Those who escaped arrest were forbidden to organize any religious activity in public. In 1930 there were 30,000 Orthodox congregations, but by 1939 only 1 in 40 churches were still functioning and only seven bishops were still active in the whole of the Soviet Union. Only 1300 mosques were still operating in 1941 as against 26,000 in 1917. The photograph below shows the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in the heart of Moscow. Stalin ordered its destruction in 1931.

To weaken the religious faith of the Soviet people, the Communist Party had set up a League of Militant Atheists back in 1924. By 1933 it had 5.5 million members, whose job was to try to turn people away from religion. They set up anti-religious museums in former cathedrals. They burnt icons and other religious objects. They organized anti-religious propaganda campaigns. In the old capital, St. Petersburg, which was now known as Leningrad, the authorities seemed to have a macabre sense of humour. The famous Kazan Cathedral was converted into a museum of atheism.

1. What do you think Karl Marx meant by, “Religion is the opium of the people”?
2. What happened to religion under Stalin?
3. What happened to religious leaders under Stalin?
4. What did the Communist party do to weaken the religious faith of the Soviet people?



Education under Stalin

Under Stalin's rule, school life and education became stricter once more. An education law of 1935 allowed teachers to use strict methods of discipline. Report cards and test marks, which had been abolished in the 1920s, were reintroduced. School uniforms were restored - including compulsory pigtails for girls. In history lessons, kings, battles, dates - especially Russian ones - became the staple diet of pupils.

The aim of education was summed up in Rule One of twenty rules of behavior that all pupils had to learn by heart: *'It is the duty of each school child to acquire knowledge persistently so as to become an educated and cultured citizen and to be of the greatest possible service to his country.'*

One result of these education policies was the almost total disappearance of illiteracy. By 1939, each child spent seven compulsory years at school. Even illiterate adults were encouraged to attend school or evening classes. Thus, by 1939 illiteracy had declined to just 4% of the male and 18% of the female population. Stalin revealed his motives behind the literacy drive when he said, *'The press should grow not by the day, but by the hour, for it is the sharpest and most powerful weapon of our people'*.

Children and adults were bombarded with propaganda inside and outside of school. The young were encouraged to join party groups, the Young Pioneers, up to 14 years, and then Komsomol, until they were 28. The photograph here shows Komsomol members parading behind their band. As young Communists they were expected to set an example to their peers: party rules, for example, forbade them to smoke or drink. Most of them went on to become full members of the Communist Party. The Communist future they were told, would be theirs, but they must do their part to build it. And build it they did, volunteering for the most grandiose projects of the Five Year Plans, and for the party's biggest prestige project in the capital – the Moscow Metro.



1. What was education like under Stalin?
2. What was one positive and negative aspect of education under Stalin?
3. According to the Stalin quote (second bolded quote), what were his motives behind literacy drives?
4. Overall, what was the aim of education under Stalin?

Family Life under Stalin

In 1936, in the face of growing trends of abortion, family desertion and juvenile crime, the government introduced new measures to strengthen family life. Divorce was made more difficult, abortion became a criminal offence except when it was necessary on medical grounds, and wedding rings were restored. And to try to increase the birth rate, tax exemptions were given to families with large numbers of children. Homosexuality was also banned.

Families received a range of new benefits under Stalin. There was a free health service for all, there were holidays with pay for many workers, and an insurance scheme against accidents at work.

Under the Communists, women won equality under the law. They gained access to education and a wide range of jobs. By the 1930's, many Soviet women were working in medicine, engineering, and the sciences. By their labor, women contributed to Soviet economic growth.

They worked in factories, in construction, and on collectives.

To encourage women to go back to work after giving birth, almost all factories set up crèches to care for their children. However, women still faced discrimination in the workplace, usually occupying the lower positions.

1. Why did Stalin change party policy on the family in the late 1930's?

2. What measures did Stalin introduce to strengthen family life?

3. How did opportunities for women improve under Stalin?



4. Looking at this propaganda poster, what was the government promoting?

Censorship under Stalin

The Communist Party kept a strict watch on the Soviet Union's creative artists - its writers, painters, composers, etc - to make sure that they supported the Party and the government. All writers had to belong to the Union of Soviet Writers, and members were expected to follow a policy of 'socialist realism' in their writings. This meant that novels, filmscripts, poems, plays and journalism had to deal with the lives of ordinary working people and to show the progress of Communism. The same applied to painters, composers and any other creative artist. Soviet people were therefore able to read only books that supported the ideas of Communism.

What about books that had already been written but which did not support the Party? Nadezhda Mandelstam, a Soviet writer, tells us in her memoirs, published in 1970, what happened in such cases:

'Varia... showed us her school textbooks where the portraits of Party leaders had thick pieces of paper pasted over them as one by one they fell into disgrace - this the children had to do on instructions from their teacher . . . With every new arrest people went through their books and burned the works of disgraced leaders in their stoves. In new apartment buildings, which had central heating instead of stoves, forbidden books, personal diaries, correspondence and other "subversive literature" had to be cut up in pieces with scissors and thrown down the toilet.'

1. What do you think Censorship means?
2. What kinds of things did Stalin censor? Why?
3. What was socialist realism?
4. Looking at this quote, how did people react to this censorship?



Propaganda under Stalin

Propaganda during the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin was focused on both justifying this dictatorship through praising Stalin's image and opposing groups that were considered menacing to Soviet ideology. One group that Stalin felt it was necessary to undermine was that of Trotsky and his supporters which were depicted as being against the values of the Soviet state. Writers of propaganda were expected to criticize these groups but not Stalin or those in power. Instead, only positive things could be said about them, and writers were only allowed to focus on advances the soviets had made.

This image reads, "Under the leadership of Great Stalin - forward to Communism!" This image encourages the Russian people that great things lay in the future. This image of a great future is a common one in soviet propaganda. These images were supposed to make the Russian people longsuffering and patient of their troubles, knowing that they were going towards a greater good.



1. What is propaganda?

2. How did Stalin use propaganda to his benefit?

3. Look at this poster and the translation underneath it, how did propaganda affect the Soviet people?



4. Can propaganda brainwash people? If so, how?

Let's consolidate the victory of socialism in the USSR! Let's technically reconstruct the country's economy!