

Europe: Topic 3 Dictatorship and Democracy in Europe, 1920-1945 | Sample answer

How did dictators use propaganda and/or terror to maintain their power?

A defining feature of 20th century dictatorships was the desire for absolute power for the respective regimes. In order to attain this, propaganda and terror campaigns were routinely used. The former controlled the thoughts of the population in relation to the government and their performance while the latter silenced dissenting voices and quashed any opposition. These features were all particularly obvious during the reigns of Josef Stalin, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini.

Stalin had fought bitterly with Gregory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev and Leon Trotsky as he looked to gain power following the death of Vladimir Lenin in 1924 so once he had control, he was determined to keep a stranglehold on it. One way in which he ensured he did was the use of propaganda. A cult of personality around Stalin was encouraged and he was made out as an almost God-like, infallible figure in literature and plays. The most effective use of propaganda saw him effectively rewrite history. Records were changed to show his involvement in the October Revolution and the Civil War and photos were doctored to present Stalin as a confidante and close friend to Lenin. These measures meant he remained extremely popular in the USSR.

Propaganda was used to protect him from threats from the public but Stalin recognised more extreme action was needed against those dangers closer to him. Following Lenin's death, he increased the party size drastically by filling it with his supporters. However, by 1934, when he had complete control, there was no need for such a large group. Stalin's secret police force, the NKVD, purged over 850,000 members by 1939 in the Great Terror. The six groups of undesirables included careerists, moral degenerates and hypocrites. This purge of party members forced absolute loyalty to Stalin on those who remained.

The height of the Great Terror were the Show Trials, the first of which took place in August 1936. The Trial of the Sixteen saw former prominent members of the Bolshevik party including Zinoviev and Kamenev charged with plotting with foreign powers to overthrow Stalin. Under torture, they confessed and were shot. The Trial of the Seventeen followed a similar story in January 1937. Later that year, high ranking members of the Red Army were killed following a secret trial. The most sensational of these incidents was the Trial of the Twenty-One which saw

leading politicians and officials tried and killed. This included those who had been involved in the first Trials.

Similarly, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party made great use of propaganda when cementing power in the 1930's. He appointed Josef Goebbels as Minister for Public Enlightenment and he set about shaping the attitudes of the German public in a number of ways. Posters offered a romanticised ideal of the party as a force for good and represented Hitler as a heroic saviour. Party uniforms conveyed a sense of authority and order lacking in the Weimar Republic. Newspapers such as "Der Sturmer" attacked Jews and proclaimed them "our misfortune." Leni Riefenstahl, a film director was employed to produce evocative movies about the power of Germany and Hitler. The most successful method however, evolved around Hitler himself and his famed oratory talents. He led the brilliantly choreographed Nuremberg Rallies which again celebrated the eternal power of the German people.

Terror forces were used by the Nazis to target their enemies. The SS and the Gestapo were established and tasked with tracking down and silencing opponents of the regime. The latter penetrated every aspect of private and public life in order to seek out resistance. Both groups were placed beyond the reach of civil law. Another secret police force, the SA, became too powerful under Ernst Rohm and Hitler struck a deal with the Army and the SS to eliminate Rohm and the SA. On the Night of Long Knives in June 1934, over 400 SA members, including Rohm, were killed. This cemented Nazi power as it removed one of the powerful opposition forces still remaining.

Benito Mussolini also used propaganda to great effect. He placed this under the control of Achille Starace who banned opposition newspapers and imposed strict censorship. A cult of personality around Mussolini was encouraged. He was referred to as "Il Duce", (the leader) and was portrayed as the embodiment of the true spirit of fascism. His office light would be kept on through the night to give he worked tirelessly for the state. Education was strictly controlled. All teachers had to be party members and textbooks were rewritten to exaggerate the role of Mussolini and Italy in the First World War. Children's storybooks even contained cartoons of him saving the world from various evils. Production of radios was radically increased so all homes would own one and listen to Il Duce's speeches.

The use of terror was much less prevalent in Italy than in Nazi Germany but was still used effectively. The OVRA, a special police force was set up in 1926 to seek out and deal with any and all opponents of the regime. They were far less brutal than the Gestapo or the NKVD.

Prison settlements were set up in the Lipari islands for political prisoners. Opponents were so swiftly removed and silenced and the use of propaganda was so effective that there was actually little need for widespread terror in Fascist Italy. Mussolini's immense popularity and domestic successes are also important in understanding why terror was not used to the same degree.

While the ideologies of Stalin's regime could not be in sharper contrast to that of Hitler's Germany or Mussolini's Italy, all three men were desperate to have absolute power over their state. Each of them successfully employed propaganda and terror in order to achieve this. Propaganda was extremely effective in the case of Mussolini but he did silence opponents too while Stalin and Hitler relied heavily on fear to control their population.