

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

How effective were the internal and external policies of Josef Stalin?

Following the death of Vladimir Lenin in January 1924, a power struggle broke out in the upper ranks of the USSR's Communist Party. Through deceit and cunning, Josef Stalin, the former General Secretary of the party, eventually emerged with control. He would go on to lead the country for almost three decades and oversee a transformation from an agrarian and dysfunctional nation to one of the world's leading superpowers while also leading the country through the Second World War. He introduced a variety of radical policies both at home and abroad to a variety of success.

Collectivisation was Stalin's most radical but arguably least successful policy on the domestic front. Under this scheme, small and medium sized farms were merged into large holdings. The output was then sold to the state at a set price. This was done to try and meet demand in urban areas and because the private property allowed under Lenin's NEP was seen as theft by many Bolsheviks. The state also needed the income from agricultural goods to purchase machinery needed for industrialisation. The policy proved to be an almost total failure.

The richer class of farmers, the Kulaks, had prospered under Lenin's NEP and resented collectivisation as they had the most to lose. In order to sabotage the policy, they cut back on production, burned their crops and killed their livestock. They succeeded in their aim and agricultural output fell dramatically. Famine broke out in 1932 but Stalin insisted collectivisation would work and decided to attack the Kulaks. Almost 10 million were killed, deported or sent to gulags. However, the damage was done and output had not returned to 1928 levels when the Germans invaded in 1941. The agricultural sector failed to meet the needs of the USSR during WW2. Unlike most of his internal policies, collectivisation was clearly a failure.

Stalin was committed to sustained social change throughout his regime. This was best seen in his overhaul of the education system. Nursery schools were provided for under-threes and school attendance between the ages of 8 and 15 was made compulsory. People were encouraged to continue into higher education and adult education was provided for working men and women. Illiteracy rates fell to 20% by 1940 and the USSR was almost universally literate by the time of his death in 1953. The education system became the most organised in

the world and this rapid development in social issues was one of the most successful internal policies of Stalin's rule.

Stalin recognised the need for rapid growth in industry in the USSR and said in 1931 that they were "behind the leading countries by fifty to one hundred years." He declared that they "must make up this distance in ten". He had rolled out the first of his Five-Year Plans in 1928 in which he aimed to increase the productivity of heavy industry. New factories, power stations and oil refineries were built. Production soared but the quality of the goods was low due to ambitious targets. That being said, national income almost doubled during the period. The second of these plans was more realistic. It focused on education and consumer goods. The quality and availability of education skyrocketed. Defence spending was also high towards the end of this plan due to the rise of Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany.

On the foreign front, Stalin also enjoyed some success as well as setbacks. He and his foreign minister, Maxim Litvinov, committed to a policy of "collective security" whereby they aligned themselves with other European countries in an effort to deter Hitler. In September 1934, the USSR joined the League of Nations and signed the Franco-Soviet Pact the following year. This was put to the test in 1938 but France disappointed Stalin by following Britain's policy of appeasement. Collective security did little to stop Hitler looking east for Lebensraum and made Stalin and the USSR look weak. Therefore, with hindsight, we can see that this policy was a failure.

Having seen collective security fail, the USSR and Stalin turned their attention to preparing for war. The third and final Five Year Plan made provisions for a German invasion. Defence spending increased further and factories were moved as far east as Siberia to keep them out of the range of Luftwaffe bombers. Stalin and his new foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, then signed a 10-year non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. This was done to allow the Five Year Plan to finish and give the army time to restructure following the Purges. The Pact came to an end with Operation Barbarossa in 1941 but these provisions for war were crucial to limiting the damage of war and allowed the USSR to go on to lead the Allied fight on the Eastern Front.

Stalin's response to Operation Barbarossa and his actions throughout the war were the most successful policies of his reign. The first days of the June 1941 invasion saw massive gains for the Germans having gained air superiority by destroying over 2000 Soviet aircraft. However, the USSR then introduced a "scorched earth" policy whereby, under instruction of Stalin, the

public deprived the onrushing Nazis of resources such as grain and fuel. This lack of supplies as well as the effects of a brutal Russian winter stalled the German onslaught. Marshal Zhukov, Chief of the Red Army led a massive counter-attack in December. Fierce battles were won by the Soviets soon after in Stalingrad and Leningrad. By the end of 1943, the Nazi forces had been driven out of the USSR and the Red Army would push on through eventually to Berlin. The decisions of Stalin proved pivotal in the Second World War and were his most successful policies.

Josef Stalin's reign of Soviet Russia was highly controversial and he was responsible for a number of setbacks both at home and abroad. Collectivisation was an unmitigated disaster despite his insistence on introducing it while his international diplomacy largely fell short of the mark. However, he oversaw rapid development of the education system and industry and his decisive actions around Nazi Germany ultimately proved very successful.