Life in USSR under Stalin

Stalin’s control over Russia meant that freedom was the one thing that people lost. The people of Russia had to read what the state allowed, see what the state allowed and listen to what the state allowed. The state’s control of the media was total. Those who attempted to listen, read etc. anything else were severely punished. Everybody knew of the labour camps and that was enough of a deterrent.

Stalin developed what became known as a “personality cult”. Artists painted pictures glorifying Stalin and he dominated many pictures. It was not unusual for Stalin to be in a white suit so that he stood out from the crowd. He gained the nickname “Uncle Joe” which was an attempt to develop an image of a kind, homely man who was the ‘father’ of all Russians. This was all called “Social Realism”. Those who wrote poems and novels had to do the same – write about Stalin in a manner which gloried him. Some artists and authors were so depressed by all this that they committed suicide rather than do what the state ordered them to do. Many others tried to leave the country.

Education was strictly controlled by the state. In 1932, a rigid programme of discipline and education was introduced. Exams, banned under Lenin, were reintroduced. The way subjects were taught was laid down by the government – especially History where Stalin’s part in the 1917 Revolution and his relationship with Lenin was overplayed. Books were strictly censored by the state and Stalin ordered the writing of a new book called “A short history of the USSR” which had to be used in schools.

Outside of school, children were expected to join youth organisations such as the Octobrists for 8 to 10 year olds and the Pioneers for the 10 to 16 year olds. From 19 to 23 you were expected to join the Komsomol. Children were taught how to be a good socialist/communist and an emphasis was put on outdoor activities and clean living.

There was a marked increase in the attacks on the churches of the USSR throughout the 1930’s. Communism had taught people that religion was “the opium of the masses” (Karl Marx) and church leaders were arrested and churches physically shut down. Stalin could not allow a challenge to his position and anybody who worshipped God was a challenge as the “personality cult” was meant for people to worship Stalin.

For a short time under Lenin, women had enjoyed a much freer status in that life for them was a lot more liberal when compared to the ‘old days’. Among other things, divorce was made a lot more easy under Lenin. Stalin changed all this. He put the emphasis on the family. There was a reason for this. Many children had been born out of marriage and Moscow by 1930 was awash with a very high number of homeless children who had no family and, as such, were a stain on the perfect communist society that Stalin was trying to create.

The state paid families a child allowance if their were a married couple. It became a lot harder to get a divorce and restrictions were placed on abortions. Ceremonial weddings made a comeback. In the work place, women maintained their status and there was effective equality with men. In theory, all jobs were open to women. The only real change took place in the image the state created for women. By the end of the 1930’s, the image of women at work had softened so that the hard edge of working became less apparent.

Living standards: these generally rose in the 1930’s despite the obvious problems with food production and shortages elsewhere. Some people did very well out of the system especially party officials and skilled factory workers. Health care was greatly expanded. In the past, the poorer people of Russia could not have expected qualified medical help in times of illness. Now that facility was available though demand for it was extremely high. The number of doctors rose greatly but there is evidence that they were so scared of doing wrong, that they had to go by the rule book and make appointments for operations which people did not require!!

Housing remained a great problem for Stalin’s Russia. In Moscow, only 6% of households had more than one room. Those apartments that were put up quickly, were shoddy by western standards. In was not unusual for flat complexes to be built without electric sockets despite electricity being available – building firms were simply not used to such things.

Leisure for the average Russian person was based around fitness and sport. Every Russian was entitled to have a holiday each year – this had been unheard of in the tsar’s days. Clubs, sports facilities etc. were provided by the state. The state also controlled the cinema, radio etc. but an emphasis was placed on educating yourself via the media as it was then.

Was Stalin a disaster for Russia?

• the country did become a major industrial nation by 1939 and her progress was unmatched in the era of the Depression in America and western Europe where millions were unemployed.

• those workers who did not offend the state were better off than under the reign of the tsar.

• Russia’s military forces were benefiting from her industrial growth.

• there was a stable government under Stalin.

• people had access to much better medical care some 10 years before the National Health Service was introduced in GB.

BUT:

• millions had died in famine after the failed experiment of collectivisation.

• Russia’s agriculture was at the same level in 1939 as in 1928 with a 40 million increased population.

• Russia had become a ‘telling’ society. The secret police actively encouraged people to inform on neighbours, work mates etc. and many suffered simply as a result of jealous neighbours/workers.

Also many of Russia’s most talented people had been murdered during the Purges of the 1930’s. Anyone with talent was seen as a threat by the increasingly paranoid behaviour associated with Stalin and were killed or imprisoned (which usually lead to death anyway). The vast Soviet army was a body without a brain as most of her senior officers had been arrested and murdered during the Purges.