

Do "great men"
change the course of
history essay sample



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Today the great man theory is out of favour as a singular explanation for why things happen. Historians look at other factors such as economic, societal, environmental, and technological which are just as or more significant to historical change. Many historians believe that a history which only follows around single persons, especially when their significance is determined primarily by political status, is a shallow view of the past, and that sometimes such a view excludes entire groups of people from being parts of the study of history.

A broader view is provided by a people’s history approach. But it takes a special kind of character to shape these influences whether he is a homicidal megalomaniac or men of undeniable charisma. Great men don’t change the course of history they create it. For better or worse, that is up to the historians to decide. But it is impossible to deny his role in not only Russian history but also world history.

In this essay I am going to look at 3 areas where Stalin changed the course of history. Obviously the two biggest achievements/impacts that were overseen during Stalin’s reign were the defeat of Hitler Germany and the transformation of Russia into a Superpower. The other major area I am going to look at is his battle of ideals with Trotsky and what this meant for history.

Socialism in one country/Permanent revolution

The rise of Stalin to leadership, first within the party and then within the state must be seen in this perspective. His importance begins to emerge

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with the growing bureaucratisation of party and state. But the bureaucracy in its turn developed and expanded because of Russia's extreme backwardness and isolation; it was the product of a revolution in retreat, pinned down within the frontiers of a poverty stricken economy, dependent on a huge mass of primitive peasants.

The change which occurred in these years, preceding and immediately following Lenin's death, proved decisive for the whole subsequent course of world history. The failure of the western revolution destroyed the strategy, which had hitherto underpinned the practice of the Bolsheviks. The hope of bridging Russian backwardness and a socialist programme, through the industrial and cultural support afforded by the resources of a socialist Europe, was now unpredictably served. This would lead to internal struggle and the debate between Socialism in one country and Permanent revolution.

This is one of the most intriguing questions in modern history what if Stalin's philosophy was not socialism in one country but like Trotsky was the theory of permanent revolution. Some western scholars like Carr, Alexander Erlich and Moshe Lewin treat his ideological position as a mere façade disguising personal ambition¹. So this idea could easily have happened.

The theory of " Socialism in One Country" originated as a response to Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, however it was used by Stalin to create a theoretical justification for the practical realities facing the Soviet Union; it can thus be viewed as " a synthesis between socialist and national loyalties." ² The resulting policy was an attempt to create a Soviet nationalist identity around shared proletarian identification. The constituent

nations of the Soviet Union were thus brought into a unitary state, and a process of proletarianization was undertaken to foster the desired Soviet nationalism. This policy found mixed results among less industrialized ethnic minorities, but on the whole was largely successful. Thus "Socialism in One Country" provided the theoretical framework for the successful policy of fostering Soviet nationalism based on socio-economic identification, rather than ethnicity.

The irony of Socialism in one country was that it was not even Stalin's idea; instead Bukharin first mooted it³ and with a cruel twist of fate the industrialisation programme conceived by the opposition, provided Stalin with the platform from which to destroy Bukharin. The creation of this new Russian state and systems had very little to do with Stalin yet he emerged victorious. He sold out everyone to achieve 'greatness' which enabled him as an individual to assume Hegelian 'world historical role'

Creation of an industrial Superpower

Never in history have a people had to endure so much for the greater good of their country as the Russians did under Stalin. His aims were to create an independently strong Russia from within. Unfortunately it was to the detriment of millions of Russians.

'We are 50 or 100 years behind the advanced countries. we must to catch up this distance in 10 years. either we do it or we go under' heavy industry he argued had to be at the centre of this modernizing effort, because that alone could guarantee the needs of military defence and from heavy industry the rest of the economy would benefit eventually. 4

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Stalin replaced the New Economic Policy (NEP) of the 1920s with Five-Year Plans in 1928 and collective farming at roughly the same time. The Soviet Union was transformed from a predominantly peasant society to a major world industrial power by the end of the 1930s.

What cannot be doubted however, is that during the first 5 year plan, considerable growth was in fact achieved in key sectors of heavy industry, especially the output of machine tools, and the foundation was laid for the creation of whole new industrial areas. Especially notable was the rapid construction of giant hydroelectric scheme on the dniper, which attracted a cluster of factories. Iron and steel rose from 3.5 million tonnes in 1928 to 10 million by 1933. Coal, the integral product fueling modern economies and Stalinist industrialization, successfully rose from 35.4 million to 64 million tons, and output of iron ore rose from 5.7 million to 19 million tons.

During the second five-year plan (1933-37), on the basis of the huge investment during the first plan, industry expanded extremely rapidly. By 1937 coal output was 127 million tons, pig iron 14.5 million tons, and there had been very rapid developments in the armaments industry, as a result of the growing threat from Germany and Japan.

Stalin had turned a backward, rurally dominated country into an industrial superpower in a relatively short space of time. Unfortunately the country was not able to enjoy the fruits of her labour with the outbreak of the war. But there is no doubting that if Russia hadn't industrialised as rapidly as it did Hitler might have won the war. Unfortunately like almost everything he did it was the Russian people who were sacrificed.

Stopping Hitler

Stalin and Russia changed history because they did what most of Europe could not. Stopping Hitler's blitzkrieg. This can be viewed as one of the most contentious objections to the great man theory. Was it the millions of Russian soldiers or the adverse Russian winter conditions that stopped Hitler. Or was it the charismatic Stalin who inspired his nation through his own strength and leadership. In June 1941, Hitler broke the pact and invaded the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa, thus beginning the Great Patriotic War.

Many allied visitors who called to the kremlin during the war were astonished to see how many issues no matter how great or small, militarily politically that Stalin had final say in. From his desk office he directed operations all over the country one of the key moves of the war was the the evacuation of 1360 plants from western russia to behind the urals an evacuation which not only involved the movement of machinery but millions of families. 6This kept Russian supplies running through the war

One of Stalin's famous speeches during the war was when he appealed to the soldiers to draw inspiration from the memories of the civil war, when 3/4s of our country was in the hands of foreign interventionisnts and the young soviet republic had no army of its own and no allies,'the enemy is not so strong as some frightened little intellulacts picture him. the devil is not so so terrible as he is painted...Germany cannot sustain such a strain for long. Another few months, another half a year, perhaps another year and hiterlite germany must burst under under the pressure of her crimes'7 The weirdest

part of his speech was his invocation of saints and warriors from imperialist Russia. Stalin a committed atheist, but like everything he had done before would do anything to get the best out of the people. When the government disbanded from Moscow the moral strength of the city seem to dissipate. Yet when it was heard that Stalin stayed on it showed the people the strength to persevere.

The weather fortunately for Stalin played a big role for the counter attack that drove the Germans back from Moscow. A letter that Stalin wrote to military historian, Colonel E. Razin suggested that he deliberately lured the Germans into interior Russia in order to destroy them there like the old Parthians against the Romans and Kutuzov against Napoleon. ⁸ It is quite hard to fathom this yet it is Stalins style to sacrifice millions of Russian lives for the greater good of the country. For the first time in the war the Wehrmacht were driven back. A massive blow for the Nazis.

The biggest blow for the Nazis would come at Stalingrad the bloodiest battle of the war. It was very much urban warfare with fighting in houses and factories. By 19th November Germany seemed to have control of most of the city. Stalin's last great act of the war was to plan the counter attack. Stalin's idea of the counter-offensive was based on the same psychological premises and the same insight into Hitler's mentality that underlay the scheme for the battle of Moscow. He banked on Hitler's blind⁹ arrogance. Under the command of Zhukov the Russians drove the Germans back and Stalin now rose to almost titanic stature in the world.

Conclusion

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How then are we to judge Stalin? Looking at him purely from a historical and a narcissistic point of view he was definitely one of if not the key person in 20th century history. . Born in obscurity, he rose to historic significance, a fallible human being of extraordinary qualities. He supervised the near-chaotic transformation of peasant Eurasia into an urban, industrialised superpower under unprecedented adversities. Though his achievements were at the cost of exorbitant sacrifice of human beings and natural resources, they were on a scale commensurate with the cruelty of two world wars.