

Totalitarianism in the ussr politics essay



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In the words of Fernand Braudel, For many years the USSR had lived under a political dictatorship, without freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of association or freedom to strike, with a single, disciplined, 'monolithic' Party"(Braudel, " A History of Civilizations, pg17). Totalitarianism is often the term used to describe the system of government that existed in Russia during the era of the Soviet Union. Traits of a totalitarian state are as follows: rule by a single party, enforce official ideology, terroristic secret police, state monopoly on mass media, monopoly on means of force, and a central directed economy. A totalitarian regime is characterized by the total and supreme centralized authority of the government in all aspects of society, ranging from the obvious such as political institutions, the military, and police to economics, education, literature, and mass media. The USSR had a system of one-party rule, which used extensive propaganda and censorship, as well as a terroristic police force, to spread its ideology and cement its power and influence in every corner of Soviet society.

To understand how the regime was able to assert control over the entirety of Russian society, one must understand the political structure of the U. S. S. R. Despite the slogan, " All power to the Soviets", in practice the power structure worked much differently. The true power of the state lay in the Communist party, which controlled Politburo and its General Secretary. The General Secretary was a member of the Politburo, chosen by its members to head the system. The politburo members were elected from the Central committee whose members were chosen from the different Republic Party Committees. Delegates to the Republic Party Committees were elected from Regional Party committees, delegates of which were elected from the

town/village party committees (lecture four October 10th, handout). In theory this system appears to be democratic but in practice, far from it. In most elections for example, there was only one candidate to vote. Other political parties were banned by the Communist party and therefore guaranteed the election of its members. Candidates were chosen according to their loyalty to the party. This one-party system of rule allowed the Communist party to exercise complete control in the USSR by insuring only those loyal and trustworthy would be elected and move up the power structure(lecture four October 10th). All those who opposed the party or held beliefs that went against the mainstream ideology were dealt with either jail sentences or execution. By eliminating other political parties and silencing opponents of the system the Communist party was able to insure its unchecked power in the political sphere of soviet society. The one party system of the USSR meets one of the criterion of a totalitarian state.

The economic system of the Soviet state differed greatly from that of a free market economy and was under the absolute control of the Soviet government. Gosplan, the Russian abbreviation for state planning committee, over saw the entirety of the Soviet economy from deciding what goods to produce, how much they cost, who's going to produce them, and how many to be made (Lecture four October 10 notes). Unlike a market economy in which market factors dictate which goods will be produce and how much they cost, in the Soviet system it was reverse. As Anders Aslund explains it, " Market allocation was abandoned for centralized allocation ' with a vengeance, but its essence has been disputed, The communist state focused on determining physical production targets for all major goods· and

enterprises through thousands of “ material balances” complied by the Central Planning Committee (Gosplan) and its suborgans” (Aslund, “ Building Capitalism”, pg 4-5). This is just one aspect of government control of the economic systems of the state. Private property within the USSR was nonexistent. All property and means of production were the assets of the Soviet state, including agriculture. Aslund continues, “ Nationalization of the means of production was carried out zealously in inmost communist countries, with enterprises becoming either state or quasi state property. Industry, trade, transportation, infrastructure; and banks were usually nationalized, Agriculture, handicrafts and some services: were initially collectivized and gradually nationalize. The collectivization of small farmers was the most brutal struggle in every country. The Soviet union, under Stalin, instituted a policy of Collectivization of agriculture.”(Aslund, “ Building Capitalism”, pg5). Stalin’s policy of collectivization resulted death of millions of livestock and the destruction of entire class of wealthy peasants known as Kulaks. Kulaks opposed the collectivization of farms due to their large land holdings and the loss of profits associated with their crops to the government. The first real clashes came in 1928, when a shortage of food supplies to cities was believed to be result of peasant’s insubordination. Lionel Kochan explains the results of this insubordination were as follows: “ The Government replied with emergency administrative measures. Search parties were sent to the countryside to confiscate hidden stocks of grain, and the recalcitrant kulaks were imprisoned. At the same time Committees of Poor Peasants were formed to denounce the hoarders. This encouragement of class war led to further violence in the villages and to a further reduction in the sown areas.”(Kochan, “ The Makings of Modern Russia”, pg 25).

Through the collectivists of agriculture, the elimination of private property, and the nationalization of all industries and means of production, the soviet government played a massive role in everyday life by not only determining your job but also where you would live, what you could buy, and how much everything would cost. A centrally directed economy is yet another feature of a totalitarian state.

However it is not only the one party political structure and the centrally directed economy that classify the Soviet Union as a totalitarian state. What truly made the system totalitarian was the enforcement of Marxist/Leninist ideology via a terroristic police force and a state monopoly on mass media that served as a propaganda machine. Any opinion that went against the state ideology was banned. Opposition organizations were infiltrated and disbanded, their leaders often executed or sent to harsh prison terms. John Parker tells us the story of Andre Gide who travelled to Russia to witness "where utopia was in process"(Parker, " Is Russia Different", pg 5). Gide tells us, " In the USSR " everybody knows beforehand that on any and every subject there can only be one opinion. Every morning Pravda teaches them just what they should know and think and believe.... So that every time you talk to one Russian you feel as if you were talking to them all." (Parker, " Is Russia Different", pg 5). Pravda was a state newspaper and one of the sources of mass media that bombarded the average Soviet citizen with state propaganda daily. As Aslund tell us, "... The communist states tried to manipulate the thinking of their citizens till the end, they pursued massive propaganda campaigns through all media and public outlets. A communist city was extraordinarily gray and drab, as little advertising was allowed, but

absurd . communist Slogans lit up the cities..."(Aslund, " Building Capitalism", pg 4) Via their control of mass media, the soviet state was able to manipulate and influence public opinion like few states before or after it. What about those who had different opinions, opinions that went against the state of ideology? The choice was clear, remain silence or face the consequences. Geoffery Hosking explains it as such, " but for the totality of the population 1936-8 was a nightmare, during which no one, save Stalin himself, could be certain of not being woken in the small hours of the night by a knock at the door, dragged out of bed and snatched away from family and friends, usually forever. Since there was neither rhyme nor reason to the process, no one could be sure of not attracting the next accusation in the capricious chain. Many people, in fact, lived with a small suitcase permanently packed with a few essentials, just in case."(Hosking, " The First Socialist Society", pg 8). Gide wrote, "" I doubt whether in any other country in the world, even in Hitler's Germany can thought be less free, more bowed down, more fearful, more vassalized."(Parker, " is Russia Different", pg 5). . Stalin used this system of propaganda to promote his economic policies and to purge out his opponents in what is called Stalin's Terror. As Kochan puts it:

At the beginning of 1937 a further group of Old Bolsheviks trod the same path to death. They also confessed to incredible crimes of treason. Early the next year the purge reached out to the Red Army and swept away Marshal Tukhachevsky, Chief of the Red Army, and Admiral Orlov, Commander-in-Chief of the Red Navy; and in March 1938, a final group of twenty-one of the highest Soviet personalities, including Rykov, Bukharin, and Yagoda, was

charged with collaborating with foreign Powers to dismember the U. S. S. R overthrow socialism, and restore capitalism. They too were found guilty and executed. The men in the dock were of course only the most notable victims. Unnumbered thousands of lesser people perished or were deported. Among the prominent victims were all the members of Lenin's Politburo (apart from Stalin himself and Trotsky), many ambassadors, most of the surviving Old Bolsheviks, the top leadership of the Red Army, the upper and middle levels of the Communist Party, and many members of the organization of Red Partisans. Those deported fell into the hands of a special department of the secret police set up in 1934. It bore the title: ' Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps and Labour Settlements.' By the end of the 1930s this body had organized a network of camps stretching across the north of European Russia and into the north-east of Siberia.

(Kochan, " The Making of Modern Russia", pg31) . Through its use of propaganda to spread the state ideology and its control of mass media, the soviet union was able to greatly influence and manipulate public opinion. All those who opposed the system or held other beliefs were handed over to the secret police, NkVD.

The USSR was the epitome of a totalitarian system. Its political position was secured by the fact that there was only one legal political party, the Communist Party. This political system went hand in hand with the soviet economic structure. The state was the owner of all the means of production and property. It dictated what was to be produce, how much was to be made, and who would make. All citizens were state employees, who were told where to work and where to live. Its Marxist/Leninist ideology was

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spread through mass media which belonged to the state and enforced by a terroristic secret police. The Communist party ruled with absolutely authority during the Soviet era in Russia. Its one party system ensured its hold on power, control of mass media and its monopoly on force allowed it to spread state ideology and influence public opinion. Its secret police brought all those against the state to their end. The USSR was the perfect example of a totalitarian state.

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