Joseph Stalin’s control of the USSR

In 1935, the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin commissioned a film. It was to be a portrait of the notorious 16th century Russian Tzar, Ivan the Terrible, whom Stalin greatly admired and who provided historical inspiration for some of Stalin’s methods of controlling the state. In fact, Stalin saw many parallels between himself and Ivan the Terrible. Stalin was by no means Lenin’s chosen successor and he came to power in 1924 having outmaneuvered his party comrades. Ivan also had to win the power struggle within the top Russian families to proclaim himself Tzar. When in power, both men faced dissent and external enemies. It was Ivan the Terrible who ingeniously turned his enemies into the means of support for his tyranny. Four centuries later, Stalin adopted this idea as the cornerstone of his absolute power. There are several other major aspects of Stalin’s control of the USSR in which the Soviet dictator went much further than the Russian Tzar, displaying even some historic originality. Stalin regulated all the economic activities within the state through state ownership of the land and the means of production and also through the 5-year economic planning. Another important string to Stalin’s bow was communist ideology which was used to brainwash the general population. The state quickly established the Iron Curtain to enable it to control and manipulate the information that reached the Soviet people. Deception and concealment were widely used to achieve full control. Finally, the cult of Stalin’s personality in the USSR served to justify all his actions.

One of Stalin’s propaganda posters, the caption reads: “Our beloved Stalin makes the peoples’ happiness”

When Stalin first came to power the Soviet leadership was the most democratic it has ever been. The top group represented different opinions on how to advance towards the main common goal of communism. Stalin immediately set out to eradicate the difference of opinion. Within the first 2-3 years of his reign all the non-Bolshevik factions (such as the remaining Mensheviks) of the Russian socialist movement were wiped out, their members exiled or thrown in prisons. This was relatively easy to do because the Bolsheviks, with Stalin as their head, always distrusted their revolutionary allies and they condoned violence as a method of political struggle. The next step that Stalin took towards assuming absolute power was to eliminate possible rivals among his friends and comrades. This was a difficult process that took years - from the exile of Trotsky in 1929, the murder of Kirov in 1934 to the show trials of Party dignitaries such as Kamenev, Zinoviev and Bukharin in 1936-38. To defeat his former friends Stalin had to create a power base for himself. For inspiration Stalin looked to Ivan the Terrible. The Russian Tzar created his personal militarized force known as Oprichnina. The members of Oprichnina (mostly common people) owed everything to Ivan. The Tzar put them above the law and they were happy to perpetrate any crime. Stalin didn’t have to create a similar military force from scratch. An internal police (CHEKA) was established in Russia shortly after the revolution in 1918. Under Stalin it was known as NKVD. It grew to an enormous
size; the head of NKVD was answerable to Stalin himself. NKVD was a force that was effectively above the law. In Stalin’s time it was often referred to as Oprichnina.

As Ivan the Terrible before him, Stalin understood the importance of having enemies for consolidating his power. The belief at the time was that enemies threatened every citizen of the USSR. Everyone lived in constant fear of mysterious foes and everyone had to pull together behind their leader Stalin who was the only one capable of defeating all the enemies. Stalin was also the only one who knew where to find the cunning enemies of the state. During Stalin’s reign his terror was directed at different social and professional groups of the population. In the late 20-s- early 30-s the peasants suffered particularly badly. During the mid 30-s it was the army and later the Soviet intelligentsia (the educated stratum). During the war several ethnic groups were almost wiped out and in the late 40-s – early 50-s a great campaign against the Jews was proclaimed – “The Doctor’s Plot”. For the rest of the population the fear was particularly poignant because very often a popular and respected person turned out to be an enemy and Stalin was perceived as the only one capable of offering protection.

The machine of terror was organized with imagination and precision. The NKVD made the arrests. In the early years the prisoners appeared before a trial judge, in the later – before a judicial commission of three (troika). One of the three had to be a party representative; the other two were usually from the NKVD. Often none of the troika had a law degree. The prisoners were often accused of outlandish crimes (in one case, plotting to bring the USSR under the US rule by joining them via Alaska, in another, plotting to dig a tunnel from Moscow to Paris to allow the enemies of state to escape). Despite the presence of a defense lawyer the outcome of such trials was a foregone conclusion. The troikas accepted confessions (often obtained under torture) as sufficient proof of guilt and looked for no further evidence. Millions of people were executed or perished in many concentration camps as a result.

Under Stalin the system of terror was put on an industrial footing. There were monthly quotas for arrests and executions that were often over fulfilled by eager party and NKVD officials. Similarly, the economic development of the USSR was proceeding as if it were a battle. The main enemy was private property. By the mid 30-s Stalin assumed full control of land through collectivization (a programme of depriving peasants of ownership of land, cattle and machinery and making them employees of state-owned collective farms). Concurrently, the whole country was industrialized (there was no significant industrial output in Russia before the revolution). Stalin’s idea was to control all of the country’s economy and manage it from the top. The whole working population became state employees, for livelihood fully dependent on authorities who set 5-year production plans. Stalin often set some of the targets himself without much reference to the economic needs of the country. In fact, to tighten his control over economy even further, Stalin politicized it. Representatives of the Party were leading every economic activity whether in industry, construction or agriculture. Party activists who reported up the chain to Stalin himself were regarded as more important than professionals in the given field.

The fear and constant state of battle were extremely effective means of control which Stalin employed throughout his time in power. However, as a young man Stalin trained as a priest and had a good grasp of psychology. Later as a Soviet leader he always balanced the negative with the positive. The big positive was the communist ideology. Having abolished freedom of travel in mid 20-s and established the Iron Curtain, the state was able to take full control of the information that reached the Soviet people. They were told many lies. In particular, they were
assured that they lived much better than people abroad; that all rich westerners were perverse, fat and ugly. Such propaganda seems childish now but it is worth remembering that by the 1930s a whole generation of the Soviet people had grown up without any idea of what was beyond the Soviet border. The crude propaganda was also supported by the Soviet film industry as well as many writers and artists. The Soviet people were persuaded that they were incredibly lucky to live in a caring socialist state which was personified in Stalin himself.

Stalin was portrayed as the father of the nation, the all-knowing, wise god-like entity but at the same time simple in his every-day habits (which was true) and having extraordinary understanding of and compassion for the common man. This image of Stalin was impressed upon the Soviet population through art and media and also through secrecy that surrounded Stalin (he was rarely seen and made very few public speeches). The cult of his personality wasn’t modeled on the Russian Tzars. Stalin wanted more – he was to be revered as a Pharaoh of Ancient Egypt. In the Soviet state all religion was abolished and those practicing were often persecuted so Stalin cunningly sought to fill the void with the worship of his own person.

Stalin styled himself as a leader the Soviet people were most fortunate to have. But a leader must lead somewhere. The remote ideological goal was communism which was vaguely described in the works of Marx and Lenin. During this time period, Communism was perceived as something that would bring happiness to everyone; however, the road there was long, fraught with difficulties and dependant on defeating all the enemies. A more immediate goal was socialism which was an imperfect state of civic development, a transitory phase on the road to communism and therefore required a true leader, someone like Stalin at the helm. The cult of Stalin’s personality was a powerful means of assuring Stalin’s control over the USSR. Of course, there existed a minority who didn’t believe Stalin’s propaganda but in the interest of self-preservation the unbelievers kept their opinions to themselves.

In conclusion, it can be said that Stalin’s control of the USSR was absolute because it permeated all spheres of life. The Soviet people were almost without exception state employees; therefore working for Stalin who not only personified the state but also set the main economic targets. From an early age the Soviet children were taught to love Stalin and regard him as the only leader wise enough and experienced enough to lead them towards communism. Many millions of the Soviet citizens were successfully brainwashed. Stalin’s god-like status helped justify his crimes against the citizens of his own country. Throughout his time in power Stalin was conducting terror campaigns against various ethnic and social groups of the population. Stalin used the imaginary threat of a deadly internal enemy as a means to keep the rest of the people compliant. Stalin kept the country in a state of permanent battle and upheaval. The Soviet people were fighting through life rather than living it.

The full version of the film “Ivan the Terrible” was released in 1944. Stalin didn’t like it because the film showed Ivan’s doubts and remorse (which was historically true) for the bloodshed he was causing. Stalin was not known to have such feelings and the film-makers...
narrowly escaped prison. Stalin (who was at the time in his 60-s) might also have reflected on the legacy he was leaving his successors. He would probably have been pleased with it as he was leaving a comprehensive system of control based on nothing but political will which managed to survive for almost another 40 years, nearly into the 21st century.

Bibliography:
Iron Curtain: The crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956 - Anne Applebaum
Trotsky – Robert Service
Stalin’s Nemesis: The exile and murder of Leon Trotsky – Bertrand M. Patenaude
Young Stalin – Simon Sebag Montefiore
Stalin: Breaker of Nations – Robert Conquest
Gulag – Anne Applebaum