The Church

There was a marked increase in the attacks on the churches of the USSR throughout the 1930s. 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.”

The Personality Cult

As early as 1918, a biography of Lenin was written, and busts were produced. With his death, his embalmed body was displayed (to exploit beliefs that the bodies of saints did not decay), and picture books of his life were produced in mass quantities.

Artists painted pictures glorifying Stalin and he dominated many pictures in his white suit. He was nicknamed “Uncle Joe” and portrayed as the ‘father’ of all Russians.

Engineering projects such as canals were described as having been decreed personally by Stalin. During the purges, he increased his appearances in public, having his photograph taken with children, airmen, and Stakhanovites, being hailed as the source of the “happy life,” and according to Pravda, riding the subway with common workers. Many young people hard at work at construction idolized Stalin. Many people chose to believe that the charges made at the purges were true.

Children and Education

In 1932, a rigid programme of discipline and education was introduced. Exams, banned under Lenin, were reintroduced. History lessons emphasised where Stalin’s part in the 1917 Revolution and his relationship with Lenin was overplayed. Books were censored as Stalin ordered the writing of a new book called “A short history of the USSR.” Children were expected to join youth organisations: the Octobrists from 8 to 10, the Pioneers from 10 to 16, Komsomol from 19 to 22. These focused on being a good communist, outdoor activities and clean living.

Women

Under Lenin, life for women had been better e.g. access to divorce and abortion. Stalin reversed this by putting emphasis on the family to prevent the high number of homeless children in Moscow. To encourage this, the state paid families a child allowance to married couples. It became a lot harder to get a divorce and restrictions were placed on abortions. Ceremonial weddings made a comeback.

In theory, all jobs were open to women so women ‘had’ equality but the emphasis on women working was lessened to discourage this.

Media

Radio was put to good use, especially to reach the illiterate; radio receivers were put in communal locations, where the peasants would have to come to hear news, such as changes to rationing, and received propaganda broadcasts with it; some of these locations were also used for posters. Wall posters were widely used in the early days, often depicting the Red Army’s triumphs for the benefit of the illiterate.

In 1918 Lenin had liquidated the independent press. In 1922, the deportation of writers and scholars warned that no deviation was permitted, and pre-publication censorship was reinstated. During the purges, textbooks were often so frequently revised that students had to do without them.

Cultural activities were constrained by censorship and a monopoly of cultural institutions. In 1937, the Industry of Socialism was intended as a major exhibit of socialist art, but it took sixteen months for the censors to approve enough for an exhibition.