Collectivization was an unmitigated disaster: peasants who refused to turn over their livestock and farms to the state were executed or sent to Stalin’s prison work camps, called gulags. With agricultural production cut in half, mass famine ensued, and at least three to ten million peasants died of starvation. Stalin denied blame for the failure of collectivization, accusing others of misunderstanding his directives. His other major goal was to introduce widespread industrialization to the USSR, in order to move the country from an agriculture-based to an industry-based economy. In this he succeeded—initiating the machinery that would eventually make the Soviet Union a superpower nation—in large part because of the slave labor provided by the millions of Soviet citizens imprisoned in the gulags. Around 1934 Stalin launched the period that would be known as the Great Terror. Throughout the 1930s about one million old Bolshevik party members (those who had taken part in the pre-Stalin revolutionary era) and countless millions of citizens were accused of sabotage, treason, and espionage and were arrested, tortured, and either executed or sent to the gulags. This massive effort to ensure Stalin’s absolute power was called “purging.” Dramatic purge trials of party officials and senior members of the Red Army were set up. Defendants were accused of treason and other trumped-up charges and were always found guilty. The purging of the army had particularly devastating effects when the Soviet Union became involved in World War II. Stalin signed a Non-Aggression Pact with German dictator Adolf Hitler in the summer of 1939. The Pact included secret plans for the two leaders to control the European territories each considered essential to his country's expansion. But when Germany invaded Poland in September of that year, Stalin sought to increase the Soviet Union’s presence in western Europe by invading Finland in November; Finland surrendered, and in June of 1941 Hitler broke his Pact with Stalin and invaded the Soviet Union, which, because of the military purgings, suffered devastating losses for nearly two years. Historians are divided over the degree of Stalin’s success as a military commander during the German invasion. Many blame the huge Soviet losses on his increasing paranoia and megalomania. Nonetheless, the Red Army did hold off the Germans until they surrendered in 1945. After the war Stalin moved quickly to seize control of Eastern European countries to create the Soviet bloc. In 1949 the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb, ushering in the arms race and Cold War with the United States that would last into the late 1980s. In 1953 Stalin was planning another series of purges, this time because of an alleged treasonous plot among the mostly Jewish Kremlin physicians. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage before the new purge trials could take place.

Major Works

Stalin produced a number of works on Soviet ideology—including Marxism and the National Question, Marxism and Linguistics, Dialectical and Historical Materialism, and his collected lectures on Foundations of Leninism—but whether or not he added anything new or innovative to theoretical communism is debatable. Many critics consider his writing unoriginal and repetitive. He did, however, transform Soviet communism, in his writings and his practices, from a revolutionary system to a strategy of conservative, isolationist authoritarianism. His talent for propaganda allowed him to establish an astonishingly effective cult of personality despite his reputation for brute violence. By neutralizing anyone he considered or suspected of being an enemy, Stalin opened an avenue to total control of both his party and his people, whether they were followers or not. Pictures and statues of him were placed in all public places, as well as in private Soviet homes. His writings were studied, and poems and songs were written to glorify him. He encouraged his image as "Father of the Soviet People" and the "Great Teacher," and, after the Germans were driven out of the USSR in World War II, he exploited the role of savior of his country. After his death Stalin was still...