



General Certificate of Education

AS History 1041

Unit 2: HIS2L

The Impact of Stalin's Leadership in the USSR, 1924–1941

Mark Scheme

2009 examination – January series

Mark schemes are prepared by the Principal Examiner and considered, together with the relevant questions, by a panel of subject teachers. This mark scheme includes any amendments made at the standardisation meeting attended by all examiners and is the scheme which was used by them in this examination. The standardisation meeting ensures that the mark scheme covers the candidates' responses to questions and that every examiner understands and applies it in the same correct way. As preparation for the standardisation meeting each examiner analyses a number of candidates' scripts: alternative answers not already covered by the mark scheme are discussed at the meeting and legislated for. If, after this meeting, examiners encounter unusual answers which have not been discussed at the meeting they are required to refer these to the Principal Examiner.

It must be stressed that a mark scheme is a working document, in many cases further developed and expanded on the basis of candidates' reactions to a particular paper. Assumptions about future mark schemes on the basis of one year's document should be avoided; whilst the guiding principles of assessment remain constant, details will change, depending on the content of a particular examination paper.

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Generic Introduction for AS

The AS History specification is based on the assessment objectives laid down in QCA's GCE History subject criteria and published in the AQA specification booklet. These cover the skills, knowledge and understanding which are expected of A Level candidates. Most questions address more than one objective since historical skills, which include knowledge and understanding, are usually deployed together. Consequently, the marking scheme which follows is a 'levels of response' scheme and assesses candidates' historical skills in the context of their knowledge and understanding of History.

The levels of response are a graduated recognition of how candidates have demonstrated their abilities in the Assessment Objectives. Candidates who predominantly address AO1(a) by writing narrative or description will perform at Level 1 or Level 2 depending on its relevance. Candidates who provide more explanation – (AO1(b), supported by the relevant selection of material, AO1(a)) – will perform at high Level 2 or low-mid Level 3 depending on how explicit they are in their response to the question. Candidates who provide explanation with evaluation, judgement and an awareness of historical interpretations will be addressing all 3 AOs (AO1(a); AO1(b); AO2(a) and (b) and will have access to the higher mark ranges. AO2(a) which requires the evaluation of source material is assessed in Unit 2.

Differentiation between Levels 3, 4 and 5 is judged according to the extent to which candidates meet this range of assessment objectives. At Level 3 the answers will show more characteristics of the AO1 objectives, although there should be elements of AO2. At Level 4, AO2 criteria, particularly an understanding of how the past has been interpreted, will be more in evidence and this will be even more dominant at Level 5. The demands on written communication, particularly the organisation of ideas and the use of specialist vocabulary also increase through the various levels so that a candidate performing at the highest AS level is already well prepared for the demands of A2.

CRITERIA FOR MARKING GCE HISTORY:

AS EXAMINATION PAPERS

General Guidance for Examiners (to accompany Level Descriptors)

Deciding on a level and the award of marks within a level

It is of vital importance that examiners familiarise themselves with the generic mark scheme and apply it consistently, as directed by the Principal Examiner, in order to facilitate comparability across options.

The indicative mark scheme for each paper is designed to illustrate some of the material that candidates might refer to (knowledge) and some of the approaches and ideas they might develop (skills). It is not, however, prescriptive and should only be used to exemplify the generic mark scheme.

When applying the generic mark scheme, examiners will constantly need to exercise judgement to decide which level fits an answer best. Few essays will display all the characteristics of a level, so deciding the most appropriate will always be the first task.

Each level has a range of marks and for an essay which has a strong correlation with the level descriptors the middle mark should be given. However, when an answer has some of the characteristics of the level above or below, or seems stronger or weaker on comparison with many other candidates' responses to the same question, the mark will need to be adjusted up or down.

When deciding on the mark within a level, the following criteria should be considered *in relation to the level descriptors*. Candidates should never be doubly penalised. If a candidate with poor communication skills has been placed in Level 2, he or she should not be moved to the bottom of the level on the basis of the poor quality of written communication. On the other hand, a candidate with similarly poor skills, whose work otherwise matched the criteria for Level 4 should be adjusted downwards within the level.

Criteria for deciding marks within a level:

- The accuracy of factual information
- The level of detail
- The depth and precision displayed
- The quality of links and arguments
- The quality of written communication (grammar, spelling, punctuation and legibility; an appropriate form and style of writing; clear and coherent organisation of ideas, including the use of specialist vocabulary)
- Appropriate references to historical interpretation and debate
- The conclusion

January 2009

GCE AS History Unit 2: Historical Issues: Periods of Change

HIS2L: The Impact of Stalin's Leadership in the USSR, 1924–1941

Question 1

- (a) Use **Sources A** and **B** and your own knowledge.

Explain how far the views in **Source B** differ from those in **Source A** in relation to Stalin's motives for Industrialisation. (12 marks)

Target: AO2(a)

- L1:** Answers will **either** briefly paraphrase/describe the content of the two sources **or** identify simple comparison(s) between the sources. Skills of written communication will be weak. **0-2**
- L2:** Responses will compare the views expressed in the two sources and identify some differences and/or similarities. There may be some limited own knowledge. Answers will be coherent but weakly expressed. **3-6**
- L3:** Responses will compare the views expressed in the two sources, identifying differences **and** similarities and using own knowledge to explain and evaluate these. Answers will, for the most part, be clearly expressed. **7-9**
- L4** Responses will make a developed comparison between the views expressed in the two sources and will apply own knowledge to evaluate and to demonstrate a good contextual understanding. Answers will, for the most part, show good skills of written communication. **10-12**

Indicative content

Source A expresses two clear motives for Industrialisation. One is about the threat faced by a weak USSR in a hostile world. Russia has perpetually been beaten by stronger enemies and it will happen again unless the USSR quickly catches up – and both economic strength and military strength in particular depend upon a strong industrial base, which must be achieved much more rapidly than could be normally expected. The other objective is a political/ideological one: the USSR has a duty to the international proletariat to develop the country as a secure beacon of Communism, plus the implicit assumption that the USSR can only become the world's first socialist state by industrialising. This would be the first stage on the way to the eventual international triumph of Communism and freedom for the workers of the world.

Source B gives a different interpretation. There is a specific emphasis on class warfare, mentioning various groups who had done well out of NEP but were ideologically anathema to good Socialists. These were to be done away within the drive to industrialise. According to Stalin, this was absolutely necessary, because the forces of capitalism were still growing in strength and would overthrow the Soviet regime unless the regime struck first. A second motive is also implied: industrialisation was a means by which Stalin could fight Bukharin, who was the

last stumbling block to Stalin becoming effectively the sole leader of the USSR. Therefore **Source B** focuses more on internal events in the USSR, whereas **Source A** is more about the international struggle of the USSR against strong capitalist forces in other countries.

Own knowledge should amplify and explain the differences. Stalin's fears in **Source A** were very real. The USSR had been beaten in war (Crimean War, Russo- Japanese war, First World War) by more advanced industrial powers. The infant USSR had been invaded after the Revolution by capitalist powers, and it could easily happen again—other great powers were strongly anti- communist. Stalin's other motive in **Source A** is more problematical. It could be argued that emphasising the international context and the USSR'S obligations to the world proletariat was just propaganda, and piously repeating the Old Marxist thesis that the advance of socialism (and eventually Communism) would only succeed when the struggle became truly international. On the other hand, it might be cynical to dismiss this as pure propaganda on Stalin's part.

Although he had advocated Socialism in One Country in the 1920s, this was not intended as an abnegation of internationalism. Stalin was simply emphasising that the USSR should modernise and industrialise **before** it focused on world revolution or at least helping foreign comrades. Promoting Communist movements elsewhere might still be on the agenda, although it did appear, once Stalin was securely in power, to become submerged beneath the drive in the USSR to promote industrialisation almost as a religion of Soviet national development. However, Stalin was no fool, and would have seen the advantages of having other friendly powers in an otherwise hostile world.

Clearly **Source B** also makes a valid argument. Stalin was involved in the struggle for leadership in the USSR. In the 1920s arguments over economic policy were almost inextricably linked with personal agendas, because of the unclear situation of the leadership after Lenin's death. For some time Stalin appeared to be almost a moderate 'man of the centre', whilst exponents of more rapid industrialisation on the Left included Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev. By 1928, with the help of the Right, Stalin had defeated the Left. Those on the Right, seem associated with Bukharin, were less hostile to NEP. Whilst all communists accepted that Industrialisation was a necessary step on the way to Socialism, Bukharin believed that it could be achieved more gradually, by taxing the increasingly prosperous peasantry rather than changing things forcibly. However, once Trotsky and co. had been defeated, with the help of the Bukharinites, Stalin then adopted the policy of the Left and brought in Collectivism and the Five-Year Plans. Therefore rapid industrialisation could be partly seen as a Stalinist tactic to discredit his remaining opposition. We cannot be certain about the extent to which Stalin was swayed by economic arguments, and the extent to which he changed policies to suit a political or personal agenda. However, before being entirely cynical about Stalin's motives, the same charge of expediency could also be laid at the door of all other politicians on the Left and Right, since they all changed their policies at some time between the Revolution and 1929. However, it is also true that there were many Communists in the Party who had always been uneasy about the NEP and the fact that it appeared to be widening class divisions and enabling sections of society to make money and exploit others. We have no reason to suppose that Stalin did not share these views, and that he saw the economic revolution as a means of crushing potential internal enemies of Socialism.

(b) Use **Sources A, B and C** and your own knowledge.

How far did the policy of industrialisation meet Stalin's objectives by 1941?

(24 marks)

Target: AO1(b), AO2(a), AO2(b)

- L1:** Answers may be based on sources or on own knowledge alone, or they may comprise an undeveloped mixture of the two. They may contain some descriptive material which is only loosely linked to the focus of the question or they may address only a part of the question. Alternatively, there may be some explicit comment with little, if any, appropriate support. Answers are likely to be generalised and assertive. There will be little, if any, awareness of differing historical interpretations. The response will be limited in development and skills of written communication will be weak. **0-6**
- L2:** Answers may be based on sources or on own knowledge alone, or they may contain a mixture of the two. They may be almost entirely descriptive with few explicit links to the focus of the question. Alternatively, they may contain some explicit comment with relevant but limited support. They will display limited understanding of differing historical interpretations. Answers will be coherent but weakly expressed and/or poorly structured. **7-11**
- L3:** Answers will show a developed understanding of the demands of the question using evidence from **both** the sources **and** own knowledge. They will provide some assessment backed by relevant and appropriately selected evidence, but they will lack depth and/or balance. There will be some understanding of varying historical interpretations. Answers will, for the most part, be clearly expressed and show some organisation in the presentation of material. **12-16**
- L4:** Answers will show explicit understanding of the demands of the question. They will develop a balanced argument backed by a good range of appropriately selected evidence from the sources and own knowledge, and a good understanding of historical interpretations. Answers will, for the most part, show organisation and good skills of written communication. **17-21**
- L5:** Answers will be well-focused and closely argued. The arguments will be supported by precisely selected evidence from the sources and own knowledge, incorporating well-developed understanding of historical interpretations and debate. Answers will, for the most part, be carefully organised and fluently written, using appropriate vocabulary. **22-24**

Indicative content

Information on Stalin's objectives can be gleaned from the sources. **Source A** is concerned with the USSR'S strength as a great power in a hostile world, with an awareness of how backward and vulnerable the USSR was compared to many other countries. Therefore the objective is rapid industrialisation. The other objective is a political/ideological one: the USSR has a duty to the international proletariat to develop the country as a secure beacon of Communism, plus the implicit assumption that the USSR can only become the worlds first socialist state by industrialising, the first stage on the way to eventual international triumph of Communism and freedom for the workers of the world. Stalin's motives in **Source B** are more about promoting class welfare against supporters of NEP and furthering his own position by using industrialisation as a weapon against Bukharin. In this context Stalin met both the objectives: Bukharin was defeated and Stalin was in power by 1929; whilst as part of rapid

industrialisation, capitalism was effectively destroyed within the USSR, with virtually everything coming under state control and management. Certain motives are implicit in **Source C**. Although the source is just a table of statistics, the rapid pace of development shown supports the emphasis given in **Source A** on rapid industrialisation: materials such as steel and oil were integral to strengthening the USSR both as an industrial and as a military power.

Source C gives some indication of the extent to which Stalin's policy met his objectives. The statistics, whatever reservations we have about them, suggest that there was a rapid increase in Soviet industrial capacity, in the capital goods sector, which was crucial to establishing a firm industrial base and also a military one. There was no indication of quality – but that had never been stated as priority. There is no indication as to whether any targets had been met – but sheer increase in production was impressive. There is no information on other sectors such as consumer goods, but then Stalin's emphasis had always been at the beginning of the plans on building national strength, not creature comforts.

Own knowledge should amplify the sources. One of Stalin's main objectives was met. Although not all targets were met, the USSR did industrialise to the extent that it was a crucial factor in enabling the USSR to defeat Germany in Second World War – the USSR was in a position from 1941 to drastically out-produce Germany because it had built up a strong industrial base, although quality was sometimes more variable. If Stalin's motives for industrialisation were political as well as economic, he was also successful here, since he had secured absolute power by the early 1930s – and the industrialisation drive was treated as a national as well as a Communist crusade, with Stalin ever more firmly in control of the party and the crusade. All opposition (real or imagined) was crushed. Living standards did recover in the later 1930s and there was slightly more attention paid to consumer goods.

Whether Stalin's ideological objectives were met is difficult to say, because it is not certain what they were. Perhaps Stalin did believe that the model he created really did represent socialism. Perhaps he did not believe (with some validity) that the USSR was regarded as a beacon of socialism/Communism by foreign Communists. Stalin appeared to be more of a pragmatist than a leader driven by ideology, but of course all decisions and actions were enveloped in propaganda. There were many faults, blunders and inefficiencies in the Soviet model of rapid industrialisation, which became increasingly problematic for the soviet economy in later years because of the rigidity of the model, but up to 1941 it is certainly possible to construct an argument that in terms of state power, Stalin's policies had been successful.

Question 2

- (a) Explain why, by 1929, Trotsky's personality had undermined his position in the Soviet leadership. (12 marks)

Target: AO1(a), AO1(b)

- L1:** Answers will contain either some descriptive material which is only loosely linked to the focus of the question or some explicit comment with little, if any, appropriate support. Answers are likely to be generalised and assertive. The response will be limited in development and skills of written communication will be weak. **0-2**
- L2:** Answers will demonstrate some knowledge and understanding of the demands of the question. They will **either** be almost entirely descriptive with few explicit links to the question **or** they will provide some explanations backed by evidence that is limited in range and/or depth. Answers will be coherent but weakly expressed and/or poorly structured. **3-6**
- L3:** Answers will demonstrate good understanding of the demands of the question providing relevant explanations backed by appropriately selected information, although this may not be full or comprehensive. Answers will, for the most part, be clearly expressed and show some organisation in the presentation of material. **7-9**
- L4:** Answers will be well-focused, identifying a range of specific explanations, backed by precise evidence and demonstrating good understanding of the connections and links between events/issues. Answers will, for the most part, be well-written and organised. **10-12**

Indicative content

Trotsky failed to become leader through a mixture of circumstances, his own errors and the activities of others, especially Stalin. After the Revolution Trotsky was clearly a significant figure: Lenin's right-hand man, he had master-minded the coup of 1917. Then he negotiated with Germany and created and led the Red Army in the Civil war, and held key posts in defence and foreign affairs. After Lenin's death Trotsky joined Zinoviev and Kamenev in the United Opposition (or Left Opposition). In 1927 he was sacked from the Party, sent into internal exile in 1928 and deported in 1929.

Features of Trotsky's personality included:

- he was disliked by many for perceived arrogance and his Menshevik past; even Lenin was not sure of his suitability (Lenin's Testament)
- he did not have a party base and made no attempt to cultivate one – evidence perhaps of arrogance, indifference or naivety
- he underestimated Stalin – again suggesting arrogance or poor judgement
- he failed to utilise Lenin's Testament against Stalin – whilst there were political reasons for this, it could be interpreted as misjudgement
- he was seen as opportunistic, allying with his former opponents Zinoviev and Kamenev
- his increasing criticisms of Stalin and the direction of policy made him enemies – but again, this did not appear to unduly worry him
- his policy of Permanent Revolution did not fit well with the needs of NEP Russia – a failure to recognise reality?

A balanced answer may consider 'other' factors also – but the answer should focus on Trotsky's personality.

- (b) 'The Struggle for power in the USSR in the years 1924 to 1929 was predominantly about economic policy.'

Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.

(24 marks)

Target: AO1(a), AO1(b), AO2(b)

- L1:** Answers may **either** contain some descriptive material which is only loosely linked to the focus of the question **or** they may address only a limited part of the period of the question. Alternatively, there may be some explicit comment with little, if any, appropriate support. Answers are likely to be generalised and assertive. There will be little, if any, awareness of differing historical interpretations. The response will be limited in development and skills of written communication will be weak. **0-6**
- L2:** Answers will show some understanding of the demands of the question. They will **either** be almost entirely descriptive with few explicit links to the question **or** they may contain some explicit comment with relevant but limited support. They will display limited understanding of differing historical interpretations. Answers will be coherent but weakly expressed and/or poorly structured. **7-11**
- L3:** Answers will show a developed understanding of the demands of the question. They will provide some assessment, backed by relevant and appropriately selected evidence, but they will lack depth and/or balance. There will be some understanding of varying historical interpretations. Answers will, for the most part, be clearly expressed and show some organisation in the presentation of material. **12-16**
- L4:** Answers will show explicit understanding of the demands of the question. They will develop a balanced argument backed by a good range of appropriately selected evidence and a good understanding of historical interpretations. Answers will, for the most part, show organisation and good skills of written communication. **17-21**
- L5:** Answers will be well-focused and closely argued. The arguments will be supported by precisely selected evidence leading to a relevant conclusion/judgement, incorporating well-developed understanding of historical interpretations and debate. Answers will, for the most part, be carefully organised and fluently written, using appropriate vocabulary. **22-24**

Indicative content

The debate about the economic direction of the USSR was very important:

- all Communists accepted that NEP could only be a temporary state of affairs. Despite its ideological gloss, it had been brought in to save a desperate situation, and was a compromise with capitalism
- all Communists believed that there must be industrialisation, to pave the way for socialism. The debate was purely about the method of getting there
- debate was triggered by growing concerns about NEP Russia – growing problems with industry, since the heavy industry run by the state was not doing well, despite a recovery from the dark days of Civil War and War Communism: the disparity between agricultural and industrial recovery was a threat; insecurity about grain collection led to requisitioning

in 1928 ('Urals-Siberian method) there was growing evidence of worker and peasant dissatisfaction

- there was a strong debate about the financing of industrialisation—basically between the left which wanted a rigorous policy and the Right which wanted a gentler approach under which the better off peasantry would be encouraged to do well and pay for industrialisation through taxation
- there was a serious concern about the relative weakness of an industrialised Russia in a hostile world.

A good answer will develop these aspects, but also recognise that they were intertwined with 'other' factors, e.g. Stalin's pronouncements on economic policy were tied up with his ambitions and campaigns against rivals as well as his (possibly genuine) views on the economy. The 'other' factors might include:

- Lenin had left no clear line of succession, criticising all leading Communists in his Testament. Therefore there was bound to be some jockeying for power
- Stalin clearly had ambition, although it is not easy to say if and when he decided that he should be the leader. He was already very powerful before Lenin's death, controlling access to Lenin and running the Party organisation
- Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin etc all had views on how Russia should develop. Some of them e.g. Zinoviev, had their own party base. They were used to intrigue and there was bound to be an element of ambition, although they sometimes, although they sometimes all agreed, e.g. the decision not to publish Lenin's Testament. The changing alliances, e.g. the Triumvirate, followed by the United Opposition, the arguments between Left and Right, were fuelled by personality as well as policies e.g. there was suspicion of Trotsky.

A good answer as well as following a reasoned argument, will be balanced and contain a well substantiated judgement.

Question 3

- (a) Explain why the use of state terror became so widespread in the USSR in the years 1934 to 1939.

(12 marks)

Target: AO1(a), AO1(b)

- L1:** Answers will contain either some descriptive material which is only loosely linked to the focus of the question or some explicit comment with little, if any, appropriate support. Answers are likely to be generalised and assertive. The response will be limited in development and skills of written communication will be weak. **0-2**
- L2:** Answers will demonstrate some knowledge and understanding of the demands of the question. They will **either** be almost entirely descriptive with few explicit links to the question **or** they will provide some explanations backed by evidence that is limited in range and/or depth. Answers will be coherent but weakly expressed and/or poorly structured. **3-6**
- L3:** Answers will demonstrate good understanding of the demands of the question providing relevant explanations backed by appropriately selected information, although this may not be full or comprehensive. Answers will, for the most part, be clearly expressed and show some organisation in the presentation of material. **7-9**
- L4:** Answers will be well-focused, identifying a range of specific explanations, backed by precise evidence and demonstrating good understanding of the connections and links between events/issues. Answers will, for the most part, be well-written and organised. **10-12**

Indicative content

There were many probable reasons for the Terror after 1934:

- there was already a tradition of purges by 1934, which usually meant demotion or expulsion from the Party; although there had already been trials e.g. the engineers' trials, with accusations of sabotage
- Stalin was in supreme power by 1934, had grudges and wanted revenge on old Bolsheviks who had opposed him. Was there an element of paranoia?
- Stalin felt threatened by possible rivals like Kirov, assassinated in 1934
- Stalin wanted total control of the Party at a dangerous time – with a perceived threat from Nazi Germany, and at a time of radical change within the USSR, involving the disruption associated with Collectivisation and industrialisation
- terror was a way of dealing with failure and it was easy to find scapegoats for things which went wrong, e.g. not fulfilling production plans
- many people took the opportunity to settle personal scores or show their enthusiasm for the regime
- in some areas it was proving difficult to control the Party – sometimes local party groups or individuals took the initiative in investigating purges
- the Terror became self-perpetuating, e.g. local police units had targets for arrests and executions which had to be met, regardless of who was 'innocent' or 'guilty'
- the gulag empire provided extra labour for the economic revolution

- Propaganda created a siege mentality – in a hostile world, the enemies of the USSR would grow ever more desperate and therefore the people must seek out traitors within. Terror could extract even more effort from ordinary people
- there was a fear of plots in the army, involving contracts with Germany
- terror was a means of ensuring conformity from those who might not be convinced by the accompanying propaganda.

Candidates may be aware that there are different interpretations of the Terror – with one extreme being the argument that much of the impetus came not from Stalin himself but other groups within the Party and the security forces. The other extreme is the view that Stalin carefully orchestrated the whole thing, just as he called off the worst excesses in 1939.

- (b) 'By 1941 the Great Terror had strengthened the USSR'.
Explain why you agree or disagree with this view. (24 marks)

Target: AO1(a), AO1(b), AO2(b)

- L1:** Answers may **either** contain some descriptive material which is only loosely linked to the focus of the question **or** they may address only a limited part of the period of the question. Alternatively, there may be some explicit comment with little, if any, appropriate support. Answers are likely to be generalised and assertive. There will be little, if any, awareness of differing historical interpretations. The response will be limited in development and skills of written communication will be weak. **0-6**
- L2:** Answers will show some understanding of the demands of the question. They will **either** be almost entirely descriptive with few explicit links to the question **or** they may contain some explicit comment with relevant but limited support. They will display limited understanding of differing historical interpretations. Answers will be coherent but weakly expressed and/or poorly structured. **7-11**
- L3:** Answers will show a developed understanding of the demands of the question. They will provide some assessment, backed by relevant and appropriately selected evidence, but they will lack depth and/or balance. There will be some understanding of varying historical interpretations. Answers will, for the most part, be clearly expressed and show some organisation in the presentation of material. **12-16**
- L4:** Answers will show explicit understanding of the demands of the question. They will develop a balanced argument backed by a good range of appropriately selected evidence and a good understanding of historical interpretations. Answers will, for the most part, show organisation and good skills of written communication. **17-21**
- L5:** Answers will be well-focused and closely argued. The arguments will be supported by precisely selected evidence leading to a relevant conclusion/judgement, incorporating well-developed understanding of historical interpretations and debate. Answers will, for the most part, be carefully organised and fluently written, using appropriate vocabulary. **22-24**

Indicative content

Arguments that the Terror strengthened the USSR could include:

- the Terror strengthened Stalin's own position over the party and the country—this had some advantages when the war came, making it easier to move to a wartime situation when a unified leadership and economy were crucial. Did the purges help the USSR when it came to facing an external threat? The Terror promoted a new batch of leaders and administrators on whom Stalin could rely totally
- Terror helped to extract extra effort and productivity from the population
- it might be argued that, economically, the gulag empire contributed to the economy (although this is debated) and the rapid developments of the Five Year Plan would have been impossible without coercion.

Arguments against the idea of the Terror strengthening the USSR could include:

- Economic: the disruption caused to economic life by the purging of large numbers of peasants and workers, especially specialists, at a time when the state was trying to radically expand and modernise the economy; disruption caused by rapid turnover of enterprise managers; a climate of fear which discouraged initiative and constructive criticism; the general waste of resources; the loss of experienced people
- Political: Stalin's iron control of the Party and society generally created a siege mentality that may have ensured political control, but discouraged the free flow of ideas, encouraged conformism, stifled talent, etc.
- Social: the disruption caused to social life could not have been healthy—demoralisation; break up of families, the resentment which showed itself in some areas of the USSR in the early stages of the German invasion in 1941
- The arrests, imprisonment and executions of millions of citizens must have had a traumatic effect generally
- Soviet military strength was weakened by the purging of the annual forces although there is a debate about how important this was.

Interpretations generally focus on the negative aspects of the purges, because they were clearly devastating in terms of their human and social impact and it can be argued that they weakened the USSR in several ways. Soviet Historians, before it became possible to criticise Stalin, took the line that since there was a threat to the USSR from foreign and internal enemies, such as peasants who opposed collectivisation and 'enemies of Socialism', the purges strengthened the USSR. They did this by keeping Stalin on the road to socialism, or at least his version of it. A more sophisticated argument might be that the Terror somehow prevented a conservative reaction which, if successful, would have prevented the excesses of the purges but not necessarily have 'safeguarded the revolution' or have equipped the USSR to successfully face war from 1941 onwards. There are also various interpretations about how significant the impact of the purges was on the population at large: since certain sections, e.g. Party members and intellectuals were disproportionately purged compared to others. There is an argument (hotly debated) e.g. about whether 'ordinary' workers were affected as much as was sometimes thought, in terms of living conditions, freedom of expression etc. All this is legitimate debate, but it should be linked to the question of the strengthening or weakening of the USSR – and good answers will be reasonably balanced, relevant, well argued and with substantiated judgement.