

STALIN

- Wife 1 I was reading an article on Stalin over the weekend
- Husband 2 Oh no – not Stalin! What did it say?
- Wife 1 Well, it sort of hedged its bets. It kept saying: ‘*Of course* he was a murderous monster’, but then it said his achievements were fantastic. It said that lots of people nowadays in Russia have gone back to thinking that he was wonderful.
- Husband 2 I saw something like that on the telly! – there are thousands of them and every year they go on a march saying they want Stalin back!!!
- Wife 2 Didn’t Khrushchev denounce Stalin?
- Husband 1 He *did*, in 1956 – in a so-called ‘secret speech’. He said that Stalin was a failure, and a paranoid murderer who slaughtered friends and opponents alike.
- Wife 1 The article I read suggested that Khrushchev only said it to undermine the hard-line Stalinists in his government ...
- Husband 1 But it IS the image of Stalin popularised by writers like Solzhenitsyn...
- Husband 2 ... the guy who wrote *The Gulag Archipelago*? I read bits of it. There’s one great story about nobody daring to stop clapping Stalin’s name because the NKVD always sent the first person to stop clapping to Siberia!
- Wife 2 You mean the KGB
- Husband 2 ... it was called the NKVD in Stalin’s time. There were massive purges after 1934. Two thirds of government delegates were killed. Three-quarters of the generals and admirals. A million members of the Communist Party!! The head of the NKVD!!! Everyone had to do exactly as Stalin wanted. Show Trials. Enforced Russification. Terror purges against Muslims. Twenty million people – including 3 million kulaks – sent to the gulag.
- Wife 2 Where was the ‘Gulag’?
- Husband 2 It wasn’t just one place – it’s the word for the whole system of workcamps all over the USSR.
- Husband 1 The thing about Stalin’s Terror was that it wasn’t just about getting rid of opponents. Everybody had to worship Stalin...
- Husband 2 ... the cult of Stalin ...
- Husband 1 ... Yes – Mothers taught their children that Stalin was ‘the wisest man of the age’ They wrote poems thanking Stalin for bringing the spring! History books and photographs were changed to make him the hero of EVERYTHING, and the names and pictures of purged people ... disappeared.

- Wife 1 But it was like Hitler's Germany – you could go out and your house wasn't robbed. The article I read said that people valued the sense of security, even if they *did* live in a dictatorship.
- Wife 2 I know about his 5-Year Plans – didn't he move the Soviet Union into the modern world?
- Husband 2 Without a doubt. There were huge increases in the production of things like coal, oil, and steel – they built Magnitogorsk, the Turkestan-Siberian Railroad, the Dneiper Dam, the Belomor Canal. By the end of Second World War, Soviet production was outstripping German industry. The achievement was incredible...
- Husband 1 ... all except, of course, collectivisation.
- Wife 2 What do you mean?
- Husband 2 Stalin tried to modernise Soviet agriculture by forcing all the peasants to unite their farms into village 'collectives'. He reckoned then that they would be able to afford tractors and fertilisers.
- Husband 1 But the peasants thought – 'if I can't have it, neither will the government'. So they killed all their animals and burned their barns – and there was just this most awful famine. Five million people starved to death in the Ukraine. Agricultural production never really recovered. Not such an 'incredible achievement' there, I think – more like a mass-slaughter.
- Wife 1 But my article said that Russians love Stalin's memory precisely *because* he kicked them into greatness – he ruled them hard, but he gave them an EMPIRE ... they had pride, I suppose. They saw themselves as Pioneers, going out, overcoming obstacles, working incredibly hard, but ushering in a new Communist world.
- Husband 1 But The human cost was just too dreadful. For every Stakhanovite, there were thousands who died in misery from overwork, accidents, or hunger, or cold. All those Soviet nuclear scientists – they gave Stalin the atomic bomb, but they all died with radiation poisoning.
And the USSR disintegrated barely 50 years later – was it worth it?