From 1924, up to 1941, Stalin consolidated his personal power and transformed the U.S.S.R. Discuss.

Joseph Stalin was one of the most powerful rulers of the twentieth century. He was able to seize control of an incredibly vast and disorderly country and maintain that control for thirty years. It is baffling how millions of Russians allowed this cruel leader to control nearly every part of their lives. Stalin established himself as dictator of Russia by using his political skill to defeat Trotsky in the power struggle of the 1920s, then by using ruthlessness to crush his rivals in the 1930s. Joseph Stalin’s changes both socially, politically and economically were able to raise the nation from the dark ages and into the world as a primary leader and although Stalin was a cruel leader responsible for the deaths of millions of his own people, he was able to transform Russia into one of the most powerful in the world.

There were two main rivals to succeed Lenin as leader of the communists - Leon Trotsky and Josef Stalin. As General Secretary of the party, Stalin was able to appoint people loyal to him to key positions of power in the government, also known as the Politburo. This allowed him to gain support during the debates of the mid-1920s. Trotsky, on the other hand, was something of an outsider, who was never fully trusted by many Party members. This mistrust was fuelled by Trotsky’s rude and arrogant behaviour. Stalin used these character flaws to isolate Trotsky within the Politburo. He also took care to always be seen to be taking Lenin’s side in the policy debates that raged in the mid-1920s. As such, he supported NEP over rapid industrialisation, and endorsed the ban on factions inside the Party. He also attacked Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, offering instead his own idea of ‘socialism in one country’. Stalin won out in all three debates. By the time Trotsky recognised the threat Stalin posed and took steps to attack him, it was too late. Stalin had stacked the Politburo with his own supporters, and had Trotsky expelled from the Party. Stalin had Trotsky expelled from Russia in 1929 and murdered in 1940. Stalin was now undisputed leader but despite his position, Stalin’s power was anything but absolute. He had rivals in the politburo, and could be removed from his power base as general secretary if the Party so wished. He now set out to turn this power into dictatorial power. Starting in 1929, Stalin used propaganda to help him consolidation his power.

From the outset, propaganda was an essential tool in the consolidation of Stalin’s power. The campaign to create a ‘cult of Stalin’ began in 1929, when an enormous celebration was planned for his 50th birthday. Using the Party’s control over the media, Stalin was presented as the ‘Supreme Genius of Humanity’ – the true successor to Lenin. His face now began to appear everywhere – in photographs and paintings, on the sides of houses and buildings. Cities and towns were named in his honour. Children were taught to give thanks to him for their happy lives. In 1935, Stalin commissioned an official history of the Communist Party of the USSR, known as the Short Course. In this book’s version of events, it was Stalin who played the dominant role in organising the November Revolution and who devised the strategies which won Civil War. Forty two million copies of the Short Course were printed, and it became required reading for all new Party members. As the sole version of Soviet history now available, it helped win for Stalin a group of new supporters and cemented his popularity with the younger generation.
However, propaganda alone was not enough to transform Russia into a totalitarian state. As Alan Bullock has observed, Stalin understood “that propaganda is most effective when it is backed by terror.” (Bullock: 305)

No sooner had Stalin eliminated his rivals from the Politburo in 1928, than he began using the secret police to enforce his will. He realised the importance of providing the people with scapegoats – enemies they could blame for the nation’s (and therefore their own) problems. Beginning with the trial of fifty engineers for sabotage at the Shakhty mines in 1928, Stalin unleashed a wage of repression – aimed at diverting attention from his own failures, and preparing people for the bloodletting that was to come. In 1930, he purged the so-called ‘Industrial Party’; the following year, he turned on the ‘Union Bureau’. All the while, he honed his killers in the campaign against the kulaks, during the collectivisation process.

The great purges were sparked by the murder of Sergei Kirov in 1934. Whether Stalin ordered the murder or not, he certainly used it as a pretext to unleash a series of spectacular show trials, aimed at discrediting and eliminating his enemies within the Central Committee.

In the first of these trials, in 1936, Stalin eliminated the so-called ‘Oppositionists’ – those Old Bolsheviks who had opposed him in the 1920s (men like Kamenev and Zinoviev). The second set of trials, in 1937, was aimed at Stalin’s own allies – those who had sought a policy of relaxation and reconciliation at the 1934 Party Congress (such as Pyatikov and Radek), contrary to Stalin’s wishes. The intention was to demonstrate that Stalin would brook no opposition, even among his own allies.

The final set of trials, in 1938, eliminated all the remaining members of Lenin’s original Party (men like Bukharin and Rykov). It was accompanied by a full-scale assault on every institution in the Soviet Union: the Party, the army, the bureaucracy, the cultural organisations, the industrial enterprises, even the secret police. In all, 18 million people died during the purges of the 1930s.

Of course, the purges were not enough to establish Stalin’s extraordinary accumulation of power. Stalin also used both collectivisation and industrialisation to consolidate power in Russia during the 1930s. Both policies allowed him to gain control over the economy, and to discredit or eliminate his rivals within the Communist Party. The most effective means of increasing Stalin’s power was collectivisation. This involved the elimination of private ownership of agricultural land, and its replacement with a system of state-owned and collectively-owned farms. The peasants who worked on these farms were under the control of the Party, which in turn was under the control of Stalin. Inadvertently, collectivisation also gave Stalin the opportunity to eliminate large numbers of ‘class enemies’ – the kulaks and to encourage Party members to murder. Seven million people starved to death during the collectivisation process. Countless more were sent to labour camps, where they met a similar fate.

Industrialisation was also crucial in helping Stalin consolidate his power. He understood that he could not hope to rule without popular support. In Stalin’s case, industrialisation shifted millions of people from the countryside to the cities, where jobs were plentiful and living standards higher than on state-run farms. Many of these people – formerly illiterate peasants – benefited from Stalin’s rule. Stalin also used the perception of economic success to consolidate his support within the Party and among the people. Economic achievements were impressive, given that they were accomplished
over a period of only ten years. Not surprisingly, they elicited considerable respect and admiration from people in the USSR and in the West. Hence it can be seen that collectivisation and industrialisation were crucial to Stalin’s consolidation of power.

In his case, this was achieved via the industrialisation process, which shifted millions of people from the countryside to the cities, where jobs were plentiful and wages were comparatively good. Many of these people – formerly illiterate peasants – benefited from Stalin's rule. On November 7, 1927, the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution Stalin introduced his new plan for Russia’s economy. The Five Year Plan, was Stalin’s solution to boosting Russia’s economy. Stalin promised to make the social lives of Russians better with lower taxes, pensions, equal status for women, and allowing cultural differences. Stalin was demanding extreme changes in the country’s productions. He wanted increases of 111% in coal production, 200% in iron and 335% in electric power. Stalin said that his plan was necessary because without it, Russia would never be able to stand up against a possible invasion, however he eventually began to use his five-year plan to wipe out those he feared and consolidate his power, kulaks, higher income farmers, were very quickly eliminated from Russia on Stalin’s orders. Millions of kulaks were arrested and expelled to regions in the arctic where they died. Stalin’s efforts did pay off and the economy was largely improved but it came at a great price. Stalin knew how far behind Russia was in the world economy and made it his personal goal to create a powerful country that could support itself.

Stalin used his political skills to out-manoeuvre his rivals and acquire the powers of a dictator. He used propaganda, censorship and a cult of personality to gain the support of the people. His use of collectivisation and industrialisation also contributed to his consolidation of power but it was his use of fear and terror that truly consolidated his power as ruler. While he did oversee the industrial development of the country, allowing it to resist the Nazi onslaught in 1941, he also subjected his people to a regime of lies, fear and dictatorship, which resulted in over 20 million deaths.