

Fact and opinion in History

Unfortunately, we can't recreate the past in order to understand it! As historians, we try to examine the past through fragments which are left to us (known as 'evidence'), including artefacts, written accounts from the time, artwork and even music.

It is sometimes useful, when reading works of History, to separate out information which the author is stating as fact and that which is being given as their opinion. Some information about the past is broadly agreed upon and well backed up with evidence, so might be called 'factual'. Other points which historians make might be based on their own opinion or interpretation of the past.

Whilst some people would argue that we can never be certain of the 'truth' about the past, separating fact from opinion can at least help us to decide whether we agree or disagree with another historian's arguments.

Can you separate out fact from opinion to reach a conclusion about Stalin?

Task:

Read the historian's account of Stalin's impact on Russia (p.3) then complete the activities that follow.

1) Stalin's positive and negative impacts

Record examples from the text of Stalin's achievements in Russia and of the actions he is criticised for.

Good things Stalin did for Russia	Bad things Stalin did for Russia

2) Fact and opinion

Choose two different colours. On your copy of the historian's account, highlight all the information being used as fact in the passage in one colour. In the other, highlight all the opinions which are given in the passage.

3) This historian's interpretation

Look at the text which you have highlighted as opinion. Do you think the author of this passage is pro-Stalin, or anti-Stalin? How can you tell?

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4) Reaching a conclusion

Now read the last short paragraph again. Do you agree that Stalin deserves to be remembered as one of the greatest men of the 20th century? Explain your answer.

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Stalin once told Winston Churchill that 'collectivisation cost 10 million lives.' Does that alter your opinion of Stalin? Explain your answer carefully.

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An historian's account of Stalin's impact on Russia

'Stalin's five year plans were a great success. He took over a country destroyed by war, revolution, civil war and famine and turned it into a superpower, able to defeat an invasion by Hitler's Germany.

The five year plans were designed to improve Russia's agriculture and industry. In agriculture, land was taken away from the peasants and turned into collective farms, able to use tractors and other modern machinery, and to produce more food, essential to feed the workers in the new industrial towns. More food was also needed so that some could be exported to pay for the new machines which Russia was importing.

Table 1: Agricultural production 1928–1945 (recorded in millions)

	1928	1940	1945
Cattle	67	55	45
Pigs	28	28	11
Horses	36	21	11
Grain (tons)	69	75	47

The peasants welcomed collective farms, and were eager to do their bit to build the new Russia. Stalin's men met with very little resistance as they toured the country to carry out the new ideas.

In industry too, the five year plans were a great success. Iron, steel, coal and oil production increased enormously:

Table 2: Industrial Production 1928-1945 (recorded in million tons)

	1928	1940	1945
Iron	6	30	-
Steel	4	18	12
Coal	36	166	149
Oil	12	31	19

Everywhere in Russia new towns and factories sprang up, often in the middle of nowhere, and enthusiastic young communists worked hard to meet the new production targets. Hard work was rewarded by extra food and extra pay. Workers who slacked, or who did not reach their targets, were punished as spies and saboteurs. By 1940 Russian industry was much stronger than in 1928. Russia was a superpower.

There is no doubt that Stalin was a great leader, who did more than anyone this century, to make Russia a powerful, industrial country. He was popular and well-liked. He deserves to be remembered as one of the greatest men of the twentieth century.'