‘He brought his country and his people nothing but harm’
Assess the validity of this view with regard to Stalin’s domestic policies in the USSR between 1929 and 1953?

After emerging successful in the power struggle in 1929, Stalin, over the next 24 years, carried out several key policies which were to transform the Soviet Union; collectivisation, the five year plans, the great purges along with an expansion of the cult of personality, increased propaganda and censorship. These domestic policies caused extreme harm to both his people and his country. However, despite the immense human suffering, some aspects of these policies can also be seen as successful for the USSR as a whole. The economic policies turned USSR into an industrialised nation, allowing it to survive the German onslaught in the Second World War and laying the foundations for it becoming a superpower after 1945.

Stalin’s policy of collectivisation can be seen to have caused nothing but harm to his people and to the Soviet Union. Firstly, Stalin’s main push of collectivisation from 1929 to 1941 resulted in up to 14.5 million kulaks being killed, and caused a massive famine in the Ukraine from 1932-1933, causing 3 to 5 million people to starve. Grain output dropped from 73 million tons in 1928 to 68 million tons in 1933, while the number of farm animals also dropped dramatically due to the peasants burning crops and slaughtering their animals rather than handing them over to the collective farms. Even though less grain was produced, Stalin took more of it to give it to the cities, which contained only around 20% of the Soviet Union’s population and this suggest Stalin allowed his people to starve, thus causing nothing but harm to his people.

Economically collectivisation was also a disaster for the Soviet Union. Grain harvests dropped dramatically in the early 1930s and did not recover to their 1928 level until the end of the 1930s. It also did not recover from its loss of animals until after the Second World War. Thus Stalin’s forced rapid collectivisation resulted in the stagnation of Russia’s agricultural economy, which would remain the Soviet Union’s weakest point until its collapse.

The Purges that Stalin carried out between 1936-1939 also brought nothing but harm to the Soviet people and the State. Around 3.5 million people were imprisoned or executed during these three years. Thus Stalin killed massive amounts of his own people often brutally, not because it helped the state or the people, but because of his paranoia that there were enemies everywhere. This suggests that Stalin was not acting in the best interests of the state or his people, but just to satisfy his paranoia and to maintain his despotic hold of the Soviet Union.

The purges weakened many areas of society, but one of the most important areas that was weakened was the military. Stalin killed most of the Soviet Union’s most educated and intelligent army officers and generals. Moshe Lewin describes the purges as destroying its ‘backbone and brain’. 80% of colonels, all admirals and their replacements were killed and 90% of all generals were killed. This left the Russian military exhausted and unable to fight. Thus in the Winter war of 1939 to 1940, when Russia invaded the tiny country of Finland, the Soviets lost 6 times as many troops as the Finns. It also left the Soviet Union weakened in the face of the Nazi invasion in 1941. This suggests that Stalin’s domestic policy of the purges was detrimental to the Soviet people and state, and did nothing but harm.
Stalin’s expansion of his cult of personality and censorship from 1929 to 1953 also caused harm to the Soviet Union and its people. The intense propaganda glorifying Stalin along with the control of all history and culture allowed no room for freedoms of any kind. Socialist Realism was the only art form allowed; literary progress which was stopped by Zhdanov, who imprisoned many “anti-state” cultural icons like Anna Akhmatova. Thus Stalin hurt Russia’s culture. Robert Service writes, for example, that “No great work of literature was published in the 1930s and artistic figures went in fear of their lives”.

However, despite the horrors and harm of collectivisation and the purges, there were some aspects of Stalin’s domestic policies between 1929 and 1953, that did in fact bring benefits to the Soviet people. Firstly, collectivisation did help the industrial development of the Soviet Union. Stalin’s agricultural policies created massive immigration to cities, whose urban population from 1928 to 1939 increased from 26 million to 38 million, with the number employed increasing from 11 million to 26 million in the same time frame. This contributed to the massive industrialisation of Russia which was to play a key part in its survival in World War Two. Secondly, agriculture was able to grow quickly after 1945, reaching 1941 levels by 1952, indicating that by this time the collective farms were working more efficiently.

The five years plans from 1929 to 1953, enacted by Stalin as part of his domestic policy, are possibly the best example of Stalin’s domestic policies helping the Soviet Union. The first five year plan, from 1929 to 1933, increased pig iron output from 3 million tons to 6 million tons, crude oil output from 11 million tons to 21 million tons, electricity supplied from 5 million gigavolts to 13.5 million gigavolts, and created around 50,000 new tractors for farmers to use by 1933. This meant that by 1937 the Soviet Union’s steel output almost reached that of Germany’s. The second and third Five Year plans concentrated more on the armaments industry and by 1940, the Soviet Union was in a position to create the weaponry needed to fight Germany. In the battle of Kursk in 1942, for example, the Soviet Union was able to field 3,400 tanks in the largest tank battle in history compared to Germany’s 2,400 tanks. Thus it could be argued that this industrialisation allowed the Soviet Union to survive during the Second World War.

Moreover, after the war, the fourth and fifth five year plans from 1946-1950 and 1951-1955 enriched the Soviet’s heavy industry, causing steel production in 1952 to be double that of 1941, and coal production in the Donets basin in 1952 to exceed that of 1941. Therefore, Stalin’s five year plan helped to industrialize the Soviet Union. This came at a cost to the Soviet people in terms of the working and living conditions, but it could be argued that the fact that it allowed the Soviet Union to survive the war and to rebuild after the war was ultimately a key point which did not harm the Soviet state or people, but rather helped them.

The weight of evidence is heavily against Stalin’s domestic policy being successful for his people or the State. The quality of life dropped, culture stagnated, millions died both through the purges and through a man-made famine. However, ultimately and despite the human suffering, the industrialisation aspect of his domestic policy has positive rather than negative results. The Soviet Union’s industry grew faster than any other country in the history of the world, and this contributed to the Soviets' victory in the Second World War and its emergence as a superpower after 1945.