Examine the political and economic developments in the USSR between 1945 and 1953.

In the immediate aftermath of the Great Patriotic War, the USSR was left in a destitute state, over 25 million soviet citizens had been killed and the economy was in shambles with large parts of the Soviet industry having been destroyed in the war. Between the end of the war in 1945 and his death in 53, Soviet leader Stalin pursued economic and political policies designed to consolidate his power and re-construct the devastated USSR. These economic and political policies had a large influence on Soviet society and the social policies of the government which aimed to eradicate western influence from all spheres of soviet life.

Soviet leader Stalin’s primary political goal in the aftermath of the war was to secure his role as supreme leader and suppress any possible political dissent. Historian Robert Service notes that Stalin was “disquieted” by the calls for reform in the aftermath of the war by broad sections of society. Stalin was especially weary of the praise accorded to the Soviet generals who had helped to win the war, fearing they posed a threat to his rule. In 1948 Stalin demoted the praised general Zhukov to a commander and sent him to Odessa where he was far away from the centres of Soviet power. The same fate also awaited the general Antonov. Due to enthusiasm for the regime that had been generated during the war, party membership had increased from 4 to 6 million and Stalin used this as an opportunity to purge potential rivals from the party. When Stalin’s right hand man Zhdanov died in 1948, the newly created MVD under Beria and Malenkov arrested and tortured his deputies and purged the entire Leningrad party, which Stalin suspected of plotting against him. Stalin achieved his political aims by removing the generals of the war from positions of influence and purging potential rivals and maintaining his role as supreme leader until his death in 1953.

The main economic goal of the soviet state in the post-war years was re-construction. The war had destroyed half of soviet industrial capacity and crippled the economy. Whilst some markets had been allowed to operate during the war, in 1946 Stalin announced the beginning of a five year re-construction plan that returned the economy to its pre-war state of centralised control. The plan mobilised the workforce of the USSR towards re-construction as workers were required to perform an additional 30 hours work a week above their 8 hour work days. Important re-construction efforts like the re-building of the Dnieper dam in 1946 were successful. Industrial re-construction was aided by reparations from Germany in the form of transported German industrial goods and slave labour from POWs and civilians. The plan was focused 85% on heavy industry and according to historian Alec Nove, was “largely a success” as coal production in the Donetsk region surpassed pre-war levels by 1946 and other areas such as capital goods also re-bounded.

Whilst Stalin achieved his aim of consolidating political control in the aftermath of the war, his actions came at a massive human cost and were often influenced more by paranoia than any legitimate threat to his rule. In 1946, the NKVD was re-named the MVD and Beria was installed as its head, the MVD engaged in intense political suppression and purging and in the post-war years the population of soviet concentration camps grew exponentially to 2.5 million. Furthermore, Stalin became increasingly suspicious of the Jews of the USSR, who
held many influential positions in the party and made up a large portion of the professional class. Stalin suspected the Jews of having loyalty to the newly created Israel and their families in the USA over the USSR and began to suppress the Jewish community. In 1948 the Jewish anti-fascist committee was shut down and many Jewish scientists and party members were purged, synagogues and Jewish schools were also closed and foreign minister Molotov’s wife was arrested in December 1948 for speaking Hebrew to the Israeli ambassador. In 1953 prominent Jewish doctors were implicated in a plot to poison soviet leaders and made to confess under torture. Stalin’s paranoia became so great that when he was found unresponsive and in need of medical help on the morning of March 3 1953 no doctor would treat him for fear of being implicated in a conspiracy were he to die, which he did.

Similarly to the political developments in the USSR, the economic policies enacted after the war came at a great human cost and in many areas were ineffective. Whilst industry recovered to pre-war levels, the focus on capital goods meant that few consumer goods were available to the population to buy producing subpar living standards. The immense industrial output also created bottlenecks in production that were not easily resolved. The most damage was done to agriculture, during the war over 100,000 collective farms had been destroyed and millions of farmers sent to the frontlines or otherwise killed or wounded, whilst some privatisation had kept the farms afloat during the war period, the re-collectivisation after the war decreased the incentive of farmers to produce goods. In 1946 over 40 million tonnes of grain were produced, half that of the 1940 level. This problem was compounded by a shortage of willing farmers as many had joined the army and did not which to return to farming, and the policies of the government which procured 70% of grain, raised taxes and diverted electricity and building materials to the industrial sector. In areas of Ukraine famine like conditions emerged during the drought of 1946. In regards to agriculture, the economic aims of the soviet state were not in the post-war years and the human cost was huge.

The economic and political developments in the USSR also impacted the social policy of the state and vice-versa. Stalin’s desire to consolidate control was expressed in campaigns of Zhdanov to completely wipe western influences from Soviet society. Zhdanov purged writers and musicians and promoted only soviet approved “socialist realism” as acceptable artistic expressions. Furthermore, returning POWs who spent time in western camps found themselves in a desperate situation upon arriving back in the USSR, to prevent them from “corrupting” soviet society with western influence over half were sent to the gulag. Soviet citizens were banned from leaving the USSR and nearly no foreigners were allowed in. The policy of removing western influence heavily damaged science, as Darwinian natural selection was condemned as a capitalist invention and the theories of the scientist Lysenko were promoted who believed exposing seeds to cold weather would allow them to grow in winter. This contributed to the failure of soviet economic policy in the agricultural sphere.

In conclusion, the soviet state under Stalin during the post-war years pursued political and economic policies that consolidated Stalin’s dictatorial rule and re-built soviet industry. However, these policies resulted in immense human losses and were not always effective as
Stalin became increasingly paranoid towards the end of his life and the soviet agricultural sphere was damaged by collectivisation. The social polices of the state, which were geared towards removing all western influence from Soviet society, were influenced by the political and economic aims of the state and also influence them.

Overall grade: 13/15
Clear focus with high level understanding of material and implication
Generally, well-structured and balanced. Paragraph openers could be more clearly focused. Knowledge is detailed, relevant and accurate. Clear contextual understanding. Clear and coherent arguments. Some attempt to consider different perspectives.