To what extent were Stalin's domestic policies successful up to 1941?

After victory in the power struggle and his assumption of the role of dictator of the USSR in 1929, Joseph Stalin went on to pursue a wide range of policies that dramatically transformed Soviet society. Some of the most important of these policies were the purges of 1934 to 1938, the collectivization of agriculture from 1928, and the three five year plans between 1928 to 1941 in industry. All of Stalin’s methods and policies were pursued to with specific political, ideological, and economic aims. Stalin set out to consolidate his personal political dictatorship, gain control over the countryside and increase agricultural productivity and to ‘catch up’ with the west industrially. He also wanted to Sovietize society. Stalin achieved many of these aims, however, others met with failure.

The large scale purges of the party that Stalin undertook between 1934 and 1938 had the political goal of consolidating the personal power of Stalin and removing his potential rivals and enemies from the party. Stalin had faced increasing opposition by 1933 to the extreme nature of his collectivization policies and of elements of his industrialization programs. The political purges began in 1934 non-violently as 22% of Communist Party members were removed from party rolls for ‘inactivity’. However, after the assassination of Kirov in December 1934, and the purges became increasingly violent. Stalin used the murder of his potential rival to unleash a full-scale and bloody political purge. Between 1936 and 1938 hundreds of thousands of individuals deemed "enemies of the people" were arrested, and there were show trials of former leading part member. Stalin managed to eliminate his critics within the party such as Ryukin, who had circulated a 200-page manifesto against Stalin as well as old Bolsheviks like Zinoviev and Kamanev who Stalin had later taken out of prison to be executed. Stalin’s aim of eliminating his political rivals was achieved by the end of the purges as everyone he even suspected of being hostile to him was imprisoned or killed and this consolidating his personal dictatorship.

The policy of collectivization of agriculture, primarily in the western regions of the USSR such as Ukraine, between 1929 and 1936 was carried out with the ideological aim of Sovietizing the peasants by forcing them to live communally, under states control, and abandon their private plots and property. This would re-mold them into a more "soviet mentality". Stalin saw the peasants as conservative and traditional and were a class in society that was not revolutionary in Marxist terms. Stalin also had economic aims for collectivization, he wanted to increase agricultural output per peasant so that the increasing number of industrial workers [created by the 5-year plans] of the cities could be better fed. He also needed to control and produce surplus grain for export to pay for his industrialization and infrastructure programs. Stalin's policy of collectivization was successful in bringing peasants into collective farms. In 1930, at the start of the program only 5% of peasants lived on collective farms, and however this number dramatically increased to 90% by 1936. Collectivization also saw the end of land holding peasants [Kulaks] who were deemed "class enemies" by the communist party and who were likely to resist state orders and the seizure of land and property. Overall, Stalin achieved his ideological aim of collectivizing the peasantry and he succeeded in gaining control over the countryside.
The policy of implementing Five-year plans, which started with the First 5-year plan in 1928, aimed economically to fully industrialize the Soviet Union so it could compete with the west, become self-sufficient, and could develop its own significant arms industry for homeland security. It also intended to ‘transform’ society and together with Stalin’s collectivization program has been called the ‘Great Turn’. The five year plans involved a vast apparatus of centrally planned organization which set quotas for specific production targets with a focus on increasing the industrial capacity of the Soviet Union. The first 5-year plan was successful as it led to a tripling in the production of electricity in the USSR, and a doubling in the production of coal and iron ore. It also moved the USSR from 5th place to 2nd place in global industrial production. The second 5-year plan, launched in 1933 focused on heavy industry and succeeded in making the USSR self-sufficient in machine production, and was on a par with Germany in steel production. The first and second 5 year plans were deemed to have met targets ahead of deadline, in just over 4 years for the first and within four years for the second. The third 5-year plan focused more on armaments productions, including tanks and in the establishment of arms factories in the east of the Ural mountains. Overall, the five year plans resulted in a significant increase in industrial capacity and production, and represented a considerable modernization of the Soviet economy from its foundation in 1928.

Despite achieving political success in terms of consolidating Stalin’s control, the purges had key negatives results. The purges removed Stalin’s political opponents from the party however, they also dealt massive damage to the Soviet society. The party was obedient, but its leaders were not necessarily in positions of power due to merit. It also meant that there was no toleration of debate or criticism. Stalin also engaged in a deep purge of the Soviet military from 1937 and this removed most of the Red Army’s top commanders and all eleven of its war commissars. This significantly weakened its ability to fight effectively and be prepared for a general war. This was evidenced when the USSR went to war with Finland in November 1940, and found itself engaged in a difficult stalemate despite its much larger army. The purges also removed many top managers, scientists, and technicians and this weakened the performance of the USSR’s centrally planned economy. The human cost of the purges was also catastrophic as over 1 million people were killed in the great terror of 1936 to 1938, a great many of whom were completely innocent of any crime. Therefore, the failures of the purges were that they damaged Soviet society at all levels.

The policy of collectivization also resulted in many key failures. Peasants actively resisted attempts to forcefully collectivize them as the party employed terror tactic to coerce peasants to join collective farms. Many destroyed their grain and livestock in the process, and this meant that productivity actually declined, and it was not until 1936 that grain production reached 1928 levels; only much later did livestock production reach pre-collectivization levels. Furthermore, the human cost of collectivization was immense as even though food production fell, the food that was produced was confiscated by Soviet authorities to be transported to workers in the cities. The Ukraine was especially targeted and some 7 million Ukrainians died in the famine of 1932 to 1934. Historian Christopher Read has described collectivization as "a civil war by the party against the peasants." Thus,
although the political aim was achieved in the countryside, the immense human and economic cost must be seen as a damning failure.

In addition, the implementation of the 5-year plans was a failure in many respects. The quotas set for each of the plans were impossibly high and the official economic data produced by the Soviet government were unreliable. Furthermore, the centrally planned nature of the process was ridden with corruption as managers and directors were purged for political purposes and party officials diverted resources to their own "pet projects". The infrastructure was not sufficiently developed, and railways clogged up with the movement of more material than they could handle. Also, the focus on heavy industries meant other areas such as textiles and consumer goods were left undeveloped. There was also significant human cost to the seemingly impressive industrial growth as prisoners from gulags were used as slave labour, thousands perished on construction projects such as the Moscow Metro and hydroelectric dams. Furthermore, peasants expelled from their land during collectivization came to make up a large portion of the workforce, however, it has been estimated that only 7% possessed the skills needed to work in a factory. Thus, although the 5-year plans led to some increase in industrial output living conditions did not improve for workers or peasants improve and the processes of the command system was ridden with inefficiency.

In conclusion, Stalin's main domestic policies were largely successful in achieving their aims by 1941. He had consolidated his dictatorship, gained control of the countryside and gain production, and he had industrialized the USSR. However, each of his policies brought about immense human suffering and terrorized all aspects of soviet society.