

## The Soviet Union under Stalin

The Revolution led by Lenin was complete by 1921, but it had left the country shattered and devastated. Farms were in ruin, and there was little food. Drought as well as the war produced the worst famine in memory, in which from 50 to 90 per cent of the population were starving. Industrial revolution completely collapsed, such that by 1921 the output of steel and textiles was four percent of the output in 1913. Peasants and workers were rioting, and Bolshevik sailors at Kronstadt openly revolted. The Revolution had indeed devoured its own children.

Lenin was shrewd enough to realize that he could not withstand a revolt by the peasants. They were still in a revolutionary mood after having seized land from the landlords, and were not about to part with it. Lenin had at first seized grain from farmers without payment and had nationalized heavy industry, railroads and banks. There was fear that Lenin would attempt to take land from the peasants, and they had no intention of letting this happen. Lenin himself knew that the government was not strong enough to do so.

In March, 1921, Lenin announced the New Economic Policy, (NEP) which re-established limited economic freedom. His plan was to rebuild both agriculture and industry. Under the plan, a "grain tax" was imposed on the peasants; however they were allowed to sell their surplus in free markets. They were also encouraged to buy goods from private traders and manufacturers whenever they could. The plan was successful both politically and economically. Politically, Lenin struck a deal with the peasants, the only force capable of overthrowing his government. Economically, the NEP caused the economy to recover rapidly. By 1926, industrial output exceeded 1913 output and the peasants were producing almost as much grain as before the war. With shorter work hours and increased benefits, urban workers were also living better.

Unfortunately, Lenin did not live long after this. He suffered a series of debilitating strokes which left him speechless. While he convalesced in his Kremlin apartment or in the countryside, a struggle broke out within Bolshevik circles as to who would succeed him. The contest was ultimately down to Leon Trotsky, the brilliant orator who had negotiated the treaty of Brest-Litovsk for Lenin, and Joseph Stalin.

Born Joseph Dzhugashvili in Georgia, Stalin was the son of a shoe factory worker who drank heavily and often beat his wife and son. His mother, as was the mother of Hitler, was very protective of him. His mother sent him to seminary to study for the orthodox priesthood at considerable expense, but Stalin was soon in trouble with the authorities when he opposed the Russification of education in Georgia, and was expelled. He often read books about a Robin Hood type character named Koba, who became his hero. Later in life, his friends (to the extent he had any) addressed him as Koba. Stalin joined the Bolsheviks in 1903 and was engaged in a number of revolutionary activities including a bank robbery to get money for the movement. The robbery drew the attention of Lenin and Stalin soon became his favorite. He changed his last name to Stalin, which means "man of steel."

Stalin was cruel, ruthless and paranoid. He did not allow loyalties or relationships to interfere with his goals. After Lenin's stroke, he brutally scolded Lenin's wife for not allowing Stalin to see him. Lenin's confidence in Stalin had already been shaken because he considered him too ruthless. After the incident with the wife, Lenin demanded that Stalin apologize, and when he refused to do so, issued his last will which left Trotsky as his heir. Lenin then suffered a fatal stroke and died at age 54; however Stalin managed to secure and destroy the will.

Stalin had become Central Committee Secretary just before Lenin's first stroke and used his position to win allies. His personal philosophy (or at least that which he professed outwardly) was of "socialism in one country," namely that the Soviet Union should build and perfect a socialist state on its own. Trotsky had argued that the revolution would only succeed if it cascaded quickly all over Europe. Stalin's position won him the support of the younger militants in the party, and he soon allied himself with Trotsky's personal enemies. Trotsky was ultimately expelled from the party and the Soviet Union in 1929. He then allied with moderates who were opposed to Trotsky's followers to defeat them, and then

turned on his own allies, eliminating them one by one. In 1927, he secured from the Central Committee a general condemnation of any "deviation from the general party line." Stalin planned to impose on the Soviet Union that which he called a "revolution from above."

Stalin's paranoia led him to quickly distrust anyone who was close to him. Almost all his advisors were arrested and shot on his own orders. When his own son attempted suicide and failed, his first comment was "the idiot can't even shoot straight." He never rested easily while Trotsky was still alive, even though Trotsky was living in Mexico City. He hired an assassin who gained access to Trotsky by cultivating a love affair with his daughter. When he was alone with Trotsky in the latter's office, he murdered him by striking him in the back of the head with a mountain climber's ice pick.

**The Five Year Plans:** In 1927, the party which had ratified Stalin's consolidation of power adopted the first Five Year Plan. The Plan called for industrial production to be increased within five years by 250 per cent, with heavy industry to grow even faster. Agricultural production was to increase by 150 percent, and one fifth of Soviet peasants were to give up their private plots and join "collective" farms, in which groups of people all worked one large tract of land together. This was Stalin's "second revolution."

Stalin had a variety of reasons for imposing the Five Year Plan:

He was deeply committed to socialism; or at least socialism as he understood it. He was afraid that a gradual restoration of capitalism might occur; and was determined to stop it. He was particularly concerned with the elements of capitalism that had surfaced in the NEP, and intended to stamp it out.

Economically, the economy had seemed to stall in 1927 and 1928. Stalin considered a new socialist offensive as necessary if industry and agriculture were to grow rapidly.

There were also political considerations. The Soviet Union was behind the more advanced capitalist nations, which Stalin and the Bolsheviks considered hostile. In 1931, he commented that "We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do it, or we shall go under."

Stalin still had a problem with the peasants, who had wanted to own their own land for centuries. The communists feared that sooner or later the peasants would become conservative little capitalists in their own right and threaten the revolution. Communist writers of the 1920's referred to this as the "cursed problem." Most communists were urban, and believed that the "class enemy" could be squeezed to provide everything needed for the auspicious industrial goals Stalin had set. As a result, Stalin waged war on the peasants as a means of bringing them under the control of the state and make them pay the costs of his new plan; something Lenin would never have dared attempt. The plan was collectivization, in which individual peasant farms were consolidated into large, state-controlled enterprises. Peasants were ordered to give up their own land and animals and become members of collective farms, even though they continued to live in their own homes. Stalin ordered party leaders to destroy the more wealthy peasants, known as kulaks, telling his people to "liquidate them as a class." They lost their land and livestock and were not permitted to join the collective farms; rather they either starved or were deported to forced-labor camps in Siberia for "re-education." Since almost all peasants were poor, the term kulak soon was used to any peasant who opposed Stalin's plan. Often whole villages were machine gunned.

Collectivization, often called the "second serfdom," was an unmitigated disaster. Many peasants burned their crops or slaughtered their animals in protest, such that by 1933, the number of horses, cattle, sheep and goats fell by at least half. While the communist economists had expected collective farms to generate enough income to pay for factories, heavy investment was needed in tractors to replace draft horses that had been slaughtered. There was no efficient infrastructure or means of getting crops delivered to processors; tons of wheat rotted in the fields while people starved for lack of bread.

The human cost was unbelievable. Stalin himself once told Winston Churchill that ten million people had died in the course of collectivization. The disaster was particularly acute in the Ukraine, where Stalin and his cronies decided that the peasants were reactionary nationalists and enemies of the revolution. In 1932, grain requisitions from the Ukraine were set at exorbitantly high levels, and party officials refused to relax the quota or allow food relief even when Ukrainian communists reported that people were starving. Estimates are that six million people died of starvation or related causes in a famine that was completely manmade. Stalin denied the existence of the famine and for years, the communist party successfully suppressed any knowledge of the incident at home or abroad.

By the end of 1932, sixty percent of peasant families were living on collective farms. By 1938, 93 percent lived there. They were employees of the state, and dependent on the state owned tractor stations. The state paid very low prices for grain and thus provided low cost grain to urban workers while the peasants whom Lenin had feared were completely suppressed. Stalin had won a cruel victory.

Industrially, the plan was more successful. Industry doubled production in the first Five Year plan, and again during the second. By 1937, industrial output was four times that of 1929. Steel production, over which Stalin obsessed, increased 500 percent. Most of the design work was done by foreign engineers, many of them American who had been without work during the Great Depression. (Oddly, Stalin, so opposed to capitalism, was not to using it when it served his purpose.) An industrial complex was built in Siberia, and cities rose where nomads had once grazed. The cost was enormous, typically collected by hidden sales taxes, which were very high.

Firm labor discipline was imposed on factory workers. Workers were assigned by the government to jobs almost anywhere in the country and one could not move without permission from the police. If more workers were needed, factory managers got them from farm managers who shipped "unneeded" farm workers to the factory.

Soviet Society under Stalin: Stalin and his followers had a utopian vision of a completely socialist society with a new type of humanity once the state owned everything. His vision did not materialize, but he did manage to build a new society with good and bad aspects which existed well into the 1980's.

There was no improvement in the average standard of living; in fact the average non-farm wage purchased only about half as much in 1932 as in 1938. Most people survived on black bread and wore old, shabby clothing. There were constant shortages in stores, although vodka, which was heavily taxed, was always available. Millions of people were moved to cities to work in factories, but the government built few apartments, such that by 1940, there were roughly four people per room in every urban dwelling. Lucky families had one room and shared a kitchen and toilet with other families on the floor. Those not so fortunate lived in shantytowns, similar to Hoovervilles in the U.S.

Even so, Stalin managed to convince people that they were building the world's first socialist society while capitalism crumbled under the weight of the Great Depression. This optimism even attracted a number of disillusioned Westerners who converted to communism in the 1930's. Workers did receive old age pensions and free medical care, education, and daycare. Unemployment was unheard of, and there was the possibility of advancement within the ranks, if one acquired specialized skills or gained a technical education. Unskilled laborers and collective farmers were paid very low wages, but high salaries and special privileges were offered to those with technical and managerial skills. Education was the key to advancement. Said one young man, "In Soviet Russia, there is no capital except education. If a person does not want to become a collective farmer or just a cleaning woman, the only means you have to get something is through education. Ironically, the socialist ideal of equality for all was abandoned to create an elite of technicians and managers.

Stalin insisted that young women must be fully equal to men, and could and should do anything a man could do. Peasant women often performed hard physical labor in factories, heavy construction building dams, roads and steel mills in summer and winter. Women could also advance through education, as men could. The preferred profession for women was medicine: by 1950 75 percent of all Soviet doctors were women. However, women were expected to make great

sacrifices for their great opportunities. The vast majority had no choice but to work outside the home as their husbands could not earn enough to support a family, even though men held the best jobs.

Culture soon became completely politicized through constant propaganda and indoctrination. Party activists lectured workers in factories and peasants on collective farms. Newspapers, films, and radio recounted socialist achievements and capitalist plots. Intellectuals were ordered to become "engineers of human minds." Writers and artists were required to combine artistic creativity with political propaganda. Writers were required to glorify Russian nationalism and history was rewritten. Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great were portrayed as forerunners of Stalin, the greatest leader of them all—ironic, since Stalin himself was Georgian, not Russian, and spoke the language with a thick accent.

Stalin seldom appeared in public. He never left the Kremlin unless necessary, and when he did, he traveled in an American Packard automobile with heavy black drapes over the windows. While not seen personally, his portrait, statues of him, books and quotations from his "sacred" writings were everywhere. Religion was persecuted and churches converted to "museums of atheism." Stalin was the high priest of the new religion of Marxism-Leninism.

The Great Purges: In the 1930's Stalin's efforts to build a new socialist state turned to ruthless police terror and the purging of the Communist party. Grumbling had erupted within party ranks about the misery of the people, even though party elite supported Stalin's plans. Even his wife complained about the misery of people and the famine. When she did so, he dropped a lit cigarette down her dress, and insulted her mercilessly. She died the same night, an apparent suicide. In 1934, Sergei Kirov, Stalin's number two man was murdered mysteriously. Stalin probably ordered the murder himself; but he used it as an excuse to launch a reign of terror. In 1936, sixteen prominent old line Communists confessed to a large number of plots against Stalin in public trials. In 1937, large number of minor party officials were arrested by the secret police, tortured into confessing plots, and then tried in show trials. Union officials, managers, army officers and intellectuals were also arrested. Eight million people were arrested and disappeared. They were either executed or exiled to forced labor camps in Siberia from which they never returned.

Stalin replaced those whom he had purged with new party members, more than half of whom were in their thirties, a Stalinist version of yuppies. Many were children of workers who had studied at the new technical schools and were placed in government and management positions. Most of them remained loyal to Stalin through his death in 1953 and governed the Soviet Union until the 1980's.

No logical reason has ever been given for the purges. It is possible that Stalin felt that the old line communists were a threat, like the NEP, which needed to be eliminated. Under any circumstances the purged, which were highly publicized with the condemned excoriated as enemies of the revolution, served as a warning that no one was secure. Everyone had to serve the party without reservation.