

Transformation of the soviet union under stalin between 1928-1941 essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Despite the ravages of seven years of war, production had almost reached pre-war levels by the mid-1920s in the Soviet Union. However, the population had increased by 20 millions in the same period and in 1921, Lenin had said, “ We are in condition of such poverty, ruin and exhaustion... that everything must be set aside to increase production”. Much had been achieved, but much more laid ahead: Stalin’s economic policy had one essential aim, the modernisation of the Soviet Union, as he affirmed, “ We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this lag in ten years.

Either we accomplish this or we will be crushed”. In order to accomplish his daring ambitions, Stalin had two essential methods, collectivisation and industrialisation. The collectivisation of agriculture, which substituted State ownership of the land for individual peasant-proprietorship, was a means to an end: It was intended to serve the needs of industrialisation drive which began with the introduction of the First Five-Year Plan in 1928. Indeed, the collectivisation of agriculture seems to have been a necessary prerequisite for the launching of the First Five-Year Plan.

In 1928 80% of approximately 150 millions Soviet citizens were engaged in agriculture. By the late twenties the peasant population, which was broken up into 25 millions families, had greatly improved its relative position in Soviet society as a result of the Revolution and NEP (New Economic Policy launched by Lenin). Peasants were no longer forced to surrender a large part of their surplus income to the state, as they had been during tsarist times, in order to finance the government’s industrialization program; and they lived

better and consumed a greater part of their own agricultural production than ever before.

The main roles of collectivisation were to feed the proletariat and therefore the towns to ensure that the goal of the Soviet Union that Stalin fixed could be reached, to produce crops that could be used in industry such as colza which can be used to make oil, rope... , produce goods that could be sold abroad to obtain foreign currency required to buy machinery and tools. Industrialisation could only be reached with such foreign currencies. It is interesting to note that there is no fourth point appearing mentioning the feeding of the rest of the population.

However, the existing agricultural structure could not fulfil these terms. The vast majority of farms were far too small to utilise machinery and modern equipment whereas the larger one, scarcer, owned by the kulaks, could. This would have meant that only a sector of agriculture was producing surpluses for the towns and could therefore demand the price it liked, and, in addition, it would maintain and encourage the existence of a group of wealthy farmers, made rich by private enterprise: this would be a severe ideological embarrassment to a regime committed to the ending of private ownership.

Stalin understood that farmers would not accept the collectivisation in a voluntary way for these reasons, and therefore, it had to be forced as, moreover, farmers are conservatives by definition. Collectivisation was calculated to eliminate effective peasant opposition to the policies of the Soviet state by reducing the number of separate units in the agricultural

population from 25 millions independent families to several hundred thousand collective farms: a fourth point appeared in the collectivisation process, getting rid of the resistance to the agricultural land, through a “dekulakisation”.

Stalin wanted to “ set up collective (“ kolkhoz”) and State (“ sovkhoz”) farms. This way leads to the amalgamation of small peasant farms into large collective farms, technically and scientifically, and to squeezing out the capitalist elements from agriculture. ” 1928 proved that a mild approach was inadequate as the quantities of grain reaching the towns was lower than ever, partly because of the old problems, and partly because the low price it fetched there, which was fixed by the government, encouraged farmers not to send it.

The government blamed the kulaks and sent civil servants to search out the hoarded grain. Kulaks who refused to surrender their produce were imprisoned and poorer peasants were encouraged to criticize the richer and to take the possession of their land from them. Collectivisation remained voluntary and had some success. In June 1928, there were just under 33 000 collective farms and by June 1929 57 000.

These contained over a million families but there were well over 100 millions peasants in all and those who had volunteered to join the collectives generally had little land or equipment to put into the new enterprise. By the summer of 1929, Stalin had decided on a policy of compulsion, both in the destruction of the kulaks and in the creation of the collectives. He declared

in December that this was a policy of “ liquidation of the kulaks as a class”. The winter of 1929-1930 was the worse period of forced collectivisation.

By January 1930, 21% of peasant households had been collectivised, a percentage that dramatically rose to 58% in March as a result of the intensified application of force and coercion by overzealous local party officials. When the kulaks refused to comply, the poorer farmers were “ encouraged” to simply seize the land, animals and equipment. To avoid this, the kulaks frequently burnt their own homes and crops and killed their animals. It has been estimated that about half the animal population of the Russian countryside died in this way between 1929 and 1933.

Stalin temporarily called a halt to forcible collectivisation with his famous “ Dizziness with Success” article of March 2, 1930, but massive peasant abandonment of collectivisation during the ensuing months led to renewed administrative pressure and violence against “ kulaks,” the term then indiscriminately used to label all peasants who opposed collectivisation. In mid-1931 53% of the peasants once again lived on collective farms. After this the same combination of persuasion and coercion that had been applied earlier steadily raised the percentage of peasants on collective farms until it reached 94% in 1938.

In many cases military units were called on to subdue unruly peasants, and decrees for the protection of socialist property sanctioned the shooting of thousands of peasants for stealing such trifles from kolkhozes as rope or sheaves of straw or for the “ hoarding of small coin. ” Hundreds of thousands

of other peasant households were deported to Siberia or other remote areas of the Soviet Union. When the peasants retaliated by destroying crops and killing their animals, the Soviet state confiscated foodstuffs the peasants needed to feed themselves.

A particularly serious crisis developed in the Ukraine and northern Caucasus during the famine winter of 1932-1933, when apparently millions of peasants starved to death. The exact human toll resulting from collectivisation is not known, but estimates run as high as 5 to 10 millions. A recent study by Robert Conquest suggests the real figure is closer to 20 millions. In terms of agricultural productivity, the results of collectivisation have not been spectacular. During the First Five-Year Plan cattle herds declined almost 50% and the gross farm output approximately 10%.

By 1940 the per capita production of fruit crops, meat, and eggs still did not attain the level of 1928, while it was as late as 1957 before the number of cattle was restored to the pre-collectivisation level. The collective farms established during the thirties were divided into two basic types: sovkhozes and kolkhozes. From the very beginning the Soviet authorities attached special importance to the state-financed sovkhozes (state farms) and intended them to serve as models for the overwhelming majority of peasants in the kolkhozes.

Sovkhoz performance, however, fell short of official expectations, though their efficiency has improved and their relative number and importance has grown since the mid-fifties. On the kolkhoz, in contrast to the sovkhoz, the

land is socialized but parts of it are allocated to individual kolkhoznik households for private use. The 1939 increase is due to these “kitchen gardens”, making up for one third of the production. The chief aim of Soviet policy makers, however, was to promote industrial, not agricultural, growth.

Collectivisation gave an initial impulse to industrialization by siphoning agricultural surplus income and manpower out of the countryside and into the city by the means of the lowering of the peasants’ standard of living and the tightening of the political control over the peasant community: but it was clear from the very beginning that the efforts of the State Planning Commission (Gosplan) and the Supreme Economic Council (Vesenkha) to plan and coordinate the economy had to be greatly intensified if rapid economic growth was to be continued.

Indeed, the rapid industrialisation of Russia was regarded as a major priority: only when it had machines and materials could she be strong enough to defend itself against the continuing threat from the rest of the world, and act as the springboard for world revolution. Everything else was subservient to this need. Overall, the aim was to triple production in the heavy industry sector, that is coal, steel, iron and ore, and double it in the other sectors.

To help all areas of industry, electrical output was to be increased six-fold. The scheme was launched in 1928 with the First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932). This campaign for industrialisation was conducted as a war upon backwardness. Plan requirements and achievements were published in factories for all to see, and, as in wartime, constant propaganda urged the to

ever higher efforts as Soviet leaders sought to achieve higher labour productivity through both indoctrination and coercive legislation.

The pressure on industrial management to over-fulfil these targets has indeed been so great that they have commonly resorted to such questionable practices as arranging for low production targets by underestimating plant capacity, hoarding supplies and fulfilling output targets by neglecting quality control. To discourage such shortcuts on the part of plant management, the Soviet economic authorities have used a system of cost accounting in order to facilitate the auditing of records and to oblige managers to rationalize plant operations and to calculate production costs accurately.

The presence of the communist party cell in each enterprise also serves as an instrument of central state control, though the effectiveness of this device has often been lessened by the tendency of many local party officials to identify themselves with the interests of local plant management. Effective control over industrial labour is another problem that has constantly preoccupied Soviet economic planners. At the beginning of forced industrialization the labour force's lack of work discipline, education, and skills placed formidable obstacles in the way of carrying out production targets under the five-year plans.

Soviet leaders realized that their ambitious economic goals could not be achieved without a notable improvement in labour productivity. But they offered the mass of workers few material inducements to work harder, for it

was an axiom of Soviet economic policy that heavy industry had to grow faster than consumers' goods production. Because of one-sided emphasis on investment in industrial expansion, agriculture, housing, clothing, and other areas of consumer production were relatively neglected.

The real wages of workers declined and apparently did not again reach the level of 1928 until the late 1950's. In other words, Soviet economic planners could not rely on a rising standard of living as a stimulus to raise levels of labour productivity but had to try to attain the same ends through persuasion or coercion. The result was that in 1932, nearly half the machine tools in use in Russia had been installed since 1928. Overall production was up 118%, the Urals and the areas beyond were exploited for the first time, the most famous such plant being the ironworks and blast furnaces at Magnitogorsk.

Specific areas became specialist producers of goods most readily available to them, such as the oil of the Caucasus, the iron of Krivoi Rog, the tractors of Karkhov. The existing cities expanded and new industrial cities like Voronezh and Novosibirsk, previously provincial centres, were doubled and trebled in size.

However, it is certain that the targets of the First Five Year Plan were not achieved in many areas, most notably in iron and steel production, where it reached about 60% of what had been planned (5. millions tons for the prescribed ten millions), but the ambitions were so great that it is hardly surprising. The planners learnt from their errors and in many respects the

Second Five-Year Plan (1933-1937) was more successful than the first. Indeed, it was slightly less optimistic, involved less administrative shuffling, and was therefore more successful. This was especially true of the years 1934-1936, by which time many of the new plants were in operation and less machinery had to be imported. In 1932 78% of machine tools had to be imported and by 1937 only 38%.

Equally, however, the Second Plan had to be adjusted to increase defence expenditure which became the first priority of the Third Five-Year Plan. The Second Five-Year Plan brought a spectacular rise in steel production more than 17 millions tons, placing the Soviet Union not far behind Germany as one of the major steel-producing countries of the world. As was the case with the other Five-Year plans, the second was not uniformly successful, failing to reach the recommended production levels in such crucial areas as coal, oil, and cement production.

The first two years of the Third Five-Year Plan (1938-1941) proved to be even more of a disappointment in terms of proclaimed production goals. Even so, the value of these goals and of the coordination of an entire economy's development of central planning has been undeniable. For the 12% to 13% rate of annual industrial growth attained in the Soviet Union during the 1930's has few parallels in the economic history of other countries. In general, during the period of 1928 to 1941, Russia made a spectacular advance in her industry, in many sectors.

Indeed, she increased her coal production from 35 millions tons in 1928 to 165. 9 millions in 1940 which implies an increase in other sectors of the industry as coal was needed to get the furnaces, for example, going. This repercussion is seen in the steel production which passed from a 4. 2 millions tons production in 1928 to 18. 3 millions in 1940. In addition, crude oil extraction augmented from 9. 2 millions tons to 31. 1 millions and electrical power output increased from 5. 0 billion kilowatts in 1928 to 48. 3 billion in 1940.

In conclusion, looking back at such figures, Stalin's industrialisation was a great success, the most remarkable in history, while at the same period, the world was undergoing the consequences of the Great Depression which followed the Wall-Street Crash of 1929. He pulled the Soviet Union from backwardness to a position in which it could win the Second World War, and he even impressed Western countries with his results. However, the extent of this success is questionable for several reason, the most important one being if the cost of this industrialisation was worth it.

Indeed, through the collectivisation process, it is possible that up to 20 millions people died of starvation, living standards were horrendous even though the Five-Year plans never intended to raise such standards, and the Soviet Union had to part from most of her great political figures, such as Bukharin, Kamenev, Zimoniev or Rykov, through the Purges. Indeed, Stalin had to provide rational explanations to the failures of the “ war” on backwardness by bringing such people to a trial for sabotage or mismanagement.

These Purges are the perfect example of the ideology directed by Stalin, one of coercion and violence which opens to question the motives of his absolute wish of making of the Soviet Union one of the world's greatest power.

Possibly was Stalin only stimulated by his greed and will of power as the Purges and the collectivisation through its dekulakisation process show but, nevertheless, he brought the Soviet Union out of her backwardness. The extent of this success is however moderated by its cost, in the sense that the Soviet Union lost some 20 millions people and her greatest political figures.