

Russia under Stalin

Joseph Stalin. Born the son of a Georgian cobbler, he was named Ioseb Dzhugashvili (Georgian) or Josef Vissarionovich (Russian). He studied in a church school in Gori, but was expelled for Marxist activity. He continued with his activities, writing Marxist essays in a Georgian newspaper. He was an enthusiastic defender of Lenin and the Marxist exiles who published the socialist paper *Iskra*.

In Georgia he led many Marxist revolutionary movements and joined the Bolsheviks. He was part of the Central Committee and was put in charge of the revolutionary newspaper *Pravda*. He took on the name of "Stalin", which means "Man of Steel" in Russian.

After defeating Trotsky and ridding the party of all his rivals, Stalin began to build up Russia. As he said, "Other countries are 50 years ahead of Russia. We must make this up in 10 years." As such, he had two main aims: (i) a centrally-planned economy called a command economy; (ii) a totalitarian system of government.

A Centrally-Planned Economy

Stalin's Economic Aims

Stalin wanted the USSR to modernize at such a fast rate that it could make up the 50-year gap in 10 years. The industry had to be developed to such an extent that the country, which had all along depended mostly on agriculture or farming, had to be changed such that it now depended on industry more. Although Russia was recovering from war, its production from heavy industries was still low compared to other countries. Stalin felt that this needed to be improved if they were to survive any possible attack that might come from the capitalist West attempting to destroy Communist Russia. The USSR needed to invest in materials like coal, iron, steel and power to defend itself properly. Rapid industrialization was also needed for defense as the USSR was surrounded, as Stalin said, by governments that hated Communism: Romania, Iran, Finland and Poland.

In order to become a strong industrial economy, the agricultural sector had to be modernized and made more efficient so it could produce enough food to meet the needs of the workforce. It would also be able to raise money needed for industrialization. Surplus had to be exported and money used to buy machinery and such. Fewer workers could then be used on the farms and industrialization could take place more rapidly by transferring more workers from the countryside to the factories. Unfortunately, Lenin's NEP was not achieving the results that they wanted. Stalin dubbed the NEP as an impediment to communism and had to be scrapped. This rapid industrialization would also bring about two political results : (i) Communist support would increase as the workers were the Communists' greatest supporters; (ii) remaining opposition would be eliminated, in particular the class of rich peasants, the kulaks.

Main Features of a Centrally-Planned (Command) Economy

During this period, Russia's economy was completely transformed. The state planned the entire economy through the State Planning Commission, or Gosplan. They issued instructions and orders, commands that were then passed down to factories, businesses or farms. They drew up a series of plans which Stalin dubbed, the Five Year Plans. The three Five-Year Plans were set targets and goals that the industry and agriculture had to achieve. In practice, the emphasis was on achieving more than the set targets rather than meeting them. Such a system greatly discouraged individual initiative. For example, a factory manager received his commands and just carried them out to the letter.

The government controlled the resources it needed to achieve the economic targets. Factories, mines, transport and farms were owned by the state. The government exercised tight control over the labor force. Ordinary workers were harshly disciplined and poor workmanship and absence made things worse. Millions of peasants were directed into the towns and cities to work in factories and mines. These and other heavy industries were given high priority in the first Five Year Plan. Consumer industries were neglected and agriculture was reorganized to suit this.

The First Five Year Plan

The First Five Year Plan was aimed at expanding and modernizing existing industries, establish new ones, and relocate those in the west further to the east, so that they would be more secure and protected by the vast amounts of land if Russia were to be attacked by the West.

Many targets which the workers had to meet were set - and most were unrealistic. For example, there was to be a 250% increase in total industrial output and a 350% increase in heavy industries. The people were given no leave and absenteeism was treated as treason. Many workers had to slog for 11 hours! However, none of them revolted, as they knew their wages were paid in food rations, which meant they would DEFINITELY not eat if they did not work. Propaganda was used. Brochures, pamphlets and posters were distributed all over to boost the people's morale. Human examples were used. One man was said to be working at a rate 500% more productive than the average worker. Of course, most of these figures were exaggerated and the people were killed by jealous workers.

The Russian heavy industries were far below average, and Stalin felt that developing these industries were important. The factories would be able to churn out machinery for farming, which would increase productivity and allow more workers to join the urban working force. Not only that, these factories would be able to change their products into war machinery. Tanks, weapons and airplanes could be produced at these factories if ever required. The large supplies of iron and steel, for example, which would otherwise have been used to make machinery meant for agricultural uses, could then be used for war machinery manufacturing. This would be a sufficient backup for machines to defend Russia if the West decided to attack.

The agricultural sector was not neglected. Rapid industrialization could only be achieved if agriculture was made more efficient, as sufficient food had to be produced to feed the workforce. Surplus food could then be sold for money to boost the industrial sector. Stalin introduced a new method of farming - collectivization.

Collectivization basically encompassed grouping small, scattered farms in an area together in a collective, or Kolkhoz. These peasants pooled their animals, tools and labour to work for the benefit of the whole community. The collectives had to sell most of their produce at low prices to the government. Any profits and surplus were theirs to keep.

Agriculture was also subjected to state planning. The First Five Year Plan was aimed at raising agricultural output by 130%. Major grain-producing areas were to be collectivized by early 1931 followed by the other regions in the following year. Each collective had a quota of grain it had to deliver to the state by a set date.

Collectivization was implemented in 1928 and supposed to be on a purely voluntary basis, and at a moderate pace. Of course, as with all theories, it never happened in practice. In 1929 Stalin sped up the process because peasants refused to share their labor and would rather burn their crops and kill their animals instead of selling food to the government. The government had to apply force to make them join the collectives. Those who resisted were severely dealt with. At the same time, Stalin dealt with the rich class of peasants, the kulaks. As Communism preached equality among all men, these peasants of "higher class" had to be eliminated. Stalin ordered these kulaks to hand over their land, houses and property to the government. Their crops, labor and machinery were to be distributed among the collectives. They were, however, not allowed to join the collectives and millions of these peasants were sent to labor camps or executed. Most kulaks resisted and destroyed their property, machinery, crops and animals so that the government would not be able to use it. In a bid to increase collective membership, peasants were granted incentives to join the collectives in 1930. Stalin introduced the machine tractor station in Russia, where collectives could borrow machinery and increase their productivity in return for payment in the form of crops.

Results of the First Five Year Plan

Even though the official government figures were greatly exaggerated, there is no denying the fact that it was a great success. The plan was achieved in four years, and not five as scheduled. There was a huge expansion of energy production as new factories and towns needed power. Dams were created and other major projects also led to the improvement of Russia. Roads, railways and canals were constructed. Russia was able to increase manufacturing and thus make more ample preparations for war in future.

However, the Five Year Plan was not all that successful if we talk in terms of the social aspects present in Russia at that time. The enormous demands placed on the workers meant that millions of them lived in harsh conditions, working on the vast projects in the interior of Russia. The state tightened its control on the workers. Absenteeism was treated

extremely harshly. The large emphasis on heavy industries meant that consumer goods were high in demand. Shops were empty, clothing was in short supply and many household items were unavailable. The lack of consumer products was one example of the fall in the standard of living. Because of the huge influx of people going into the cities from the countryside, there were insufficient medical facilities, houses and schools. Workers were poorly paid.

Collectivization was also part of the Five Year Plan, but it was less successful than industrialization. It did not fulfill its targets under the Plan and grain production even declined from 1928 to 1932. This caused widespread famine later on. Even though up to 7 million peasants died, the government still hoarded grain to sell to other countries to earn foreign currency to be used for investment in industry. Grain production recovered a lot, but the livestock took till 1953 to regain its 1928 level due to all the killings earlier. Collectivization was a huge success as it made Russia's agriculture more efficient. The huge amount of mechanization involved, the efficiency meant that many peasants left their farms and went to work in the industrial labor our sector.

According to Stalin, the Plan was also a success because they were able to rid themselves of the kulaks and move towards communism. Also, collectivization put an end to private ownership of land. Land was nationalized and allowed peasants to own a small plot of land as a concession, to win their support. The state could now exercise more control over the peasants with the collectives.

The Other Five Year Plans

Basically the following five-year plans focused on a more balanced economy after that, with increasing emphasis on other stages of industrialization, moving into the light industry and so on.

The second Five-Year Plan (1933-37) continued and expanded the first. The third plan (1938-42) was interrupted by World War II. The fourth covered the years 1946-50, the fifth 1951-55. The sixth plan (1956-60) was discarded in 1957, primarily because it overcommitted available resources and could not be fulfilled. It was replaced by a Seven-Year Plan (1959-65), which fell far short of estimated increases in agricultural (especially wheat) production. The Seven-Year Plan was considered the start of a longer period (20 years) devoted to the establishment of the material and technical basis of a Communist society. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw increased emphasis placed on consumer goods, and the 9th Five-Year Plan (1971-75) for the first time gave priority to light industry rather than heavy industry. The agricultural sector still grew far less than projected in the 10th (1976-80) and 11th (1981-85) Five-Year Plans, and overall economic performance was poor. The 12th and final Five-Year Plan (1986-90) projected increases in consumer goods and energy savings, but the economy began to slide, shrinking by 4% in 1990. The dissolution of the Soviet Union made the formation of a 13th Five-Year Plan a moot point.

A Totalitarian Government

A totalitarian government is one where there is only one party allowed - the ruling party. In Stalin's Russia this meant that the Communist Party was supreme. All criticism and opposition is eliminated. The people are expected to be totally loyal to the state and to the person at the head of the government. Stalin ruled as a dictator, commanding his people with absolute power. He conducted many purges against his rivals and introduced a new constitution which reinforced his power. The secret police and even a cult helped to build up his image and keep him in power.

Reasons for the Purges

Under Stalin's totalitarian government of the 1930s, many purges were held, killing millions.

The main reason for the purges was because Stalin felt insecure. People were questioning his leadership, his methods and his policies. Many people were unhappy with the harshness of his Five Year Plans. He also faced criticism from within the party. Politicians who were overly critical of Stalin were at risk, but a few took their chances.

Sergei Kirov was one such man. He had been one of Stalin's closest supporters on the Politburo and was, in 1934, the party boss of Leningrad. At the 1934 Party Congress, Kirov switched sides and began criticizing Stalin and his harsh policies. Fearless ones warmly applauded Kirov as they agreed, while other less daring ones remained silent. Stalin's position in the Central Committee was under siege, as Kirov pulled in the highest number of votes while Stalin got the lowest. He only managed to stay in as there were just as many vacancies as there were candidates. As such, Stalin decided to take action against Kirov who was emerging as a potential rival for leadership of the Party. On 1st December 1934, Stalin had Kirov assassinated. On the same day, Stalin passed a law that ordered anyone accused of terrorism and plots against the government was to be arrested and executed immediately after conviction. This law gave Stalin the chance to carry out the Great Purges properly and easily without any resistance.

The Great Purges

Stalin used this 1934 law to launch a massive purge of all the people, including Communist Party members and top government officials, who were potential rivals or threats to him, those who criticized his policies and even the innocent few. Stalin held show trials for those party members who opposed him. These trials were meant for the people to see and serve as a warning to any people planning to oppose Stalin. They were held in Moscow and were filmed at times to show in other parts of Russia, so that the people in those places would also receive the same precautionary warning.

In the "Trial of the Sixteen", in 1936, Zinoviev, Kamenev and 14 other prominent members of the party who had questioned Stalin and his actions before were put on trial.

They were charged with being part of a conspiracy to assassinate leading Communists, and they were found guilty and executed promptly.

The "Trial of the Seventeen" in 1937 saw Radek and 16 other members charged with a variety of crimes such as sabotage and treason. 13 of them were executed while the other 4 were brought to labor camps.

In 1938 the "Trial of the Twenty-One" was held. Bukharin, Rykov and 19 others were charged with an even greater assortment of crimes. As in the earlier trials, the secret police tortured the accused and extracted confessions of guilt.

By 1937 the purging had spread to the armed forces. Russia's most famous general Tuchachevsky and other generals were arrested and killed. By 1939, 3 out of 5 marshals and about half of the military officials had been purged.

The Great Purges had affected Russians all over as they lived in constant fear that they would be arrested and jailed, tortured or shot. It was common for ordinary citizens to accuse their neighbors or even family members of criticizing Stalin so as to project a patriotic and loyal image of themselves in the hope that they would not be killed. In this way, all sectors of society were affected. People of every profession and background were purged. Over 10 million people were sent to labor camps where they often died, while a million were executed.

Effects of the Purges

The most important political effect was, naturally, that Stalin became even more powerful than before. He had got rid of his political rivals and nobody dared to challenge his authority. Even when Russia was doing badly in World War II, his leadership was not challenged. He introduced a new constitution called the Stalin Constitution. This placed him firmly in control of the USSR.

A serious military effect was that the purges severely weakened the armed forces by removing many capable leaders who had to be replaced by inexperienced officers. This contributed greatly to the slow start that the Russians made in World War II.

In economic terms, the purges slowed down economic development, what with all the internal squabbling and fear in the country. Many industrial workers and high-end employees were killed, thus affecting worker morale and productivity.

Lastly, the purges made life extremely difficult for the people - the millions of citizens. Everyone lived in fear and terror, with the secret police patrolling the area. Apart from those sent to the labor camps where conditions were appalling and most people died or disappeared, the family and friends that they left behind suffered because they did not know what had happened to their loved ones.

The Stalin Constitution

Stalin claimed this constitution was the fairest in the world. Everyone over 18 was allowed to vote every four years for a national assembly called the Supreme Soviet. This assembly met for two weeks a year. It elected a smaller body, the Presidium, to act on its behalf. It also chose a Council of Ministers responsible for running the country. Stalin, as Secretary or leader of the Communist Party, led this cabinet.

Only members of the Communist Party could be elected to the various posts. Stalin controlled party membership, and thus chose those people who liked and supported him and his position. Although the constitution was supposed to be democratic, it is obvious that Stalin had the real power. Stalin and the Communist Party tried to make themselves look good by recognizing the rights of the people to free medical care, to work, to education and political rights, such as freedom of speech and freedom of press. However, all these "freedoms" had to be expressed according to Stalin's and the party's wishes.

The Cult of Stalin

Throughout the 1930s propaganda was used to build up Stalin's image. Like a religious worship, a cult of Stalin was formed. Stalin was like a godlike leader to the people, praised in the newspapers, books and in films and posters. Poems published in Pravda praised his deeds, speeches exalting his skills, his modesty, his wisdom and his brilliance. People who attended these meetings were careful to applaud long and loudly, and the person who stopped first would most likely be arrested as it showed great disrespect and disloyalty to Stalin.

Social and Cultural Policies

Education was closely regulated. It was free and compulsory, and tended to be indoctrinated as it sought to mould people into the Communist way of thinking. The secret police ensured that Communist ideology was taught.

The arts were controlled by the state which used them for propaganda purposes. Pressure was put on writers to write novels about the glorious achievements of the government. Musicians, artists and film-makers who refused to follow the state's direction were persecuted or purged.

The Russian Orthodox Church was also persecuted by Stalin. The totalitarian government could not tolerate people being loyal to other influential institutions such as the Church. Churches were closed down and religious leaders were persecuted. However, the Church continued to survive.

The 1930s was a period of terror and fear. Stalin and the Communist Party ruled the USSR with an iron fist and as a dictatorship. They may have overthrown the Tsar, but this government was in little way different.