

Overview/Intro to Stalin ("Man of Steel")

Five Year Plans

The first Five Year Plan was launched 1928, the second in 1932 and the third in 1937. Each plan laid out targets for industrial production. Targets were set for each factory in the USSR, every shift of workers and even for every individual worker.

The plans aimed at producing a surplus. Production targets were set very high to give the workers something to aim for. If workers did not achieve their targets, they were punished. Desperate factory managers fiddled the books or committed suicide as the pressure to produce more and more became too great. If the workers succeeded in reaching targets, they might be rewarded with increased wages. But usually their targets were increased as well.

Each year Stalin's government produced a report on progress. These reports were made available for foreign governments to see how successful communism was. Stalin was careful not to publicize any failures to the rest of the world. The picture that emerged from the USSR during the 1930s was one of success.

Stakhanovites

In 1935 a coal miner called Alexei Stakhanov was reported to have dug 102 tons of coal in a single 6 hour shift. This was many times more than a miner was expected to cut. Starkhanov was rewarded and praised as an example to all other workers. The public were not told that Starkhanov had two co-workers, plus machinery in perfect working order, to help him achieve so much.

Russians were told to model themselves on Stakhanov. They rose to the challenge in what became known as the Starkhanovite Movement. The Starkhanovites tried to perform feats of great productivity, through working harder and also through organizing the way things were done in their place of work. They were rewarded with better pay and also lots of praise and publicity. This was just one way in which Stalin attempted to persuade his new industrial laborers to work more efficiently.

Collectivization

To achieve the enormous feat of industrialization, Stalin had to modernize the agriculture. There had to be enough food, not only to feed the workers in towns, but also for export. Selling grain abroad would raise the money needed to invest in industry.

Stalin decided to take control of all farms and make them much larger and more productive. The farmers were not compensated. They were expected to work with other farmers and hand over most of their produce to the government. In return, they would be supplied with tools, tractors and taught how to produce more.

The policy of collectivization was not popular with the peasants. Many refused to give up their land or to give the government the crops that they had grown. Instead, they preferred to slaughter their animals, burn their crops and destroy their farm machinery. Stalin ordered the army to liquidate them. Uncooperative peasants were forcibly evicted from their farms, sent to labor camps in the Urals and Siberia and worked to death. Millions starved to death or were killed.

Gulag

The gulag was a system of hundreds of forced labor camps, plus transit camps and prisons, which held criminals. Increasingly gulag prisoners were political prisoners – people who were opposed to Stalin, people accused of failing to meet their work targets and peasants sent there during the collectivization of agriculture.

From 1929-32 the numbers of people in the gulag increased greatly, coinciding with collectivization. It is estimated that there may have been 5-7 million people in these camps at any one time. In later years the camps also held victims of Stalin's purges, ranging from high officials to intellectuals to ordinary people, as well as World War 2 prisoners.

Gulag prisoners were a useful supply of workers from large projects in remote and inhospitable places in the USSR. For example, the Belomor Canal, which connects the White Sea with the Baltic, was almost entirely constructed by hand, using 250,000 prisoners. Prisoners also worked in mines or cut timber.

They were not paid. They were underfed, housed in poor conditions and worked long hours in a difficult climate. They could be executed if they refused to work. It is possible that around 10% of prisoners in the gulag died each year, although we cannot tell from official figures.

Terror

Rapid industrialization led to opposition. Stalin refused to allow this to halt the pace of his economic plans. He acted to reinforce his own power. Stalin's political opponents were arrested and given show trials before their execution. Many ordinary people were also imprisoned or executed, but few of these had a court trial.

Being accused was enough to convict the innocent as well as the guilty. For example, in March 1928 the NVKD (Stalin's secret police) announced they had found foreign spies in the Shakhty mines who were plotting to stop the mines reaching their targets. Fifty-five people were arrested. For the next two months, newspapers, cinemas and billboards all denounced these 'wreckers' and demanded that they be punished. There was no evidence to convict them, but all confessed to being enemies of the people and 49 were sent to prison camps, five were shot and one was acquitted.

People lived in terror that some neighbor or co-worker would denounce them to the NVKD. They dared not protest. They became obedient workers. The arrest of other people gave them someone to blame, a scapegoat for the hardship they faced in their everyday lives.

Questions: Use at least one quote from the reading to support your answer to each of the following questions.

1. What methods were used to encourage workers and factory owners to work harder?
2. For what reasons were people such as Stakhanov willing to work hard?
3. What types of people were sent to the gulags?
4. Explain how Stalin used terror to help achieve his industrial and agricultural goals.