

# MODERN HISTORY

## National Study- Russia and the Soviet Union 1917-1941 Research Task

### Analyse the purpose and impact of Stalin's Five-Year plans

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*"You are backward, you are weak- therefore you are wrong; hence you can be beaten and enslaved. You are mighty - therefore you are right; hence we must be wary of you. This is why we must no longer lag behind."*

Despite the perceived direction towards Socialism in the portrayal of Russia's backwardness, an underlying tone of sleuth remains in this extract of Stalin's speech, symbolising almost a threat to the Russian demographic. The threat Stalin brought to fruition was the Five-Year plans, modelled for economic prosperity, with rapid industrialisation as priority. GOSPLAN introduced the Five-Year plans in 1928, relying on the interdependence of collectivisation and industrialisation. Overall targets for each industry were met with achievements of targets set for each branch of command. In examining the economic, social and political purposes and impacts of the Five-Year plans, one can analyse the ironies Stalin imposed in the struggle for national security, survival and strength.

Stalin strived for rapid economic mobilisation in the Five-Year plans, believing it was the only way to secure communism within one country. In reality, the plans' focus on speed plus the disregard for productivity and living standards displays the extremity of Stalin's persistence in securing Communism within Russia.

The first Five-Year Plan (1928-32) lacked planning and productivity, with unrealistic broad objectives and an unequal emphasis on favoured materials. The second (1932-37) and the third (1938-43) plans were more realistic, but still centrally uncoordinated. The disorganisation of the plans, one assumes, was the excesses of Stalin's persevered focus on speed at the expense of efficiency, demonstrating his lack of economic intelligence. Faults were generally unchecked; the focus was on attaining targets in the shortest amount of time, not on quality. Magnitogorsk, a city based on the Five-Year plans, epitomised the magnitude and speed of industrial completion without the consideration of inputs and training.

Nevertheless, the first two plans experienced incredible rises in production, with electricity rising by 62 million kilowatt hours, coal by 93 million tonnes and oil by 14 million tonnes.

The surrealism of quantity, which is debatable due to the unreliability of the Soviet record-keeping at the time, led to fluctuations of over-production and under-production, the result of industry branches delayed for lack of essential supplies. With the operational faults of the Five-Year plans came the economic exploitation of the peasants and proletariat, hidden in the successes of collectivisation and industrialisation.

In collectivisation, the government was fiscally victorious in centralising the rural environment, but was paid a human and economic price of the peasantry. Problems included ignorance of urban communist supervisors, mass peasant resistance, and the rural famine of 1932-33, killing 5-7 million in Ukraine alone. In the outcomes of collectivisation, we discover Stalin's pursuit of industry growth at the expense of his workers and productivity. One can judge whether Stalin knew the essence of worker productivity in the completion of industrial projects- nonetheless, Stalin achieved his aim of consolidating Socialism in rural sectors.

In the industrial sector, despite economic achievement, Stalin had purposely restricted living conditions of his proletariat. Stalin decreased the amount available for consumption; increased resources invested in heavy industry and lowered housing conditions. The decrease in living standards left more capital for industrialisation and national defence, again following Stalin's goal of national socialist security. In order to attain maximum profit with maximum effort, Stalin introduced

measures of control within industrialisation, including employee workbooks, internal passports, enforced discipline and wage rates determined by amount produced, not by hour. Here, Stalin seemed to have ignored egalitarianism and contradict Marxist dogma, with his method of wealth redistribution ascertained by effort, not necessity. However, Stalin's persistent approach ironically won him the immediate quantities needed for economic mobilisation.

However, a massive paradox remained between theory and practice, where the wellbeing of the proletariat was pragmatically the lowest of priorities.

Stalin's neglect of social needs was not accidental, claiming that collective sacrifice was rudimentary for the military survival of Soviet Union. The collective sacrifice society had undertaken actually consisted of constraining social activity as well as segregating workers into classes – both had contributed to Stalin's achievement of power.

Workers were expected to endure housing shortages and deteriorated urban health standards for national interest.

In contrast, 'Shock Brigades' and Stakhanovites, employees used by the government to pressure workers into increasing effort, earned special privileges for ideal performance. Stalin's approach of nepotism seems capitalist when measured against the equality principles of Marx; perhaps Stalin was creating the opportunity for socio-economic control.

The 'cult of Stalin' formed during the Five-Year plans. Plays, novels and poems were based on Stalin's life. Socialist Realism, a 1920-30s art movement, portrayed the efforts of the Five-Year plan workers. He was referred to as 'Iron Soldier', and 'Granite Bolshevik'. Ironically, Stalin condemned churches and organised religions, signifying perhaps Stalin's autonomous style of ruling in similarity to Tsar Nicholas' reliance on religious endeavour to sustain autonomy.

Women were encouraged to engage in both workforce and domestic roles, supporting traditional versions of family life promoted in film and literature. The reversal of legal regulations, for example, difficult divorce and abortion procedures plus forbidding homosexuality, limited the social liberty of the Russian public, eradicating traces of Lenin's implementation of equality- the restriction on social liberty, one deduces, allowed for Stalin's ease of manoeuvring power.

Stalin opted for mass education, assisting the public in acquiring workforce skills. The rate of literacy rose from 51% in 1929 to 81% in 1940 due to mass campaigns. The success of the procedure allowed for the formation of *vydvizhentsy*, a group of proletariats educated at rapid speed for industrialisation, used by Stalin to replace the positions of the purged. The need to educate at an enormous rate indicates the problems inherent in enforcing an industrial revolution on peasants of a rural and conservative nature. But Stalin, an opportunist, used the availability of peasants, 80% of the Russian population, for labour and resources in collectivisation and industrialisation. The term *kulak* broadened to define anyone that appeared to oppose collectivisation- to lessen upheaval, therefore stretching *smychka*, Stalin commenced *dekulakisation*, involving either labour camps or death.

Along with the suffering workers are others that emerged from the opportunities created in the Five-Year plans. The power and status of industrial managers amplified. Surfacing alongside them were the new *dvoriane*, noble-like groups benefiting from the changes of the 1930s. *Apparatchiks* were the emerging bureaucrats loyal to the state apparatus.

One assumes that Stalin, driven by a bureaucratic mentality, restricted social expression and permitted class emergence for the restoration of a capitalist community clouded as a communist state struggling for survival. Yet the only form of survival defended here is Stalin's, where unjustified power is abused for sole survival by eradicating all forms of threat in his political regime.

Stalin's political regime heightened his authority whilst revealing his political delusions, tackling internal and external opposition using deception and intimidation. The political manoeuvring that associated the operation of the Five-Year plans was the internal counterpart to the Five-Year plans' impact on foreign relations.

Criticising the Five-Year plans led to arrest and expulsion. Officials and managers misunderstood the leaders' ambiguous instructions, hence susceptible to Stalin's accusations of incompetence. To compensate, managers and officials laundered production figures to escape charges faced with under-achievements whilst monitoring workers' activities, conceivably denoting the incompetence and fallibility of higher ranks, delegating demanding roles to the workers through force and constant supervision. The 1928 Shakhty Affair, the execution of mining engineers charged for alleged collaboration with external opposition, was one of the first events Stalin used to force workers into siding either for or against effort.

In 1934, the NKVD formed to deal with such internal affairs. It is argued that the NKVD and the Soviet bureaucracy had elements of corruption, fragmentation and disorganisation that Stalin was possibly aware of. With this in mind, Stalin used the 1934 murder of Kirov to minimise potential threats by freely removing opponents through closed trials and immediate execution, hence, the intensification of secret police that followed in 1936-38, known as the *Yezhovshchina* (Great Terror). Stalin's expansion of apparent perpetrators was counteracted by exponential increases in show trials and public executions. In estimation, 7-9 million were arrested and 8-12 million imprisoned within the 2 years alone, and approximately 1 million party members had died during this regime. The unreliability of the bureaucracy may account for Stalin's paranoia that the older, more established sectors of the Soviet elite had the most potential to become his most perilous opposition. It can be conjectured that the older Bolsheviks' previous association with Trotsky, Stalin's arch-rival, may have elicited a response of distrust, possibly stemming from Trotsky and Stalin's differing approaches towards achieving Socialism.

Nonetheless, with the paranoia that accompanied Stalin's coercive pursuit of the Five-Year Plans came also a concealment of the purges' severity in the form of the 1936 Constitution. In the Constitution, Stalin perceived the demise of internal class struggle, recognising the need to construct socialist order, portraying to the world the benefits of Socialism. Foreign powers, in fact, knew little of the truth, which was further stretched in 1939, when Stalin devalued conditions due to the immediate demands of war. By 1941, USSR was 2<sup>nd</sup> to USA in economic performance and output. The international economic ranking of Soviet Union by the end of the third Five-Year plan indicates Stalin's concentration on foreign perception and competition. His concentration was rewarded with the large-scale mobilisation sustaining the war against Germany. Ironically, as conditions depleted, Russia managed to successfully defeat Germany. The colossal effort devoted to the Five-Year plans had finally been proven successful.

Successful to an extent. Successful to an extent where Stalin's goals of security, survival and strength jumbled around ironies and inconsistencies. Like the Bolshevik consolidation of power, Stalin extracted theories of Socialism to support pragmatic contradiction. Up to the end of the Third Five-Year plan, Stalin had succeeded in rapidly mobilising the Russian economy. Perhaps here lies the genuine Socialist intention of the Five-Year plans, which over time had been sugar-coated with economic perseverance, social attainment of power, and political paranoia to form Stalin's plaque of catastrophe, as his successor Khrushchev described in his 1957 speech: *"It is a bad thing that Stalin launched into deviations and mistakes which harmed our cause... he did that with the full conviction that he was defending the gains of the Revolution, the cause of Socialism. That was Stalin's tragedy"*

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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