

Building Socialism: The Five-Year Plans

The Five-Year Plans for industry were ambitious and far-reaching. They envisaged nothing less than the transformation of the Soviet Union into a great industrial power. Central planning would replace the capitalist market as the main device for managing the economy.

The plans soon hit problems as the central planning system found it could not cope with the demands it had imposed on itself. The First Five-Year Plan was marked by its outrageous targets for INDUSTRIAL ENTERPRISES. The workers suffered as their needs were pushed to the bottom of the scale of priorities. Yet, despite all the problems, the plans were successful in many ways. Answer the following questions to get a sense of industrialisation drive:

What do Sources 1-7 suggest about:

- The attitudes of certain groups towards the big push for industrialisation
- The scale and vision of the venture
- The idea of socialism in comparison to capitalism in the 1930s?

Source 1 – S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation*, 1995, p. 35

The transformation of the old Russia into the USSR was viewed as tantamount to the discovery of a new continent by one contemporary geographer... To the majority of people who participated in building it, socialism in the USSR afforded the means to acquire a niche, as well as a sense of pride, in a society that did seem to be qualitatively different - in comparison with capitalism, which was then synonymous not with wealth and freedom but poverty and exploitation, as well as imperialism and war.

Source 2 – A. Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives*, 1991, p. 298

A young Komsomol [Young Communist League] member leaped at the opportunity to organise a shock brigade in 1929. 'When we went to work in the factories, we lamented that nothing would be left for us to do, because the revolution was over, because the severe [but] romantic years of civil war would not come back, and because the older generation had left to our lot a boring, prosaic life that was devoid of struggle and excitement.'

Source 4 – S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation*, 1995, p. 93

A group of young enthusiasts, working double shifts, whole days without rest and with little food, met to discuss the work on blast furnace no. 2, 'their' furnace, the Komolska. One of them opened the meeting by asking, 'Does anybody have any suggestions?' Someone else was quoted as saying, 'What kind of suggestions could there be – everybody straight to the site for a subbotnik [any time extra time was performed without compensation].' If we are to believe the credible account from which this conversation is taken, the youths 'worked till dawn'. Such pathos was genuine and it was widespread. 'Everyone, even the labourers, felt that Magnitogorsk [steel works] was making history, and that he, personally, had a considerable part in it,' wrote John Scott, himself deeply affected by the enthusiasm of the crusade. 'This feeling was shared to some extent even by the exiled kulaks.'

Source 3 – A. Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR, 1917-91*, 1992, p. 193

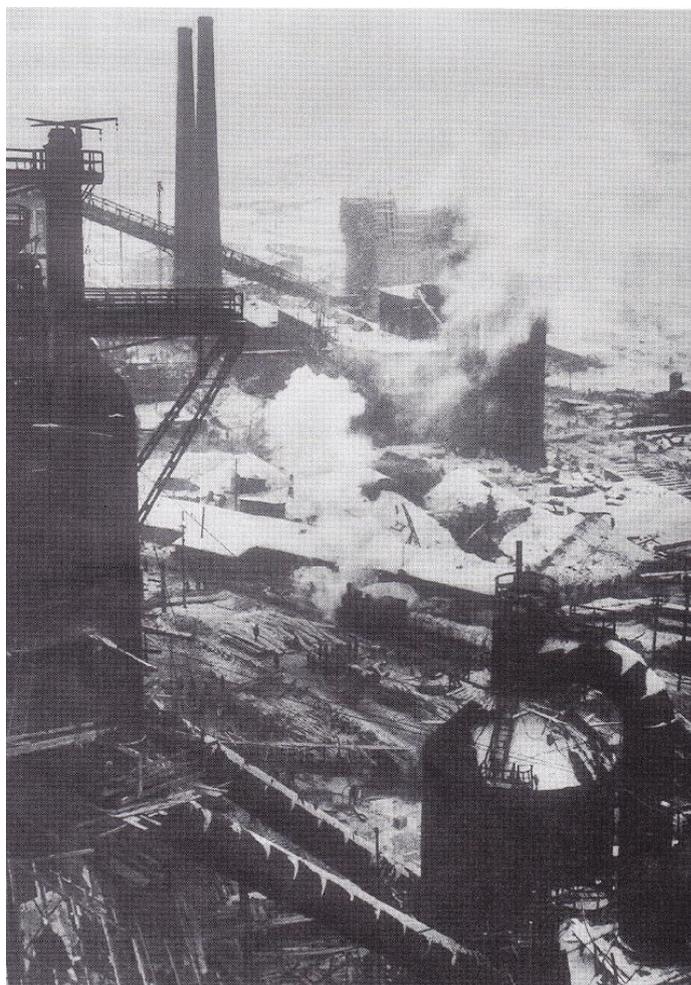
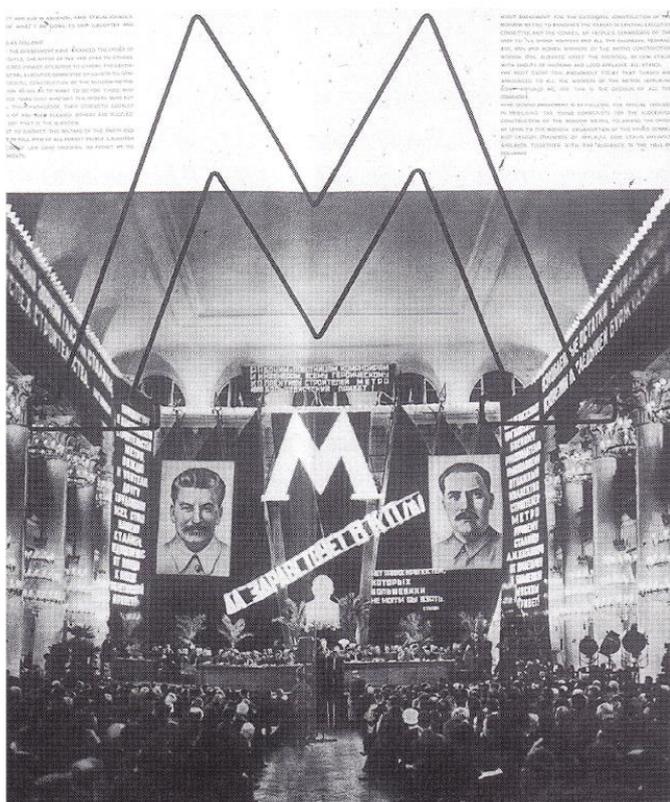
There were, in the later years, all too many examples of phoney official superlatives, which gave rise to widespread cynicism. So it is all the more necessary to stress that thousands (of young people in particular) participated in the 'great construction projects of socialism' with a will to self-sacrifice, accepting hardship with a real sense of comradeship. Statistics will also be cited to show that others had very different attitudes to their work, not only prisoners and deportees but also peasants fleeing collectives.

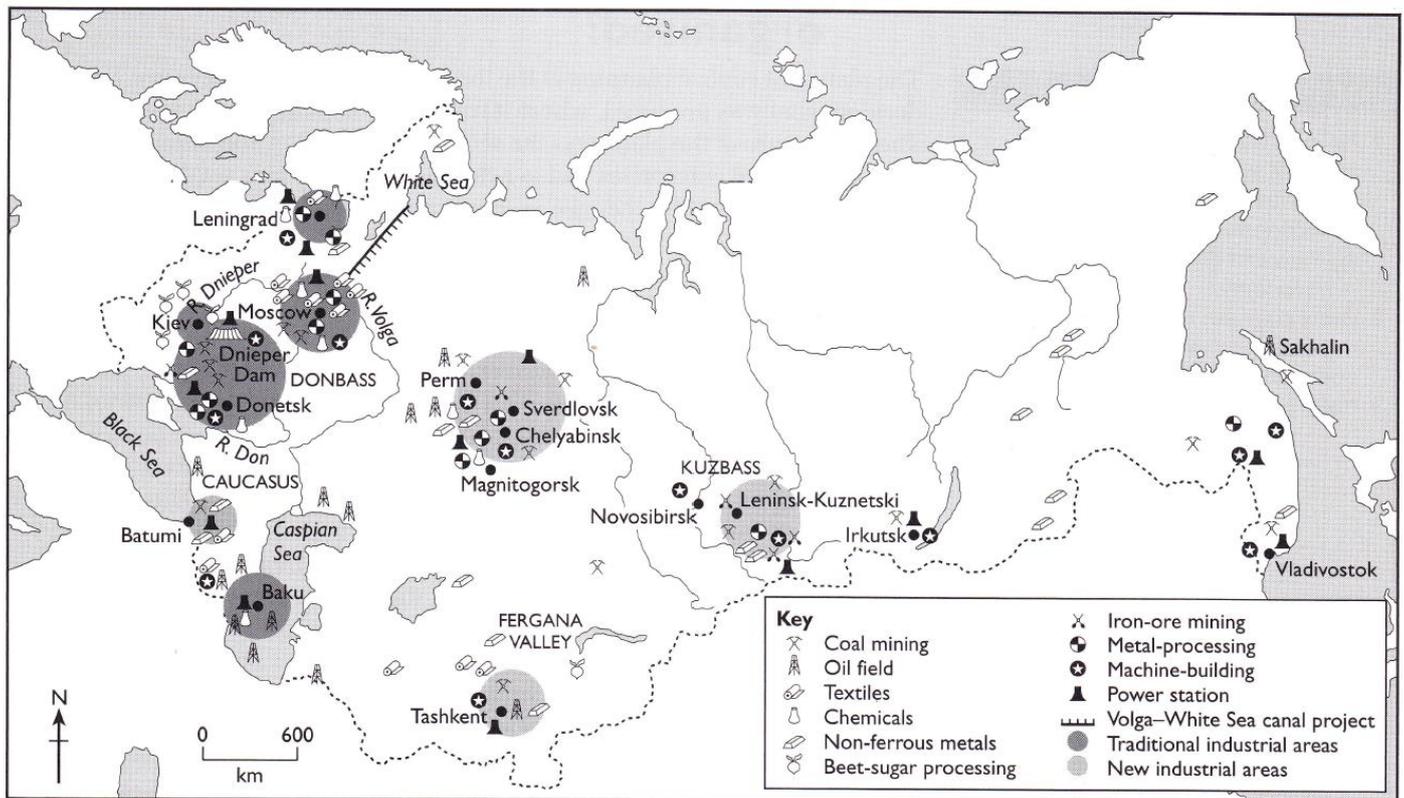
→ Source 5 -
The
Dnieprostroi
Dam, built in the
1930s,
increased Soviet
electric power
output fivefold
when it began
operating.



↓ Source 7 – The Magnitogorsk steel works, 1932.
Magnitogorsk rapidly developed into a major
industrial centre in the early 1930s.

↓ Source 6 – The Moscow metro, built in the 1930s,
was a showpiece of Soviet construction.





The idea that the Soviet Union was at last on the road to socialism, via industrialisation, inspired party members and urban workers alike. There was a feeling that they were creating a new type of society that would be far superior to that of their capitalist neighbours. After the compromises of the NEP, there was a return to the war imagery of the Civil War and War Communism. There was talk of a 'socialist offensive', and of 'mobilising forces on all fronts'. There were 'campaigns' and 'breakthroughs'. 'ambushes' by 'class enemies'. People who opposed or criticised the regime's policies thus became guilty of treachery.

The creation of this state of psychological warfare, with appeals to patriotism, was a useful device to push through policies, particularly since mistakes and failures could be blamed on the enemy. But many Communists did see the struggle as a war against backwardness and enemies inside and outside the Soviet Union. Industrialisation was the way to break through to socialism and to protect themselves from the hostile forces that appeared to be surrounding them.