**Did life become ‘better and more joyous’?**

In 1935 Stalin claimed that ‘Life had become better, comrades, life has become more joyous’. But was he correct? Do Source 1-5 confirm the truth of his claim? This activity requires you to interpret, evaluate and use source material in relation to its historical context. Use the table below to help you answer the questions.

1. Carefully analyse both the content and provenance of the sources. Notice the differences in content and what this says about the experience of different sections of Soviet society and how experiences change in different parts of the country.
2. Examine the origins and purpose of the sources so you can judge their value and limitations.
3. Think about the different perspectives of the writers, for example, Lewin is a professional historian and N. Mandelstam was a victim of Stalin’s repression.
4. Give an extended answer to the following question: ‘**How do Sources 1-5 confirm Stalin’s claim of 1935 that ‘Life has become better, comrades, life has become more joyous’?’**

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| **Source Content** | **Origins – Who? When?** | **Purpose – Why was the source written?** | **Values – Is the source valuable in any way?** | **Limitations – What doesn’t the source say? Why is it not reliable?** |
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**Source 1** – M. Lewin, ‘Society, State and Ideology during the First Five-Year Plan’, 1976, in C. Ward (ed.), *The Stalinist Dictatorship,* 1998, p. 177

*In the cities, the inordinate and unanticipated growth transformed a strained housing situation into an appalling one, creating the specifically Soviet [or Stalinist] reality of chronically overcrowded lodgings, with consequent attrition of human relations, strained family life, destruction of privacy and personal life, and various forms of psychological strain. All this provided a propitious hunting ground for the ruthless, the primitive, the blackmailer, the hooligan, and the informer. The courts dealt with an incredible mass of cases testifying to the human destruction caused by this congestion of dwellings. The falling standards of living, the lines outside stores, and the proliferation of speculators suggest the depths of the tensions and hardships.*

**Source 2** – M. Fainsod, *Smolensk under Soviet Rule,* 1958, p. 322, describing living conditions for unskilled workers in 1937

*The workers’ barracks were described as overcrowded and in a state of extreme disrepair with water streaming from the ceiling ‘straight on to workers’ beds’. Heat was rarely provided in the barracks; bedding went unchanged; and sanitary work was almost non-existent. There were no kitchens and eating halls on the construction sites; hot food could not be obtained until the evening when workers had to walk a long distance to reach the dining hall. ‘Many of the women’, one female Party member reported, ‘live practically on the street. No one pays any attention to them; some of those defenceless creatures threaten to commit suicide.’ In addition, cases where wages were not paid on time were on the increase. All this ‘neglect of the elementary needs of workers’ as well as ‘lack of care for them as human beings’ resulted in ‘fully justified dissatisfaction’ and bitterness on the part of the workers.*

**Source 3** – H. Eekman, a Belgian diplomat, saw ordinary families in Moscow in the late 1930s cramped into small, shared living accommodation

*They made pathetic efforts to isolate from their neighbours the few square feet of floor space allotted to their use. Every piece of furniture, every stick they owned, every ragged remnant saved from old curtains, was pressed into service to build some sort of fence or stockade around their cramped refuge.*

**Source 4** – N. Mandelstam, *Hope against Hope,* 1971. Mandelstam was the wife of one of Russia’s greatest poets of the 20th century, Osip Mandelstam, and a victim of Stalin’s repression. She survived and wrote two volumes of memoirs: *Hope against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned.*

*At the end of the twenties and in the thirties our authorities, making no concessions to ‘egaliterianism’, started to raise the living standard of those who had proved their usefulness. The resulting differentiation was very noticeable, and everybody was concerned to keep the material benefits he had worked so hard to earn – particularly now that the wretched poverty of the first post-revolutionary years was a thing of the past. Nobody wanted to go through that again, and a thin layer of privileged people gradually came into being – with ‘packets’, country villas, and cars. They realised only later how precarious it all was: in the period of the great purges they found they could be stripped of everything in a flash, and without any explanation. But in the meantime those who had been granted a share of the cake eagerly did everything demanded of them.*

**Source 5** – J. Scott, *Behind the Urals*, 1942, pp. 122-23. John Scott was an American volunteer working in Magnitogorsk. Here, he writes about Masha the daughter of illiterate, poor peasants. Masha did not receive her first pair of shoes until she was four-teen years old. Her parents were very supportive and Masha studied at school, in a higher education institute in Moscow and at Magnitogorsk Teachers’ College. She then taught adults in a party higher education college.

*From the increadible poverty and suffering of the civil-war period, the Russian people were working their way up to a higher standard. All Masha’s family were enthusiastic. Several of the children joined the Komsomol, and after years of argument, the mother succumbed to the pressures of her children and took down the icons from the walls of the hut. Then she too decided to study. Masha’s mother learned to read and write at the age of 55. She was taught by her youngest daughter.*

*Masha went to the capital in 1929. At that time the industrialisation of the country was just beginning. Russia’s rapidly expanding economy was crying for every kind of professional skill, for engineers, chemists, teachers, economists, and doctors. The higher schools paid stipends to their students, and aided them in every way to get through their courses and out to factory and laboratory. Masha finished up her prepatory work, and then entered the Mendelyeyev Institute, where she worked part time as a laboratory assistant to make a few roubles for bread.*

*Masha was very happy in Magnitogorsk. She felt that the world was at her feet. She spelt on the divan of her sister and brother-in-law’s tiny hotel room, she had two or three dresses, two pairs of shoes and one coat. In two more years, she would graduate from the teachers’ college. Then she would teach, or perhaps take graduate work. Not only this, she was living in a town which had grown up from nothing just as she herself had. Living conditions were improving as the pig-iron production of the mill increased. She felt herself a part of a going concern. Hence her spontaneous pity for me, whom she first saw as a cast-off from a bankrupt and degenerating society.*

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