

To what extent was the Stalinist State established at the expense of the Soviet people?



Image taken from <http://mapage.noos.fr/moulinhg02/urss.staline/controle03.corrige.html>

The caption reads « The captain of our country takes us from victory to victory”. СССР on the helm is USSR in Russian.

Total Word Count: 1999

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A. Plan of Investigation.

This investigation will contend to answer the question “To what extent was the Stalinist state established at the expense of the Soviet people”. I will focus on the economical, agricultural and social policies undertaken by the Stalinist dictatorship, and look into particular detail how these policies and reforms affected the peasantry and the proletariat in Russia.

I have chosen this topic for I am deeply interested in how Josef Stalin managed to re-organise the Russian nation into the superpower it had the potential to be after Russia emerged victorious after WW2. I was amazed how quickly the country progressed after it had been soiled and dragged in mud by a painful and endless tsarist autocratic rule, displaying Tsars each as bad as the other, failing to reform in multiple aspects of Russian life. In order to answer this question, I have structured my analysis to firstly see what were the benefits of the changes adopted by Stalin, and secondly if these benefits were outweighed by their cost. In order to keep the scope of the study manageable, I have made use of a variety of carefully selected sources, in particular a wide range of book passages, photographs, quotes and statistics.¹

Word Count: 200

¹ The books used in this investigation are the following:

- Hindus, Maurice (1931), *Red Bread Collectivization in a Russian Village*, 0-253-34953-2
- Ulam, Adam (1989), *Stalin the man and his Era*, 0-8070-7005-6
- Montefiore, Simon Sebag, (2003), *Stalin the court of the Red Tsar*, 978-0-7538-1766-7

The Textbooks used in this investigation are the following:

- Lynch, Michael, (2008), *Stalin's Russia, 1924-1953*, 978-0340-965-894
- Oxley, Peter, (2001), *Russia 1855-1991 From Tsars to Commissars*, 0-19-9134189

B. Summary of Evidence.

Prior to Stalin's rise to power as leader of The USSR, Russia was undergoing a period of great change and turmoil. Immediately after Lenin's death in 1924, the struggle for power and individual ruling of Soviet Russia had already started only to end in 1928, with Stalin beating both the right and the left with cunning ability enhanced by good fortune.² In the late 1920's, Stalin became the definite *vozhd*³ of the USSR and did not wait to apply his concept of 'Socialism in One Country' (concept that had countered Trotsky's notion of 'Permanent Revolution').⁴ This concept aimed to overcome Russia's present primitive agriculture and industrial problems.⁵ Stalin, who believed that the USSR's survival depended on its ability to become a powerful modern and industrialized nation, made it very clear from the start that this was its main priority, for in 1931, Stalin announced that " We (the USSR) are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years[...] or we shall be crushed".⁶

Stalin's economic aims aimed for a second revolution (a Revolution from Above⁷) that would definitely modernise the USSR. Motivated by the envy of enabling the Soviet Union to catch up with the western powers and to confirm his authority as a leader,⁸ Stalin chose the two policies of Collectivisation and Industrialisation to remedy to the Russian plague that was its terrible economic situation.

The first of these two policies, Collectivisation, was introduced in 1928 by Stalin, he thought that the best way of raising mass amounts of capital was by using the Soviet land, land that was considerably under cultivated. This policy was born after an announcement at the 15th Party Congress in 1928 by Stalin,⁹ calling for a "transformation of the small scattered peasant's plots into large consolidated farms based on the joint cultivation of land using superior techniques". Stalin claimed that collectivization, when it was introduced in 1928, had been a measure enthusiastically proposed by the peasants, and that this work was voluntary. This however,

² Stalin associated himself to Kamenev and Zinoviev to form a triumvirate aiming to isolate Trotsky from a possible position of power. For this, they took advantage of Trotsky's main disadvantages being that Trotsky lacked a power base in the Party compared to Stalin whom held key positions in the government and in the party, mainly due to the Lenin enrollment; secondly, Trotsky was never fully accepted as a member of the Bolsheviks for he joined the Party in 1917, previously being a part of the Mensheviks, causing him to look uncredible when he tried to fight on certain issues like Bureaucratization or the NEP. Stalin then turned on Kamenev and Zinoviev (who form the United Opposition in 1925), and used the Right Communist votes in the 1926 Congress to (i) definitely dismiss Kamenev and Zinoviev as Soviet Chairmen and (ii) expel Trotsky from the Committee and from the Politburo, with final result Stalin's defeat of Trotsky and the left. Stalin could then easily defeat the Right Opposition (with the main trio being Bukharin, Tomsky and Rykov) due to their poor organization and lack of appealing ideas to public opinion.

³ Russian term for supreme leader.

⁴ Lynch, Michael. 2008. Stalin's Russia 1924-53, Fourth Edition. Hodder Education p25.

⁵ as well as building a modern and industrial state capable of rivalising with powerful western countries

⁶ Speech made from Stalin to workers in a factory in February, 1931.

⁷ It was claimed by the CPSU (The Communist Party of the Soviet Union) that the 1917 revolution had actually come from the peasantry, rather than power being forcefully taken by the Bolsheviks, thus being a revolution from below.

⁸ Lynch, Michael. 2008. Stalin's Russia 1924-53, Fourth Edition. Hodder Education p36.

⁹ Appendix A

could not be further from the truth, for collectivization was unforced upon a very reluctant peasantry, whom preferred by far the system of private ownership.

To try to encourage these reluctant peasants to carry out his policies, Stalin engaged in a major propaganda offensive¹⁰ in the form of de-kulakisation. This had a major social impact for Stalin identified a class of 'Kulaks'¹¹ whom he accused of hogging all their farm productions, thus holding back the modernization of Russian farms. The notion of an oppressing Kulak class proved a very powerful one and provided the grounds for the coercion of the peasantry as a whole.¹² A huge amount of kulaks faced deportation from their native villages between 1930 and 1932, and their 'liquidation' was subject of many demonstrations.¹³ After a very present resistance to collectivization,¹⁴ a huge national famine (Holodomor) arose in 1932¹⁵-1933¹⁶. Another terrible social consequence resulting from Stalin's gain of supremacy over the party in 1936 was the Great Purge (1936-1939).¹⁷ Stalin started by taking care of the opposition by firstly announcing a 'Trotskyite-Kamenevite-Zinovievite-Leftist Counter-Revolutionary Bloc'.¹⁸ It was during this purge of the party that Kamenev and Zinoviev were put on public trials¹⁹ after being blamed for the murder of Kirov,²⁰ and were then executed. Until 1937, the Soviet army had more or less acted as an independent force, however Stalin soon remedied to this. It was soon said that a gigantic conspiracy had been uncovered in the army, and that the Chief of General Staff named Tukhachevsky was its leader. They were immediately arrested for treason and were shot. Similarly to the purging of the party, this initial move set the grounds for even greater purging in the army²¹. The Yezhovschina²² took place between 1937 and 1938.²³ In

¹⁰ Lynch, Michael, (2008), *Stalin's Russia, 1924-1953*, 978-0340-965-894, page 36

¹¹ Kulaks were peasants who had grown wealthy under the NEP and were not what Stalin made them out to be. The concept of a Kulak class was a Stalinist myth, and their prosecution was a result of Stalin's propaganda offensive to try and create a form of coercion between the peasantry.

¹² Lynch, Michael, (2008), *Stalin's Russia, 1924-1953*, 978-0340-965-894, page 37

¹³ Appendix B.

¹⁴ Official figures recorded for the period 1929-1930 showed that 30,000 arson attacks occurred, and that organized rural mass disturbances increased by one third (from 172 to 229). Women took a very prominent role in these disturbances; they would often try to break into barns and try to reclaim their bags of seeds or their cattle.

¹⁵ In 1932 Stalin also faced numerous problems of political nature – the Riutin famine, Kirov's possible resistance to Riutin's execution, the famine, - but the most notable one was the suicide of his wife, Nadezhda Stalin – Taken from Montefiore, Simon Sebag, (2003), *Stalin the court of the Red Tsar*, 978-0-7538-1766-7

¹⁶ Peasants (in particular Kulaks) were not satisfied with these new policies, so they started eating their own harvest and killing their own herds of cattle, instead of giving it to the government. The government responded with tremendous fierceness, imprisoning, executing and deporting a huge number of Kulaks. Stalin sent special seizing squads to seize all the grain from urban regions, and then left the peasants to starve. It is estimated that approximately 6 million people died in the regions of Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the North Caucasus and the Volga Region.

¹⁷ This ensured the purge of the Party, the purge of the armed forces, and the purge of the people.

¹⁸ This set the grounds for a campaign of denunciation and expulsion, and thousands were denounced for having radical ideas not conform to the ones of the party, and were sent to Gulags

¹⁹ There is little doubt that Stalin had the power to carry out these purges in an illegal way, however Stalin's astuteness and genius is showed by the fact that he insisted on public trials, to not only prove that there was an actual risk of conspiracy against him and the regime, but also to show the people the need for continuous purging.

²⁰ Sergei Kirov was the secretary of the Leningrad Soviet and was shot dead in the first of December 1934. The apparent motif was revenge for Kirov had been having an affair with the killers wife, however it was suggested (and still is) that Stalin approved and planned the murder of Kirov.

²¹ 14 of the 16 army commanders were removed, Half of the officers (35 000) were imprisoned or shot, and all 11 war commissars were removed from office.

order to definitively force all regions and their respective nationalities total and uncontested obedience to Stalin. The NKVD followed a policy of mass repression, and even had a quota of individuals to arrest and execute every day.²⁴

Stalin also announced his industrial policies at the 15th party Congress, in the form of massive industrialization. To carry out such drastic changes, and to successfully equip the Soviet Union for it to become a superpower, Stalin retained Lenin's economic planning institution (the Gosplan²⁵) to help draw up a series of Five Year Plan's²⁶ which would be a key part of Stalin's industrial policy, with the first one being launched in 1928, and ending in 1932. This policy is still greatly criticised by contemporary historians.²⁷

Word Count: 781

²² The period of terror directed towards the ordinary Soviet citizens in 1937-1938, gets its name from the head of the NKVD of the time, Yezhov.

²³ In order to definitively force all regions and their respective nationalities total and uncontested obedience to Stalin.

²⁴ Overall, it is estimated that by 1941, eight million Russians had been sent to Gulag camps.

²⁵ Traynor, John (1991), Europe 1880 – 1990, Longman Group Editions, 0-582-05126-6

²⁶ There were in total 5 'Five Year Plans' drafted under the Stalinist rule.

²⁷ Notably Robert Conquest, a sharp critic of Stalin's totalitarianism whom remarked "Stalinism is one way of attaining industrialisation, just as cannibalism is one way of attaining a high protein diet".

C. Evaluation of Sources.

Appendix C - Extract from *Behind the Urals*, by John Scott.

In reference to origin, this passage was written from an American volunteer who worked at Magnitogorsk in Russia. This extract describes in detail the conditions endured by the workers who worked to build the city of Magnitogorsk. This source has for purpose to inform the reader about the appalling working conditions for the workers and how “the construction work went on with a disregard for individuals...” The value of this source is that it clearly shows the conditions in which the workers had to work, and more importantly, this source is considered primary for John Scott was a primary eye-witness to the huge industrial task that building Magnitogorsk from scratch was. At face value, the historian may think that the fact that John Scott, an American coming from the West, would automatically critic the Soviet government way of thinking, however one must keep in mind that John Scott was actually an American who became disillusioned with America during the 1929 depression,²⁸ therefore volunteered²⁹ to work for an American company,³⁰ which supervised the construction of Magnitogorsk. However, it is in this seeming limitation that perhaps lays the greatest value of the source, for a supporter of the Soviet government way of thinking commenting on what he sees, going to the extent of saying “I would wager that Russia’s battle of ferrous metallurgy alone involved more casualties than the battle of the Marne” makes this source a particularly trustworthy one.

Word Count: 238

²⁸ Extract from Scott, John (1941) *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel*, Houghton Mifflin editions, 0-89526-571-0, page 147.

²⁹ John Scott was affected by the same ‘Gigantomania’ (unnatural obsession with massive projects) that the Soviet Government was, thus why he volunteered enthusiastically to the prospect of building a huge city from scratch.

³⁰ American Arthur Mackee Corporation

Appendix D - Data representing how successful Stalin's economic reforms had been by 1940. Data taken from the works of the economic historian E.Zaleski, whose findings are based on careful analysis of Soviet and Western Sources.

This set of data has for purpose of presenting the historian with a set of values helping to assess and judge the scale of Stalin's 'achievement'. At first sight, these statistics are very impressive, showing coal production having grown five-fold, steel production having grown six fold, oil extraction having more than doubled and electricity generation having grown five-fold,³¹ however the historian must keep in mind that this table does not show or attest for the quality of the products being produced, nor of the price taken to produce the products. Regarding the origin of this source, it comes from the works of E.Zaleski, an economic historian. This source is of good value for E.Zaleski combines a careful analysis of both Soviet and Western sources to present these values, thus adding to the value of the source. The main limitation of this source is when the concept of growth from a low base is applied, for we are not told by what percentage the amounts of each material increase, even though we are given the original set of values.

Word Count: 178

³¹ Lynch, Michael, (2008), *Stalin's Russia, 1924-1953*, 978-0340-965-894, page 51

D. Analysis.

Different Interpretations.

Stalin's personality and role is at the centre of many historical debates about the USSR from the 1930's onwards.³² Whether Stalinist historian, totalitarian, or Revisionist historian,³³ all agree that Russia's economy was backwards in 1928, and was terrible compared to the economies of the western countries. Important questions such as "Would the economy have gotten back up slowly but surely if the NEP had kept on going?" are important. Historian David Hoffman³⁴ offers a strong argument in which he argues that Stalin's use of coercion in seeking economic and social change proved both inhumane and ineffective. He points out what he believes contradictions in Stalin's economic policies.³⁵ On the other hand, Revisionist historian Peter Gattrell³⁶ acknowledges that Stalin's measures were harsh and destructive in the way he treated the Soviet people, however Gattrell argues that "hard though it is for the Western liberal mind to accept, it may be that Russia could not have been modernized by any other methods except those used by Stalin".³⁷

Word Count: 165

³² Regarding the historical debates about Stalin's main economic policies being Collectivization and Industrialization, the question of "How successful were the economic policies of Stalin during the 1930's" has raised numerous debates about it

³³ Stalinist Historian – Those who follow the line of the Communist Party during Stalin's lifetime.

Totalitarian Historian – Those who see the USSR as a totalitarian state controlled from above by Stalin. These historians see Marxist and Bolshevik ideology as a fundamental cause of the nature of the regime and Stalin's dictatorship.

Revisionist Historian – Those historians who turn their attention away from the personality of Stalin and the apparatus of terror. Instead they tend to concentrate on the structures inside the USSR, the difficulties the regime faced in carrying out important policies, etc.

³⁴ Professor Hoffman is a specialist in Russian and Soviet history, with a particular focus on the political, social, and cultural history of Stalinism. He is the author of *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914-1939* (Cornell University Press, 2011), a novel which outlines the economic and social practices of the Stalinist regime.

³⁵ Appendix E

³⁶ Peter Gattrell is a historian whom researches two broad subjects: population displacement in world history and the history of modern Europe. He is well known for his research in the economic and social development of modern Russia.

³⁷ Lynch, Michael, (2008), *Stalin's Russia, 1924-1953*, 978-0340-965-894, page 55.

Critical Analysis.

Was Stalin's collectivisation programme necessary and beneficial? This question is the one which all sources used in this investigation ultimately aim to answer. Both sources used in Part C: Evaluation of Sources are Sources that have one prime objective, arguing a certain point. The set of Data in Part C cannot be particularly trusted for a set of values and statistics are not the most trustworthy of sources, and as Winston Churchill states “There are three types of lies, lies, greater lies, and statistics”. Sheila Fitzpatrick, a very well-known historian, broadly agrees with criticisms expressed by people such as Robert Conquest, for she especially denounces Stalin’s ‘Gigantomania’ which she judges heavily distorted the economy during the 1930’s, as well as laying a particular emphasis on the stagnation and even decrease of Soviet living standards, “the Stalinist regime did little to improve the life of its people in the 1930’s”.³⁸ On the other hand, an interesting argument is that without Stalin’s plans for Russia, Russia’s economy and industry would have remained weak during World War Two³⁹.

Word Count: 176

Historiography and philosophy in History.

As previously stated, the most fundamental problem when investigating the number of deaths due to collectivization and the programme of de-Kulakisation, or the industrial output of the USSR in certain areas, is the various interpretations historians can bring to the sets of figures and data. Where one historian may see gradual increase in a certain production, the other will see a decline in quality of the specific product, thus considering it an actual decrease of production. Sources are often subject to problems of bias and selection, for sometimes we are given a deluge of information, thus having to select certain sources and ignoring others, and in other cases there are problems of bias, and historians need to assess how trustworthy sources are. Moreover, Historians aim to persuade and to entertain, thus sometimes distorting our ‘knowledge’ even further, and making it harder to comprehend fully the topic in question.

Word Count: 148

³⁸ However, she also stresses that Stalin’s policies need to be put into context, for even if they were very harsh and extremely controversial, they established a certain stability in Russia, stability that Russia had lacked since the overthrowing of Tsar Nicholas II in 1917.

³⁹ thus being easily overwhelmed by Hitler’s operation Barbarossa and Blitzkrieg, thus ensuring a Nazi victory in World War Two.

E. Conclusion.

Stalin's economic reforms can be met with mitigated opinions for certainly they succeeded to a great extent in traditional sense,⁴⁰ but "the simple fact remained that Stalin's policies had deprived Soviet Union of any chance of genuinely competing with the modernising economies of Europe and the USA".⁴¹ Because Russia had undergone a 'produce at any price' philosophy, this meant the quality of products being produced heavily declined, always leaving a feeling leaving "Russia with a legacy of inefficiency".⁴² It is highly debated whether the modernizing of Russia could have been done in a different way, thus avoiding the enormous cost in human lives and misery that followed Stalin's policies. If the 'Revolution from Above' was to be a full success, the modernizing of Russia would have needed "a change of heart in the Soviet people themselves".⁴³

Word Count: 136

⁴⁰ In the sectors were brute force for labour needed to be used, such as building refineries, bridges, factories and other large production facilities, the results were every satisfactory.

⁴¹ Lynch, Michael, (2008), *Stalin's Russia, 1924-1953*, 978-0340-965-894, page 53.

⁴² Oxley, Peter, (2001), *Russia 1855-1991 From Tsars to Commissars*, 0-19-9134189 Page 187.

⁴³ Oxley, Peter, (2001), *Russia 1855-1991 From Tsars to Commissars*, 0-19-9134189 Page 187.

F. List of Sources.

Books (Listed alphabetically by author surname):

1) Hindus, Maurice; foreword by Ronald Grigor Suny (1988). *Red Bread Collectivization in a Russian Village*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press (ISBN: 0253349532).

2) Scott, John (1941) *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel*, Houghton Mifflin editions, 0-89526-571-0, page 147.

3) Simon Sebag Montefiore, John Nettles (Reader) (2004). *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*. Orion (an Imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd)(ISBN: 0752866028).

4) Adam B. Ulam, (1989). *Stalin: The Man and His Era*. I B Tauris & Co Ltd (ISBN: 1850431744).

Textbooks (Listed alphabetically by author surname):

1) Lee, Stephen J. 1999. *Stalin and the Soviet Union*. London: Routledge.(ISBN: 0415185734).

2) Lynch, Michael, (2008). *Access to History Stalin's Russia 1924-53*. Oxford University Press, USA (ISBN: 0340965894).

3) Oxley, Peter. 2001. *Russia : 1855-1991, From Tsars to Commissars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.(ISBN: 0199134189).

Appendices:

Appendix A - Stalin's Proposals, announced at the 15th Party Congress in 1928, and then elaborated on in 1929.

“The solution lies in the transformation of the small scattered peasants’ plots into large consolidated farms based on the joint cultivation of land using superior techniques.”

“We are beginning seriously to re-equip agriculture. For this we must expand the development of collective state farms, employ on a mass scale the contract system and machine and tractor stations as a means of establishing a bond between industry and agriculture along the lines of production. We must reinforce the support of the middle and poor peasant masses, as one of the leans of breaking the resistance of the Kulaks”.

Appendix B



An anti-kulak demonstration on a collective farm in 1930. The banner reads “Liquidate the Kulaks as a Class” Image taken from: <http://74.53.140.71/~williamr/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/kulak2-300x231.jpg>

Appendix C - Extract from *Behind the Urals*, by John Scott

“Men froze, hungered and suffered, but the construction work went on with a disregard for individuals and a mass heroism seldom paralleled in history... Tens of thousands of people were enduring the most intense hardships to build blast furnaces. I would wager that Russia’s battle of ferrous metallurgy alone involved more casualties than the battle of the Marne. In early April it was still bitter cold, everything was frozen solid. By May, the ground had thawed and the city was swimming in mud. Bubonic plague had broken out in three places nearby. The resistance of the population was very low because of under-nourishment during the winter and consistent overwork. Sanitary conditions were appalling. Within two weeks the sun was upon us. By the middle of May the heat was intolerable. In the barracks we were consumed by the bedbugs and other vermin...It was a varied gang, Russians, Ukrainians, Tartars, Mongols, Jews, mostly young and almost all peasants. The tartar Khaibulin had never seen a staircase, a locomotive or an electric light until he arrived in Magnitogorsk”.

Appendix D - Data representing how successful Stalin’s economic reforms had been by 1940.

	1927	1930	1932	1935	1937	1940
Coal (million tons)	35	60	64	100	128	150
Steel (million tons)	3	5	6	13	18	18
Oil (million tons)	12	17	21	24	26	26
Electricity (million tons)	18	22	20	45	80	90

Data taken from the works of the economic historian E.Zaleski, whose findings are based on careful analysis of Soviet and Western Sources.

Appendix E – Quotation from David Hoffman, taken from *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism.*

“Social change must be gradual and consensual if it is to succeed. Even if violence achieves superficial change, it does not permanently transform the way people think and act. Moreover, in the Soviet case the means and ends were themselves in contradiction. State coercion by its very nature could not create social harmony. The arrest and execution of millions of people only sowed hatred, mistrust and disharmony in Soviet society”.