

## 2 The Soviet Union Under Stalin

Lenin suffered a series of strokes beginning in 1922. Even before Lenin's death in 1924, a power struggle was brewing behind the scenes. Several Communist leaders wanted to be Lenin's successor. The chief contenders were Trotsky, architect of the Bolshevik takeover in 1917, and Joseph Dzhugashvili, better known as Joseph Stalin. Stalin took this name, which means man of steel, as a young revolutionary. Later, he would more than live up to its meaning.

### Stalin's Rise to Power

As a young man, Stalin had studied briefly to become a priest, but in 1903 he joined the Bolsheviks. Along with other Bolsheviks, he conspired against the czar. During the Russian Revolution, he rose within the party. By 1922, Stalin had become secretary-general of the Communist party. He used this position to gain greater influence within the party. He carefully built up support by recruiting and promoting party members loyal to him.

When Lenin died, Stalin used his strong position in the party to outmaneuver his chief rival, Trotsky. Trotsky thought that the Soviet Union should move more quickly toward communism and should increase its efforts to bring about world revolution. Stalin skillfully turned Trotsky's criticisms of government policies against him, accusing Trotsky of undermining the state.

By 1927, Stalin had won the support of the majority of party members. The party expelled Trotsky and his followers and then exiled Trotsky to Siberia. With Trotsky out of the way, Stalin was able to establish himself as dictator. In 1929, Trotsky left the Soviet Union. He settled in Mexico, where he was murdered in 1940 by political enemies.

### The Five-Year Plans

Stalin saw the Soviet Union as surrounded by enemies. He thought the nation was weak militarily in part because its economy was

not industrialized. "We are 50 or 100 years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in 10 years. Either we do it, or we shall go under." Stalin believed the only way the Soviet Union could survive a foreign attack was to develop its industry.

In 1928, Stalin launched his first five-year plan, an economic program that set specific production goals in industry and agriculture. In 1933 and 1938, he again announced ambitious five-year plans for strengthening the Soviet economy.

**Plans for industry.** Stalin's five-year plans concentrated on the development of heavy industry. He poured Russian resources into building steel mills, electric power stations, cement plants, and oil refineries, all industries that were essential to a strong modern nation.

Between 1928 and 1940, the five-year plans appeared to yield impressive results. Steel production more than quadrupled. In the same period, oil production tripled. By 1940, the Soviet Union had become the second largest producer of iron and steel in Europe.

The Soviet Union industrialized at great cost, however. The quality of finished goods was often poor. Often, costly projects were built that served no useful purpose. They were simply show pieces meant to impress foreign journalists. In addition, Stalin's economic goals were achieved at a tremendous sacrifice in human terms.

The government launched a massive propaganda campaign to glorify work and encourage worker productivity. Each factory and each worker had production quotas, or goals. If workers failed to meet their quotas, the government punished them for laziness or sabotage.

**Collectivized agriculture.** Stalin realized the Soviet Union needed to make its agriculture more efficient in order to industrialize. He ordered all peasants to give up their land and farm animals and form *collective farms*,

large, government-run enterprises. On the collective farms, peasants were supposed to be paid according to the amount of work they did. A portion of a collective's harvest was paid to the government.

Collectivization had many goals. First, it sought to increase food production by introducing machines on the collective. Second, it was designed to give the government control over farm production. Third, collectivization was intended to free people from farming so they could work in industry. Fi-

*Under Stalin's program of collectivization, the government took over peasants' land, livestock, and farm tools. Party-appointed managers supervised the collective farms. Stalin tried to mechanize agriculture. But in the 1930s, much work was still done by hand, as this photograph of women farm workers shows.*



nally, it was seen as a way to extend socialism to the countryside.

Most peasants opposed collectivization, which began in 1928. The stiffest resistance came from *kulaks*, prosperous peasants who did not want to lose their farms. Protesting kulaks destroyed their livestock and crops. Stalin responded with a brutal crackdown on all opposition. Millions of kulaks were executed or sent to forced-labor camps in Siberia. As a result, farm production fell in the early 1930s, and a terrible famine caused widespread starvation. Stalin later admitted that 10 million people had died during collectivization.

By 1939, most peasants had been placed on collective farms. But even with the use of farm machinery, production increased slowly. Food shortages continued to occur. Eventually, Stalin compromised, allowing peasants on collective farms to maintain their own small garden plots, which helped feed their families.

## A Totalitarian State

Stalin harnessed the skill and energy of the Soviet people to make the Soviet Union a strong communist state. But to achieve this goal, he organized a new kind of government, today called a totalitarian state. In a *totalitarian state*, the government is a single-party dictatorship that controls every aspect of the lives of its citizens. Individual rights count for little or nothing. Citizens are expected to obey the government without question. Critics are quickly silenced. Furthermore, the totalitarian state supports extreme nationalism.

Totalitarian states differ from the absolute monarchies you read about in Chapter 18, although both exercise absolute authority. The totalitarian state has much greater power over the people. In the twentieth century, dictators such as Stalin have used new technology to persuade the masses of the people to support their cause. Under Stalin, the government controlled newspapers, the radio, and all other means of communication. He used the press to pour out propaganda praising his policies.

## Daily Life Under Stalin

Stalin relied on censorship to bolster support for his regime. Soviet writers and artists were expected to glorify the Soviet Union and praise Stalin. In 1932, for example, the government organized writers into the Union of Soviet Writers. The union monitored the work of all writers and rewarded those who praised the state. Those who refused to praise Stalin and the state were expelled from the union and could not get their work published.

Stalin also used terror to silence opposition to his rule. As you have read, millions of peasants died during collectivization. In the 1930s, Stalin cracked down on his critics within the Communist party. Thousands of

party members were purged, or expelled, from the party. A high party official, Serge Kirov, was assassinated in 1934, probably by Stalin's agents. However, Stalin used Kirov's death as an excuse to launch the Great Purge. In the next four years, millions of men and women were arrested. Many of them were tried and executed. The terror inspired by the purges affected everyone in the Soviet Union. No one was safe from government persecution.

During the 1930s, the standard of living in the Soviet Union remained low. People were faced with constant food and housing shortages. Stalin's five-year plans emphasized heavy industry at the expense of consumer goods. Thus, many items such as clothing and household appliances were always

### "Confessions" of an Old Bolshevik

Between 1934 and 1939, Stalin conducted the Great Purge of the Communist party. Dozens of prominent party officials were accused of treason. Many of the accused were "Old Bolsheviks," Lenin's original supporters. In 1936, 1937, and 1938, these Old Bolsheviks appeared as defendants in cleverly staged, public show trials.

Stalin never appeared in the courtroom, but his presence was continually felt. Many defendants made public confessions, admitting their guilt to a variety of crimes against the state. Stalin wanted these confessions so that the defendants would be convicted by their own words and could not be seen as martyrs. While some of the accused were undoubtedly tortured into confessing, others were probably motivated by a lifetime of loyalty and obedience to the party.

Few party leaders escaped the Great Purge. Nikolai Bukharin, once a close associate of Stalin, was among the accused. In August 1936, the prosecutor at the first round of show trials announced that Bukharin was under investigation. But Bukharin's prestige and popularity as an Old Bolshevik saved him for a time. The next year, defendants at the show trials accused Bukharin of sabotage, treason, and murder. At a meeting of the Communist Party Central Committee, Stalin and his sup-

porters demanded the arrest of Bukharin. Bukharin, who was present at the meeting, told a Stalin supporter: "I will not tell lies about myself." Stalin's supporter replied: "We'll arrest you, and you'll confess."

Bukharin was arrested and spent 13 months in jail. He was charged with the attempted murder of Lenin, organizing kulak uprisings, and poisoning livestock. When he refused to confess, his wife and infant son were exiled to a distant city and threatened with death.

Finally, Bukharin made a general confession admitting that he was "politically responsible" for many of the charges against him. At his trial, however, Bukharin turned the tables on the prosecutor. He denied each specific charge. He cross-examined witnesses and revealed contradictions in their testimony. Bukharin knew that his actions would not save his life, but he hoped to reveal the truth.

The prosecutor demanded that Bukharin and the other defendants be "shot like dirty dogs." *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Communist party, which Bukharin had once edited, declared: "By exterminating [them] the Soviet land will move even more rapidly along the Stalinist route, . . . the life of the Soviet people will become even more joyous." On March 15, 1938, the Soviet government announced that Bukharin had been executed.

expensive and hard to obtain. Despite these drawbacks, the Soviet government managed to keep some support from the masses of people. Although wages were low, there was no unemployment. The government also provided old age pensions and free public education, which had been unknown under the czars.

Many Russians hoped that through education they could improve their position in society. In theory, communism provides a classless society. However, under Stalin, a small group of people enjoyed greater privileges than the rest. These were skilled workers such as engineers, artists, and intellectuals who supported Stalin, as well as high party officials.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, women won equal rights. During the 1920s

*Propaganda posters portrayed Stalin as the father of the Soviet people. In this 1936 poster, Stalin towers above the young Soviet athletes. Physical fitness for children was emphasized as one way of building a strong Soviet state.*



and 1930s, many women took jobs outside the home. Because wages were so low, their salaries were needed to help their families survive. Women worked in factories. They also attended schools and universities and entered professions such as medicine in large numbers.

## Quest for Foreign Recognition

When the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, they expected to lead a world revolution. To coordinate this communist revolution, the Russian Communist party created the Communist International, or Comintern, in 1919. The Comintern included representatives from communist parties all over the world who were pledged to revolution. In the chaos following World War I, the Comintern supported several communist revolutions that broke out in Germany and in Eastern Europe. These revolutions were quickly suppressed. However, Soviet support for revolutionary activity made it an outcast among other nations.

During the 1920s, the Soviet Union downplayed its call for world revolution. Soviet leaders sought diplomatic relations and commercial ties with other nations. In 1924, Britain officially recognized the Soviet government. Other nations soon followed. In 1933, when the Soviet Union promised to end its propaganda activities in the United States, the American government gave it diplomatic recognition. The following year, the Soviet Union joined the League of Nations.

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### SECTION REVIEW

For answers  
see p. A 94

1. Identify: five-year plans, Comintern.
  2. Define: collective farm, kulak, totalitarian state.
  3. How did Stalin become powerful within the Communist party?
  4. (a) Why did Stalin launch his five-year plans?  
(b) List two results of Stalin's five-year plans.
  5. What different methods did Stalin use to exercise control over the Soviet people?
  6. Which group or groups of people had special privileges in Soviet society?
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