PART TWO: DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS - THE THIRTIES

POLITICS AND THE ECONOMY

After the war scare of 1927 [5] came the fear of foreign economic intervention. Wrecking was taking place in several industries and crises had occurred in others - or so Stalin claimed in April 1928. The following month he put the nation’s youth on the alert:

‘Comrades, our class enemies do exist. They not only exist but are growing and trying to act against Soviet power.’ Then it was announced that a large-scale conspiracy involving engineers in the Shakhty areas of the Donbass had been uncovered. Stalin skilfully used the perceived threats to Soviet power to create an atmosphere of tension and apprehension. The coiled-up energy of the population could thereby be released and directed towards the achievement of specific targets. The first Five-Year Plan (FYP) set these goals. In December 1929 it was decided that the plan could be achieved in four years and in the end it ran from 1 October 1928 to 31 December 1932. Plan goals were continually increased irrespective of economic rationality, as human will overruled mathematical calculations. As one planner stated: ‘There are no fortresses which we Bolsheviks cannot storm’. The Great Depression, which began in 1929 in the advanced industrial states, added fuel to the conviction that the Bolsheviks were on the highway to success.

The Soviet leadership appears to have been surprised how easy it was to speed up collectivisation. Party officials in several selected areas competed with one another and when they proved successful Stalin and the key officials concerned with collectivisation, Molotov and Kaganovich, knew that they could outstrip the modest aim of collectivising 20 per cent of the sown area laid down for 1932 [69].

The number of peasants in collective farms of all types doubled between June and October 1929, and Stalin declared on 7 November 1929 that the great movement towards collectivisation was under way [8]. The Politburo stated on 5 January 1930 that large-scale kulak production was to be replaced by large-scale kolkhoz production. Ominously, for the better-off farmers it also proclaimed the ‘liquidation of the kulaks as a class’.

It was hoped that the collectivisation of the key grain-growing areas, the North Caucasus and the Volga region, would be completed by the spring of 1931 at the latest and the other grain-growing areas by the spring of 1932. A vital role in rapid collectivisation was played by the 25,000 workers who descended on the countryside to aid the ‘voluntary’ process. The ‘twenty-five thousanders’, as they were called, brooked no opposition. They were all vying with one another for the approbation of the party. Officially, force was only permissible against kulaks, but the middle and poor peasants were soon sucked into the maelstrom of violence. Kulaks were expelled from their holdings and their stock and implements handed over to the kolkhoz. What was to become of them? Stalin was brutally frank: ‘It is ridiculous and foolish to talk at length about dekulakisation. When the head is off, one does not grieve for the hair. There is another question no less ridiculous: whether kulaks should be allowed to join the collective farms? Of course not, for they are the sworn enemies of the collective farm movement.’ Kulaks were divided into three classes. The first consisted of about 63,000 ‘counter-revolutionary’ families who were to be executed or exiled and have their property confiscated. Group two was made up of 150,000 households labelled ‘exploiters’ or ‘active opponents’ of collectivisation. These were to be deported to the remote regions of the east and north, but permitted to retain some possessions. Another group was composed of between 396,000 and 852,000 households who were to be allowed to remain in their home region but on land outside the collectives. (This meant, in fact, on land which was at that time not arable.) If one assumes a modest five members per household, the first two groups amounted to over one million persons. No one in the Politburo cared whether they survived or not. Others abandoned their home villages and made for the towns, desperately trying to beg enough for survival. Kulak children were sometimes left to die, since their deported fathers belonged to the ‘wrong class’.

Sufficient sporadic peasant violence met the ‘twenty-five thousanders’ and their cohorts to make the leadership nervous. Thereupon Stalin changed course and launched an attack on all those officials who had herded peasants into collectives against their will. His article in Pravda on 2 March 1930 was entitled ‘Dizzy with Success’ [Doc. 3]. In it he pilloried the wayward officials, but this was mere double-talk. It was he, in fact, who had driven them...
on! Pravda became a best-seller in the countryside as desperate officials attempted to restrict circulation. There was a stampede to leave the kolkhozes, and only 23 per cent of the peasants were left in collective farms by 1 June 1930. Stalin had not lost his nerve; he merely wished to ensure that the spring sowing was completed. Afterwards the collectivisation offensive was resumed, and the beaten peasants took to slaughtering their livestock and breaking their implements rather than see them collectivised. Mikhail Sholokhov, the Nobel Prize-winning Soviet novelist, catches the atmosphere in Virgin Soil Upturned. “Slaughter! You won’t get meat in the kolkhoz”, crept the insidious rumours. And they slaughtered. They ate until they could eat no more. Young and old suffered from indigestion. At dinner time tables groaned under boiled or roast meat. Everyone had a greasy mouth, everyone hiccupped as if at a wake. Everyone blinked like an owl, as if inebriated from eating 5 p. 162].

Livestock numbers in 1932 were less than half those of 1928. To the government the tractor was the symbol of the mechanisation and modernisation of agriculture and the trump card of the new kolkhozes and state farms, sovkhozes [8]. It penetrated the countryside more rapidly than expected. Since so many draught animals had been slaughtered, scarce resources had to be diverted to the production of even more tractors. The shortage of cattle and sheep meant less leather and wool for consumer goods.

Timid voices were raised about the breakneck speed of industrialisation. Could the pace not be slowed down a little? Stalin firmly rejected such thinking [Doc. 4]. He even wanted the economy to expand more rapidly, on the grounds that with imperialist vultures circling overhead the Soviet Union had to become strong enough to keep them at bay. ‘Specialist baiting’ was a popular sport during the early years of the first FYP [8]. After the Shakhty trial in 1928 came the ‘industrial party’ trial in November—December 1930, when industrial experts confessed to wrecking and other heinous crimes. The Shakhty trial was followed by the arrest of thousands of ‘bourgeois’ or non-party engineers. By 1931 half of the engineers and technical workers in the Donbass, a key industrial region, had been arrested [108]. What did the charge of wrecking amount to? If a machine broke down – as happened quite often, due to the fact that the peasant turned worker had to learn on the job – someone higher up was to blame. If imported machinery [5] was not adequately used it could be construed as wrecking. It may seem paradoxical that at a time when their skills were desperately needed, ‘bourgeois’ and foreign engineers were being held behind bars. However, there was a rationale behind the arrests: the leadership was desperately anxious to break down all resistance to central directives. The ‘bourgeois’ engineer could see the orders were not feasible and said so. Moscow wanted engineers who would attempt to do the impossible.

A declared opponent of the campaign against ‘bourgeois’ engineers was Sergo Ordzhonikidze, who became head of the Supreme Council of the National Economy (VSNKh) at the end of 1930 and thereby the de facto leader of the drive for industrialisation. He appears to have influenced Stalin’s decision to call a halt to the campaign. On 23 June 1931 the Secretary-General declared that the policy of considering every specialist an ‘undetected criminal and wrecker’ should be dropped [Doc. 5]. Show trials of engineers did not completely cease, however, as the case against the Metro-Vickers engineers in 1933 demonstrated. The change of heart towards the experts was accompanied by a dramatic change in the fortunes of labour. The years 1928–31 saw workers exercise an influence over production never again to be equalled. Shock workers and shock brigades showed the workers the way, and there was a great deal of worker initiative as hierarchy was played down. This happened at a time when the planners could not accurately plot the way ahead. Some members of the leadership, working on the assumption that socialism meant a moneyless economy, believed that the exchange of products would replace money as NEP was phased out. Indeed, many of them in 1930 thought that this stage was fast approaching. It was also widely assumed that society could be transformed very rapidly and that workers would be motivated by enthusiasm, so that an end could be made to payment by result. In July 1931, however, Stalin changed his approach. He attacked the prevalent egalitarianism and proposed wage differentials which reflected skill and responsibility [Doc. 6]. The ideas of the American time and motion expert, F.W. Taylor, found favour, and engineers were given the task of setting scientifically based norms. Authority was reinvested in specialists and engineers.

The first FYP was a period of genuine enthusiasm, and prodigious achievements were recorded in production. The ‘impossible’ targets galvanised people into action, and more was achieved than would have been the case had orthodox advice been followed. New cities, such as Magnitogorsk in the Urals, rose from the ground. According to official statistics the first FYP in industry was fulfilled [Doc. 7].
no. 5/ with the plan for producers’ goods – the production of the means of production (heavy industry) – being
over-fulfilled [no. 9]. Consumption goods (light industry), on the other hand, fell short of the target [no. 10]. These
figures are open to criticism, however. They are expressed in 1926—27 prices, but many of the goods
produced during the plan were not made in 1926—27. Money values in roubles were used instead, and these
certainly erred on the high side. Various western economists have recomputed the results and their estimates
range from 59.7 to 69.9 per cent fulfilment [nos. 6—8].
Whatever the figures, a great engineering industry was in the making and the rise in the output of machinery,
machine tools, turbines and tractors was very impressive. Ukraine, the Volga, the Urals and the Kuzbass (south-
west Siberia) saw most expansion. Engineering enterprises in the Leningrad and Moscow regions were
modernised and expanded. Industry also penetrated the less well developed republics, especially Kazakhstan and
Central Asia. Power for expanding Ukrainian industry flowed from the huge Dnieper dam which was completed
during these years. The plan for railway expansion was less than half achieved but canals increased rapidly, often
using forced labour, as in the case of the Volga—White Sea canal [8].
Not surprisingly, the agricultural performance was abysmal [Doc. 7, no. 11]. The rush out of the countryside
led to the over-fulfilment of the labour plan [no. 16] and unemployment in the cities had disappeared by 1932.
Industry took on many more workers than planned [no. 17]. All this meant that money wages were far in excess
of the plan [no. 18]. Thus there was even more money than expected chasing the few consumer goods on offer.
Living standards were miserably low, and if they were low in the towns they were even worse in the countryside.
Despite the over-fulfilment of the labour plan, industrial production was officially only a fraction over the plan
[no. 5]. This meant that labour productivity was very low, and came as a great disappointment to the planners.
Determined efforts were made to increase labour discipline during the FYP. The first legislation involving prison
sentences for those who violated labour discipline was passed in January 1931. Work books were introduced for
all industrial and transport workers in February 1931, and the death sentence could be applied for the theft of
state or collective farm property as from August 1932. Missing a day’s work could mean instant dismissal after
November 1932, and the internal passport
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(not issued to *kolkhozniks*) was introduced on 27 December 1932 to restrict movement and increase control [8]. Such draconian measures bear eloquent testimony to the difficulty of transforming the peasant into a worker.

The industrial achievements of the first FYP were mainly the result of utilising the available capacity more fully, including the extra plant which came on stream as a consequence of pre-1928 investment. Plant started during the first FYP was completed, in the main, in 1934—3 6, and the investment plan was only half fulfilled (Doc. 7, no. 26).

However, not everyone was willing to put up with low living standards indefinitely. Stalin, speaking at a CC plenum in January 1933, had a message for all the grumblers: ‘We have without doubt achieved a situation in which the material conditions of workers and peasants are improving year by year. The only people who doubt this are the sworn enemies of Soviet power.’

The mayhem of collectivisation and low yields of 1932 led to a famine in 1933. It was made even worse by the need to seize seed grain from the farms to build up stocks to feed the Red Army if a conflict with Japan occurred in the Far East. The number of deaths from starvation was 7.2—8.1 million [123] but these were not mentioned in the Soviet press.

Thus the second FYP (1933—37) got off to a very inauspicious start and the XVIIth Party Congress in January—February 1934 redrafted it. The new version revealed that Soviet planning had become more realistic, for this time the targets set did not belong to cloud cuckoo land. Agriculture was in a parlous state in 1933 but improved rapidly afterwards. Although there were still about nine million peasants outside the collective farm sector in 1934, by 1937 they had practically all been collectivised. High taxes and compulsory deliveries were levied on the peasant, and when he could not meet his obligations all his goods and belongings were sold to meet the deficit.

Livestock numbers recovered rapidly after the depredations of the early 1930s [8]. This was due in large part to the state’s willingness to permit farmers to own their own animals—within strict limits, of course. Each household was also allowed a private plot. Surplus produce could be sold legally in towns in the *kolkhoz* market, though only by the producers themselves. No middlemen were permitted to reappear.

A Congress was convened in 1935 to draft a model charter for the *kolkhozes*, which was to stay on the statute book until the early 1970s. The *kolkhoz* was defined as a voluntary cooperative working land provided by the state rent-free in perpetuity. The chairman was to be elected by the members, but in practice the *kolkhoz* enjoyed little autonomy since its goals were set by the party and the government. The mechanical work was done under contract by machine tractor stations [8]. Thus the available machinery was spread around as much as possible. The farms paid for such services in kind. Unlike state farms or *sovkhозes*, collective farms did not offer their members a guaranteed wage before 1966. If the farm did well, the profits were shared out at the end of the year. If results were poor, little or nothing was paid out. Hence it was possible for a *kolkhoznik* to work assiduously and to receive little or no reward for his labours. Not surprisingly he quickly came to realise that the private plot was his staff of life and that his cow was especially valuable (Doc. 26). He therefore devoted his energies to his private plot and merely went through the motions on the collective farm. The girls often opted out of agriculture altogether by moving to the towns, and the more ambitious young men followed them.

The second FYP was over-fulfilled, in general, by 3 per cent (Doc. 7, no. 5). The engineering industry again expanded rapidly. The output of steel almost trebled, the main reason for this being that the great plants begun during the first FYP entered production. Magnitogorsk, Kuznetsk and Zaporozhe, for example, became great industrial centres. Karaganda (Kazakhstan), the Kuzbass and the Urals saw a great expansion of coal production; the generation of electricity grew but oil output was disappointing as Baku and the Urals—Volga fields failed to cope with their technical problems. Industry was spread around the country, even to the non-Slav republics where the return on investment was lower than in ‘older’ industrial areas [8].

The pious hopes about according consumer goods greater emphasis bore no fruit (no. 10). One of the reasons for this was the increasing share of industrial production being devoted to defence officially only 3.4 per cent of total budget expenditure in 1933 but 16.5 per cent in 1937. (Real defence expenditure in 1933 appears to have been about 12 per cent.) Agriculture flopped again (no. 11); indeed no FYP for agriculture ever achieved its targets in the Soviet Union.

The number of workers in the economy as a whole, and especially in industry, fell below the levels projected by the FYP (no. 16), but as output had exceeded the targets this meant that labour productivity was rising faster than expected. One of the contributory
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factors to this was the impact of the Stakhanovite movement, named after Aleksei Stakhanov, who on 30—31 August 1935 had shown just what could be done by mining 102 tonnes of coal in five hours and forty-five minutes (the equivalent of fourteen norms). Doing the work of fourteen men is an astonishing feat, but Stakhanov’s achievement was also eloquent testimony to the low productivity of Soviet miners. Needless to say Stakhanov did not achieve the feat on his own: he had all the help he needed and all the machinery was in working order.

Real wages increased greatly during the second FYP but were still lower in 1937 than in 1928 and in that year were little better than in 1913. Rationing was gradually phased out in 1935, but even with a ration card (only issued to workers and employees) there was no guarantee that the desired goods would be available. Free market prices were very high, reflecting especially the shortage of bread, a staple food [8].

The third FYP (1938—41) was adopted at the XVIIIth Party Congress in 1939, but was cut short after three and a half years by the German invasion [105]. It reaffirmed the emphasis placed on heavy industry, but it also increased defence expenditure to 18 per cent of GDP in 1940. As a consequence the living standards of workers and employees stagnated and may even have fallen slightly by 1941.

Forced labour, supervised by the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD),* made a significant contribution to the fulfilment of the plan. Western estimates of the number of prisoners in 1941 range from 3.5 million to 15 million. Recent Soviet research has produced a figure of 1.9 million in 1941 rising to 2.5 million in 1952 [110]. It would appear that the Soviet figures only include part of those doing compulsory labour.

Government attitudes towards the workers became noticeably harsher in 1939 and 1940. Hitherto workers had been able to choose their place of work, and this produced a high labour turnover as they sought to improve their lot. In 1940, however, the state decreed that the free labour market was to end. No worker could change his job without permission, and skilled workers and specialists could be directed anywhere. Absenteeism, which could mean being twenty minutes late for work, became a criminal offence and one woman was actually convicted of the crime while she was in a maternity ward. The legislation stayed on the statute book until 1956, and if judges were soft on offenders they were put in the dock themselves. Theft was severely dealt with. One man who worked in a flour mill brought home a handful of grain for his hungry family, and was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment. Social benefits for most workers were cut and fees were introduced for students in institutions of higher learning and for senior pupils in secondary schools. The population must have been frightened.

CULTURE

Education changed dramatically as the entire pedagogical system was transformed. Schools were handed over to collective farms or enterprises, pupils and teachers abandoned formal learning and sought to learn through ‘productive labour’ or were mobilised to fulfil the plan. There was even talk of the ‘withering away of the school’ altogether. Universities were transferred to Vesenko (VSNKh) or the major economic commissariats. The majority were restructured along functional lines, involving narrow specialisms. ‘Bourgeois’ academics were, like school teachers, hounded out. However, by 1932 literacy was back in fashion. The socialist substitute, the rabfak, had produced high drop-out rates and little technical expertise. (One of those who dropped out was Nikita Khrushchev.) Selection reappeared and by the end of 1936 non-proletarians could again enter higher education. Russian nationalism was promoted and all other nations were referred to as ‘younger brothers’. Tuition fees had to be paid for the final three forms of secondary education. Compulsory uniforms were introduced (including pigtails for girls) and these remained until the end of the Soviet era. Out of experimentation developed a fine educational system with a particularly good record in the pure sciences.

The party did not attempt to control all aspects of culture during the 1920s, and a 1925 decree made this clear [5]. The defeat of the right, however, had serious repercussions, since several key writers were linked to Bukharin. The All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP)* was in the ascendant in 1928 and propagated the hegemony of working-class values in fiction. There was only one fly in the ointment as far as RAPP was concerned, namely the All-Russian Union of Writers (AUW).* The latter tried to keep politics out of their fiction but although RAPP disapproved strongly of this attitude, most of the leading Russian writers were members of the AUW. Undeterred, RAPP launched a campaign against Evgeny Zamyatin, the AUW chairman, and Boris Pilnyak, head of the Leningrad branch, accusing them of publishing anti-Soviet works

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amounted to little more than saying, for example, in Uzbek, what was being said in reality this way: ‘National in form, Socialist in content, to describe what was permissible. In nationalism boded ill for the other nationalities. Stalin formulated the slogan ‘Great figures; Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible walked again. This tide of optimism was compulsory. Every novel, like a Hollywood picture of the period, must have a happy ending as the hero or heroine battled against impossible odds to final victory.

In essence it meant building the brave new world with the bricks of the present. Literature was to uplift the reader so that he would become a more efficient constructor of socialism. It was to be deliberately didactic, and the machine was worshipped; indeed only a country as backward as the Soviet Union could have placed so much faith in technology as the answer to man’s problems. The rest of Europe had had the myth of the good machine exploded during the First World War, but for post-war Russia, noise was still a sign of progress, and the smoke belching out of factory chimneys a symbol of a brighter future.

After 1931 the literary hero changes. The manager, the expert, the party official, in other words the decision-makers, take over. The writer had also to be a skilled craftsman, the ‘engineer of the soul’, as Stalin graphically put it. His frame of reference was laid down by Andrei Zhdanov in April 1934 at the 1st Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers. Socialist realism was to be the guiding light [5]. In essence it meant building the brave new world with the bricks of the present. Literature was to uplift the reader so that he would become a more efficient constructor of socialism. It was to be deliberately didactic, and optimism was compulsory. Every novel, like a Hollywood picture of the period, had to have a happy ending as the hero or heroine battled against impossible odds to final victory.

The main hero, of course, was Stalin. Another was the Russian nation and its great figures; Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible walked again. This tide of nationalism bode ill for the other nationalities. Stalin formulated the slogan ‘National in form, Socialist in content, to describe what was permissible. In reality this amounted to little more than saying, for example, in Uzbek, what was being said about Stalin and Russia in Russian. The national heroes who had fought against imperial Russian control were banished; the local bards were swept aside and replaced by Russian luminaries. The purges which wiped out the non-Russian elites completed the process.

THE PURGES

All the show trials between 1928 and 1934 linked the accused to the economy [108]: the Shakhty engineers, the ‘industrial party’ trial, the Menshevik trial of 1931, the two secret trials of March 1933 which resulted in seventy state farm and People’s Commissariat of Agriculture officials being shot, and the trial of the Metro-Vickers engineers. Other trials led to the passing of the death sentence on food scientists and bacteriologists. The trials all had to be carefully prepared since they had to appear plausible both inside the Soviet Union and outside. The paraphernalia of the great Purge Trials of 1936—38 was already in place: the written confessions, often to the most preposterous crimes, the bullying, sarcastic behaviour of the prosecutor, and the complete absence of any rules of evidence [108]. All the shortcomings of the economy were to be blamed on the unfortunates in the dock.

The only major trial with political overtones which occurred before 1934 was that involving a group around a communist called M.N. Ryutin. They had produced a 200-page indictment of Stalin and his regime from a Bukharinist point of view in late summer 1932, in which the Secretary-General was described as the ‘evil genius of the Russian revolution who, motivated by personal desire for power and revenge, had brought the revolution to the brink of destruction’. Since they wanted Stalin removed, he took this to mean that they were going to kill him, and therefore demanded the death penalty. But a majority of the Politburo was opposed to such an extreme measure, and in the event Ryutin and his followers were merely expelled from the party. Since many other party members had seen the offending document and had not reported it, the opportunity was seized to purge the whole organisation. Some 800,000 members were expelled in 1933 and a further 340,000 in 1934. The Ryutin affair rankled with Stalin, and time and again during the Purge Trials reference was made to it.

Stalin was shaken by the suicide of his second wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva, in November 1932. She took her own life as a protest...
against the brutalities of collectivisation. Stalin never remarried and over time isolated himself more and more from his family. He seems to have lived surrounded by men, and although Khrushchev records that on one occasion he encountered a ‘dark Caucasian beauty’ in the Kremlin, she scurried away in an instant.

The murder of Sergei Kirov, party secretary in Leningrad, on 1 December 1934 set in motion a train of events which resulted in death for hundreds of thousands of people. Some of the details of the assassination are still not known, but it would appear that Stalin himself was implicated. Kirov was the only credible political alternative to Stalin, for he had been elected a secretary at the XVIIth Party Congress in 1934 at which Stalin had lost his post of Secretary-General. Kirov had been approached by delegates to stand for the post of Secretary-General but declined and reported this to Stalin. It is tempting to regard this episode as sealing Kirov’s fate. With Kirov dead, much repressive legislation was introduced. One of the chief targets was the party itself, as indications about spilling Bolshevik blood were cast aside. The XVIIth Congress, described at the time as the ‘Congress of Victors’, might more appropriately have been called the ‘Congress of the Condemned’, for 1,108 of its 1,966 delegates were executed and 98 of the 139 members of the CC elected at the Congress were shot in the years following.

The punitive legislation introduced —which included, for example, the death penalty for boys of twelve —was consonant with Stalin’s views of the class struggle. Classes would disappear, he said, ‘not as a result of the slackening of class conflict but as a result of its intensification’. The state would wither away ‘not through the weakening of its power but through it becoming as strong as possible so as to defeat the remnants of the dying classes and to defend itself against capitalist encirclement’. This really was standing Marx on his head and is another example of Stalin’s ideological relativism. An orthodox Marxist would expect classes to disappear as class conflict declines and for the state to wither away as the need for it disappears. Marx saw the state as an oppressive instrument used by the minority to oppress the majority.

Paradoxically, at the same time as these punitive measures were being applied, the Stalin constitution of 1936 —the ‘most democratic in the world’, as Stalin described it —came into effect. This introduced a bicameral legislature, the Soviet of the Union and the Soviet of Nationalities, collectively known as the USSR Supreme Soviet. The role of the local soviets now changed. Hitherto they had been seen as both legislative and executive organs, not mere extensions of the central authority, constituting a unified system of equal links of varying sizes. They had also been seen as peculiar to the stage of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The 1936 constitution shattered the unity of the soviets. Local soviets (all those below republican level) were reduced to the status of local authorities. The Supreme Soviets (‘the supreme organs of the soviets’) became legislative organs; and the government (‘the supreme organ of state power’) became the executive organ. The Supreme Soviets even began to call themselves parliaments, despite Lenin’s contempt for that institution.

The new constitution stated that the foundations of socialism had been laid and that the exploiting classes had ceased to exist. There were now only fraternal classes —the working class and the collective farm peasantry —and they coexisted harmoniously with the intelligentsia, defined as a stratum rather than a class since it owned no property.

Freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly and of religious observance were guaranteed by the 1936 constitution. However, it was pointed out that the party remained the key institution and it was clear to every Soviet citizen that the party’s interests would override any personal or group interest. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union appeared to be moving in the right direction and made a refreshing contrast to the rest of Europe where fascism was on the march.

There were three great Show Trials during the years 1936—38 [108]. The first took place in August 1936 and involved Kamenev and Zinoviev, along with sundry minor officials. Trotsky was introduced as the arch villain and it was claimed that he had ordered numerous assassinations and wrecks. Andrei Vyshinsky, who became notorious as a brutal prosecutor, demanded in his closing speech that these mad dogs be shot, every last one of them! They were all shot, but it was Stalin who was the real judge. Vyshinsky epitomised a certain type of official who slavishly served Stalin. As an ex-Menshevik he felt that he had repeatedly to reaffirm his credentials of loyalty to the regime.

The second great Show Trial should have involved Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky in September 1936, but it was cancelled. Tomsky cheated the executioner by taking his own life and it was possible that neither Bukharin nor Rykov would make the obligatory confession. Also Yagoda, the man in charge, lost his position to Nikolai Ezhov in September 1936. Yagoda’s dismissal may have been connected with his failure to deliver Bukharin and productivity was rising faster than expected. One of the contributory
Others thrown in included Yagoda, getting a taste of his own medicine. had previously slipped the net, Bukharin and Rykov.

been a ghastly mistake since the charges against the officers were baseless. All eight admirals were shot. In total 35,000, half of the officer corps, and seventy-five of the eighty members of the Supreme Military Council were veritable slaughter of the top brass. All eleven deputy Commissars of Defence military figures were branded as traitors and shot in June 1937. Then followed a Commissar for Finance who had resisted the wild targets of the first FYP; Lenin in his ‘Testament

Pre-war period was 111,800 in 1912. The number shot was 799,455 of which no less than 681,692 were executed during 1937 and 1938, the Ezhovshchina. Lower peaks of repression were 1930—33, 1942 and 1945—46. Another remarkable statistic is that over the years 1923—53, in the RSFSR alone, 39.1 million persons were sentenced by the regular courts (excluding the special NKVD courts, special councils and tribunals). If one excludes those under the age of 14 and over 60 years old, then during the course of one generation, from 1923 to 1953, every third citizen was sentenced for non-political offences. In comparison, the highest number in prison in the immediate pre-war period was 111,800 in 1912.

The second great Show Trial turned out to involve Pyatakov, mentioned by Lenin in his ‘Testament’: Sokolnikov, a signatory of the Brest-Litovsk treaty and later a Commissar for Finance who had resisted the wild targets of the first FYP; and various other party functionaries. They were all lumped together as an ‘Anti-Soviet Trotskyist Centre’ [1]. Pyatakov debased himself but nevertheless was shot. Sokolnikov died in a labour camp in 1939.

The turn of the military came in due course. Marshal Tukhachevsky, a deputy Commissar for Defence and a leading strategic thinker, and many other top military figures were branded as traitors and shot in June 1937. Then followed a veritable slaughter of the top brass. All eleven deputy Commissars of Defence and seventy-five of the eighty members of the Supreme Military Council were executed. All eight admirals were shot. In total 35,000, half of the officer corps, were either executed or imprisoned. As Khrushchev was to admit later, it had all been a ghastly mistake since the charges against the officers were baseless [12].

The last great Show Trial opened on 2 March 1938 and involved the pair who had previously slipped the net, Bukharin and Rykov. Others thrown in included Yagoda, getting a taste of his own medicine.

Vyshinsky branded them as the ‘Bloc of the right wingers and Trotskyites’, and the inevitable death sentence followed.

Foreign communists in exile in the Soviet Union were mown down like ripe corn, the NKVD being especially severe on the Germans and Poles. The greatest prize of all, however, eluded them until 21 August 1940, when an agent put an ice pick through Trotsky’s skull in Mexico [5].

After such a catalogue of methodical madness the question must arise: was Stalin himself a victim of the frenzy of the period? Did he lose his sanity for a while? Svetlana Alliluyeva, his daughter, believes that officials such as Beria poisoned his mind and convinced him that the mad accusations were true [15; 501. This is not so. Stalin himself edited the indictment against Pyatakov, Sokolnikov, Radek and others for the second great Show Trial. All lists of condemned were forwarded to Stalin and during 1938 at least 383 lists, containing 44,000 names of whom 39,000 were executed, were passed on to him. Stalin signed 362 lists, Molotov 373, Voroshilov 195, Kaganovich 191 and Zhdanov 177. Stalin’s Politburo colleagues were enthusiastic in their support of these repressions. They often wrote comments in the margin encouraging the NKVD to step up the torture: for example, against certain names: ‘beat again and again!’ [109] [Doc. 13]. The terror was turned off like a tap in 1939, but the show trials had had a momentum of their own. The NKVD did not have to go and look for suspects; they were inundated with denunciations [Doc. 141. Such was the spirit of the times that in order to avoid being denounced one had to denounce everyone else first. There were even targets set for the number of people one had to denounce in a given period.

An understanding of the period can be gleaned from the fortunes of two persons caught up in the NKVD net, Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam [38]. Thousands, perhaps millions, had similar experiences.

Osip Mandelstam was a gifted poet but never became a Bolshevik. Like many other writers his patron was Bukharin. He was arrested in May 1934 for composing a poem which contained an unflattering reference to Stalin [Doc. 8]: ‘All we hear is the Kremlin mountaineer/The murderer and peasant slayer.’ His wife Nadezhda recalls the techniques used to force confessions [Doc. 9]: lack of sleep, bright lights shining in the eyes, poor food, the deliberate telling of lies to confuse the prisoner and make him more anxious. ‘such and such a person had been arrested and had confessed

productivity was rising faster than expected. One of the contributory
everyday work. He and his wife were given accommodation in a rest home east of Moscow, but shortly after their arrival, on 1 May 1938, Mandelstam was arrested and was never seen again. His wife returned to Kalinin and narrowly escaped arrest. She then moved to a small town north-east of Moscow, coming in regularly to the capital in search of information about her husband. She eventually discovered that he had died in a labour camp, probably in December 1938.

FOREIGN POLICY

The rise of fascism was completely misinterpreted in Moscow, where it was assumed to be the most predatory face of finance capital, with only a limited capacity to endure, if it ever came to power. The Comintern, the Russian Communist Party wearing its foreign suit, came to the conclusion that the German National Socialists (NSDAP)* were claiming to do the impossible. They promised to put German industry back on its feet, which implied that big business would do very well, but at the same time they canvassed the votes of small businessmen, shopkeepers and farmers. They promised the latter they would protect them against unfair competition and secure a bright future for them, yet in order to do this the Nazis would have to restrict the activities of the industrial giants. In other words the Nazis could not satisfy both sides. The Italian fascists were not seen as a threat to the Soviet Union, so why should German fascism be different? The Social Democrats (SPD)* were regarded as the main enemy and labelled ‘social fascists’. In Germany the SPD was the main supporter of the Weimar republic, and it was assumed in Moscow that the destruction of the SPD would topple the republic.

The breath-taking ease with which Hitler and the NSDAP swept the Communist Party of Germany (KPD)* off the political stage, the pusillanimity of the other political parties and the Fuhrer’s ruthlessness in disposing of Ernst Rudhm and the SA (Sturmabteilung or storm troops) as part of a deal with the German army, the Reichswehr, rudely awakened Moscow. The Comintern, at its VIth and final Congress in August 1935, called for the formation of a popular front. Western governments were slow to react. After all, the previous Comintern policy had been to appeal to rank-and-file social democrats over the heads of their leaders, who were publicly vilified.
The Soviet Union set out to repair her fences with the rest of Europe. She joined the League of Nations in 1934 and signed a treaty with France in 1935 which was extended to embrace Czechoslovakia. The 1936 constitution, partly for external consumption, made the USSR more attractive. However, 1936 was a bad year for Moscow. The German remilitarisation of the Rhine-land, the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact by Germany, Italy and Japan, and the onset of the Spanish Civil War, with the Soviet Union as the main ally of the Spanish republic, boded ill for Soviet hopes.

The Munich Agreement of September 1938, from which the Soviet Union was excluded, led Stalin to doubt whether France and Great Britain would ever stand up to Germany.

Stalin had at least two alternatives so far as policy towards Germany was concerned. He could enter into an alliance with France and Great Britain and thereby effectively checkmate the Third Reich, which could not face a war on two fronts. However, the Soviet leader could not be absolutely sure that France and Great Britain would remain committed if war with Germany did break out. Stalin’s other option was to sign a pact with Hitler and unleash the dogs of war westwards. When he came to the conclusion that war was inevitable his main objective was to keep the USSR out of the conflict. After what he had done to the Red Army and Navy this was the most prudent course. The Soviet Union began negotiating seriously in May 1939, when Litvinov, a Jew, was replaced as Commissar for Foreign Affairs by Molotov. The German—Soviet Non-Aggression Pact was signed by Ribbentrop and Molotov in Moscow on 23 August 1939 (Stalin and Hitler never met) and it was consequently only a matter of time before Hitler attacked in the west. Moscow was alarmed by the rapid success of the German Blitzkrieg in Poland and by the fact that neither France nor Great Britain made any move to attack Germany. Stalin even began to fear that the Wehrmacht (German armed forces) would not stop at the agreed demarcation line in Poland and would carry on to invade the Soviet Union. He therefore ordered the Red Army to enter Poland in September 1939 to secure the USSR’s slice of the bargain. France and Great Britain obligingly did not treat this as an act of war against them.

With Finland part of her zone of influence, Moscow pressed the Finns to accept a frontier away from Leningrad. The Soviets also wanted naval bases on Finnish soil, but Helsinki would not countenance this. The Red Army therefore launched an assault against Finland on 30 November 1939, but the Winter War highlighted its deficiencies, and led to the death of some 200,000 of its soldiers. In order to forestall intervention by France and Great Britain, a lenient peace was signed in March 1940. Great efforts were made afterwards to improve the fighting capacity of the Red Army.

Hitler regarded a war between Germany and the Soviet Union as inevitable. The world was too small for two such ambitious ideologies as fascism and communism. Stalin considered that a conflict could be avoided. He thought that Hitler could be bought off with concessions and believed that Germany had to defeat Great Britain first. This would give the Soviet Union the breathing space necessary to build up her armed might to such a pitch that the Wehrmacht would not invade.

Stalin handled his relations with Hitler very badly. Since the USSR was the weaker power he had to appease the German dictator. When Molotov visited Berlin in November 1940 Hitler proposed that the Soviet Union should joint the Tripartite Pact which linked Germany, Italy and Japan with Berlin’s east European satellites. The bait was Soviet gains in the Black Sea area and in Central Asia. Molotov astonishingly then produced his own shopping list. Finland and southern Bukovina (Romania) were to fall under Soviet sway; Bulgaria was to form part of a Soviet security zone, as was Sweden; and notice was served that the Soviets had future designs on Hungary, Yugoslavia, Greece and even on part of German-occupied Poland. The Soviets also wanted military bases in the Dardanelles and a Soviet—Danish condominium over the Baltic. Shortly afterwards Stalin accepted the invitation to join the Tripartite Pact and demanded that the Soviet Union be permitted to expand through Iran to the Persian Gulf. Since the USSR militarily was in no position to make such demands on Germany, the only result of this démarche was to annoy Hitler and to fuel his doubts about the reliability of his new partner.

Stalin’s demands revealed the weakness of the Soviet Union, and instead of pacifying Hitler they provoked him. Just why did Stalin act so clumsily? Perhaps he thought that if he did not make any demands Hitler would have regarded the Soviet Union as weak and afraid to assert its interests. Stalin remained unaware of his blunder, however, and the German invasion of 22 June 1941 took him completely by surprise, even though he had been forewarned by his own intelligence services. He simply refused to believe the information. The Wehrmacht had intended to attack earlier, in May productivity was rising faster than expected. One of the contributory
1941, but had been detained in Greece and Yugoslavia. Stalin thought he was safe in June, since this would be too late for a summer offensive.

If the prime goal of Soviet foreign policy during the 1930s was to keep the country out of a European war, then it was a dismal failure. The rise of fascism was looked on with equanimity; indeed, the NSDAP and the KPD cooperated from time to time and were even known to share the same offices in some places. Stalin thought that the Second World War would be a re-run of the First, with the European powers becoming bogged down. When they had exhausted themselves the USSR would be free to intervene and do as she pleased. Again, this was a disastrous miscalculation. All the USSR succeeded in doing was to make Germany even stronger. A Machiavelli might argue that in the end it all turned out right for the Soviet Union. Not only was Germany defeated but Moscow ended up occupying part of Germany, thereby making the USSR a great power. This, however, is no justification for a policy which unleashed a holocaust which killed over fifty million and maimed millions of others in body and mind. Also, this argument assumes that the Soviet occupation of eastern Europe was a net benefit to Moscow. All the European powers must assume some responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities, but had France, Great Britain and the Soviet Union acted decisively together in 1939, Germany could not have launched a European and eventually a world war.

**STALINISM TRIUMPHANT**

Stalinism flowered in a responsive soil. Without his army of willing cohorts, Stalin could not have propelled the Soviet Union into breakneck industrialisation and collectivisation and maintained the pace after the initial enthusiasm had ebbed. A corps of state and party officials came into being who were welded to the Stalin chariot [129]. The bloodletting and the violence of collectivisation found many wanting, and they passed from the scene and were replaced by those who were not so squeamish. Battle-scarred, ruthless and dedicated, the new men really were people of a special mould. Since their goal was socialism, any measure which advanced the USSR towards that glorious culmination was justified. If mistakes were made they paled into insignificance when placed alongside the triumphs of the period. Since capitalism had been left behind, what was being built in the USSR had to be socialism.

What were Stalin’s aims during the 1930s? Simply to make the Soviet Union politically, economically and militarily strong. The greater the industrial growth, the stronger the USSR became. The terror was used to produce a pliable, malleable work force, to destroy opposition to central directives, to render everyone insecure, from the top official to the collective farmer, and to shift blame for all the shortcomings of everyday life on to the shoulders of those arrested and sentenced.

The typical Stalinist official was of peasant origin. He eagerly followed the party leadership and quickly accepted the view that all opinions which differed from those of the leadership were treasonous. The XVIIth Party Congress in 1934 can be seen as a watershed. Eighty per cent of the delegates had joined the party before 1920 and hence really belonged to the Leninist elite. At the Congress, however, Stalin secured the abolition of Rabkrin, the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspectorate, which supervised government officials, and of the Central Control Commission, which was responsible for party officials. This breakthrough, allied to Kirov’s murder, opened the floodgates of violence. The purges swept most of the Leninist elite to their doom. They were replaced in turn by the Stalinist elite. Some of the Stalinist cadres were motivated by idealism, some were attracted by the perquisites of office [Doc. 15], others by the feeling of power which their position afforded them.

Stalin liked military metaphors. He referred to the party as the General Staff of the proletariat [Doc. 1]. At a CC plenum in March 1937 he divided the party into leaders and the led. There were 3,000—4,000 senior leaders, who were the generals; the 30,000—40,000 middle-rank officials made up the officer corps, and the 100,000—150,000 lower-level leaders were the NCOs. This neatly illustrates Stalin’s hierarchical way of thinking. No one had any right to an opinion unless his seniority entitled him to one. Stalin’s attitude to people was the reverse of the story he told about the incident in Siberia [Doc. 16]. In practice he was just as callous or fatalist as the Siberians.

The way Stalin projected himself is instructive. During the 1920s he claimed to be the only true apostle of Lenin; others, such as Trotsky and Zinoviev, were anti-Leninists. Gradually, Stalin became the equal of Lenin, and the phrase ‘Lenin—Stalin’ made its appearance. The slogan ‘Stalin is the Lenin of today’ marked the next stage, in which Stalin was ahead of Lenin. Stalin was projected as the father of the nation and the epithet ‘Stalinist’ guaranteed success. He could work miracles and his intervention produced exaltation and joy [Doc. 17].

So successful was the projection of this productivity was rising faster than expected. One of the contributory
image [Doc. 18] that many people accepted it and believed that all the injustices of the 1930s were the fault of nasty and incompetent officials. Some went to their deaths convinced that if only comrade Stalin had known what was really going on he would have stepped in to right the injustice.

Stalin’s rise meant that the role of the party changed. It was no longer true that the party knew best. Stalin’s thought became the fount of all wisdom.

There was an assault on learning after 1928 so as to destroy the influence and power of the ‘old’ elites [125]. They were replaced by new elites whose attitude to learning was radically different. All intellectual activity was to be channelled into fighting the battle for socialism. Learning was demystified, and anyone with the right attitude, a Stalinist attitude, could become a specialist. Folk heroes appeared in many fields: Makarenko in education, Vilyams in grassland management, Lysenko in agronomy, and Michurin in fruit-farming. The fact that practically everything they preached was dismissed out of hand in the west only strengthened their position. What else could one expect from bourgeois scientists jealous of the successes of socialism?

Hence Stalinism meant modernisation, it meant technology, it meant a bright future, it meant victory. The tide of Russian nationalism also rose. The new elites (industrialists, lawyers, and so on) before 1914 should reassert themselves. The party watched the government, the government was hampered in its implementation of the plans. The flow of information was restricted. The more important an official, the more he was told. The party watched the government, but the political police watched both. Key decision-making was centred in Stalin’s own chancellery, presided over by a trusted official, Poskrebyshev. All the threads came together in the chancellery, all the information was pieced together there, the jigsaw was complete. Stalin was the only person in the entire country who saw the whole picture and he skilfully used the information available to him. Stalin’s power was not based on control of the government or the party or the political police. It involved exploiting all three. It was vital to Stalin that he should maintain several independent sources of information; in that way he hoped to judge which source was misleading. After 1936 he successfully prevented any body, be it the Politburo or the CC of the party or the government, meeting as a group and taking counsel together independent of him. He preferred to consult individuals or small groups, and here his tactics were based on setting one person against another. This explains why there were only two Party Congresses between 1934 and 1953, for they were frankly unnecessary. Stalin very seldom left Moscow. He disliked mass meetings and was always conscious of his Georgian accent. He restricted the number of people who had direct access to him and in so doing created a mystique around his person.

Why and how did Stalinism function? The destruction of the old ruling strata, the more able farmers, the kulaks and the old intelligentsia left a void. It was inevitable that the authoritarian political culture which was just being challenged by civil society (autonomous institutions outside the control of the government) and the new elites (industrialists, lawyers and so on) before 1914 should reassert itself. Lenin changed his views on the state, moving from a weak to a strong state. This fitted the pre-1917 Russian tradition. Autonomous labour organisations, such as factory committees and trade unions, were emasculated because they wished to share in decision-making. No independent institutions were permitted to emerge. Hence all the new institutions and organisations were instrumental, to serve Bolshevik, later Stalinist, goals. The Soviet constitution afforded soviets legislative and executive functions but this constitution was at variance with the newly emerging Bolshevik state. The failure of world revolution isolated Soviet Russia and it had to survive on its own. Outside ideas, ‘bourgeois’ ideas, were by definition counter-revolutionary. The violent internecine strife which illuminated the 1920s encouraged authoritarianism. Utopianism was given its head during the first Five-Year Plan and led to untold misery for millions of peasants and others. Bukharin, perceptively, warned of the ‘Leviathan state’ which would emanate from the ‘military-feudal exploitation of the peasantry’. The Bolsheviks were determined to eliminate the peasant mir* or community. The muzhik* had to depart the stage.

The type of economic planning adopted shaped the regime. Bolshevik rejection of the market was total and this was in part due to the fact that the market was only just emerging in Russia in 1914. Communist planners declined to base their plans on value and price and concentrated on material balances instead. The former would have afforded enterprises the opportunity, in their own interests, to achieve the plan more effectively by cutting costs. Costs, in fact, were ignored in the early years of the first FYP. Material balances meant that an increasing number of quantitative goals, which could not encapsulate quality and innovation, had to be set, productivity was rising faster than expected. One of the contributory...
thereby requiring more and more bureaucrats. Stalin, significantly, complained of
the difficulty of obtaining objective information about enterprise potential during
the 1930s. Planners were reduced to increasing annual targets by a certain
amount (the ratchet principle). Stalin was forced to legalise the market, but only
the kolkhoz market. Illegal markets began to develop to make up for the lacunae
which the planners could not or would not cope with.

The reasons for the purges are still unclear. Lewin sees them as a means of
demonologising the opposition, the majority of the population [90]. Such were
the tensions within society, a predominantly peasant society, that Stalin and his
co-leaders adopted a peasant idiom. By so doing they hoped to deflect peasant
anger at prevailing conditions away from the regime. The purges go through
various stages. There are Show Trials. There are purges of local officials with
locals being encouraged to denounce local bureaucrats and vent their anger on
them. Mobilisation becomes significant in proletarianising the bureaucracy. The
same is true of industry.

Recent research [79] does not attempt to provide a monocausal reason for
the purges. The totalitarian approach which views the purges as the logical
consequences of Marxist—Leninist doctrine, as a product of the inner logic of
absolute rule and utopia in power, has not been confronted with a powerful
counter-argument. What is clear, however, is that the social scope of the purges
appears to be more restricted and less indiscriminate than previously thought.
Research now concentrates on how the purges were implemented. Viola (in [79])
demonstrates that the purges in the countryside appear to have revitalised among
peasants old methods of disposing of socially marginal persons in the villages.
Rittersporn (in [79]) wonders if the recurring theme of conspiracy in Stalinist
politics may have been a psycho-social consequence of the structure of power
itself. Since power was mainly structured along personal and institutional
networks of loyalties, party and state bureaucrats were predisposed to perceiving
intra-bureaucratic conflict as conspiracy. The purges affected industrial workers
to a much lesser degree than managers and technical personnel. Stakhanovism
was pugnacious populism and contained elements of social demagogy. Previous
research did not notice that in the armed forces there was a move to expel all
officers from the party, which was independent of the arrests and executions.
Getty (in [79]) suggests several different explanations for the purges but
concludes that there may not have been any identifiable aims at all when Stalin
took the decision to initiate them. (This would appear quite erroneous since Stalin devoted great
attention to whom should be purged, at least at the top.)

The mass mobilisation and the assault on established elites and bureaucracies
are reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution in China, which began in 1966 and
was aimed at removing bureaucrats and indeed everyone in authority so as to
introduce new cohorts who would be more responsive to the thoughts of
Chairman Mao. It is as if the Stalin leadership were dissatisfied with the new
bureaucratic elites which emerged. They had to be swept away to make way for
new cohorts which in turn would be decimated. The party-state became more and
more dependent on its bureaucrats as the economy grew but, ironically, the
iconoclastic attitude to local officials meant that they could not be relied upon to
implement orders. The low level of expertise was part of the problem, but the
other aspect was the impossible demands visited on local officials and managers.
They, in turn, developed defence mechanisms, including colluding to report
overblown successes, to such an extent that a permanent tension developed
between the centre and the periphery. The centre reacted by attempting to
eliminate horizontal links and networks.

For example, in 1934 the existing economic regions were divided into 79
caller oblasts, the principal territorial subdivision of a republic, plus the cities
of Moscow and Leningrad. Between 1934 and 1944 Urals oblast, which had
developed into an economic and political centre to rival Moscow, was split into
six new oblasts. What did this restructuring of the economic administration lead
to? To the destruction of established structures, to the reshuffling of personnel, to
the violation of economic and cultural life. It undermined specialisation and
cooperation. One of the reasons why Aleksei Rykov, a former chairman of
Sovnarkom, was executed was because he had argued that the economy could not
be run from the centre. The same happened in the northern regions. The whole
Arctic region was divided among the central ministries so that no central body
existed to control the colonisation of the north. Thus, the northern minorities lost
all control over their own existence. The great central ministries attempted to
gain control over all enterprises within their remit. However, it is doubtful if the
ministries at the centre could have been effectively coordinated.

Hence Stalinism flowered for a short time but sowed the seeds of its own
impotence. Bent on destroying local autonomy, especially in non-Russian areas,
it was not able to put anything dynamic in its place. The late 1930s saw the
gradual decline of Stalinism.

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