



Background

[Five Year Plans](#) ▼

[Stakhanovites](#) ▼

[Collectivisation](#) ▼

[Gulag](#) ▼

[Terror](#) ▼

Five Year Plans

The first Five Year Plan was launched in 1928, the second in 1932 and the third in 1937. Each plan laid out targets for industrial production. Targets were set for each factory in the USSR, every shift of workers and even for every individual worker.

The plans aimed at producing a surplus. Production targets were set very high to give the workers something to aim for. If workers did not achieve their targets, they were punished. Desperate factory managers fiddled the books or committed suicide as the pressure to produce more and more became too great. If the workers succeeded in reaching targets, they might be rewarded with increased wages. But usually their targets were increased as well.

Each year Stalin's government produced a report on progress. These reports were made available for foreign governments to see how successful communism was. Stalin was careful not to publicise any failures to the rest of the world. The picture that emerged from the USSR during the 1930s was one of success.

It is clear that production greatly increased and new factories, dams, railways and roads were built. However, there were problems with wastage and inefficiency in the plans. Official figures were exaggerated or gave only a partial picture of the targets met, so it is difficult to know the extent to which production increased.

Stakhanovites

In 1935 a coal miner called Alexei Stakhanov was reported to have dug 102 tons of coal in a single 6-hour shift. This was many times more than a miner was expected to cut. Stakhanov was rewarded and praised as an example to all other workers. The public were not told that Stakhanov had two co-workers, plus machinery in perfect working order, to help him achieve so much.

Russians were told to model themselves on Stakhanov. They rose to the challenge in what became known as the Stakhanovite Movement. Stakhanovites tried to perform feats of great productivity, through working harder and also through reorganising the way things were done in their place of work. They were rewarded with better pay and also lots of praise and publicity. This was just one way in which Stalin attempted to persuade his new industrial labourers to work more efficiently.



Collectivisation

To achieve the enormous feat of industrialisation, Stalin had to modernise agriculture. There had to be enough food, not only to feed the workers in towns, but also for export. Selling grain abroad would raise the money needed to invest in industry.

Stalin decided to take control of all farms and make them much larger and more productive. The farmers were not compensated. They were expected to work with other farmers and hand over most of their produce to the government. In return, they would be supplied with tools, tractors and taught how to produce more.

The policy of collectivisation was not popular with the peasants. Many refused to give up their land or to give the government the crops that they had grown. Instead, they preferred to slaughter their animals, burn their crops and destroy their farm machinery. Stalin ordered the army to liquidate them. Uncooperative peasants were forcibly evicted from their farms, sent to labour camps in the Urals and Siberia and worked to death. Millions starved to death or were killed.

Gulag

The gulag was a system of hundreds of forced labour camps, plus transit camps and prisons, which held criminals. Increasingly gulag prisoners were political prisoners - people who were opposed to Stalin, people accused of failing to meet their work targets and peasants sent there during the collectivisation of agriculture.

From 1929-32 the numbers of people in the gulag increased greatly, coinciding with collectivisation. It is estimated that there may have been 5-7 million people in these camps at any one time. In later years the camps also held victims of Stalin's purges, ranging from high officials to intellectuals to ordinary people, as well as World War 2 prisoners.

Gulag prisoners were a useful supply of workers for large projects in remote and inhospitable places in the USSR. For example, the Belomor Canal, which connects the White Sea with the Baltic, was almost entirely constructed by hand, using 250,000 prisoners. Prisoners also worked in mines or cut timber.

They were not paid. They were underfed, housed in poor conditions and worked long hours in a difficult climate. They could be executed if they refused to work. It is possible that around 10% of prisoners in the gulag died each year, although we cannot tell from official figures.

Terror

Rapid industrialisation led to opposition. Stalin refused to allow this to halt the pace of his economic plans. He acted to reinforce his own power. Stalin's political opponents were arrested and given show trials before their execution. Many ordinary people were also imprisoned or executed, but few of these had a court trial.



HEROES & VILLAINS

Stalin & industrialisation > Background

Being accused was enough to convict the innocent as well as the guilty. For example, in March 1928 the NKVD (Stalin's secret police) announced they had found foreign spies in the Shakhty mines who were plotting to stop the mines reaching their targets. Fifty-five people were arrested. For the next two months, newspapers, cinemas and billboards all denounced these 'wreckers' and demanded that they be punished. There was no evidence to convict them, but they all confessed to being enemies of the people and 49 were sent to prison camps, five were shot and one was acquitted.

People lived in terror that some neighbour or co-worker would denounce them to the NKVD. They dared not protest. They became obedient workers. The arrest of other people gave them someone to blame, a scapegoat for the hardship they faced in their everyday lives.