

- I. Introduction
 - A. Thesis
 - B. Statement of problem
- II. Beginnings
 - A. Childhood
 - B. The Making of a Revolutionary
- III. The Five Year Plans in Industry
 - A. Progress and Benefits to Russia
 - B. Downfalls for the People
- IV. Agricultural Changes
 - A. Collectivization
 - B. The Liquidation of the Kulaks
 - C. Famine
- V. Social Changes
 - A. Social Benefits
 - B. Personal Advancements
 - C. Woman in Society
- VI. Purges
 - A. The Party
 - B. The Army
 - C. The Burial Pits
- VII. Conclusion
 - A. Summary
 - B. Final Statement

Stalin: Did his Rule Benefit Russian Society and the Russian People?

In this paper I plan to prove that even though Stalin made improvements in the Russian industrial system, his rule did not benefit Russian society and the Russian people. In order to accomplish this, several questions must be asked. How did Stalin affect Russia's industrial power? How did Stalin try to change Russia's agricultural system? What changes did Stalin make in society? What were Stalin's purges, and who did they effect?

Joseph Vissarionovich Djugashvili was born on December 21, 1879, on the southern slopes of the Caucasus mountains, in the town of Gori. His mother, Ekaterina was the daughter of a peasant who married at fifteen and who lost her first three children at birth. Vissarion, his father, was a self-employed shoemaker who had a violent temper (Marrin 6-7).

Young Djugashvili was small and wiry and had a deeply pitted face from a small pox attack that nearly killed him. He also had blood poisoning in his left arm that was probably caused by Vissarion's beating fists. The arm would stiffen at the elbow joint and wither, making it lame and useless for the rest of his life (Lewis 8; Marrin 8).

He was dedicated to only one person, his mother, and her only ambition was for her son to become a priest and to bless her with his own hands. But, this dream was crushed when Joseph was expelled from Tiflis Theological Seminary for reading "forbidden books" such as Marx and Lenin (Lewis 8; Marrin 20).

After his expulsion from Tiflis school, Joseph became a revolutionary. He organized strikes and demonstrations at factories and also found ways to gather money for Lenin and the Bolshevik party. He was banished to Siberia six times between the years 1903 and 1917. Each time, he escaped easily, except the last, when he was released because of the February revolution (Lewis 19; Marrin 24).

After the death of his first wife, Ekaterina Svanidze, Joseph became more cold and tough. He gave the child that his wife bore him to her parents and even chose a new name for himself, Stalin, the Man of Steel (Marrin 26).

Then came the October Revolution and the rise of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Stalin became general secretary of the Bolshevik party's Central Committee. He was also the commissar of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate and the commissar of nationalities (McKay 927; Treadgold 205). After Lenin's death Stalin gained power by allying himself with the moderates to fight off his rival, Leon Trotsky, who was a radical and another member of the Central Committee. Stalin expelled Trotsky and suppressed his radical followers. Then he turned against his own allies, the moderates. Stalin at last had gained complete control (McKay 927-928).

One of the great achievements that Stalin made for the Soviet Union were the Five Year Plans in industry. Russia had not yet had their industrial revolution and were far behind the other powers of the world. Even Stalin said, "We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do it, or we shall be crushed." So, that is what Stalin set out to do (Dmytryshyn 158).

The First Five Year Plan was adopted in April 1929 by the Sixteenth Party Conference. Its purpose was to increase Russia's industrial production. On December 31, 1932, the First Five Year Plan was declared officially completed ahead of schedule. Total industrial output increased two hundred and fifty percent, steel production increased three hundred percent, production of large-scale industry showed an increase of one hundred and eighteen percent, production of machinery and electrical equipment increased one hundred and fifty-seven percent, heavy metal increased sixty-seven percent, coal output increased eighty-nine percent, and consumer goods increased about seventy-three percent (Dmytryshyn 158; McKay 928; Treadgold 266).

After the success of the First Five Year Plan, the Seventeenth Party Congress formally adopted the Second Five Year Plan, covering the years 1933-1937 in January, 1934. To overcome the lacking of iron and steel, the Second Plan ordered construction of forty-five new blast furnaces, one hundred and sixty-four open-hearth furnaces, and one hundred and seven rolling mills. Other goals of the second plan were an expansion of machine tool production, the development and production of non-ferrous metals, and the improvement and double-tracking of the main railroad lines (Dmytryshyn 159).

The results of the Second Five Year Plan were that some items reached their estimated targets while others lagged behind. Overall, by the end of the Second Five Year Plan, the Soviet Union was emerging as a strong industrial country. It possessed increased capability to produce iron, steel, coal, and electric power. It also had a whole new range of new industries, including aviation, tractor, locomotive, chemical, aluminum, nickel, and tin. The Soviet Union now had a well-established industrial base capable of further expansion and growth (Dmytryshyn 160-161).

Although rapid industrialization helped improve Russia, it hurt the workers. "Industrialization moved so fast and was often so poorly planned that disasters frequently resulted . . ." (Marrin 102). The amount of work that had to be put in was also hard on the workers. The workers had to work longer under Stalin than when they were ruled by the tsars. "Depending on the industry, they worked between forty-eight and sixty hours a week, Sundays included . . ." (Marrin 103).

Once the industrial Five Year Plans started to roll, Stalin decided to make some agricultural changes to support the industrialization. In April, 1928, Stalin presented the draft of a new land law. Although the draft failed to become a law, it showed a couple of Stalin's objectives. One was the rapid and forcible collectivization of the peasants in order to industrialize the country quickly. The other was the liquidation of the kulaks as a class. Kulaks were classified as, "Those peasants who were either industrious, or more prosperous than their neighbors, or simply those who were not enthusiastic about the policies of the communist party . . ." (Dmytryshyn 167).

Collectivization was the forcible consolidation of individual peasant farms

into large, state-controlled enterprises. It was suppose to help Russian agriculture and support the quickly industrializing country (McKay 928; Dmytryshyn 167). Soviet writer, Lyudmila Saraskina believed that, "Collectivization was a bloody, terrible, and monstrous means of the seizure of absolute power, because the free peasant and master of the land, the farmer, constituted one of the main obstacles on the path to the absolute feudal power that Stalin really wanted . . ." (Lewis 65).

The kulaks were the well off peasants that opposed collectivization any way they could. The way Stalin dealt with them was to first turn the bedniaks or poor peasants against them offering the bedniaks the kulaks castles and machinery. Then, Stalin had the rest of the kulaks either killed or exiled to the northern or eastern regions of the country. The death toll recorded in the anti-kulak campaign is between three and ten million killed (Treadgold 268; Dmytryshyn 168; Lewis 63).

Many peasants killed their cattle, pigs, and horses; destroyed the farm implements; and either burned their crops or let them rot in the fields before being forced into collectivization. Because of this, poor harvests, grain seizures, and the elimination of the better farmers, the kulaks, there was a man made famine (Lewis 65) . The famine was so bad that some people resorted to cannibalism. Mykola Pishy reported this about her neighbor, "Ivan was a good specialist - a joiner, a tailor, a shoe-maker - a good fellow who could turn his hand at anything. But the famine was awful and he got to the end of his tether. He was so hungry that he killed his child, and ate the meat . . ." (Lewis 66-67). In Targan, the city where Alisa Maslo lived, 362 people died from the famine.

They went from house to house and they took away everything to the last grain . . . and this included ours. And they really left the family to certain famine death. And so my grandma died and then one of my brothers. . . . My mother was lying in bed swollen with hunger . . . my older brother had died. And I told my mother that 'we're the only two left', that my brother was also dead. Up came the cart and the man took my brother and dragged him to the cart, and then my own live mother. I started crying and the man said, 'Go to the orphanage where at least you'll get some soup. She'll die anyway, why should I come here a second time?' And so I became an orphan (Lewis 65-66).

Between five and ten million people died from starvation because of the famine (Dmytryshyn 169).

Along with the improvements in industry and the attempted improvements in agriculture, Stalin started to make improvements in society. Soviet workers received some important social benefits, such as old-age pensions, free medical services, free education, and free day-care centers for children. There was also the possibility of personal advancement.

To improve your position, you needed specialized skills or technical education. Massive numbers of trained experts were needed for the rapid industrialization going on. High salaries and many special privileges were offered to the technical and managerial elite. Millions struggled in universities, institutes, and night schools for the all important specialized education. "In Soviet Russia there is no capital except education. If a person does not want to become a collective farmer or just a cleaning woman, the only means you have to get something is through education . . ." (McKay 931-932).

Another change under Stalin was that there was an equality of rights for women. They were urged to work outside the home and to liberate themselves sexually. Divorces and abortions were also made very easy. "Young women were constantly told that they should be fully equal to men, that they could and should do anything men could do . . ." (McKay 932). Most women had to work outside the home because it took both the husband and wife working to support their family. But, the woman had a heavy burden of household chores in her off hours. Soviet men still considered the home and the children the wife's responsibilities (McKay 933).

Along with some of these beneficial changes that Stalin made to society came some non-beneficial ones, specifically the purges. One of the first to be

eliminated was Stalin's wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva, who after being ridiculed by her husband at a party for the fifteenth anniversary of the revolution on November 8, 1932, apparently shot herself (Lewis 83-84; McKay 930). Then, at four o'clock in the afternoon of December 1, 1934, a young disillusioned Communist named Leonid V. Nikolaev shot Stalin's number-two man, Sergei Kirov, who had just been offered Stalin's job of General Secretary from the senior members of the Party (Marrin 116; Lewis 86; McKay 930; Treadgold 278).

Stalin used Kirov's death to launch a reign of terror. Stalin blamed Kirov's death on foreign powers, the exiled Trotsky, and the moderates. Stalin ordered the "purification" of the party. On August 19, 1936, sixteen old Bolsheviks were publicly tried for conspiring with Trotsky and for the murder of Kirov (Dmytryshyn 179-181; Treadgold 279). Anyone connected anyway to Nikolayev was also arrested. Robert Conquest explains:

Everyone who was remotely connected with the case was seized. One woman had worked as a librarian at the 'Young Communist Club' in Leningrad which had been disbanded in the mid-twenties but, with which Nikolayev had in some way been associated. Not only was she arrested, but also her sister with whom she lived, her sister's husband, the secretary of her Party cell, and all those who had recommended her for jobs (Lewis 90).

Then in January 1937 there was another trial for seventeen more party members. They were accused of conspiring with Nazi Germany and Japan to dismember the USSR (Dmytryshyn 181).

The trials and arrests continued. There were mass arrests, confessions extracted by force, and the executions and deportations of thousands of peasants. Soviet officers were also arrested and convicted. The Red Army lost three of its five field marshals, fourteen of its sixteen army commanders, sixty of its sixty-seven corps commanders, 136 of its 199 division commanders, 220 brigade commanders, all eleven deputy commissars of war, seventy-five members of the Supreme Military Council, all military district commanders, all air force officers, all except one navy fleet commander, and all eight Red Navy admirals. In addition, the army lost half of its officer corps, 35,000 men ranging from colonels to company commanders (Dmytryshyn 180-182; Marrin 127).

Many that suffered from the purges were sent to labor camps or were just executed by the secret police. Local units of secret police were even ordered to arrest a certain percentage of the people in their districts (McKay 931). Graves were discovered in 1934 holding over 9,000 bodies of people killed around 1938 in the Ukraine. Since then mass burial sights have been discovered outside major cities such as Minsk, Kiev, and Novosibirsk, and one with possibly 40,000 bodies in the Kirov region of Donetsk. A burial sight at Chelyabinsk, was found to contain more than 80,000 people. Zenon Pozniak, an archaeologist who has excavated many of these burial plots also found 510 burial pits in Kuropaty and calculated that each one contained about 150 bodies. That could mean there are around 75,000 bodies in there. Apparently there were as many as 1,000 pits originally (Lewis 106-107). Pozniak has also researched the circumstances of these people's deaths:

They were shot by NKVD (secret police) soldiers in NKVD uniform. They shot them from behind, in the back and pushed them into the pit. When that group was finished, they covered the corpses with sand like a layer cake. They got the contents of the next lorry and shot them, and in that way they filled the pit right up to the top . . . people who lived in the villages nearby told us that . . . the earth would breathe. Some people weren't actually dead when they were buried, and the earth breathed and heaved and the blood came through (Lewis 107).

Stalin used the Five Year Plans to make great strides in industrializing Russia. When he tried to equal that success with agricultural growth he met some resistance and ended up liquidating a class and causing famine. Socially, he

gave some important social benefits to workers and gave women equal rights. But, he also tried to purge the country and eliminated a lot of the Party, most of the army, and a good part of the workers and peasants. Stalin made several industrial improvements for his country but, that does not even begin to equal the death and destruction that he caused.

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