Why did Stalin make the Great Turn?

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Under the NEP the Soviet Union had recovered from seven years of warfare (1914–21), but by 1927 it had not developed its industry much beyond the pre–1914 level and its agriculture was still backward. Also, by the late 1920s the NEP was presenting the Communists with a variety of economic and social problems. Stalin, with the support of the majority of the party, felt that the NEP was not delivering the economic performance or the type of society they had envisaged. They wanted to press ahead with rapid industrialization to build a socialist society. In this chapter we look at the reasons for the Great Turn.

A What were the driving forces behind Stalin’s economic policies? (pp. 152–153)
B Was the NEP working at the end of the 1920s? (pp. 154–156)
C The Great Turn (pp. 156–157)

A What were the driving forces behind Stalin’s economic policies?

The overriding aim of Stalin’s policies was to industrialise and modernise the USSR as quickly as possible. He wanted backward Russia to become the ‘Soviet America’. The Russians would beat the capitalists at their own game and become a force in the world to be reckoned with. Stalin had a number of reasons – practical and ideological – for wanting to force the pace.

Why did Stalin want to industrialise the USSR so quickly?

1 To increase military strength
Stalin knew that a country that was not industrialised was a weak country. To fight a modern war, a country had to have a well-developed industrial base to manufacture the huge quantities of weapons and munitions that would be required. There was a war scare in the late 1920s, and during the 1930s Stalin became increasingly convinced that the USSR would be attacked.

2 To achieve self-sufficiency
Stalin wanted to make the USSR much less dependent on Western manufactured goods, especially the heavy industrial plant that was needed for industrial production. It was important that the USSR had a strong industrial base to produce the goods its people needed. This would make it self-sufficient and more independent in the world.

3 To increase grain supplies
Stalin wanted to end the dependence of the economy on a backward agricultural system. In the past, this had created major problems whenever there was a bad harvest or the peasants did not produce enough food. He did not want the new socialist state to be at the mercy of the peasantry.

4 To move towards a socialist society
According to Marxist theoreticians, socialism could only be created in a highly industrialised state where the overwhelming majority of the population were workers. In 1928, only about twenty per cent of the population of the USSR were workers.

5 To establish his credentials
Stalin needed to prove to himself and other leading Bolsheviks that he was the successor and equal of Lenin. His economic policies were central to this. The economic transformation of the USSR, taking the revolution forward in a giant leap towards socialism, would establish him as a leader of historic importance.

6 To improve standards of living
Stalin wanted to catch up with the West, not just militarily, but also in terms of the standard of living that people enjoyed. Industrialisation created wealth for a society. The Communist life should be a good life and people in other parts of the world should appreciate what it had to offer working people.

■ Learning trouble spot

Why did industrialisation depend on agriculture in the USSR?

To industrialise a country you need to spend money on factories, machinery and equipment to produce goods. This is called capital investment. Initially, the machinery and equipment have to be bought from foreign countries. The USSR had gold, fuels, timber, oil and a range of products to export, but these could not generate the sums of money needed to pay for heavy industrial equipment on the scale Stalin required.

The Soviet Union was not in a position to obtain loans from abroad (as the tsars had done); few Western capitalists would invest in a Communist state. The only source which could generate enough wealth was agriculture. Surplus grain could be exported to earn foreign currency to buy industrial capital equipment. On top of this, the peasants were required to produce extra grain to feed a growing workforce in the cities. This meant that every year the state had to obtain from the peasants food for the cities as well as grain for export. The problem for the Communist government was that agricultural production was in the hands of the millions of peasants who could hold the great socialist experiment to ransom. If they did not yield up sufficient grain, the push to industrialisation could not move forward.

COMMUNISTS AND PEASANTS

Lenin, Stalin and other leading Communists had never had much time for the peasants. The conservative tendencies of the peasants and their petty-bourgeois attitudes had no place in the new state. Lenin looked forward to huge factory farms where the agricultural workers would be no different from their industrial brothers, all part of the socialist utopia. The party never really managed to secure any real hold on the mass of the peasantry and the peasants, for their part, returned the hostility.
B Was the NEP working at the end of the 1920s?

The 1920 Party Congress had charged the leadership with the transformation of our country from an agrarian into an industrial one, capable by its own efforts of producing the necessary means. The push for industrialisation was on. However, at the end of the 1920s it seemed that the NEP had run out of ‘push’. By 1920, the excess capacity in industry had been used up. This meant that all the factories, machinery and equipment that had existed pre-1914 had been put back into use as far as this was possible. A massive injection of capital investment was now needed to move the industrialisation process forward. To make matters worse, the economy was facing serious difficulties at the end of the 1920s.

The NEP and the peasants

Although the grain supply had increased enormously under the NEP and the fear of famine had receded, the peasants were not producing the quantities of grain the government needed for its industrialisation plans. In 1912, Russia exported twelve million tons of grain; in the best years of the NEP the amount never exceeded three million. This was having a devastating effect on foreign trade; in 1926-27 exports were at 5% per cent and imports at 50 per cent of their 1913 levels due to the decline in grain exports. So the Soviet Union could not bring in the technology (machinery, etc.) it needed for industrial expansion.

The grain was simply not reaching the market. There were a number of reasons for this:

- Agriculture was still very backward, relying on traditional methods of farming. For example, in 1927 over five million inefficient wooden ploughs were still in use.
- The land was shared out after the revolution, peasant landholdings had tended to become smaller than before 1917. The large estates and large farms which supplied the cities had disappeared. They had been divided up amongst the land-hungry peasants. On the majority of these smaller holdings, people ate most of what they produced.
- The relationship between the government and the peasants deteriorated towards the end of the 1920s (you will find out more about this in Chapter 11).

The government tried a new tactic to encourage the peasants to put more grain on the market. It stopped collecting taxes from the peasants in the form of grain and made them pay a money tax. At the same time, the government clipped down on private traders who were paying the peasants around twice the price that the state was paying for grain. So the peasants had to sell at lower prices to the state and had to sell more than before to pay their taxes.

This worked initially, but the peasants soon got wise to the government’s ploy. Since meat prices were still going up, they started to feed grain to their animals rather than sell it at low prices. Also, they found that there was not much point in having surplus money because there was little they could buy with it, since industrial consumer goods were still in short supply. So peasants started to hold back their grain from the market, hoping for the price to rise. As a result, the grain procured by the state at the end of 1927 was about three-quarters of what it had been in 1920.

It got worse. The harvest in 1928 was very poor and bread had to be rationed in the cities. Stalin sent out officials, backed by the police, to seize grain. He himself went to the Urals and Western Siberia on a requisitioning campaign. He got more grain, but the relationship between the government and the peasants was breaking down and there was substantial resistance to Stalin’s actions.

ACTIVITY

What would you advise?

You are one of Stalin’s advisors. Everyone agrees on the need for industrialisation but you have to help him decide how to carry it out. Decide which policy you think is the better one for Stalin to follow. Give your reasons for choosing that policy and identify three points which would make the other policy less acceptable. You must take into account the circumstances at the end of the 1920s.

Policy 1

- Carry on with the NEP policies with some modifications.
  - In particular, increase the price of grain to encourage the peasants, especially the best farmers, to produce more.
  - This will give the peasants more money to spend on consumer goods, which will encourage growth in industry.
  - This will increase employment and gradually improve wages. The state will be able to procure more grain for export and for the workers. However, in the short term there will not be so much money for investment, so industrialisation will have to proceed more slowly.
  - Provide a programme of agricultural help, encouraging peasants to work together and set up cooperatives, and even to join collective farms. The state will provide help with mechanisation, especially tractors, to increase grain production. Develop model farms for peasants to visit and educate them in modern agricultural methods.
  - This is the only way to avoid a return to the days of World War Communism and the conflict with the peasants that had such disastrous results in 1921. Workers will benefit in the long term.

Policy 2

- Go out all out for rapid industrialisation because time is running out. Russia needs to move towards socialism and be able to defend itself. Organise workers into ‘shock brigades’ to achieve higher production, and keep their wages low so that all available resources can be used in industry.
- Squeeze the peasants’ hard: keep the price the state pays for grain low and tax the peasants heavily. This will provide extra money to invest in industry, and grain for export in order to buy industrial machinery.
- If the peasants do not offer the grain for sale voluntarily, we will use force. The state will use its forces to force them as in 1918.
- Encourage peasants to work on large collective farms which can be farmed more efficiently and provide equipment. Government will provide tractors and other mechanised equipment. This will also release surplus labour to go to the cities to work in the new developing industries. Collective farms are the only way to reduce the number of peasants, since the state cannot afford to pay wages.
- Fast industrialisation will actually help the peasants because it will produce the tractors and equipment they need.

THE URALS-SIBERIAN METHOD

Stalin’s visit to the Urals lasted for only three weeks. It is said that this is the only time he visited an agricultural area in his life. During this period, the so-called ‘Urals-Siberian method’ was developed. This involved encouraging poor and middle-income peasants to denounce kulaks who were ‘hoarding grain’. The grain would then be seized and the kulaks arrested. The Urals-Siberian method was identified with the coercion of the peasants.

Why did Stalin make the great turn?
The policies that you have considered in the Activity on page 155 broadly represent the positions of different groups in the Communist Party at the end of the 1920s, although they have been adapted for the purposes of this exercise.

Policy 1
The first policy is close to that of Bukharin and the right. Bukharin accepted that industrialisation was the main goal but believed that the best way to achieve this was with the co-operation of the peasantry. He thought that the 1905 Revolution had failed because there was no link between the workers and the peasants — "the supreme lesson for us all" — and that they had been successful in 1917 because of the combination of "a peasant war against the landlord and a proletarian revolution". It was not that he particularly liked the peasants. But he had been impressed by their fierce independence during 1920-21 and believed that trying to force the peasants to supply more grain might lead to the collapse of Soviet Russia and the end of all their revolutionary hopes.

The right, which included most of the party's agricultural experts, were prepared to take more time to achieve the desired ends. They believed it would take time to prepare Soviet agriculture for collectivisation and were not keen on Stalin's 'War Communist' style methods of seizing grain.

Policy 2
The second policy is close to the ideas of Eugene Preobrazhensky, a leading left-wing economist. He argued that the USSR had to pass through a stage of "primitive socialist accumulation" similar to the "primitive accumulation" that Marx identified as a stage in the development of industrialised societies. In developing capitalist societies, workers had been exploited (for example, by low wages and poor conditions) and colonies had been raid (for cheap raw materials) to provide the capital for industrial growth. In the USSR, it was the peasantry who had to be exploited through taxation and prices so that the wealth they generated could be transferred to industrial investment. For example, if the government bought cheap grain from the peasants and sold it for higher prices, the surplus money that resulted could be "pumped" into industry. The implication of this policy was that industrial development could be funded only at the expense of the peasants. However, Preobrazhensky did not advocate violence, confiscation or forced collectivisation.

ACTIVITY
Use the information collected in your Focus Route activities to answer the following questions.
Either:
1. Write three or four paragraphs setting out the reasons why Stalin made the Great Turn. Each paragraph should make a key point and be backed up with further explanation or supporting evidence for the key point.
Or:
2. Draw a large annotated diagram showing the issues and debates surrounding the NEP and why Stalin and the Communist Party opted for the Five-Year Plans.

Why did Stalin make the Great Turn?
1. The NEP was not producing the sort of society that many Communists wanted by the end of the 1920s.
2. There was a continuing debate about the NEP in the Communist Party throughout the 1920s: the right wing of the party wanted to keep it and the left wing wanted to end it.
3. No Communists liked the outward manifestations of the NEP — the Nepmen and the strength of the private market. Nor did they like being held to ransom by the peasants.
4. Urban workers and Communist Party members wanted to move forward to take the revolution on and build a socialist society.
5. The workers were suffering high unemployment rates and low wages.
6. The peasantry were starting to hold back food from the market and food shortages were serious in 1928 and 1929.
7. There was a war scare in 1928 that increased fears about the Soviet Union's vulnerability to attack and made the need to produce armaments more urgent.
8. In 1928, the decision was taken to end the NEP and to embark on a massive industrialisation programme in the Five-Year Plans.
9. This has been called the Great Turn and it marked a significant shift in economic, political and cultural — in the history of the Soviet Union.

KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER 10
1. The NEP was not producing the sort of society that many Communists wanted by the end of the 1920s.
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