

## 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 industrialisation 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.

### FOCUS ROUTE

Make notes on the reasons why Stalin wanted to industrialise the USSR as rapidly as possible.

### 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, furs, 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.

## FOCUS ROUTE

Why did the majority of the party think a new approach to the peasantry was required?

## ACTIVITY

Work in groups of three. Each person takes on one of the roles below and has a minute to clearly explain one of the following:

- as a bureaucrat – why more grain is needed and why it isn't reaching the markets
- as a government official – how you are going to persuade the peasants to get more grain to the markets
- as a peasant – how and why you will avoid supplying more grain to the markets.

After each explanation, the other two members of the group summarise what they have heard by choosing two or three key points.

## 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.

## B Was the NEP working at the end of the 1920s?

The 1926 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 1926, 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 1913, 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 33 per cent and imports at 38 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.
- When 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 clamped 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 1926.

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.

## Was the NEP working for the urban workers?

The NEP had not brought great rewards for the urban workers. Although they were better off than at any time before the revolution, real wages had, by 1928, only just passed their pre-war level. True, they had an eight-hour working day and other social benefits, and in state-run factories they had some power: local trade-union representatives often sat on a panel running the factory alongside the specialist director (usually an old bourgeois manager). But most industrial organisations were still hierarchical and the trade unions tended to support government-appointed managers rather than their own members. Lenin himself had favoured schemes from the USA which used time and motion studies to speed up production.

Worse than this, thousands of workers did not have jobs at all. High unemployment persisted throughout the NEP. The workers complained bitterly about the gap between themselves and the better off. They complained about the high prices charged for food by the peasants and market traders and about the bourgeois specialists and officials who were paid so much more than they were.

Women had been particularly hard hit by the NEP. Many had been forced out of their jobs when the Red Army was demobilised or been forced to move from skilled to unskilled work. So large numbers of jobless, unsupported women ended up on the streets.

Housing was still a major problem and most workers lived in overcrowded, poor-quality houses and flats. For instance, in Smolensk in 1929, the factory committee of a cement works reported: 'Every day there are many complaints about apartments: many workers have families of six and seven people, and live in one room.' There was also a mounting crime problem in the cities. As a result of the turmoil of the war and civil war, thousands of young people were parentless and rootless, forming gangs which roamed the streets to find their victims. It was hardly the workers' paradise that the revolution had promised.

## ACTIVITY

### What would you advise?

You are one of Stalin's advisers. 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 share machinery, 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 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 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 invested 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, wring it out of them by force as in 1918.
- Encourage peasants to work on large collective farms which can be farmed more efficiently and productively. The 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 will socialise the peasants.
- Fast industrialisation will actually help the peasants because it will produce the tractors and equipment they need.

Discussion and review

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 Preobrazensky, 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 raided (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, Preobrazensky did not advocate violence, confiscation or forced collectivisation.

FOCUS ROUTE

Draw up a chart. On one side, make the case for continuing the NEP. On the other, put the case for a more direct, forced approach.

Continuing the NEP	Ending the NEP/rapid industrialisation

C The Great Turn

At the Fifteenth Party Congress in December 1927, the announcement of the First Five-Year Plan marked the end of the NEP. The plan demanded more rapid industrialisation, setting high targets for industry to achieve. In agriculture, the plan called for collectivisation – some fifteen per cent of peasant households were to be collectivised.

The NEP had provided a ‘breathing space’ while industry and agriculture recovered from the dismal depths of War Communism. But it was not developing an industrial, urban, proletarian, socialist society. From the Bolsheviks’ point of view, it was creating the wrong type of society. The NEP encouraged private markets, private enterprise and Nepmen. The peasants, still the great mass of the population, showed no signs of becoming good socialists and could not be relied upon to produce the grain that the state needed for its industrialisation programme.

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.

The majority of party members had accepted the constraints of the NEP but they had never liked it. They were itching to move forward towards the establishment of a socialist society. This could only, in their eyes, be achieved with the support of a largely proletarian workforce in a highly developed industrialised society. So they warmly welcomed Stalin’s ‘left turn’ (adopting the ideas of the left wing of the party) in his policies for the modernisation and industrialisation of the USSR. The Five-Year Plans represented a significant step towards achieving the goals of the revolution.

There was also another factor which encouraged the party to support more rapid industrialisation – the fear of invasion. By 1927, relations with France and Poland had deteriorated, Britain had broken off diplomatic relations and there were suspicions about Japanese intentions. The USSR needed an industrial base to build armaments.

The change from the NEP to Five-Year Plans is called the Great Turn because it marks a major shift in the direction of the Soviet economy towards central planning – the ‘command economy’. The land was to be socialised through collectivisation; no longer would it be owned by individual peasants. Industrialisation would lead to the growth of the proletariat, along with new cities and new wealth – the ‘good society’ that workers aspired to – and would build a strong, self-sufficient state. This was to be the big step forward towards the new socialist society. It indicated a significant cultural shift, in the process of which ‘New Soviet Man’ would emerge. You can read about this in Chapter 18.

Stalin’s policies were not new. Planning by the centre had been an important feature of the Soviet economy since the revolution. Lenin had assumed direct control of industry after 1917 and had kept control of the ‘commanding heights’ of industry (large-scale industries, banking, etc.) under the NEP. It was the way Stalin carried out his policies that was new. He was to take the planning to a level unimaginable at the time of Lenin’s death in 1924 and to implement his policies in a way that few could have foreseen.

Another reason why the Great Turn is significant is that these policies also wrought great changes in the Communist Party and the relationship between the party and the people. Some historians maintain that it is at this point that the Soviet Union ‘went wrong’ – that it now followed a path that led to totalitarianism, tyranny and inhumanity. These historians suggest that the USSR would have done better to have continued with the NEP (see page 197).

KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER 10 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 – economic, political and cultural – in the history of the Soviet Union.