

## Culture and society in a decade of turmoil

### CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The second decade of Communist rule began with the Cultural Revolution of 1928–31. It involved a return to the class struggle of the Civil War, with attacks on bourgeois specialists in the industrial workplace and on kulaks in the countryside. Its radical programme had an impact on the arts, education and religion. It was followed by a 'Great Retreat': a return to traditional values in the family, an emphasis on academic standards and discipline at school, and a more conservative style in the arts.

- A** What was the impact of the Cultural Revolution? (pp. 288–291)
- B** Women and the family in the 1930s – was there a 'Great Retreat' back to family values? (pp. 291–295)
- C** What was the impact of Socialist Realism in the arts? (pp. 296–301)
- D** What happened in education after the Cultural Revolution? (pp. 301–302)
- E** Soviet society at the end of the 1930s: had 'a new type of man' been created? (pp. 303–306)

### A What was the impact of the Cultural Revolution?

#### FOCUS ROUTE

Make notes on the impact of the Cultural Revolution in different parts of Soviet life by examining:

- religion
- education
- the arts.

The Cultural Revolution was part of a great upheaval in the USSR associated with the 'socialist offensive' which began at the end of the 1920s with the First Five-Year Plan. There was a return to the class warfare of the Civil War and a repudiation of everything that had gone with the compromise of the NEP. This was seen in the attack on bourgeois specialists in industry, the Nepmen and the kulaks. It was accompanied by an attack on the old intelligentsia and bourgeois cultural values. Non-Marxists working in academic subjects such as history, philosophy and science, in the cinema, the arts and literature, in schools, in architecture and in town planning were denounced. There was an attempt to find truly 'proletarian' approaches in all these fields. So it was labelled the 'Cultural Revolution'.

The Cultural Revolution was more than an attack on bourgeois values. There was a vision of what the socialist future might be like, of a society transformed. People believed great changes were imminent. They had visions of new cities with large communal living spaces where money was no longer the main means of rewarding people and transacting exchanges. There would be a 'new Soviet Man'.

Young Communists, in particular, enthusiastically took up the challenge and took the lead in taking the attack forward on many fronts. They mounted a fierce attack on religion in the villages, broke up 'bourgeois' plays by booing and criticised painters and writers who did not follow the party line. The activists had been itching to move forward towards a more proletarian society with proletarian values. They pushed matters further than the leadership wanted. The Cultural Revolution was not simply a manipulation from above; it gained a momentum of its own.

**SOURCE 18.1** A Komsomol activist interviewed in Munich after the war and quoted in S. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 1999, p. 37

*I saw that the older generation, worn out after years of the war and the postwar chaos, were no longer in a position to withstand the difficulties involved in the construction of socialism. I thus came to the conclusion that the success in transforming the country depended entirely on the physical exertions and the will of people like myself.*

#### ACTIVITY

Study Sources 18.1–18.3. What was the role of the Komsomols in the Cultural Revolution?

#### TALKING POINT

Does any Cultural Revolution require a body of people like the Komsomols in order to carry it through?

### The role of the Komsomols in the Cultural Revolution

The Komsomol (Young Communist League) had been set up in 1918 to help the party. Its members were aged fourteen to twenty-eight and by 1927 it had two million members. It was an exclusive club: many applicants were rejected on grounds of immaturity or insufficiently proletarian social origins. The membership was enthusiastic and leapt at the opportunity to drive the Cultural Revolution. They were to fulfil a number of roles between 1929 and 1933:

- being 'soldiers of production' in the industrial drive; one of the first directors of the Magnitogorsk site described the local Komsomol as 'the most reliable and powerful organising force of the construction'
- imposing labour discipline; leading and joining shock brigades
- enforcing collectivisation and collecting state procurements of grain, etc.
- leading the campaign against religion
- keeping an eye on bureaucracy, exposing official abuses, unmasking hidden enemies
- weeding out students whose families had been members of the 'former people', attacking non-party professors and teachers, with the aim of making the intelligentsia proletarian
- reporting on the popular mood.

**SOURCE 18.2** R. Service, *A History of Twentieth-Century Russia*, 1997, p. 199

*There is no doubt that many young members of the party and the Komsomol responded positively to the propaganda. The construction of towns, mines and dams was an enormously attractive project for them. Several such enthusiasts altruistically devoted their lives to the communist cause. They idolised Stalin, and all of them – whether they were building the city of Magnitogorsk or tunnelling under Moscow to lay the lines for the metro or were simply teaching kolkhozniki (collectivised peasants) how to read and write – thought themselves to be agents of progress for Soviet society and for humanity as a whole. Stalin had his active supporters in their hundreds of thousands, perhaps even their millions... Stalin's rule in the early 1930s depended crucially upon the presence of enthusiastic supporters in society.*

**SOURCE 18.3** A Soviet slogan

*The future belongs to the Komsomols.*

### CASE STUDY: KOMSOMOL ACTIVITIES IN SMOLENSK

The worker and student Komsomols in Smolensk were given a major role in leading the collectivisation drive and overseeing all aspects of the harvest. The Smolensk archive contains the following resolutions passed at a Komsomol committee meeting for the whole area in April 1931:

- 1 Participation in the collectivisation drive, universal Komsomol enrolment in kolkhozes, and active leadership in preparation for the spring sowing
- 2 A major role in fulfilling the figures for industrial production during the year
- 3 An intensified campaign to enlist industrial and farm workers in the Komsomol and to establish a Komsomol cell in every kolkhoz and sovkhoz (state farm)
- 4 Prepare for military service, help to liquidate illiteracy among draftees, and provide political instructors for them.

The Komsomol members were also called upon to serve as pace-setters in industry and transport. They were required to enrol in technical courses to improve their qualifications, to organise shock brigades, and to encourage competition between different groups of workers. They were also expected to conduct campaigns to shame the laggards and discourage loitering on the job.

Impact on religion

The Cultural Revolution produced another onslaught on the Church and the priests who were part of the ‘old world’. The Soviet government stressed the link between kulaks and churchgoers, accusing priests of supporting the peasants in their resistance to collectivisation. Priests were hounded out of the villages, churches were raided and church bells were melted down for industrialisation funds. The state imposed punitive taxes on churches and their priests. Peasants resisted, especially women, and were prepared to pay the taxes if they possibly could. But, by the end of 1930, 80 per cent of the country’s village churches were closed.

Only one in 40 churches was functioning by the end of the 1930s, the others had either been knocked down or were being used for secular purposes. No churches were allowed in the new cities and towns. The number of active Orthodox priests fell from around 60,000 in the 1920s to only 5665 by 1941. More priests, mullahs and rabbis were killed during this period than during the Civil War. By 1939, only twelve out of 168 bishops active in 1930 were still at liberty.

Impact on education

Traditional teaching and discipline came under attack, as did textbooks, homework and testing an individual’s academic achievement. Shulgin, a radical who headed an education research institute, put forward his theory of ‘the withering away of the school’. He favoured the project method where education focused on ‘socially useful work’ which meant both practical production work and public activism. He said that a child could be socially useful by gathering firewood, working in a factory, teaching peasants to read or distributing anti-religious literature. The child could not, however, be socially useful by sitting in a classroom reading books or solving mathematical problems.

Shulgin believed schools should be directly linked to factories. This could lead to a very narrow education: at one school all the children in the upper years were trained to be ‘poultry breeding technicians’ and in central Asia children aged eleven to thirteen were exploited as cotton pickers for weeks on end. On the other hand, factory managers were not very happy about having untrained and undisciplined children getting in the way of their production targets.

Although the Cultural Revolution in schools did not last long, it had a lasting effect on the teachers. Many older non-party teachers were driven out, branded as ‘bourgeois specialists’, and replaced by ‘red specialists’. The drive to create ‘red specialists’ can be seen, too, in the order from the Central Committee to send 1000 party members to technical colleges to study for higher degrees. Sheila Fitzpatrick has calculated that during the First Five-Year Plan, 150,000 workers and Communists, making up nearly a quarter of all students in higher education, began technical and political courses (*The Russian Revolution 1917–1932*, 1994, page 84).

**SOURCE 18.4** Shulgin, quoted by S. Fitzpatrick in ‘Revolution and Counter-Revolution in the Schools’ in R. V. Daniels (ed.), *The Stalin Revolution*, 1990

*You go into the classroom. Everyone stands up. Why do they need to do that? ... Why? Well, it is the old residual past; the old dying order; the old type of relationship between adults and children, ‘bosses’ and ‘subordinates’, the ‘teacher’ and ‘pupil’. An awful fart, a fart of the past ... It must be driven out of the school, driven out.*

18A Key events

- 1929** Lunacharsky replaced as Commissar for Popular Enlightenment. Cultural Revolution coincides with the industrialisation drive.
- 1930** Mayakovsky commits suicide; Malevich under arrest for three months in 1930.
- 1931** Stalin’s speech about the value of the tsarist-educated intelligentsia indicates that the Cultural Revolution is at an end.
- 1932** The RAPP abolished.

Impact on the arts

Art

With the intensification of the class war associated with the Cultural Revolution, some old master paintings were vandalised as products of bourgeois culture, and some galleries began to label exhibits according to the class origins of the artists. The major artist association changed its name to Association of Artists of the Revolution in 1928 and then to the Russian Association of Proletarian Artists in 1931. The emphasis was on the proletarian background of artists; more traditional artists like Aleksandr Gerasimov and Isaak Brodsky (see page 300), two of the leading realist painters, were attacked. Realist painters left the organisation, unable to adapt to the new demands.

Literature

The RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) was the radical left-wing organisation which became the dominating force in literature during the Cultural Revolution. The RAPP was used to control Soviet writers and to fight ‘deviations in literature’ and ‘fellow travellers’ (non-party writers) who did not toe the proletarian line. Socialist construction and class struggle had to be at the heart of literature. Artistic brigades were organised, such as the ‘First Writers’ Brigade in the Urals’, which sang the praises of industrialisation and collectivisation. For some writers it was too much: after witnessing the horrors of collectivisation Boris Pasternak was unable to write at all for a year.

Cinema

In an article ‘We have no Soviet cinema’, written by film director Pavel Petro Bytor in April 1929, film-makers including Eisenstein were accused of doing nothing for the workers and peasants. The principal task of Soviet cinema, according to the article, was to raise the cultural level of the masses. To do this, ‘You must either be from the masses yourself or have studied them thoroughly’ by spending two years living their lives. Straightforward, realistic films must be made with a simple story and plot. Films must deal with cows that are sick with tuberculosis, must be ‘about the dirty cowshed that must be transformed into one that is clean and bright’, must be about crèches for children and collective farms. ‘Every film must be useful, intelligible and familiar to the millions – otherwise neither it nor the artist who made it are worth twopence’ (quoted in R. Taylor, trans. and ed., *The Film Factory: Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1936–1939*, 1988, pages 261–62).

**B** Women and the family in the 1930s – was there a ‘Great Retreat’ back to family values?

Although in the 1920s the family had been described as ‘bourgeois’ and ‘patriarchal’ it had remained a key institution. The Soviet urban marriage rate remained very high by both pre-war and contemporary European standards. However, the impact of radical policies – unregistered marriages, postcard divorces and abortion – had noticeably weakened the family. The American sociologist Nicholas Timasheff claimed that ‘Millions of girls saw their lives ruined by Don Juans in Communist garb, and millions of children had never known parental homes’ (*The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia*, 1946).

The upheavals caused by collectivisation, with millions of families uprooted, and the ‘quicksand society’ created by rapid industrialisation, with thousands of workers constantly on the move, had added to the growing problem of social instability. There was concern over the falling birth rate, and juvenile crime was increasing as a result of the huge numbers of homeless children on the streets. Soviet society needed some anchors and the mid-1930s saw a positive move to pro-family, pro-discipline and anti-abortion policies.

FOCUS ROUTE

1 Draw and complete a table like the one below.

	Attitudes in 1920s	Attitudes in 1930s
Family		
Marriage		

2 What were the main reasons for the Great Retreat? Make a note of your answer.



This change in attitude has been called the ‘Great Retreat’: marriage was to be taken seriously, and children urged to love and respect their parents, ‘even if they are old-fashioned and do not like the Komsomol’ (*Pravda*, 1935). The change in emphasis can be seen in the new Family Code of May 1936 in which:

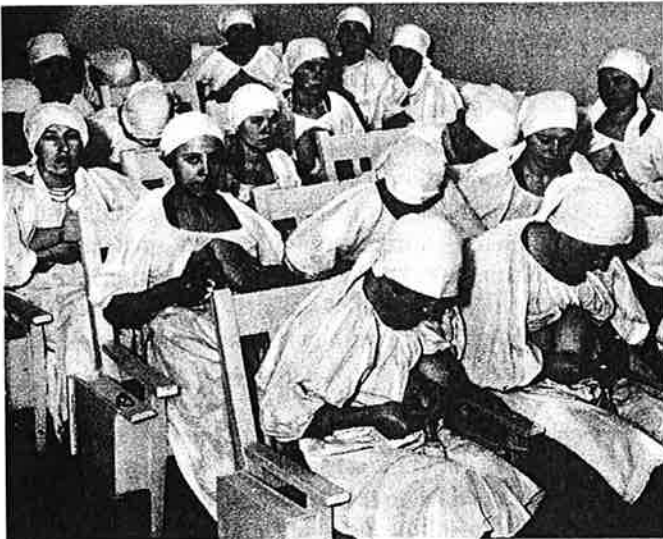
- abortion was outlawed except where there was a threat to the woman’s life and health, and for women with hereditary diseases
- divorce was made harder: both parties were required to attend divorce proceedings and the fee for registering a divorce was raised to 50 roubles for the first divorce, 150 for the second and 300 for any subsequent divorce
- child support payments were fixed at a quarter of wages or salary for one child, a third for two, and 50–60 per cent for three or more children
- mothers with six children were to receive cash payments of 2000 roubles a year – a really substantial amount – for five years, with additional payments for each child up to the eleventh.

Around the same time, laws were passed against prostitution and homosexuality, and having illegitimate children was stigmatised. The birth rate did rise from under 25 per 1000 in 1935 to almost 31 per 1000 in 1940. Newspapers reported prosecutions of doctors for performing abortions and some women were imprisoned for having abortions, although the punishment for women in these circumstances was supposed to be public contempt, rather than prosecution.

**SOURCE 18.6** A poster with the slogan ‘The wide development of a network of crèches, kindergartens, canteens and laundries will ensure the participation of women in socialist reconstruction’



**SOURCE 18.5** Women expressing milk at a factory. Their babies were given the milk while the mothers worked in the factory



■ 18B Abortion rates in Leningrad, 1930–34

By the early 1930s, Soviet doctors were performing 1.5 million abortions a year. Abortion rates were highest in the cities. Statistics, especially for illegal abortions, are notoriously unreliable, but in *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent 1939–41*, (1997, p. 65) S. Davies provides some figures for Leningrad

Year	Births (per thousand of population)	Abortions (per thousand of population)
1930	21.3	33.9
1931	21.3	36.3
1932	20.7	34.0
1933	17.0	36.7
1934	15.9	42.0

Divorce declined in Leningrad, but so too did marriage and by 1939 the marriage/divorce ratio was not much better than in 1934 – about 3.5 marriages for every divorce. Because of the high rate of desertion by husbands, many women ended up as the sole breadwinner for families which often consisted of a mother, one or two children, and the irreplaceable *babushka* (grandmother) who ran the household. At all levels of society, though most notably at its lower levels, it was women who bore the brunt of the many problems of everyday life in the USSR. However research, including interviews with refugees carried out by Harvard University’s Russian Research Center, shows that the family was resilient and the state’s change of attitude to the family in the middle of the 1930s was positively received.

A draft of the Family Code was published for public discussion. In the debate on abortion in the USSR there was nothing about the foetus’s ‘right to life’ and little on women’s right to control their own bodies (unlike the debate in the USA in the late twentieth century). The big issue was whether women whose material circumstances were very poor should be allowed to have abortions. The shortage of urban housing, which forced families into miserably confined spaces, and the high rate of desertion by husbands were major factors in this. While almost all participants in the discussion agreed that access to abortion should be restricted, total prohibition was deeply unpopular with urban women. How important do you think abortion on demand is to women’s rights?

Juvenile crime was perceived as an increasing problem in the first half of the 1930s. For juvenile offenders, the law was relatively mild and rehabilitation was preferred. In 1935, Voroshilov, a member of the Politburo, signalled a change when he urged that the NKVD should be instructed to clear Moscow immediately not only of homeless adolescents but also of delinquents out of parental control. ‘I don’t understand why we don’t shoot these scoundrels,’ he concluded. A Politburo decree in April 1935 allowed just that. It made violent crimes committed by juveniles from twelve years of age punishable in the same way as those committed by adults, though the archives show no examples of actual executions of adolescent hooligans. This was followed by a law ‘on the liquidation of child homelessness and lack of supervision’, which increased NKVD involvement in attempting to get children off the streets and into appropriate institutions. Parents could be fined for the hooliganism of their children and risked having them taken away and placed in orphanages where parents would have to pay for their maintenance.

**SOURCE 18.7** S. Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution 1917–1932*, 1994, p. 151

*The old-style liberated woman, assertively independent and ideologically committed on issues like abortion, was no longer in favour. The new message was that the family came first, despite the growing numbers of women who were receiving education and entering professional careers. No achievement could be greater than that of the successful wife and mother. In a campaign inconceivable in the 1920s, wives of members of the new Soviet élite were directed into voluntary community activities that bore a strong resemblance to the upper-class charitable work that Russian socialist and even liberal feminists had always despised. At a 'national meeting for wives' in 1936, the wives of industrial managers and engineers described their successes in cleaning up factory kitchens, hanging curtains in the workers' hostels, advising the working girls on personal hygiene and how to keep out of trouble, and so on.*

**SOURCE 18.8** S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation*, 1995, p. 179

*In the Magnitogorsk newspaper in May 1936 abortion was pronounced 'an evil holdover from the order whereby an individual lived according to narrow, personal interests and not in the interests of the collective. In our life there is no such gap between personal and collective life. For us it seems that even such ultimate questions as the family and the birth of children are transformed from personal to social issues.' This was a long way from the 'abolition of the family as the basic cell of society' announced in the Magnitogorsk newspaper back in 1930.*

**SOURCE 18.9** A statement in the Soviet press in 1934, quoted in N. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia*, 1946

*There are people who dare to assert that the Revolution destroys the family; this is entirely wrong: the family is an especially important phase of social relations in socialist society... One of the basic rules of Communist morals is that of strengthening the family... The right to divorce is not a right to sexual laxity. A poor husband and father cannot be a good citizen. People who abuse the freedom of divorce should be punished.*

**SOURCE 18.10** *Pravda*, 28 May 1936

*When we talk of strengthening the Soviet family we mean the fight against the wrong attitudes towards marriage, women and children. Free love and a disorderly sex life have nothing in common with Socialist principles or the normal behaviour of a Soviet citizen... The outstanding citizens of our country, the best of Soviet youth, are almost always devoted to their families.*

**SOURCE 18.11** Extracts from letters sent to *Rabonitsa*, a women's magazine, in 1936. These letters would have been carefully selected for publication

**From Tatanya Koval of the Lubchenko collective farm, Kiev district**

*I can't find the words to express my gratitude to the Party and the Government, to dear comrade Stalin for his care of us women... My children are my joy. I've never had an abortion, and I'm not going to have any. I've borne children and I shall go on bearing them.*

**From Nina Ershova, Moscow**

*If a mother has seven children one has to be sent to school, another to the kindergarten, the third to a crèche; and then in the evening Mother has to collect them all, give them supper, look after their clothes, put them to bed... Well, then that mother... won't have a single minute left to herself. This surely means that women will be unable to take part in public life, unable to work.*

*This new law undoubtedly has much in its favour, but it is still too early to talk of prohibiting abortion. We must first develop our communal restaurants so that a woman does not have to bother about dinners, suppers and breakfast... We must have more and better crèches and kindergartens, more laundries.*

## FAMILY LOYALTY OR CONSCIENCE OF THE NATION? THE CASE OF PAVLIK MOROZOV



### The real Pavlik

In a trial in 1932, thirteen-year-old Pavlik testified that his father, a poor peasant who had become chairman of the village soviet, had taken property confiscated from the kulaks. Pavlik's furious grandfather and cousin later stabbed him and his younger brother to death in the woods.

### The legend of Pavlik

Pavlik's father secretly helped local kulaks by selling them false documents. In court Pavlik denounced him as a traitor. When Pavlik later denounced kulaks in the village for hiding and spoiling their grain, some of them ambushed him and killed him in the woods. They received the death sentence.

### His symbolic importance

The legendary Pavlik was celebrated in song, statue and story. Those who were young in the 1930s recall being told at Pioneer and Komsomol meetings that it was their duty to report all suspicious events, following Pavlik's example.

Pavlik embodied the 'good' Soviet citizen who was 'above all, a member of the Soviet community, and only incidentally of the family group with which he could only identify himself if the group was in tune with the whole Soviet group. In rejecting his family and in denouncing his father, Pavlik Morozov was simply turning towards the group of which he was fundamentally a member. With the years, his story assumed a more definite content. More than towards the group, it was towards the Father of the group that he turned, towards Stalin... Is it surprising that in the years of the purges his example was followed by countless children?... the constantly presented influence of this example must not be underestimated for it had gradually placed the whole of society under Stalin's parental authority.' (Helene Carrère D'Encausse, *Stalin: Order Through Terror*, 1981, pages 76–77)

## ACTIVITY

Study Sources 18.7–18.11.

- 1 What change do these sources suggest is taking place in attitudes to the family?
- 2 How do Sources 18.8–18.11 show how the Soviet regime was managing this change in attitudes?
- 3 Which letter writer in Source 18.11 is closest to the original revolutionary view about abortion and the role of women in society?

- 1 How do you explain the differences between the real and the legendary Pavlik?
- 2 It has been argued that in the 1930s, in some respects, families drew closer for self-protection. 'We talked freely only in our own family. In difficult times we came together' (Harvard Project quoted in S. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 1999, page 140). Do you think this was more likely to happen than children following Pavlik's example?



## C What was the impact of Socialist Realism in the arts?

### FOCUS ROUTE

Make notes on what happened in the 1930s in the following areas:

- painting
- music
- literature
- cinema.

### ■ 18C Key events in the arts, 1931–38

- 1931** Stalin makes a speech emphasising the value of the tsarist-educated intelligentsia.
- 1932** A party resolution is passed abolishing aggressive and competing proletarian organisations. RAPP is abolished and the Union of Composers and the Union of Architects are formed.
- 1933** Union of Writers formed. Zhdanov outlines the doctrine of 'Socialist Realism'.
- 1934** Architectural competition to design the 'Palace of Soviets' is won by a plan to build a 300-metre tower (taller than the Empire State Building) topped by a 100-metre statue of Lenin (taller than the Statue of Liberty). (It is never built.)
- 1936** Stalin criticises Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. The party issues decrees against 'formalism' in architecture and painting. (Formalism is defined as 'non-accessible, non-realistic, non-socialist'.)
- 1937–39** Purges hit the arts: around 1500 writers are killed, including the poet Mandelstam, the theatre director Meyerhold and the short story writer Babel.
- 1938** Eisenstein makes the film *Alexander Nevsky* which is in tune with growing nationalism and concern about impending war.

In the middle of 1931, Stalin proclaimed the Cultural Revolution at an end. A decree of April 1932 abolished all proletarian artistic and literary organisations and ordered all artists to come together in a single union. There was a dramatic reversal of the official attitude to the intelligentsia. Avant-garde artists were excluded from the mainstream of artistic life. The leading realist artists and sculptors became very successful, guided down the path of Socialist Realism.

**SOURCE 18.12** *Industrial Worker and Collective Farm Girl*, a sculpture by Vera Mukhina exhibited at the Paris Fair in 1937



### What was Socialist Realism?

Although the origins of 'Socialist Realism' lay with Lenin's view that art and literature must educate the workers in the spirit of Communism, the term appears for the first time in 1932. In 1934, the newly founded Union of Writers proclaimed Socialist Realism to be the 'definitive Soviet artistic method'. Stalin liked realism – art which could be easily understood by the masses and which told a story. It would be a good vehicle for propaganda. Zhdanov said that 'Soviet literature must be able to show our heroes, must be able to glimpse our tomorrow.' Socialist Realism meant seeing life as it was becoming and ought to be, rather than as it was. Its subjects were men and women, inspired by the ideals of socialism, building the glowing future.

### Art

From the beginning of the 1930s, Soviet paintings swarmed with tractors, threshing machines and combine harvesters or else peasants beaming out of scenes with tables groaning with food. It was at the height of the purges that Vera Mukhina's famous *Industrial Worker and Collective Farm Girl* (Source 18.12) was sculpted – a massive image of the Soviet people striding into a joyful future.

**SOURCE 18.13** *A Collective Farm Feast*, a painting by Alesandr Gerasimov, 1937. Paintings like these were intended to reflect the 'typical' or exceptional characteristics of the new life: i.e. the Party's concern for the labourers, which transformed inordinately heavy work into a joyful festival. Reality was very different. But such paintings were given the name in the USSR not of surrealism but of socialist realism' (I. Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art*, 1990)



### ■ 18D Some other titles of Socialist Realist art

*Expulsion of the Kulaks* (1931)  
*Construction of a Railway Bridge in Armenia* (1933)  
*In the Struggle for Fuel and Metal* (1933), a poster  
*Stakhanovites in a Box at the Bolshoi Theatre* (1937)  
*The Factory Party Committee* (1937)  
*Collective Farmers Greeting a Tank* (1937)  
*Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin* (1938)

**Anna Akhmatova (1888–1966)**  
 Akhmatova is considered to be one of the greatest poets in Russian history. Much of her work was banned in the 1920s for being bourgeois and individualistic and she stopped writing for publication in the 1930s. It was not until after Stalin's death in 1953 that her work was published again in the Soviet Union.



The content of pictures was more tightly controlled. Artists were now given quite detailed guidelines when they were commissioned to produce specific works on a given subject. There were almost no pictures of domestic and family scenes. 'To judge from art alone Soviet man passed his entire existence in the factories, on the fields of collective farms, at party meetings and demonstrations, or surrounded by the marble of the Moscow metro!' (I. Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art*, 1990, page 193). Museum directors and their staffs received bonuses if they exceeded their targets for visitors – a big incentive to organise mass visits to their exhibitions. This ensured that more people were exposed to the message of Socialist Realism.

### Music

Socialist Realism extended to music, too. Music was to be joyous and positive. Symphonies should be in a major key. Folk songs and dances and 'songs in praise of the happy life of onward-marching Soviet Man' were the acceptable sounds of music. Shostakovich's new opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* was attended by Stalin. He did not like it. It was criticised in *Pravda* in an article entitled 'Muddle instead of Music' and banned. Shostakovich never composed another opera.

### Literature

By mid-1932, Stalin decided that the RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) had served its purpose: it was criticised as being too narrow and was abolished. It was replaced by the Union of Soviet Writers which included non-proletarian and non-party writers and had Maxim Gorky (see page 301), himself a non-party member, as its first head. The degree of state control, however, was just as strong and Socialist Realism was proclaimed to be the basic principle of literary creation. In this climate, some great writers like Isaac Babel, Boris Pasternak and the poet Anna Akhmatova practised 'the genre of silence' and gave up serious writing altogether. According to Robert Service, 'No great work of literature was published in the 1930s and all artistic figures went in fear of their lives' (*A History of Twentieth-Century Russia*, 1997, page 248).

### What were Socialist Realist novels like?

For Stalin, writers were the 'engineers of human souls', and Socialist Realism was 'the guiding principle': 'Literature should not be a single step away from the practical affairs of socialist construction.' From late 1929, many literary organisations began to organise writers into brigades and sent them to construction sites, kolkhozes and factories. Simple, direct language and cheap mass editions were demanded to make books accessible to a newly literate readership. There was nothing subtle about the titles: *Cement*, *The Driving Axle*, *How the Steel was Tempered*, and *The Great Conveyor Belt*.

**Boris Pasternak (1890–1960)**

Pasternak published his first collection of poems, which showed the influence of Futurism, in 1913. By 1917, he was established as a leading lyrical poet. Although he initially welcomed the Revolution, he soon became disillusioned by the excesses of the Bolsheviks. He was criticised as 'bourgeois' for writing about the individual, love and nature. He would not compromise with Socialist Realism in the 1930s and earned his living as a translator of classics, including Georgian works that Stalin liked. There is a story that Stalin crossed his name off an arrest list in the purges, saying, 'Don't touch this cloud dweller.' During the war he worked on his semi-autobiographical novel *Doctor Zhivago*. He could not get it published in the USSR but it was published in the West in 1957 and in 1958 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The publication of *Doctor Zhivago* with its implicit criticism of the Communist regime led to his being persecuted inside the Soviet Union until he died in 1960. His book was finally published in the USSR in 1987.



As early as 1925, Gladkov wrote *Cement*, in which Gleb Chunalov, Soviet literature's first major hero of socialist construction, battled to bring a cement factory back into production against bureaucratic obstacles. Initially praised, by 1929 the hero was seen as too individualistic. Gladkov revised the novel after 1930 to bring it into line with the prevailing orthodoxy. The demand between 1929 and 1932 was to celebrate the little man, so Gladkov in his 1932 novel *Energy* had as his heroes a small group of construction workers.

In 1932 (after the RAPP had been closed down), the little man gave way to the hero. At the first congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934 Zhdanov argued: 'It was in the decaying West that one found a preference for little heroes, minor writers and modest themes. Soviet literature, in contrast, reflected the great themes and heroism of the Soviet construction achievement.' The hallmark of the new Soviet literature, according to Zhdanov, was to be 'heroisation'.

Nikolai Ostrovsky's book *How the Steel was Tempered* fitted in well with this. Criticised when the first part came out in 1932, after 1934 it was praised as a classic work of Socialist Realism. It was the most frequently borrowed book from Magnitogorsk libraries. This book was not Stalin-centred but Ilin's *The Great Conveyor Belt* (1934) was. One of its heroes, a tractor-plant executive, in despair at the failure to get production going after the plant is built, resigns. But then he attends a Kremlin conference of economic executives at which Stalin explains the causes of current difficulties and how to overcome them. He is transformed and energised and demands, 'Send me where you will!'

**HOW THE STEEL WAS TEMPERED**

Nikolai Ostrovsky's hero Pavel Korchagin lives a life of self-sacrifice for 'common betterment'. After a humiliating childhood before the revolution he goes off to fight in the Civil War. Always seeking dangerous assignments, he emerges with a cracked skull and severely damaged spine but he plays his part in reconstruction after the war. He takes a correspondence course from the Red university to become a writer. Women fall in love with him but he chooses a mousy, ideologically 'unawakened' girl who works as a dishwasher. He encourages her to train to become a party member and when at last she gains admission it is a day of great happiness for him. Dying, blind and paralysed, he writes: 'I still believe that I shall return into the ranks and that in the attacking columns there will be my bayonet... For ten years the party and the Komsomol educated me in the art of resistance and the words of our leader were meant for me: "There are no fortresses that the Bolsheviks cannot take."'

The popularity of Pavel Korchagin took on cult proportions before, during and even for a few years after the Second World War. *How the Steel was Tempered* was an autobiographical novel. Ostrovsky suffered just as much as his hero but never despaired. When he wrote it, he was blind and could hardly move his hands and arms – he composed it half-writing, half-dictating – but writing it allowed him to make a contribution still.

How well does the development of the novel in these years illustrate the changes in Soviet society?

**Cinema**

Under the First Five-Year Plan, Stalin ordered increased production of documentaries supporting the plan's industrial objectives. Film-making came under the control of the Politburo's economic department and films had to be presented 'in a form that can be understood by the millions'. Film-makers were controlled by the 'cast-iron' scenario system. Under it, elaborately detailed scripts for new films – the subjects of which were often prescribed by Stalin – had to be precensored in the State Committee for Cinematography, and the film director had to work with colleagues whose task it was to ensure strict execution of the approved plan. No wonder there was not the same creativity and originality that there had been between 1925 and 1928.

Stalin loved watching films and had his own cinema in the Kremlin and in his *dacha* (country lodge) where he previewed new films before they could be released for the public. He particularly enjoyed musical comedy (musicals and literary adaptations dominated the film industry's output) and films which showed him as the main hero in the Civil War. He thoroughly enjoyed Charlie Chaplin films and imported Westerns. The mass audience preferred Hollywood films: Douglas Fairbanks was more popular than Eisenstein. The Bolsheviks had believed that film would be peculiarly effective and that the mass audience would be incapable of rejecting its message. Some very famous films were made, but film was much less effective than it aspired to be. The myth that the film was so powerful was more influential than the films themselves.

**What were the experiences of leading figures in the arts in the 1930s?**

In 1939, Isaak Brodsky, a very able draughtsman but with no great reputation outside the USSR, died honoured by the Soviet state. In the same year Vsevelod Meyerhold, who did have an international reputation, lay on the floor with a fractured hip and blood streaming from his battered face while his interrogator urinated on him. Why had they suffered such different fates?

**Case study: Vsevelod Meyerhold (1873–1940)**

Meyerhold was a renowned theatre director and founder of the avant-garde theatre; his writings on the theatre are still read in the West today. He welcomed the revolution, became a Bolshevik, and proclaimed the beginning of a 'theatrical October'. The teacher of Eisenstein (see page 283) and the producer of Mayakovsky's satirical plays (see page 279), his Meyerhold Theatre in Moscow had an international reputation.

During the Cultural Revolution, Meyerhold and Mayakovsky were heavily criticised by the RAPP. In 1937, Meyerhold decided to produce a play based on the Five-Year Plan novel *How the Steel was Tempered* (see page 298) to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the revolution. The horrors of the Civil War had never been shown so graphically on the stage, but it was optimistic Socialist Realism rather than genuine realism that was required and so the play was rejected. In December 1937, he was attacked in *Pravda* for failing to depict the problems which concerned every Soviet citizen. His theatre was closed in January 1938. He was accused of formalism but, at the conference of theatre directors in June 1939, said he preferred to be called a formalist than be forced into Socialist Realism.

Unsurprisingly, Meyerhold was arrested a few days later. His wife, a beautiful actress, was savagely stabbed to death in their apartment soon after. Meyerhold was horribly tortured to drag out a confession that he was a foreign spy and Trotskyite and he was shot in January 1940.



**SOURCE 18.14** Scene from a play (possibly *The Bedbug* by Mayakovsky) produced in Russia by Meyerhold in the 1920s or 1930s

**SOURCE 18.15** Meyerhold, quoted in R. C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941*, 1992, p. 563

*I, for one, find the work of our theatres at present pitiful and terrifying. This pitiful and sterile something that aspires to the title of socialist realism has nothing in common with art... Go to the Moscow theatres and look at the colourless, boring productions which are all so alike and differ only in their degree of worthlessness... In your efforts to eradicate formalism, you have destroyed art!*





#### Case study: Isaak Brodsky (1884–1939)

Brodsky first came to notice when his picture of Lenin won the painting section of a competition held in Petrograd. Lenin was to remain Brodsky's main subject and his style that of the documentary photograph. His pictures, such as *Lenin's Speech at a Workers' Meeting*, portray both Lenin and the masses – two idealised elements of the USSR. The famous *Lenin at Smolny* shows Lenin absorbed in his work and his simple lifestyle despite the Civil War raging outside.

Brodsky's reputation grew in the 1920s but his style – 'too photographic' – fell out of favour during the Cultural Revolution. He was expelled from the Association of Proletarian Artists. By 1932, the Cultural Revolution was over and Brodsky was one of Stalin's favourite artists. His picture of Lenin in front of the Kremlin was the basis for the massive May Day decorations in 1932, in which Lenin and Stalin were paired as they were to be so often in the 1930s. Brodsky slavishly declared, 'A painting must be living and comprehensible. I have remembered these words of Comrade Stalin for ever.' In 1934, Brodsky was made director of the All Russian Academy of Arts and became the first artist to be awarded the Order of Lenin. He died in 1939.

**SOURCE 18.16** *Lenin's Speech at a Workers' Meeting at the Putilov Factory in May 1917* by Isaak Brodsky, 1929



**SOURCE 18.17** *Lenin in Smolny* by Isaak Brodsky

#### ACTIVITY

- 1 Why was Meyerhold so criticised?
- 2 How well do Brodsky's paintings and methods illustrate Socialist Realism?
- 3 What do the experiences of Brodsky, Gorky and Meyerhold tell us about the relationship between artists and the Bolsheviks?

#### Case study: Maxim Gorky (pen name of A. M. Peshkov; 1868–1936)

Gorky's novels and plays gave him an international reputation and earnings which were large enough to be one of the Bolsheviks' main sources of income before 1917, although he was never actually a member of the party. The pseudonym he adopted means 'bitter' and, sent out to work at the age of eight, he knew more about the seamy side of life than almost any other Russian author. He was a humane and democratic socialist. He was critical of Lenin's seizure of power in 1917 and deeply distressed by the terror during the Civil War. The destruction appalled him and he helped to preserve both works of art and artists and intellectuals in the aftermath of the revolution. He became increasingly disillusioned with the Bolsheviks: even as early as the beginning of 1918 he wrote, 'It is clear Russia is heading for a new and even more savage autocracy.' Gorky left the country in 1921.

Stalin was desperately anxious for Gorky to return so that he could demonstrate that the most celebrated living Russian author was an admirer of the system. Gorky returned for a visit in 1928 when his sixtieth birthday was celebrated and he became a permanent resident in 1931. In 1934, he was made the first president of the Soviet Writers' Union. Former colleagues who had criticised the Bolsheviks felt he had sold out. He was flattered on a grand scale – the main street of Moscow was renamed after him, as was his birthplace Nizhny Novgorod – but he was never to be allowed to leave the Soviet Union again. By the end of his life, he regarded himself as under house arrest.

Although Gorky's health had been deteriorating, the circumstances and timing of his death have been regarded with suspicion. He died in June 1936 while receiving medical treatment. This was very convenient for Stalin, coming two months before the first show trial which Gorky was bound to have criticised openly. At his show trial in 1938 Yagoda, who was head of the NKVD in 1936, confessed to having ordered Gorky's death.



**SOURCE 18.18** Gorky (left) with Stalin

In his notebooks, found after his death, Gorky compared Stalin to 'a monstrous flea which propaganda and the hypnosis of fear had enlarged to incredible proportions'. Stalin, though, led the mourners at his funeral and Gorky's ashes were placed in a niche in the Kremlin wall.

## D What happened in education after the Cultural Revolution?

In the middle of 1931, the Cultural Revolution came to an end. A Central Committee resolution criticised the project method and the 'withering away of the school'. Compare the extract in Source 18.19 with Shulgin's ideas (page 290).

Stalin was outraged by the state of schools in 1931. The Komsomol's 'Cultural Army' had done enormous damage to local education authorities and wreaked havoc in the schools. Stalin needed educated workers to work in skilled jobs and be able to take advantage of the higher education and training schemes that were now on offer. The Central Committee ordered a fundamental shift in educational policy. The core recommendation was that the teaching of physics, chemistry and mathematics in particular 'must be based on strictly delineated and carefully worked out programmes and study plans', and that classes should be organised on a firm timetable. Examinations, homework, textbooks and rote learning reappeared. Discipline was emphasised and the authority of parents and teachers over pupils was supported; in the late 1930s school uniforms reappeared.

**SOURCE 18.19** Central Committee resolution of 25 August 1931

*[The school's basic failing is that it] does not give a sufficient amount of general knowledge, and does not adequately solve the problem of training fully literate persons with a good grasp of the bases of sciences (physics, chemistry, mathematics, native language, geography and so on) for entrance to the technicums and higher schools.*

## FOCUS ROUTE

Make notes answering the following questions:

- 1 Did the Cultural Revolution have any lasting impact?
- 2 How far was radical change replaced by conservatism?
- 3 What was the impact of the changes on one subject: history?

In universities, there was also a return to something much more like the situation before the revolution. Entrance to university was based more on academic success than on class or political criteria. Examinations, degrees and academic titles were restored.

### History, nationalism and education

'I like your book immensely,' wrote Lenin in the preface to M. N. Pokrovsky's *Brief History of Russia*. Published in 1920, it became *the* Soviet school text book. Pokrovsky was a historian who had been a Bolshevik since 1915 and became Deputy Commissar for Education. It was a straightforward Marxist work, which saw the whole of Russian history in terms of class struggle and included long descriptions of the brutal beatings of serfs by their owners and the dreadful working and living conditions of industrial workers. Economic forces drove history onwards, leading inevitably to socialism. Tsars and generals were barely mentioned, as Pokrovsky believed personality mattered very little in history.

The two most famous first-hand Bolshevik accounts of the revolution, John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919) and Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, presented the revolution as a popular rising and emphasised the role of the proletariat rather than the party in making the revolution. Lenin wrote in the foreword to Reed's book that he wanted to see millions of copies published in all languages – Stalin was much less keen, perhaps because he was not mentioned, and no Russian editions were published between 1930 and 1956.

Soon after the revolution, history was banished as a school subject because it was seen as irrelevant to contemporary life and had been used under the tsars to develop patriotism and reinforce the values of the ruling class. In the Cultural Revolution one notable historian, Professor Tarle, a non-Marxist historian and Russian patriot, who had written about Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible, was attacked for glorifying the idea of monarchy and imprisoned. Professors could be identified as bourgeois specialists, too.

For Stalin, the Cultural Revolution was part of the great transformation of the USSR, but it did not reflect his ideas on history. By 1934, Pokrovsky had come under attack for reducing history to an abstract record of class conflict without names, dates, heroes or stirring emotions. Historians were now required to write about the imperial past in positive terms and Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, who expanded that empire, were looked on particularly favourably by Stalin. The term *rodina* (motherland), despised by the old Bolshevik internationalists, came back into common use. In May 1934, a decree on history teaching was issued declaring that the old ways must be replaced with 'mandatory consolidation in pupils' memories of important historical events, historical personages and chronological dates'. History faculties were restored in the universities of Moscow and Leningrad. Professor Tarle was released from prison to reoccupy his university chair in Moscow. In the new school history texts, which appeared in 1937, the years 1917–37 are 'presented as the finale of embattled Russia's long march through history from humble beginnings in the tenth century to world leadership and greatness under Lenin–Stalin' (R. C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941*, 1992, page 53). The past and its interpretation was important to Stalin. In Soviet history books, he emerged as one of the main architects of the revolution, the close companion and adviser to Lenin, and a hero of the Civil War.

### ACTIVITY

- 1 How did interpretations of history change between the 1920s and the mid-1930s?
- 2 How did individual historians fare?
- 3 Did this add up to a 'Great Retreat' in history?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of schools following a national curriculum in history and other subjects?

## E Soviet society at the end of the 1930s: had 'a new type of man' been created?

Socialist construction involved not only building the structures of the socialist state but also creating the right sort of citizens to live in it. New Soviet Man would embody the morality, values and characteristics that a good Soviet citizen should possess. He would be a willing servant of the state with the right attitudes, far removed from the illiterate, uneducated peasant who exemplified the backwardness which had cursed the USSR in the past. New man was part of new modern industrial society, above all a proletarian with a sense of social responsibility and moral virtue. Creating citizens like this was the objective of the proletarianisation that was such an important part of the Cultural Revolution of 1929–31 (see page 288). The changes were aimed mainly at the young through the education system and the Komsomol youth organisation but all sorts of pressures were also brought to bear on adult workers in order to make them conform (see Chart 18E on page 304).

Pavel Korchagin, the hero of Nikolai Ostrovsky's novel *How the Steel was Tempered* (see page 298), is the archetypal new man who puts the interests of his comrades, the Bolsheviks and the revolution before himself – an example of self-sacrifice and moral virtue. Soviet writers from the mid-1920s onwards presented to the public new Soviet heroes who overcame hardship and obstacles in the cause of the construction of the new socialist society.

The idea that people could be programmed in this way drew support from the spurious theories of the Soviet scientist Trofim Lysenko, who believed that human beings could acquire characteristics that could be passed on from one generation to the next. Stalin was very much influenced by Lysenko's thinking and came to believe that socialist characteristics could be passed on if people were taught the right habits and attitudes. It was this notion of socialist programming that appalled writers such as George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, who in their books *1984* and *Brave New World* put the case against totalitarianism and its apparent need to crush individuality and the human spirit.

### THE FORERUNNER OF ORWELL AND HUXLEY

Yergeny Zamyatin is not as well known in the West as Orwell and Huxley but his novel *We*, written in 1924, was the forerunner of their books. In this Dystopia (a nightmare Utopia) the people are robot-like, known by numbers and have lives programmed in every detail. The story of D503's 'pitiful struggle against the ruler – the bald Benefactor – is a plea for the right of the individual to live his life without oppressive interference from the state'. The book was banned in the USSR for sixty years. Robert Service in *A History of Twentieth Century Russia*, page 139.

### Was a new type of man produced in Magnitogorsk?

If the new man were to be created, surely it would be at a place like Magnitogorsk where a great steel plant and a town of 150,000 people were created from nothing between 1929 and 1939? Stephen Kotkin, in his book *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation* (1995), has produced a remarkable study of the town, and what follows is based on his research. The aim at Magnitogorsk was to build not only an industrial giant but also a socialist paradise (see Chart 18E).

### FOCUS ROUTE

Make notes on the forces trying to create the new man in Magnitogorsk and the evidence that the creation of a new man still had some way to go. What conclusion would you reach – had a new type of man been created?



### Housing

In Magnitogorsk housing was not just for shelter; it was also designed to mould people. It was largely communal, and in every barracks there was a 'Red corner' with the barracks wall newspaper, shock-worker banners and pictures of Lenin and Stalin. It was intended to be a cultural training ground in which the dwellers could read, listen to lectures, watch films and discuss political issues.

### Education

Virtually everyone in Magnitogorsk, even those who worked full time, attended some form of schooling, which reinforced the socialisation and politicisation being experienced at work. The school curriculum combined basic education with technical subjects and 'the spirit of socialism'. Compulsory courses in Marxism-Leninism began at an early age.

### Public holidays

These took place on the anniversary of the October Revolution and on 1 May. The May Day parade was a highly organised procession, based on people's different places of work, with numerous floats, portraits of the leaders and Communist slogans.

### Speaking Bolshevik

In Magnitogorsk you identified yourself as a 'Soviet worker' and learned to say the right things in the right way. The 'Dear Marfa' letter (Source 12.23 on page 189) is a classic example. Kotkin found that workers in Magnitogorsk still spoke in the same way as they had in the 1930s, fifty years later.

### Shock workers and socialist competition

An individual's work history recorded his or her profession, party status, record on absenteeism, study or course attendance, production achievements and how often their equipment broke down. The work histories of the shock worker, the award winner, and those who succeeded in socialist competition were made public and used to decide the distribution of material rewards.

### Entertainment

More than 600,000 seats a year were sold at the cinema in Magnitogorsk: it was easily the most popular form of entertainment and a key mechanism for spreading socialist values. All Soviet films shown there carried forceful political messages. Foreign films were for pure entertainment, but no recognisably anti-socialist or overtly pro-capitalist popular culture was permitted. Newsreels were shown before and after every film. The inhabitants of Magnitogorsk read avidly: 40,000 books were sold in January 1936 and 10,000 people held library cards. Nikolai Ostrovsky's novel *How the Steel was Tempered* was the most frequently borrowed book from the Magnitogorsk libraries.

### Censorship

'Censors were quintessential "social engineers", with the media serving as their instruments – or weapons, as Lenin wrote – in the battle to construct a Communist society. The instructional messages emanating from reading matter, radio, and, especially, films were paralleled by training received in schools' (S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation*, 1995)

### Campaigns to improve behaviour

There were campaigns to improve men's behaviour towards women and to discourage alcohol consumption.

### Use of agitators

In 1936, 214 agitators were employed to discuss political issues and present interpretations of domestic and international events.



### EVIDENCE THAT THE CREATION OF NEW SOVIET MAN STILL HAD SOME WAY TO GO

### Housing

Private housing was never entirely eliminated, even in 1938. Privately owned mud huts (which had no 'Red corners') made up 17.5 per cent of the living space in Magnitogorsk. In the latter half of the 1930s, there was a shift away from barracks to providing apartments for families, as part of the pro-family policies then being adopted.

### Preferences in entertainment

Next to the cinema, the most popular entertainment was performances of French wrestling (scripted wrestling). Attempts were made to use the circus at Magnitogorsk as a vehicle for propaganda about the Five-Year Plans and socialist construction but such attempts failed miserably – in *Beyond the Urals* (1942) John Scott describes such attempts as 'ludicrous'.

### Limited success in campaigns to improve behaviour

The campaigns to improve men's behaviour towards women and to discourage alcohol consumption had very limited success.

### Opposition to Stakhanovites

The case of the Magnitogorsk Stakhanovite (see page 192) shows the resentment that could be aroused. One worker remarked that Stakhanovism was an attempt to enslave the working class – he was arrested and sentenced to forced labour. Anti-Stakhanovite jokes show this resentment was felt all over the country.

### The leverage that workers had

There was a perpetual labour shortage. Managers, desperate to meet their targets, could not afford to sack workers for breaking the rules on absenteeism and so on, and were prepared to take on workers sacked elsewhere. As we have seen, Magnitogorsk was a revolving door.

## What was the national picture?

Magnitogorsk is just one example of the massive change that took place in the USSR in the 1930s. The regime was committed to economic, social and cultural transformation. In the First Five-Year Plan, there was massive social dislocation as ten million peasants changed occupations and moved into the towns.

By 1939, the combination of the technical education opportunities granted by the Cultural Revolution and the opportunities for upward mobility created as a result of rapid industrialisation and the purges meant that a working class/peasant governing élite had been virtually achieved. Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Kosygin, who became key Soviet leaders in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, were among the 150,000 workers and Communists entering higher education during the First Five-Year Plan.

But was the mass of the people transformed? The attitude of the people to the regime is one way of assessing this. The historian John Barber estimated that one-fifth of all workers enthusiastically supported the regime and its politics, while another minority opposed, although not overtly. This left the great mass of workers, who were neither supporters nor opponents but nonetheless more or less 'accepted' the regime for its social welfare policies. NKVD soundings of popular opinion in the 1930s indicate that the regime was relatively, though not desperately, unpopular in Russian towns but much more unpopular in the villages, especially in the first half of the 1930s. The post-NEP situation was compared unfavourably with the NEP and Stalin was compared unfavourably with Lenin, mainly because living standards had fallen. The arbitrary nature of terror and rewards encouraged fatalism and passivity in the population. The historian Sheila Fitzpatrick in her book *Everyday Stalinism* (1999) has found that 'a degree of scepticism, even a refusal to take the regime's most serious pronouncements fully seriously, was the norm'. *Homo Sovieticus*, who emerges in the 1930s, may or may not be a new man, but he had to be a survivor and one 'whose most developed skill involved the hunting and gathering of scarce goods in an urban environment'.

### ACTIVITY

Make a presentation to the rest of the class. Your presentation will cover changes in Soviet culture and society in the 1920s and 1930s. This can be done in groups or individually. If done in groups, it is important that each individual has a chance to participate so that the teacher can assess his or her performance.

- 1 In a group, divide up the topics. Some topics are bigger than others, so two students might cover women and the family, one education, and so on.
- 2 Subdivide topics for individual presentations, e.g. the arts could be divided into painting, street theatre and agit-prop, literature, film and music. Students could research and report on individuals such as Malevich, Shostakovich and Mayakovsky.

### WAS THERE A 'GREAT RETREAT'?

Trotsky denounced Stalin as the leader of a new privileged class and saw this as part of Stalin's betrayal of the revolution. The 1930s were a time of great shortage so access to special food rations and other scarce goods at low prices in special élite stores, together with access to better services and housing, was at the heart of privilege.

Does this inequality, combined with the change by the middle of the 1930s to more conservative policies on family values, divorce, abortion, education and the arts which we have already noticed, signify a retreat? Historians have debated this issue. Some, like Sheila Fitzpatrick, argue that there was a retreat, contrasting the revolutionary spirit of the Civil War and Cultural Revolution with the mid-1930s. They point to:

- the acceptance of hierarchy and social privilege
- respect for authority and tradition
- the return to traditional values in education, the family and the arts.

Historians who challenge this interpretation, like Stephen Kotkin and Ewan Mawdsley, argue that the creation of the new working class and the new intelligentsia meant that:

- there was no retreat on private ownership of land and the means of production, or on hiring labour
- the rest of the world saw Communist Russia as still distinctly anti-capitalist
- Stalinist culture may have embraced many of the traditions of nineteenth-century Russian realism but the content was 'modern': it was promoted to achieve objectives which the regime chose to stress – economic activity, the socialist utopia, national defence and adulation of the leader. It reflected a changing and advancing rather than a retreating society.

### KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER 18 Culture and society in a decade of turmoil

- 1 The Cultural Revolution of 1928–31 coincided with industrialisation and collectivisation. It saw a return to the class struggle of the Civil War.
- 2 The Komsomols were particularly active in enforcing the Cultural Revolution in education and art and intensifying the attack on religion.
- 3 After the Cultural Revolution there was a return to traditional values in many areas of Soviet society. This has been called the Great Retreat.
- 4 Abortion was outlawed and divorce was made harder after the introduction of the 1936 Family Code, which emphasised the value of family life.
- 5 In education, discipline, exams and traditional procedures were brought back.
- 6 Socialist Realism was the guiding principle for all artists from 1932 onwards.
- 7 Art was even more tightly controlled than it had been in the 1920s. Artists rose, like Brodsky, or fell, like Meyerhold, depending on how closely they followed the dictates of Socialist Realism.
- 8 Great writers like Pasternak were silent; lesser ones produced novels about the Five-Year Plans.
- 9 The Soviets were trying to produce a new type of man.
- 10 Their success was very limited. In spite of Stalin's terror, the Soviet people were survivors and remained sceptical.
- 11 There has been a debate among historians about whether there was a Great Retreat or not.