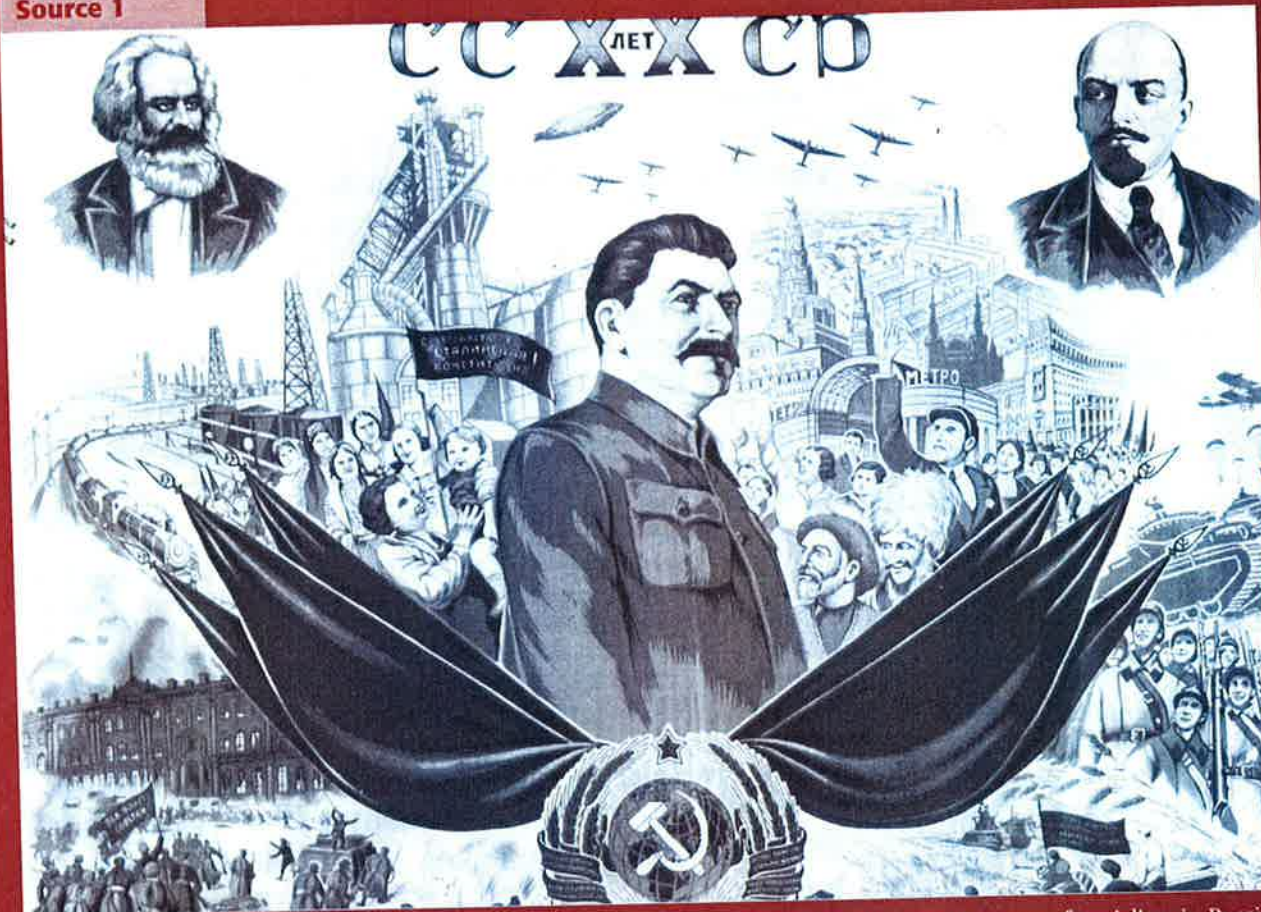


Chapter 1

Society and culture in Stalin's Russia

Source 1



▲ A poster from 1937 celebrating twenty years of socialism in Russia.

Source 2

One afternoon the head of the port administration sent for me. He was Trotsky's brother. Passing through an ante-room I stepped into an opulent suite – embossed tables, malachite urns, settees and couches upholstered with costly brocade. Everything matched. An added luxury were two polar-bear skins on the polished parquet floor. A table was covered with a snow-white cloth and laden with platters of jellied veal, cold turkey, juicy, sliced pink sturgeon and fruit in cut-glass bowls. Two bottles of champagne reclined in silver ice buckets. Why were these privileges allowed in hungry Leningrad?

From *A Soviet Odyssey* by Canadian Communist Suzanne Rosenberg, describing an incident shortly after arriving in Russia in 1931

Think about

Symbols, as we have seen before, were very important in Soviet Russia.

- ▶ What powerful symbols are used in Source 1?
- ▶ What are being presented as the most important achievements of the regime?

Introduction

Marxists envisaged a future society where inequalities of wealth and power had been swept away in a new spirit of egalitarianism and freedom. All would contribute to society in any way they could, working for the common good, as shown in Source 1. How close was Russia in the 1930s to reaching this goal? Was the talk of socialist society simply a propaganda image to conceal a new class system, based on political privilege, as many historians in the 1950s and 1960s suggested? Suzanne Rosenberg, herself a Communist, seems to have been shocked by what she experienced on reaching the Soviet Union (Source 2).

In this chapter we will look more closely at the realities of society and the values it sought to encourage in its people.

Key questions

- What happened to religious faith?
- How was family life affected?
- What changes were made to schools and education?
- Was it possible to improve your position in life?
- Did people support the regime?
- What kind of cultural life was there in the USSR?

Moving into the cities

By far the biggest change in the life of many Soviet citizens came when they left the collective farms for the cities. Between 1929 and 1941 18.5 million made this journey. Until the introduction of the internal passport in 1932, there were no restrictions on movement. After collectivization those who remained on the *kolkhoz* were destined to a life of poverty and near-serfdom. However, the demand for labour during these years offered many opportunities for those prepared to take the risk of digging up their roots. Those who had specialized skills must have found the move easiest. Tractor and combine drivers, for example, once they were trained by the MTS, could easily find employment in construction and mining.

Note

MTS are Motor Tractor Stations. See Chapter 9 'Building Paradise'.

Leaving all family contacts and the rural life they had been brought up to must have been a profound shock for many people.

Religion

'Religion is the opium of the people', wrote Karl Marx. All Bolsheviks believed that religion was an invention to distract the poor and oppressed from trying to remedy their situation on earth by offering them the prospect of perfect happiness after death. If a Communist society was to be achieved, the shackles of religious belief needed to be shattered.

The attack on religion had begun under Lenin and it continued throughout the 1920s. Lenin had ordered the execution of several bishops, ostensibly because they refused to sell church gold and silver to help those affected by the famine in 1922, but as the NEP developed it saw a decline in religious persecution, especially of some of the non-orthodox congregations. None the less, 117 out of 160 Orthodox bishops had been arrested during this period of relative toleration, which ended dramatically with the First Five Year Plan.

The collectivization of villages was accompanied by widespread attacks on religion. Many churches were closed and their priests were deported. Church buildings were either pulled down or converted to secular purposes, as barns,

schools etc. In 1930 there were 30,000 Orthodox congregations, but by 1939 only 1 in 40 churches was still functioning and only seven bishops were still active in the whole of the Soviet Union. Worship could only take place in licensed premises by congregations registered with the government. Many congregations had to apply to use religious vestments and silver from the local authorities and return them after use.



In Moscow church buildings suffered even more. Churches, such as the famous Chapel of the Iberian Virgin by Red Square, were knocked down around the Kremlin to allow the passage of parades of armed vehicles. The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, built in the nineteenth century to commemorate the defeat of Napoleon, was dynamited to make way for what was planned to be the world's tallest construction, the Palace of Soviets. This was to be crowned by a statue of Lenin, though in fact the Palace was never built because the foundations were unsound.



Source 3

A monastery is blown up in 1930 to make way for a cultural centre.

Think about

- ▶ What is the attitude of the artist to the destruction of religious buildings in the USSR?
- ▶ Do you think this is a reliable picture for the historian?

Source 4

The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in the heart of Moscow. Stalin ordered its destruction in 1931.

The 1937 design for the Palace of Soviets, which was never built.

Source 5



Think about

- ▶ How do Sources 4 and 5 reflect the priorities of the two regimes?
- ▶ Why do you think Stalin chose this spot for his Palace of Soviets?

Note

The League of the Militant Godless was set up in the 1920s to fight against organized religion. It consisted mainly of younger people, especially Komsomol, the party's youth organization.

Think about

- ▶ Why do you think religious belief persisted in the face of this attack by the State?

In the old capital, St Petersburg, which was now known as Leningrad, the authorities seemed to have a macabre sense of humour. The famous Kazan Cathedral was converted into a museum of atheism, while the Monastery of Alexander Nevsky, where formerly famous Russians musicians were buried, became the place of burial for prominent anti-religious figures.

The Communists also attacked Islam, the second largest religious community in the USSR. Only 1300 mosques were still operating in 1941 as against 26,000 in 1917.

However, there is much evidence that the party's campaign against Christianity was not very successful. Many congregations continued to meet in private houses, despite the lack of ordained priests to take services. The party tried to prevent the observance of religious holy days, but was singularly unsuccessful. Some *kolkhoz* chairmen complained to their bosses that peasants were observing even more religious holidays than before collectivization. Perhaps religion here was a good excuse to resist the demands of the hated *kolkhoz*. Apparently some *kolkhoz* chairmen later in the 1930s were actually churchwardens.

The 1937 census showed that despite the official campaigns and activities of the League of the Militant Godless, 57 per cent of Russians said they were still believers. The percentage was even higher for the older generation. Clearly the regime had not managed to dislodge religious belief and the view of the world which it represented amongst the majority of Russians. In fact the tide seemed to be turning in the opposite direction. The League of the Militant Godless lost three-quarters of its members between 1932 and 1938. Its Leningrad branch was closed down for lack of members in 1936.

Educating for the future

Building roads, railways and factories of itself would not create communism. All Marxists believed that a change in political consciousness was also necessary, and that would need to be taught. Education also served other purposes. It was self-evident that a modern economy needed a literate and numerate workforce.

Primary education was made compulsory for all in 1930 for four years. During the 1930s this term was extended, until each child spent seven compulsory years at school by 1939. Even illiterate adults were encouraged to attend school or evening classes. The results were striking; by 1939 illiteracy had declined to just 4 per cent of the male and 18 per cent of the female population. This meant a huge expansion in the number of teachers, though, especially in the rural areas, they were often not well-treated. The onus was put on the *kolkhoz* to find the money for schools, and particularly in the harsh years of the early and mid-1930s money was in very short supply. Feeding the community was a higher priority than teaching them to write.

There were interesting changes in teaching and learning styles. The Revolution had introduced some progressive ideas into schools. Exams had been denounced as 'bourgeois'. Similarly activities which emphasized competition, e.g. sports, were downplayed. Traditional academic education was replaced by a heavy emphasis on vocational training. In 1928 there was an attack on 'bourgeois intellectuals' both in the economy and in education. Many professors were removed from universities, and a proletarian background became compulsory to pursue a university education as a student or to teach at any level. Many universities were broken up and handed over to Vesenkha. Between 1928 and 1934 '900 specialist departments and 566 institutes' (Ward, *Stalin's Russia*, 1993) were set up. Instead of a broad academic higher education, students now passed through narrow specialist courses which prepared them for their future role in completing the Five Year Plans.

Some of the changes in teaching were seen to be counter-productive; by 1935 a more traditional approach was reintroduced. Tests and examinations became compulsory, uniforms were imposed, with pig-tails for girls, and traditional academic subjects were once again studied by all pupils as well as, of course, Marxism-Leninism. The attack on academics slowed. By 1936 the insistence on a proletarian background for higher education was removed. As the number of students in higher education expanded, in 1940 the State introduced fees for higher education, as in Britain in the 1990s. These were also introduced for the last three years of secondary schooling. Here is how one anonymous student reacted:

Source 6

Again we're going backwards. Before a boss wouldn't let a worker squeak, and now workers are repressed. Before children of capitalists studied in universities and now workers' children have only one route – to die at the bench like their parents.

Facts and figures

Number of schools in USSR

1927	118,558
1933	166,275

Quotation

'The press should grow not by the day, but by the hour, for it is the sharpest and most powerful weapon of our people.' Stalin

- What does this quote tell us about the motives behind the literacy drive?

Facts and figures

Komsomol membership

1929	2.9 million
1940	10.2 million

Think about

- What impression does this photograph give of the children?
- Does this photograph prove that the young supported the regime?

Source 8



▲ Komsomol members parade behind their band.

Literacy was, however, of little use if there was little to read. *Pravda* and *Izvestia* were widely distributed, and sold for only 10 kopeks.

Source 7

USSR newspapers

	1913	1928	1939
Number of Russian papers	775	861	6475
Number of others	84	336	2294
Total circulation (millions)	2.7	9.4	38.0

Publishing houses turned out copies of the classics of Russian and foreign literature at very low prices. Even in the barrack blocks, in which the first workers at the new city of Magnitogorsk lived, there was always a daily paper provided and a small library, although the barracks leaked and were infested by bedbugs. 70,000 libraries were built across Russia.

Children and adults were bombarded with propaganda inside and outside school. The young were encouraged to join party groups, the Young Pioneers, up to 14 years, and then Komsomol, until they were 28. As young Communists they were expected to set an example to their peers: party rules, for example, forbade them to smoke or drink. Most then went on to become full members of the Communist Party. The Communist future, they were told, would be theirs, but they must do their part to build it. And build it they did, volunteering for many of the most grandiose projects of the Five Year Plans, and for the party's biggest prestige project in the capital – the Moscow Metro.

They were also given idols of their own age group to admire. Source 9 shows Pavlik Morozov, the Young Pioneer who denounced his own father for maintaining ties with *kulaks*. He was murdered as a result by other members of his own family while picking berries in the woods.

Source 9



◀ A statue of Pavlik Morozov

■ Think about

- ▶ Why were statues put up to Morozov?
- ▶ What image of the dead boy does the statue present?

Family life

Marriage as an institution did not at first win the favour of all Bolsheviks. For many women through the centuries their experience of marriage had been child-bearing, hard work and brutality at the hands of a drunken husband. Some Communists, including senior diplomat Alexandra Kollontai, went so far as to call marriage a 'bourgeois institution', which gave men the legal framework to exploit the female under-class. Her solution was to dissolve the institution altogether. Both sexes, she thought, should be able to choose to have sexual relations with whomever they wished. As for children, some Communists argued that bringing them up was best left to State-run children's

homes rather than to parents at home. This would instil in children the proper social attitudes and destroy any divisions between social groups.

After the Revolution a number of reforms had been passed to try to give greater equality to women. Divorce was made cheap and very easy. All that had to be done was to visit a judge and sign the necessary papers. Abortion was also legalized, though not encouraged. Many people lived together in unregistered partnerships, though marriage was still the norm. Government propaganda, even in the 1920s, emphasized the role of women workers as well as homemakers. Childcare at the workplace was common, though extended families also took on these arrangements themselves.

'The Great Change' put a huge strain on the family and the institution of marriage. The arrest and deportation of over a million *kulaks* often meant their wives went with them. Many families tried to leave children with relatives or friends. As we have seen, for those who remained life on the new collective farms was difficult; young men in particular often could see no future for themselves. They left their villages in millions, with or without the necessary permission, to look for work in the nearest city or industrial region. Many seem to have abandoned their family obligations, often starting up a second family in their new surroundings. Fathers were bound by law to pay maintenance for their children, but, in the chaotic circumstances of the time, it was impossible to track fathers down and they could easily move on if detection looked likely. Factories were desperate for workers, especially if they had special skills. The 1934 famine, which devastated large parts of Russia, left many thousands of orphans. Desperate villagers, without enough food for themselves, sent them off to the nearest town.

For families living together in the cities and towns, life was also harsh. Even party leaders were not exempt from the conditions, long before the rapid movement of people which accompanied the Five Year Plans. Here Khrushchev, the future Soviet leader, reflects in his memoirs, about being a delegate to the 14th Party Congress in 1925:

Source 10

We lived in the House of Soviets...Our quarters were very simple and crowded. We slept on plank beds, and we were stacked together like logs.

Khrushchev, Khrushchev Remembers, 1971

Of course, Khrushchev and his comrades did not have to suffer these conditions for more than a few days. Families often lived together in extremely claustrophobic conditions. Housing was desperately short and families of three generations, grandma, parents and children, lived in rooms of 11 square metres. In this room they ate, washed and slept. Where new blocks of flats were erected in the 1930s, the 'socialist' plan of communal bathrooms and kitchens (*kommunalki*) was often followed. This gross overcrowding must have put enormous strain on family relationships at all levels. Husbands and wives deserted their families and children ran away from unhappy homes. Desperate parents put their children into orphanages and abandoned them there. There were, therefore, an increasingly large number of children being brought up away from their parents. The State orphanages were creaking under the weight of new admissions.

The result of many of these pressures was gangs of street-children in the cities living lives on the margins of society, stealing, scrounging and begging.

Note

High status families were somewhat better off. In 1928 an apartment block, Government House, was begun containing 566 furnished flats with telephones, constant hot water and many other modern amenities.

Facts and figures

Average space per resident in Leningrad

1927	8.5 sq m
1935	5.8 sq m

Juvenile crime became a major problem for the government, absorbing the time of all levels of government – even the Politburo.

What should the government do about this? Juvenile offenders had at first been treated sympathetically by the courts. Social circumstances were held to be responsible for their problems, and education and care the best solution. Now attitudes hardened and, in 1935, a new harsh law was passed by the Politburo. The law in future was to treat all those aged twelve and over as adults, even imposing the death penalty if it was felt to be appropriate. Parents of hooligans were also made liable to fines. Troublesome children could be removed from their parents to State orphanages and parents would have to pay for their upkeep.

In 1936 the government introduced new measures to strengthen family life. The law made abortion illegal, despite much public debate and opposition. Newspapers afterwards carried many stories about the punishment of doctors and illegal abortionists, as well as husbands who forced wives to have illegal abortions, to discourage the practice. The birth rate did increase substantially from 25 to 31 per thousand as a result, but it would appear that illegal abortionists were still kept busy. The same law also made divorce much more difficult, requiring the presence of both parties in the court, and making it considerably more expensive. Absent parents also had to contribute a higher proportion of their wages to the upkeep of children, which was a strong disincentive to divorce. Homosexuality was also banned.

The State also implemented a system to reward mothers who had six or more children. For five years they received 2000 roubles per year, which was a large sum of money for working families. These reforms and payments did not lead to a decline in the number of working women. In Leningrad they rose from 44 per cent to 50 per cent of the workforce between 1935 and 1937. To encourage women back to work after giving birth, almost all large factories set up creches to care for their children. In Moscow in the central Gorky Park was a Children's Village where in suitable weather the creches brought the children for healthy games and outdoor exercise.



When men were mobilized into the army, this percentage continued to grow. However, women still suffered discrimination at the workplace, usually occupying mainly lower positions. Between 50 and 60 per cent of doctors were women, but only 4 women were chief doctors in Leningrad. Illiteracy was also higher amongst women than men.

Think about

Britain has faced similar problems.

- What have recent governments done to try to deal with them?
- Have their efforts been successful?

Facts and figures

318 male factory directors in Leningrad.

20 female factory directors in Leningrad.

- What does this tell us about sexual equality in the USSR?

Source 11

Women express milk in a Moscow factory in 1930.

Think about

- Why did women express milk in the factory?

What does Source 11 tell us about

- the wishes of the State?
- the wishes of mothers?

Source 12

*Today is a clear day
Merry children
Play and dance
Know no cares
But at home mummy
Toils and knows not
What to cook them
For dinner
How to clothe and shoe
Her own children
Mummy doesn't know
Where to get shoes
They need coats
They need boots
Worries
Poor mother.*

The pressure felt by women is reflected in this poem written by schoolchildren in 1935

Think about

- What does Source 12 tell us about the role of women in the USSR?
- Do you think it is a reliable source for a historian?

Cross reference

See Chapter 9 for more detail about the quality of life in the 1930s.

Cross reference

You can read more about what the canteen meals were like in the Spotlight on Magnitogorsk on page 184.

Note

NB The situation in the early 1930s was much worse in the countryside. See pp. 168–73.

Facts and figures

Average living space per person in Moscow

in 1930	5.5sq m
in 1940	4 sq m

Were people better off in the 1930s?

Not even Stalin claimed that the USSR had become a Communist society in the 1930s. Scarcity of goods and services meant that this was as yet an impossible dream. But exactly how were these scarce resources distributed amongst the Russian population? Did all have equal access?

Workers

As far as industrial wages were concerned, the tendency to equalization after 1917 was reversed. In 1931 wage differentials had been sharply increased and many workers were paid on the basis of piecework, that is how much they produced. Jasny's estimates of real wages (what wages could buy) is that they fell by over a half during the First Five Year Plan, and only rose to 56 per cent of their 1928 level by 1940. Many workers, therefore, ate most meals in communal canteens and did not cook. It is also important to remember that luxury goods were only available in shops restricted to party functionaries and managers. Ironically prices were often lower here. There were perpetual shortages in the State shops, and this meant endless queueing and a culture of 'in case' string bags. These were carried all the time to take advantage of any goods suddenly available. Queues formed outside food shops at 2 a.m. in midwinter when temperatures were 20 degrees below freezing. The average married worker in Moscow ate virtually no fat and very little milk or fruit. He ate one-fifth of the meat and fish that was eaten in 1900. Even bread consumption was down by 50 per cent compared to 1900.

Quality of life

The whole urban and rural environment also deteriorated. Paint was impossible to find, unless you had the right contacts, so repair and maintenance of homes was very difficult. As the house no longer belonged to you, what was the point in 'wasting' money on it? You could not sell it on to anyone else afterwards. Overcrowding, as we have seen, was a terrible problem for almost all families in towns and cities. The government saw its first priority as the building of

However, parks were laid out in the cities. The government also put a large emphasis on the health of its citizens.

[illegible]

Sir A. Newsholme, a prominent British doctor, toured the USSR and wrote this in 1934 in *Red Medicine*:

When a Russian becomes ill, the government does something about it...The Soviet Union is the one nation in the world which has undertaken to set up and operate a complete organization designed to provide preventive and curative medical care for every man, woman and child within its borders.

Farmers saw a collapse in their living standards. Collectivization caused the terrible famine which killed millions of farmers in the richest farming regions. By the end of the 1930s the farmers' lot had improved considerably, chiefly because they were allowed their own plots on which to grow food for themselves or to sell on the open market. Mechanization at last did begin to make some impact on their working lives, but still the grain harvest in 1940 at best only equalled that of 1913. Although they knew of the problems of life in the cities from relatives who wrote back, millions fled there, where at least there was a chance to build a new life.

In Moscow, Gorky Park, formerly the Park of Culture and Rest, had open air dance floors, bowling alleys and a Ferris wheel.

◀ A Moscow health centre in 1934.

► What evidence can you find in this picture that the USSR had an effective healthcare system?

- ▶ Why might the employment of house servants seem odd to many commentators of Stalin's Russia?
- ▶ What can we learn from this about the USSR society of the 1930s?

In the cities and new industrial areas some saw their life chances transformed. For some Stakhanovites life did improve. Sheila Fitzpatrick quotes a Magnitogorsk newspaper:

Aleksei Tischenko...had arrived in Magnitogorsk in 1933 with all their possessions in a single home-made suitcase. By 1936 the couple owned furniture, including a couch and a wardrobe, as well as dress clothes, including two overcoats, some women's dresses, men's suits, shoes...His prizes included a hunting gun, a gramophone, money and a motorcycle.

None the less, industrialization created literally millions of new opportunities for those with the education, skills, drive or, perhaps most important, the connections to take advantage of them. A new class of foremen, supervisors, technicians, fitters, electricians as well as managers was needed to build and run the new industrial enterprises. A whole army of bureaucrats was needed to administer the Plans, to set and check targets, to order materials, to run the transport system.

Servants made life for the better off much easier. A factory buyer, who had left the USSR, later told an American interviewer in the 1970s that servants were cheap, but difficult to find. It was necessary to negotiate with a *kolkhoz* director for a suitable girl. It is clear that these negotiations involved the exchange of money or favours. He paid his girl servant 18 roubles a month plus board and lodging, while his wife earned 300 roubles per month as a typist! This growing difference between social groups was commented upon by many visitors to the country.

One of the noteworthy developments in Moscow life during the past year or so is the emergence...of a new urban bourgeois class. They are...obviously better-fed, and well and are smartly dressed...They frequent the more expensive, if still modest, native restaurants. They live, by our standards, plainly, but in this country it is luxury to have enough.

A British diplomat writing to London in 1931

The Soviet government set a high value on shared social and cultural activities. Stadia were built in all the large towns and cities to accommodate ice hockey, athletics and football. Teams were supported by government funds, and matches attracted large crowds of spectators.

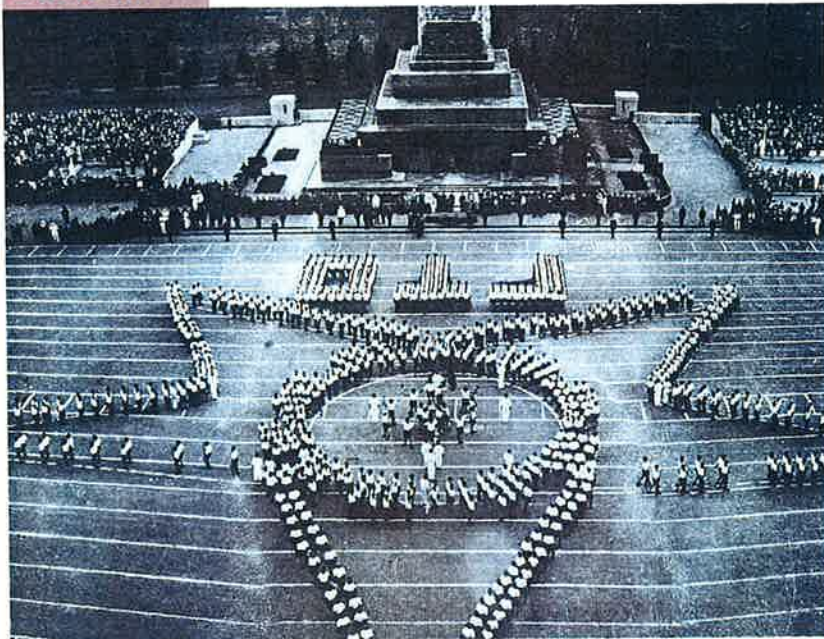
For organized sports the city [Moscow] has about a 100 grounds, besides the new Dynamo Sport Club Stadium...Over the entrance to the stadium is a huge legend reading 'Be Ready for Labour and Defence'.

Newsholme, *Red Medicine*, 1934

Chapter 9 deals more fully with the effects of collectivization

Chess players and gymnasts were given considerable State support and coaching. They were also given a high public profile. Russian grandmasters dominated the world chess scene, much as they still do today. Physical exercise was emphasized in the schools and mass displays were a feature of the rituals of Soviet life. Mayakovsky, who became almost an official poet (after his suicide) wrote that bronzed muscles and fresh skin were the best clothes in the world.

Source 18



◀ A mass display to commemorate the October Revolution.

Soviet culture

The government's attempts to win the hearts and minds of the Soviet people knew no limits. By the 1930s the radio occupied an increasingly important place in everyday life. Though there were only 3.5 million radios in the country, loudspeakers were set up about towns and cities so government announcements could be heard by the urban population. A minority of villages was linked to an electricity supply before the Second World War. Workers in the State radio service were left in no doubt about their important role:

Source 19

The Soviet Radio...carries to the masses the inspired word of Bolshevik truth, aids the people in its struggle for the full victory of Communism in our country, summons them to heroic deeds in the name of the further strengthening of the power, of the economic and cultural prosperity of the USSR.

From *USSR Speaking*, a manual for radio workers

The cinema, as in Europe and the USA, was becoming, in the cities at least, the most popular form of entertainment. The themes of the films reflected the concerns of the regime. By the later 1930s, as Nazi Germany threatened, films were increasingly patriotic in tone, and based on real historical figures, such as Ivan the Terrible.

Think about

- ▶ Why might the government have felt displays like the one shown in Source 18 were needed?

Think about

- ▶ How did the Soviet government view the role of broadcasting?
- ▶ How would we in a democracy see the role differently?

Note

RAPP led the assault on 'bourgeois' art and literature – forcing the closure of plays.

Note

An excerpt from *Time, Forward* (Source 32 on p. 221) will give you some idea of the kind of novels that were favoured during the early 1930s. Kataev spent months living in Magnitogorsk to research his book, to ensure its 'socialist realism'.

Note

Komsomol denounced RAPP for its slogan 'Overtake and surpass the classics'. Proletarian writers, they argued, must automatically be in advance of 'landlord literature'.

Think about

- ▶ Why did Gorky think that Soviet authors were important?
- ▶ How would this view be received in the West today?

In all the arts the government looked for Soviet stars, instead of the bourgeois figures of the past. The 1920s had seen experimentation in art, music and literature. Marxist theory said that a socialist economic system would produce socialist art. What precisely was the new proletarian art supposed to be like? The prevailing artistic tendencies, not just in the Soviet Union, were towards the abstract, both in art and music.

Literature also served the needs of the regime. Stalin called on writers to be 'engineers of human souls'. Mayakovsky, once the leader of the avant-garde, wrote propaganda pieces, such as *The March of the Shock Brigades* to inspire readers to even greater efforts. However, he also wrote plays, like *The Bath House*, which criticized the callous behaviour of Stalinist bureaucrats. After his suicide in 1930, caused by the hounding of The Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) for his play *The Bedbug*, he was honoured by the Communist Party, which he had once supported. A Moscow Metro station was named after him. The regime needed its new stars, even if it had to distort reality to create them. Dead heroes were better than live ones; they were unable to tarnish their image by independent thinking!

'Socialist realism' became the new approved way of writing. Novels during the First Five Year Plan glorified the ordinary worker, under the lead of RAPP. Production was what mattered and it was the job of literature to support this drive. RAPP launched an appeal for 'shock worker writers', for shock workers to try their hand at writing. The result was 5 million roubles spent on commissioning books, but almost all were so poor as to be unprintable! *Time, Forward* by Kataev is an example of the literature approved by RAPP.

In June 1931 Stalin made a dramatic keynote speech, 'New circumstances and new tasks'. 'Bourgeois specialists' were rehabilitated, to restore some order to the chaos into which the Plans had thrown the country. He called for an end to the attack on experts, just because of their class background. Immediately writers felt the change; the approved heroes were now skilled engineers. *Time, Forward* was criticized for its 'concrete hysteria', production at all costs. RAPP was broken up and all writers joined the Union of Russian Writers. It was not compulsory, but only its members could have their work published! Stalin managed to persuade playwright Maxim Gorky, a former critical friend of Lenin, to return to the USSR to head this organization. Propaganda *coups* like this helped to bolster the image of the regime.

Here is an extract from Gorky's speech to the Union's first Congress in 1934:

Source 20

The proletarian state must educate thousands of first-class 'craftsmen of culture', 'engineers of the soul'...in order to restore to the whole mass of the working people the right to develop their intelligence, talents and faculties – a right of which they have been deprived everywhere else in the world...This places us not only in the position, traditional to realist literature, of 'judges of the world and men', 'critics of life', but gives us the right to participate directly in the construction of a new life, in the process of 'changing the world'.

Art followed a similar path.

Activity

- 1 What are the (not very hidden!) messages being conveyed by Sources 21 and 22? Do you think Stalin would have approved of them?
- 2 Collect together other pieces of 'socialist realism' art. Now look at the art that was favoured in Nazi Germany. What are the similarities between them? Why do you think they are so similar?
- 3 You may like to contrast these works with other art being produced elsewhere in the 'free' world. Picasso's famous picture of Guernica was also a product of the 1930s, and had a political message. How does it differ from the two 'socialist realism' pictures shown here?

Further research

You will find more 'socialist realist' art on these websites:

www.ii.nl/exhibitions/chairman/sovinro.html

www.poster.s.cz/listy/russ8.htm

www.maniichuk.com/gallery.html

www.medicalnet.art/horvath/soc.htm

www.russianartgallery.com/socialrealism.htm

Source 21



▲ A 1930s painting entitled 'Higher and Higher'.

Source 22



◀ A 1930s painting showing lunch on the collective farm.

Dmitri Shostakovich



Dmitri Shostakovich

Further reading

Shostakovich was not unique. Find out how other artists were affected in the 1930s:
E.g. Pasternak, Mandelstam

Source 23

The atmosphere was highly charged, the hall was filled – as they say, all the best people were there, and all the worst too. It was definitely a critical situation, and not only for me. Which way would the wind blow?

Think about

- Why was the atmosphere in the hall so 'highly charged'?

The life and career of Dmitri Shostakovich illustrate the problems which artists and composers faced in their professional life. Even though he became the most respected Soviet composer and was given a State funeral, there were times when it seemed his very life was in the balance.

Shostakovich entered the Petrograd Conservatoire of Music in 1919, two years after the Revolution, when the regime was looking for new Soviet composers. His First Symphony was given its first performance in 1926, when the composer was only 20, to great popular applause. His career seemed destined for great things.

In 1934 his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* was also well received by the audiences and the press. Unusually it received premier performances in Leningrad and Moscow on the same day. Two years later it was still being regularly performed. The composer intended the opera to be the first of four on the theme of women in society. The plot concerned Katerina Ismailova, who was a triple murderess, and walled up her husband in a cellar! The music and the staging graphically portrayed Katerina making love to her servant. Act three is set in a police station, however, while the finale is in Siberia amongst convicts. Perhaps it was the setting rather than the music itself, which annoyed Stalin when he went to see it in January 1936. At any rate he walked out of the performance.

Shortly afterwards *Pravda* carried a leading article entitled 'Muddle instead of Music'. Shostakovich's music was described as 'cacophonous' and 'pornographic', and *Pravda* threatened that the composer 'could end very badly', if he did not mend his ways.

The opera was immediately withdrawn. Shostakovich was summoned to a meeting of the Composers' Union, which denounced his music as 'incomprehensible', 'formalist' and 'against the proletariat'. The attack on Shostakovich did not suddenly end. *Pravda* boasted that it had 'caught off guard the masked defenders of decadent bourgeois music'. Like many other prominent figures, Shostakovich packed a small case with warm clothes and boots, and kept it ready, in case the NKVD arrived without notice.

At this time the composer was already completing his Fourth Symphony, a work largely pessimistic in mood. The Union of Soviet Composers now expected that music would be easy on the ear and optimistic in tone. When it was being rehearsed, Shostakovich suddenly withdrew it, obviously terrified that it would not be well received. Instead he wrote his famous Fifth Symphony, which bore the subtitle 'A Soviet Artist's Practical Creative Reply to Just Criticism'. This ended with blaring trumpets and contained folk tunes. Shostakovich described the first performance in Leningrad in November 1937 in his 'Testimony', which he dictated to a friend before his death (Source 23). He need not have worried. The symphony was a popular and critical success. Shostakovich no longer needed his suitcase.

Between 1936 and 1941 the State organized 10 festivals designed to celebrate the cultural life and language of each USSR republic, each lasting 10 days. This was perhaps an attempt to counterbalance the increasing Russification of education and the media.

Music also suffered badly during the 1930s. Composers sought to present the ideologically correct party line. As we have seen this altered from time to time, so it was not always possible to keep up with the latest trend. Mayakovsky wrote his Twelfth Symphony, subtitled 'The Collective Farm', but it was still rejected by Proletkult.

How successfully did the regime mould public opinion?

Source 24

I want to earn even more – two thousand, three-and-a-half, because our Soviet power gives us the chance to work well, earn a lot and live a cultural life. Can't I wear a good Boston suit, buy good cigarettes? I can. Some comrades envy me, but what's that to me?

A Stakhanovite speaking in November 1935

Source 25

For a happy, cultured, joyful life!

How life has changed! Gone are the times when the worker only thought about his daily bread.

Leningrad Pravda, a newspaper, January 1934

Source 26

But a person arrives at suicide because he is afraid that everything will be revealed and he does not want to witness his own public disgrace.... There you have one of the last sharp and easiest means that, before death, leaving this world, one can for the last time spit on the party, betray the party.

Stalin speaking at the December Plenum, 1936

Source 27

Life has become better. Life has become merrier.

Stalin in 1936

Source 28

I want to share my feelings: I live very well and think that I will live even better. Why? Because I live in the Stalin epoch. May Stalin live longer than me! ... All my children had and we are having education thanks to the State and, I would say, thanks to the party, and especially comrade Stalin, for he along with Lenin, opened the way for us simple people...I myself, an old woman, am ready to die for Stalin and the Bolshevik cause.

A letter to President Kalinin from an old woman in 1939

Source 29

I beg you not to cry for me, but be happy. Now he who is born must cry about this life, and he who dies must rejoice. Mummy, I'm sorry, but I cannot live on this earth any longer...No one in our family has ever been put on trial, even long ago, and I can't stand it.

A worker's suicide note in 1940

Source 30

The speeches are good, but there's no bread.

There are not enough food and goods. When will we live to see the end of it? It's time to start getting worried about it.

Comments on a speech by Stalin 1935 at factory meetings

Source 31

The May Day demonstration in 1937 encountered a marked lack of enthusiasm. People questioned why they should go to the demonstration when there was nothing to eat, and meetings at factories to celebrate the day attracted little support. At the Kirov factory, only 30 of the 500 workers from the first shift came to the meeting, and 60 of the 2000 from the second shift. Only 20 of the 1000 workers of the Fifth hydro-Electric Power Station turned up to their meeting.

Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, 1997

Source 32

The ore would go into the blast furnaces. The coke would be lighted. Molten iron would flow. The molten iron would be boiled into steel. They would make rails, wagons, saws, axes, ploughs, machines. And all this would be for the needs, for the happiness of 'him'.

To make life happy, it was not enough to say good words. It was not enough. One needed steel, steel, steel, steel. With steel, there will be a new, happy life, a life that has never been before, a life that has never been seen before!

And all this was for 'him'. And 'he' – that is I. And 'he' and 'I' – are we. And we – that is life!

Now Ishchenko opened his eyes, and, for the first time in his life, looked down the entire length of time. It flowed too slowly. But it flowed for him. The past flowed for the future.

And it lay securely in his hands.

Oh, how good life was, after all!

Time, Forward, a novel by V. Kataev, 1934

Source 33

Soviet acronyms were mimicked by ordinary people. These don't work so well in translation!

OGPU = 'O Lord, help us to flee.

CCCP = Stalin's death will save Russia

VKP (CPSU) = Second serfdom

Source 34



Stalin delivers a speech in 1936.

Source 35

More than 200,000 collective farms and 5,000 State farms have been organized, with new district centres and industrial centres serving them...Unemployment, that scourge of the working class, has disappeared...With the disappearance of *kulak* bondage, poverty in the countryside has disappeared...

Now that the correctness of the party's political line has been confirmed by the experience of a number of years, and that there is no longer any doubt as to the readiness of the workers and peasants to support this line...

Stalin to the 17th Party Congress, January 1934

Source 36

What are people discontented about? In the first place, that the worker is hungry, he has no fats, the bread is *ersatz* [artificial] which is impossible to eat...It's a common thing that the wife of a worker stands the whole day in line, her husband comes home from work, and dinner is not prepared, and everyone curses Soviet power. In the lines there is noise, shouting and fights, curses at the expense of Soviet power.

Pravda's summary of readers' letters, August 1930 for party leaders

Activity

Look at each of Sources 24–36 and work out whether they do or do not support the view that Russians supported the Communist government. Draw a table like the one below for recording your results. In the middle column, state how reliable you think the evidence is.

Evidence for	Reliability?	Evidence against

How useful do you think novels like *Time, Forward* are to the historian?

Which of the sources are likely to be typical of what ordinary Russians felt?

Does the evidence suggest the Russian people were afraid to express their true opinions? Were they a cowed population?

Look back at this chapter and Chapters 9 and 10. Is it possible to be certain from the evidence in these chapters how most Russian people viewed the regime?

Rebuilding Moscow

The world's first Communist state should be a beacon of excellence to the rest of the world, an example to inspire the proletariat of other countries. The regime to this end began to build vast new projects in the capital. We have already seen some of these mentioned, the sports stadia and the Palace of

Source 37



The Foreign Ministry building in Moscow.

Think about

- Why was this style called the 'wedding cake'?
- Why did the Communists favour this style of building?

Activity KEY SKILLS

Soviet rule was based entirely on fear. To what extent do you agree with this view? Prepare an answer to this question, using visual materials, maps, pictures, to illustrate your points from more than one electronic source. Create a new way of presenting statistical information in your report. Either write an essay or make a presentation to the class, or both. Using the same or different material prepare a wallchart for Y9 pupils on society in Stalin's Russia.

Source 38



A bronze statue and carvings at the entrance to a Moscow Metro station.



Source 39

A ceiling mosaic from the Moscow Metro.

Soviets. The Communist 'gigantomania' referred to in the Five Year Plans can also be seen again here. The Russians wanted to build monuments to equal anything in the capitalist world. Stalin's preferred architectural style has been satirized as 'the wedding cake' style, or 'Stalinist baroque.' He planned a series of great buildings to dominate the Moscow skyline, such as the Foreign Ministry.

Most impressive of all was the Moscow Metro. Even today one cannot but be impressed by this monument to socialist realism. Chandeliers light the platforms, and stained glass, mosaics and bronze statues decorate the platforms and corridors. These too had political messages. The Kiev station, built while the Ukrainians were suffering from the worst famine in Russian history, shows mosaics of happy peasants gathering in their plentiful harvest.

Conclusion

No one can have been unaffected by the enormous changes in the 1930s. One historian said the USSR became a 'quicksand society', because people disappeared into it all the time – either because they had been arrested or because they had engineered their own disappearance – to avoid child maintenance, to get a better job, to escape justice etc. Only half the criminals sentenced in Leningrad ever served their sentences.

Some benefited from the changes and rose up the ladder. Sometimes this was by their own efforts, by working hard (Stakhanovites), by improving their level of education. Often, however, it was because of their connections. This was always more important than cash in hand in a society of scarcity. For women, opportunities were available as never before, but few had a real choice as to whether to stay at home and bring up their children or continue to work. The falling real wages of the 1930s forced all but a few wives and mothers to stay at work. For those who did work the evidence shows that few were able to rise to the top of their chosen professions.

Many endured real hardship. Though medical care undoubtedly improved considerably, especially in the towns, the falling standard of living brought a decline in life expectancy. Suicides increased. Workers returned home to unbelievably cramped accommodation with often shared facilities, making 'normal' family life virtually impossible. Even the solace of religion was more difficult to find. Grumbling, shown in the jokes and the memoirs of the period, must have been common. For outspoken dissidents, things turned out much worse.

However, despite all these difficulties there does seem to have been, in at least some of the community, a sense of optimism – a shared sense of struggle to build the world's first Communist society, to build that paradise on earth that Marx had prophesied. Partly, no doubt, as well, this was because of the all-pervasive indoctrination, which affected the arts, the press, schools and the workplace.

For most people, like Shukov at the end of *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovitch* perhaps it was enough to have survived and live to see another day.

Further reading

- V. Andrie, *A Social History of Twentieth Century Russia*
- S.A. Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, 1997
- A. Inkeles and R. A. Bauer, *The Soviet Citizen*, 1959
- A. Rybakov, *Children of the Arbat* (novel)
- C. Ward, *Stalin's Russia*, 1993