Question C:
To what extent (how much) were Stalin's policies from 1928-1941 a success or a failure for the people of the USSR (Soviet Union)?

The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union

by
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Chapter

3 The Stalin Era: 1924–1953

Joseph Stalin was born in 1879 in Georgia, a mountainous region of Russia later reorganized as a Soviet republic. He was enrolled in a seminary at age fifteen but was expelled just before graduating. He then joined the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, becoming one of its most radical advocates of revolution. When the party split in 1903, Stalin joined the more radical faction, the Bolsheviks. With Lenin's approval, in 1907 he helped finance Bolshevik activities by organizing the robbery of a carriage transporting a large sum of the czar's money. After the 1917 revolution he became one of Lenin's trusted lieutenants, rising steadily in influence.

The office of general secretary of the Communist Party had been created for Stalin in 1922 because Lenin regarded him as a loyal plodder well suited to the administrative duties he envisioned for the post. It was by no means meant to be a stepping-stone to higher authority; however, Stalin made it one. He used his new position as a platform for some entry-level networking, traveling around the Soviet Union to meet and cultivate minor provincial Party officials, who became his allies in his later climb to power.

POLITBÜRO POLITICS

The Politburo had given Lenin unified support in deference to his skills as a mediator and his long history as leader and founder of the Party. But although he partially recovered from the disabling stroke...
he suffered in May 1922 and resumed much of his leadership role, the unity of the Politburo disintegrated. In this uncertain atmosphere, a governing troika, or three-person steering committee, consisting of Stalin, Lev B. Kamenev, and Grigori V. Zinoviev, emerged to oppose the leadership ambitions of Trotsky and of Nikolai I. Bukharin, one of whom many believed would be Lenin’s heir. Lenin had seemed to derive his governing authority from ongoing consultation with other Party leaders that resulted in consensus. In truth, he dominated the Politburo through force of will and his demonstrated ruthlessness. Politburo support would not automatically be extended to the new leadership troika.

Stalin soon had to compete with the other two members of the troika as well as the other claimants to power, Trotsky and Bukharin. Kamenev and Zinoviev formed an alliance with Trotsky against Stalin, but were stripped of their influence through Stalin’s connections as Party secretary.

The emergence of three claimants to succession, presenting a facade of collective leadership, demonstrated one of the weaknesses of the government Lenin had established. Because power in the Soviet Union flowed from the top down, when the leader at the top died, a leadership vacuum followed. No democratic process existed for election of leaders by the people.

The struggle for power after Lenin’s death was more than a contest to fill the top office of the still-young Soviet Union; it was also an ideological struggle among adherents of opposing ideas for achieving the ideal Communist state. Trotsky and his supporters, who were considered the left wing of the Party, advocated complete collectivization as soon as possible in Russia, coupled with an ambitious foreign policy that included active encouragement of worldwide revolution to ensure the success of communism. The right wing, represented by Bukharin and his allies, concentrated on domestic affairs, advocating gradual transformation to communism by continuing Lenin’s New Economic Policy, which allowed small enterprises to operate privately while large industry was centralized.

Nikolay Bukharin advocated gradual transformation to communism by continuing with Lenin’s New Economic Policy.
COMMUNISM IN ONE COUNTRY

Stalin chose a position somewhere between the two extremes, adopting a theory once advanced by Lenin: "communism in one country." This doctrine called for aggressive development of socialism in the Soviet Union without the need for world revolution and regardless of whether other countries likewise adopted socialism. This position was closer to the beliefs of Bukharin, and Stalin gained the right-winger's support, which gave Stalin sufficient strength to remove Trotsky and his allies from their positions in the Party. Trotsky was discredited and forced into exile; his allies in the Party were persecuted and many were expelled. Roy Medvedev records that "hundreds of Trotskyites were arrested, some for a real but many for an imaginary connection with Trotsky." 24

Not until the spring of 1929, however, did Stalin move against Bukharin and his associates, to stand alone as the undisputed leader of the Soviet Union. In many respects "communism in one country" or "socialism in one country," as it was sometimes called, was simply Lenin's NEP under another name. In other respects it was a rhetorical device that allowed Stalin to manipulate economic affairs, advancing and retreating from the actual practice of communism while voicing strict adherence to Marxist principles. Though the era of NEP, which outlived Lenin by roughly four years, was a retreat from communism, it was by no means a retreat for the Communist Party. Stalin used these years to consolidate his own authority, establish relations with other European countries, and plan for transformation to "real" communism.

Stalin's chosen method to achieve communism was to adopt a rigid timetable for implementing the needed transformation to a controlled, centralized planning system. He set goals for achieving these changes in five-year increments and spelled out the details in a series of five-year plans. In the beginning, at least, Stalin seemed to be using the new system to further the NEP.

NEP UNDER STALIN

The NEP era allowed for a degree of freedom of expression that had not been tolerated under Lenin and would not return until the era of glasnost in the 1980s. As the authors of Soviet Union: A Country Study indicate, however, Stalin granted such freedoms only when he felt the state would benefit: "Communist writers Maxim Gorky and Vladimir Maiakovskii were active during this time, but other authors, many of whose works were later repressed, published work lacking socialist political content. Film, as a means of influencing a largely illiterate society, received encouragement from the state." 25

At the same time, schools were expanded. Night school for working adults addressed the pervasiveness of illiteracy and well-prepared members of the lower classes were provided with higher education.

These transitory freedoms were revoked whenever it suited Stalin's purpose.
The real purpose of authoritarian relaxation during NEP was to allow economic recovery from too rapid collectivization. During this period social attitudes became more permissive; abortion was legalized and divorce was made more readily available. Traditional social institutions such as marriage were intentionally undermined to facilitate a shift of loyalties from family and the church to the state. Religious practice, in particular, was discouraged in accordance with Marx’s belief that it served a counterrevolutionary purpose—namely, to dull the political sensibilities of the masses, who otherwise might fail to appreciate the wisdom of the Communist form of government. Thus atheism was promoted and churches were closed and, sometimes, torn down. The attempt to shift individual loyalties to the state also included encouraging people to inform the authorities about friends and family members not sufficiently dedicated to communism.

Although by 1925 NEP had raised agricultural production to pre–World War I levels, peasant farmers remained dissatisfied with commodity prices and further reduced production in protest. Increasing agricultural output led to a dilemma: Increasing industrialization was needed to supply technologically advanced farm machinery that would improve farm production, but industrialization could not proceed without factory workers, who could only be pulled from the agricultural sector. Thus neither agriculture nor industry flourished.

Stalin’s plan of collectivization was to transform small and scattered peasant plots into large farms.
Stalin’s solution to this dilemma was the First Five-Year Plan, announced in 1928. The plan was to rapidly bolster the industrial infrastructure by financing its development through state-owned, centrally planned, agricultural collectives. Millions of small, inefficient, ill-equipped peasant farms would be combined into large, well-run collectives. Stalin expressed his faith in collectivization in his Collected Works: “The solution lies in the transformation of small and scattered peasants’ plots into large consolidated farms based on the joint cultivation of land using new superior techniques.”

This brief definition, however, failed to provide a workable plan for achieving the massive changes represented by collectivization.

Collectivization was very unpopular among the peasants subject to the process, especially the kulaks, who were quite well off, and in some cases rich. NEP had benefited the kulaks, allowing them to increase their acreage and livestock, and collectivization required them to give up their gains. In December 1929 Stalin announced a policy to eliminate the kulak class.

Stalin ordered army units into the countryside to implement collectivization, and peasants who refused to cooperate were punished according to the level of their opposition. The most vigorous protesters were shot. Others were exiled to the harsh eastern region of Siberia; still others were sent to labor camps and their property turned over to government managers. Ian Grey estimates that “more than five million kulaks were deported to Siberia and the arctic north, and of them at least a quarter perished. Many more were killed in their villages and in trying to defend their property.”

By 1932, toward the completion of the First Five-Year Plan, more than 60 percent of the countryside had been collectivized. The total would eventually rise to 90 percent.

But collectivization was not a success. The peasants resisted by butchering and eating their livestock, destroying their implements, burning their crops, and otherwise preventing the government from profiting from their work. As a result, in
A STALINIST EDUCATION


“Our teacher was a real Stalinist. Cruel, tough as nails, she ruled with an iron hand. But she was always emphasizing that we were all brothers, all equal. All problems could be solved through her. We were supposed to go to her and squeal on our classmates—Petrov copied his homework from so and so. She encouraged us to inform on each other. In the classroom there was a large portrait of Pavlik Morozov. We were told that during collectivization some of the peasants hid their grain. Pavlik’s father hid his grain too and Pavlik informed on him. He was a hero, a real Pioneer [boy scout], who had helped his country. He did not spare his own father for the good of the country. A Pioneer is supposed to tell the truth and that’s what Pavlik did. And it was for telling the truth that he was killed by some of the other peasants. The country and the party are more important than your father, that was the conclusion we were supposed to reach.”

Education during the Stalin era was strict and tough. Children were encouraged to inform on each other and on their own families.
in the mid-1930s a famine engulfed a large part of the country, especially Ukraine and the northern Caucasus, and an estimated 5 to 10 million people died of starvation.

**STATE INDUSTRIALIZATION: THE FIVE-YEAR PLANS**

The other side of the First Five-Year Plan, and two subsequent plans, was industrialization. Perhaps because the country had suffered so greatly during World War I, when its industrial base was inadequate to supply the needs of the army, Stalin became obsessed with achieving rapid industrialization. He formed a state planning commission, called Gosplan, under his (and other high officials') direct supervision.

Because the Soviet Union lagged so far behind other industrialized countries, the most important industrial program was geared toward producing machine tools, that is, building machines that build other machines. Stalin also emphasized manufacturing farm implements, automobiles, and electric power plants.

In their push to catch up with the industrialized nations of the West, however, the planners neglected many needs of the Soviet people. Food was scarce, sanitation and water quality poor, and housing inadequate, especially in the cities. Conditions did not improve as the First Five-Year Plan was succeeded by the Second and Third, which focused on refining the First by improving the quality of output while still concentrating on heavy industry.

**A NEW SOVIET ELITE EMERGES**

Collectivization in the countryside and industrialization in the cities deprived Soviet citizens of basic freedoms such as the ability to choose where to live and what
jobs to take. Movement within the country was restricted by a system of internal passports, making it difficult for people dissatisfied with working or living conditions in one area to move to another. At the same time, Stalin violated Lenin’s most precious commitment to Marxism: the equality of all citizens. Stalin created a privileged elite, a class of citizens that endured throughout the history of the Soviet Union. People with special talents or abilities were given special treatment, such as better living quarters, travel privileges, and access to scarce luxury foods and clothing. The privileged class included not only high Party officials and skilled managers, but also musicians, writers, and athletes, whose talents would be exploited cynically for propaganda purposes.

The visibility of the highly successful elite and the NEP retreat from socialism allayed the concerns of the democratic countries of Europe over their giant neighbor’s political aims. Stalin, in turn, appeared to be less fearful of violent conflict with his World War I foes. Thus while the Soviet Union recovered from that devastating conflict, there was much less talk of world revolution as Lenin, then Stalin, sought diplomatic recognition from the very countries they had once hoped would join the Russian Communists in overthrowing capitalist governments. However, Stalin continued to support the Comintern, an international organization established in 1919 to foment world revolution, until it was shut down during World War II as a concession to the Allies.

Despite the success of NEP, or perhaps because of it, by the late 1920s Stalin began to be suspicious of members of the Party who seemed insufficiently enthusiastic about his leadership and the transition from NEP to collectivization. To eliminate opposition and potential deviation from the direction he intended the country to take, Stalin embarked on the systematic removal of his political opponents, both real and imagined. Such an undertaking, defined as a purge, usually began with accusations of disloyalty to the Communist Party or other crimes, then proceeded to trial, imprisonment, and even execution.

THE PURGES

The Great Purge occurred roughly from 1934 to 1938, but Stalin conducted limited purges throughout his career. Lesser purges began in the late 1920s, about the time of Stalin’s great drive to replace NEP with collectivization. Historian Nicholas Riasanovsky says of the Great Purge that it “marked Stalin’s extermination of all opposition and his assumption of complete dictatorial power.” A number of officials, including Stalin’s one-time rival Bukharin, were accused of counterrevolutionary activities and of being “right-wing deviationists” and expelled from office or from the Party altogether. In 1934, Sergey Kirov, a moderate Leningrad Party official, was assassinated, probably on Stalin’s orders. Among those accused of plotting the murder were Zinov’ev and Kamenev, partners with Stalin in the ruling troika that had
or perhaps Stalin benefited from the highly enthusiastic and the enthusiastic manipulation of the situation. To obtain the desired result, the plot was executed. Such an event usually resulted in the execution of the political opponent. Such an event, usually with the support of the political system, was highly favorable for Stalin.

During the era of the purges, several high-ranking government officials were subjected to show trials. The first, in 1936, included Zinov'ev and Kamenev once again. Predictably, the former troika members, along with fourteen other Party officials, were convicted and executed. Two additional show trials were held in 1937 and 1938, this time claiming thirty-seven victims, including Nikolay Bukharin.

The show trials relied on elaborate "confessions" by the accused, thus eliminating the need for prosecutors to produce or fabricate physical evidence against them. The defendants, who confessed under torture, usually named additional "traitors," who were then rounded up, becoming victims of the purges as well.

The purges just prior to World War II had a devastating effect on the Soviet ability to defend the country. About half of the Soviet military officer population had been executed, jailed, or sent to labor camps in Siberia. By the time the purges wound down, millions of Soviet citizens, many of them government or Party officials, former allies or aides to Stalin himself, had been killed or jailed. The reasons for this mass execution were complex and multifaceted, ranging from ideological purity to personal loyalty.
The Purge

Survivors of Stalin’s purge remember the horrors of waiting for the unfounded accusation, the imaginary crime that could not be disproved. In his collection of survivors’ accounts, The Unquiet Ghost, Adam Hochschild includes witnesses’ descriptions of mass arrests and torture.

“The main aim was to make a prisoner sign his interrogation record. Most of these people were illiterate. And so they stamped the prisoner’s finger on each sheet. Those who refused had their fingers squeezed between the door and the wall until their fingers were broken.

What were the specific crimes they were accused of? In Kolpashevo [a town on the Ob River in central Siberia, site of one of the massacres of the Great Purge], for example, a plan to blow up a bridge over the Ob River. But at the time this bridge did not exist! In Tomsk, they would charge people with planning the explosion of a bridge over the Tom River, which also did not exist.

The Purge did not have to do, after all, with punishing people for actual crimes. To the extent that it had a conscious purpose, it was to inspire terror and obedience. The very impossibility of the crimes must have added a spooky dimension to that terror. To be charged with plotting to blow up a bridge that did not exist must have made people feel at the mercy not only of a cruel and powerful state, but of a frightening, incomprehensible new system of logic, against which there could be no appeal, no argument, no demonstrating that the crime you were accused of was impossible.”

for the purges are still unclear. Some historians believe Stalin was mentally ill. Roy Medvedev concurs in this view:

It is not difficult to detect pathological elements in his behavior. Morbid suspiciousness, noticeable throughout his life and especially intense in his last years, intolerance of criticism, grudge-bearing, an overestimation of himself bordering on megalomania, cruelty approaching sadism—all these traits, it would seem, demonstrate that Stalin was a typical paranoid.

Others surmise that for Stalin, the purges were the ultimate deterrent, a tactic for commanding blind, unquestioning obedience to his policies. This theory is supported by a great irony of the period. In 1936 Stalin issued a constitution that promised free elections, universal suffrage, and basic civil and economic rights for all Soviet citizens. These announced privi-
Leges were rendered worthless, however, by the stipulation that all political power was to be held by the Communist Party.

Stalin’s lip service to greater freedom was a ruse to draw attention away from the actual results of his dictatorship: millions of deaths of Soviet citizens due to famine or purges, and lives of scarcity and terror for the vast majority of survivors. Stalin used a similar deception on the eve of World War II, attempting to divert German interest from the Soviet wealth in land and minerals by entering into a friendship pact with German dictator Adolf Hitler.

THE NONAGGRESSION PACT

In the late 1930s Germany began moving against its neighbors, annexing weaker countries such as Czechoslovakia and Austria. In addition, according to historian Nicholas Riasanovsky, “Germany and Japan concluded the so-called Anti-Comintern Pact [in 1936] aimed specifically against the U.S.S.R. The pact called for opposition to international communism.

Stalin’s response to these aggressive moves was to negotiate a secret nonaggression pact with Germany by which he hoped to head off future invasion by Germany. Under the agreement, the USSR would gain control of part of Poland after Hitler’s September 1939 invasion of that country, sparking World War II. Shortly thereafter, the Soviet Union invaded Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, incorporating the Baltic countries, against their will, into the Soviet Union.

Stalin’s pact with Hitler collapsed on June 22, 1941, when Hitler declared war on the Soviet Union as German troops were crossing the Soviet border. Stalin’s purge of the officer ranks had rendered his forces woefully unready, and the Germans seized equipment, territory, and troops in the early days of the invasion. By November Hitler’s army had pushed through Ukraine and begun its siege of Leningrad.

WORLD WAR II BEGINS

Stalin’s efforts to build up his industrial base paid off in World War II, which the Soviets called the Great Patriotic War. Indeed, as Germans invaded the western Soviet Union, the Soviets were able to dismantle entire factories in that region and move them to safety in the north of the country. By 1943 the tide of the war turned in the Allies’ favor. By the end of 1944, the Soviets had recaptured Leningrad, were able to push into Eastern Europe, and at war’s end in April 1945 captured the German capital, Berlin. The Soviets joined American, British, and French forces in partitioning the defeated Germany into two spheres of influence, East (administered by the USSR) and West (jointly occupied by the United States, Great Britain, and France).

The United States wanted to restore war-torn Europe’s largely destroyed industrial base as quickly as possible, and so provided massive monetary and technical aid in a recovery program known as the Marshall Plan. Although the Soviet Union