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The first five-year plan

THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE NEP SYSTEM AND THE SEARCH FOR NEW SOLUTIONS

The NEP was an inherently unstable social and political system: it contained the seeds of its own destruction. The Bolsheviks carried out policies in which they did not fully believe and whose implications worried them. For the sake of economic reconstruction they had allowed the reemergence of private enterprise, and as time went on, many of them came to be convinced supporters of this mixed economic order. Others, however, based on their reading of Marxist texts, found such policies distasteful. They feared that the new economic policies would strengthen those social forces which, in the long run, were bound to be hostile to socialism.

The Bolsheviks were particularly concerned about developments in the countryside. While in the cities the new order was firmly established, in the villages the Soviet government lacked the organizational strength to enforce its will; and therefore, as the revolutionaries saw it, the power of the kulaks was especially threatening. The peasants were encouraged to produce because the government desperately needed their products, but at the same time the successful peasants faced the threat of being defined as kulaks, and therefore enemies. Ambivalence led to confused policies. The leaders of the regime abandoned the policies of the NEP not so much because they were eager to resume the advance toward a socialist society, as because the existing system was unraveling. The country was suffering an extraordinarily severe economic and political crisis, a crisis that ended only with the dismantlement of the existing social and political order and the introduction of an unparalleled social experiment.

The period 1928–29 marked a transition, perhaps the most decisive turning point in the history of the country. While the NEP system was not formally repudiated, official policies increasingly came to contradict its fundamental assumptions. (Indeed, NEP was never renounced. Soviet historians always considered the period of the first two five-year plans as part of NEP. According to their interpretation, the turning point was 1937, the moment of "victory of the socialist methods of production.") The leaders of the regime were looking for ways to transcend the crisis. They grappled with genuine problems, and in searching for solutions created a new Stalinist order.

The crisis resulted from the coincidence of several problems of varying magnitudes. One of them was an expectation of war. Today we know that war was, in fact, not on the horizon, and, contrary to contemporary talk, the capitalist powers were not about to recommence intervention. By the mid-1920s all major European powers had reestablished diplomatic and commercial relations with Soviet Russia, and the country was gradually regaining its place in the international arena. The Bolsheviks, implicitly and temporarily, gave up their hope for world revolution – peace was necessary for the return of normality, and trade was essential for reconstruction. But then the Soviet Union suffered some setbacks. The Chinese communists, on the advice of Moscow, pursued an unwise policy and as a consequence were slaughtered by the troops of Chiang Kai-shek; this debacle was followed by recriminations in the comintern leadership and within the politburo. In 1927 England canceled its trade treaty with the Soviet Union and broke off diplomatic relations. The Soviet ambassador to Warsaw was murdered. However, these unrelated events did not add up to a likelihood of renewed hostilities. Indeed, it is likely that Stalin manufactured the war scare. But whether or not he was responsible for creating it, he clearly benefited from it, for the extraordinary means he recommended for industrialization seemed more plausible at a time of crisis.

The chief source of crisis was not foreign but domestic policy. Once reconstruction was completed, the economy needed larger investments just to maintain the previous level of growth. But as Bukharin in his controversy with Preobrazhenskii had pointed out, an excessively high rate of growth, requiring large investments, was inconsistent with the balance of political forces in the country and with the concept of the worker-peasant alliance. Stalin's change of heart in the vital matter of industrialization led to a break between him and Bukharin, who along with his allies were now dubbed the right-wing opposition. Stalin could risk this political confrontation because he had already succeeded in getting rid of his enemies on the left. To Bukharin and to many other contemporaries it seemed that Stalin had stolen the program of the defeated left. Stalin found it more difficult to defeat Bukharin than Trotsky, because the Right enjoyed support not only among segments of the population but also among the middle-level party functionaries. Stalin won because he ultimately succeeded in persuading the communist activists, who at this point were decisively important within the political system, that his policies were realistic as well as within the Leninist tradition.

The general secretary now threw his weight behind the most extreme industrializers. In an unprecedented effort to plan the industrialization of a backward society, the state planning agency had been drawing up increasingly ambitious projects. Although the first variant of the five-year plan, drawn up in 1927, was already extraordinarily optimistic, the planners, pressured by politicians, presented ever-higher target figures. The final document called for impossible goals and was internally inconsistent: investment and consumption were to rise, and both industrial and agricultural production were to grow fantastically. Even before the plan was formally accepted by the sixteenth party conference in April 1929, large-scale projects, such as building a great dam on the Dnieper, were under way.

The great economic reconstruction was accompanied by an attack on a segment of the population whose services were sorely needed in backward and uneducated Russia: the old intelligentsia. Even before the introduction of collectivization, the Stalinists had embarked on a campaign against planners and engineers. The centerpiece of the campaign was a series of trials, in which the accused were compelled to confess to imaginary crimes. The point of these trials was to frighten the old intelligentsia, to establish scapegoats for failures, and to show young militants that the regime was taking a "revolutionary" line and did not fear an old elite. The future order of Stalinist Russia was already taking shape.

It is possible but unlikely that the Stalinists had another, cynical reason for their attack on this new "class enemy." Planned or unplanned, the attack greatly contributed to the atmosphere of crisis. It conveyed the idea that the normal and old-fashioned ways of doing business would no longer suffice. The government would no longer bow before the necessities created by mundane reality. In the new era, it was enthusiasm that counted, not the sober measurement of resources. The attack on the old intelligentsia found support among enthusiasts, who had always disliked this remnant of the old order. They also knew that the removal of the educated specialists would open up places for the new cadres and bring about social mobility.

The most important element in the atmosphere of crisis was the deteriorating food situation in the cities. Although overall agricultural production approximated pre-war standards, the share that reached markets remained very much lower. The situation was especially bad in grain, the mainstay of the Russian diet. While grain production was 90 percent of what it had been in 1913, the peasants brought to market less than half of what had been sold in prerevolutionary times. Part of the problem was structural: the segment of agriculture that had produced primarily for the market, the large estates, had been destroyed. The very success of egalitarian policies contributed to the crisis. Given the abysmally low standard of living, the peasants preferred to eat their surplus product rather than sell it, at a time when industry could not produce goods at affordable prices. The shortsighted policies of the government greatly contributed to the difficulties.

Since the government desperately needed capital for investment in industry, it tried to economize by keeping grain prices low. The consequences in a market economy were predictable: the peasants switched from cultivating underpriced products to others that promised a better return. The unwillingness of the peasants to sell to the government at artificially low prices directly threatened the ambitious industrialization program. The government also had great trouble in maintaining an export program, which was essential if they were to buy foreign machinery that domestic industry could not yet produce.

The situation in the winter of 1927–28 was becoming critical. The peasants did not have much grain, and what they did have they preferred to sell to private traders, who offered much higher prices than the government. Those who could afford to wait in anticipation of higher prices were, of course, the better-off peasants, those the government classified as kulaks. For political reasons the Stalinist leadership blamed these people for the entire crisis and initiated an attack on them. In some areas, especially in the Ural mountains and in Siberia, forcible requisitioning was reintroduced. The reintroduction of a brutal form of "class war" came to be called the "Ural-Siberian" method.

Governmental policies created confusion. After all, "kulak" was never a precisely defined term; the authorities could use it against anyone who resisted. Nor was the concept of "surplus" defined. Any peasant who had foodstuff in addition to his immediate needs was in danger. When the authorities defined someone as a "kulak" and established that he had "surplus," they took everything. Obviously, the peasants tried to hide what they had, but concealment was a crime. The line between speculation, which was a criminal offense, and trade, an essential part of the NEP system, was vague.

The Communist Party structure had been weak in the villages; the government needed help to carry out the new and unpopular policies. It sent tens of thousands of workers into the countryside in search of food. Such policies, however, courted the danger of unifying the entire peasantry against the regime. The Stalinist leadership turned once again to its longstanding policy of fanning class war in the villages. It attempted to enlist the services of the poor by promising them a share of the loot for their help. Poor peasants now had a material interest in denouncing their rich neighbors for concealment. It is difficult to say how successful the policy of dividing the peasantry was. The worse the situation became and the harsher the attacks, the more likely it was that the entire peasantry would unite against Bolshevik policies.

The attack on the peasantry was carried out with great violence, which undermined the fundamental assumptions of the peasants about the communist regime. Forcible collections of grain made the return to a functioning market more difficult. The peasants lost confidence in their ability to

market their products and lost their incentive to produce. Requisitioning grain one year increased the need to repeat it next year. It was in this situation of ever-present crisis that the government hit on the solution: forcible collectivization.

COLLECTIVIZATION

It is difficult to describe the period of the first five-year plan.[1] For purposes of analysis we must discuss individual topics separately, but such an approach obscures a complex historical process in which various aspects of the transformation coincided and reinforced one another. Violence against the peasants, the "cultural revolution," the politically inspired show trials, the new ways of conducting politics, and the fantastic industrialization plans went hand in hand; they could not have existed without one another. Of the various aspects of the extraordinary transformation, it was collectivization that was the most difficult to carry out and had the most profound consequences.

The Bolsheviks had distrusted the peasants even before the revolution, regarding private ownership of land as a major obstacle to the victory of socialism and approaching the rural way of life always with hostility. They would have liked to organize agriculture on the pattern of industry – that is, to make workers out of peasants. Only under the pressure of events did the Leninists accept as inevitable the de facto private ownership of land. But even at that difficult time Lenin in his famous manifesto of November 1917 was careful to describe land as the property of society – even if peasants could cultivate it as if it were their own. During the civil war it seemed wise not even to talk about the ultimate goal of collectivizing agriculture, for the peasants obviously hated the idea.

In the 1920s it became clear to the Bolsheviks that agriculture needed reorganization. Like previous knowledgeable observers, they understood that the traditional Russian pattern of land holding, according to which the village commune periodically redistributed the land, was economically unsound. Such a land tenure system perpetuated the cultivation of small strips of land and thereby precluded the modernization of a backward agriculture. They also saw that a state directed industrialization drive would not succeed as long as the authorities had no firm control over agricultural production and, most importantly, over marketing.

In their debates during the 1920s Bolshevik theoreticians continued to take for granted the superiority of collective agriculture. They assumed that when the modernized Soviet economy managed to supply collectives with fertilizers, machinery, and agricultural expertise, the peasants would see the superior standard of living of their fellows in the collectives and would want to join. Since during the period of NEP the regime was unable to provide for the existing collectives, it naturally failed to increase its influence among the peasants, and their way of life was little changed. However much the theoreticians favored large-scale collectivized agriculture, it never occurred to any of them that it would be desirable or possible to coerce the entire Russian peasantry to give up its way of life.

Since the revolution there had been a few state-operated farms and a tiny collective movement. The collective farms succeeded in attracting only the very poorest; they were incompetently managed, uneconomically small, and suffered from rapid turnover of membership. Under the circumstances they could not possibly serve as advertisements. In 1928 hardly more than one percent of the arable land was cultivated by collectives. Concurrently with drawing up the plans for industrialization, party leaders and theoreticians discussed the role of collective farms in the new economic system. State and party organs started to take a more active interest and, by 1928, sometimes used coercion to collectivize entire villages. However, in the late 1920s even the most ambitious proposed only that 15 percent of the total output be produced by collectivized agriculture at the end of the first five-year plan.

Despite all the previous talk about collectivization, what occurred in the fall of 1929 and winter of 1930 was totally unexpected. The Stalinist leadership, having rid itself of all vestiges of opposition in the highest echelons of the party, carried out a frontal attack on the way of life of the peasantry. At first in selected regions, and soon in the entire country, the peasants were forced to join collectives. The speed with which the transformation was carried out was remarkable. At the end of September 1929 only 7.4 percent of the peasant households were collectivized. This rose to 15 percent by the end of the year, and then the great rush began. In January and February 1930, 11 million households joined the collectives, and the share of collectivized peasant households rose to 60 percent. At this point Stalin, apparently fearing the consequences of his policy, called a temporary halt. With extraordinary hypocrisy, he dissociated himself from the "excesses" of collectivization. In early March he published an article in *Pravda* , under the heading "Dizzy with Success," in which he blamed the local authorities for violating the voluntary principle for joining. Within a few weeks, half of the recently collectivized peasantry left the kolkhozy. Probably Stalin took this action because he feared that the confusion created by collectivization would interfere with spring sowing and create a disastrous famine. By reversing course he allowed time for consolidation. In the fall of 1930 the offensive was resumed in a more orderly fashion. In the following four years almost the entire peasantry was collectivized, and by 1937, at the end of the second five-year plan, private agriculture had been destroyed.[2]

The de facto declaration of war on the peasant way of life was obviously a risky undertaking. In view of the fact that the peasants bitterly resented the necessity of joining the collective farms, and the party at the outset of the campaign possessed only limited organizational strength in the villages, it is remarkable that the task could be accomplished at all. This war was

carried out with the greatest brutality. The local party secretary or chairman of the soviet, often in the presence of cadres from the cities, announced the formation of the kolkhoz. At the same time the Soviet authorities set impossible procurement and tax obligations on the recalcitrants, and those who spoke among their fellow villagers against the new institution were declared to be kulaks and mercilessly punished.

The destruction of the kulak stratum and the establishment of collective farms went hand in hand. At the beginning of the collectivization campaign Stalin called for the "elimination of the kulaks as a class" and insisted that they not be allowed to join the collective farms. At first glance, it is not evident why the attempt to create a modern agriculture had to be accompanied by the physical destruction of the most able peasant producers. Yet it is clear that the attack on the kulaks was an essential element in coercing the peasants to give up their farms. The dreadful danger of being classified as a kulak made many peasants accept the lesser evil of life in a kolkhoz. The fate of the kulaks was an irrefutable argument that there was no future in private agriculture. Many Bolsheviks could hardly wait to resume the "heroic age" of class struggle that had been suspended during the years of NEP. For them, deporting kulaks and confiscating their property was not essentially different from fighting the Whites in the civil war. The violent attack on the better-off peasants started during the procurement crisis. Only the richer peasants could have a surplus, and it was only from them, therefore, that it could be taken away. By fighting the kulaks, the government attempted to create the impression that it was only the kulak stratum that opposed collectivization.

There was no precise definition of a "kulak," and this vagueness suited the Bolsheviks' purposes, allowing them to use the definition as a political weapon. Being relatively well off and opposing Soviet policies were identical from the Bolshevik perspective. Under the guise of the war against the kulaks, the regime got rid of potential and genuine opponents, for example priests (although priests could by no definition be considered rich). Also, by declaring war on the kulaks, the party and the government aimed at and to some extent succeeded in dividing the peasant class.

According to contemporary party estimates, there were one million kulak households in the entire country, consisting of approximately five million people.[3] Local authorities had a great deal of latitude in classifying people as kulaks. Although central plans were drawn up and local districts even received quotas of kulaks to identify, the destruction of the kulaks was inevitably a somewhat haphazard operation. Enthusiastic local officials often exceeded their quotas. In order to carry out the actual work of deportation, local officials called on the help of the OGPU (political police), mobilized workers, and the militia. The property of the kulaks was to revert to the newly formed collective farms. In reality, however, the disorder created by the state allowed a great deal of looting and settling of private scores.

The kulaks were divided into three subgroups. Those whom the local authorities found especially dangerous were deported by the political police to distant regions in the far North and in Siberia. Approximately a million and a half human beings were subjected to this punishment. These people were abandoned with a minimum of resources in most inhospitable regions, where they had to fend for themselves. Many did not survive. Kulaks in the second category also had their property confiscated and were required to leave their native provinces; however, they were not deported to distant areas. The authorities wanted to remove them from their villages because they believed they had influence among their fellow peasants and might use it against the collective farms. Kulaks in the third category were allowed to remain in their villages, but most of their property was confiscated. As compensation they received the worst land and were subjected to heavy taxation. They were demoted to a second-class citizenship. Rules and regulations made the lives of these ex-kulaks miserable.

The regime could not have carried out the attack exclusively with its forces in the countryside. At the outset of the collectivization drive it had only about a third of a million rural party members, many of them unreliable, corrupt, and uneducated. Therefore the party sent out teams of workers to help in the procurement and collectivization campaigns. In addition, at the time of the decision of full collectivization, in November 1929, the party decided to mobilize 25,000 reliable worker cadres for permanent work in the villages. These workers, most of them genuinely enthusiastic for the task of the great transformation, took on jobs in party and soviet administration, and in particular served as chairmen of collective farms. Some of them became disillusioned within a few years and drifted back to the cities, but others spent the rest of their days in the country. The peasants naturally resented this invasion of outsiders, who knew nothing about agriculture and village life but nevertheless came to rule over them. They frequently became objects of violence.[4]

No matter how much the peasants hated the new institutions, they were unable to protect themselves. Resistance was almost exclusively passive, taking such forms as the slaughter of domestic animals. (The peasants killed them to avoid giving them to the hated collectives.) Such behavior had lasting consequences for Soviet agriculture and made recovery very difficult. Active struggle amounted to nothing more than occasional haphazard, senseless, and desperate violence – assassinations of party and Soviet leaders, the burning down of Soviet buildings. Such acts convinced the Bolsheviks that they were in fact engaged in "class struggle" and seemingly justified their own violence. As so often in Russian history, the peasant class proved unable to overcome its organizational weakness in order to protect its interests.

The Bolsheviks feared that the commune might serve as an organizational base of peasant resistance. Therefore, along with the establishment of the

collective farms, the Soviet regime, ironically enough, abolished that age-old expression of peasant collectivism, the village commune. The nature of the village commune was such that communists could not penetrate it and subvert it, but had to abolish it altogether. Given the brutality with which the struggle against the kulaks was carried out and given the danger of being classified as an enemy of the Soviet state, any discussion of the "voluntary" nature of the kolkhoz movement was purely illusory. Stalin and his fellow leaders gambled that they would be able to prevail against the peasantry, and they won the gamble.

The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was a thorough social revolution that destroyed the basic class structure of imperial Russia by abolishing the gulf between the privileged and unprivileged. From the point of view of the peasants, the most significant act of the revolution was the removal of the hated landlord from the village. The revolution of collectivization was a different kind of transformation, though it created a no less significant change. While it was a directed revolution, a "revolution from above," it caused just as much trauma and had just as many victims. It changed not so much the relationship of classes – though that also happened, as the relative position of the peasantry within the social structure greatly declined – but it destroyed a way of life. In the course of the 1920s the Leninists had managed to make very few inroads in the villages and had left the structure and institutions of peasant life untouched. Collectivization changed that by destroying centers of peasant autonomy and gradually creating a political base for the Bolshevik rulers.

Many of the changes brought about by collectivization were bound to occur eventually in any case. The patriarchal peasant family was slowly breaking down. Industrial growth, and with it urbanization, was likely to accelerate. Collectivization, however, made the changes extraordinarily rapid and traumatic. Despite the overt industrial and urban orientation of the Soviet regime, its special genius was found not so much in its organization of industry or in its particular methods of industrializing, but in its organization of agriculture and treatment of the peasantry. Other countries have carried out thorough social revolutions, and other countries have had rapid industrialization drives. But the Soviet Union was the first country in the world that forced its peasants into collectives, and that particular feature of the regime has been imitated only by other communists.

Collectivization created havoc in agriculture. Fortunately for the regime, in 1930 the weather was unusually favorable, so the adverse effects did not show up immediately. However, the reckoning was not long in coming. The ills of Soviet agriculture, from which the country would not recover for decades, were the consequence of collectivization.

Forcing the peasants to give up their way of life was a turning point in Soviet history. Even before this, the regime had suppressed civil liberties. Singling out millions of human beings who had committed no wrong, participated in no opposition movement, just because they belonged to a vaguely defined category, however, was a new departure, a new violation of a moral code. How were the Soviet leaders capable of such a crime? With their constant talk about class struggle in the previous decade, the Bolsheviks had unwittingly prepared themselves. They had convinced themselves that the kulaks were determined "class enemies" who were innately hostile to the Soviet order and who had successfully mobilized the bulk of the peasantry against them. The regime established a bloody precedent. The great bloodletting of the later 1930s, in which millions of human beings lost their lives, probably could not have occurred without this earlier atrocity. Mass murder for vaguely defined political goals became a possibility – this was the most important legacy of collectivization.

INDUSTRIALIZATION

The Bolsheviks, before their revolution, had always assumed that the proletariat would take power only after the country had been industrialized under a capitalist system of production. But reality refused to follow the demands of theory, and the Bolsheviks found themselves ruling over a backward and impoverished country. Under the circumstances, it fell to the Leninists to finish the task the capitalists had only begun. Once power was securely in their hands, and the country had survived its worst period of devastation, the new rulers set themselves as their primary task the industrialization of the country.

In the great industrialization debate of the 1920s, the only controversial issues were the methods and speed of industrialization; all Bolsheviks agreed that the industrialization of the country was essential. This conviction followed from the Marxist belief in progress, a progress predicated on economic development. In the Bolshevik worldview an industrial civilization was ipso facto superior to a nonindustrial one. Soviet Russia was to follow the Western European experience, and that above all meant building a modern economy.

Stalin, after the victory over his rivals, brought a new element into Bolshevik thinking. He justified the need for rapid industrialization by an injured sense of Russian nationalism. He best expressed this very non-Marxist and non-Leninist thought in an often-quoted speech in 1931. He insisted that the breakneck tempo of industrialization could not be slackened but, on the contrary, had to be further increased. Otherwise, he said, Soviet Russia would fall behind, and those who fall behind would be beaten. He recalled the humiliation of imperial Russia at the hands of stronger adversaries, by implication claiming the heritage of Imperial Russia and promising to seek revenge for past humiliations. In the Stalinist view, such an extraordinary effort was needed in order to make the Soviet Union a powerful participant in the international arena.

When the reconstruction following the destruction of war, revolution, and civil war was completed, and the country was ready to turn to new economic tasks, planners prepared ambitious – yet still reasonable and thoughtful plans for accelerated growth. In 1928 and 1929, as the political climate changed, the planning process acquired a dynamism of its own. One of the ironies of Soviet economic history is that when Soviet Russia entered the age of planning and five-year plans, planning became meaningless. Competent planners were removed from their jobs, and tried for their "wrecking" activity. "Wrecking" meant the planners' desire to incorporate into their work a professional approach – that is, to insist on the maintenance of internal consistency. In the new world, "planning" was reduced to naming target figures which had little more than propaganda significance.

Party leaders in charge of the economy promised not only vast increases in the output of heavy industry, but also dramatic improvements in the standard of living of the Soviet people. How unrealistic the plans were can be seen by the fact that some of the target figures promised by the party leaders were achieved not in 1932, at the end of the first five-year plan, but in 1960, fifteen years after the end of the Second World War. The goal of the first-five year plan was reached by fiat: after four years the Soviet leaders simply announced that the plan had been fulfilled.

During the years of the first five-year plan, the citizens of the Soviet Union experienced a sensation that they were living in extraordinary times, when normal rules had ceased to apply. Indeed, the possibility of suspending the rules of economics became an article of communist faith. The slogan of the day expressed that faith: "there are no fortresses that the Bolsheviks could not storm!" The Party demanded not careful planning and balancing of resources and tasks, but enthusiasm; the leaders considered it treason when economists pointed out irrationalities in their plans or argued that impossible goals were bound to create crises, which in turn would lead to waste and inefficiency.

The Soviet method of industrialization turned out to be an immense improvisation, a revival of the war economy. The times shared a great deal with the period of war communism. The Stalinists resurrected the utopian mentality, suspended the market mechanism, and reintroduced rationing. But there were differences as well: the new revolution promised neither liberation nor equality, and terror provided a sinister backdrop for genuine enthusiasm.

To what extent euphoria was government-inspired and to what extent it was real and deeply felt is impossible to say. Indeed, perhaps the two could not be separated. The regime made every effort to manipulate and propagandize for the purpose of construction. On the other hand, the success of the propaganda drive shows that there was at least a politically significant minority eager to listen. The Stalinist promise to build an industrial economy in the shortest possible time fired the imagination of many. Many young activists, convinced of the superiority of the communist ideology and way of life, were willing to accept hardships for the sake of a brilliant future.

The Soviet economy was particularly geared to undertake gigantic tasks. In these years construction of a new industrial city, Magnitogorsk, was started; hydroelectric stations were built; and an important railroad line was constructed, connecting central Asia to the trans-Siberian line. The very magnitude of projects was a source of appeal to the activists. Some of the projects were ill-conceived, such as the White Sea Canal, built by convict labor with only the most primitive tools. Built at the cost of terrible suffering, the canal was almost useless when completed – it was so shallow that only small boats could use it.

Soviet industrialization was not planned to bring about balanced growth. The planners established Class A and Class B industries. Class A industries included producer goods, such as coal and iron and machine-building, and Class B included consumer goods. All variants called for much higher rates of growth in Class A than in Class B industries. In reality, however, the disproportion of growth was far greater than even originally envisaged. In an economy of scarcity, where decisions constantly had to be made about the allocation of scarce resources, the economy functioned on the basis of the so-called priority method. This meant that when resources were not easily available – which was most of the time – preference was given to heavy industry. As a consequence, a remarkably dynamic heavy industry coexisted with a stagnating, and on occasion even declining, light industry.

Economists disagree about the extent of industrial growth during the first five-year plan, because Soviet statistics are not altogether trustworthy. The problem was not that the Statistical Bureau made up figures. It was that as each agency reported to a higher level, the figures were padded, and the overall figures came to be distorted. The totals, after all, could be only as reliable as the raw data on which they were based. Furthermore, Soviet statisticians expressing national product according to pre-plan prices overstated the extent of the growth, since the product mix to which those prices corresponded was altogether different. (For example, some relatively sophisticated machines that were produced in 1932 had not been produced at all in 1928. Assigning high monetary values to such products overstated growth.) There was an enormous amount of waste. To be sure, waste exists in every economy. However, during the first five-year plan the performance of factories was evaluated exclusively in quantitative terms, with no attention paid to quality. A considerable portion of the finished goods, though reported in the statistics, were in fact useless.

According to figures issued by the Soviet government, the rate of growth in industrial production during the first five-year plan was an annual 19.2 percent. Although Western economists dispute these figures, no one doubts that the growth rate was impressive. The Soviet government, by keeping

down consumption and investing an extraordinarily large share of the national product in the production of producer goods, managed to bring about an industrial transformation. The foundation of the great industrial power that was to be the Soviet Union had been laid. The character of the Soviet economy in 1932 was very different from what it had been at the outset of the industrialization drive.

As in the case of every industrializing country, the capital for the building of industry was squeezed out of the peasantry. In the Soviet Union the situation was complicated by collectivization. Forcing the peasants to give up their private farms created such havoc and destruction that there was a net outflow of investment from industry to agriculture. For example, the peasants slaughtered their animals rather than give them to the hated collectives; the animals had to be replaced by tractors relatively quickly in order to avoid disaster. Still, the simple facts remain: peasants moved from villages to cities, where their productivity increased, and peasants who remained in the villages had less to eat than people in the cities. In this sense, the peasantry paid for industrialization.

The fundamental features of the Soviet economy were created during the great industrialization drive. At the outset, when the economy was still relatively primitive, it was an exceptionally dynamic system. The country needed a great deal of steel and iron and almost everything else. Later, the many dysfunctional elements of the system came to the surface, and the Soviet Union had to pay a significant price for its particular methods of modernization. The highly centralized and hierarchically organized economy necessitated a large bureaucracy, which attempted to control, supervise, and allocate resources. The bureaucracy struggled to control enterprises; enterprises, attempting to perform well and fulfill the plan, struggled to circumvent control. As long as the factory manager was successful, he was often allowed to get away with violating rules, but when he failed, he was punished. A system in which planning was expressed in terms of physical output placed little premium on quality and discouraged innovation. The risk of failure was too high. A large bureaucracy that attempted to control a huge economy could best coexist with a repressive political system.

The communists have always considered the industrialization of the country as their most important achievement. They believed that it was only the Soviet, and specifically Stalinist, method of industrialization that could have accomplished so much in such a short time. As long as their regime existed, Soviet publicists regarded an economy that was capable of catching up with the advanced capitalist West as the best proof of the superiority of their political, social, and economic system.

As the egalitarian and utopian goals of the October revolution increasingly receded, an economic system producing rapid growth and national might came to be the main justification for the revolution. The communists' successful industrialization drive in their eyes became the decisive legitimizing factor. Had Soviet industry not been able to produce weapons in sufficient numbers and quality, they argued, the Nazi armies might have been unstoppable.

THE CREATION OF AN URBAN LABOR FORCE

Rapid industrialization created a vast social transformation. Collectivization destroyed the institutions and way of life of the peasantry. The transformation of the working class was perhaps not as obvious and violent, but nevertheless a mentality, a set of traditions, was also destroyed. In its place something new emerged: modern Soviet labor. Not even during the time of the revolution was Soviet society in such a state of flux.

Ironically, the greatest gain for the workers of the socialist revolution was the opportunity to cease to be workers. The avenue for advancement for the ambitious and the intelligent was open. The hostility toward the technical intelligentsia and the great need for specialists allowed workers with little formal education to become engineers. On the one hand, tens of thousands of workers left the workbench and became engineers, took jobs in administration, or went to the countryside to assume responsible positions. On the other hand, millions of people who had had no experience in industrial labor swelled the working class.

All through the 1920s the Soviet Union had suffered serious unemployment. By 1930 this was not only eliminated, but the economy came to suffer from a shortage of labor. Between 1928 and 1932 the total number of employed increased from 11.5 million to 24 million, and the size of the industrial labor force from three to six million. The bulk of the new workers came from the countryside. The urban population grew from 26 million in 1926 to 38.7 million in 1932.[5] This influx was far greater than the planners had anticipated. Labor productivity did not grow as fast as expected and therefore the new factories needed more workers; collectivization created such misery in the villages that millions escaped to the cities in search of a better life.

In principle the Bolsheviks approved the transformation of peasants into workers. However, this vast, indeed unparalleled, demographic change over which the authorities had little control disturbed the Stalinist politicians. In order to establish control, the government in 1932 reintroduced domestic passports, which had existed in Tsarist Russia but were abolished by the revolution. The new regulations established two classes of citizenship: the urban dwellers, who were in possession of their passports and therefore had freedom of movement, and the collective farm peasants, whose passports were kept in the offices of the chairman of the farm. This system gave the chairman power over his workers, because they needed his permission to leave the village even temporarily. The government – at times even individual factories – negotiated with collective farms over the delivery of workers.

The second important source of new labor was women. They made up less than a quarter of the industrial labor force during the years of NEP, but by the end of the 1930s their proportion had increased to 40 percent. In the course of the second-five year plan, for example, 82 percent of the newly employed were women. Women participated in every branch of the economy, including construction and mining; but they were an especially important element in farm labor. They comprised 55 percent of the farm labor force in 1937. The greatly increased participation of women in the labor force was a boon to the Soviet economy. Only because women worked was it possible for the government to lower wages dramatically while assuring that family incomes did not sink below subsistence levels. Furthermore, if the authorities had to bring in even more workers from the villages to supply the factories, it would have been necessary to construct more apartment buildings. Such investment in social overhead could have come only at the expense of heavy industry. As it was, the regime was able to use workers who already lived in the cities. Without the contribution of women, the Soviet method of industrialization could not have succeeded.

It is difficult to estimate the importance of forced labor for industrialization. We do not know and probably will never know the exact number of prisoners working during this period. It is indisputable, however, that in some distant and harsh regions such as Siberia and the far North, and in some branches of the economy, such as lumbering and mining, convict labor was a significant factor. It was cheap. It was the ultimate form of exploitation. However, this method of using human beings was also wasteful. Skilled engineers worked in construction at a time when the economy desperately needed engineers, and of course the productivity of unfree labor was especially low. This kind of wastefulness was a chief characteristic of Soviet industrialization.

The productivity of free laborers was only slightly higher than that of the prisoners. The newly created labor force was of extremely low quality. The new workers not only lacked industrial skills, but also had trouble adjusting to a different way of life. One of the serious problems the regime faced with untrained labor was extremely rapid turnover. In some cases the turnover reached fantastic proportions. In the most extreme case, in the Donets basin in 1930, a quarter of the miners left their jobs every month. On the one hand, the peasants who entered industry were not prepared for what they encountered; on the other, the very rapid growth of industry created a constant shortage of labor, with factories bidding against one another for workers. Labor turnover of such proportions acted as a break in the development of labor discipline and depressed productivity.

Turnover was not the only problem. The workers lacked labor discipline. They were not used to arriving on time, did not know how to take care of machinery, had very little interest in learning, and drank on the job. The result was a great deal of waste; breaking of expensive, often foreign-made machinery; and poor quality work. The Soviet regime ultimately dealt with the problem in its own characteristic fashion. It introduced ever more severe laws to punish the offenders. By the time of the outbreak of the Second World War workers were mobilized and treated like soldiers in wartime.

The great social transformation of the first five-year plan was traumatic, like any social transformation of this magnitude. Workers and peasants alike suffered great privations. The leaders who decided on rapid industrialization were not primarily interested in raising the standard of living of the Soviet people, and did not hesitate to impose suffering when they believed that their goals justified it. They did not, however, foresee the extent of the sacrifices that would be demanded. The original plans actually called for an improvement in the standard of living. It did not turn out this way. No one foresaw the extent and bitterness of the peasants' resistance to collectivization, and the consequences of that resistance. Nor did the planners foresee the amount of waste and mismanagement. They also could not predict the international economic crisis. This crisis brought great prestige to the Soviet cause everywhere in the world: people saw a remarkable contrast between the collapsing economies of the capitalist West and the fantastic tempo of growth in the world's first socialist state. In concrete terms, however, the international economic crisis was costly to the Soviet Union. The country needed Western machinery and Western technology. The imports had to be paid for by Soviet exports, and the only possible export was food. Agricultural prices were depressed on Western markets, and there was a famine in the Soviet Union. Without the economic crisis abroad, there would have been no need to export so much in order to gain so little.

The main reason that the plan turned out to be wildly optimistic in terms of improvement of living standards was that wherever there was a shortage, the loss was made up at the expense of the production of consumer goods. Since almost everything was in short supply, the priority method, which gave primacy to heavy industry, implied a disastrous neglect of the welfare of the Soviet people. According to the calculations of economists, real wages of 1932 were only about half of what they had been in 1928. The decline in family incomes was smaller, since there were more wage earners per family.

The decline in incomes meant poor diet, clothing, and housing for the urban population. Although bread remained available in the cities, meat and milk consumption fell significantly. Since the production of textiles actually decreased during this period, it is obvious that the standards of clothing also deteriorated. The situation was worst in housing. Since the planners had not foreseen the extent of urbanization, they could not have planned for it. Living conditions for workers had been very bad in tsarist days and had further deteriorated during the war and revolution. The plans called for a slight improvement in the per capita living space available; what happened instead was a disastrous decline.

During the first five-year plan the population of Soviet cities almost doubled.[6] What this meant in terms of living conditions can be easily imagined. The Soviet state was determined to invest in heavy industry and was not about to be diverted by spending scarce resources on social overhead, meaning construction of apartment buildings and provision of various city amenities such as transportation and water. Living conditions became appalling: usually several families had to share a kitchen, and often a family could not even have a single room to itself. It would take a long time for the Soviet Union to make up for this dreadful neglect.

The answer to the question of who paid for Soviet industrialization is simple. Primarily the peasants paid. Hundreds of thousands of them lost their property through confiscation and were forced to work as convict laborers. Those who stayed in their villages had not only their way of life and institutions taken away, but also most of their food. Much of the peasantry was condemned to starvation. But the workers also paid: their standard of living declined, and they lived in misery.

COLLECTIVIZED AGRICULTURE

Collectivization was a vast improvisation. Its organizers did not foresee how it would be carried out and what its consequences would be, and had only vague ideas about what kind of collectives they wanted. If collectivization was a revolution from above, the revolutionary army was marching in uncharted territory. The major features of the new order emerged gradually as a result of a great learning exercise. The system was completed only in 1935 with the publication of a model collective farm charter.

The Soviet agricultural system was the outgrowth of a series of compromises between Bolshevik theoretical notions about socialist village life on the one hand, and harsh reality on the other. The communists would have liked to make agriculture into a branch of industry, so that the peasants would cease to be property owners and become wage earners. In any case, according to the decree on land of 1917, the land was the property of society – or to put it more precisely, the property of the state, even if the peasants were allowed to cultivate it as if it were their own.

From this it followed that the authorities' preferred form of organization was the state farm (*sovkhoz*). At the time of the civil war the first state farms were established by carving lands out of large estates, but in the course of the NEP they fell, like the collective farms, into a deplorable state. They made only a minimal contribution to the national economy: in 1927–28 state farms produced only one percent of the total grain output of the USSR. When collectivization was put on the immediate agenda in 1928, the government also attempted to expand the land under cultivation in state farms, mostly by bringing virgin lands under cultivation. In some instances, however, privately cultivated lands were confiscated. Sovkhoz-cultivated land jumped from 3.6 million hectares in 1928 to 93.5 million in 1935. The government used its scarce investment resources lavishly on these farms.

Despite the investment and government encouragement, the economic failure of the state farms was even more evident than that of the collective farms (*kolkhoz*). Reality did not bear out the theories concerning the economic rationality of enormous size, and this gigantomania of the planners was costly. The country possessed neither the equipment for large-scale cultivation nor the agricultural expertise. Giant farms produced giant failures. Motivation for work was even lower than in collectives. Excessive specialization in state farms also turned out to be harmful. Some, for example, grew only sugar beets or cotton. After the first-five year plan, the state farms were relatively speaking deemphasized and the dominant form of organization remained the collective farm. After all, however poorly workers were paid on state farms, the state retained an obligation to pay wages. In the case of collective farms, the peasants directly paid for the failure.

The second crucial organizational decision was not to distribute agricultural machinery among the collective farms but to concentrate them in machine tractor stations (MTS). By the fall of 1929 not a single one remained in private possession. At first the confiscated tractors were distributed among the collective farms. Soon the representatives of the government realized that it made no sense to distribute the tractors, because the majority of the kolkhozes were too small to use them efficiently. There were not enough tractors to satisfy the needs of the collective farms; and after the slaughter of horses and oxen by the peasants, mechanical power was crucial for the success of agriculture. Even if some larger collective farms could have used tractors efficiently, they could not perform proper maintenance.

But even aside from the economic considerations, the Soviet regime had other reasons for concentrating machinery. The concentration of implements allowed centralization and control. The kolkhozes drew up contracts with the MTSs according to which the kolkhoz handed over a percentage of the produce (usually 20 percent). By and large in collectives which were served by MTSs, the peasants received even less compensation than in farms without the benefit of mechanization. From the point of view of the peasants the MTS was just one more exploiter. Since the state managed the MTSs, it received two shares of the harvest: one as general procurement, which every collective had to pay, and another as payment for the labor rendered.

The MTSs were fortresses of the city in the hostile countryside. It was natural to make them supervisors of the political education system in the villages. Each MTS had a political department, which was independent of the local party organizations and reported directly to a national body. The department played a role in assuring that procurements would be carried out in the interest of the state and in setting up production plans. Ironically,

because departments came to identify too much with local villagers and for a while became defenders of the peasantry, they were reorganized in 1934. The head of the political department, also deputy head of the MTS, remained responsible for political education work, but he was now put under the local party organization.

The third decision made about collectives was their optimum size. At first the Bolshevik leadership was attracted to giant farms. This attitude was part of an utopian attempt to transform peasants into workers. The Bolsheviks were keenly aware of the American example. They knew that in the United States large farms existed and enjoyed superior productivity. They wrongly assumed that the secret of American success depended on size, and hoped to surpass American productivity by surpassing the American scale of production. However, in the absence of scientific management and good communications, large kolkhozes and state farms made little economic sense. The peasants in particular were hostile. When the collectivization drive resumed in the fall of 1930, the communists did not insist any longer on the establishment of giant farms. In the system that finally emerged, the size of the average collective farm came to depend on the size of the village. Typically each village formed a collective farm.

The fourth issue was the degree of cooperation. In the course of the 1920s three types of collectives existed. The loosest form was the so-called TOZ, in which some of the agricultural work was carried out in common, but lifestock and even most farm implements remained private property. This was the most popular form. In the artel, the field work and implements were collectivized, as was most of the lifestock. The commune was the most ambitious form of cooperation, in which everything, including buildings, was common property. Since the commune required extensive subsidies to function, and since the communists regarded the TOZ as insufficiently cooperative, after some hesitation the party chose the artel as the basis of the Soviet collective farm.

This decision implied that in addition to the arable land, the horses and plows became the property of the kolkhoz. The peasant was allowed to retain a small kitchen garden plot and to keep some animals such as chickens and pigs. The sale of such products became an important part of the total income of the peasant and an important part of the national economy. However distasteful this remnant of individual enterprise was for the communist leaders, the products of private plots were too important for the national economy to be abolished.

Fifth, the authorities had to decide the basis of compensation for the collective farm workers. The regime soon retreated from its attempt to make the peasants into workers by paying them wages. Such a system was undesirable because the regime wanted the produce as cheaply as possible, and payment of wages was too expensive. How should the workers be compensated? Different collective farms had different systems. Some, on the basis of old peasant custom, paid families according to the number of members in the household, others according to the hours of collective work performed. Eventually the "labor day" system came to be favored. This meant that the peasants' earnings were commensurate to the amount of labor delivered. A labor day, however, was not necessarily a chronological day. What was considered to be a labor day depended on the skills necessary for the performance of the task. Four hours of actual labor by a tractor driver, for example, was the equivalent of eight hours of work by a milkmaid. How much one labor day was worth depended on the performance of the kolkhoz. The farm first had to pay its obligation to the state, then to the MTS, then had to put aside seeds for next year's sowing. What remained was divided among the peasants according to the number of labor days accumulated.

The collective farm as it came into being in the 1930s was by no means egalitarian. The collective farm chairman, who often came from the city, and the brigade leaders had power and were materially better off than the peasants. The private plot became an essential feature of the system. These were and remained immensely more productive than the collective lands, since the peasants had every incentive to work on them. In order to have such a plot, a peasant had to earn a certain number of labor days. Stratification as it continued to exist in the village under collectivized agriculture depended on access to political power and the availability and productivity of private plots. Although functionaries in the villages had only rather modest economic advantages over their fellow villagers, in circumstances of extreme scarcity such advantages made a significant difference.

The trauma of collectivization, the lack of incentives, and the peasants' hatred for the new institutions led to a considerable decline in overall agricultural production. According to estimates, crop production declined 10 percent between 1928 and 1932 and the output of animal husbandry declined 50 percent. At the same time the state became far more efficient in removing produce from the countryside. Delivery quotas were high, usually 40 percent of the product of the farm. During the first five-year plan deliveries were two or three times higher than the quantities the peasants had previously marketed. The result was predictable: great misery and ultimately starvation in the countryside.

Overall production figures conceal a great deal of regional variation. While in better functioning collectives the peasants could maintain a reasonable standard of living, elsewhere they were on the verge of starvation. After the good harvest of 1930, two bad years followed, and in 1932–1933 disaster struck. The Soviet Union suffered the costliest famine in its history. Precisely in the best grain-growing regions in the country – Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, and the lower Volga region – mass starvation reached dreadful proportions. Survivors describe the most horrible scenes. People

resorted to cannibalism, and entire villages came to be deserted. In some places so many people died that there were not enough survivors to bury them decently; the corpses had to be dumped into pits and covered with a little dirt.

This famine was different from previous ones. It was manmade in two different senses. The starvation was clearly the result of the giant social experiment of collectivization, and unlike previous occasions, the regime took no steps to assist the people. Instead, the government insisted on carrying out the procurement plans, whatever the cost, and grain continued to be removed from the famine-struck villages. The cities were spared from starvation, and grain imports continued.

At the time, of course, the truth could not be kept from the majority of the Soviet people. Although no newspaper mentioned it, signs of the catastrophe were everywhere. Yet the government refused to acknowledge reality and consequently did not ask for foreign help, nor undertake any effort to save lives. Admitting the existence of famine would have undermined the claim for the success of the collectivization drive, and would have affected the country's international prestige. It would also, of course, have made further grain export difficult. The cost in human lives for protecting the prestige of the Soviet Union was very high. As long as the Soviet Union existed, the great post-collectivization famine could not be discussed openly by historians or by survivors.

Charges have been made, primarily but not exclusively by Ukrainian nationalists, that the Stalinist leadership was punishing Ukraine for its continued nationalism and for its particularly fierce resistance to collectivization.[7] Several contemporary observers noted that villages on the Ukrainian side of the border had no food at a time when bread continued to be available in the nearby Russian and White Russian villages. Some survivors even reported that roadblocks were placed at the border to prevent the importation of food into Ukraine.

Since the Stalinist government never discussed its actions, we have no clear evidence concerning the motivation of the leadership; we can only guess. While there is nothing in the record of this government that allows us to dismiss the charge out of hand, it is possible that the government decided to restrict the famine to certain areas in order to help conceal it, and that therefore policies were not directed against the Ukrainians as such. We do not know the exact number of victims, but estimates by Western scholars vary between five and seven million; so this famine was costlier in terms of human lives than collectivization itself. Collectivization might be regarded as an inhuman act, but also as a heroic undertaking aimed at changing Soviet life and society. The party activists who participated in the brutal acts believed that what they were doing was in the name of a better future. There can be no similar excuse for the Soviet government at the time of the famine. The government violated a basic implied social contract: it failed to save the lives of its citizens.

"A CULTURAL REVOLUTION"

The years of the first five-year plan were a remarkable interlude in the history of Soviet culture. Given the revolutionary transformation of Soviet society and politics, it was to be expected that the cultural life of the country would also be profoundly affected. The repudiation of the NEP system meant a declaration of war on "class enemies," as defined by the new Stalinist leadership. As NEPmen were dispossessed and the kulaks destroyed, the leadership also brutally attacked what it considered a remnant of the bourgeois social order, the old intelligentsia. The activists called for a new "cultural revolution," which would contribute to the transformation of the social-political order. The phrase was confusing, for Lenin had used it earlier to describe something very different. When Lenin had spoken of the need for a cultural revolution, he had meant the necessity of raising the cultural level of the people to that of advanced Europe. In his "cultural revolution" the enemies were ignorance, backwardness, and the lack of civilization.

Many activists, especially the young, had found the policies in the 1920s unacceptably liberal. Even at that time, heavy attacks were made on some artists and intellectuals for their perceived apoliticism. Indeed, many of the themes that dominated the age of the cultural revolution had appeared in the mid-1920s. The difference was that at that time, the radical views had been only one of the variety of perspectives, while by the end of the decade, they had become the only acceptable view – and disagreement cost not livelihoods, but lives.

The great transformation that was taking place in Soviet economics and politics unleashed an element within the party and the professions that felt the revolution had not gone far enough. The radicals objected to allowing the "bourgeois" intelligentsia to hold onto its powers and subvert the creation of a genuine "proletarian" culture. The cultural revolution would be carried out in the name of the "proletariat." Perhaps it is needless to add that the slogans and policies advanced in the name of the working classes had nothing to do with actual workers. Those who spoke in their name rarely knew much about working class life and were as likely to have come from bourgeois families as those they denounced.

The cultural revolution was iconoclastic. Disrespectful of authority, it was directed against the entrenched by those who felt they were on the sidelines. The party leadership managed to tap a genuine radicalism existing within the professions, especially among the young. What took place in those years was partly a generational conflict. The attitude of the Stalinist leadership to the cultural revolution was complex. Clearly that leadership

was responsible for the milieu in which the cultural revolution took place and benefited from it. It was the new leadership that commenced the attack on the old intelligentsia in 1928 by staging trials on trumped-up charges. The Stalinists turned the talk of intensified class struggle and vigilance to their political advantage by bringing cultural activities under closer political control. It must be acknowledged that many of the utopian, even eccentric ideas that came to the surface at this time clearly could not have been initiated from above. One activist suggested, for example, that workers bring their diaries to workshops; the task of writers be only to assemble them. Another figure, a film critic, argued that there was no need for features films and that the industry should produce only agitational shorts.[8] Nonetheless, when the party leadership felt that the cultural revolution had gone far enough, it had no trouble whatever in bringing it under control: the new rulers got rid of ideas they considered undesirable and retained only what seemed to them useful.

By extending their definition of politics to include all cultural activities, the Bolsheviks did immense harm to Russian intellectual life. The "cultural revolution" was profoundly anticultural and even antiintellectual; it created a far more radical break in Russian intellectual history than had the revolution. It finally ended that glorious period of intellectual life that had begun in the early nineteenth century. The aspects of Soviet culture that suffered most at this period were those aimed at satisfying the cultural needs of an intellectual elite. This elite had survived surprisingly well. Ironically, when Stalin explicitly repudiated the notion of egalitarianism as a petit-bourgeois idea, proponents of antielitism gained the upper hand. Writers and film directors who produced works that were not immediately accessible to a mass audience were denounced. These policies, of course, did not imply that artists were encouraged to produce what the majority of workers and peasants wanted. They were to produce what the people *should* want.

The first five-year plan established a framework for Soviet economics within which the country operated as long as it existed. By contrast, in the cultural life of the Soviet Union this period was not a seminal one, but an aberration. The party leadership knew what it did not want much better than what it did want, and this was a period of experimentation. After three or four years of turmoil the Stalinists called a halt, and only then did the new Soviet culture emerge. This culture lacked the verve, the utopian elements, and the madness of the age of the cultural revolution. It was tame, conformist, and profoundly petit-bourgeois.

5

High Stalinism

TERROR

Those who have never believed the emancipatory promises of the revolution, and have seen only evil in that great social upheaval, point to the dark age of Stalin as the ultimate justification for their beliefs. By contrast, the partisans of the revolutionary ideology have had the painful task of coming to terms with the sad and inconvenient fact that it was Stalin who ultimately emerged victorious. It is hard for them to answer the question: has there always been a worm in the communist apple? Stalinism is at the heart of Soviet history. Rightly or wrongly, we are often tempted to regard the history of the 1920s as preparation for Stalin, and the post-1953 period as a long recuperation from the ravages of tyranny.

The preconditions for the rise of Stalin and the main outlines of the era of terror are not in doubt, but the reasons for the mass murder remain elusive. As long as the Soviet Union existed, historians had no access to party and secret police archives. In any case, the answers to the most significant questions cannot be found in documents. The important decisions were never put on paper; Stalin, it seems, ordered the destruction of his closest comrades by a nod of the head. It is unlikely we will ever know all that we would like to know.

The historian is compelled to describe and analyze mass murder on an extraordinary scale, a self-immolation of society. One cannot avoid psychological explanations, and the historian is always on thin ice in such matters, for it is difficult to find rational explanations for irrational phenomena. As a consequence, at the very heart of Soviet history there is a blank spot, a large area open to widely different interpretations, none of them is fully satisfactory.[1] Our knowledge of the era cannot be complete without understanding the person who controlled events, but Stalin was an extremely secretive person. While we have a good idea of Hitler's mind and motives, we know almost nothing about Stalin's mind. He did not have Hitler's desire to