

How did dictators come to power?

What is dictatorship?

We often complain about our government and our police force. But, by and large, we in Britain live in a very free and fair society. People who criticise the government do not have their books and articles censored. People are not imprisoned or tortured for demonstrating against the government. Regular, free elections are held so that the government can be changed if it is unpopular. Many countries in the world today do not enjoy these basic freedoms of democracy.

At the end of the First World War, the Allied leaders hoped very much that democracy would spread to most European countries. At first, it looked as though this would happen. But many countries had enormous difficulties. Democratically elected politicians seemed to spend more time arguing than solving the problems. Then, in each of several countries, one man with the support of a political party took complete control. We call such a man a 'dictator'. Often the people were so impatient with the other politicians, that they were quite happy that a leader was at last doing something positive. But when they later wanted to protest, it was too late: the dictator had stopped free elections, banned certain newspapers and created a powerful police force which he used like a private army.

European dictators

The most famous dictators in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s were Stalin (see Chapter 3), Mussolini and Hitler. But other countries had dictators too. For example, we shall



General Franco, Dictator of Spain, 1936-75

see in Chapter 5 how General Franco became dictator of Spain. In some countries there were also unsuccessful attempts by politicians to become dictators. For example, there was a very small 'Blackshirt' party in Britain called the British Union of Fascists (B.U.F.), led by Sir Oswald Mosley.

Oswald Mosley, leader of the B.U.F., 1932-40



The popularity of dictators

In some countries the dictators were very popular. We shall see later in this chapter that many millions of people voted for Hitler. There were two main reasons for this.

Economic problems

People become badly discontented if they suddenly become poorer. This happens when prices rise more rapidly than wages, when savings drop in value or when people become unemployed.

As we shall see on p.49 savings in Germany in 1923 were made worthless by the collapse in the value of the mark. In Chapter 7 we shall see how Americans who owned stocks and shares were ruined by the 'Wall Street crash' of 1929.

In fact, the year 1929 marked the start of what became known as the Great Depression. In 1931 the largest Austrian bank announced that it would not be able to repay the money that people had invested. In America and Europe, firms very quickly went bankrupt, banks closed, international trade slowed down. And if there is no business, there are no jobs. Millions of people became unemployed. People became poor, some even starved. They therefore became angry with the governments who, they believed, had allowed all this to happen. The dictators promised to put things right.

National glory

The other reason for the popularity of men like Hitler and Mussolini was their promise to restore the pride and glory of their countries in the eyes of the world. But this led them to invade and occupy other countries. Gradually, a Second World War became more likely (see Chapter 5).

Mussolini and Fascism

Mussolini the man

The first of the European dictators was Benito Mussolini. He became dictator of Italy in 1922. Mussolini was a vain, boastful man. He once said to his mother, 'One day I shall astonish the world.' He spent his early years as a teacher, a wandering casual labourer, a soldier in the First World War and a journalist. In later years he liked to think of himself as an all-rounder—as a sportsman (he fenced, rode and swam), as a musician (he played the violin) and as a lover (he had many mistresses). He also had a certain air of authority and people came to have confidence in him.

Benito Mussolini, Dictator of Italy, 1922–43



Mussolini's seizure of power

In 1919 Mussolini formed the Fascist party. The word 'fascist' comes from the Latin word, 'fascis'. They were the bundles of rods and an axe carried in ancient Rome as symbols of authority. Mussolini used the fasces as his symbol to show that he was going to revive the glories of the ancient Roman empire.

In 1922 Mussolini and his Fascists took control of the government. This is how it happened. Italy had a series of weak governments. The latest resigned in October 1922. Thousands of Mussolini's followers were then organised for a 'March on Rome' (although Mussolini went by train!). There were also Fascist demonstrations in other towns, supported by the army. The king of Italy, Victor Emmanuel III, invited Mussolini to be prime minister. Soon, he had all the powers of a dictator.

The March on Rome of Mussolini's followers in 1922



The aims and achievements of Fascism

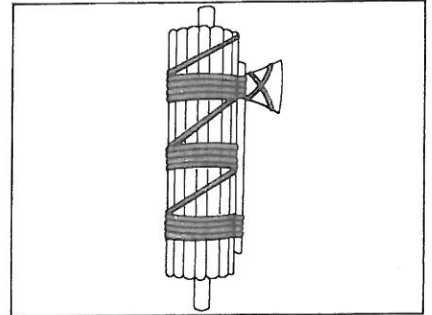


Figure 1 The fasces

Violence and discipline

Mussolini's followers wore a uniform of black shirts. Many were bullies by nature and beat up their opponents. One act of violence by the blackshirts shocked many people throughout the world. This was the murder in 1924 of Mussolini's most outspoken opponent, the Socialist politician, Matteotti. As he left his house one afternoon he was hustled into a car that drove off at high speed. Two months later his body, was found in a shallow grave some distance outside Rome. He had been stabbed to death.

Mussolini & Fascism

The corporative state

Yet much of Mussolini's popularity lay in his promise to bring discipline to Italy, a country that was in many ways in a chaotic condition. Also many people were afraid that the Communists might take over and preferred what Mussolini promised.

The basic idea of Fascism was that the government should control the whole of a person's life. Mussolini himself wrote that 'outside the state no human or spiritual values can exist'. The government took firm control over education, newspapers, trade unions, even sport. Newspapers were censored and opponents of the government were imprisoned.

Mussolini would not, of course, allow parliament or the trade unions to remain free of his control. The government came to be run by the Fascist Grand Council instead of the elected parliament. Also workers and professional people were forced to join corporations. These were controlled by the government and replaced the trade unions. This system was called 'the corporative state'.

At the head of it all was Mussolini who took the title of 'Duce' or Leader. There were slogans everywhere to persuade the people that the Fascist government benefited them. One of the most common said, 'Mussolini is always right.'

The Lateran Treaty

Many people who were unimpressed by Fascism were influenced by the Lateran Treaty, which Mussolini signed with Pope Pius XI in 1929. This recognised Roman Catholicism as the only official religion in Italy. But more importantly, Mussolini could now show that he



Mussolini takes the salute at a meeting in Rome, where University students were sworn into the army. The words mean 'believe', 'obey' and 'fight'

was officially recognised by the Pope: he had become respectable!

The economy

Mussolini tried to take control of the economy just as he took control over the government. His main aim was to make Italy self-sufficient so that she would not have to rely on imports. These were some of the most important schemes:

- 1 Help was given to the really poor areas of Sicily and southern Italy.
- 2 The 'Battle for Grain' was a campaign that improved wheat production enormously.
- 3 The malaria-infested Pontine marshes near Rome were drained and put to good use.
- 4 Road and rail transport were improved. Some people sum up Mussolini's achievements by saying that he made the trains run on time!
- 5 The 'Battle for Births' was a campaign to increase the population of Italy by encouraging people to have more babies.

But much of what was done was

for 'show' with no really solid improvement for the country.

The balance sheet of fascism

If you lived in Italy in about 1940 would you think that your country had on balance benefited or suffered from Fascism? Read through the following list and consider which you would put on the credit side and which on the debit.

- 1 Many countries copied the Italian Fascist movement. For example, the British Union of Fascists (see p.45), the German Nazis (see pp.52-56) and the Romanian Iron Guard.
- 2 Mussolini expanded the Italian empire especially in Africa (see pp. 62-3).
- 3 Italy was more efficiently run and more Italian people were better fed than in 1920.
- 4 Political freedom was crushed by police violence, imprisonment and even murdering of opponents, censorship of books and newspapers and the abolition of trade unions and parliament.

Hitler's rise to power



Adolf Hitler

Hitler's character

The most notorious of all the dictators was Adolf Hitler. Although he became dictator of Germany (from 1933 to 1945), he was, in fact, born in 1889 in Austria. He failed in his ambition to become an architect. However, he served bravely in the First World War. Then after the war, he became involved in politics with discontented demobilised soldiers.

Hitler was by no means an imposing figure to look at. He was of

medium height and had a funny little black moustache. How then did he become so powerful? He had tremendous will-power, a most powerful personality, almost hypnotic eyes and a most fearful temper. Important men like generals or ministers would enter Hitler's room determined to make him change his mind; they would emerge either utterly convinced that they were wrong or frightened into quivering jellies!

Hitler had just as much power over huge crowds as over individ-

uals. Otto Strasser bitterly disliked him. Nevertheless he recognised his brilliance as a speaker. When he spoke, so Strasser wrote:

as the spirit moves him, he is promptly transformed into one of the greatest speakers of the century. Adolf Hitler enters a hall. He sniffs the air. For a minute he gropes, feels his way, senses the atmosphere. Suddenly he bursts forth. His words go like an arrow to their target, he touches each private wound on the raw, liberating the mass unconscious, expressing its innermost aspirations, telling it what it most wants to hear.

Crowds, sometimes of hundreds of thousands, would roar their support, rather like an excited football crowd when a particularly fine goal is scored. They would stand up and chant, 'Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer!' that is, 'One state, one people, one leader!' Hitler took the title of 'Führer' or leader of his country. (Compare the title Mussolini gave himself.)

The weakness of the Weimar Republic

However, it took Hitler many years of planning and struggle before he became Führer. The system of government set up in Germany after the First World War was called the Weimar Republic. Its governments were weak and they had huge problems to cope with. The three most serious difficulties were these.

Inflation

This means the rise of prices and therefore a drop in the value of money. We have suffered from this problem in Britain in recent years—but not as disastrously as Germany in 1923. In 1921 the British pound sterling was worth 500 marks. By

Hitler's rise to power



A kite made from worthless German banknotes, 1923

the end of 1923 its value was 16,000,000,000,000 marks! There are many stories about how worthless German banknotes became. People had to take bags full of notes when they went shopping. A woman left a shopping basket heaped with money outside a shop and when she went to fetch it the basket had been stolen but the less valuable banknotes had been left behind! All this may sound amusing until you realise that people's savings were made utterly worthless in this way.

Unemployment

This was a particularly serious problem in the early 1930s. As you can see from Figure 2 the numbers shot up from 3 million in 1930 to about 6 million in 1932.

Lack of confidence in the government

The government seemed unable to cope. People tended to vote for other parties in the hope that they would make things better. One of the parties to benefit was Hitler's Nazi Party.

The success of the Nazis was due to the following:

- 1 The economic depression and discontent with the government of the Centre parties (see p.45).
- 2 Very careful organisation of the

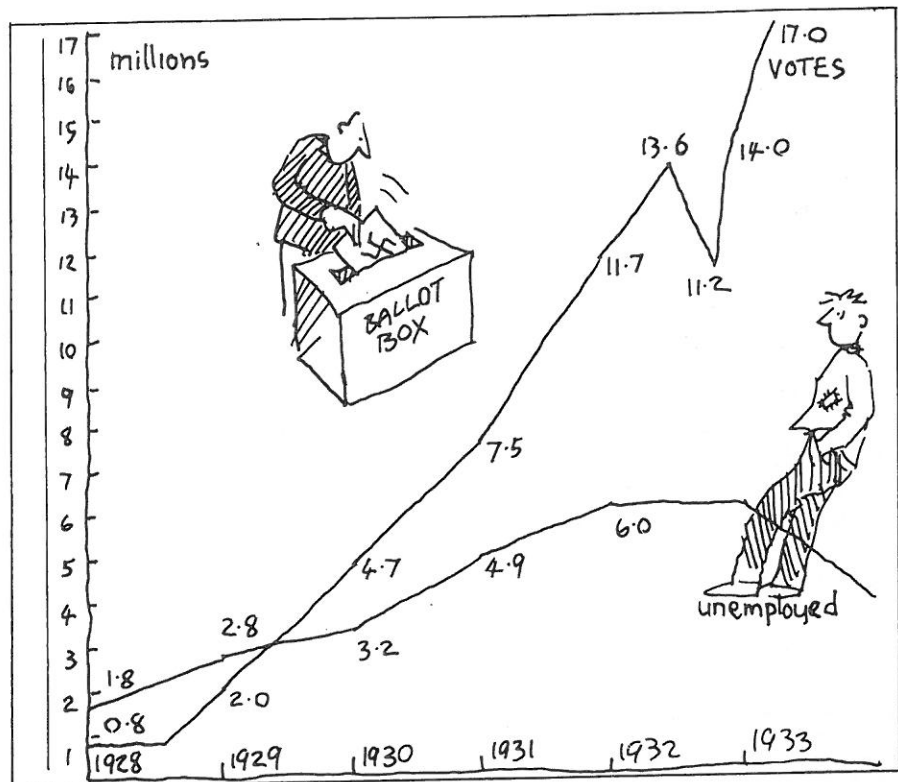


Figure 2 The relationship between unemployment and votes for the Nazis

Nazi Party and tireless campaigning.

3 Fear of Communism, especially among businessmen. Many donated money to the Nazis.

4 They took advantage of the resentment felt for the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Look at Figure 2 again. Consider whether Hitler would have been so successful if the German people had been happier.

Hitler's early struggle for power

The Munich putsch

The story of Hitler's rise to power really starts in 1923. By that year he had become a leading member of the small National Socialist German Workers Party (Nazi for short). Like the Italian Fascists they had their own private army of strong-arm men, the S.A. or 'Brownshirts'.

The main strength of the party was in Bavaria. In November 1923 Hitler and other Nazi leaders in Munich (the capital of Bavaria) organised a demonstration in an attempt to take over the government. The German word for such a violent seizing of power is 'putsch'. A rather pathetic group, carrying their new flag, marched from a beer-hall through the streets of Munich. They were quickly dispersed and the leaders, including Hitler, were arrested.

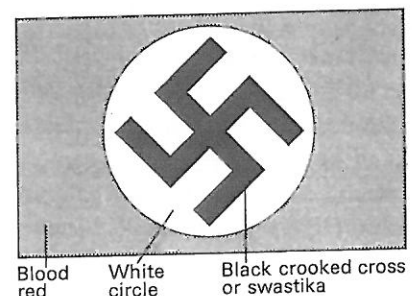


Figure 3 The Swastika flag

Hitler's rise to power

Mein Kampf

Hitler was imprisoned in Landsberg Castle. Here he wrote his book *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle). It is a long, rambling book about Germany, history, race, and is partly autobiographical. Here is a typical extract:

For myself and all other true National-Socialists there is only one doctrine: Nation and Fatherland.

What we have to fight for is security for the existence and increase of our race and our nation, nourishment of its children and purity of its blood, freedom and independence for the Fatherland, and that our nation may be able to ripen for the fulfilment of the mission appointed for them by the Creator of the Universe.

Strengthening of the party

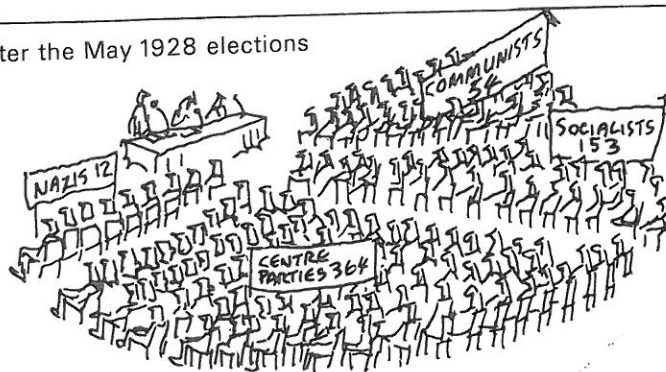
The lesson Hitler learned from the failure of the Munich putsch was to proceed very carefully. From now on he would concentrate on the legal path to power—by strengthening the party in the country and increasing its number of seats in the Reichstag (the German parliament). You can see from Figure 2 how quickly the Nazis increased their power.

Hitler secures power, 1932–34

Hitler becomes Chancellor

As you can see from Figure 4 the Nazis were the largest single party in the Reichstag in November 1932, though they did not have a majority over all the other parties combined. Hitler demanded that he should be made Chancellor (that is, prime minister). Field Marshal von Hindenburg, the aged President, refused the suggestion with contempt. But the government of von Papen was weak with both the Communists and Nazis in opposition. A new

Reichstag after the May 1928 elections



Reichstag after the November 1932 elections

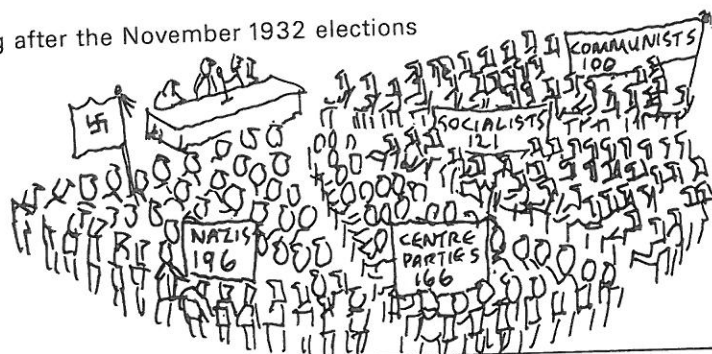


Figure 4 Nazi seats in the Reichstag

Chancellor, von Schleicher, was appointed, but his government was no stronger. Eventually, on 30 January 1933 the President was forced to ask Hitler to be Chancellor. Cheering crowds thronged Berlin that night.

The Reichstag fire

The most serious immediate threat to Hitler was the strong Communist Party. On the night of 27 February 1933 the Reichstag building was gutted by fire. A young Dutch Communist, van der Lubbe, was arrested and found guilty of starting the blaze. The next month, elections were held and the Nazis secured a majority in the Reichstag by declaring the Communist Party illegal because of their supposed plots. But were the Communists really guilty? The fire and the arrest of van der Lubbe were so convenient to the Nazis that it has even been suggested that the Nazis set the building ablaze themselves in a scheme to discredit the Communists.

Field Marshal von Hindenburg, President of Germany, 1925–34



Hitler's rise to power



A parade of brownshirts (S.A.)

The Enabling Law

Hitler immediately made the Reichstag pass an 'Enabling Law' which gave him enormous powers. He had made a start to becoming dictator. He then used these powers to destroy the independence of the trade unions and make all other political parties, apart from the Nazis, illegal.

The Night of the Long Knives

But Hitler could not feel that he had complete control unless he had control of the army and the S.A. We saw on page 49 how the Nazi Party had organised its own private army of brownshirted 'Stormtroopers' (S.A.). By 1934 there were about

two million of these men, commanded by Ernst Röhm. Hitler decided to destroy this threat to his personal power. He had already created his own black-shirted guard of S.S. (Schutz-Staffen). At 3 o'clock in the morning of 30 June members of the S.S. visited the S.A. leaders and shot them dead. Later, Hitler presented the murderers with ceremonial daggers as a reward for their bloodthirsty work on the 'night of the long knives'.

Hitler—Führer

The next month President Hindenburg died. Hitler immediately took over the powers of the president and

took the title of Führer (Leader). He also required the army to take a new oath of allegiance:

I will render unconditional obedience to the Führer, Adolf Hitler, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and will be ready as a brave soldier to stake my life at any time for this oath.

Hitler was now complete dictator of Germany, now called the Third Reich (the first had been the Holy Roman Empire and the second, the Empire created by Bismarck). He boasted that, like the first, it would last for a thousand years.

Stalin's character

Stalin was born in 1879. He ruled Russia from 1929, by which year he had defeated his rivals, until 1953, when he died. He is one of the most important men of the twentieth century. He was a dictator, that is he personally had complete control of the government.

Stalin was utterly ruthless in his governing of Russia. Many millions of people were sent to prison camps or died because of him. He worked very long hours in his rooms in the Kremlin, the headquarters of the government in Moscow. He was a secretive, lonely man, trusting no one. Although he terrified many people, he also tried to persuade the ordinary men and women of Russia that he was a kindly, all-powerful, almost god-like person. Artists and writers were encouraged to give that impression. Sympathisers outside Russia called him 'Uncle Joe'.

Industry

Compared with other main European countries Russia's industries were very backward. Also the years of war and civil war had caused much damage and disorganisation. Stalin decided that a huge effort must be made to develop the main, 'heavy' industries like steel. He was afraid that Russia might be attacked again, as she had been in the civil war, by countries who wanted to destroy Communism. Russia therefore had to be made strong and the way to be strong was to build up her industries.

Stalin decided to set targets for production in the form of Five-Year Plans. These involved vast increases. You can see from the diagram how ambitious they were.

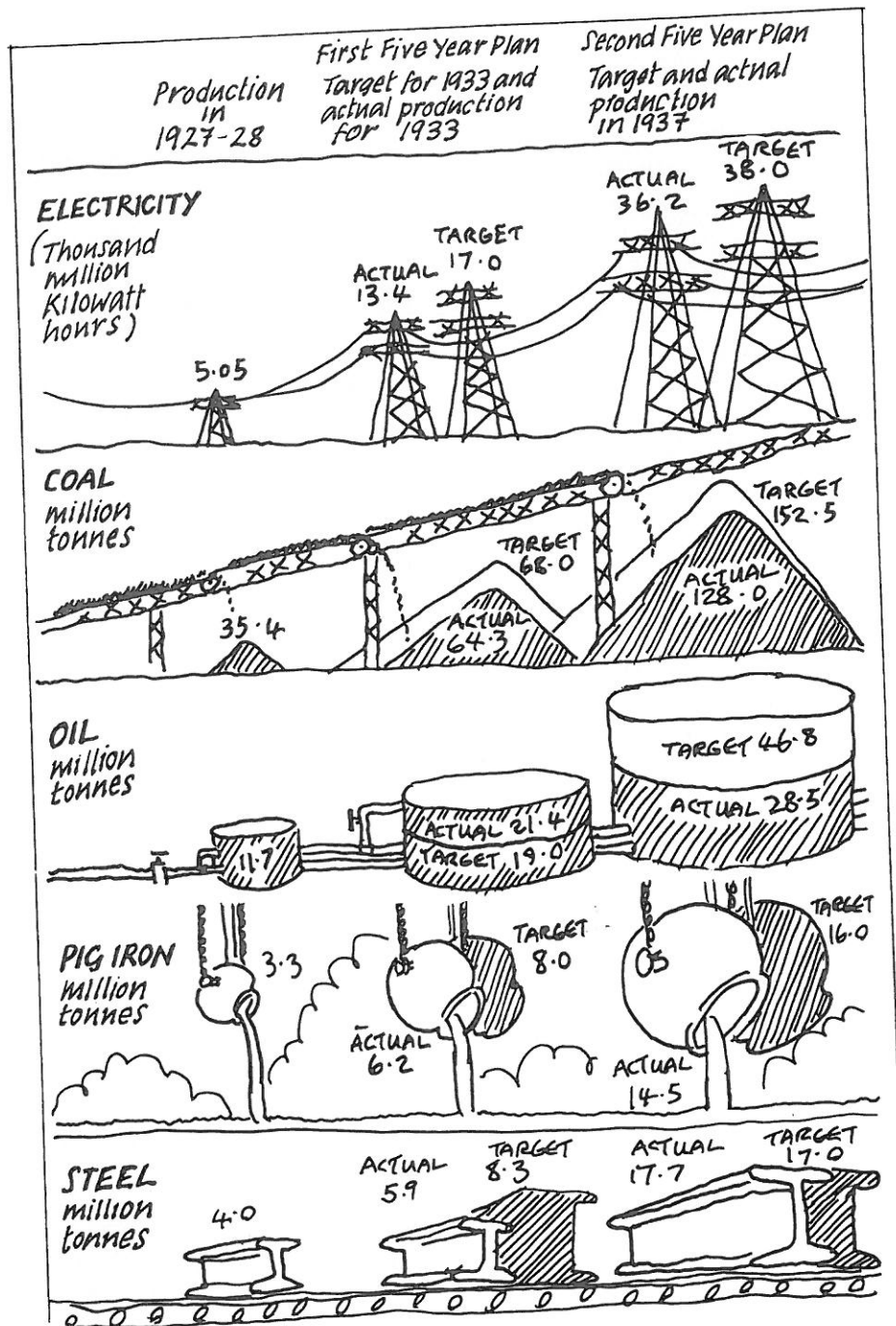


Figure 2 Industrial production. Five Year Plans and actual figures

What other information can you gain from these figures? Were the plans generally successful? Which parts of the plan were most successful?

Try to imagine the changes that must have taken place in the industrial towns of Russia. Many more

mines, factories, oil-refineries and generating stations had to be developed during the ten years 1928-38. Millions more workers were needed. In fact, during those ten years the proportion of the whole population living in towns increased from one-fifth to one-third.

Stalin

Stalin organised a great publicity campaign to persuade peasants to move to the towns and to encourage the workers to work extra hard. A man called Stakhanov devised a system for increasing coal-production. He became a hero. Other men who copied his example came to be called 'Stakhanovites'. You can see from the poster that Stalin looks very friendly. In fact, as we shall see later, millions of people suffered and died so that Russia could become a strong industrial country.

Agriculture

The problem

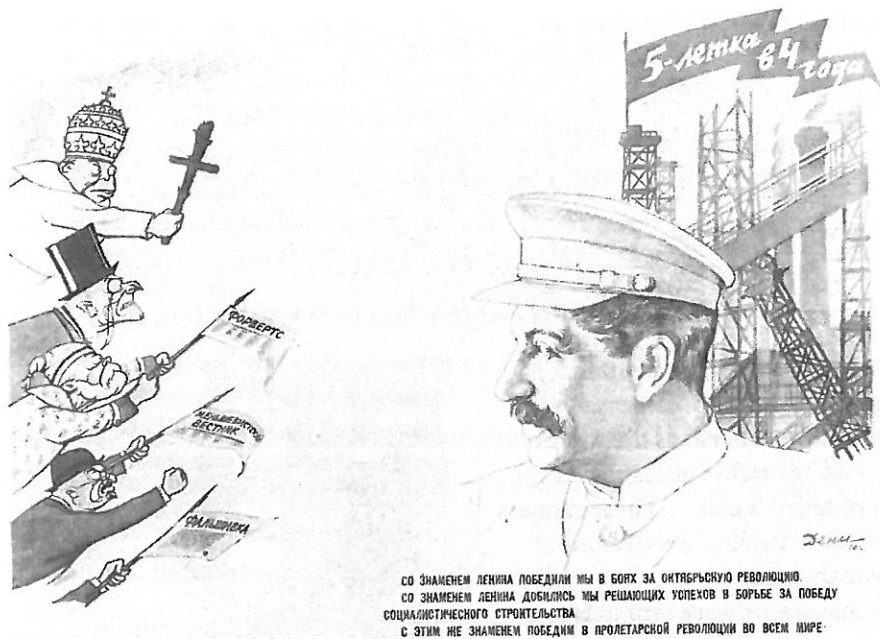
Russian farming was very backward indeed. Most of the peasants were extremely poor and used the most primitive methods to cultivate the land. Flails for threshing and even wooden ploughs were still widely used.

Yet Stalin urgently needed to increase the production of food. The first Five-Year Plan, as we have seen, needed a huge increase in the number of industrial workers. Food had to be available in the towns for them.

Stalin's solution

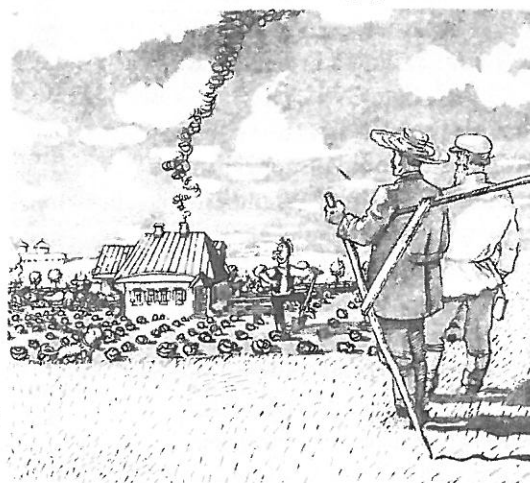
Stalin produced a scheme to solve all these problems. The small peasant plots would be joined together to form big 'collective' farms. These would have the following advantages:

- 1 They would be big enough to use modern methods of farming, including tractors.
- 2 A very large farm would need fewer peasants than the smaller plots separately. The surplus people could go to the towns to work in the factories.



This is a poster showing that Stalin is achieving the Five-year Plan in four years in spite of foreign enemies and 'wreckers' inside the country. It was produced in 1930 and contains the following quotation from Stalin: 'With the banner of Lenin we achieved decisive successes in the struggle for the victory of socialist construction. With this same banner we shall conquer in the proletarian revolution throughout the world'

К Р О К О Д И Л



The problem of the private plot. This cartoon from the Russian magazine Krokodil shows how difficult it was to persuade the peasant to spend as much time and care on collective land as on his private plot.

3 Communist Party officials could control the collectives through their organising committees.

The changes were introduced very quickly. The result was anger and chaos. The peasants were forced to give up their land, their animals, even their tools to the col-

lective. And in return the government took an increasing proportion of the grain harvest! Many peasants managed to keep their own vegetable plots and worked harder on these than on the farm. Many also slaughtered their animals rather than give them up to the collective.

Stalin

The following diagram shows the disastrous effect of collectivisation on Russian livestock:

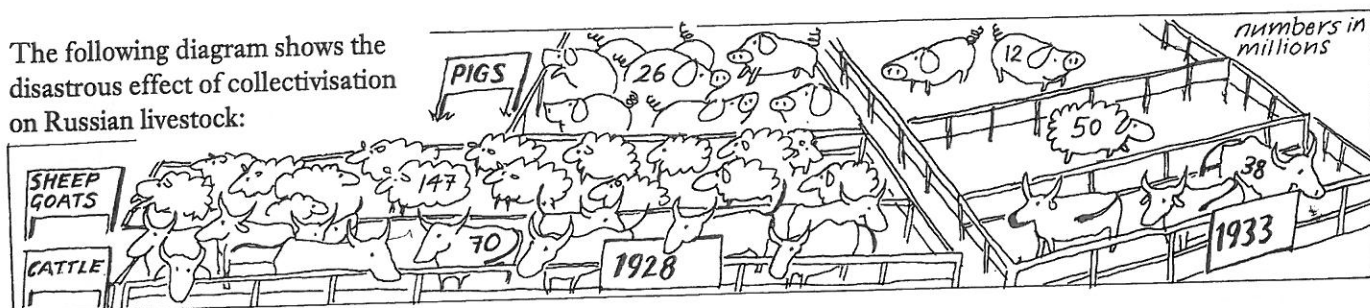


Figure 4 The decrease in the numbers of Russian livestock between 1928 and 1933

However, Stalin's treatment of the majority, the poor peasants, was not nearly so harsh as the way he treated the richer peasants. These were called 'kulaks'. These farmers and their families were removed from their land—over four million people. Some were sent to labour camps, some to farm in Siberia. The majority died in the appalling conditions.

Stalin's 'Terror'

Labour camps

Lenin's secret police, the Cheka, was greatly increased in size and power by Stalin and renamed the O.G.P.U. (later N.K.V.D.). During Stalin's time hardly anyone felt safe. Individuals would disappear in the middle of the night. Whole groups of people, like the kulaks for example, would be set to build towns, factories or communications systems in the bitterly cold expanses of northern Russia and Siberia. Stalin was so determined to transform Russia into a modern industrial country and so determined to crush all opposition that no human sacrifice was too big. Many millions of people died of starvation, disease, exhaustion or exposure to the cold.

One of the most famous Russians to have survived the labour camps and to have written about them is Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The following extract from his short novel,



A scene from the film, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, showing labour camp prisoners. Why do you think we could not find a real photograph of a scene from within the labour camp?

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, will give you an idea of what conditions were like.

As usual, at five o'clock that morning reveille was sounded by the blows of a hammer on a length of rail hanging near the staff quarters. The intermittent sound barely penetrated the window-panes on which the frost lay two inches thick. . . .

[Shukhov] didn't get up. He lay there in his bunk on the top tier, his head buried in a blanket and a coat, his two feet stuffed into one sleeve, with the end tucked under, of his wadded jacket. . . .

Shukhov remembered that this morning his fate hung in the balance: they wanted to shift the 104th from the

building-shops to a new site, the 'Socialist Way of Life' settlement. It lay in open country covered with snow-drifts, and before anything else could be done there they would have to dig pits and put up posts and attach barbed wire to them. Wire themselves in, so that they couldn't run away. Only then would they start building.

There wouldn't be a warm corner for a whole month. Not a dog-kennel. And fires were out of the question. Where was the wood to come from? . . .

They sat in the cold mess-hall, most of them eating with their hats on, eating slowly, picking out putrid little fish from under the leaves of boiled black cabbage.

Stalin

Elimination of political opponents

Stalin moved further and further away from the ideals of the revolution. He rid himself of all possible political opponents. Political leaders and ordinary party members and even generals were arrested. Many were executed, the rest were sent to the labour camps. In 1936 and 1937 great 'show trials' were held in Moscow. Leading members of the party (e.g. Zinoviev, Bukharin) confessed to the most incredible false charges of plotting against the government and Stalin. They had not been able to resist the persuasive methods of the N.K.V.D.! But Stalin's greatest enemy was still Trotsky. He was living in exile in Mexico. However, in 1940 one of Stalin's agents managed to enter his well-guarded house and smashed his skull with an ice-axe he had hidden in his coat pocket.

Foreign policy

One of the reasons that Stalin quarrelled with Trotsky was that Stalin wanted to concentrate on making Russia strong while Trotsky thought that Russia should concentrate on helping to spread Communism to other countries. An international organisation of Communist parties was set up—it was called the Comintern. Its headquarters was in Moscow. But Stalin did not help it very much.

Stalin did, however, help the Communists in Spain during the Spanish Civil War (see p. 63).

By August 1939 Europe was on the brink of the Second World War. In order to protect Russia against a possible attack from Germany, a treaty was signed between the two countries (see p. 68). By this treaty it was arranged that Poland should be divided between Russia and Germany. This treaty lasted until 1941



Map 3 Land gained by Russia, 1939-40

when the Germans invaded Russia.

Russia also took control of the small Baltic countries and, after a short but fierce war, parts of Finland. As a result of acquiring these lands

Russia regained much of the territory she lost after the First World War. These additions also meant that her western frontier was now further from Moscow.