

The Marxism

In 1848 Karl Marx wrote a book called the Communist Manifesto in which he predicted that the working class would overthrow the rulers of the country, and that all wealth would be divided equally, creating the socialist society. He believed that this revolution was inevitable, and people who believed his ideas were called Marxists. In Russia there were several Marxist parties, including the Social Revolutionaries, and the Social Democrats, which split into the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks in 1903. Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin were members of the Bolshevik Party, which seized power in the October Revolution of 1917.

Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

In March 1917 Russia signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (Brest-Litovsk was a Russian town on the border with Germany) with Germany and Austria-Hungary, ending their part in the First World War. Its terms were very harsh: Russia had to give up Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Ukraine and Georgia, and pay a fine of 300 Million rubles. However, Lenin believed it necessary to give the Bolsheviks a breathing space to extend their control over the rest of Russia

The Civil War

Following the Revolution, the Bolsheviks controlled Petrograd and Moscow, but little of the rest of Russia. In May 1918 their enemies seized control of the Trans-Siberian Railway and there began a bitter fight for control of Russia. The Bolsheviks introduced conscription - all men between 18 and 40 had to serve in the army, and Trotsky organized the Red Army. Opposed to them were the 'Whites', a collection of people opposed to the Bolsheviks, ranging from supporters of the royal family to Socialist Revolutionaries. They were aided by Britain, France, America and Japan. However, they never worked together effectively, and Trotsky's brilliant organization and leadership of the Red Army allowed the White Armies to be defeated one at a time. By 1920 the Bolsheviks had established control over most of Russia.

Collectivization

The vast majority of the population in Russia were peasants, earning their living from farming. However, not enough food was reaching the cities to feed the workers, partly because the government only offered low prices for the grain they bought, and partly because the peasants were keeping food to feed themselves better. In 1929 to solve the problem of the shortfall, Stalin announced that farms would be collectivized. This meant that instead of each individual family working their own farm, groups of 50-100 families would work a collective farm. It was hoped that this would be more efficient, and allow more modern methods, such as tractors, to be used. The peasants would not be allowed to sell grain for a profit, but would instead sell their grain to the government at a fixed price.

Stalin knew that the richer peasants, known as Kulaks, would oppose this idea, so he deported about 1.5 million of them, many of whom later died from cold or starvation. However, many other peasants opposed collectivization, which took away their incentive to produce more food, since they could not sell it for profit. They destroyed animals, crops and machinery in protest, and this led to a serious drop in food production. As a result of collectivization 5-6 million people starved to death in the following three years.

Five Year Plans

Russia was a very backward country compared to the rest of Europe, and Stalin realized that if communism was to survive then it had to modernize quickly. A series of five year plans were introduced with the aim of rapidly increasing Russia's industrial production. Though the plans did not always achieve the targets that had been set, it is undoubtedly the case that Russia's industrial capacity grew enormously as a result. By 1940 Russia had overtaken Britain in production of iron and steel. However, although some workers, such as the Stakhanovites worked hard out of patriotism, others only worked out of fear - failure to meet production targets could result in a labor camp sentence.

The Great Purge

In 1935, following the assassination of Kirov, an important member of the Party, Stalin launched a purge of the Party, aimed at expelling unreliable members. Anybody could be denounced for being Trotskyites or counter-revolutionaries, even on the evidence of a single comment. Millions were expelled from the party and sent to labor camps. In 1936 the Show Trials began, where important Party members were put on public trial, found guilty and executed. In 1937 the armed forces were also purged - by 1939 every admiral, three of the five top army commanders, and about half of all officers had been shot. By now the whole of Russia was living in terror. Children were encouraged to denounce their parents, and some did, and you could even be arrested for failure to denounce suspicious people. The terror undoubtedly ensured Stalin's domination of the country, but both the economy and the armed forces suffered from the loss of so many experienced leaders.

Nazi-Soviet Pact

Alarmed by Hitler's growing power and Germany's expansion in the 1930s Stalin looked for allies against a possible German attack. However, France and Britain, suspicious of Stalin and believing the Russian Army to be weak, turned him down. Stalin now turned to the only alternative, Hitler himself. In August 1939 the Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed, in which the two countries agreed not to attack each other. They also agreed to divide Poland between them, and that Russia could take back Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and part of Finland - land that had been lost in 1918. This agreement provided Russia with security in the short term, but also freed Hitler from the fear of Russian intervention when he invaded Poland, and later France.