

### **What challenges faced the Soviet Union in peace and war, 1924-1945? (2014)**

Joseph Stalin was the leader of the Soviet Union for almost three decades. During this time, the Soviets faced many challenges both domestically and internationally. Stalin recognised the economic challenges faced by the Soviet Union and formed his idea of 'Socialism in One Country' as a result. Socialism in One Country was seen to be a more effective plan for overcoming Russia's challenges than Trotsky's 'Permanent Revolution' plan. As such, Stalin became Lenin's successor. Under Stalin's leadership, the Soviet Union faced many challenges. In addition to economic and agricultural problems, Stalin's own paranoia caused many challenges for the Soviets in war and peace. In war, they were also politically challenged as the Soviets had few allies.

Socialism in One Country was Stalin's policy that followed his realisation that worldwide revolution couldn't be depended on to make Russia a global power. Instead, Stalin said they needed to rapidly industrialise their economy so it would be equal to that of the hostile Western powers. Stalin famously stated "We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make up this gap in ten years. Either we do it or they will crush us". Stalin's recognition of this challenge was followed by the introduction of his three five-year plans, with the first one beginning in 1928. The first plan focused on the heavy industries such as coal, iron and steel. It was a huge undertaking and no easy task. Factories producing a huge variety of goods from cars to tractors were built east of the Ural Mountains. Despite that great step, the challenges for individuals only grew. Workers and managers were put under great pressure with hugely unrealistic targets.

Propaganda and punishments were used extensively to maximise output. The Stakhonvite Movement was named after "Russia's greatest miner" who supposedly mined 102 tonnes of coal in one 6 hour shift. Movements such as this motivated workers to push themselves to their limits to maximise their output, however, this didn't motivate them as much as the harsh punishments they could receive for seemingly minor offences. If even one day of work was missed, they could be fined, evicted or have their ration cards confiscated. This intense pressure made life hard, as did the dramatically decreasing wages and living standards. Rationing and the widespread shortages of consumer goods were difficult and dispiriting for ordinary people. Managers were

treated harshly and in response treated their workers harshly. If they didn't reach their targets, they were deemed wreckers or saboteurs. Many even appeared in the show trials.

The other main focus of the five-year plans was collectivization. Russia was very agriculturally dependent, but methods were outdated and basic. They needed to increase output for the growing urban populations and to increase grain output which they could sell abroad to earn currency to fund industrialisation. To make this possible, Stalin needed to modernise methods and make mechanisation widespread.

To do all of this Stalin proposed the collectivisation of Russia. This was a process that would turn all the individual farms into big, state-owned, collective farms. Each collective farm or kolkhoz had 50 to 100 families working on it. However, the peasants resisted the collectivisation and this was Russia's next great challenge.

Stalin acted aggressively in response to the peasants, particularly the Kulaks (wealthier peasants), as they were seen as class enemies. The revolts continued anyway. Specially in Ukraine. Livestock was killed and revolt occurred all throughout the countryside. Troops tried to crush the resistance but to no avail. Then, Stalin resorted to one of the most bizarre acts of domestic government policy ever; he used farming against his own people. "Never has one man wage such a war on his own people."

Soviet law demanded farmers reached their quotas before taking any for themselves. Stalin continuously raised quotas, leaving the people to starve. He treated the Ukraine, "the breadbasket of the USSR", particularly harshly, raising their quotas by 44%. Eventually the famine broke the will of the people. After an estimated 6 million deaths, Stalin deemed collectivisation a success, although almost every historian today would view it as an objective failure. The famine was undoubtedly a huge challenge for the Soviet Union in a time of peace. It also wasn't until 1940 that livestock reached pre 1928 levels and the cotton grain and sugar production increased, thus making it a challenge to the actual production process too.

The great terror of the 30s was a time of unprecedented fear in all levels of Russian society. After the murder of Sergei Kirov, the NKVD took control and anyone could be imprisoned, deported or executed. At the height of it, over 1500 people were shot daily. This was challenging for Russians because of the deep paranoia, mistrust and suspicion it manifested in everyone's daily life. As NKVD members were anonymous, it wasn't uncommon for family members to turn on each other.

However, the purge also affected the Soviet Union at a time of war. This focused on Old Bolsheviks, priests, former Socialists, anyone associated with Trotsky and really anyone Stalin

**Stalin's Russia | Sample answer**

felt threatened his power. This combined with the purge of the Red Army and the Show Trials meant much of Stalin's political and military experts were dead by the time Germany invaded Russia in June 1941. The purge of the Red Army had left half of Russia's military officials dead. Unsurprisingly, this had a hugely negative effect on the Red Army and was deeply challenging for them in World War Two, especially at the beginning.

The Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression pact of 1939 was signed by both Hitler and Stalin. It was essentially a promise by both countries not to attack the other for 10 years, giving Stalin short term security. However, after Hitler was defeated by the Royal Air Force, he began Operation Barbarossa. This was his plan to invade Russia and break their agreement. Stalin ignored the British intelligence warnings of a Nazi invasion. He refused to believe Hitler would break their agreement. As such, Stalin's own stubbornness was a significant challenge to the Soviet Union.

Even after the Germans invaded Stalin remained adamant that it wasn't true. However, eventually, two weeks after they invaded, he sprung to action. The Germans proved a strong enemy and initially the Russians faced heavy defeats. Stalin intervened in several military decisions resulting in casualties, however, unlike Hitler, he learnt from these mistakes. The Soviets overcame this challenge as Stalin took a step back. The winter of 1941 hit the Germans hard, with the extreme weather conditions freezing oil tanks and giving soldiers frostbite. Then in Stalingrad in 1943 the tides turned, and the allies grew stronger. The Soviets learned from their previous challenges and mistakes and improved their tactics.

The USSR faced many challenges in times of both war and peace. Domestically, industrialisation, collectivisation and Stalin's own ruthless paranoia proved to be challenging for both the people of Russia and the state as a whole. The war brought numerous challenges, but they eventually emerged victorious. Although it came with a horrific human cost, the allies' victory in WWII was only possible due to the rapid industrialisation of Russia in the previous two decades.