

# Industrial and agricultural change in Russia 1917-85: The First Five-Year Plan

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## Teaching notes

This resource is one of a sequence of eight resources, originally planned for Edexcel's Paper 1 Option: Russia, 1917-91: from Lenin to Yeltsin. The sequence focuses on the theme 'Industrial and agricultural change, 1917-85'. Although the content of the resources is drawn from this particular specification, there is no reason why they couldn't be used to support the teaching of other similar courses, perhaps with some adaptation of the suggested activities.

**The eight resources in the sequence are:**

1. War Communism (search '25198' to find it on [Teachit History](#))
2. The New Economic Policy (search '25199')
3. **The First Five-Year Plan (this resource)**
4. Collectivisation (search '25201')
5. Soviet Industry and Agriculture in WW2 (search '25202')
6. Virgin Lands (search '25203')
7. Stagnation and the Brezhnev era (search '25204')
8. Reform under Gorbachev (search '25205')

Each resource contains a section of reading followed by some suggested tasks. These could be completed in class or as independent homework tasks.

### Background

By 1928 Joseph Stalin had emerged as the leader of the Soviet Union. He was the party's general secretary and had triumphed over his rivals, Leon Trotsky, Gregori Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev to dominate the Communist Party. In 1928 the policy of the NEP came to an end, as did the uncertainty about how long the policy was meant to last for. Stalin instituted a 'second revolution' in 1928; one which he believed would address the unfinished business of the October Revolution of 1917. In 1917 there had been a political revolution, but many Bolsheviks believed that the social and economic revolution had never been successfully implemented in order to create a socialist society. The Five-Year Plans are thought of by many historians as a 'revolution from above' where massive change came as a result of state power. Mass, state-led industrialisation, which used the coercive power of the bureaucracy and was based around fixed quotas and targets, saw Russia dramatically transformed between 1928 and 1932. The work was carried out by:

- a. workers in the towns and cities
- b. hundreds of thousands of deported Kulaks who were sent into exile
- c. prisoners sent into the gulag system.

Stalin was aware that unless Russia was industrialised, she would remain weak and poorly defended. He believed that a revolutionary state would inevitably be encircled by enemy powers and therefore it needed to be prepared, as an attack was not just possible, but inevitable.

### Urbanisation

The Communist Party hoped that industrialisation would bring about a social revolution in Russia. The mainstay of communist support came from the industrial working class, but by 1928, the workers were still a small minority in the Soviet Union compared with the peasantry. By building factories, hydroelectric dams and creating entire new cities (such as Magnitogorsk), it was hoped that millions of peasants would be drawn to the towns and cities to work and abandon the land, learning proletarian values along the way. There was a rapid expansion in the urban population, as new jobs became available and poor peasants flocked to take them. The chaotic nature of the Soviet government meant that there was no infrastructure put in place to deal with this influx and the result during the first Five-Year Plan was massive overcrowding. Few new houses were built to accommodate the new workers and a policy of 'consolidation' was enforced, where families were crammed into small apartments together.

### Sabotage

The Soviet government offered career advancement for workers, especially those who were party members. Patronage and corruption often resulted in poorly educated and unskilled members of the working class rising to senior positions. This combined with demands for massive effort in constructing new factories, roads and infrastructure led frequently to poor standards of work, workplace accidents and shortages. The regime and many of its supporters explained the setbacks and mistakes as sabotage. It was popularly believed that the promises of the revolution (a modern, technologically advanced, egalitarian society) were not being realised because someone, somewhere *must* be undermining it. Workers who were late, absent, drunk at work, made mistakes or stole, were accused of counter revolutionary activity. Factory committees of workers would interrogate and punish their comrades who did not live up to the standards of work and behaviour expected by the party and by the new culture of the Soviet Union. Workers were expected to be punctual, well dressed and if male, clean shaven. Drunkenness, bad language and anti-social behaviour were evidence of counter revolutionary thinking.



### Stakhanovites

In 1935 a coal miner, Alexei Stakhanov became a nationwide celebrity in the Soviet Union for digging 102 tons of coal in one shift. His story was given national coverage by the soviet press, who presented Stakhanov as a heroic figure and an example of everything soviet workers should aspire to be. *Pravda* and other newspapers heralded Stakhanov's achievements as evidence that a 'New Soviet Man' had developed as a result of the revolution. In the west, it was argued, workers could only be induced to work harder by offering more money or threatening them with the sack. In the USSR, workers were happy to work hard and make sacrifices in the interests of the revolution and the rest of society. A movement of model workers developed called 'Stakhanovites'. They received better wages, access to government stores where clothes, food and luxuries could be purchased and were feted by the soviet media. Some Stakhanovites even met Stalin and were rewarded with the soviet medal of labour valour. Whilst only a few workers were in the Stakhanovite movement, they inspired hundreds of thousands of others. Stakhanov and his contemporaries received letters from workers all over Russia, showering them with praise. This was partly because there was a general sense of optimism among the working class in Russia during the first Five-Year Plan, even though it coincided with a period of acute shortages and hunger. Many workers were able to endure the difficulties of the present, sure in the belief that a better future was being constructed and they were allowed to be a part of creating it.

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## Construction

Despite the food shortages and the problems that workers faced from chaotic factories and cramped apartments, the results of the first Five-Year Plan were impressive and continued into the next plan (1932-37). Between 1928 and 1937 Russian heavy industry grew dramatically:

Industry	Growth in output
coal	From 36 million tons to 130 million tons
iron	From 3 million tons to 15 million tons
oil	From 2 million tons to 29 million tons
electricity	From 5,000 million to 36,000 million kilowatts

These improvements were made possible by the use of millions of slave labourers in the gulag system, who were forced to work in horrific conditions. It was also made possible by local and regional party bosses, upon whom there was immense pressure to achieve seemingly impossible targets, and who often motivated their workers through brute force. The Soviet government looked to workers and party members to sacrifice everything in the service of production targets, as this was part of the process of 'building socialism'. Equally, those workers who were less than enthusiastic or who were not passionate about targets and quotas were soon ostracised or even arrested for their lack of revolutionary zeal.

## Public spaces

While workers in Russia's major cities might have been forced to live in over-crowded and cramped apartments, the era of the Five-Year Plans saw enormous changes to public spaces in Russian cities. In Moscow the metro system carrying millions of workers and bureaucrats to work was decorated like an ornate Tsarist palace. Chandeliers and murals decorated the large waiting areas, as the Soviet government attempted to 'democratise' high culture, ensuring the masses had access to the fine art of the Tsar's palaces. There was another motivation, however; the government hoped that people would embrace public spaces and eventually prefer them to their own private homes. Not only could people in the privacy of their own homes not be spied on by the state and by other citizens (though thin walls often made this a possibility), the act of private life itself was considered counter revolutionary. In the eyes of the government the socialist revolution meant that workers should at all times want to engage in collectivist activities and inhabit shared spaces; those that preferred their own space could be thought of as having bourgeois tendencies. In Moscow and Leningrad, old medieval streets that had grown and developed in an unplanned way were replaced with broad boulevards. Planned cities such as Magnitogorsk were built and the new urban environment had to reflect the centrally planned, seemingly efficient and well-ordered nature of Soviet life. Western visitors to the USSR were often impressed by these changes to once dirty, chaotic and 'backward' cities like Moscow. However these visitors did not see the food shortages, poverty, hunger and overcrowding that accompanied the Five-Year Plans.

## Tasks

1. What is Stalin attempting to say about Russia in Source A? What is he arguing about the need for modernisation?

### Source A

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#### Joseph Stalin to the Communist Party in 1931:

In the past we had no fatherland, nor could we have had one. But now that we have overthrown capitalism and power is in our hands, in the hands of the people, we have a fatherland, and we will uphold its independence. Do you want our socialist fatherland to be beaten and to lose its independence? If you do not want this, you must put an end to its backwardness in the shortest possible time and develop a genuine Bolshevik tempo in building up its socialist economy. There is no other way. That is why Lenin said on the eve of the October Revolution – "Either perish, or overtake and outstrip the advanced capitalist countries." We are 50 or 100 years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in 10 years. Either we do it, or we shall go under.

2. Working in pairs, create two mind maps:
  - a. the development of the first Five-Year Plan
  - b. the impact of the plan on the workers