

# Chapter 2: The USSR under Stalin, 1924-1939

## Introduction

Following **Lenin's death in 1924**, **Joseph Stalin** gradually consolidated power to become the undisputed leader of the Soviet Union. His rule saw radical **economic, political, and social transformations**, including the introduction of **collectivisation, the Five-Year Plans, and mass purges**. Stalin's dictatorship relied on **propaganda, repression, and terror**, as he sought to industrialise the USSR and eliminate all opposition. This chapter explores his rise to power, economic policies, totalitarian rule, and foreign policy.

## 1. Stalin's Rise to Power (1924-1929)

### The Leadership Struggle

- Following **Lenin's death in January 1924**, there was no clear successor.
- The main contenders for power were:
  - **Leon Trotsky**: Leader of the **Red Army**, favoured **permanent revolution**.
  - **Joseph Stalin**: General Secretary of the Communist Party, promoted "**Socialism in One Country**".
  - **Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev**: Senior Bolsheviks, initially allied with Stalin.
  - **Nikolai Bukharin**: Supported the **New Economic Policy (NEP)**.

### Stalin's Tactics

- **1924-1925**: Aligned with Zinoviev and Kamenev to remove Trotsky from the Politburo.
- **1926-1927**: Turned against Zinoviev and Kamenev, expelling them from the Party.
- **1928-1929**: Defeated Bukharin, ending the NEP and implementing radical economic policies.
- **1929**: Trotsky exiled, Stalin became undisputed leader.

## 2. Stalin's Economic Policies

### Collectivisation (1928-1940)

- Stalin **abolished private farms**, merging them into state-controlled **kolkhozy (collective farms)** and **sovkhozy (state farms)**.
- Aimed to:
  - Increase food production.
  - Control the peasantry.
  - Fund industrialisation through grain exports.

### Opposition and Consequences

- **Kulaks (wealthy peasants)** resisted collectivisation:

- Burned crops and slaughtered livestock in protest.
- Stalin launched the “**Dekulakisation**” campaign, leading to mass arrests, deportations, and executions.
- **5 million kulaks sent to gulags.**
- **Famine (1932-1933):**
  - **Grain quotas left peasants starving.**
  - **Holodomor (Ukraine):** Stalin deliberately worsened famine conditions, killing **5 million Ukrainians.**
  - **Overall famine deaths: 10 million.**
- **By 1940, over 90% of farms collectivised, but agricultural output remained low.**

### *The Five-Year Plans (1928-1941)*

- Aimed to **industrialise the USSR rapidly.**
- Organised by **Gosplan (State Planning Commission).**

### *First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932)*

- Focused on **heavy industry (coal, steel, oil, electricity).**
- Major projects: **Magnitogorsk steel plant, Dnieper Dam.**
- **Successes:**
  - Coal output **doubled.**
  - Oil production **increased by 50%.**
  - Workforce **doubled from 11 million to 22 million.**
- **Failures:**
  - Consumer goods **neglected.**
  - Factory workers faced **harsh conditions and long hours.**
  - **Falsified production reports.**

### *Second Five-Year Plan (1933-1937)*

- Continued focus on heavy industry, but **increased consumer goods production.**
- **Projects:** **Moscow Metro, Moscow-Volga Canal.**
- **Armament production increased due to growing international tensions.**

### *Third Five-Year Plan (1938-1941)*

- Shifted focus to **rearmament in preparation for WWII.**
- **Interrupted by Nazi invasion in 1941.**

## *3. Stalin's Totalitarian State*

### *The Cult of Stalin*

- Stalin promoted himself as **Lenin's rightful successor.**

- Propaganda glorified Stalin, portraying him as a genius and protector of the USSR.
- Statues, paintings, and literature praised Stalin.
- History was rewritten to exaggerate Stalin's role in the Bolshevik Revolution and Civil War.
- Textbooks removed Trotsky's contributions.

### *Censorship and Propaganda*

- Pravda (newspaper) and Izvestia controlled all news.
- Artists and writers had to promote socialist realism.
- Dissenters were arrested or executed.

## *4. The Great Purge (1936-1938) and Show Trials*

### *Causes of the Purge*

- Stalin feared opposition within the Party and military.
- Used Sergei Kirov's assassination (1934) as a pretext to eliminate rivals.

### *Key Features*

- **1936-1938:** Stalin launched mass arrests, executions, and forced confessions.
- **Show Trials:** Public trials of Bolsheviks, forced to confess to **treason and sabotage**.
  - **Trial of the Sixteen (1936):** Zinoviev, Kamenev executed.
  - **Trial of the Seventeen (1937):** Trotsky's supporters executed.
  - **Trial of the Twenty-One (1938):** Bukharin, Rykov executed.
- **Red Army Purge (1937-1938):**
  - **35,000 officers purged**, including Marshal Tukhachevsky.
  - **Weakened Soviet military** before WWII.
- NKVD (secret police) led purges, headed by Yezhov, later executed himself.
- Gulags (labour camps) housed millions of political prisoners.
- Overall deaths: estimated 1.2 million executions, 13 million sent to gulags.

## *5. Stalin's Foreign Policy (1924-1939)*

### *Isolation and Diplomacy (1924-1933)*

- USSR joined League of Nations (1934).
- Formed alliances with France and Czechoslovakia (1935).
- Supported Republicans in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

### *Nazi-Soviet Pact (1939)*

- Signed Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Nazi Germany.
- Agreed to divide Poland and Eastern Europe.
- Gained time to strengthen USSR before WWII.

## *Conclusion*

- Stalin **eliminated all rivals** to secure power.
- His economic policies **transformed the USSR into an industrial superpower** but caused massive suffering.
- **The Great Purge and Show Trials eliminated opposition**, creating a **climate of fear**.
- His foreign policy shifted from isolation to **strategic alliances**, ultimately leading to WWII.

## *Key Terms*

- **Socialism in One Country:** Stalin's policy of building communism in the USSR rather than worldwide.
- **Collectivisation:** The merging of private farms into state-controlled collectives.
- **Five-Year Plans:** Economic policies to industrialise the USSR.
- **Gulag:** Labour camps for political prisoners.
- **Show Trials:** Public trials where Bolsheviks confessed under duress.
- **Great Purge:** Stalin's campaign of mass arrests and executions.
- **Nazi-Soviet Pact (1939):** Non-aggression treaty between Hitler and Stalin.