Introduction

The 1930s saw a remarkable transformation in the Soviet Union. At the end of the 1920s the Soviet Union remained a backward state in comparison with other major powers. Twelve years of Communist rule had restored the country to roughly the same economic position that she had occupied in 1913. This may perhaps be regarded as a great achievement in view of the appalling cost of the First World War and the following period of civil war. It was not, however, what Russian Marxists hoped to achieve. From 1928 onwards the cautious pragmatism of the NEP years was thrown aside and the whole population was plunged into a concerted drive to industrialize and modernize the USSR – a 'Second Revolution.' Lenin's revolution had been to put the Communist Party in power; Stalin's would build the Communist Utopia in the Soviet Union.

Note

Pragmatism means that there was less emphasis on ideology and more on gaining practical results.

The methods chosen to carry out this 'Second Revolution' were extraordinary. The peasants were driven into collective farms, largely against their will. So-called *kulaks* were shot or driven into exile in an effort to create a classless, socialist society in the countryside and modernize the primitive state of Soviet agriculture. Meanwhile, three Five Year Plans set impossible targets for industrial enterprises. Huge power plants, new canals and railways, vast new industrial complexes were all constructed from scratch, often in the most inhospitable climate and terrain. In order to complete at least partially these great transformations, the party believed a new culture with different attitudes had to be built. Those who did not actively support the new objectives set for the Soviet people were now seen as 'enemies of the people,' whether they were party members or not. The secret police, the OGPU or later NKVD, filled the labour camps which appeared across the Soviet Union with those who were regarded as an obstacle to socialist progress.

Key questions

- Why and how were the farms of the USSR collectivized?
- How successful were the collective farms?
- Why and how did the USSR become more industrialized?
- How successful was the industrialization drive in the USSR?

Although historians disagree about many of these questions, what is not in doubt is the turmoil into which the country was plunged and the suffering which the population had to bear.

Building socialism in the countryside?

As we have seen in the last chapter the NEP was in crisis in the late 1920s. The most urgent problem was to provide food for the cities.

Facts and figures

There were two types of collective farm. In both land was pooled and worked together.

1. A ***sovkhoz*** was run directly by the State. The peasants were paid wages like factory workers.
2. A ***kolkhoz*** was organized by the farmers themselves. They were given a share of the surplus production of the collective farm after the State had taken its quota.

Stalin favoured the *sovkhoz*, but most farms were of the *kolkhoz* type.

Why were farms collectivized?

1. To achieve socialism in the countryside

From 1925 onwards, private traders and entrepreneurs in the cities and industrialized regions had to face increasingly harsh taxes and even arrest. It was, therefore, a growing contradiction to allow private farmers greater freedom to make profits in the countryside. For all members of the party socialized farming meant collective farms. Lenin had set up the first of these, hoping other peasants would follow the example of their success. However, less than 2 per cent of farmers were in collective farms in 1928, and even 'Right' Communists, like Bukharin, were disappointed by this. The 1927 Party Congress approved a target of 20 per cent of farmers to be in collectivized farms by 1933.

2. To control and transform 'the backward peasantry'

For many forward-thinking Russians the peasantry had always represented the biggest obstacle to progress. Alexander II, Witte and Stolypin had all tried to modernize agriculture and change the ingrained habits of the conservative peasantry. For Communists the desire to transform rural life was even stronger. The peasantry was seen as primitive and uneducated. The proletariat was the class of the future. There was only 1 Communist in every 125 peasant households. Peasant ignorance, they believed, made them easy prey to *kulak* propaganda and religious superstition. They would always be, therefore, a potential source of opposition to the Communist regime.

After collectivization the party hoped to control the peasants, and to 'raise' by education their cultural level to support Communist ideals.

3. To solve the problems of food supply

In 1927 and 1928 the government had great difficulty in purchasing grain to feed the urban population. It resorted to seizing grain, just as Lenin's government had done during the years of civil war. As Marxists, who believed all history was determined by class struggle, the Communist government expected to be opposed by its class enemies. Since the harvest had been good, for them the only sensible explanation of food shortages was that grain was being hoarded by the better-off peasants, the *kulaks*. Collectivization would mean that the State would manage agriculture and guarantee the food supply in future.

4. To raise revenue for industrialization

The new, larger collectivized farms, bringing economies of scale and using modern equipment, would produce more. Large surpluses would then be sold abroad to pay for the import of machinery to build an industrialized society.

5. To destroy political rivals

In 1928 Stalin shared power with the Right: Bukharin, Tomsky and Rykov. A move to forced collectivization would isolate them and enable Stalin to emerge as the dominant figure in the Soviet Union.

6. To prove the success of Communism to the Russian people and the rest of the world

Source 3

We are leaving behind us our age old backward Russian past and when we motorize the USSR and put the peasant on a tractor, then let them try to catch us up – those respected Capitalists with their much vaunted civilization.

Stalin in 1929

How was collectivization achieved?

Policy towards the peasants did not change immediately. At first the party hoped for voluntary collectivization. It drifted toward forcing peasants into collective farms over a period of two years. It began with the grain crisis you have read about in the previous chapter.

Timeline

Nov 1929 25,000-ers into the villages
Dec 1929 Attack on *kulaks* begins
Jan 1930 All-out collectivisation drive begins
March 1930 Stalin's 'Dizzy with success' speech
1932 Peasants allowed to trade 'The Five Stalks Law'
Internal passports introduced
1932–4 Famine in principal grain areas
1935 New *Kolkhoz* Charter

Note

Komsomol was the CPSU youth movement and consisted of over 2 million 14–28-year-olds in 1928.

Note

This was called the Urals-Siberian method because this is the area where it was used widely. Stalin was the Central Committee member closely associated with it.

Stage One: Emergency measures

In January 1928 the Politburo voted unanimously for 'emergency measures'. In practice this meant confiscating grain by force. Historian Stephen Cohen called this 'a pivotal event,' signalling an end to the *smychka*, the partnership between workers and peasantry. In the summer of 1928 over 100,000 party workers, Komsomol members and factory workers went out into the farms to help with the harvest.

Stage Two: The Urals-Siberian method

This method of collecting grain was approved by the Central Committee in November 1928 and used during the 1928–1929 winter. Village meetings were called and the poorer peasants were asked to point out those *kulak* families hoarding grain. They were offered a reward of 25 per cent of any grain confiscated. This produced some of the grain needed for the cities, but was not a permanent solution to the problems of a secure grain supply in the future.

Stage Three (i): Forced collectivization

In summer 1929 the Collective Farm Centre was set up. Some regional party committees announced plans to collectivize farms in their areas. The Central Committee in November decided on 'a further speed-up of the processes of collectivization' and 25,000 more party workers from the factories were sent into the villages to organize the peasants into collective farms. In January 1929 Stalin had called for the collectivization of all grain-producing areas by autumn 1930. There was now a headlong rush to collectivize and almost 60 per cent of all farms were collectivized between November 1929 and March 1930. In theory peasants were supposed to vote for the creation of collective farms, but there was widespread opposition. Individuals who objected to the new policy ran great risks: in particular of being branded a *kulak* and transported or worse.

Source 4

▶ Peasants voting to join the collective farm.

■ Think about

- How enthusiastic were the peasants in this picture about entering the collective farm?
- Why were they voting for collectivization?

Stage Three (ii): Dekulakization

Source 5

The world had seemed simple to me. The worker was the ideal, the repository of the highest morality. The *kulak* was a beast, an evil-doer, a criminal.

From the memoirs of General P. Grigorenko, exiled to the USA after Stalin's death

For the party the richer peasants had always been the biggest obstacles to collectivization, and therefore they had to be removed. A separate Politburo committee was set up to make recommendations about the *kulaks*. It divided them into three categories. The most dangerous *kulaks* were to be imprisoned or shot. Category two were to be transported to the North or beyond the Urals. The third group was to be given marginal (poor) land outside the collective farms. Targets were set for dekulakization for each district and village. Peasants were again invited to denounce the *kulaks* in their village. The number of *kulak* families affected by these measures was over 1 million. Probably about one-third of these were transported, according to the historian L. Viola.

Quotation

We must break down the resistance of the *kulaks* and deprive this class of its existence. We must eliminate the *kulaks* as a class. We must smash the *kulaks*...we must strike at the *kulaks* so hard as to prevent them rising to their feet again.

Stalin to the Party Congress in December 1929

Stage Three (iii): Peasant opposition

Although the concept of *kulak* made sense in Marxist theory, it was almost meaningless in terms of the realities of village life. The party assumed that 3 per cent of the peasants were *kulaks*, about 1 million families. Quotas of *kulak* families to be identified were set for each area, but on the ground so-called *kulak* families were difficult to identify. At first there were no definitions for party workers to follow. When the orders finally arrived, they were often found to fit no members of the village. Villages had a complex web of inter-relationships. Richer and poorer families worked together, prayed together, and married each other. 'We have no *kulaks* here' was a common reply when the collectivization squads arrived in villages.

Quotation

Kulak status was in the eye of the beholder.

L. Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin*, 1996

It did not stop many brigades from realizing their quotas, as V. Kravchenko remembered in *I Chose Freedom* published in Britain in 1947.

Source 6

So this was the 'liquidation of the *kulaks* as a class!' A lot of simple peasants being torn from their native soil, stripped of all their worldly goods, and shipped to some distant lumber camps or irrigation works. For some reasons most of the families were left behind...As I stood there, I heard a woman shouting in an unearthly voice...The woman, her hair streaming, held a flaming sheaf of grain in her hands...She tossed the burning sheaf onto the thatched roof of the house. 'Infidels! Murderers! We worked all our lives for our house. You won't have it. The flames will have it!'

Think about

- What is Kravchenko's attitude to dekulakization?

Some of the collectivization brigades interpreted their briefs very widely, and tried to collectivize all peasant possessions and property, including goats, chickens, tools and gardens. Many brigades were accompanied by youngsters from the League of the Militant Godless, who also set about attacking the churches, burning icons, taking down church bells and deporting the priests. There was a determined effort to break the culture of the peasants. Churches were transformed into barns, socialist clubs and libraries. Holidays based on the Church calendar were renamed: Easter was now 'The day of the first furrow', the 'Day of Elijah' was now the 'Day of Electrification.' Even villages were renamed 'The Red Ploughman, Red Dawn etc.

Facts and figures

The League of the Militant Godless was set up in 1925 to destroy religious belief. Marxists regarded all religion as ignorance and superstition. Many of its members were also members of Komsomol, the youth branch of the Communist Party.

This attack on culture, and the deaths accompanying it, reminded many peasants of the Coming of the Antichrist with his Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The Communist government was linked to the Antichrist. Priests preached that collectivization was against God's will. It was also associated in the peasant mind with immorality – there were widespread rumours about sharing wives and beds.

Source 7

The looting of the Simonov Monastery by Red Army soldiers in 1927.

Think about

- Why do you think this photograph was taken?
- In what ways is this photograph useful to a historian?

There was an explosion of opposition in many areas of the Soviet Union. There were individual acts of terror and murder against collectivizers. More common was spontaneous village action to prevent the removal of a *kulak* family, the disruption of collective farm meetings, breaking open farm stores to take back their grain and tools. Women took the lead in many of these actions, and it was more difficult for the brigades and OGPU troops to use violence against them. Many peasants slaughtered and ate or sold their animals rather than hand them over to the new collective farms. March 1930, in L. Viola's words, saw 'a massive peasant rebellion.'

Quotation

The successes of our collective farm policy are due...to the fact that it rests on the voluntary character of the collective farm movement... Collective farms should not be imposed by force.

Stalin in *Pravda* on 2 March 1930

Stage Four: The party retreats

On 2 March 1930 *Pravda* carried an article written by Stalin under the headline 'Dizzy with success'. This article explained that some party workers had been too enthusiastic and had forced the pace. They were criticized for collectivizing village livestock, closing churches and 'bureaucratic methods'. The article called for the return of unjustly dekulakized peasants and a purge of overzealous officials. The paper sold out quickly and was read throughout the countryside. From a total of 60 per cent of peasants collectivized in February 1930 the figure fell to about 20 per cent by August as peasants left the *kolkhozy* in droves.

Why this sudden retreat? The regime was certainly shocked by the widespread opposition. If the spring sowing of cereal crops was not completed, rationing and perhaps starvation would be inevitable. As events were quickly to show, the party had not abandoned its policies.

Stage Five: Collectivization resumed

As soon as the grain was collected in from the good harvest of 1930, collectivization began afresh. By 1931 more than half of peasant families were in *kolkhozy* again. By 1937 the figure had reached 93 per cent. This time many peasants were allowed to keep small plots and some of their animals. Farms were controlled through a series of motor-tractor stations (MTS) set up all over

the country. Each MTS covered about 40 farms. This organization distributed seed and collected the grain. It also decided how much a farm could keep for its own subsistence and how much money should be given as payment to collective farmers. This was very little. Most farmers were now worse off than their fathers and grandfathers had been as serfs.

However, a few collectives, called 'Potemkin Villages', received extra government help. They acted as the showcases for collectivization, appearing in the newsreels and being shown to foreign visitors.

Stage Six: Famine 1932–1934

In January 1933 Stalin spoke thus to the Central Committee:

Source 8

The collective farm regime has destroyed pauperism and poverty in the village...Under the old regime the peasants were working for the benefit of the landlords, *kulaks* and speculators...working and leading a life of hunger.

As Stalin spoke these words, large areas of the Soviet Union were in the grip of famine. Kravchenko described what he found when he stopped overnight in a peasant hut in the Ukraine.

Source 9

Our hostess was a pleasant young peasant woman. All feeling...seemed to have been drained from her starved features. They were a mask of living death...'I will not tell you about the dead,' she said...'the half-dead, the nearly dead, are even worse. There are hundreds of people bloated with hunger. I don't know how many die every day. Many are so weak that they no longer come out of their houses. A wagon goes round...to pick up the corpses. We've eaten everything we could lay hands on...The trees have been stripped of their bark...and the horse manure has been eaten...We fight over it. Sometimes there are whole grains in it.'

V. Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom*, 1947

Think about

Kravchenko became a senior Communist Party official who later defected to the West. His book *I Chose Freedom* was published in the West in 1947.

▶ What value do you place on his testimony?

Families died lying outside warehouses full of grain but under armed guard. The exact numbers of those who died of famine is still a matter of debate, as with all figures from the Communist period, but 4–5 million seems likely. The deaths were ironically concentrated in the richest farming areas, the Ukraine and the Volga regions.

Why did such a severe famine affect the richest farming districts in the Soviet Union?

Source 10

	1928	*1930*	*1931*	*1932*	*1933*	*1934*	*1935*
Grain harvest	73.3	83.5	69.5	69.6	68.4	67.6	75.0
State procurement	10.8	22.2	22.8	18.8	23.3	26.3	28.4
Exports	0.3	4.8	5.1	1.8	1.7	0.8	1.5
Remainder	62.5	61.3	46.7	50.8	45.1	41.3	46.6

(All figures are in millions of tons)

Facts and figures

'The Five Stalks Law' 1932

Savage penalties were imposed on *kolkhozniks* who stole or damaged *kolkhoz* property. Farmers were arrested for 'hairdressing' – cutting individual ears of corn in the fields. Hence the popular title for the law.

Facts and figures

To disguise the grain shortages, crop yields were calculated in biological yields. Yields were calculated on crops in the field, rather than crops actually harvested. They were an overestimate by about 20 per cent, compared to the yield.

Think about

- Why might a supposedly impartial western journalist have described the Ukraine in this way when we now know millions were dead or dying?

The harvests of 1931 and for the next three years were poor because of the weather. These would have been difficult years under any economic system. They became impossible because of the heavy procurements collectivized farms had to hand over to the State. Since the urban population had grown from 26 to 40 million between 1930 and 1932, the higher procurements seemed essential to the government.

The consistent shortages in the farms year after year meant disaster for millions. Peasants were forced to give up the grain they needed for their own families. If they stole from the fields they were punished. Some collective farms collapsed because no one was left to work them. Robert Conquest sees this as a deliberate policy to destroy any Ukrainian national feeling. He also calls it 'Stalin's revenge on the peasants'.

Officially the famine was denied. It was made an offence punishable by five years in prison simply to refer to it. The State took severe measures to ensure that no starving peasants were able to buy train tickets to the cities. OGPU officials checked all the trains. Even some westerners visiting the Soviet Union were persuaded that all was well on the collective farms. Walter Durranty wrote in September 1933:

Source 11

I have just completed a 200 mile automobile trip through the heart of the Ukraine and can say positively that the harvest is splendid and all talk of famine is ridiculous....Collectivization may now be said to have been established on a solid foundation, with enormous benefits to the Russian countryside.

W. Durranty, *Russia Reported*, 1934

There were dramatic falls in the number of animals in the Soviet Union. Many peasants chose to kill or sell their animals rather than hand them over to the collective farms. With grain supplies so low, they did not have enough to feed them through the winter. The drop in the number of horses was probably critical, since horses were needed for the many tasks of agricultural work. The new tractors were not plentiful enough to fill the gap and were expensive to hire – perhaps only 4 per cent of what was needed.

Source 12

	1928	*1929*	*1930*	*1931*	*1932*	*1933*	*1934*	*1935*
Cattle	70.5	76.1	52.5	47.9	40.7	38.4	42.4	49.3
Pigs	26.0	20.4	13.6	14.4	11.6	12.1	17.4	22.6
Sheep and Goats	146.7	147.0	108.8	77.7	52.1	50.2	51.9	61.1
Horses		34.0				17.0		

(Figures in millions of head)

Stage Seven: Consolidation

In 1935 a special Party Congress was called to approve a new model charter for collective farms. This laid down rules for the payment of *kolkhozniks* and for the relations between the *kolkhoz* and the MTS. It also formally legalized private plots of about half a hectare or less for each *kolkoznik* household and recognized the right of every household to own one cow, one sow, four sheep and an unrestricted number of poultry and rabbits. The result of this charter can be seen in the following figures for January 1938:

Source 13

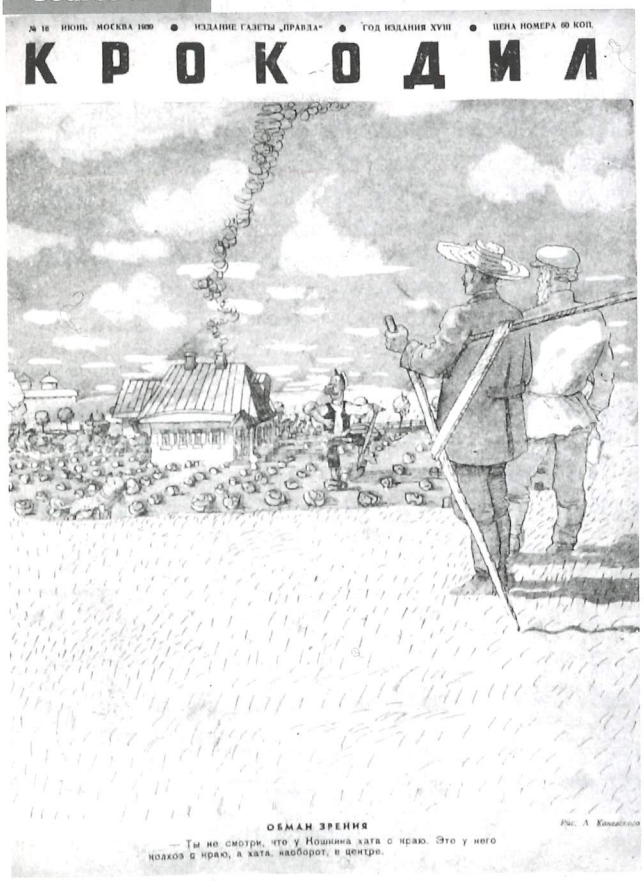
	State/collective farms	*Private farms*
Cows	5.5	17.2
Sheep and goats	29.3	37.3
Pigs	8.8	16.9

(Figures in millions of head)

The State and collective farms continued to produce low crop yields compared to the private plots. These by the end of the 1930s were producing the vast bulk of the nation's eggs, milk and meat. Most of this was contracted to the State, but any surplus could be sold on a restricted free market to provide income for the hard-pressed peasants.

Document exercise: views of collective farms

Source A



A cartoon showing a peasant working on his private plot, being watched by two peasants from the collective farm.

Source B

Look back at Source 9

Source C

A joke from the 1930s

Stalin complained to a colleague in the Kremlin that his office was infested by mice and that nothing, including traps and poison, had succeeded in getting rid of them.

'No problem!' the colleague replied. 'Just declare that your office is a collective farm. Half the mice will run away and the other half will die of starvation!'