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STALIN'S NEW INITIATIVES

On December 3, 1927, Stalin gave a lengthy address to the Party congress about the future of the New Economic Policy (NEP). He began by reviewing the errors of the opposition, whom he accused of having too little faith in Leninism. He said Trotsky was incorrectly advocating the forced transformation of light industry to make up for what was called a "goods famine." What was needed was a revolution in heavy industry (manufacturing and military goods).

Bukharin was now faulted for encouraging the kulaks to "enrich themselves." Stalin claimed that the NEP had reached its limits, and more had to be done to cut the kulaks down to size. Agricultural production was falling behind countries like the United States and Canada. The way out was "to transform the small and scattered peasant farms into large farms based on cultivation of the land in common, to adopt collective cultivation guided by a new and higher technique."[1]

Applause greeted Stalin's speech, which concluded: "We are in the process of moving from the restoration of industry and agriculture to the reconstruction of the entire national economy on a new technical foundation, at a time when the building of Socialism is no longer simply

a prospect but a living, practical matter, which calls for the overcoming of massive internal and external difficulties."[2]

FIVE-YEAR PLAN

Stalin wanted to end the NEP without causing panic among peasants afraid of a return to the cruel days when government squads simply requisitioned surpluses. He thus had to make the argument that it was crucial to the health and security of the country that the Party take this change of course. An opportunity that came his way was a "war scare" in 1927, one he deliberately exaggerated to drive home the point that the USSR was vulnerable to the hostile West.

In May, Britain broke off diplomatic relations because the Soviets abetted British strikers and looked like they wanted to foment revolution. There was friction with France, but when Foreign Minister Georgy Chicherin returned home in the summer, he was surprised to learn that war was in the air. Stalin played it up as it gave credence to his demand to industrialize the country as rapidly as possible, to focus on heavy industry, and to drop the NEP in favor of a far more Communistic five-year plan.[3]

He also took advantage of political developments at home. For example, local officials in Ukraine during the 1920s blamed the failures of the NEP on what they called bourgeois "specialists" (*spetsy*). Show trials of these "wreckers" (*vrediteli*) proved to be popular because they shifted the blame for shortfalls away from workers and onto the shoulders of management and trade-union leadership.[4] In late 1927 a secret police official and old comrade of Stalin's from the North Caucasus informed him about a "wrecking conspiracy" involving fifty-three engineers from the town of Shakhty and the nearby Donbass in Ukraine. On March 10, 1928, the secret police announced they had uncovered the plot.[5]

Stalin used the opportunity to stage a mass trial in Moscow in May–June. Like Lenin he believed in the educative value of such rituals, which, to be successful, had to reveal a credible threat by providing a story line plausible to ordinary people. Such trials unmasked the double-dealers and demonstrated treason, and to that end, the event had to

be stage-managed carefully.[6] Stalin became directly involved and appointed Andrei Vyshinsky judge of a "special judicial presence," not a regular court. The wreckers were charged with sabotaging their factories on behalf of foreign governments. The object of the show trial, which was held in the former Moscow Club of the Nobility, was to attract publicity and teach. Most of the accused were given prison terms; the foreigners (Germans) were released; and of the eleven sentenced to death, five were eventually shot.[7]

The Shakhty trial was supposed to mobilize the country behind the government by demonstrating the imminent threat of war. The message was that enemies within "wore masks"; that is, they were not who they appeared to be, and everyone had to be on the lookout. The miners in the Donbass were evidently convinced about the "conspiracy" and, when the details came out, covered trolleys with the slogan "Long live the GPU!"[8] The latter was the latest name (used since 1922) for the Cheka.

Stalin sounded distinctly warlike at the July meetings of the Central Committee in 1928. Everywhere there were "fronts" to be taken—the "grain front," the "planning front," even the "philosophy front." The refrain was that enemies of the revolution were not going to give up, and the closer they came to defeat, the more desperate they would grow.[9]

"Foreign threats" justified the need to fight on the "industrial front." Whereas imperial Russia's industry was located mainly in the western, European parts of the empire—with the notable exception of Baku in the Caucasus to the south—Stalin now opted, for defense reasons, to situate new industry east of the Ural mountain range. This decision proved important when the Nazi invasion later overran the western parts of the country.

Recent findings in Soviet archives show that in 1929–30, Stalin did indeed take these "threats" seriously, even if they seem far-fetched today. His letters dealing with the show trials indicate that he believed the conspiracies. He was insistent that the trials and punishments be published in the press.[10]

Stalin's policies called on the peasants to provide plentiful grain at cheap prices. The peasants would have to pay a "tribute," that is, offer surpluses to be sold abroad so the government could pay for new technology.[11] Stalin wrote to Molotov on August 29, 1929, "If we can beat this grain thing, then we'll prevail in everything, in both domestic and foreign policies."[12]

The Soviet blueprint for constructing socialism was incorporated in the first Five-Year Plan (*piatiletka*) that began in October 1928 but was only adopted by the Sixteenth Party Conference in April 1929. This plan was discussed as far back as 1925. In its final version, it visualized a kind of second Russian Revolution that would overcome all the enduring problems plaguing the country since Peter the Great.

The Five-Year Plan represented the first attempt by a major power to transform all aspects of society and economy. The only other example mentioned in the literature was Germany's "war Socialism" during the First World War to organize industry and reconcile the interests of labor and management. The new Soviet strategy was much more far-reaching and based on the principle of militant anticapitalism and radical social revolution.[13]

THE PLANNED SOCIETY

In November 1928, Stalin asserted that the Soviet Union had "overtaken and outstripped the advanced capitalist countries by establishing a new political system. That is good. But it is not enough. To secure the final victory of Socialism in our country, we must also overtake and outstrip these countries technically and economically. If we do not do this, we shall find ourselves forced to the wall."[14]

The plan touched all aspects of social and cultural life and enunciated specific goals for industrialization "to catch and overtake" the West. The aim was to surpass capitalism's per capita output; to make greater technological advances; to give priority to heavy industry, rather than consumer goods; to raise the standard of living, including providing people access to better education, health care, and welfare; and to secure the country against foreign invaders by locating much of the new development in areas less vulnerable to attack.

Sergo Ordzhonikidze, the commissar of heavy industry, admitted the challenges were daunting for a "country of the wooden plough." The bitter pill to swallow was that the Soviets, like Peter the Great, would have to import experts and borrow technology from the West.

Large American firms, among them the Austin Company, which had just finished an enormous plant for General Motors, signed contracts to

build even bigger facilities in the Soviet Union. On August 23, 1929, Austin agreed to construct a gigantic factory complex and new industrial city at Nizhni Novgorod on the Volga. It was a mammoth undertaking by any standard. The plant was designed to produce over 100,000 vehicles per year. Austin created an entire system so they could be made in one place from blueprint to finished product. To provide for every need of the sixty thousand and more workers, a new city was created. The *New York Times Magazine* published a feature story on the project called "Communism Builds Its City of Utopia."[15]

The Ford Motor Company signed a contract on May 31, 1929, to produce Model A cars and Model AA pickup trucks, with a goal to turn out thirty thousand cars and seventy thousand trucks per year. Initially, Soviet workers would assemble American-made parts until Ford technicians trained Soviets to manufacture parts, as in Nizhni Novgorod. Other American companies were involved in building tractor factories in Stalingrad and Kharkov.[16]

Henry Ford was criticized at home for helping Communists. He responded that getting people to work was the main thing. "The adoption of high wages, low prices, and mass production in all countries is only a matter of time," he declared. "Instead of reducing our foreign markets, it will serve to define them."[17]

One of the spectacular projects put together with the help of the West was the new steel complex at Magnitogorsk, a brand-new city built from the ground up. Everything, from blast furnaces, sources of energy, transportation, and so on, was fashioned as a set piece, but on a grand scale and constructed as quickly as possible. The contract went to Arthur McKee & Co. of Cleveland, Ohio, which was shocked to learn it had to deliver the plan in two months. The engineers were doubly dismayed when they finally got to the construction site: two-thirds of the workers had no previous industrial experience and no skills to speak of, and a good 30 percent were illiterate. Nonetheless, the project, situated on the eastern side of the Ural Mountains in Siberia, was completed in record time and opened on February 1, 1932, to great fanfare by Mikhail Kalinin.

A sense of the difficulties faced by Soviet industry may be gathered from the fact that the first freight shipments arrived in Magnitogorsk from Moscow after a seventy-day trip. But the new "Socialist city" pointed the way to the future and was the kind of project perfectly suited to Stalin's gargantuan visions. It was a prime example of the sixty

or more towns created out of nothing during the first Five-Year Plan. The new metropolis was to demonstrate all the Communist virtues, that is, planned and modern. Making these communities really work—like the tractor factory city of Chelyabinsk, the "Chicago of Siberia"—was easier said than done. Who really knew how to plan a complete city? The ambition to create them was part of the utopian quest but driven also by fears of being overrun by the capitalists, as well as by dreams of showing them up.[18]

Under the heading "Year of the Great Breakthrough" (*perlom*), Stalin gave a first review of the Five-Year Plan for *Pravda* on November 3, 1929. The occasion was to celebrate victories on various fronts on the anniversary of the Russian Revolution. The justification for the intense industrialization drive was couched in typically military language:

> The past year was a year of great *change* on all the fronts of Socialist construction. The key to this change has been, and continues to be, an unrelenting *offensive* of Socialism against the capitalist elements in town and country. This offensive has already brought us a number of decisive *successes* in the Socialist reconstruction of our national economy. We may, therefore, conclude that our Party made good use of our retreat during the first stages of the New Economic Policy and that we are thus able, in the subsequent stages, to organize the *change* and to launch a *successful offensive* against the capitalist elements.

After outlining the growth of industry and the strides taken to collectivize agriculture, he asserted that the Soviet Union was finally making progress:

> We are advancing rapidly along the path of industrialization to Socialism, leaving behind the old "Russian" backwardness. We are becoming a country of metal, automobiles, tractors. And when we have put the USSR on an automobile, and the muzhik [common peasant] on a tractor, let the worthy capitalists, who brag so much about their "civilization," try to overtake us! We shall see which countries may then be called backward and which ones advanced.[19]

Stalin was by no means alone in his drive to transform the country. Quite apart from those in the upper echelons of the Party apparatus, he

won the support of many educators, engineers, and administrators well down the line.

The first Five-Year Plan was accompanied by its own "cultural revolution," which was above and beyond the kind of sweeping transformation originally envisaged by the Bolsheviks. Taking their cue from the Shakhty case, the changes in 1928–31 called for purges of government offices and institutions of higher learning to root out ubiquitous wreckers. Shakhty and other show trials in 1930 were designed to shake up "bourgeois" specialists and get the technical intelligentsia behind the industrialization drive. The show trials and purges cleared out those sympathetic to the right and made room for those better disposed toward Stalin. These trials were the first "offensives" on the "cultural front," the aims of which included transforming every worker and backward peasant into the proud "new man."

At the end of the 1920s the Soviet Union, with a total population of around 150 million, was still overwhelmingly rural, with only one-fifth classified as urban. A mere 57 percent of the population (aged nine to forty-nine) were counted as literate in the 1926 census, but even that figure probably was overly optimistic.[20]

The cultural revolution sought to create a new intelligentsia, one drawn from the working class, whose entrance into higher education was encouraged. The numbers enrolled jumped from 160,000 in 1927–28 to 470,000 in 1932–33, but as always, care has to be taken with the (often inflated) statistics. The drive opened doors for a new generation of intellectuals and political leaders, people like Leonid Brezhnev—future leader of the post-Stalinist Soviet Union—who rose to prominence during the 1930s. While the offspring of poor families were given a chance to move upward, the other side of the coin was that countless individuals were destined to become superfluous because their parents happened to be "former people," such as members of the bourgeoisie, nobility, or clergy.[21]

ASSAULT ON THE COUNTRYSIDE

In the autumn of 1927 a foreign Communist in Moscow remarked that something had changed from an earlier visit. There was "no meat, no

cheese, no milk" in the stores, and the sale of bread was irregular.[22] At the turn of the year 1927–28, the secret police reported numerous "anti-Soviet manifestations" across the country that could be traced to grain procurement problems and a "goods famine"—or shortages of supplies. People in some areas like Ukraine were led to believe the Jews—that is, "the Yids and the government"—had hidden various items "in order to cheat the peasants later." Kulaks and others were supposedly trying to utilize the discontent to get rid of cooperatives and other Socialist institutions.[23] Nearly everywhere in the summer of 1928 there were breadlines and rationing.

Early in 1928, Stalin sent close associates to key areas to assess the situation and speed up food deliveries. Lazar Kaganovich went to Ukraine, Anastas Mikoyan to the North Caucasus, and Molotov to the Urals. In mid-January, Stalin spent three weeks in Siberia and the Urals, where he browbeat local officials at every stop. He cajoled and threatened, demanding that they use whatever means necessary, including violence, to get food needed for workers and the cities. He was behind the unanimous decision of the Politburo that "extraordinary measures" had to be used.

This ruthless approach became known as the "Ural-Siberian method" of obtaining the grain. Stalin demanded officials use articles 105 (on trade violations) and 107 (on withholding grain) of the criminal code to prosecute "kulak speculators" and others. The campaign employed radical Communists and workers from the city and doled out rewards to poor peasants who informed on the better-off kulaks and then shared in the spoils.[24]

One historian describes the ripple effects of these campaigns as follows:

> Rumors of the most alarming kind began to spread among the population; it was said that there would be famine, that war and the fall of the Soviet regime were imminent. Violence or the threat of violence against Party activists became an everyday occurrence. From Kherson, Melitopol, Semipalatinsk and other regions, came reports of fires, the looting of food from shops and warehouses, civil disorder and attempts to prevent the authorities from taking grain from the agricultural regions. Public discontent in the towns and villages found its expression in riots and demonstrations against the authorities.[25]

Repression was deployed against the slightest signs of resistance or what was called "kulak terror." Over one thousand such "crimes" were reported for 1929, involving everything from murder to "wrecking." For the same period "economic" and "counterrevolutionary" crimes resulted in close to thirty thousand arrests.[26] Repressing the kulaks was meant to beat them into submission and have a demonstrative effect on the entire countryside.

From early 1928, there was a sharp crackdown on small traders, those who found ways to take advantage of the NEP. Thousands of "people with sacks" (*meshochniki*) would search the countryside for food they willingly paid for at higher prices than the state offered. They would then resell these goods for tiny profits in the cities. There were also traders who hired unemployed people to queue for scarce goods, which they later resold for a profit.[27] Some of these Nepmen, so called because they took advantage of small freedoms permitted under the policy, came to be despised by the regime, which, like Stalin, regarded them as wreckers. Stalin wanted them stamped out.[28]

On his trip to Siberia, he concluded that the main cause of the grain crisis was the peasants' cultivation of small plots of land. The problem, he said, was that the practice was economically inefficient and as long as it persisted the crisis would recur. As he saw it, to cure the structural problems, farms had to be collectivized so they could afford and use modern machinery. That was Lenin's plan, he stated, and it would be "decisive for the victory of Socialism in the countryside."[29]

Collectivization of agriculture was not yet government policy, and in 1928 some in the Politburo still believed in the NEP. Bukharin, for example, wanted only to change pricing and taxation and argued that peasants would produce and sell more to the state if they could expect some gain. In the shadow of mounting grain shortages, Stalin came out against Bukharin and labeled his stance a "right opposition" that deviated from the "central line" and favored kulaks and other independent-minded peasants.

Stalin's clash with this opposition was bitter but short-lived. By April 1928, Bukharin had been defeated, and in November he was expelled from the Politburo. His fall resulted mainly from his identification with the NEP, a more liberal approach loved by many people but denounced by Party radicals. Those who favored it were now blamed for the shortages and the petty abuses of the system.

Moscow, Leningrad, and other big cities had to introduce bread rationing in the winter of 1928–29, and on February 15, 1929, the Politburo extended it to the whole country. Procurement of grain was less successful that winter than the year before, and in October 1929 rationing was established for the most important foods (such as bread, meat, butter, tea, and eggs) in some major cities and industrial areas. It was not until the beginning of 1931 that these norms were extended nationwide, but by then famine had already become a real threat.[30]

The Five-Year Plan called for a modest changeover from private to collective farming, but the transformation took on a dynamic of its own. As early as the summer of 1929, local authorities were competing with each other to see who could collectivize most. Peasants were cajoled into joining or given false promises of the advantages of belonging to a collective farm. Even so, by the time of Stalin's speech in November 1929, most of those who were collectivized came from the 30 percent or so of the peasants classified as either poor or farm laborers. The better-off were not persuaded by the propaganda.[31]

The nearly 70 percent of the remaining peasants were "middling" or better off, such as the kulaks. Like Lenin before him, Stalin resorted to terror, but this time on a greater scale than ever.

"ELIMINATING THE KULAKS AS A CLASS"

Stalin explained to Marxist students on December 27, 1929, that it was time to begin "eliminating the kulaks as a class." He claimed that a "new Socialist offensive" was necessary as all other methods of dealing with these capitalist elements had failed. It was a declaration of war on the countryside:

> During the past year we, as a Party, as the Soviet power (*a*) developed an offensive along the whole front against the capitalist elements in the countryside; (*b*) this offensive, as you know, has yielded significant, positive results. What does this mean? In a word, we have passed from the policy of *restricting* the exploiting tendencies of the kulaks to the policy of *eliminating* the kulaks as a class. We have acted on, and continue to act on, one of the decisive planks in our whole program. . . .

> An offensive against the kulaks is a serious matter and is not to be confused with declamations against the kulaks.... An offensive requires that we smash the kulaks, eliminate them as a class. Less than that would amount to mere declamation, pinpricks, phrase-mongering, certainly not a real Bolshevik offensive. To launch an offensive against the kulaks, we must make preparations and then strike, strike so hard as to prevent them from ever again rising to their feet. That is what we Bolsheviks call a real offensive. Could we have undertaken such an action, say five years or even three years ago, with any hope of success? No, we could not.[32]

The drift of the argument was that since the regime had made progress in the countryside, by creating farms and (allegedly) producing enough, the country could now afford to "eliminate the kulaks" and build Socialism. The kulaks were not identified with a specific ethnic group, but could be almost anyone.

Should kulaks be allowed to join the new kolkhozy? After all, they were known to be industrious and had skills and initiative. For Stalin the answer was a resounding no. He wanted them uprooted and did not care how. As far as he was concerned, the (alleged) production successes of the collective farms meant the Soviet Union could go beyond tinkering with restrictive measures against the kulaks to wiping them out as a class. In his view it was foolish to spend more time talking about kulaks: "When the head is cut off, you do not mourn for the hair."[33]

Fired up by Stalin, a commission led by Molotov produced a far-reaching decree, with implementation instructions, on January 30, 1930. First-category kulaks, guilty of "counterrevolutionary activities," were to be executed out of hand or sent to concentration camps and their families deported to distant parts and stripped of all property. The second category, "arch-exploiters with an innate tendency to destabilize the regime," were to be dispossessed and deported far away with their families. Finally, third-category kulaks were thought to be loyal to the regime, but in any case had to be moved out of their homes and away from "collectivized zones" and onto poor land.[34]

In keeping with the quota thinking of this era, the commission estimated that "on average" kulaks owned between 3 and 5 percent of all farms and had to be eliminated within six months, and so it set quotas for how many were to be sent to the concentration camps, exiled, and so on.

Everything was laid out, including the disposition of confiscated property, like a military campaign.[35]

The chief of the secret police, Genrikh G. Yagoda, instructed his paladins to mobilize the Chekist ranks, "which once again have a tremendous, difficult job ahead of them. . . . We are engaging in a new battle, we must wage it with minimal losses on our side. This requires a sudden, devastating strike, the force of which depends solely on our preparation and organization, and discipline."[36]

Politburo members such as Kaganovich, Mikoyan, and Molotov went into the countryside, complete with units of the secret police, on armed trains. Their scribbled notes back to the Kremlin told of resistance and, with some relish, of the need to obliterate it. But it was Stalin himself who urged on the whole process, as he pressed regional and local bosses to keep going. His commissars, embracing the murderous activity, told themselves they embodied "Party-mindedness, morality, exactingness, attentiveness, good health, knowing their business well and bull nerves." These self-aggrandizing images covered over self-indulgence, ruthlessness, and amorality.[37]

There developed an atmosphere akin to the days of the civil war. Maxim Gorky, once a voice of conscience, now hailed the cruel campaign against the peasants. He had returned to the Soviet Union in 1928 after a period of exile in the West and apparently wanted to show how Red he was. In leading newspapers and on the radio he stated the matter with brutal simplicity: "We are opposed by everything that has outlived the time set for it by history, and this gives us the right to consider ourselves again in a state of civil war. The conclusion naturally follows that if the enemy does not surrender, he must be destroyed."[38]

Each district slated for collectivization was visited by a troika of officials, which usually included the Communist Party's first secretary, a member of the secret police, and the president of the local Soviet executive committee. The troikas sometimes showed up with "lists" or relied on denunciations.

Regional authorities saw they could benefit from the large pool of "dekulakized" peasants forced off the land and into the burgeoning labor camp system. The free labor would help them fulfill quotas, and so they used these peasants, now turned into serfs, on various grand projects.[39]

Just how savage it became for the victims would take a sorrowful

book to tell. "Dekulakization brigades," sent to the countryside and in collaboration with locals, engaged in excesses every bit as dreadful as anything seen during the civil war. City radicals joined up in brigades known as the "25,000ers"—with individual representatives called "Comrade Thousander" by the peasants.

These activists were workers and young members of the Komsomol, or Communist Youth, and included many with disdain for the peasants and hatred for anyone deemed a kulak. The brigades, numbering up to 180,000 in 1930 and assisted by assorted others from trade unions, the Red Army, and the secret police, convinced themselves they had "History" on their side in the war against the kulaks, whose identity was as vague as could be. Stalin himself scribbled on a note at one point during all this: "What does kulak mean?"[40]

By 1929–30, when most peasants were already impoverished, "rich" kulaks could hardly be found, so it became enough for a family to own two samovars, or have a "status symbol," to be condemned. These goods served as "signs" of a kulak, and any peasants so identified were robbed of their every possession down to their underclothes and turned out in the streets. Local priests, resented for their religion, connections with the people, or reservations about Communism—whether expressed or not—were attacked and driven from their homes in the dead of winter.[41]

The "dekulakers" were supposed to confiscate everything and pass it along to the kolkhoz, the new collective farm, but in fact, the confiscations were little more than state-sanctioned looting. The brigades consumed much of the food and drink they found, and their campaigns involved widespread rape and all kinds of other abuses.[42]

Locals took advantage of these brigades to get rid of troublemakers, social outsiders, habitual drunks, or people who did not fit in. Rumor or hearsay that someone was a "harmful element" was sometimes enough to have the peasant deported. The attitude of some spiteful people was: "You've had a good coat on your back. Now it's our turn to wear it!"[43]

In some districts there were too few kulaks for the brigades to meet their quotas, so their wrath fell on "middle-income" peasants, who were barely removed from dire poverty. Their "crime" might be that they made "excessive visits to the church."[44]

This was man-made hell and embittered millions, who lost whatever trust they might have had in the Communist regime.

10

STALIN SOLIDIFIES HIS GRIP

The scope of the upheaval in the countryside can be estimated by looking at the numbers affected. In 1930 alone 337,563 families were dekulakized, or well in excess of a half million people. It is not clear whether these figures include those subjected to sentencing by troikas of the OGPU. A separate document for 1930 lists 179,620 individuals who were sentenced by these "courts." Of these, 10.6 percent (18,966 people) were executed; 55.3 percent (99,319) sent to a concentration camp; and the rest "exiled" (21.3 percent, or 38,179) or "banished" (4.3 percent, or 8,869). Exactly 7.9 percent (14,287) were sentenced "conditionally" and handed over to the Commissariat of Justice or "freed."[1] The data are incomplete, as some areas had not sent in reports.

In 1930 the dekulakization campaign turned the countryside upside down. Some regions—for example, the North Caucasus—went from less than 10 percent of their farms collectivized in 1929 to over 50 percent by mid-1930. Similar if not quite such dramatic changes affected the other major farming areas.[2] Even then, the pursuit of the kulaks and collectivization continued.