2 THE COLLECTIVISATION OF SOVIET AGRICULTURE

A *The need to introduce collectivisation*

Why was Soviet agriculture in need of urgent reform?

The plan to force the Soviet Union through a period of rapid industrialisation meant that money had to be found to purchase the necessary capital equipment, such as machinery, from abroad. Where was it to come from? Capitalist countries were unlikely to make loans available whilst, at home, there were few left with sufficient wealth to tax. The only alternative was to increase grain production and sell it abroad and, at the same time, increase the taxes paid by the peasantry. If the peasants resisted their grain could be requisitioned, as it had been during the period of War Communism, and in order to boost production, they could be forced into collective farms.

Lenin had always supported the collectivisation of agriculture but gradually and by argument and voluntary means. With Stalin in control, things changed rapidly. He wanted a return to Marxist principles and the Party's ideological objectives and felt it was time 'to guide peasant farming towards socialism'. Backed by the Politburo, Stalin decided to abandon Lenin's experiment in economic freedom. The problems he faced were enormous. The Soviet Union was a massive country extending to over 22 million square kilometres of land. In the east, much of this was barren tundra but elsewhere there were areas that were fertile and arable. One might ask, if the prairies of North America could produce sufficient grain to feed the people of the United States and millions besides, why not the steppes of Russia? What was wrong with Soviet agriculture? The truth was that Russian farming methods were primitive and inefficient. Machinery was seldom available, there was little knowledge of modern farming methods and the majority of smallholdings were too small to be run efficiently.

In 1928, some 75% of the Russian people were employed on the land and depended on agriculture for their living. At the top end of the scale were the prosperous kulaks and, at the other end, poor peasants struggling to grow enough for their own needs on their meagre smallholdings. However, the bulk of the peasants, over sixty-per-cent, were

neither desperately poor nor kulak-rich. They were self-sufficient, enjoyed reasonable living standards and were proudly independent. The Bolshevik leadership was mainly urban in origin and their sympathies tended to be with the industrial workers in the towns and cities and not with the peasants who they thought ideologically unreliable. Stalin knew that the peasants would resist collectivisation but there was no longer any scope for compromise. It was time to bring the peasants to order.

B *Collectivisation – the theory*

The intention was to encourage the peasants to surrender their privately run smallholdings in order to create large farms or *kolkhozee. Kolkhoz* is the abbreviated form of *kollektivnoe khozyaistwo*, a collective farm. The pooling of land and livestock meant that farming would be based on much larger units and benefit from the economies of scale – the advantages of large-scale production. These advantages include increased output without a proportionate increase in costs and a greater division of labour that would allow individual workers to specialise in one aspect of the work done. In the long run the main advantage would be cheaper production costs and consequently lower prices. Stalin also promised to set up Mechanical and Tractor Stations, MTS, to make tractors and agricultural equipment available on hire. The peasants would surrender their independence to become wage-labourers. Families would live in village communities and eventually benefit from improved amenities – nurseries, schools, hospitals and clinics. In addition to collective farms, it was also intended to set up state farms or *sovkhozes.* These, described by Martin McCauley as 'factories without a roof', were established in areas where there had been little agricultural development. Those employed in *sovkhozes* were considered to be workers rather than peasants and they received a fixed wage. If a *sovkhoze* made a loss it was covered by the state whereas any loss made by a *kolkhoze* had to be made good by the peasants themselves. To start with, Stalin urged the peasants to form collective farms voluntarily but he was well aware that, in spite of the well advertised advantages, they would not surrender their independence willingly. The fiercest opposition came from the kulaks.

THE KULAKS

The word kulak means 'fist', a grasping fist (see pages 8 and 9). The kulaks first emerged after serfdom had been abolished in 1861. They were those who bought up common pastureland and woodland and took advantage of the peasantry who wanted grazing land for their cattle and firewood. During World War I it was claimed that some of the kulaks bribed local officials in order to avoid conscription into the army and then, at the first opportunity, bought up the land of those killed at the front. Their success can be seen by the fact that by 1917, they owned ninety-percent of Russia's most fertile land. The war

Q *Why did the kulaks oppose collectivisation?*

brought acute shortages and, as food prices increased and so did the wealth of the kulaks. By the end of the war, the kulaks were a distinct class of prosperous farmers.

KEY ISSUE

How would Soviet agriculture benefit from the economies of scale?

C *Collectivisation – the practice*

On 27th December 1929, just a few days after Stalin's 50th birthday, a Central Committee resolution officially ordered the start of enforced collectivisation. The methods Stalin intended to use to collectivise the peasants had nothing in common with the ideas of Lenin. Pressed by the urgent need for extra food, he sent Party officials into the countryside to organise the compulsory collectivisation of all farming land in the Soviet Union. Police and Red Army units ruthlessly confiscated grain and livestock to feed the towns and cities. 'They collectivised,' said Trotsky, 'not only horses, sheep, pigs, but even new-born chickens'. A foreign observer noted that they took everything 'down to the felt shoes, which they dragged from the feet of little children'.

The reaction of the peasants, and the kulaks in particular, who were determined not to hand over their stock to the *kolkhozee* was to sell their grain off cheaply, destroy their implements and slaughter their animals. Stalin told the Party:

> 'In order to oust the kulaks as a class, the resistance of this class must be smashed in open battle... That is a step towards the policy of eliminating the kulaks as a class. Without it, talk of ousting the kulaks as a class is empty prattle... without it, no substantial, let alone complete, collectivisation of the countryside is conceivable... Hence, the Party's present policy is... a turn away from the old policy of restricting the capitalist elements in the countryside towards a new policy of eliminating the kulaks as a class'.

On 30th January 1930, Stalin approved the resolution – On Measures for the Elimination of Kulak Households in Districts of Comprehensive Collectivisation.

D *'The red holocaust' – the elimination of the kulaks*

The kulaks were to be divided into three categories. The first, the most hostile and reactionary, were to be shot or imprisoned; the second, the families of the first, were to be deported; the third were to be settled in marsh and forest land where farming would be extremely difficult if not impossible. As the OGPU and Party activists moved into the countryside they were warned that they must make no concessions and show no mercy. The kulaks had to be found, isolated and eliminated. This extract from *Famine in Russia* by Brian Moynahan (1975) describes the times:

> So one family was deported because it owned a cow and a calf; another because it's mare had a foal; another because a woman helped a relative with the harvest. A peasant with eight acres was forced to clear the railway lines of snow. On his return, he found all his property seized apart from a kettle, a saucer and a spoon. He was then sent lumbering in the far North. In some villages, a Party activist would arrive from the city, produce a pistol, and say that any peasant who refused to join a *kolkhoz* would be sent immediately to Siberia.

Every kulak was rounded up and, as Alexander Solzenitsyn wrote, 'all had to go down the same road, to the same common destruction'. Whole families, even the youngest children, were herded into cattle wagons so tightly that their feet seldom touched the ground. Deported kulaks often took weeks to reach Siberia and, unfed and subject to sub-zero temperatures, thousands died during the journey. Those that reached their destination were placed in camps and used as slave labour. The camps were run by an OGPU agency, the Chief Executive of Corrective Labour Camps, usually known by the **acronym**, GULAG. In the camps, tens of thousands died of starvation, disease and exposure to severe weather conditions. Some of those who survived did so by living in holes in the ground and by scratching a living out of the earth with their bare hands. The guards referred to their prisoners as 'white coal' and a common saying was that 'Moscow does not believe in tears'. By 1931, there were over two million held in the camps.

acronym a word formed from the initial letters of other words.

As the process of collectivisation proceeded rapidly across the Soviet Union, Stalin called for a pause and a period of consolidation and blamed the excesses on over enthusiastic Party officials. In an article in *Pravda* in March 1930, he attempted to explain their behaviour:

> It is a fact that by February of this year 50 per cent of the peasant farms have been collectivised ... it is a tremendous achievement ... Such successes sometimes lead to a spirit of vanity and conceit: 'We can do anything!, 'There's nothing we can't do!' People become intoxicated by such successes; they become dizzy with success, lose all sense of proportion and the ability to understand realities.'

As a spur to the peasantry who had formed collectives, he offered a concession – each would be allowed to cultivate a small area of their own and even keep a number of animals. In fact it was a ploy to get them their spring seed. Afterwards, many could not resist the temptation to concentrate their efforts on their own plots and neglect the needs of the kolkhozee. It was a return to what Harold Sukman referred to as 'a kind of mini NEP'. It was only a temporary halt. The pressure to collectivise resumed in 1932 and was to coincide with a disastrous famine.

E *The consequences – famine*

In eliminating the kulaks, Stalin had deprived his country of its most productive farmers. The bulk of the other peasants, now experiencing a 'second serfdom' as enforced members of collectives, were in no mood to over exert themselves in the interests of the Communist state. As a result, seeds went unsown and crops went unharvested. With no kulaks left, the axe next fell on the peasants who were accused of being loafers and still influenced by the 'kulak spirit'. Even though agricultural output had fallen alarmingly, orders were sent from Moscow to the provinces increasing the quotas of grain demanded. Each district was ordered to produce their share of the quota and, in turn, the district made similar demands of each village. The quotas demanded were totally unrealistic and had no chance of being fulfilled. When they were not forthcoming, the OGPU and Communist officials from the towns and cities swarmed over the region confiscating all the food they could find. Anyone found guilty of hoarding was liable to be sentenced to terms of imprisonment or even shot. Stalin's plan was to starve the peasantry into submission and if necessary sentence them to death by hunger. Vasily Grossman, a Russian journalist witnessed the effects of the famine with his own eyes, documented in the following extract from his book *Forever Flowing* (1972).

> Fathers and mothers wanted to save their children and hid tiny amounts of grain, and they were told: 'You hate the country of socialism. You are trying to make the plan fail, you parasites, you kulak supporters, you rats.' The entire seed fund had been confiscated. Everywhere there was terror. Mothers looked at their children and screamed in fear. They screamed as if a snake had crept into their house. And this snake was famine, starvation, death... And here, under the government of workers and peasants, not even one grain was given them... Death from starvation mowed down the village. First the children, then the old people, then those of middle age. At first they dug graves and buried them, and then as things got worse they stopped. Dead people lay there in the yards and in the end remained in their huts. Things fell silent. The whole village died.

Starving peasants stood at railway stations and alongside railway tracks in the hope that food might be thrown from passing trains. This ended when soldiers dispersed them and passengers were forbidden to open carriage windows. In some areas, the peasants resisted but, lacking leadership and weapons, they were easily overcome. One of the main centres of resistance was the Ukraine that once produced vast harvests of grain and was regarded as 'the breadbasket of Europe'. The whole region was encircled by the military to ensure that no food entered the stricken area. At one stage, Stalin considered deporting the whole population of the region but was told there was no place to deport them to! It was as one woman claimed 'a war in which the weapons were not

tanks, machine guns or bullets – but hunger.' In his book, *I Chose Freedom*, Viktor Kravchenko describes the extremes to which people would go to find even the smallest amount of food. He recalled, 'Yes, the horse manure. We fought over it. Sometimes there were whole grains in it.' In the Ukraine, the loss of life from starvation was greater than any country in World War I. The famine and systematic starvation of the peasantry was politically motivated. It was a reprisal for opposing Stalin and the enforced imposition of collectivisation by means of terror. Lev Kopelev, young Party activist involved who helped implement Stalin's policy, later wrote in his book *The Education of a True Believer* (1980).

> And I persuaded myself, explained to myself I mustn't give in to the weakness of pity. We were carrying out an historical necessity. We were performing our revolutionary duty. We were obtaining grain for the socialist fatherland, for the five-year plan. Some sort of rationalistic fanaticism overcame my doubts, my pangs of conscience and my simple feelings of sympathy, pity and shame ... it was necessary to clench your teeth, clench your heart and carry out everything the Party and the Soviet power ordered. ... How could all this have happened? How could I have participated in it?

Yet there were men who did show remorse for their actions even at the time. In *Black Famine in the Ukraine* (1977), Andrew Gregorovich provides an account of a meeting with a colonel in the OGPU. Close to tears, he said:

> I am an old Bolshevik. I worked in the underground against the Tsar and then I fought in the civil war. Did I do all that in order that I should now surround villages with machine-guns and order my men to fire indiscriminately into crowds of peasants? Oh no, no!

The confiscated grain was stockpiled and guarded by the military and OGPU. Later it was either exported to earn much needed foreign currency or simply allowed to rot. None was released to feed the starving masses. Abroad, an international relief committee was set up under the Archbishop of Vienna but it was barred from the Soviet Union because the government insisted there was no famine. It is impossible to calculate how many Russians perished during the terrible famine of 1932–3. Some claim that 10 million died but this may be a very conservative estimate. Whatever, it places Stalin high in the ranks of those responsible for mass murder and genocide – and there was even worse to come!

F *How successful was collectivisation?*

It is possible to consider the success of collectivisation from two points of view. Firstly there was the undoubted success of the extent to which

collectivisation was implemented. After 1930, the speed by which it was carried through was impressive and by 1941, the second year of the Soviet Union's involvement in World War II, virtually all farming had been collectivised.

During this period some 25 million small peasant holdings were turned into a quarter of a million collective farms. However, if secondly we consider collectivisation from the point of view of production levels then it was a disaster. The elimination of the kulaks robbed the country of its most efficient farmers whilst the remaining peasants showed little enthusiasm to work as wage labourers on the land they had once owned. Some 19 million left the *kolkhozee* and headed for the industrial regions to work on Five-Year Plan projects. In the countryside, there was stagnation and production levels fell alarmingly. It took a full seven years before grain production recovered to reach 1928 levels whilst recovery in livestock production took even longer. By 1937, the output from the privately owned plots was greater than that of the collectives! Very gradually, as the *kolkhozee* were more efficiently managed, so production figures improved.

TABLE 52 *Progress towards collectivisation (% of land collectivised)*

1930	23.6
1931	52.7
1932	61.5
1933	66.4
1934	71.4
1935	83.2
1936	89.6
1941	98.0

	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Grain (million tonnes)	73.3	71.7	83.5	69.5	69.6	68.6	67.6	75.0
Cattle (million head)	70.5	67.1	52.5	47.9	40.7	38.4	42.4	49.3
Pigs (million head)	26.0	20.4	13.6	14.4	11.6	12.1	17.4	22.6
Sheep and goats (million head)	146.7	147.0	108.8	77.7	52.1	50.2	51.9	61.1

TABLE 53 *Agricultural production in the Soviet Union 1928–35 (estimates based on Soviet statistics)*

Although each *kolkhoz* elected its own chairman, local Party officials still mainly dictated policy. Payment to the peasants was based on the productivity of their *kolkhoz* and, if no profit was made there was no payout. Generally the promised new schools and hospitals were slow to appear but there were showpiece collectives with modern amenities. Visitors to the Soviet Union were taken to see these models of socialist achievement. On the other hand, machinery leased by the Mechanical and Tractor Stations (MTS) became more readily available and the number of tractors and combine harvesters available increased considerably. Eventually agricultural output did increase sufficiently to support industrial growth but at what cost!

G *Collectivisation – an historical perspective*

The view held by the majority of historians is that Stalin sacrificed the Russian peasantry in order to bring about the industrial transformation of his country and that he overcame opposition to his scheme by approving the slaughter of millions of kulaks and peasants. In *Stalin and Stalinism*, Alan Wood comments, 'Collectivisation was in effect a civil war unleashed by the Party on the peasant population'. Alan Shukman agrees. In *Stalin*, he writes, 'Stalin chose a course that

was bound to conflict with the peasants' basic instincts... Thus, what began as an economic policy quickly turned the countryside into a scene of despair, bloodshed and terror.' K. Perry in *Modern European History* describes collectivisation as 'a tragedy for Russia... Stalin, ignorant on economic matters, launched policies which brought economic disaster by the mad speed which characterised them.' Later, in 1942, when Winston Churchill, the British prime minister, questioned Stalin about these events he went as far as to admit – 'Collective farm policy was a terrible struggle... Ten millions... It was fearful. Four years it lasted. It was absolutely necessary...'

On the other hand, some historians have questioned the extent of Stalin's responsibility. It has been argued that if he had not ended NEP it might well have undermined the revolution and led to a return to a capitalist system. Others have maintained that Stalin did not plan collectivisation but 'stumbled into it with neither planning nor foresight'. In *The Politics of Stalinism* (1986), J. Arch Getty argues that collectivisation was a panic measure and that Stalin 'went with the momentum and was influenced by an economic and political environment that he did not create.' Some go as far as to question if Stalin was really in charge and suggest that the situation simply 'ran out of control.' Then there are those who deny it ever happened. Ray Nunes, a leading New Zealand Communist, has written 'Nobody has any evidence. But that didn't stop the newspapers of the capitalist world from making totally unfounded assertions about the millions murdered, all attributed to Stalin.'