

### 3 ↪ LIFE IN THE SOVIET UNION

#### A *The Soviet education system*

After the Revolution, there was a reaction against learning and scholarship. Children under the age of six were taught by *babushkas* or their grandmothers and the responsibility for providing schools was handed to the collective farms and industrial enterprises. These were short-term measures and some even spoke of the need for schools 'withering away'. Traditional teaching methods were abandoned and only the most elementary instruction given often by adults who were themselves barely literate. It was said that such education as was necessary should be achieved through 'a system of learning through productive labour'. In Moscow, the head of the Institute for Educational Research stated that the *metod proektov*, the project method, was the 'one and only Marxist and democratic method of teaching'. The project method involved sending children into factories where they worked alongside workers. Afterwards they prepared reports on what they had seen and done. Where schools existed, places were allocated on a quota basis according to class. The children of the proletariat were the most favoured whilst those of the former bourgeoisie were assigned only a minimal number of places. Some were denied access to any sort of education. The few universities provided instruction in a very limited range of practical subjects taught to a low level. With examinations scrapped, the quality of student achievement was poor and the drop-out rate extremely high with some three-quarters of all students failing to complete their courses. Teachers and academics were generally considered relics of the discredited bourgeoisie and were baited, humiliated and driven out of their profession.

**Q**  
To what extent  
did the Soviet attitude  
to education change  
during the Stalinist  
period?

Under Stalin, the Soviet education system changed radically. As the need for a sound education system was recognised, the project method was abandoned and plans were made to extend nursery, primary, secondary and further higher education across the country. By the mid-1930s, the Soviet Union had one of the most centralised education systems in the world. Experimentation was scrapped and traditional

teaching methods restored as was strict classroom discipline and the requirement to wear school uniform. For girls, hair worn in plaits was compulsory. Nursery schools were provided for those under the age of three whilst those aged three to seven attended infant schools or kindergarten. This was followed by 8 years at secondary school where attendance was compulsory up to the age of 15. A range of subjects was taught as a common core and schools stressed the need for obedience, hard work and loyalty. Pupils were also subject to a degree of political indoctrination. With over a 100 different languages spoken across the Soviet Union, pupils were allowed to study in their own native tongue but the learning of Russian was made compulsory. A system of rigorous examinations was introduced and parents had to make some financial contribution during the final years at the secondary stage of education. The overall responsibility for the provision of education lay with the *Narkompros*, the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment, with policy decisions made by the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Amongst the pioneers of educational reform were Anatoly Lunarcharsky and Alexander Bubnov. The charismatic Lunarcharsky, known as the 'Poet of the Revolution', was an educated and cultured man as well as a dedicated Communist. He was to be responsible for turning the country's former stately homes into museums. Bubnov, a staunch supporter of Stalin's reforms, was responsible for ending the period of experiment and returning to traditional methods of teaching. Each of the republics of the Soviet Union had its own ministry and, in each locality, members of the local Soviet appointed a school board. The boards selected the headteachers who, in turn, appointed their own teaching staff. Advancement in the teaching profession often depended on one's standing in the Communist Party. With the status of teachers and lecturers restored, young people were encouraged to enter higher education and working men and women to improve themselves by joining adult education classes. *Rabfak*, the Workers' Faculty, which was created specifically to improve the level of education of working people, provided such opportunities. Amongst those to benefit were Nikita Khrushchev, the future Russian leader, and the aircraft designer, S.V. Ilyushin. In the new universities and technical colleges special emphasis was placed on the study of mathematics, science and technology. Entry to higher education was by competitive entrance examination, and with the restriction on students from non-proletarian families removed, there was a rush to secure places. To start with, a fixed percentage of places in higher education were allocated to women. This soon became unnecessary and by 1940, nearly 60% of all undergraduates were women. From a racial viewpoint, some 80% of students were ethnic Russians, Ukrainians and Jews. Russian Jews, who only accounted for two per cent of the population of the Soviet Union, showed their enthusiasm for learning by taking up 13% of the university places. By 1936, the country's higher education system was producing large numbers of well-trained engineers, scientists, doctors and teachers.

At all levels, the purpose of education was seen as preparing students to play their part in the life of a modern industrial state. As future

citizens of a Communist state, they were expected to show a desire to work, patriotism in the form of love for Mother Russia, an appreciation of Party ideology, a rejection of religion and a hatred of capitalism. To help insure this, the Communist Party exercised tight control over textbooks and the curricula. The whole system was geared, as Stalin himself put it, to creating 'the new Soviet man' who thought and acted as instructed by the Party.

## **B Soviet Youth Movements**

In common with all totalitarian regimes, the rulers of the Soviet Union tried to influence and indoctrinate its young people by encouraging them to enrol in one of the Communist youth organisations. The aim of all was to spread Communist ideology and prepare the young to be part of the next generation of Communists. For the very young there was the Little Octobrists. At the age of nine, they could transfer to the All-Union Lenin Pioneer Organisation. Organised into brigades, they now took part in politically orientated educational and recreational activities. At 14, they became eligible for membership of the Komsomol.

Komsomol is the abbreviated form of *Vsesoyuzny Leninsky Kommunistichesky*, the All-Union Leninist Communist League of Youth. The movement, which included young people aged between 14 and 28, first came into being in 1918. It was made up of members of various Communist youth groups that had been involved in the Revolution and were now brought together to form fighting groups needed to support the Red Army in the civil war. After 1922, it reverted to the more normal activities associated with youth movements and encouraged its members to engage in sporting, educational and health activities as well as industrial projects. Membership of Komsomol brought with it numerous advantages. Members were favoured in matters of employment and promotion and were more likely to be awarded educational scholarships. More important, active participation in the activities of Komsomol could become a major consideration when seeking much coveted membership of the Communist Party.

## **C Women and the family in Soviet Society**

During the processes of collectivisation and industrialisation, Russian women and their children shared the same hardships as their menfolk. Whole peasant families endured hunger and death at the time of the famine whilst kulak women and children were not spared the horrors of transportation to Siberia and the tortuous existence of life in the labour camps. After the Revolution, the Bolsheviks applied Marxist philosophy to marriage and family life. Marriage, a bourgeois institution intended to exploit and degrade women, was not encouraged. Those who married did so at a civil ceremony. This was part of a general policy to downplay religion and reduce the significance of church ritual. The truth was that the employment of women was essential to Stalin's plans to industrialise the Soviet Union. Women were active at

all levels of industry and child bearing did not absolve mothers from their commitment to work. Granted minimum maternity leave, mothers left their children with elderly relatives. Mothers also had to undergo the indignity of transferring the milk from their breasts to bottles so that the feeding of infants would not interrupt their work routine. Many children that were orphaned or abandoned took to the streets and engaged in criminal activities. In 1937, Stalin wrote:

'The triumph of socialism has filled women with enthusiasm and mobilised the women of our Soviet land to become active in culture, to master machinery, to develop a knowledge of science and to be active in the struggle for high labour productivity.'

Control of policy decisions relating to women was placed in the hands of the women's section of the Central Committee, the *Zhenotdel*.

### THE ZHENOTDEL

The *Zhenotdel*, the Party's Women's Bureau, was set up to encourage Russian women to play a more active part in the political and economic life of the country. Its leaders included the eminent Party members and feminists Aleksandra Kollontai and Inessa Armand. Both originally from upper class families, Kollontai was the daughter of a general. Although married to an officer in the Tsarist army, she became an active revolutionary and was forced to live in exile in the United States. She returned to Russia in 1917 and, after 1920, became the first commissar for social welfare. Later she joined the diplomatic service and was the first woman to hold ambassadorial rank. Armand, twice married and the mother of five children, was a close friend of Lenin. She became the first director of *Zhenotdel*. Representatives of the Bureau toured factories to make sure that the laws intended to protect the rights of women were being enforced. *Zhenotdel* championed the cause of female emancipation and their campaigns contributed to the undermining of the influence of the family. They saw to it that divorce was made easier and that contraception and abortion were freely available to all women. By 1934, in Moscow, the capital city, 37% of all marriages ended in divorce whilst nationally the number of abortions was three times greater than that of live births. Believing that education provided women with the best chance of improving their status, they encouraged women to study and organised childcare facilities to enable them to do so. From the start, many men, including leading Party members and even groups of women workers, opposed their policies. Those who lived in the Soviet Union's Muslim provinces particularly resented their attempts to abolish **polygamy** and the traditions of the seclusion of women, *purdah*. Although the number of women in the nation's workforce increased rapidly, *Zhenotdel* was unsuccessful

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**polygamy** marriage to more than one person at a time.

in its attempt to enroll them as Communist Party members. By 1930, less than 15% of women had applied for membership. In addition, there was no female representation on the country's ruling Presidium and very little on the Central Committee.

Stalin, concerned at the decline of the family in national life, recognised the need to bring about change in the Party's attitude to women. A propaganda campaign emphasised that the ideal woman was a good wife and mother as well as being a good worker. In 1930, the *Zhenotdel* was closed down since it was claimed that it had achieved its aims. Although the majority of women workers were employed in traditional female occupations – clerical work, nursing, teaching and the textile industries – a great many worked shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts in the steel and engineering industries and were encouraged to become *stakhanovi*. Some worked in coalmines and they also contributed fully to the more menial jobs of street cleaning and refuse collection. In spite of the claim that women had the same pay, promotion prospects and status as men, in reality this was seldom the case. As the 1930s progressed so the authorities accepted that the family unit was central to national stability and traditional attitudes to women and family values began to reassert themselves. Marriage was again encouraged and promiscuity, contraception and abortion frowned upon. Women were once again expected to be central to family life. The happy family was once again fashionable in the Soviet Union. As Martin McCauley has written – 'Nowhere are the contradictions of Stalinism greater than in the reluctant acceptance of the family'. As for the extent of employment of women, the figures speak for themselves. During the period 1928–40, the number of working women rose from 3 to 13 million. During the World War II, this rose further to 16 million and women comprised 56% of the workforce. In addition, during the war, some 800 000 Russian women were recruited into the armed services and over 70% fought as combat soldiers. There is a legend that a husband and wife went as far as to secure Stalin's permission to obtain their own tank and fight together at the front!

## D *Stalinism and religion*

In 1844, Karl Marx wrote 'Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the feelings of a heartless world and the spirit of conditions which are unspiritual. It is the opium of the people.' In equating religion with opium, Marx was expressing the view that religion, like a drug, allowed people to escape the pain of their everyday lives. He also believed that the ruling class used organised religion for their own purposes. It was a means of convincing the downtrodden working classes that they should accept their status in life since it was the station 'into which God had called them'. He pointed out that the Churches possessed considerable influence over the lives of the people, possessed great material wealth and were themselves part of the ruling class, a 'Pillar of the



**PICTURE 28**

Used for propaganda purposes, a Soviet cartoon identifies the enemies of socialism.

Establishment'. Lenin's views were identical. In his *Collected Works*, published in 1922, Lenin writes.

'Religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression which everywhere weigh upon the masses of the people crushed by continuous toil for others, by poverty and loneliness... Religion teaches those who toil in poverty all their lives to be resigned and patient in this world and consoles them with the hope of reward in heaven.'

Although Marx favoured religious tolerance and was against the persecution of people for their religious beliefs, after the Revolution the Bolsheviks set out to eradicate religion. Their immediate target was the Russian Orthodox Church and other Christian sects in Russia but they also turned their attention to the Muslims and Buddhists who lived in their Asian republics. During the Civil War priests and their congregations fell victim to Bolshevik atrocities. In 1929, a law was passed which made it illegal to hold religious ceremonies outside church buildings and congregations could only gather if they had first been licensed. The situation worsened during period of collectivisation. Churches were closed and priests, often accused of being capitalist agents or of being in league with the kulaks, were arrested and murdered. They were **disenfranchised**, subjected to higher rates of taxation and their children barred from attending schools. Muslims were prohibited from practicing Islamic law. Fasting during the Holy Month of Ramadan was forbidden, women were encouraged to abandon the veil and men and women were not allowed to take part in pilgrimages to Mecca. In spite of the fact that many leading Party members — Trotsky, Bukharin, Kamenev and Zinoviev — were themselves Jews, Russian Jewry suffered the same persecution as others. Jewish schools, libraries and synagogues were closed and the study of Hebrew forbidden. As we shall see, many religious leaders

**disenfranchised** denied the right to vote.

**Q**  
To what extent  
was Stalin consistent in  
his attitude to religion?

and high ranking priests became victims of the Terror. The campaign against religion was orchestrated by the League of Godless. As part of the attack on church institutions marriage became a civil ceremony, the wearing of wedding rings was frowned upon, the religious observance of Sunday was abolished, and religious teaching was abolished in schools and replaced by anti-religious teaching. Many churches were converted into anti-religious museums and those who persisted with their religious beliefs were openly ridiculed. Within the Party, a good Communist was expected to be an atheist. In 1935, the campaign against religion eased. Easter novelties and Christmas trees were sold, the children of priests allowed to attend school and a number of churches reopened. This respite did not last long and with the start of the Terror, Stalin renewed his attack on the Church which was estimated to be still actively supported by over half the people. To counter this, the Church went underground and priests survived by abandoning their clerical robes so that they were indistinguishable from the rest of the population. As concern about Nazi Germany and the prospect of war grew, so Stalin again relented. In 1941, in the needs of national unity, he went as far as to ask the Church to support the war effort.

### **E *The arts – a cultural revolution?***

Although many Russian artists, writers and musicians fled abroad in 1917, it was the hope of those that remained that the Bolshevik Revolution would allow them to enjoy greater freedom of expression. It was certainly true that the early 1920s witnessed a period of great creativity in all forms of the arts. Previously Lenin had expressed the view that access to the arts should be freely available to the masses and to help achieve this *Narkompros*, the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment, took over galleries and museums and arranged for new ones to be built. Once Stalin was in power, all forms of creative art were directed towards *partiinost* – serving the needs of the Party. His aim was to bring about a 'cultural revolution'.

#### **LITERATURE**

After the triumph of the Bolsheviks, many Russian writers emigrated and continued their work abroad. Those that remained had to adapt their talents to the needs of the new regime. In the 1920s, writers wishing to get their works published had to join the Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP). The Association urged writers to concentrate on the lives and achievements of the proletariat and the needs of socialism. Consequently the period 1928–31 turned into what Martin McCauley has described as years of 'the glorification of the man in the street'. This situation was short-lived. Stalin demanded major changes and, in 1932, RAPP was abolished and replaced by the Union of Soviet Writers. The Union imposed the new political correctness on writers and greatly reduced their creative freedom. Andrei Zhdanov stated that the aim of writers should now be to achieve 'Socialist Realism'. It was a switch from writing about the masses to writing about the achievements

of collectivisation, industrial developments, and to glorify Stalin. The change also marked the rediscovery of Russian history and the great national heroes of the past. Amongst the most famous Russian writers of the time were Maxim Gorki and Mikhail Sholokhov.

**Maxim Gorki** (1868–1936) was the pen name of Alexsei Peshkov. Orphaned at the age of nine, he was brought up by his grandparents and experienced hard times as he struggled to survive as a down and out or by taking part-time manual jobs. He first became famous as a writer in tsarist times but was arrested for his revolutionary activities and sent to live abroad. Gorki returned to Russia in 1917 and found his sympathy with the Bolsheviks strained by the unbridled violence of the Civil War. He had considerable influence with the Bolsheviks and tried to build a bridge between the old classical culture of tsarist times and the requirements of the Soviet regime. Between 1921 and 1928, he lived abroad in Italy but returned to the Soviet Union and helped to develop the idea of Socialist Realism. He died in 1936 whilst undergoing medical treatment but some suspect that he was murdered on Stalin's orders. In spite of his fame in Russia, few of his works became widely read in the western world. After his death, his birthplace, Nizhni Novgorod, was renamed Gorki in his honour.

**Mikhail Sholokhov** (1905–84) came from the Don Cossack region of Russia. Of mixed background, his father worked in many occupations whilst his mother was illiterate and of peasant stock. During the Civil War, Sholokhov joined the Red Army but, afterwards, was reduced to supporting himself by doing manual labour. His first book, *Tales of the Don*, an account of the strife within a family during the Civil War, was published in 1925. In 1932, Sholokhov joined the Communist Party and, in 1937, was elected to the Supreme Soviet. Party members thought his criticism of the treatment of the kulaks and the mass arrests in 1938 amounted to treason but Stalin saw to it that he was spared. By far his most famous book was *Quiet Flows the Don*, a novel that covered events in the Soviet Union between 1928 and 1940. In 1941, he was awarded the Stalin Prize for Literature. In his later years, Sholokhov invariably followed the official Party line of the day and by the end of his life, some 79 million copies of his works had been sold published in 84 languages. In later years, the dissident Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn alleged that *Quiet Flows the Don* had been **plagiarised** from the works of a little known Cossack writer.

#### ART AND ARCHITECTURE

In 1920, Lenin proclaimed himself to be a 'barbarian who disliked Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism and all the other isms.' Referring to

#### KEY ISSUE

*The application of Socialist Realism to the arts.*

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**plagiarised** writing or ideas copied or stolen from another.



the limited appeal of art, he said, 'it does not matter what art gives to hundreds, or even thousands, out of a total population numbering millions. Art belongs to the people.' For a while after the Revolution, a modernistic movement amongst artists was allowed to flourish in Russia. However, before the Ministry of Culture could impose the traditional styles of Socialist Realism, many of the country's greatest artists moved abroad. Art had to portray people, scenes and events as they really were and could not be abstract. The abstract artists that remained had their work condemned and it was never exhibited. Among the leading artists of the day were Georgi Nisski and Vera Mukina. Many others had to be content to produce paintings and posters that illustrated the achievements of socialism. Similarly in architecture early experimentation was soon brought to an end and Soviet architects had to concentrate on austere designs that were soon to produce functional high rise blocks of flats and offices. The exception was the so-called 'wedding cake' architecture used in the construction of the new Academy of Sciences in Moscow. One of the country's most noted architects was Alexei Shchusev who designed the Lenin mausoleum in the Red Square.

### MUSIC

At the time of the Revolution in 1917 some of the country's greatest composers and musicians chose to leave Russia. These included Nicolai Medtner, Sergei Rachmaninov, Igor Stravinsky, Nicolai and Alexander Tcherepnin and Sergai Prokofiev. Prokofiev worked in the United States until the mid-1930s when he chose to return to the Soviet Union. The Association of Contemporary Music, established in 1923, supported experimentation and modern music but in the 1930s, in common with other art forms, music had to conform to the Stalinist requirement of Socialist Realism. Music considered modern or *avant garde* was no longer acceptable. Composers had to belong to Composers' Union and new works had to have 'a socialist content and be expressed in a musical language that ordinary people could easily understand'. It was also supposed to 'rejoice in the glorious potential of life under Communism' and extol the country's industrial achievements. Typical of this was the symphony, the *Iron Foundry*, written by Alexander Mossolov, a composer later removed from the Composers' Union for being drunk and behaving lewdly. He spent the next eight years in a Siberian *gulag*. Among the greatest composers of the 1930s were Sergai Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich and Aram Khachaturian.

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**Sergai Prokofiev** (1891–1953), whose mother was a gifted pianist, was excused military service during the World War I in order to continue his musical studies. After he returned home from self-imposed exile in 1935, he composed his most famous work, *Peter and the Wolf*, as well as the score for the film *Alexander Nevsky*. Because he slavishly complied with the requirements of the Soviet authorities, his work was criticised elsewhere for being too simple and naïve. **Dmitry Shostakovich** (1905–84) was criticised for failing to uphold

the principles of Socialist Realism and had to adjust his style so that it was more cheerful and less complicated. His Fifth Symphony (1937) proved acceptable to the authorities and helped him to re-establish his reputation. He wrote many symphonies, concertos and choral works. The Armenian, **Aram Khachaturian** (1903–78) whose *Song of Stalin* (1937) won him great popularity, still tended to go his own way and this irritated Soviet officialdom. His most famous work was his *Sabre Dance* that many years later made the pop charts in Britain.

### THE CINEMA

When Lenin came to power in 1917, he quickly recognised the propaganda value of the cinema in indoctrinating the largely illiterate masses with socialist principles. Although the cinema was still in its infancy and the films made were silent and in black and white, to him the cinema presented a unique opportunity of encouraging the Russian people to share his ideals. The Bolshevik leader went as far as to describe the cinema as 'the most important art'. As a film historian has written in the book *Idols and Icons. A Survey of Russian and Soviet Cinema* by Mike Hertenstein, 1999.

The Bolsheviks gained power by quickly seizing all possible means of communication. Their Revolution sent the Russian film establishment fleeing the country and vanishing into history's dustbin. The Soviets had to rebuild with a younger generation – one imbued with, and eager to share, the Communist vision.

The new Soviet film industry followed the official style imposed by Socialist Realism. An outstanding Russian filmmaker and a man subsequently acclaimed as one of the greatest film directors of all time was Sergei Eisenstein.

**Sergei Eisenstein** (1881–1948) was born in Riga in Latvia. He first trained as a civil engineer and architect before serving in the Red Army during the Civil War. He first made his mark in the cinema as a stage designer but, after 1917, was one of those given the task of re-establishing the Soviet film industry. His first film, *Strike*, made in 1924 established his reputation. The film, that told the story of a strike that was brutally put down by the authorities, was considered a brilliant piece of Communist propaganda. Eisenstein soon proved himself one of the great masters and innovators of the silent film era. His most famous film was *The Battleship Potemkin* made in 1925. Now considered a cinema classic, it covered an episode in the 1905 revolution. In 1948, an international panel judged it to be the best film ever made. His later films included *Alexander Nevski* (1938) and *Ivan the Terrible* (1945). His main rival was another

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Russian, **Vsevolod Pudovkin** (1893–1953). His films were largely based on the exploits of heroic characters.

There were also other art forms that flourished under Stalin largely because of the appeal to the Soviet proletariat. Classical ballet had been popular in Russia since the mid-eighteenth century. The most famous companies in the Soviet Union were the Bolshoi, in Moscow, and the Academic Theatre in Leningrad. In 1935, it was renamed the Kirov Ballet following the assassination of the city's Party leader. Being even more egalitarian in its appeal, the circus was considered to be on a par with ballet and opera. An Englishman, Philip Astley, first introduced the circus to Russia in the late eighteenth century. In Stalinist Russia, the leading company was the Moscow State Circus.

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