

Five Year Plans

What

A series of three plans for set time periods (1928-33, 1933-37, 1938-41) which would rapidly industrialise the USSR. Targets were set by Gosplan with the aim to modernise and improve production in the country. The first plan focussed on heavy industry and infrastructure, whilst the second focussed on manufactured goods. The third targeted consumer goods, though with the oncoming war this was abandoned in favour of military goods. The Five Year Plans were facilitated by a combination of high targets, propaganda control of the people, shock workers and the creation of new industrial regions like Magnitogorsk.

Key features

- *Gosplan*
- Industrialisation
- Control economy
- Shock workers
- New industrial centres
- Show pieces

Why

Stalin had a belief that USSR was 50-100 years behind the modern west and that failure to catch up would result in their defeat. This was partly because of the threat of Hitler, but also because Stalin believed that he could not trust the capitalist west due to their different ideology (capitalism) and past actions where they acted against Russia (e.g. Treaty of Versailles).

However it was also a means of taking control of the country by introducing a bold new plan which would prove his leadership and force the people to obey his commands.

Successes

- After the Shakhty Trial of mine managers in March 1928, managers were too scared to challenge Stalin or Gosplan.
- Large parts of the population, particularly the Pioneers and Komsomol, formed up behind Stalin to work.
- New industrial centres, notably Magnitogorsk, were quickly constructed and rapidly increased the potential industrial output for the USSR.
- Although few targets were actually met, the overall national economy increased by a large amount. The average increase of the economy in the 1930s was 12-13% per year, a phenomenal amount (in 2011 the British economy shrank by 1%)
- Factory worker numbers rose from 4.6 million in 1928 to 12.6 million in 1940.
- Some huge increases were made, e.g. in the 1st Plan, coal production rose from 35million tonnes to 64 million tonnes (though the target was 68 million).
- When WW2 broke out, the economy was robust enough for the USSR to survive German invasion.
- The show pieces were good propaganda.

Failures

- Although the shock workers, like the Stakhanovites (mining) led to some production increases, they also created tension and resentment from other workers.
- Few targets set by Gosplan were met.
- The use of rewards partially contradicted the concept of communism in the plans.
- The punishing of managers who failed their targets led to a situation where managers rewarded workers regardless of produce just to retain workers.
- Violence broke out between factories as they competed for targets and resources.
- Control mechanisms for the population failed, and a quicksand society occurred with workers migrating at will with managers turning a blind eye.
- Initiative was lost as anyone who left the set plans and protocols and then failed targets would be punished; the population lost industrial innovation.

Observations

The plans may not have succeeded in the conventional sense but it made huge moves forward. By the end of the 1930s, Stalin was consolidated in power. He had also created an economic power base which was able to survive the invasion of the USSR and this was a great success. Yet the long term outcome was that the economy was modernised but lost initiative. This meant that it never improved and remained second rate compared to the west. When later leaders tried to improve the economy they failed as the population had lost all economic initiative and entrepreneurial spirit.