

To what extent were the first three Five Year Plans an economic and political success?

To look at the officially published figures, the Five Year Plans were an outstanding economic success. In truth, however, the benefits to the Soviet regime were more political in nature, the economic transformation proving to be something of a mirage.

Despite everything, it is undeniable that great strides were made in the Russian economy as a result of the first three Five Year Plans. Gosplan's figures showed that coal output rose from 35 to 128 million tons between 1927 and 1937. Oil production similarly quadrupled over the same period. By 1937, the country was almost self-sufficient in metal production and manufacture. Even allowing for the exaggeration of the Soviet authorities, the steep rise in production of these raw materials was impressive. Supporting this were great efforts of construction, such as the building of the Belomor Canal, and the establishment of new industrial centres, such as the creation of the city of Magnitogorsk. Heavy industry flourished under Soviet investment, and also with the promotion of a new work ethic, in particular the ideology of the Stakhanovite movement, encouraging super-human efforts from the workers in return for perks like better housing, bonus pay or increased status. The electricity industry was virtually created under the plans – electric output rose eightfold from 5bn kWh in 1928 to 48bn kWh in 1940, allowing factories to move from steam and therefore improve their efficiency. By the time of the third Five Year Plan, the system was able to cope with a sudden and dramatic need for re-armament due to the imminent threat of war. Examining all this, it is hard to argue that economic success was not the result of the Five Year Plans.

And yet it can be shown that Stalin's great push for industrialisation had major flaws that held it back. Firstly, the figures were never entirely what they seemed. Deceit was built into the system, from local officials fiddling the numbers to avoid denunciation or demotion, to the party leaders who wanted to proclaim success. The Central Administration for Economic Statistics announced first that the production figures for 1936 amounted to 70.1 billion roubles, however later announced that 80.9 roubles was the total for 1936. It is obvious that the statistics do not tell us the true story. In addition to this, the quality of production was often so poor that the output materials were not fit for use, poor quality steel for example being fit for nothing but meeting production quotas. The heinous cost of collectivisation, resulting in a massive decrease in food output and famine in Ukraine, lessened the pool of potential workers who could be sustained through food rations in the cities, weakening industry's ability to pull ahead even faster. Purges of the middle and upper classes resulted in a lack of expertise to drive industry on successfully; without experienced managers and engineers, progress was bound to be slower than otherwise. When looking at the massive increases in production before 1928 – and the difficult conditions Russia had gone through in the decade and a half before this, World War One, revolution, civil war – it is hard to see what value the Five Year Plans actually added. Coal production had risen from 77m roubles to 120m roubles from 1925/6 to 1927/8, demonstrating the huge capacity for growth that already existed. To sum up, Stalin's chaotic collectivisation, the poor quality of production, the 'brain drain', and pre-existing success show us that the Five Year Plans, if anything, underperformed on what they would have been expected to achieve.

Politically, though, the Five Year Plans were an undeniable success. That is not to say that their effects were pleasant; far from it. The plans were characterised by outrageous suffering: slave labour, shortages of consumer goods due to the emphasis on heavy industry, and repressive

practices designed to squeeze the most out of the workers. It was this moulding of society to Stalin's will, however, that was his greatest triumph. Firstly, the Five Year Plans had come out of political scheming. They were Stalin's big idea, his way of asserting his authority over the party, and sidelining his last real rival, Bukharin, who still favoured the New Economic Policy. The promotion of Stakhanov as a worker hero led to a culture where some were inspired to follow his example, while others were afraid of the consequences of not doing so. This led to denunciations and back-stabbing as some denounced 'wreckers' – disastrous for community spirit and co-operation, perfect for Stalin's purposes of weakening opposition to him and the party as now discontented workers turned their frustrations on each other. The state management of factories, with ever present party officials, allowed Stalin access into all areas of peoples' lives. Stalin's political power grew stronger than ever as a direct result of the Five Year Plans.

Nonetheless, this did not happen without peril to his position. Stalin virtually tore Soviet society apart in his efforts to gain a stranglehold. He flirted with disaster in his radical efforts to reshape Russia. The lack of consumer goods led to resentment from many; while heavy industry flourished, the average Soviet worker languished in poverty. The second and third Five Year Plans went some way to alleviating this, but the propaganda machine had to work hard to bridge the gap between official successes and the drab reality of daily life. In fact, without the Great Terror going hand in hand with industrialisation, it is easy to imagine serious challenges to Stalin's position. His ruthless approach when dealing with his erstwhile colleagues and former rivals – executing Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and others – reasserted his authority in a potentially precarious situation. Having said all this, Stalin emerged into the 1940s as the supreme and undisputed leader of the Soviet Union, free of all internal threats against him.

In conclusion, the economic gains made under the Five Year Plans were not quite an illusion – the successes were real enough – but while heavy industry did indeed grow massively, the quality of this increase often left much to be desired. The actual increases, while high, were less than officially proclaimed and less than might have been expected under a better run system. It was in the realm of politics, therefore, that the Five Year Plans yielded great success. Rolled out in conjunction with state-led terror, the plans moulded Soviet society into a compliant industrial machine; not always efficient or effective, but brought under the undeniable and total control of the party. Through the Five Year Plans, Stalin had made some economic gains and certainly avoided disaster, but more importantly for him had achieved total power and ultimate political success.