

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 235

“The Five-Year Plan”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Lenin was dead, but the Soviet Union lived on.

What path to take? Was Russia merely the springboard, the first stop on socialism’s path to worldwide revolution? Increasingly, it seemed this was not so. Perhaps the Soviet Union’s role was as a showcase, a demonstration project that would prove conclusively that socialism was the only way forward.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 235. The Five-Year Plan.

We’re going to return to the Soviet Union today, to check in on the doings there. We last visited the USSR all the way back in episode 188, so it’s about time. We concluded that episode with the death of Lenin in January 1924.

The Soviet Union was by this time in an uncertain state. The successive conflicts of the Great War, the Revolution, and the Civil War had devastated the country, and early attempts to rebuild the economy along socialist lines led to backlash from the rural peasants. I speak of what was called “War Communism,” the principle that the highly regulated and centrally administered economy of wartime could be continued in peacetime, that the economy could be run hierarchically, like the military, where everyone has their role in the system, and the system takes care of everyone.

These early attempts at “War Communism” failed. They proved unpopular with the rural peasants, who were exactly the sort of people who were supposed to be the principal beneficiaries of socialism, so that’s a problem.

The root of this difficulty goes back to Karl Marx. Lenin and the Bolsheviks took Marx very seriously. But Marx never produced anything like a blueprint for how a socialist society was supposed to be organized and operate. Marx was primarily a social critic and a moral philosopher. Industrial capitalism had brought a vast increase in wealth and productivity to the

19th century, but it seemed incapable of distributing those benefits in a just and equitable way. Marx, as a rationalist and a moral optimist, took it as a given that no human society could or should accept these injustices forever. Someday capitalism would have to be replaced by something better, something more equitable. Let's call it socialism. Perhaps it would be best to think of Marx as the prophet of a secular religion, a John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness, proclaiming the coming of something mightier than he. Or perhaps a better analogy is that of the American economist J. Bradford DeLong, who likens Karl Marx to St. John the Divine and his writings to the Book of Revelation.

Marx believed, or persuaded himself, that this transition to socialism was both inevitable and just, and that the mechanism by which it would be achieved was the increasing immiseration of the working class, until the depredations of capitalism became obvious and intolerable. In fact, economic inequality rose throughout the 19th century, but by the early twentieth century, the trend toward inequality reversed. With the benefit of historical hindsight not available to Marx, we can now say that increasing inequality is definitely a problem under capitalism, but it is not inevitable.

The Bolsheviks who took control of Russia in 1917 believed fervently in Marx, as I have already told you, but as I have also already told you, Marx may have left them with a trenchant critique of capitalism, but he surely hadn't left them with a blueprint for how to build a socialist economy. The first Bolsheviks had been academics and writers and journalists. No Bolshevik had ever organized or run anything bigger than *Pravda*. They didn't know how to run a factory or an oil well or a dairy.

There were people who knew how to run those things, but those people were called capitalists and they were the enemy. If you recall from episode 188, the solution that Lenin came up with in the final years of his life was the New Economic Policy, under which a limited amount of small-scale capitalism would be tolerated, for the sake of getting the Soviet economy up and running again.

The New Economic Policy was a success in economic terms, but a failure in ideological terms. We'll come back to the ideological problems a bit later, but by the time of Lenin's death in 1924, agricultural production in the USSR was bouncing back, and Russia was once again in the grain export business. Industrial production grew even faster. Ordinary Soviet citizens were generally happy with the way things were going. The nightmares of the Great War and the Civil War were receding, and life was getting better. So when he died, Lenin and the regime he had led were fairly popular.

The Communist government sought to leverage Lenin's popularity. The deceased revolutionary was held up as a sort of secular saint in a way that the actual Lenin would not have approved of. Petrograd was renamed Leningrad. Lenin's corpse was put on display in a glass sarcophagus inside a mausoleum right on Red Square in Moscow. This move may have been inspired by

traditional Catholic and Orthodox beliefs that the bodies of some saints were preserved incorrupt through divine intervention as a sign of the saint's holiness. Now Lenin, the secular saint, would be preserved incorrupt by the secular miracle of modern science and the socialist state. Lenin's brain was sliced into more than 30,000 slivers, which were mounted into glass slides to be preserved for study at the Moscow Brain Institute, where experts could probe the source of his genius.

Lenin's writings, Lenin's speeches, and the path Lenin had blazed on the way to effecting the world's first successful socialist revolution would, after his death, be embraced by his successors as the second half of what began with Karl Marx, and the combined ideology, known by the unwieldy handle Marxism-Leninism, would become the official ideology of the Soviet Union.

All of this would no doubt have been offensive to Lenin himself, who did not himself hold to the view that he was the one indispensable person who had made socialism a reality. Nor had he designated an heir. He had left behind his political testament, his thoughts on the future organization of the Soviet state and on the leadership qualities of the six most prominent Bolsheviks besides himself. To put it briefly, and bluntly, he didn't think much of any of them. So perhaps he wasn't so modest about his personal role in the Revolution as he wanted us to think, if he could find no one else capable of filling his own shoes.

The obvious choice to succeed Lenin would have been Leon Trotsky, or at least, so it seemed from a distance. Most people outside Bolshevik circles saw Trotsky as the clear number two figure of the Revolution, second only to Lenin himself. Within the Party, though, Trotsky was not as well liked as he seemed.

It comes back to the ideological problems with Lenin's New Economic Policy. No one among the Bolsheviks was entirely happy with the NEP, not even Lenin himself. The NEP looked uncomfortably like backsliding into the bad old days of capitalism. Everyone, even Lenin, agreed that the NEP was meant as a temporary policy to speed Russia's recovery from the devastation of war, but no one opposed the NEP more vociferously than Leon Trotsky. Trotsky worried that the reintroduction of a capitalist class would inevitably lead to capitalists doing what capitalists did best, namely, stealing wealth and political power from the workers and hoarding it for themselves. The Revolution was in danger of being undone from within.

Yet for Trotsky, this was just one facet of a much larger worry. You'll recall that back in the glory days, just after the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks weren't even all that interested in the question of how to build a socialist economy. That was because they saw their own Revolution as just the first step in a coming global socialist revolution. Now was not the time to ponder how to run a steel mill or how to get the peasants back into the fields. Now was the time to spread the Revolution into Europe. Once more advanced nations, like Germany or Britain, became socialist, nation-states wouldn't matter anymore, and the British and German proletariats

would cheerfully and generously share their expertise and their prosperity to help build the Russian economy.

Yes, in early 1919, with empires collapsing left and right like so many dominoes, it was possible to believe that the worldwide socialist utopia was just months away. But five years later, and after seeing eruptions of socialist revolution snuffed out as soon as they appeared in Hungary, in Bavaria, in Ireland, and many other places, it was no longer easy to be so sanguine. In fact, the Revolution had failed everywhere it had been tried, except in Russia. Increasingly, Russia appeared to be not so much the herald of the coming global revolution as some strange outlier, where the Revolution happened not to get crushed, for some reason.

So what do you do about that? For Trotsky, the answer was clear. The Communist Party must persist in exporting revolution; it must use Russia as the platform to launch socialism into the rest of the world, no matter the cost, no matter the scale of the challenge, no matter the odds. Because, in Trotsky's view, it's as simple as this: Russia cannot and will not survive alone as an island of socialism in a capitalist ocean. Either the rest of the world goes socialist, or the socialist state is finished. We must all hang together or surely we will all hang separately.

[music: Rimsky-Korsakov, "Chant Hindou"]

By the time of Lenin's death, most everyone in the Party was getting pretty darn sick of Leon Trotsky and his endless carping about the imperiled future of the socialist revolution. That included Lenin himself, who went so far as to push for Stalin to become General Secretary of the Communist Party, as a way of clipping Trotsky's wings.

Other respected and powerful Bolsheviks, notably Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, who was Trotsky's brother-in-law, sided with Stalin, because they saw Trotsky as too powerful, too great a threat. It was fine to talk about the worldwide revolution in 1919, but this is 1924. Russia was finally at peace after six nightmarish years of war and economic activity was finally beginning to pick up again. Life had returned to Russia. And it was a better life. The Russian GDP would soon be back to pre-war levels. That might not sound like so great an accomplishment, but consider this: there was no longer a czar or an aristocracy to order everyone about while sucking up most of the wealth of the nation and spending it all on fancy Easter eggs. The average Russian of 1924 was wealthier and had more freedom than in 1914, and credited these boons to Lenin and the Communist Party, while Trotsky was being a troublemaker, a fly in the ointment, a pain in the neck. Can't we just shut up about the worldwide socialist revolution and rest on our laurels for a little while?

But against this argument, Trotsky had his argument that the USSR could not survive in isolation. Either all the world's nations become socialist or none of them can. While you guys are resting on your laurels, the capitalists are still out there, and no doubt they are already planning the counterrevolution.

Trotsky was also complaining that the Communist Party was becoming too centralized and hierarchical. Local Party officials were being appointed by the Central Committee and they answered to the Central Committee and not to the local Party. Internal debate was being stifled when it should be encouraged. The Party needed a dose of democracy.

Yeah, maybe that last argument was Trotsky's most obnoxious of them all. Against this, Stalin and his supporters, like Zinoviev and Kamenev, developed their own doctrine, called "socialism in one country." Contrary to Trotsky's claims, they argued that the USSR was a huge and diverse nation, with a large population and many natural resources. The Soviet Union could and would stand on its own, against the hostility of the entire world, if necessary. And it would triumph. Socialism was inherently more efficient than capitalism, because it didn't have the parasitic capitalists skimming the workers' output for their own selfish use. The Soviet economy would grow richer and its fruits would be shared more equitably until at last even the capitalist world would have to admit that they had become obsolete. And if the capitalists tried to overthrow the Soviet state by force, well, the Soviet state would be more than capable of defending itself.

Although Lenin did not name a successor, the Politburo recognized when the end was coming. So did Lenin, who was barely involved in Soviet government in the final months of his life. The transition went smoothly, and this cult of personality that was set up around Lenin after his death was meant to send the message that the Party leadership were collectively his heirs and intended to observe the doctrines of Marxism-Leninism and follow in the great man's footsteps.

As it happened, Trotsky was ill when Lenin died and was on his way to a resort in the Caucasus for a little rest and rehabilitation when the news came. He was not present at Lenin's funeral, where Stalin was a pallbearer. And all this posthumous Lenin-worship, while it benefited all the Old Bolsheviks, benefited Trotsky the least. Trotsky, remember, had once been a Menshevik and had clashed with Lenin frequently in the old days. He had only joined the Bolshevik movement a few weeks before the October Revolution. Is this really the guy you trust to stay the course Lenin set?

The truth is that every one of the leading Bolsheviks, including Zinoviev and Kamenev and, yes, even Stalin, had quarreled with Lenin at one time or another over the years. None of these guys were what you would call "yes-men." But Trotsky had picked his own fight, over the NEP, more recently. It was like a game of musical chairs. When the music stopped, everyone else quickly settled in to the cult of Lenin, while Leon Trotsky happened to be the one left standing.

And Trotsky's ideas on how to govern the nation were not standing the test of time. Domestically, the NEP was a big success, no matter how harshly you might criticize it on ideological grounds. In foreign affairs, the USSR had managed a trade deal with the UK in 1921. In 1922, the Treaty of Rapallo normalized relations between the Soviet Union and Germany. The Germans were even building arms factories and military training facilities in Russia as an end run around the restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles. By 1924, France, the UK, Poland, and the

Scandinavian nations had extended diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union. Even nations that refused to recognize the USSR, like the United States, were open to trading with it. The worldwide slump in grain prices in the 1920s robbed the new Russia of one of the old Russia's principal sources of export income, but the USSR could and did export petroleum, timber, and minerals. Russian exports in 1927 were only about one-third of what they had been in 1913, but foreign income was foreign income, and it still helped to rebuild the Soviet economy.

All these diplomatic and foreign trade successes tended to support Stalin's position that the USSR could and should survive in a capitalist world, while tending to undermine Trotsky's view that survival depended on instigating Communist revolution at once. Worldwide Communist revolution clearly was not in the cards. Not in the short term. Not even in the medium term. Maybe someday, in the distant future.

When the Communist Party held its 13th Congress, in May 1924, just four months after Lenin's death, the knives came out for Trotsky. He was accused of an unhealthy attachment to violence and revolution. Stories circulated about his harsh treatment of soldiers and civilians during the Civil War. His resistance to the successful New Economic Policy was criticized, and his long history of opposition to the policies of the now-canonized Lenin was brought back into the spotlight. In contrast to Trotsky's attraction to violence and revolution, Stalin and his supporters spoke of a slow and gradual transition into socialism.

Stalin and his supporters in the Party chipped away at Trotsky's reputation throughout the year 1924. Examples of Trotsky's brutality during the Civil War were brought to light—there was plenty of brutality to go around during the Civil War. By January 1925, there had been enough embarrassing revelations to force Trotsky to resign as military commissar. One of Trotsky's greatest political strengths had been his pungent writing, now he couldn't even get an op-ed piece published in *Pravda*. He was effectively isolated and silenced.

The sidelining of Trotsky in 1925 left Joseph Stalin as the Party's most prominent figure. It was at this moment that the town of Tsaritsyn was renamed Stalingrad, but it didn't take very much of this sort of thing before those who had wholeheartedly supported Stalin while he was fighting to cut Trotsky down to size began to reconsider. Zinoviev and Kamenev began turning on Stalin, with the support of Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's widow, who was never much of a Stalin fan.

During this political jockeying, the Soviet economy continued to grow, at a rate modern historians estimate at 6% or more per year, pretty good results from the NEP, all the more remarkable when you consider that foreign investment was nonexistent. Investment in the Soviet economy came from the Soviet government, period. Crucial imports, such as factory machinery and farm equipment, had to be paid for in hard currency. No capitalist bank or government was keen on extending loans to the nation that so famously and defiantly had repudiated its past debts. A number of little capitalists, known as *nepmen*, as in men of the NEP, were getting rich, so much so that the Soviet government imposed special taxes on them.

It was a record that would have made some governments proud, but committed Bolsheviks in the Politburo found it embarrassing, for ideological reasons. The new prosperity was patchy; too many citizens of the new Soviet Union were being left behind. Leon Trotsky called it the “scissors economy.” He meant that industrial output was going up, up, up, while agricultural production was lagging behind, making the graph of the two look like an open pair of scissors.

In 1927, the harvest was a little smaller than it had been in 1926, the first decline since the end of the Civil War. Even worse, the peasants were increasingly refusing to sell their harvests to the state, for the simple reason that farm prices were flat while industrial prices were rising, meaning the rural farmers couldn’t afford to buy anything with the modest payments they were getting for their harvests.

The year 1927 also saw the debacle of the massacre of Chinese Communists by Chiang Kai-shek, which I talked about last week. It had been the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, through Comintern, that had pressured the Chinese Communists into their alliance with the Nationalists. Now that policy was revealed to have been a dreadful mistake.

It was time for a shakeup at the Politburo. Opponents of the leadership, the principal ones being Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Kamenev, called for more democracy within the Party. Well that’s nice, but their calls sounded awfully self-serving. None of them had been especially pro-democracy when *they* were calling the shots. Understand too, that their calls for more democracy were really calls for more debate and more votes within the existing Communist Party. Not even the most strident critics suggested giving a voice to the Mensheviks or the Socialist Revolutionaries, let alone the Kadets.

And you can add to this the fact that Stalin had had three years to elevate his loyalists into upper Party positions. So when the shakeup came, it wasn’t Stalin who got shook up, it was his opponents: Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Trotsky. The problem in the Party was cast as too much infighting, too much dissent. The Party couldn’t function properly unless everyone was on the same page.

The hammer finally came down at a meeting of the Communist Party Central Committee in November 1927, at which Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and hundreds of their supporters were expelled from the Party for their anti-Leninist opinions. Zinoviev and Kamenev gave in quickly; in January 1928, just two months later, they confessed their errors and petitioned the Party to be re-admitted into membership.

Trotsky would not.

[music: Rimsky-Korsakov, “Chant Hindou”]

With the expulsion of Trotsky in particular, Stalin’s doctrine of “socialism in one country,” that the USSR could and would become the world’s first fully socialist economy, even in isolation

from the rest of the world, was now official policy. That massacre of Communists in China was sufficient proof, if you still needed any, that worldwide socialism wasn't coming anytime soon.

But that just brings us back around to the problem I laid out at the top of the episode. There is no plan, no blueprint, no consensus on what exactly a socialist economy is, how you build it, or how you make it work. In principle, it should be a modern, efficient, organized system that would outperform wasteful capitalism. Under socialism, there would naturally be no capitalists, skimming off the wealth of the workers. There would not be economic downturns and business failures. There would not be irrational competition, under which different factories marketing essentially the same product would attempt to differentiate their goods with ephemera like trade names and fancy packaging and marketing campaigns, aimed at persuading consumers to buy this soap rather than that soap, even though they're both just soap. In a socialist economy, there would be just soap, and the money saved on marketing could be spent making the product, and the workers' lives, better. And indeed, eventually in the vast Soviet Union, every store in every city and town would sell the same soap and the same flour and the same toothbrushes and the same clothing, and it may have been efficient, but it was also a little drab.

As for it being organized, well, in 1927, the Soviet Union's dirty little secret was that hardly anything was actually organized. Far from being a planned economy, with experts employing scientific methods aimed at maximizing production and efficiency, with an eye to insuring that the benefits gained would be distributed equitably throughout society, the Soviet Union was actually run by a Politburo of academics and ideologues whose governance was mostly reactive, not proactive, driven by whatever seemed the most pressing problem at the time, and the New Economic Policy still bore the uncomfortable stench of capitalism.

Agricultural production was lagging, and Party leaders, Stalin foremost among them, became convinced it was because of the so-called *kulaks*, the wealthier peasants, the ones who owned their own land. They were widely believed to be greedy and selfish and dishonestly withholding their harvests from the state, so they could profiteer later. In short, they were dirty capitalists, undermining the system from within.

Industry was doing better, but in the Soviet Union demand for industrial products outstripped supplies, which kept prices high. Party leaders like Stalin wanted to see massive increases in industrial output, and not only for the sake of good economic management. Ever since the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks had taken it for granted that the capitalist world saw the fledgling USSR as its greatest enemy. You didn't have to look any farther than the Red Scare in the USA, episode 203, or the brutal crackdowns on the workers' soviets in Germany, episode 213, or the massacre of Communists in China, episode 234, to get confirmation of that.

Stalin believed, just as Lenin had believed before him, that it was only a matter of time before the capitalist countries would go to war with the Soviet Union. Napoleon had invaded Russia in 1812. The British and French had begun the Crimean campaign in 1854. Germany and Austria

had invaded Russia and attempted to dismember it during the recent Great War, and afterward, the Allied powers had sent their soldiers to occupy parts of Russia. Sooner or later, it was bound to happen yet again.

If the Great War has taught us anything, it is that in order to survive a modern conflict, a nation needs a robust industrial sector that can produce arms and ammunition in the quantities modern warfare demands. This was particularly true for Russia, the nation that literally sent soldiers to the front lines empty-handed and told them to pick up the rifles of their fallen comrades.

Also bear in mind how so much of the industry Russia did have was in the westernmost regions of the country. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk would have cost Russia half of its industry. Some of this lost industry was recaptured by the USSR after the Treaty was abrogated, but some was lost forever to Poland and Finland and the Baltic States.

Comrade Stalin believed that it's only a matter of time before the capitalists got around to invading the USSR again, with an eye toward destroying it, and you and I know he's absolutely right about that. That being the case, it is clear what needs to be done. Russia was fifty years or more behind the world's most advanced nations. That gap needed to be closed, and not in fifty years, but in five. Russian industry needed to expand rapidly, and it needed to be located not in the westernmost regions of the nation, where invaders from Europe could capture it in the early days of a war. It needs to be as far east as feasible. That meant in and around the Ural Mountains, in the far east of Great Russia, on the doorstep of Siberia.

In summer of 1928, Stalin was proposing a huge industrialization program that would transform the Soviet economy over five years. The number of industrial workers in the country would increase by a third, while industrial output would double, the difference being made up by modernization and improved productivity. The cost of this modernization would be borne by the state at first, but the massive increase in output would soon provide all the reinvestment funds needed to keep up that level of growth, while also allowing for factory wages to increase seventy percent.

Thus was the first Five-Year Plan grandly announced in September 1928, to be completed in September 1933. In fact, the Plan was declared complete nine months early, in December 1932. The claims of Stalin and the Party that industrial production doubled over this period is likely exaggerated, but modern historians estimate it increased by 50%, which is still pretty remarkable. That would be a rate of growth any nation would welcome. And indeed the Soviet Union would maintain this dramatic rate of growth until 1941.

Under the Five-Year Plan, gargantuan industrial facilities were built the underpopulated rural regions of the East. There was, for example, the world famous Stalingrad Tractor Plant in Stalingrad, which was originally named after Felix Dzerzhinsky, who died in 1926. It was designed and built by American architects and engineers and it produced hundreds of thousands

of tractors, part of the mechanization of agriculture, also part of the Five-Year Plan. Construction was begun on a canal connecting the White Sea to the Baltic and on a Moscow subway system.

The town of Magnitogorsk, at the southern end of the Ural Mountains, takes its name from heavy concentrations of iron ore in its vicinity. Under Stalin's industrialization plans, tiny Magnitogorsk would get one of the world's largest steel mills and develop into a major industrial center. The project was modeled on Gary, Indiana in the United States, where, you'll recall from episode 17, the United States Steel Corporation built a giant steel mill and an entire city to house its workers, named after the president of the company. Now Stalin and the Communist Party were following Elbert Gary's playbook. And the Ford Motor Company, headed by Henry Ford, probably the world's most famous and successful industrialist, signed a deal to help build a massive automotive plant in Nizhny Novgorod.

This dramatic industrial growth was all the more remarkable when you consider that over this same period, 1928-1932, industrial output in the Western capitalist economies was cratering because of the Great Depression. This contrast between economic growth and increasing prosperity in the USSR with shuttered factories and long bread lines in the United States gave encouragement to socialists everywhere, and led even the most ardent free-marketeer to wonder what the hell was going on.

But while everyone admired the impressive accomplishments in industrialization spotlighted by Stalin and the Party, elsewhere, in the darkness of neglect lay the ugly story of what the Five-Year Plan was doing to the rural peasantry.

This story begins a few months before the Five-Year Plan was announced, in January 1928. You remember how I said agricultural output was declining in 1926 and 1927? The New Economic Policy had eliminated the food shortages and starvation of the war years, but now food production was becoming a problem once again. Part of it was the weather; the years 1926 and 1927 were not good to farmers, but it was also resistance to selling in particular grain to the state. State prices weren't very good; farmers preferred to grow other crops to consume themselves or sell locally on the open market, rather than raise grain for the state. This was probably related to the worldwide collapse of agricultural prices that preceded the Great Depression.

In that month, January 1928, Stalin traveled to Novosibirsk on behalf of the Central Committee to investigate these grain shortages. He went with the approval of his Party colleagues, but they probably had no idea that once he was on his own, he would assume the authority to begin requisitioning grain to make up the shortfall, for Stalin was convinced that the peasants were deliberately withholding food to enrich themselves and sabotage the Soviet state. Farmers were called into village meetings and ordered to produce their harvests. No doubt you remember the early days after the October Revolution, when something similar took place. Back then, the Bolsheviks simply went out into the countryside and confiscated grain to feed the cities. Well,

the New Economic Policy was over, and now we're back to a command economy. Comrade Stalin has had enough of those kulak capitalist-wannabees.

Over the next two years, the New Economic Policy was dismantled, and Soviet farms forcibly collectivized. No more kulaks, no more private farms, and from now on the central government is not going to ask you nicely, it is going to tell you how much of your harvest you are going to turn over to the state, and don't bother whining about shortfalls or poor harvests. Nobody wants to hear it. If you don't hand it over voluntarily, armed forces are going to come and take it from you.

By 1930, over half of the farmers in the Soviet Union were working on collective farms. Life was not easy on these farms. The work was demanding, and the peasants were paid next to nothing. Stalin was counting on agricultural exports to help fund investment in the Five-Year Plan, but with world agricultural prices plunging with the onset of the Great Depression, the demands placed on the collectives grew every year.

Many farm workers fled to the cities, since the industrial expansion was supposed to be creating new factory jobs. And it was, although the pay these new jobs offered was lousy. The promised pay increases did not come, although the influx of farm workers willing to take the lowest of the low-paying jobs allowed experienced factory hands to move up into better paying jobs, so they were pretty happy about that.

But the increasing demand for income from agricultural exports, not to mention the increased demand for food domestically from workers in the growing industrial sector meant that in the collectives, ever fewer peasants were expected to produce ever more food. The collectives were poorly organized, often led by party zealots from the cities who knew next to nothing about agriculture, and state promises to flood the countryside with tractors and other modern farm equipment were not met. For all these reasons, although the weather improved for the seasons of 1930, 1931, and 1932, agricultural production kept declining. And despite all the evidence to the contrary, the official Party position was that any shortfalls were the result of greedy peasants selfishly hoarding grain for their own profit.

In many places, peasants resisted the new round of confiscations. As before, the Party sent young loyalist toughs from the cities out into the countryside to enforce the requisitions at gunpoint. They were told that greedy kulaks were conducting a "grain strike" to starve urban workers into meeting demands for extortionate payments. Even many of these urban ideologues were shocked when they discovered how poor and miserable the rural folk actually were.

This was a system headed for disaster, and disaster finally struck in 1932 and 1933. Harvests were bad those years, but the state took no notice. With most of the nation's farms now collectivized and controlled, the state made its confiscations, and what was left was not nearly enough to feed the farmers who had grown it.

During those dreadful years, millions of Soviet citizens starved to death. Corpses were collected in carts and buried in mass unmarked graves. Children begged for food or ate grass. Mothers offered to give their babies away to anyone who would feed them. Peasants slaughtered their horses and livestock for food, meaning it would take years for agricultural production to recover. And there were thousands of reports of cannibalism.

The government covered up the evidence and denied any of this was happening, so exact figures are not available, but the most plausible estimates run from three to seven million, making this famine one of the biggest disasters of the twentieth century.

Industrial workers had it relatively easy by comparison. There was rationing, but people survived. And a precedent was set. In the Soviet Union, when drought or famine came, it would be the farmers, not the urban workers, who would starve. It would take until after Stalin's death in the 1950s before Soviet agricultural production got back to the level of 1913. And it would take until after Stalin's death for the full horror of the famines of 1932 and 1933 to come to light.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Luca and Rob for their kind donations, and thank you to Rafszul for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Luca and Rob and Rafszul help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take a look at developments in radio. Before the Great War, radio meant radio telegrams, using Morse code signals, usually to or from ships at sea. The technology to transmit sound over radio waves moved from experimental to practical during the war, allowing for the radio telephone, but further experiments in the United States demonstrated that radio had a whole other potential use, an entirely novel one, previously undreamt of. The Radio Music Box, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The Soviet famine of 1932-33 primarily affected the southern, non-Russian areas of the country, like the North Caucasus and Kazakhstan, but especially Ukraine. In more recent times, and especially after the fall of the Soviet Union, it has become common to

suggest that the famine was a genocide, a deliberate attempt to reduce the numbers of ethnic minorities in the USSR by starvation.

There is no hard evidence that Stalin and the Communist Party deliberately targeted minorities, or indeed that they intended to kill large numbers of people at all, so labeling the famine “genocide” may be going too far. It seems far more likely that Stalin and his supporters simply refused to believe the famine was as bad as the peasants were saying. All their experience in the fifteen years since the Revolution had led them to conclude that the peasants were greedy and untrustworthy, and they would not let go of that belief, even at the cost of millions of lives.

Still, as I argued back in episode 99, when I talked about the Armenian genocide, getting bogged down over the definition of the word *genocide* is like not seeing the forest because you’re studying the bark on one particular tree. A government has an obligation to protect the well-being of its people. A government that confiscates its own people’s food has an obligation to leave them with enough to survive on. A government that recklessly disregards that obligation doesn’t get to shrug and say, “Oops. Sorry, didn’t mean to do that.” It may not quite be deliberate murder, but to so blithely disregard the welfare of millions of people you are responsible to protect is a horrific crime, no matter what label you may want to put on it.

[music: Closing Theme]