



r/communism:

Analysis, myth-debunking & other effort posts

Various authors

r/communism: The Book

Collected by u/Mother_Red_Vulture

r/Communism: How many layers of megathread are you on right now?

Reddit: Idk, maybe like 5 or 6 my dude.

r/Communism: You are like a baby, watch this.

- u/ladyscarlett22

Contents

Preface	v
1 Refuting General Anti-Socialist Claims	1
1.1 The Most Common Anti-Socialist Myths	2
2 Analysis of the Soviet Union	8
2.1 Masterpost on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics	9
2.2 Workers' Control and Democracy in the Soviet Union	21

Preface

In 1917, the world would be forever changed. In the Russian Empire, there existed a political party known as the Russian Social Democratic Party, or the Bolsheviks. Fed up with their empire's economic instability, industrial underdevelopment, appalling treatment of the working-class people, and the lack of initiative by the new provisional government to address these issues, they realized that a "reformist" plan of action was not tenable. In October that year, they overthrew the liberal provisional government and established a new nation, Soviet Russia. Over the next five years, they fought against the fascist forces of the White Army and its international allies to secure their massive country, and in 1922, such security was permanently recognized. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, otherwise known as the Soviet Union, became the successor to the autocratic, capitalist badlands of the Russian Empire. The Soviet Union would lead its working people on the path towards communism, a state of society in which there is no existence of class, money or the state, and the means of production are commonly owned by all working members of the community.

The establishment of the Soviet Union would inspire many similar revolutions across the world, in which vanguard parties of proletariats (the working class) would take power in their capitalist-torn nations and established socialist societies. Power over the means of production would be taken from the greedy bourgeoisies (the ruling class) and given over to the proletariat, so that they could build their nations into industrial powerhouses of modernity, together and democratically.

This way of thinking is commonly known as Marxism-Leninism, named after its founders Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, the latter of whom was the founder of the Soviet Union. Marxist-Leninist states have been established all across the globe, and the achievements of these nations—both economically and socially—have been tremendous, and have rivalled the accomplishments of their capitalist counterparts. Unfortunately, they have also been under constant scrutiny and persecution from the imperialist action of said counterparts, and most Marxist-Leninist nations have either submitted to "free market" regression and eventual dissolution, or have been forcefully overthrown by strong capitalist powers, most notably the United States of America.

Nevertheless, Marxist-Leninist theory persists among a small number of proletariats today, and this persistence has been accompanied by a general growing disillusionment with capitalism and its unstable forces across the world. A 2019 study by the PR firm Edelman shows that 56% of the world's population is "dissatisfied" with capitalism, and an Axios survey done the same year showed that at least 40% of Americans prefer their varying definitions of "socialism" to capitalism.

Clearly, the proletarians of the world are once again beginning to wake up to the true nature of the situations they live in. And the internet has only made it infinitely easier for the average working-class person to communicate with and learn from other like-minded individuals from any location on earth. Enter r/communism, an online community powered by the social media website Reddit, and the largest forum on the internet for communists who subscribe to Marxist-Leninist thought. Established in 2008, r/communism has grown to hold approximately 131,000 members as of March 2020. In those twelve years—almost exclusively the past five—dozens of large written posts, known as "masterposts" or "megathreads," have been created by members of our subreddit on various issues and topics pertaining to our ideology. Whether they be detailed analyses of former ML states that cite academic sources, or well-written essays refuting the many lies and myths of socialism, there is a lot to be learned here if you are a newly professed ML looking for short answers to the many questions you may have.

This book is a compilation of 54 of said masterposts and megathreads, written by two dozen authors over the course of a near six-year period, from mid-2014 up until just this year. Some of them have been somewhat altered from their original state to be more suited for book form, but otherwise remain virtually identical to their original posts. We obviously do not advocate these texts over the works of professional Marxist-Leninist thinkers, but for those who are quite new to the ideology, these relatively simple and straightforward posts can offer a suitable starting point.

Even if you are not a communist or Marxist-Leninist, but are simply intrigued by some of our arguments, we welcome you to read this book as well. Regardless of your ideology, we hope that you find something educational in these pages, and that you can develop a better understanding of who we are, and what we stand for!

Long live the struggle against capitalism, imperialism and fascism!

Long live the people!

Workers of the world, unite!

Chapter 1

Refuting General Anti-Socialist Claims

1.1 The Most Common Anti-Socialist Myths: A Response

Written by /u/flesh_eating_turtle on the 12th of February 2020

Introduction

Hello everyone. I just wanted to provide some quick sources to refute the most common anti-socialist myths tossed around online, as a quick reference for arguments with liberals and reactionaries. I hope you all find it useful.

Myth #1: Capitalism and Liberal Democracy Are Popular

According to a recent survey conducted by Edelman (the world's largest PR firm, based in the United States), 56% of the world's people feel that capitalism does "more harm than good in the world."¹

In addition, a recent survey from Cambridge found that 58% of the world's people are "dissatisfied" with liberal democracy.² These figures indicate growing global discontent with the capitalist system.

Myth #2: Capitalism is Democratic

The evidence overwhelmingly contradicts this point. Let's take the United States as our example; according to a study from Princeton University,³ "the preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy." As the study puts it:

We believe that if policy-making is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans, then America's claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened.

In addition, a study from Northwestern University found that the wealthy "are extremely active politically and that they are much more conservative than the American public as a whole with respect to important policies concerning taxation, economic regulation, and especially social welfare programs."⁴ They also state:

We suggest that these distinctive policy preferences may help account for why certain public policies in the United States appear

¹John, "Capitalism seen doing 'more harm than good' in global survey".

²<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/news/global-dissatisfaction-democracy-record-high-new-c/>

³https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/mgilens/files/gilens_and_page_2014_testing_theories_of_american_politics.doc.pdf

⁴<http://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~jnd260/cab/CAB2012%20-%20Page1.pdf>

to deviate from what the majority of US citizens wants the government to do. If this is so, it raises serious issues for democratic theory.

The people as a whole support significantly more left-wing policies (according to the above study, more than half of all Americans support state-run universal healthcare, wealth redistribution, and a jobs guarantee), but these policies are blocked by the ruling class. These issues can be expected to occur in other capitalist nations as well.

Myth #3: Public Ownership is Inefficient

There is little-to-no evidence that SOEs (state-owned enterprises) are less efficient than private enterprises, given similar external conditions. According to a study conducted at Cambridge University (put out by the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs),⁵ “there is no clear systematic evidence that SOEs are burdens on the economy.” The study further notes that “Despite popular perception, encouraged by the business media and contemporary conventional wisdom and rhetoric, SOEs can be efficient and well-run.” It points out:

Many countries achieved economic success with a large SOE sector... Conversely, many unsuccessful economies have small SOE sectors.

A study from Stanford University’s Center on Global Poverty and Development evaluated both public and private enterprises in China,⁶ finding the former to be significantly more productive, even when controlling for favorable market conditions and better management:

We find that, the labor productivity and TFP of SOEs are significantly higher than private firms... Furthermore, this paper finds that, although better human capital, more market power and better management can explain partially why productivity in SOEs are higher, there remains a large share of the SOE advantage in productivity that is still left unexplained.

Another study,⁷ published in the *International Journal of Production Economics*, measured the efficiency of public and private enterprises, using Spain as an example. They found that SOEs showed similar or slightly higher efficiency relative to private enterprises:

⁵https://esa.un.org/techcoop/documents/PN_SOEReformNote.pdf

⁶<https://kingcenter.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/1037wp.pdf>

⁷<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0925527312002745#>

In short, SOEs were not amongst the most inefficient in their sectors, but neither among the most efficient, showing a level of efficiency similar or slightly above the median of the efficiency of private companies... our findings would challenge the recurrent argument on the need of privatizing these companies due to their high levels of inefficiency.

While some enterprises did experience an increase in efficiency after privatization, other studies have indicated that this is due to structural changes that occurred *before* the privatization took place. Even the above paper notes that “other studies provide evidence that profitability increases *before* privatization, suggesting that governments can effectively restructure companies before selling them.” It should also be noted that in most cases (eight out of fourteen) “differences in efficiency before and after privatization are not statistically significant.”

Other studies have supported the idea that pre-privatization restructuring is the primary factor in increased efficiency. For example, one study,⁸ published in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, looks at the impact of privatization on efficiency in Britain, noting that “the most dramatic changes have occurred in state-owned enterprises like (pre-privatization) British Steel and British Coal, where productivity gains have been massive by any standards.”

Privatization also depends fundamentally on the competence of the government which carries it out. This presents a conundrum; according to the aforementioned UN study:

At root, it appears that if a government has the capacity and capability to conduct a good privatization, it probably also has the capacity to operate good SOEs; whereas, if a government does not have the capacity to operate good SOEs, it likely also lacks the capacity to conduct a good privatization.

To further complicate matters, the problems that state-owned enterprises *do* have often occur in private firms as well; as the above UN study puts it:

All the key arguments against SOEs—the principal-agent problem, the free-rider problem, and the soft budget constraints—apply to large private sector firms with dispersed ownership.

While public ownership is not problem-free, there is no good evidence to suggest that it is less efficient than private ownership.

⁸<https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/jep.5.2.111>

Myth #4: Capitalism Meets Human Needs Better Than Socialism

Socialism has been consistently superior to capitalism in terms of meeting human needs. A study published in the *International Journal of Health Services* notes that “contrary to dominant ideology, socialism and socialist forces have been, for the most part, better able to improve health conditions than have capitalism and capitalist forces.”⁹

Another study,¹⁰ published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, measured physical quality of life (PQL) in capitalist and socialist countries, finding that:

In 28 of 30 comparisons between countries at similar levels of economic development, socialist countries showed more favorable PQL outcomes... Our findings indicate that countries with socialist political-economic systems can make great strides toward meeting basic human needs, even without extensive economic resources. When much of the world’s population suffers from disease, early death, malnutrition, and illiteracy, these observations take on a meaning that goes beyond cold statistics.

A subsequent study,¹¹ published in the *International Journal of Health Services*, verified these results, finding that “in general, nations with strong left-wing regimes have more favorable health outcomes (e.g., longer life expectancies and lower mortality rates) than do those with strong right-wing regimes.”

These results can be explained by referencing the aforementioned UN study;¹² as it noted:

As a “one-dollar-one-vote” system, markets are not likely to adequately meet the basic needs of the poor. For example, 20 times more money is spent on research on slimming drugs than on research on malaria, a disease that kills more than a million people every year. If we want a broad-based and politically sustainable development, we need to find mechanisms that can meet the basic needs of everyone.

These facts must be taken into consideration.

⁹<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.2190/B2TP-3R5M-Q7UP-DUA2>

¹⁰<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1646771/pdf/amjph00269-0055.pdf>

¹¹<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.2190/EQUY-ACG8-X59F-AE99>

¹²https://esa.un.org/techcoop/documents/PN_SOERReformNote.pdf

Myth #5: Capitalism is Eliminating Global Poverty

According to an article by Jason Hickel (London School of Economics),¹³ global poverty is significantly higher than most people believe, due to the absurdly low poverty line used by the World Bank (\$1.90 a day). As he puts it:

It's obscenely low by any standard, and we now have piles of evidence that people living just above this line have terrible levels of malnutrition and mortality. Earning \$2 per day doesn't mean that you're somehow suddenly free of extreme poverty. Not by a long shot.

If a more reasonable poverty standard (such as \$7.40) is used, "we see that the number of people living under this line has increased dramatically since measurements began in 1981, reaching some 4.2 billion people today." It must also be noted that most actual poverty reduction since 1981 has occurred in China, which is hardly a free market society (five-year plans are still drawn up, and the state still owns most strategic industries). As Hickel puts it:

Moreover, the few gains that have been made have virtually all happened in one place: China. It is disingenuous, then, for the likes of Gates and Pinker to claim these gains as victories for Washington-consensus neoliberalism. Take China out of the equation, and the numbers look even worse. Over the four decades since 1981, not only has the number of people in poverty gone up, the proportion of people in poverty has remained stagnant at about 60%. It would be difficult to overstate the suffering that these numbers represent.

Finally, according to a study published in the *World Social and Economic Review*,¹⁴ eliminating global poverty will be functionally impossible without a significant reduction in global inequality:

Poverty eradication, even at \$1.25-a-day, and especially at a poverty line which better reflects the satisfaction of basic needs, can be reconciled with global carbon constraints only by a major increase in the share of the poorest in global economic growth, far beyond what can realistically be achieved by existing instruments of development policy—that is, by effective measures to reduce global inequality.

¹³<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/29/bill-gates-davos-global-poverty-infographic-neoliberal>

¹⁴<http://wer.worldeconomicsassociation.org/papers/incrementum-ad-absurdum-global-growth-inequality-and-poverty-eradication-in-a-carbon-constrained-world/>

These facts make a continued capitalist model highly untenable.

Sources

John, Mark. “Capitalism seen doing ‘more harm than good’ in global survey”. In: *Reuters* (Jan. 19, 2020). URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-davos-meeting-trust-idUSKBN1ZJ0CW>.

Chapter 2

Analysis and Myth-Debunking of the Soviet Union

2.1 Masterpost on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Introduction

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was the first nation ever to declare itself a socialist state, dedicated to the building of communism. Over the seven decades of its existence, the USSR went through many stages and phases of development, from a semi-capitalist feudal society, to a state capitalist nation during the NEP years, to a developed socialist country, and finally to a revisionist state regressing towards capitalism. The purpose of this post is to examine the achievements of socialism in the USSR up to the early 1960's, at which point market reforms and capitalist restoration began to take effect. We will also be examining the disastrous effects that these reforms had on the health and well-being of the Soviet people.

This post will consist of three parts. This first part is a discussion of the achievements of Soviet socialism in terms of economic development, living standards, and healthcare. The question of Stalin and the Ukrainian famine will also be discussed. The second part will be a discussion of Soviet advances in women's rights, as well as opposition to racism (both internally, and in its global manifestation of imperialism). We will also discuss the nature of Soviet democracy. The third part will discuss the eventual fall of the USSR, and the disastrous effects of capitalist restoration and revisionism in the USSR.

All sources are listed at the end of the post. I will indicate which source I am using each time I quote from one. Now, let us begin.

Revolution, War Communism, and the NEP

When the 1917 revolution took place, Russia was a backwards, semi-capitalist feudal society. The manor system had only recently been abolished, and replaced by the most brutal and primitive form of capitalism. The nation was dreadfully under-developed, with no sign of improving in the future. Not only that, but what little growth did occur led to massive inequalities. According to Professor Robert Allen (formerly of Oxford University, now at NYU):

Not only were the bases of Imperial advance narrow, but the process of growth gave rise to such inequitable changes in income distribution that revolution was hardly a surprise. Real wages for urban workers were static in the late Imperial period despite a significant increase in output per worker.... The revolution was also a peasant revolt, and the interests of the peasants were

different... As in the cities, there was no gain in real wages.¹

Simon Clarke, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Warwick, supports these claims:

Agriculture had reached North American levels of productivity by 1913 and wheat prices collapsed after 1914. The expansion of the railroads had run its course and there was no prospect of protected light industry becoming internationally competitive. The appropriate comparators for the prospects for Russian capitalism in the twentieth century are not Japan but Argentina or even India. Moreover, Russian capitalist development had brought little if any benefit to the urban and rural working class, intensifying the class conflicts that erupted in Revolution.²

With the 1917 revolution (and after the bloody civil war, with its policy of war communism), the Soviet economy began to grow rapidly. The New Economic Policy (which nationalized large-scale industry and redistributed land, while allowing for the private sale of agricultural surplus) succeeded in transforming Russia from a semi-capitalist society into a developing state capitalist society, laying the groundwork for socialism. Professor Clarke states:

Following War Communism, the New Economic Policy (NEP) sought to develop the Russian economy within a quasi-capitalist framework.³

However, economic circumstances came to require the transition to a planned socialist economy:

However, the institutional and structural barriers to Russian economic development were now compounded by the unfavorable circumstances of the world economy, so that there was no prospect of export-led development, while low domestic incomes provided only a limited market for domestic industry. Without a state coordinated investment program, the Soviet economy would be caught in the low-income trap typical of the underdeveloped world.⁴

Thus, the material conditions of the time made the transition to a socialist economy a necessity.

¹Allen, *Farm to factory: A reinterpretation of the Soviet industrial revolution*.

²Clarke, *Farm to Factory: A Reinterpretation of the Soviet Industrial Revolution*.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

Economic Development and Living Standards in the Socialist Era

In 1928 (after Stalin came to power as head of the Communist Party), Soviet Russia instituted a fully planned economy, and the first Five Year Plan was enacted. This resulted in rapid economic growth. According to Professor Allen:

Soviet GDP increased rapidly with the start of the first Five Year Plan in 1928... The expansion of heavy industry and the use of output targets and soft-budgets to direct firms were appropriate to the conditions of the 1930's, they were adopted quickly, and they led to rapid growth of investment and consumption.⁵

Bourgeois economists often alleged that this rapid growth came at the cost of per-capita consumption and living standards. However, more recent research has shown this to be false. Professor Allen states:

There has been no debate that 'collective consumption' (principally education and health services) rose sharply, but the standard view was that private consumption declined. Recent research, however, calls that conclusion into question... While investment certainly increased rapidly, *recent research shows that the standard of living also increased briskly.*⁶

Calorie consumption rose rapidly during this period:

Calories are the most basic dimension of the standard of living, and their consumption was higher in the late 1930's than in the 1920's... In 1895-1910, calorie availability was only 2100 per day, which is very low by modern standards. By the late 1920's, calorie availability advanced to 2500... By the late 1930's, the recovery of agriculture increased calorie availability to 2900 per day, a significant increase over the late 1920's. The food situation during the Second World War was severe, but by 1970 calorie consumption rose to 3400, which was on a par with western Europe.⁷

Overall, the development of the Soviet economy during the socialist period was extremely impressive. According to Professor Allen:

⁵ Allen, *Farm to factory: A reinterpretation of the Soviet industrial revolution.*

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

The Soviet economy performed well... Planning led to high rates of capital accumulation, rapid GDP growth, and rising per capita consumption even in the 1930's.⁸

The USSR's growth during the socialist period exceeded that of the capitalist nations:

The USSR led the non-OECD countries and, indeed, achieved a growth rate in this period that exceeded the OECD catch-up regression as well as the OECD average.⁹

This success is also attributed specifically to the revolution and the socialist system. As Professor Allen states:

This success would not have occurred without the 1917 revolution or the planned development of state owned industry.¹⁰

The benefits of the socialist system are obvious upon closer study. As the Professor Clarke puts it:

...a capitalist economy would not have created the industrial jobs required to employ the surplus labour, since capitalists would only employ labour so long as the marginal product of labour exceeded the wage. State-sponsored industrialization faced no such constraints, since enterprises were encouraged to expand employment in line with the demands of the plan.¹¹

Economic growth was also aided by the liberation of women, and the resulting control over the birth rate, as well as women's participation in the workforce. Allen states:

The rapid growth in per capita income was contingent not just on the rapid expansion of GDP but also on the slow growth of the population. This was primarily due to a rapid fertility transition rather than a rise in mortality from collectivization, political repression, or the Second World War. Falling birth rates were primarily due to the education and employment of women outside the home. These policies, in turn, were the results of enlightenment ideology in its communist variant.¹²

⁸ Allen, *Farm to factory: A reinterpretation of the Soviet industrial revolution*.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

Reviews of Allen's work have backed up his statements. According to the Professor Clarke:

Allen shows that the Stalinist strategy worked, in strictly economic terms, until around 1970... Allen's book convincingly establishes the superiority of a planned over a capitalist economy in conditions of labour surplus (which is the condition of most of the world most of the time).¹³

Other studies have backed-up the findings that the USSR's living standards rose rapidly. According to Professor Elizabeth Brainerd (formerly of Williams College, now at Brandeis University):

Remarkably large and rapid improvements in child height, adult stature and infant mortality were recorded from approximately 1945 to 1970... Both Western and Soviet estimates of GNP growth in the Soviet Union indicate that GNP per capita grew in every decade in the postwar era, at times far surpassing the growth rates of the developed western economies... The conventional measures of GNP growth and household consumption indicate a long, uninterrupted upward climb in the Soviet standard of living from 1928 to 1985; even Western estimates of these measures support this view, albeit at a slower rate of growth than the Soviet measures.¹⁴

Unfortunately, after the introduction of market reforms and other revisionist policies, living standards began to deteriorate (although some measures continued to increase, albeit more slowly). According to Professor Brainerd:

Three different measures of population health show a consistent and large improvement between approximately 1945 and 1969: child height, adult height and infant mortality all improved significantly during this period. These three biological measures of the standard of living also corroborate the evidence of some deterioration in living conditions beginning around 1970, when infant and adult mortality were rising and child and adult height stopped increasing and in some regions began to decline.¹⁵

Economic growth also began to slow around this time. According to Professor Allen:

¹³Clarke, *Farm to Factory: A Reinterpretation of the Soviet Industrial Revolution*.

¹⁴Brainerd, "Reassessing the standard of living in the Soviet Union: An analysis using archival and anthropometric data".

¹⁵Ibid.

After the Second World War, the Soviet economy resumed rapid growth. By 1970, the growth rate was sagging, and per capita output was static by 1985.¹⁶

The Cold War was another factor which contributed to slowing growth rates:

The Cold War was an additional factor that lowered Soviet growth after 1968. The creation of high tech weaponry required a disproportionate allocation of R & D personnel and resources to the military. Innovation in civilian machinery and products declined accordingly. Half of the decrease in the growth rate of per capita GDP was due to the decline in productivity growth, and that decrease provides an upper bound to the impact of the arms race with the United States.¹⁷

In short, the USSR achieved massively positive economic results until the 1970's, when revisionist policies and the Cold War began to cause a stagnation. Now, let us move on from economic development, and talk about the health standards of the Soviet population.

Healthcare Conditions in the Socialist Period

Health conditions in Czarist Russia had been deplorable; it was among the unhealthiest nations in Europe (arguably in the entire world). According to Professor Reiner Dinkel (University of Munich):

Without doubt the Soviet Union was one of the most underdeveloped European countries at the time of the October Revolution. In terms of life-expectancy it lagged behind the other industrialized countries of Europe by a gap of about 15 years.¹⁸

However, after the socialist revolution, healthcare conditions began to increase rapidly. By the end of the socialist period, healthcare standards (measured by life expectancy and mortality rates) were superior to those of Western Europe and the USA. Professor Dinkel states:

One of the most striking advances of socialism has been and was generally seen to be the improvement in public health provision for the population as a whole. In accordance with this assumption mortality-rates in the Soviet Union declined rapidly in the

¹⁶Allen, *Farm to factory: A reinterpretation of the Soviet industrial revolution*.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Dinkel, "Declining Life Expectancy in a Highly Developed Nation: Paradox or Statistical Artifact?"

first two decades after World War II. In 1965 life-expectancy for men and women in all parts of the Soviet Union, which still included vast underdeveloped regions with unfavorable living conditions, were as high or even higher than in the United States. Such a development fits perfectly into the picture of emerging industrial development and generally improving conditions of living.¹⁹

Even reactionary intellectuals were forced to acknowledge these achievements; according to Nicholas Ebserstadt (a conservative think-tank adviser), healthcare standards in the Soviet Union during the socialist period surpassed those of the USA and Western Europe:

Over much of this century the nation in the vanguard of the revolution in health was the Soviet Union. In 1897 Imperial Russia offered its people a life expectancy of perhaps thirty years. In European Russia, from what we can make out, infant mortality (that is, death in the first year) claimed about one child in four, and in Russia's Asian hinterlands the toll was probably closer to one in three. Yet by the late 1950's the average Soviet citizen could expect to live 68.7 years: longer than his American counterpart, who had begun the century with a seventeen-year lead. By 1960 the Soviet infant mortality rate, higher than any in Europe as late as the Twenties, was lower than that of Italy, Austria, or East Germany, and seemed sure to undercut such nations as Belgium and West Germany any year.²⁰

He even notes that these achievements made socialism seem nearly unbeatable:

In the face of these and other equally impressive material accomplishments, Soviet claims about the superiority of their "socialist" system, its relevance to the poor countries, and the inevitability of its triumph over the capitalist order were not easily refuted.²¹

While health conditions did start to decline after the introduction of revisionist policies in the mid-60's (this will be discussed in more detail in part three), the healthcare achievements of the socialist system remain unimpeachable.

¹⁹Dinkel, "Declining Life Expectancy in a Highly Developed Nation: Paradox or Statistical Artifact?"

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

The Question of Stalin

(EDIT: An entire masterpost on this topic has been prepared, with more extensive sources and detail. I recommend going there instead for a more in-depth and detailed look at this issue.)

Joseph Stalin was the principal architect of the socialist period in the USSR. As a result, he has been the victim of perhaps the most extensive smear campaign in modern history. Claims that he killed tens of millions of people, jailed victims without cause, and deliberately starved Ukrainian peasants are only some of the propaganda charges leveled against him. As such, it is the duty of any informed socialist to combat this propaganda.

Firstly, we must remember the extensive achievements discussed above, which vastly improved life for hundreds of millions of people. These achievements were the result of the socialist system, built primarily under Joseph Stalin. Even reactionaries have been unable to deny this. According to the right-wing commentator Nicholas Eberstadt:

Stalin's results were incontestable. This is a point those of us in the West often overlook. Stalin inherited a country that was the primary casualty of World War I, and bequeathed to his successors a super-power. It is but a single measure of the success of the 'Leader', and his understanding of the endurance of his nation, that between 1940 and 1953... the USSR doubled its production of coal and steel, tripled its output of cement and industrial goods, and increased its pool of skilled labor by a factor of ten. These rates of growth were geometrically higher than in the less devastated and Terror-free West.²²

Now, let us discuss some of the particular issue relating to Stalin.

The Great Purge

The purges of the late-1930's are a definite black mark on the legacy of Soviet socialism; this much cannot be denied. That being said, they have been the subject of decades-worth of unjustified and intolerable distortions and exaggerations by bourgeois academics, necessitating a thorough reply.

Firstly, let us establish the facts of how many people actually died in the purges. While Westerners are often treated to numbers ranging from 20 to 50 million, the true figures (while bad enough in their own right) are nowhere near that high. According to Professor J. Arch Getty:

From 1921 to Stalin's death, in 1953, around 800,000 people were sentenced to death and shot, 85 percent of them in the years of

²²Eberstadt, "The health crisis in the USSR".

the Great Terror of 1937-1938. From 1934 to Stalin's death, more than a million perished in the gulag camps.²³

To these figures must be added an important qualification: contrary to popular opinion, the vast majority of gulag inmates were not innocent political prisoners. Professor Getty notes that those convicted of "counter-revolutionary crimes" made up between 12 and 33 percent (depending on the year) of the gulag population, with the rest having been convicted of ordinary crimes. He also rejects the common claim that non-Russian nationalities were disproportionately targeted. To quote from his article in the *American Historical Review*:

The long-awaited archival evidence on repression in the period of the Great Purges shows that the levels of arrests, political prisoners, executions, and general camp populations tend to confirm the orders of magnitude indicated by those labeled as "revisionists" and mocked by those proposing high estimates... inferences that the terror fell particularly hard on non-Russian nationalities are not borne out by the camp population data from the 1930's. The frequent assertion that most of the camp prisoners were 'political' also seems not to be true.²⁴

These figures are confirmed in a CIA report on the topic.

In addition, the gulag camps were not death camps like those of the Nazis; they were prisons, albeit harsh ones. Even noted anti-communist scholars (such as those who worked on the infamous *Black Book of Communism*) have admitted this. To quote again from Professor Getty:

Stalin's camps were different from Hitler's. Tens of thousands of prisoners were released every year upon completion of their sentences. We now know that before World War II more inmates escaped annually from the Soviet camps than died there. [...] Werth, a well-regarded French specialist on the Soviet Union whose sections in the *Black Book* on the Soviet Communists are sober and damning, told *Le Monde*, "Death camps did not exist in the Soviet Union."²⁵

It must also be noted that, contrary to the popular conception of Stalin's USSR as a place of "total terror" (to quote Hannah Arendt), the majority of the population did not feel threatened by the purges. Referring to the time of the Great Purge, Professor Robert Thurston notes that "my evidence

²³Getty, Rittersporn, and Zemskov, "Victims of the Soviet penal system in the pre-war years: a first approach on the basis of archival evidence".

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

suggests that widespread fear did not exist in the case at hand.” He also notes that the Great Purge was an exceptional occurrence, which cannot be used to characterize the Stalinist-era as a whole:

I will not simply imply but will state outright that the *Ezhovshchina* (Great Purge) was an aberration. Torture was uncommon until August 1937, when it became the norm; it ended abruptly with Beria’s rise to head of the NKVD in late 1938. Mass arrests followed the same pattern... A campaign for more regular, fair, and systemic judicial procedures that began in 1933-1934 was interrupted and overwhelmed by the Terror in 1937. It resumed in the spring of 1938, more strongly and effectively than before. Thus more than one trend was broken by the *Ezhovshchina*, only to reappear after it.²⁶

He also points out that some arrests which took place during the Great Purge were based on previously-ignored (yet arguably still legitimate) crimes against the Soviet state, such as fighting with the reactionary forces during the Civil War:

People were suddenly arrested in 1937 for things that had happened many years earlier but had been ignored since, for example, serving in a White army.²⁷

The question arises: why arrest former White Army soldiers, among others? The answer lies in the general fear of counterrevolution which pervaded the party at this time. According to Professor James Harris:

By the mid-1930’s, the rise of the Nazis in Germany and the militarists in Japan, both stridently anti-communist, posed a very real threat to the USSR. War was then on the horizon, and Stalin felt he had no choice but to take preemptive action against what he saw as a potential fifth column – a group that would undermine the larger collective.²⁸

Remember that since the moment of its founding (still a recent event, at this time), the Soviet Union had been invaded by multiple capitalist powers (including the United States) in the early-1920’s, and had also been subject to espionage and internal sabotage. Combined with the looming threat of war with an increasingly powerful Nazi Germany, it is hardly surprising that

²⁶Thurston, “On Desk-Bound Parochialism, Commonsense Perspectives, and Lousy Evidence: A Reply to Robert Conquest”.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Harris, *Historian James Harris says Russian archives show we’ve misunderstood Stalin*.

these factors came together to form an atmosphere of paranoia, which lent itself to the sort of violent excess seen during the Purge. This coincides with Professor Thurston's interpretation of the events, from his book *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia*:

...between 1934 and 1936 police and court practice relaxed significantly. Then a series of events, together with the tense international situation and memories of real enemy activity during the savage Russian Civil War, combined to push leaders and people into a hysterical hunt for perceived 'wreckers.' After late 1938, however, the police and courts became dramatically milder.²⁹

This general atmosphere of fear (not of the purges, but of external and internal enemies) is most likely why the majority of the Soviet people seemed to support the government's actions during the Purge period. According to Professor Thurston:

The various reactions to arrest cataloged above suggest that general fear did not exist in the USSR at any time in the late 1930's... People who remained at liberty often felt that some event in the backgrounds of the detained individuals justified their arrests. The sense that anyone could be next, the underpinning of theoretical systems of terror, rarely appears.³⁰

Overall, perhaps the most succinct summary of this issue is the one provided in Professor Thurston's book, in which he states:

There was never a long period of Stalinism without a serious foreign threat, major internal dislocation, or both, which makes identifying its true nature impossible.³¹

As Marxists, we should be well aware that material conditions shape ideological and political structures. The savagery of the Russian Civil War, the multiple invasions from capitalist powers, and the increasing threat of a war against fascism make the paranoid atmosphere of the late-1930's understandable, if not condonable; yet even while we discuss the genuine causes of the Purge, and reject the hysterical anti-communist mud-throwing of the Cold Warriors, we must still acknowledge the black mark that the Purge leaves on Stalin's legacy.

²⁹Thurston, *Life and terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941*.

³⁰Thurston, "Fear and Belief in the USSR's "Great Terror": Response to Arrest, 1935-1939".

³¹Thurston, *Life and terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941*.

The Ukrainian Famine

Perhaps the most pernicious accusation against Stalin is that he orchestrated the dreadful famine of the early-1930's in order to squash a Ukrainian nationalist revolt. This despicable slander (which is peddled largely by Ukrainian nationalist and neo-fascist groups) is easily refuted by examining the historical consensus. The following quotes are compiled in an article from the *Village Voice*, cited below.

Alexander Dallin of Stanford University writes:

There is no evidence it was intentionally directed against Ukrainians... that would be totally out of keeping with what we know – it makes no sense.³²

Moshe Lewin of the University of Pennsylvania stated:

This is crap, rubbish... I am an anti-Stalinist, but I don't see how this [genocide] campaign adds to our knowledge. It's adding horrors, adding horrors, until it becomes a pathology.³³

Lynne Viola of the University of Toronto writes:

I absolutely reject it... Why in god's name would this paranoid government consciously produce a famine when they were terrified of war [with Germany]?³⁴

Mark Tauger, Professor of History at West Virginia University (reviewing work by Stephen Wheatcroft and R.W. Davies) has this to say:

Popular media and most historians for decades have described the great famine that struck most of the USSR in the early 1930s as “man-made,” very often even a “genocide” that Stalin perpetrated intentionally against Ukrainians and sometimes other national groups to destroy them as nations... This perspective, however, is wrong. The famine that took place was not limited to Ukraine or even to rural areas of the USSR, it was not fundamentally or exclusively man-made, and it was far from the intention of Stalin and others in the Soviet leadership to create such a disaster. A small but growing literature relying on new archival documents and a critical approach to other sources has shown the flaws in the “genocide” or “intentionalist” interpretation of the famine and has developed an alternative interpretation.³⁵

³²Coplon, *In Search of a Soviet Holocaust: A 55 Year Old Famine Feeds the Right*.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Tauger, *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931-1933*.

More recent research has discovered natural causes for the Ukrainian famine. Tauger notes:

...the USSR experienced an unusual environmental disaster in 1932: extremely wet and humid weather that gave rise to severe plant disease infestations, especially rust. Ukraine had double or triple the normal rainfall in 1932. Both the weather conditions and the rust spread from Eastern Europe, as plant pathologists at the time documented. Soviet plant pathologists in particular estimated that rust and other fungal diseases reduced the potential harvest in 1932 by almost nine million tons, which is the largest documented harvest loss from any single cause in Soviet history.³⁶

It should be noted that this does not excuse the Soviet state from any and all responsibility for the suffering that took place; one could accuse the government of insufficiently rapid response, and note that initial reports were often downplayed to avoid rocking the boat. But it is clear that the famine was not deliberate, was not a genocide, and (to quote Tauger) “was not fundamentally or exclusively man-made.”

Conclusion

During its socialist period, the Soviet Union made some of the most impressive achievements in modern history. The socialist system transformed a nation of illiterate and half-starved peasants into a superpower, with one of the fastest growing economies on Earth, one of the world’s best-educated and healthiest populations, and some of the most impressive industrial and technological achievements to date. It provided a model for the oppressed people’s of the world to follow, as was shown in China, Cuba, Vietnam, and many other nations.

In part two, we will examine Soviet advances in women’s rights and anti-racism, as well as the Soviet role in global anti-imperialist struggle. We will also examine the governance structure, learn about Soviet democracy, and debunk the claim that the USSR was a “totalitarian state”.

2.2 Workers’ Control and Democracy in the Soviet Union

Written by u/flesh_eating_turtle on the 30th of January 2020

Introduction

One of the most common allegations leveled against the USSR (and socialist states in general) by left-anticommunists is that it was not “real socialism,”

³⁶Tauger, *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931-1933*.

because the workers did not have direct control over production. This claim may be found in the writings of Noam Chomsky, Murray Bookchin, Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, and numerous other anti-Soviet leftists. It is claimed that the indisputable gains made by the working class in socialist states (such as vast improvements to their health and welfare) are irrelevant, because these revolutions were “bureaucratic,” and therefore, illegitimate.

The goal of this post is to demonstrate that, in point of fact, the Soviet working class *did* have a degree of workers’ control, which successfully gave Soviet workers far more rights and influence than their capitalist counterparts.

As always, sources will be listed at the end.

Workers’ Control in the Soviet Workplace

When discussing this topic, it is helpful to start at the level of the individual workplace. Professor Robert Thurston (Miami University at Ohio) states that “at the lower levels of society, in day-to-day affairs and the implementation of policy, [the Soviet system] was participatory.” He notes that workers were frequently encouraged to take part in decision making:

The regime regularly urged its people to criticize local conditions and their leaders, at least below a certain exalted level. For example, in March 1937 Stalin emphasized the importance of the party’s ‘ties to the masses’. To maintain them, it was necessary ‘to listen carefully to the voice of the masses, to the voice of rank and file members of the party, to the voice of so-called “little people,” to the voice of ordinary folk.’¹

These were not empty words or cheap propaganda; while there were limits to criticism, Professor Thurston notes that “such bounds allowed a great deal that was deeply significant to workers, including some aspects of production norms, pay rates and classifications, safety on the job, housing, and treatment by managers.” The workers had a voice in various official bodies, and they generally had their demands met:

The Commissariat of Justice also heard and responded to workers’ appeals. In August 1935 the Saratov city prosecutor reported that of 118 cases regarding pay recently handled by his office, 90, or 73.6 percent, had been resolved in favor of workers.²

Workers also took part in direct oversight of managers:

¹Thurston, “Reassessing the History of Soviet Workers: Opportunities to Criticize and Participate in Decision-Making”.

²Ibid.

Workers participated by the hundreds of thousands in special inspectorates, commissions, and brigades which checked the work of managers and institutions. These agencies sometimes wielded significant power.³

The rights of Soviet workers were often noted in later accounts of the socialist era:

One emigre recalled that his stepmother, a factory worker, ‘often scolded the boss,’ and also complained about living conditions, but was never arrested. John Scott, an American employed for years in the late 1930’s as a welder in Magnitogorsk, attended a meeting at a Moscow factory in 1940 where workers were able to ‘criticize the plant director, make suggestions as to how to increase production, increase quality, and lower costs.’⁴

These facts are all the more impressive when we recall the dismal state of workers’ rights in the capitalist nations at this time:

This occurred at a time when American workers in particular were struggling for basic union recognition, which even when won did not provide much formal influence at the work place.⁵

Thurston makes the following observation:

Far from basing its rule on the negative means of coercion, the Soviet regime in the late 1930’s fostered a limited but positive political role for the populace... Earlier concepts of the Soviet state require rethinking: the workers who ousted managers, achieved the imprisonment of their targets, and won reinstatement at factories did so through organizations which constituted part of the state apparatus and wielded state powers.⁶

He also notes that “no sharp division between state and society existed,” though different levels of the state wielded different powers.

In short, while the Soviet Union did have authoritarian elements (as was inevitable given the conditions; the USSR had been ravaged by civil war, and invaded by multiple capitalist nations), there was also a strong element of workers’ control, giving the USSR a legitimate claim to being a workers’ state.⁷

³Thurston, “Reassessing the History of Soviet Workers: Opportunities to Criticize and Participate in Decision-Making”.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

Political Participation in the Soviet Union

Working people did not only have the right to take part in decision-making at the workplace; they also had a voice in national policy decisions. Professor Kazuko Kawamoto (Hitotsubashi University) states that the USSR had “a more democratic face than what is usually imagined, especially among Western people.” As they put it:

The Soviet regime was democratic in its own sense of the word... participation through sending letters and attending discussions gave self-government a certain reality and helped to legitimize the Soviet regime. Therefore, listening to the people was an important obligation for the authorities... the government encouraged people to send letters to the authorities and actively used the all-people's discussions.⁸

These all-people's discussions existed from the early days of the Soviet Union, and they had great significance (contrary to the assumptions of Western scholars):

Although the first all-people's discussion was conducted with the approval of the 1936 Stalin constitution on the grounds that the former ruling classes no longer existed, publication and public discussion of bills had been common before the constitution in the name of participation of the masses. Western scholars usually took this as an attempt to put a face of legitimacy on the process, understanding the discussions to be a mere formality. However, that is not the case with the Principles argued here. The discussions were neither a disguise nor a mere formality.⁹

Legislators took direct part in these meetings, altering proposed bills in accordance with popular opinion. Professor Kawamoto states that “it is worth pointing out that members of the subcommittee actively participated in the discussion, rewriting the draft at the same time.”¹⁰

It is also noted that Soviet citizens “believed that they were entitled to demand policy changes, and the draft writers, including specialists, officials, and deputies, felt obliged to respond to those demands.”¹¹ The process of gathering public opinion was intensive enough that it often slowed down the process of legislation:

⁸Kawamoto, “Rethinking Soviet Democracy”.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

Regarding the process of creating the Principles, direct participation worked largely as expected in the ideology of Soviet democracy, although it took many years.¹²

As Professor Kawamoto says, “the reason why it took so long was deeply rooted in the ideas of Soviet democracy.” Contrast this with bourgeois democracy, where legislators typically disregard the opinion of the masses.¹³ This may speed up the legislative process, but it results in extremely high levels of popular discontent¹⁴.

In addition to the aforementioned means of popular participation, Soviet officials also traveled throughout the nation to gather information on popular opinion. Using the development of Soviet family law as an example, Professor Kawamoto states:

The draft makers were not only passive recipients of letters but also traveled throughout the Soviet Union to listen to the people. When the work in the Commissions of Legislative Proposals was reaching its end, members of the subcommittee and officials working for them visited several union republics from April to June 1962 to research the practice of family law and collect opinions on important standards in the draft of the Principles... After these research trips, the commission finished the draft and presented it to the Central Committee of the Party in July.

While Soviet democracy was not without its flaws (as mentioned, the process was often rather slow, and there were limits to the extent of criticism), it would be highly inaccurate to describe the USSR as a “totalitarian” society, with no democratic structures; on the contrary, the USSR did practice its own form of democracy, and it did so rather effectively.

Conclusion

The Soviet Union developed under conditions of extreme pressure, facing invasion from capitalist powers¹⁵, the Nazi invasion¹⁶ (the deadliest front in military history), and espionage from the West. Given the difficulties that it faced, it is remarkable the USSR managed to provide a positive political role for the working people, especially in a time when workers in the capitalist world were still struggling for basic union rights.

¹²Kawamoto, “Rethinking Soviet Democracy”.

¹³Gilens and Page, “Testing theories of American politics: Elites, interest groups, and average citizens”.

¹⁴Rampell, “Americans have grown to really, really hate their government”.

¹⁵Wikipedia, *American Expeditionary Force, Siberia*.

¹⁶Wikipedia, *Eastern Front (World War II)*.

The USSR was a legitimate workers' state, in which the proletariat held power in the workplace, and had significant influence on national policy decisions. Contrast this with the utter lack of popular influence in bourgeois states, and this is even easier to appreciate.

Sources

- Gilens, Martin and Benjamin I Page. "Testing theories of American politics: Elites, interest groups, and average citizens". In: *Perspectives on politics* 12.3 (2014), pp. 564–581. URL: https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/mgilens/files/gilens_and_page_2014_testing_theories_of_american_politics.doc.pdf.
- Kawamoto, Kazuko. "Rethinking Soviet Democracy". In: *Popular Participation in Family Law Reform after Stalin* (2014), pp. 112–115. URL: http://jpsa-web.org/eibun_zassi/data/pdf/JPSA_Kawamoto_final_July_9_2014.pdf.
- Rampell, Catherine. "Americans have grown to really, really hate their government". In: *Washington Post* (Aug. 2015). URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/rampage/wp/2015/09/23/americans-have-grown-to-really-really-hate-their-government/>.
- Thurston, Robert. "Reassessing the History of Soviet Workers: Opportunities to Criticize and Participate in Decision-Making". In: *New Directions in Soviet History. Cambridge etc* (2002), pp. 160–188. URL: <https://www.docdroid.net/t9gG4jQ/thurston-robert-reassessing-the-history-of-soviet-workers-opportunities-to-criticize-and-participate-in-decision-making.pdf>.
- Wikipedia. *American Expeditionary Force, Siberia*. [Online; accessed 27-March-2020]. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Expeditionary_Force,_Siberia.
- *Eastern Front (World War II)*. [Online; accessed 27-March-2020]. URL: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Front_\(World_War_II\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Front_(World_War_II)).