Russia under

Stalin



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**From Tsar to Stalin**

In January 1917, the Russian empire is still governed by the all-powerful Tsar Nicholas II -- one man, answerable only to God, who rules more than 170 million people. The Tsar's armies have grown increasingly demoralized and disaffected fighting in the First World War: Russia has been bleeding for almost three years. Two million have died. February sees the Tsar overthrown and a provisional government installed in his place.

Then, in October, Vladimir Lenin's Bolsheviks storm the Winter Palace and seize power, promising the Russian people a dictatorship of the proletariat and a new era of classless equality, freedom, peace, and prosperity. In Red Flag, the people who were there explain how Communism became an all-consuming, all-explaining ideology that appealed to their deepest hopes and dreams. Red Flag hears testimony of members of the Red Guard, party activists, students, and workers striving to build a modern industrial state. And through them, we hear how the Communist dream turned into a nightmare.

Twenty-five-year-old poet Alexander Briansky remembers the October Revolution and the taking of the Winter Palace: "Everyone rushed forward, shouting `Hurrah!' We climbed over the gates and broke into the Winter Palace. I was at the front and ran up the stairs and stumbled into a big hall where there was a whole detachment of officer-cadets with their rifles at the ready. I shouted `Throw down your rifles!' and they threw down their rifles as if to order."

For Briansky, the Revolution meant an end to exploitation. Lenin pledged that "the oppressed masses will themselves form the government." Ella Shistyer, a student and electrical engineer, sums up the fervor of many: "What I liked was the promise of a happy, classless society in the future, in which everyone would enjoy all the good created by society. . . . The Revolution gave me the right to feel equal to any man. It gave me the right to work, to study what I wanted to study."

In the 1920s, millions learned to read, women were able to work as men's equals -- and even orchestras became free from the "tyranny" of the conductor. Moscow musician Izo Degtyar remembers that "the founder of the orchestra said that it was the musician who mattered, and that he should liberate himself from the fetters of the conductor. If you didn't like something, you all had a vote. It was a real innovation."

But despite all the talk about equality, the Russian masses did have a conductor who directed everything -- and he was Lenin. By the time of his death in 1924, Lenin had created a one-party State and an elaborate system of control. Under Joseph Stalin, the pace of change accelerated as he sought to convert the country from an agrarian, peasant economy into a modern industrial power at breakneck speed. Millions labored to build the enormous new factories, highways, and dams that Stalin demanded.

Red Flag shows Tatiana Fedorova, a construction worker, in a Soviet newsreel of the 1930s thanking, on behalf of all young people, "our party and dear Comrade Stalin for this joy we have." Today she remembers: "Stalin set a task: build this or build that -- and, thanks to the fact that people trusted him, and the enthusiasm of young people, it was possible. Remember, this was a country where people were illiterate [and] wore birch-bark shoes. Even now, I think it's like something out of a fairy tale."

But it was not a fairy tale. Stalin's use of terror as a weapon of government intensified. One by one all possible challenges to his rule were removed. Churches were demolished and village priests were forced to renounce God. Stalin decided that kulaks -- prosperous landed peasants -- were a barrier to the collectivization of farming and should be "liquidated as a class." More than three million were shot, or died in exile or prison camps. The state seized control of their land and farming equipment. They confiscated food and grain. Seven million peasants starved to death.

Pelageya Ovcharenko, a villager in the Ukraine, was, as a child, almost taken to be buried by the State "body collectors": "Three people came up to the house. One tended to the horses; two were piling up corpses on the cart. They threw on my mother. They threw on my father. My father gestured to me [and] I knew I had to go and hide. The men swore, but could not find me. . . . The corpses were piled up like bales of straw. The men took the cart to a big hole and tipped the bodies in regardless of whether they were dead or alive."

No one was safe. In 1937, Nikolai Bukharin, a powerful member of the Politburo who rivaled Stalin for power in the 1920s, was arrested, forced to "confess" his plots against the State in a show trial -- and executed. His widow, Anna Larina, remembers: "It was terrifying, tragic. He literally fell down on his knees before me and asked forgiveness for ruining my life. He said that if he could ever have imagined that his life would end this way, he would have run as far away as possible from me. No matter how strong his love, he would have suppressed it. He asked me never to forget his letter, which is now called his testament, and without fail to bring up his son a Bolshevik. That's the kind of faith he had. A Bolshevik to the end."

But it was not just possible political rivals that concerned Stalin. Stalin saw enemies everywhere; anyone and everyone was at risk. Death warrants were delivered to every city and province in the Soviet Union. Secret Police orders assigned each Soviet region arbitrary quotas for Stalin's purges.

In the second half of the 1930s, an estimated seven million people were sent to prison camps. Even the devoted Ella Shistyer -- who had worked so tirelessly to help build the new State -- found herself enslaved in a labor camp for "transgressions" she never understood.

Mikhail Mindlin was sent to the mines in Siberia: "The important thing was not to die of hunger. It was considered that if you survived the first winter you would get through the sentence. Most people didn't survive."

Ella Shistyer also survived the camps: "There was no socialism under Stalin. Stalin himself destroyed socialism. If it hadn't been Stalin, it would have been someone else. Someone would have destroyed this system."

In the camps, ordinary men and women toiled and died for a political system whose rhetoric and utopian promise became one of the most powerful forces of the century. And far from failing, the Communist system would go on to dominate the lives of many more after the end of the Second World War.

**Five Year Plan**

In 1927 Stalin's advisers told him that with the modernization of farming the Soviet Union would require an extra 250,000 tractors. As well as tractors there was also a need to develop the oil fields to provide the necessary petrol to drive the machines. Power stations also had to be built to supply the farms with electricity.

Since the October Revolution industrial progress had been slow. It was not until 1927 that production had reached the levels achieved before the start of the First World War. Stalin decided that he would use his control over the country to increase production.

The first Five Year Plan introduced in 1928, concentrated on the development of iron and steel, machine-tools, electric power and transport. Joseph Stalin set the workers high targets. He demanded a 1115 increase in coal production, 200% increase in iron production and 335% increase in electric power. He justified these demands by claiming that if rapid industrialization did not take place, the Soviet Union would not be able to defend itself against an invasion from capitalist countries in the west.

Every factory had large display boards erected that showed the output of workers. Those that failed to reach the required targets were publicity criticized and humiliated. Some workers could not cope with this pressure and absenteeism increased. This led to even more repressive measures being introduced. Records were kept of workers' lateness, absenteeism and bad workmanship. If the worker's record was poor, he was accused of trying to sabotage the Five Year Plan and if found guilty could be shot or sent to work as forced labour on the Baltic Sea Canal or the Siberian Railway.

With the introduction of the Five Year Plan, Stalin argued that it was necessary to pay higher wages to certain workers in order to encourage increased output. His left-wing opponents claimed that this inequality was a betrayal of socialism and would create a new class system in the Soviet Union. Stalin had his way and during the 1930s, the gap between the wages of the labourers and the skilled workers increased.

**Soviet Gulags**

In the 19th century, the Tsars and their governments deported around 1.2 million prisoners to Siberia. Most of the revolutionary leaders in Russia spent time in Siberia. This included Lenin , Leon Trotsky and Joseph Stalin.

After the Russian Revolution the labour camps in Siberia were closed down. These camps were later reopened by Joseph Stalin and opponents of his regime were sent to what became known as *Glavnoye Upravleniye Lagere* (Gulag).

Probably the worst of the labour camps was at Kolyma. Located in north-eastern Siberia, temperatures drop to -90 degrees during the winter. About 30 per cent of the prisoners in Kolyma died each year.

People sent to the Gulags included peasants who were accused of "individualistic tendencies" and opposed the establishment of collective farms. Large numbers of Ukrainians, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kirghiz, Mordovians and Caucasians fell into this category.

The theory of Socialist Realism was adopted by the Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. Approved by Joseph Stalin, Socialist Realism demanded that all art must depict some aspect of man's struggle toward socialist progress for a better life. It stressed the need for the creative artist to serve the proletariat by being realistic, optimistic and heroic. The doctrine considered all forms of experimentalism as degenerate and pessimistic.

Experimental and non-conformist writers and artists such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn suffered under this policy. Some writers and artists managed to leave the country, whereas some committed suicide. Writers who refused to change were executed or died in labour camps.

Joseph Stalin was particularly suspicious of people who lived abroad or had relatives abroad. This included foreign communists who had fled to the Soviet Union to avoid persecution from their own governments. In 1937 Nikolai Yezhov, head of the NKVD Secret Police, arranged for large numbers of these communists to be arrested and deported to Siberia. A high percentage of these foreign communists were Jews from Germany, Austria and Hungary.

Large numbers of people living along the western frontier of the Soviet Union and Chinese and Koreans who lived along the eastern border were deported to Gulags in the interior just before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Others were sent to labour camps because of their religious beliefs. This included Catholics, Baptists and members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

During the Second World War people sent to Soviet labour camps included collaboration with the enemy under the occupation, prisoners of war, and men and women taken from Nazi Germany.

It is estimated that around 50 million perished in Soviet gulags between 1930 and 1950.

**The Rise of Totalitarianism**

The period after the First World War was known as the Age of anxiety. The Age of Anxiety, the age of the lost generation, was also an age in which modern Fascism and Totalitarianism made their appearance on the historical stage. By 1939, liberal democracies in Britain, France, Scandinavia and Switzerland were realities. But elsewhere across Europe, various kinds of dictators reared their ugly heads. Dictatorship seemed to be the wave of the future. It also seemed to be the wave of the present. After all, hadn't Mussolini proclaimed that this century would be a century of the right? Of Fascism? The modern totalitarian state rejected liberal values and exercised total control over the lives of its subjects. In this way, totalitarianism became a new political religion for the Age of Anxiety. How did this occur?

The twentieth century -- thanks to improved technology -- would change all that. In fact, it can be said that true totalitarian regimes are limited only by the extent to which mass communications have been made a reality. And, of course, with mass communications comes mass man, and the capability of total control.

Modern totalitarian regimes made their appearance with the total effort required by the Great War. The reason for this is quite simple -- war required all institutions to subordinate their interests to one objective at all costs: victory. The individual had to make sacrifices and so their freedoms, whatever they might have been, were constantly reduced by increasing government intervention. The invisible hand of Adam Smith had to be replaced by the visible hand. Governments could not longer remain idle hoping that some "laissez-faire" mentality would carry them through the day. No. Governments had to intervene and the great event which made this notion of intervention a necessity, was the Great War.

Beyond this crucial experience of the First World War, it was Lenin, the Bolsheviks and the Russian Civil War. Lenin had shown how a dedicated minority -- the Bolsheviks -- could make a dedicated effort and achieve victory over a majority. This was as true of the Revolution as much as it was of the Civil War when the Bolsheviks overcame the White Army who were numerically superior. Lenin also clearly demonstrated how institutions and human rights might be subordinated to the needs of a single party and a single leader. So, Lenin provided a model for a single party dictatorship, i.e. the Bolsheviks. It was Lenin, who provide the model for Stalin as well as Hitler and Mussolini.

Totalitarian regimes -- thanks to technology and mass communications -- take over control of every facet of the individual's life. Everything is subject to control -- the economy, politics, religion, culture, philosophy, science, history and sport. Thought itself becomes both a form of social control as well as a method of social control.

The totalitarian state was based on boundless dynamism and constant change. Totalitarian society was a fully mobilized society, a society constantly moving toward some goal. As soon as one goal was reached, it was replaced by another. It was also a state at odds with others, and bond together by a common enemy. The Soviet Union was always readying itself for war with capitalist-democracies in the West.



Such was the case in Stalin's Russia. Stalin implemented a series of Five Year Plans in an effort to build up the industrial might of the Soviet Union. Production quotas were constantly announced well before they had been reached in order to supply the illusion that the Five Year Plan was working. But before the Five Year Plan had run its course, another Five Year Plan was announced.

In the end, totalitarianism meant a "permanent revolution," an unfinished revolution in which rapid and profound change imposed from above simply went on forever. Of course, a permanent revolution also means that the revolution is never over. The individual is constantly striving for a goal which has been placed just a hair out of reach. In this way, society always remains mobilized for continual effort. The first example of such a permanent revolution the "revolution from above," instituted by Joseph Stalin in 1927 and 1928. After having suppressed his enemies on both the left and the right, as well as the center, Stalin issued the "general party line." Anyone who deviated from that line was condemned to either exile or execution -- in most cases, execution. Stalin's aim was to create a new kind of society and a new human personality to inhabit that society: socialist man and socialist woman -- *Homo Sovieticus*. At the same time, a strong army would have to be built as well as a powerful industrial economy. Once everything was owned by the State, Stalin believed, a new kind of human personality would emerge. The Soviets under Stalin were by no means successful. Just the same, the Soviets did build a new society, one whose basic outlines survived right down to the late 1980s.

However, Stalinist society did have its frightening aspects and none was more frightening than the existence of brutal, unrestrained police terrorism. First used against the wealthy peasants or kulaks during the 1920s and 1930s, terror was increasingly used against party members, administrators and ordinary people. No one would ever be above suspicion -- except Stalin, of course. Some were victims of terror for deviating from the party line -- others were victims for no apparent reason other than Stalin's moodiness. One Soviet recalled that in 1931, "we all trembled because there was no way of getting out of it. Even a Communist can be caught. To avoid trouble became an exception."

**Stalin’s Purges**

As we now know, Stalin's second wife also publicly rebuked Stalin for the destruction the terror famine was working and she committed suicide in 1932. And on December 1, 1934, Sergei Kirov, the man who in some circles was rumored to be Stalin's heir, was assassinated in Leningrad on Stalin's orders. Using Kirov's death as an excuse, Stalin systematically purged the Communist Party of his opponents. Hundreds of party members were shot for their alleged complicity in Kirov's death. Kirov was a full member of the ruling Politburo and leader of the Leningrad party apparatus as well as an influential member of the ruling elite. His overt concern for the welfare of the Leningrad workers and his skill as an orator earned him considerable popularity. It is doubtful that Kirov represented a serious threat to Stalin, however, Kirov did disagree with Stalin on several key issues.

But Stalin had already begun to doubt the loyalty of the Leningrad party and he looked for a pretext to begin a broad purge. The murder of Kirov was necessary. Although it was Leonid Nikolaev who committed the assassination, it is now clear that the whole episode had been, over a period of two years, crafted by Stalin and the NKVD. Stalin, of course, then used the crime as an excuse to introduce severe laws against all political crimes. So, following the death of Kirov at the end of 1934, there began the Soviet witch-hunt which culminated in the Great Terror of the years 1935-1939.

In 1936, Stalin brought his old comrades Zinoviev and Kamenev to a staged public trial. An international press corps was invited to lend a sense of legitimacy to the proceedings. When their trial had ended Zinoviev, Kamenev and fourteen other old Bolsheviks either admitted involvement in the Kirov Affair or signed confessions that had been fabricated for them. These men had not been conspirators but they did satisfy Stalin's paranoia. As to be expected, they were all executed. The confessional process was helped by the black jack, continuous interrogation and the swan dive, where towelling was put between the jaws and the feet and tightened, arching and breaking the back. But often, the confession was voluntary because the Party demanded it. As one survivor recalled, "serving the party was not just a goal in life but an inner need."

In January 1937 a second great show trial was held in which seventeen leading Bolsheviks declared that they had knowledge of a conspiracy between Trotsky and the German and Japanese intelligence services by which Soviet territory was to be transferred to Germany and Japan. A crowd of 200,000 packed Red Square in frigid weather to hear Nikita Khrushchev read out the death sentences. All seventeen were executed.

While Hitler plotted his war, in 1937, the best of the Red Army, stripped of their medals and insignia, were ushered into the courtroom. They included Marshal Tukhachevsky, the most brilliant soldier of his generation and the pioneer of armored and airborne warfare. The generals were accused of spying for the Germans, found guilty, shot and dumped in a trench on a construction site, all within eighteen hours. Six of the officers who condemned them were soon shot. Of 85 corps commanders 57 disappeared within a year. Of the 100,000 Red Army officers on active duty in 1937, perhaps 60,000 were purged.

The last of the public trials took place in March 1938, as twenty-one leading Bolsheviks, including Nikolai Bukharin confessed to similar charges and were executed. Also to go was Yagoda, Stalin's hand-picked head of the NKVD.

These public show trials and the secret trials of the generals provide only a faint idea of the extent of the Great Terror. Every member of Lenin's Politburo except Stalin and Trotsky were either killed or committed suicide to avoid execution. A partial list of those who ceased to exist would include:

--two vice-commissars of foreign affairs
--most of the ambassadors in the Soviet diplomatic corps
--numerous members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party
--almost all the military judges who had sat in judgment and had condemned
--the Red Army generals
--two successive heads of the NKVD
--the prime ministers and chief officials of all the non-Russian Soviet republics
--the director of the Lenin Library
--the man who had led the charge against the Winter Palace in 1917
--a 70 year old schoolteacher who owned a book which included a picture of Trotsky
--an 85 year old woman who made the sign of the Cross when a funeral passed
--a man who took down a portrait of Stalin while painting a wall

Arrests multiplied tenfold in 1936 and 1937. Anything was used as an excuse for an arrest: dancing too long with a Japanese diplomat, not clapping loudly enough or long enough after one of Stalin's speeches, buying groceries from a former kulak. People went to work one day and simply did not return -- they were either killed immediately or sent to the Gulag. The NKVD employed millions of secret informers who infiltrated every workplace. Most academics and writers came to expect arrest, exile and prison as part of their lives. A historian could be sent to exile for describing Joan of Arc as nervous and tense just when the general party line wished her described as calm in the face of death. When a linguistic theory that held that all language was derived from four sounds was accepted as official, professors who opposed this view had their books confiscated. By 1938 at least one million people were in prison, some 8.5 million had been arrested and sent to the Gulag and nearly 800,000 had been executed. In fact, before the KGB was dissolved in 1991, it was revealed that 47 million Soviet citizens had died as a result of forced collectivization and the purges. That figure, of course, represents the recorded tally. How many more people died without being recorded is a matter of conjecture.

There is no doubt in anyone's mind that Stalin wanted to destroy any possibility of future conspiracies. So he trumped up charges against anyone who could conceivably become a member of a regime that might make the attempt to replace his own. He did this to maintain his power. He also did this, as his biographers are quick to point out, because he was paranoid. Despite the upheaval of the constant purge trials, the Soviet state did not break down. New bureaucrats were found to replace the old. New Stalin-trained officials filled all top-level posts and terror became one of the principal features of the government itself. In the end, the purgers were also purged. They were the scapegoats used by Stalin to carry out the Great Terror. Meanwhile, Trotsky had been out of Russia for years but he continued to use his pen to attack Stalin in his journal, *The Bulletin of the Opposition*. In Stalin's eyes, Trotsky could not be left free.

Stalin's purges baffled nearly all foreign observers. He saw threats everywhere. Were they real? Leading Communists confessed to crimes against the State they never committed. Some were brainwashed, others tortured. Still others, like Nikolai Bukharin, were shot in the head. And eventually, even Trotsky was murdered in Mexico City in 1940, an ice pick to the head.

**Soviet Culture and Propaganda**

Soviet life in the 1930s, purge trials aside, was one of constant propaganda and indoctrination. Party members lectured to workers in factories and peasants in the field. Newspapers, films and radio broadcast endless socialist achievements and capitalist evil. Art, literature, film and science were politicized -- sovietized. The intellectual elite of the 1930s were ordered by Stalin to become "engineers of human souls" or, as Maxim Gorky put it, the "Craftsmen of Culture." Russian nationalism had to be glorified. Capitalism was portrayed as the greatest of evils. Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great were resurrected and depicted as the forerunners of Stalin. History had to be rewritten. "Who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present controls the past," wrote Orwell. Stalin rarely appeared in public but his presence was everywhere: portraits, statues, books, films and quotations from his idiotic books surrounded the Soviet man and woman.

**Standard of Living**

Life was hard inside Soviet Russia and the standard of living declined in the 1930s, despite Stalin's claim that the Five Year Plans had modernized the nation. Black bread and shabby clothes came to represent the Russian masses. There were constant shortages of food although heavily taxed vodka was always available. Housing was poor and in short supply.

Although life was hard, the Soviet people were by no means hopeless. The average Russian saw himself heroically building the world's first socialist society while capitalism was crumbling in the west. On the positive side, the Soviet worker received social benefits such as old age pensions, free medical services, free education and even day care facilities. Unemployment was technically non-existent and there was the possibility of personal advancement. The key to advancement was specialized skills and a technical education. Rapid industrialization under the Five Year Plans required massive numbers of experts, technocrats, skilled workers, engineers and managers. So the State provided economic incentives for those people who would faithfully serve the needs of the State. But for the unskilled, low wages were the rule. But, the State dangled high salaries and special housing to those members of the growing technical and managerial elite. This elite joined forces with the "engineers of the human mind" to produce a new social class -- and all this in a supposedly classless society.

**Stalin’s Genocide in the Ukraine**

Joseph Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union, set in motion events designed to cause a famine in the Ukraine to destroy the people there seeking independence from his rule. As a result, an estimated 7,000,000 persons perished in this farming area, known as the breadbasket of Europe, with the people deprived of the food they had grown with their own hands.

The Ukrainian independence movement actually predated the Stalin era. Ukraine, which measures about the size of France, had been under the domination of the Imperial Czars of Russia for 200 years. With the collapse of the Czarist rule in March 1917, it seemed the long-awaited opportunity for independence had finally arrived. Optimistic Ukrainians declared their country to be an independent People's Republic and re-established the ancient capital city of Kiev as the seat of government.

However, their new-found freedom was short-lived. By the end of 1917, Vladimir Lenin, the first leader of the Soviet Union, sought to reclaim all of the areas formerly controlled by the Czars, especially the fertile Ukraine. As a result, four years of chaos and conflict followed in which Ukrainian national troops fought against Lenin's Red Army, and also against Russia's White Army (troops still loyal to the Czar) as well as other invading forces including the Germans and Poles.

By 1921, the battles ended with a Soviet victory while the western part of the Ukraine was divided-up among Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. The Soviets immediately began shipping out huge amounts of grain to feed the hungry people of Moscow and other big Russian cities. Coincidentally, a drought occurred in the Ukraine, resulting in widespread starvation and a surge of popular resentment against Lenin and the Soviets.

To lessen the deepening resentment, Lenin relaxed his grip on the country, stopped taking out so much grain, and even encouraged a free-market exchange of goods. This breath of fresh air renewed the people's interest in independence and resulted in a national revival movement celebrating their unique folk customs, language, poetry, music, arts, and Ukrainian orthodox religion.

But when Lenin died in 1924, he was succeeded by Joseph Stalin, one of the most ruthless humans ever to hold power. To Stalin, the burgeoning national revival movement and continuing loss of Soviet influence in the Ukraine was completely unacceptable. To crush the people's free spirit, he began to employ the same methods he had successfully used within the Soviet Union. Thus, beginning in 1929, over 5,000 Ukrainian scholars, scientists, cultural and religious leaders were arrested after being falsely accused of plotting an armed revolt. Those arrested were either shot without a trial or deported to prison camps in remote areas of Russia.

Stalin also imposed the Soviet system of land management known as collectivization. This resulted in the seizure of all privately owned farmlands and livestock, in a country where 80 percent of the people were traditional village farmers. Among those farmers, were a class of people called Kulaks by the Communists. They were formerly wealthy farmers that had owned 24 or more acres, or had employed farm workers. Stalin believed any future insurrection would be led by the Kulaks, thus he proclaimed a policy aimed at "liquidating the Kulaks as a class."

Declared "enemies of the people," the Kulaks were left homeless and without a single possession as everything was taken from them, even their pots and pans. It was also forbidden by law for anyone to aid dispossessed Kulak families. Some researchers estimate that ten million persons were thrown out of their homes, put on railroad box cars and deported to "special settlements" in the wilderness of Siberia during this era, with up to a third of them perishing amid the frigid living conditions. Men and older boys, along with childless women and unmarried girls, also became slave-workers in Soviet-run mines and big industrial projects.

Back in the Ukraine, once-proud village farmers were by now reduced to the level of rural factory workers on large collective farms. Anyone refusing to participate in the compulsory collectivization system was simply denounced as a Kulak and deported.

A propaganda campaign was started utilizing eager young Communist activists who spread out among the country folk attempting to shore up the people's support for the Soviet regime. However, their attempts failed. Despite the propaganda, ongoing coercion and threats, the people continued to resist through acts of rebellion and outright sabotage. They burned their own homes rather than surrender them. They took back their property, tools and farm animals from the collectives, harassed and even assassinated local Soviet authorities. This ultimately put them in direct conflict with the power and authority of Joseph Stalin.

Soviet troops and secret police were rushed in to put down the rebellion. They confronted rowdy farmers by firing warning shots above their heads. In some cases, however, they fired directly at the people. Stalin's secret police (GPU, predecessor of the KGB) also went to work waging a campaign of terror designed to break the people's will. GPU squads systematically attacked and killed uncooperative farmers.

But the resistance continued. The people simply refused to become cogs in the Soviet farm machine and remained stubbornly determined to return to their pre-Soviet farming lifestyle. Some refused to work at all, leaving the wheat and oats to rot in unharvested fields. Once again, they were placing themselves in conflict with Stalin.

In Moscow, Stalin responded to their unyielding defiance by dictating a policy that would deliberately cause mass starvation and result in the deaths of millions.

By mid 1932, nearly 75 percent of the farms in the Ukraine had been forcibly collectivized. On Stalin's orders, mandatory quotas of foodstuffs to be shipped out to the Soviet Union were drastically increased in August, October and again in January 1933, until there was simply no food remaining to feed the people of the Ukraine.

Much of the hugely abundant wheat crop harvested by the Ukrainians that year was dumped on the foreign market to generate cash to aid Stalin's Five Year Plan for the modernization of the Soviet Union and also to help finance his massive military buildup. If the wheat had remained in the Ukraine, it was estimated to have been enough to feed all of the people there for up to two years.

Ukrainian Communists urgently appealed to Moscow for a reduction in the grain quotas and also asked for emergency food aid. Stalin responded by denouncing them and rushed in over 100,000 fiercely loyal Russian soldiers to purge the Ukrainian Communist Party. The Soviets then sealed off the borders of the Ukraine, preventing any food from entering, in effect turning the country into a gigantic concentration camp. Soviet police troops inside the Ukraine also went house to house seizing any stored up food, leaving farm families without a morsel. All food was considered to be the "sacred" property of the State. Anyone caught stealing State property, even an ear of corn or stubble of wheat, could be shot or imprisoned for not less than ten years.

Starvation quickly ensued throughout the Ukraine, with the most vulnerable, children and the elderly, first feeling the effects of malnutrition. The once-smiling young faces of children vanished forever amid the constant pain of hunger. It gnawed away at their bellies, which became grossly swollen, while their arms and legs became like sticks as they slowly starved to death.

Mothers in the countryside sometimes tossed their emaciated children onto passing railroad cars traveling toward cities such as Kiev in the hope someone there would take pity. But in the cities, children and adults who had already flocked there from the countryside were dropping dead in the streets, with their bodies carted away in horse-drawn wagons to be dumped in mass graves. Occasionally, people lying on the sidewalk who were thought to be dead, but were actually still alive, were also carted away and buried.

While police and Communist Party officials remained quite well fed, desperate Ukrainians ate leaves off bushes and trees, killed dogs, cats, frogs, mice and birds then cooked them. Others, gone mad with hunger, resorted to cannibalism, with parents sometimes even eating their own children.

Meanwhile, nearby Soviet-controlled granaries were said to be bursting at the seams from huge stocks of 'reserve' grain, which had not yet been shipped out of the Ukraine. In some locations, grain and potatoes were piled in the open, protected by barbed wire and armed GPU guards who shot down anyone attempting to take the food. Farm animals, considered necessary for production, were allowed to be fed, while the people living among them had absolutely nothing to eat.

By the spring of 1933, the height of the famine, an estimated 25,000 persons died every day in the Ukraine. Entire villages were perishing. In Europe, America and Canada, persons of Ukrainian descent and others responded to news reports of the famine by sending in food supplies. But Soviet authorities halted all food shipments at the border. It was the official policy of the Soviet Union to deny the existence of a famine and thus to refuse any outside assistance. Anyone claiming that there was in fact a famine was accused of spreading anti-Soviet propaganda. Inside the Soviet Union, a person could be arrested for even using the word 'famine' or 'hunger' or 'starvation' in a sentence.

By the end of 1933, nearly 25 percent of the population of the Ukraine, including three million children, had perished. The Kulaks as a class were destroyed and an entire nation of village farmers had been laid low. With his immediate objectives now achieved, Stalin allowed food distribution to resume inside the Ukraine and the famine subsided. However, political persecutions and further round-ups of 'enemies' continued unchecked in the years following the famine, interrupted only in June 1941 when Nazi troops stormed into the country. Hitler's troops, like all previous invaders, arrived in the Ukraine to rob the breadbasket of Europe and simply replaced one reign of terror with another.