

2 (a) Write an account of life in Soviet Russia.

To live in Soviet Russia between 1917 and 1941 was to experience hardship - first by revolution, then by Civil War, and then by the relentless transformation of society under the Communist government, by Lenin (and later under Stalin).

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 promised peace, land, and bread. For the workers and peasants who had suffered through World War I and Tsarist oppression, it seemed a new era was dawning. But this quickly gave way to civil war: The Russian Civil War was fought from 1918-1921 between the Reds and the Whites. Cities suffered from famine, disease, and violence. The economy collapsed. People ate anything they could find. Many starved to death.

The Bolsheviks responded with "War Communism". Thus requisitioning grain from peasants, outlawing private trade, and centralizing all production. Resistance was met with swift punishment. The Cheka, Lenin's secret police, instilled fear with arrests, executions, and disappearances.

Fortunately Lenin realised that changes had to be made to keep the people on his side. Therefore, he introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) to stabilize the economy. Small businesses were allowed to reopen, peasants could sell surplus grain, and a degree of normalcy returned. Markets reappeared. Life, while still hard, became more acceptable again.

After the civil war, the Bolsheviks also improved education. Students studied in new Soviet schools, and focussed on art, literature, and the sciences. There was, however, no religious freedom. Also, people did not have much political freedom - Soviet Russia was a one-party state. And, when Lenin died in 1924 a power struggle followed that saw Stalin's rise to power.

With Stalin's firm grip on power by the late 1920's, life changed dramatically. The NEP was abandoned. Stalin's Five-Year Plans aimed to industrialize the USSR at great speed. Giant factories were built from nothing, often with foreign engineers and slave labour. The industrial improvements did not benefit the people, though. For example, in the new industrial towns like Magnitogorsk, people had to live in tents. Also, very few consumer goods were available, as Stalin focussed on heavy industry and rearmament. Workers worked long hours under immense pressure, 6 days a week, and received low wages. Meeting production quotas was everything. Rewards were given to "Stakhanovites" (model workers who exceeded expectations), but failure could mean accusations of sabotage and imprisonment. In cities, apartments were overcrowded. For example, a family might share one room in a communal flat. There were few benefits: a skilled workforce emerged, and at least there were no unemployment in Russia (unlike in other countries that experienced the Great Depression).

Life in the countryside was even worse. Stalin forced millions of peasants onto collective farms (*kolkhozes*). Any resistance was brutally crushed. The so-called "kulaks" (wealthier peasants) were arrested, exiled, or executed. Grain was seized for the cities and for export, leading to a large scale famine (1932-1934). The most horrifying result was the famine in the Ukraine - millions died. The government denied the famine existed.

People also lived in fear during Stalin's rule. The NKVD (secret police) spread terror. During the Great Purge (1934-1938), millions were arrested on fabricated charges. No one was safe - not even teachers, engineers, or army officers. People disappeared overnight. Confessions were extracted through torture. Many ended up in labour camps where they worked to death.

Yet, amid this repression, some clung to belief in the communist system, because of powerful Soviet propaganda. Big posters and parades promised a glorious future. Children were taught to revere Stalin as a father figure. Some saw genuine progress (e.g. new schools, electricity in rural areas, and rising literacy rates), which made them persevere under soviet rule.

By 1941, the USSR was an industrial and military power. However, the people lived in poverty. The state controlled every aspect of life, from the books people read to the jobs they worked, the songs they sang, and the thoughts they dared express. Overall, to live in Soviet Russia, from 1917 to 1941, was to endure constant upheaval. For many, life meant survival (surviving famine, purges, and fear). For others, it meant sacrificing for what they believed was a better future.