

Did ordinary people benefit from Communist rule 1917-1985

Since the whole point of a proletarian revolution was to improve living conditions for the repressed working class, it is interesting whether the economic and social principles within Socialism have managed to achieve a rise in the standard of living. Life in the USSR has been up and down throughout its 70 years of existence. Therefore, splitting apart the different eras allows us to distinctly analyse and critique the communist experimentation. Every area of Soviet life is to be split into:

1. **War Communism era: 1917-1921**
2. **NEP Period 1921-1928**
3. **Stalinist era: 1928-1953**
4. **Khrushchev's era: 1956-1964**
5. **Era of Stagnation: 1964-1985**

Employment levels and conditions in work:

Overall, it was important ideologically to make the workplace friendly for the workers. This was done by constructing worker canteens, consistently cutting working hours as the USSR progressed, and providing extensive state subsidies and welfare. This was done while officially maintaining virtually no unemployment, but at the expense of productivity which degraded as the so-called worker's state continued to exist.

1. War Communism

- This was arguably the only period where conditions at work and employment levels suffered.
- However, employers were forced to allow breastfeeding women 30 minute breaks every 3 hours
- Industrial Labour force declined by 50% of the 1913 figure
- Agricultural population diminished by 14 million men
- No new farming methods, farmers still had to manually till and harvest fields
- In the dead unproductive factories, workers spent their time making pen knives out of pieces of machinery, and shoe laces out of conveyor belts to barter on the black market
- Workers themselves fled to the countryside thus highlighting how little food there was in the cities
- Labour duty by non-working classes was made obligatory
- However, factory committees and councils were available to voice dissent and complaints



Figure 1: Putiliv Factory Committee in Petrograd, 1917

2. NEP Period

- Demobilisation of the Red Army meant that millions of workers returned to the cities thus leading



Figure 2: Smolensk Market in the 1920s signifies the relaxed government intervention in the allocation of labour

- Unemployment reached over a million workers in 1926
- However, skilled workers faced a rise in job security and real wages increased due to sustained economic growth. (GDP Per capita doubled from \$600 in 1921 to \$1200 in 1926).
- The government did not clamp down on the system of *Arteli* which allowed workers to pool their labour together and were paid as a group. This symbolises the relative freedom Soviet workers had at the time.
- Skilled workers demanded higher pay thus giving rise to differences in wages which meant that Soviet society at the time heavily demanded skilled labourers
 - However, in the countryside the expected rise in industrial output was not enough to provide the rural areas with motorised farming vehicles thus working conditions remained primitive.

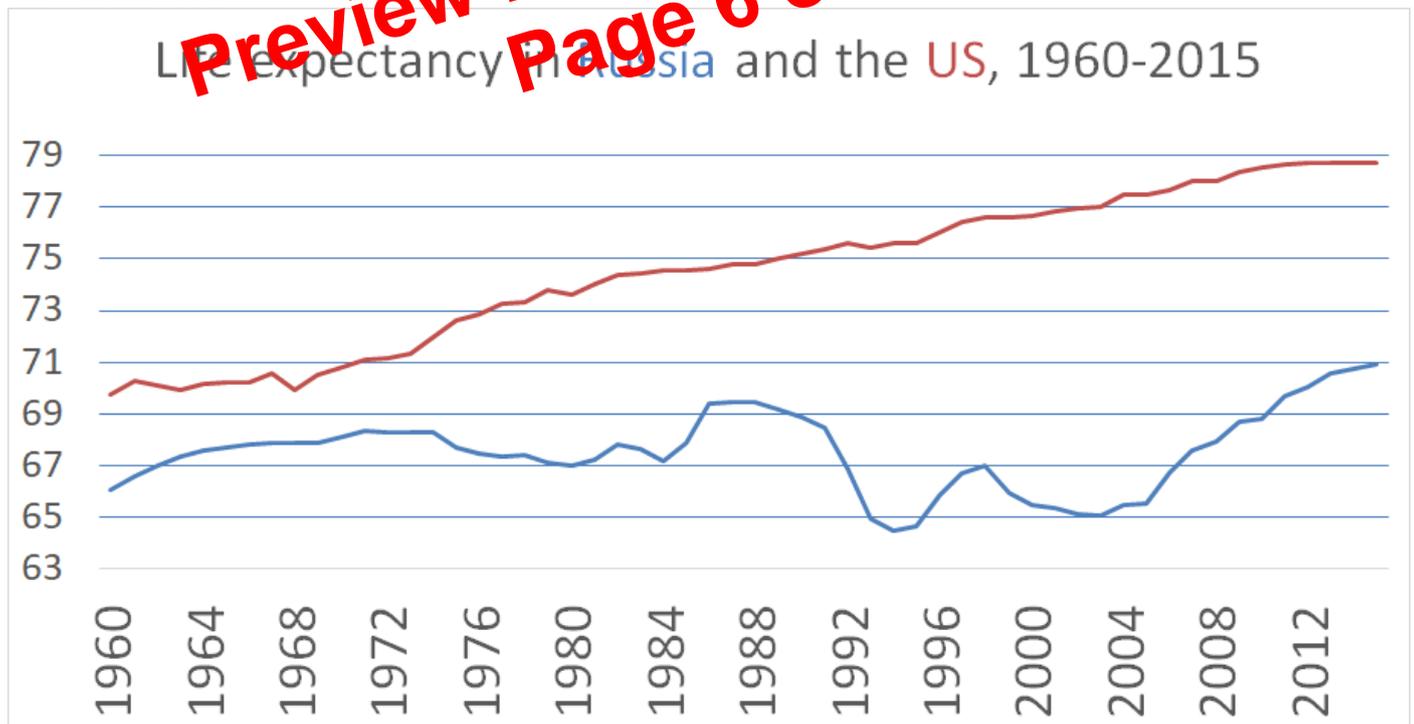
benefitting ordinary people is debated. A minimum wage further overvalued certain jobs which paid less thus leading to an inefficient distribution of labour. Also, a notable problem recorded as a result of the rise in the minimum wage was the increased demand of goods as people could afford more. This ultimately expanded upon the shortage economy and led to even more queuing as theoretically people could afford goods, but there were no goods to buy. Ultimately, this further increased the repressed inflation within the economy and the price controls gave no real value of a good.

- Pensions continued to rise at a rate faster than wages

5. Era of Stagnation

- The use of state provided sanatoria expanded with 2000 sanatoria in 1978
- However, sanatoria facilities worsened in rural areas
- Healthcare was modelled around the Semashko system which was centralised. Primary care was provided through polyclinics which could then send the patient for referral in surgery
- Between 1960 and 1980, the social security budget expanded from 71.65 billion roubles to 352.96 billion
- Most of the social security developments remained unchanged from 1964 to 1985. However, the quality of some services such as polyclinics worsened as the state budget took a hit from falling oil prices in the 1980s.

To conclude, ordinary people overall did benefit from communist rule in terms of social security benefits. The USSR was one of the first countries to fully develop a welfare state which was available to everyone. Throughout the 70 years there was a massive rise in the state budget dedicated to social security, including more spending on the provision of healthcare. On the other hand, the provision of a massive range of state support could have hampered ordinary people in the long run. The incentive to work reduced which resulted in a rise in absenteeism and essentially giving away money led to a massive increase in consumer demand which the inefficient planned economy could not supply which led to the shortage economy and the infamous bread lines. Therefore, ordinary people did on the surface benefit from social security in the short term, but the resulting stagnation in the economy most likely contributed to a decrease in living standards which could have been reflected in the overall life expectancy in the USSR as seen below.



Adult Literacy programmes

In order to radicalise the working class and make them complacent to socialism, they had to be taught the principles of Marxist theory. Therefore, along with the benefits of having a highly-educated society, the Bolshevik government prioritised the eradication of illiteracy. Once this was achieved in the 1950s, it was effectively consolidated through the rigorous Soviet education system where the benefits can be seen today as the current Russian literacy rate is on par, and even overtakes, some western countries.

1. War Communism

- Since the Bolsheviks realised that they were controlling a population who mostly haven't been educated, they realised to sow the seeds of socialism in the proletariat, they had to educate the masses in political theory. Lenin realised that knowledge breaks the chains of slavery
- Therefore, even before the October revolution, the Bolsheviks through the Petrograd Soviet organised evening classes for factory workers teaching them Marxist literature along with reading and basic numeracy skills which continued on after October
- Lenin himself stated that without literacy there can be no politics, only rumours gossip and prejudice
- The Libkez campaign was started on December 26th 1919 which aimed to completely eradicate illiteracy
- Narkompros set up the Cheka Libkez which hired teachers and released propaganda to promote literacy
- The Bolsheviks also built reading rooms across the country, which served as public libraries but with an emphasis on propaganda



Figure 16: This poster states that if you don't read books, you will forget the grammar. This symbolises the extensive propaganda campaign against illiteracy

2. NEP Period

- The Libkez campaign failed to eradicate illiteracy by 1923, which was the original goal
- Narkompros was struggling to receive funding from the Politburo thus was limited in its expansion to the countryside
- Narkompros funding dropped to 2.8% of the state budget in 1924 to 1.6% in 1928
- Many teachers were also unwilling to live in the countryside
- The state funded the writing of short stories and pamphlets which usually talked about the plights of domestic women
- However, despite the extensive efforts, the literacy rate was only 51% in 1926

3. Stalinist era

- As the state prioritised rapid industrialisation, funding for adult literacy programmes was reduced
- Propaganda was mostly focused on the achievement of the Five year plans
- However, the literacy rate has risen to 90% for men and 72% for women in 1939
- A theory states that the peasants were quite competent in self education when they had a need to. Therefore, without state support they taught themselves how to read and write thus questioning whether government intervention was really needed.

4. Khrushchev era

- By the 1950s, literacy rates were approaching 100%
- Khrushchev, himself being taught in a Rabfak, recognised the importance of adult education
- He set up additional courses for adults in full time employment, which was undertaken by 2 million people by 1964

5. Era of Stagnation

- Adult courses continued, but their priority was mostly in the education of technical skills, rather than literacy education