

# Between Ambition and Reality: A Comparative Analysis of the First Five - Year - Plan of the Soviet Union and the Great Leap Forward of China

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At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, communist economic models began to rival capitalism. People's embitterment with totalitarian regimes espousing free market principles gave birth to revolutionary movements which eventually toppled the Tsar of Russia and brought Communism to China. However, regimes brought to power following revolutions do not necessarily bring political, social and economic benefits to the denizens they purportedly represent. We see examples of these dysfunctional post - revolution governments going back centuries. One notorious such regime followed the French Revolution, whose lofty goals were betrayed by Maximilien Robespierre's ambition, leading to the Reign of Terror in the late 1700s.

Others include Cuba's communist regime which followed the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista by Fidel Castro's guerrilla forces. Today, Cuba is a shadow of what it was economically and politically under all previous presidents going back to its independence from Spain. The Islamic Revolution of Iran offers another example of a regime that continues to impose theocratic dictatorial principles on its population following its overthrow of the Shah in 1978.

In the case of Communist China and the Soviet Union, economic failure came at the onset of both regimes and continued for decades. Both Marxist - Leninist countries attempted to transform predominantly agricultural societies into industrialized economies but failed due to various factors including poor and unrealistic planning as well as execution. While both plans shared a similar communist ideology, their outcomes yielded disparate results: The Soviet Union made short lived industrial progress, with immense human effort, whereas China experienced a total economic collapse.

## The Great Leap Forward<sup>1</sup>

Not only as an economic campaign but also as a social undertaking, The Great Leap Forward (1958 to 1962) launched by Chairman Mao Zedong, was meant to reconstruct China's economy. It aimed to accomplish this by converting its agrarian economic system into an industrialized society through the formation of people's communes. This counterintuitive approach was designed to increase grain yields, hence, bringing industry to the countryside. The initiative failed when local officials, fearful of reprisals from Anti - Rightist Campaigns overfilled their quotas initially based on Mao's exaggerated claims. This

allowed them to collect non - existent surpluses but left many farmers to starve to death.

Fear of reprisal by Mao, caused higher officials to not report the economic catastrophe which was being caused by his policies. At the national level, officials blamed bad weather for the decline in food output, therefore taking little or no action. This caused the death of tens of millions of Chinese. Later known as the Great Chinese Famine, it is believed to be the second largest famine in human history.

Rural Chinese people were slowly introduced to mandatory agricultural collectivization in which private farming was prohibited. Those engaged in it were persecuted and labeled counter - revolutionaries. Public struggle sessions or denunciation rallies - where those accused of being class enemies were publicly humiliated, accused, beaten, and tortured - were imposed on those deemed recalcitrant.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, The Great Leap Forward had the opposite effect of its initial intention as the economy shrank between 1953 and 1976. Political economist Richard Baum deemed that, "Mao's Great Leap Forward Failed Miserably." Economist Dwight Perkins states that during the GLF China experienced "modest increases in production or none at all." He called it "a very expensive disaster."

## The First Five - Year - Plan of the Soviet Union<sup>4</sup>

Created by Communist Party General Secretary Joseph Stalin was the first of a series of Five - Year - Plans that continued until the dissolution of the USSR in December of 1991. The First FYP was in effect from 1928 until 1932. Touted by Stalin as a "revolution from above" it was meant to improve the USSR's domestic policy for the rapid industrialization and collectivization of agriculture. Stalin desired to replace the policies put in place by the New Economic Policy created by his predecessor and mentor Vladimir Lenin.

Stalin's plan was to transition the Soviet Union from a loosely controlled agrarian society into an industrial powerhouse. His aspirational vision while grand, was poorly planned and implemented. The short timeframe in which Stalin wanted to accomplish his goals doomed the FFYP.

<sup>1</sup>Wikipedia, "Great Leap Forward," July 25, 2023. Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki?curid=71262>.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Wikipedia, "Great Leap Forward," July 25, 2023, available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Leap\\_Forward](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Leap_Forward).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Wikipedia, "Struggle Session," June 17, 2023. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Struggle\\_session](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Struggle_session).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Everything Explained Today, "First Five-Year Plan Explained," n.d., available at [/First\\_five\\_year\\_plan/](/First_five_year_plan/).<sup>1</sup>

### Analysis and Conclusion - China's Great Leap Forward and the Soviet Union's First Five - Year - Plan Causes of Economic Underperformance

The goals both regimes coveted were lofty. To convert entire nations from agrarian societies into modern industrial behemoths centralized in the hands of a few government elites was strictly aspirational; specially given the short period of time both leaders were allotting for their largely bureaucratic leagues of fledgling government officials to accomplish this task.

On the one hand, China's scientific and social advantages prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> were eroded by an exploding population and foreign invasions. In the case of Russia, the Tsar, aristocracy and the Russian Orthodox Church rejected the Industrial Revolution and the benefits it brought as signs of Western corruption and depravity. Intellectuals such as Nikolai Gogol, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky often claimed the Russian soul to be held in the hands of the serfs and within the vast lands over which Russia had stewardship. To them, this Russian soul represented the uniqueness of the Russian national identity.

Both governments were part of new regimes with little experience in creating pragmatic economic policy. Moreover, these two radical government initiatives yielded paradoxical outcomes providing a unique perspective and insight for analyzing other revolutionary movements and their calamitous outcomes.

#### Vladimir Lenin and the New Economic Policy<sup>5</sup>

In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and the formation of the Soviet Union, the regime under Vladimir Lenin instituted the New Economic Policy (NEP). This was to be a pragmatic blend of socialist and capitalist production methods aimed at reconstructing the country's ravaged economy. This approach nationalized vital industries, yet permitted private ownership in several other sectors, including agriculture, services, and retail. However, Lenin's death in 1924 sparked a fierce power contest that eventually led to the ascent of Joseph Stalin. Different from his predecessor, Stalin not only implemented policies with far greater assertiveness but also exhibited a more violent and relentless determination in achieving his objectives. This is clearly reflected through his action in eliminating his opposition and anyone who would interfere with his rule.

With a different leader came a different vision for the nation. While the NEP's main objective was to rebuild the economy post World War I, the Russian Revolution and the Russian Civil War; by 1928 when Stalin was in power the economy had already revived. However, Stalin wanted to initiate rapid and large - scale industrialization across the Soviet Union so that it could keep up and compete with developed capitalist economies. In fact, he stated, "We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do it, or we shall be

crushed."<sup>6</sup> With this vision in mind Stalin launched his First Five - Year Plan.

#### China to Move Away from Agrarian Society

Just as the Soviet Union experienced a shift in economic policy, the People's Republic of China underwent significant transformations under Mao Zedong. In 1949, the vast population of Chinese were peasants. However, for centuries this population was exploited economically and suffered from malnourishment. Mao believed that dismantling the old system of landlord - peasant relations was the key to drive the communist revolution and transition to socialism. So, on June 28, 1950, the Agrarian Reform Law was put in place.<sup>7</sup> It sought to abolish the landlord class and introduce peasant land ownership. This was to be accomplished through confiscation and redistribution of landlords' properties.<sup>8</sup> This reform not only aimed for the redistribution of land but the dismantling of the traditional social hierarchy which divided people into distinct classes perpetuating economic inequalities.

By 1953, the Chinese Communist Party's agrarian reform resulted in 60% of the population controlling 40% of the land.<sup>9</sup> This was a transformative shift marred by significant violence against former landlords. However, the new peasant landowners often struggled with productive cultivation due to the lack of knowledge and resources, which caused food supply disruptions and cultural upheaval. This period marked the beginning of more radical changes in future initiatives.

#### Mao Launches Five - Year - Plan

In 1953, Mao shifted his focus to a broader economic transformation. Inspired by the Soviet model of industrialization, he launched the Five - Year Plan that sought to metamorphose China's agrarian economy into an industrial one. The overarching goal for this first plan was to limit foreign inputs and to increase domestic output of heavy industry. In general, the plan was successful in achieving its economic goals, as China's gross domestic product increased from 82, 400 million yuan in 1953 to 106, 800 million yuan in 1957.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the net export of goods and services rose from a - 8.4 million to a positive 5.5

<sup>6</sup> Joseph V. Stalin, "Speech to Industrial Managers," Documents in Russian History, last modified February 1931, accessed July 7, 2023, [https://academic.shu.edu/russianhistory/index.php/Stalin\\_on\\_Rapid\\_Industrialization](https://academic.shu.edu/russianhistory/index.php/Stalin_on_Rapid_Industrialization).

<sup>7</sup> [https://photius.com/countries/china/economy/china\\_economy\\_the\\_1950s.html](https://photius.com/countries/china/economy/china_economy_the_1950s.html), "China The 1950s - Flags, Maps, Economy, History, Climate, Natural Resources, Current Issues, International Agreements, Population, Social Statistics, Political System," n.d.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Chao Kuo-chün, *Agrarian Policies of Mainland China* (n.p.: Harvard University Asia Center, 1957), 4:[Page 41], <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1tg5kvj>.

<sup>9</sup> Chinese Revolution, January 5, 2023. Alphahis. "Agrarian Reform." Available at: <https://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/agrarian-reform/><sup>1</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The Historical National Accounts of the People's Republic of China 1952-1995, last modified September 1997, accessed July 9, 2023, [https://www.ier.hit-u.ac.jp/COE/Japanese/online\\_data/china/tablea1.htm](https://www.ier.hit-u.ac.jp/COE/Japanese/online_data/china/tablea1.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Fleming, Esther. "Who Had Started New Economic Policy in Russia? - BioSidmartin," May 24, 2020. <https://biosidmartin.com/who-had-started-new-economic-policy-in-russia/>.

million by the end of the First - Five Year Plan.<sup>11</sup> Yet Mao was not satisfied with this achievement, he felt the necessity to rapidly transform China into a modern industrial communist society in order to compete with developed Western nations. Therefore, the Second Five - Year Plan, also known as The Great Leap Forward, was introduced which was far more ambitious and radical in nature than the first.

### Goals Soviet Union First Five - Year Plan of the Soviet Union and The Great Leap

Comparatively, the First Five - Year Plan of the Soviet Union and The Great Leap forward shared the same goals and visions. The First Five - Year Plan of the Soviet Union signified a remarkable shift in its economic strategy, with a dual purpose of catalyzing economic expansion and overhauling the socio - economic structure. Communists believed that a modern industrial society was a precondition to the establishment of Communism. The new plan compared to the NEP is more aligned with Marxism. Additionally, an industrial working class was thought to be easier to control politically and indoctrinate than independent - minded farmers. Likewise, The Great Leap Forward proceeded with a very similar vision. The two primary goals respectively were to expand industrialization and to collectivize agriculture. This similarity is attributed to the fact that China's plan stemmed from that of the Soviet's, reflecting a shared ideological alignment between the two Communist powers rooted from Marxism - Leninism and the perceived necessity for rapid industrialization to build a socialist state.

While the two plans shared ideologies, their similarities extended further into the operational mechanisms and structural policy implementations. These were characterized by profound shifts in land ownership and resource distribution. The Soviet Union's First Five - Year Plan is known for its introduction of the policy of collectivization. This meant farmers worked together in enormous common farms in which all the production was controlled and redistributed by the state. This policy dramatically increased the efficiency of food output and allowed former agricultural workers to become industrial workers, thereby increasing yield. As the Great Leap Forward tightly followed the Soviet Union's model, the general mechanism was similar and executed in an even more aggressive manner.

### Private Ownership of Land

Private ownership of land was abolished and instead people moved into communes working on collective farms. Not only was agricultural input and output shared but also daily tasks such as cooking and cleaning. It may seem that both Five - Year plans' mechanisms were flawless. Yet both led to various degrees of famines due to the disregard of obvious weaknesses and flaws: private ownership barely existed, destroying the incentive to work, and the system of redistributing output disproportionate; often neglecting rural areas which ultimately led to food shortages.

<sup>11</sup>The Historical National Accounts of the People's Republic of China 1952-1995.

On the surface, it can be observed that The Great Leap Forward bore structural and mechanical resemblance with the Soviet Union Five - Year Plan. However, there are significant differences in their outcomes and impact on their respective countries within the global context. The Soviet Union's first Five - Year Plan resulted in significant industrial growth, despite severe human loss of life. It also allowed the country to emerge as a global superpower at that time. In contrast, China's second Five - Year Plan resulted in economic disruption and a devastating famine. It also significantly delayed China's development and global ambitions.

### Differences Between Both Systems

Delving deeper into the comparison between the two, their outcomes were significantly influenced by their specific national, global, and historical contexts. The difference can also be attributed to distinct approaches and circumstances. The Soviet Union's focus on heavy industry transformed it into an industrial power, despite sacrifices in consumer goods and agriculture. Conversely, China's bid to boost both agriculture and industry simultaneously through labor mobilization led to inefficiencies and a severe famine. China's more extreme centralization also led to unrealistic production targets and devastating consequences.

Technological and infrastructural differences were other key determinants; the Soviet Union's relatively advanced industrial base and technology bolstered its industrial growth, despite a significant human cost. The role of local officials in China, who inflated production figures, along with the adverse environmental conditions compounded the food crisis. Finally, the Soviet Union's isolation provided some economic independence, while China's international reputation suffered due to the failures of the Great Leap Forward, affecting its global standing.

Moreover, the Soviet Union's First Five - Year Plan and China's Great Leap Forward aptly illustrate the hurdles involved in orchestrating revolutionary transitions within fresh regimes. These initiatives reveal the risks of centralized planning without realistic strategies and flexibility, leading to severe outcomes. The plans also underscore the dangers of unchecked policies in authoritarian settings and ideologically - driven decisions over expert input. The necessity of managing international relations is evident in the Soviet Union's isolation and China's damaged reputation. Ultimately, the human tragedies associated with both instances emphasize the crucial need for synchronizing economic growth with societal wellbeing.

### Theory of Paradoxical Outcomes

More interestingly, the comprehensive examination of the paradoxical outcomes observed in the Soviet Union's First Five - Year Plan and China's Great Leap Forward yields insights into revolutionary transitions. The results of these two Five - Year Plans reveal that their consequences and outcomes are paradoxical in nature. This can be generalized as the Theory of Paradoxical Outcomes. This theory postulates that strategies aimed at achieving specific ends can at time yield the exact opposite. This highlights the complex dynamics of revolutions. Both the Soviet Union's and Chinese economic plans serve as prime examples of this

paradox. Their ambitious industrialization efforts initially intended to improve living standards, inadvertently resulted in the neglect of agriculture, subsequent famines, and ultimately a decrease in overall living conditions.

By ignoring these realities and attempting to forcefully accelerate industrialization, the Soviet Union and China experienced increasingly disastrous outcomes. This added layer to the paradox reveals that revolutionary transitions can have negative outcomes due to their complexities. It also shows that these outcomes can be significantly magnified if the strategies implemented do not align with the unique socio-economic conditions of the country. Specifically, the paradox is reflected in the following dimensions: the achievement of set goals, economic impact, social impact, and long-term sustainability.

Looking into the Soviet Union's First Five-Year plan, it had an ambitious goal: to transform an agrarian economy into an industrial powerhouse by prioritizing heavy industry over consumer goods. This plan initially yielded positive economic trends, as rapid industrialization boosted the country's GDP. However, this growth came at a significant cost. The overemphasis on industrial output resulted in the neglect of the agricultural and consumer goods sectors, leading to economic sectoral imbalances and frequent shortages of essential goods.

The paradoxical nature of these outcomes becomes even more apparent when considering their social impact. Forced collectivization displaced millions of peasants, triggering widespread civil unrest. The deliberate elimination of private ownership significantly reduced the incentive to work, leading many farm owners to destroy their fields and slaughter livestock. These actions foreshadowed the potential for future food shortages resulting from collectivization. (Note: Some food shortages were manufactured by Stalin. Case in point, the Ukraine famine known as Holodomor which killed millions between 1930 - 1933.) Despite these warning signs, the Soviet Famine occurred, causing an estimated 5 to 10 million deaths. Shockingly, rather than halting the economic plan, the famine was met with further persecution and executions. The targeted farm owners, known as kulaks, faced intensified persecution as they were blamed for the food shortages.

This social impact underscores the neglect of the agricultural sector and deepens the paradox between the goal of improving living standards and the tragic consequences of millions of deaths and widespread persecution.

Examining long-term sustainability reveals yet another manifestation of the paradox. While the economic plan laid a foundation and introduced innovative societal ideas, it also sowed the seeds of inefficiencies and corruption within the centrally planned economy. Over time, these issues led to economic stagnation, ultimately contributing to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Similarly, China's Great Leap Forward sought to rapidly accelerate industrialization, drawing inspiration from the Soviet model. However, this ambitious plan yielded even more catastrophic failures. This due to its misguided attempt

to replicate the Soviet Union's rapid industrialization without adequately considering China's unique socio-economic reality. Furthermore, China's experience unveils another facet of the paradox: the perils of excessive government centralization and the resulting feedback loops in decision-making. China's highly centralized system suppressed dissenting opinions and discouraged open dialogue, impeding the flow of realistic feedback on The Great Leap Forward's failures to higher levels of authority. This perpetuated flawed policies and exacerbated the already severe consequences; highlighting the paradox and illustrating how the absence of open dialogue and accountability during revolutionary transitions can hinder progress and lead to detrimental outcomes.

Lastly, the Chinese experience reveals a tragic irony inherent within the paradox. The Great Leap Forward, initially intended to propel China toward industrialization and improve living standards for the population, tragically resulted in one of the deadliest famines in history. Instead of uplifting the people, the plan inflicted immeasurable suffering upon them, representing a profound contradiction between the goals and the actual outcomes of the revolution.

#### **Similar Paradox in Other Countries**

The paradoxical nature observed in the Soviet Union and the Chinese Five-Year Plan adds to the intrigue of studying these historical events. This paradox can also be applied to analyze other revolutions throughout history. For instance, the French Revolution provides a prime example. The pursuit of radical equality and fraternity during this revolution ultimately led to the Reign of Terror, where thousands were executed. This outcome can be seen as contradicting the original goals of the revolution, which aimed for liberty, equality, and fraternity. Similarly, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 aimed to establish an Islamic republic that upheld justice and the rights of the disenfranchised. However, the revolution resulted in a highly centralized theocracy that imposed significant restrictions on political freedom and civil liberties. The goal of creating a just society paradoxically led to a system criticized for its lack of democratic processes and human rights abuses.

The presence of paradoxical outcomes is also evident in certain contemporary revolutionary processes, as exemplified by the Arab Spring in the early 2010s. These revolutions were driven by the objective of dismantling authoritarian regimes and establishing democratic systems. One significant paradox was the transformation of aspirations into political instability. The Arab Spring, driven by a desire for greater freedom, equality, and civic participation, revealed deep-rooted divisions as power vacuums and uncertainties emerged. The lack of robust institutions and consensus on the way forward created fertile ground for conflict and competition, resulting in unintended and adverse consequences, including political instability, civil war, and, in some cases, the resurgence of authoritarian rule.

Thus, this theory of paradoxical outcomes provides a unique perspective on studying revolutions: the radical nature of revolutionary change and the intricacies of societal systems

often lead to unforeseen and sometimes contradictory results. It is important to note that this does not diminish the significance of revolutions in bringing about systemic change. Instead, it underscores the necessity for careful and nuanced strategies that acknowledge and address the inherent complexities and potential unintended consequences of radical transformation.

While both the First Five - Year Plan of the Soviet Union and the Great Leap Forward of China produced paradoxical revolutionary outcomes, where ambitious revolutionary processes resulted in unintended and often counterproductive results, it seems unlikely for future revolutions to replicate the exact mechanisms seen in the Soviet and Chinese plans. This is due to the global changes in political economy, technological advancements, and the lessons learned from history. Nonetheless, the general concept of a Five - Year Plan continues to persist, particularly in modern China, albeit with significant modifications. This demonstrates how revolutionary tools can evolve over time to adapt to new circumstances and challenges.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the two revolutionary events underscore the challenges faced by new post - revolution regimes. They provide crucial insights into the significance of exercising caution in centralized planning, the importance of implementing balance checks, and the imperative of striking a delicate equilibrium between lofty ideals and pragmatic realism. These lessons are particularly relevant in the context of establishing a new regime to ensure a more successful revolution.

Furthermore, the paradoxical outcomes observed in these historical revolutions underscore the necessity for nuanced strategies to acknowledge the inherent complexities and potential paradoxical consequences of radical transformations. By understanding these dynamics, it becomes possible to prevent the recurrence of such disastrous paradoxes and pave the way for more successful revolutionary transitions in the future. These lessons are invaluable in shaping the approach towards societal transformations. And emphasizing the significance of thoughtful planning, adaptive strategies, and a deep understanding of the complexities involved in revolutionary processes.

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