How did Lenin and Stalin transform the society and economy of the USSR?

Under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin, the Soviet Union made great strides in economic developments. In a relatively short period of time Russia was transformed from a backward agricultural country into an industrial giant. Both rulers claimed they were creating a new society based on communism. Under communism the State owns factories and banks, there were no private business and land was held in common. Although the Communist rule was brutal, it is credited with many worthwhile improvements in unemployment and education. Both leaders were dictators and therefore democracy was banned and a one party police state was established. They used terror as state policy, guilt or innocence was irrelevant. Lenin was essentially a realist who was willing to adapt socialist ideas to suit circumstances in Russia. Stalin had one main aim, to make Russia a modern industrial country and he was prepared to use any method to achieve this aim.

After the devastation of World War I, the Revolution, and Civil War, Russia was a total wreck. Factories were in ruins and half the working class gone, either dead or returned to the farms. Millions had died, mainly from the famine and disease accompanying war. Two million more, mostly nobles, middle class, and intellectuals, had immigrated to other countries. Lenin returned to Russia from exile in 1917 and it was up to him to restore some degree of prosperity, order and eventual control of all aspects of Russian economy and society. Lenin’s policy of War Communism proved a disastrous failure. War Communism included forced seizure of grain, nationalization of all trade and industry and strict control of labour. As a result of this program and of the ravages of the war, industrial and agricultural production declined sharply, and the population suffered severe hardship. It caused a famine that led to the death of an estimated 5 million people. Worker control of factories ended, workers were now subject to strict discipline and strikers could be shot, food would be rationed, peasants were expected to sell all their produce to the government and only keep what they needed to survive and forced labour was introduced. This policy resulted in hyperinflation with the rouble becoming worthless, peasants refused to give up their grain and the Cheka and the Red Army were sent out to seize it. The only success of the War Communism policy was that it helped Russia win the war by ensuring the soldiers were fed.

‘We will take one step backward in order to take two steps forward’, this is how Lenin justified his New Economic Policy. Growing social discontent culminating in the naval strike at Kronstadt proved to Lenin that if the Communist regime was to survive he would have to get the peasants on his side. He allowed some degree of free enterprise to encourage higher production by the peasants. The government now took only 10% of the peasants’ income in tax and they could sell any excess for profit. Small privately owned companies such as shops were allowed. Within five years, the NEP saw industrial and agricultural output rise to pre-war levels, domestic and international trade grew and inflation was brought under control.
Lenin’s introduction of the brutal Totalitarian state brought massive change to Russian society. Democracy was banned and a one-party police state was established, terror played a crucial part in justifying the regime, secret police, show trials and concentration camps were all part of his regime. The Cheka, set up in 1918, after a failed assassination attempt on Lenin, began the Red Terror. This involved mass executions of people based not on their actions, but by who they were. Anyone from rich peasants, nobles, priests, non-communist party members, even moderate socialists were targeted. Guilt or innocence were completely irrelevant – what mattered was establishing complete control through fear and terror. He devalued human life but it was Stalin who was to bring this aspect to its bloody logical conclusion in the 1930’s.

Stalin ended the NEP and introduced a new concept of Socialism in One Country. He believed that priority should be given economically to the industrialisation of Russia. His strategy involved building an industrial nation with a heavy emphasis on coal, iron and vast public works such as canals. He ended the NEP and destroyed all elements of private enterprise in Russia. Three five-year policies were the basis for his industrialisation policy. Many factories were built near the Ural Mountains: iron and steel works, tractor factories, car factories and oil refineries were created with Magnitogorsk, an industrial city, employing 45,000 people and had a permanently dark haze hanging over it. Despite set targets being over-fulfilled, food was rationed and living standards for workers fell. Terror was used when targets were not met, with show trials held for managers who were wrongly accused of sabotage, workers were severely disciplined for minor offences and being absent for even one day could result in a worker losing his job, his food ration card and being evicted from his house. Rewards were also given to get workers to work harder. Stakhanovite became a role-model for workers.

Whole new cities and even lakes appeared where none had existed before, many of them named after Stalin himself. Oil production trebled, while coal and steel production rose by a factor of four times. Stalin also established a massive system of public schools and universities to provide a literate (and more easily brainwashed) work force as well as engineers for his factories. By 1940, the Soviet Union had an 85% literacy rate and was the third largest industrial power in the world behind only the United States and Germany.

Industrialisation also brought substantial benefits to Russian society. Life was made bearable for many by the provision of work, a flat, free schooling and basic health care. A greater equality in society meant that careers such as doctors, teachers and engineers were open to women. Creches and day-care centres in factories meant mothers could go to work. Russia changed from a mainly agricultural society to a major industrial power resulting in a massive population transfer from the countryside to the cities where the urban workforce trebled in size.

Collectivisation had a huge impact on society and economy. It made farming more efficient and able to feed the growing urban labour force. Peasants who resisted – the wealthy Kulaks – were sent to Gulags where about 5 million people died. In other instances troops were sent
in to defeat the peasants. Famine was used as a state policy, particularly in the Ukraine – the ‘bread basket’ of the USSR. Economically, the policy of Collectivisation was a disaster. Any gains Soviet agriculture may have made were probably in spite of Stalin, not because of him. While a good harvest in 1933 helped agriculture to revive, rationing was ended and livestock levels began to rise again. Increased mechanisation ie the use of tractors and combine harvesters helped a little. By 1939, over 90% of farms were part of collectives. However, while the economic impact of collectivisation was minimal the human cost was staggering. Some estimate the numbers of farmers who died resisting the policy to be about 10 million.

terror played a central role to control both the people of the USSR and members of the Communist party. The Great Terror, also known as the Purges were introduced to remove ‘enemies of the people’ from the party. They were also used to lay the blame for all the failures of Stalin’s policies at the hands of ‘traitors’ and ‘spies.’ The NKVD (secret police) arrested millions the majority were innocent of any crimes. This led to a climate of fear with neighbours spying on neighbours and even children on their parents. Bizarre crimes were invented and the accused confessed under torture and named more names. There were around 500 labour camps or Gulags set up where conditions were extremely harsh. Temperatures were very cold and inmates were often beaten, tortured or murdered by camp guards or other inmates. The Kremlin went to great lengths to conceal the death numbers but some historians put the figure as 20 or 30 million.

The elaborately staged Show Trials of ‘Old Bolsheviks’ were an absolute farce, where the accused were forced to read contrived confessions of their alleged crimes against the state before being sent to Stalin’s labour camps, providing much of the slave labour needed for Stalin’s industrial projects. However, the purges did great harm to Russia. Besides stifling initiative and poisoning society with an element of fear, they also eliminated most of the Red Army’s top officers, replacing them with men who were inexperienced and subservient to Stalin. Russia would pay a terrible price for this in World War II.

There is no doubt that both Lenin and Stalin transformed the society and economy of the USSR. Lenin led the first successful revolution and, against the odds, held on to power and consolidated his control. Stalin industrialised the country and collectivised agriculture. To achieve their aims they introduced terror on a scale that was rarely experienced before or after. This new society was seen as an inspiration throughout the world but it was largely an illusion based on propaganda and terror.