

## **How far had the 'New Soviet Man' emerged in the USSR by the end of the 1930's?**

When the Bolsheviks seized power they immediately realised that they had to produce a new Russia. The building of industry in Russia is well known, but alongside this was the development of a 'New Soviet Man', someone who would possess all the characteristics that a Soviet citizen should have: a willing servant of the state, but also literate and socially and morally virtuous. In essence it was proletarianisation of the people to coincide with industrialisation of the economy. To evaluate just how far this 'New Soviet Man' had emerged is difficult because there were approximately 200million people in Russia at the time, but using statistics available and looking at what the Bolsheviks did in order to try and develop their 'New Socialist Man' then it becomes possible to see how far 'he' had emerged by the 1930's.

For the Bolsheviks to survive and revolutionise they had to challenge social tradition which included the role of women, religion and culture and the arts, for Russia was still a backward thinking nation and the Bolsheviks saw the New Soviet Man as the way forward. The Soviet Man ideal was as much about women as it was men, and more specifically changing their role in society. This was intended for two reasons, one was that they had untapped industrial potential, but more importantly in this case their current treatment was not dissimilar to the feudal system and the Bolsheviks wanted to modernise. The liberation of women would come in several forms and it marked the first major change to produce a new socialist man or in this case woman, because the hope was that they would become loyal to the Bolsheviks as a result of their liberation. Women were freed from the old bourgeoisie system of marriage and where therefore given freedom of choice when it came to marriage, which also gave them sexual liberation, and latterly the right to divorce. In 1920 laws were introduced that gave women the right to an abortion on demand, making the USSR the only country in Europe to do so, and thus catapulting her from a state of backwardness to one of pioneer status in one swift move. Alongside the change in society was the change in industry. Women were, for the first time, allowed to work in the industries, albeit mostly in textiles. This was significant because it allowed for the freedom of women because they could afford to buy a home and food, whereas before the ideal women were almost totally dependant on men. In theory the 'emancipation' of women was aligned with the New Soviet Man ideal as it would at least create a willing servant of the state and introduce women to the proletarian workforce, however in practise the results were far from ideal and probably damaged the strength of society in Russia. The state was unable to offer the services that women would depend on if they were to become free individuals; there would be no public crèches or canteens to enable women to work and have a family at the same time. Divorce rates were at almost 50% leading to many broken homes, and a shortage of housing meant that divorcees had to remain living together which unsurprisingly led to domestic abuse and rape, prostitution was high with an estimated 39% of proletarian men having used a prostitute in the 1920's, and children, who would feature as a core foundation of the New Soviet Man ideal, were suffering to a terrible extent; the English journalist Malcolm Muddridge described the orphans as '...barely articulate and recognisably human...'. The situation then, from this perspective was not one that

suggested that the New Soviet Man policy was producing the desired results, in fact it could easily be argued that women were no better off than before the revolution, particularly as they were far from free in real terms because of the lack of vital services, and the textile industry which served as the main employer of women was decreasing throughout the 1920's as a result of the development of heavy industry. The number of women working in industry was virtually the same in 1929 as it was in 1913. The population, both men and women could not be described as virtuous, particularly because there had been no attempts to change the thinking of men so many were still chauvinistic and unsympathetic to the government's aim to create proletarian unity, and under the current situation women especially would not be firm supporters of the state by choice because their situation had not improved, and in cases it was worse than it had been in early 1917.

The New Soviet Man ideal was easily transferred to children, whom the Bolsheviks saw as imperative to the future of the party, using the idea that children could be loyal to the party whilst being morally and socially virtuous by Socialist standards. The result was the Komsomol, which was one of the outstanding successes of the New Soviet Man policy. Fundamentally it was a form of boy Scouts, but it was far more serious and was used by the government to try and control and change the entire population and not just the children. As a testament to its popularity, there were over 2 million members by 1927, yet it was still thought of as an exclusive club with many applicants being rejected membership. The Komsomol was very serious indeed but were also developing them was New Soviet men. For example the Komsomol was given tasks such as enforcing collectivisation, and pushing the industrial drive. One director in Magnitogorsk went as far as to describe the Komsomol as 'the most reliable and powerful organising force of the construction'. The Komsomol were clearly willing servants of the state, but their duties did not end with industry; they were also encouraged to expose any bureaucracy and unmasking enemies of the state as well as distributing propaganda. Many of the Komsomol were encouraged to study a technical skill so that they could add to society further, for example poultry breeding was offered which would hopefully begin to replace the Kulaks, the section of the peasants who had the most skill in the countryside and all of whom had been purged as a result of their success which made them appear to be capitalist. The Komsomol was designed to prepare the youth of the USSR for life in Socialist Russia, and it was an outstanding success. The people involved were very loyal to the state, as shown by their testaments against enemies of the state but also by their willingness to distribute government propaganda and enforce policies such as collectivisation and encourage industrialisation, but they were also socially aware and morally virtuous especially by Soviet standards as they identified enemies of the state and so-called 'former-people' who had not adopted the Socialist ideals and helped the government introduce 'Red-Friendly' teachings in schools, whereby the teachers were communist friendly and so taught of the benefits of the Bolsheviks. In this particular aspect of society the New Socialist Man was almost perfected and would be the model Soviet man when they matured.

The development of children was not limited to the Komsomol, education was an important part of the socialist plan- it was defined as 'an instrument for the communist transformation of society' by the Bolshevik party programme of 1919, and indeed it had the potential to be the most important aspect of creating the New Soviet Man as it was

not selective like the Komsomol and was open to almost everyone. Its main aim was to cleanse people of bourgeois ideas, but it also served to replace religion with the importance of communist ideals and promoted atheism. Unfortunately the system failed, not because of the content, but because the way in which the ideas were taught was changed. A 'learning by doing' approach, progressively western, was adopted which was particularly liberal and reduced the control and power that teachers had. The system failed almost completely for a number of factors, none more so than because only 5.5% of secondary school teachers were communists and so inevitably taught badly because they didn't believe in what they were teaching, but also because no-one really had control over what went on in schools. The hope was that through teaching people would become more Bolshevik friendly, and an educated nation, it was hoped, would be more socially and morally responsible and thus fit in with the Soviet Man ideal. All was not lost however, as the 'liquidation of illiteracy' decree of 1919 attempted to eradicate illiteracy, through 'liquidation points' set up across Russia. It was illegal to refuse to learn and between 1920 and 1926 5 million people passed through the courses, and whilst it is not a huge figure in proportion to the population it was at least a start for an illiteracy eradication program. Unfortunately it was a case of too little too late, and the education programme to change the socialist man was a failure, until the cultural revolution of 1929.

Socialism was not friendly to religion, under Marxist theory religion was too aligned with capitalism and the 'old ways' that the Bolsheviks were trying so hard to move away from, so unsurprisingly the programme to mould the Soviet Man also focused on the disestablishment of the church and religion. In true proletarianisation the Bolsheviks would try to replace the power of God with the power of the Bolshevik party; according to Lenin 'Electricity will take the place of God. Let the peasant pray to electricity; he is going to feel the power of the central authorities more than that of heaven.' The idea then was clearly to create an atmosphere where the Central committee of the Bolsheviks is considered as the ultimate place in society and is strongly aligned with the ideals of the New Soviet Man: if the central authorities will replace God, and the population is strongly religious then the New Socialist Man will be very loyal to the party. The loyalty would be achieved through a number of means, which included the ever-present propaganda, but also the Bolsheviks compared the Church to Industry in an attempt to show that hard work in the factories was helping more people than Religion was, the clergy were portrayed as parasites living off the state. The idea was simple – to show the ordinary people that becoming a Soviet was more meaningful than being Christian because it helped more people and was a visible icon to the people. The core of the New Soviet Man was atheist, hard working and loyal, but under the current situation of Orthodoxy the first and last criteria were unobtainable. The church was to be crushed rather than altered to allow the New Soviet Man principle to work, and this was implemented in a variety of ways including using the Komsomol as weapons for Socialism. The results were mixed; there wasn't a complete backlash from the church that defeated the New Socialist Man, yet there wasn't a sudden influx of Communism into the ordinary lives of people. In the mid 1920's it is estimated that 55% of peasants still practised religion and supported the church, but what was important was that the urban workers, the proletariat, were adopting the principles of the Bolsheviks at a much more successful rate, and it was in the cities that the Bolsheviks needed the New Soviet Man to

emerge and it was the cities that would drag Russia out of here backwardness. Faith was not crushed all together, but it was weakened enough to allow the Bolshevik ideals to have some success that would encourage the creation of the New Socialist Man.

Of course an educated and socially aware man could not exist without the reform of culture in General. One of the prime purposes of creating the New Socialist Man was to escape the restraints of the old system, whereby the peasants and the proletariat were uneducated, and so the reform of culture was influenced by the 'liquidation of illiteracy' programmes and the downfall of the church. The current culture was considered bourgeois, too focused on the individual and too elitist, so the aim was to create a culture that centred on the 'we' of communism and would help create the Socialist Man who would be willing to be part of a collective, working towards a common goal. Thus the Proletkult was created which had two purposes; one was to educate the masses as the transformation of culture included tackling illiteracy and its other purpose was to become the most important tool in propaganda. The 'avant-garde' artists were created as a result of the transformation of culture, who would have phenomenal influence on the everyday lives of the proletariat particularly because they were essentially a propaganda machine and propaganda did as much to create the New Soviet Man as any other Bolshevik policy. The 'avant-garde' artists, who included painters and filmmakers, strived to show the benefits of Bolshevik principles and virtues in their works, with the aim of influencing the adoption of Communism and creating more loyal subjects. Film such as 'the old and the new' by the most famous filmmaker of the decade, Eisenstein, depicted the need for Collectivisation. It was commissioned by the Central Committee with the undoubted aim of showing the ordinary workers that the Bolsheviks were trying to make Russia a better place, and thus gain more loyalty from the working population. The success of this first stage of cultural change was limited, especially as there was the need for the 'Cultural Revolution' in 1929. The problem with the first Cultural Revolution was that it allowed for too much freedom and so bourgeois values and Non-Marxist ideals were broadcast that unsurprisingly did little to create and strengthen the New Socialist Man. The 'Cultural Revolution' was particularly proletarian in its approach and so had much more chance of success in creating the New Soviet Man. Alongside the propaganda campaign was a period of attack on the old values, which was particularly effective in building this New Soviet Man. Indeed it was so effective that before long it had gained sufficient momentum of its own, especially due to the participation of the Komsomol, and government intervention was kept to a minimum. The 'Cultural Revolution' highlighted all the previous failures of Bolshevik policies in relation to creating the New Soviet Man and focused on altering them to suit their role in creating the new man. Religion was attacked once more, this time with the aim of achieving the destruction of the church, with favourable results: 80% of churches were closed by the end of the 1930's and by 1939 only 12 of 168 Bishops were still at liberty, this wave of destruction was combined with heavy taxes on the church which had the effect of severely weakening its influence. The result was that the ordinary man had not focus or idol in their lives, and so turned to the Cult of Stalin which aligned them with the ideals of the Bolshevik party, thus creating a loyal subject, the foundation of the Soviet Man.

Similarly education, which was almost a complete failure in terms of creating loyal communist supporters, was radically changed. The 'old' teachers who did not have the Bolshevik commitment and who made up approximately 95% of the teaching

population were replaced with 'Red Specialists', teachers who were keen Bolshevik supporters who could influence the thinking of the youth – a section of the population that was particularly important in creating the New Soviet Man. One factor of the previous teaching system did remain however – technical teaching – which was designed to teach socially useful skills both in the countryside and in the industries. It fit in with the New Soviet Man ideal because it would be socially virtuous, and seems as the subject would be assisting soviet economy, it would be a form of loyalty. In the industrial city of Magnitogorsk virtually everyone attended some sort of schooling even if they worked full time, which shows that the spirit of the New Socialist Man was at least present. Meanwhile the arts, which were liberated in early Bolshevik rule, were to come under tighter controls because the freedom, it was believed, was leading to too many non-proletarian friendly works that were unpatriotic to the Bolsheviks and were thus morally and socially useless. If anything the liberation saw the re-birth of bourgeois elitism, although it was very short-lived. If the New Soviet Man was to be a success then everything around him must highlight the positives of a Communist rule; it must show the Bolsheviks to be the saviours of Russia, as that way the man would become loyal. Seems as the arts had become such a major part of peoples live in the early 1920's it was logical for them to be very pro-Bolshevik. Art and literature were forced to show the benefits of collectivisation and industrialisation and depict the class struggle of the proletariat against the former elite, all with the aim of creating a sense of loyalty to the Bolsheviks who have taken on the fight against and are developing Russia. The cinema was not left unaffected by the Cultural Revolution; the cinema was seen as one of the best tools of propaganda available to the Bolsheviks in creating their New Soviet Man, particularly because many people were still illiterate and could only respond to visual propaganda. Films were to be 'useful, intelligent and familiar to the millions' said film director Pavel Petro. He meant that films must relate to ordinary peoples lives, but they were to be pro-Bolshevik and pro-Communist, otherwise they were '... [Not] worth twopence'. The Arts played a huge role in the attempt to produce the New Soviet Man, particularly because of its ability to promote propaganda, although it is clear that it had limited success, not least because the original policies had to be radically re-designed towards the end of the 1920's. The Cultural Revolution played a significant part in sculpting the frame of the Soviet Man; it programmed people with Bolshevik ideas and praise. Before the revolution 300million cinema tickets were sold, and the number rose after meaning that a very large proportion of the population were potentially influenced by what they saw. However, propaganda is only one part of the process of moulding a society that had been unchanged for hundreds of years, and the system in place was still generally weak, particularly highlighted by the fact that scripted wrestling was the second most popular preference in entertainment – hardly the educated and socially virtuous that was intended to emerge from the cultural revolution.

The early liberalisation of women highlights that despite attempts the results were not favourable to the Bolsheviks. Women in general were not better off under the new system because they could not work and look after children effectively at the same time; therefore in the 1930's there was a radical overhaul of the family system. The Great Retreat as it was known was an attempt to create a anchor for society through the family. The current situation was weak and there were several moral issues under debate, such as promiscuity, rape, prostitution, abortion and domestic violence. If the New Soviet Man

was to be morally and socially virtuous, this was not the ideal way to try and craft this. The new system was to be based on pro-family, pro-discipline and anti-abortion. The hope was that the new system would not only create socially and morally virtuous subjects, but through discipline they would become loyal, especially to the Bolshevik cause. The ideals were in place for families, but unfortunately the ideals were never successful. Discipline was never achieved, not only in the family but also in the workplace where there were so few workers that men were rarely laid off for breaking the rules, a particular crime against Bolshevik ethics, and even when a worker was dismissed they were easily employed elsewhere. The atmosphere in the workplace didn't prove to be the breeding ground for the New Socialist Man ideals, more so from the example it helped encourage people to disregard Bolshevik ideals even if they were not actively against them – they were no better off from conforming than by acting normally. Divorce rates barely altered between 1934 and 1939, and abortions increased from 33.9 per thousand to 42.0 per thousand. Men were still chauvinistic and treated women with contempt, whilst alcohol abuse remained high and undermined the family system particularly as domestic violence was still commonplace. Promiscuity, rape and prostitution were also still rife so the social and moral virtue never materialised in this sense, and the discipline through the family system was never fully implemented so the new Soviet Man was not helped by the poor family system and the failure of two policies.

The New Soviet Man ideal therefore had very mixed success. The programme to convert children was hugely successful. The Komsomol was almost the personification of the theory of the New Soviet Man; the members were incredibly loyal and responsive whilst being socially and morally virtuous, especially by Bolshevik standards and were undoubtedly educated in some skills, particularly those that were directly beneficial to the state. However, the attempts to change the adult population into the New Soviet Man mould were of little outstanding success. There were minor successes in education for example, whereby several million had become literate through the 'liquidation' programmes, but on the whole people were still illiterate and the remainder of the education system was poor. The New Soviet man was never fully created; propaganda converted a proportion of people to the Bolshevik way, but there was never a majority of Bolshevik idealists – people were more concerned with finding the money to buy food and clothing to worry about ideals, and the Bolshevik party were never very popular. Historian John Barber suggests that only one in five of all workers were keen supporters of the Bolshevik ideals, and that only a very small proportion were actively against the Bolsheviks. This left a very large number of people who were indifferent to the Bolshevik cause, and who were far from New Soviet People; they carried neither the loyalty nor the social or moral virtue set by the Bolsheviks to become part of this ideal. Anti-Stakhanovism popular all over the country because workers felt that it was an attempt to enslave the working class, which was clearly against the Bolshevik ideals of a new part, not least because Stakhanovites were seen as prime examples of New Soviet Men, and there are the earlier examples of workers disregarding Bolshevik ideology in the workplace because they were under very little danger from not conforming, which helps explain why only 1/5<sup>th</sup> of the working population could be considered as New Soviets. A New Soviet Youth was created with outstanding success; a New Soviet Man however was little more than a faction of the population. By the 1930's there Bolsheviks were not even one quarter of the way to creating a new soviet man.

