

Internal Problems of the USSR: Economic (b) Short-Term

Introduction

- The overall effect of Communist ideas about how the economy should be organised meant that neither the workers, nor the bosses, had little incentive to work hard.
- The wealth of the country slowly declined, so that the USSR became characterised by poor housing, empty shops, chronic pollution and such poor health that the government banned the publication of life expectancy figures (the average life expectancy for a male was actually 62 by the 1980s!).
- The historian John Mason said that the USSR of this period "resembled more that of a developing third world country than a capitalist economy of Western Europe or the United States".
- The "Parasite Law" of 1983 attacked "the loss of working time through absenteeism, slow work and breaks for cigarettes".

Task 1: Overview

1. Using your notes from the previous activity, complete these two sentences:
 - a. The bosses were demotivated because ...???
 - b. The ordinary workers were demotivated because ...???

Task 2: Details

- a. Define the following terms, used in the table below:
 - (a) Black Market
 - (b) Poverty Line
- b. Read through the Soviet Jokes overleaf as a class, and then copy your favourite one into the "Soviet Joke" cell of this table.
- c. Half the class should conduct some research on Lake Baikal and the other half should focus on Chernobyl. Complete the relevant cell of the table, then each group should feedback to the class so that everyone is able to complete the table.

	General Points	Case Study
Living Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wages: a government official would get 10X as much as a factory worker. • Vodka: the general despair and boredom led to alcoholism becoming a major problem. 	Soviet Jokes illustrate the dissatisfaction of ordinary people. One example is as follows ...???
Agriculture ("Collectivisation")	General points <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor harvests 1965, 1966, 1967, 1972, 1975. • 38% of peasants were living below the <i>poverty line</i> by 1980. 	Lake Baikal illustrates the failure of these agricultural policies because ...???
Industry ("Five-Year Plans")	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wages: a government official would get 10X as much as a factory worker. • Vodka: the general despair and boredom led to alcoholism becoming a major problem. 	Chernobyl illustrates the failure of these industrial policies because ...???

Soviet Jokes

1. A woman walking in the street is carrying a bag full of rolls of toilet paper. A passer-by opens his mouth, "Hey, where did you buy that?"
"Buy? Are you crazy? Where could I buy it nowadays? They are five years old. I am taking them back from the cleaners."
2. A man came home and found his wife in bed with a stranger. Furious, the man shouted, "You, good-for nothing, look at what you're spending your time for, while at the corner store they're selling eggs, and they have only three boxes left!"
3. Seven paradoxes of the socialist state:
Nobody works, but the plan is always fulfilled. The plan is fulfilled, but the shelves in the stores are empty. The shelves are empty, but nobody starves; nobody starves, but everybody is unhappy; everybody is unhappy, but nobody complains; nobody complains, but the jails are full.
4. At a meeting in a factory, a lecturer from the district Party committee tells the workers about their bright future in the USSR.
"See, comrades, after this five-year plan is completed, every family will have a separate apartment. After the next five-year plan is completed, every worker will have a car! And after one more five-year plan is completed, every family will own an airplane!"
From the audience, somebody asks, "What the hell one may need an airplane for?"
"Don't you see comrades? Let's say, there are shortages in potatoes supplies in your city. No problem! You take your own plane, fly to Moscow and buy potatoes!"
5. At a May Day parade, a very old woman carries a slogan, "Thank you, comrade Stalin, for my happy childhood!"
The Party representative approaches the old man. "What's that? Are you deriding our Party? Everybody can see, when you were a child, comrade Stalin was not yet born!"
"That's precisely what I'm grateful to him for!" she said.
6. Two skeletons meet, and one asks the other, "Did you die before the collectivization policies or after?"
"I'm still alive."
7. A woman walks into a food store. "Do you have any meat?"
"No, we don't."
"What about milk?"
"We only deal with meat. Across the street there is that store where they have no milk."
8. To alleviate the perennial shortages of butter, The Politburo of the Communist Party ordered the Soviet scientists to develop a technology for converting human faeces into butter. After six months of work, the Politburo demanded a progress report. The scientists reported that they had achieved a 50% success. The party requested elaboration. The reply from the Academy of Sciences explained, "One can already spread it, but not yet eat it."
9. Bedbugs appeared in the house occupied by the secretary of the region Party committee. The Party boss summoned an expert on insects and asked him how to get rid of bedbugs. The expert said, "The best way is to organize a collective farm for bedbugs. Then half of them will flee, and the rest will die."
10. A delegation of Italian communists came with a friendly visit. They were taken to a collective farm.
"How are your tomatoes?" the guests asked.
"Tomatoes don't grow here."
"Hmm. What about cucumbers?"
"Worse than with tomatoes. They don't grow here at all."
"Hmm. Maybe you plant them in a wrong way?"
"Oh, if we had any seed to plant, they would grow."