

The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia Volume 7:
The Soviet Economy and the Approach of War,
1937–1939

R. W. Davies · Mark Harrison
Oleg Khlevniuk · Stephen G. Wheatcroft

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To Michael and Lucia

PREFACE

This volume concludes *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia*. The series aims to provide an authoritative history of the Soviet Union's industrial transformation between 1929 and 1939 in seven volumes. R. W. Davies has been the author or co-author of every volume from the first, which appeared in 1980. When he envisaged the series, the world looked very different from today. The Soviet Union was a global superpower, the Cold War was in full swing, and the leaders of many countries emerging from poverty looked to the Soviet Union for military and economic assistance and advice. The writing of Russian history was also different from today, for the Soviet archives of the period were entirely closed to independent researchers. The world has changed and the writing of Russian history has also changed. In concluding our series, we are able to look back on the Soviet economy as a more passing phenomenon than appeared at the time, although one that has left indelible traces in the modern world. Today we can also look back with far more complete knowledge than we dreamed about in the 1970s, based on millions of pages of formerly secret official reports, investigations, and memoranda, including the private letters of Stalin, Molotov, Kaganovich, and other Soviet leaders.

Volumes 1–3 of our series narrated the sweeping transformations that Stalin set in motion in 1929 and 1930: the collectivisation of 25 million peasant farms, and the centralisation of the entire economy under a hierarchy of plans and quantitative controls. These changes were aimed at securing the basis of an immense national effort to industrialise the

country and modernise its economic and military power. While great steps were now taken towards these goals, the immediate result was a great crisis that spread across both town and countryside. In the context of unexpected harvest shortfalls in 1931 and 1932, Stalin's policies brought about a famine that carried away up to six million lives. The evolution of that crisis was recounted in Volume 4 and 5.

In the middle years of the decade, that is, from 1934 to 1936, the crisis receded. The harvest returned to a more normal level in 1933, and this was followed by a more general recovery. The recovery was promoted by a turn away from the extremes of 1929 and 1930. The more moderate policies of the mid-1930s included greater toleration of private farming and food markets, the limitation of repression and violence directed at managers and industrial specialists, and a more stable, predictable policy framework. This allowed not only the recovery of agriculture and food distribution but also the belated completion of many projects begun in earlier years. There was an upsurge of industrial production and productivity. The progress of this period, described in Volume 6, was remarkable.

The present and final Volume 7 covers the years 1937–1939. In contrast to the progress of the economy in the mid-1930s, the events we describe are darker in tone. Our period is dominated by war preparations. It begins with the Great Terror and concludes with the German-Soviet pact of 1939 and the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe. In this context, many chapters display common themes: the Soviet leaders' growing sense of war threats, the mobilisation of the society and economy against both internal and external enemies, the forced expansion of industrial production and particularly of war production, and the resources poured into capital projects to increase the country's industrial and defence capacities. In the absence of significant further growth of the economy's aggregate production, there was increased compulsion of labour of detainees held in camps under grim conditions, employees in factories and offices and of peasants in collective farms were increasingly regimented, and living standards were placed under severe pressure.

Surprisingly, perhaps, this is not the entire story of our book. Its chapters also describe factors at work in the economy that fell outside the party leaders' sphere of control. Among these uncontrolled influences were ordinary people. At work they were often recalcitrant or pushed back against the heavy hand of regulation; they also persisted in

being born, reproducing, and dying at rates that fell outside government projections. Foreign governments and international markets behaved unpredictably, sometimes to the frustration of party plans and directives, sometimes bringing unexpected opportunities for gain. One of the greatest forces that resisted Soviet rule was nature, which continued to exert more influence over the Soviet harvest than the planners.

Our book is organised chronologically and thematically. Chapter 1 sets out the extent of the mass repressions of 1937 and 1938, their possible causes, and their economic consequences. Chapter 2 describes the changes in the Soviet political and ideological order that accompanied the repressions, from the growing sense of war threat to the increasingly extreme centralisation of Stalin's authority. Chapter 3 traces the economic impact of repression in the sudden slowdown of the planned economy during 1937. Chapter 4 then examines the various branches and activities making up the economy in 1937. While the year was largely dominated by the struggle against internal and external enemies, there was also an unexpected bonus: good weather and a record harvest.

Chapter 5 turns to a different aspect of 1937, the population census held that year, the disappointing results of which led to a collision between demographic expertise and political authority. As the chapter recounts, a second census was held in 1939 with a quite different outcome.

Chapter 6 reviews developments through 1938. The narrative starts from the collapse of the state's capacity to plan the economy under the pressure of purges and continues through the subsequent rebuilding of the planning process. The economy's main branches and activities are considered, apart from agriculture. Chapter 7 is devoted to agricultural developments through 1939. The common thread of this story is the state's struggle to regain control over grain surpluses, temporarily lost after the 1937 harvest, paving the way to increased restriction of private farming activities.

Chapter 8 considers the state of the economy in early 1939 as the Soviet leaders prepared for and then held the eighteenth party congress. At the congress, Soviet leaders thought aloud about the third five-year plan, the requirements of economic modernisation, the threat of war, and the need for increased regimentation of the workforce in both state industry and collective agriculture. Chapter 9 summarises the further developments of the economy in 1939 under the impact of the

additional measures for war mobilisation taken at the time. The second half of 1939 was dominated by the sudden warming of Soviet-German relations and the opening of the Soviet economy to German trade as the Second World War began.

Chapter 10 concludes the book, and the series, with a retrospective view on the industrialisation of the Soviet economy in the 1930s. It considers the pattern of forced industrialisation, the measures of its progress that were made available at the time, the extraordinary militarisation of a mobilised society and economy, the emergence of the Soviet Union as a global military power, and the scope for reforms within the system that Stalin created and ruled over. To finish, we ask what kind of economic development this was.

* * *

Many people and organisations have contributed to the research for this volume, and we owe thanks to all of them. Various institutions have provided financial and other support. Professor Davies thanks the Centre for Russian, European, and Eurasian Studies of the University of Birmingham; he remains grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK for its past support of the Soviet Industrialisation Project, the foundation of the present series. Professor Harrison thanks the Department of Economics of the University of Warwick and its ESRC Centre for Competitive Advantage in the Global Economy. Professor Khlevniuk thanks the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics of the Russian Federation and the Russian Academic Excellence Project ‘5-100’ for research funding. Professor Wheatcroft thanks the University of Melbourne, Nazarbayev University, Hokkaido University, and Deakin University, and the Australian Research Council for funding under Discovery Project 120104384.

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Birmingham, UK
Coventry, UK
Moscow, Russia
Melbourne, Australia

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CONTENTS

1	The Repressions of 1937–1938 and the Soviet Economy	1
	1 <i>The Nomenklatura Purge</i>	2
	2 <i>The Mass Purge</i>	12
	3 <i>The Effect of the Repressions on the Economy</i>	19
2	The Political Context of Economic Change: 1937 to the Spring of 1939	23
	1 <i>The Advance of German and Japanese Aggression</i>	23
	2 <i>The Revised Political Ideology</i>	32
	3 <i>Politics and Society in 1937 and 1938</i>	37
3	The Economic Slowdown of 1937	47
	1 <i>The 1937 Plan: The Shift Back to More Balanced Growth</i>	47
	2 <i>Plans and Purges</i>	55
	3 <i>The First Half of 1937</i>	66
	4 <i>The Second Half of 1937</i>	74
4	1937 in Retrospect	79
	1 <i>Capital Investment</i>	79
	2 <i>The GULAG Economy</i>	83
	3 <i>Industrial Production</i>	88
	4 <i>The Defence Industries</i>	93
	5 <i>Labour and Labour Productivity</i>	100
	6 <i>Agriculture: Plans and Policies</i>	101

7	<i>Agriculture: Operations and Outcomes</i>	109
8	<i>Internal Trade and Consumption</i>	118
9	<i>Foreign Trade</i>	126
5	The Soviet Population and the Censuses of 1937 and 1939	129
1	<i>The Much-Delayed Census of 1937</i>	129
2	<i>Carrying Out the 1937 Census</i>	133
3	<i>The 1937 Census Outcomes Suppressed</i>	136
4	<i>1938 and Preparations for the 1939 Census</i>	143
5	<i>Popov's Warning</i>	145
6	<i>Outcomes of the 1939 Census</i>	148
7	<i>The Two Censuses in Retrospect</i>	153
6	The Partial Recovery of the Economy in 1938	157
1	<i>The Temporary Collapse and Revival of Planning</i>	157
2	<i>The GULAG Economy</i>	168
3	<i>Industrial Growth</i>	175
4	<i>The Defence Industries</i>	184
5	<i>The Railway Crisis</i>	193
6	<i>Internal Trade</i>	195
7	<i>Foreign Trade</i>	197
7	Agriculture in 1938 and 1939	203
1	<i>The Agricultural Officials</i>	204
2	<i>The Private Sector After 1937</i>	209
3	<i>Plans and Policies, 1938</i>	216
4	<i>Operations and Outcomes, 1938</i>	222
5	<i>Plans and Policies, 1939</i>	228
6	<i>Operations and Outcomes, 1939</i>	232
8	The Drive for Growth and the Eighteenth Party Congress, January–March 1939	239
1	<i>The Third Five-Year Plan</i>	241
2	<i>Current Economic Planning</i>	255
3	<i>Managing the Industrial Worker</i>	257
4	<i>The Eighteenth Party Congress</i>	266

9	The Economy in 1939: Further Moves to a War Economy	273
1	<i>The Growth of Industry</i>	274
2	<i>The Defence Industries</i>	278
3	<i>The GULAG Economy</i>	286
4	<i>Internal Trade and Consumption</i>	294
5	<i>The Soviet-German Accord</i>	300
10	The Soviet Economy: The Late 1930s in Historical Perspective	311
1	<i>Forced Industrialisation</i>	314
2	<i>The Measurement of Economic Performance</i>	320
3	<i>Militarisation: A War Economy in Peacetime</i>	327
4	<i>The Emergence of the Soviet Union as a World Power</i>	331
5	<i>The Reformability of the Soviet Economy</i>	336
6	<i>The Nature of Soviet Economic Development</i>	339
	Afterword: The History of the Soviet Union	345
	Appendix A: All-Union People's Commissariats and Other Agencies of the USSR, 1937–1939	347
	Appendix B: Tables	351
	Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Technical Terms	403
	Bibliography	409
	Index of Names	423
	Index of Subjects	429

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LIST OF TABLES

Chapter 1

Table 1	The nomenklatura purge by dates: turnover of heads of economic departments of the central government, 1936–39	7
Table 2	The nomenklatura purge by numbers: Soviet and economic agency employees included in the Central Committee nomenklatura at the beginning of 1939, by date of appointment	12
Table 3	The mass purges, 1937–1938: numbers arrested and sentenced	16
Table 4	The mass purges, 1936–July 1938: persons under NKVD arrest and investigation by former social status and current occupation (numbers and per cent)	17

Chapter 2

Table 1	Soviet armaments supplied to Spain, 1937–1939 (units)	28
Table 2	Soviet and Axis military equipment delivered to Spain, 1936–9 (units)	29
Table 3	Soviet military equipment delivered to Spain and China, compared with Soviet domestic production (units and per cent)	30

Chapter 3

Table 1	Capital investment: the evolution of plans during 1936 (million rubles and per cent)	49
Table 2	The state budget for 1937: preliminary and final variants (million rubles)	53

Table 3	Planned productivity and costs of the industrial commissariats, 1937 (change over 1936, per cent)	54
Table 4	The heavy and defence industries: employment plans, April–June 1937 (thousands)	57
Table 5	Industrial production in the first halves of 1936 and 1937, change over the first half of the previous year (per cent) by branch and product group	71
Table 6	Industrial production in 1937, third and fourth quarters (physical units)	77
Chapter 4		
Table 1	Capital investment, 1936–1937: outcomes (million rubles and per cent)	80
Table 2	Capital investment, 1937: plans and outcomes (million rubles and per cent)	81
Table 3	Capital investment in defence and the NKVD, 1936–1937 (million rubles and per cent)	82
Table 4	New iron and steel production facilities in 1937 (units)	90
Table 5	Aircraft produced by type and model, 1936–1937 (units)	94
Table 6	Tanks produced by type and model, 1936–1937 (units)	97
Table 7	Predicted weather effects on grain yields across regions in 1936–1937 (per cent)	109
Table 8	The progress of spring sowing: all crops, 1936 and 1937 (thousand hectares)	110
Table 9	The grain harvest, 1936 and 1937: from plans and reports based on biological yield to grain available for use (million tons)	113
Table 10	Grain collections, 1936/37 and 1937/38 (million tons)	115
Table 11	Energy consumption from food: survey-based estimates for the mid-1920s and 1937 (calories per person per day)	120
Table 12	Money incomes and outlays of the Soviet population, 1936–1937 (million rubles)	122
Table 13	Export prices from Soviet customs data, 1929 and 1935–1937 (rubles)	127
Table 14	Expenditures on imports: plan versus outcome, 1937 (million rubles)	128
Chapter 5		
Table 1	The Soviet population in the censuses of 1926 and 1937: the Kurman gap (millions)	139

Table 2	The Soviet population in the census of 1939, preliminary and final reports (thousand)	150
Chapter 6		
Table 1	Capital investment; the 1938 plan compared with 1937 outcomes (million rubles)	162
Table 2	Plans and results for Union and Union-republican industrial commissariats, January to May 1938 (production measured in plan prices of 1926/27 and per cent)	176
Table 3	Gross value of industrial production, 1938, by quarters (million rubles and plan prices of 1926/27)	179
Table 4	Gross industrial production, 1938: plans and performance (million rubles)	181
Table 5	Industrial production of intermediate goods, 1938 (in plan prices of 1926/27 and per cent of 1937)	183
Table 6	Gross value of output of the armament industries, 1937–1939 (million rubles at current prices and per cent)	184
Table 7	Aircraft produced by type and model, 1937–1938 (units)	185
Table 8	Tanks produced by type and model, 1937–1938 (units)	188
Table 9	Money incomes and outlays of the Soviet population, 1937–1938 (million rubles)	196
Chapter 7		
Table 1	The spring sowing plan, 1937 and 1938 (thousand hectares, excluding previously sown perennial grass)	210
Table 2	Cattle and pigs, December 31, 1935–1937 (per cent of previous year)	213
Table 3	Capital construction for the Commissariat of Agriculture, January to September 1937 (million rubles)	219
Table 4	Autumn sowing, 1936/37 and 1937/38 (million hectares)	223
Table 5	Autumn ploughing, 1936/37 and 1937/38 (million hectares)	224
Table 6	Predicted weather effects on grain yields across regions, 1937–1938 (per cent)	225
Table 7	The grain harvest, 1938 compared to 1937 (million tons)	226
Table 8	Grain collections, 1938/39, compared to the annual plan and the preceding year (million tons)	226

Table 9	Grain stocks held by producers, 1938 and 1939 (million tons on July 1)	227
Table 10	Agricultural production, 1938 compared to 1937, total and by collective farm peasants on private allotments (million rubles and plan prices of 1926/27)	228
Table 11	Targets for agricultural production, 1939 compared to the outcomes of 1938	229
Table 12	Investment in agriculture versus defence and heavy industry, 1936–1939 (million rubles and per cent)	230
Table 13	Draft power in Soviet agriculture, 1929 and 1938–1939 (million horse equivalents)	231
Table 14	Targets for the delivery of chemical fertilisers to agriculture, 1937 and 1939 (thousand tons and per cent)	232
Table 15	Autumn sowing, 1937/38 and 1938/39 (million hectares)	232
Table 16	Autumn ploughing, 1937/38 and 1938/39 (million hectares)	233
Table 17	Spring sowing, 1938–1939 (thousand hectares)	234
Table 18	Predicted weather effects on grain yields across regions, 1938–1939 (per cent)	235
Table 19	The grain harvest, 1939 compared to 1938 (million tons)	235
Table 20	Grain collections, 1939/40, compared to the annual plan and the preceding year (million tons)	236
Table 21	Grain stocks held by producers, 1939 and 1940 (million tons on July 1)	236
Chapter 8		
Table 1	Drafts of the third five-year plan: industrial targets for 1942	242
Table 2	Drafts of the third five-year plan: agricultural targets for 1942 (in plan prices of 1926/27 and per cent of 1937)	244
Table 3	Drafts of the third five-year plan: currency emission, 1938–1942 (million rubles)	254
Table 4	Planned industrial production, 1939 (change over previous year, per cent)	256
Table 5	Plans for defence-related capital construction, 1939 (million rubles)	257
Chapter 9		
Table 1	Gross value of industrial production, 1939, by quarters (million rubles and plan prices of 1926/27)	275

Table 2	Industrial productivity and wages, 1938–1940 (per cent of previous year)	277
Table 3	Organised recruitment of labour, 1938 and 1939 (thousands)	278
Table 4	The value of civilian products of the defence industries, 1933–1939 (million rubles in plan prices of 1926/27 and selected years)	279
Table 5	Aircraft produced by type and model, 1938–1939 (units)	280
Table 6	Tanks produced by type and model, 1938–1939 (units)	283
Table 7	Energy consumption from food: survey-based estimates for the mid-1920s and late 1930s (calories per person per day)	295
Table 8	Relative incomes and non-food consumption of urban households, 1934 and 1937–1939 (per person and per cent)	296
Table 9	Money incomes and outlays of the Soviet population, 1938–1939 (million rubles)	299
Table 10	Soviet trade with Germany in selected commodities, September 1939 to June 1941, compared with Soviet output in 1940 (thousand tons and per cent)	307
Chapter 10		
Table 1	Soviet real GDP and mid-year population, 1913 and 1928–1940	313
Table 2	The Soviet economy, 1940 compared with 1937: Soviet official and Western estimates (per cent of 1937)	323
Table 3	The uses of Soviet national income, 1937 and 1940 (per cent of national income)	326
Table 4	Combat aircraft produced, 1939: the great powers (units and per cent)	332
Table 5	War production, 1939: Soviet Union versus Germany (units and per cent)	332
Table 6	Research, design, and production facilities of the Soviet defence industry by specialisation, selected years (number of establishments)	333
Appendix B: Tables		
Table B.1	Persons arrested by the NKVD, 1936–1940, by social background (numbers and per cent)	352
Table B.2	Persons arrested by the NKVD, 1936–1940, by social background: the composition of subtotals (numbers)	353

Table B.3	Numbers held by the NKVD in GULAG labour camps and colonies and in prisons, January 1, 1936–1940 (thousands)	355
Table B.4	Accounting for the GULAG camp population, 1937–1941 (thousands)	355
Table B.5	Capital investment plans, 1937 (million rubles and estimate prices)	356
Table B.6	Capital investment plans, 1938–1940 (million rubles and estimate prices)	357
Table B.7	Capital investment, 1936–1939 (million rubles and current or estimate prices)	358
Table B.8	Capital investment in defence and the NKVD, 1936–1939 (million rubles and per cent)	360
Table B.9	Capital investment in the defence industries, 1937–1939: plans and outcomes (million rubles)	361
Table B.10	NKVD capital construction, billion rubles: plans and outcomes, 1937–1940 (million rubles)	362
Table B.11	Industrial production, 1935–1940	363
Table B.12	Industrial employment, 1936–1940: alternative estimates (thousands and annual average)	364
Table B.13	Gross value of production of the defence industry by commissariat, 1937–1940 (million rubles at plan prices of 1926/27 and per cent)	365
Table B.14	Defence-related industrial products, 1937–1940 (physical units)	365
Table B.15	Civilian industrial products, 1937–1940 (physical units)	366
Table B.16	Coal, 1936–1939: average daily production by year and month (thousand tons)	367
Table B.17	Crude oil and gas, 1936–1939: average daily production by year and month (thousand tons)	367
Table B.18	Rolled steel, 1936–1939: average daily production by year and month (thousand tons)	368
Table B.19	Aircraft produced by type and model, 1936–1940 (units)	368
Table B.20	Tanks produced by type and model, 1936–1940 (units)	369
Table B.21	Tractors and combine harvesters produced, 1936–1940 (units and horsepower)	370
Table B.22	Agricultural fertiliser produced, 1936–1940 (thousand tons)	371
Table B.23	Gross value of industrial production of Union and Union-Republic commissariats, 1937–1939 (million rubles at 1926/27 prices and per cent)	372

Table B.24	Gross value of industrial production of Union and Union-Republic People's Commissariats in 1939 compared with 1938 (million rubles at 1926/27 prices and per cent)	373
Table B.25	Research, design, and production facilities of the Soviet defence industry by production specialisation, 1917–1940 (number of establishments and selected years)	374
Table B.26	Railway freight, 1928 and 1936–1939 (standard two-axle daily goods wagons loaded per day in thousands and monthly and annual averages)	374
Table B.27	The stock of draft power in Soviet agriculture, 1929 and 1936–1940 (units and horse-equivalents)	375
Table B.28	Predicted weather effects on grain yields across producer regions, 1936–1940 (per cent and percentile over 1883–1992)	375
Table B.29	Sowing plans, all crops, 1934/35 to 1938/39 (million hectares)	376
Table B.30	The sown area of Soviet agriculture, 1912/13 and 1934/35–1938/39 (million hectares)	377
Table B.31	The progress of sowing, 1934/35–1938/39 (thousand hectares)	377
Table B.32	The progress of harvesting, 1935–1939 (thousand hectares)	378
Table B.33	The grain harvest, 1935–1940: plans and outcomes (million tons)	379
Table B.34	Grain available for use, 1935–1940 (million tons)	381
Table B.35	Grain collections: plans, 1935/36–1939/40 (million tons)	382
Table B.36	Grain collections: outcomes, 1935/36–1939/40 (million tons)	383
Table B.37	Grain stocks held by producers, 1935–1940 (million tons on July 1)	383
Table B.38	Planned livestock herds by sector on January 1, 1937–1940 (thousands)	384
Table B.39	Livestock herds by sector, 1936–1940 (thousands and January 1)	386
Table B.40	Meat and dairy produce, 1936–1939, by supplier category (million rubles and plan prices of 1926/27)	387
Table B.41	Gross value of agricultural production by type of produce (million rubles and plan prices of 1926/27)	387

Table B.42	USSR state budget outlays and revenues in standardised classification, 1936–1940 (million rubles)	388
Table B.43	Soviet household money incomes, 1936–1940 (billion rubles)	389
Table B.44	Soviet household money outlays, 1936–1940 (billion rubles)	390
Table B.45	Retail trade turnover, 1935–1938 (million rubles and current prices)	391
Table B.46	Kolkhoz market trade, 1938–1940: volumes and prices of selected commodities (per cent of previous year)	392
Table B.47	Currency in circulation, 1936–1940 (million rubles)	392
Table B.48	Real consumption per head: estimates for 1928 and 1937–1940 (1937 prices and per cent of 1937)	393
Table B.49	Energy consumption from food: survey-based estimates for the mid-1920s and late 1930s (calories per person per day)	393
Table B.50	Urban household income and expenditure, 1934 and 1937–1940, by occupational status of principal earner (rubles per person)	394
Table B.51	Exports, 1936–1940 (thousand tons)	395
Table B.52	Imports, 1936–1940 (thousand tons)	396
Table B.53	The size of the Soviet population, 1927 and 1933–1939: reports and estimates (millions and January each year)	397
Table B.54	The natural increase of the Soviet population, 1933–1939: reports and retrospective estimates (thousands)	398
Table B.55	Life expectancy and infant mortality, 1927 and 1933–1939	400
Table B.56	Age-specific fertility, 1927 and 1933–1939 (births per thousand women, by age)	400
Table B.57	Soviet net material product, 1937–1940: official estimates (billion rubles and per cent)	400
Table B.58	Soviet gross national product, 1937–1940: Western estimates (billion rubles and per cent)	401
Table B.59	Real industrial production, 1937–1940: official measures versus Western estimates (billion rubles at plan prices of 1926/27 and per cent)	401

Table B.60	The gross output of the munitions industries, 1938–1940: official measures versus Western estimates (per cent of 1937)	402
Table B.61	The uses of Soviet national income, 1937–1939: official estimates (billion rubles at current prices and per cent)	402
Table B.62	The uses of Soviet national income, 1937 and 1940: Western estimates (billion rubles at factor costs of 1937 and per cent)	402