WWII changed the Soviet Union forever, becoming the single most seismic event of the Stalin era. From 1941, when the Germans launched their surprise invasion, to the death of Stalin in 1953, Soviet life was dominated by the war and its painful aftermath. For Soviet citizens, the battle against the Nazis was a struggle for their country’s survival, and in the first six months of war, that country almost ceased to exist. During that time, the USSR lost half its industry and 40% of its agriculture to the Wehrmacht army. In an effort to save whatever resources they could from being seized by the Blitzkrieg invaders, from July to November 1941, Soviet officials oversaw the relocation of over six million people and 1523 industrial enterprises eastward, into Siberia. The next four difficult years saw a continuing transfer of economic activity from the west to the east, an enormous drop in food supplies (especially in German-occupied areas), tremendous destruction of individual life, and mass dislocation of the civilian population.

Starvation was a daily reality. During the 900-day siege of the city of Leningrad, residents faced winters without heat, electricity, or food: rations totaled only 250 grams of bread daily for manual workers and 125 grams (4.4 ounces) for all others. Citizens were so hungry that they ate wallpaper paste, rats, and household pets, and drank “soup” made from boiled leather belts and shoes. Even outside of combat zones, Soviet citizens received rations which were lower than subsistence level. In 1944, children under 13 “were rationed at barely 1000 calories a day; non-working dependents at just 780; clerical employees at just over 1000… and for all categories it was assumed that roughly 80% of calories would come from bread.”

People planted whatever they could in any available open parcel of land, such that, as Donald Filtzer has noted, “One of the problems of maintaining basic levels of communal sanitation after 1945 was the fact that during the war, localities had ploughed up waste dumps, and in some cases even their water filtration beds, and used them to grow food.”

To the surprise and gratitude of Western leaders, the Soviet Union managed to turn the tide of the Second World War, defeating Adolf Hitler’s army at Stalingrad, pushing the Germans out of their invaded country, and chasing the Wehrmacht all the way back to Berlin. To many both at home and abroad, these triumphs seemed worth the individual sacrifices they had necessitated. However, soon after the war, perceptions of Soviet success began to change. For after 1945, the quality of life for ordinary people in capitalist countries, particularly the U.S., soared in comparison to that inside the USSR. At the same time, repressive Soviet policies, particularly in the occupation of Eastern Europe, destroyed whatever moral legitimacy the socialist regime had acquired in the eyes of the Western world as a result of its essential contribution to Allied victory over Hitler.

World War Two left the Soviet Union in ruins – far more damaged than most Western countries realized at the time and far more impoverished than its own leaders wished to admit. As Cold War animosities between the U.S. and the USSR intensified in 1946-47, Stalin grew ever-more anxious to maintain his country’s international image as a superpower and to conceal the extent of its domestic need. Soviet propaganda movies showed Red Army peasants returning home after war to celebratory homecoming feasts, where plump villagers gathered around tables laden with food, to dance and sing and praise Stalin’s leadership. In reality, however, the Soviet Union lost between 20 to 30 million people during the war, and then sank into such a food-shortage crisis immediately thereafter that another 1 to 1.5 million people died in 1946-47 from starvation and related diseases. Many of these victims were urban residents, particularly workers and their families in Ukraine and Moldavia, who perished once the regime began raising prices on rationed goods and removing some 25 million people from the ration lists.

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1 “Germans occupied territory that had accounted for over 60% of the total coal, pig iron, and aluminum production; nearly 40% of total grain production and 60% of total livestock.” From Susan Linz, “World War II and Soviet Economic Growth, 1940-1953,” in The Impact of WWII on the Soviet Union, Linz, ed. (New Jersey: Rowman and Allanheld, Publishers, 1985), 13.


4 Ibid.

5 Filtzer, 5.
were so low during this period that “in many factories the cost of a single [cafeteria] meal exceeded young workers’ daily earnings.”

People lived in ruins and rubble, many without sewage, electricity, heat, or even a safe source of purified drinking water. Statistics from the time paint a grim picture of post-war everyday life. More than 50 percent of urban living space in the territory occupied by the Germans, an area which had contained 40% of the pre-war Soviet population, was damaged or destroyed, and housing in other parts of the USSR had tremendously deteriorated. “In Moscow at the end of the war, for example, 90% of central heating and 48% of water and sewage systems were out of commission, and urgent repairs were needed on 80% of roofs, 60% of electrical equipment, and 54% of gas equipment.” In the city of Gorkii in 1948 only 13% of homes had central heating, and “fewer than 30% of residents had sewerage and running water.” Per capita urban living space was lower in 1950 than it had been before the war, and in various towns in Siberia, party officials reported that the “real average norm of living space for one inhabitant does not exceed two square meters.” In the Greater Moscow coal fields of 1947, dormitories “had an average of one table for every ten workers, one stool for every three… and only one wash basin for every seven rooms – that is roughly one for every 70 people.”

Rather than rewarding citizens for victory or allowing them to relax after their years of sacrifice, Stalin immediately insisted on mobilizing them for yet another war, this time a war to rebuild. And due to an increasingly tense international situation, the Soviet regime, once again, placed full priority on regaining military and industrial might, rather than on improving domestic supply of consumer products or medical care, even on furnishing prostheses for the country’s millions of invalids or screws, nails, nuts, and bolts for urgently needed housing repairs. The Fourth Five-Year Plan of 1946 emphasized the production of heavy machines and weapons over that of food – at a time when no milk was available in cities, even for nursing mothers. The intensifying global East-West conflict and the emerging U.S./USSR nuclear arms race dominated government concerns. Meanwhile, little to no official attention was paid to citizens’ emotional or psychological recovery, or to burgeoning peacetime problems of alcoholism, adultery, and domestic violence – unsurprising afflictions for a country where families had been separated for years, where returning veterans had witnessed near-unimaginable atrocity, and where women far outnumbered men. Many surviving soldiers were not even permitted to return home promptly at war’s end in 1945, but were instead immediately “remobilized” to take part in domestic reconstruction projects (i.e. the building of factories) for several more years. By 1948, most sectors of heavy industry had been restored to pre-war levels of production, but such reconstruction came at extraordinarily high civilian cost.

The late Stalin period thus was the time when shortage became associated specifically with socialism and when capitalism began to look incomparably more comfortable, by comparison. For the U.S. emerged from WWII as the wealthiest country in the world. Suddenly it had the money to implement many of the same type social-welfare programs that the Soviet Union had, decades earlier, promised to introduce. Through legislation such as the G.I. Bill, Washington began to offer workers and veterans a host of government benefits; at the same time, U.S. leaders stressed prosperity for all, rather than Soviet-style economic leveling. They promised that blue-collar workers could enjoy a high standard of living in a capitalist system, earning respectable wages and even owning their own homes – homes which U.S. advertisements promised would be filled with a myriad of labor-saving and luxury devices, such as vacuum cleaners, washing machines, toasters, and televisions. Many of these homes would include garages, for every post-1945 American family would be able to afford at least one car.

In the post-1945 Soviet Union, in contrast, all that most citizens could afford – or even find in stores – were bread and potatoes. The only widely available vegetable was cabbage. While Americans bought washing machines, the Russians searched for soap. Consumer goods were so scarce in the USSR that, as Don Filtzer has noted, during 1946-47 “yearly purchases per family member came to half a pair of leather footwear; a third of a pair of galoshes; 1.5 kilograms of coarse industrial soap; and a third of a bar

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6 Filtzer, 6.
8 Filtzer, 4.
9 Fitzpatrick, 137.
of toilet soap… in fact, in 1946 the Soviet clothing industry produced only one quarter of a piece of underwear and less than one pair of socks for each of its citizens.” Elsewhere, he writes that: “As late as 1948, for example, the average member of a peasant household in the Moscow region could buy a pair of leather shoes once every two years and a set of underwear once every ten years. In the Gorkii region, it took 10 years to acquire a pair of shoes and 16 years to buy a set of underwear.” Agriculture also suffered from government neglect. In 1952, for example, farmers produced less per acre than they had in 1913, years before the Russian Revolution and the introduction of mechanized agriculture. Not giant communal farmlands but postage-stamp-sized household plots – family gardens grudgingly allowed by the government in response to famine – fed virtually the entire country during the late Stalin era.

The hardship and breakdown of the post-war period led to an increase in crime. As the Soviet regime proved itself unable to provide for its citizens’ most basic needs, the very act of survival came to entail breaking with the regime and certain of its rules. Virtually all families engaged in black market transactions. Many stole extra supplies from their workplace, to exchange surreptitiously for deficit goods. Such actions were not without considerable risk. In 1947 – the same year that wartime rationing was lifted and prices soared – the Stalinist dictatorship imposed strict laws against the stealing of state and private property. At least two million citizens fell victim to new mandatory sentencing laws, which required seven to 25 years’ imprisonment for even the most insignificant theft.

Yet at the same time as the state tried to impose discipline through force on its lower-level citizens, it often turned a blind eye to the corrupt machinations of prominent Communist officials. Many local bureaucrats made relative fortunes in the post-war years by siphoning off whatever little reconstruction aid their communities received. When Americans sent shipments of celebratory “gifts” to the Soviet Union in thanks for the country’s wartime achievements, prominent office-holders embezzled a staggering percentage – archival documents speak of fistfights breaking out among “A-list” wives at train depots, as they struggled to divide up carloads of pianos, suits, and shoes. The discrepancy between elite and ordinary Soviet lifestyles, first noticeable in the 1930s, became ever more obvious after 1945. Privileged cadres, members of the so-called nomenklatura, shopped in exclusive stores, often with secret entrances, employed maids, and took full advantage of post-war regime laws protecting them from critical media coverage and criminal prosecution unless explicitly sanctioned from above.

Thus one can conclude that in the post-war Stalin era, Soviet industry recovered, but individual life did not. The USSR never fulfilled its Revolutionary-era promises to care for the toiling masses, but instead became a country with a sick and malnourished population, exhausted by decades of building, sacrifice, and war. The people's heroic efforts were left, by and large, unrewarded. Some historians, such as Sheila Fitzpatrick, have claimed the 1945-53 period was marked by a “return to normalcy” in the Soviet Union – but one must question in what such “normal life” consisted. For this “normalcy” referred to a state of poverty for the majority and luxury for an elite few. It was a normalcy of shortage, widespread disillusionment, and increasingly obvious government hypocrisy. Everyday life in the Soviet Union did slowly improve following price cuts in 1949, and the last years of Stalin’s reign, 1950-53, were markedly more comfortable than those that had preceded them. Nevertheless, the standard of living enjoyed by ordinary Soviet people lingered far, far below that of workers in either reconstructed western Europe or the economically booming United States.

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