



# The first 35 years of Soviet living standards: Secular growth and conjunctural crises in a time of famines<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates welfare and living standards in the Soviet Union during the great crises of the first 35 years of Soviet power, during which the USSR experienced 5 major famines. It reviews the classic literature on traditional measures of Soviet consumption and recent critiques of them. It discusses the nature of welfare and welfare indicators, the reliability of Soviet statistical indicators on welfare, and it charts the dimensions of the groups in Soviet society that were most vulnerable to these welfare crises. A range of welfare indicators covering nutrition, mortality and stature are critically examined both regarding their immediate and long-term consequences and the groups affected.

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## 1. Introduction

This article investigates welfare and living standards in the Soviet Union during the great crises of the first 35 years of Soviet power. This was an extraordinary period in which critical welfare crises covered more than half of these years,<sup>1</sup> and where there were at least 5 major famines. Because these crises and famines were associated with major political events, (revolutions, wars, collectivization) there has been a tendency to view them as separate individual events, and to ignore their common aspects. At the time attempts were made to distort the record and to conceal the scale and nature of these famines. Very little information was publicly available about these famines until the archives were opened. However, considerable materials were gathered at the time and preserved in the archives together with reports and other documents indicating the nature of the internal struggles over statistical evaluations. These materials are now available. This article makes a critical analysis of the whole range of data on welfare over this period, including those from previously closed Soviet archives.

The first part of the article begins with a review of the classic literature on traditional measures of Soviet welfare, and recent critiques of them. These works estimated the growth of real wages and household consumption for the whole of the Soviet population between a selected number of relatively favorable years. While this approach did produce results that corrected some of the excessive claims of the Soviet government at the time, it under-estimated the complexity of the situation which the USSR faced, the many crises through which Soviet society was passing, and the fractured nature of society as regards the welfare entitlements of different groups.

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<sup>1</sup> i.e. the 18 years of 1918–1922, 1928–1933, 1941–1947.

**Table 1**

Chapman's calculation of Soviet real wages, 1928–1952 made in 1954 and 1963

Real Wages	Before taxes & bond purchases		After taxes & bond purchase		
	1928 price weights	1937 weights	1928 weights	1937 weights	
				1954	1963
1928	100	100	100	100	100
1937	58	82	57	81	57
1940					54
1948	45	62	40	56	40
1952	72	103	63	90	66

Source: Chapman (1954, 1963). Chapman's figures in 1963 were given in proportion to a 1937 base of 100. For comparative purposes I have changed the base back to 1928. Note: Chapman noted that Jasny and Prokopovich had given slightly lower figures. Chapman, *ibid.* 1954, p. 147.

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The second part of the article discusses the nature of welfare, the overall reliability of Soviet statistical indicators and provides a survey of the most vulnerable groups in society, who were most likely to face the most severe entitlements crises.

The third and major part of the article surveys a range of welfare related indicators that capture crisis developments for society as a whole, and wherever possible for separate groups within society. All of these indicators are treated critically with an exposition of the politics around them, the extent of political distortions and a general assessment of their reliability.

## 2. A brief review of the classical studies of growth in per capita consumption in the USSR

### 2.1. Early classics: Bergson, Chapman and Gregory

In the 1950s, Abraham Bergson and his team (including Janet Chapman) carried out a major US research effort to analyse the 'real' nature of Soviet economic growth as distinct from the 'unreal' claims that were being made by Soviet officials at the time.<sup>2</sup> Janet Chapman's early (1954) estimates of Soviet real wages argued that contrary to the Soviet claims of growth, that between 1928 and 1948 there had been a quite distinct decline in real wages, which were only partly recovered in the final years of Stalin's reign. The calculation of real wages is complex, and is dependent upon several things including what price weights are used. But in all the concepts and price weights provided by Chapman both in her original article in 1954, and in her 1963 book she finds that Soviet performance was poor (Table 1).

When Bergson (1961) produced his calculation of Soviet Real National Income for these years in 1961, he used a somewhat broader indicator of household consumption per employed person, as well as the much broader concept of total household consumption, which included the peasantry. Both of these indicators, and especially those for total household consumption provided a much more favorable picture, although still not a particularly good one. The fall in consumption in the early 1930s had still not been totally recovered in the late 1930s, and only began exceeding the 1928 level in the late 1940s (Table 2).

In these early studies, the Bergson team did not include indicators for the pre-revolutionary period, but Paul Gregory later provided a 1913 benchmark to link the Bergson national income series with his own pre-revolutionary series for 1880–1913 (Gregory, 1982, pp. 102–121). According to Gregory's calculations per capita national income fell significantly between 1913 and 1928; by 17% instead of the 9% growth claimed in official Soviet statistics. This would make the subsequent decline in the 1930s claimed by Bergson and Chapman even more significant, and would imply that 1950 consumption levels were still lower than 1913 levels.

### 2.2. Challenges to these early pessimistic views: Davies, Wheatcroft and Allen

This pessimistic scenario has been challenged. The Birmingham research team under R.W. Davies, (with which I am associated) was generally impressed with the reliability of most of the Bergson calculations, but we were critical of Chapman's estimates of real wages, the selection of benchmark years and especially of Gregory's 1913 benchmark link. We argued that Chapman had somewhat under-estimated the level of growth of living standards in the late 1930s, by concentrating on the decline in real wages earned in industry, instead of considering the effects of structural change, as formerly low paid peasants moved to the higher paid urban sector. We also argued that because of the exceptional harvest of 1913, a 1913 benchmark would provide a quite uncharacteristic indicator of pre-revolutionary consumption. Furthermore we thought that Gregory's 1913 figures further exaggerated the growth in rural consumption by not adequately capturing urban supplies

<sup>2</sup> Khrushchev in 1958 would eventually claim that the USSR was catching up on American growth and would exceed them in 10 years.

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