Stalin and Stalinism

Martin McCauley argues that our obsession with Stalin as a mass murderer evades the real question – how did his system work?

Stalin has now been dead for over 40 years but the system he developed, Stalinism, lived on after him. It used to be claimed that Lenin was more alive than the living but it would be more true to say that Stalinism is always with us. The Stalin period can be viewed as dating from his rise to power in 1928, although the Stalinist system was not fully in place before 1936 to 1953. This extraordinary quarter of a century has left an indelible mark on the Soviet Union, its successor states and the world. Stalin had many admirers in the outside world, from those who revelled in his use of coercion against his opponents, real and imagined, to more intellectual types who admired the symmetry and harmony of his system. Harold Wilson, the most successful Labour politician in the 20th century and the victor of four general elections in Britain, was greatly taken by the Soviet planning system. Ways were sought whereby a market economy could be introduced to the benefits of a plan. It was not only in Britain that the concept of planning gained currency. France went further than Britain along this path. Another spin off was the belief that utilities and other key industrial sectors could be better managed if state run. Hence nationalisation was deemed to be necessary to make the economy more efficient and more just. Unconsciously – and in a few cases consciously – Labour politicians were following the Soviet example.

The reaction against state planning

The turning of the tide against collectivism and state regulation began with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. She began to preach the virtues of privatisation, individual initiative and freedom. A devoted follower of Hayek (she ignored the fact that politically he was left of centre), she embraced the market as the regulator of economic life. When she arrived in power about 60% of Britain's Gross Domestic Product was administered by the state. This she identified as one of the fundamental reasons why the British economy was weak. It took the breath away when she proposed that a public utility such as British Telecom could be privatised and would thereby become more efficient. She was appalled to discover that there was no economic theory stating that privately owned enterprises were more efficient than state owned ones. Economic theory was more concerned about how the assets were managed than about ownership. The anti-state ethos which pervaded her thinking was mirrored in the United States by President Ronald Reagan.

With the wisdom of hindsight it is astonishing that the tide against the increasing role of the state, on the grounds that most state-run enterprises were increasing inefficient, did not lead to a rethink about the communist economic system, fashioned by Stalin. The major reason for the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was that state investments had become increasingly unprofitable. If state investments in the west were not producing rising profitability, what were the implications for the Soviet Union where practically all investment was by the state? The most dynamic economies in the 1980s were the 'Asian tigers', (South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, etc.) and they were aggressively capitalist. Europeans and Americans were so enamoured of the belief that the Soviet Union was a superpower that they failed to apply the lessons of the 1980s to the Soviet Union. No leading scholar concluded that the Soviet planning system would collapse under its own inefficiency. There was a widespread view among western political scientists and economists that Gorbachev's perestroika could not succeed. In order to survive, the USSR had to revert to the tried and tested methods of the pre-Gorbachev age. The Soviet ruling class, the nomenklatura, was more perceptive. They did not believe that the Soviet system, the Stalinist system, could be successfully reformed to produce dynamic economic growth. By the late 1980s they had ensured that their future in the post-communist state was secure. With the resources of the state at their disposal, they established businesses, commercial banks, engaged in foreign trade and acquired much property at home and abroad. Part of their wealth was deposited abroad. This epitomises the morality of the Soviet nomenklatura – fashioned under Stalin. They were concerned about their own wellbeing and not that of the population at large.

Stalin's basic aims
Stalin deliberately destroyed civil society (autonomous institutions outside the control of the state), horizontal links between regions and institutions, and imposed a ruthlessly effective coercive political and economic system. It was effective but not efficient. Logically his plan was breathtakingly simple. Concentrate all resources (human and capital) at the centre, mobilise the country to achieve centrally given goals and the result was bound to be gratifying. Stalin, like Lenin, always believed that the end justifies the means. Shorn of any moral constraint, he demanded the achievement of impossible goals – irrespective of the human or material cost. Statistics measure the results but, from Stalin's point of view, all statistics are first political and then economic, social, etc. He once commented that 'paper will take anything that is printed on it'. Reporting became careless. The Central Statistical Administration, housed in a splendid Le Corbusier-designed building, was wont to boast that 'all five year plans were constructed in the building and they were all fulfilled within the building'. This reveals that the functions assigned to the statistical agency can best be understood as monitoring and propaganda functions. Here Stalin fell into his own trap. How was he to discover what the real state of affairs was? He attempted various reforms to unearth the real reserves of enterprises, for instance. He launched, for example, campaigns of social competition. They, however, became counter-productive as enterprises conspired to emulate one another – but only on paper. Stalin never allowed the facts to get in the way of a good story line. The two soldiers who hoisted the Red flag over the Reichstag in Berlin in May 1945 were Russian and Tatar. This did not please Stalin, who decided he wanted a fellow Georgian to have the honour. When the Russian and the Tatar turned up at anniversary parades to reclaim the honour they were arrested and then released afterwards. On the other hand, Stalin is one of the great politicians of the 20th century. He inspired a whole generation of Soviets to attempt: the impossible (after 1991, those who bad selflessly served him were wont to complain that he had betrayed them and robbed them of their youth). He fashioned an elite which never attempted to remove him – the coup against Khrushchev in 1964 and the attempted coup in 1991 would have been inconceivable under Stalin. Many of his cohorts remained loyal. For example, Molotov and Kaganovich averred to their dying days that Stalin had acted correctly and that the mess the Soviet Union later got itself into was the result of deviating from Stalin’s path.

What of foreign and security policy? A Soviet leader has to satisfy various constituencies: the domestic, involving strengthening the state and providing the population with inspirational leadership and direction and convincing them that things are getting better; military; foreign affairs – negotiating with foreign states according to normal diplomatic practice; and promoting the expansion of communism. Stalin provided strong, at times inspirational, leadership; as commander in chief he guided the country to victory in 1945 but never trusted his military. He outwitted Churchill and Roosevelt but was outmanoeuvred by Hitler. The tendency is now, in Russia and outside, to blame him for beginning the Cold War and setting in train (he ruinously expensive arms race. Eastern Europe, his prize for winning the Second World War, had become an albatross by the 1980s. His treatment of Mao Zedong and the People’s Republic of China – he wanted to make the Chinese as subservient as eastern Europe – fuelled the conflict which erupted into border clashes in the 1960s and almost led to war. He was highly successful at promoting communism abroad but the obverse of this coin was that it stoked up the Cold War and the armaments race as western insecurity grew.

His economic and political system collapsed when Gorbachev attempted to reform it. Herein lies its greatest weakness – its unreformability. The ruling class it spawned was incapable of innovative thinking and instead preferred to feather their own nests while the ship of state sank. Hence the balance sheet shows more liabilities than assets. What were his lasting achievements? He dragged the Soviet Union into the modern world and transformed a largely agrarian country into a superpower capable of taking on and defeating Germany. Great scientific achievements were recorded under his aegis. Rocket technology, later to put Yury Gagarin in space, was well under way when Stalin died in 1953. He effected a social revolution without a civil war. He kept the lid on the nationality problem. The unprecedented growth of educational opportunity produced new elites, especially in the non-Russian areas. A health, housing and social security system was fashioned at a time when no other country was attempting to do anything similar.

Earlier analytical approaches

What about western analyses of Stalin and Stalinism? There are two main schools of thought – they can be labelled the 'totalitarian' or 'intentionalist' on the one hand and the 'structuralist', 'social' or 'pluralist' on the other.
The totalitarian approach grew out of the beginning of the Cold War and held sway until the 1960s. It is dominated by the personality and preferences of Stalin. Totalitarians would not claim that Stalin ever achieved his goal of a totalitarian state but that their approach provides incisive insights into the phenomenon of Stalinism. It was believed that the Stalinist state was strictly disciplined and that the ruler was able to impose his will on society. Conquest now concedes that this is flawed and that the state was often ineffective and that initiatives from below were significant. The experiences of the anti-Vietnam War campaigners and the 'generation of 1968' led to a realisation that the state and the existing order could be challenged and changed from below. Applied to the Soviet Union, this produced the pluralist approach. This implies that the state merely acts as referee between competing interests in society. However, the state for instance is responsible for defence, security and foreign affairs. The government has its own preferences since it needs to nurture a constituency in order to be reelected. Another way of portraying the totalitarians and the pluralists is to borrow terminology from the study of Nazi Germany and label them intentionalists and structuralists. The former view Hitler as a strong leader, imposing his policy agenda on the nation. Here most emphasis is placed on politics and ideology. The latter see a semi-chaotic polycratic power structure under (he apparent monolithic surface of the regime.

In Stalinist studies the intentionalists are the totalitarians and the structuralists are the social historians. The key source for the views of the social historians is that of Sheila Fitzpatrick. She sees the Stalin era as a dichotomy between the 'revolution from above' and the 'revolution from below', presented by the totalitarians and the revisionists, the social historians. The totalitarians, in her view, analyse Soviet developments in the context of the dichotomy between state and society, with society reacting, seeking to resist, evade, subvert or through passive resistance neuter the impositions of the state. The state therefore seeks to mobilise a victimised, weak, inchoate society. Fitzpatrick collides with these views head on and claims that society was dynamic: with new hierarchies, new privileges and levels of status, vertical and horizontal cleavages were emerging. State coercion was the response engendered by the problems of managing this social fluidity. The indoctrination of society can be interpreted as a necessary part of the training and culture needed in the new era of socialism. There are social as well as political dynamics in Stalinism. The social historians concentrate not on the 'actions of the state, but the dynamic of relationships between the different social strata and classes; the prevalent social distinctions and their significance in the lives of individuals; the ways in which the individuals could improve their status and protect themselves; the various aspects and repercussions of social mobility; and the ways in which some aspects of the social hierarchy could persist or emerge in spite of, rather than because of, the actions of the regime' (p.26).

Another major concern is whether the new elite at the top of the social hierarchy was a ruling class, in the Marxist sense, or whether it was the group with the highest status and economic advantages in society. This approach is referred to as social history to distinguish it from political history which is mainly concerned with the party-state.

A touchstone is the assessment of the terror. The social historians or the 'new cohort' regard the differences between the Stalinist and the normal political process as one of degree rather than quality. The mobility and dynamism of society were such as to devolve almost into anarchy. Rittersporn traces the origins of the terror to the un gover nability of the country resulting from the bureaucrat ic in-fighting and the centre-periphery conflict. Getty argues that the Great Purges were not the 'result of a petrified bureaucracy stamping out dissent and annihilating old radical revolutionaries. In fact, it may have been just the opposite... a radical, even hysterical reaction to bureaucracy. The entrenched officeholders were destroyed from above and below in a chaotic wave of voluntarism and revolutionary puritanism' (p.206). Hence Stalin's role fades into the background. Rittersporn and Getty view him as just one of the actors who played a role in the drama of factional strife. Others play down his influence by mentioning him only in passing.

Critics of the social historians scorn their approach as an attempt to 'de-demonise Stalin and the Politburo' and make their policies appear 'humdrum' and mundane – as if the Soviet government were 'just like any other government operating in difficult circumstances'. By consciously avoiding any link between social and political history, these scholars give the impression that one is dealing with the pluralist model of politics, and hence that there are similarities between Stalinism and pluralist democracy. One critic sees them as deflecting some of the blame for the brutalities and the suffering of the 1930s away from Stalin and offloading it elsewhere. Their approach is broadly Marxist in that they search for causes in the 'socio-economic base rather than the political-ideological superstructure'. It is instructive that Fitzpatrick excludes Moshe Lewin from her new cohort' of social historians, presumably because he does address the problem of the interaction of the social and the political.
Gainers and losers

What distinguishes the work of the 'new cohort' from that of Lewin? Fitzpatrick researches 'mass education, social mobility, cultural revolution and a revolutionary continuity spanning from February 1917 until the consummation of the first five year plan'. She is mainly concerned to examine the newly emerging society from a positive point of view. Education is one of her passions and she delves into the effects it has on creating a new social elite. She is not concerned with the cultural and social cost of the new policies. She does not dwell on the old elites and their fate since they have little to contribute, besides being the handmaidens, to the new order. She conceives revolution as spanning the years from 1917 to the early 1930s and hence has a wide palate to work with. Getty examines radical tendencies within the party, which sought to bring the bureaucracy under the influence of a mobilised grass roots democracy. He is engaged in refuting the view that the party was merely the instrument of a dominant leader, Stalin. It had its own inner dynamic. Many of its members achieved social mobility through the party's ranks. The upper ranks of the party did attempt to dominate and transform the rank and file into instruments to implement their policies but grass roots democracy was a reality and a powerful force when mobilised. Rittersporn, as well, finds political forces at play which tried to grapple with bureaucratic conservatism. Again the view emerges that the party was not monolithic and the instrument of one dictator. There was a powerful undercurrent which made itself felt and hence had to be taken into account when shaping policies. Manning writes of participatory management in the collective farms, Viola of working class enthusiasm for the collectivisation campaign. Here one cannot fault her, but in the end it was not workers but peasants who were eventually to decide the effectiveness of the collectivisation approach to agricultural growth. One should not forget that many of the enthusiastic workers were first generation workers and hence still had vivid memories of the countryside. Collectivisation to most of them was taking the land away from the barin or landlord. Thurston retells the pleasurable as well as the grim aspects of everyday life in the 1930s.

Broadly speaking these scholars have radical sympathies. Lewin, on the other hand, regards the 1930s as a disaster of epic proportions as the Stalinist state established a string of bureaucratic institutions to stabilise the quicksand society it had engendered by its own destructive campaigns. Lewin underlines the view that Stalin was an historical demon by providing it with roots in peasant culture, but the 'new cohort' regard this demonic nature as a myth. Lewin's very negative view of Stalin permits little positive to be said about him. The revolution from above was destructive and the cost paid by the Soviet Union too high. It was destructive rather than constructive and because of this a bureaucratic strait jacket had to be placed on the country. Without it there would have been anarchy and chaos since the changes were not organic but forced.

These social scholars attract fire from revisionist scholars, such as Stephen Cohen, who emphasise the discontinuities between Leninism and Stalinism. Cohen objects to their approval of certain developments in the 1930s, which implies continuities between the radicalism of the early revolutionary years and the 1930s. However one critic of the 'new cohort' concedes that their emphasis on life at grass roots and middle management level tends to 'provide circumstantial evidence that some of the Stalinist policies were couched in terms which were not without popular appeal, thus in effect raising the possibility that they were the product of shared perceptions and reasons rather than of Stalin's personal designs' (p.40). In other words, some of Stalin's policies were organic and developed naturally from the economic and social environment. As such they benefited some strata of society and moved the country forward. Mass education, mainly in technical disciplines, the expansion of literacy, the growth of social services (a rudimentary health service began to emerge), the rapid decline of unemployment and the sheer excitement of the drama which began unfolding in the early 1930s rallied support to Stalin's revolution. This undermines the contention that the grandmaster Stalin played political, economic and social chess with the inhabitants of the country. Economic and social changes cannot be wrought according to the tenets of a grand design if they are to achieve success understood as the rapid modernisation of the Soviet Union so as to transform it into a leading and eventually the leading world economic power.

Totalitarians emphasise the power of the state and the deliberate terrorisation of society. The state could and did crush any group which stood in its way and could even deliberately provoke a famine (for example in Ukraine in 1932-33). Its goal was the atomisation of society. However, there were still areas where autonomy remained: a major one was the family; others were the persistence of religious faith, nationalism and ethnicity.

Social historians have worked hard to identify the social base of the Stalinist state, those who supported and
benefited from its policies. Most belong to the party-state bureaucracy, the military, control agencies (NKVD, etc),
mass organizations, party and Komsomol members. Fitzpatrick is concerned with the new elite, Kuromiya, the
younger generation of industrial workers, Viola, workers promoting collectivisation, Siegelbaum, the
Stakhanovites who led the way in showing it was possible to increase labour productivity. This, of course, made
them unpopular with many since they were expected to follow. A striking fact about the social base so far identified
is how small and insecure it was. This may have been the result of the tremendous social mobility and upheaval of
the 1930s. It is clear that there was considerable resistance to new practices at the work place. Studies of the
immediate post-Stalin period indicate how ineffective controls were. For example, it was very difficult to mobilise
factory workers since they paid more attention to their own regional leaders than to the factory foremen. Their
loyalty was still to their region of origin and this solidarity blocked many measures. They also gradually discovered
that they could collectively slow down the work process and thereby hamper technical innovation.

Totalitarians lay great stress on the state control of education, the mass media and propaganda in producing
social consensus through mass indoctrination. This was probably more effective in the 1930s than later. Given the
low level of formal education and the lack of alternative sources of information, most Russians probably believed
the official version. It is difficult to measure the level of ideological uniformity imposed by Stalin in and after 1933.
People hesitated to express opposing views in public but there was always the private sphere. Hence Soviet
citizens lived in two worlds, the official Soviet world, and the private, real world.

Totalitarians see continuities between Leninism and Stalinism, stressing the strong state, monopolistic communist
party and the desire to transform society according to policy preferences agreed at the top. Both Leninism and
Stalinism are viewed as negative phenomena. On the contrary, the social historians are broadly in sympathy with
the goals of Leninism and Stalinism and see links which are not necessarily negative. Sheila Fitzpatrick analyses
the Russian revolution in a social context and concludes that it reached from 1917 to the early 1930s.

The recon approach

Given the shortcomings of the totalitarians (intentionalists) and the social historians (structuralists), it is worth
attempting a more rounded approach which pays due attention to the interaction of political and social policies.
Following Tucker’s, this can be called the 'reconstruction-consolidation or recon approach'. This views the history
of the Soviet Union as a series of advances and retreats in order to consolidate gains. Revolution and war
communism were an advance; NEP was a retreat in order to allow the Bolsheviks to build up their strength before
attempting further advance; 1928-32 was a whirlwind advance; 1933-36 was a temporary slowdown to
consolidate; 1937-39 was another violent advance; 1939-41 was less radical as it saw the end of the purges; then
war intervened; 1946-52 again saw consolidation; but in 1952-53 it would appear Stalin was again considering an
assault on the bureaucracy and the party. The evidence for this was the smaller and larger Presidium elected at the
XIXth Party Congress and the Doctors’ Plot.

The recon approach gives due weight to the power of the state but also takes into account social resistance to
official policy. This explains the need for periods of consolidation. The crisis of 1932-33, the terrible famine and
the slowdown in economic growth rates, all of which put Stalin's position in jeopardy, rendered necessary the
period of consolidation which followed. Recent research has revealed that Stalin and Molotov believed that there
was widespread opposition to the regime which could become critically important in the event of war. This may
explain the assault on the Red Army in 1937-38. In addition, Molotov and Kaganovich harboured doubts about the
wisdom of certain aspects of the violent advance of 1937-39 which included wiping out the old Bolsheviks.
Advances built on previous experience. The 1936-38 purges are inconceivable without the accumulated
experience of war communism and 1928-32. The terror may be read as evidence of the weakness of the regime
as it struck out at perceived enemies. The terror redefined societal relations and promoted social mobility.
Egalitarianism was pushed aside in the 1930s. There are parallels between the USSR and China. After the Great
Leap Forward came a period of calm, followed by the Cultural Revolution. Mao was always concerned to
proletarianise and renew the bureaucracy and downgrade accumulated experience.

The Stalinist betrayal

Trotsky’s interpretation of Stalin has been influential. As a Marxist he was concerned to provide a Marxist critique
of the Stalinist phenomenon. This played down the role of the individual and placed great emphasis on
circumstances. Trotsky came up with concepts of 'Thermidoran reaction' and 'bureaucratic degeneration'. The failure of the socialist revolution abroad led to the gradual degeneration of the revolution at home. Russia's minuscule working class, decimated, dispersed and weakened by war, revolution and famine, could not elevate the gains of October 1917 to a fully functioning democratic dictatorship of the proletariat. Instead, a bureaucratic Leviathan, the totalitarian party-state machine, placed itself above society and took control of politics, administration and the manufacture and distribution of scarce goods. Russian's burgeoning civil society was overwhelmed as commissars, enterprise managers, party officials, soviet functionaries – apparatchiki who controlled supply and distribution of goods and services – took control of the small 'surplus product'. They were not concerned about the goals of October.

Stalin was apparat man personified. Initially the apparat sided with the right, since only NEP could guarantee its privileges. Stalin was forced into violent conflict with the 'revolutionary vanguard', the left and united opposition. After their defeat the contradictions of NEP obliged Stalin to turn to the right and introduce the 'third phase' of Soviet history, collectivisation and industrialisation, orchestrated from above. To Trotsky the decay of socialism was not the fault of Lenin or the Bolshevik party or the left or the united opposition. It was due to the coming together of a unique set of historical circumstances. The 'dialectics of history' had thrown up Stalin who worked through human instruments fashioned by NEP, the dross, the flotsam, the bureaucrats, the sneaks, the 'worms who were crawling out of the upturned soil of the manured revolution', Trotsky was convinced that Stalinism would not last. He even believed that the Second World War would fatally weaken the system. In the end, however, he was right but he did not live to see Stalinism's demise.

Stalinism in the full-blown sense only came into being in and after 1936. Hence it is necessary to bear in mind that this phenomenon evolved over time and is therefore different during the various stages of its growth. One can speak of various degrees of Stalinism. Research since 1991 has concentrated on revealing how awful and vile it was. It will be some time before some comprehensive theory emerges to explain its rise and fall. Whether one approves or disapproves of it, it is a truly remarkable phenomenon, one that profoundly mared the twentieth century. One can only approve of it if one suspends moral judgement.

Further reading:


Chris Ward, *Stalin's Russia*, Edward Arnold, 1993

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