The Mystery of Stalin

Paul Wingrove examines the starkly different interpretations that seek to explain the career of Joseph Stalin, who died fifty years ago this month.

Among twentieth-century statesmen perhaps none was so self-contained, enigmatic, mysterious and unapproachable as the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. To his closest comrades-in-arms and to foreign statesmen and diplomats he was a man of few words, reticent, patient and imperturbable, pacing or smoking quietly while he worked his way through a problem. His calm, thoughtful demeanour convinced even Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill that they could work with him and, to a degree, take him at his word. In the Soviet Union and in the Communist Bloc created after First World War, by coercion or as a voluntary act of allegiance, Stalin was the wise, omniscient, certainly unchallengeable, leader. His portrait appeared everywhere; the slogans praised his genius; and the history books told only of Stalin and his unerring capacity to be right. His was the steady, purposeful hand which, however dreadful the sacrifices, would guide the masses on the arduous path to Communism.

Such an unreal representation was, of course, achieved through Stalin’s extraordinary personal self-control, and through absolute state control of every public – and private – source of information. By such means was established, in Nikita Khrushchev’s phrase when he denounced Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, the ‘cult of personality’. This is an odd, evasive phrase. In fact it was used by Khrushchev as a criticism of the system of arbitrary one-man rule established by Stalin, rather than of any ‘personality’ which engendered and maintained that system. One-man rule was simply anti-Leninist, contravening the ideal of rule by the party of the working class; and hence the act of criticising this allowed Khrushchev to re-assert the validity of a Leninist system which, in this view, had been perverted by Stalin. Nor, interestingly, did Khrushchev dig too deeply into the ‘personality’ of Stalin since that would have opened up all sorts of embarrassing questions about morality and personal responsibility, perhaps even touching on the moral responsibility of such people as Khrushchev himself. Of course, Khrushchev intended not to open up Stalinism for historical examination, but quietly to bury the more odious and unsettling parts as quickly as possible and re-assert some sort of normality and governing capacity in a Soviet Communist party which had been largely destroyed by its own leader.

For Western historians, however, Stalin’s creation of his own myth and the concealment and distortion of truth at all levels has always been a stumbling block to understanding. There were, of course, accounts by exiles and defectors (including, not least, by Svetlana, Stalin’s own daughter), or by the disaffected, but only enough of this sort of material to allow historians to scratch the surface of the history of the Stalin era and obtain some limited understanding of the nature of a ruthless tyranny. But now, fifty years after the death of Stalin in March 1953, knowledge and understanding of the man and his era are growing, fuelled particularly by access to Soviet-era archives, although those archives are only partly open, with much of the most sensitive material strictly off limits.

Of course, even if the archives were freely open we might find that crucial evidence does not, in fact, exist. Thus, while we now have records of Stalin’s engagements – those whom he saw, and for how long – and even some of his early letters, as far as we know he never kept a diary; and similarly, many of those who ruled alongside him did not record their memories or have, for obvious reasons, sanitised them. Furthermore, many records have simply been destroyed, either deliberately or as a result of war. Nonetheless, even limited access to the archives has begun to establish some of the truth of those times, to make historical sallies behind the palisade of the myths and distortions. Paradoxically, as we shall see, this has engendered a considerable argument over the real meaning of what we know about Stalin.

There are many discrete parts of the history which have now been exposed. In external relations, to choose some arbitrary examples, we know that Stalin encouraged Kim Il-sung to attack south Korea; we know that Stalin treated his supposed ally Mao Zedong in the most offhand manner when he visited Moscow in December 1949; and we know that Stalin almost certainly planned to assassinate another quondam ally, Tito, in a plan described as ‘some kind of active measure against Tito personally’ in the document discovered by Russian historian Dmitri
Volkogonov. We also know of Soviet guilt for the Katyn massacres in eastern Poland in 1940.

As for the bloody infighting and the purges of the Bolshevik party leadership in the 1930s, J. Arch Getty notes (in Getty and Manning, *Stalinist Terror*) that we have

… an abundance of gruesome new details. We know that there is human blood splattered on Marshal Tukhachevskii’s 'confession.' We know that Zinoviev denounced Kamenev, that Ezhov would not permit Piatakov to execute his own wife, and that M. Riutin never capitulated to his interrogators. In addition … we know … that [Stalin] personally edited the lists of defendants and their statements for the 1936 and 1937 show trials.

We also have conclusive evidence that Stalin’s signature appears on lists of individuals named for execution which often ran into thousands.

Yet the arresting details of the conflict at the apex of the party are in some ways less interesting than what we learn about the dynamics of party in the hands of Joseph Stalin, especially during the purge of many of his former colleagues on a conveyor belt of arrest, imprisonment, torture, confession to imaginary political crimes, show trial and – finally – execution, in the second half of the 1930s. The ‘iron discipline’ of the party of Lenin, which in large part explains how that process could be carried out, was supported, even urged, by some of those who were later to be its victims. Hence Bukharin, one of the last of the Old Bolsheviks to be cut down by Stalin, declared in 1930 that he would ‘always march in step with the party’. Shkiriatov, in 1933, called for ‘iron, Bolshevik discipline in the party … when there aren’t any members in the party who are not in agreement with the party line’. Rudzutak, at the same party plenum, noted that ‘you won’t find a single instance where Comrade Stalin has hesitated or retreated. That is why we are with him. Yes, he vigorously chops off that which is rotten … if he didn’t do this he would not be a Leninist.’ Such sentiments, such unstinted support, provided the medium and mechanism for the growth and survival of Stalinism. There was no room for difference with the party, no place for nuance or individual opinion. As Trotsky said, it had to be ‘my party, right or wrong’.

In this atmosphere a Bolshevik such as Yenukidze had to protect himself even when he failed to ‘draw the appropriate conclusion from the report given to me … to the effect that a certain cleaning woman was engaged in counter-revolutionary conversation’. This is almost laughable and yet, of course, the Old Bolsheviks, and many others, were executed or sent to die in the camps not because they had been insufficiently alert to trivial instances of counter-revolution or (more likely in this case) simple below stairs grumbling, but on charges that did not contain even that grain of truth: that they had been Trotskyists, wreckers, spies for foreign powers, or that they had plotted the death of Stalin. Nearly all such charges laid against the Old Bolsheviks and against countless thousands of others were without the slightest foundation and rested on nothing more substantial than on confessions extracted by torture.

The difficulty of opposing the party, and Stalin, once its course was set, is evident from the despairing speeches of Bukharin and Rykov to a party Central Committee of 1937 which had by now labelled them anti-party and anti-Stalin. Bukharin first:

I've been guilty of many things, but I protest with all the strength of my soul against being charged with such things as treason to my homeland, sabotage, terrorism … The whole tragedy of my situation lies in this, that Piatakov and others like him so poisoned the atmosphere, such an atmosphere arose that no one believes human feelings – not emotions, not the impulses of the heart, not tears. (Laughter)

Then Rykov:

Oh my Lord, be it your will, it's all too clear. I was never a part of any bloc. I never belonged to any
Despite their pleas, members of the central Committee one by one called for their expulsion from the party, to be followed by investigation by organs of state security. Neither man, old comrades of Lenin though they were, survived the Stalinist meat grinder.

Another part of the battle of understanding is over the statistics – how many suffered and died under Stalin? – but here there is no easy agreement, and may never be. There are too many arenas of oppression, too many assumptions to be made, too few hard statistics and too many inconsistencies in what is available. Perhaps there was more slave labour than once we thought, and perhaps fewer executions, although Getty and others give figures of more than 300,000 executions in each of the years 1937 and 1938, horrific by any standards. But the estimates for deaths due to the character and policies of the regime vary from several millions to as many as twenty millions, with the variation explained as much by assumptions of authors as by hard statistics.

Even if the figures cannot delimit the Stalin regime precisely, the terrible suffering of the Stalin years cannot be denied, and much of it is now well documented: the attacks on, and deportations of, the peasants in the drive to collectivise agriculture; the devastating and partly man-made famine of the early 1930s which killed hundreds of thousands; the extensive use of slave labour (on canals, in logging, in gold and uranium mining); the arrests, tortures, confessions and executions which characterised the show trials of leading party members; the arrests of families of the accused (including children) almost as a matter of course; the extensive system of camps (the gulag) in which so many perished; the purge of the Red Army; the shooting of thousands of Polish officers at Katyn; the wholesale deportations of national groups during and after the war; the arrest and execution of foreign communists resident in the USSR; the suppression of the church, of free thought, music and literature, and of freedom itself.

Death, suffering and oppression were at the core of Stalinism. In this context, numbers matter, but only to a degree – quantity, as it were, should not overwhelm quality. However patchy and insubstantial some of the evidence may still be, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent outflow of documentation has necessarily established a more empirical approach to the study of Stalinism; and from this empiricism there arises the spectre of ‘revisionism’, a term which Getty – often seen as the leading ‘revisionist’ – does not much care for, but let us use it nevertheless.

Revisionists explain Stalinism in terms of a system of interests, of social attitudes, of party discipline, of bureaucratic conflicts, of nervous leaders seeking security in a dangerous time, of smaller men following the twists and turns of policy to save their own skins, creating and colluding with a system, and thereby colluding with Stalin. As these other factors enter the equation so does the image of the cunning, cruel, plotting ‘Man of Steel’ diminish. Thus Getty, in his Origins of the Great Purges (based mainly on the captured Smolensk archive rather than newer sources), can find no Stalinist ‘master plan’ and therefore, presumably, no master planner: ‘There is no doubt that he [Stalin] had chief responsibility for political leadership, but the [account given here] has more than once failed to conclude that the events were part of a coherent plan’. In his later work, The Road to Terror (from which come many of my documentary citations above), Getty still maintains that ‘there is precious little evidence of a plan for terror’. He now gives greater emphasis to the anxieties of the ruling elite:

Their fears of losing control, even of losing power, led them into a series of steps to protect their position and manage the situation: sanctioning and building a unifying cult around Stalin, stifling even the hint of dissent within the elite by closing ranks around a rigid notion of party discipline, and embarking on a programme of centralisation in everything from administration to culture.

So Stalinism becomes a version of bureaucratic politics, while Stalin is no longer the master manipulator. His guilt, his cruelty, his paranoia – these appear as diminuendo themes buried in a flurry of factions, local and bureaucratic interests and power-plays.
Robert W. Thurston takes this line even further in his *Life and Terror in Stalin’s Russia*. He argues that Stalin ‘… was not guilty of mass first degree murder and did not plan or carry out a systematic campaign to crush the nation … this fear-ridden man reacted, and over-reacted, to events’. Compare this interpretation with that of Robert Conquest, who writes that as a result of the terror of 1936-38 ‘… the country had been silenced and broken’; and it is clear who broke it. For Conquest and others, such as Roy Medvedev, the explanation of these years is also empirical, but it is in addition clearly an act of remembrance, a documentation of the evil that was perpetrated, and a determination of moral culpability. Their explanation is in terms of the psychotic, paranoid personality of Joseph Stalin.

In the past year a novitiate historian has joined the battle. Martin Amis, the novelist, turning his hand to history in *Koba the Dread*, writes with biting passion to remind us of what happened under Stalin – or rather, to warn us never to forget or find excuses. Not only does he anathematise Stalin, he turns his fire on others who must bear some of the guilt by purporting to see good in the USSR and turning a blind eye to the cruelties. Included in this group is Amis’s old friend Christopher Hitchens, but Amis also takes a sideswipe at the ‘revisionist’ historian Getty, who is dismissed in a scornful footnote: ‘If Getty goes on revising at his current rate, he will eventually be telling us that only two people died in the Great Terror, and that one very rich peasant was slightly hurt during Collectivisation’.

Novelists, as opposed to academic historians, can say things like that. Amis was understandably influenced by his friendship with writers and scholars such as Robert Conquest, who opened the historical charge sheet on Stalinism with *The Great Terror*, and with Tibor Szamuely, sent to the camps for eight years for being heard to call Soviet Prime Minister Malenkov a ‘fat pig’, though afterwards managing to flee to the West. Martin Amis speaks for them and for a tradition within Stalin studies which contests with the new empiricism. However, the field is not simply dominated by Getty and those who take a different view. From the new materials scholars such as Davies, Viola, Roberts, Khlevniuk are deepening our understanding of ordinary life under Stalin, of agricultural collectivisation, of foreign policy, of the operations of Stalin’s politburo. This fiftieth anniversary will see many more studies appearing. By such work we will come to a more rounded appreciation of Stalin and the system he made or, conversely, the system that made him.

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