

Stalin's Role

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Stalin and his Stalinism: Power and Authority in the Soviet Union, 1930–1953

Ronald Grigor Suny

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Editor's Introduction

In explaining Stalinism, many historians focus on Joseph Stalin himself – his mindset, his methods, and his personality. Characterizations of Stalin highlight both his Machiavellian thinking and his malicious nature. Stalin is thus portrayed as an evil genius – someone whose cunning and ability to wield power were matched only by his vindictiveness toward potential rivals. In this view, the brutality and terror of the Stalinist system derived principally from Stalin himself. As an omnipotent but paranoid leader, Stalin arrested and executed millions of innocent people, including many of his fellow Communist Party members. Through this exercise of mass terror, he ensured that no one opposed his policies or challenged his personal dictatorship.

Such explanations generally emphasize Stalin's ruthless maneuvering to account not only for his bloody reign but for his rise to power in the first place. Apart from his guile, Stalin seemed an unlikely successor to Lenin. He lacked the theoretical brilliance and oratorical skills of Trotsky and other leading Communists. Many Party members saw him primarily as a functionary – someone skilled in organizational matters though unsuited for leadership. But Stalin proved to be an extremely effective political infighter. By aligning first with one group and then another, he succeeded in discrediting and eliminating rivals, until he emerged in the late 1920s

as the supreme leader of the country.¹ Stalin was aided in his rise to power by his appointment as the Communist Party's General Secretary – the person in charge of personnel matters. Initially seen as an administrative post, Stalin used this position to promote his own loyalists within the Party and thus to build his base of support.²

Other historians have questioned whether Stalin's rise can be attributed solely to his manipulation and ruthlessness. They point out that Stalin, with his blunt and dogmatic style, actually appealed to many rank-and-file Communists, and that his shifting positions were responses to changing political and economic circumstances instead of purely tactical moves to outflank his opponents.³ Scholars have also noted that both Stalin's political shifts and his intolerance of dissent were common to other Communist leaders, and hence reflected emergency circumstances and Party culture as much as Stalin's personal predisposition. As Chris Ward writes, "Stalin's personality cannot be divorced from the world in which he functioned."⁴ Of course, it was Stalin who took the Party's intolerance of dissent to such extremes that he executed thousands of fellow Communists during the Great Purges of the late 1930s. The question of Stalin's personal role, then, is one still very much debated by historians.

In the selection that follows, Ronald Grigor Suny, a specialist on Stalin and Soviet nationalities, synthesizes old and new evidence regarding Stalin's method of rule and his personal imprint on the system that bears his name. Suny maintains that, contrary to the totalitarian model, the Stalinist system did not completely control or atomize Soviet society. While Stalin concentrated enormous power at the top, that power was diffused downward through lower-level Soviet officials. Factory directors and collective farm managers had to accommodate workers and peasants to some degree, and this accommodation left room for the average Soviet citizen to maneuver within the system.

While he rejects the totalitarian model, Suny still emphasizes the extremely negative characteristics of Stalinism and attributes these to Stalin personally. He argues that Stalin drastically departed from Lenin's policies and practices; his article thus exemplifies the revisionist argument

¹ Adam B. Ulam, *Stalin: The Man and His Era* (Boston, 1989); Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko, *The Time of Stalin: Portrait of a Tyranny*, trans. George Saunders (New York, 1980); Dmitrii Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, trans. Harold Shukman (New York, 1991).

² Leonard Shapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (New York, 1960); T. H. Rigby, *Communist Party Membership in the U.S.S.R., 1917–1967* (Princeton, 1968). As Suny writes in the selection below, Stalin was the ultimate "man of the machine."

³ Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above 1928–1941* (New York, 1990); Michal Reiman, *The Birth of Stalinism: The USSR on the Eve of the "Second Revolution,"* trans. George Saunders (London, 1987). For more on economic debates within the Party, see Alexander Erlich, *The Soviet Industrialization Debate 1924–1928* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960).

⁴ Chris Ward, *Stalin's Russia* (New York, 1993), p. 32.

that there was a fundamental discontinuity between Bolshevism and Stalinism. Suny highlights a range of areas – collectivization of the peasantry, suppression of national minorities, cultural conservatism, and a turn away from internationalism – where Stalin deviated from the original orientation of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Indeed, as Suny points out, Stalin eventually executed most of the original Bolsheviks during the Great Purges, which made his break with Bolshevism even more complete.

In his discussion of the Great Purges, Suny stresses Stalin's personal mistrust and vindictiveness toward others. He cites Stalin's letters demanding the execution of alleged conspirators as well as Party leaders' accounts noting Stalin's suspiciousness and insecurity. Quoting another scholar, he calls Stalin's "gloomy personality" and "paranoid tendencies" crucial causes of Stalinist terror. He also concludes that, despite debates among historians about the political dynamics behind the Great Purges, that Stalin's will and ambition were the principle catalyst. Through the purges, Stalin established unlimited despotism over the Party as well as the country. As Suny describes, a number of high-ranking Party members opposed Stalin's policies prior to the purges, but afterwards any opposition to Stalin became unthinkable.

In addition to making the argument that Stalin personally shaped the Stalinist system, Suny's article provides a good overview of the Stalin period. He describes the "Stalin revolution" – Stalin's elimination of private trade and creation of a state-run economy. This economic program, which included the coercive collectivization of agriculture, facilitated rapid industrialization but caused great deprivation and suffering among the population. Suny also discusses another important element of Stalinism, the Stalin cult – a propaganda effort that presented Stalin as a wise and charismatic leader. This cult bolstered Stalin's legitimacy and helped establish him as Lenin's heir even as he deviated from Leninism in practice. After analyzing Stalin's cultural conservatism and use of terror during the purges, Suny turns finally to the Second World War and postwar years, which saw Stalin's power grow even greater. The exigencies of war promoted further concentration of authority in Stalin's hands, and the victory over Nazi Germany raised Stalin's stature to new heights. But as Suny notes, over-centralization and Stalin's own mental deterioration exacerbated the mistrust and rigidity that plagued the Stalinist system.

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Ronald Grigor Suny

The deceptively simple question to be answered in this essay is: how did Stalin rule? How did he maintain his authority while establishing a personal autocracy? His extraordinary and brutal political achievement was to act in the name of the Communist party and its central committee against that party and central committee, while remaining the unchallenged head of party and state and, evidently, a vastly popular leader. At the end of the process his absolute grip on power allowed him to declare black white and completely reverse the foreign policy of the Soviet Union and the line of the Comintern by embracing Nazi Germany in a non-aggression pact. The colossal and costly destruction he brought upon the country on the eve and in the early days of the Second World War gave rise to no organised opposition, and the centralised apparatus of control that he had created was not only able to weather the Nazi invasion but to organise a victory that would preserve the essence of the system he forged for another half-century.

The simplest, though inadequate, answer to the question, would be that Stalin's power was maintained through the exercise of terror and monopolistic control of the means of communication throughout society. Though certainly an important part of the answer, an exclusive focus on terror and propaganda does not explain how Stalin won his authority within the party in the 1920s and maintained it among his own supporters even before the advent of the Great Terror. Once initiated, terror operated through collaboration, and Stalin's associates almost never attempted to free themselves from the source of their fears. Terror was supported by many within and outside the party who believed that extraordinary means against vicious and hidden enemies were required. Tens of millions regarded Stalin as the indispensable leader of the 'socialist' camp, perhaps someone to be feared as was Ivan *groznyj*, a leader who filled the hearts of enemies with awe.¹ . . .

The author wishes to express his gratitude to Lewis Siegelbaum and Moshe Lewin for their careful and critical readings of earlier drafts.

¹ Michael Cherniavsky, 'Ivan the Terrible as Renaissance Prince', *Slavic Review*, 27, 2 (June 1968), pp. 195–211.

Building Hegemony in the 1930s

Though the relative peace, stability, and economic improvement of the NEP years, in contrast to the preceding seven years of war, revolution, and civil war, had given the Leninist state a degree of acceptance and authority in the eyes of many, that acceptance was fragile and based on the compromises and limits of what the Communists almost invariably saw as a transitional period, a temporary retreat from socialism. The launching of the Stalin revolution, first in the countryside and then in industry, destroyed the basis of the regime's fragile relationship with the great majority of the population (the *smychka*) and created a new crisis of legitimacy and authority.

By ending NEP and almost all private production and trade, Stalin created the first modern non-market, state-run economy, one that simultaneously eliminated rival sources of power and resistance to the will of the central authorities. 'Industrialists' no longer held property in the means of production. Workers could no longer effectively organise in order to raise the price of labour. Farmers could no longer withhold grain to affect market prices. Yet all of these groups devised ways within the command economy to exercise limited degrees of power, autonomy, and resistance. Workers, to take one example, were able to undermine harsh factory regimes by taking their skills, so desired by managers, to another workplace. Bosses, caught between demands from above for higher productivity, had to satisfy, however inadequately, some of the needs and demands of their workers and even permit a degree of worker autonomy on the shop floor.² Much of the time and effort of Soviet officials was concerned with raising output and productivity, and successive state strategies required accommodations and concessions as often as additional pressure and repression.³ Thus, while power was actively being concentrated at the top by Stalin, it was being diffused downward and outward throughout the economic and political systems by thousands of *vintiki* (little screws) who had their own requirements for survival and 'making out'. The state grew; in Moshe Lewin's sense, it 'swallowed' society; but at the same time it was unable to realise the vision presented by totalitarian theory of complete atomisation of society. The limits of state power were met when people refused to work

² Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin's Industrial Revolution: Politics and Workers, 1928-1932* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988).

³ Much of the work of Lewis Siegelbaum has explored the various strategies by which the regime attempted to raise productivity. See, for example, his 'Soviet Norm Determination in Theory and Practice, 1917-1941', *Soviet Studies*, 36 (1984), pp. 48-67; and *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988).

efficiently, migrated from place to place by the millions, or informally worked out ways to resist pressure from above.

Stalin came to power in the absence of a broad consensus on the legitimacy and necessity of his personal rule. Using the instruments of state power to mobilise people in a grand programme of social transformation, the regime confidently conceived of itself as possessing a popular and historically sanctioned mandate and worked assiduously to increase support for itself through education and propaganda, leadership cults, election campaigns, broad national discussions (e.g., on the constitution), public celebrations (like the Pushkin centennial of 1937), show trials, and political rituals.⁴ Most importantly, the party/state made real concessions to the populace and satisfied the ambitions and aspirations of many (certainly not all) for social mobility and an improved living standard. Peasants who became workers and workers who became managers and party bosses were moving up, while many of their envied social 'betters' of the past were experiencing an enforced downward mobility.⁵

In the Stalinist formulation the 'revolution from above' of the 1930s, though initiated by the state, was supported from below by millions of peasants and workers struggling to create a new society based on collective farms and socialist industry. The state-initiated industrialisation of the 1930s mobilised millions of men and women into the most mammoth building project in modern times, and a romance of dams and powerstations, new cities on the steppe and in Siberia, created enthusiasts among the new workers and managers. The enormous difficulties that the breakthrough into 'socialism' entailed – resistance from farmers, famine, economic bottlenecks and breakdowns – were seen as the work of enemies and saboteurs, rather than inherent in the party's policies or a by-product of popular recalcitrance and massive coercion. Though the disjuncture between these forced images of imagined harmony and purpose and the hardships and dislocations of actual worksites created unease among many who attempted to govern a vast country, the sheer scale of the transformation and its construction as a human epic engendered the broad social support that the regime had sought for two decades.⁶

⁴ Christel Lane, *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society – the Soviet Case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981).

⁵ Social mobility has been a frequent theme in the work of Sheila Fitzpatrick. See, for example, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921–1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979); and 'Stalin and the Making of a New Elite, 1928–1939', *Slavic Review*, 38, 3 (September 1979), pp. 377–402.

⁶ As the Harvard Project interviews in the early 1950s demonstrated, and as Donna Bahry has emphasised in a recent study, 'one of the cardinal values defining the Soviet

The naked exercise of unrestrained power was key to Stalin's victory, but his regime simultaneously worked to create authority and acceptance, borrowing from and supplementing the repertoire of justifications from Lenin's day. While appropriating the mantle of Lenin and much of the rhetoric of Bolshevism, however, Stalin revised, suppressed, and even reversed much of the legacy of Lenin. Internationalism turned into nationalism; the *smychka* between the workers and the peasants was buried in the ferocity of collectivisation; radical transformation of the family and the place of women ended with reassertion of the most conservative 'family values'. And in the process almost all of Lenin's closest associates fell victim to the self-proclaimed keeper of the Leninist flame.

Within ten years of his dispute with Lenin, Stalin transformed nationality policy from a series of concessions to non-Russians into a powerful weapon of imperial state-building. He reversed Lenin's focus on 'Great Russian chauvinism' as the principal danger in nationality relations and emphasised instead the dangers from the nationalism of non-Russians. In 1923, he turned on M. Kh. Sultan-Galiev, a former associate in Narkomnats and a spokesman for the aspirations of Muslim Communists, accused him of *national-uklonizm* (national deviationism), had him 'tried' before a party conference, arrested, and expelled from the party.⁷ Five years later, the state police 'discovered' a new plot, the 'Sultan-Galiev counter-revolutionary organisation', and in the next decade the OGPU and its successor, the NKVD, 'unmasked' dozens of conspiratorial groups promoting nationalism from Ukraine to Central Asia.⁸ In a letter to Levon Mirzoian, first secretary of the Kazakh *kraikom*, in 1933, Stalin called for intensifying the struggle against local

system's claim to legitimacy was industrial transformation . . . [R]apid industrialization appeared to have near-universal backing' (Donna Bahry, 'Society Transformed? Rethinking the Social Roots of Perestroika', *Slavic Review*, 52, 3 (Fall 1993), p. 524).

⁷ *Tainy natsional'noi politiki TsK RKP: 'Chetvertoe soveshchaniye TsK RKP s otvetstvennymi rabotnikami natsional'nykh respublik i oblastei v g. Moskve 9-12 iyunia 1923 g.'* *Stenograficheskiy otchet* (Moscow: Insan 1992); N. Tagirov, 'Sultan-Galiev: Pravda i domysly', *Kommunist Tatarii*, no. 9 (September 1989), pp. 68-76; 'Shehitaem svoim revoliutsionnym dolgom', *Kommunist Tatarii*, no. 6 (June 1990), pp. 51-5; Alexandre A. Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union: A Revolutionary Strategy for the Colonial World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1979); Stephen Blank, 'Stalin's First Victim: The Trial of Sultangaliev', *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, 17, 2 (Summer 1990), pp. 155-78; Douglas Taylor Northrop, 'Reconsidering Sultan-Galiev', in *Selected Topics in Soviet Ethnopolitics*, eds. Gail Lapidus and Coroin Lydcy (Berkeley: University of California 1992), pp. 1-44.

⁸ 'V komissii Politbiuro TsK KPSS po dopoinitel'nomu izucheniiu materialov, svyazannykh s repressiyami, imevshimi mesto v period 30-40 kh i nachala 50 kh godov', *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 9 (1990), pp. 71-6; 'O tak nazyvaemom "natsional-uklonizme"', *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 9 (1990), pp. 76-84.

Kazakh nationalism 'in order to create the conditions for the sowing of Leninist internationalism'.⁹ Five years later, after having carried out purges against Kazakh intellectuals and 'deviationist' party members, Mirzoiian himself was arrested and executed.¹⁰

Stalinism was both a revolutionising system, unwilling to accept backward Russia as it was (and here it differs from many traditionally authoritarian dictatorships), and a conservative, restorative one, anxious to reestablish hierarchies, affirm certain traditional values like patriotism and patriarchy, and create political legitimacy based on more than victorious revolution.¹¹ The revolution and the restoration were both evident in the 1930s, with the former powerfully present in the First Five-Year Plan period and the latter dominating in the middle 1930s. The unresolved tensions between those aspects of Stalinism that extended the revolutionary egalitarian, participatory impulses of 1917 and those that resurrected stratification and authoritarianism remained in irresolvable tension with one another.

The ultimate 'man of the machine', Stalin was one of the least likely candidates for charismatic hero. Short in stature, reticent in meetings and on public occasions, neither a talented orator like Trotsky or Zinoviev, nor an attractive and engaging personality, like Lenin or Bukharin, Stalin did not himself project an image of a leader until it was created for him (and by him) through the cult. First the promotion of a cult of Lenin, which Stalin actively encouraged, then his identification as a loyal Leninist, and eventually his merger with and substitution for the image of Lenin were important props for Stalin's authority both within the party and in society.¹² All this was accomplished in a political culture based on the pre-revolutionary Bolshevik traditions in

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁰ Boris Levytsky (comp.), *The Stalinist Terror in the Thirties: Documentation from the Soviet Press* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press 1974), pp. 176–9; Martha Brill Olcott, *The Kazakhs* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press 1987), pp. 218–19.

¹¹ Nowhere was this more evident than in the state's shifting strategies toward women and the family. See Wendy Z. Goldman, 'Women, Abortion and the State, 1917–36', in *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, eds. Barbara Evans Clements, Barbara Alpern Engel, and Christine D. Worobec (Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press 1991); and her *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993).

¹² Robert C. Tucker, 'The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult', *American Historical Review*, 84, 2 (April 1979), pp. 347–66. A key role in the effort to link Stalin with the legacy of Lenin was played by Stalin's assistant, Tovstukha, who worked in the Lenin Institute from 1924 to 1926, helped edit the first two volumes of Lenin's collected works, edited the first nine editions of Stalin's collection of articles *Problemy leninizma*, and wrote the first official Soviet biography of Stalin (1927) (Rosenfeldt, *Knowledge and Power*, pp. 170–4; *Pravda*, 10 August 1935, pp. 1, 3; I. B. Rusanova, I. P. Tovstukha, K 80-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia', *Voprosy istorii KPSS*, no. 4 (1969), pp. 128–30).

which emphasis on personality, the exaggerated importance of the leader, and the attendant sacral notions of infallibility were all alien.

The ideological props of the Stalin dictatorship were both a radically revised Marxism and a pro-Russian nationalism and etatism. Class warfare was seen as inevitable and intensifying rather than diminishing as the country approached socialism. As long as the country was surrounded by hostile capitalist states, it was claimed, state power had to be built up. When the Soviet Union was declared to be socialist by Stalin in 1936, the positive achievement of reaching a stage of history higher than the rest of the world was tempered by the constant reminders that the enemies of socialism existed both within and outside the country, that they are deceptive and concealed, and must be 'unmasked'. Repeated references to dangers and insecurity and to the need for 'vigilance' justified the enormous reliance on the 'steel gauntlets of Ezhov'.

Inventing Opposition

The enthusiasm for industrialisation was tempered by much less support for Stalin's agrarian revolution. The open resistance to collectivisation among the peasants was reflected in less dramatic form by quiet forms of opposition within the party. The oligarchy that carried out the Stalin revolution was a very narrow political elite but not one that had effectively closed the party to debate and consideration of alternatives. Between the fall of Bukharin in 1928-9 and the death of Kirov in December 1934, Stalin-faction rule produced and reproduced oppositions and potential oppositions. The real disagreements with the General Line of rapid industrialisation and full collectivisation and dekulakisation were fuelled by the evident failures and costs of implementing these policies. In his own statements Stalin refused to accept any blame for the economic chaos or the famine. Because 'the last remnants of moribund classes', some of whom had 'even managed to worm their way into the party', were actively sabotaging the building of socialism, more repression was needed.

The abolition of classes is not achieved by the extinction of the class struggle, but its intensification . . . We must bear in mind that the growth of the power of the Soviet state will intensify the resistance of the last remnants of the dying classes.¹³

¹³ Originally this was an idea put forth by Trotsky. J. V. Stalin, 'Itogi pervoi piatiletki: Doklad 7 ianvaria 1933 g.', *Sochineniia*, 12, pp. 211-12.

In a letter replying to the Cossack writer Mikhail Sholokhov's protests against the systematic brutality of the grain collection, Stalin took a hard line:

One must take into account . . . the other side. And that other side amounts to the fact that the respected corn-growers of your region (and not only your region) have gone on a sit-down strike (sabotage) and shown no concern about leaving the workers, the Red Army, without grain. The fact that the sabotage was peaceful and outwardly bloodless in no way alters the realities – that the respected grain-growers have in essence carried out a 'peaceful' war with Soviet power. A war by starvation (*voina na izmor*), dear Comrade Sholokhov.¹⁴

The growing gap between the public statements and images put forth by the state, on the one hand, and the real destruction in the countryside, on the other, prompted prominent party members to resist the cover-up of the failures. Already in late 1930 some in the leadership of the RSFSR and the Transcaucasian federation expressed misgivings, which in turn were interpreted by the Stalin centre as a widespread and united oppositional tendency (the Syrtsov-Lominadze Right-Left Bloc).¹⁵ Swift retribution (demotion in these cases) did not deter a number of other critical foci from emerging, notably the Riutin Platform and Appeal (1932) and the Smirnov, Tolmachev, and Eismont opposition (1932). Within the Central Committee and the Politburo more moderate elements opposed the rapid tempos in industry and proposed a more conciliatory attitude toward society, particularly the peasantry.

¹⁴ Quoted by Khrushchev, 8 March 1963; *Pravda*, 10 March 1963; Jonathan Haslam, 'Political Opposition to Stalin and the Origins of the Terror in Russia, 1932-1936', *The Historical Journal*, 29, 2 (1986), p. 403.

¹⁵ R. W. Davies, 'The Syrtsov-Lominadze Affair', *Soviet Studies*, 33, 1 (January 1981), pp. 29-50. Indicative of the mood in the party is a conversation with Lominadze reported by a friend: 'When I saw him, with another of his friends, in 1931, he was boldly critical of Stalin's leadership. Now that opposition from both Left and Right had been suppressed, he thought the next logical step was a radical reform of the Party and its personnel.

"What about the General Secretary?" asked his friend.

"If there is a spring cleaning, every piece of furniture has to be removed, including the biggest one."

"But who could replace him?"

"That's up to the Congress." It was time for younger men to take a share of the responsibility – men who had some practical experience but had been less involved in the struggle between the factions.

Needless to say, this was extremely risky talk. It even occurred to me that Lominadze saw himself as a suitable successor to Stalin' (Joseph Berger, *Shipwreck of a Generation: The Memoirs of Joseph Berger* (London: Harvill Press 1971); American edition: *Nothing But the Truth* (New York: John Day 1971), p. 166).

The short-lived attempt to organise opposition to Stalin by Martem'ian Ivanovich Riutin never went further than a few meetings of like-minded party members, the formation of an organisation – the Union of Marxist–Leninists, the discussion of Riutin's report, 'Stalin and the Crisis of the Proletarian Dictatorship', and an appeal to party members to join their efforts. Riutin condemned Stalin's emerging dictatorship as the negation of the collective leadership of the Central Committee and the principal cause of the growing disillusionment of the people with socialism. He believed that the only way to save Bolshevism was to remove Stalin and his clique by force. If Riutin was right that 'the faith of the masses in socialism has been broken, its readiness to defend selflessly the proletarian revolution from all enemies weakens each year', then the regime had either to move immediately toward conciliation and the rebuilding of confidence or turn to even more radical and repressive measures.¹⁶

Riutin's circle is an unusual instance of coherence and organisation among those who opposed Stalin.¹⁷ Much more evident was a broad, inchoate discontent with Stalin's rule that permeated political and intellectual circles. Several loyal Stalinists, like Kaminskii, Kosior, Vareikis, and Bauman, harboured serious doubts about Stalin's agricultural policies. Others, like Mykola Skrypnyk, a co-founder of the Ukrainian Communist Party who had sided with Stalin in the 1920s and early 1930s, were critical of the growing ethnocentrism in the party and state and the evident pro-Russianness of Stalin's nationality poli-

¹⁶ On Riutin, see: 'Stalin i krizis proletarskoi diktatury' [Platform of the Union of Marxist–Leninists (the Riutin Group)], *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 8 (1990), pp. 200–7; no. 9, pp. 165–83; no. 10, pp. 191–206; no. 11, pp. 161–86; no. 12, pp. 180–99, with commentary, pp. 200–2; M. Riutin, 'Ko vsem chlenam VKP? (b)', reprinted in *Osmyslit kult Stalina*, ed. Kh. Košo (Moscow: Progress 1989), pp. 618–23; 'O dele tak nazyvaemogo "Soiuza Marksistov–Leninistov"', *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 6 (1989), pp. 103–15. See also, the biography of Riutin by B. A. Starkov in *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 3 (1990), pp. 150–63, followed by Riutin's letters, pp. 163–78.

¹⁷ The members of the Riutin group were arrested a few weeks after their first meeting. Riutin had been expelled from the party in 1930, and his seventeen associates were expelled by the Central Control Commission on 9 October 1932, for 'having attempted to set up a bourgeois, kulak organization to re-establish capitalism and, in particular, the kulak system in the USSR by means of underground activity under the fraudulent banner of "Marxism–Leninism"'. A number of accounts hold that Stalin demanded the death penalty for Riutin but was thwarted by Kirov and other moderates (Boris I. Nicolaevsky, *Power and the Soviet Elite: The Letter of an Old Bolshevik and Other Essays* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger 1965), pp. 3–65; Arkadii Vaksberg, 'Kak zhivoi s zhivymi', *Literaturnaiia gazeta*, 29 June 1988; Lev Razgon, 'Nakonets! Moskovskie novosti', 26 June 1988; Dmitrii Voikogonov, *Triumf i tragediia: Politicheskii portret I. V. Stalina*, I, part 2 (Moscow: Novost' 1989), pp. 85–6). Riutin was sentenced to ten years' solitary confinement. On 10 January 1937, he was secretly tried and shot.

cies.¹⁸ Perhaps most ominously, tensions arose between the Red Army commander, Mikhail Tukhachevskii, who called in 1930 for expansion of the armed forces, particularly aviation and tank armies, and Stalin and Voroshilov, who opposed what they called 'Red militarism'.¹⁹ During the famine in Ukraine high military officers, like Iakir, angered Stalin by reporting their upset at peasant resistance, which, they felt, could spread to the troops, and by demanding that more grain be kept in the region.²⁰

Even among Stalin's closest supporters there were fractures, though their precise nature remains mysterious. The open disagreement at the Seventeenth Party Congress (January-February 1934) between Orjonikidze and Molotov over industrial targets was a rare public sign of a deeper split between moderates and radicals.²¹ The popular Kirov, the only real rival left to Stalin by 1932, was in all his public and political appearances completely loyal to the General Secretary, though he often emphasised the need for 'revolutionary legality', which was understood to be a lessening of repressive measures.²² Stalin still represented for the majority of party members the militant turn toward socialism – collectivisation, rapid industrialisation, the destruction of organised political opposition. However, his personal proclivity toward the use of force seemed to some to have gone beyond the broad bounds of Bolshevik practice.

The private letters from the vacationing Stalin to his closest comrade Molotov (from 1930 and 1933) reveal in a striking way the less public characteristics of the dictator and his methods of rule. He wrote short, terse memoranda to Molotov on the important matters that were before the Politburo, and apparently did the same with Kaganovich, Orjonikidze, and others. 'From the boss (*khoziain*) we are receiving regular and frequent directives', Kaganovich wrote to Orjonikidze in 1932.²³ While he preferred to work through his own narrow circle of friends – Molotov, who was his principal executor, Voroshilov, Mikoyan,

¹⁸ Skrypnyk committed suicide in 1933, as Ukrainian national communists were systematically being purged.

¹⁹ R. W. Davies, *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia, 3: The Soviet Economy in Turmoil, 1929–1930* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1989), pp. 446–7. In May 1932 Stalin apologised to Tukhachevskii and endorsed some of his proposed reforms.

²⁰ Eventually some grain was sent to Ukraine in January 1933 along with the new party boss, Postyshev.

²¹ Kendall E. Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin: Origins of the Soviet Technical Intelligentsia, 1917–1941* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1978), pp. 275–80; J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985), pp. 13–17.

²² S. Kirov, *Stal' i rech', 1934* (Moscow 1934).

²³ 'Pis'ma Stalina Molotovu', p. 94.

Orjonikidze, Kaganovich – Stalin was quick to turn on any of them if he felt challenged. In 1933 he severely criticised Orjonikidze for objecting to remarks by Vyshinskii that attacked those working in the industrial and agricultural ministries: ‘The behaviour of Sergo (and Iakovlev) in the story of the “completeness of production” is impossible to call anything else but anti-party, because it has as its objective goal the defence of reactionary elements of the party *against* the CC VKP(b).’²⁴ Because Kaganovich had sided with Orjonikidze, he too fell under Stalin’s wrath. Nothing came of this dispute at the time, nor of the more serious accusations made against Mikhail Kalinin.

The OGPU was carrying out investigations in 1930 into a series of anti-Soviet ‘parties’ made up of former Mensheviks, industrial specialists, and Ukrainian activists.²⁵ Stalin received regular reports from Jagoda and insisted that Molotov circulate them among the members of the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission, as well as among ‘the more active of our *khoziaistvenniki* (economic managers)’. He told Molotov that he was convinced that these conspiratorial elements were linked with the Rightists within the party.

It is absolutely essential to shoot Kondrat'ev, Groman and a pair of the other bastards (*merzavtsy*) . . . It is absolutely essential to shoot the whole group of wreckers in meat production and to publish this information in the press.²⁶

He personally demanded the arrests of the former Menshevik Sukhanov, his Communist wife (who, he says, must have known what was going on in their home), Bazarov, Ramzin, and others. The concocted stories of anti-Soviet conspiracies were fed throughout the top bureaucracy and created an atmosphere of suspicion that justified the use of precisely the kinds of harsh measures that Stalin advocated.

Fear and the need for vigilance, which were created both by the police findings and by the real and imagined weaknesses and insecurities of the Soviet Union, bound the Communists together around the leader who projected an image of Bolshevik toughness. At the same time the Stalinist settlement involved the creation of a highly hierarchical system of rewards and privileges, of access to information and influence, that effectively disenfranchised the great mass of the population and privileged a small number of party and state officials, intellectuals, and managers. The end of rationing in 1934–5 forced everyone below the privileged upper levels of society to forage in government stores and peasant markets for what they could afford. Social inequalities grew in

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

an economy of permanent shortages where money talked less effectively than one's position and personal connections. A 'ruling class without tenure', in Lewin's phrase,²⁷ grew increasingly dependent on being in favour with those even higher up. They were under a constant threat of demotion, expulsion from the party, arrest and even death. Their success required absolute and unquestioning obedience, enforcement of the decisions from the top with determination, even ruthlessness, on those below, and a willingness to acquiesce and participate in what can only be considered criminal activity (denunciations of the innocent, approval of lawlessness, collaboration with a regime based on deception).²⁸ Their dilemma was that it was dangerous for them to be anything but responsive to the top, and yet their position and requirements to increase production and satisfy the demands of the top and the centre pulled them toward making arrangements with the bottom and the periphery.

Conservative Revolutionary

Neither a consistent moderate nor radical, Stalin himself shifted from centre-right (during his alliance with Bukharin in the mid-1920s) to left (during the period of the so-called 'cultural revolution' at the end of the 1920s and the early 1930s) and then back to a more moderate position around 1931–2. Responding to a growing mood among party leaders concerned with industry, Stalin announced in June 1931 a major change in the party's wage policy (the end of *uravnilovka*, levelling the wages, and the introduction of greater differentials between skilled and unskilled workers in order to end labour migration) and a much more tolerant and supportive policy toward the technical intelligentsia.²⁹ Whether or not this policy shift was imposed on Stalin or corresponded to a genuine reevaluation of his position, during the next half-decade he steadily began to reverse the more radical policies of the end of the 1920s and the early 1930s and pull back from egalitarianism and collectivism toward a promotion of hierarchy, cultural traditionalism, and social conservatism that has come to be known as the 'Great Retreat'.

²⁷ Moshe Lewin, 'The Social Background of Stalinism', in *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton 1977), p. 130.

²⁸ Roi Medvedev, *Oni okružali Stalina* (Moscow 1990); English translation: *All Stalin's Men* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1984).

²⁹ I. V. Stalin, 'Novaia obstanovka – novye zadachi khoziaistvennogo stroitel'stva', *Sochineniia*, 13 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury 1951), pp. 51–80. Bailes shows how this conciliatory move was initiated by Orjonikidze and others involved in industrial production: (*Technology and Society*, pp. 144–55).

On a variety of fronts the Stalinists retreated from their forward positions of just a few years earlier. Though the collective farms remained firmly under the tutelage of the state and continued to operate essentially as grain-collection apparatuses,³⁰ a series of decisions allowed the collective-farm peasants to possess some livestock, to sell their surpluses on the market, and to own their houses and work household plots. While workers were increasingly restricted in their movements through the 1930s, an essentially 'bourgeois' system of remuneration was created: 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his work'. Workers were encouraged to compete with one another in order not only to maximise output, but to win material rewards, and various collective forms of organising work and payment were eliminated.³¹ Progressive piece-work was introduced in the spring of 1934, and while real wages fell for most workers a significant number of *udarniki* (shock workers) and *stakhanovtsy* participated in the more 'joyous' life that Stalin had promised.³² Worker power declined and that of managers and technicians increased.³³ 'The Party wanted the bosses to be efficient, powerful, harsh, impetuous, and capable of exerting pressure crudely and ruthlessly and getting results "whatever the cost" . . . The formation of the despotic manager was actually a process in which not leaders but *rulers* were made.'³⁴ In the words of Mikhail Kaganovich, 'The ground must shake when the factory director enters the plant.'

The severe economic crisis of the winter of 1932-3, as well as the coming to power of Hitler in Germany, helped accelerate the swing toward state policies that favoured the educated and ambitious and eased the pressure on others. By the middle of the year arrests and deportations declined; production targets for the Second Five-Year Plan were reduced; and consumer goods were given higher priority. As one historian sums it up:

³⁰ Moshe Lewin, "'Taking Grain": Soviet Policies of Agricultural Procurements Before the War', *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Intenwar Russia* (New York: Pantheon 1985), pp. 142-77. 'Peasants in Stalin's times were indeed legally bound to their place of work, submitted to a special legal regimen, and - through the kolkhoz - to a form of collective responsibility with regard to state duties. They were transformed, not unlike as in pre-emancipation times, into an estate placed at the very bottom of the social ladder' (p. 176).

³¹ Lewis H. Stegelbaum, 'Production Collectives and Communes and the "Imperatives" of Soviet Industrialization, 1929-1931', *Slavic Review*, 45, 1 (Spring 1986), pp. 65-84.

³² Lewis H. Stegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988), particularly chapter 6, 'Stakhanovites in the Cultural Mythology of the 1930s'.

³³ Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin's Industrial Revolution*, pp. 50-77.

³⁴ Moshe Lewin, 'Society, State, and Ideology during the First Five-Year Plan', in *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1978), p. 74.

In the mid-1930s Soviet society struck a balance that would carry it through the turmoil of the purges, the Great War and reconstruction. The coercive policies of the Cultural Revolution [1928-31] were replaced or supplemented by the use of inducements. Benefits were quickly apparent: education opened professional opportunities; a stable countryside improved dietary standards; increased production and income encouraged consumerism. A lightened mood swept the nation. Women wore make-up; young people revived ballroom dancing. Life, as Stalin said, and Lebedev-Kumach's popular song repeated, had become better and happier.³⁵

A new Soviet middle class developed with its own form of 'bourgeois values'. More attention was paid to private life. From Stakhanovite workers, with their newly acquired bicycles and wristwatches, to factory managers and their wives, who were on the receiving end of Stalin's 'Big Deal', a certain level of security and material improvement, 'a sense of pride and participation', wedded them to the order created by Stalin.³⁶

James van Geldern emphasises how Soviet citizens were turned into spectators in the 1930s, rather than active participants. Formal, meaningless voting, viewing the leaders atop Lenin's mausoleum, were 'rituals of participation', public observations of political spectacles.³⁷ New heroes, from aviators to polar explorers, and extended public dramas – like the rescue of downed female fliers and ice-bound sailors – riveted public attention and reinforced the values of the modernising party/state. An empire was created disguised as a voluntary federation of free peoples, with a reconstructed Moscow at its centre, and festivals of reaffirmation, like the Moscow Olympiad of Folk Music, periodically reminding people of the unbreakable unity of a diverse, continent-size country. Ideas of progress – the conquest of recalcitrant nature, the overcoming of peasant 'darkness' and the isolation of remote villages, the building of the Moscow Metro – enhanced the heroic nature of Soviet leaders and the efforts of the Soviet people. Sacrifice and vigilance went along with pride in *nashi dostizheniia* (our achievements). The image of the motherland (*rodina*) was revived, gradually displacing that of the international community of proletarians, until in 1943 Stalin cavalierly dissolved Lenin's Third International. In 1939, he had pro-

³⁵ James van Geldern, 'The Centre and the Periphery: Cultural and Social Geography in the Mass Culture of the 1930s', in *New Directions in Soviet History*, ed. Stephen White. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992), p. 62.

³⁶ Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity*, pp. 210–46. The idea of the 'Big Deal', Stalin's exchange of material goods and security for loyalty, is the theme of Vera Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1976).

³⁷ Van Geldern, 'The Centre and the Periphery', p. 71.

posed, as a joke to Ribbentrop: 'Let's drink to the new anti-Cominternist - Stalin!'³⁸

In his public rhetoric of these years Stalin maintained his severity and toughness, qualities that had long been part of Bolshevik culture, but showed that under pressure he could be more flexible and accommodating. He seemed not only a competent commander to many but indeed an indispensable leader in a time of political stress and economic crisis. A high party official, Barmin, wrote about this period (1932): 'Loyalty to Stalin was based principally on the conviction that there was no one to take his place, that any change of leadership would be extremely dangerous, and that the country must continue in its present course, since to stop now or attempt a retreat would mean the loss of everything.'³⁹ Rumours that Stalin, had suggested that he resign (probably after the suicide of his second wife, Nadezhda Allilueva, in November 1932) were embellished by reports of his associates rallying around him.⁴⁰

The years of upheaval and uncertainty of the early 1930s were clearly coming to an end by the opening of the Seventeenth Party Congress in late January 1934. Though the full story has yet to be told, there appears to have been a movement at the Congress to replace Stalin with Kirov, but Kirov's differences with Stalin were not great enough for the Leningrad leader to repudiate the General Secretary as many others wished. Though many still feared the trend toward personal autocracy by Stalin, the oligarchic bureaucratic system seemed more secure than ever; oppositions had been rendered impotent; and a new emphasis on 'revolutionary legality' seemed to promise a more orderly, procedural, less disruptive mode of governance. But, as Lewin notes:

Stalin was not ready to accept the role of just a cog, however powerful, in his own machine. A top bureaucrat is a chief executive, in the framework of a constraining committee . . . But Stalin had had the power, and the

³⁸ *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym: Iz dnevnika F. Chueva* (Moscow: Terra 1991), p. 19; *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics: Conversations with Felix Chuev*, ed. Albert Resis (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee 1993), p. 12.

³⁹ A. Barmin, *One Who Survived* (New York, 1945). When the Menshevik Fedor Dan asked Bukharin in 1936 why he and other communists had so blindly trusted Stalin, Bukharin answered, 'You don't understand this; it is completely different. It is not he who is trusted but a man whom the party trusts; it happened that he became a kind of symbol of the party, [and] the lower ranks, the workers, the people believe in him: maybe this is our fault but that is how it happened, that is why we all climb into his mouth . . . knowing for sure that he will eat us. And he knows this and only chooses the right moment' ('On pozhret nas', from the archive of L. O. Dan in the Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, published in *Osmyslit' kuit Stalina*, ed. Kobo, p. 610).

⁴⁰ On Stalin's relationship with his second wife, see '"Nadezhde Sergeevne Alliluevoi, lichno ot Stalina" (Perepiska 1928-1931 godov)', *Istochnik: Dokumenty russkoi istorii*, no. 0 (1993), pp. 9-22.

taste for it – for ever more of it – since he had led the early stage of the shattering breakthrough and gotten full control over the state in the process. At this point, the traits of his gloomy personality, with clear paranoid tendencies become crucial. Once at the top and in full control, he was not a man to accept changes in the pattern of his personal power . . . He therefore took the road of shaking up, of destabilising the machinery and its upper layers, in order to block the process fatally working against his personal predilection for autocracy.⁴¹

Terror and Autocracy

The half-dozen years before the murder of Kirov (December 1934) might be seen as the prehistory of Stalinism, the period of formation of the political structures and social conditions that created the possibility for a regime of extreme centralisation of power, overwhelming dominance of a weakened society, and particular ferocity. The unlimited despotism of Stalinism was the product of the Great Purges, which simultaneously eliminated all possible resistance and created a new and more loyal elite with which the tyrant could rule.

There is no consensus among scholars as to the motivations behind the Purges. Interpretations range from the idea that purging was a permanent and necessary component of totalitarianism in lieu of elections (Zbigniew Brzezinski) to seeing the Great Terror as an extreme form of political infighting (J. Arch Getty).⁴² Dissatisfaction with Stalin's rule and with the harsh material conditions was palpable in the mid-1930s, and the regime was faced with the difficulties of controlling the family circles and local feudatories (particularly in the union republics). One of the effects of the Purges was the replacement of an older political and economic elite with a younger, potentially more loyal one.⁴³ The largest number were promoted workers and party rank-and-file, young technicians, who would make up the Soviet elite through the post-Stalin period until the early 1980s.⁴⁴ 'Stalin – and, for that matter, the majority of Soviet citizens', writes Sheila Fitzpatrick,

⁴¹ Lewin, 'The Social Background of Stalinism', pp. 130–1.

⁴² Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, p. 206. For a range of views on the purges, particularly of the so-called 'revisionists', see J. Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning (eds.) *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993).

⁴³ A. L. Unger, 'Stalin's Renewal of the Leading Stratum: A Note on the Great Purge', *Soviet Studies*, 20,3 (January 1969), pp. 321–30; Bailes, *Technology and Society*, pp. 268–71, 412–13; Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Stalin and the Making of a New Elite, 1928–1939', *Slavic Review*, 38, 3 (September 1979), pp. 377–402.

⁴⁴ Bailes criticises Fitzpatrick for not distinguishing between those who rose into the intelligentsia through formal education, many of whom were workers (the *vydvizhentsy*), and the *praktiki*, who were elevated through their work experience ('Stalin and the Making of a New Elite: A Comment', *Slavic Review*, 39, 2 (June 1980), pp. 286–9).

saw the cadres of the mid-1930s less in their old role as revolutionaries than in the current role as bosses. There is even some evidence that Stalin saw them as Soviet boyars (feudal lords) and himself as a latter-day Ivan the Terrible, who had to destroy the boyars to build a modern nation state and a new service nobility.⁴⁵

Yet neither arguments from social context nor functionalist deductions from effects to causes have successfully eliminated the principal catalyst to the Terror, the will and ambition of Stalin. The Great Purges have been seen traditionally as an effort 'to achieve an unrestricted personal dictatorship with a totality of power that [Stalin] did not yet possess in 1934.'⁴⁶ Stalin guided and prodded the arrests, show trials, and executions forward, aided by the closest members of his entourage: Molotov, Kaganovich, Zhdanov, Malenkov, Mikoyan, and Ezhov.⁴⁷ Here personality and politics merged, and the degree of excess repression was dictated by the peculiar demands of Stalin himself, who could not tolerate limits on his will set by the very ruling elite that he had brought to power.⁴⁸

Whatever his authentic political aspirations, Stalin was marked by his deep suspiciousness and insecurity. As Bukharin told the old Mensheviks Fedor and Lydia Dan, Stalin

is even unhappy because he cannot convince everyone, and even himself, that he is greater than everyone, and this is his unhappiness, perhaps the most human feature in him, perhaps the only human feature in him, but already not human. Here is something diabolical: because of his great 'unhappiness' he cannot but avenge himself on people, on all

⁴⁵ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1982), p. 159. Comparisons to the Russian past – autocracy, the service nobility, the collective-farm peasantry as serfs – are used metaphorically by Moshe Lewin and are central to the analysis of Robert C. Tucker in *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941* (New York: W. W. Norton 1973).

⁴⁶ Robert C. Tucker, 'Introduction', in *The Great Purge Trial* eds. Tucker and Stephen E. Cohen (New York 1965), p. xxix. This is essentially the argument of the second volume of his Stalin biography, as well as the view of Robert Conquest in *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* (New York: Macmillan 1968); *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press 1990).

⁴⁷ Boris A. Starkov, 'Narkom Ezhov', in *Stalinist Terror*, eds. Getty and Manning, pp. 21-39.

⁴⁸ Stalin's personal involvement in the details of the Terror has been indisputably demonstrated by archival documents released in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One such note to Ezhov will suffice to give the type of intervention that the *võzhd'* engaged in. In May 1937, he wrote: 'One might think that prison for Beloborodov is a podium for reading speeches, statements which refer to the activities of all sorts of people but not to himself. Isn't it time to squeeze this gentleman and make him tell about his dirty deeds? Where is he, in prison or in a hotel?' (*Dialog* (Leningrad), no. 4 (1990), p. 21; cited in Starkov, 'Narkom Ezhov', p. 29).

people, but especially on those who are somehow higher, better than he . . .⁴⁹

The Purges destroyed primarily those in power. 'It is one of the mysteries of Stalinism', Lewin summarises.

that it turned much of the fury of its bloody purges against this very real mainstay of the regime. There were among the *apparaty*, probably, still too many former members of other parties or of the original Leninist party, too many participants and victors of the civil war who remembered who had done what during those days of glory. Too many thus could feel the right to be considered founders of the regime and base on it part of the claims to a say in decisions and to security in their positions. Probably, also letting the new and sprawling administration settle and get encrusted in their chairs and habits could also encourage them to try and curtail the power of the very top and the personalised ruling style of the chief of the state – and this was probably a real prospect the paranoid leader did not relish.⁵⁰

Stalin's initiation and personal direction of the Purges was the catalyst to thousands of smaller settlings of scores.⁵¹ In the context of deep and recurring social tensions the state gave the green light to resentments against the privileged, the intelligentsia, other ethnicities, outsiders. The requirement to find enemies, to blame and punish, worked together with self-protection and self-promotion (and plain sadism) to expand the Purges into a political holocaust. At the end the Soviet Union resembled a ruined landscape, seriously weakened economically, intellectually, and militarily, but at the same time dominated by a towering state apparatus made up of new loyal *apparatchiki*, disciplined by the police, and presided over by a single will.

Victory and Decline, Finale and Conclusion

By the outbreak of the Second World War the central government, the military, the republics and local governments, the economic infrastructure had all been brutally disciplined. Obedience and conformity had eliminated most initiative and originality. Ruling through his like-minded lieutenants, Stalin relied on specialists whenever he needed

⁴⁹ 'On pozhret nas', p. 610.

⁵⁰ Moshe Lewin, 'Grappling with Stalinism', *The Making of the Soviet System*, pp. 308–9.

⁵¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'How the Mice Buried the Cat: Scenes from the Great Purges of 1937 in the Russian Provinces', *Russian Review*, 52, 3 (July 1993), pp. 299–320.

expertise or greater competence. After decimating the high command of the armed forces, his control over his military was greater than Hitler over his, at least at the beginning of the war. He intervened and interfered in both minute and major decisions, and was often abrupt and threatening, yet he was more willing to rely on his generals than was Hitler, who became progressively more involved with operational command and more contemptuous of the military leaders. 'Hitler's generals', writes Severyn Bialer, 'exercised less influence on the decisions of their High Command at the moment they were most able to act effectively; Stalin's generals exercised more'.⁵² Stalin stood at the centre of all strategic, logistical, and political decisions. He was chairman of the State Defence Committee, which included the highest party officials (Molotov, Beria, Malenkov, Voroshilov, Kaganovich, and later Voznesenskii and Mikoyan); the chairman of Stavka, the supreme military headquarters; General Secretary of the party and chairman of the Politburo; chairman of the Council of Ministers and People's Commissar of Defence. Real business often took place in late-night meetings at Stalin's apartment or dacha, and the exigencies of total war reinforced and accelerated the centralisation of power.⁵³

Official propaganda convincingly identified the victory over Nazism with the superiority of the Soviet system, its organic link with *rodina* (the motherland), and the personal genius of Stalin. The triumph over fascism provided the Communists with another source of legitimation and authority. New Russia and the Soviet Union were melded into a single image. Patriotism and accommodation with established religious and national traditions, along with the toning down of revolutionary radicalism, contributed to a powerful ideological amalgam that outlasted Stalin himself. In the post-war decades the war became the central moment of Soviet history, eclipsing the revolution and the *velikii perelom* of the early 1930s.⁵⁴ And though there would be sporadic uses of repression and terror against individuals or groups (the 'Leningrad Affair' of 1947, the 'Doctors' Plot' of 1953), as well as a series of ethnic deportations of repatriated Armentians, Kurds, Meskhetian Turks, and

⁵² Severyn Bialer, *Stalin and His Generals* (New York: Pegasus 1969), p. 43. 'As supreme head of army command, Hitler was centrally involved in the formulation of day-to-day tactics in a way which occupied no other head of state during the Second World War. For the German army, this was catastrophic. The command structure which he had devised placed him in charge of both the general management of military campaigns and its detailed tactics' (Ian Kershaw, *Hitler* (London and New York: Longman 1991), p. 175).

⁵³ Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World 1962), *passim*.

⁵⁴ Nina Tumarkin, 'The Great Patriotic War as Myth and Memory', *Atlantic Monthly*, 267, 6 (June 1991), pp. 26, 28, 37, 40, 42, 44.

others, no massive terror on the scale of 1937 was employed after the war.

Whatever benefits accrued to the Soviet system from the unity of decision-making at the top must be weighed against the costs of over-centralisation and the resultant paralysis lower down in the apparatus. In the years of the Cold War, as Stalin deteriorated physically and mentally, the entire country – its foreign policy, internal politics, cultural life, and economic slowdown – reflected the moods of its leader and was affected by his growing isolation, arbitrariness, and inactivity. No one could feel secure. The ruling elite was concerned with plots, intrigues, and rivalries between Stalin's closest associates, the rise and fall of clients and patrons. 'All of us around Stalin', writes Khrushchev, 'were temporary people. As long as he trusted us to a certain degree, we were allowed to go on living and working. But the moment he stopped trusting you, Stalin would start to scrutinize you until the cup of his distrust overflowed.'⁵⁵ In his last years Stalin turned against Molotov and Mikoyan, grew suspicious of Beria, Voroshilov, Kaganovich, and Malenkov. Khrushchev overheard him say, 'I'm finished. I trust no one, not even myself.'⁵⁶

The Stalinist system was restored and consolidated after the devastation of the war years. As a single political cultural synthesis became hegemonic and the more disruptive violence of the pre-war period receded, pervasive fear, which disciplined people into obedient silence, coexisted with genuine acceptance of the system. The figure of Stalin stood symbolically for ideal behaviour in an ideal society. Enemies were still omnipresent; a single simplified reading of historical reality was at hand in the *Kratkii kurs* (the short history of the Communist party) and the official biography of Stalin; and the USSR was still the future in the present.

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⁵⁵ *Khrushchev Remembers*, trans. and ed. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown and Co. 1970), p. 307.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

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