Stalinism

The Essential Readings

Edited by David L. Hoffmann
Stalinism
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Stalinism

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Edited by David L. Hoffmann
To my daughter Sarah
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Glossary

apparatchiki – see apparaty.

apparaty – Soviet bureaucrats or functionaries.

Bolsheviks – Communists.

Bukharin, Nikolai – Communist Party leader and rival of Stalin; executed during Great Purges.

byt – everyday life.

Central Committee – governing body of the Communist Party; elected by Party congresses.

Cheka – Soviet secret police; subsequently renamed OGPU and NKVD.

CPSU – Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Decembrists – Russian officers who revolted against the tsarist autocracy in 1825.

de-Cossackization – elimination of Cossacks (frontier people).

dekulakization – elimination of kulaks (wealthy peasants) through dispossession and deportation.

Enlightenment – eighteenth-century philosophical movement that stressed the application of reason to human affairs.

Ezhov, Nikolai – head of Soviet secret police (NKVD) during the Great Terror.
First Five-Year Plan – plan of rapid industrialization, 1928–32.

Great Break – Stalin’s radical policy change in the late 1920s; initiated collectivization, rapid industrialization, and attack on non-Communist authorities.

Great Patriotic War – term for Second World War in the Soviet Union.

Great Purges – arrests and executions of Communist Party members; part of the Great Terror, 1936–8.

Great Terror – widespread arrests and executions, 1936–8; included the Great Purges of Communist Party members.

Great War – First World War.

Gulag – system of forced labor camps.

Homo Sovieticus – Soviet Man.

_Ivan groznyi_ – see Ivan the Terrible.

Ivan the Terrible – sixteenth-century Russian tsar.

Kamenev, Lev – a Communist Party leader; executed during the Great Purges.

kolkhoz – collective farm.

kolkhozniki – collective farm peasants.

Komsomol – Communist youth organization.

Khrushchev, Nikita – succeeded Stalin as leader of the Communist Party and Soviet Union.

Kirov, Sergei – popular leader of Leningrad Party organization; seen by some as potential rival to Stalin; murdered in 1934.

krai – region; territorial administrative unit.

kraikom – regional Communist Party committee.

kulaks – wealthy peasants; deemed exploiters and class enemies by the Soviet government.

Lenin, Vladimir – founder and leader of Bolshevik/Communist Party until his death in 1924.

MTS – machine tractor stations.

_nachal’stvo_ – authorities; command.

Narkomnats – Commissariat of Nationalities.
Narkomyust – Commissariat of Justice.

NKVD – Soviet secret police; previously called OGPU.

New Economic Policy (NEP) – policy enacted by Lenin in 1921; allowed for limited private enterprise and free trade.

Nepmen – private entrepreneurs of NEP period.

obkom – provincial Communist Party committee.

oblast – province; territorial administrative unit.

OGPU – Soviet secret police; subsequently called NKVD.

OUN – Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists.

Peter the Great – eighteenth-century Russian tsar.

philosophes – French philosophers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

Politburo – Communist Party’s highest decision-making body; elected by Central Committee.

proletariat – industrial working class.

raikom – district Communist Party committee.

raion – district; territorial administrative unit.

Shklovsky, Viktor – literary theorist and leader of the Russian Formalist movement in the early 1920s.

smychka – alliance; term use by Communists to refer to their idea of an alliance between workers and peasants in the 1920s.

sovkhoy – state collective farms.

spravka – list; inventory.

Stakhanovites – hero workers; named for record-breaking coal miner, Aleksei Stakhanov.

stakhanovtsy – see Stakhanovites.

troiki – tribunals during the Great Terror.

Trotsky, Lev – a Communist Party leader and rival of Stalin; expelled from the Party in 1927 and subsequently deported from the country.

Tsar – title of pre-revolutionary hereditary monarchs.

UPA – Ukrainian Insurgent Army.
velikii perelom – see Great Break.

Vlasov army – anti-Soviet Russian army during the Second World War.

vozh’d – leader.

zemstvos – organs of local self-government in the late pre-revolutionary period.

Zinoviev, Grigorii – a Communist Party leader; executed during the Great Purges.
Introduction: Interpretations of Stalinism

David L. Hoffmann

For scholars of Soviet history, no problem looms larger than that of Stalinism. How was it that the October Revolution of 1917, which seemed to promise human liberation and equality, resulted not in a communist utopia but instead in a Stalinist dictatorship? Why did this attempt to create a perfect society lead to gulag prison camps, bloody purges, and unprecedented levels of state repression? For decades historians have grappled with these questions, and have put forward a range of competing explanations. Some have blamed Stalin personally, others have focused on socialist ideology or the international threat, still others have explored Stalinism’s social and cultural origins. Stalinism, then, represents not only the most central problem in Soviet history, but one rich in historiographical controversy and interpretation as well.

This book presents various explanations of Stalinism written both by eminent historians and by younger scholars who have conducted research in newly opened Russian archives. The articles and excerpts offer a range of interpretations as to what caused Stalinism and what were its social consequences. Taken together these interpretations provide an important lesson in historical causality. Underlying each explanation of Stalinism are assumptions regarding the forces that cause events to happen. Interpretations that stress Stalin’s personal role assume that history is shaped by individuals. Explanations that emphasize socialist ideology see ideas and ideological systems as driving history. Social historians of Stalinism focus on characteristics of Soviet society, while cultural historians highlight Soviet cultural constructs or modern political culture more generally.
Stalinism can be defined as a set of tenets, policies, and practices instituted by the Soviet government during the years in which Stalin was in power, 1928–53. It was characterized by extreme coercion employed for the purpose of economic and social transformation. Among the particular features of Stalinism were the abolition of private property and free trade; the collectivization of agriculture; a planned, state-run economy and rapid industrialization; the wholesale liquidation of so-called exploiting classes, involving massive deportations and incarcerations; large-scale political terror against alleged enemies, including those within the Communist Party itself; a cult of personality deifying Stalin; and Stalin’s virtually unlimited dictatorship over the country.

The range of phenomena included under the name Stalinism alerts us to the fact that not all aspects of Stalinism can be explained by a single cause. Indeed, historians generally eschew monocausal explanations, and instead see a variety of forces as shaping history. Even a single Stalinist policy, such as collectivization, may be best explained by an array of factors – Soviet leaders’ ideological aversion to private agriculture, national security imperatives to industrialize quickly, a short-term economic crisis that prompted government grain requisitioning, and a penchant among modern policymakers for economic planning and state control. But because the study of history represents an attempt to understand the world and what makes things happen, historians are obliged to weigh these causal factors and argue which of them predominated or how they worked in combination to produce a certain outcome.

During the Cold War, debates as to what caused Stalinism were highly politicized. At issue were the legitimacy of the Soviet government and the culpability of socialist ideology. The totalitarian model, the dominant paradigm of the Cold War era, posited an all-powerful government ruling over an atomized, defenseless society. This model explained how a government that lacked popular support and legitimacy could nonetheless remain in power. Many totalitarian theorists emphasized the role of socialist ideology, thereby implicitly or explicitly condemning it for Stalinist brutality and terror. Such interpretations saw Stalinism as the logical result of the October Revolution, when, according to this view, the Bolsheviks (later renamed Communists) seized power in an

1 Socialist ideology encompasses a range of political thought, of which Marxism became the leading strain. The political party of Russian Marxists led by Vladimir Lenin (and subsequently by Stalin) was called the Bolsheviks, renamed Communists after the October Revolution. Communist leaders never claimed to have achieved communism; according to Marxism a communist utopia would emerge only as the last stage of history. But Stalin did claim to have established socialism in the Soviet Union by the mid-1930s.
illegitimate coup d’état and proceeded to impose their ideological vision upon the population.²

In the 1970s and 1980s, revisionist scholars challenged the totalitarian model, and presented Soviet society as more than a passive object controlled by an all-powerful state. One revisionist trend emphasized the role of workers and soldiers in the October Revolution and their support for the Bolsheviks. This research portrayed the Bolshevik rise to power as a popular revolution rather than a coup d’état, and thus attributed to the Soviet government a substantial degree of legitimacy.³ Another strain of revisionist scholarship stressed that Stalinism was not the logical outcome of the Revolution, and that more moderate alternatives existed within the Communist Party. These scholars drew a distinction between Bolshevism and Stalinism, and implicitly exonerated socialist ideology from the crimes of Stalinism.⁴

Of course revisionism required that Stalinism be explained in some other way. If the October Revolution was not an illegitimate seizure of power that created a ruthless dictatorship, and if socialist ideology did not necessarily lead to Stalinist excesses, then revisionists still had to explain the origins of the Stalinist dictatorship and terror. While revisionist scholars generally held Stalin accountable for betraying the ideals of the Revolution, many also looked for deeper causes of Stalinism. Some focused on Stalin’s control of Communist Party personnel, or on support within the Soviet bureaucracy for him and his policies.⁵

Others sought the social origins of Stalinism, portraying Soviet society, with its backward peasant population, as a fertile breeding ground for the patriarchal authoritarianism of Stalinism. Even more radical revisionists suggested that certain segments within Soviet society supported or even advocated Stalinist policies such as rapid industrialization, collectivization, and purging.

While revisionism provided a far more sophisticated picture of Stalinism than did the totalitarian model, not all aspects of revisionist scholarship were accepted by the scholarly community. Sheila Fitzpatrick, the leading scholar in the field and one who first raised the possibility that Stalinist policies emanated from Soviet society, herself rejected the idea that collectivization and industrialization should be described as a “revolution from below” and instead argued these policies were clearly the initiative of the Stalinist leadership. On the alleged link between peasant patriarchalism and Stalinism, further research revealed that the Soviet Union’s largely peasant society, far from supporting Stalin’s rule, opposed Stalinist policies and engaged in active or passive resistance. Some scholars such as Martin Malia rejected revisionist social history altogether and insisted that Stalinism was indeed the logical result of an attempt to put socialist ideology into practice. A more general turn in the historical profession away from social history toward cultural history has also contributed to post-revisionist scholarship which no longer seeks the origins of Stalinism in Soviet society.


6 See Lewin’s article in this volume.
10 See Malia in this volume.
11 Recent cultural history that provides new perspectives on Stalinism includes Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton,
One important trend within post-revisionism attempts to place Stalinism in an international comparative context. During the Cold War scholars tended to assume a fundamental disjuncture between the Soviet Union and Western democracies, and they therefore highlighted the distinctive features of Soviet history. But now that these Cold War dichotomies are less salient, it is possible to see striking parallels, as well as important differences, between Stalinist social practices and those of other modern states. Recent work on Stalinism has demonstrated that it, like other twentieth-century governmental systems, deployed technologies of social cataloguing and intervention that were new to the modern era. These technologies grew out of Enlightenment thought and European disciplinary culture, which promoted social intervention in the name of rational social reform. State intervention in society vastly increased during the First World War, when the advent of mass warfare prompted political leaders across Europe to expand both welfare programs and excisionary coercion to ensure a loyal and militarily fit population. The Soviet state, formed at this moment of wartime mobilization, institutionalized many of these interventionist practices and used them to pursue its own ideological agenda. New scholarship thus maintains that Stalinism, with its radical interventionism to reshape society, cannot be understood apart from the rise of modern state welfare and state violence.

Equally exciting new work is being done on the consequences of Stalinism – how Stalinist policies affected the population and how people responded to these policies. Here the opening of former Soviet


12 The totalitarian model did posit a fundamental similarity between Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, but it counter-posed these systems to Western liberal democracies. Modernization theory represents the one attempt during the Cold War to see similar processes of industrialization and urbanization as shaping both Western democracies and the Soviet Union (as well as other non-Western countries); see, for example, Cyril E. Black, ed., *The Transformation of Russian Society: Aspects of Social Change since 1861* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960). This theory, however, was criticized for its ethnocentrism and determinism; it implied that all countries would ultimately become like modern Western societies.

archives has proven especially important for research. Using previously classified documents, scholars have discovered widespread opposition to Stalinism, including worker strikes, peasant protests, and popular expressions of contempt for Stalin and the ruling elite, not to mention more passive forms of resistance to the Stalinist system. Additional new sources such as diaries have provided valuable insights into how people experienced and understood Stalinism, and how some individuals came to internalize Stalinist ideas and values.

Other important work, both past and present, explores the impact of Stalinism on particular groups within Soviet society. The Stalinist gender order, as constructed during the 1930s, meant the large-scale recruitment of women into the industrial workforce, but Soviet propaganda simultaneously emphasized women’s reproductive obligations. Gail Warshofsky Lapidus’s classic book on this topic, excerpted in this volume, still offers the most succinct discussion of women’s double burden under Stalinism, but it has been joined by important new research as well. Studies of Stalinist nationality policy represent some of the most vibrant new scholarship in the field. These studies explore the treatment of national minorities, and reveal the ways the Soviet government inadvertently fostered the very national conscious it hoped to supersede. Amir Weiner’s article in this volume is pathbreaking not only in situating Soviet conceptions of ethnicity within the larger utopian project, but in its analysis of the Second World War’s impact on the Soviet purification drive. The excerpt from Elena Zubkova’s book also exemplifies pioneering research on the postwar Stalin years, a period scholars are only beginning to investigate.

Stalinism is such a large topic that a great deal of important scholarship could not be included in this volume. Among the most significant of this work is Robert Davies’s multi-volume history of Stalinist indus-

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trialization. Covering all aspects of Soviet economic history during the industrialization drive, Davies’s work, along with contributions by other British economic historians, constitutes one of the most valuable bodies of scholarship on Stalinism. This research is nicely complemented by several important studies of Soviet workers during Soviet industrialization, and by recent work on Soviet trade and consumption during the Stalin era. Regrettably scholarship on Stalinist diplomatic and military history also could not be included in this volume. Instead the focus will be on the political and social history of Stalinism.

Stalinism was one of the most central phenomena of Russian history and of the twentieth-century world; it was also one of the deadliest, involving the incarceration and execution of millions of people. It is therefore appropriate that Stalinism has been the subject of intense scrutiny and lively scholarly debate. Historians have the role of trying to understand the past — what happened, why things occurred, and what they mean. In the case of the Stalinist past, historians struggle to understand it, not only, as is so often intoned, to avoid repeating it, but also to come to terms with it, and perhaps even to help work through the collective trauma it inflicted. Stalinism represents one of the darkest and most complex pages of human history, and it therefore deserves our most careful attention and thought. This volume seeks to facilitate that task by presenting a range of interpretations as to the origins and consequences of Stalinism.


20 See, for example, Jonathan Haslam, The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933–1939 (London, 1984); Gabriel Gorodetsky: Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia (New Haven, 1999); William Taubman, Stalin’s American Policy: From Entente to Déente to Cold War (New York, 1982); John Erickson, The Road to Stalingrad (London, 1975), and The Road to Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin’s War with Germany (Boulder, Co., 1983).
Part I  The Origins of Stalinism
Stalin’s Role
Stalin and his Stalinism: Power and Authority in the Soviet Union, 1930–1953

Ronald Grigor Suny


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. 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.

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. 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.” 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.

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