WORLD HISTORY PROJECT

Communism in the Soviet Union

By David Eacker

This examination of the totalitarian features of the Soviet state under Stalin is a useful way to learn the differences between two rival ideologies: communism and fascism.

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Introduction

Soviet Russia occupies a prominent place in twentieth-century history. Under Joseph Stalin's rule, the Soviet military played a decisive role in the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II (1939–1945). Yet millions of people died as a direct or indirect consequence of Stalin's reign. Terms like *gulag*, a system of cruel labor camps, have become shorthand for the brutality of communist authoritarianism during his reign. Here we will consider how well the Soviet state in the 1920s and 1930s fits the labels totalitarian and authoritarian. These terms are often applied to it and other states of this period.

The rise of Stalin

Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Soviet Union took form during a period of deep crisis. (As of 1922, the Soviet Union—or Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)—consisted of Russia, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.) Its first Premier,[1] Vladimir Lenin, and the *Bolshevik* (communist) leadership faced big challenges in the first stages of their revolution. They had to guide Russia out of World War I (1914–1918) and deal with the famine of 1921–1922. They also needed to nationalize and modernize an economy that lagged behind its Western rivals. For just three items, it was a nightmare to-do list. To get out of the war—goal number one—Lenin had adopted "hardline War Communism." This emergency policy imposed state control directly over the economy. Its strict measures went over badly with peasants and many others. So when he got to goals two and three, Lenin was forced to reconsider his approach.

Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin at Gorky, 1922. Public domain.

The result was Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1921. It combined state control of certain activities with elements of free-market capitalism. The NEP loosened the state's grip on private business and agriculture so the economy could become more flexible and profitable. This "state capitalism" had some positive effects. It freed up workers from direct government intervention in their enterprises and brought some life to the Russian economy. Lenin's willingness to adapt proved successful, at least in the short term.

Shifts like this showed that the Communists were flexible in the initial years of their rule. For all of their political and ideological enthusiasm, they could be practical and experimental. However, the rise of Joseph Stalin and Stalinism reduced this flexibility.

1 A premier is the head of a government, like a prime minister.

Soviet agents seizing grain hidden by a Ukranian peasant in a graveyard. From the RIA Novosti archive, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Stalin took power after Lenin died in 1924. He immediately returned the state to an authoritarian stance, as was obvious by his reaction to a food production crisis in 1927–1929. Arguing that grain was a vital national resource, Stalin used state power to forcibly confiscate it from individual farmers. Stalin also waged class warfare against wealthy peasants, or *kulaks*. Whether they resisted or not, they faced a grim fate, and many were killed. Forced collectivization[2] in Ukraine coincided with famine there in 1932–1933. It resulted in the deaths of about four million Ukrainians. Historians refer to this as the *Holodomor*, widely regarded as a great moral disaster of the period. But Stalin and party elites would stop at nothing to achieve a "revolution from above" in which power emanated throughout society from a centralized state. And that state was controlled by the Communist Party and its leader.

The expansion of state power under Stalin wasn't just about agriculture. Industry and the whole economy were organized through a system of Five-Year Plans. As the 1930s wore on, Soviet leadership pushed for more extreme forms of centralization. Stalin tried to ensure people's loyalty by purging—or eliminating—anyone he suspected of not being loyal to the party or himself. The party elite had a lot of paranoia about "class enemies," and Stalin knew how to use it. He played into their fears to gain support for his state machinery of terror and suppression during these purges.

2 Collectivization is the idea that, within a state, nothing can be privately owned because everything is meant to be shared with all members of the state.

This system didn't work entirely as planned. Outwardly, it consolidated and exercised power in an authoritarian and totalitarian way. But historian Ronald Grigor Suny has argued that the reality was not so straightforward. In this period, he writes, the state "was in actuality a disorganized, inefficient, and unresponsive *leviathan* [giant sea monster]." With this in mind, we can think of Stalin's USSR in the 1930s as a regime striving to become totalitarian but not "totally" getting there.

Social history affects how we understand the nature of power under Stalin's state. Even if this state was as dysfunctional as Suny claims, it still had a profound impact on how people actually lived. State intervention at so many levels of everyday life *did* link destinies and people's daily lives to regime policies. To get food and livelihood, folks had to learn how to deal with the state bureaucracy, however incompetent its performance. To do this, they acquired or invented a range of skills. Historian Sheila Fitzpatrick calls these skills "strategies of survival and advancement."

For our purposes, the main point here is that the state and the people had to develop a system through interaction. The state forced people to adopt certain behaviors to survive. People responded with innovations that the state did not anticipate but could work with. To the degree we want to think of the U.S.S.R. in the 1930s as totalitarian, then, we must still consider the role of regular citizens in the shaping of the Soviet system. Their ability to cope, adapt, and innovate does not diminish the brutality or destructiveness of Stalinist politics. But it does make us reflect on the limits of totalitarianism.

Communism and Fascism

People often compare communism under Stalin with fascism. Although the two systems opposed each other, they had some similarities.

- Both exhibited an authoritarian impulse to bring the population into line with the aims of the state.
- Both sought to install a totalitarian system that could do as it pleased.
- Both used violence to achieve political ends.
- Both rejected the political and moral philosophy of liberalism: individual freedom, consent of the governed, and equality before the law.
- The fascist "new man" even had a counterpart in the "new Soviet man." Each was a symbol of their movement's values.

Yet for all that, fascism and Soviet communism differed in significant ways:

- The Soviets embraced left-wing socialist internationalism. Fascists embraced right-wing ethnic nationalism.
- The Soviets, in theory at least, rejected racism and ethnic nationalism. These doctrines were central to fascism.
- Soviet communism touted the erasure of class and gender inequalities. In contrast, fascists wanted to affirm social norms and gender roles that limited women to marriage and motherhood. Fascists also promoted a violent cult of masculinity.

In general, the Soviets continued to believe that humans could work together to engineer an egalitarian society. Fascists, not so much.

Conclusion

Under Stalin, the USSR embarked on a path toward a centralized command economy. It encountered many obstacles as circumstances changed in the late 1920s and 1930s. The need to modernize the economy, food shortages, famine, the specter of war with Germany all drove Stalin and Soviet leaders toward more extreme policies. Like many things born of necessity, the state that emerged out of this period was imperfect. Stalin may have aspired to a finely tuned totalitarian regime. In reality, it was less harmonious. While the state he oversaw shaped Soviet life in important ways, it stopped short of becoming fully totalitarian. We can perhaps think of Stalin's state in the 1930s as incipient totalitarianism: a political system *on the way* to becoming totalitarian. The authoritarian and totalitarian features of Stalinism offer tempting comparisons to fascism. However, Soviet Communism's underlying commitment to the rational organization of society along egalitarian, non-racist lines fundamentally distinguished it from fascism.

Poster of Azerbaijan, 1936—Labor Ethics. The words at the bottom of this idealized Image of Labor Equality translate to "We do it like Stakhanov." Alexey Stakhanov was a "Hero of Socialist Labor" and his pro-socialist work ethic was publicized in this campaign to increase worker productivity. Public domain.

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