

DEBATES ON STALINISM: AN INTRODUCTION

Stalinism

The historiography of the Soviet Union contains three major fields of contention. The first is the Revolution of 1917, a debate about origins and legitimacy. Why did the Revolution happen? Who supported it? Could it have been avoided? Was it a legitimate revolution or an illegitimate coup?¹ The Soviet Union's end is also controversial, a debate about the future of socialism as much as its history. Was the Soviet Union reformable? Could 1991 have been avoided? Was it doomed from the start, or could it have developed into a more humane version of socialism?² The third debate focuses on the years of Stalin's brutal reign, from the end of the 1920s to the dictator's death in 1953: the years of Stalinism. This debate is about the destination of the Soviet project and its essence. It is the topic of this book.

Beginning in 1928, Stalin and his leadership team launched a major revolutionary assault on the society they ruled. This revolution from above had three prongs: quick industrialization of the urban economy, forced collectivization of the peasantry, and the replacement of elites of pre-revolutionary vintage with new Red cadres. The goal was to build a socialist industrial state which could withstand modern war. The immediate results were plummeting living standards, famine, a growing police state, increasing levels of coercion, and a sprawling concentration camp empire. Not content with his first revolution from above, Stalin soon launched a second assault, a peak of state violence known as the Great Terror of 1937–38, when millions were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Some 700,000 were shot.³

If calamity and horror were the immediate results of Stalin's policies, in the medium term they allowed the mobilization of the resources of an industrializing agrarian country for modern war. The system focused on heavy industry and armaments, ignoring the needs of the population. It was based on suffering and exploitation and created enormous waste. Shortages and inefficiencies were built into the command economy. But it did get the job done, as became obvious between 1941 and 1945, when the Soviets won

the war against Nazi Germany. In the long-term, however, the Stalin revolution created an economy of scarcity and a dictatorial system of government which proved impossible to transform into a socialism with a more human face.⁴

This history of the Soviet Union under Stalin has produced enormous debate. Did 'Stalinism' form a system in its own right or was it a mere stage in the overall development of Soviet society? Was it an aberration from Leninism or the logical conclusion of Marxism? Was its violence the revenge of the Russian past or the result of a revolutionary mindset? Was Stalinism the work of a madman or the product of social forces beyond his control? Could it have been avoided? Could the war have been won without it? What was it like to live within it? The answers to such questions form the historiography of Stalinism.

Definitions

But what does 'Stalinism' mean? For twentieth-century intellectuals on the political Left, the concept was attractive because it allowed them to isolate (good) Marxism from its totalitarian instantiation. That Stalinism was 'bad' was the only judgement everybody using the word seemed to agree on.⁵ It was 'the mongrel offspring of Marxism and primitive magic', wrote one prominent writer. Displaying his European prejudices, he added that it was produced 'by the impact of a Marxist revolution upon a semi-Asiatic society'.⁶ It was divided from Leninism by 'a whole river of blood', wrote another of Stalin's victims.⁷

Beyond such demarcations, critics differed in what they saw as the actual content of Stalinism. Was it the class rule of the bureaucracy,⁸ or the personal despotism of one man?⁹ Was it a political system, exemplified not only by the Soviet Union under Stalin but also by 'Eastern Europe, China and Indo-China', the 'internal mode of functioning of many Communist Parties as well as various political sects of the far Left'?¹⁰ Could Stalinism exist without Stalin? Or was that a contradiction in terms and the term denoted 'a special political formation' in which 'the psychopathic personality of Stalin was a powerful driving force'?¹¹

Whatever it was, it was a system of rule characterized by 'excess' and 'extraordinary extremism'. Stalinism, to such critics, was 'not merely coercive peasant policies, but a virtual civil war against

the peasantry; not merely police repression, or even civil war-style terror, but a holocaust by terror that victimized tens of millions of people for twenty-five years; not merely a ... revival of nationalist tradition, but an almost fascist-like chauvinism; not merely a leader cult, but deification of a despot'.¹² This peculiar combination did not exist before Stalin built his personal power between 1928 and 1938. And, at least in the Soviet Union, it disappeared with his death in 1953. 'Stalinism', then, was the totalitarian phase of Soviet socialism, 'a form of personalized, terroristic rule with totalitarian aspirations, which emerged under conditions of socio-economic change, ethnic-cultural conflicts, institutional underdevelopment and societal mobilization'.¹³

Such definitions seek to grasp the essence of a phenomenon in motion. Neither Stalin's own position,¹⁴ nor the situation of his closest entourage, remained fixed between 1928 and 1953.¹⁵ The society they ruled transformed dramatically under the impact of two revolutions from above (1928–32 and 1937–38), famines (1932–33 and 1946–47), and war (1938–49). People and peoples were moved around, social structures dissolved and reformed, humans were killed, personalities 'reforged'. Terror came in waves, with periods of relative calm in between, and the police forces underwent remarkable evolution, both institutionally and in terms of their repressive practice.¹⁶ Even the physical borders of Stalin's realm changed repeatedly between 1939 and 1951.

Thus, historians view Stalinism simply 'as that which happened during Stalin's tenure as General Secretary'.¹⁷ More precisely, most begin Stalinism in 1928 – that is, with the moment Stalin and his team won the factional fights after Lenin's death. Such a definition, of course, just describes the boundaries of the phenomenon under review, not its content. Therefore, this book does not include a discussion of the 'export of Stalinism' to other places or times. It is a book not about a political model or an ideological construct, but about attempts to understand a concrete society in a concrete space and a concrete time: the historiography of the Soviet Union under Stalin.

Historiography

'Historiography' has at least three meanings. The term can denote an honest account of the state of a field of historical research, of

the findings of fact and the changing approaches of those who came before: the kind of review essay one finds at the beginning of good doctoral dissertations. It maps the current state of knowledge for a particular topic in order to define an agenda: What is there still to be known? What contribution will this particular piece of history-writing make? Historiography can also be a narrative of a field of historical study – a history of history. Such accounts sometimes lapse into myth: historians tend to tell a particular story which places their own work at the apex of a historical development. The writer's own approach, it usually turns out, is the latest paradigm all other scholars are to follow. A third approach to historiography sees it as debate: between scholars and between the present and the past. This approach focuses on disagreements and their underlying logic. It does not assume that the truest account of the past wins: history is political.¹⁸

This book owes something to each of these approaches. It tries to provide a sketch of the history of my field which is based on evidence, on sources, and on plausible interpretation. *Debates on Stalinism* also gives readers a general orientation of where the study of Stalinism is, what we know, and what we have learned collectively. It tries to dispel myths about the field's own past, not promote one version of it. It does not tell a story from darkness to light, but shows the complexities in the development of the field. At times, *Debates on Stalinism* comments on what I see as the current consensus on a matter, and in the conclusion I offer my own view of what are the most promising avenues of further research. But Stalinism is such a wide field of research that giving a full account would be impossible in a book of this length. It would also be tedious. Hence, the focus is on particular debates and their implications. Other historians would have written different chapters. They should do so.

Overview and arguments

The book begins with a debate among anglophone scholars in the mid-1980s, which marked the point when historians had left enough of a mark on Stalinism that they could claim this field of study as rightfully theirs. The 'revisionism debate' erupted just when the Soviet Union began to embark on its most determined attempt

yet to get rid of the legacy of Stalinism: General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, known as '*glasnost*' (openness) and '*perestroika*' (reconstruction). They would lead to the breakdown of the Soviet empire, an event with far-reaching consequences for the study of Stalinism. But in 1986 none of this was clear, and the debate reflected all the bitterness of the Cold War. The chapter also introduces a major myth about the history of this field: a narrative about a succession of generations – totalitarians, revisionists, post-revisionists.

Next come three biographical studies. Chapter 2 recounts the life and work of Moshe Lewin, a scholar who marked the extreme Left of polite academic discourse about Stalinism in the United States. His equivalent on the Right was Richard Pipes (Chapter 3), a scholar of Russian history and the Russian Empire whose work also had enormous influence on how the wider public understood both Stalinism and the work of the so-called 'revisionists'. Chapter 4 moves on to the most iconic of them – Sheila Fitzpatrick.

Together, these three chapters make several points. One is that the generational narrative of totalitarianism-revisionism-post-revisionism is inadequate to describe the history of this field; another, that this historiography is transnational in more than one respect. Not only do scholars in different countries read each other's works. The scholars themselves are products of international lives: all three of the major American historians of Stalinism these chapters explore were recent immigrants who brought sensibilities from other contexts with them.

This transnational nature of much of the debate is a main theme of this book. Displaced scholars, circulating ideas, and a multiplicity of national, political, ideological and temporal contexts explain the particular richness of this historiography, but also the often acrimonious debate, fuelled by ideological and political confrontations, but also by mutual misunderstandings.¹⁹ Given that this book is written for an anglophone audience, a bias towards English-language historiography remains: a German, French, Russian or Ukrainian history of the field of Stalinism studies would look different. Nevertheless, the deeper I got into writing the book, the more did the theme of transnationalism assert itself – not so much by design or by dictates of fashion, but because it was such a defining aspect of the historiography.²⁰

Third, the biographical studies complicate the phrase ‘history is political’ – an assumption of the series *Issues in Historiography*. In the writing of history politics is personal and hence often idiosyncratic. Political positions are entangled with personality, biography, and the environment historians move in. Personal experiences, individual resentments, fears and hopes all shape a historian’s outlook on life, the world and the past. Changing fashions and changing source bases, too, have their impact. Academic politics – the struggle for recognition, for positions, for book contracts, for good reviews, for readers, for influence – is as significant as ideological commitments, sometimes more so. Thus, we need to know something about the historians involved, about their life paths, personalities and careers, not just their politics, presumed or real.²¹

The rest of the book shifts from studying individuals and their work to debates and literatures. The first is about Stalin, the centre of Stalinism (Chapter 5). Biographies of the dictator often serve as ways into the history of this society more broadly. We observe not only how topics of ‘totalitarians’, ‘revisionists’, or ‘post-revisionists’ appear at inopportune moments in this literature, but also how historians learn from each other despite polemical oppositions. This process of learning and forgetting is another theme the book explores throughout.

Chapters 6 and 7 investigate in a more systematic fashion the debate about totalitarianism, revisionism, and what came after. The themes of learning and forgetting and of personal idiosyncrasies reappear, but the inadequacy of the established narrative about the development of the field is at the centre of attention. Rather than totalitarians being replaced by revisionists only to be overcome by post-revisionists, the two chapters demonstrate that neither revisionism nor post-revisionism really broke free from the framework drawn up by earlier scholarship. Far from being overcome, the concept of totalitarianism in its empirical application captured something essential about Stalinism. Rather than a series of ruptures, then, the two chapters of Part III narrate the unfolding of one larger paradigm. This way of telling the story explains why explicitly totalitarian approaches could so easily be reappropriated by scholars in the 1990s. The concept continues to serve political purposes in a world where open societies are again under attack by their enemies.

The final two chapters are devoted to highly charged contemporary debates. Chapter 8 explores how the history of Stalin's Second World Wars have become a battleground for identity politics in today's Russia. Chapter 9 focuses on similar processes in Ukraine, where the Great Famine, known now as Holodomor, has taken the status of a central national myth. In both chapters we see that the end of the Cold War has not depoliticized the debates about the Stalinist past. It merely recast their politics.

That these debates are highly transnational makes them, if anything, fiercer. Passions flare in Twitter storms. Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, and Baltic nationalisms are ever-present. Outside the successor states, other identities muddle the picture. Many of the intellectuals involved are cosmopolitans with more than one loyalty. Few have easily identifiable identities; most have complex careers; and all are – to one extent or another – products of transnational debates, and often transnational lives. Transnationalism and the increasing cosmopolitanism of historical debate, while exciting to intellectuals, also heighten the risk of saying something that someone, somewhere, will find offensive. In many ways, historians today face the often complex choice of whom, not whether, to offend.

Overall, this book combines a thematic with a chronological approach. Each chapter tells the story of the life of one person or the changes over time to one particular topic. The book, overall, begins in the 1980s and ends in the 2010s, with various flashbacks as far back as the 1930s along the way. Taken together, the chapters narrate the increasing internationalization and professionalization of the field, but also stress countervailing forces of renationalization and repoliticization. Hence, no upward movement towards greater enlightenment, no clear shift between paradigms, but also no story of rise and fall structures this book. Instead, the reader will follow this history in all its complexity.

The final verdict is decidedly mixed: while historians today have a much larger source base and a much better secondary literature about Stalinism at their disposal than ever before, many chose to forget about the work of their predecessors. Moreover, while a large part of the field has become professionalized, Stalinism remains full of political touchstones, both within the region of the former Soviet Union and without. While these help to engender debates and keep this history relevant, they also often create roadblocks to understanding.

Notes

- 1 See Ronald G. Suny, *Red Flag Unfurled: History, Historians, and the Russian Revolution* (London, 2017).
- 2 For introductions, see David Rowley, 'Interpretations of the End of the Soviet Union: Three Paradigms', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 2, no. 2 (2001): 395–426; and David R. Marples, 'Revisiting the Collapse of the USSR', *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 53, no. 2/4 (2011): 461–73.
- 3 For my own summary see Mark Edle, *Stalinist Society 1928–1953* (Oxford, 2011).
- 4 I tell this overall story in Mark Edle, *The Soviet Union: A Short History* (Oxford, 2019).
- 5 Cf. Giuseppe Boffa, 'The Problem of Stalinism', *The Stalin Phenomenon* (Ithaca, 1992), 1–13.
- 6 Isaac Deutscher, *Russia After Stalin: With a Postscript on the Beria Affair* (London, 1953), 52.
- 7 Leon Trotsky, 'Stalinism and Bolshevism', (August 1937), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/08/stalinism.htm> (accessed 6 June 2019).
- 8 Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going?* (New York, 1972); Milovan Djilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (New York, 1957). The rule of the bureaucracy, of course, continued after Stalin's death: M. S. Voslenskii, *Nomenklatura: Anatomy of the Soviet Ruling Class* (London, 1984).
- 9 N. S. Khrushchev, 'On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences', in: *The Stalin Dictatorship: Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' and Other Documents*, ed. T. H. Rigby (Sydney, 1968), 23–89.
- 10 Tariq Ali, 'Preface', in: *The Stalinist Legacy: Its Impact on Twentieth-Century World Politics*, ed. Tariq Ali. 2nd ed. (Chicago, 2013), 7–8, here: 7.
- 11 Robert C. Tucker, *The Soviet Political Mind: Stalinism and Post-Stalin Change*. Rev. ed. (New York, 1971), xi.
- 12 Stephen F. Cohen, 'Bolshevism and Stalinism', in: *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York, 1977), 3–29, here: 12.
- 13 Jörg Baberowski, 'Wandel und Terror: Die Sowjetunion unter Stalin 1928–1941. Ein Literaturbericht', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 43, no. 1 (1995): 97–129, here: 129.
- 14 S. G. Wheatcroft, 'From Team-Stalin to Degenerate Tyranny', in: *The Nature of Stalin's Dictatorship: The Politburo, 1924–1953*, ed. E. A. Rees (Basingstoke, 2003), 79–107.
- 15 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Melbourne, 2015).
- 16 Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926–1941* (Baltimore, 2009); David R. Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924–1953* (New Haven, 2009).
- 17 Chris Ward, 'Introduction', in: *The Stalinist Dictatorship*, ed. Chris Ward (London, 1998), 1–3, here: 2.

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- 18 A famous exponent of this view was also a historian of the Soviet Union. E. H. Carr, *What Is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures Delivered at the University of Cambridge January–March 1961* (New York, 1961).
- 19 The issue of the international nature of the field has been raised by Michael Confino, ‘The New Russian Historiography and the Old – Some Considerations’, *History and Memory* 21, no. 2 (2009): 8–33, here: 21–26.
- 20 Akira Iriye, *Global and Transnational History: The Past, Present, and Future* (Basingstoke, 2013).
- 21 For this approach to historiography, see also R. J. B. Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima: History Writing and the Second World War 1945–1990* (London, 1993).

