

# Stalin - the politics of the Soviet Union 1924 - 53

## I

### Stalin and the legacy of Lenin's rule

“Stalin” was one of the aliases adopted by Joseph Vissarionovich Djugashvili during his period as a revolutionary in Tsarist Russia. It means ‘man of steel’. He was born 1879 in Georgia. His father was a shoe-maker and they lived in poverty. His mother was a devout woman and she arranged for her son to study at a Georgian-Orthodox seminary in Tbilisi for the priesthood. He was a satisfactory but not outstanding pupil. But in 1899 he was expelled from the seminary probably because he was involved in the Georgian resistance movement. He became a committed follower of Lenin and was prepared to participate in bank and train robberies to raise funds for the Bolsheviks. Prior to 1914 he was arrested eight times; he was exiled to Siberia during 1914-17.

In March 1917 he returned to Petrograd as a result of the general amnesty for political prisoners introduced after the February Revolution. He had already impressed Lenin before 1917; Lenin described him as ‘that wonderful Georgian’. In 1912 he was one of six members of the Central Committee and had been a founding participant in the Party's paper - *Pravda* (*The Truth*). Stalin supported Lenin's decision to initiate the coup in October 1917 - a decision opposed by Kamenev and Zinoviev.

After the October Revolution he was appointed Commissar for Nationalities. He was as a result in charge of the entire Caucasus region during the 1918-21 Civil War. This gave him military authority and brought him into conflict with Trotsky who was Commissar for War. His treatment of the Georgians was overbearing and Lenin had to intervene to resolve conflict. In fact, in his final notes, known as Lenin's Testament Lenin warned that Stalin had become too powerful and that he should be removed from his position as General Secretary of the Party. But this did not happen.

The volatile atmosphere of post Revolution Russia favoured Stalin. He is not likely to have succeeded in a more traditional framework. In rising to power Stalin was often lucky. He was, however, also persevering and was willing to undertake heavy, boring administration.

By 1924 the government of the USSR had two principle components: (i) the Council of People's Commissars - that is, effectively, the Cabinet. To belong to this you had to be a member of the Bolshevik Party. This was theoretically answerable to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets. (ii) The Secretariat, or civil service, which was also staffed by



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Bolsheviks. The Party was run by the Politburo, answerable to the Central Committee, which was answerable to the Party Congress.

The General Secretary, which was Stalin, appointed the Secretariat and controlled membership of the party. It was a one-party state. Stalin, through a series of appointments, gained the power of patronage over many parts of the Bolshevik Party. (i) People's Commissar for Nationalities (1917) - appointed many officials in the regions. (ii) Liaison Officer between Politburo and Orgburo (Bureau of Organisation) - access to information about party personnel. (iii) Head of the Worker's and Peasants' Inspectorate (1919) - access to information about all government departments. (iv) General Secretary of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party (1922) - access to information about all Party members. Through these positions Stalin became the vital link between the Communist Party and government. He acquired the power of patronage and used it to appoint his own supporters. This enabled his 'bloc' to outvote other factions in key votes.

Between 1923 - 25 the Party had expanded by recruiting more 'proletarians' - this was called 'the Lenin enrolment'. It increased from 300,000 in 1922 to 600,000 in 1925. The recruits were uneducated in the main and self-seekers; they realised that promotion and party privileges derived from loyalty to the person who appointed them. The expansion of the Party thus increased Stalin's power of patronage.

Additionally, Lenin's actions against factionalism also increased Stalin's power. Lenin made factionalism illegitimate. Thus the charge of 'factionalism' could henceforth be used against a political enemy. Lenin also allowed a cult of personality to develop about him - he effectively became god to the Communist party and became personally responsible for settling all disputes in the Party. This set a precedent for a powerful figure to monopolise central authority. This was a paradox since theoretically Marxism rejected individualism. Indeed, the position of leader of the Communist Party did not exist. Nonetheless, the effect of the civil war was to shift power towards the centre and power effectively lay in a leader (that is Lenin) rather than in collective responsibility.

## II

### Stalin's Rise to Power

Following the death of Lenin the politburo declared publicly that it would follow a principle of collective leadership. It comprised Rykov, Tomsky, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Trotsky and Stalin. Stalin gained an early advantage as the orator at Lenin's funeral. He used strong, emotive language of praise and worship. Trotsky was absent.



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Trotsky is a “complex” character. He was brilliant but also, at times, prone to exaggerated self-assurance, whilst at others, prone to fits of nervousness. He was not always decisive and he sometimes lacked judgement. He even told Smirnov (a supporter of his) that Stalin would be the dictator of the USSR, but he failed to act on his intuition.

Lenin’s Testament made damning comments about Stalin and advised his removal as General Secretary, but nearly all the members of the Politburo colluded in suppressing it, because the document made critical remarks about all of them.

At the same time the Politburo viewed Trotsky with suspicion. Kamenev, Zinoviev and Stalin formed an anti-Trotsky triumvirate. Trotsky was unpopular in the Party - as an intellectual he did not win the support of the new proletarian members. Although he was respected within the Red Army he was unpopular in the Party. He might be admired, but he could not attach loyalty. Trotsky tried to attack Zinoviev and Kamenev writing a series of essays - especially his *Lessons of October* - opposing party bureaucracy, advocating more democracy within the Party, and attacking Kamenev and Zinoviev for disagreeing with Lenin during the October revolution. But Kamenev replied with his pamphlet *Lenin or Trotsky* which highlighted Trotsky’s past as a Menshevik and his own disagreements with Lenin. Stalin at this time was cast in the role of moderator. Trotsky’s attack was misjudged. The party *was* bureaucratic precisely because Lenin had allowed it to be. Trotsky was failing to recognise the Party for what it was.

The New Economic Policy was introduced in 1921. It permitted peasants to trade surplus produce at a profit and allowed markets and money to be used. Lenin expected the NEP not to be lasting, but it did increase output. Continuation of the NEP divided the party into Left Communists, who wanted its immediate end, and Right Communists, who were prepared to delay its conclusion. This dispute was only over timing, but differences, nonetheless, marked out rival factions.

The USSR needed to modernise in order to overcome its poverty. There was general agreement over this, but once again there were factions disputing the methods to be employed. The dispute was intensified by the fact that the October 1917 Revolution had not fitted the traditional Marxist model. Russia was not a developed industrial country. During industrialisation Germany and Britain had brought together capital, resources and labour. Russia did have resources, but lacked capital. Foreign countries would not lend them capital. Hence Soviet industrialisation would have to exploit the people. The idea was to produce a food surplus that could be sold abroad to bring in capital needed for investment in industry. Left Bolsheviks saw the coercion of the peasantry as an inevitable consequence of this argument. Trotsky believed in ‘Permanent Revolution’ as a result of which Russian interests would be second to the cause of international revolution. He argued that the Soviet Union should concentrate on exporting revolution. Stalin replied with his own slogan, ‘Socialism in One Country’, and used this to portray



Trotsky as unpatriotic. Fear of invasion favoured Stalin's strategy as did his control over party membership.

A vote at the 1925 Party Congress resulted in Trotsky being removed as Commissar for War. The Congress was packed against him, mainly by Kamenev and Zinoviev, who were chairmen of Moscow & Leningrad Soviets respectively. But having done this Kamenev and Zinoviev then publicly stated, in 1925, that the party should work for revolution in all capitalist countries. This formed them into the 'New Opposition', but their policies were hardly different from those of Trotsky. Then in 1926 Trotsky joined them. The Right Communists - Stalin, Bukharin, Rykov and Tomskey opposed and outvoted this faction. Kamenev and Zinoviev were dismissed and their positions as chairmen of the Moscow & Leningrad Soviets were filled by supporters by Stalin - Molotov and Kirov respectively. In the 1927 Congress Trotsky mounted another ill-conceived challenge to Stalin, and once again was out-voted. He was expelled from the Party, forced into internal exile in 1927 and external exile in 1929. Trotsky never had a power base and did not understand the soviet system.

The Right comprised Rykov, the Chairman of the Central Committee, Tomskey, the leader of the trade unions, and Bukharin, the editor of *Pravda*. They never had the political power to challenge Stalin, but Stalin moved against them anyway, because of his decision to adopt the economic policies of the Left. Bukharin and the Right did not believe that industrialisation in the USSR had to be accelerated. Bukharin maintained that coercion of the peasants was economically regressive. But the Right seemed weak and unrealistic given the atmosphere of fear of invasion and Stalin portrayed them as failing to appreciate the threat to the Soviet Union. The Right also failed to understand that they could not influence the Party whilst Stalin controlled membership of it. Stalin successfully characterised the Right as a dangerous faction. The only power base of the Right lay in the trade unions, chaired by Tomskey and in the Moscow branch of the Communist Party, lead by Uglanov, an admirer of Bukharin. Stalin purged both - sending Kaganovitch to remove suspect trade unionists and Molotov to purge the Moscow party. By 1929 Tomskey was removed as leader of the Trade Unions and Uglanov was replaced as Moscow Party leader. Molotov replaced Rykov as Chairman of the Central Committee; Bukharin was replaced as Chairman of the Comintern. They were not expelled from the party, but were forced to publicly admit they were wrong.

### III

#### **Stalin & Political Power: The Purges**

The 1920s had seen thousands of anti-Communists sent to labour camps. In the early stages of the First Five Year Plan there was the Shakhty trial which initiated prosecutions



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against 'industrial enemies'. In 1932 a Right Bolshevik, M.N. Ryutin published an attack on Stalin calling him an 'evil genius'. He and his supporters were put on trial and expelled from the Party. From 1933-34 1 million party members were expelled on the charge of supporting Ryutin. Expulsion would occur when a party member would not have his Party card returned to him after checking. Expulsion meant you could not obtain employment, housing and food-ration cards. From 1934 Stalin began to terrorise colleagues and party members. His behaviour was irrational. Terror became all-pervading.

### The Post Kirov Purges, 1934-36

The constitutional legislative body was *sovnarkom* – the Council of People's Commissars, which was formed October, 1917. However, after only one year in office, Lenin and his associates tended to ignore the Council. In January 1919 two inner subcommittees of the Council were formed: the Politburo dealing with politics, economics, war and international relations, and the Orgburo, which dealt with the party administration and was serviced by a Secretariat. In a one party state one had to be a member of the Bolshevik party to serve either in the Council or on one of the two subcommittees, so effectively power lay with the Communist (Bolshevik) party by 1919.

The Party Congress had the power to elect members of the Central Committee – membership of the Central Committee was a stepping-stone to membership of the Politburo. Thus, by 1925 a measure of internal party democracy did exist, since unpopular Politburo members could be voted out of the Central Committee – it would only take time before they would have to resign from the Politburo as well. Stalin enhanced the authority of the Party Congress in his struggle against Trotsky. As Party Secretary Stalin ensured through patronage that the Congress inclined to his views; but this did not guarantee at that time obedience to his personal rule.

Stalin was surrounded by an inner core of loyal activists that include Kaganovitch, Molotov and Shkiryatov. However, beyond that he had to contend with a strengthened Party Congress, and with the existence of continued opposition from recently ousted leaders. As Robert Service argues, "Stalin and his associates... knew that resentment of their rule in the rest of society was deep and wide, and they feared lest former Bolshevik oppositionalists might exploit this circumstance."<sup>1</sup>

In 1933 Stalin, with control over the Secretariat, attempted to impose his authority. During the 1933 purge of party membership 854,300 party cards were withdrawn. This started to crystallize the opposition to him at local level, and also in the Congress. There was great tension at the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress that began on 26<sup>th</sup> February, 1934. One of his appointees, Leningrad party boss, Sergei Kirov, began to oppose Stalin. This was the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia*, p. 210



signal that party members who owed their promotion entirely to Stalin could and would oppose Stalin. Kirov made a provocative speech at the Congress entitled, "The fundamental difficulties are already behind us." It appeared that Stalin's personal rule was rapidly coming to an end. At the elections, Stalin lost the title of General Secretary and Kirov was promoted to the Central Committee. During the summer of 1934 Stalin appeared to be on the retreat – for example, the OGPU was placed under the control of the NKVD. Since the NKVD was not at that time an organ of terror, this appeared to indicate a weakening of the mechanisms of arbitrary repression.

Then on 1<sup>st</sup> December, 1934 Kirov was assassinated by ex-Zinovievite, Leonid Nikolaev. Stalin used this as a pretext to push through a decree giving the NKVD authority to arrest, try and execute. Nikolaev and anyone (down to drivers) that had any connection with him was executed or disappeared. Stalin's complicity in the Kirov murder remains unproven. In 1934 Andrei Zhdanov became Central Committee Secretary and Leningrad party chief. He sought to assert party control over the commissariats. On 20<sup>th</sup> May, 1935 a Politburo directive required every former Trotskyist to be sent to a labour camp. On 20<sup>th</sup> November, Trotsky, Kamenev and Zinoviev were accused of conspiracy. Kamenev and Zinoviev were sentenced to 10 and 5 years imprisonment respectively. Other supporters of Zinoviev were exiled.

The popular Kirov was the sort of person that might attract the support of unhappy Party members. Stalin blamed the murder on Trotskyites and Leftists. He was supported by the new recruits to the Communist Party - these were skilled workers and managers involved in the first five-year plan, but they were also career orientated and so willing to support the purge of opponents of Stalin. Purges were good for promotion prospects. The purge in 1933 had been conducted by Yezhov, who was chief of the Control Commission, but the purge after the Kirov murder in 1934 was administered by Yagoda, head of the NKVD, which was the new name of the State security force, formally the OGPU. Zhdanov took over as Party boss in Leningrad. Nikita Khrushchev became party boss in Moscow. The State Prosecutor was Andrei Vyshinsky. Lavrenti Beria had responsibility for state security over the national minorities. Poskrebyshchev was placed in charge of the Secretariat. Stalin controlled every part of the Soviet bureaucracy. Kamenev and Zinoviev were arrested and no one was safe. The government enacted a decree against terrorist acts after the Kirov murder which gave the NKVD full freedom to pursue any chosen enemy. Of the 1996 delegates at the 1934 Party Congress, 1,108 were executed during 1934 - 37.

#### The Great Purge, 1936 - 39: The Purge of the Party

There were rumours that opposition had not ceased to exist. In 1936 Stalin was informed that Trotsky was maintaining contacts with clandestine groups within Russia. In August





1936 Kamenev and Zinoviev were retired, both pleaded guilty and made abject confessions ; they were sentenced to death and executed.

Stalin needed a more efficient henchman. In September 1936 Nikoli Yezhov was appointed to head the NKVD. Stalin's brutality was opposed by Ordzhonikidze and Kuibyshev. Kuibyshev died and supporters of Ordzhonikidz, Pyatkov and Radek, were put on show trial and convicted. Ordzhonikidze shot himself.

Stalin dispensed with the Politburo, in Spring 1937 creating a commission that could take decisions on behalf of the Politburo.

Bukharin, Rykov and Tomskey were then investigated. There was a further show trial in 1937 of 17 Communists called the 'Anti Soviet Trotskyist Centre' by prosecutors. The defendants included Radek, Pyatkov, Sokolnikov. In a third show trial (1938) Bukharin and Rykov and 18 others were accused of being 'Trotskyite-Rightists'. Yagoda himself was among the accused. They all admitted their guilt - only Bukharin made some attempt to defend himself. It is ironic that in 1936 he had drafted the new constitution of the USSR that Stalin hailed as 'the most democratic in the world'. This constitution was a fraud.

The evidence that Stalin took more than a personal satisfaction in the scale of the terror is as follows: the terror was "systematically arbitrary". Quotas were assigned to each region, and it was stated that 28% of victims were to be shot and the remainder sent to labour camps. A further 57,200 were arrested in March 1938, of which 48,000 were shot. Stalin also took a personal interest in the punishments. He approved when local officials exceeded their quotas. The NKVD was staffed with many people who enjoyed inflicting physical torture – notably, Lavrenti Beria, who was Yezhov's deputy from July 1938. Even casual jokes about Stalin were regarded as a form of treason.

#### The Great Purge, 1936 - 39: The Purge of the Army

There followed a purge of the army. In May 1937 Vyshinsky proclaimed that a conspiracy had been uncovered within the Red Army. During the same month Marshal Tukhachevski, the Chief of the General Staff, was arrested and beaten into confessing to plotting a coup d'état. He was shot in mid-June. Bukharin, Tomskey and Rykov were pronounced guilty of spying. Yezhov had 259,450 people arrested between August and November. Torture was used as normal procedure during interrogation. Bukharin was put on show trial in March 1938, and he confessed in order to save his wife and son. Seven other generals (all 'heroes' of the Civil War) were also arrested. They confessed, were condemned and shot. Marshal Vorshilov was President of the secret court that delivered the judgements - he was a personal rival of Tukhachevsky and a fanatical Stalinist. In the next 18 months all 11 War Commissars were purged; 3 of the 5 marshals were dismissed;



75 of 80 members of the Supreme Military Command were killed; half of the officer corps, amounting to 35,000 were either imprisoned or killed. The Navy and Air Force were also purged. By 1939 the Soviet military was seriously under-staffed and inexperienced. Stalin had lost touch with reality.

That the primary target was the Party itself is shown as follows. By 1939 2.9 million prisoners were in labour camps. Statistics show that only 1 in 30 of the congress members of 1934 survived to 1939. Of the Central Committee only 16 of 71 members survived. Of the Red Army only 16 of 17 army commanders survived. There was no party congress from 1934 to 1939. "The Great Terror ... left no one in doubt about the consequences of overt disobedience."<sup>2</sup>

Official records indicated 681,692 executions were held during 1937-38, and up to 1.5 million were killed by one means or another.

After the 1937-38 purge of the high command of armed forces, the terror abated. Yezhov was forced to resign on 19<sup>th</sup> November, 1938 and was arrested in April 1939. He was executed in February 1940. Beria replaced him. Even the NKVD operated in fear of Stalin.

### The Purge of People

There were show trials in every republic of the USSR. State prime ministers, Party secretaries, officials academics, lawyers were all purged. Exiles from Poland, Germany and elsewhere were imprisoned or shot, including Bela Kun, the leader of the Hungarian revolution in 1919, who was shot in 1936. During this period 1 in 18 of the population were arrested.

The terror extended to every aspect of society. It was coupled to the coercion of the peasants. It would be all the more effective if it could be coupled to ideological goals, such as increased production, and tied in with traditional scapegoats, such as "wreckers" and kulaks. When in August 1935 a miner, Aleksei Stakhanov, was alleged to have hewed 12 tons of coal in six hours, Stalin created the cult of Stakhanovism, and used it to "encourage" managers to make attempts on records.

### The Later Purges, 1941-53

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia*, p.234





Even during the war the purges continued. Scapegoats for military failures were found and persecuted. Many Soviet troops had deserted to the Germans during the war. The Yalta and Potsdam Conferences of 1945 had agreed that prisoners-of-war would be returned and the Allies did forcibly repatriate many prisoners held who were executed on mass by Stalin. The war left the USSR occupying many areas of central Europe and Stalin was determined that pro-Soviet regimes be installed in all satellites. From 1947 Stalin ruled without either the Central Committee or the Politburo. In 1949 there was a further Party purge when Party and city officials in Leningrad were arrested, condemned and shot. Stalin also persecuted the Jews because one had an affair with his daughter, Alliluyeva. In 1953 it was claimed a 'Doctor's Plot' had been uncovered in Moscow in which a Jewish medical centre was said to be planning the murder of Stalin. Stalin died in March 1953 just before a purge of the medical profession was due to be enacted.

### The Dimensions of the Purges

After 1988 the KGB (successor of the NKVD) permitted certain archives to be opened. These revealed that:

- 1934 saw the execution of one million in the purge following the Kirov murder.
- By 1937, 17 or 18 million had been sent to labour camps, of which 10 million died.
- A further 5 to 7 million were purged by 1939 of which 1 million were shot and 1 to 2 million died in labour camps.
- When the Baltic States were occupied 2 million were deported and most of these died.
- Deportations of Germans, Chechens and Tartars in 1941 led to a further 1 million deaths.
- Between 1944 and 1946 10 million returned prisoners of war were sent to labour camps of which 5 to 6 million died.
- Between 1947 and 1953 a further 1 million died as a result of purges.

The purges were irrational and "wildly excessive and brutal". Stalin's daughter, Alliluyeva, wrote that her father "was stifling from emptiness and lack of human companionship." He was insane! What is a part mystery is why so many confessed. This may be explained by the ideology of the Revolution. 'Outside the Party there is no purpose to life'. Confession was the last statement of loyalty. Recent research has also emphasised the role of the Party as a whole. "While the decision to launch the purges was obviously taken by Stalin himself, how that decision was actually put into effect largely depended on the local Party organisation." The revolution, collectivisation and industrialisation so fragmented Soviet society that extreme measures became possible.

## IV



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### Continuity or not?

Historians debate whether Stalin's totalitarianism was a progression from Lenin or a thing in its own right. Trotsky's view was that Stalin perverted the revolution for his own ends and this is supported by Isaac Deutscher and Roy Medvedev. It is true that the apparatus that Stalin used for his terror was created by Lenin. "The Cheka, the forced-labour camps, the one-party state, the mono-ideological mass media, the legalized administrative arbitrariness, the prohibition of free and popular elections, the ban on internal party dissent; not one of these had been invented by Stalin."<sup>3</sup> But Robert Service concludes "Lenin would have been horrified by the scale and methods of the Great Terror."<sup>4</sup> Edward Crankshaw, Robert Conquest and Martin McCauley take the view that Lenin was already a dictator and Stalin's tyranny grew out of this. They argue that under Lenin the USSR was already a one-party state with a secret police force where factionalism within the Party was a crime. Stalin bequeathed to the USSR a deeply conservative bureaucracy that would resist major change.

It is arguable that the Great Terror was Stalin's instrument for establishing his personal dictatorship over the Soviet Union. It is claimed that Stalin *enjoyed* the spectacle; he took a personal interest in the arrests and executions that is incompatible with a man of conscience. The counter-argument would start with economic considerations. If Stalin was right that industrialization would require the use of coercion of the peasantry primarily, and that opposition to the use of coercion could not be tolerated, then the decision to impose absolute uniformity on political life may receive a different interpretation. Apologists for Stalin may also consider that, even if industrialization did not require the use of coercion, yet Stalin may have sincerely believed that it did.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia*, p. 227

<sup>4</sup> Robert Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia*, p. 227

