

TRANSLATION: Alexander Filippov on 'Debates about Stalin's Role' in *A New History of Russia 1945-2006*

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Information for reflection

Debates about Stalin's Role in history¹

Iosif Vissarianovich Stalin (Jughashvili) remains one of the most polarizing figures in the politics and history of our country; it is difficult to find another personality in Russian history who is subjected to so many contradictory interpretations, both during his rule and after. For some, he is the hero and orchestrator of Victory in the Great Patriotic War; to others, he is the embodiment of evil itself.

One of the most famous views on the historical significance of Stalin was held by Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of Great Britain during World War Two, a man hardly known for his pro-Stalin sentiments: "Stalin came to Russia with a wooden plough and left in it possession of nuclear weapons". The other point of view is represented by Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko, the son of a major participant in the 1917 Revolution and Civil War who was repressed under Stalin: "bloody tyrant".

During Stalin's life the first view predominated; after his death the second became conventional wisdom, primarily because of revelations about Stalin's organizational role in the political repressions of the 1930's and 1940's. Evaluating Stalin's historical significance requires looking at him in a wider historical context, beyond just the chronological framework of the Soviet period. This approach reveals many similarities between Stalin's policies and those of preceding Russian sovereigns.

Analysis of the historical evolution of the Russian state over the past 500 years through three different forms of statehood – Muscovite Tsarism (15th-17th centuries), the Russian Empire (18th century to the start of the 20th century) and the Soviet Union – reveals a certain continuity in political characteristics, albeit with significant changes in external form. The similarities between these states could be explained by the historical constancy of the political-organizational principles on which they were built.

The guiding light of these principles was concentration of authority in one center and strict centralization of the administrative system. The power of Russia's paramount leader was traditionally absolutist, drawing in all resources and subordinating all political forces to itself.

¹ This is the most controversial chapter of the most controversial history textbook in Russia, which critics have accused of trying to rehabilitate Stalinism and justify Russia's (alleged) drift into authoritarianism. Read and decide for yourself. It should be noted that, to date, it is just one of dozens of "approved" history textbooks (whereas the vast majority of Russian schools use a few "recommended" texts) and has had only a very limited print run.

Adverse conditions for the development of the Russian state required the concentration of resources, including executive, in one center and their centralized distribution in key sectors. As such, people capable of forcing through such centralizations repeatedly came to power. However, it's necessary to note that these centralizations were inevitably accompanied by distortions, the most important of which was the transformation of the real need for strong authority into a habit for its own sake, and to such an extent as to be beyond all necessity. This interpretation holds equally for the reigns of Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great and Iosif Stalin. Even during the 19th century, the famous Russian thinker Konstantin Kavelin remarked, "Peter's Tsarism was the continuation of Ivan's Tsarism". Stalin saw himself as the heir to his Tsarist forebears on the Russian throne; he knew Russian history well and respected the aforementioned men, regarding them as his teachers and consciously using their 'historical recipes'.

It is thus erroneous to restrict our search for the causes of power centralization to the characters of Russia's rulers (though this does not mean we should ignore the influence of their personalities on the formation and function of their states) and to explain the stability of Russian political traditions exclusively in terms of the personal and psychological idiosyncrasies of the Russian princes, Emperors and Secretary-Generals. Or as the famous philosopher Blaise Pascal put it, "Cleopatra's nose, had it been shorter, the whole face of the world would have been changed".

One interesting perspective on Stalin's policies comes from the famous Russian philosopher Ivan Ilyin², a convinced opponent of the USSR's historical continuity from imperial Russia: "The Soviet Union is not Russia...not one achievement of the Soviet state...qualifies as an achievement of the Russian people," Ilyin wrote. A hard-line opponent of Communism, Ilyin supported the rebirth of the Russian Empire, which he believed possible on the fulfillment of three conditions: Orthodoxy, monarchy and a unitary state guaranteeing the unconditional equality of all peoples within the Empire. Paradoxically this is exactly what Stalin created. He resurrected the monarchy under the guise of his cult of personality. He strengthened belief – not in God, but in a new, red³ faith: Communism in the early Soviet period became a new religion with its own symbols and martyrs. And it was he, Stalin, who in opposition to the Leninist concept of the right of nations to self-determination instead created a state close to the unitary ideal.

A significant factor behind the strictly centralized nature of the econo-political administrative system during the Soviet period was the already obvious inevitability of a big war with Germany in the 1930's, the war itself, and the accelerated pace of postwar reconstruction. It is this that defined the forced rates of antebellum industrialization and economic resurgence in the postwar period. No wonder foreign observers labeled the 1930's as a 'race against time'. The concept of accelerated modernization amidst a deficit of historical time was voiced by Stalin in February 1931: "We are 50 to 100 years behind the advanced countries. Either we make good the difference in ten years or they crush us". Events in summer 1941 would confirm his prescience.

The 'race against time' in connection with the threat of war not only meant a time deficit as regards carrying through industrialization, but also exacerbated the problem of inadequate existing means of modernization – for that required an exceptionally high share of the national economy be devoted to

2 His other big idea is the concept of "conscience of law" (правосознание), which is a key theme of Medvedev's thinking.

3 "новую, красную веру" – lit, "new, red faith". In Russia, "red" also has connotations of beauty (красота)

both capital investment and military spending. Regardless, according to the then People's Commissar of Finance, Arseny Zverev, even during the Great Patriotic War the USSR continued accumulating gold reserves, refusing to sell a single gram. All this implies that just as with Peter the Great at the beginning of the 18th century, the state forced development, through the total mobilization of everything at its disposal, while simultaneously shouldering huge military expenditures and refraining from foreign loans.

Not only was the savings rate extremely high, but so was the pressure on labor and the exploitation of human resources, which were impelled to remain in a state of permanent mobilization.

How things were...

“Every director of an enterprise had a package with five wax seals. That in turn was enclosed in another sealed package. This was the so-called ‘mobilization package’. The director was only allowed to open it up during a state of emergency. And inside, there were instructions for what to do in the case of war... These packages detailed where to make your new base: some were to be sent off to the Volga, some to the Urals, some beyond the Urals, as well as who would be producing what during the war,” - remembers A.F. Sergeev, the son of the famous Bolshevik, F. A. Sergeev (Artem). His mother, E. L. Seergeva, a director of a textile factory, had such a packet from as early as 1937.

There is political and historical evidence that when faced with serious threats even ‘soft’ and ‘flexible’ political systems will, as a rule, evolve towards a harsher form of political organization, including towards the restriction of the rights of citizens vis-à-vis the state, just as happened, for instance, in the US after the events of September 11th, 2001.

Therefore, this analysis of external and internal factors allows us to ascertain that the Soviet period saw a recurrence of an older state of affairs that cropped up frequently in Russian history – the necessity of survival and development while in the situation of a ‘besieged fortress’ (threat of foreign invasion coupled with temporal and means-of-development deficits). In these conditions the formation of a harsh, militarized political system emerged as a solution to extreme problems and extreme circumstances, and this system itself was but a modification of those which existed under Muscovite Tsarism and the Russian Empire.

This allowed the renowned Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev to tie up the sources and spirit of Russian Communism with the Russian national idea. In his 1937 book *The Origin of Russian Communism*, Berdyaev wrote that instead of “the Third Rome, Russia managed to bring about the Third International, on which were imprinted many of the features of the Third Rome... The Third International is not an International, but the Russian national idea”. Therefore the Soviet state represents a transformation of the “ideas of Ivan the Terrible, a new form of the old hypertrophied state of Russian history... Russian Communism is more traditional than people usually think, and is nothing more than a transformation and distortion of the old Russian messianic idea”.

This view was shared by many thinkers in the Russian diaspora. The philosopher Georgy Fedotov,

characterizing the rise of the Soviet system, wrote about the similarity of the Soviet and Petrine states, "...the new Russian regime in many ways takes us back" to the 18th century, and viewed the transfer of the capital from Petrograd to Moscow and the government's relocation to Moscow as a "symbolic act".

At this point it would be fitting to quote the poets:

*What really changed? Just signs and symbols,
Same storms sweep all our myriad paths:
The commissars succumb to fell autocracy,
And fires of revolution consume the Tsarist heart.*

- Maximilian Voloshin

*Lenin has the spirit of an Old Believer⁴,
Proclaims decrees with abbatial gravitas,
As if the causes of our ruin and collapse
He seeks within the "Pomorian Answers"⁵.*

- Nikolai Kluyev

Of course Stalin's personal qualities informed the intense drama and stresses of the Soviet period. Contemporary accounts and later psychological investigations show that the defining feature of Stalin's personality was his black and white worldview (which explains his perception of the people around him as either friends and enemies), a perception that he was in a permanently hostile environment, cruelty, and a drive to dominate.

However, the influence of Stalin's psychological idiosyncrasies was most likely of secondary importance relative to the role of objective factors. Carrying through a program of accelerated modernization required a certain system of power and the creation of an administrative apparatus up to the task. In many ways these reasons explain the scale and spirit of Stalin's 'revolution from above'. In their recognition of the Stalinist revolution, authors as different as Leon Trotsky and Georgy Fedotov, or the American political scientists Stephen Cohen and Robert Tucker, were at one despite approaching this subject from highly divergent positions. They noted that though the first decade of Stalinist transformations had historical precedents and roots in Leninist Bolshevism, it was "not its continuation to a predetermined outcome, but a revolution with its own specific features and dynamic".

In many ways this revolution substantially repeated the political experience of the Petrine reforms. One of the main goals of Peter the Great, together with the development of domestic industry, the Army and Navy, and the attainment of recognized imperial status, was to draw members from all social groups into state service, including the hereditary nobility (i.e. securing universal social obligations before the state), and the maintenance of meritocratic criteria in the formation of the new administrative system.

The realization of universal social obligations before the state in the Soviet period is evidenced, for example, by the fact that not only the offspring of simple families directly participated in military

4 "керженский дух" - lit, "spirit of a Kerzhak"; refers to a tributary of the Volga traditionally settled by Old Believers, dissenters from mainstream Orthodoxy.

5 "Поморские ответы" - lit., "Pomorian Answers", a key Old Believer religious text from 1723.

operations during the Great Patriotic War, but also those whom we today would call the ‘golden youth’⁶. Many of them who went off to the front never came back. Stalin’s eldest son Jacob Jughashvili, Mikhail Frunze’s son Timur, one of Anastas Mikoyan’s sons Vladimir, Kliment Voroshilov’s nephew Nikolai Scherbakov died on the battlefields of the Great Patriotic War, just like many other sons of high-placed functionaries. “Many families then living on Rublyovka had funerals,” A. F. Sergeev writes.

As for the measures of control undertaken in relation to the ruling nomenclature, their aim was to mobilize the administrative apparatus so as to guarantee its effectiveness both during the industrialization process and during postwar economic reconstruction. This problem was partially resolved through political repressions, which not only used normal citizens for mobilization, but also the bureaucratic elites.

A good example of elite mobilization can be found in the memoirs of Nikolai Baibakov, *Forty Years in Government*. In 1942, during his spell as Deputy People’s Commissar of the Oil Industry, he received orders from Stalin instructing him to leave for the North Caucasus, to be ready to blow up Soviet oil installations if the Soviet armies failed to stand fast. Stalin’s framing of the problem is remarkable – he said, “We have to do everything to make sure Germans don’t get a drop of our oil...So I warn you, if you leave the Germans even a single ton of oil, we will shoot you. But if you destroy the oil installations, but the Germans don’t come and we end up without fuel, we will also shoot you...”

The drive to squeeze out maximum effectiveness from the administrative apparatus is further evidenced by the fact that the upper and middle levels of the bureaucracy were one of the groups subjected to repressions.

Practically all members and candidates for membership of the Politburo, selected after the XVII Party Congress, suffered to some extent in the ‘Great Purge’ of the late 1930’s. That the strike was carried out against the nucleus of the Bolshevik Party – the old Leninist vanguard, is confirmed by a multitude of historical sources: “The first to be destroyed were the old Bolsheviks of Lenin’s generation,” Khrushchev recalled. According to the writer Yevgenia Ginzburg, who spent many years in prison, membership of the Communist Party was a “burdening condition”, a point of view that by 1937 had “already firmly seeped into everyone’s consciousness”. Ginzburg’s prison neighbor, the young post-graduate student Ira, firmly insisted on her lack of affiliations, which she thought gave her a colossal advantage relative to Party members.

The political repressions of the postwar era had a similar character. Those swept up in the ‘Leningrad Affair’ at the end of the 1940’s included Second Secretary of the All-Union Communist (Bolshevik) Party and Chairman of Gosplan Aleksei Kuznetsov, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR Nikolai Voznesensky, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR Mikhail Rodionov; ministers, secretaries of big Party organizations, other influential managers. There were almost 2,000 victims of the ‘Leningrad Affair’, many of whom were shot. Domestic and international research confirms that the foremost victim of the 1930-1950’s repressions was indeed the ruling class.

6 “золотой молодежи” - lit., “golden youth”, referring to the gilded youth / frequently pampered children of the elite.

How things were...

The historian Roy Medvedev wrote on the following point: “It’s no secret that in the 1940’s many feared promotion to high government posts. It just seemed dangerous. Of course...nobody was safe from the Terror during the Stalin years, and it was particularly the upper echelons of the Party apparatus who were subjected to the harshest purges...It was obvious even to the majority of non-Party folks, who in those years slept much better at night than the Communists, that the ‘Great Terror’ was for the most part directed against the Party itself”.

We should also note it was Khrushchev’s report to the XX Party Congress which laid the foundations for the interpretation of the Great Terror as an exclusively Stalin-inspired phenomenon, due to his cruelty, arbitrariness, intolerance of other opinions, and so on. Meanwhile, the famous poet David Samoylov wrote: “One would have to be a complete indeterminist to believe that the strengthening of Stalin’s power was the sole historical purpose of 1937, that with the sole force of his ambition, vanity, harshness, he could turn history where he wanted, to individually will through the monstrous happenings of that year”.

Contemporary researchers tend to see rational causes behind the use of violence to ensure the effectiveness of the ruling class, as a means of social mobilization for the fulfillment of impossible tasks. Stalin followed the logic of Peter I: demand the impossible from your subordinates, to get the maximum possible. It was no accident that physical health and the ability to handle high workloads was one of the key things required of People’s Commissars. According to Nikolai Baibakov, prior to his appointment as head of the oil industry, Stalin told him of his requirements of People’s Commissars, the most important of which were – a “bull’s nerves”, optimism and physical health.

The result of Stalin’s purges was the formation of a new administrative class, adequate to the tasks of modernization in conditions of resource deficits – unconditionally loyal to Soviet power and irreproachable in their executive discipline. This was achieved through a tariff-qualification system (a descendant of the Petrine Table of Ranks), which offered significantly differentiated labor compensation levels corresponding to differences in qualifications.

Georgy Fedotov wrote about the importance Stalin staked on quality: “Stalin’s real support came from that class, which calls itself ‘distinguished persons’⁷. They are those who made their careers by their own talent, energy or lack of scruples, rising to the crest of the revolutionary wave. Party membership and past achievements now mean little; personal usefulness coupled with political reliability is all important. This new ruling class is populated with the crème de la crème of the Party, weeded out for their unscrupulousness, commanders of the Red Army, the best engineers, scientists and artists of the country. The Stakhanovite movement aims to draw into this new aristocracy the upper layers of the worker and peasant masses, to declass them, to seduce their most energetic and vigorous with high salaries and place them on a pedestal inaccessible to their former comrades. Stalin tentatively, instinctively repeats Stolypin’s bet on the strong. But since it is no longer private, but state business that is the new arena of competition, Stalin creates a new service class, a class subsumed to the people, thus reliving even the more remote experience of the Muscovite state. Life experience showed him the weak

7 “знатными людьми”

side of serf socialism – the lack of personal, egoistic incentives to work. Stalin searches for socialist stimuli for competition, corresponding to bourgeois profits. He finds them in a monstrously differentiated compensation scale, in material inequality, in personal ambition, in orders and distinctions of merit – ultimately, in the elements of a new class system. The word ‘distinguished persons’ is already a whole class program by itself’.

We can find an example of this set-up for support of the ‘strong’ in the memoirs of Andrei Gromyko, who managed Soviet foreign policy over the course of several postwar decades. Gromyko remembered how he, a commoner from a Gomel village and a graduate of a Minsk agricultural institute and post-graduate study in Moscow, came to work in the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

How things were...

I never got an ‘understanding’⁸ hand from anyone in the capital; I achieved everything on my own. They harp on about how I was Molotov’s protégé. Sure, I was, since he nominated me for diplomatic work. It would be stupid to deny that. But it’s important to understand why it was me, along with a few other people, whom the commission picked. Remembering that interview, I am of the firm opinion that it was not my social origin that played the decisive role, but my answer to the question: “What were the last books you read in the English language?” After I casually replied, “Rich Man, Poor Man”, I felt, that they would take me in.

Thus in this fashion, similar to how Chancellor Bismarck through ‘blood and iron’ consolidated the German lands into a united state in the 19th century, Stalin harshly and mercilessly reinforced the Soviet state. He viewed the strengthening of the state, which encompassed the strengthening of its military-industrial potential, as one of the principles of his politics. This attitude is indirectly evidenced in the memoirs of his daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva, who wrote about how her father, looking over her dress and frowning, always asked her the question: “Is it foreign what you have on?” – and lightened up, when she answered, “No, it’s ours, domestic make”.

One of the most prominent manifestations of the highly-centralized nature of Stalin’s power became his cult of personality. The German writer Lion Feuchtwanger, visiting Moscow in 1937, was struck by the ubiquity of Stalin’s portraits. That said, according to both L. Feuchtwanger, and S. Alliluyeva, these displays of reverence irritated Stalin.

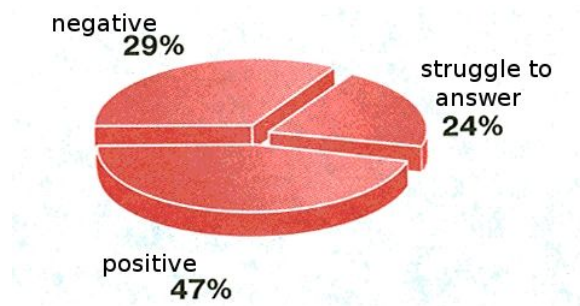
How things were...

“Father couldn’t bear the view of the crowds, applauding him and shouting, Urrah!” – his face warped from annoyance... “They just open their traps and holler, like idiots!” he said angrily... When I have to...read and hear, that during his life my father considered himself as something like God, - I find it weird, that people who knew him well could insist on this,” wrote Svetlana Alliluyeva.

8 “мохнатой руки” - lit., “furry arm”, signifying a friendly, helping hand offering to pull you up to higher places.

And indeed, at the start it is likely Stalin's relation to his cult was shaped by utilitarian concerns, in that he viewed this mass support as a useful asset in the political struggle. "Bear in mind...that the Russian people spent centuries under a Tsar. The Russian people – they're Tsarist. The Russians, Russian folks, they've gotten used to there being one person in charge," he said. However, as is well known, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. There are many examples in Russian history of how degraded a personality could become given a long enough spell at the reins of power. This is partially evidenced by the biographies of rulers even as distinguished as Peter I or Catherine II. Though initially irritated by his cult, in time Stalin became accustomed to it. The Leader's closest comrade-in-arms, Vyacheslav Molotov, admitted that although at first Stalin battled his own cult, he eventually came to like it: "He was very reserved in the first years, and then...it all got to him".

We can judge how Stalin remained in people's memories by consulting a Public Opinion Foundation poll from February 2006: *Everything considered, do you think Stalin played a positive or negative role in Russia's history?*



In conclusion, it's obvious why views on Stalin's historical role are so contradictory. On the one side, he is regarded as the most successful Soviet leader⁹. It was during his rule that the country expanded its territory, reaching the borders of the former Russian Empire (and sometimes exceeding them), achieved Victory in the greatest of wars – the Great Patriotic War, accomplished industrialization of the economy and brought forth a cultural revolution, as a result of which the percentage of people with higher education soared and the country acquired the world's best education system. The USSR entered the league of advanced states in the sphere of scientific progress and eliminated almost all unemployment.

But Stalin's rule had another side. His successes – and they are acknowledged by many of the Leader's opponents – were achieved through the ruthless exploitation of the population. During Stalin's rule the country went through several waves of large-scale repressions. The initiator and theorist behind this 'heightened class struggle' was Stalin himself. Entire social classes like the landed peasantry, the urban petit-bourgeoisie, the priesthood and the old intelligentsia were liquidated. Furthermore, on occasion many people completely loyal to power suffered from the harsh laws. It is not even worth going into the safety of life during the Stalin years. Quality of life remained low, especially in the villages. All this did not promote the strengthening of the country's moral climate.

9 An oft-quoted phrase typically taken out of context to condemn this textbook.