

5. Stalin's "Soft Course" and the Soviet 1930s Phenomenon

The Stalin's new Soviet Society

The new phase in internal party development was conditioned by the consolidation taking place in the country. Stalin and his circle were likely aware of his critical nature, and that it could not be resolved using force. So they decided to first alter their economic and social policies in what Oleg Khlevniuk described as a 'moderate turn'.¹³⁰ This entailed terminating the first five-year plan and cooling the social situation down. It is easy to describe the steps that underlay this turn. The first came in January 1933, when the forced purchase of grain was abolished and an 'agricultural tax' was renewed. Kolkhoz peasants were once again allowed to sell their 'excess' stock in the market. This was accompanied in May 1933 by an easing of repressive acts; the punishment of peasants for minor theft (the 'Tassel Act') was repealed; more than 90,000 court rulings were vacated; and 37,000 prisoners were given an early release. Two years later, additional changes came when peasants sentenced to five years in prison had their sentences erased, benefiting up to 560,000 people. 1935 also saw the release of functionaries sentenced for 'sabotaging' the collection of grain levies in 1932–34. In May 1934, some displaced kulaks received limited civil rights and, in January 1935, the right to vote.¹³¹ Younger members of these families were allowed to study, even at university. The economic situation of the peasants also changed. Machinery and tractor stations were set up to mediate an influx of modern machinery in the agricultural production regions. Kolkhoz members were allowed to farm their own crofts and to own small animals and a cow.¹³² Thus were the ranks of peasants, who had suffered under Stalin's previous policy reduced. These measures did not enrich Soviet villages, nor did they undo the damage of collectivization and forced grain purchases, but they did raise them from the level to which they had sunk under forced collectivization.

Changes also occurred in the cities, where Stalin himself had forced planning institutions to adopt extreme ideas. The revision of these notions allowed funding to be released that was tied to uncompleted construction projects. It also

130 A.Khlevniuk O., *Chozjajin: Stalin i utverzhenije stalinskoj diktatury*, p. 177.

131 Barsenkov / Vdovin A., *Istoriya Rossii*, p. 231.

132 Khlevniuk O., *Chozjajin: Stalin i utverzhdenniye stalinskoj diktatury*, pp. 179–180.

opened the way for attempts to ameliorate the disproportion borne of Stalin's effort to immoderately intensify the developmental pace.¹³³ The planned pace of development remained fairly high in spite of this at 16.5% to 18.5% per year, still not enough for the balanced development of agriculture and supplies for the citizenry.¹³⁴ The reason for this was that Soviet development was impacted ever more by the escalating conflicts in Europe that accompanied the rise of Nazi Germany and the expansionist policies of the Japanese in the Far East, forcing the leadership to increase spending on the armed forces and military production. This maintained an even deepened the existing disproportion, something which was reflected in the difficult living conditions in the USSR.

The cities did, however, experience a level of relief. The government abolished the rations introduced in 1928–29,¹³⁵ and then it took advantage of the change to introduce a system of task-based and qualification-based salaries and wage differentiation. Party bodies initiated a 'model worker' movement, aimed at increasing worker performance, resulting in greater differentiation within the blue-collar and white-collar environments. Housing starts grew, with a percentage of workers leaving wooden houses in favour of brick homes that did not necessarily offer a significant improvement in housing quality, but did bring greater stability and offered better amenities. Overall, buildings were outfitted in a substandard way. An effort by state and communal institutions to construct separate social and cultural facilities was intended to make up for this, improving the living standard by providing public spas, nursery schools, kindergartens, and public catering facilities. Unions, meanwhile, organized factory clubs and interest-based clubs, stadiums and convalescent homes were constructed, all offering opportunities for spending leisure time. Healthcare services for the population were also increased.

Construction also began of higher-quality housing, but it was chiefly for the privileged—for top economic staffers, high functionaries and officials, military and security officers, professionals with qualifications and 'model workers'. Downtown districts were also reconstructed as examples of socialist housing of the future. Especially massive was the reconstruction of Moscow and the building of the underground, the construction project of the century for the USSR in

133 *Nashe otechestvo*, Vol. 2, pp. 272–273; *KPSS v rezolyutsyakh i resheniyakh*, Vol. II, pp. 747–763.

134 *KPSS v rezolyutsyakh i resheniyakh*, Vol. II, pp. 747 and 883, official information on the plan and its fulfilment (in parentheses); For details see Khlevniuk O., *Politbyuro: Mekhanizmy politicheskoy vlasti*, Moscow, ROSSPEN, 1996 pp. 134–139.

135 Khlevniuk O., *Chozjajin: Stalin i utverzheniye stalinskoy diktatury*, pp. 220–221.

that period. But construction also took place in Leningrad, Kiev, Kharkov, and Tbilisi, and a number of new towns came into being. Hence it seemed that, in exchange for the extraordinary suffering of the victims, a turning point occurred which saw the country launch off on a path of rapid transformation into an industrial power. By February 1934, at the Seventeenth Congress of VKS/b, which approved the second five-year plan, Stalin could claim that its fulfilment would make the USSR into a technologically, economically independent country with developed technology.¹³⁶

We have already spoken of how Stalin's attitude to the 'old intelligentsia' changed. On the one hand, he persisted in his usual rhetoric of class struggle, but he also wished to calm the situation down. This has prompted the historiographical literature of the past decade to trend towards the notion that Stalin's changes in attitude were caused by his leaning towards Russian national ideology, supported by the concept of 'socialism in a single country'. But we find another aspect of Stalin's thinking noteworthy. The Bolsheviks had seized power as a minority, their will forced upon majority society. This made them feel that they were in a state of siege within their own country that limited them both economically and in terms of their political power. The 1928–33 crisis was a turning point whose nature was defined not so much by Stalin's victory over his party opponents, but by the changes within society that had strongly limited and disrupted the remaining traces of private ownership and thereby savaged the economic independence of the citizenry. Thus could Stalin speak of the upcoming liquidation of the remaining 'exploitative classes'. In the future, society was to comprise two 'friendly' classes: workers and kolkhoz peasants. To these, Stalin appended the lower and middle strata of working intelligentsia. He remained silent on the bureaucracy and on the leading political stratum as a special body outside of society. The Bolsheviks had traditionally spoken of bureaucracy only as a despicable method for controlling work.¹³⁷

This concept of Stalin's allowed the Bolsheviks—in theory if not in fact—to leave their 'besieged fortress' behind them and try to take on a new role as a leading force throughout society. The importance of this change, however, was not recognized immediately nor fully. It first manifested itself in the country's cultural and literary life, which had been starkly restricted by the Bolsheviks' 'fortress thinking' of the 1920s, which placed its focus on fighting so-called petty bourgeois ideology among 'fellow travellers', including most well-known artists,

136 *KPSS v rezolyutsiyakh i resheniyakh*, Vol. II, p. 764.

137 *Ibid.*, pp. 364–375.

who were members of organizations that either partially or entirely rejected the regime. The supporters of this fortress thinking, the so-called RAPPists¹³⁸, made a racket in the late 1920s and early 1930s about ‘purifying’ the writers’ community. But given what was happening in 1932, the last thing the party—meaning Stalin and his circle—would wish for was a conflict with the literary public. The party leadership thus had no choice but to agree on reconstructing literary and artistic organizations and unifying them, which simultaneously ended the existence of RAPP.¹³⁹ This meant the party lost its ‘own’ proletariat writers’ and artists’ organizations. But it gained the opportunity to become a leading power within the arts overall. The resolutions that liquidated RAPP and other proletariat art organizations did not in any way end the party’s supervision of artists. New art associations were forced to adopt socialist realism as a creative template, amounting most of all to requirement to depict ‘Soviet reality’ positively, and to make sure that art remained ‘people’s art’, accessible to the masses.¹⁴⁰

What this demonstrated was that the VKS/b leadership was changing its image, wishing to act as a centre of power that expressed the interests of ‘society at large’. Stalin’s subsequent emphasis on the positive nature of Soviet and Russian patriotism, supported by the renewed teaching of history, particularly Russian history, at secondary schools and universities, was an outgrowth of this shift.¹⁴¹ A new political formula had arisen that justified the Soviet state conceptually not as communist or Bolshevik, but rather as a society-wide institution. The culmination came two years later with the adoption of a new Soviet constitution that made clear how self-confident Stalin’s leadership had become. The leadership had recovered after the failures of earlier years, and began talking about party policies that expressed the interests of the entirety of the ‘Soviet people’.¹⁴²

138 A term created from the name Rossijskaia asociaciia proletarskich pisateley (RAPP).

139 “Schastie literatury”: *gosudarstvo i pisateli, 1925–1938: Dokumenty*. Babichenko D. L. (Ed.) Moskva, ROSSPEN, 1997. pp. 130–131.

140 For more details see, Geller M. / Nekrich A., *Utopia u vlasti, Istoria Sovjetskogo Soyuza s 1917 goda do nashich dnei*: London, Overseas Publications Interchange Ltd, 1986 p. 286–290; Korzhichina T. P., *Izvol’te byt’ blagonadezhny!* Moscow, RGGU, 1997, pp. 281–283.

141 For more detail, see: *Kratkiy kurs istorii SSSR*, eds Shestakov A. V., Kudriashov S.. Moscow, Vestnik arkhiva Prezidenta Rossiyskoy federatsii, 2008.

142 *KPSS v rezolyutsiyakh i resheniyakh*, Vol. II, p. 763; O. Khlevniuk, Chozhajin: Stalin i utverzhenije stalinskoj diktatury, pp. 224–225. This was accompanied by an attempt on the part of the leadership to create a new image for the security forces. OGPU merged with the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD).

Gestures of reconciliation seem to have multiplied within the governing party, as well. As noted above, after a year's exile, Zinoviev and Kamenev returned to Moscow along with Preobrazhensky, a Trotskyite who declared his loyalty to the Stalinist leadership. Party membership was returned to many members of the opposition, some of whom were even invited to speak at the Seventeenth Party Congress. Even members who had been adamant in their support of Trotsky, such as Rakovsky, were swayed. Resistance against Stalin's policies had lost its force.

These steps by the leadership had an impact on the mood of many of the USSR's citizens, who had just emerged from the difficult transitional years. Below, we will discuss the policy of mass murder of the post-revolution political and social elites that was rooted in the developments of these years separately in great detail. This policy was behind much of what counted as cultural and social phenomena in the 1930s, the specifics of which may not be reduced to Stalin's push for a 'course of moderation', or to the campaign of terrorism against the new upper echelon of society. The Soviet Union of the 1930s was remembered by those who lived through that decade, as well as subsequent generations, not only for its brutal, homicidal reality, but also as a time of penetrating change. The USSR had undergone the radical reconstruction of its social life, something which reshaped it and changed the fate of most of the country's citizens. Change this radical and this deep-rooted has never taken place in any country free of charge. It requires sacrifice. The chief question is whether the loss suffered by individuals and society in the name of such radical change and their sacrifice is adequately balanced by the benefits generated. The seed of the radical change that took place in the USSR was ensconced in the deep economic and social crisis and the failure to address it in time, a failure which imparted an enormous sense of urgency and gave rise to spontaneous dynamics. Together, these factors and Stalin's rhetoric resulted in extraordinary loss of life and material assets, permanently impacting the governmental and social system of the USSR.

We have already noted that pre-revolutionary Russia entered the modern era with an immature social, economic and cultural base and the consequences and manifestations of this had not been overcome by the 1917 revolution and the world and civil wars—in fact, oftentimes the problems had deepened. With the internal political conflicts and the accompanying purges that plagued the leadership of the USSR, power shifted over time increasingly into the hands of a second and third wave of politicians who lack the intellectual, professional and moral qualifications needed to resolve complex economic and social issues. Stalin stood out primarily because of his ability to handle power, and because of his brutality and intransigence. All of what has been said above applied to him, along with a total lack of political culture and the absence of any social or moral

scruples. He did find a way out of the crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s, but only at the cost of enormous losses of both material assets and human lives.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the preconditions for successfully resolving the economic and social issues at hand were sorely lacking. The result was a solution that was improvisatory in nature and brutally enforced without regard for the victims. In spite of this, a real social situation was being addressed, a resolution characterized not only by enormous sacrifice but by drastic changes to the material and social conditions of life such as Russians had never experienced before, perhaps except at the time of Peter I. Millions of people left behind their former lives in the remote villages of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Transcaucasus and elsewhere, places where no event of note had ever occurred. They arrived in the cities and at construction sites, and they took part in construction projects that, in the course of one or two generations, radically changed the face of the country.¹⁴³ Their work in new companies was exhausting, but from their viewpoint also dramatic and meaningful: they acquired new qualifications, they got a basic general education. Their homes were undignified and their work inadequately remunerated, but they were striving for something and, as happens during times of revolutionary change, they could see the fruits of their efforts. For readers today, it is difficult to imagine the miracle this seemed through their eyes. The USSR had come into being and taken root at a time of deep global economic crisis, a crisis which saw existential conditions in the Western countries plummet, and which prompted some from those countries to travel to the USSR in worker delegations to view first-hand this iconoclastic miracle. The visitors also included leading figures of public life and culture and not all were communists. Although criticism was often voiced, their opinion was in no way uniformly negative.

143 The construction projects included structures such as the Turksib Railway (1930), connecting the European section of the USSR with Siberia, the Dnieper dam and the hydraulic power plant Dnieprogres (1932), a metal works in Zaporozhye and Donbas, “Magnitka” – a metallurgic base of the Urals and the neighbouring Kuznetsk coal basin and “Uralmash” (1933) the machinery giant that created a new industrial region. Later, it was the decisive factor in the outcome of World War II. Other projects included agricultural engineering facilities in Rostov-on-Don (1930), Stalingrad (1930), Kharkov (1931), and Chelyabinsk (1933), automobile plants in Moscow (1931) and N. Novgorod (1932), machinery plants in Leningrad and the surrounding region, the ‘youth town’ of Komsomolsk in Amur and many others.

This naturally filtered through to the people of the Soviet Union at that time. In spite of their sacrifice and their suffering, they acquired more life experience, both personal and professional, than had the many generations before them, and these years left a significant mark on Soviet literature of the era, and on its film, art, theatre, and music that continues to attract cultural consumers to this day. This was part of the phenomena of the Soviet 1930s, one which—at least temporarily—was often able to drown out the suffering that was present everywhere. Even today, it cannot be reduced to simple strategic manoeuvring and the crimes of its brutal dictator.

Developments in the USSR in the 1930s led to a great breakthrough with regard to living conditions in a society that still felt so strongly the impact of the Middle Ages. But because of this impact, the breakthrough did not extend to the country's political, social, or spiritual life. The radical changes of the 1930s thus gave rise not to a society of free people, but to a totalitarian state that was doctrinally based and curtailed the rights of its citizens. But the feeling of change and that the country had elevated itself nevertheless provided Stalin support and his policies—policies that not only helped, but also enormously hurt, the country and its society for an extended period.

Kirov's Murder and the Turning Point in Stalin's Domestic Policy

In late 1934, the USSR seemed to be positioned at the threshold of the great leap forward, one which would transform it into a modern industrial country. Hardly anyone anticipated the cruel twist which was about to appear. In a draft presented earlier in the year, the year the Seventeenth Congress of the VKS/b was held, it was anticipated industrial production would increase 2.1 times in the new, second five-year plan. The pace of production had been somewhat toned down, but construction started under the first five-year plan was to be completed, freeing funds currently locked in a still-unfinished projects. The estimated production of Soviet industry from 1928–1940 thus grew approximately three times. An ambitious but unrealistic goal was set for agriculture, where production was to double and grain production was to increase. Construction of social facilities and housing was targeted for expansion. In transportation, efforts to expand and modernize the railway network already underway were to be complemented by the construction of river transport facilities, roadways, and development of the aviation industry.

Measured in terms of its results, the second five-year plan turned out not to be particularly realistic. About 70% of its targets were met, with annual production

increments oscillating around 14.5%.¹⁴⁴ But these results were impacted by the increased development of the armaments industry starting in 1932, which added up to a total of 745 million rubles.¹⁴⁵ The fast pace of development became a significant component in Soviet economic growth but limited expansion of social expenditures and held down the population's standard of living.¹⁴⁶ From 1926–1939, the population of the USSR increased by 22.7 million people, 17 million in the Russian Federation.¹⁴⁷ From 1928 until 1940, the number of blue-collar and white-collar workers in the USSR rose from approximately 13 million to 33 million. New job takers had to acquire both new working habits and a new lifestyle, and the poorer conditions and feelings of dislocation often led to alcoholism, demoralization, and mass crime.¹⁴⁸ But there were positives as well. Unemployment was eliminated by industrial development. The employment of women rose importantly, with their share in the number of those employed at 24% in 1928 and 39% by 1940. Family incomes expanded, and life in the cities provided more opportunities for access to culture. But the prospects for defending political and social rights remained dim, and the state was virtually the only employer.

In the villages, however, things were much more complicated. At the end of the initial five-year plan, up to 15 million peasant farms were associated in approximately 200 thousand kolkhoz collectives, 62% of the total. Added to this were 4500 state owned farms that primarily employed peasants.¹⁴⁹ The villages underwent cataclysmic change when around 20 million people, particularly young people, left for the cities, meaning less food was required to feed them in the villages at the same time their production for the market was increased. In the villages, the production facilities were enhanced by the development of

144 *KPSS v rezolyutsyakh*, Vol. II, pp. 747–760; Gregory, “*Politicheskaya ekonomiya sotsializma*”, p. 154.

145 *Ibid*, p. 585. (A total of 745 million Rubles).

146 See, e.g., *Stalin i Kaganovich: Perepiska. 1931–1936 gg.* Khlevnjuk O. V. et al. (Eds.), Moscow; *Stalinskoye Politbyuro v 30-e gody*. Ed. O. V. Khlevnjuk et al. Moscow, AIRO-XX, 1995; Pis'ma I. V. Stalina V. M. Molotovu 1925–1936 gg. *Sbornik dokumentov*.

147 *Naseleniye Rossii v XX veke*, sv. 1, 230.

148 For details, see Meerovich Mark, *Nakazaniye zhilishchem: Zhilishchnaya politika v SSSR kak sredstvo upravleniya ljud'mi 1917–1937*, Moscow, ROSSPEN, 2008; Lebina N. B., *Povsednevnyaya zhizn' sovietskogo goroda 1920–1930 gody*. S. Peterburg, Letnij sad, 1999.

149 Hildermeier M., *Geschichte der Sowjetunion*, p. 489, indicates the following share of private farmsteads in kolkhozes: 1934 – 71.4%; 1935 – 82.3%; in Jun' 1936 – 90.5% and two years later 93.5%.

machinery and tractor stations that eased access to powerful agricultural technology and disrupted the production structure and village lifestyle that had been common to that point. But life in the kolkhoz nevertheless mirrored much of what had framed the peasant lifestyle under the old regime, when the village produced under the supervision of the landed nobility. Preference had been given to working on the lord's fields, and peasants were restricted in their movements. The kolkhoz and those who worked on it were likewise confined to do so within the limits designated by the state.¹⁵⁰ The living conditions in villages stabilized from 1933 onward, but no element of 'socialist social structure' came into being with the rise of the kolkhoz collectives.

In spite of its frequently revolutionary changes and their impact on the country and its inhabitants, prior to World War II, the USSR remained only at the threshold of transformation into a modern industrial superpower. But it seemed that the path the country had set out on would bring about rapid change, humanizing and democratizing Soviet life and increasing the living standard and cultural level of the people. As early as 1934, though, a radical act thwarted this potential. On December 1 of that year, Leonid Nikolayev, a former party member and functionaries, murdered Sergei M. Kirov, the party secretary, by shooting him in the neck execution style.

The circumstances of the murder have not been completely explained to this day. Most researchers have come to the conclusion that it was the act of someone who was socially and personally adrift.¹⁵¹ Kirov was one of Stalin's friends.¹⁵² He had been appointed Secretary of the Central Committee at the Seventeenth Congress of the VKS/b and was about to begin work in Moscow. It is no wonder that Stalin interpreted the murder as a political act. But the actions he took in consequence are noteworthy. Immediately after the killing, Stalin dictated his famous decree against terrorism to the Politburo. State-sponsored terror was legalized; executions were permitted without due process.¹⁵³ From the outset, the decree

150 see Maslov S., *Kolchoznaya Rossiya*, Chapter VII: Chto takoe kolhoz, pp. 129–157.

151 Zhukov Yu., *Inoy Stalin: Politicheskiye reformy v SSSR v 1933–1937 gg.*, Moscow, Vagrius, 2003, pp. 83–99; Kirilina Alla, *Neizvestny Kirov*, St. Petersburg / Moscow, Neva / Olma-Press, 2001, pp. 244–248. During the interrogation, Nikolayev denied he had associates.

152 For more detail see Kirilina Alla, *Neizvestny Kirov*, pp. 304–356.

153 See *Reabilitatsiya: Kak eto bylo. Dokumenty*, Vol. II, Moscow, MFD, 2003, p. 545; also O. Khlevniuk, *Chozjajin*, p. 233. The decree stated: Investigation of terrorist offenses should take no longer than 10 days; notification should be delivered to defendants 24 hours before the start of the trial; the hearing is to be held in the absence of

was meant to function as a tool for eliminating internal party opposition, and with Stalin's intervention, the investigation radically changed course. No effort was made to obtain any real evidence of guilt. The focus was placed on coming up with a list of names of those who might have been designated 'conspirators'.¹⁵⁴ The trial took place on December 29, 1934 and took approximately 15 hours. Fourteen defendants, including Nikolayev, were condemned to death, and the ruling was carried out forthwith.

Zinoviev and Kamenev were also taken into custody during the investigation and brought to Leningrad. There, they were charged with 'moral and political responsibility' for the assassination. Along with Zinoviev, who was placed behind bars for ten years, and Kamenev, who was to serve five, nineteen other persons were sent to prison. The NKVD resolution resulted in seventy-seven former leading party functionaries being sentenced to internment in a 'concentration camp' or exiled to remote regions of the USSR.¹⁵⁵ In subsequent trials, seventeen more people were condemned to death, seventy-six sentenced to prison, thirty to exile, and 988 to party punishment. Up to 11,000 members of the pre-revolution upper class were punished administratively.¹⁵⁶

The main goal of these rulings was, however, not chiefly to punish the culprits, but rather to create a basis for mass terror to be carried out against members of the post-revolution political and social elite of the USSR. In general, rulings were handed down by a kangaroo court. State and party bodies, including VTsIK, the government, the Plenum of the Central Committee of VKS/b and even the Politburo were excluded from taking part in the decisions. The Politburo frequently approved the rulings only after the fact, by memorandum, or without a quorum

representatives of the procedural parties, i.e., of prosecutors and defence lawyers, judicial review is not allowed and death sentences shall be executed immediately after their publication. The act is dated 1.12.1934, the day the murder and was approved by the politburo and the presidium of VCIK SSSR only 3.12. It was abolished in 1956.

154 See Reabilitatsiya: Kak eto bylo, Vol. II, p. 547: "*File material and review materials show that only Nikolayev's charges were justified...*".

155 Reabilitatsiya: Kak eto bylo, Vol. II, p. 551 Shvernik commission found out that "*Zinoviev's Moscow counterrevolutionary centre did not exist. No person condemned in this matter had any relationship to the murder of Kirov...*".

156 *Reabilitatsiya: Kak eto bylo*, Vol. II, p. 553; also Khlevniuk O., *Chozjain*, 237; Chaustov V./Samuelson L., *Stalin, NKVD i repressii*, 64; According to later data that includes the purge in Leningrad of former members of the upper class and the purge of the border regions, up to 10,399 families were affected over the four months following December 1934, a total of 34,700 people, 70% of whom had formerly been members of the upper class.

present. There are no doubts that Stalin intended to create a means to punish former members of the party opposition to an unlimited extent, and the initial targets were gradually broadened to taken the punishment of persons Stalin or other bodies decided were disloyal or hostile elements.

As we have already noted, Stalin had probably begun to set the stage for these steps starting in 1932. The famine was only separated from Kirov's death by the space of a year-and-a-half, and in 1932 Stalin began to try to establish capital punishment for party members, but the meaning and impact of Stalin's moves was not immediately transparent to his contemporaries. As part of his policy of moderation, he made a number of conciliatory gestures towards the party that may have disoriented his contemporaries. Even Stalin himself potentially may not have initially been clear about how far he wish to go along this path, but he was certainly clear that neither the public nor the party's upper tier were ready for terror to be turned on the party itself.

The attitudes of the NKVD leaders probably also constituted an especial stumbling block for Stalin. They are frequently trivialized in the literature. In May 1934, Vyacheslav R. Menzhinsky died. After Felix E. Dzerzhinsky, Vyacheslav R. Menzhinsky had become leader of OGPU. The administration of NKVD was taken over by Genrih G. Jagoda. This was clearly a move made under duress: the NKVD leadership was part of the top strata of the USSR, and it was far from clear what its behaviour would be in a situation in which sanctions on former and current party officials and a wider segment of the Soviet elite were at stake. Nikolai I. Yezhov appeared on the horizon of Soviet politics. Stalin entrusted him with the role of party supervisor of security bodies. Yezhov possessed neither education nor culture, and Stalin took advantage of his lack of independence and complete reliance upon Stalin.

Changes in the International Situation and Soviet Politics

The changes that we have been speaking about that were taking place within the internal political situation in the Soviet Union took place at a time when international relations were undergoing a significant shift. The turning point occurred with the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany in January 1933. This twist of events was a serious loss for Soviet foreign policy, because Soviet-German agreements had provided assurance for the USSR against any potential attack from the West. But under Hitler, Germany became the USSR's key military threat.

Originally, both Europe and the USSR grossly underestimated the impact of this turn of events in Germany. As early as October 1933, Germany exited the International Disarmament Conference, announcing immediately afterwards

that it was also leaving the League of Nations. Demands for an increase in the number of Reichswehr troops and to place the Saarland under German control soon appeared on the negotiation table. In March 1935, Nazi Germany renewed universal conscription and made a significant effort to break the restrictions on building the air force and navy. Concerns about Germany had already appeared by the late 1920s, when France and the United States offered to conclude the so-called Kellogg–Briand Pact that bound signatories to resolve conflicts peacefully.¹⁵⁷ The Soviet Union took advantage of the offer to conclude nonaggression agreements with Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Poland, and later even France, and its position improved further when Franklin Roosevelt decided to recognize the USSR *de jure*. The USA played an important role at the time in delivering machinery and equipment to the USSR, where several thousand American experts were at work installing these facilities.

In 1934, another turning point came for Soviet-European politics. The USSR joined the League of Nations and was seated on its council. This happened in spite of the negative connotation ‘Agreement’, ‘Versailles’, and ‘League of Nations’ had for the Soviets. But with these developments, the Soviets supported a plan to create an Eastern regional pact intended to protect the eastern portion of Central Europe against Nazi expansionism. These acts and attitudes, however, were thwarted by German diplomatic activities, under which a separate German-Polish pact was set up in January 1934. This unfavourable development was reinforced by the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia in the autumn of 1934. Jean Barthou, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs and one of the pact’s promoters, was also a victim of the assassination.

But the problem did not lie exclusively in the German-Polish pact. The attitude of the English conservatives in power, who preferred a policy of reconciliation with Germany, was a serious obstacle to shackling Nazi aggression. As a result, the eastern regional pact lost a substantial part of its original meaning for the USSR. In 1935, the country concluded alliance agreements with France and the Czechoslovak Republic, but these agreements in no way replaced the originally planned eastern pact. France’s ties to England words priority, and England, for its part, continued to avoid any conflict with Germany until the spring of 1939.

The alliance with France, though, did not enjoy Stalin’s full support either. He likely believed that Nazi politicians did not seek war against the USSR as

157 Ort, Alexandr: *Evropa 20. století*. Prague: Arista, 2000, pp. 59–61, 69, 72–73. Aristid Briand was the Minister of Foreign Affairs; Frank J. Kellogg was the US Secretary of State. The Pact was signed by six superpowers including Germany and a total of 57 countries cosigned.

a priority, but rather wished to weaken France and Belgium, thereby opening room for Germany in Western Europe.¹⁵⁸ Stalin was still cognizant of the experience of World War I, believed in the potential dominance of the Western countries, and did not wish to repeat Russia's experience from the war, which bled the country to death. All this likely impacted Stalin's attitude to potential collaboration between the Communists and the Social Democrats in Germany and other countries.

Stalin's attitude on these issues was nevertheless subjected to severe trials. The danger of a turn to the right soon also became acute in Austria, Spain, and France, where it caused the mobilization of left-wing forces that in 1936 brought victory to the government of the 'People's Front', headed by Leon Blum. The rise of this government was the result of a sharp turn by the French electorate in the communist direction. Stalin recommended French Communists not to participate in Blum's government but to support it 'from the outside', something which naturally brought no benefit to either the left-wing nature of the government or the People's Front.

The devastating consequences of Stalin's attitude were soon reflected in neighbouring Spain. There, the reinforced left-wing, together with its citizen supporters, created a government whose conflict with the right wing resulted in civil war. The French 'People's Front' government decided not to aid the Spanish Republicans, fearing an isolated conflict with Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, which intervened in Spain. The British government, for its part, insisted on 'non-intervention', and exerted strong pressure upon Paris to comply, which it did.¹⁵⁹ The Spanish generals who attacked the Republican government took this as a go-ahead. In autumn of 1936, Germany and Italy recognized the generals' government and continued to intervene.

We will not go into further detail about the events that unfolded in Spain. For our purposes, it is enough to note that Soviet policy did nothing to help protect the Spanish Republic from interventions, nor did it work toward making the USSR and its future allies opposed to Hitler draw closer. The Spanish civil war was primarily a gain for Stalin because it shifted the epicentre of international conflict away from Soviet borders, and particularly because it provided him with

158 Reference is made to Stalin's editing of Tuchachevsky's article entitled "Military Plans of Current Germany" and Tuchachevsky's "probing" in Paris and Berlin in January 1936. See Minakov S. T.: *Voyennaya elita 20–30 godov XX. veka*, Moscow, Russkoje slovo, 2004; pp. 421–422 and 424–426.

159 Cf. Furét F., *Das Ende der Illusionen: Kommunismus im 20. Jahrhundert*. München-Zürich, Piper, 1998. pp. 316–319.

the time he needed for his internal political purge. But Stalin could not remain on the sidelines of what was happening in Spain, even if he did not risk taking a direct part in the war. He sent no military units to Spain, but he did send ‘specialists’, military commanders and political commissioners who were charged with helping build Spanish security forces, and who intervened into the composition of Spanish government institutions and the general staff.¹⁶⁰ International brigades made up of volunteers from various countries, particularly communists, fought on the side of the Republicans. Approximately 35,000 in number, they accounted for six of the 137 brigades operating within Republican Spain, and they fought bravely.

Midway through the purges unfolding in the USSR, Stalin could hardly have wished for serious international complications, but he was likely still basing his actions on the presumption that Hitler was primarily targeting the West.¹⁶¹ He therefore had no reason not to be happy that Germany and Italy had their hands busy in remote Spain. But he probably underestimated the significance of France’s deepening dependency on Britain. The awakening came in September 1938 in Munich, when England and France sat down to the negotiation table with Hitler and Mussolini. The Spanish intermezzo had allowed Stalin time to murder his own countrymen and the social elites, including his army leadership, but it did not protect the USSR from Nazi expansionism, and it weakened the European left-wing and civic democratic parties as potential allies in the war against Hitler.

Stalin’s Constitution

Stalin’s foreign policy, particularly his policy on France and Spain must be noted. One glance will make apparent labyrinthine character and will reveal that Stalin’s withdrawal from the policy of non-intervention in Spain was not a simple act of solidarity. It was tied to the webwork of his policy as a whole. The heightening of internal political repression and the manner in which it belied the promises of the new ‘democratic’ Soviet constitution was no accident. Stalin’s trials were not targeted against ‘perverts’ or ‘dissidents’, but rather against ‘terrorists’ and

160 Erickson J., *The Soviet High Command*, pp. 429–432. The Soviet government continually denied the presence of Soviet soldiers and “volunteers” in Spain.

161 *Ibid*, 428–429; *Politbyuro CK RKP/b–VKP/B: Resheniya ‘osobo papki’* (treatise by M. M. Narinsky), pp. 300–302.

‘agents of foreign superpowers’,¹⁶² In choosing these labels, Stalin suggested he did not consider Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan his allies, and to the public he suggested that he was not trying to suppress democracy but to expand it. The proposed new constitution was to serve as testimony to this.

Stalin’s internal policies were not aimed only at liquidating the opposition. An important goal was to reconstruct the mass of ties the regime had inherited from the 1920s. These represented an obstacle to Stalin’s plans for centralization and were also a frequent basis for differences of opinion. This was also true for transferring the competencies of individual republics to nationwide institutions in Moscow.

Here we should take notice of voting reform. The literature has frequently interpreted this reform as a democratizing element of Stalin’s constitution. Multistage elections were abolished, peasants and workers gained equal rights, and members of the upper stratum in pre-revolutionary Russia gained suffrage, but the reform did not touch the party power monopoly. ‘The new draft constitution...maintains the working class dictatorship, just as it leaves the Communist Party unchanged in the leading position,’ Moscow Pravda commented.¹⁶³ With the abolition of multistage elections, the competencies of elected representative bodies were radically reduced, limiting their ability to influence the composition and policies of higher bodies.

For Stalin, the true achievement lay in the relationship between the party and the government, now anchored in the constitution. Earlier, the Politburo and the Central Committee of the governing party had possessed the power to discuss important issues related to government actions, but the party apparatus had no position of authority over leading representatives. The Prime Minister’s position was firm, something which was particularly revealed when economic and social issues were resolved. The government and its bodies, STO and VSNCh, influenced the control, planning, and coordination of activities of the extensive state economic complex. Disputes between government officials and party officials were usually factual in nature and the competencies of party representatives were generally political. But Stalin continued to exert control over the operations of ministries that possessed power potential, such as OGPU,

162 Hitler ordered German diplomats whose names were mentioned in connection with trials to explain the incidents. They claimed the charges had no material basis. Moscow dismissed Germany’s subsequent diplomatic intervention by saying the explanations had been offered by enemies of the country. (*Politisches Archiv Auswärtiges Amtes, Botschaft Moskau A2I*).

163 *Pravda*, 26.11.1936.

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the army. Originally, these were under the control of the head of government, who cemented his influence by promoting his own people to work in these ministries: Kliment Ye. Voroshilov, Anastas I. Mikoyan, Maxim M. Litvinov V.R. Menzhinsky and later N.I. Yezhov. Many times he removed people, who were capable and independent from these institutions, which was one of the conflicts he had with the Prime Minister and significant members of the government. Originally, there were system obstacles in place against the interference of the “party” in the government. On many occasions, he removed capable, independent people from these institutions, a source of conflict with the Prime Minister and with leading members of the government. Originally, the system had safeguards built in to keep the party from tampering with the government’s areas of competency. Its role, and that of the Prime Minister, derived from the original notion that they should play a key role in the power structure. But Stalin viewed the role played by the government (SNK), the Soviet Bureau, and the Council of Labour and Defence (STO) with undisguised hatred. ‘Our top Soviet political elite,’ he said, ‘is suffering a terminal disease. The STO has turned from a working, fighting body into an empty parliament. The SNK is paralyzed by Rykov’s weak moves counter to party interests. The Deputy Committee has a tendency to behave like a team squared off against the Central Committee. It’s clear this can’t go on.’¹⁶⁴

But more than just these governmental bodies was involved. Other obstacles to Stalin included the VSNCh, People’s Commissariat for Finance (Narkomfin) and the Military-Revolutionary Committee (VRS), which coordinated various aspects of the government’s work. With the ‘right-wing perverts’ out of the way, Stalin began to carry out structural changes in the government. By appointing Molotov to the post of Prime Minister, the state became subject to party supervision. Stalin’s policy moves were aimed at changing the government’s role within the power structure and abolishing bodies that coordinated its operation from within.¹⁶⁵ The constitution was democratic on paper only, since the democratization process was focused on electing bodies who were anyway losing their role as independent decision-makers.

164 *Pis'ma I. V. Stalina V. M. Molotovu*, p. 217 – Letter from Stalin to Molotov dated 13.9.1930.

165 Resolution of the Seventeenth Congress of VKS/B “*Partiynoye i sovyetskoye stroit-estvo*”, in: *KPSS v rezolyutsiyakh i resheniyakh*, Vol. II, pp. 765–771.