

# Introduction

Although a scattering of memoirs and other literature emerged during the period between the wars, it was in the 1950s that the pace of international research into the history of the Soviet Union visibly hastened. Its course was serpentine, with a scope of investigation that reached well beyond the dictatorial, later totalitarian, turn taken by the political powers when Russia's traditional government and social system collapsed in 1917. State and social structures, the economy, personal relationships, science and culture – the elements which a country's national life is constructed of – were placed upon fresh foundations in Soviet Russia and the USSR. International relationships, as well, were drawn a new. Accordingly, those who would research these events must take deeper notice of political history and the decisions of the governing powers than they otherwise might.

Indeed, the progress of the research has itself suggested the course of Soviet political history. In recent decades, Soviet history in general, and the country's political history in particular, have seen a clash of ideological and political concepts. Key in this was the watertight censorship of the Soviet regime, which condemned Soviet historians to parrot officially approved historical schemas. Another factor was the Cold War atmosphere that insinuated itself into research and influenced the ideology and politics of social science content both in the East and, in a different guise, in Western Europe and the United States.

Today, the archives have been unsealed and censorship controls relaxed in Russia and the USSR successor states, and historiographical research has attained to a new standard. Previously unknown sources have surfaced to redefine our views of Soviet history. Their interpretation has been enhanced by the contributions of Russian and Russian-speaking historians, who, freed of their fetters, have lent valuable insight into the nuances of Russian and Soviet ideology, psychology, and the country's way of life.

But these newly emerged sources are marked by internal tensions and substantive conflicts that stem from the diverging views held immediately after World War II by Western researchers, on the one hand, and leftists, European communists and Soviet historians on the other. The former were influenced by the concept of totalitarianism, which equated the Soviet system to that of Germany in the grip of the Nazis. In the 1917 revolution and the USSR's subsequent development, the latter, by contrast, saw the construction of a socialist society. This view of Soviet historiography did not initially change even once the excesses of the Stalin era had been revealed. The disclosures did cause a number of historiographical

tenets to be challenged; but heavy censorship was brought to bear, dissent was squelched, and essential information was kept classified. And so, Soviet historians of the era remained blocked from venturing into new directions of research.

When the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union took place in 1956, it was Western sources of research that were chiefly impacted by its outcome. In the United States, and later in Europe, studies challenging the dominance of the totalitarianism concept appeared with growing frequency. This was especially true in the work of the American 'revisionists', soon to be supported by European scholars as well. They conducted meticulous studies of social and sociocultural elements, and performed detailed analyses of the facts of Soviet development.

By the early 1960s, the official portrayal of Soviet history had eroded to the point that its loss of status was felt in the USSR itself, as well as in the countries of the Soviet bloc and among Western left-wing theorists and communists. The attempt to deal critically with the reality of the Soviet system that lay beneath the shift in outlook, particularly Stalin and Stalinism, formed the thrust of an emerging stream of dissent, and figured prominently in the writings of post-Stalin émigrés. The dissenters lacked internal homogeneity. Some bought into the notion of totalitarianism with which they had become acquainted. But the left flank, for political and factual reasons, took a different tack. On a number of points, it approximated the ideas on Soviet history of the Western revisionists. During the 1980s, it was the totalitarianism concept, alongside various offshoots of Russian and other nationalist ideologies, which gradually gained ground among Soviet dissenters and Soviet émigrés.

Before it could secure its position, however, the 1991 collapse of the USSR took place, making Soviet archive materials available. Historiography in the USSR assumed a new form and acquired a new focus. Most former taboos gave way, and a wide-ranging exchange of opinions among historians from the former USSR and the West sprang up. A kind of revolution in historiography had been sparked. Research into the history of the USSR was internalized, and a process of assimilating international currents of thought got underway. But the historiography of the individual nations and state systems of the former USSR, including that of the Russians, was also strongly influenced by nationalist ideology. It took holding the course of the countries' own efforts to justify their frequently incipient existence as nations and states, and was concurrently reflected in international research.

Our objective in this book will not be to evaluate the outcome of this historiographical development – even more so since it is far from complete. Our own

sympathies lie with those concepts and methodologies that approach their subject differentially, assessing the multifaceted impact and significance of events.

The research that has been carried out in both the West and in the former USSR has focused, above all, on Stalinism – its origin and development, its causes and consequences. Crucially, this research has understated the degree to which the historical picture was distorted by Cold War elements whose roots, in many cases, reach deeper down than the developments after World War II. Indeed, they reflect many ideological and political schemas already in existence prior to World War I, as expressions of the rifts and conflicts between the imperial powers in Russia and the Central European states, particularly Germany. This is worth highlighting, because once the Cold War had ended, these could have served as starting points for the development of ‘novel’ ideologies, which might have justified the long-standing antagonisms between the Western world and the European East, and perhaps other regions as well.

The history of Russia after 1945 is beyond the scope of this work. Present-day Russia is not a totalitarian state. This is despite the fact that it is plagued by abiding problems that cannot be remedied by simply trying out Western political and social patterns. For reasons which merit targeted, independent research, Russia's development in the pre-Soviet period substantially lagged that of the leading European countries – Great Britain, France, and Germany – as well as that of the USA. After 1917, its developmental potential was severely checked in turn by the collapse in World War I, the Stalinist terror and the consequences of Stalinism, and the heavy losses incurred in the war with Nazi Germany. The latter took a toll of 25–29 million lives, with a material and cultural loss impossible to quantify even today. Russia lost several generations of its elite. But while it is true that the Bolsheviks had overestimated their chances of boosting the living standard in the USSR to catch up with the developed world, even this is no alibi for the country's backwardness, which concealed its weak points and hid its deficiencies.

In reality, the rise of Russia was never contingent simply upon political will. The mere adoption of Western patterns could not bring it about. What was needed was something attained neither easily nor quickly: a far-reaching, nationwide effort. Attempts to speed changes in Russia's standard of living usually saw existing levels of economic and social progress in Russia and the USSR exaggerated in an ultimately unhealthy effort to maintain superpower status. The development that took place on this basis did nothing to ease the friction between Eastern and Western Europe, or to blunt the threat of mutual alienation between them.

The pages to follow treat the history of Russia from 1917 until 1945. This period contains, in concentrated form, the negative aspects that have attended the

country's evolution in the present era, and that have generated frequent discussion about the extent to which Russia is a part of Europe. In fact, the country's role in the political and cultural history of the continent has been considerable, and this should not be forgotten. Thesis also true with respect to the Europe of the twentieth-century, influenced as it was by Russian leaders such as Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky, who made a lasting mark on the course of European history and European political thinking. As historians, we must eschew anything that might obscure the ties between Russia and Europe and unwillingly fuel their mutual alienation – with potentially fatal consequences for both.

We are not speaking here solely about ideological constructs that express the diminished significance of the world role played by Europe and European civilization, in the process reducing that role even further. The tendentious, imprecise way twentieth-century researchers retold the events of Soviet and European history gave rise to many conceptualizations and ideological schemas that influenced research into individual issues, some of key importance. Today, large numbers of Soviet sources are being published and scrutinized. But frequently, they bear the marks of the outdated Soviet and European perceptions of history that stem from prior decades. Even though the sources themselves may be bona fide historiographical or, in academic in another discipline, they burden the discipline with the weight of outmoded stereotypes.

To us today, Stalin's attempt to reshape society by violence and mass terror seems to have posed a much greater danger than some historians of the 1970s and 1980s perceived in it;<sup>1</sup> freshly declassified materials show that the regime's brutality went enormously beyond what most earlier literature had supposed.<sup>2</sup> But even with what has come to light about Stalin, the fact remains that the USSR cannot be force-fitted into a one-size-fits-all, internally homogeneous concept of totalitarianism that encompasses both Stalinism and Nazism.

We discuss here the historical classification of terror and the role it plays, as well as the use of the term 'totalitarianism' in Soviet history. The Stalinist terror

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- 1 Litvin A. / Keep J., *Stalinism: Russian and Western views at the turn of the Millenium*, London / New York, Roudedge / Taylor & Francis Group, 2005; see also Voráček E., *Stalinismus a Sovětský Svaz 1927–1939. Historiografie, evoluce výzkumu, problém výkladu fenoménu a jeho interpretační modely*, in: Litera B. a kol., *Formování stalinského mocenského systému: K problematice tzv. sebedestrukce bolševiků 1928–1939*, Prague, HIU ČAV, 2003.
  - 2 This is clear in, e.g., Wert Nicolas, *La Terreur et le Désarrois: Staline et son systeme*, Khlevniuk O, *Chozjajin: Stalin i utverzhennye stalinskoy diktatury*, Moscow, ROSSPEN 2010.

was a complex historical phenomenon. It was not a direct descendent of the terror of the revolution or the civil war, even if this period did leave a significant mark. Instead, it was in the post-revolutionary phase of Lenin's rule, separated from the 1930s though it was by the NEP period, that the Stalinist terror found its roots, transmitted by the same generation, still in power. The terror was motivated by a fundamental crisis the Soviet system suffered in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Market inequalities brought about deep differences in the character and tempo of agricultural versus industrial development, as well as in what was required for that development to take place. It was thus from sources other than those that had motivated the terror of the revolution and the civil war that the terror of the 1930s sprang.

Special attention must be given to the "Great Purge" of 1934–38 that arose out of the aforementioned crisis. In 1937–38, this mass terror, directed against social elites and holders of post-revolutionary power, resulted in the arrest of 1.5 million citizens by the NKVD, according to official figures. The actual numbers were undoubtedly much higher. Of these victims, 700,000 were executed.<sup>3</sup> This extended instance of terror was unique from its outset in mostly targeting entire social strata instead of specific individuals, adversaries, or opponents of the regime. The victims hailed from groups reluctant, for one reason or another, to accept the plans and decisions of the governing party. The impact of the repression was felt as well in social relationships, where it functioned to forcibly reshape social life. Many of the means used were justified as essential for the 'construction of socialism'.<sup>4</sup> During Stalin's reign, as during Lenin's, show trials were held of 'counterrevolutionaries' and 'saboteurs'. These repugnant performances were offered to explain away failed governmental projects and mistakes made during the economic and social reconstruction process. The 700,000 people we have noted were executed during this two-year period starting in 1937 – half of those jailed – received no judicial

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3 *Reabilitatsiya: Kak eto bylo. Dokumenty Priezidiuma CK KPSS i drugie materialy*, eds. A. N. Jakovliev, Volume 1, Moscow, MFD, 2000, pp. 76–77, tab. 15; official data from 1954. The term "terror" in the proper sense of the word, however, includes not only mass arrests, imprisonment, and the murder of citizens. It also includes a policy of *intimidation* whose goal was to attain certain social or other objectives. This is important to note, because its restricted use may easily cause a distortion of historical reality.

4 Reiman, Michal: *Lenin, Stalin, Gorbachev: Kontinuität und Brüche in der sowjetischen Geschichte*, Hamburg, Junius, 1987, 140–142; Stalin's notes on the topic the following during the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress of VKS/b (1930): "*Repressions in the Course of Socialist Construction Are a Necessary Element for an Offensive*". See Stalin, *Sochineniya*, Volume 12, p. 309.

hearing of any kind. This aspect of the Great Purge will be discussed in the main text. These victims differed from those who suffered under Stalin's restructuring of the economy and society by being ensnared in a systematic effort to massacre the post-revolutionary Soviet political, social, and cultural elite.

What is written here is based upon a monograph I co-authored, entitled *Genesis of a Superpower: The History of the USSR 1917–1945*. The goal in that publication was to explore the depiction of the USSR during the period referenced in the title by historians of the past. In addition to the crucial issues of the era, it investigated specific facts which had been left out of historiographies from both the East and the West, and whose omission derived from political or ideological motivations, or otherwise stemmed from inadequate research or a biased point of view. The present text offers the content and conclusions of that work in a briefer form.

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