

Stalin and the Communist Party in the 1920s

Did the system spawn a monster - or a monster the system? Norman Pereira re-evaluates the road to totalitarianism in the Soviet Union after the Revolution, and Stalin's part in it.



Stalin, Lenin and Mikhail Kalinin in 1919The chief political story of the 1920s in Soviet Russia was the rise to supreme power of Joseph Stalin, and the related failure of Leon Trotsky. Their rivalry – which moved from relatively minor antagonisms and jealousies to bitter competition for the role of Lenin's successor – deeply divided the Bolshevik (renamed Communist in 1918) party and the international revolutionary movement in general; it also coloured many of the more important issues facing the new state.

In the West, Stalin has been depicted as a sinister figure, virtually unknown until Lenin's death in January 1924, who somehow managed to outmanoeuvre the vastly more talented and deserving Trotsky to become Lenin's successor. This picture is misleading because it does not acknowledge Stalin's years of service in the Bolshevik cause, long before Trotsky turned his back on Menshevism to join the party in 1917; and it does not take into account the cultural parochialism of the millions of workers/peasants who entered the ranks during the critical 1917-21 years of revolution and civil war, and became Stalin's base constituency. For these people, Stalin was a role model, while the other top leaders were either too cosmopolitan and intellectual, or simply alien. It was his closeness to the unlettered masses which constituted Stalin's great, and often misunderstood, strength. Of course, intrigue, treachery, and terror also contributed to his success, but by themselves they do not account for Stalin's extraordinary role or popularity (which survives in some circles in the former Soviet Union to this day).

Stalin was never an intimate of Lenin in the manner of either Grigory Zinoviev or Lev Kamenev; they were Lenin's most trusted assistants and close personal friends from the founding of the Bolshevik party in the early years of the twentieth century. Nor was Stalin the intellectual equal of Nikolai Bukharin who, with Lenin, was responsible in 1921 for formulating the New Economic Policy (NEP) which offered the peasantry a partial return to small-scale agrarian capitalism and a free market economy. And almost everyone – including Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Bukharin – assumed that Stalin was no match for Trotsky, whose prestige had just reached its zenith with his triumphant leadership of the Red Army in the civil war (1918-21).

Stalin was not without his own special qualities which prompted Lenin to have him appointed to the Central Committee as early as 1913. With the possible exceptions of Zinoviev and Kamenev, there was no one upon whom Lenin relied more for the most difficult party tasks. When the rest of the leadership had been forced into

exile abroad by the Tsarist authorities, Stalin remained in Russia, and continued to look after the unglamorous day-to-day work of the party. If he lacked the verbal facility of some of his peers, Stalin more than made up for it with shrewd judgement, a fine memory, common sense, and an uncanny sense of timing. Even his relatively poor education and ungrammatical Russian worked to his advantage because they made him appear to be more a man of the people, especially in comparison with the silver tongued Jews, Trotsky and Zinoviev.

During the initial period of Soviet power, Stalin appeared to be the mediator among titans. When clashing ambitions in the leadership jeopardised party unity, it was he who offered to step down – at the Twelfth Party Congress in 1923 (when Lenin was already too ill to participate) and again at the fifteenth, in 1927. Even if they were ploys, these gestures were effective and stood in marked contrast with the too obvious self-promotion of the Zinovievs and the Kamenevs. Stalin could also be tactful in disagreement; his rhetoric was low-key, even with a touch of self-deprecatory humour. Remarkable as it may seem in retrospect, until the end of the 1920s, he was widely regarded as the man of the golden mean, as the bridge between the extremes of left (Trotsky and later Zinoviev and Kamenev) and right (Bukharin and his allies).

Stalin cultivated this role of mediator in another way as well. He concentrated on the thankless and unglamorous task of providing exegesis for one or another of Lenin's dense texts. This was no small contribution, since so much of what the leader wrote was not readily accessible to the general public. It was Stalin's job to grasp the gist of the argument and paraphrase it for wider consumption.

Gradually Stalin developed his own unique rhetorical style, marked by deliberateness, concreteness, and repetition. As in a good undergraduate lecture or parish sermon, his listener/ reader was taken step-by-step through the esoteric new knowledge, given specific examples drawn from common experience, guided through the whole process again, and told exactly what it all meant. He peppered his writings and speeches with italics for emphasis, especially when quoting Lenin or himself. Using common folk idiom, he reduced complex issues to neat formulas which could be easily absorbed. In bringing the message from the stratosphere to the ground, Stalin did for Lenin what, in a different context, Lenin had done for Marx. But his goal was more narrowly conceived: to convince the masses of the correctness of the Party's policy.

Stalin's famous oath of fealty to the just-deceased Lenin perfectly conveys the sing-song, patristic quality of his style:

In leaving us, Comrade Lenin ordered us to hold high and keep pure the great title of member of the Party. We vow to thee, Comrade Lenin, that we shall honourably fulfil this thy commandment... In leaving us, Comrade Lenin ordered us to guard the unity of our Party like the apple of our eye. We vow to thee, Comrade Lenin, that we shall fulfil this thy commandment, too... In leaving us, Comrade Lenin ordered us to guard and strengthen the dictatorship of the proletariat. We vow to thee, Comrade Lenin, that without sparing our strength we shall honourably fulfil this thy commandment, too...

It was unimaginable that Trotsky or Lenin would under any circumstances express himself in such mawkish terms, but to the Russian peasant ear the words were familiar and comforting.

With the onset of Lenin's critical illness in 1922 and the power vacuum it created, Stalin began to position himself for the imminent succession struggle. He challenged Trotsky's ingenious theory of 'Permanent Revolution' which provided a justification for the seizing of power by the Bolsheviks (in apparent contradiction of orthodox Marxism) within a still largely rural and pre-industrial society.

For Stalin this was a potentially risky line of attack, since Lenin himself had sanctioned Trotsky's theory as the appropriate refutation of the Mensheviks' main criticism that the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution was historically premature. By contrast to Bolshevism's revolutionary ardour, Menshevism was characterised by a strict adherence to the generic rules set forth by Marx and Engels for evolution from capitalism to socialism. Trotsky countered the Menshevik argument by proposing that the two revolutions, bourgeois and proletarian, could be 'telescoped' into one continuous process which together with the more developed West would bring about a pan-

European socialist community. Implicit to Trotsky's analysis, however, was the assumption that socialism in Russia was dependent upon socialist revolutions in the advanced industrial nations of the West; by itself the Russian revolution would become isolated and inevitably succumb to domestic reaction and foreign intervention.

Stalin's strategy was to depict himself as the true disciple of Lenin, and Trotsky as a Menshevik renegade who was twisting Lenin's legacy. For his part, Trotsky pointed to the dying leader's belated concern with the unrestrained growth of bureaucracy which every one knew signified the apparatus of Stalin's Secretariat. With Lenin out of the way, at the Party Conference of January 1924 Stalin counter-attacked by accusing his foe of slandering 'the collective leadership and splitting the party'.

Stalin made the most of the fears of the party majority for whom Trotsky's anti-bureaucratism was not merely a matter of high politics, but a direct threat to their own new-found prominence and status in society. That was why it had to be refuted as apostasy, even if to do so meant distorting both the theory of 'Permanent Revolution' and Lenin's position. Thus they echoed Stalin's words:

The Leninist theory of proletarian revolution is the negation of the theory of 'permanent revolution.' Distrust in the strength and capacity of our revolution, distrust in the strength and capacities of the Russian proletariat forms the basis of the theory of 'permanent revolution'. The theory of 'permanent revolution' advanced by Comrade Trotsky is but another variety of Menshevism.

Trotsky countered with his 'Lessons of October', published in autumn of 1924, which argued that the revolution was being betrayed from the right, but he stopped short of implicating Stalin.

The problem for Trotsky was tactical as well as strategic. He believed that he was obliged by Leninist norms of party discipline to fight the battle inside the party where there was little chance of success because of Stalin's role as General Secretary. As of the beginning of 1923, party membership was barely half a million people and therefore only a tiny proportion of the general population. In society at large and in the army Trotsky was far more popular. But there was the real danger of a split in the Bolshevik leadership being exploited by their common enemies.

Trotsky, nevertheless, always believed that he could overcome opposition with the force of his arguments and reasoning. By contrast, Isaac Deutscher describes Stalin as a 'Communist pessimist' because he 'treats his own doctrine as a piece of esoteric knowledge. He does not believe that the working classes are really capable of accepting it, unless it is, brutally speaking, pushed down their throats'. Stalin counted on rank-and-file members caring less about intellectual consistency than about social solidarity and party-consciousness:

We Communists are people of a special type. We are carved out of special matter. We are those who form the army of the great revolutionary strategist, the army of Comrade Lenin. There is no loftier title than member of the Party of which Comrade Lenin was the founder and director. It is not given to everyone to endure the misfortunes and the storms involved in belonging to such a party. The sons of the working classes, sons of poverty and struggle, sons of incredible privations and heroic efforts – they are the men to be members of such a party. That is why the Leninist Party, the Communist Party calls itself the party of the working classes.

Stalin, it is true, stressed a particular side of Lenin: his revolutionary will, his scorn of Menshevik 'objectivism' – all those rules about when the situation would finally be ripe for socialism – and his contempt for 'bourgeois democracy' in politics. Stalin also shared with Lenin a fierce commitment to the primacy of the Communist Party. The essence of the matter for them both was the party's claim to being the sole legitimate representative of the working class: 'Our party is a party of the elect... Our party has a monopoly among the working class'.

Stalin was shrewd enough to realise, moreover, that this monopoly would only last so long as the party promoted

the interests of its mass membership, made up increasingly of recent recruits from the unskilled workers and peasants. Through his appointment in April 1922 as General Secretary (a position which initially was seen to be largely administrative rather than the fulcrum of authority it became) he was able to create a network of like-minded and class-allied local party bosses around the country. These men became his eyes, ears, and loyal agents.

But that was not all. Again taking his cue from Lenin, Stalin insisted that the party operate like an army. In a speech on December 2nd, 1923, he described it as 'a military union of those who act alike on the basis of a common programme'. The image was not fortuitous, armies are not democratic and they do not tolerate division of authority or dissent within their ranks.

Because of its special role and nature, Stalin believed that the party was particularly vulnerable to hidden internal enemies. Robert Tucker portrays Stalin as a victim of his own delusions:

In Stalin's mind, then, the hero-image of himself was in symbiosis with a villain image of the enemy. Counterposed to the picture of himself as a great revolutionary and Marxist, the truest of Lenin's disciples and his rightful successor at the head of the movement, was a picture of the enemy inside the party as would-be betrayer of it and the Revolution.

To fight such dangerous influences, it was absolutely necessary for Stalin to be tough, even if that made him look like an oriental despot. Indeed, for many of his followers it was an important part of his appeal. The omnipotent and omniscient boss was still the norm in a society so recently under Tsarist autocracy. Moreover, Stalin's notion of Russia at the centre of the universe was close to the cosmology of the Orthodox Church and peasantry:

The centre of the revolutionary movement was bound to shift to Russia. Is it surprising, after all this, that a country which has accomplished such a revolution and possesses such a proletariat would have been the birthplace of the theory and tactics of the proletarian revolution? Is it surprising that Lenin, leader of this proletariat, became the creator of this theory and tactics and the leader of the international proletariat?

This had a triple effect: it asserted Russian primacy, rejected the indignity of dependence upon and comparison with the West, and implicitly refuted Trotskyism.

Stalin's own seminal theory – *Socialism In One Country* – asserted that Soviet Russia could successfully build socialism on its own. Sanctioned by the Fourteenth Party Conference in April 1925, this marked a real shift in emphasis for the Communist party as for the Soviet state. In Sheila Fitzpatrick's words, it 'meant that national modernisation, not international revolution, was the primary objective of the Soviet Community Party'. Thereafter the explicit priority was to strengthen the international position of the Soviet state, even at the expense of the world revolution and Communist parties ahead, since the survival of Soviet Russia was the chief thing.

Socialism In One Country had much to offer the party faithful. First of all, it was optimistic and affirmative about Russia's future:

Whereas Lenin considers that the victory of socialism in one country is possible..., Trotsky, on the contrary, considers that if a victorious revolution in one country does not very soon call forth a victorious revolution in other countries, the proletariat of the victorious country will not be able even to retain power (let alone organize a socialist economy); for, Trotsky says, it is hopeless to think that a revolutionary government in Russia can hold out in the face of a conservative Europe..

The point was to make Trotsky appear disloyal and defeatist, as well as a usurper. According to Stalin, Trotskyism

meant that Russia's future was 'either (to) rot to the root, or [to] degenerate into a bourgeois government'. This, of course, was unfair to Trotsky, but it had enough truth in it to give pause and to pave the way for bigger lies.

At the Twelfth Party Congress it was Zinoviev (rather than Stalin) who took charge of beating back Trotskyist demands for greater accountability on the part of the Secretariat:

the good of the revolution – this is the highest law. Every revolutionist says: to the devil with 'sacred' principles of 'pure' democracy.

Inexplicably Trotsky himself kept silent, despite Lenin's last-ditch offer from his sick-bed of support in the fight against Stalin's bureaucratic concentration of power. The next round in the political struggle took shape during the spring and summer of 1925 when Zinoviev and Kamenev attempted to out-flank Stalin from the left. They now joined Trotsky in emphasising that NEP had been conceived by Lenin as a 'strategic retreat' in the face of overwhelming temporary privations of war and natural disasters facing the young Soviet state, and that it was time to scrap NEP and retake centralised command of the economy in order to build socialism without further delay.

Stalin, with the support of the right, quickly responded that such criticism demonstrated a Trotskyist misunderstanding of the purpose and nature of NEP which was based upon winning over the poor peasantry to the side of the proletarian dictatorship; and that in their failure to distinguish between the rural poor and rich kulaks, Zinoviev and his allies were showing themselves to be both bad Leninists and fundamentally 'anti-peasant'.

By the end of 1925, moreover, it was already too late for the reunited left to be effective against Stalin's growing monopoly on power. There had been so much blood spilled in public between Zinoviev and Trotsky that it obscured their basic agreement on economic priorities. Even more important, their differences with Stalin were not well-known or understood, particularly outside the narrow confines of the Central Committee.

At the Central Committee plenum in April 1926 the United Opposition (of Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev) still stopped short of a direct attack upon the General Secretariat or open repudiation of NEP. It was not until the middle of 1927, and then only for limited circulation, that they attributed both international and domestic failures to Stalin's theory of 'socialism in one country'. For this breach of discipline, all three were formally expelled from the ranks of the party at the Fifteenth Congress in December, 1927. Thus at the tenth anniversary of their glorious combined victory in 1917, Lenin's closest comrades-in-arms saw their role within the party come to an abrupt and ignominious end.

Having disposed of the left, Stalin was only half done. He then had the Congress reaffirm the principles of NEP but also lay the groundwork for the first Five Year Plan (FYP) which proposed the consolidation of agricultural production into large collective farms as well as a new emphasis upon heavy industry. The FYP, in fact, represented a sharp turning away from NEP toward centralised command of the economy. Initially, however, the transition was presented as a gradual and voluntary plan; there was no indication of the brutally coercive features of implementation which Stalin introduced several months later.

An ideological division had existed all along between a minority (led by Bukharin) in the party which was really enthusiastic about NEP as an alternative path to socialism, and a silent majority which regarded any such concessions to private enterprise as backsliding and a betrayal of Marxism. While Lenin was alive, this restive majority kept quiet, but always in the anticipation that NEP was transitory and that the drive to socialism would be rekindled at the first opportunity.

Stalin maintained a studied silence, whether out of respect for Lenin or for more opportunistic reasons. Prior to 1927-28, and especially in the period just after his 1924 lectures under the title 'Foundations of Leninism', he seemed to be squarely on the side of Bukharin and those who supported the continuation and even extension of NEP, while assiduously promoting the view that Trotsky and the left were anti-NEP and anti-peasant.

When Stalin performed his great turn-about in late 1927 and took over the left analysis, after disposing of its chief advocates, he was not only affirming his own true instincts but also reaping clear political benefits. Thus the decision to abandon NEP coincided with a concerted campaign to depict his former allies on the right as naive and too willing to make common cause with all peasants, including the rich kulaks.

At the end of May, 1928, Stalin sounded the new call to party members: the only solution was massive application of force against the recalcitrant kulaks. Harsh administrative measures were necessary as well to deal with 'wreckers' who were everywhere – in industry, in management, even in the party. Stalin hinted that the policies of the right and a general lack of vigilance were responsible for major industrial sabotage and other social reversals. On October 19th, 1928, he attacked the Moscow party leadership for taking part in a 'Right Deviation'.

Between April 23rd and 29th, 1929, the Sixteenth Party Conference met to adopt Stalin's new industrial and agricultural policy. Bukharin was explicitly identified as leader of the right opposition and denounced for his 'non-Marxian theory that the kulaks will grow into socialism, [and] his failure to understand the mechanism of the class struggle under the dictatorship of the proletariat'. The right was now in full disarray; on November 26th, 1929, Bukharin, A.I. Rykov and M.P. Tomsky suffered the humiliation of having to denounce themselves in public, just as the left opposition had done in the recent past. A month later, Stalin announced ominously that the party had moved on from 'a policy of limiting the exploiting activities of the kulaks to a policy of liquidating the kulaks as a class'. It amounted to a declaration of war on the peasantry.

The decade ended with Zinoviev and Kamenev broken, Bukharin discredited, Trotsky in disgrace and exile abroad, and Stalin alone at the helm about to launch his great adventure in social engineering. Still no one imagined the full terrible consequences of what was to follow, least of all the common people and the party masses who saw in him their natural leader and champion. With one rousing voice they joined the Central Committee in celebrating the occasion of Stalin's fiftieth birthday on December 21st 1929, just as his revolution from above was descending upon their heads.

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Further reading:

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- G.R. Urban (ed), *Stalinism* (St Martin's Press, 1969)
- L. Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (Vintage Books, 1971)
- R.C. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary* (WW Norton, 1990)
- S. Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution 1917-1932* (Oxford University Press, 1985)