



**ДА ЗДРАВСТВУЕТ ВЕЛИКОЕ, НЕПОБЕДИМОЕ ЗНАМЯ
МАРКСА-ЭНГЕЛЬСА-ЛЕНИНА-СТАЛИНА!**

Communism in the Soviet Union

By David Eacker

This examination of the totalitarian features of the Soviet state under Stalin is a great way to learn the differences between two rival ideologies: communism and fascism.

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Introduction

Soviet Russia occupies a prominent place in twentieth-century history. Under Joseph Stalin's rule, the Soviet military played a decisive role in the defeat of Nazi Germany. Yet millions of people died as a direct or indirect consequence of Stalin's reign. Terms like *gulag*, a system of cruel labor camps, have become shorthand for the brutality of communist authoritarianism during his reign. Here we will consider how the Soviet state in the 1920s and 1930s fits the labels totalitarian and authoritarian that are often applied to it and other states of this period.

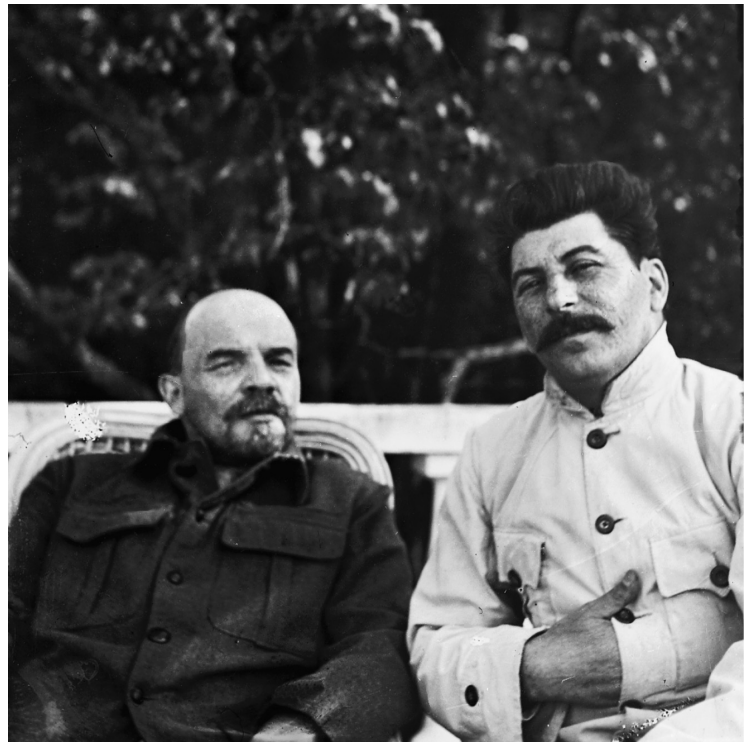
The rise of Stalin

The Soviet Union was born during a period of deep crisis. Its first Premier,¹ Vladimir Lenin, and the Bolshevik (communist) leadership faced big challenges in the first stages of their revolution. They had to guide Russia out of World War I, deal with the famine of 1921–1922, and nationalize an economy that lagged behind its Western rivals. For just three items, it was a nightmare to-do list. To get out of the war—goal number one—Lenin had adopted “hardline War Communism”. This imposed state control directly over the economy. These strict measures went over pretty badly with peasants and many others. So when he got to goals two and three, Lenin was forced to reconsider his response to the famine and the issue of nationalization.

The result was Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1921. It combined state control of certain activities with elements of free market capitalism. The NEP loosened the state's grip on private business and agriculture so the economy could become more flexible and profitable. This “state capitalism” had some positive effects. It freed up workers from direct government intervention in their enterprises and brought some life to the Russian economy. Lenin's willingness to adapt proved successful, at least in the short term.

Shifts like this showed that the Bolsheviks were flexible in the initial years of their rule. For all of their political and ideological enthusiasm, they could be pragmatic and experimental. However, the rise of Joseph Stalin and Stalinism reduced this flexibility.

Stalin took power after Lenin passed away in 1924. He immediately returned the state to an authoritarian stance, as was obvious by his reaction to a food production crisis in 1927–1929. Arguing that grain was a vital national resource, Stalin used state power to forcibly confiscate it from individual farmers. Stalin also waged class warfare against wealthy peasants, or *kulaks*. Whether they resisted or not, they faced a grim fate, and many were killed.



Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin at Gorky, 1922. Public domain.

¹ A premier is a head of a government, like a prime minister.



Soviet agents seizing grain hidden by a Ukrainian peasant in a graveyard. From the RIA Novosti archive, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Forced collectivization² in Ukraine coincided with famine there in 1932–1933 resulting in the deaths of around four million Ukrainians. Historians refer to this as the *Holodomor*, widely regarded as one of the great moral disasters of the period. But Stalin and party elites still relentlessly pursued a command economy. They would stop at nothing to achieve a “revolution from above” in which power emanated throughout society from a centralized state. And that state was to be administered by the Communist Party and its leader.

The expansion of state power under Stalin wasn’t just about agriculture. Industry and the whole economy were organized through a system of Five Year plans. As the 1930s wore on, Soviet leadership pushed for more extreme forms of centralization. Stalin tried to ensure people’s loyalty by purging—or eliminating—anyone he suspected of not being loyal to the party or himself. The party elite had a lot of paranoia about “class enemies”, and Stalin knew just how to use it. He played into their fears to gain support for his state machinery of terror and suppression during the purges.

² Collectivization is the idea that, within a state, nothing can be privately owned because everything is meant to be shared with all members of the state.

This system didn't entirely work as planned. Outwardly, it consolidated and exercised power in an authoritarian and totalitarian way. But historian Ronald Grigor Suny has argued that the reality was not so straightforward. In this period, he writes, the state "was in actuality a disorganized, inefficient, and unresponsive leviathan [giant sea monster]." With this in mind, we can think of Stalin's USSR in the 1930s as a regime striving to become totalitarian, but not "totally" getting there.

Social history affects how we understand the nature of power under Stalin's state. Even if this state was as dysfunctional as Suny claims, it still had a profound impact on how people actually lived. State intervention at so many levels of everyday life *did* link people's destinies to regime politics. To get food and a livelihood, folks had to learn how to deal with the state bureaucracy, however incompetent it may have seemed. To do this, they acquired or invented a range of skills. Sheila Fitzpatrick calls these skills "strategies of survival and advancement." Similarly, Stephen Kotkin calls them "little tactics of the habitat."

For our purposes, the main point here is that the state and the people had to evolve a system through negotiation with each other. If the state forced people to adopt certain behaviors to survive, people might respond with innovations that the state did not anticipate, but could work with. To the degree we want to think of the USSR in the 1930s as totalitarian, then, we must still consider the role of regular citizens in the shaping of the Soviet system during this period. Their ability to cope, adapt, and innovate does not diminish the brutality or destructiveness of Stalinist politics. But it does make us reflect on the limits of totalitarianism.

Communism and Fascism

People often compare communism under Stalin with its enemy, fascism, and they had some similarities.

- Both, of course, exhibited an authoritarian impulse to bring the population into line with the aims of the state.
- Both sought to install a totalitarian system that could do as it pleased.
- Both used violence to achieve political ends.
- Both rejected liberalism.
- The fascist "new man" even had a counterpart in the "new Soviet man". Each was a mythic symbol of their movement's values.

Yet for all that, fascism and Soviet communism differed in major ways:

- The Soviets embraced left-wing socialist internationalism, while fascists embraced right-wing ethnic nationalism.
- The Soviets, in theory at least, rejected the doctrines of racism and ethnic nationalism, while these doctrines were central to fascism.
- Soviet communism wanted to erase class and gender inequalities, while fascists wanted to affirm social and gender hierarchies that limited women to marriage and motherhood and promoted a violent cult of masculinity for men.

In general, the Soviets continued to believe that humans could work together to engineer an egalitarian society. Fascists, not so much.

Conclusion

Under Stalin, the USSR embarked on a path toward a centralized command economy. It met many obstacles in its path as circumstances changed in the late 1920s and 1930s. The need to modernize the economy, food shortages, famine, the specter of war with Germany all drove Stalin and Soviet leadership toward more radical policies. Like many things born of necessity, the state that emerged out of this was imperfect. Stalin may have aspired to a finely tuned totalitarian regime, but reality on the ground was less harmonious. While the state he oversaw shaped Soviet life in important ways, it stopped short of becoming fully totalitarian. We can perhaps think of Stalin's state in the 1930s as incipient totalitarianism—a political system *on the way* to becoming totalitarian. The authoritarian and totalitarian features of Stalinism offer tempting comparisons to fascism. However, Soviet Communism's underlying commitment to the rational organization of society along egalitarian, non-racist lines fundamentally distinguished it from fascism.



Poster of Azerbaijan, 1936—Labor Ethics. The words at the bottom of this idealized Image of Labor Equality translate to “We do it like Stakhanov.” Alexey Stakhanov was a “Hero of Socialist Labor” and his pro-socialist work ethic was publicized in this campaign to increase worker productivity. Public domain.

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