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STALIN AND HIS ERA

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ABSTRACT. *The partial opening up of the formerly closed Soviet archives has had an enormous impact on the amount of new historical material available for research. Recent developments in research on Stalin and the Soviet Union are remarkable. The present article examines these developments with respect to three particular topics: 'Stalin and Terror', 'Stalin and ideology', and 'Stalin and society'. It argues that whereas in certain areas new information has led to a greater consensus among historians, in others, such as Stalin's Great Terror, it has led to heated controversy. The article asks why, and suggests that the problem lies both in conceptualization and in the use of historical sources. More generally, the article discusses the present state of knowledge in the field. Because the study of Stalinism is often assessed in the light of the study of Nazism, it includes brief comparisons of Stalin and Hitler and Stalinism and Nazism where appropriate.*

Not so long ago there was such a discipline as Kremlinology: Western scholars and researchers made informed guesswork based on the observation of, say, the standing order of Soviet leaders atop the Lenin Mausoleum in Red Square on celebratory occasions. Scholars like Robert Conquest, the author of the immensely popular *The Great Terror* (1973), went so far as to claim that rumours, for instance, were the best source of Soviet history. Many who practised it still work in the field. The secrecy of the regime made the historical study of the Soviet Union, especially Stalin and his era (1922–53), difficult. This state of affairs contrasted sharply with the study of Hitler and Nazi Germany: thanks largely to the defeat of Nazism in the Second World War, most, if not all, of the relevant historical sources were made available. In the period of *glasnost'* and *perestroika* under Mikhail Gorbachev (1985–91), a torrent of formerly suppressed information on the history of the Soviet Union became accessible.[1] This was followed in the wake of the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union by a flood of more new information.[2]

A decade and a half has passed since then, and diligent work in the formerly closed Soviet archives has begun to bear fruit, although, in comparison with the historians of Nazi Germany, historians of Stalin's Soviet Union still operate under many constraints. An unknown amount of what appear to be critically important documents are still classified, and some de-classified files are being re-classified. (Such regrettable constraints are due to the fact that the Soviet Union, unlike Nazi Germany, did not collapse through defeat in war: the post-Soviet leaders, who were products of the Soviet regime, still

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[1] R. W. Davies, *Soviet history in the Gorbachev revolution* (Bloomington IN, 1989).

[2] R. W. Davies, *Soviet history in the Yeltsin era* (Basingstoke, 1997).

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have a vital interest in keeping certain documents and information secret.) In light of the extraordinary secrecy with which these secret documents are treated, one inevitably wonders if, de-classified, they would change history dramatically. In any case, it seems appropriate to survey briefly the recent literature on Stalin and his era to ascertain the current state of knowledge and research, whilst recognizing that this article cannot cover all the interesting and important subjects in this particular area of research.[3] Discussion is thus restricted to three key topics: Stalin and Terror, Stalin and ideology, and Stalin and Soviet society.[4] In addition, since the study of Nazism is a discipline against which the study of Stalinism is often assessed,[5] brief comparisons will also be drawn in this area.

I

Stalin was, and still is, an enigma. Nearly every foreigner that dealt with him found him inscrutable if sometimes charming in his own way. Even one of Stalin's closest associates, L. M. Kaganovich, found him difficult to understand:

> Stalin was notable for not always disclosing himself. He did not always disclose his plans to us. We had to guess. Often, without disclosing his schemes, he hinted: pay attention to such and such units (*uzly*), pay attention to such and such setup (*oformlenie*). That's all.[6]

Whilst not all extant archival material on Stalin has been made available, large parts of Stalin's personal library and archives are also missing, either stolen or destroyed after his death in 1953.[7] Amongst these documents, seemingly destroyed is Stalin's 1937 instruction permitting the use of torture against suspected 'enemies of the people'.[8] Curiously, however, documents bearing the signature of Stalin authorizing the execution of numerous Soviet citizens during the Great Terror of 1937–8 have been preserved,[9] as has the infamous secret protocol of the 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop pact. Whatever the limitations of the available sources, recent research has clarified the enigmatic figure of Stalin and his era.

One of the most important and contentious issues concerns the Great Terror. In this case, the Soviet instance may be clearer than Hitler's Holocaust. Even though so much more is known about the Holocaust, the Holocaust as a decision has been a bone of contention owing to the lack of definitive documentation. By contrast, many major decisions are now documented in the case of the Great Terror: Stalin's instructions on the Moscow show trials (in which Old Bolsheviks were tried and confessed to being foreign

[3] For a more comprehensive survey of literature, see Alter Litvin and John Keep, *Stalinism: Russian and Western views at the turn of the millennium* (New York, 2005).

[4] For an attempt to assess the more diverse aspects of Stalin, see Sarah Davies and James Harris, eds., *Stalin: a new history* (Cambridge, 2005).

[5] The latest attempt is this regard is Henry Rousso, ed., *Stalinism and Nazism: history and memory compared* (Lincoln NE, 2004); the original French edition was published in 1999.

[6] 'Dve vstrechi s L. M. Kaganovichem', *Novaia i noveishaia istoriia*, 2 (1999), pp. 101–22 at p. 110.

[7] Roy Medvedev and Zhores Medvedev, *The unknown Stalin: his life, death, and legacy* (Woodstock, NY, 2004), especially ch. 3.

[8] A copy has, however, been preserved. See *Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich. 1957. Stenogramma iiun'skogo plenuma TsK KPSS i drugie dokumenty* (Moscow, 1998), pp. 121–2. See also Oleg Mikhailov, 'Limit na rasstrel', *Sovershenno sekretno*, 7 (1993), p. 5.

[9] Dmitri Volkogonov, *Stalin: triumph and tragedy* (London, 1991), pp. 308, 323, 338–9, 422.

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spies),[10] the decision on the so-called 'kulak operation', a Terror operation targeting former kulaks (dispossessed as 'rich peasants'), criminals, ministers of religion, and others;[11] the decisions on the 'national operations', Terror directed at certain national groups such as ethnic Poles, Germans, Koreans, Greeks and Latvians.[12]

Whether Stalin played a central role in the Great Terror (or even whether Stalin knew its extent) has been a contentious issue. Robert Thurston, for instance, strongly questions Stalin's role itself. Recent literature leaves no doubt: Stalin played *the* central role, making all major decisions on the Terror in terms of its initiation, expansion, and ultimate termination.[13] During the summer of 1937, Stalin identified groups of people to be physically liquidated, defined the numerical limits (targets), and in the course of the Terror operations raised the limits sharply. By late 1938, Stalin terminated the operations of mass Terror and removed the chief executioner of Terror, the secret police chief Nikolai Ezhov, who was subsequently executed.[14]

Recent literature, both Western and Russian, has solved yet another puzzle: exactly who was Terrorized. Works by Michael Ellman and Melanie Ilich are noteworthy.[15] Were the victims mainly the elite, such as Old Bolsheviks, party and government officials, and economic managers? Research on Stalin's Terror has until recently focused on these people. Whilst such individuals were visible because of the positions they held before they were arrested and executed, 'ordinary people', such as workers and peasants, were also killed. The exact extent and reach of the Terror has thus become much clearer. In numerical terms, the Terror struck 'ordinary people' more than the elite. As noted earlier, the Terror was not random but directed: kulaks, criminals, priests, certain national groups *and* those associated with them were targeted by the Terror. This point is, however, still disputed by some scholars (such as J. Arch Getty, a historian of the Soviet Union and Charles Maier, a historian of Germany) who maintain that in the course of the Terror operation, the targets became so blurred that the Terror lost all focus and became 'stochastic'.[16] These 'ordinary people' were the bulk of the victims, although the elite was almost certainly disproportionately attacked. In the two years of 1937 and 1938, according to official Soviet data, 790,665 and 554,258 people were indicted respectively for political crimes. Of them, 353,074 and 328,618 were sentenced to be shot respectively. These two years account for 85 per cent of all death sentences from 1921 to 1953. The next peak

[10] As discussed in R. W. Davies Oleg V. Khlevniuk, and E. A. Rees, eds., *The Stalin–Kaganovich correspondence, 1931–1936* (New Haven, CT, 2003). See also *Reabilitatsiia. Politicheskie protsessy 30–50-kh godov* (Moscow, 1991) and J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The road to Terror: Stalin and the self-destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–1939* (New Haven, CT, 1999).

[11] As argued by Rolf Binner and Marc Jung, 'Wie der Terror "Gross" Wurde: Massenmord und Lagerhaft nach Befehl 00447', *Cahiers du monde russe*, 42 (2001), pp. 557–614.

[12] As discussed by Terry Martin, *The affirmative action empire: nations and nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY, 2001).

[13] Robert Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia* (New Haven, CT, 1996).

[14] Marc Jansen and Nikita Petrov, *Stalin's loyal executioner: People's Commissar Nikolai Ezhov, 1895–1940* (Stanford CA, 2002).

[15] See, for example, Michael Ellman, 'Soviet repression statistics: some comments', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 54 (2002), pp. 1151–72; and Melanie Ilic, 'The Great Terror in Leningrad: a quantitative analysis', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 52 (2000), pp. 1515–34.

[16] See Charles Maier, 'Heiß und kaltes Gedächtnis: Über die politische Halbwertszeit von Nazismus und Kommunismus', *Transit*, 22 (2002), pp. 153–65; and J. Arch Getty, '"Excesses are not permitted": mass Terror and Stalinist governance in the late 1930s', *Russian Review*, 61 (2002), pp. 113–38.

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years were 1930, the year of collectivization and de-kulakization, and 1942, the year of war, during which 20,201 and 23,278 death sentences were handed down respectively. The years 1937 and 1938 thus mark an extraordinarily concentrated period of Terror.[17] S. G. Wheatcroft has called the phenomenon not so much Terror as 'mass killings'.[18]

Like many other Soviet statistics, these data are incomplete and ambiguities remain. Not everyone sentenced to death was actually executed, although the vast majority were, and not everyone executed is listed in these data. Many who were tortured to death, for example, are almost certainly not included. The most detailed scholarly estimate is that of Michael Ellman: approximately 1 million people died in the Great Terror of 1937–8.[19] Further details of the composition of the executed have also emerged. For instance, it was suspected that men suffered from the Terror disproportionately more than women. One sample examination of the Terror victims in Leningrad by Melanie Ilic confirms that women accounted for less than 4 per cent of the executed in the city and the Leningrad *oblast'* (province).[20]

It has been debated, often sensationally, that Stalin killed more people than did Hitler. This is the central theme of the well-known French publication *The black book of communism: crimes, Terror, and repression* (1999) by Stéphane Courtois and others which generated much discussion.[21] Lack of data have led Western scholars to widely divergent estimates of the number of people killed – from millions (sometimes tens of millions) to mere thousands. As far as direct killings are concerned, Michael Ellman is right in asserting that the number murdered by Stalin is much smaller than the number murdered by Hitler.[22] This, however, raises more questions than it answers. What of those who died in the infamous Soviet Gulag? And those millions who died in the Great Famine of 1932–3 in the Soviet Union? Regarding the data on the Soviet Gulag population, for example, we now know, thanks to works by Oleg Khlevniuk and others, that some 20 million people (including 'repeat convictions') were convicted and approximately 3 million exiled and deported between 1930 and 1941.[23] According to Michael Ellman, excluding 'the deportees, prisoners of war and interns, those in the post-war filtration camps, and those who performed forced labour at their normal place of work', but including the repeat offenders, some 17–18 million people were 'sentenced to detention in prisons, colonies and camps' between 1930 and 1956.[24] Recent research thus refutes both overstated and understated claims on the extent of Stalin's Terror. Taken together, it has greatly clarified one of the darkest pages in the history of the Soviet Union. This is a remarkable achievement, almost unimaginable two decades ago when the Soviet Union still existed. In some respects, particularly in matters of decision-making, the study of Stalin's Great Terror has arguably surpassed that of Hitler's Holocaust on account of the preservation of some critical documents.

[17] V. P. Popov, 'Gosudarstvennyi Terror v sovetskoi Rossii. 1923–1953 gg. (istochniki i ikh interpretatsiia)', *Otechestvennyi arkhiv*, 2 (1992), pp. 20–31 at p. 28.

[18] S. G. Wheatcroft, 'Towards explaining the changing levels of Stalinist repression in the 1930s: mass killings', in S. G. Wheatcroft, ed., *Challenging traditional views of Russian history* (New York, 2002), pp. 112–46. [19] Ellman, 'Soviet repression statistics'. [20] Ilic, 'The Great Terror', p. 1518.

[21] The original French version was published in 1997. A rejoinder volume by Michel Dreyfus et al., *Le siècle des communismes* appeared in Paris in 2000. [22] Ellman, 'Soviet repression statistics', p. 1170.

[23] Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *The history of the Gulag: from collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven, CT, 2004), p. 328.

[24] Ellman, 'Soviet repression statistics', p. 1164. The most comprehensive work on the Gulag is *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga. Konets 1920-kh – pervaia polovina 1950-kh godov* (7 vols., Moscow, 2005).

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In other respects, the discovery of new archival documents has sharply divided the scholarly community. Although the picture of the Great Terror has become much clearer, recent literature is sharply divided on the reasons for the Terror, despite scholars basing their views on virtually the same new documents. When the sorts of people killed in the Terror were still not known, it was difficult to examine exactly why Stalin resorted to the mass killings. The central issue here concerns whether there was active opposition or resistance to Stalin in the 1930s, in other words, whether Stalin's Great Terror was a response to an actual (or perceived) threat to his power. Scholars are sharply divided on this question. Ironically, the more data that becomes available, the sharper scholarly disagreements become, pointing to several serious pitfalls concerning the conceptualization of Stalinist politics and society and the understanding of Stalin's own sense of power.

When some formerly top-secret documents became accessible, it became evident that Stalin and other Soviet leaders used the same kinds of expressions in their private discussions and correspondence as they did in public. In the pre-archival era, scholars had suspected that their public language was self-consciously more rhetorical than substantive. Yet on the face of it, this suspicion has proved wrong. Such terms as 'German spies', 'Japanese spies', 'anti-Soviet elements', and 'enemies of the people' *were* used both in public and in private, as revealed by the private correspondence of Soviet leaders and by numerous newly accessible records of the secret police and other organs, often referred to as '*svodki*', or summary reports. Such reports portray the existence of a population who spoke against the Soviet regime. From these reports, it appears that there were untold numbers of Soviet citizens bitterly opposed to Stalin's regime who preferred Hitler's Germany to Stalin's Soviet Union. One gets such an impression from reading Sarah Davies's influential work, *Popular opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, propaganda and dissent, 1934–1941* (1997). Although no scholars say so in print, in conferences and conference halls one often hears historians remark that *everyone* in the Soviet Union was opposed to Stalin. According to scholars such as J. Arch Getty, these were the people who posed a real and actual internal threat to the Stalinist regime, particularly in the countryside: 'opposition in the countryside was reaching dangerous levels' by 1937.[25] The threat was magnified by the release of formerly arrested and exiled kulaks and by the promises of Stalin's 1936 Constitution for democratic governance, including multi-candidate Soviet elections. The German scholars, Rolf Binner and Marc Jung, criticize Getty for his view of the Great Terror as 'stochastic', but, like Getty, they acknowledge actual threat, in their case, from priests.[26]

Yet these views emphasizing internal threat have drawn criticism. First, was there actually such a strong internal threat? Political statements by Stalin and others, together with police reports on anti-Soviet opposition and resistance, are notoriously difficult to prove. Falsification, exaggeration, and manipulation abound. Critics of the 'internal threat theory' (such as the author of the present review) posit that the picture presented is the same as the one projected by Stalin to justify the Terror: enemies of the Soviet regime were ubiquitous. Moreover, they contend that archival documents showing the ubiquitous presence of enemies are misleading: the police invented enemies everywhere. A mighty

[25] Getty, '"Excesses are not permitted"', p. 136.

[26] 'Vernichtung der orthodoxen Geistlichen in der Sowjetunion in den Massenoperationen des Großen Terrors 1937–1938', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 52 (2004), pp. 515–33 My rejoinder to Binner and Jung is 'Why the destruction of Orthodox priests in the Soviet Union in 1937–1938?', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 55 (2007), pp. 86–93.

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state like Stalin's Soviet Union could have dealt with those threatening elements relatively easily by (re)confining them in prisons and camps. Why was it necessary to kill them en masse? [27]

A rival explanation of the Great Terror, represented by the works of the Russian historian Oleg Khlevniuk and those of the author of the present review, emphasizes the factor of war. It was the threat of war that determined the timing and the character of the Terror. Internal threat, if it existed at all, was insufficiently strong in itself. Rather, it was the threat posed by those elements suspected of disloyalty *in the case of war* who, though unlikely to act alone, saw a chance for change in war. In Stalin's eyes, this hidden expectation made them enemies and spies: they were defeatists and might thereby reveal themselves to be 'fifth columns'. The Great Terror was a pre-emptive strike against those suspected of being potential enemies.[28]

Critics of this 'war theory' such as Getty, Jung, and Binner maintain that it minimizes the genuine internal threat that did exist, and also argue that 1937 and 1938 were not the years when the threat of war was felt most acutely. Moreover, the Terror affected a far wider group of people than those perceived to be politically disloyal. It included criminals, the unemployed, and simply the old and the sick who could not possibly be described as 'spies' and 'fifth columns'. The Terror performed the function of social engineering and social cleansing as well.[29]

In addition to raising questions concerning archival documents (particularly, how to tell fact from fiction in the archives),[30] the controversy on the Great Terror has raised important questions regarding how Stalin perceived his own power. Was Stalin confident of his power and position? Or was he afraid of challenges to his power? The 'internal threat' camp as represented by Getty tends to emphasize the weakness of the Soviet state and the fears Stalin entertained about his perceived weaknesses. According to this perspective, the Soviet state was so weak that it could not even implement policies in the way that it intended. For instance, although the centre wanted to confine the Terror operations within certain limits because it feared losing control, it could not resist local pressure to raise such limits and, ultimately, ended up losing control of operations. The Great Terror, according to Getty, 'illustrate[s] the unpredictability and incoherence of the Stalinist system', which was 'unable to plan or to efficiently carry out any kind of operation'.[31] Terror was 'defensive, not pro-active', which partly resulted 'from a complex of perceptions that fall into the categories of anxiety and fear'. Getty contends that the Soviet leaders, Stalin among them, were 'frightened little men terrified of their surroundings', 'frightened little men with big weapons', and not 'totalitarian giants'.[32]

[27] See Kuromiya, 'Accounting for the Great Terror', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 53 (2005), pp. 86–101.

[28] See Kuromiya, 'Accounting'; and Oleg Khlevniuk, 'The objectives of the Great Terror, 1937–1938', in J. Cooper, M. Perrie, and E. A. Rees, eds., *Soviet history, 1917–1953: essays in honour of R. W. Davies* (London, 1995).

[29] See Getty, '"Excesses are not permitted"'; Binner and Jung, 'Wie der Terror "Gross" Wurde'; and Ilich, 'The Great Terror'.

[30] Note the well-known book on this matter in French history: Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the archives: pardon tales and their tellers in sixteenth-century France* (Stanford, CA, 1987).

[31] Getty, '"Excesses are not permitted"', pp. 130, 134, 136–7.

[32] J. Arch Getty, 'Afraid of their shadows: the Bolshevik recourse to Terror, 1932–1938', in Manfred Hildermeier, ed., *Stalinismus vor dem Zweiten Weltkrieg: Neue Wege der Forschung* (Munich, 1998), pp. 172 and 191.

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By contrast, those such as Khlevniuk who emphasize the war factor in the Great Terror tend to see that by the time of the Great Terror, Stalin had secured his dictatorial, even tyrannical, position. It was not fear, but determination not to take any chances that led to the Great Terror: Stalin intended to eliminate all potentially disloyal elements in order to protect his power in the case of war. He meant to play it safe. Stalin stayed in control of the entire operation: it was he who initiated the Terror and it was he who ended the Terror.[33] A recent work by Russian scholars, drawing on still classified documents, notes that all work by the secret police in the area of Terror was tightly controlled by the Politburo (i.e. Stalin): no single decision was made by the secret police without the approval of the Politburo.[34] For Getty and others who criticize this position, it sounds perilously close to the apologies put forth by Stalin's closest associates such as L. M. Kaganovich and V. M. Molotov who insisted to the very end of their lives – Kaganovich died in 1991 and Molotov in 1986 – that without the Terror, the country would have lost the war with Nazi Germany.

The fact that, unlike Nazi leaders, Soviet leaders have not been tried judicially for their Terror against the Soviet population irritates many moralists and scholars such as Courtois and Martin Malia.[35] If the Soviet leaders had been captured and tried, would they have defended their actions publicly? No one knows. What is abundantly clear, however, is that Stalin and his close associates believed in the Terror. Although Molotov, who as a revolutionary Bolshevik was apparently embarrassed by the imperialist nature of the secret protocol to the 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, never admitted its existence, he readily admitted that, along with Stalin, he and other leaders signed numerous death warrants during the Great Terror.[36] As revolutionaries they believed in the legitimacy of 'revolutionary Terror' and at trial, they might therefore have insisted on its legitimacy.

The opening of the formerly closed Soviet archives has thus given rise to not merely interpretive but conceptual debates. The conceptual differences are such that they are unlikely to be smoothed out easily.

II

This raises the question of ideology. Was Stalin a committed Marxist until his death? Or was he merely a pragmatist who used Marxism whenever it suited his political and personal goals? Or did he become a mere dictator (or tyrant) at some point in his life? What was Stalin like as a politician and a human being? Scholarship has been divided on these matters. While newly available documents have not yielded definitive answers to these questions, they have greatly enriched our knowledge of Stalin as a politician, Stalin as an ideologue, and Stalin as a human being.

Perhaps like many other dictators, Stalin was suspicious and vengeful. Recent research by Robert Service, Simone Sebag Montefiore, and Donald Rayfield illuminates both the

[33] Khlevniuk, 'The objectives'; and Kuromiya, 'Accounting'.

[34] *Pravo na repressii* (Moscow, 2006), pp. 193–4.

[35] Malia wrote a preface to the English edition of Courtois et al., *The black book of communism*, emphasizing this point.

[36] *Sto sorok besed s Molotvym* (Moscow, 1991), pp. 439–40. There is an abridged English translation of this book: *Molotov remembers: inside Kremlin politics* (Chicago, IL, 1993).

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monstrous and human aspects of Stalin.[37] Even without archival documents or first-hand accounts, there has been little doubt as to Stalin's personal monstrosity. His own daughter Svetlana, who after his death converted to Christianity and defected to the West, once said that he was a 'moral and spiritual monster'.[38] Nor have his human aspects been entirely unacknowledged. There are many observations made by foreign journalists, interpreters, and diplomats (including Winston Churchill and Harry S. Truman) about his surprisingly human touch in negotiations. It was his peculiar charm, some observers have contended, that misled some naive Westerns (such as the US President Franklin D. Roosevelt) into trusting him.[39]

In my own study, I have suggested that his charm and inhumanity were not contradictory: he understood human relations well and used such understanding for political purposes. Stalin was a rare, and even unique, politician who literally lived by politics alone, subsuming everything human within it.[40] This surely did not deprive him of non-political dimensions. Robert Service, for instance, has uncovered many previously unknown aspects of Stalin, including Stalin as husband (until 1932 when his second wife killed herself), Stalin as father (who looked after his children after his wife's death), Stalin as reader (who adhered to a self-imposed quota of several hundred pages a day), Stalin as editor (who paid attention to minute details of his and others' writing), Stalin as diplomat (who supervised every major dealing with foreign countries), and Stalin as military strategist (who led the Soviet Union to victory in the Second World War).[41] Stalin had a weakness for films and enjoyed history books. Even at the height of the Second World War, he 'read history books on his divan until he fell asleep in the early hours'.[42] Particularly towards the end of his life, he was given to sumptuous gluttony and certainly did not share the hunger and privation of the Soviet population. Nevertheless, he was uninterested in material things. In comparison with Mao Tse-dong's hedonism, Stalin was austere and ascetic. Unlike Mao who continued to write poetry in old age, Stalin stopped writing poems when he became a Marxist revolutionary. Perhaps he had stopped being a romantic and had become a realist.[43]

Simon Sebag Montefiore has argued convincingly that Stalin became Tsar, the Red Tsar, and his government, his court.[44] As a metaphor, this seems fitting. After all, Stalin appropriated Tsarist legacies and symbols, such as the Kremlin itself. When asked by his mother in 1935 what he had become in Moscow, he said that he was like a Tsar, to which she responded, 'You'd have done better to have become a priest.' (In his youth Stalin had studied at a theological seminary and, at one point, had wanted to be a priest.) He accepted the fact that he was like a Tsar and maintained that the Soviet people needed a Tsar, as David Brandenberger and A. M. Dubrovsky have shown drawing on newly accessible documents.[45]

[37] Robert Service, *Stalin: a biography* (Cambridge, MA, 2005); Simone Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: the court of the Red Tsar* (London, 2003); and Donald Rayfield, *Stalin and his hangmen* (London, 2004).

[38] Svetlana Alliluyeva, *Only one year* (New York, 1969), p. 364.

[39] For this point, see Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin: profiles in power* (Harlow, 2005).

[40] See ibid.

[41] Service, *Stalin*. Regarding Stalin as editor, see also Norman M. Naimark, 'Cold war studies and new archival materials on Stalin', *Russian Review*, 61 (2002), pp. 1–15.

[42] Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin*, p. 392. For Stalin's 'secret life', see also B. S. Ilizarov, *Tainaia zhizn' Stalina* (Moscow, 2002).

[43] For Stalin's early life in Georgia, see Rayfield, *Stalin and his hangmen*, which utilizes sources in Georgian.

[44] Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin*.

[45] '"The people need a Tsar": the emergence of national Bolshevism as Stalinist ideology, 1931–1941', *Europe–Asia Studies*, 50 (1998), pp. 873–92.

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How did he reconcile being a Tsar with being a Marxist revolutionary? More generally, why did he tolerate the cult of himself that grew increasingly grotesque? [46] Dominant views, as represented by Sebag Montefiore, tend to hold that Stalin, like other dictators, was jealous of his power, fond of displaying it, and enjoyed the adulation of the Soviet people and communists abroad. Although, as a Bolshevik, he had rejected Tsarism resolutely, once in power, he found himself in a position similar to that of the Tsar. In 1937, he conceded that the Russian Tsars 'did one thing that was good – they amassed an enormous state, all the way to Kamchatka. We have inherited that state.'[47] The 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop (Soviet–Nazi Non-Aggression) Pact included a secret protocol that divided much of Eastern Europe into respective spheres of influence, an imperialist scheme. When the Second World War ended, Stalin managed to recover much of the territory of the former Tsarist Empire (save Poland and Finland) and to acquire some new lands (Western Ukraine in the west and the Kurile Islands in the east). When he joined the war against Japan in August 1945 and won (perhaps more precisely against Japan and Japan's puppet government Manchukuo in north-east China), he declared that the 1904–5 stain of defeat to Japan had left painful memories on the Russian people's consciousness and that 'our people' waited forty years for such a victory.

These and other facts led historians such as Robert C. Tucker to maintain that Stalin was a 'neo-tsarist Marxist' for whom the autocratic Russian state of Tsars and his revolutionary state were one and the same.[48] Such views are, however, not supported by recent research. Stalin did not merely compare himself to a Tsar, but sought to learn lessons from the rule of the Tsars. He was, after all, a lover of history and read voraciously. As Maureen Perrie has shown, Stalin may well have found inspiration for his own rapid industrialization drive, the First Five-Year Plan, in Peter I's grandiose transformation of Russia in the eighteenth century. Yet Stalin faulted Peter for opening Russia to European influences, allowing it to become almost 'Germanized', whilst Catherine II committed the same sin. Unlike Peter and Catherine, Ivan the Terrible was a 'national Tsar', who did not expose sixteenth-century Russia to pernicious foreign influences. Nevertheless, even Ivan was not deemed flawless by Stalin. According to Stalin, although Ivan's brutal Terror against his enemies and traitors was perfectly justified, he was insufficiently resolute to eliminate his enemies, thus explaining why the country fell apart after his death. Ivan was also hindered by God: after he executed someone, he felt remorse and prayed for a long time.[49]

Clearly, Stalin was not a blind follower of the Tsars and Tsarism. Was he an adherent of Russian nationalism? He increasingly identified the Soviet Union with Russia and his rhetoric in the 1930s and afterwards sounded almost nationalistic. Since Stalin appeared not to distinguish between the state interests of the Soviet Union and the traditional national interests of Russia, many former enemies of the Soviet regime were reconciled to it in the 1930s, believing that Stalin was a defender of Russian national interests. At a celebratory gathering after the victory in the Second World War, Stalin thanked the 'Russian people' who were 'the most remarkable of all the nations of the Soviet Union' and proposed a toast 'To the Russian people.' Yet this proposal appears to have been

[46] For the most recent work, see Apor Balász et al., eds., *The leader cult in communist dictatorships* (New York, 2004).

[47] Ivo Banac, ed., *The diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933–1949* (New Haven, CT, 2003), p. 65.

[48] See, for example, Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in power: the revolution from above, 1928–1941* (New York, 1990).

[49] Maureen Perrie, *The cult of Ivan the terrible in Stalin's Russia* (Basingstoke, 2001).

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greeted with a counter-proposal from the military commanders present: 'To the Soviet people.' After a moment's silence, Stalin reiterated 'To the Russian people.'[50] His use of Russian nationalism, at least rhetorically, further increased in the post-war years which, as David Brandenberger has shown, laid the foundation for the emergence of naked Russian nationalism after his death.[51]

Erik van Ree's detailed study of Stalin's thought demonstrates that, although seemingly nationalistic, Stalin understood nations and nationalism within a Marxist framework, regarding them as transient concepts within the wider context of world history. The Soviet Union would thus have to act as a nation for the foreseeable future to survive in a world of nation states.[52] Stalin used Russia as the linchpin of the Soviet Union to promote the Soviet Union's national interests by any means available, but clearly he did not equate the Soviet Union with Russia. Moreover, although Stalin may have wanted to regard himself as a Russian, he was not an ethnic Russian but a Georgian. Van Ree thus suggests that, in his own way, Stalin actually remained a Marxist to the end.

Whereas Stalin, as the dictator, may have had the nation's internal affairs under control, he could not control the international situation. A sense of practicality and realism was required in order for Stalin to accept what he could not control. The 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact is a good example. More than anything else, this event promotes the image of Stalin as a realist, rather than as a Marxist ideologue, since Stalin appears to have accepted a Faustian bargain with Hitler who considered Bolshevism his life enemy. At times, Stalin's inflated sense of himself and his personal power undermined his political acumen. This was evident in 1941, when Stalin believed that he was outsmarting Hitler, whereas the opposite was actually the case. After the victory in the Second World War, Stalin appeared to continue to pursue a foreign policy of realism: he wanted to maintain the newly acquired status of the Soviet Union as one of the Grand Alliance of the 'Big Three' (USA, UK, and USSR). Suspicions died hard in the West, however, that Stalin, as a Marxist, had a master plan for exporting revolution abroad. Yet Norman Naimark's work on the Soviet occupation of Germany and other recent works on the Cold War, which signified the end of the Grand Alliance, suggest that Stalin pursued a realistic foreign policy, but within the framework of the world as he understood it from a Marxist perspective. Thus initially Stalin did not have a master plan to communize Eastern Europe. Yet Stalin never relinquished the long-term goal of world revolution.[53] He did not hold that another World War was imminent, but that, in the future, imperialist powers would inevitably come into conflict: 'World War I wrested one country from capitalist slavery; World War II created a socialist system; and the third will finish off imperialism forever.'[54]

Works by van Ree suggest that Stalin used Marxism to understand the world but that he did not treat it as a rigid ideological canon. He re-interpreted Marxism in his own way and presented his understanding as 'creative Marxism', demonstrating his capacity to adjust to new conditions and, accordingly, to re-interpret and re-invent his

[50] Iu. A. Zhdanov, *Vzgliad v proshloe: vospominaniia ochevidtsa* (Rostov on the Don, 2004), p. 135.

[51] David Brandenberger, *National bolshevism: Stalinist mass culture and the formation of modern Russian national identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).

[52] Erik van Ree, *The political thought of Joseph Stalin* (London, 2002), particularly ch. 4.

[53] See Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: a history of the Soviet zone of occupation, 1945–1949* (Cambridge, MA, 1995); and Vladislav Zubok and Konstantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: from Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA, 1996).

[54] Quoted in *Molotov remembers*, p. 63.

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ideology.[55] Whilst now there is little doubt that Stalin remained a Marxist, surely, he was not a rigid ideologue.

It is often asserted that Stalin was an anti-Semite, particularly in his later years. Throughout his life he told ethnic jokes that were anti-Semitic and anti-Polish and was also inclined to use national and other prejudices for political purposes. His attack on the Soviet Jews in the post-war years derived from his seeing the Zionist danger in the wake of the 1947 founding of the state of Israel, which he had supported. Unlike Hitler, however, Stalin does not seem to have been an anti-Semite, as a very sensible treatment of Stalin and anti-Semitism by Leonid Luks suggests.[56] This is a point of critical importance, for whilst Hitler believed in racism, Stalin did not. In 1945, Stalin said that he hated the Germans, who had, after all, attacked the Soviet Union in 1941 and had killed untold numbers of Soviet citizens, but he added that the Germans were 'a great people', good 'innately brave soldiers', and could not be eliminated.[57] Stalin even cautioned foreign leaders against being swayed by emotions such as retribution which were not a good political guide.[58]

Like other political leaders, Stalin enjoyed his immense power and had certainly fought very hard to gain a dictatorial position. It is not entirely clear, however, whether, as a Marxist, Stalin personally enjoyed the cult of himself. He certainly promoted himself, with clear self-aggrandizement. He justified his cult, however, as a necessity, and as something to satisfy the Soviet people, in the same way as the people had wanted a Tsar before the Revolution. It is difficult to determine whether such reasoning was genuine or feigned. It may well have been genuine, to some extent, since Stalin used to insist that he, personally, was not 'Stalin'. As Sebag Montefiore has discussed, Stalin used to scold his son, Vasilii, for believing that he, too, was 'Stalin': 'No, you're not Stalin. You're not Stalin and I'm not Stalin. Stalin is Soviet power. Stalin is what he is in the newspapers and the portraits, not you, no not even me!'[59] Similarly, Stalin rejected a German offer to exchange his son, Iakov, then in German hands as a prisoner of war, for German Field Marshall Friedrich von Paulus, who had surrendered at Stalingrad, saying 'How many sons of Ivanovs, Petrovs, Sidorovs' are in captivity? No, I don't have the right to an exchange. Otherwise, I'd cease to be Stalin.'[60] He thereby identified his political self with the Soviet Union to such an extent that he referred to himself in the third person singular: 'Stalin'.

All the same, it is possible that he very cleverly feigned modesty for political purposes. At the same time as he promoted his own cult, he rejected absurdities such as a proposal in 1938 to rename Moscow 'Stalinodaror' ('Stalin's gift') and an attempt in 1945 to name Moscow 'Stalin'. If he feigned all these manoeuvres for political purposes, he did so rather consistently, and certainly more effectively than other contenders for power such as Stalin's arch-rival, Lev Trotskii, whose intellectual pretensions and arrogance served him poorly in politics. Stalin may not have been as intellectually brilliant as Trotskii, but he was an effective politician. Vladimir Lenin, whose political heir Stalin claimed to be, understood this, observing in 1921 that 'Trotsky is a temperamental man with military experience … but as for politics, he hasn't got a clue.'[61] My own research thus suggests

[55] Regarding changes in Stalin's view of what constituted a socialist society, see R. W. Davies, 'Stalin as an economic policy-maker', in Davies and Harris, eds., *Stalin*, pp. 121–39.

[56] Leonid Lukes, 'Zum Stalinschen Antisemitismus – Brüche und Widersprüche,' *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung*, 1 (1997), pp. 9–50.

[57] *Istochnik*, 5 (1997), p. 128.

[58] Kuromiya, *Stalin*, p. 160.

[59] Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin*, p. 4.

[60] Akakii Mgeladze, *Stalin kakim ia ego znal* (n.p., 2001), p. 198, quoted in Kuromiya, *Stalin*, p. 155.

[61] Richard Pipes, ed., *The unknown Lenin: from the secret archive* (New Haven, CT, 1996), p. 124.

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that whatever vanity Stalin may have had, he understood politics well and did not sacrifice politics to his human failings. Whatever he may have been as a human being, he was a political past master.[62] Unlike Hitler, Stalin was not a bigoted racist. He was self-disciplined and cared deeply for the political aspects of what appeared to be mundane administrative and organizational matters. He once admitted, 'I cannot know everything, that is why I pay particular attention to disagreements, objections, I look into why they start, to find out what is going on.'[63] Although Stalin may have exercised absolute power and treated his entourage as court attendants, he took politics seriously, and used his followers accordingly, as Derek Watson's recent work on V. M. Molotov, one of his most trusted lieutenants, shows.[64]

III

Modern politics is mass politics. Soviet politics was no exception. How did society relate to Stalin and his regime? This question is one of the most controversial questions in the field of Soviet history, partly because of the universally uncritical use of newly available archival sources to reach radically different conclusions and partly because the subject is not conceptualized sufficiently rigorously.[65]

This subject is closely related to issues concerning the reasons for the Great Terror, examined earlier. As in the case of the Great Terror, here, too, recent research is sharply divided. One reason relates to historical sources since a massive amount of formerly forbidden sources have recently become available. On the one hand, numerous reports, particularly secret police documents on the political mood of the Soviet population, compiled in detail from the village level all the way up to the national level, have become available, if only in fragmented form. They are filled with reports on the mood and remarks critical of Stalin and the Soviet regime. While often noting that the mood of the population was generally positive, they depict the widespread, almost ubiquitous existence of enemies of the Soviet regime. Strikes, rebellions, and other forms of popular demonstration did take place, but they became increasingly rare after the 1932–3 famine crisis. These reports illuminate formerly little known aspects of Soviet society so well that historians like Sarah Davies and Lynne Viola have concluded that Soviet society was full of critical elements and that 'resistance' was the key element of Soviet society under Stalin.[66] Based on these new works on resistance and opposition, as stated above, some historians implicitly (although not in print) claim that everyone was opposed to Stalin.

On the other hand, private documents such as diaries, notes, and letters have also become available. Some of them, particularly those discussed in the pioneering works of Jochen Hellbeck, suggest that many Soviet people strove to acquire a proper public

[62] Kuromiya, *Stalin*.

[63] Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg Khlevniuk, *Cold peace: Stalin and the Soviet ruling elite, 1945–1953* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 83, 168–89.

[64] Derek Watson, *Molotov: a biography* (Basingstoke, 2005).

[65] My earlier examination of this issue is Hiroaki Kuromiya, 'How do we know what the people thought under Stalin?', in Timo Vihavainen, ed., *Sovetskaia vlast' – narodnaia vlast'? Ocherki istorii vospriiatiia sovetskoi vlasti v SSSR* (Spb, 2003).

[66] See Sarah Davies, *Popular opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, propaganda and dissent, 1934–1941* (Cambridge, 1997); and, for a collective effort to conceptualize 'resistance', see Lynne Viola, ed., *Contending with Stalinism: Soviet power and popular resistance in the 1930s* (Ithaca, NY, 2002). For a critical analysis of the resistance paradigm, see Anna Krylova, 'The tenacious liberal subject in Soviet studies', *Kritika*, 1 (2000), pp. 119–45.

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Soviet identity as prescribed by the Stalinist regime that was dedicated to the good of the public, and to the extinction of a private sphere independent of the public. Using these documents, scholars like Hellbeck and Igal Halfin suggest that the 'subjective' understanding of the world is key to studying the Stalinist regime and that the Soviet citizen was incorporated 'heart and mind' into the Soviet regime, with no private sphere. The Soviet citizen learnt not merely to 'speak Bolshevik' but also to think and act Bolshevik.[67]

Both the 'resistance school' and the 'subjective school' explain particular aspects of Soviet society well. Yet when they generalize, their rival positions appear tenuous at best. Secret police records detailing the hostile mood of the population served the police well whose mission was to seek and destroy the enemies of the regime. The lengths to which the Soviet regime went to create enemies out of loyal Soviet citizens are widely known. The police falsified documents, tortured people into confessions of crimes they did not commit, and executed untold numbers of innocent people. In addition, one might add that grumblings about Soviet life are not equivalent to political disloyalty. Nor can one contend, without the risk of underestimating the strength of popular emotion, that the Soviet people never expressed their anger and discontent. Yet it is certainly the case that the vast majority of the Soviet population learnt to hide their private sentiments. This was why the police made every effort to extract the hidden, private thoughts of people, using torture if necessary. The 'subjective school' similarly tends to take the archival (in this case, private as opposed to public in the case of the 'resistance school') documents at face value. Writing was a dangerous act under Stalin. Still people did write. They may have done so as security, in case of emergency, using their private diaries and notes to defend themselves. It is also the case that people did not write about certain matters, whether consciously or unconsciously. By experience and by instinct, people understood what they could not write about. They learnt to hide their deeply private thoughts. They also learnt how to dissimulate in order to survive in a repressive regime.[68] The fact that people appeared to have identified completely with the regime in writing and in action did not mean that they did not have a private sphere at odds with the Soviet public sphere.

In addition to uncritical readings of archival documents, there is a problem of simplistic conceptualizations. When no other means of gauging the political mood of the population, such as free elections, free polls, and a free press, existed, it was easy to misjudge or misrepresent it. Historians, however, ought to be more careful. If 'resistance' was so widespread (even if not ubiquitous), why is it that the Soviet Union did not collapse during the war and why did it survive so long thereafter? The picture presented by the 'resistance school' is, in broad outline, the picture Stalin presented in order to justify his Terror. By contrast, the picture presented by the 'subjective school' is a picture of a Soviet Utopia, one which Stalin might have wished for, but which he did not have. Surely Stalin would have wished that the Soviet subject were indeed as compliant as this school suggests, in which case, his brutal Terror would have been unnecessary.

These two schools are the most extreme but also the most popular in the field, even though their problems are evident. Even such cautious arguments as those of the French

[67] Jochen Hellbeck, *Tagebuch aus Moskau, 1931–1939* (Munich, 1996); idem, *Revolution on my mind: writing a diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Igal Halfin, *Terror in my soul: communist autobiographies on trial* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); and Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic mountain: Stalinism as a civilization* (Berkeley, CA, 1997), which has inspired some proponents of the 'subjective school', is a much more careful work.

[68] Oleg Kharkhordin, *The collective and the individual in Russia* (Berkeley, CA, 1999).

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historian Gábor T. Rittersporn often end up on one side or the other.[69] Breaking new conceptual ground has proved difficult. Whether the controversy will be settled is difficult to gauge, but it is likely to continue for some time, just as the discussion regarding resistance and consent in Nazi Germany continues.[70]

There was a time, in the pre-archival era, when it was thought that once the closed Soviet archives opened, most if not all questions in Soviet history would be answered. True, many questions have now been answered thanks to new, archival documents. The enigmatic figure of Stalin, for instance, has become much less so, because we now know so much more about Stalin the man, Stalin the politician, and the country he ruled. The subject of the Great Terror, for another, has been clarified a great deal. Numerous subjects, beginning with Stalin's childhood and ending with collectivization, de-kulakization, the 1932–3 Great Famine, the Second World War, and the Cold War have similarly been elucidated.

Yet new archival documents have also created new disagreements and controversies. Excitement over new archival documents may dull one's critical sense. In retrospect, one should know better than to believe that archives can provide a ready answer to every historical question. This realization probably will mark a new point in scholarly advancement. As in the study of Nazi Germany, subjects as complex as Stalin and Stalinist society cannot be examined without controversy. The disagreements discussed here are evidence of the vigour and energy in the field as a whole.

[69] See, for example, Gábor T. Rittersporn, 'Le régime face au carnaval: folklore non conformiste en URSS dans les années 1930', *Annales*, 58 (2003), pp. 417–96, speaks of a 'spirit of rebellion' in the 1930s without specifying the time period (p. 496). There is much difference, however, between 1930 when the countryside witnessed numerous rebellions and 1937 when the Great Terror assaulted the country.

[70] See the Sarah Davies and Hellbeck exchange in the journal *Kritika*, 1 (2000). For one attempt to overcome the two extreme schools, see Kuromiya, 'How do we know?'. Sheila Fitzpatrick's *Everyday Stalinism: ordinary life in extraordinary times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York, 1999) does not engage in this debate but proposes a view of the Soviet people trying merely to survive.

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