

MODERN HISTORY

To what extent was Stalinist regime totalitarian?

Stalinist rule in the 1930's encompassed strong characteristics of authoritarian and totalitarian rule. This was clearly evident through his economic policies, the treatment of minority groups, the cult of personality and his use of terror to consolidate a 'god-like' image for a position of total supremacy. Views such as Christian's, "Socialism will always lead to the creation of a coercive, monolithic, 'totalitarian' society" must be assessed in a different light to determine a non-biased view of Stalin's regime. It is only after the opening of new evidence from the Russian archives as well as further evidence and differing perspectives, the view of Stalinist regime as totalitarian has been distorted and changed from traditional views.

The political scientists Friedrich and Brzezinski were primarily responsible for expanding the usage of the totalitarian term, reformulating it as a paradigm for the communist Soviet Union as well as fascist regimes. For Friedrich and Brzezinski, the defining elements were intended to be taken as a mutually supportive organic entity composed of an elaborating guiding ideology, a single mass party, a system of terror, a monopoly of the means of communication, physical force, a central direction and control of the economy. They also held the revisionist view that Stalinism was a natural progression from Leninism; however their model may have been biased by the Cold War's need to paint the Soviet Union in a totalitarian light.

German historian Karl Bracher, argues that the "totalitarian typology" as developed by Friedrich and Brzezinski is an excessively inflexible model, and failed to consider the "revolutionary dynamic" that Bracher asserts is at the heart of totalitarianism, an idea also resonated by American historian Walter Laqueur who argues that Bracher's definition seemed to fit reality better.

A later model developed by Robert Tucker consists of a charismatic leader, an all pervasive ideology, a coercive monopoly of force, a control of technology and a system of propaganda. However neither Friedrich nor Tucker accurately portrays Stalinism, showing that totalitarianism cannot be defined accurately. Although the Tucker model was based on Stalinism, it still couldn't accurately explain Stalinism as a whole as it contained very general statements as refuted by Fitzpatrick, but it is the closest model that fits Stalinism.

Stalin's system of government was based on the twin pillars of centralized direction and the use of force, much like Leninism. Stalin manipulated the organization to achieve absolute power for himself. As a member of the Orgburo, Politburo and Secretariat, he had established by the late 1920s an unassailable power base. The absence of a middle class, the lack of a true proletarian organization and a disciplined Party organization allowed Stalin to institute his revolution from above.

The revisionist view of Stalinism focuses not on the actions of the state, but the relationships between different sections of society. Stalin's use of a "rampant nationalism" to control unrest can also be seen as a progression from Leninism and previous tsarist rule, going against Marxist theories to appeal to the Russian people. However historians such as *Wood* align this to other totalitarian regimes. The "recon" view converges on the reconstruction of a state-controlled power base. This view establishes the fact that Stalinism was not a simple progression of Leninism, but more of a philosophical change, "he was interested in the practical use of Lenin's gadgets, not in the Leninist laboratory of thought" (Deutscher).

Stalin is still seen as one of the world's most ruthless dictators, due to his cynical and unparalleled use of terror on such a massive scale. However the efficiency of the USSR is no longer seen as the product of Stalin's brutality, rather he is seen to have been pushed by the circumstances as much as he controlled them. By 1927 the idea of moderation was failing and radicalism was reviving with new energy, which coincided with Stalin's consolidation of power.

This allowed Stalin to launch new programs such as collectivization, political centralization and the Five Year Plans. Stalin is now seen to have been reactivating the earlier dynamism of the Bolsheviks through the radicalization of the economy and society. Tucker himself states that Stalin's "all pervasive ideology wasn't constant, as he changed it whenever he fell like it," going against the Friedrich totalitarian model.

Stalin's centralization of the economy can be seen as an act of consolidating power, as well as carrying on from the framework and ideas that Lenin had created. Writing just after WW2 Hannah Arendt argued that Stalin's collectivization was the first year of clear cut totalitarian dictatorship in Russia, as the Stalinist elite imposed upon its mass social constituency an unprecedented journey. The industrial policies and creation of the proletariat was done to create the wealth necessary for communism to survive. However abandoning communist ideologies for expansion did not bind together the peasants as originally Marxist-Lenin ideologies had become the replacement of religion, who also embraced it for personal gain. Alex Nove, an economic historian, argues that Stalin's policies fluctuated in reaction to problems rather than following a 'master plan', thus being defective in planning and execution. But the effects of industrialization and collectivization on the mass population cannot be argued, the policies lead to greater living and working conditions for certain minorities. But through the persecution of the Kulaks and the Gulags, Stalin had established himself as a ruthless leader, a view emphasized by the Ukraine famine of 1932-33, implanting Deutscher's claim that "Socialism was to be built by coercion, rather than persuasion".

Stalin created a cult of personality in the Soviet Union around both himself and Lenin, as Stalin "sought to regiment not just the bodies but also the minds of the population" (Wood). A cult of personality is essentially hero worship directed to political leaders. Stalin used mass media to create a heroic public image through unquestioning flattery and praise, much to the criticism of Trotsky who believed that it went against the values of socialism and Bolshevism. In the minds of the Soviet people, Stalin's name was indissolubly linked with Lenin's, a step towards "the consecration of charismatic leadership, beyond criticism" (Kochan). However David Christian and Sheila Fitzpatrick disagree with Stalin as being a "charismatic leader", rather he lacked personality and oration skills. But his position as a paternalistic demigod figure, much like in an autocracy, allowed him to build on Stakhanovite propaganda, a move seen by Nove as "fixing the leaks in the system".

It is argued by historians that Stalin put in practice an unprecedented and unparalleled use of terror and coercion. Stalin even surpassed Hitler and Mussolini through his use of the secret police, the NKVD, and mass purges. Stalin faced little political opposition, an effect of his mindset to extinguish any possible hostility, but still did not possess full control of the monopoly of coercive force. Stalin's combination of terror and totalitarianism for optimum effect produced social paranoia and took state power to a new level, galvanizing his rule within society, much like preceding Russian regimes. "Terror was an essential and indispensable element of his system of political coercion and social control" (Wood). However the argument of the totalitarian nature of the purges can be contradicted by the communist doctrines of Marx which state that there should be periodic purges of those who disagree with the revolution. Fitzpatrick and Christian argue that terror wasn't what caused society to base itself on negative coercion, but instead propaganda was used to control society, as it was targeted the simple human nature of self-interest.

Although it can be argued that the only reliable views of Stalin's regime came after the opening of Russian archives, it was still possible to see that many aspects of Stalinism were the embodiment of totalitarianism. The state through the communist party dominated and controlled the social, political, economic and cultural life of its citizens. The cult of personality built around Stalin represented the total influence he had over the entire population. No opposition was allowed and through the extensive use of terror Stalin manipulated Russian society. However it is prudent to suggest that the totalitarian model was more correct than incorrect in comparison with the Soviet Union, as Stalin's Russia was not a totalitarian regime and just as incoherent as that of Hitler or Mussolini, a distinction caused by the superficiality of the term. Instead Stalinism needs to be seen as "sui generis" (Kershaw), as it is hard to be placed in a single model.