

Stalin and Stalinism

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Alan Wood



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The Cold Warrior

Reconstruction

A physically decimated, debilitated and emotionally distraught nation was now called upon to restore its shattered economy. Over one-quarter of the industrial capacity of the Soviet Union had been destroyed, and in those areas occupied by the enemy the proportion was even higher, around 65 per cent. In particular, the heavy industries such as iron, steel and fuel, which had been given special emphasis during the five-year plans, were badly hit. Hundreds of factories, foundries, mines and workshops had been either devastated in the fighting or demolished by the scorched-earth policies of the retreating armies, both Russian and German. What could be saved had been transported east and relocated in a desperate programme of territorial diversification of industry which successfully enhanced production levels after the initial onslaught. Over 300 entire enterprises and their workforces were uprooted, trans-shipped and reassembled in Siberia.

Light industry had also suffered. During the war years all industry was geared to military or paramilitary output, with little or no spare capacity for consumer-goods production. This had, of course, been a feature of the pre-war economic priorities and the same pattern was now to be repeated in the new five-year plan for national reconstruction (1946-50), with a consequent continuation of material hardship, shortages of essential goods, and a depressed standard of living for the foreseeable future. The situation was exacerbated by the low priority given to the construction of domestic accommodation in favour of capital building and rebuilding projects and it was not until well into the 1950s that large-scale housing schemes got under way to alleviate the desperate shortage. Transport and communication networks had likewise been ruined and strenuous efforts had to be made to replace railways, rolling stock and blown-up bridges. Agriculture was in a shambles. In the occupied areas where farms had been decollectivized, a crash programme of recollectivization was instituted, but a combination of lack of manpower on the land, shortage of livestock and machinery, drought and dubious planning methods ensured that agriculture long remained the Achilles heel of the Soviet economy.

Despite the hardships and the sacrifices, progress was made. Some of the industrial losses were made good by the import of capital equipment from the defeated countries, in particular the Soviet sector of Germany, in the shape of reparations and war booty. Shortfalls in manpower were to some extent offset

by utilizing the forced labour of prisoners of war, around two million of whom were detained in Soviet labour camps until long after the end of the war. Even Soviet prisoners of war returning home from captivity in Europe now found themselves once more behind barbed wire as Stalin punished them for having surrendered or succumbed to the enemy! The technological expertise of captured or commandeered foreign specialists and scientists was also made to contribute to the nation's recovery. They also assisted in the race to match the United States' recently demonstrated atomic weapons capability. But the major contribution to national revival was made by the spectacular exertions of the Soviet working population, which was called upon yet again to conquer almost insurmountable obstacles in what were still generally appalling conditions. Genuine enthusiasm to make good the war losses was reinforced by a return to the strict communal discipline and draconian methods of the 1930s. Stalin abandoned the relative relaxations of the war years and marshalled all the resources of the police state to reimpose the controls of his totalitarian system with a renewed vigour.

The cult of Stalin himself, already well established in the 1930s but now illuminated by the aureole of martial glory, assumed new dimensions. Extravagant, incredible, even ludicrous claims were made concerning his revolutionary zeal, his intellectual prowess, his economic achievements, his military leadership and his omniscient wisdom. Stalin was hailed as the Father of the Peoples, the Captain of Industry, the Closest Comrade-in-Arms of Lenin, the Great Educator, the Mighty Leader, even the Shining Sun! The panegyrics knew no bounds. This was not just hero-worship; this was Stalin's apotheosis.

No one dared query his word. Even his obsequious creatures on the party Politburo were, in Nikita Khrushchev's chilling phrase, only 'temporary people' who never knew on leaving Stalin's presence whether they would end up at home in bed or in the cells of the Lubyanka. At one of his increasingly frequent drinking bouts, Stalin once ordered the portly Khrushchev to dance the strenuously athletic Ukrainian *gopak*, squatting on his haunches and kicking out his heels. Khrushchev painfully but prudently obeyed. As he later observed to his fellow Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan, 'When Stalin says "Dance!", a wise man dances'.

Outside the closed circle of his political minions, the rest of the population also danced to Stalin's bidding. Apart from the toiling peasants and workers, members of the artistic and scientific intelligentsia were all compelled to perform according to the dictates of the master choreographer. One of the most serious casualties was the science of genetics, which was set back a whole generation because of Stalin's support

for the ideologically convenient but scientifically spurious theories of the bogus biologist Trofim Lysenko, who claimed that acquired characteristics could be genetically transmitted. Only mathematics and physics seemed to be safe from interference, no doubt because of their strategic and military applications.

In the humanities, linguistics, philosophy and even music were forced into the Stalinist straitjacket, but it was literature that bore the brunt of Stalin's renewed attack on creative freedom. The 'Great Educator's' chief hatchet-man in the artistic abattoir of the late 1940s was Andrei Zhdanov (1896-1948), the man who had succeeded the murdered Kirov as boss of the Leningrad party organization in 1934. In 1946 the so-called 'Zhdanov decrees' were promulgated, which introduced a period of such cultural sterility and talentless uniformity as to outrival even the 'socialist realist' mediocrities of the 1930s. After closing down two Leningrad journals for publishing material that allegedly 'kowtowed' to western literary fashion, Zhdanov singled out two writers for especially vicious abuse and public humiliation, Mikhail Zoshchenko, a writer of satirical short stories, and the popular lyric poetess and veteran of the Leningrad siege, Anna Akhmatova. The intensely personal love themes and religious imagery of much of Akhmatova's verse led Zhdanov to pillory her as 'part nun, part whore', who divided her time between the convent and the brothel. The crude invective apart, the extreme nationalism with which Zhdanov's campaign was suffused was not without its anti-Semitic overtones, and many Jewish intellectuals, condemned as Zionists or 'rootless cosmopolitans', disappeared in the arid cultural wilderness of the *Zhdanovshchina*.

In a sense the intense philistinism, paranoia and xenophobia of this post-war period of 'high Stalinism' was an internal reflection of the rapidly deteriorating relations between the Soviet Union and the West in the early years of the Cold War.

Cold War

Rivers of ink have flowed in an attempt to trace and analyse the origins of the Cold War, which in many ways dominated the course of international relations throughout the world in the second half of the twentieth century. Many regional conflicts in far-flung areas of the globe are impossible to understand except in the context of the political, ideological and military confrontation between the Soviet Union and her allies on the one hand and the United States and the western powers on the other. How did the

wartime allies become peacetime antagonists, threatening to bring the world to the brink of a nuclear Armageddon?

Many historians trace the origins of the Cold War right back to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which the capitalist countries regarded as a direct threat to their own political stability and economic security. (Hence Churchill's call to throttle the infant monster, mentioned earlier.) In this interpretation, the wartime alliance was a temporary aberration forced on the participating countries by the shared menace of German Nazism, and the post-war slide into non-belligerent hostility merely a resumption of 'normal' relations. While there is much force in this argument, one must also seek the more immediate causes of the mutual suspicion, mistrust and outright animosity during the last few years of Stalin's life.

At the conferences of Teheran and Yalta, as already indicated, some kind of loose agreement was reached among the 'Big Three' on the political and territorial settlement of post-war Europe. It was understood that the Soviet Union had a legitimate interest in ensuring that the countries along her western and south-western borders should not only come within the USSR's 'sphere of influence', but also be governed by regimes that would be politically at the very least well-disposed to their powerful eastern neighbour. If it is true that Stalin overestimated the degree of latitude he had in interfering in the internal politics of the East European states, it is equally true that the explicitly hostile declarations of some western politicians, as well as Russia's long experience of vulnerability to invasion from the west, made Stalin unwaveringly determined that the military security of the USSR should have absolute priority over the political independence of those countries, some of which had in any case recently fought alongside Hitler. In this way, starting with eastern Germany and Poland, Stalin gradually extended direct Soviet political control over most of Central and Eastern Europe, thereby creating a *cordon sanitaire* or protective barrier of buffer states between the Soviet Union and the West. This was the famous 'Iron Curtain' across Europe, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, about which Winston Churchill thundered in his speech at Fulton, Missouri, in 1946, which has often been interpreted as the West's opening verbal salvo of the Cold War.

In fact there had been more than a whiff of grape-shot about soon after the Yalta conference during an open confrontation in Washington between the new American President, Harry Truman (Roosevelt died in April 1945), and the Soviet Foreign Minister, Stalin's old crony from the Tsaritsyn days, Vyacheslav Molotov. In what one commentator described as 'the language of a Missouri mule-driver', Truman publicly harangued his visiting Soviet ally over what he regarded as the unacceptable composition of the

proposed government of Poland, on which a compromise agreement had already been reached at Yalta. There was a heated exchange, but Stalin immediately wrote to the President in remarkably restrained tones pointing out the Soviet Union's crucial interest in ensuring the existence of a friendly government in adjacent Poland, and reminding him, correctly, that the USSR had neither been consulted about, nor claimed the right to interfere in, the establishment of the governments of, for instance, Greece or Belgium in the western sphere. 'To put it plainly', he wrote, 'you want me to renounce the interests of the security of the Soviet Union; but I cannot proceed against the interests of my own country'. Stalin's face-to-face meeting with Truman at the Potsdam conference in July- August 1945 did nothing to dispel the mounting antipathy between the two still formally allied leaders; indeed, it served only to confirm their suspicions about each other's hostile intentions and drive them into even more firmly entrenched positions. Well before Churchill's Iron Curtain speech, therefore, the tone of the Cold War and the bellicose language in which it was to be conducted had been established.

In fact, some of the misinterpretations of each other's actions and intentions in the early stages of the Cold War lay in the imperfect,



ambivalent conclusions of the end-of-war conferences. Many of the most contentious issues raised at Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam were deferred, and even when agreements were reached, they tended to be vaguely worded and open to differing interpretations and conflicting inferences. For instance, the concept of 'free elections' meant different things to different people. And, given Russia's experience of what the Soviet leadership regarded as western perfidy, it was obvious that Stalin would give priority to the establishment of 'friendly governments' on its borders, rather than ones elected on the American or British model.

On 6 and 9 August 1945, the United States of America dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is impossible here to explore the complex web of military, political, moral and technological arguments surrounding Truman's personal decision to use these dreadful new weapons of war, thus making the USA the first, and so far the only, country in the world ever to launch nuclear 'weapons of mass destruction' against an enemy. There is, however, an abundance of evidence to suggest that the decision was motivated as much by political considerations in relation to the Soviet Union as by military objectives against Japan. Even before the bomb was successfully tested, Truman had remarked, with reference to the Russians, *not* the Japanese, 'If it explodes ... I'll have a hammer on those boys!' The American Secretary of State, James Byrnes, was also quite explicit in his opinion that the United States' possession and demonstration of the bomb 'would make Russia more manageable in Europe'.

He was wrong. If anything, it made Stalin even more intransigent in his determination to strengthen his grip on Eastern Europe. Between 1946 and 1949 communist-dominated puppet governments were systematically imposed on East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, as the western allies joined the United States in its vigorous campaign to 'contain' the spread of communism across Europe at almost any cost. In the case of Yugoslavia, Marshal Tito's ideological break with Stalin in 1948 suggested that disunity within the Soviet bloc was capable of being encouraged, extended and exploited to Stalin's disadvantage. Despite the Soviet- Yugoslav rift, on the whole the West persisted for many years in seeing communist Eastern Europe as monolithic, with every regime taking orders from the Kremlin as part of a strategy for world domination. Consequently, the so-called 'Truman doctrine' of 'containment' gradually gave way to the policy of 'roll-back' - that is, an attempt to undermine the Soviet Union's monopoly of power in her 'satellite' countries and overthrow their communist governments. Some western statesmen even privately advocated the use of nuclear weapons to bring this about - not so much a policy of 'roll-back' as of 'wipe-out'! Stalin's response was a series of purges, arrests, proscriptions, trials and even executions of East European politicians suspected of anti-Soviet leanings or 'Titoist' sympathies, and to impose his own brand of socialism through terror everywhere east of the river Elbe. It was not any more a policy of building the Stalinist model of 'socialism in one country', but 'socialism in one bloc'.

In 1949 three important events took place. The first was the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a formal alliance of eleven West European and North American powers directed specifically against the Soviet bloc. The second was the successful testing of the atomic bomb by the USSR. In effect, the nuclear arms race was now definitely on the international agenda. And third was the victory of the communist revolution in China and the establishment of the Chinese People's Republic.

Although the Soviet Union had played no part in Mao Tse-tung's triumph, the fact that the territorially largest and the demographically most populous countries in the world were now both governed by communist dictatorships added to the alarm of the capitalist powers and their Third World colonial dependencies in Asia and elsewhere. The Cold War had now shifted from being a conflict over spheres of influence in Europe to a global confrontation between two military superpowers and their respective allies, both of them armed, from 1953 onwards, with the hydrogen bomb and both, therefore, with the potential power to plunge the entire planet into a nuclear holocaust.

Although both Stalin and Truman may have misinterpreted each other's military intentions and/or capabilities in the early stages of the Cold War, this is the awesome responsibility they left their political heirs to shoulder when they both, in their different ways, departed from the political scene in 1953.

Death

Stalin's seventieth birthday was celebrated in December 1949 amidst extravagant outpourings of official encomia, obsequious greetings, exhibitions, publications, poetry and even prayers. Apart from the ritual references to the various manifestations of his superlative leadership and genius, the more effusive offerings contained intimations of immortality. But not even Stalin was able to organize that. His mental

The most prominent people around him, who were later to form the so-called 'collective leadership' after Stalin's death, were Malenkov, Molotov, Kaganovich, Beria, Khrushchev, Mikoyan and Voroshilov, all of them plotting and scheming in an atmosphere of fear and mutual suspicion. The most senior member of the Politburo after Stalin himself, Andrei Zhdanov, had died, probably of natural causes, in 1948. He was replaced as head of the Leningrad party organization by Giorgii Malenkov, who seemed to be being groomed for the leadership succession. However, his authority was offset to some extent by the recall of Khrushchev from the post-war re-collectivization drive in Ukraine and his appointment as head of the Moscow party organization. Beria, too, had a potentially formidable power base in the NKVD, although the fate of his two predecessors at its head, Yagoda and Yezhov, did not suggest that the position was exactly free of risk. From his Leningrad base, and with Stalin's obvious approval, Malenkov inaugurated a purge of senior party officials and Zhdanov protégés to consolidate his own position. The 'Leningrad Affair', as it came to be known, in fact spread far beyond Leningrad and resulted in the dismissal, arrest and execution of an unknown number of people in the party and government hierarchy. Though nowhere on the same scale as the Great Terror, it was nevertheless an ominous reminder of the sinister methods and mayhem of the 'thirties.

Proximity to Stalin was no guarantee of political survival or personal safety and there is a fair amount of evidence to suggest that around 1952 Stalin was on the verge of another major shake-up of personnel. In October of that year the Communist Party held its 19th Congress, the first for thirteen years. Stalin used the opportunity not only to alter the party statutes but also to disband the tightly knit Politburo and replace it with a much larger, more amorphous policy-making body renamed the Praesidium. This at any rate implied a dilution of the authority of the old Politburo members, which could hardly have increased their sense of well-being. Added to this, some members of Molotov's and Mikoyan's family had been arrested; Stalin's long-serving personal secretary, the shadowy Poskrëbyshev, had been dismissed; and even the odious Beria was under something of a cloud as a result of his mishandling of the affairs of his, and Stalin's, native Georgia. In Eastern Europe, the trials of leading Communist Party officials were going ahead. Then in January 1953 came news of the 'Doctors' Plot'. It was announced that nine Kremlin doctors, most of them Jewish, had been arrested and accused of deliberately bringing about the death of Zhdanov in 1948 and of conspiring to assassinate a number of senior military figures. They were further charged with maintaining links with overseas intelligence agencies and international Jewish organizations. The echoes of the purges of the 1930s were unmistakable.

All the omens seemed to indicate the Stalin was about to launch yet another wave of terror. However, if that was indeed his intention, he was prevented from doing so by the timely intervention of a fatal brain haemorrhage on 2 March 1953. Part-paralysed, incoherent, semi-conscious and stupefied by alcoholic excess, he died three days later. In the official bulletin, it was solemnly announced that 'The heart of the wise leader and teacher of the Communist Party and the Soviet People - Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin - has ceased to beat'. (Speculation that his death may have been the result of other than natural causes is based on very flimsy evidence, which need not be explored here.) In her memoirs, Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva, describes the deathbed scene. Senior party men had gathered at the secret Kuntsevo *dacha* along with family members and household servants. When the final moment came, many of them, she says, including Malenkov, Khrushchev, Kaganovich, other leading acolytes of the Stalin cult and partners in his crimes, shed genuine tears. It is not facetious to suggest that these tears, while genuine enough, may not have been the expression so much of grief, as of relief.

The body lay in state for three days while thousands and thousands filed in a state of shock past the open coffin. The funeral was held in Red Square, followed by the enshrinement of his chemically embalmed corpse alongside that of Lenin in the mausoleum. In a final, tragic episode, scores of mourning citizens

were crushed and trampled to death by the grief-stricken, frenzied crowds, the last victims of the cult of Stalin.

The public obsequies had been presided over by the members of the Praesidium, with eulogies delivered by Molotov, Malenkov and Beria. Whatever sentiments were openly expressed, and whatever their innermost feelings at their master's demise, his successors now jointly faced the formidable task, as his political trustees, of administering the ambiguous and imponderable legacy of Stalin and **Stalinism**.