A TSAR OR A PRIEST

The doctor of Stalin's mother recalled the final conversation between Stalin and his mother, at their last meeting in 1935:

Stalin: ***Why did you beat me so hard?***

Mother: ***That's why you turned out so well . . . Joseph . . . who exactly are you now?***

Stalin: ***Remember the Tsar? Well, I'm like a tsar.***

Mother: ***You'd have done better to have become a priest.***

KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER 20

Stalin's final years 1945–1953

1 The loss of life – up to 27 million Soviet citizens – and physical damage done to the USSR during the war was on an unimaginable scale.
2 Stalin returned to pre-war methods of control despite the desire for a more relaxed society.
3 Prisoners of war and Soviet citizens who had been trapped in the occupied areas were treated harshly, many sent to the Gulag or executed.
4 Stalin mounted a campaign of nationalism and anti-Westernism to help unite society and prevent the Soviet Union from being contaminated by any democratic ideas. Zhdanov led a drive for ideological and cultural purity (the Zhdanovshchina), which included a clampdown on the arts and sciences.
5 Stalin returned to the centrally planned economy and Five-Year Plans with an emphasis on heavy industry and armaments. Industrial recovery and growth was impressive.
6 The agricultural sector remained the weakest aspect of the Soviet economy.
7 Stalin's position as the all-powerful leader of the one-party state was strengthened by the war. He used the same manipulative politics to maintain his grip on power and control contenders for the leadership.
8 The period from 1945 to 1953 had been called 'high Stalinism'. Historians have put forward a number of explanations for why this developed.
9 Historians debate the extent to which the Stalinist state was built on Leninist foundations. Some believe there is a clear break between Lenin and Stalin, others think there is a clear line of continuity between the two.
10 Any assessment of Stalin must acknowledge that he drove the programme of industrialisation that modernised the USSR and enabled it to defeat Germany in the Second World War. However, a terrible price was paid for this – some 20 million people's deaths and a society poisoned by fear and terror.

21 Conclusion

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The beginning of this chapter looks at the similarities between Stalinism and tsarism, bringing the book full circle. It then explores the nature of the totalitarian Stalinist state, which was full of contradictions and inefficiencies and did not exercise the total control of mind and action that the word 'totalitarian' implies. Finally, it provides a brief overview of the Soviet Union until the collapse of Communism in 1991 and the changes in the new Russia thereafter.

A Comparing tsarism with Stalinism

At the beginning of this book we looked at the tsarist regime in pre-revolutionary Russia. The Communist Revolution of 1917 was intended to bring about radical change and create a modern society in which social relations and the relationship between state and people were completely different from those of the tsarist system. Yet the Stalinist state that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s had many features in common with its tsarist predecessor. The system of personalised control in Stalin's dictatorship was very similar to that of the Tsar: the notion of a god-like leader, the chief benefactor and protector of the people, who knows the right course to follow and can lead the Russian people out of darkness into the light; the culture of blaming officials for problems instead of the person at the top. The icons of tsarism and Stalinism – the pictures, statues and imagery – are very similar in the way they portray the leader.

This is not to say that Stalinism was somehow inevitable. But there is a strong case for arguing that the traditions of Russian history played an important role in determining the shape and characteristics of Stalinism. In the difficult and sometimes chaotic circumstances in which the Russians found themselves, they retreated or slipped into traditional solutions that they understood well and with which they were comfortable. Traditional patterns of control found their way easily into the Stalinist repertoire and one school of thought sees Stalin as a Red tsar who pursued some of the tsars' traditional goals such as promoting nationalism and Russification and extending the boundaries of the empire. Stalin certainly saw himself as a moderniser in the tradition of Peter the Great. It is reported that in 1935 Stalin himself said that ordinary people needed a tsar to worship.

In chart 21A (see pages 388–389), the similarities of the two systems – tsarism and Stalinism – are compared. The three guiding principles of tsarism, autocracy, orthodoxy and nationalism, are used as a basis for comparison along with aspects of economic policy.

21A Similarities between tsarism and Stalinism

Tsarism	Stalinism
Autocracy	
Rule by a supreme leader, the Tsar, who makes major decisions and has power of life and death over his subjects. He was given divine status.	Stalin was supreme leader of the Soviet Union, with power to sign death warrants. He was portrayed as a god-like figure in the cult of the personality.
The Tsar was supported by an élite – the nobility whose prime role was to serve the Tsar. Their positions of influence in the government, armed forces and civil service were held through the patronage of the Tsar.	Stalin was supported by the *nomenklatura* – an élite who held the top positions in the party, government, armed forces, etc., through the patronage of Stalin. He kept their support by the threat of removing privileges – access to scarce goods, best apartments, etc.
There was a huge government bureaucracy, slow, unwieldy and impenetrable, with corruption at lower levels.	There was a huge, faceless bureaucracy in government and party which led to 'death by paper'. In local areas 'inner circles' of government and party officials and industrial managers cooked up deals to suit themselves, often ignoring instructions from the centre.
There was a well-developed system of ranks and privileges.	A system of ranks developed in the 1930s from the *nomenklatura* downwards. Being a party official or member brought power and privileges commensurate with the level. The command economy demanded there be officials and managers at different levels and wage differentials between workers.
The secret police – the Okhrana – were used to support the state and deal with critics and opposition. Many oppositionists were arrested and exiled to Siberia. The Okhrana had an extensive network of agents penetrating all areas of society.	There was extensive use of the secret police (OGPU, then NKVD) in all aspects of Soviet life – government, party, economic spheres and prison system (the Gulag) – and at all levels. They performed a monitoring role, with power to root out opposition to party leadership.
Internal passports, residence permits and visas were used to control the movement of the population.	Internal passports, residence permits and visas were used to control the movement of the population.
There was lack of free speech – censorship of the press and banning of political parties (except between 1906 and 1914).	There was lack of free speech – censorship of the press and banning of rival political parties.
There was no tradition of democratic political institutions.	There were no genuinely democratic institutions although soviets were designed to be a purer form of democratic participation.
Tsars like Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible saw themselves as leaders who were enforcing change on the nobility and others to create a strong Russian state. Peter also saw himself as a moderniser bringing Russia out of the dark ages. Ivan broke the nobility, torturing them and executing them on suspicion of treason, ensuring their loyalty to the state. His agents, the Oprichniks, wore black uniforms; their insignia was a dog's head on a broom, signifying their dog-like devotion to the Tsar and their duty to sweep away treason.	Stalin saw himself as being in the same tradition as Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible, taking the Soviet Union towards socialism and making it into a great industrial power, respected in the world. He praised Peter in 1928, on the eve of the Great Turn, for building mills and factories to strengthen the defences of the country. When watching Eisenstein's film about Ivan he remarked that Ivan's fault lay in not annihilating enough of his enemies. Like Ivan, Stalin was prepared to deal harshly with any opposition. He believed he was acting in the interests of his country and its people.
Orthodoxy	
The Tsar's power was underpinned by the Russian Orthodox Church, a branch of Christianity. Russians saw their Orthodox beliefs as special and believed they had a mission to spread their beliefs to other parts of the world. They believed they were the upholders of the 'true' Christian faith.	Stalinism was underpinned by Marxism–Leninism which became an orthodoxy trotted out by Stalin to justify his actions. It was treated as a quasi-religion. Russians believed they had a mission to spread Communist beliefs throughout the world by encouraging world revolution.
Nationalism	
There was a strong emphasis on Russian nationalism and patriotism. There were attempts to export the Russian way of life to other parts of the empire through the policy of Russification. Tsars throughout the nineteenth century were looking to expand their empire and to become a major dominant power in European affairs.	Stalin emphasised nationalism in 'Socialism in One Country' – the idea that Russians could build socialism on their own without outside help. There were appeals to nationalism and patriotism in the Five-Year Plans. People who did not co-operate were denounced as traitors and 'enemies within'. Stalin mounted a drive on nationalism and Soviet patriotism in the 1940s. This included a policy of Russification. Stalin was keen on Russian domination of both government and party in the other Soviet republics, although some concessions were made to regions developing their own national traditions. In foreign policy, Stalin pursued a very nationalistic line, putting Soviet security above everything else, even to the point of doing a deal with Hitler. Any tsar would have been proud of Stalin's foreign policy, particularly the successful expansion after the Second World War, with the USSR's becoming a superpower.
Economic policy	
Under Nicholas, economic change was led from above, largely because the middle classes were too weak. It was a state-sponsored model with the government promoting industrial growth in conjunction with the development of the railways. The main emphasis was on the development of heavy industry at the expense of consumer goods. The driving force behind this was the need to be able to produce weapons and armaments so that Russia could remain a major power in the world. To get money for investment the state borrowed money from abroad and squeezed the peasantry very hard through taxation.	In 1928, Stalin initiated a programme of rapid industrialisation. This was driven from above through the command economy and Five-Year Plans. Targets were set by the planners at the top, which those below had to achieve. The main emphasis was on heavy industry at the expense of consumer goods. One of the main reasons for this was to build up a powerful armaments industry with which to fight the USSR's enemies, before and after the Second World War. To get the resources to invest in this, Stalin squeezed the peasantry very hard through taxation and by taking grain to feed workers and sell abroad.

ACTIVITY

Write a short essay under the title: Stalin the Red Tsar. Decide how far you think this statement is fair and what the main similarities between the tsarist state and the Stalinist state were. Draw on material from the beginning and end of this book and your own knowledge.

B An imperfect totalitarian state

The image of the totalitarian state is that of a well-oiled, efficient machine in which commands and instructions from the top are passed down to those below and diligently carried out. But the Stalinist state was far from this. It was much messier and full of contradictions and inefficiencies. It was a totalitarian state but control was far from perfect. Stalin was dependent on the party élites and regional subordinates to get his policies put into action and they had to interact with society as a whole. Outwardly there was obedience to orders but under the surface there was often considerable disorderliness. The Soviet people were not just passive agents subject to the instructions, mobilisation and manipulations of the people at the top. They were participants who developed a way of coping with the Stalinist state – what has been called a 'Stalinist culture'. Sometimes this involved taking up Communist Party ideas and values and interpreting them in their own interests; sometimes it involved resistance and avoidance. Some, of course, took up the Soviet *mentalité* and tried to eradicate anti-Soviet elements in their life. Above all, *Homo Sovieticus* (see page 319) was a survivor.

There was a gulf between the centre and the periphery: cliques in regions far away from Moscow ran their own fiefdoms for their own interests while paying lip service to the central government. Many joined the Communist Party for their own advancement rather than ideological commitment, and fraud was common. Some ignored official policies or were deliberately obstructive. A lot of this type of action was kept secret from those higher up the chain of command. One reason for the purges was to try to gain control of outlying regions and make them carry out central policies more effectively.

In the centrally planned system, targets were set from the centre and the different parts of the system were supposed to work in harmony to achieve the desired outcomes. But 'the imperatives of meeting production targets of the Five-Year Plans led regional party and economic leaders into self protective practices that involved a systematic deception of the Centre' (S. Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Stalinism New Directions*, page 10). Desperate to fulfil targets, people sought to bribe or steal from others to get raw materials; factories turned out sub-standard or useless products or fiddled the figures. Party members often colluded in this because they did not want to be held responsible for unfulfilled targets. Even party bosses, desperate to carry out their own pet projects, manipulated the system for their own ends. Corruption was rife throughout the whole system. Workers also subverted the system, making use of the 'revolving door' in the early to mid-1930s to move on to other jobs to avoid trouble or to evade being caught by the authorities. Skilled workers, before and particularly after the war, were in such short supply that they could put pressure on managers to give them better wages and conditions and escape stringent labour discipline.

The peasants found all sorts of ways of subverting the running of the kolkhozes, turning matters to their advantage despite the draconian laws. Non-cooperation, lack of effort or insubordination all contributed to poor performance and this often led to mangers being replaced because they failed to reach targets. Party or local officials were caught by contradictions in policy, e.g. they were supposed to identify and remove kulaks but these were the very people who were most productive and most useful in fulfilling targets. Even a Politburo commission referred to the whole dekulakisation programme as a 'dreadful mess'.

As Chris Read has written, 'In many ways Soviet Russia remained a fluid and mobile society filtering through the fingers of those trying to control it.' Party and police authorities became obsessed by fear of social disorder from the uncontrolled migration of millions of peasants into towns and cities. Socially marginal elements and petty criminals roamed their outskirts. NKVD Order 00447 of July 1937 was designed to eliminate the 'socially harmful elements'. What Pasternak called 'the unprecedented cruelty of Yezhov's time' was in part an attempt to control the 'quicksand society'.

Stalin's Russia was a heavily centralised and controlled state and there was much tighter control of the average person's existence. Conformity to a formulated state view was insisted upon. But it was not the total control that the word 'totalitarian' implies. The non-Communist intelligentsia were intimidated by the authorities but did not always toe the party line; many of them stopped writing or creating art and kept their heads down. The cult of the personality and propaganda were effective but many saw though the fabrication. In the final years of Stalin's rule, there were many problems in the economy and difficulties in controlling the wider population. For example, young people wanted a more liberated lifestyle. The party leaders and their subordinates knew about the problems and knew that reform was needed but nobody would tell Stalin. There were also other contradictions: Communist Russia was supposed to be an egalitarian society but it was hierarchically ordered with a self-interested ruling class; it was meant to be a workers' paradise but for much of Stalin's rule there were dire shortages, rationing and poverty.

C From Stalin to the modern day – a brief overview

SOURCE 21.1 Khrushchev

Khrushchev 1953–1964

Nikita Khrushchev, who emerged as leader after Stalin, realised the need to reform the Stalinist system (see De-Stalinisation page 372). He inherited all the problems of the over-centralised economy and was anxious to bring in changes. He wanted to reward collective farmers more generously and increase the supply of food; he also wanted to produce more consumer goods – telephones, televisions, fridges and the like – to improve the basic standard of living. Khrushchev commented in 1953: 'What sort of Communism is it that cannot provide sausage?' Indeed under him the quality of life did improve significantly. However, too many of his schemes, labelled 'hare-brained' by his opponents, did not work. This, together with perceived failures on the international front, notably the Cuban missile crisis, saw him removed from power in 1964. Interestingly, however, he was not executed or imprisoned.

There was a thaw in cultural life during the Khrushchev era. Many writers who had been banned were rehabilitated, like Anna Akhmatova. Writers tested the limit of state censorship: prose or poems critical of Stalin were acceptable but works that denounced the party or belittled the present Soviet way of life were off limits – they were denounced or left unpublished. Boris Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago* was refused publication in the Soviet Union but was published in Italy in 1957 and in 1958 Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Illegal copies circulated in the USSR and Pasternak was expelled from the Writers' Union, although subsequently he was reinstated. In 1962, Solzhenitsyn published *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the first time that the full truth of what went on in the camps had been revealed in Soviet literature. On 21 October, *Pravda* published Yevgeny Yevtoshenko's poem 'The Heirs of Stalin'. The poem attacked Stalin and his followers and warned against a resurgence of Stalinism. It began with the removal of Stalin's coffin from the Lenin Mausoleum for reburial and contained the lines:

And I appeal to our government with the request:
to double,
to treble
the guard at this tombstone,
So that Stalin may not rise,
and together with Stalin –
the past.

These two publishing events were a high watermark for reform; conservatives were outraged. Solzhenitsyn was unable to publish his next novels and Yevtoshenko's poem was not printed again for a quarter of a century.