

Unit 9: Stalin and the 1930s

Remarks by Professor Blois

Alternatives to Bolshevism Most histories of the October revolution and its aftermath, whether Soviet or western, concentrate on the victors. Perhaps this is only natural, though the Bolsheviks' various Civil War opponents are worthy of some study. Basically, the several factions of "Whites" (mainly royalists) were so out of touch with the popular will and in such disarray that they did not offer a serious alternative to Bolshevik rule. For its part, the Allied intervention (in the north--Murmansk, Arkhangelsk--mainly British, in the south--Ukraine, Crimea--mainly French, and in Siberia mainly American and Canadian) was sometimes symbolic, sometimes providing evacuation routes. Nonetheless, it was long-lived enough (until the early 1920s in some parts of Siberia) to prompt some observers, including George Kennan, to date the beginning of the Cold War from the intervention rather than the 1940s. In any event, neither foreign rule nor the Whites were contenders for Russia's destiny for long.

As Lenin began to consolidate power, other forms of opposition to his policies emerged. Primarily, this opposition centered in rival socialist parties, though members of the Bolshevik party also stood, at times, against Lenin and his eventual successor, Stalin. Before turning to Stalin and

Stalinism, here are a few words about what we may call political opposition to Lenin and his government in the 1920s.

The Socialist Revolutionaries The Socialist Revolutionary (SR) party was founded in 1902 and represented a rejuvenation of revolutionary populism. The party counted among its members, at one time or another, such diverse figures as Trotsky, Chernov, and Kerensky. The SRs were the revolutionary party most prone to the use of violence and terror.

The SR party reached its high water mark in January 1918 when a majority of elected members to the Constituent Assembly were SRs. Unfortunately for them, this potential legislative body met for only 13 hours before being prorogued by the Bolsheviks. It met just long enough to elect the SR Victor Chernov chairman and to begin debating various policies. Fearing that the Bolsheviks might turn off the electricity or in other ways seek to disband the assembly, many members came armed with candles and sandwiches. At 4:00am on January 19 (OS) the sailors guarding the proceedings ordered the discussions terminated so they could get some sleep. The assembly never re-assembled.

By then, the Bolsheviks has effectively coopted the SRs' only major political weapon, their land program. The SRs continued to support the Bolsheviks for a few months, but largely deserted the new regime in the

wake of the March 1918 Brest treaty. Even the so-called Left SRs, who had openly supported the Bolsheviks from the beginning (and in return had one of their number appointed commissar for agriculture) turned against Lenin in mid-1918 and resorted to violence, dooming the party to persecution and eventual elimination by the government.

Eventually, the SRs still residing in Russia were rounded up and tried under a 1922 law making aid to the "international bourgeoisie" punishable by death. This was the first political trial after the October revolution, and many of the defendants were charged with offenses dating to 1918. Of sixteen defendants, fourteen were given death sentences, carried out a few years later on orders from Stalin.

The Mensheviks In the period between the February and October revolutions the strength and influence of the Bolsheviks constantly increased, while that of the Mensheviks steadily diminished. Isaac Deutscher (biographer of both Trotsky and Stalin) felt that the Mensheviks never recovered from this period in which they were unable to define a role for themselves and act it out. Deutscher attributed this fault to a general lack of resoluteness on the part of the Mensheviks, an absence of an "oaken strength" that had characterized Luther but not Erasmus and of which Lenin and Trotsky, but not Plekhanov and Martov, were possessed.

As late as 1920 a Menshevik party congress was held in Moscow, at a time when the Mensheviks were still the most influential party within the trade unions. However, the struggles with the Workers' Opposition and the Kronstadt uprising caused Bolshevik toleration of other political parties to end. In 1921 Martov and Dan and the SR Chernov all emigrated.

Just as he had so effectively taken over the SR land program, Lenin showed that he was coming close to the Menshevik gradualist approach to socialism in the 1921 transition to NEP. The Mensheviks quickly became mere observers of Russian events, writing their critiques and memoirs in exile. Unlike Trotskyism, their movement failed to attract followers, and finally the Menshevik journal "Socialist Herald" came to be published entirely by octogenarians.

Bolshevik opposition The oppositional parties primarily rejected Lenin's methods, while oppositional Bolsheviks took issue with the policies themselves. One of the first deviations was the Left Communist faction, over the 1918 Brest compromise; another was the Workers' Opposition of 1920-1921, which decried growing bureaucratization and advocated greater power to the trade unions.

Lenin's March 1921 turn to NEP was accompanied by a ban on factional activity within the party, and for the rest of his life there was little

evident opposition to Lenin's policies. But, shortly before his death in January 1924, there began to appear factions concerned with two points of vital importance--the succession of power and the duration of the NEP. Von Laue called the debate over future policy a reincarnation of the ideas of Stolypin and Witte, the greatest pre-revolutionary proponents of a slow or a fast economic pace, in the persons of respectively Bukharin and Preobrazhensky. The factions that gathered around these two oppositional approaches to economic development were both suppressed by Stalin in the later 1920s.

Why did the opposition fail? Many theories have been forwarded to explain Bolshevik success over other parties and factions. Two necessary and highly important factors were the political monopoly in effect during the Civil War (which was never really relinquished) and the 1921 ban on even intraparty opposition. Leonard Schapiro, for example, felt that by 1922 the "communist autocracy" had been largely delineated by Lenin. Schapiro thereby greatly stressed Lenin's role in propelling Stalin into power.

Seeking to explain the opposition's general lack of success, Robert Daniels suggested that the oppositionists were always more concerned with ideals while the Bolsheviks were concerned with power. He felt that this resulted in an uneven struggle between the means and the ideals of socialism. Deutscher applied a similar terminology to Soviet affairs but,

unlike Daniels, felt that the "ideals" remained operative in Soviet politics both then and later.

The British historian E. H. Carr wrote that the premise of dictatorship was shared by all of the contending factions during the Civil War. And Adam Ulam, in a similar vein, contended that any coalition government in the early years after 1917 would have bickered itself to death, as had the Provisional Government. If either contention is accepted, there is less room to criticize Lenin and the Bolsheviks over their power monopoly. The question then becomes whether the Bolsheviks could, or should, have relaxed their authoritarian control of Russia after having fought so hard to achieve it. It would have been unrealistic to expect this, but the question of whether a higher degree of intraparty openness could have been maintained by the Bolsheviks is more debatable. But it is undeniable that Stalin's suppression of the left and right opposition within the party was political overkill.

Stalin and his "-ism" Napoleon once said he wanted to leave behind some "blocks of granite" on the unformed institutional landscape of the then new French republic. Stalin, not known for picturesque speech, did erect the two blocks of granite that most permeated and characterized the Soviet Union throughout its more than seventy years of existence--forced-pace industrialization and collectivized agriculture. He also molded the ruling party into a shape it never transcended.

Let's now turn to some of the most important events in all of Soviet history, and all attributable directly to Stalin--industrialization, collectivization, and the Great Terror.

The rise of Stalin Stalin was one of the very few Bolshevik leaders active during Lenin's lifetime who could claim a proletarian origin. For a long time, this was his only distinction in party circles. After the October revolution, however, Stalin gained prominence rapidly. He possessed, as did most prominent Bolsheviks, a high degree of organizational ability and dedication to the cause, but he also had diligence and common sense, which were almost totally absent in Lenin's closest associates. That is, Stalin exhibited those qualities most needed in the post-October years when administrative talent was in short supply. Stalin, of all Bolshevik leaders, was most keenly aware and capable of effectively manipulating the devices of power and the sinews of government. Stalin achieved control of the party almost by default, since he gladly took on tasks no one else was willing to accept.

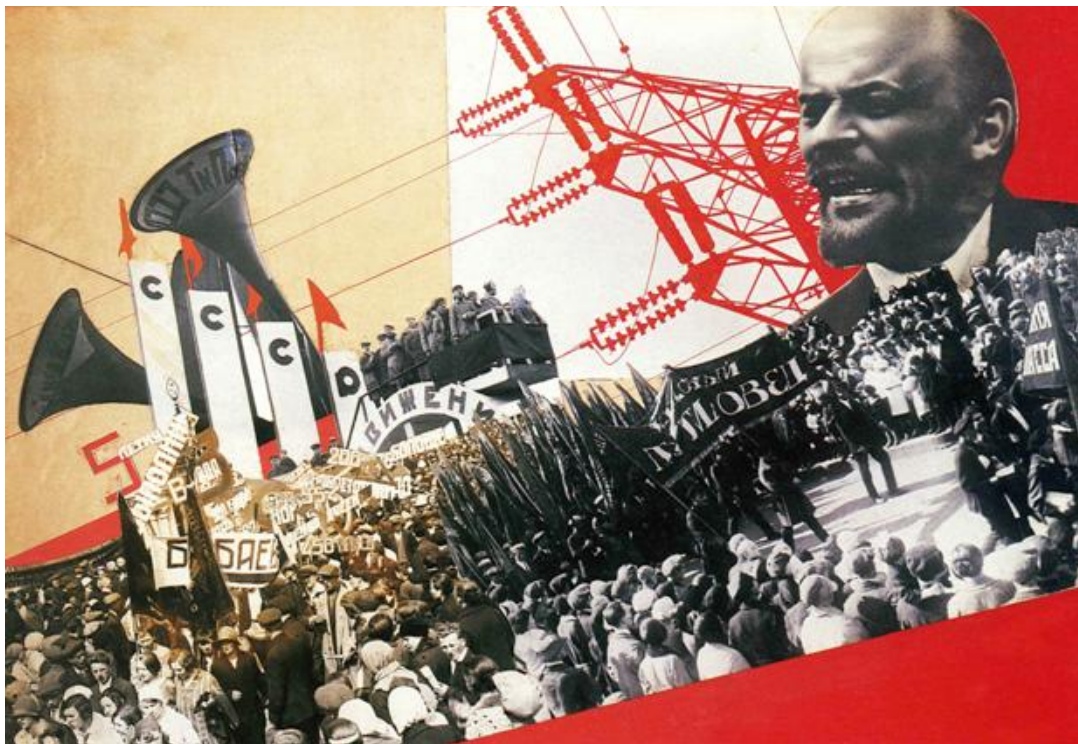
The industrialization drive By the mid-1920s the Soviet economy had regained the approximate levels of production for 1913, and concern was increasingly voiced over the future course to be pursued. A debate over alternative industrialization policies resulted. Chief proponents of, respectively, slow or rapid industrial development were the former co-authors of The ABC of Communism, Nikolai Bukharin and Evgeny

Preobrazhensky. Never a real participant in this debate, Stalin effectively silenced it by adopting in the late 1920s the forced-pace industrialization of Preobrazhensky, marrying it to coercive methods never advocated by its theorist. Soon enough, in his inimitable fashion, Stalin would purge and ultimately order the execution of both men.

Gosplan, massive state-directed economic planning Stalin's main tool for industrial development was economic planning. Planning had first of all been forced upon the government by a national emergency: the Civil War, which demanded efficient management of scarce resources. Lenin soon began to speak and write about the need for electrification, in one instance stating that "communism is soviets plus the electrification of the entire country." In 1921, Lenin launched both the NEP and Gosplan (the state planning agency). With NEP loosening the government's control of the economy, Gosplan lacked a clear role, but by the late 1920s it was gaining visibility by being an open proponent of rapid industrialization. Stalin tasked Gosplan with drawing up and managing the five-year plans that would characterize the Soviet economy for over sixty years (the XIIth plan was in effect as the USSR was unraveling in the late 1980s).

Economic planning and industrial development in the 1930s were done on a massive scale which saw millions of peasants moving from villages to cities, some of which were only villages themselves (Magnitogorsk) when the

process began. While crude in many ways, the process nonetheless yielded--with untold suffering by millions--an industrial economy that could withstand the onslaught by Hitler's armies just a decade later. A "great offensive" (as it was called by Maurice Hindus) it was indeed, both materially and ideologically.



A poster touting accomplishments of the first five-year plan. Notice the prominence of the electric wires, in red of course, and the image of Lenin, as the inspiration for 'storming' forward. Source: Khan Academy

The revolution in the countryside Citing a questionable set of statistics on the reportedly deteriorating situation in agriculture, Stalin in 1928 announced the collectivization of agriculture. Any rapid industrialization demanded such a course, it was reasoned, causing many to reject a forced-pace industrialization as too costly, since it was assumed that the peasants

would rebel against collectivization. Knowing all this, Stalin made his decision.

First planned as a gradual advance, collectivization "became a flood," as Riasanovsky said. Peasant resistance exceeded all estimates, a fact that more than anything else allowed for the over-exuberant fulfillment of collectivization quotas by party officials in the field. At the height of so-called dekulakization, the costs in human lives and slaughtered livestock were tremendous, yet acceptable to Stalin. The only thing Stalin was unwilling to accept was a slackening of industrialization. Since the development path and pace were both unacceptable to the Russian (largely Ukrainian) peasantry, violence was inevitable given Stalin's resoluteness.

The famine (Holodomor) This is not the place to discuss the "Ukrainian national project," a long-lived phenomenon that reached a peak in the years immediately after World War I, when the collapse of both the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires produced a briefly independent Ukraine. However, with it as a backdrop it is easier perhaps to understand Stalin's brutal antipathy to Ukraine once he held total power over all aspects of Soviet policy.

When the USSR came into being in 1923, Ukraine was given a semi-autonomous standing as a "soviet republic." Any hopes of true autonomy

were dashed once industrialization and collectivization were underway circa 1930. The full speed ahead collectivization in Ukraine during 1929 and 1930 led many peasants, and not just the prosperous ones, to resist and in some cases emigrate. Crop yields declined and livestock were slaughtered, leading to a crackdown overseen by two of Stalin's closest associates, Kaganovich and Molotov, coupled with the brief retreat accompanying Stalin's "dizzy with success" proclamation.

Confiscations of grain soon returned, and those in rural areas that had not joined collective farms or migrated to cities were left to starve. In 1932-1933, it is estimated that over 4,000,000 Ukrainians starved to death. In their places, the Soviet government resettled ethnic Russians. The whole episode was characterized by two factors: Stalin's attempt to staunch Ukrainian nationalism once and for all, and his growing fear that Soviet Russia was becoming encircled by capitalist powers bent upon its destruction. There is more than a whiff of genocide at work also, and the so-called Holodomor (hunger-terror) was labeled as genocide by the Ukrainian parliament in 2006. Several authors have done much to bring all this to the world's attention, including Robert Conquest, Anne Applebaum, Timothy Snyder, Serhi Plokhy, in the post-1991 era of Ukrainian independence.

In describing the inhumane grain and livestock confiscations of 1932-33, Applebaum says there was an "indifference to violence" and an "amoral nonchalance about mass murder" which were later recognized, acknowledged, and written about by some members of the party cadres sent to the Ukrainian countryside, for instance the novelists Lev Kopelev and Vasilii Grossman, whose works could finally be published during the era of *glasnost* that commenced in the late 1980s. Snyder describes the irony that when famine grips a society it is normal for the cities to empty as food is sought in the countryside, where farmers even in the worst of times are subsisting. In Ukraine gripped by the early years of collectivization, things were so bad in the countryside--especially during and after the grain confiscations--that the peasantry streamed to the cities, only to find starvation rampant. Cannibalism, Snyder writes, was not uncommon. Stalin's confiscations and simultaneous blockage of food aid to Ukraine from the Red Cross and other international agencies were described as "genocide" in 1953 by the jurist who had earlier coined the term, Rafael Lemkin. And as with the purges and Great Terror (see below), it was Robert Conquest who did perhaps more than any other author, and did it first (with his 1986 Harvest of Sorrow) to shed light on the extent of suffering and death in Ukraine--and Kazakhstan--in the early to mid-1930s.

The purges Stalin's industrial and agricultural policies were for at least a few decades after implementation viewed by many writers as more or less "necessary" (see below). Implementation of these policies was another matter entirely and has always been seen as brutal, to put the best face on it. The purges, on the other hand, have been universally condemned, after 1956 even by the Soviet leadership. And as the Soviet Union was imploding in the late 1980s, works such as Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago and the Medvedev brothers' Let History Judge (both published with their author's permission in English language translation) were published openly in Russia. Even Robert Conquest's The Great Terror, in Russian translation, was likewise published and discussed widely. These indictments of Stalinism root and branch should have laid all these matters to rest once and for all in history's dustbin, but under Putin things have turned out otherwise (see unit 14), causing Masha Gessen to ask rhetorically in a 2015 New Yorker article, "Is it 1937 yet?"

Purges had not been infrequent within the Bolshevik party, but the events constituting the "Great Purges" found their pretext in the murder of Sergei Kirov (almost certainly ordered by Stalin) in December 1934. Kirov, party leader in Leningrad, was the closest thing the Bolsheviks had to a charismatic figure, he reportedly was a great speaker, and shortly before his death had been mentioning the controversial 1923 "Lenin's testament",

highly critical of Stalin and of uncertain authorship (some now suppose it was written by Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya).



Stalin and purged generals. Cartoon by David Levine for the New York Review of Books, copyright 1969. Copyright shared with NVCC, 1986.

The famous show trials took place between 1936 and 1938 and led to the execution of prominent party leaders (Bukharin, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Preobrazhensky, and Radek among others), military leaders (Tukhashevsky), and finally many of the purgers themselves (Yagoda, Ezhov). Stalin is reported to have told Yagoda, then chief of the NKVD, that he preferred men who supported him from fear rather than from conviction, since convictions could change. In the early 1930s many of Stalin's associates in the were having doubts about his fitness to rule, and it was not

difficult for Stalin to imagine a scenario in which these men would move against him. Over such matters, the purges began.

To this day, it remains difficult to understand why so many prominent defendants, most of whom were doubtless innocent, confessed so abjectly. Roy Medvedev found his answer in extreme party loyalty, which prevented the old Bolsheviks from doing otherwise. To deny their guilt would have been to deny the party, and only secondarily to deny their own trumped-up indictments.

If most of the purge defendants were guilty only of party loyalty, why did Stalin move so ruthlessly against them? The only logical answer is that many must have opposed Stalin on basic policy decisions. The Menshevik Boris Nicolaevsky, one of the fathers of Kremlinology, felt certain that Stalin was correct in his perception of both political opposition and resentment over his casting himself as Lenin's heri. Stalin was moving against men who had opposed his hard-line policy in peasant affairs and his increasing overtures to Hitlerite Germany and who, at the same time, denied his claim to be the "second Lenin." This last point was given great stress in Robert Tucker's attempt to probe Stalin's psyche.

All of this is summed up in the title to Robert Conquest's 1968 The Great Terror. It was and remains a landmark work of historical analysis and

a watershed event. Twice it was modestly updated and republished, in 1989 and again in 2008. Re-reading portions of it, as I did recently, it continues to shock. How could such things happen, one asks. "Why am I being arrested?" so many innocents asked of their interrogators. Tatyana Tolstaya, descendant of both Leo Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev, says the enigmatic, Kafkaesque reply "Because" is all that can be said. And in a depressing remark about the long run of Russia's history, she writes that the late 1930s are called the 'great' terror to distinguish the era from the 'little' terror under which Russians have lived since at least the time of Ivan IV.

Stalin and the arts: socialist realism

There was much artistic experimentation in post-revolutionary Russia through the 1920s, in all areas of artistic endeavor. Whole movements such as constructivism, suprematism, and futurism sprung up and flourished, if briefly, until socialist realism was proclaimed in 1934 and writers, as well as all other artists, were told by Zhdanov that they were henceforth to be "engineer of the human soul" who would illustrate "reality in its revolutionary development." Art in the early Soviet years had often been so zealously experimental that it called into being a reaction described by Lunacharskii as a hoped for "renaissance of realism... the sort of realism that would proceed approximately from the peredvizhniki (wanderers)", the late nineteenth

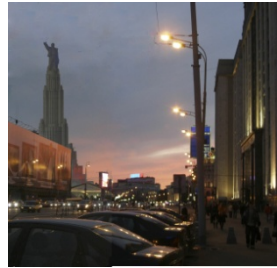
century Russian school of realistic, sometime radical, painting that included Repin, Levitan, and Kramskoi.



Isaak Brodsky, in his early thirties at the time of the revolution, had always worked in a traditional, portrait-oriented, style of painting. Never a member of the avant-garde, his realistic approach came back into vogue with the party and he received a number of commissions in the 1920s and '30s. Here he can be seen sketching Lenin at a 1922 conference in Moscow. The sketch later became an iconic painting with Lenin transported artistically to October 1917 and to a drafty room in the Smolny Institute, Petrograd, preparing his remarks for later the same evening at the second congress of soviets, to which he would proclaim that the provisional government had been overthrown. Socialist realism in its essence. Incidentally, Brodsky's painting made its way to Washington's Hirshhorn Museum for a 1988 exhibition of Russian and Soviet Art, 1900-1930. [photo credits needed]

Avant-garde art and artists from the recent past and present were no longer acceptable models. Out went the music of Prokofiev and Shostakovich, the poetry of Esenin and Akhmatova, the films of Eisenstein, and the graphic art of Malevich and Chagall. Still, hewing to the sort of "boy meets tractor" art encouraged graphically and in novels was difficult under Stalin and his henchmen Yagoda and Ezhov, as was glorifying the almost deification of Lenin and Stalin. Of the over 700 who attended the first writers congress in 1934, only approximately fifty survived to witness World War II.

The unreality, perhaps surreality, of these years is expressed in the underground joke told after celebrations of the hundredth anniversary of Pushkin's tragically early death in 1937. The joke had it that a statuary contest was held to honor Pushkin. Third place was awarded to a statue of Lenin reading Pushkin. Second place went to a statue of Pushkin reading Lenin. And first place went to a statue of Lenin.



Vladimir Tatlin's "tower" (1920), left, was to be a constructivist monument to the Third International, itself to have been the stalking horse for world revolution. Here one can see how it would have dominated the neo-classical landscape of Petrograd (soon to be Leningrad). World revolution fizzled, the Bolsheviks moved on to "socialism in one country", and the tower never got farther than a wooden model.

By the 1930s, avant-garde architecture was definitely out, and the Palace of Soviets, middle, if completed, would have dominated the Moscow skyline even more than the un-built tower. More than a quarter mile high, counting the more than 300 meter statue of Lenin atop it, it would have by far been the world's tallest and largest by volume structure. Construction was begun on the site of the former Christ the Savior cathedral (demolished in the early 1930s), but was interrupted by World War II. Later, instead of recommencing construction, the excavated site was repurposed into a very large swimming pool. Even later, in the 1990s, a new Christ the Savior cathedral was constructed where the pool once was.

So what actually did get built? The 1930s were a great age of industrial construction, steel mills and etc. After the war, not surprisingly, so-called Stalinist Empire style (often derided as "wedding cake") dominated the Moscow skyline. The world's tallest hotel for more than twenty years after its 1954 opening was the Hotel Ukraine (Khrushchev chose the name). It's now a Radisson. [need image credits]

The strictures of socialist realism in all areas of the arts would persist until the so-called "thaw" of the mid-1950s (see unit 12), and would carry on even thereafter in somewhat lessened form.

Was Stalin necessary? It cannot be denied that Stalin has suffered from a bad press. Even his supporters among Western writers tend to implicitly denigrate Stalin's creative, constructive role. For instance, E. H. Carr felt that Stalin was a "great agent of history," but that events made the man rather than vice versa; that is, the situation(s) Stalin faced made many of his decisions seem logical or necessary. So, in largely absolving Stalin, Carr also denied his personal significance. Stalin's most recent biographer in English, Stephen Kotkin, will have none of this. For him, Stalin is neither a

Tolstoyan cork bobbing on a sea of historical forces (a la Napoleon in War and Peace), nor someone "made" by the psychodynamics of his youth and upbringing (as Tucker seeks to demonstrate), but a man of clear and consistent ideology, demonstrated over and over again (primarily by his actions to eliminate opponents and confiscate grain in Tsaritsyn in 1918 and his emulation of these tactics on a grander scale in the full-scale collectivization of 1928 and thereafter and the total war he waged against any and all critics beginning in the 1920s and reaching full scale brutality in the 1930s' purges. For Kotkin, collectivization proves not Stalin's determination to succeed at remaking society by the surest method but rather his determination to remain consistent ideologically, even if it meant a greater risk of failure.

Numerous writers who see continuity in the long run of Russian history have seen Stalin as a reincarnation of Ivan the Terrible or Peter the Great (Karpovich, Gerschenkron, Von Laue). Where Isaac Deutscher, always more sympathetic to Trotsky than Stalin, described Stalinism as a necessary, though regrettable, stage in the revolutionary process, Von Laue saw Stalin as the very fruition of the revolution, since he was able to overcome Russia's traditional economic backwardness. Having no ideological tests against which to judge him, Von Laue gave Stalin higher marks than Deutscher.

Stalin's dictatorial excesses Von Laue attributes not to the man, but to Russia's backwardness and concomitant need for authoritarian rule.

Perhaps viewing Russia as the first "underdeveloped" nation, as it was seen by numerous mid-twentieth century economists and historians, beginning with Gerschenkron. And it was for the underdeveloped, or less-developed, nations that the Russian model had the most appeal: China, Cuba, and assorted other nations wishing to engineer an economic "take off" (Walt Rostow's term) and to do so very rapidly. The economic historian Alec Nove also held this view, and authored a 1960s book with the title Was Stalin Really Necessary?. In it, he argued that while the "whole hog Stalin" was not inevitable, given the twin goals of holding political power and industrializing rapidly, both integral to Bolshevism, Stalin's course logically ensued.

Recommended readings: bks by Schapiro, Daniels, Deutscher, O. Radkey, Trotsky, Rex Wade, E. H. Carr, Conquest, Applebaum, Snyder, Plokhy