

## Historical interpretations of Stalinism.

### A short introduction.

In dealing with different historical interpretations of Stalin there are a few things to keep in mind:

- Which factors does the historian focus on and what keys does the historian use? In looking at different historical periods the answer to your question will be different.
- The historian can choose to believe parts of or all of the following ideas about history:
  - **The Structuralist** believe that it is structures in society that will determine the actions of history. The French revolution is caused by society, not by persons storming the Bastille.
  - **The Liberal** thinks that persons play a major part in history. Stalin as a person is interesting in understanding the events, he took advantage of other persons weaknesses etc to build his personal power.
  - **The Determinist** believes that there are actual “laws” determining the historical way that events will take. If there are a number of factors present, then these factors will lead to that certain event. Their approach is similar to a natural scientist’s, if you heat water it will boil, if you have population starving in the cities you will have a revolution etc.
  - **The Intentionalists** examines the willing and desires of different persons or factors in society had. Did Stalin intend for the Purges to take place or not? Are there any evidences for this. If you are an intentionalist you are most likely to have an liberal perspective too.
  - **The Revisionist** is an historian who has revised the history out of any reason, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they belong to a whole new school, it only means that they have a different opinion than most other active historians coming from having revised the facts.
  - **The Normative approach**, means that we should use history as a warning example, there are dos and don’ts in history.

## 1. Stalin's rise to power.

| <b>Historical School</b>             | <b>Main focus and idea</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | <b>Important Historians, books and sources.</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
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| <b>Liberal School</b>                | <p>Focus on the <b>Personality of Stalin</b>. Stalin is a very shrewd, cruel, determined and manipulative person. All his actions are seen as a part of Stalin's plans to become the dictator of the Soviet Union. His opponents are portrayed weak, indecisive and easily fooled by Stalin's plans.</p> <p>They also focus on the tactical mistakes made by Trotsky, describing him as arrogant and that this meant that he underestimated Stalin.</p> <p>They have an intentionalist approach to Stalin. This means that they think that Stalin had the intention to take power, to carry out his policies etc. (See Structuralist approach)</p> | <p>The Liberal view is often found in Biographies of Stalin. The sources are usually émigrés who suffered in Stalin's camps.</p> <p>Robert Conquest "Stalin – Breaker of nations" 1991 is the most well known historian of this school today.</p> <p>R Tucker's "Stalin as a Revolutionary 1879-1929" 1974 is another.</p>                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>The Soviet school before 1985</b> | <p><b>The years 1930 – 1953 mark one period.</b> During this time Stalin was portrayed as the great, wise, all-knowing leader who saved the revolution against the attacks from Trotskyist etc.</p> <p><b>After Stalin's Death Khrushchev (1953-1964)</b> started a period of criticism of Stalin's leadership, but since he and all of his friends were men who made a career during Stalinist reign the critical voices were focused on Stalin's personality.</p> <p><b>During Brezhnev (1964-1980)</b> Stalin was basically erased from the History books.</p>                                                                                  | <p>These historians share the same approach as the Liberal school. With the huge difference that the early historians focus on the greatness of Stalin.</p> <p>G F Alexandrov "Joseph Stalin: A short biography" 1947 portrayed Stalin as a hero.</p> <p>E Yaroslavsky "Landmarks in the Life of Stalin" 1942 is even worse. "Long may he live and flourish, to the dismay of our enemies and to the joy of all working people – our own, dear Stalin."</p> |
| <b>Russian Writers since 1985</b>    | <p><b>Gorbachev and Glasnost meant a reassessment of Stalin.</b> In 1988 the party encouraged journalists, old victims etc to write about the period of terror and mistreatment that Stalin was responsible for.</p> <p>The focus was very much on Stalin's personality. Gorbachev was a Leninist and</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <p>Structuralists show up later in the period, since 1988 basically.</p> <p>Most of the time the focus on Stalin and his personality.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

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|                                   | <p>when the critics were turning their focus on the structural problems and the misdeeds by Lenin and the men leading the revolution the debate went quieter.</p> <p>After the fall of the Soviet Union everyday problems became more of interests and the historical debate silenced.</p> <p>Nowadays Stalin is actually a fairly popular person in Russia, a person that many people see as an doer, a strong leader, the answer to Russia's problems today.</p> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>The Trotskyist approach</b>    | <p><b>Trotsky was a “world revolutionary”</b>. In his view Russia wasn't ready for the socialist state alone.</p> <p>Trotsky meant that the growing bureaucracy caused the problems in Russia after the revolution, they became a state in the state.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Trotsky in “My Life” (1931) and “The revolution betrayed” (1937)                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>The Structuralist approach</b> | <p><b>Stalin is seen as a bureaucrat</b>, his rise to power is the triumph of the bureaucracy.</p> <p>The rise of Stalin was due to the Party and the post as General Secretary.</p> <p>Structural reasons within the State rather than Stalin's personality explains the rise of Stalin.</p> <p>The structures within wich Stalin and his rivals had to operate.</p> <p>The old values of the Czarist bureaucracy are in focus.</p>                               | E H Carr “The Bolshevik revolution” (1953)                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>The Party History approach</b> | <p>Similar to structrualist approach.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <p>Lenin in his What is to be done 1902 states that the oranisation of the party needs to be centralized etc.</p> <p>Historians showing the continuity in the policitics from Lenin through Stalin all the way to Gorbachev.</p> |
| <b>The ideological approach</b>   | <p><b>Focus on the importance of the political struggle concerning the NEP</b>. The <i>ideological struggle rather than Stalin's personal struggle</i> for power is put in focus.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | E H Carr and M Levin in “Political Undercurrents in the Soviet Economic Debates from Bukharin to the modern Reformers.” 1974.                                                                                                    |

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|                                      | <p>They mean that Stalin’s position was that of a practical politician, weighting differences and adopting his policies to the winning team. Stalin was according to them prepared to keep NEP as long as it worked but when it got into problems he quickly changed his policies to industrialization.</p> <p>Stalin’s opposition to permanent revolution is also seen as a practical way of dealing with the fact that the Soviet Union was ill equipped and would have lost a war against other countries, a war Lenin saw as inevitable.</p> <p>Liberals have criticized this approach saying they put Stalin in a good light and missing the personality of Stalin.</p>                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <p><b>The Revisionist School</b></p> | <p><b>They followed up on the ideological approach, focusing on the members of the Party. Why did they carry out these hideous orders?</b></p> <p>The factor they focus on is the revolution as a generator of Social Changes in the Soviet society.</p> <p>The Lenin Enrolment 1924, handed by Stalin, which meant the growth of number of members in the communist party is the key. They meant that the new members meant a gap between the leaders of the party and the “individual member”. A lot of the new members were from the workers and they were opposed to NEP, to the farmers etc, so when Stalin proposed the end of NEP, this was welcomed. They also welcomed the focus on heavy industry and their part of society.</p> <p>The social factor is their key explanation .</p> <p>The rivalry between farmers and workers.</p> | <p>W Chase “Workers, Society and the Soviet State 1918 – 1929”.</p> <p>S Fitzpatrick, the Homo Sovieticus you know, is also a historian with this approach.</p> |

**2. Did Stalin start something new or only follow the way laid out by Lenin? The role of Stalin:**

| Historical School                    | Their main views                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
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| <p><b>Soviet historiography:</b></p> | <p><b>1) During Stalin:</b><br/>Stalin orders a new compulsory history book to be published in 1938, this claims that Stalin has only done what Lenin intended. The enemies of the state were punished in the great purges, all for the good of the state and the people.</p> <p><b>2) Trotsky:</b><br/>Is claiming that Stalin has ruined the revolution allowing the bureaucracy to grow stronger and taking away power from the workers and the ideals of the revolution.</p> <p><b>3) During Khrushchev(53-64):</b><br/>Stalin was the one to blame, he had made errors interpreting Lenin's will. Stalin is made an scapegoat for everything that went wrong.</p> <p><b>4) Brezhnev to Gorbachev (64-85):</b><br/>Brezhnev simply erased Stalin, not willing to criticize him but not willing to denounce him.<br/>Stalin is mentioned like this in the official history book written by Kukushin History of the USSR of 1981:<br/>"... as times went by, all the achievements in socialist construction were ... credited to him and his personal leadership. This was a mistake as the crucial part played by the Soviet People and the Communist party, the two decisive forces in the building of a new society, was thus regulated to the background."</p> <p>Dissidents managed to smuggle their work to the west.<br/>Solzhenitsyn and his novels on life in the Stalinist camps are most known.<br/>Sakharov and Medvedev are others worth mentioning, also dealing with Stalinist period.</p> |

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|                                      | <p><b>5) Gorbachev:</b><br/>The devise “Back to Lenin” was his main policy. The view was that similar to Khrushchev’s, but this time not only Stalin and his person were in the line of fire, the whole period was considered a failure and something that Lenin didn’t want. The situations got out of hand when people started criticize not only Stalin’s action but the whole communist state and even Lenin.</p> <p><b>6) After the fall of the Soviet Union:</b><br/>Historians have had a tendency to cricize the whole period and Stalin’s part is seen as a part of a bigger wrong.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p><b>Western historiography</b></p> | <p><b>1) Reporters who actually visited Stalin’s Russia:</b><br/>Stalin was seen as the big savior and the Stalinist state seen as the Great Experiment. Stalin playes a big role in this.<br/>M Muggeridge is the British exception, he reports from the Ukraine famine but wasn’t believed by other commentators.<br/>Many of the western communists saw the USSR as a future savior against Hitler’s Germany. And after WW2 the focus was on the heroic works they had done in the war.<br/>The beginning of the Cold War led to a new approach:</p> <p><b>2) The Liberal Intentionalist school</b> after 1945: See above. They focused on Stalin’s personal intention to make the totalitarian state. Stalin as a inheritor of Lenin’s way is sometimes pointed out, but the main issue isn’t about that.</p> <p><b>3) Determinist school:</b><br/>Criticized the liberal approach saying that the role of Stalin is less important.</p> <p>A Nove in his “Was Stalinism necessary?”(1962) claims that if the minority, the Bolsheviks, wanted to modernize the backward country then Stalinism was necessary.</p> <p>E H Carr stated something similar in the 50’s in his work “The History of Soviet Russia” where he writes that the revolution would have run into the sand hadn’t Stalin done what he did. He also points out that the period of time in which Stalin was active is more important than his personality. See above under structuralists.</p> <p><b>4) The revisionist School:</b><br/>See above. They focused on the role played by the actual people of the Soviet Union, showing that many supported the collectivization, especially among the workers.</p> <p>A more controversial idea was adopted by these historians in explaining the Purges. J Arch Getty proves in his “Origins of the great purges” (1985) that there were an actual Trotskyite conspiracy against the Stalin regime. Sheila Fitzpatrick shows that there was atrong</p> |

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|  | pressure on the central government to deal roughly with the NEP-men coming from the local functionaries. |
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### **3. Was Stalinism necessary for the modernization of Russia?**

Well let's see what the different historians answer:

#### **Liberals:**

They are of course saying NO. They focus on the huge human costs that Stalinism cost. Robert Conquest is the most famous of the historians, focusing on the horrible lives people had in the camps, the great injustice of the Moscow trials, counting the dead after the famine etc.

#### **The Determinist School:**

They are saying WELL YES, it is depending on the goals the USSR had. A Nove and his "Was Stalin really necessary" is the best example on this approach. He states that if the goal was to modernize and industrialize Russia, then Stalinism and the forced collectivization was necessary. He states that this doesn't necessarily mean that Stalinism was desirable but he shows on some of it's strengths. Without Stalinism the USSR would have lost the war for example.

They have a non-normative approach to history, they mean that is not the historians job to determine whether actions taken in the past were right or wrong. They are only interested in whether it was necessary to do certain things to achieve certain goals.

#### **The revisionist school:**

They say I DON'T CARE. In this specific period of history the revisionist school opened up the new perspective of studying the social impact of Stalinism and the way the Social structures played in explaining the society that appeared. Historians like Fitzpatrick have shown what happened with people living in this totalitarian state, how it influenced their ideas about society etc. If they had to answer the question whether Stalinism was necessary they would probably say that there were a great deal of support from the workers in the industrialization but a lot of farmers were opposed to it, this meant that since the Party were relying on the support of the workers; YES, but it is not important whether it was necessary or not.

#### **Soviet Historians:**

They would say WHO'S IN CHARGE? Depending on what year they published they will answer very differently.

#### **4. How popular was Stalin?**

Well, **soviet historians** answer different in different times.

**The Liberals** focus on the negative sides of Stalinism and would say that Stalin was very unpopular, focusing on the lack of freedom that the soviet citizens had. This becomes more apparent during the cold war.

**The revisionist** approach is interesting here, they would say that Stalin was very popular among certain sectors of society. Hanna Arendt's "The Origins of Totalitarianism" points out that cruel dictators usually get support from many groups of society, she examines both Hitler's Germany and Stalin's USSR and finds proof of this. Critics say that this approach render Stalin the role of a Puppet acting on under social pressure.