

**James Richter**

## **Confronting Stalin's Legacy**

**According to an old Soviet joke**, Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev are travelling in a train compartment when the train stops. Lenin goes out, harangues the engineer about his proletarian duty and the train moves on. The train stops again. This time Stalin gets out, shoots the engineer and replaces him with someone else, and the train moves on. When the train stops a third time, Khrushchev gets out, harangues the engineer, fires him, and tries to drive the train himself, and the train moves on. Finally, the train stops a fourth time. Brezhnev closes the windows to the compartment, bounces up and down and says "let's pretend the train is moving."

### ***THE TRANSFORMATION AFTER STALIN: THE OVERALL IMPRESSION***

Stalin's death in March, 1953 precipitated a fundamental shift in the way the Soviet regime operated. Though the institutions and even much of the rhetoric remained largely unchanged (except Stalin's apparatus of terror), the world view that implicitly informed these structures and behavior shifted from an all-consuming millennial vision of impending transformation under Stalin to a world view planted more firmly in the world of empirical observation. In other words: as Stephen Hanson has argued (*Time and Revolution: Marxism and the Design of Soviet Institutions*. Durham, NC: North Carolina University Press, 1996), though official propaganda in both eras urged the population to work hard towards the inevitable advent of communism, the conceptions of when and how that transformation would occur changed significantly. Under Stalin, official rhetoric regarding the transformation to communism entailed a millennial vision that in some ways resembled Christian visions of the second coming. The notion of time in this rhetoric is fundamentally discontinuous: "We will work hard, continue to industrialize, devote ourselves to the party's revolutionary ideal, and at some unknown time in the future we will live under glorious communism. " There is no road map on how this transformation would occur. It just would. Stalin, as the engineer of this transformation, was appropriately attributed with near divine powers. Meanwhile, the population at large was required to devote themselves entirely to the cause of this transformation. A true commitment to the revolutionary goal bestows society with extraordinary power, such that all obstacles can be overcome by zealous hard work. Giant dams, steel mills can arise from nothing; powerful enemies can be defeated. If a person is not wholly committed to this cause, however, if he or she is not part of the transformation, he or she is an enemy that can undermine such progress, and must be purged.

By 1961, much had changed. The millennial vision of almost magic transformation had turned into a vision based more firmly in the real world. Official rhetoric still projected an impending transformation to communism, but in Khrushchev's rhetoric communism differed from Soviet society of the 1950s mostly in that there would be more stuff. And it wasn't going to happen at some unforeseen moment in the future: Khrushchev claimed the Soviet people would live under communism by 1980. Also, Khrushchev was not deified as a god. He acted very humanly. He was not hidden away in the Kremlin; his very human, portly figure was constantly seen visiting farms,

factories or visiting foreign countries. Indeed, he spoke exuberantly—in public—of all the various bodily functions to which we humans are so prone (alas, these utterances were usually edited out before they make the pages of *Pravda*). Of course, there was still a great deal of faith in the power of revolutionary fervor to overcome all obstacles, and the party-state still dominated the public sphere. People were not allowed to oppose the regime in public. Unlike the Stalinist era, however, there was no longer the implicit assumption that if you are not wholeheartedly for the revolution, you must be an enemy. If you behaved as you were expected to behave, you were left alone. In other words, the regime implicitly recognized a private sphere, where people could concern themselves with their families, their friends, their hobbies and interests, without subordinating such thoughts to the revolutionary mission.

### ***THE HISTORY: HOW IT HAPPENED***

As noted, Stalin was deified as a god, as the one leader who understood Lenin's vision better than anyone else, the one leader who pulled the Soviet Union through World War II, the one leader who was best able to recognize and defeat the enemies of socialism. Apparently, the aged Stalin once told his closest advisors, "After I am gone the imperialists will wring your necks like chickens," and many of these advisors were afraid he was right. They were particularly afraid that Stalin's death would create panic in the population and encourage the United States to act more aggressively towards the Soviet Union. On a more fundamental level, they wondered how they would ever legitimate the Soviet system, and their own positions within that system, without the awe inspired by the Generalissimo. Their predicament was further complicated by a decision to stop Stalin's terror. At his death, Stalin was preparing another gigantic purge based on a supposed "Doctor's Plot" of prominent Jewish physicians to harm leading Soviet officials. Many members of the leadership were themselves also targeted for destruction. Within a month after Stalin's death, however, the leadership announced that no Doctor's Plot ever existed. Meanwhile, the leadership began (at first slowly, then by the hundreds of thousands) to let people out of Stalin's camps and back to their homes, where they began to tell stories of the horrors they encountered. How does the leadership explain these horrors without undermining the legitimacy of the whole regime?

In June, 1953, the leadership arrested Stalin's last head of the secret police, Lavrentii Beria, and executed him in October of that year (more on him later). Although they arrested Beria largely out of fear that he would have used his secret police against them, the discredited Beria also proved useful as a scapegoat for the "mistakes" and "excesses" of the Stalin period; Beria misled Stalin, the official line went; he was the one to blame. Clearly, this didn't work out so well, and pressure remained to do something more. Many of the leadership were very reluctant to do so, however, because criticizing Stalin would raise questions about the entire system he created. Finally, at a closed session of the **Twentieth Party Congress** in February, 1956, which only party activists could attend, Khrushchev defied some members of the leadership and made a speech cataloging many of the crimes Stalin committed against **THE PARTY** and **LOYAL MEMBERS OF THE PARTY**. He listed the thousands of high party officials murdered under false pretenses. But at the same time, he defended collectivization and the first five year plan as absolutely necessary, and he never rehabilitated Trotsky,

Zinoviev or Bukharin. In other words, Khrushchev argued that Stalin was right until 1934, when he began his murderous rampage against the party, hoping in this way to heap criticism on Stalin's person while sparing Stalin's system.

The reasons behind the new leadership's desire to end the reign of terror go beyond a craven desire to protect themselves from each other. Some analysts have argued that every revolutionary government creates both **ideologues** and **managers**. The ideologues were driven by the vision of social transformation, the need to overcome (either through force or through persuasion) traditional practices to introduce new, better ways of living. They wanted to change reality, and saw existing habits, social structures as obstacles that had to be overcome. The managers were more concerned with staying in power, with administering and dealing with the reality that was given them, and improving this reality rather than transforming it. In the Soviet case, after collectivization and industrialization, many members of the communist elite (the *nomenklatura*) began to argue that much of the transformation had already occurred; with collectivization and the destruction of the kulaks, the last reserve force of the bourgeoisie had been defeated and a proletarian dictatorship had been created. There were relatively few enemies left, so the Party no longer needed to exercise terror in the population. The population could be trusted to be loyal to the Party, and the Party should now try to create a better life for them. Indeed, the very process of industrialization gave rise to managers rather than revolutionaries. Think of it: you are managing or acting as an engineer in the local blast furnace, and your ability to do your job correctly requires some stability and predictability. Do you really want the party coming in and telling you to reorganize your production according to some new view of history? Do you want the Party pressuring you to perform miracles with the few resources you have? Do you want the secret police to come in and take away your best engineers, and maybe even yourself? No, you want to plan for incremental improvements over time based on a sober calculation of the resources you have on hand and the newest technical information.

Many analysts have argued, in fact, that the overcentralization and terror that characterized Stalin's industrialization drive were no longer functional. In the early years of industrialization, these methods, the centralization and coercion, though wasteful and brutal, enabled the regime to concentrate a great deal of the country's labor and economic resources to the cities and factories he felt were most important, while the mostly manual tasks he required of his labor at this stage could be supervised through coercion. Once the workers were already there, however, once the resources had been accumulated, and once you ask people to be more creative than the cattle you had treated them like before, centralization became more wasteful than productive, and coercion intimidated people and prevented them from making even simple decisions out of fear that they may be accused of treason. (According to one story, no one in Siberia was willing to take the responsibility to decide if a set of buildings should be painted blue or red, so that finally the Politburo had to make the decision in Moscow. Though probably apocryphal, the story illustrates a real phenomenon.) There were many economic reasons, therefore, for the leaders to end terror and trust the people.

For many members of the elite, too, the experience of the war brought into question the notion that society as it currently existed could not be trusted and had to be transformed. During the war, many Russians remember, the people were unified as never before or since. The Party, too, sought to downplay the rhetoric of class struggle in favor

of the rhetoric of national unity against a common foe. Many people felt that after the war, when the people had proved their devotion to the Party, when they had defeated the foe, that the state would let up a bit on the emphasis of preparing for a foreign war and devote more attention to improving people's lives.

Instead, Stalin re-imposed the centralization and social discipline after the war (arguing that the USSR would have to fight another war in fifteen years). In fact, the Soviet economy at the time of Stalin's death was not in good shape. The emphasis on rebuilding the country's industrial might after the Second World War left the population with few goods for material consumption. Particularly hard hit were the rural areas, where starvation continued to take people's lives well into the Stalinist 1950s. Obviously, many people became more dissatisfied with the regime as it existed, and wanted change. To some extent, they were afraid to articulate this dissatisfaction, but it clearly was there, and once Stalin died, the new leaders had to deal with it.

The new leadership, therefore, had several problems with legitimacy. First, they wanted to reform the system, and distance themselves from Stalin, but did not want to undo the institutional edifice identified with his rule. Second, the new leadership did not want to give up the idea of the Party's leading role, but if they did introduce the notion that the Party was to serve existing society rather than to transform it, why was there a need for the Party at all? Remember, the Party was to serve as the vanguard, the leaders of the proletariat in the transformation of society and in the struggle against the enemy. But if there were no enemies, if society was already transformed, what role should the Party serve? Why not just have all the people ruling themselves without the Party? Their problems did not end there. Not only did they have less legitimacy, but they needed more of it. Once terror was removed, they could no longer rely on coercion as before. Before, people never knew when they might be considered an enemy, so they all worked hard. After terror was removed, they knew that if they played by the rules, they would be left alone, and could get on with their lives. But in a complex, industrialized society, it's not enough for people just to play by the rules. The Party needed active participation to renovate the economic machinery, to work harder, etc., etc. How do you get people enthusiastic about the Party's policies? That is the question that bedeviled Stalin's successors.

Khrushchev tried to square this circle by claiming that the Party could still play a transformative role in the economy. The Party would not change society, but it would change the economy to make the Soviet Union a wealthy country. Khrushchev firmly believed in the potential of socialism. He promised that if people followed the party's dictates, the Party would help transform people's living standards. Thus, he continued to emphasize centralized economic decision making towards huge projects, but the projects were designed more towards improving living standards. He called upon thousands of volunteers to go into southern Siberia and northern Kazakhstan to plant grain and cotton. He had the government put huge amounts of money into housing projects and into chemical industries for fertilizers and synthetic cloth. He even promised the Soviet Union would catch up with the United States in Gross National Product by 1970 and that communism would be introduced by the very real date of 1980. But when the Party-State proved incapable of meeting his goals, he blamed the bureaucracy rather than the population at large. He continually fired people who were fairly high up in the

leadership, and at one point even suggested ten-year term limits for people in the Central Committee, one of the leading policy-making bodies in the country.

For many people, the Khrushchev period was an exciting time. Lots of houses were built; living standards grew quickly; intellectuals could attack Stalin and Stalinism and even raise questions about improving the system at home (but you still couldn't attack the Party or Khrushchev). Solzhenitsyn was published in the official press, and Sakharov was able to express his opposition to the use of nuclear weapons to Khrushchev himself. Khrushchev also was the first Soviet leader to reintroduce the emancipation of women onto the Party's agenda. This was the time when Gorbachev and most of his colleagues in the 1980's entered political life. They were "children of the Twentieth Congress.

But Khrushchev should not be idolized. Many of his plans were nutty, like his insistence that collective farms switch to corn instead of grain. The campaign to cultivate the Kazakh steppes ended up in one of the worst dust bowls in history. And he could also be quite brutal. He really believed in the New Soviet Person, and was willing to use the state's power to see it put into action. His enthusiasm for socialism led him to disallow the Soviet rural workers from keeping their own livestock, causing for yet another mass slaughter. He renewed the state's attacks on nationalism and organized religion. He sent tanks to crush a rebellion in Hungary, killing 50,000 people.

Still, Khrushchev's reforms, his attacks on the Party apparatus, his attempt to reduce military spending, earned him a lot of enemies, and in October, 1964, he was kicked out of the leadership, the only Soviet leader prior to Gorbachev who did not die in office.

When Brezhnev entered office, there was a mild effort at reform, but this ceased after the reforms in Czechoslovakia "got out of hand." Like Khrushchev, Brezhnev called for an improvement of living standards, but unlike Khrushchev he was unwilling to make ambitious promises or threaten the bureaucracy. Indeed, a key facet to Brezhnev's regime was the notion of a "stability of cadres," which essentially allowed bureaucrats to stay in their position as long as they did not challenge Brezhnev. Kazakhstan provides a good example of this: as long as Kunaev was willing to play Brezhnev's game, Brezhnev did not interfere in Kunaev's efforts to build his own patronage machine in Kazakhstan. He had near complete discretion in his own little fiefdom. Indeed, because the bureaucrats knew they were safe as long as they touted the official line, you had corruption (which had always existed) grow to phenomenal proportions in the 1970s and early 1980s.

So, where many people believed during Khrushchev's rule that at least some progress was being made towards some goal besides the status quo, Brezhnev announced that the Soviet Union had entered the phase of "mature socialism" that would last many, many years. So the party continued to dominate all public life in the name of some common future, but all evidence of motion towards that future disappeared. Without this, the only thing that Brezhnev could rely upon for legitimacy was that the party could slowly improve people's living standards, and that the Soviet Union was a great power that had defeated Hitler and might have to fight the United States. This turned out to be quite soul-destroying. ON the one hand, nobody believed what they had to say in public in order to avoid being bothered by the authorities, but they participated in this lie in order to improve their own living standards.

As Havel notes, what we see in the Brezhnev period, then, is a massive distinction between the public and the private. All public life was dominated by the Party. In any official occasion, in any occasion at all that included a gathering of people you might not know, you basically toed the Party line to avoid losing your job. In private, however, among friends or family, you could say what you like. Not surprisingly, then, people retreated as much as possible from public life, trying to carve out as much as they can in their private little niches. There is no real communication between these niches, however. So when glasnost arrives, you have the emergence of hundreds of thousands of little worlds that earlier had no connection one with another.

### ***The Impact on Foreign Policy***

The prevailing rhetoric on foreign policy under Stalin reflected also the millennial character of the official ideology. In the 1920s, Stalin had allied with moderate Bolsheviks to support the idea of “socialism in one country” to oppose more radical visions of exporting revolution to other countries. Unlike the moderates, though, Stalin’s linked the term to an intense, xenophobic exultation of the Soviet state and those citizens who supported its revolutionary mission. Whereas the domestic revolutionary mission sought to transform existing social realities, the outside world represented an empirical reality the regime could not transform or do away with. Not surprisingly, the Stalinist regime therefore did its best to quarantine the Soviet Union from such contaminating and dangerous outside influences. The public rhetoric of mature Stalinism (except under the exigencies of World War II) drew a sharp line between its friends and its many enemies around it. The Soviet Union was portrayed as a besieged fortress surrounded by enemies. These enemies, however, also helped explain Soviet failures to achieve the transformation as quickly as the rhetoric would imply. Thus Soviet foreign policy identified the interests of the revolution with the interests of the Soviet state, and excluded all those, like the new anti-colonial regime in India or even Yugoslavia’s Tito, who, despite ideological affinity, did not make loyalty to the Soviet state the key organizing principle of their own foreign policy. Nuclear weapons, of course, presented the regime with an empirical reality that the regime could not ignore, yet the official rhetoric continued to insist that, in case of a new war, the mobilization and revolutionary fervor of the Soviet people would prove decisive even in the face of nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union would be able to make tactical peace initiatives, in order to help accelerate tensions within the capitalist countries that would lead to a war between them.

As in domestic policy, by 1953 the Stalinist line placed the new leadership in a difficult position. The Soviet Union faced an antagonist in the United States that was much much more powerful than was the Soviet Union. Stalin’s foreign policy had not been able to reduce the US presence in Western Europe. Rather than a divided imperialist camp, the Western capitalist countries were united in NATO under US leadership. The regime had consolidated their hold on Eastern Europe, but its efforts to “construct socialism” in these countries often created economic havoc, notably in East Germany. China remained an ally in Asia, but so long as the war in Korea remained deadlocked it remained a potentially dangerous flashpoint.

As in domestic policy, too, as the new leadership had to balance the need for reform with the continuing demands of legitimating Stalinist institutions. They had to confront the economic weakness of their East European allies, the continuing unity of the “capitalist camp” under US leadership, and most importantly of all, the prospect of nuclear annihilation should war occur. But they also had to maintain some sense of Soviet distinctiveness in global politics and its character as the leader of world revolution in the ultimately victorious struggle with an antagonistic capitalist world.

The new leadership all agreed they had to step back somewhat from Stalin’s position if they were going to move forward with domestic reforms. They all agreed to change the rhetoric towards peaceful coexistence with the United States and Western Europe. They all agreed to encourage China towards solution of the Korean conflict. They all called for fairly significant reforms in East Germany, Hungary and elsewhere in East Europe.

How far were they willing to go? Were they willing to allow socialism to fail in East Germany in return for guaranteed neutrality of a unified Germany? The leadership as a whole clearly was not united on these points. There is some evidence, for example, that Beria might have entertained such an idea, but there is also much evidence that he did not. What about relations with the West? Could they push through domestic reforms if they continued to emphasize the threat of war? And if war occurred, how could they guarantee socialist superiority in the face of nuclear weaponry?

I won’t repeat the debates between Molotov and Malenkov on these points, as McCauley does this well, and they are not crucial. Malenkov sought to link his calls for domestic reforms to an argument that nuclear weapons made war impossible and détente necessary, and that Soviet willingness to compromise could strengthen the forces of peace in the West. This was rejected as denying the inevitability of socialist victory, undermining the legitimacy of the communist mission and opening the Soviet Union up to blackmail. Molotov generally closest to the Stalinist line and faltered when it continued to fail to improve the Soviet international system.

Khrushchev offered a substantial reframing of the debate. On the one hand, like the other leaders, he realized the destructive power of nuclear weapons. On the other hand, as the head of the Party apparatus, where regional party leaders counted among his base of support, he could not abandon the mobilizational elements of the Party ideology or the idea that socialism would triumph. So, like Malenkov, and unlike Molotov, Khrushchev rejected the Stalinist argument of inevitable war. At the same time, unlike Malenkov, he did not argue that war, if it occurred, would lead to the end of civilization. Rather, he argued that, because the imperialists understood strength, they would recognize they could not attack a nuclear-armed Soviet Union and survive. If they did, however, this would unleash a revolutionary movement among the world’s workers and national liberation movements that would end in the defeat in capitalism.

In the calculation of the “correlation of forces”, too, Khrushchev redefined the boundaries of the Stalinist vision. Just as his domestic arguments provided a neutral space between friends and enemies, so in the international sphere he recognized a space between socialism and capitalist camp, the so-called zone of peace, which included not only workers, but anti-imperialist national liberation movements, some social democratic parties and other advocates of peace. Just as in his domestic policy, then, if one was not anti-communist, one was potentially pro-peace. This reframing of the debates enabled

Khrushchev engage the world outside the communist parties under Soviet control. Tito could now be courted as a possible ally; the new nationalist governments in Indonesia, India and Egypt could be included among the zone of peace.

Khrushchev's formulation allowed him to rethink somewhat the division of Europe. First, because Khrushchev did not rely on inter-imperialist divisions to stave off a devastating war, but instead called on a larger zone of peace to deter the imperialist camp, the consolidation of NATO and even the inclusion of West Germany into the alliance did not represent a threat to his vision as it did to Molotov's. Thus, whereas Molotov, who still had a hard time conceiving a non-communist state as anything but an enemy, continued to resist recognizing the possibility of a neutral Austria, and still sought to use that country as a lever in discussions on Germany as late as early 1955. Khrushchev, on the other hand, felt that a neutral Austria in the middle of Europe would be good for Soviet security. Similarly, Khrushchev grudgingly accepted West Germany's inclusion in NATO and normalized relations with Bonn soon after the Geneva summit in 1955.