The Stalin Era

Philip Boobbyer

Routledge Sources in History

6 Government

According to traditional Marxist doctrine, the state was supposed to wither away under socialism. In theory, the state and the law were part of the so-called 'superstructure', i.e. they grew out of the social and economic structure – the 'base' – of a particular society. It was argued that in a bourgeois-capitalist society, the state was used by the ruling middle class to maintain its power and privileges; with socialism, however, class divisions would be abolished and the state would disappear, leaving just a few basic administrative tasks to be done. In his *State and Revolution* (1917), Lenin qualified this by noting that, in taking power, the proletariat would need first to use the bourgeois state to crush the counter-revolution before the state would finally begin to wither away (Lenin 1947 vol. 2: 201–2, 208).

Stalin developed his own theory for why there was a need for a strong and repressive state in the USSR. He argued that, with the approach of socialism, there would be an intensification of the class struggle and the proletariat would have to use all possible means to fight the class enemy. Thus, a strong state was in no way incompatible with the general idea of the withering away of the state. In a report to the 16th Party Congress in June 1930, Stalin suggested that the apparent contradiction between the theory of a shrinking state and the reality of strong government, was a contradiction which was true to the principles of Marxian dialectics.

Document 6.1 Stalin on the State

We stand for the withering away of the state. At the same time we stand for the strengthening of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is the mightiest and strongest state power that has ever existed. The highest development of state power with the object of preparing the conditions *for* the withering away of state power – such is the Marxist formula. Is this 'contradictory'? Yes, it is 'contradictory'. But this contradiction is bound up with life, and it fully reflects Marx's dialectics.

Source: J. Stalin, Works, *vol. 12, 1955, p. 381.*

With the advent of socialism, therefore, classes were supposed to disappear. Using the same theoretical framework, Stalin could dispense with the need for political parties: parties were supposed to represent class interests; where there were no classes, no parties would be needed. This was a point that Stalin made in a speech

on a draft of the constitution in November 1936. The idea that socialism had been achieved in the Soviet Union by the mid-1930s was used to justify the need for the constitution and it was formally accepted in December 1936.

Document 6.2 Stalin on Freedom and Democracy

A party is a part of a class, its most advanced part. Several parties, and consequently, freedom for parties, can exist only in a society in which there are antagonistic classes whose interests are mutually hostile and irreconcilable – in which there are, say, capitalists and workers, landlords and peasants, kulaks and poor peasants, etc. But in the U.S.S.R. there are no longer such classes as the capitalists, the landlords, the kulaks, etc. In the U.S.S.R. there are only two classes, workers and peasants, whose interests – far from being mutually hostile – are, on the contrary, friendly. Hence there is no ground in the U.S.S.R. for the existence of several parties, and consequently, for freedom for these parties . . . In the U.S.S.R. only one party can exist, the Communist Party, which courageously defends the interests of the workers and peasants to the very end . . .

Source: Merle Fainsod, How Russia is Ruled, *1963, p. 139.*

The most prominent Soviet legal theorist of the 1920s was the Marxist E.B. Pashukanis, who was the director of the Institute of Soviet Construction and Law. He developed an argument that at a time of transition from capitalism to socialism, law should be understood as dependent on politics. No static system of law should be allowed to impede the dynamic process of social development. This certainly fitted the traditional Marxist approach, wherein law was considered to be part of the superstructure. The following extract is taken from his book *The Soviet State and the Revolution in Law* (1930).

Document 6.3 The Relationship between Law and Politics

The relationship of law to policy and economics is utterly different among us from what it is in bourgeois society. In bourgeois-capitalist society, the legal superstructure should have the maximum immobility – maximum stability – because it represents a firm framework for the movement of the economic forces whose bearers are capitalist entrepreneurs. Accordingly, the aspiration to create final and integrated systems of law, free from inner contradictions, is characteristic of bourgeois jurists. Among us it is different. We require that our legislation possess maximum elasticity. We cannot fetter ourselves by any sort of system, because every day we are demolishing the structure of production relationships and replacing them by new production relationships . . .

We have a system of proletarian policy and upon it law should be orientated . . . We are against law . . . absorbing policy. We are in favor of policy occupying

the first place in law, of policy being sufficient above law because it leads forward . . .

I may say that for us revolutionary legality is a problem that is 99 per cent political . . . we must not put in the place of a movement forward . . . any system that has been frozen into immobility, even though it be dubbed proletarian law.

Source, E.B. Pashukanis, 'The Soviet State and the Revolution in Law', in V.I. Lenin et al., Soviet Legal Philosophy, *1951, pp. 279–80.*

In practice, Pashukanis's argument offered an intellectual justification for party dictatorship: at a time of transition, the leaders of the proletarian party should not be restricted by law. It is thus surprising that in the 1930s, Pashukanis' school of law should lose favour. It is one of many Stalinist paradoxes, that Stalin's rule witnessed the rehabilitation of the idea of law at the very time when legal and political institutions were at their least powerful. Vyshinsky, as well as presiding over the show trials, had from the spring of 1934 spearheaded a move towards justifying the idea of law as the foundation for politics and society (Solomon 1996: 156–73). In 1938 in Moscow, Vyshinsky addressing the First Congress of the Sciences of Soviet State and Law, attacked Pashukanis' school of legal theory and noted that the Soviet constitution of 1936 should be understood as providing a firm legal foundation for Soviet power.

Document 6.4 Vyshinsky and Soviet Law

The Pashukanises thus rejected the very possibility of constructing a soviet socialist theory of law . . .

In asserting that law is nothing but a form of capitalist relationships, and that law can develop only in the conditions of capitalism . . . , the wreckers who have been busying themselves on our legal front were striving towards a single objective: to prove that law is not necessary to the soviet state – and that law is superfluous, as a survival of capitalism, in the conditions of socialism . . .

In reducing law to policy, these gentlemen have depersonalized law as the totality of statutes – undermining the stability and authoritativeness of statutes, and suggesting the false idea that the application of the statute is defined in the socialist state by political considerations, and not by force and authority of the soviet statute. Such an idea means bringing soviet legality and soviet law into substantial discredit . . . If law is merely a form of policy, then how is article 112 of the Stalin Constitution – which says that among us judges are independent and subordinate only to the statute – to be explained? Article 112 solves the problem of the independence of the judges in their court work perfectly, clearly, and distinctly: that work is subordinate to the statute and nothing else. The incorrectness of mechanically reducing law to policy is thereby emphasized once again . . .

The tasks confronting us at the present time require work which is directed at making the soviet law and the soviet state strong.

Source: Andrei Vyshinsky, 'The Fundamental Tasks of the Science of Soviet Socialist Law', in V.I. Lenin et al., Soviet Legal Philosophy, *1951, pp. 325, 328–9, 331.*

In one way, Vyshinsky's comments are a piece of sophistry. He argues that law is not just a form of policy, and that in the USSR, judges are answerable only to the state. Yet he makes no mention of the fact that in a system where both government and state bodies are dependent on the party, the distinction between the two is effectively lost. At the same time, the move to rehabilitate the idea of law was rooted in a genuine desire on Stalin's part to see the emergence of a powerful state (Solomon 1996: 158). Here there was a contradictory dimension to his own aspirations. For the personalised system of rule which he established could only operate freely when the legal framework was bypassed. But at the same time he wanted to establish such a framework for the smooth running of the state (see Kershaw and Lewin 1997b: 356).

The updated version of the party rules of 1934 (which replaced the rules of 1925), which was accepted at the 17th Party Congress, offers a good illustration of the way the Stalinist party formally adhered to certain formalised procedures, which were in practice set aside. According to the rules, the principle of democratic centralism, which the party subscribed to, involved the election of all party members, and the 'subordination of the minority to the majority'. In theory, for example, the Secretariat was answerable to the Central Committee. In practice, Stalin, as General Secretary, ran the party and built up a personalised dictatorship. This tension between formal institutions and arbitrary rule was typical of the Soviet Union: there was 'a multiplicity of institutions operating in an uninstitutionalized framework' (Sakwa 1989: 194).

Document 6.5 Updated Version of Party Rules

The party leads all the organs of the proletarian dictatorship and secures the successful construction of socialist society . . .

IV THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE PARTY

18. The guiding principle of the organizational structure of the party is democratic centralism, which signifies:

a Election of all leading party organs from the highest to the lowest ranks;

b Periodic reports of party organs before the party organization;

c Strict party discipline and subordination of the minority to the majority;

d Unconditional adherence by the lower party ranks and all party members to the decision of the higher party organs . . .

23. The organizational structure of the party is as follows:

a. USSR: all-union congress – Central Committee of the VKP(b);

b. Oblast, krai or republic: oblast or krai conferences or national party

congresses – oblast committees, krai committees, central committees of national communist parties.

c. Cities, raions: city or raion conferences – city or raion committees.

d. Enterprises, hamlets, kolkhozes, MTSs, Red Army units, institutions: general meetings, conferences of primary party organizations – primary party committees (factory and plant party committees, party bureaus of Red Army units, etc.).

24. The order of subordination, accountability, of proceedings and debate of party decisions (from the highest instance to the lowest): all-union congress; Central Committee of the VKP(b); oblast/krai conference; conference or congress of national communist party; oblast/krai committee, central committee of a national communist party; city/raion conference; city/raion committee; and so forth . . .

27. The party congress is the highest organ of the party. Regular congresses are convened at least once every three years. Extraordinary congresses are convened by the Central Committee on its own initiative or on the demand of at least one-third of the party members represented at the preceding party congress. The convocation of a party congress and its agenda are announced at least a month and a half before the congress. Extraordinary congresses are convened on two months' notice . . .

29. The congress:

a) hears and approves reports by the Central Committee, Commission of Party Control, Central Revision Commission and other central organizations;

b) reviews and revises the party Programme and Rules;

c) defines the tactical line of the party on basic questions of current policy;

d) elects the Central Committee, the Commission of Party Control, Central Revision Commission . . .

32. The Central Committee organizes: for political work – a Political Bureau; for general leadership organization work – an Organizational Bureau; and for current work of an organizational and executive character – a Secretariat.

Source: Robert McNeal, Resolutions and Decisions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Vol. 3, The Stalin Years: 1929–1953, *1974, pp. 140, 143–6.*

The Soviet constitution of 1936 is a further example of a document which is filled with ambiguity. Superficially, the constitution established a coherent separation of powers. The legislature, the Supreme Council (Soviet), was the highest organ of state, and it passed laws and made policy. The government, the Council of People's Commissars, carried out policy. This was replicated in the union-republics, in what was a federal system from which the constituent parts could at any time secede. However, Article 25 noted that such rights as freedom of speech were given 'for the purpose of strengthening the socialist system', and article 26 observed that the Communist Party was the 'leading nucleus of all organisations'. In practice, the so-called 'nomenklatura' system of appointments – nomination to posts from party

lists – ensured that all power rested in the hands of those appointed by the party elite.

The Soviet constitution can thus be read as a piece of Stalinist propaganda. Certainly, the regime used the constitution to try to draw the population's attention away from the growing reality of terror. Furthermore, the constitution offered sympathetic observers in the West encouragement to believe that democracy was already establishing deep roots in the USSR. Propaganda it doubtless was. On the other hand, the constitution created at least a formal regulatory framework, and its hypocrisies gave critics of the regime a stick with which to beat it. Furthermore, it could be considered puzzling that a regime so anxious to centralise power, should devote so much media space in 1936 to public discussion of the constitution, even to the point of widely raising the issue of electoral rights. Indeed, certain electoral procedures were introduced in May 1937 which had the effect of removing low level party officials. Although the issue of electoral rights was soon shelved, the fact that it was raised at all, and then quietly forgotten, has led at least one historian to suggest that the regime did not know its own mind, and was making up policy as it went along (Getty 1991: 32).

Document 6.6 The Constitution of 1936

1. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is a socialist state of workers and peasants . . .

4. The economic foundation of the U.S.S.R. consists in the socialist system of economy and socialist ownership of the implements and means of production, firmly established as a result of the liquidation of the capitalist system of economy, the abolition of private ownership of the instruments and means of production and the abolition of exploitation of man by man.

5. Socialist ownership in the U.S.S.R. has either the form of state ownership (public property) or the form of co-operative and collective farm ownership (property of individual collective farms, property of co-operative associations) . . .

9. Alongside the socialist system of economy, which is the dominant form of economy in the U.S.S.R., the law allows small private economy of individual peasants and handicraftsmen based on individual labour and excluding the exploitation of the labour of others . . .

13. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is a federal state, formed on the basis of the voluntary association of the Soviet Socialist Republics with equal rights:–

Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic
Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic [S.S.R.]
Belorussian [S.S.R.]

Azerbaijan [S.S.R.]
Georgian [S.S.R.]
Armenian [S.S.R.]
Turkmenian [S.S.R.]
Uzbek [S.S.R.]
Tajik [S.S.R.]
Kazakh [S.S.R.]
Kirghiz [S.S.R.] . . .

16. Every Union republic has its own constitution, which takes into account the specific features of the republic and is drawn up in full conformity with the Constitution of the U.S.S.R.

17. Each Union republic retains its right freely to secede from the U.S.S.R. . . .

30. The supreme organ of state power of the U.S.S.R. is the Supreme Council [or Soviet] of the U.S.S.R. . . .

64. The supreme executive and administrative organ of state power in the U.S.S.R. is the Council of People's Commissars of the U.S.S.R. . . .

79. The supreme executive and administrative organ of state power of a Union republic is the Council of People's Commissars of the Union Republic . . .

102. Justice in the U.S.S.R. is administered by the Supreme Court of the U.S.S.R., the supreme courts of the Union republics, territories and province courts, courts of the autonomous republics and autonomous provinces, special courts of the U.S.S.R. which are created by decisions of the Supreme Council of the U.S.S.R. and People's Courts . . .

105. The Supreme Court of the U.S.S.R. and special courts of the U.S.S.R. are elected by the Supreme Council of the U.S.S.R. for a period of five years . . .

112. Judges are independent and subject only to the law. . .

118. Citizens of the U.S.S.R. have the right to work – the right to receive guaranteed work with payment for their work in accordance with its quantity and quality . . .

122. Women in the U.S.S.R. are accorded equal rights with men in all fields of economic, state, cultural, social and political life . . .

124. To ensure to citizens freedom of conscience the church in the U.S.S.R. is separated from the state and the school from the church. Freedom to perform religious rights and freedom for anti-religious propaganda is recognised for all citizens.

125. In accordance with the interests of the toilers, for the purpose of strengthening the socialist system, the citizens of the U.S.S.R. are guaranteed:-

a) Freedom of speech
b) Freedom of the press
c) Freedom of assembly and meetings.
d) Freedom of street processions and demonstrations . . .

126. In accordance with the interests of the toilers and for the purpose of developing the organisational self-expression and political activity of the masses of the people, citizens of the U.S.S.R. are ensured the right of combining in public organisations: trade unions, co-operative associations, youth organisations, sport and defence organisations, cultural, technical and scientific societies, and for the most active and conscientious citizens from the ranks of the working class and other strata of the toilers, of uniting in the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R., which is the vanguard of the toilers in their struggle for strengthening and developing the socialist system and which represents the leading nucleus of all organisations of the toilers, both public and state . . .

134. Deputies to all soviets of toilers' deputies, the Supreme Council of the U.S.S.R., Supreme Councils of the Union republics, territorial and province soviets of toilers' deputies, Supreme Councils of autonomous republics, soviets of toilers' deputies of autonomous provinces, regional, district, city, and village soviets of toilers' deputies . . . are elected by the electors on the basis of universal, equal and direct suffrage by secret ballot . . .

141. Candidates are put forward for election according to electoral districts. The right to put forward candidates is granted to social organisations and societies of the toilers: communist Party organisations, trade unions, co-operatives, youth organisations and cultural societies . . .

Source: The New Soviet Constitution, *1936.*

Since Stalin was General Secretary of the party, he could conveniently portray any opposition to him as 'anti-party'. It would be wrong to believe that there was no opposition to Stalin during the 1930s. Indeed, during the years of collectivisation, there was a lot of dissatisfaction. The most serious manifestation of unease in the early 1930s was the so-called 'Ruitin Group', which belonged to the 'Union of Marxist-Leninists'. Its members, who included former members of the Right Opposition and some academics, produced a document entitled 'Stalin and the Crisis of Proletarian Dictatorship' which called for Stalin to be overthrown. The document was circulated in the Central Committee in 1932. When it was uncovered, the GPU and Stalin recommended that Riutin be executed, but the Politburo voted instead that he be exiled. It was not until 1936 that Stalin could move freely against his enemies in the party.

Document 6.7 'Stalin and the Crisis of Proletarian Dictatorship'

The measures necessary for the party and the country to exit this crisis and deadend are essentially as follows:
1. The liquidation of the dictatorship of Stalin and his clique.
2. The immediate overthrow of the whole leadership of the party apparatus and new elections of party organs on the basis of genuine democracy within the party and the creation of strong organisational guarantees against the usurpation of the rights of the party by the party apparatus.
3. An immediate extraordinary congress of the party.
4. A decisive and immediate return of the party on all issues to the ground of Leninist principles.

Source: 'Stalin i krizis proletarskoi diktatury', Izvestiia TsK KPSS, *1990, no. 12, p. 198.*

Stalin's private secretariat, headed by A.N. Poskrebyshev, was an important mechanism for his control over the bureaucracy and the decision-making process. It has even been suggested that it was through Poskrebyshev that Stalin ruled (Tucker 1992: 272). The secretariat was neither a state nor a party institution. Stalin used it to avoid, where possible, the formal mechanisms of decision-making. Another mechanism under Stalin's control was the Special Sector. A resolution of the Central Committee Secretariat on 13 November 1933 made the Secret Department of the Central Committee answerable directly to Stalin himself. The Secret Department was renamed the 'Special Sector' at the beginning of 1934. One of the tasks of the Special Sector, where Stalin's secretary was again Poskrebyshev, was administrative: it supervised the distribution of documentation to Central Committee Secretaries, Politburo members and other party leaders. This gave Stalin complete control of information. If he wanted to isolate someone, he could simply withhold documentation from them. Furthermore, Poskrebyshev was the head of all the assistants to other members of the Politburo, and thus through them could keep a close watch on them.

The Central Committee Secretariat was reorganised in 1934. The new structure reflected an attempt by the Secretariat to keep control of the rapidly growing economy. The following document is a Politburo resolution of 4 June 1934, in which the duties of the Central Committee Secretaries were allocated. Stalin's responsibility for the Special Sector and the Politburo, as well as Culture and Propaganda, illustrates his hold on the central levers of power. The sections concerned with transport, industry, agriculture, planning-finance-trade and political administration each had subsections that were concerned with more specialised branches of industry and administration. In general within their own sectors, they were responsible for cadres, party organisational work, mass agitation, and checking up on the fulfilment of party and government decrees. The Section on Leading Party Organs supervised the party apparatus. The Section on Culture and Propaganda in 1935 dissolved into five new

sections: Party Propaganda and Agitation, Press and Publishing, Schools, Cultural-Instruction Work, and Science (see Fainsod 1963: 194).

Document 6.8 Distribution of Central Committee Duties

Com. Stalin:
1) Culture and Propaganda,
2) The Special Sector,
3) The Politburo of the CC,

Com. Kaganovich:
1) The Orgburo of the CC,
2) The Industrial Section,
3) The Transport Section,
4) Komsomol,
5) Party Control,

Com. Zhdanov
1) The Agricultural Section,
2) The Planning-Finance-Trade Section,
3) The Political-Administrative Section,
4) The Section of Leading Party Organs,
5) The Chancellery,
6) The CC Secretariat.

Source: Oleg Khlevniuk et al. (eds), Stalinskoe Politbiuro, *1995, pp. 141–2.*

Wherever possible, Stalin bypassed the formal mechanisms of decision-making altogether. From early 1933, the Politburo went into decline. The total number of Politburo meetings fell rapidly through the 1930s: there were 43 meetings in 1932, 24 in 1933, 18 in 1934, 15 in 1935, 9 in 1936, 6 in 1937, and just 2 in 1940. Furthermore, while there were 32 meetings of the Secretariat in 1932, there were none between 1936–40, and the number of Orgburo meetings also declined considerably from the levels of the late 1920s. In addition, the number of meetings of Sovnarkom (the Council of People's Commissars) also declined considerably (Rees 1995a: 106–8; Watson 1996: 55). Increasingly, policy-making took place in Stalin's office. The Politburo, when it met, came to be a rubber-stamp for decisions made by Stalin in the company of small groups of selected party leaders.

The following document gives an insight into this process. It is taken from the lists of visitors to Stalin's office which have been recently published for all of his years in power. This extract covers the final days of the third major show trial in March 1938. On 11 March 1938, Vyshinsky summed up his testimony. His presence in Stalin's office that evening, along with V.V. Ulrikh, who presided over the trial, illustrates how closely Stalin was involved in monitoring the events of the trial. The

court retired to consider the verdict on the evening of 12 March, and announced its verdict in the early hours of 13 March (Conquest 1992: 395). Subsequently, Stalin met his closest colleagues on the evening of the 13 March:

Document 6.9 Visitors to Stalin's Office

11 March 1938	Entrance	Exit
1. com. Molotov	18.50	22.45
2. com. Voroshilov	19.15	22.45
3. com. Kaganovich	19.20	22.45
4. com. Beria	19.20	22.45
5. com. Smirnov	19.20	20.20
6. com. Vyshinsky	19.30	19.45
7. com. Ulrikh	19.30	19.45
8. com. Mikoian	20.15	22.45
9. com. Eikhe	20.30	22.10
10. com. Bulganin	20.30	22.10
11. com. Shestiakov	20.30	21.55
12. com. Popov	20.30	22.10

The last left at 22.45

13 March 1938	
1. c. Molotov	17.15–22.30
2. c. Yezhov N.I.	18.00–22.30
3. c. Kaganovich	18.15–22.30
4. c. Voroshilov	18.55–22.30
5. c. Zhdanov	19.00–22.30
6. c. Kalinin	20.35–21.00
7. c. Gorkin	20.40–20.50

The last left at 22.30

Source: A.V. Korotkov et al. (eds), 'Posetiteli kremlevskogo kabineta I.V. Stalina 1938–1939', Istoricheskii archiv, *1995, nos 5–6, p. 10.*

This kind of source cannot, of course, reveal what was discussed at these meetings. However, that such meetings took place throughout Stalin's rule, coupled with the declining importance of the formal institutions of power, illustrates the fact that Stalin's regime was founded on a highly personalised system of decision-making. The Politburo and the party Secretariat were divided into fragmented small groups, which were answerable to Stalin alone, and he began to dominate the decision-making process completely (Bialer 1980: 33). In his Secret Speech in 1956, Khrushchev noted the way that party institutions were thus downgraded.

Document 6.10 Stalin's Small Groups

Many decisions were taken either by one person or in a roundabout fashion, without collective discussions . . .

The importance of the Central Committee's Political Bureau [Politburo] was reduced and its work was disorganized by the creation within the Political Bureau of various commissions – the so-called 'quintets', 'sextets', 'septets', and 'novenaries' . . .

The result of this was that some members of the Politburo were in this way kept away from participation in reaching the most important state matters.

One of the oldest members of our Party, Kliment Yefremovich Voroshilov, found himself in an almost impossible situation. For several years he was actually deprived of the right of participation in Political Bureau sessions. Stalin forbade him to attend the Political Bureau to receive documents. When the Political Bureau was in session and Comrade Voroshilov heard about it, he telephoned each time and asked whether he would be allowed to attend. Sometimes Stalin permitted it, but always showed his dissatisfaction. Because of his extreme suspicion, Stalin toyed also with the absurd and ridiculous suspicion that Voroshilov was an English agent . . . A special tapping device was installed in his home to listen to what was said there.

By unilateral action Stalin had also separated one other man from the work of the Political Bureau – Andrei Andreyevich Andreyev. This was one of the most unbridled acts of willfulness.

Source: Nikita Khrushchev, Khrushchev Remembers, *1971, pp. 558–9.*

Dinner parties also became a venue for the discussion of policy. In the last decade of his life, Stalin would meet with cronies such as Malenkov, Molotov, Khrushchev and Beria for long night-time sessions of eating, drinking and joking. Milovan Djilas, vice-President of Yugoslavia, who witnessed such dinners, has left an account of them, going so far as to suggest that they occupied a central political role.

Document 6.11 Dinner Parties

In a spacious and unadorned, though tasteful, dining room, the front half of a long table was covered with all kinds of foods on warmed heavy silver platters as well as beverages and plates and other utensils. Everyone served himself and sat where he wished around the free half of the table. Stalin never sat at the head, but he always sat in the same chair – the first to the left of the head of the table.

The variety of food and drink was enormous – with meats and hard liquor predominating. But everything else was simple and unostentatious . . .

Such a dinner usually lasted six or more hours – from ten at night till four or five in the morning. One ate and drank slowly, during a rambling conversation which ranged from stories and anecdotes to the most serious political and even philosophical subjects. Unofficially and in actual fact a significant part

of Soviet policy was shaped at these dinners. Besides they were the most frequent and most convenient entertainment in Stalin's otherwise monotonous and sombre life.

Source: Milovan Djilas, Conversations with Stalin, *1962, pp. 72–4.*

In 1952, Stalin decided to abolish the Politburo and replace it with a Presidium of twenty-five members. In his Secret Speech, Khrushchev suggested that the change was designed to bring about the removal of Mikoian and Molotov, who had fallen from favour. Indeed, he argued that Stalin was preparing to replace the older Politburo members with a new and younger leadership. In his memoirs, Khrushchev describes the introduction of the Presidium in scornful terms, portraying Stalin as an arbitrary and even incompetent tyrant. The episode illustrates very clearly the tension between Stalin's desire to set up formal procedures, and the personalised nature of his dictatorship.

Document 6.12 The Presidium

Stalin himself opened the first Central Committee Plenum after the [Nineteenth Party] Congress and proposed the creation of a Presidium of twenty-five members. He took some papers out of his pocket and read a list of names to us – the new membership. The proposal and the nominations were accepted without discussion. We were all too accustomed to such undemocratic procedures . . .

When the plenum session was over, we all exchanged glances. What had happened? Who had put this list together? Stalin himself couldn't possibly have known most of the people whom he had just appointed . . . I confess that at first I thought Malenkov was behind the new Presidium and wasn't telling the rest of us . . .

I now guess on the basis of certain indications that Stalin bypassed Malenkov and made use of Kaganovich's assistance. Some of the names were little known in the Party, and Stalin certainly had no idea who the people were. But Kaganovich knew them . . .

You see what sort of leadership we had? Stalin was supposedly running the Congress, putting together a new Central Committee, and creating a new Presidium, but in fact he had very little idea of what he was doing . . .

After Stalin proposed the twenty-five names, he said that because a group of that size would be cumbersome, we had to select a Bureau from the Presidium membership. Now, this was a non-statutory proposal. We had just adopted new Party Statutes at the Nineteenth Party Congress, and we had made no provision for a Presidium Bureau. We were violating the Statutes already! Stalin said that the Bureau would meet more often than the full Presidium and would make decisions on all operational matters that might come up. He proposed a Bureau of nine men and straightway appointed the staff: himself, Malenkov, Beria, Khrushchev, Voroshilov, Kaganovich, Saburov, Pervukhin, and Bulganin. Molotov and Mikoian were left out . . .

Out of the nine members in the Bureau, Stalin selected an inner circle of five . . . The usual five were Stalin himself, Malenkov, Beria, Bulganin, and Khrushchev.

Source: Nikita Khrushchev, Khrushchev Remembers, *1971, pp. 246–8.*

The totalitarian interpretation of the Stalin regime suggested a system of centralised control which was so thorough that there was no room for political infighting. Stalin was ultimately in complete control. In a revisionist critique of this approach, it has been argued that in practice a significant measure of the decision-making was left to Stalin's subordinates, and that beneath the monolithic façade of Stalinist government, there was some real elite politics going: Ordzhonikidze and Molotov had disagreements; Malenkov and Zhdanov were at odds. Furthermore, these personalised rivalries were the symptoms of deeper bureaucratic struggles (Getty 1985: 199). The collapse of the Soviet Union, and the release of valuable archival material have not led to a radical reassessment of the totalitarian argument. It is clear that there was an extraordinary centralisation of power under Stalin; the mechanisms of decision-making, and the way Stalin used them, point away from the idea that there were significant elements of plurality in his regime. Nevertheless, tight control over the central levers of power is not incompatible with certain revisionist perspectives. Complete institutional control, as far as that is practically possible, is not in itself incompatible with the idea that policy decisions were taken on the spur of the moment. Furthermore, particularly in the later years, there is considerable evidence to suggest that issues were dealt with in a haphazard way. In his memoirs, for example, Molotov notes that in Stalin's later years many resolutions were issued in Stalin's name without him being aware of them.

Document 6.13 'Packages would Lie Unopened'

It's worth remembering how [Stalin] handled resolutions of the Council of Ministers and the Central Committee. The Council of Ministers sometimes passed a hundred resolutions a week. Poskrebyshev had all of them sent in a big package to the dacha for Stalin to sign. Packages would lie unopened at the dacha for months. But then they'd all be published over Stalin's signature. In our meetings he would inquire about these resolutions, what the problems had been. We'd have dinner, talk, argue, and compare notes. If they were not clear, the problems got sorted out. It was senseless for him to read all those resolutions. He simply would have become a bureaucrat. He wasn't in a position to read all that. And you know what questions were discussed – economic, military, political, cultural, and the devil knows what else . . . All this came out in the name of the Council of Ministers, of which he was chairman. Everything was promulgated over his signature, yet all these packages of resolutions were thrown in a corner, unopened. You would go to the dacha and they would have been lying there for a month, and now there is a new pile. Lenin used to say, 'This is published' – and he said this when there

was ten times less paperwork. He would sign resolutions that he had not yet managed to read. 'I don't read everything I sign. You must have confidence in your staff.'

Stalin would ask, 'Is it an important question?' 'Yes, it's important.' Then he would pore over it to the last comma. But it was, of course, impossible to know everything in order to approve a resolution on how much to give whom for this or that. So he had to trust his deputies, or the people's commissars and members of the Central Committee.

Source: Felix Chuev, Molotov Remembers, *1993, pp. 179–80.*

The reality is that for all his power, Stalin's system was very inefficient. During the first Five Year Plan, there was a massive expansion in the state bureaucracy. Centralised ministries – People's Commissariats – were set up to administer the different branches of industry. There were three such ministries in 1932, twenty in 1939, and thirty-two in 1948. In 1928, white-collar workers made up 4.8 per cent of the workforce; by 1939 they had expanded to 15.5 per cent. This meant an increase from just under 4 million to almost 14 million personnel (Lewin 1997: 63). The influx of new workers without administrative experience was not the only reason for the inefficiency. The 'nomenklatura' system meant that the party was unaccountable to anything outside itself. Following Lenin's suggestion, in 1923 the Central Control Commission-Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate (1923–34) had been formed to supervise party and state institutions and provide a democratic check on party organs. In practice, this simply became an instrument in Stalin's hands, as indeed were the Commissions of Party and Soviet Control which replaced it (see Rees 1987: 225–32). These factors set the scene for the stagnation and 'bureaucratisation' of the system.

Stalin was critical of bureaucratic hindrances to his policies, but in many ways he was the creator of the bureaucracy. The idea that the Stalinist system involved a corruption and bureaucratisation of the Soviet system owes much to Trotsky. Trotsky had to account for the fact that leadership of the party had fallen into the hands of Stalin, a 'mediocrity' in his eyes. In *The Revolution Betrayed* (1937), which presented a version of a Menshevik interpretation of Soviet history, Trotsky suggested that since the socialist revolution had occurred in a country without a powerful industrial working class, it had fallen on the shoulders of the party itself to modernise the country and by political means to create the conditions for socialism. However, this had led to the emergence of a bureaucracy keen to protect its own interests. Stalin, in Trotsky's view, was the personification of that bureaucracy. Thus, by this interpretation, Stalin rose to power not through any skills of his own. Just as the French Revolution had degenerated into Bonapartism, Trotsky suggested, so the Bolshevik revolution had degenerated into Stalinism.

Document 6.14 Trotsky on Bureaucracy

The inner regime of the Bolshevik party was characterized by the method of *democratic centralism*. The combination of these two concepts, democracy and centralism, is not in the least contradictory . . .

In March 1921, in the days of the Kronstadt revolt . . . , the tenth party congress of the party thought it necessary to resort to a prohibition of factions . . . This forbidding of factions was . . . regarded as an exceptional measure to be abandoned at the first serious improvement in the situation . . .

However, what was in its original design merely a necessary concession to a difficult situation, proved perfectly suited to the taste of the bureaucracy, which had then begun to approach the inner life of the party exclusively from the viewpoint of convenience in administration . . .

Democratic centralism gave place to bureaucratic centralism. In the party apparatus itself there now took place a radical reshuffling of personnel from top to bottom. The chief merit of a Bolshevik was declared to be obedience. Under the guise of a struggle with the Opposition, there occurred a sweeping replacement of revolutionists with *chinovniks* [professional functionaries]. The history of the Bolshevik party became a history of its rapid degeneration . . .

The increasingly insistent deification of Stalin is, with all its elements of caricature, a necessary element of the regime. The bureaucracy has need of an inviolable super-arbiter, a first consul if not an emporer, and it raises upon its shoulders him who best responds to its claim for lordship. That 'strength of character' of the leader which so enraptures the literary dilettantes of the West, is in reality the sum total of the collective pressure of a caste which will stop at nothing in defense of its position. Each one of them at his post is thinking: *l'état – c'est moi*.' In Stalin each one easily finds himself. But Stalin also finds in each one a small part of his own spirit. Stalin is the personification of the bureaucracy. That is the substance of his political personality . . .

The Stalin regime, rising above a politically atomized society, resting upon a police and officers' corps, and allowing of no control whatever, is obviously a variant of Bonapartism – a Bonapartism of a new type not before seen in history . . .

In the last analysis, Soviet Bonapartism owes its birth to the belatedness of the world revolution.

Source: Leon Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed, *1972, pp. 94, 96–7, 98, 277.*

The state over which Stalin ruled expanded between 1939 and 1945. The Baltic states and Moldavia, both annexed in 1940, were incorporated into the Soviet Union. Towards the end of the war, Stalin annexed the Western Ukrainian regions of Galicia and Volhynia, which had previously belonged to Poland. Galicia had been part of the Austro-Hungarian empire prior to 1914. Simmering unrest in Western Ukraine would prove a headache for Soviet leaders in subsequent years. In particular the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists, headed by Stepan Bandera, and the associated Ukrainian

Insurgent Army, were responsible for conducting a guerrilla campaign for Ukrainian independence which lasted until 1953. The following party resolution of 1944 illustrates the concerns of the Soviet leadership about the mood in Western Ukraine towards the end of the war.

Document 6.15 Deficiencies in Party Work in Western Ukraine

A major inadequacy in the work of party organizations of the western oblasts of the Ukraine is their poor development of work concerning the measures that the Soviet state has taken to re-establish Soviet order and law in the territories that have been liberated from the fascist brigands. In their political work with the populace party organizations inadequately utilize the fact that the land has been returned to the toiling peasantry – land that the Soviet state had allotted to them before the war and the German brigands had taken from the peasants . . .

A serious omission of party organizations of the western oblasts of the Ukraine is their inadequate work in denouncing fascist ideology and the activity of agents of the German brigands, the Ukrainian-German nationalists who are hostile to the people and who in recent times were active in distributing significant numbers of anti-Soviet newspapers, brochures, and leaflets, and in spreading provocational rumours . . .

Work on the marxist education of the intelligentsia, a significant part of which was educated in German, Austro-Hungarian, Polish, and Rumanian schools in the spirit of bourgeois ideology, is poorly organized.

Source: Robert McNeal (ed.), Resolutions and Decisions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, vol. 3, The Stalin Years, 1929–1953, *1974, pp. 228–9.*

Although the federal system was in some ways a fiction under Stalin, since most important decisions were taken in Moscow, the existence of national territories within the Soviet Union was potentially destabilising. In the crisis of the Gorbachev era, national grievances which had been suppressed for decades turned out to be fatal to the Soviet Union's very existence.