Russia & The Soviet Union II of IV Dr. Lawrence Davis

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Выросшие в крови, стертые с земли

“To slacken the tempo would mean falling behind.

And those who fall behind will get beaten.

But we do not want to be beaten.”

With these words, Stalin framed his revolution not as a choice, but as the culmination of every failure the Russian people had ever endured—an emphatic triumph through the sheer willpower and endurance of the Soviet State. This warning of urgency masked the darker truth of these events: his “revolution from above” was less about uplifting the masses than it was breaking them down.

The peasantry, bound to the land by centuries of tradition and communal ties (obshchina), became the primary target of Stalin’s brutal modernization. He weaponized their social hierarchies, vilifying the кулаки—literally “fists”, labeled greedy class enemies—as greedy parasites and a threat to homogeneity to justify their extermination. The kulak designation was often arbitrary, applied not just to wealthy farmers but to any peasant who opposed state grain requisitions or collectivization (Snyder 25; Stalinism 4, 6, 13). Over a million were shot or deported, not for their wealth, but for their refusal to surrender grain—or autonomy—to the state (Snyder 47-48; Stalinism).

Marx envisioned socialism as a worker-led utopia of shared plenty; Lenin imagined a vanguard party guiding the proletariat. Stalin perverted both into a dictatorship where the state, not the people, owned the future. The gulags, the famines, the cult, all were antithetical to Marx’s

"withering away of the state," yet justified as steps towards a "true communist state" (Snyder 84; Stalinism 2, 6, 8, 24). This purge was less about Marxist ideals of equality than it was about centralizing control over the collective through the NKVD, Stalin's secret police. Under *Order. No. 00447,* the state enforcers executed state violence through arrest quotas and labeled even minor dissenters as "counter-revolutionaries" or kulaks under the flimsiest pretenses (Snyder 89, Stalinism 19). Survival itself became criminalized: the "Five Stalks Law" (1932) mandated 10 years in the Gulags, or even execution, for peasants caught stealing grain—turning desperation into a death sentence (Snyder 39; Stalinism 17). The NKVD's power was not that solely of a state enforcer but of an all-knowing and controlling state apparatus, functioning as a "state within a state", rewarding loyalty with privileges like high pay and alternative housing as a reward for their service to the party (Stalinism 19).

A 1931 propaganda poster reading:
Kolkhoznik, read the book!
Encourages literacy to be properly indoctrinated; masking repression as modernity.

With survival criminalized and dissent silenced, Stalin's regime turned its focus to the countryside, extracting every resource possible from these communities. Collectivization destroyed the peasantry's communal farming and social practices, replacing them with state-controlled kolkhozes—колхо́з, meaning "collective farm"—that prioritized grain extraction for urban factories over rural survival. The result was catastrophic: disrupted harvests, state-seized crops, and engineered famines like the Holodomor (1932–33) in Soviet Ukraine, where Stalin's regime sealed borders and watched millions starve

(Thompson 235-7; Snyder 48; Stalinism 17). By 1940, the USSR was the world's second-largest industrial power, second to the United States dominance and

Japan's growth, but the propellants of this growth came from Gulag labor projects like the White Sea Canal, mines and factories, accomplished at the cost of the starving masses (Thompson 235; Snyder 27). Stalinist propaganda posed this suffering as a "necessary sacrifice" for modernity, framing resistance as treason. But the true message was clear: Stalin's revolution was a war on the peasantry, waged not for progress, but for absolute domination. To fall behind was to be beaten, but to resist was to be eradicated.

So erasure followed. Sergei Kirov, a once popular member of the party—more moderate in his policy advocacy—became a casualty of this logic. His 1934 assassination, likely orchestrated by Stalin, can be seen as the beginning of the Great Purge (1930s)– a wave of terror that targeted any possible alternative schools of thought, solidifying Stalin's grip on power (Thompson 240-1; Stalinism 15, 18). Rivals like Leon Trotsky disappeared from photographs and textbooks, erasing his role in the Bolshevik lineage and positioning Stalin as Lenin's sole heir; discarding the greater global communist thought with a one country, one system rule (Stalinism 13, 17). Even Kirov was posthumously recast as a martyr—his murder exploited to justify further repression and arrests of the more moderate members, implicating them in the blight to be cleansed (Thompson 241; Stalinism 15). The rewriting of history, akin to airbrushing

A propaganda poster featuring Stalin and children looking up to him; As a father figure to the youth, elevation to "divine right".

the very participants that got them there from existence, cemented Stalin's cult of infallibility. These were not merely acts of historical revisionism—they were the foundation of a cult of personality that transformed Stalin into a divine, "father of nations" figure, sanitized of any truths of revolution or ideology. The show trials and kulak purges became rituals of this cult, their forced confessions and executions sanctified as "cleansing" the USSR of "traitors" (Snyder 83-5; PPT 19). The elimination of opposition from history or participation (like Bukharin, Kirov, the Bolsheviks, and kulaks) transformed his political vulnerabilities into ideological triumphs. These Great Purges allowed him to retroactively write scripture, justifying policy as prophecy, erasing any trace of dialogue or dissent from the Soviet Narrative. (Stalinism 1, 13, 15 , 19; Snyder 85).

Stalin's purge and ideological rigidity, enforced by the NKVD and the state's propaganda, did more than eliminate dissent—it eliminated any chance of the state's capability to reform. A narrative crafted where terror became prophecy and dissent heresy. The Great Purge decimated the Red Army's leadership, with nearly seventy to eighty percent of high ranking officers (generals, colonels, and commanders from the generation that borne the revolutionary state) executed or imprisoned–leaving it unprepared for Hitler's eventual invasion in 1941, a blunder masked with myths of his own strategic genius (Thompson 242, 248). The Holodomor's scars left in Ukraine festered resentment within the Ukrainian nationalists, later capitalized with the liberation of the Ukrainian state and with it, the Donbas—ironically, the very region Stalin's Five-Year Plans had developed (Snyder 404-5). Later leaders, like Brezhnev and Khrushchev, kept rhetoric like Stalin's but lacked the cult and following to enforce it, leaving a toothless state with no bite (Stalinism 24). The USSR's eventual collapse echoed Stalin's fatal flaw: a state built on fear cannot outlive its tyrant. The purges meant to eternalize his power fell the first domino of

collapse– trauma, distrust, and nationalist ties no longer unified– beginning a rot of the Soviet State from within.

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