

From Lenin to Stalin: Political and Cultural Changes in the Soviet Union from 1922-1924

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ABSTRACT

The transition of power from Lenin to Stalin directly changed the destiny of the Soviet Union, amounting to much more than just a simple change in leadership. Although to a significant degree, Stalin maintained many aspects of Lenin's leadership, there were still significant political and cultural changes which took place in Russia during the shift of power and ensuing political competitions. Three key political changes stemmed from this transition: 1.) Lenin's New Economic Policy was replaced by a series of policy changes that came to be called "The Great Turn"; 2.) There were significant changes in the formation of the Russian Communist Party, leading to conflicts between old guard Bolsheviks and new members; and 3.) There were significant changes in other policies used to control the country, including the use of police, gulags, and propaganda. In concert with these political changes, there were also two significant changes in the broader Soviet culture: 1.) The earlier revolutionary emphasis on Marxist-Leninism was systematically supplanted by an emphasis on total obedience to Stalinism and Stalin's dictatorship in the "Great Purge" of the 1930s; and 2.) The relative respect for the sovereignty of neighboring communistic countries under Lenin was supplanted by a much more imperialistic and expansionary policy of "state communism" under Stalin.

This essay will explore the political and cultural changes as mentioned that stemmed from the transition in power from Vladimir Lenin to Joseph Stalin from 1922-1924, starting from the three political changes before proceeding into the analysis of broader social changes.

From Lenin's "New Economic Policy" to Stalin's "Great Turn"

In "The Soviet Succession: Lenin and Stalin," Robert V. Daniels writes:

"Russian society was still in a state of flux at the time of Lenin's death. A temporary equilibrium had, to be sure, been achieved by the [New Economic Policy], but the institutions and social structure of the country had been altered radically in the preceding few years and were destined to change perhaps even more in the following decade. Fundamental questions about the course of the Revolution remained unsettled. The troublesome anomaly, in the scheme of Marxian theory, of a successful "socialist" revolution under Russian conditions of backwardness had not yet been resolved. The regime was beset by weaknesses both internal and external. Economic policy, Comintern policy, Party organization, and even the basic theory of the nature of the state and of the conditions for socialism, were all burning issues." (Daniels 160)

In this passage, Daniels demonstrates the degree to which the Soviet Union was still unstable at the time of Lenin's death. The combined influences of the Russian Revolution and World War I caused an extended period of instability which endured throughout Lenin's leadership of the Soviet Union. Although, as Daniels puts it, Lenin achieved "a temporary equilibrium" with the introduction of New Economic Policy, when he died in 1924 there was still much that was left unresolved. A period of instability, accompanied with a series of economic, political, and social problems, came after the death of Lenin. In order to realize Marx's socialistic ideals, Russia still needed to resolve many basic political and social issues.

Pursuant to Marxist tenants, private property had been abolished following the Russian Revolution of 1917. In 1921, Lenin introduced his "New Economic Policy," re-established a significant degree of privatization, thereby using financial profit to incentivize agricultural production (Daniels 157). Lenin made this compromise because at the time there were severe food shortages in Russia. Lenin recognized that a purely communistic system was not yet realistic in the Soviet Union, and conceded that certain forms of privatization could operate as a short-term solution. Under NEP, Lenin allowed the central economic policies to be relaxed and the market to be brought back. He reintroduced money in Russia as a medium of exchange. In terms of Agriculture, he replaced the requisitioning of grain by tax in kind, which means that the peasants would hand over to the government part of their produce in exchange for a fixed sum of money. (Lynch 170)

In 1928, Stalin formally abolished New Economic Policy, introducing the coercive collectivization of grain through the use of force and violence. As Brovkin and others have demonstrated, forced collectivization resulted in famine and a breakdown of viable agricultural practices that had developed under NEP (Brovkin 205). Stalin's reversal of NEP effectively returned the Soviet economy to the same condition it was in during wartime communism. In what came to be called "The Great Turn," Stalin introduced new policies that ended the private ownership of land, making it only possible for collective ownership by peasants or centralized state ownership. In terms of agriculture, Stalin's change was known as collectivization, but there were significant changes made to industrial production as well. In 1928, Stalin announced his first five year plan, which aimed to increase the working productivity by 110% by 1933. In the end, the goal was not achieved but it did stimulate the growth in industries by expanding numerous factories and construction projects. (Tucker 67). In "Between Lenin and Stalin: The Breakdown of a Revolutionary Culture," Tucker argues that:

"The Soviet Union edged towards the chaos of another civil war under a façade called collectivization. Prices for food in the cities soared and long bread lines became places of political discussion. Discontent rose in workers' neighborhoods. Those who considered themselves the party's old guard found themselves unable to bear the unfolding drama without doing something. The years 1928 and 1929 were periods of boisterous informal discussion. Numerous student groups, university professors, and old party members formed all kinds of informal associations where they discussed politics. Some of them were so foolish that they took notes and minutes of their proceedings. Others met in the forests, as before the revolution. Still others admitted that they "gathered, discussed, and collected signatures." (208)

The significance of this passage hinges on the word "chaos." Stalin's collectivization resulted in rising food prices in cities across the Soviet Union. Some Soviet leaders, especially Bukharin, opposed this change and suggested that NEP was a practical policy that should be retained. The opposition also rejected the use of violence to execute the policy of grain collection and dekulaktization. Besides him, some officials in Leningrad also expressed similar dissatisfaction to the new policies applied by Stalin. Despite such opposition, NEP remained abolished and Stalin's "Great Turn" towards collectivization continued (Brovkin 207). Outside of the government, however, the crisis resulted in widespread political discussions among workers, students, and members of the Russian Communist Party. In response, Stalin began to systematically bend the Russian Communist Policy to his will — introducing many new members who were unquestionably loyal to his leadership.

Shifts in the Membership of the Russian Communist Party

Under Lenin's leadership, the Russian Communist Party was made up of the old guard Bolsheviks who had played an active role in the Russian Revolution. These people were loyal to Lenin and Marxist-Leninism, which means that they believed that communism should be applied and spread around the world. In Lenin's period, political discourse was robust and widespread, and the party was more vibrant and less bureaucratic than what the party became after Lenin's death. Under Stalin's leadership, the old guard Bolsheviks were increasingly replaced by Stalinist bureaucrats with little interest in the ideology of Marxist-Leninism.

As Daniels argues, while Lenin was still alive, Stalin tended to position himself in the middle of the road politically. Reluctant to take a hard position on any issue, Stalin instead emphasized an unwavering loyalty to Lenin (Daniels 87). The Russian Communist Party, which had been the ideological core of the Russian Revolution, remained firmly planted in Marxist-Leninist ideology up until Lenin's death.

However, as Tucker has argued, following Lenin's death, Stalin: "...transformed the Bolshevik Party into a submissive instrument of his will and created a police-based autocracy more absolute than that of the Tsars." By contrast: "The Stalinist 1930s brought into being a militarized as well as industrialized party—state, a Soviet society hierarchically divided into a privileged bureaucratic serving class, a subordinate industrial working class, a collective-farm peasantry likewise under state control, and a large under-class of forced laborers in a far-flung concentration-camp empire." (Tucker 51-52) In contrast to the relative openness of the Leninist era, party members became increasingly submissive to Stalin's leadership, and the country became an industrialized and militarized empire run by a highly centralized, bureaucratic machine.

Indeed, Brovkin argues that by the end of the 1920's, Stalin had effectively taken control of the Russian Communist Party. As he writes:

Freedom to express political opinion in the party was extinct. Success and promotion were linked to politically correct opinions and obedient execution of orders from above. As a result, in a matter of a few more years, all those who had political opinions or remembered the times when they had political opinion — people like Riutin—wound up in Gulag cells, and people who thrived on not having independent political opinion and instead reiterated what was required of them, like Khrushchev, made astonishing career advances. The RCP as an organization had lost control over its own fate by the end of the 1920s. The leader-selection process, the infusion of illiterate upstarts, the dogmatization of ideology, and the personal dictatorship of the General Secretary all but predetermined its self-destruction." (Brovkin 212)

Here, we see that under Stalin's leadership, members of the Russian Communist Party had effectively lost their freedom to express political views. The promotion of members in the party was almost exclusively dependent on their loyalty to the leadership. The original ideology that had inspired the Russian revolution had grown largely irrelevant, with uncritical loyalty supplanting the tenets of Marxism.

During the 1920's, Russia had a low level of literacy, and in more rural, agricultural provinces, more than half of the population were illiterate. Many of the new members of the Russian Communist Party introduced under Stalin had little or no knowledge of socialism or Leninism. (Brovkin 193) Further, a key tenet of Marxism was the abolition of religion, but many of the new members remained devoted to the Russian Orthodox faith. (Brovkin 197) A culture of political submission in exchange for a share of the material spoils came to supplant the idealism of the party in its earlier incarnations. Such cultural divides created a serious rift between the old guard Bolsheviks who had historically made up the party's membership and Stalin's new guard. Between deportation to the gulags or conformity to the rising Stalinist tide inspired by the fear of the gulags, political opposition was quickly and efficiently quashed within the party. Through the combined influences of state control of the universities, the widespread illiteracy of the society more broadly, and the rising patriotism which stemmed from the advent of World War II, Stalin faced no serious political opposition beyond the RCP—resulting in the effective elimination of virtually all political opposition within the Soviet Union by the end of the 1930's. (Brovkin 202)

Police, Gulags, and Propaganda: Shifts in Policies Used to Control the Country

From the time of Lenin's rise to power in 1917, his leadership of Soviet Russia had always been characterized by totalitarian characteristics. Disruptions to traditional systems of justice and suspensions of civil liberties

(such as they had been under Tsarist authority) which began during the Russian Revolution of 1917 were prolonged when World War I began the following year. As Robert C. Tucker demonstrates in *Political Culture and Leadership in Soviet Russia: From Lenin to Gorbachev*, this era of "War Communism" was characterized by "summary justice, the taking of hostages, shooting on the spot, and imprisonment of people categorized as class enemies." (Tucker 55) The result was a dictatorship rooted in a culture of terror. Police, gulags, and propaganda were used as tools to control the population with the intention of efficiently winning the war and resuming the Soviet nation-building that had commenced in 1917 (Daniels 165).

Indeed, as Lenin himself asserted: The courts must not eliminate terror.... It must be grounded and legalized in principle, without duplicity and embellishment. The formula must be as broad as possible because only revolutionary legal consciousness and revolutionary conscience will set conditions, broader or narrower, of application in practice" (Daniels 56) Here, we see the essential difference between Lenin's use of terror and that of Stalin: revolutionary consciousness and conscience. As we have seen the in the shift from Lenin's Russian Communist Party to Stalin's, the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary ideology was systematically eliminated. Whereas under Lenin, police, gulags, and propaganda had been used in the interest of furthering the coherent ideology of Marxist revolution, under Lenin the tools of terror were used absent of such ideology and, perhaps even more importantly, absent of ideologically-driven human agents. (Tucker 382) As Tucker writes: The development from Lenin to Stalin illustrates most impressively the effects and consequences of a political religion which ascribes to one group, the party, knowledge of the aim of history and society, and believes that this aim can be realized by economic-political measures and reorganizations. The promise to realize freedom and justice is relegated to a distant future. (Tucker 387)

The shift described by tucker is one from dictatorship to totalitarianism. Under Lenin, the Soviet Union was still not in a state of true totalitarianism due to the fact that he had already owned absolute reputation in the party, while in Stalin's ruling period, the secret polices and political repression were used more often, and the totalitarianism had risen to a climax, ultimately leading to the "great purge" of the 1930s. (Tucker 382) Under Lenin's dictatorship, government was more provisional in character, while under Stalin's dictatorship political leadership grew more highly centralized and the authority of that government grew more absolute.

As historians including Gurian Waldemar have noted, Stalin decreased the importance of freedom and justice in the country, which was once promised, and delayed it as an issue in the future while establishing more measures to control the politics and economics of the country (Waldemar 387). This was also accompanied by an expanded use of propaganda. Since the religions in Russia, such as the Russian Orthodox Church, were banned during Lenin's rule, personal cult was put into the country to replace the original status of the god, and Stalin put Lenin into the position of the "god" to let the people to worship him, and this helped Stalin to take a tighter grip on the country. While Stalin was enhancing Lenin's role in propaganda, his actual policies increasingly deviated from those of Lenin, and the new members which he introduced to the Russian Communist Party were less and less tied to Bolshevism and were increasingly brainwashed by emerging Stalinist thought. As the historian Adam B. Ian has argued: "Following the death of Lenin, Stalin increasingly used the persona of Lenin as a tool for propaganda. There was a popular slogan "Lenin lives, Lenin is more alive than those actually living." Although Stalin's political policies would grow increasingly distant from those of Lenin, he nevertheless made claims on Leninist ideology as he did so." (Iam 461)

Broader Cultural Changes

So far, we have seen that the succession in Soviet leadership from Lenin to Stalin resulted in three key political changes: 1.) The shift from Lenin's "New Economic Policy" to Stalin's "Great Turn," which replaced a relatively more capitalistic economic system under Lenin with a much more restrictive form of agricultural collectivism; 2.) The broad repression of political discourse, as seen in the shift from a Russian Communist Party rooted in the revolutionary ideology of Marxism-Leninism; and 3.) Changes in the use of terror, including police, gulags,

and propaganda, shifting from a use of terror guided by the consciousness and conscience of revolutionary ideology to the use of such devices separate from any ideology but Stalinism. Now, we will explore two of the broader cultural changes precipitated by the transition of power: 1.) The cultural abandonment of Marxist-Leninism in favor of total submission to Stalinism in the "Great Purge" of the 1930s; and 2.) A shift away from a commonwealth culture which respected the sovereignty of neighboring states under Lenin towards an increasingly aggressive and imperialistic culture under Stalin.

The Great Purge: Stalin's Transformation of Leninism to a Stalinist Orthodoxy

As we have observed in the political realm, Stalin based his rule on some of the basic elements that Lenin established in the Russian Communist Party, such as the absolute authority of the party and zero toleration to the opposition. However, while Lenin only used harsh policies to crush the opposition outside of the party, Stalin had to use the secret police and terror to crush opposition inside the party, since Lenin enjoyed the absolute authority in the party while Stalin did not have absolute power yet. This brought him to impose the Great Purge in the country. Beside crushing the opposition, Stalin also changed the meanings of many Leninist terms and expressions, such as "constructing socialism," which in came to mean working for the government and criticizing the old guards of Bolsheviks under Stalin. These acts diminished influence of Leninism in the country, and while most of the old guards which originally supported Leninism found out that the revolution carried out by Proletariat was rather an Utopian thought, they surrendered to Stalin, and those who didn't was captured and executed by Stalin. (Brovkin 210-212)

The result was a broad cultural shift from Marxist-Leninism to Stalinism. Gurian writes: "Lenin himself had claimed even before he assumed power, before World War I, that there could be only one philosophy - that taught by him, regarded by him as the sole true interpretation of the absolute truth, embodied in Marxism. What distinguishes Stalin's policies from those of Lenin is the fact that he started, after some hesitation, to apply inside the party the terror policies which Lenin applied mercilessly against everyone outside the party." (Gurian 383) When he assumed power, Stalin succeeded part of the Lenin's idea, that the party should never be opposed and questioned. On the basis of this, since Stalin did not have the status as high as Lenin, he had to crush the opposition inside the party with terror as well. After finding purging opposing party members effective, Stalin decided to keep on utilizing his secret polices to maintain his unquestionable leadership in the party and the state. Under such an act, party members who really have thoughts disappeared, and the whole party were filled with people who simply follow Stalin's orders.

Upon assuming leadership of the Soviet Union in 1924, Stalin published *Foundations of Leninism*, in which he codified Marxist-Leninism into a new orthodoxy. Through *Foundations of Leninism*, Stalin transformed Leninism into doctrines designed for the effective rule of the country. This was accompanied with the party's leadership pressing down opposition, like Zinovievists claim that Stalin's "socialism in one country" was not beneficial for revolution and was covering the real problems in the country, and defending their own policies. In this period, the act of opposition was treated more and more criminally, and more sanctions were put on those who chose to express political dissent. (Daniels 162)

In Lenin's period, Soviet political antagonisms were primarily between Russian Communist Party and opposition from outside of the party. The "class enemies" that the party fought against during Lenin's time contained the Kulaks and some of the workers and peasants that opposed his rules. Under Stalin, there was a significant shift. With opposition outside of the party effectively contained, Stalin shifted his attention within the party itself. This change was aided by the flexibility and ambiguities of such Leninist doctrines as "class enemy," which Stalin was able to extend to nearly all the people and party members to create terror in order to carry out collectivization in Stalin's period. (Tucker 69-70).

From Leninist Sovereignty to Stalinist Imperialism

Stalin was born in Georgia, and had served in the leadership of nationality-related affairs within the Russian Communist Party under Lenin near the beginning of his career. Lenin eventually made Stalin Commissar of Nationality Affairs. Lenin himself had believed that Marxist Revolution would happen naturally in countries "ready" for Communism, and had tended to respect the sovereignty of neighboring countries in the belief that history would inexorably lead towards the Marxist ideal. Stalin had a much more proactive view of the Soviet Union's role in bringing about global revolution, resulting in increasing Chauvinism of the Russian State under Stalin which exceeded the limits of conventional internationalism. (Tucker 66)

As Tucker argues, Stalin: ...kept faith with international Communist revolution as a paramount, if deferred policy goal. But his way of keeping faith was very different from that of Lenin and the party left, who envisaged the future revolutions occurring in one or more 'advanced' countries, that is, Western European ones. Stalin's perspective, on the contrary, was revolution in 'neighbouring countries'. The capitalist encirclement, he averred, must be replaced with a 'socialist encirclement.' The further growth of the international Communist revolution was implicitly equated with Soviet Russia's future aggrandizement, its takeover of bordering lands (as occurred during Stalin's accord with Hitler in 1939—41 and after World War II). Hence Stalin's form of national Bolshevism, quite unlike that of the rights, was an imperial Bolshevism, an amalgam of Bolshevik revolutionism with Great Russian imperialism. (Tucker 67)

Here, we see that while Lenin considered the process of Marxist revolution as one in which the revolutions first start in advanced countries then spread into other countries, Stalin tended to believe that Russia must be the agent which brings about these revolutions. The result was a new Russian imperialism, one which spread socialism by expanding the Russian Empire and combining the neighboring country into this socialist state — a unique combination of Bolshevism and the Great Russian Imperialism of the Tsarist era.

Conclusion

The succession of the soviet leadership from Lenin to Stalin was associated with a series of political and cultural changes. In terms of politics about economy, the New Economic Policy established by Lenin to regain the support of the people and facilitate the development of the Soviet economy was abolished and replaced by Stalin's collectivization and industrialization. This shift in policy was allowed to be done due to another changed caused by the shift in leadership, which is the change in membership of Russian Communist Party from being filled with Lenin's supporters who were more loyal to their ideology of Bolshevism and Marxist-Leninism to being filled with people who would simply carry out Stalin's orders. The shift in membership and the tight control on the party was effectuated by a change in ways of secret police and terror being used, and to be more specific, Stalin extended the use of terror to most of the people and party members. Apart from politics, in terms of culture, the shift in leadership caused a change of ideology from Marxist-Leninism in the party, which had later become meaningless doctrines, to Stalinism and his thought of "socialism in one country." This shift was also accompanied with a shift from internationalism to nationalism in the state.

In general terms, the changes brought about by this succession of leadership were decisive and significant, and significantly influenced the destiny of the Soviet Union. After this shift, succeeding leaders such as Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Gorbachev never intended to revive Marxist-Leninism in the Soviet Union. This shift of leadership marked the end of the period of the new-born regime under the influence of Bolshevism, Internationalism and Leninism. Therefore, by marking up a new age of the USSR, the succession of soviet

leadership from Lenin to Stalin can be regarded to be a significant epoch in Russian history and in the broader movement of socialist revolutions around the world.

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