Introduction

In 2010, Communist Party members in Zaporizhia, a city in southeastern Ukraine, erected a statue of Joseph Stalin. Nearly a thousand people attended the monument's unveiling, including many World War II veterans bedecked with medals. After the playing of the Soviet national anthem, one speaker called out "Long live Stalin!" and the audience responded "Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!" Not all of the city's residents welcomed the Stalin monument with such enthusiasm. Several months later, unidentified protesters used a hacksaw to cut off the statue's head. A few days after that, the decapitated statue was blown up completely by a homemade bomb. Where the Stalin statue once stood, only an empty pedestal remains.

Few historical figures inspire more adoration and loathing than Joseph Stalin, dictator of the Soviet Union from 1928 until his death in 1953. Under his rule, the Soviet Union was transformed from an underdeveloped, agrarian country into a military superpower that defeated Nazi Germany and rivaled the United States for world domination. But this transformation was accomplished through massive state violence and bloodshed. Stalinist methods included deportations, incarcerations, and executions. Literally millions of Soviet citizens suffered arrest, starvation, or death as a result of Stalinist policies. While Stalinism modernized the Soviet Union and changed the course of world history, it did so at tremendous human cost.

For students of Soviet history, no problem looms larger than that of Stalinism. How was it that the October Revolution of 1917, which seemed to promise human liberation and equality, resulted not in a communist utopia but in a Stalinist dictatorship instead? Why did this attempt to create a perfect society lead to Gulag prison camps, bloody purges, and unprecedented levels of state repression? To answer these questions, it is imperative to study the origins of Stalinist methods and to examine the combination of forces that led to the establishment of such a repressive political system. It is also important to discuss the

consequences of Stalinism – the impact it had upon the lives of Soviet people and the suffering that it inflicted.

Before proceeding to explain what caused Stalinism, let us pause for a moment to define it. Stalinism was a set of tenets, policies, and practices wielded by the Soviet government during the years in which Stalin was in power (1928–53) – policies characterized by extreme coercion employed for the purpose of economic and social transformation. Among the particular features of Stalinism were the abolition of private property and free trade; the collectivization of agriculture; a planned, state-run economy and rapid industrialization; the wholesale liquidation of so-called exploiting classes through dispossessions and incarcerations; widespread repression of alleged enemies, including those within the Communist Party itself; a cult of personality deifying Stalin; and Stalin's virtually unlimited dictatorship over the country.

What caused Stalinism? The simplest explanation is Joseph Stalin himself – his personal vindictiveness, his skillful political infighting, his accumulation of power and excessive use of coercion. Stalin was a ruthless dictator, someone who personally signed the death warrants of thousands of people and who ordered secret police operations that resulted in countless arrests and executions. There is no question of Stalin's guilt or responsibility for the state violence of his era. And there is no doubt that as a dictator he wielded unchallenged authority within the Soviet Union. As a historical explanation, however, blaming only Stalin for the crimes of Stalinism is incomplete. The Soviet state was a massive bureaucratic apparatus overseen by the Communist Party, with more than a million members. Stalin's fellow Communist Party leaders shared not only his belief in Marxism-Leninism but much of his worldview, with its focus on class struggle and internal enemies. While Stalin personally played a pivotal role in the system that bears his name, an understanding of Stalinism must go beyond the thoughts and actions of a single person.[1]

Another possible explanation is that Stalinism derived from Russia's autocratic traditions, as both the prerevolutionary tsarist government and the Stalinist dictatorship were characterized by authoritarian rule, extensive use of police powers, disregard for individual rights, and state control of information.[2] It is true that the tsarist autocracy was an absolute monarchy that denied its subjects basic rights and liberties. Centuries of autocratic rule did nothing to establish democratic traditions and hence provided no basis for the development of representative institutions. This legacy contributed to the authoritarianism of the Soviet state. At the same time, any sort of facile equation of tsarism and Soviet socialism is highly misleading. Not only were these systems based on diametrically opposed ideologies, but the degree to which they intervened in society was

drastically different. While the tsarist police sent a few thousand political prisoners into administrative exile (where they lived among the population in Siberia), the Soviet secret police under Stalin imprisoned several million "class enemies" and "enemies of the people" in Gulag prison camps. The tsarist government had no ambition to reshape the population or refashion individuals, as did the Soviet government, and accordingly its social interventions were limited. So along with Stalin's personality, Russian political traditions contributed to Stalinism, but they do not fully explain it.

To understand Stalinism, it is important to consider the geopolitical context in which it arose. By 1900, the Russian empire had fallen far behind the more developed countries of western Europe. An overwhelmingly peasant country, Russia largely lacked the factories, burgeoning cities, and railway networks that characterized the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. Much of Russia's population remained impoverished and illiterate. Its military did not have adequate artillery, munitions, or warships. In order to compete both economically and militarily, Russia needed to industrialize quickly.[3] But how could this be accomplished? In western Europe, industrialization had taken place over a century and it was based on free market capitalism. A gradual approach, however, would not allow Russia to catch up, and moreover, many Russian observers were repulsed by the exploitation and class antagonism that accompanied capitalist industrialization.

The fact that Russia was a late-developing country meant that its intelligentsia could draw upon a preexisting critique of industrial capitalism.[4] Leftists in western Europe had condemned capitalist inequality and proposed various alternatives labeled "socialism," which generally sought political and economic equality for workers. One branch of socialist thought was Marxism, based on the writings of German philosopher Karl Marx. Marx envisioned violent proletarian revolution as the means to overthrow the capitalist system and establish socialism. Many Russian intellectuals were drawn to Marxism, given its scientific critique of capitalism and its conviction that socialism was inevitable. The more radical wing of Russian Marxists, called the Bolsheviks and later renamed the Communists, ultimately came to power in the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Here, then, we have another possible explanation for Stalinism: Marxist ideology.[5] Lenin, Stalin, and other Soviet leaders were Marxists – they employed Marxist categories and viewed the world in terms of class struggle.[6] They saw history progressing along a Marxist timeline to socialism and ultimately to communism. And they believed that, as the vanguard of the proletariat, the Communist Party could push

the Soviet Union along this timeline through a process of economic and social transformation. Soviet leaders' sense of historical progression also guided their cultural and nationality policies.[7] In these ways, Marxism infused the thinking of Communist leaders and played a crucial role in the Soviet system.

Marxist ideas alone, however, do not explain the genesis of Stalinism. Marxism provided no blueprint for how to construct a socialist state. In fact, Marx's writings gave only a vague description of what life would be like under socialism. It is true that Marx endorsed violent proletarian revolution as the means to overthrow the old order, but nowhere did he discuss the scale or types of violence that would be used. Moreover, none of the Stalinist state's institutions or methods came from Marxist ideology. Features of Stalinism such as the planned economy, deportations, and Gulag prison camps were state practices that had their origins elsewhere. We must therefore look further to account for the extreme social intervention characteristic of the Stalinist system.

To provide a new perspective on Stalinism, this book will place it in an international, comparative context. While often viewed as anomalous, Soviet history actually had striking parallels, as well as important differences, with the histories of other countries. In the twentieth century, a sharp rise in state intervention occurred not only in the Soviet Union but in countries across Europe and around the world. In an age of industrial labor and mass warfare, governments increasingly sought to manage and mobilize their populations. In this sense, Stalinism represented a particularly violent incarnation of state practices that developed over several centuries and reached their culmination during and after World War I.

Efforts to shape populations first began in early modern Europe, when cameralist thinkers argued for a greater state role in fostering a productive society. Eventually, the narrow fiscal interests of cameralists were superseded by broader ideals of improving the population's welfare for its own sake. In the nineteenth century, social science disciplines and modern medicine offered new means to identify and solve social problems. A wide range of professionals – social workers, urban planners, public health inspectors – intervened in people's lives to safeguard the population's health and wellbeing. Some reformers were altruistic and sought to ease the suffering of the urban poor, while others were more concerned with economic productivity and public order. In themselves social reform efforts were generally benevolent and did much to reduce disease and poverty. But by the twentieth century, some governments launched more coercive and sweeping attempts at social transformation.[8]

World War I marked a dramatic increase in coercive state intervention. Many "Stalinist" practices – the state-run economy, widespread surveillance, propaganda campaigns, large-scale deportations, and the use of concentration camps – did not originate with Stalin or even in Russia, but were instead tools of governance that became widespread throughout Europe during World War I. The Stalinist planned economy was modeled on the German World War I economy where the government established extensive control over the production and distribution of goods. The Soviet welfare system, which included full employment, universal health care, and old age and disability pensions, reflected a pan-European trend toward mutual obligations between the state and its citizens. The Soviet use of surveillance followed practices established by the governments of all major combatants in the war.[9] The establishment of Soviet concentration camps – what became the Gulag – was based on a method of European colonial warfare that was utilized (in the form of internment camps) during World War I by the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the United States.[10]

The Soviet system was formed at a moment of total war – the juncture of World War I and the Russian Civil War – and wartime institutions and practices became the building blocks of the new political order. Although the Soviet government, once in power, ended involvement in World War I, it almost immediately began mobilization for the Civil War, and it continued many wartime practices. State bureaucracies and agencies, including the Soviet secret police, were established to enact these measures, and they soon became institutionalized as permanent means of rule. The revolutionary origin of the Soviet state also meant that its leaders could act with no traditional or legal limits on their authority. So while state interventionism increased throughout Europe at this time, it assumed a particularly virulent form in the case of Stalinism.

To understand Stalinism as one particular version of modern state practices is not to exonerate Stalin and his fellow leaders for the death and suffering they caused. Wartime practices such as deportations and incarcerations were tools of social control that leaders could choose to use or not. The actualization of Stalinist state violence resulted from the Soviet Union's type of government and the decisions of its leaders. The Soviet government was a dictatorship with no constitutional constraints on its power. Stalin and his fellow leaders chose to use instruments of state violence to pursue their agenda of rapid industrialization and social transformation.

No single factor caused Stalinism. As with all complex historical phenomena, a range of factors contributed to the coercive set of policies enacted under Stalin. While Stalin's vindictiveness, Russian authoritarian

political traditions, and Marxist ideology all played a role, we must also take into account the wider international context in which Stalinism developed. The Stalinist era was one of acute international tensions and military aggression. The Soviet Union, like other underdeveloped countries, needed to industrialize quickly for the sake of national defense. The mass warfare of this era also led political leaders throughout Europe to enact new state practices of mobilization and social intervention. Such practices included both positive interventions (welfare programs and public health measures) and negative interventions (surveillance, deportations, and incarcerations). This book will explore these causes of Stalinism, and it will also describe its social consequences. Among those consequences were the death and suffering of millions of people.

Overview of Chapters

To examine the roots of Stalinism, Chapter 1 begins with a description of the tsarist empire on the eve of World War I. At that time, Russia was an underdeveloped country with a government that thwarted reform efforts. It was only with the enormous demands of World War I that the tsarist autocracy undertook state welfare and public health initiatives. Foreshadowing future Stalinist policies, the wartime tsarist government also implemented coercive measures of economic and social control. The chapter then discusses the Russian Revolution and its two stages – first, the collapse of the tsarist autocracy and its replacement by the Provisional Government; and second, the October Revolution when the Bolsheviks took power. The chapter goes on to discuss the Russian Civil War as well as the 1920s, the period of the New Economic Policy.

Chapter 2 describes the first period of Stalinist rule, 1928–33, what Communist Party leaders called "the era of building socialism." In these years, the Soviet government eliminated capitalism and launched a crash industrialization drive intended to catch up with the more industrialized countries of western Europe. These economic policies triggered massive social upheaval. Millions of peasants moved to cities to find work constructing new factories, and large numbers of urban women took jobs in heavy industry. Many workers received educational opportunities as the Stalinist leadership, distrustful of "bourgeois specialists," sought to create a new technical elite from the ranks of the proletariat. Rapid industrialization was made possible by state control of the economy and the channeling of all resources into the building of steel mills and machine plants. An end to private farming meant the forced collectivization of agriculture, an extremely coercive Stalinist policy that saw the dispossession and

deportation of several million peasants labeled kulaks. Overall this period was a time of severe economic deprivation – the Soviet government introduced rationing, living standards fell sharply, and famine in the countryside resulted in nearly 6 million deaths.

Chapter 3 covers the period after Stalin declared that the foundations of socialism had been built, 1934–38. With the end of capitalism and the establishment of a state-run economy, Soviet leaders believed that they had attained a new stage in world history – the era of socialism. As Marxists, they felt that a new economic base should dictate a new political and cultural superstructure. Accordingly, they issued a new constitution, the Stalin Constitution of 1936, and reoriented official Soviet culture away from iconoclastic avant-garde art toward socialist realism. Having eliminated those people deemed class enemies – kulaks and petty capitalists – Soviet leaders thought the time of open class struggle had passed. But secret police officials warned that there remained hidden enemies who would seek to sabotage the Soviet state. In the late 1930s, with the growing threat of war from Nazi Germany and fascist Japan, Stalin launched a massive wave of state violence to incarcerate or execute potential traitors, in particular former oppositionists within the Communist Party, petty criminals and former kulaks, and members of diaspora national minorities.

Chapter 4 covers World War II, beginning with the Nazi-Soviet Pact. After the signing of this treaty, Germany invaded Poland from the west, while the Soviet Union invaded eastern Poland, the Baltic countries, and Finland. The chapter goes on to discuss the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 – an invasion the country barely survived. The German army drove deep into Soviet territory and within a few months had reached the outskirts of Leningrad and Moscow. To mobilize for the war effort, Soviet leaders relied upon the same state practices they had used during the Civil War and the 1930s – state control of economic resources, surveillance and propaganda to ensure the loyalty of the population, and secret police arrests to neutralize any potential dissent. While the Soviet Union ultimately defeated Nazi Germany, 27 million Soviet citizens lost their lives during the war. For the Soviet people, the story of World War II is not only one of victory, but also of repression, sacrifice, and death.

Chapter 5 analyzes the postwar Stalin years, 1946–53. As a result of the wartime victory, the Soviet Union attained the status of a superpower within the international system, rivaling the United States for world domination. This international prominence profoundly affected both Soviet foreign and domestic policy. The Soviet Union imposed Communist governments upon eastern European countries, an act that

fueled Cold War tensions with the United States and its allies. In domestic policy, the mammoth task of rebuilding the country, where millions were homeless and hungry, was accomplished through continued state economic controls and coercion. Despite people's hopes for political liberalization after the war, the Stalinist regime remained just as repressive. The wartime victory seemed to vindicate the Stalinist system, and the Cold War dictated continued vigilance.

The conclusion considers the legacy of Stalinism, a legacy that cast a long shadow over the remainder of the Soviet period and even beyond. Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's successor, embarked on a contentious campaign of de-Stalinization, denouncing Stalin's cult of personality and his use of violence against Party members. But with Khrushchev's ouster in 1964, discussion of Stalinist repressions ceased, to be revived only in the late 1980s under Mikhail Gorbachev. At that time, fuller disclosure of Stalinist repressions discredited the Soviet government and, along with a host of economic and ethnic discontents, contributed to the rapid demise of the Soviet system. The end of the Soviet Union, however, did not end the debate over Stalinism, which is bitterly contested in Russia even to this day.

Stalinism is of central importance to our understanding of twentieth-century world history. During the Stalinist era, the Soviet Union became a military and industrial superpower, capable of winning World War II and rivaling the United States during the Cold War. But Stalinism is not simply a tale of industrial modernization and military triumph. While the Stalinist system represented an alternative model of development and a grave ideological challenge to liberal democracy and capitalism, it also exacted an appalling human toll. Our obligation to study the Stalinist era stems not only from its importance, but also from our responsibility to come to terms with one of the darkest pages in all human history.

1 Prelude to Stalinism

In his 1835 book *Democracy in America*, French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville predicted that Russia and the United States would eventually become the most powerful countries on earth. He wrote, "There are at the present time two great nations in the world ... the Russians and the Americans ... Each of them seems marked out by the will of heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe."[1] By the middle of the twentieth century, his prediction had come true. The United States and Russia, by then called the Soviet Union, had emerged as the world's two superpowers, and they were locked in a Cold War struggle for world domination. But fifty years earlier, at the dawn of the twentieth century, few observers could foresee this. True, Russia was an enormous land empire and was considered one of the Great Powers of Europe. But the country's economic and military strength seemed to be diminishing compared to the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the United States. Whereas these countries were undergoing rapid industrialization, Russia remained an agrarian country, in only the early stages of industrialization. Militarily the country was also falling behind. In 1905, Russia endured a humiliating loss in the Russo-Japanese War. A decade later, the Russian army suffered crushing defeats at the hands of the German army in World War I. How was Russia going to defend itself in this era of industrial production and mass warfare? How was it going to mobilize its vast human and natural resources to fashion a modern military capable of preserving its national sovereignty?

Stalinism was not inevitable. We need to explain how and why it developed. But part of this explanation involves understanding the international context in which Russia operated in the early twentieth century. World War I ushered in a new era of international rivalry and mass warfare, and Russia's lack of industrial development left it militarily vulnerable. Rising international tensions were accompanied by growing interventions by political leaders to ensure the economic capacity and war readiness of their populations. Here too the Russian monarchy had lagged

behind western European governments. But once World War I broke out, the tsarist state vastly expanded its social reach. After the Bolsheviks seized power during the Russian Revolution, they further expanded state control and coercion as they fought a bloody civil war. The Soviet bureaucracy and secret police were formed during the Civil War, and they went on to become fundamental components of the Stalinist state. The origins of Stalinism are complex, and to understand these origins we must consider the prelude to the Stalinist era.

Russia on the Eve of War and Revolution

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia was a vast yet underdeveloped empire. The largest country on earth, it stretched 9,000 miles – nearly halfway around the world – from west to east. It extended across the Eurasian land mass, from the Baltic Sea all the way to the Pacific Ocean (see Map 1.1). The northern reaches of Siberia were a seemingly endless expanse of frozen tundra, while the Central Asian part of the Russian Empire was desert and arid steppe. Only 14 percent of the empire's 125 million inhabitants were urban dwellers, meaning that most of the population lived in villages scattered across this enormous region. Transportation and communication remained very poor, so that many of these villages, even in European Russia, were connected to the larger world only by dirt roads, some of which turned to mud and became impassable during spring rains. A decree issued by the tsar, the country's hereditary monarch, might take weeks or months to reach his subjects.

The empire was inhabited by a wide range of ethnic and religious groups. Russians made up just more than 40 percent of the population. Together with other Slavic peoples – Belorussians, Ukrainians, and Poles – they constituted around 70 percent. Although the tsarist state had coopted some ethnic elites, many nationalities felt oppressed by Russian rule. Among Poles, Finns, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians there was a strong desire for independence, something these nationalities achieved following the Russian Revolution. Other nationalities also had aspirations for independence, including those in the Caucasus such as Georgians and Armenians, both of whom possessed distinct political and cultural heritages. A majority of people in the Russian empire were Christian, including ethnic Russians who overwhelmingly were members of the Eastern Orthodox Church, but there were also large Jewish and Muslim populations. Jews felt oppressed by the tsarist regime, as its laws restricted both where they could live and what occupations they could take up. The many Muslim peoples of the empire, including Tatars on the Volga River, ethnic groups in the Caucasus, and