**Reading History: Stalin's Russia**

By [Christopher Read](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/1465) | Published in [History Today](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/43) [Volume: 33 Issue: 4](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/2129)

Christopher Read explores the historiography of Russia under Joseph Stalin.

The historian of twentieth-century Russia labours under a number of disadvantages, some of his own making, others well beyond his control. The main ones, which are themselves interconnected, are that access to sources is relatively limited and that the subject is highly politicised. Related to the latter is the fact that there is no strong historiographical tradition in this area among Russians themselves because of the ideological control exerted by the Soviet authorities. These conditions also affect history written by émigré Russians and other non-Soviet historians. The atmosphere of emotional involvement and embattled commitment sometimes engendered can lead to lively polemic but does not always produce the best grounded historical analysis.

The effects of this environment can be seen from the themes which have attracted most attention from historians of the Stalin period (that is, from the mid 1920s to 1953). Among non-Soviet historians more attention has been paid to political repression and the purges. Other major areas of interest are leadership politics, biographies of major figures and, chosen by those seeking to be more 'objective' about Soviet conditions, industrialisation. There are some inexplicable gaps. There is very little on social history after the 1920s, including the period of the Second World War and after. There are good military histories of the war, an area which Soviet historians of the period concentrate on to the exclusion of almost everything else other than industrialisation, but few studies of its internal social and political effects. There is surprisingly little on foreign policy. There is very little on any aspect of the Soviet Union in the period from 1945 to 1953. On the positive side one recent growth area, cultural revolution and educational policy in the 1920s, has shown that solid work can be done on grassroots history other than economic history which has tended to dominate this field. Studies of the communist party and of the planning system have also broken new ground, but there is much virgin soil to be upturned.

Despite these disadvantages a number of pioneering works of excellent scholarly quality were produced in the 1950s and remain the starting point for any student of the period. Basic political history has been painstakingly researched and analysed with lucidity and penetration by Leonard Schapiro in his *Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 2nd ed., 1970). Another exceptional contribution, perhaps overlooked at times, is Merle Fainsod's *Smolensk Under Soviet Rule* , (Macmillan, 1959), unique in that it is the only history of the period written from a wide range of secret Soviet archives which were captured by the Germans in 1941 and fell into American hands in 1945. Though based on regional events in Smolensk province they throw vivid light on all the themes of the period such as party organisation, collectivisation of agriculture, industrialisation, purges, social relations, the NKVD and so on. Quite different but equally pioneering are Isaac Deutscher's biographies of *Stalin* , (Oxford University Press, 1949) and, in three volumes, *Trotsky* (Oxford University Press, 1954) which, though dated in many respects, retain their virtues of clear analysis, good writing style and careful scholarship. Of an extensive memoir literature two contributions stand out. In the political field Victor Serge's *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (Oxford University Press, 1967) capture the atmosphere of the early Stalin years brilliantly from the point of view of a minor party official. The somewhat haphazard but equally evocative memoirs of the area of literature and politics in the 1920s and early 1930s by Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope against Hope and Hope Abandoned* , (Collins Harvill, 1970) are also outstanding. Among memoirs of Stalin's victims Evgenia Ginzburg's *Into the Whirlwind* (Collins Harvill, 1967) is one of the most moving and thought-provoking accounts of the prison camps.

A number of wider-ranging works, produced more recently, touch on certain aspects of the Stalin period. E.H.Carr's monumental *History of Soviet Russia* (Macmillan, 1950 -) has, with the collaboration of R.W.Davies, inched its way to the end of the twenties, and the most recent volumes, by Professor Davies, provide exhaustive coverage of the collectivisation of agriculture. Much briefer is Alec Nove's Economic History of the USSR (Alien and Unwin 1965), which is more comprehensive than its title would suggest. Professor Nove has provided a sound, easily intelligible but not oversimplified account of the period showing how developments in political, economic and social life were all intimately bound up with one another. Hére d'Encausse's history of the Soviet Union, translated into English in two volumes rather misleadingly entitled *Lenin and Stalin* (Longman, 1981) gives a brilliant analysis of the origin and development of Stalinism, tracing its roots to the organisational and bureaucratic imperatives following inexorably from the bolshevik attempt to carry out a social revolution with minority support.

In the realm of more specialised works the symposium *Stalinism* (W.W. Norton, 1980) edited by Robert Tucker brings together leading historians and political scientists to discuss its subject from many different points of view. As such it provides an excellent starting place for exploration of the topic. Rather lighter in tone, but addressing the same general themes, are analyses by Alec Nove *Stalinism and After* (Allen and Unwin, 1979), and the French communist Jean Elleinstein *The Stalin Phenomenon* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), which provide stimulating overviews of Stalin and his time, attempting, from their different points of view, to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the rise, development and widening influence of Stalinism.

A number of biographies have also provided new insights into the period. In the front rank of these is Stephen Cohen's *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1980) which provides not only an excellent political and intellectual biography of its central character, but also a sympathetic account of an alternative path to socialism in Russia mapped out by those later condemned by Stalin as a right-wing deviation in the party. For this group alliance with the peasantry and gradual rather than rapid, comprehensive change were seen as guiding principles. Their leading opponent on the left of the party, Trotsky, has continued to find numerous biographers. His approach to the revolution, based on the assumption that the peasantry were intrinsically hostile to it and would remain so, and also that only strenuous efforts to spread the revolution to advanced capitalist countries could correct the deformities of Russia's own revolution, have been central themes of a number of recent studies of Trotsky's life and thought, notably those by Robert Wistrich and, in brief essay form, by Irving Howe. A brilliant, comprehensive study of *The Social and Political Thought of Lean Trotsky* by Baruch Knei-Paz (Oxford University Press, 1978) and the more narrowly focused Leon Trotsky and the *Politics of Economic Isolation* by Richard Day (Cambridge University Press, 1973) have made penetrating criticisms of some of the major assumptions about Trotsky's ideas. Day, for instance, has argued that Trotsky was not implacably hostile to a temporary period of 'socialism in one country' based on his recognition by the mid-twenties that supporting revolutions in Germany and elsewhere were no longer on the agenda. Stalin, who combined elements of both left and right, has attracted less attention from biographers than the more charismatic Trotsky, who is easier to study since a lot of his papers are available to scholars. A notable account of Stalin's early life and rise to power is contained in Robert C. Tucker's *Stalin as Revolutionary* (Chatto, 1974) which follows his career up to 1929. Tucker emphasises Stalin's psychological identification of himself with Lenin and proposes that this helps explain his ruthless pursuit of and relentless grip on power. Also noteworthy is the account of Stalin's life by the dissident Russian Marxist Roy Medvedev entitled *Let History Judge* (Macmillan, 1972), in which he criticises Stalin for betraying the principles laid down by Lenin. Other recent biographies, each idiosyncratic in its own way, include Adam Ulam's Stalin, *Ronald Hingley's Stalin: Man and Legend* (Hutchinson, 1974) and Ian Grey's *Stalin* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979). This last is unique in that it sympathises with its subject, arguing that only the toughest of measures could preserve Russia from disintegration and conquest.

Memoirs from some unexpected quarters have appeared; formerly, those of the dissenting Yugoslav communist Milovan Djilas Conversations with Stalin (Hart-Davis, 1962) stood alone in this genre. Now there are the memoirs of Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter, entitled *Twenty Letters to a Friend and Only One Year* (Hutchinson, 1967 and 1969). More concerned with politics and absorbing, if somewhat prolix and self-serving, are the two volumes of *Khrushchev Remembers* (Andre Deutsch, 1971) which touch extensively on Stalin and Stalinism.

Monographs of a more specialised kind have appeared at a steady, but far from overwhelming, pace. The area of economics, economic history and economic planning have received considerable attention. Moshe Lewin's pathbreaking *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power* (Allen and Unwin, 1963) focused attention on the political roots of apparently economic policies, in this case the collectivisation of agriculture. An unusual and stimulating account of economic theory in the 1920s and 1930s is provided by Richard Day in *The 'Crisis' and the 'Crash'* (New Left Books, 1981) which, through a study of the key problem of how Soviet Marxists interpreted the Wall Street crash and ensuing depression, shows the wide gap between Marx's ideas and the crude 'Marxist' analysis of economic theorists like Varga who were favoured by Stalin. A major technical analysis of the origin and development of the Soviet planning system has been produced by E. Zaleski, but can only be recommended to the specialist. A new approach to the administrative and managerial structure of the Stalinist system has been made by Timothy Dunmore, whose *The Stalinist Command Economy* (Macmillan, 1981) has argued that the 'totalitarian' model of a society being driven from the top is not adequate to explain the amount of pressure which managers could exert on central planners in the 1940s.

Important, and sometimes controversial, studies of the Communist party in this period include T.H.Rigby's *Communist Party Membership* (Princeton University Press, 1968) which through a study of the social composition of the party, has shown convincingly that the effect of the purges was to produce a party of supervisory and administrative officials at the expense of workers and the traditional intelligentsia. In Stalin and the Soviet Communist Party, A. Avtorkhanov provides an account of life within the party, based partly on the author's personal experiences, illustrating the growth of Stalin's dictatorship as seen by a minor official. In Stalin Embattled, W.O. McCagg has questioned the idea that Stalin personally wielded absolute power, arguing that Stalin was fighting for his own political survival even in the 1940s and did not always have things his own way. On the other hand, Neils Erik Rosenfeldt's *Stalin's Secret Chancellery* (Copenhagen, 1978) presents the evidence about Stalin's personal secretariat which he used from the mid-1950s to circumvent normal political channels and establish a personal power base through direct links with the secret police. On a similar theme, but much more ambitious in scope, Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror* (Macmillan, 1968) has accumulated an enormous amount of evidence on the purge of 1936-1938. It is largely descriptive. It has been somewhat superseded by Alexander Solzhenitsyn's monumental *Gulag Archipelago* (Fontana, 1975). The author has tried to accumulate as much information as possible about the experiences of purge victims and provides riveting examples of fortitude and horror. Neither of these authors provides much analysis of the events they describe. Both seem content to blame it all on Marxist ideology and leave it at that, which is rather like saying that the Spanish Inquisition was caused by Catholicism, which does not provide any real help in understanding the issue in all its complexity.

Naturally, the cold war distortions loom largest in studies of Stalin's foreign policy. *Russia's Road to the Cold War* by V. Mastny (Columbia University Press, 1979) tries to prove that the real cause of the cold war was Stalin's unwarranted suspicion of western motives and America's failure to be sufficiently tough with the Russians at the Teheran and Yalta Conferences. The thesis is marred by giving plenty of examples of Allied behaviour calculated to make Stalin suspicious (Munich, the phoney war, deals with Italian collaborators in 1943, delay of the second front, and so on) and by a monumental error. Mastny's thesis rests on the assumption that once the second front was a reality Stalin refused to conciliate the Allies further, pointing to the fact that the military campaign promised by Stalin to coincide with the opening of the second front came in the peripheral theatre of Finland. In fact, Finland was only a diversionary campaign preceding the largest battle in history, the Byelorussian campaign, in which the German army was pushed back and the road to Warsaw, and hence to Berlin, was opened. Mastny, now a Professor of Strategy at the Naval War College, Providence, Rhode Island, appears not to know of this battle, which rips a hole in his argument as big as the one it made in the Wehrmacht. It is also significant that none of the major reviewers have commented on the omission, a depressing example of cold war ideology anaesthetising critical scholarly faculties. Oddly enough, the military side of the war has been better served, notably by John Erickson in *The Road to Stalingrad* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975). Seweryn Bialer's *Stalin and his Generals* (Souvenir Press, 1970) provides extracts from the massive quantity of Soviet war memoirs produced largely in the 1960s and organises them neatly into themes.

Finally, a notable new area of study, cultural and educational policy and its social consequences has been opened up. Much of it concerns the early and mid-twenties alone but some of the main works also look at the 'cultural revolution' of 1928-31, which finally silenced the old intelligentsia and replaced it with a new, more narrowly educated white-collar intelligentsia. The contributors to *Cultural Revolution in Russia 1928-1931* , edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick, examine this process in a wide variety of areas. The effects of these policies on the historical profession in the Soviet Union have been carefully scrutinised by John Barber in *Soviet Historians in Crisis* (Macmillan, 1981) and George Enteen in *The Soviet Scholar-Bureaucrat: M.N. Pokrovskii and the Society of Marxist Historians* (Penn. State University Press, 1979). Also covered in detail is the technical intelligentsia in Kendall Bailes *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin* and N. Lampert *The Technical Intelligentsia in the USSR 1928-1935* (Macmillan, 1979). By and large the main thrust of these works is to show that ideological uniformity was not simply created from above but found active collaborators from below who became an essential element in the Stalinist power structure.

Thus, despite the special problems involved, a variety of historical research is under way in this area. So far it is distinguished more by careful seeking out and evaluation of empirical data than by bold and imaginative synthesis and overall analysis. Nonetheless, the careful accumulation of fact may now be sufficient to provide the basis for a more satisfactory theory of how Soviet society under Stalin functioned.

**Christopher Read is lecturer in history at the University of Warwick and author of *Religion, Revolution and the Russian Intelligentsia, 1900-1912* .**