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The Evolution of Totalitarianism

From Stalin to Putin

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The Evolution of Totalitarianism: From Stalin to Putin

The Soviet Union is commonly cited as “totalitarian.” But just how totalitarian was the Soviet Union? The modern Russian Federation?

There is an ongoing debate in Georgia about potential closure of the museum of Soviet Occupation. The debate is accompanied by an extensive scientific debate about the Soviet past. Various roundtables and conferences reflecting on the historical, political and sociological contexts of the Soviet occupation are held in Georgian academic institutions and universities. On a discursive level, it is broadly accepted that the ‘Evil Empire’ was indeed totalitarian – brutally repressive, all-encompassing, and terrorizing. Hardly anyone can deny that Stalin’s Soviet Union was indeed a totalitarian state in the classical sense, but one can’t help wondering if this term can be applied to the Soviet Union throughout its history (1922–1991).

The use of “totalitarianism” as a term to describe a political regime dates back to the 20th century, when Italian fascists characterized their model of statehood as “totalitarian.” They defined the term as an absolute loyalty of citizens to the state: “Everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state,” in Mussolini’s words (Gurian, 1978). Zbigniew Brzezinski and Carl Friedrich characterized the totalitarian state as having a single ideology, a party with an omnipotent leader, a state-controlled economy, a monopoly on all forms of communication, control over the military, and an organized terrorizing secret police (1965). In totalitarian regimes, the state completely penetrates the lives of individuals and the loyalty of citizens to the state is strictly enforced. Most modern definitions of totalitarianism are applied specifically to Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union.

Many scholars have argued that Stalin’s Soviet Union was unprecedented and unparalleled both in the scale of its state-sponsored crimes and in its mass control of its population (Courtois et al., 1999). State terror was pursued by a vindictive secret police (NKVD) that was one of the most essential means of sustaining the regime. The NKVD had a wide range of civil and military agents. It reported on various aspects of social and political activities, regulated the censorship of communication and freedom of expression for ‘preventive’ purposes, and executed several million possible and ‘real’ opponents of the state. Even the members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union were under constant threat of being reported. As a result, around half a million members of the party were executed in 1938. Thus, the state penetrated not only into the lives of average Soviets, but also into the lives of the representatives of the political establishment (Kenez, 2006).

Despite the formal separation of power between the State and the Party, all decision-making processes were under the complete control of Stalin: “...there would be no State without the controlling Party function, and no nation without its omnipotent Leader” (Shukman, 2005: 10).

From an ideological perspective, Stalin's Soviet Union perceived capitalism as the main threat to the party's dominant Marxist-Leninist ideology. Embodied with ultimate political power, Stalin initiated vicious programs aimed at cleansing the "remnants of capitalism" from society (Kennan, 1946: 570). One of these programs was the forced collectivization of agriculture, a process called Dekulakization. Kulaks, the class of richer peasants, were regarded as "proto-capitalists" (Fitzpatrick, 2002: 43). Their property was confiscated and they were executed, deported to labour camps, or imprisoned by the secret police. In theory, this 'reform' was aimed at the rapid modernization and industrialization of the Soviet economy. Instead, it caused a food deficit and millions of Soviet and Ukrainian peasants died from "famine-genocide" in 1933. The failure of economic programs was blamed on the victims, a commonplace tactic in the Stalinist Soviet state. The peasants who opposed collectivization and Dekulakization were accused of being "counterrevolutionary suspects," which was used as an excuse to renew massive repressions. It can be assumed that either the regime viewed Soviet citizens as necessary sacrifices for the "higher ideals of socialism" (Naimark, 2010: 18) and viewed human deaths as "statistics" in the pursuit of this goal (to quote Stalin), or that the state prioritized its own power expansion over the well-being of its citizens in order to achieve complete control over the economy, and state terror was an initial part of "...Stalin's vision of modernization" (Lee, 1999: 32). A gradual shift in Soviet politics occurred after Stalin's death, and the priorities of Soviet citizens changed from fighting for survival to acquiring less subjugated position in relation to the state (Patrikeef, 2005).

After the death of Stalin, the new Soviet leaders chose to govern collectively, rather than continuing under a totalitarian dictatorship. Despite the fact that most of the Stalinist institutions still existed in Khrushchev's time, particular emphasis was placed on improving the economic situation of society and deconstructing the myth of the almighty Vozhd (Leader), rather than continuing a genocidal method of governance. Stalinist labour camps were closed and bans were lifted in certain areas of social life. Political dissidents began returning to the country. This process had an effect on the totalitarian nature of the Soviet state, as the lifting of particular restrictions on expression allowed citizens a certain amount of freedom to question both the past history of the regime and its legitimacy. Even Pravda, the most loyal communist newspaper, began to mildly criticize Stalin and his policies from time to time. The lessening of state repression under Khrushchev can be explained both by permanent internal party rivalries for power and by the fact that post-Stalin, post-war Soviet society was exhausted. Hence, continuing under the existing model of governance could have been less effective in sustaining power for the leaders. However, despite this, the communist state still retained the utmost utility as an instrument for attaining the highest goals of socialism (Kneen, 1998; Kenez, 2006; Shukman, 2005). Consequently, the Mussolinian formula – "Everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state" – still applied to the Soviet Union under Khrushchev.

During Brezhnev's regime, the exceptionality of party ideology appeared to be criticised more often at various stages. Unlike his predecessor Nikita Khrushchev, Brezhnev avoided an anti-Stalinist campaign. The return of exiled and deported people from Stalin's labour camps (around 50 million people went through Gulags according to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn), initiated in Khrushchev's period and carried out in Brezhnev's time, made the process of de-ideologization and de-totalitarization even more inevitable (Brown, 2009). More and more spheres of social life were left uncontrolled by the party, and the influence of the reformed secret police decreased. The 'period of stagnation' that began in Brezhnev's reign continued under both Andropov and Chernenko, both short politically dull regimes. These were transitional periods where the institutional structure of Stalinist totalitarianism gradually started to break down.

During the Gorbachev era, the Glasnost and Perestroika policies made Soviet society comparatively freer than in earlier periods. Economic and institutional changes initiated by Gorbachev had decisive effects on the totalitarian nature of the Soviet Union. One can fairly argue that it was no longer a totalitarian state but a gradually evolving quasi-corporatist political entity. Gorbachev emerged as a Sword of Damocles for the totalitarian legacy, a "self-assured autocrat taking charge and using his power against the system itself" (Karklins, 1994:32). His policies directed the Soviet government to the 'third way' that blended elements of both capitalism and communism. This model of statehood, somewhat similar to the fascist concept of corporatism, still included a state-controlled economy and repressive institutional structure (in addition to repressive political police, harshly censoring laws and etc.). However, unlike the government of previous regimes, the Soviet system under Gorbachev introduced new instruments for achieving its goal of retaining its monopoly on the political, economic and cultural sectors of society. This tool was state-controlled 'private' enterprise. Of course, the Soviet definition of private enterprise was in no way the equivalent of the private enterprise of the capitalist economy. Gorbachev himself several times reaffirmed his belief in a system somewhat different from that of a market economy. For example, in one of his addresses he denied the market solution:

"...some think that whether we like it or not this problem must be solved by switching on the mechanisms of a market economy – let the market sort everything out. We do not share this approach, since it would immediately destroy the entire social situation and disrupt all the processes in the country." – [Soviet Television](#), May 30, 1989.

One outcome of his reforms was that the state attempted to maintain its dominant position in the economy by selectively devolving certain powers to quasi-private entities. This evolved out of a necessity to guarantee loyalty to the Party, both from emerging business circles of the crumbling empire and from the impoverished and dissatisfied Soviet citizens. In this way, Gorbachev's reforms served to further political strategic assertions of an emerging (or demerging) corporatist

state which aimed to consolidate the gradually disintegrating public consensus about the divinity of communism. However, putting Gorbachev's Soviet Union on the same level as Stalin's might be inaccurate. If the Soviet Union under Stalin was demonstrably totalitarian, with the state penetrating almost every sphere of life, controlling every (state and non-state) institution, and engaging in mass slaughter of the "enemies of the nation," this term cannot apply to the country under Gorbachev. The trend towards a freer economic model and less repressive and less organized state institutions allows us to suggest that the nature of the Soviet state under Gorbachev can be better explained by a corporatist rather than a totalitarian model of statehood.

Having scrutinized the nature of the Soviet state in its historical context, it is possible to draw certain parallels between the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia under Vladimir Putin. One of the key similarities between the two models of governance is the domination of force-structures on the socio-political and economic life of the country, though each exhibits a different degree of domination. After Putin's emergence on the Russian political scene, the so-called Siloviki (silovye struktury) armed forces and uniformed services personnel were appointed to almost all key political and administrative posts in the Federation, heading five out of seven federal administrative districts. These Siloviki were delegated various functions, including some in the economic and socio-political spheres. In case of the latter, Siloviki incited fear in society about the end of Putinism and discredited political opposition to the regime. In the economic sphere, they guarantee the party's financial support and to no small extent fund Putin's modernizing agenda, including infrastructural and industrial projects and social policies. The institutionalization of this police-state mechanism has gradually reduced or even removed almost all alternative sources of power, be it governors 'disloyal' to the Kremlin, an independent media, public organizations, or the Duma deputats and rich oligarchs. The peculiar deaths of journalist Anna Politkovskaya and former KGB officer Aleksander Litvinenko, as well as various controversial imprisonments (i.e. oil-tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky) indicate that certain elements from Brzezinski's and Friedrich's classical definition of totalitarianism may be used to characterize some aspects of Putin's model of governance.

Vladimir Putin's Russia is neither Gorbachev's Soviet Union nor Stalin's terrorizing totalitarian state, despite the fact that Putin himself is openly nostalgic about the Soviet Union and considers Stalin's policies "necessary" and "modernizing" and labels the Soviet collapse as "the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" and "a genuine tragedy". It might be more accurate to hypothesize it as a corporatist-kleptocratic state with strong elements of a militocracy rather than a totalitarian state in its conventional form. In policies somewhat similar to those of Gorbachev's period, private entrepreneurs under Putin are instruments used to assure public loyalty towards the party and its omnipotent leader. In this way, a corporatist-kleptocratic element emerges in Putin's model of governance. The extraordinary influence of Siloviki on political and economic processes of the country recalls a Stalinist state structure where the dominant source of the state

power and control also lied in its force-structures, though Putin's regime is as yet incomparable to Stalin's in terms of violence and crimes committed.

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