

# Stalin and the Tsars: Stalin's emulation and rehabilitation of Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great

By Henry Rugg

## Introduction

'The people need a Tsar' Stalin is reported to have said at a dinner party attended by senior communist party officials in 1926.<sup>1</sup> Talk had turned to the topic of governing Russia in the absence of Lenin. 'Don't forget we are in Russia, the land of the Tsars. The Russian people like to have one man standing at the head of the state,' he hastened to add. No one attending the party took exception to the comment, but in retrospect it was a defining statement of Stalin's Tsarist cast of mind, and the revealing of a self-justifying political creed that would later become realised in full. As early as 1926 Stalin had himself in mind as the great chief of Russia, the heir to the Tsarist throne.

A voracious reader with an especially large appetite for early modern and pre-revolutionary Russian history<sup>2</sup>, Stalin was versed in the nation's Tsarist tradition and the attempts of past Tsars to put an end to centuries of subjugation under the Tatar yoke, overcome the hostile encirclement of the Rus' and later attempts to establish and expand a centralised, modern state.<sup>3</sup> As we will see, Stalin looked to historical antecedents to confirm his place in history, seeking legitimisation in the parts of Russia's tsarist past that allowed him to enact his self-identity: the great tsars, national builders and evil despots, Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great are the two Tsars with whom Stalin felt the most affinity. Between himself and the two Tsars, Stalin found a legitimating parallel with a powerful allure; for they provided a model – set in historical circumstances remarkably similar to that which Stalin faced in the late 20s and 30s – that confirmed and informed Stalin's economic and social policies. It is no surprise therefore that Stalin's Great Purge of 1936-38 and the Five Year Plans followed in remarkably similar fashion to Ivan's IV reign of terror and Peter the Great's industrialisation campaign respectively.<sup>4</sup>

As Stalin set out to emulate the two Tsars, he simultaneously then personally saw to their rehabilitation in popular history and culture, altering their negative depictions to positive ones, which will be the focus of the latter part of this essay. In elevating the two Tsars to the status of national heroes, the parallel would now serve his image. It would place him as the natural heir to the great nation builders, as the man set on completing the campaign – that they started with good intentions but failed to complete – to overcome Russia's backwardness. The second aspect of the rehabilitation of Ivan and Peter was that it formed part of a wider shift in the Soviet Union's interwar domestic policy known as 'National Bolshevism'; born out of the need to create national heroes to engender a strong sense of a national identity and bolster support for a potential war.<sup>5</sup>

Viewing the Stalin period through the prism of his Tsarist influence, we can chart the dynamic, fluctuating relationship between Stalin, the Tsars and the Soviet state.

## Stalin and the Bolshevik 'Boys'

The enduring popular image of Ivan IV Vasilyevich, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Tsar, is one of a despotic tyrant. His epithet Grozny, or 'The Terrible' is better reflected in English by terms such as 'inspiring terror' or 'formidable,' due to his ruthless expansion of the Tsardom in the 1550s through conquests of the Tatar khanates of Astrakhan and Kazan, almost doubling the territories of Russia

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<sup>1</sup> Recounted by Pyotr Chagin, one of the leaders of the Leningrad Party organisation, who was a close friend of Kirov and was present at the dinner

<sup>2</sup> {The Guardian, "Stalin's Library by Geoffrey Roberts Review – the Marks of a Leader," the Guardian, February 16, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/feb/16/stalins-library-by-geoffrey-roberts-review-the-marks-of-a-leader>.

<sup>3</sup> Yale University Press, "Stalin Digital Archive," [www.stalindigitalarchive.com](http://www.stalindigitalarchive.com)

<sup>4</sup> Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System* (Methuen Publishing, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> D. L. Brandenberger and A. M. Dubrovsky, "'The People Need a Tsar': The Emergence of National Bolshevism as Stalinist Ideology, 1931–1941," *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 5 (July 1998): 873–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668139808412570>.



correspondences.<sup>17</sup> His methods mirrored that of Ivan's, employing imprisonment, tortures to extract confessions, treason trials and executions. As the evidence from Stalin's speeches and correspondences suggest, he saw himself in battle against the coalition of the Gorbachev grandees, purging Russia of dissension from within.

### **Stalin's Petrine revolution**

As a leader determined to overcome Russia's backwardness through industrial development, Stalin was consciously emulating Peter the Great. This we have directly from Stalin himself in 1926, in one of the most important speeches of Stalin's career, declaring in front of an enlarged Central Committee the need for rapid industrialisation. Referring to Peter's policies of industrialisation and modernisation to combat the external threats of the Chinese Tartars in the south and Sweden in the northwest, Stalin said 'when Peter the Great, conducting business with the more advanced countries in the West, feverishly built mills and factories to supply the army and strengthen the defences of the country, it was a special sort of effort to keep clear of the confines of backwardness.'<sup>18</sup>

Drawing historical parallels between the hostile encirclement of the Russian Empire in the early 18th century and the similar capitalist, western encirclement that Stalin believed surrounded the Soviet Union in 1926, Stalin, the aspiring state builder, embarked on a Petrine course of rapid industrialisation which would become the 'Five Year Plans'<sup>19</sup>, in an attempt to overcome Russian backwardness and compete with the West. Peter the Great's inclination to modernise did not carry with it an inclination to lessen the majesty of the autocratic office. In Peter's world, the whole of society including the nobility, had to serve the state: the Boyar council was abolished and the use of terror to enforce Peter's industrial revolution 'from above' was commonplace.<sup>20</sup> Prisoners of war, civilians from occupied territories, and state owned serfs were brought together in what have been called 'Peter's forced labour camps'.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, coercion was woven into the fabric of Stalin's programme of industrialisation. Stalin used the purges of ordinary Soviet citizens, 'dekulakisation' and the forced migration of peasants to the urban industrial areas, to acquire free labour for his industrial revolution from above.<sup>22</sup>

### **Rehabilitating the two Tsars in history and popular culture**

As Stalin's twin policies of industrialisation and the purges continued apace, the obvious parallels with the Tsarist autocrats began to be visible. Historians and writers were beginning to pick up on the striking similarities between Stalin's policies and those of Peter and Ivan, for instance when in December 1931 historical biographer Emil Lushchik asked Stalin in an interview whether he saw any similarity between himself and Peter the Great.<sup>23</sup> Problematically for Stalin the widely held views of Ivan and Peter in 1931 were negative. The state endorsed historical narrative of Russia's Tsarist past was in large part provided by the pro-soviet Soviet historian and former revolutionary Mikhail Pokrovsky, whose accounts of history were firmly infused with Marxist orthodoxy and denigrated the role of the individual in shaping history. Rather, Pokrovsky stressed the primacy of 'impersonal economic forces' in determining the course of history, but not without first heaping scorn on the Tsars.<sup>24</sup> In his 1920 work *Russian History in Briefest Outline*, commissioned as the official school history textbook, he wrote that 'Peter, called by sympathetic historians 'The Great,' locked up his wife... tortured his son' and 'died of syphilis after passing it on to his second wife.'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Alexander Orlov, *The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes* (New York, 1968), p.286.

<sup>18</sup> *For Stalin*, *Speeches* (Moscow, 1980) pp.286-7.

<sup>19</sup> *Stalin's Speeches*, *The Secret History of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Robert Tucker, *Stalin as Leader: The Revolution from Above, 1926-1929* (New York, Norton, 1980).

<sup>21</sup> Maximo Gorky, 'The Day the Emperor the leader Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great and Vladimir Alexandrovich Tsar' (*From "The House of the Dead"*).

<sup>22</sup> Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>23</sup> *For Stalin*, *Speeches* (Moscow, 1980) p.286.

<sup>24</sup> *Emil Lushchik* (New York, 1931).

<sup>25</sup> Mikhail Pokrovsky, *Russian History in Briefest Outline* (1920, 1925).