

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 1926.¹ 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 history², 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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵

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 'Boyars'

The enduring popular image of Ivan IV Vasilyevich, the 16th 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

¹ 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

² (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>.

³ Yale University Press, "Stalin Digital Archive," www.stalindigitalarchive.com

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

⁵ 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>.

consequences.⁷⁷ His methods mirrored that of Ivan's, employing imprisonment, torture to extract confessions, floggings and executions. As the evidence from Stalin's speeches and correspondence suggests, he cast himself in battle against the will of the Bolshevik government, purging Party of deviation from within.⁷⁸

Stalin's Peasant revolution

As a leader determined to overcome Russia's backwardness through industrial development, Stalin was consciously emulating Peter the Great.

Indeed, in one of the most controversial aspects of Stalin's career, depicting as front of an enlarged Central Committee the need for rural industrialisation, reflecting in front of an enlarged Central Committee the need for rural industrialisation. Referring to Peter's policies of industrialisation and agriculture to convert the eastern parts of the Russian Empire to the south and southwest in the northwest, Stalin said 'when Peter the Great, conducting business with the more advanced countries in the West, successfully 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 conflicts of the tsars'.⁷⁹

Drawing historical parallels between the battle-mobilisation of the Russian Empire in the early 18th century and the wider capitalist western expansion that Stalin believed surrounded the Soviet Union in 1930, Stalin, the ageing state builder, reflected on a Petrine course of rapid industrialisation which would become the 'Five Year Plans'.⁸⁰ In an attempt to stimulate Russian backwashness and compete with the West, Peter the Great's motivation to modernise did not carry with it an inclination to lessen the majority 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 unquestioned.⁸¹ Peasants of one village from occupied territories, and their armed sons were brought together in what have been called 'Peter's forced labour camps'.⁸² Similarly, concern was given to the future of Stalin's programme of industrialisation. Stalin used the power of ordinary peasant officers, the kolkhoz and the forced migration of peasants to the urban industrial areas, to acquire free labour for his industrial revolution from above.⁸³

Rehabilitating the Tsar Tsars in history and popular culture

As Stalin's total policies of industrialisation and the purges continued apace, the obvious parallels with the Tsardom's 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 2001 historian Christopher Lloyd Llewellyn asked Stalin in an interview whether he saw any continuity between himself and Peter the Great,⁸⁴ predominantly for Stalin the entire historical view of Ivan and Peter in 1701 were negative. The state endorsed historical narrative of Russia's Tsarist past was to large part produced by the pre-revolution Soviet historians and former communists Nikolai Tolstovsky, whose accounts of history were firmly infused with Marxist orthodoxy and glorified the role of the tsars in shaping history. After Tolstovsky claimed the primacy of material economic forces in determining the course of history but not culture that shaped events in the Tsars,⁸⁵ in his 2000 work *Russian History in Soviet Culture* concentrated on the official school history textbook, he wrote that Peter, called by historians 'The Great', 'locked up his wife... abandoned his son' and died of syphilis after passing it on to his second wife.⁸⁶

⁷⁷ G. M. Trebilcot, *The Soviet Union under Stalin: 1928-1941* (London, 1970), p. 100.

⁷⁸ G. M. Trebilcot, *Stalin: 1929-1941* (London, 1970), p. 100.

⁷⁹ G. M. Trebilcot, *The Soviet Union under Stalin: 1928-1941* (London, 1970), p. 100.

⁸⁰ G. M. Trebilcot, *The Soviet Union under Stalin: 1928-1941* (London, 1970), p. 100.

⁸¹ G. M. Trebilcot, *Stalin: 1929-1941* (London, 1970), p. 100.

⁸² G. M. Trebilcot, *Stalin: 1929-1941* (London, 1970), p. 100.

⁸³ G. M. Trebilcot, *The Soviet Union under Stalin: 1928-1941* (London, 1970), p. 100.

⁸⁴ Christopher Lloyd Llewellyn, *Russian History in Soviet Culture* (London, 2001), p. 100.

⁸⁵ Christopher Lloyd Llewellyn, *Russian History in Soviet Culture* (London, 2001), p. 100.

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