

## Stalinshchina



**KEN LIVINGSTONE** has recently set the cat among the pigeons by suggesting that Joseph Stalin the Soviet dictator was not all bad. His crimes and aggressions much exaggerated. Ken is evidently at one with Anatoly Utkin, a former director of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the editor of a teacher's manual on modern Russian History, who went so far as to compare Joseph Stalin's erudition to the tardy efforts of those in the West: "Can you tell me", Utkin asked in 2008, "of any other leader, an American president, for example, who read 10,000 books?" Utkin is drawing our attention to the fact that Stalin, when he wasn't initialing lists of people to be shot, got through at least one book *every day* between 1924 and 1953.

Vladimir Putin is also backing the drift towards a revision of Stalin's record with regard to both his

victory over Hitler, and the industrialisation of the country during the nineteen thirties. Putin favourably contrasts Joseph Stalin's centralism to the dastardly federalism of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, which he thinks explains the fragmentation of the Russian empire. It seems that Stalin, despite many errors and at times, excessive severity, ensured that Russian workers and peasants made the sacrifices necessary for the founding of modern industry and the consolidation of a great state.

These continue to be lively issues in some circles on the far left. They are often expressed with gentle humour and knowing sophistication. Excepting, the most resolute 'tankies', there is no appetite for the baroque forms of adulation associated with the Stalin cult. Indeed, ironic distancing is deployed in the use of Stalinist kitsch, and in the dissemination of socialist realist imagery as Internet memes, which function as jocular references to a certain historical naivety that "nobody as sophisticated as us could fall for". However, admiring Stalin and the achievements of the Soviet Union go hand-in-hand with nostalgia for a lost time of red banners, youthful enthusiasm, and the certainty of victory.

A few months ago a comrade of mine speculating in counter-factual fashion on the Second World War informed me with a straight face that it was the Red Army that defeated Hitler, and could have done so without any help at all from Eisenhower, American farm boys, US boots, shipyards or industrial plant. I was so astonished that I was struck dumb for the rest of the conversation. The comrade in question clearly hadn't considered that after the defeat of Britain at Singapore in February 1942, and in the absence of American participation in the war, the Empire of Japan would almost certainly have invaded Siberia from Manchuria and Korea. Then the Soviet Union, rather than Nazi Germany, would have found itself with an unwinnable war on two fronts. Counter-factual speculation can deliver truly unwelcome results.

Back in the real (rather than the fanciful) Second World War, which for Britain, Poland, and France started at the end of August and the beginning of September 1939, Joseph Stalin was in alliance with Hitler for the first twenty months – supplying petroleum and other war materials to the fascists. Stalin participated in the invasion and partition of Poland and then in June 1940, after defeating Finland, and with Hitler's agreement, helped himself to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

However, the course of the four-month 'Winter War' with Finland had come as something of a shock to Stalin. He'd attacked Finland in November 1939 in order to steal thirty per cent of Finland's economy and eleven per cent of the country's territory; the great man had anticipated a push over because the Red Army forces in the field outnumbered the Finnish resistance three to one, they had vastly more tanks and heavy equipment, and more or less complete air superiority. Despite this, the fabled Red Army suffered reversal after reversal and vast casualties over the four months in question before defeating their tiny neighbour. Indeed the Red Army took almost 400,000 casualties, 125,000 of whom were killed or 'lost without trace'. (The Finns suffered just over 66,000, of whom 23,000 were killed or missing.)

This catastrophe was repeated a thousand fold as the Red Army collapsed in the face of the Nazi onslaught when Hitler decided to break with Stalin and invade the Soviet Union in June 1941. Stalin presided over a debacle in which some 3.9 million of soldiers were captured – 65 per cent of the Red Army – together with half its reserves of fuel and food and 96 per cent of the Soviet Union's planes – as the armies of Stalin's erstwhile ally, Adolf Hitler, swept across Ukraine, the Crimea, and Western Russia, encircling Leningrad, threatening Moscow, and laying Stalingrad in ruins.

Stalin's profligate expenditure of his soldiers' and his civilian subject's blood and lives in the Winter War, and in the debacle of the German invasion, was

clearly akin to his approach to planning the counterattack at Stalingrad, Kursk, and the earlier industrialisation of the Soviet Union. Stalin squandered the lives of peasants, workers, intellectuals, and Communist Party members, with a truly cavalier disregard for the scale or nature of the losses incurred.

Essentially, between 1928 and the mid-thirties the Stalin plan was rapidly to build up industry, and create a new urban working class, that would be fed, albeit meagrely, from increased procurements of agricultural products made possible by the defeat of peasant resistance in Russia's villages. Stalin decided to 'take on' the majority of the Soviet population by re-imposing serfdom.

Until 1861 the peasant population of the Russian Empire had been serfs – the peasants belonged to the land they worked. They could not leave the land, or transact any business, commercial or personal, without the express permission of the gentry and aristocrats on whose great estates they lived and worked. Stalin reintroduced this system during the early thirties – peasants once again were tied to the land, their residence, their movements, decisions concerning planting and all aspects of their lives were placed under the control of 'collective farm' administrations; their land, their tools, animals, seeds, and domestic equipment were seized as the state took violent possession of everything they owned.

The result was the catastrophic loss of livestock as peasants killed their animals rather than surrender them to the state. Mass arrests and deportations ensued as peasants hid grain, and resisted the loss of their land and the independence they'd won during the revolution of February 1917. Agricultural production plummeted and famine stalked the land in which, according to Stalin's own estimate, ten million people died.

The secret police, the network of prison camps, the forced labour, arbitrary arrests, show trials, executions, and terror inaugurated by Lenin's government at the end of 1917 and during the course

of 1918, was vastly improved and expanded by Stalin. The state monopoly of food, fuel, and all other necessities ensured, not only famine and the extensive use of slave labour, but also the iron grip of the Party on the entire population. As a consequence Stalin had absolute control of the state and party apparatus between 1928 and his death in 1953.

Of course, none of the facts of Stalin's murderous rule are seriously contested. His conduct of Soviet government is a matter of interpretation. John Arch Getty in his *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938*, suggests that there was considerable chaos local autonomy in the exercise of terror, and that Stalin was reacting to social and political processes, rather than instigating them. Or we may agree with Sheila Fitzpatrick's account in *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village After Collectivization*, that the Stalinshchina was essentially about progress and social mobility.

What is not in doubt, or open to interpretation, however is that the Soviet state demanded enormous sacrifices from its subjects in return for a bright, if perpetually receding, future. It was for this bright future that a vast prison estate was constructed and murders on an industrial scale committed. Lies became abiding truths. Martin Marlia expressed it thus: "In short, there is no such thing as socialism, and the Soviet Union built it." This was the very model for George Orwell's, *Animal Farm*, and there is really no point in denying it.

Consequently, the defenders of Stalin's record talk of the great man's 'mistakes' and 'crimes', even of his excessive 'cruelty'. This mode of reasoning enables them, on balance, all things considered, to take the view that the unimaginable costs of the Stalinshchina, the were a price worth paying for the modernisation of Russia – Stalin was not a deliberately cruel, anti-Semitic, hammer of entire

nationalities. He may have murdered the Polish or Georgian military, political, and intellectual leadership, he may have starved, deported, tortured, and killed people, by the bushel, but we should never forget he did it all for the good of the cause: the defence and development of the Socialist Motherland.

It is truly odd that comrades of mine, outraged by the Tory's trade union bill, should continue to venerate a man and a regime that denied workers the right to strike, to organise, or even to travel around their own country without an internal passport and labour book.

It is truly odd that left-wingers committed to the welfare of the 99 per cent should venerate a man and a regime that set out to brutally dispossess at least eighty per cent of its own population.

It is truly odd that people passionately committed to the fight against racism should venerate a man and a regime that oppressed national minorities and carried out wholesale deportations, show trials, sweeping pogroms and mass arrests of 'suspect' peoples and populations.

The inescapable answer to this conundrum is: "It was a price worth paying". But this is a peculiar reaction too, given that the industrial and state system pioneered by the Soviet Communist Party proved incapable (despite the travels of Sputnik, Laika the dog, Yuri Gagarin, and Valentina Tereshkova), of establishing an economy that could absorb global innovation or meet the most mundane needs of those living under its writ. 'Actually existing socialism', Stalinist dictatorship, or what Oscar Wilde with considerable prescience called "barrack socialism", did not prove to be an acceptable form of economic or political arrangement. This is why it collapsed. At the end of the day nobody wanted it, not even the Soviet elite.

It is truly tragic that capitalism, with its booms and slumps, with its vicious wars, and vast inequalities, seems to most people eminently preferable to anything that Stalin or Mao Zedong,

Nicolai Ceacescu, or Fidel Castro might have to offer – electric power, public nurseries, or good healthcare notwithstanding.

So why the attempt of Livingstone and others on the left to soften Stalin's legacy, to find something worthwhile in the Stalinist state form?

The answer is to be found in the lively belief on the left in voluntarism – the belief that with well-meaning officialdom, and planning with sufficient oomph and gusto – all things are possible. This is why we're invited to admire Stalin's First Five Year Plan (famously achieved in four years). This is why we're encouraged to fight for the deployment of no-nonsense government and state power in the interests of the working class and the population at large.

Those who promote neo-Stalinism do so because they believe that socialism and the state control of the economy are synonymous. This is why they show such disregard for bourgeois democracy, for civil society, or for the struggle to develop a popular conception of socialism and social solidarity, in which the freedom of individuals to pursue their own careers, consumption choices, and employments, independent of the orders of state or Party officials, is celebrated rather than condemned.

For such people socialism is conceived as a system in which appropriately qualified experts and well-intentioned trade union and government officials will determine what we need and will then direct economic activity accordingly. Evidently, these comrades plan on being more successful and less terrible than Joseph Stalin, but their conception of socialism is essentially the same – which is why they think 'Uncle Joe' was not so bad after all.

The contemporary relevance of all this, is that such an outlook will not persuade the mass of working people that we have anything to offer them or society at large. Praising Stalin simply reveals a preparedness to support dictatorship in the form of the Castro brothers, or Assad, or Putin, in the struggle to back anybody other than America. The danger of nostalgia

for the Stalinshchina is that the left finds itself in the anti-democratic camp yet again; it can only deepen the vast gulf between us, and the population at large.

Attempts to revise the history of Stalin and Stalinism will simply put yet another nail in our political coffin.