

How much did stalin
deviate from
marxism?



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Joseph Stalin can be, and has been, interpreted in many different ways; a sadistic terrorist who revelled in the misfortune and pain of his subjects, an egotistical dictator whose every action served to promote his own self-interests, the political servant of Vladimir Lenin, and the man who translated Communism into practical terms. Despite this being a political and ideological study, in the case of Stalin it becomes impossible to consider his interpretation of Marxist-Leninism and his consequent leadership style without judgement of his character. The influence of his personality upon his leadership can be said to a primary motivation for many of the decisions which have been made, including the impact of his tumultuous home life with regards to his wife and children, his desire to assert himself as a credible and important man which was perhaps inspired by his feelings of neglect from his father, and the increasing loneliness that came from his intense paranoia and fear of those around him. In an ideological sense, Stalin's policies are indeed deviations from those which Lenin himself might have implemented, however yet again this may be as a consequence of the differing personalities of the two leaders. This study will aim to assess 'Stalinism' as an ideology up to 1938, the end of 'The Great Terror' and question whether it indeed deviated from Marxist-Leninism, whether it was instead a practical implementation of Communism in which communism principles ran through the core, or whether it was a whole different ideology, brought to power on a false platform of Communism.

In order to make such assessments there must be a standard set of what Marxist Leninism is. In the same way that Stalin could be said to have interpreted Marxist-Leninism, Lenin interpreted Marxism. Thus Marxist-

Leninism forms a filtered version of Marx's original theories. The key principles of Communism in Marxist terms, as laid out in the Communist Manifesto, written in 1847 by Karl Marx, are as follows; abolition of private property, progressive or graduated income tax, abolition of all rights of inheritance, confiscation of the property of all emigrants, centralisation of credit, national bank and an exclusive monopoly, centralisation of communication and transport, extension of centralisation of factories and production by the state, cultivation of waste-lands and the improvement of the soil, equal liability of all to work, combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries, free education and religion and nationalities will be superseded by the principle of community.[1] Following on from this, Lenin proposed that the proletariat can successfully achieve revolutionary consciousness only under the leadership of a party of professional revolutionaries[2], thereby reversing Marx's order of economics over politics[3], where aims are achieved with internal democratic centralism, wherein policy decisions are agreed via democracy and every member must support and promote the agreed party policy, essentially a dictatorship of the proletariat government[4]. Lenin agrees with Marx's ideas concerning nationalism and religion, citing them as part of the false consciousness instilled by the bourgeoisie in facilitating exploitation. It was under Lenin the notion of a dictatorial state and a class war came about, marked changes from Marx's own ideologies. As Lenin said, ' One cannot be a revolutionary Social-Democrat without participating, according to one's powers, in developing this theory [Marxism] and adapting it to changed conditions'. [5] Thus whilst Marxism heavily influenced Leninism, the latter is a distinctly different adaptation, arguably one which made the October revolution in

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1917 possible. Stalinism as a term came to be, in light of one of Stalin's associates claim, " Let's replace Long Live Leninism with Long Live Stalinism!"[6]Whilst ' Stalinism' has been said to refer to a style of governance, key principles wherein the supposed deviations from Marxist-Leninism can be found include, economic policy, collectivisation, use of violence, the rise of bureaucracy and the development of the personality cult. Deciphering what Lenin or Marx would have done is impossible, and indeed the term ' Marxist-Leninism' was coined and used by opposing political groups within 1930's Russia as the ideology which they stood to defend. Regardless, this study aims to assess the extent to which ' Stalinism' and the key principles of his rule up to the end of ' The Great Terror' were informed by Marxist-Leninism theology.

The new economic policy (henceforth NEP) brought forth by Lenin in 1921, was dramatically overhauled through Stalin's wave of economic reforms in the early 1930's. Known as the ' Great Turn', this saw a total transformation of agricultural and industrial economic handling within Russia. However despite initially provoking criticism from Trotsky and other members of the Left Opposition, who felt a more internationalist approach to revamping the economy would be appropriate, Stalin and Bukharin had been supporters of the NEP, stating that they believed that it was patriotic and would further Soviet influence and impact in the international system[7]. The reasons for Stalin's apparently hypocritical ' U-turn' may on some levels simply be practical responses to crises and yet can simultaneously be interpreted as Stalin's first foray into the development of ' Stalinism'. The NEP had secured the rights of individual peasants to sell their products freely, whether to

private traders or to state agencies. Whilst the state controlled all large enterprises, such as factories, mines and railways, small private enterprises (those employing fewer than 20 people) were allowed. The requisitioning of farm produce was in turn replaced by a tax system and the peasants were free to sell their surplus, albeit at a state-regulated price[8]. The NEP had been Lenin's attempt to ensure the survival of the Communist state following 'War Communism' which had been implemented from 1914 to 1921, to coincide with World War 1 and the Russian Civil War, and to try and rebuild Soviet production to its pre-1914 levels. It is undeniable to regard the NEP as a concession of key communist values, and indeed Lenin himself saw it as a 'strategic retreat'[9]. This development of a relative mixed-economy was justified as a form of 'state capitalism', the last stage of capitalism before socialism evolved.[10]The Grain Crisis of 1928 was arguably the impetus for Stalin to revoke the NEP. As more peasants began consuming their own goods, as opposed to purchasing the overpriced ones which the small private enterprises were producing, (Peasants controlled 3, 140, 000km², divided into 25 million holdings, producing 85% of the food, but consuming 80% of what they grew[11]), a 2 million ton shortfall of grain occurred in 1928. Requisitioning was launched, leading to a higher expected rate of industrialisation and as a consequence higher agricultural production as more grain was required to feed a growing industrial work force and to pay for imports of machinery through exportation. Collectivisation was escalated beyond the levels of Sovkhozes encouraged during the NEP era. There can be little doubt that revoking the NEP was a deviation from Lenin's aims, however questions must be asked about the purpose of such a change,

whether Stalin ever supported the policy and to what extent was his ultimate rejection of the NEP was in keeping with Communist principles.

The purpose of the change is in practical terms a reaction to the Grain Crisis, arguably caused by the greed of the 'kulaks'. However the forced requisitioning opened the doors to other more revolutionary forms of governance. The persecution of the bourgeois and the 'kulaks' intensified as Stalin encouraged the blaming of them for the short fall in grain and consequent economic situation. Enterprises across the board became subject to greater instruction and supervision as the state steadily expanded state capital accumulation thus developing a forced rate of industrialisation. The internal party regime was further tightened and show trials were resumed against surviving leaders of rival parties. An offensive began against every kind of nationalist tendency. The boundaries of cultural expression were drastically reduced and organised religion became the object of violent assault[12]. In his initial input in attempts to rectify the grain crisis, Stalin provided a route for an escalated governmental involvement, thereby centralising the Russian state, marginalising and persecuting minority groups, and increasing industrialisation expectations. As Service says, 'Although agriculture had been the focal point of Stalin's initiative in January 1928, he associated himself with a much larger agenda... Industry, schooling, urban construction and socialist indoctrination were to be prioritised. The state was to become more penetrative and the traditional attachments to religion and nationhood were to disappear'.

Whether Stalin ever really supported Lenin's NEP is essentially questioning whether Stalin intended manipulate the situation in the way that he did.

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Speaking out in support of the NEP he claimed ' Either we do it, or we shall be crushed', referring to the need to compete with western industrial levels. It is highly plausible, particularly given his industrial drive which remained for the entirety of his leadership, that Stalin's belief that industrial supremacy superseded any economic compromises which may need to be made in order to achieve this. When the NEP wasn't proving to be as successful in producing an industrially prosperous nation, merely bringing it back from the poverty line, a change in strategy would seem to be an appropriate step. However, ' Stalin lived for Bolshevism'[13]and the NEP was seen by many to be an interim measure[14]regardless. His support for the NEP was probably not due to the dubiously capitalist elements or the relinquishment of state control, but through a devotion to Lenin and belief in his ability to lead, the fact that supporting the NEP established him as part of the ' inner circle' along with Bukharin, and therefore casting aside Trotsky and other detractors, was likely to have been an additional benefit of expressing his support for this policy.

The NEP could not have been classified as a policy borne from strictly Communist principles, defying ' abolition of private property' and ' centralisation of factories and production by the state' elements of the Communist manifesto. This particular policy is a practical compromise of communist principles, deemed necessary in order to rescue the failing economy. In many ways, this may seem to suggest that communist economic management principles are conducive to a successful economy, with capitalist elements used as a ' rescue' method. However, upon Stalin's intervention in 1928, and the subsequent Five Year Plans, which projected

capital goods were to increase by 161% and consumer goods by 83%, expectations which were surpassed, the opposite is thus suggested. The question whether a state directed economy or a free-market produce the most successful economy is one which is virtually impossible to answer, given the instability, and varying contributing factors to the economy in question. However, the NEP, whilst not strictly adhering to Communist principles, and thus irritating the Left Opposition and other strict factions of the Communist party, undeniably rescued the economy in the wake of ' War Communism', whether it could have been saved in another way is a different question, yet the NEP remains a practical concession which arguably must have been made in order to go on to implement other aspects of Communism. As Lenin said, ' We are taking one step backward to later take two steps forward'.

The notion of collective farming had existed since the Russian Revolution, yet it was under Stalin's rule, and in reaction to the Grain Crisis, that collectivisation as a policy really took hold and was implemented on serious levels. The unpopularity which requisitioning of the apparent missing grain had had led to a lower grain production, primarily due to hoarding and illegal transfers. By November 1929, the central committee had elected to implement accelerated collectivisation in the form of kolkhozes and Sovkhozes. A primary example of the escalation which Stalin's ending of the NEP allowed, collectivisation was in principle in keeping with the Communist ideal. However, the manner in which it was done, and the consequences which unfolded after and the subsequent management must be evaluated in

terms of whether the actions taken were deviations from Marxist-Leninism, or the implementation of a long held policy.

The Communist manifesto states that 'cultivation of waste lands... improvement of the soil... equal liability for all to work [and] agricultural armies' are a key part in communism, similarly the 1919 party programme specified that 'all the working masses without exception must be induced to take part in the work of state administration'[15]. Whilst collectivisation was not specifically mentioned, the idea of complete state ownership of the land with all agricultural workers working together for a common goal remained prevalent. The Kolkhoz charter, produced in 1930, establishes the kolkhoz as 'a form of agricultural production cooperative of peasants that voluntarily unite for the purpose of joint agricultural production based on... collective labour' and goes on to assert that 'the kolkhoz is managed according to the principles of socialist self-management, democracy and openness, with active participation of the members in decisions concerning aspects of internal life'[16]. This projected utopia appears to be similar to the one which Lenin himself advocated, as Grant says 'Lenin always advocated the collectivisation of agriculture gradually and by voluntary means. But he never entertained the mad idea that millions of scattered peasant holdings could be forced to collectivise overnight at gun-point. Collectivisation was to take place through example. The peasant was to be convinced by patient argument and through the setting up of model collective farms and the introduction of the latest modern technology, tractors, fertilisers, electricity and schools'[17]. However, by the end of 1928, the number of collective farms was only at 33, 300, with only 2. 3% of sown area in collective use.

Following Stalin's policy of forced collectivisation this figure rose to 85, 900 collective farms, and 33. 6% of sown area in collective use by 1930[18], and by 1938 there were 242, 400 collective farms and 99. 8% of sown area in collective use[19]. However, a key element of the kolkhozes was the voluntary nature of them, and in order to achieve such figures, Stalin embarked on a policy of forced collectivisation, leading to estimated figures of 4 to 10 million deaths due to the poverty which ensued and the violence used to maintain this. The utopia spoke of in literary works couldn't have been more different to the manifestation of 'collectivisation' under Stalin.

Despite the high prediction levels, the first four years of forced collectivisation failed to produce, and there was indeed a fall in agricultural production which in turn led to famine. Bad production, combined with drought and arguably as a consequence of severe animosity towards the policy meant that Stalin and the authorities only persisted to increase the use of violence, implementing more grain seizures and further blaming of the class 'kulaks' for every shortfall. In July 1929, it was official policy that terror should be avoided and that kulaks as well as the majority of peasantry ought to be enlisted in collective farms. By December 1929 Stalin announced that kulaks should be banned from becoming collective farm workers.[20] Stalin himself prior to this announcement had condemned the class as a whole in Pravda in November of that year saying 'Now we have the opportunity to carry out a resolute offensive against the kulaks, break their resistance, eliminate them as a class and replace their production with the production of kolkhozes and Sovkhozes... Now dekulakisation is being undertaken by the masses of poor and middling peasant masses themselves who are realising

total collectivisation. Now dekulakisation in the areas of total collectivisation is not just a simple administrative measure. Now dekulakisation is an integral part of the creation and development of collective farms. When the head is cut off, no-one wastes tears on the hair'.[21]. Two months after this chillingly brutal article, the Politburo approved the liquidation of kulaks as a class. Estimates suggest that about a million 'kulak' families (totally around five million people) were sent to the forced labour camps, or the Gulags as they were more commonly known[22]. Due to the kulaks only making up 1-2% of the Soviet population, and being increasingly hard to identify, the Soviet government began to cut off food rations to other social classes, particularly those where there was some degree of collectivisation, for example in the Ukraine. This policy can be linked to the Holodomor famine, which has repeatedly been linked to suspected genocide towards the Ukrainian people, or in a more pragmatical way, as a consequence of the economic policies implemented. The Ukraine was not alone, with the Soviet Union as a whole suffering from a famine in 1932-3. Widely negated as anti-communist propaganda, and denied even in western media at the time, the cycle of forced collectivisation and relinquishment and requisition of crops, poor pay (by 1946, 30 percent of Kolkhoz paid no cash for labour at all, 10.6 percent paid no grain, and 73.2 percent paid 500 grams of grain or less per day worked[23]), hoarding which then led to a shortfall of grain production, which then instigated another requisition of grain. In an attempt to prevent the hoarding, the Law of the Spikelets was enacted on August 7, 1932, and confiscation of unlimited amounts of grain from peasant households was allowed. Taking food was considered theft of 'socialist property' and could result in punishment by death, or a ten-year prison sentence. Even children

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could be shot for picking up leftover grain in the fields. 125, 000 sentences were passed for this particular offence in the bad harvest period from August 1932 to December 1933[24]. The corruption and brutality of the Soviet government extended beyond human lives, with the prices paid for produce hardly changing between 1929 and 1953, meaning that the State did not pay even one third of the cost of production, charging wholesalers 335 rubles for 100 kg of rye, but paid the kolkhoz roughly 8 rubles. The business of collectivisation proved to be a massive money-making experience for the Soviet government, and one which looked set to continue to prosper, for the State at least, for a great many years. As until 1969, all children born on a collective farm were forced by law to work there as adults unless they were specifically given permission to leave, which as is to be expected, was very rarely. Despite the October revolution aiming to release the peasants from the hold of the bourgeoisie, a system of ' neo-serfdom' existed, where the Communist bureaucracy replaced the former landowners. As Trotsky criticised, ' In these conditions an exaggeratedly swift collectivisation took the character of an economic adventure'[25]. Whilst Trotsky should be expected to criticise Stalin, Service agrees predominantly with Trotsky's assertion; ' social and ideological goals would also be served through mobilisation of the peasants in a cooperative economic enterprise which would produce higher returns for the State and could serve a secondary purpose of providing social services to the people'. Thus, the policy of collectivisation and the devastation which it reaped struggles to be seen as merely a practical implementation of the collectivisation policy spoken of by Marx and Lenin. Indeed, the voluntary nature of the initial policy hadn't produced much support, but the manner in which this support was forced

upon the Soviet people, produced even less. The brutal nature of the policies and punishments and lack of acknowledgement of the effects forced a wedge between the peasants and the Soviet government. The utopia depicted within the Marxist-Leninism ideal of collectivisation, and whilst this may have not been achievable in practical terms, Stalin's alternative, deviated so much from the basic principle of what collectivisation is that it became unidentifiable. It wasn't enough to simply apply an outcome to achieve the utopia, the philosophy and methods, i. e. the voluntary nature, had to be broadly shared amongst the Soviet people. As it was, the lack of this fundamental practice turned the whole policy into a variant of the serfdom which Communism strove to eliminate and thus undermined the notion of Stalinism being a practical implementation of Marxist-Leninism ideas.

The key issue within collectivisation was the replacement of the old bourgeoisie with the bureaucrats of the Soviet government. The rise of bureaucracy was clearly an issue, as there was an increase in the difference between the living standards of the working class and the upper layers of the bureaucracy in particular[26]. Comprised primarily by the poor economic state of the working class in consequence of collectivisation, yet the bureaucrats acquisition of wealth furthered this gulf, the Soviet state began to represent the antithesis of what Marx and Lenin had proposed. Whilst it is generally acknowledged that those at the top of the party benefited financially and personally from their role, potentially leading to corruption and manipulation of their own purpose, it becomes interesting to see how such an issue developed. As early as 1920, Lenin said that 'ours is a workers

state with bureaucratic deformations'[27], hauntingly similar parallels can be drawn with the policy of collectivisation. Issues which were around, and in some cases encouraged, during Lenin's time, found themselves becoming colossal under the reign of Stalin. Whether the bureaucratisation of the party apparatus was simply an extension of Lenin's own leadership, whether it would classify as a deviation or whether it was indeed a wholly new policy, must be examined.

The Leninist programme for 1917 included the following points regarding state and bureaucracy: the discontinuance of the police and the standing army, abolition of the professional bureaucracy, elections for all public positions and offices, revocability of all officials, equality of bureaucratic wages with workers' wages, the maximum of democracy, peaceful competition amongst parties within the soviets and abolition of the death penalty. As the Italian revolutionary Berneri says prior to his death in 1937, 'Not a single one of these points in this programme has been achieved.'[28]Whilst Berneri was heavily critical of Stalin as a leader and so his judgement may be impacted by his own dislike for the man, several elements of the Leninist programme were undeniably ignored, or at least undermined, by the actualities of Stalinist bureaucracy. 'In a speech in 1931, Stalin spoke of the 'happy life' of the people of the Soviet Union. At this time the workers' living standards were sub-standard, and the wages of the workers remained depressed throughout the 1930s, despite the colossal gains of the first two Five Year Plans. Yet the 'happy life' was a reality for millions of officials in the state and Communist party; they lived very well. In addition to the other privileges of provisions and lodgings, a new network of

closed 'distributors' was established and restaurants were reserved for the use of high Communist or non-Party officials. Then special 'state shops' were set up for their exclusive use. In these shops one could buy anything and everything but at prices no worker could afford'[29]. This development created an 'upper class' in a state where there was to be no class divisions, with Lenin's maximum of democracy aimed to prevent such a sector developing. Lenin saw that the existence of wage differentials was a survival of capitalism that would tend to disappear as society moved towards socialism. 'The development of the productive forces would be accompanied by a general improvement of living standards and the inequalities would tend to decrease.'[30]Despite the chasm of difference between Lenin's envisaged state and Stalin's realisation, Lenin himself admitted that the state he led did include bureaucratic deformations. However the deformations were trivial compared to the tiered state which formed in consequence of Stalin's encouragement. His dictatorship style of leadership, which allowed him to 'weed out' the members of the Party which disagreed with him allowed him to create a circle of peers who were able to reap the benefits which collectivisation and industrialisation allowed.

The crux of the argument rests within the debate of whether 'Marxist-Leninism' was ever a foreseeable policy and whether there was an alternative Communist state than the one which Stalin oversaw. Several key historians claim that Stalin's actions were the inevitable continuation of Leninism and there is some evidence to support this. Richard Pipes declares Stalinism the natural consequence of Leninism, as Stalin 'faithfully implemented Lenin's domestic and foreign policy programmes'[31]. Edvard

Radzinsky similarly acknowledges that Stalin, as he claimed himself, was the real follower of Lenin[32]. Robert Service, whilst on the whole condemning the extent of Stalin's rule concedes that ' personally he remained devoted to Lenin and his rule and conserved and reinforced the Leninist regime' and this was reflected in Stalin's whole-hearted attempts to elevate the memory of Lenin to somewhat of a deity and his development and insistence of Marxist-Leninism. It was under Stalin's control which the notion of a ' Marxist-Leninist' ideology was popularised. Indeed the Civil War measures implemented by Lenin introduced the idea of the Red Terror and developed internment camps, Lenin was the instigator of Article 58 in 1927 which condoned the arrests of those suspected of counter-revolutionary activities. The autocratic system within the Communist party was too developed by Lenin[33]. Lenin's ban on factions within the Russian Communist party and introduction of the one-party state in 1921 allowed Stalin to get rid of his rivals easily. In many ways, Stalin can be seen to have utilised Lenin's tools; the exclusion of alternative ideologies from public life was strengthened, instruments of dictatorship, terror and a politicised judiciary were furthered with Stalin's reliance upon the Gulags and trails of political competitors, such as Bukharin and Trotsky. The states economic control, whilst substantial since the Civil war, was tightened dramatically In particular, the notion of continuing the despotism evident in the earlier Soviet period, the brutal nature of the fighting within the Civil War and October Revolution providing prime examples, is clear in the use of terror as a method of control in the first two decades of Stalin's rule.

However there are significant criticisms saying that Stalin's deviation's disfigured Marxist-Leninism beyond recognition. As Roy Medvedev says ' one could list the various measures carried out by Stalin that were actually a continuation of anti-democratic trends and measures implemented under Lenin... in so many ways, Stalin acted, not in line with Lenin's clear instructions but in defiance of them'. Likewise, Isaac Deutscher, in his biography on Trotsky claims that ' only the blind and deaf could be unaware of the contrast between Stalinism and Leninism'[34]. A more modern criticism comes from Graeme Gill, ' Stalinism was not a natural flow-on of earlier developments; it formed a sharp break resulting from conscious decisions by leading political actors'[35]. The totalitarian perspective that the negative facets of Stalinism were inherent in Communism from the start is perpetually undermined by attempts to distance Stalinism from Leninism; Trotsky