Stalinism and Soviet Life

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Course description

This specified subject allows students to discover one of the lost worlds of the recent European past, the ‘civilization’ of the Soviet Union. It focuses on the years of Stalin and Khrushchev, from the late 1920s to the early 1960s, but places this period in the wider context of 1917-1991 for the sake of clarity and completion.

In an epic process of creation and destruction, the Stalinist dictatorship built the world’s first ‘socialist’ society while killing and imprisoning millions of citizens. It triumphed against Nazi Germany and rebuilt the country after 1945. But the Stalinist system faced a defining crisis with the death of Stalin himself in March 1953. Khrushchev’s Secret Speech of February 1956 selectively condemned the crimes of Stalinism and opened up yet another version of the Soviet Union’s revolutionary new world. Arbitrary rule and widespread fear were replaced with ‘the thaw’ and improving living standards, but the lasting trauma of war and terror still haunted Soviet society.

Students will observe Soviet life from the inside, from communal apartments and factory floors to prison camps and Kremlin halls, but they will also debate the classic questions of Soviet historiography. Was Stalinism a natural consequence of 1917 or a disgraceful aberration from the true Leninist path? Was it a new type of civilization or a terroristic personal dictatorship, a lethal malfunction of modernity or a ‘neotraditional’ reinvention of Russia’s autocratic past? Did ‘the thaw’ create a new relationship between people and power based on respect and rights, or was it simply a new version of repression? How useful a term is ‘totalitarianism’, and why should historians even ask such a question?

Teaching

I. Lecture-classes

Lectures delivered in Lent only – tbc.

Provide an overarching discussion of Soviet history, especially between 1928-64, with a focus on major problems and disputes.

Each lasts for ninety minutes, apart from 1 and 16, which run for 2 hours.

Contain elements of conventional lectures together with extended class discussions.

Schedule:

Prologue. 1917-28

1. The Russian Revolution and alternatives to Stalinism
Section I. Pure Stalinism? 1928-41

2. Dictatorship and totalitarianism: Stalin and the Soviet system
3. Economy: plans and chaos
4. Who were Stalinist people? Class, nation, gender
5. Mass culture and everyday life
6. Violence and terror

Section II. Late Stalinism? 1941-53

7. The small cogs of victory: social histories of the War
9. The Gulag before and after 1945
10. Midnight at Stalin’s dacha: the late Stalinist dictatorship

Section III. Post-Stalinism? 1953-64

11. The ‘thaw’: responding to Stalin’s death, 1953-4
12. Nikita Khrushchev and the Secret Speech
13. A traumatized society: coming to terms with the past
14. Towards utopia: Soviet society and the communist future
15. Voices of dissent: the fall of Khrushchev

Epilogue. 1964-91

16. The meanings of Soviet history: late socialism and its collapse

II. Supervisions

In consultation with your supervisor, you will arrange a programme of seven supervisions from the following topics. Topics are usually more specific than in lecture-classes, and will allow you to develop a more detailed and precise understanding of aspects of the period. You will be required to choose at least one topic from each chronologically defined group (A, B and C). You can cluster five topics from one group if you wish or you might pursue a particular thematic interest across the whole period. Note that the examination will not be divided into three sections.

A. 1928-41

1. Industrial life and the Soviet working class
2. Collectivization, famine, and the ‘war against the peasantry’
3. Gender and the Soviet project
4. The nationalities question
5. The Gulag before 1941
6. The Great Terror
7. Socialist realism and Stalinist culture
8. Propaganda and public opinion
9. The great retreat? Domestic life and kulturnost’
10. Architecture and the Stalinist city

B. 1941-53

11. The Great Fatherland War: the home front
12. The Great Fatherland War: the Red Army and the Eastern Front
13. Late Stalinism and the reconstruction of Soviet society
14. The late Stalinist leader cult
15. The Doctors’ Plot and the Leningrad Affair
16. The Gulag during the years of War and Late Stalinism

C. 1953-64
17. The Secret Speech
18. Soviet culture and socialist realism during ‘the thaw’
19. The transformation of the Gulag and the survivors’ return
20. Coming to terms with war and terror
21. The mass housing programme: domestic life and the new Soviet city
22. Consumer society and the welfare state
23. The ‘Cultural Cold War’
24. Dissidents and rebels

Introductory reading


Mark Edele, Stalinist Society 1928-1953, Oxford, 2011: a provocative and very engaging account, organized by theme (read Hosking first)

Sheila Fitzpatrick, Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s, Oxford, 1999: the most vivid and important of histories from below


Denis Kozlov, The Readers of Novyi Mir: Coming to Terms with the Stalinist Past, Cambridge, MA, 2013: the most brilliant of the recent monographs on the Khrushchev era


William Taubman, Khrushchev: The Man and His Era, New York, 2002: the only full-length biography in English, excellent on Khrushchev’s personality and the epic dilemmas he faced

www.soviethistory.org: an excellent and very concise choice of introductory essays by leading historians

beyondthekremlin.wordpress.com: my own blog on Russia past and present: many of the posts are (broadly conceived) relevant to our studies.