

Communism in the Soviet Union

By David Eacker

Joseph Stalin led the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s until 1953. It was a communist country. His brutal rule often invites comparisons to fascism. Looking at the totalitarian features of each system shows their differences.

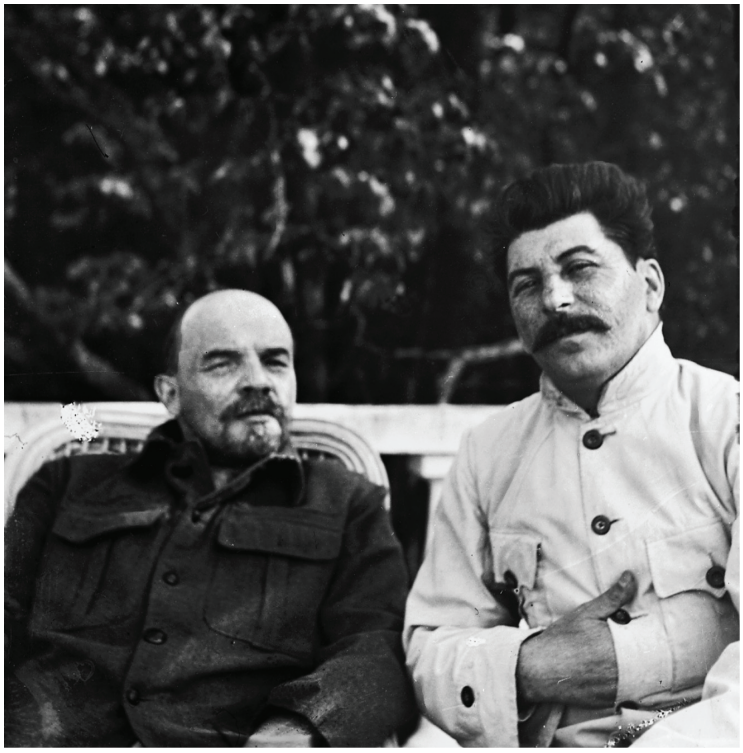
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Introduction

The Soviet Union was a communist country. Communism is a system where all property is controlled by the government. The Soviet Union's huge territory reached from Europe to Asia. It included Russia, Ukraine, and other republics. It has a central place in twentieth-century history. Stalin rose to the country's top position in the mid- 1920s. He ruled the country as a dictator. The Soviet Union played a leading role in World War II (1939–1945) and the defeat of Nazi Germany. However, millions of Soviet citizens died because of Stalin's cruel policies. "Stalinism" came to mean communist authoritarianism. Here, we will consider the Soviet state in the 1920s and 1930s. This article will examine its attempts at authoritarian and totalitarian rule. These terms are often applied to the Soviet Union and other countries of this period.

The rise of Stalin

In 1917, revolutionaries overthrew the Russian government. The Soviet Union began to take form. Its first Premier[1] was Vladimir Lenin. He and the communist leadership faced three big challenges. They had to guide Russia out of World War I (1914–1918). They also had to deal with the famine of 1921–1922. At the same time, they were trying to modernize their factories and other parts of the economy. The Soviet Union was very behind compared to other countries.



Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin at Gorky, 1922. Public domain.

This to-do list was difficult. Goal number one was getting out of the war. To do so, Lenin adopted "hardline War Communism." This emergency policy gave the government direct control of the economy. It was strict and went over poorly with small farmers and peasants. Lenin was forced to change his approach.

The result was Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP). It took effect in 1921. It combined state control with some ideas of free-market capitalism. For a time, the economy improved. This "state capitalism" freed up workers from government interference. Lenin's willingness to adapt proved successful. This switch showed that Russian Communists could be realistic and flexible. Then came Stalin.

Stalin took power after Lenin's death in 1924. He immediately took a more authoritarian position. Stalin wanted complete command of the Soviet economy and society. For example, he took a hardline approach during a food crisis in 1927–1929. He argued that grain was an important national resource. He used state power to seize it from farmers. Stalin also went after wealthy peasants, or *kulaks*. They faced a grim fate, and many were killed. Forced collectivization[2] in Ukraine took place during a famine there in 1932–1933. It resulted in the deaths of about four

1 A premier is the head of a government, such as a prime minister.
2 Collectivization is the idea that, within a state, nothing can be privately owned because everything is meant to be shared with all members of the state

million Ukrainians. Historians refer to this as the *Holodomor* and regard it as one of the great humanitarian disasters of the time. But Stalin and top party leaders still pursued a command economy. They stopped at nothing to achieve a "revolution from above" in which power stemmed from a centralized state run by the Communist Party.



Soviet agents seizing grain hidden by a Ukranian peasant in a graveyard. From the RIA Novosti archive, CC BY-SA 3.0.

The whole economy was organized through a system of Five-Year Plans. Soviet leadership pushed for extreme forms of centralization. In the 1930s, Stalin used "purges" to frighten people into obeying him. Purges were a program of political suppression. They tried to eliminate anyone suspected of disloyalty. Millions of Soviet citizens were sent to prison camps. Hundreds of thousands died.

Stalin's desire for total control didn't always go as planned. Outwardly, it concentrated power in an authoritarian and totalitarian way. But historian Ronald Grigor Suny has argued that the reality was not so straightforward. He writes that the government was like a clumsy sea monster: It was powerful but bumbling. We might think of Stalin's Soviet Union in the 1930s as wanting to become totalitarian. However, it failed to "totally" get there.

Social history affects how we understand Stalin's rule. The state had a big effect on how people actually lived. To get food and work, folks had to learn how to deal with the authority of the state. It might be badly run, but they had no choice. To do this, they developed a range of special skills.

The main point is that the government and its citizens adjusted to each other. The state forced people to use certain behaviors to survive. People responded with adjustments that the state did not anticipate. Stalin may have wanted a totalitarian state. However, regular citizens also helped shape the Soviet system. Their ability to adapt does not reduce the destructiveness of Stalinist rule. However, it does show that totalitarianism has limits.

Communism and Fascism

People often compare communism under Stalin with its enemy, fascism. The two systems had some similarities.

- Both exhibited an authoritarian impulse. Both sought to force their people into line with the aims of the state.
- Both sought to install a totalitarian system. In other words, the central government wanted complete control of society.
- Both used violence to achieve political ends.
- Both rejected liberalism. This included expressions of individual freedom, free elections, and personal rights.
- The fascist "new man" even resembled the "new Soviet man." Each was a symbol of their values.

Yet fascism and Soviet communism differed in important ways:

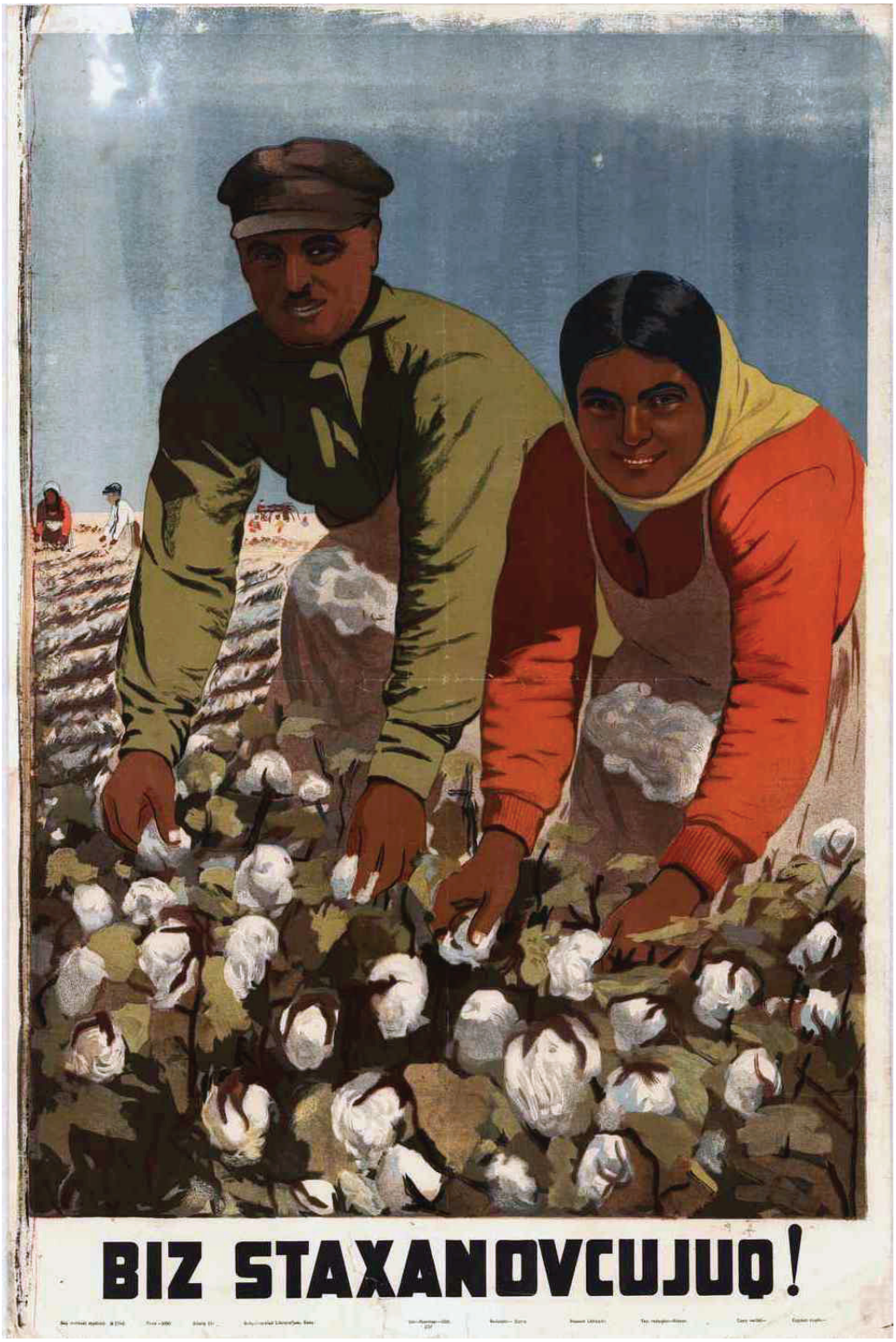
- Communists embraced left-wing socialist internationalism. Fascists embraced right-wing ethnic nationalism.
- In theory, the Soviets rejected racism and ethnic nationalism. These ideas were central to fascism.
- Soviet communism had official policies meant to erase class and gender inequalities. Fascists wanted to emphasize such distinctions. For example, women's roles were limited to marriage and motherhood.
- Fascists also celebrated a violent cult of masculinity.

In general, the Soviets believed that people could work together. Their differences, like race or ethnicity, were not supposed to matter. Fascists believed the opposite.

Conclusion

Under Stalin, the Soviet Union tried to turn itself into a state controlled by the central government. That goal faced many obstacles in the late 1920s and 1930s. Difficulties included the need to modernize the economy. Food shortages were also a problem. By the late 1930s, the Soviet Union also faced the threat of war with Nazi Germany. The state that emerged from this period was deeply flawed. Stalin may have wanted a well-run totalitarian government. It proved impossible, however.

Stalin's rule shaped Soviet life in important ways. However, it never became fully totalitarian. In a way, Stalinism in the 1930s was basic totalitarianism: a system *on the way* to becoming totalitarian. Its authoritarian and totalitarian features invite comparisons to fascism. Soviet Communism's official position of wanting a fair, non-racist society never came to be. However, its ideals were fundamentally different from those of fascism.



Poster of Azerbaijan, 1936—Labor Ethics. The words at the bottom of this idealized Image of Labor Equality translate to "We do it like Stakhanov." Alexey Stakhanov was a "Hero of Socialist Labor" and his pro-socialist work ethic was publicized in this campaign to increase worker productivity. Public domain.

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