

Schools of Russian History

| | Soviet / Marxist | Revisionist / Post Revisionist | Liberal / Western |
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| Outline & General Outlook | <p>Soviet history has changed and evolved over the years depending on the political climate. Originally published in 20 volumes in the 1920's, 'Lenin's Collected Works' became a framework for interpreting the history of the revolution. By contrast, Trotsky's writings on the revolution were erased from Soviet historiography.</p> <p>During the Stalinist period, serious historical research was abandoned. Stalin authorised 'The History of the Russian Communist Party' (1938): no Soviet account was allowed to diversify from this; access to Soviet archives was severely restricted. During the Gorbachev era, 'Glasnost' allowed for greater openness, re-opening Soviet archives. This led to the availability of a great deal of documentary evidence.</p> <p>Marxist historians such as Isaac Deutscher reflect the heroic 'class struggle' of the proletariat. They are highly critical of Stalin and see 'Stalinism' as a betrayal of true socialism. Marxist Historians in the Soviet Union were suppressed under the Communist regime. The Khrushchev era of the 1950's/ 60's saw some restrictions lifted; dissident Soviet/Marxist historians such as Mikhail Pokrovsky and Roy Medvedev advocated a return to greater liberal freedoms with writings such as: 'Let History Judge: The Origins & Consequences of Stalinism'.</p> | <p>Revisionist historians such as Orlando Figes and Sheila Fitzpatrick have re-assessed events in the Soviet Union, first in the light of the Khrushchev Thaw and more recently the opening of the Soviet archives after Glasnost.</p> <p>There have been major re-assessments of the nature of the Revolution and the role of Lenin, new insights into the nature of Stalinism and the Terror due to the availability of the NKVD archives.</p> <p>'Post-Revisionism' takes account of both 'pre' and 'post' Glasnost writings and often offers some halfway house conclusions.</p> | <p>Prior to Glasnost, Western historians were limited by restrictions on access to source material. This meant relying on a narrow range of sources from official Communist publications such as Pravda. One exception to this was the discovery of the Smolensk Archive, captured from the local Smolensk Communist Party during Operation Barbarossa in 1941. Western historians could also draw on the writings of Soviet dissidents and exiles, notably Trotsky whose prolific writings in the 1930's included heavily critical titles such as 'The Revolution Betrayed'.</p> <p>The Western School has been divided into various sub-genres, for example:</p> <p>Intentionalist Approach: Intentionalists stress the role of the individual in influencing the outcome of events</p> <p>Structuralist Approach: Structuralists stress the role of circumstances in influencing the outcome of events</p> <p>Liberal School: A sub-division of the Western School, Liberal historians tend to reflect a right-wing, anti-Communist perspective on events. Liberal historians were prominent during the Cold War period and include the Polish-American Richard Pipes, well known for his right-wing, anti-Soviet stance, and Robert Conquest, whose 1968 'The Great Terror' was the first major writing on the Stalinist Purges</p> |
| Stalin's Rise to Power | <p><i>The Soviet School also emphasised Stalin's personality as being a key reason for his assumption of power, though from a more flattering perspective. Stalin was viewed as the leader who saved socialism from the 'Trotskyite leftists' and 'Bukharin rightists'</i></p> | <p><i>Revisionist Historians believe that Stalin's rise to power was due to social and cultural changes in party membership; the importance of Stalin the individual is downplayed, while more emphasis is placed on the rank and file of the party in enabling Stalin to assume power.</i></p> | <p><i>The Liberal School believe that Stalin's rise to power was due to his own personal qualities. Stalin, according to Conquest, demonstrated the necessary grit, determination, manipulative skills and ruthlessness to attain power through his own means. The weaknesses of Stalin's opponents are also highlighted</i></p> |

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| Stalin and Stalinism | <i>Official accounts under Stalin praised the leader for his actions. After Khrushchev however there was a shift in the writing of history to show that Stalin had made errors and abused his power. The actions of the Party were therefore shown to be the most important driving factors in the Stalinist era.</i> | <i>Since the mid-1980's, Revisionist Historians have challenged the view of a totalitarian state, arguing that Stalin was a weak and opportunistic leader at the head of a chaotic and confused system of government unable to deal with the economic and social pressures the Soviet Union faced. Revisionist historians also suggest that there was a measure of popular support for Stalin's policies including those of repression; support for the policies of class warfare and de-Kulakisation for example. There was also great enthusiasm for the programme of rapid industrialisation among the workers – such views have proved controversial.</i> | <i>Traditionalist Western historians believe that Soviet society was the victim of a totalitarian state; suffering systematic and widespread repression centrally organized by the Communist Party with Stalin at its core. Intentionalists among Western Historians believe that Stalin was fundamentally the motivator behind policies of oppression and cruelty culminating in the period of The Terror. EH Carr, however, challenged this view concluding that Stalin's policies were more a product of the time and place. Such views were later picked up on by Revisionists.</i> |
| The Terror | <i>Roy Medvedev, who wrote during Khrushchev's era, is in little doubt that 'the criminal' Stalin's main motivation 'was lust for power, boundless ambition.' Medvedev continues that fear of exposure and retribution drove him to commit more and more crimes. 'Having wiped out most of the Leninist old guard and almost all his erstwhile friends and comrades, having cast aside all laws of party and state, Stalin had good reason to be afraid...;</i> | <i>Robert Thurston, while not absolving Stalin from blame, is more sympathetic towards his overall role in the purges. He argues that Stalin 'did not carry out a systematic plot to purge the nation' but rather 'he was sitting at the top of a pyramid of lies and incomplete information and he must have known it.'</i> | <i>Robert Conquest believes there was no one cause of the purges, citing: 'the consolidation of the dictatorship, the rise of individuals and the emergence of extreme economic policies.' Nové suggests that victims of the purges were made scapegoats for the real failings: 'Shortages of consumer goods, breakdowns in supply, errors in planning could be put down to malevolent planning...or so the readers of Pravda were supposed to believe.'</i> |
| The Cold War | | <i>Revisionist historians argue that Stalin's policies were a defensive reaction to American aggression. Kennedy-Pipe, sympathetic to Stalin's post-war strategy, states that 'he also attempted, through the use of diplomatic measures, to assert special rights in the east. It was Stalin who suggested the American occupation zone...' Chris Ward supports this view, believing that Stalin was: 'Profoundly debilitated by four years of struggle against the most vicious imperialist regime ever to emerge from Europe [Germany] Russia was quite unable to risk further conflict.' J.L. Gaddis, however, a Post-Revisionist, states: "New' history is bringing us back to the old answer; that as long as Stalin was running the Soviet Union a Cold War was inevitable.'</i> | <i>Traditionalists believe that Stalin was the aggressor, continuing Lenin and Trotsky's policy of world revolution, having established 'socialism in one country'. Stalin is seen as an opportunist who took advantage of the circumstances that arose at the end of World War II</i> |