

Enabling Authoritarianism: The Rise of Stalinist Soviet Russia

With the global rise of authoritarian nationalism in the last decade and the emergence of populist leaders in countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, it seemed an oddly appropriate time to teach a graduate course (HIST 5350) on Stalin and Stalinism in the fall of 2018. Stalin, a Georgian man from the borderlands of the Russian empire, took the powerful ideas of global anti-capitalism, equality, and social justice that had been unleashed by the Russian Revolution in 1917 and changed them radically. Stalinism became a seductive ideology about Russian national greatness, rapid technical and social modernization, and the enhanced military prowess of the Soviet Union. Socialist ideas of equality and justice were replaced by notions of upward mobility, pay differences based on meritocracy, and acquisitive materialism embedded in privatized living space and selective access to consumer goods for members of the Soviet elite. The cultural canon of socialist modernity served to wean Soviet citizens away from the dreams of communism and communal living and redirect their energy towards building a technologically advanced society but also a stratified one. Stalin's administration also relied on the lavish use of terror that was expended indiscriminately on internal and external enemies of the state. While historians have spent many decades trying to understand Stalin and Stalinism from above, students in my class turned their analytical lenses on how ordinary people made Stalinism a historical reality. Using emotions as a framework of analysis, the essays below explain how individuals, and their emotional reactions, contribute to the rise of authoritarian societies and help build and sustain the cult of charismatic leaders.

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