2
Bolshevism and Stalinism

If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow and which will not

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Every great revolution eventually puts forth, for debate by future scholars and partisans alike, a quintessential historical question. Of all the questions raised by the Bolshevik revolution and its outcome, none is larger, more complex, or more important than that of the relationship between Bolshevism and Stalinism.

Most essentially and generally, it is the question of whether the original Bolshevik movement that dominated the Soviet Union for a decade after 1917 and the subsequent events and social-political order that emerged under Stalin in the 1930s should be interpreted in terms of fundamental continuity or discontinuity. It is also a question that necessarily impinges on, and shapes the historian’s perspective on, a host of smaller but critical issues between 1917 and 1939. With only slight exaggeration, one can say to the historian of those years: Tell me your interpretation of the relationship between Bolshevism and Stalinism, and I will tell you how you have interpreted almost all of significance that came between. Finally, it has been and remains a political question. Generally, apart from Western devotees of the official historiography in Moscow, the less empathy a historian has felt for the Revolution and original Bolshevism, the less he or she has seen meaningful distinctions between Bolshevism and Stalinism.

A reader unfamiliar with Western scholarly literature on Soviet history would, therefore, reasonably expect to find it full of rival schools and intense debate on this central issue. Not only is the question large and complex, but similar ones about other revolutions—the relationship of Bonapartism to the French Revolution of 1789 being an obvious example—have provoked enduring controversies. Still more, the evidence seems contradictory, even bewildering. If nothing else, there is the problem of explaining Stalin’s revolution from above of the 1930s, an extraordinary decade-long upheaval that began with the abrupt reversal of official policy and forcible collectivization of 125 million peasants, witnessed far-reaching revisions of official ideological tenets and sentiments, and ended with the official destruction of the original Bolshevik elite, including most of the Soviet founding fathers and their historical reputations.

All the more astonishing, then, is the fact that until recently the question produced very little dispute in academic Soviet studies. Instead, during the expansion of the field between the late 1940s and 1960s, a remarkable consensus of interpretation formed on the subject of Bolshevism and Stalinism. Surviving the rise and decline of various methodologies and approaches in Sovietology, the consensus posited an uncomplicated conclusion: No meaningful differences or discontinuity existed between Bolshevism and Stalinism, which were fundamentally the same, politically and ideologically. Inasmuch as the two were distinguished in scholarly literature (which was neither frequent nor systematic because the terms Bolshevik, Leninist, Stalinist were used interchangeably), any difference was said to be only a matter of degree resulting from changing historical circumstances and the Soviet system’s need to adapt. Stalinism, according to the consensus, was the logical, rightful, triumphant, and even inevitable continuation, or outcome, of Bolshevism. For twenty years, this historical interpretation was axiomatic in almost all scholarly works on Soviet history and politics. It prevails even today.
The purpose of this chapter is to reexamine the continuity thesis; to suggest that it rests on a series of dubious formulations, concepts, and interpretations; and to argue that, whatever its insights, it obscures more than it illuminates. Such a critique is necessary and long overdue for several reasons.

First, the view of an unbroken continuity between Bolshevism and Stalinism has shaped scholarly thinking about all the main periods, events, causal factors, actors, and alternatives during the formative decades of Soviet history. It is the linchpin of that larger consensus in Sovietology, which I sketched out in the previous chapter, about what happened, and why, between 1917 and Stalin’s death in 1953. Second, the continuity thesis has largely obscured the need for study of Stalinism as a distinct phenomenon with its own history, political dynamics, and social consequences. Finally, it has strongly influenced our understanding of contemporary Soviet affairs. Viewing the Bolshevik and Stalinist past as a single undifferentiated tradition, many scholars therefore have minimized the system’s capacity for change in the post-Stalin years. Most of them apparently believe that Soviet reformers who call upon a non-Stalinist tradition in earlier Soviet political history will find there only “a cancerous social and political organism gnawed by spreading malignancy.” As we will see in later chapters, that view obscures the great conflicts between anti-Stalinists and neo-Stalinists, between reformers and conservatives, that have shaped official Soviet politics since Stalin’s death.

The Continuity Thesis

The history and substance of the continuity thesis require closer examination. Controversy over the origins and nature of Stalin’s spectacular policies actually began in the West early in the 1930s. For many years, however, it remained a concern largely of the political Left, especially anti-Stalinist Com-
as it has."

The other is that early academic works were, as a founder of Russian studies once complained, "too often written in the atmosphere of an intense hatred of the present Russian regime." Those perspectives undoubtedly contributed to the scholarly view that the evils of contemporary Stalinist Russia were predetermined by the uninterruptedly spreading malignancy of Soviet political history since 1917.

The theory of a "straight line" between Bolshevism (or Leninism, as it is regularly mislabeled) and major Stalinist policies has been popularized anew by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn since his banishment from the Soviet Union in 1974. But it has been a pivotal interpretation in academic Soviet studies for many years, as illustrated by a few representative statements.

Michael Karpovich: "Great as the changes have been from 1917 to the present, in its fundamentals Stalin's policy is a further development of Leninism." Waldemar Gurian: "All basic elements of his policies were taken over by Stalin from Lenin." John S. Reshetar: "Lenin provided the basic assumptions which—applied by Stalin and developed to their logical conclusion—culminated in the great purges." Robert V. Daniels: "Stalin's victory . . . was not a personal one, but the triumph of a symbol, of the individual who embodied both the precepts of Leninism and the techniques of their enforcement." Zbigniew Brzezinski: "Perhaps the most enduring achievement of Leninism was the dogmatization of the party, thereby in effect both preparing and causing the next stage, that of Stalinism." Robert H. McNeal: "Stalin preserved the Bolshevik tradition and approached the completion of the work that Lenin had started." Adam B. Ulam: Bolshevik Marxism "determined the character of postrevolutionary Leninism as well as the main traits of what we call Stalinism." Elsewhere Ulam says of Lenin: "His own psychology made inevitable the future and brutal development under Stalin." Arthur P. Mendel: "With few exceptions, these attributes of Stalinist Russia ultimately derive from the Leninist heritage."

Jeremy R. Azrael: "The 'second revolution' was, as Stalin claimed, a legitimate extension of the first." Alfred G. Meyer: "Stalinism can and must be defined as a pattern of thought and action that flows directly from Leninism." The recitation could continue; but finally H. T. Willets, who confirms that Western scholars regard Stalinism "as a logical and probably inevitable stage in the organic development of the Communist Party."

What is being explained and argued in this thesis of "a fundamental continuity from Lenin to Stalin" should be clear. It is not merely secondary events, but the most historic and murderous acts of Stalinism between 1929 and 1939, and even beyond, from forcible wholesale collectivization to the execution and brutal imprisonment of tens of millions of people. All of that, it is argued, derived from the political—that is, the ideological, programmatic, and organizational—nature of original Bolshevism. The deterministic quality of that argument is striking, as is its emphasis on a single causal factor.

As we have seen, such interpretation is inexplicable apart from the totalitarianism school that dominated Soviet studies for so many years. In addition to obscuring the subject by using "totalitarianism" as a synonym for Stalinism, that orthodox approach contributed to the continuity thesis in two important ways. While most Western theorists of Soviet totalitarianism saw Stalin's upheaval of 1929-33 as a turning point, they interpreted it not as discontinuity but as a continuation, culmination, or "breakthrough" in an already ongoing process of creeping totalitarianism. Thus Merle Fainsod's classic summary: "Out of the totalitarian embryo would come totalitarianism full-blown." As a result, there was a tendency to treat the whole of Bolshevik and Soviet history and policies before 1929 as merely the antechamber of Stalinism, as half-blown totalitarianism. The other contribution of the approach, with its deterministic language of "inner totalitarian logic," was to make the process seem not just continuous,
but inevitable. To quote one of many examples, Ulam writes: “After its October victory, the Communist Party began to grope its way toward totalitarianism.” He adds: “The only problem was what character and philosophy this totalitarianism was to take.”

The continuity thesis was not the work of university scholars alone. A significant role was played by the plethora of intellectual ex-Communists (Solzhenitsyn being among the more recent) whose intellectual odyssey carried them first away from Stalinism, then Bolshevism-Leninism, and finally Marxism. As their autobiographical thinking developed, once important distinctions between the first two—and sometimes all three—faded. Armed with the authority of personal experience (though often far from Russia) and conversion, lapsed Communists testified to the “straight line” in assorted ways. Some became scholarly historians of “totalitarianism.” Others, including James Burnham and Milovan Djilas, produced popular theories presenting Soviet Communism in a different light—as a new class or bureaucratic order. But they, too, interpreted the Stalinist 1930s—the victorious period of the new class (or bureaucracy)—as the “continuation” and “lawful ... offspring of Lenin and the revolution.” Historiographically, their conception differed chiefly in terminology: an unbroken continuity from half-blown to full-blown new class or ruling bureaucracy. Finally, there was the unique contribution of Arthur Koestler, whose novel *Darkness at Noon* presented Stalin’s annihilation of the original Bolsheviks as the logical triumph of Bolshevism itself. The continuity thesis was fulsome; the consensus, complete.

Just how complete is indicated by the two major historians whose work otherwise fell well outside the academic mainstream—E. H. Carr and Isaak Deutscher. Neither shared the mainstream antipathy to Bolshevism; Deutscher was a partisan of the revolution, and Carr viewed it with considerable empathy. Both presented very different perspectives on many aspects of Soviet history. And yet both, for other and more complex reasons, saw a fundamental continuity between Bolshevism and Stalinism. Carr’s monumental *History of Soviet Russia* concludes before the Stalin years. But his extended treatment of 1917–29 and his dismissive approach to any alternatives to Stalinism are consistent with his early judgment that without Stalin’s revolution from above, “Lenin’s revolution would have run out in the sand. In this sense Stalin continued and fulfilled Leninism.”

Deutscher’s views on the subject were more complicated and interesting, partly because he, almost alone, made it a central concern in his historical essays and biographies of Stalin and Trotsky. He carefully distinguished between original Bolshevism and Stalinism. He described major discontinuities, even a “chasm between the Leninist and Stalinist phases of the Soviet regime,” and he was an implacable critic of scholars who imagined a “straight continuation” between the two. On balance, however, because the nationalized foundations of socialism were preserved, because Stalin’s regime had carried out the revolutionary goal of modernizing Russia, and because the only Bolshevik alternative (Trotskyism, for Deutscher) seemed hopeless in the existing circumstances of the 1920s, Deutscher believed that Stalinism “continued in the Leninist tradition.” Despite Stalinism’s repudiation of cardinal Bolshevik ideas (chiefly internationalism and proletarian democracy, according to Deutscher) and grotesque bureaucratic abuse of the Bolshevik legacy, the “Bolshevik idea and tradition remained, through all successive pragmatic and ecclesiastical re-formulations, the ruling idea and the dominant tradition of the Soviet Union.”

In short, for all their other disagreements, there was an “implicit consensus” between the mainstream cold-war scholarship and the counterschool of Carr and Deutscher about an “unbroken continuity of Soviet Russian history from October 1917 until Stalin’s death.” On that issue, the only dispute seemed to be whether the inexorable march of Stalinism should be dated from 1902 and the writing of Lenin’s
What Is to Be Done?, from October 1917 and the subsequent abolition of the Constituent Assembly, from 1921 and the ban on Communist Party factions, or from 1923 and Trotsky’s first defeat.

Scholarly consensus is unnatural, even in Soviet studies. The first implicit revision of the historiography of the reigning totalitarianism school came in the early 1960s from mainstream scholars who tried to look at Stalinism in the broader perspective of underdeveloped societies and modernization. They began to see Stalinism in terms of Russian history and the problem of social change. But rather than challenge the continuity thesis, they embraced, or reformulated, it. Stalin’s policies of the 1930s—sometimes including even the blood purges—were interpreted as the Bolshevik (or Communist) program of modernization, as necessary or functional in the context of Russia’s backwardness and the party’s modernizing role, and thus as the “logical conclusion” of 1917. In a kind of amended version of the totalitarianism view, Stalinism was portrayed as full-blown Bolshevism in its modernizing stage.

A direct challenge to the continuity thesis has finally emerged in recent years. Benefiting from new Soviet materials, revisionist scholars are united less by any special approach than by a critical reexamination of Soviet history and politics from 1917 onward. Although their books have been reviewed respectfully and even favorably, their impact on Sovietological thinking evidently remains limited. The academic consensus on the relationship between Bolshevism and Stalinism is no longer intact. But the majority of Sovietologists, including the new generation, still believe that “Stalin epitomized the Communist mind,” that his acts were “pure, unadulterated Leninism,” and that “Lenin was the mentor and Stalin the pupil who carried his master’s legacy to its logical conclusion.”

Straight Lines and Other Whig Conventions

The voluminous scholarship devoted to the continuity thesis has certain tenacious conventions. They are, loosely defined, of two sorts: first, a set of formulations, historical approaches, and conceptual explanations of how and why there was a political “straight line” between Bolshevism and Stalinism and, second, a series of interlocking historical interpretations said to demonstrate Bolshevik programmatic continuity between 1917 and Stalin’s upheaval of 1929–33. Both need to be reexamined, starting with conceptual matters.

The problem begins with the formulation of the continuity thesis itself. Among its most familiar assertions is that Bolshevism contained the “seeds,” “roots,” or “germs” of Stalinism. To that proposition even the most ardent proponent of a discontinuity thesis must say—yes, of course. Or as other clichés in the literature correctly state, Stalinism was not an “accident”; Leninism-Bolshevism made it “possible.” Unfortunately, those generalizations say very little, indeed only the obvious. Every historical period—each political phenomenon—has antecedents, partial causes, “seeds” in the preceding one: the Russian Revolution in tsarist history, Hitler’s Third Reich in Weimar Germany, and so forth. Such generalizations actually demonstrate nothing about continuity, much less causality or inevitability. They simply remind us that nothing in history is completely new or without important origins in the immediate past.

The Bolshevism of 1917–28 did contain important “seeds” of Stalinism; they are too fully related in our literature to be reiterated here. Less noted, and the real point, is that Bolshevism also contained other important, non-Stalinist, “seeds”; and, equally, that the “seeds” of Stalinism are also to be found elsewhere—in Russian historical and cultural tradition, in social events such as the civil war, in the international setting, and so on. The question is, however, not “seeds” or even less significant continuities, but fundamental continuities or discontinuities. Moreover, to change metaphors and quote a onetime Bolshevik on this point, “To judge a living man by the death germs which the autopsy reveals in a corpse—and which he may have carried in him since birth—is that very sensible?”
Even less helpful are the three definitional components of the continuity thesis: Bolshevism, Stalinism, continuity. In customary usage, these terms obscure more than they define. The self-professed raison d’être of the totalitarianism school was to distinguish and analyze a wholly new kind of authoritarianism. Yet precisely this critical distinction is often missing, as illustrated by the familiar explanation of Stalinism: “authoritarianism in prerevolutionary Leninism naturally and perhaps inevitably gave birth to Soviet authoritarianism.” Variants of this proposition explain that Stalinism continued the illiberal, nondemocratic, repressive traditions of Bolshevism.

That argument misses the essential comparative point. (It also assumes, mistakenly, I think, that some kind of truly democratic order—liberal or proletarian or otherwise—was a Russian possibility in 1917 or after.) Bolshevism was in important respects—depending on the period—a strongly authoritarian movement. But failure to distinguish between Soviet authoritarianism before and after 1929 is to obscure the very nature of Stalinism. Stalinism was not simply nationalism, bureaucratization, absence of democracy, censorship, police repression, and the rest in any precedent sense. Those phenomena have appeared in many societies and are rather easily explained.

Instead, Stalinism was excess, extraordinary extremism, in each. It was not, for example, merely coercive peasant policies, but a virtual civil war against the peasantry; not merely police repression, or even civil war-style terror, but a holocaust by terror that victimized tens of millions of people for twenty-five years; not merely a Thermidorean revival of nationalist tradition, but an almost fascist-like chauvinism; not merely a leader cult, but deification of a despot. During the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years, Western scholars frequently spoke of a “Stalinism without the excesses,” or “Stalinism without the arrests.” Such formulations make no sense. Excesses were the essence of historical Stalinism, and they are what really require explanation.

Similar problems arise from the customary treatment of original Bolshevism, which is to define it in such a selectively narrow fashion as to construe it as Stalinism, or “embryonic” Stalinism. I have tried to show elsewhere that Bolshevism was a far more diverse political movement—ideologically, programmatically, generationally, and in other respects—than is usually acknowledged in our scholarship. Another related convention of the continuity thesis should also be questioned: the equating of Bolshevism and Leninism. Lenin was plainly the singular Bolshevik; his leadership, ideas, and personality shaped the movement in fundamental ways. But Bolshevism was larger and more diverse than Lenin and Leninism. Its ideology, policies, and politics were shaped also by other forceful leaders, lesser members and committees, nonparty constituents, and great social events, including World War I, the Revolution, and the civil war. I am not suggesting that Leninism, rather than Bolshevism, was nascently Stalinist. Those who do so rely similarly upon an exclusionary selection of references, emphasizing, for example, the Lenin of What Is to Be Done? and the civil war years, while minimizing the Lenin of The State and Revolution and 1922–23.

What, then, of formulating continuities and discontinuities? It is among the most difficult problems of historical analysis. Most historians would agree that it requires careful empirical study of historical similarities and dissimilarities, that both continuities and discontinuities are usually present in some combination, and that the question of degree, of whether quantitative changes become qualitative, is critical. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this venerable approach plays a central role in our thinking about differences between tsarist and Soviet political history and almost none in our thinking about Bolshevism and Stalinism. Thus, a major proponent of the continuity thesis warns against equating the tsarist and
Soviet regimes: “It is important to stress that there is a deep gulf dividing authoritarianism and totalitarianism, and if we treat the two as identical political formations, we end by revealing our inability to distinguish between continuity and change.”13 But if we were to apply that sensible admonition to Soviet history itself, it would be difficult not to conclude, at the very least, that here, too, “differences in degree grew into differences of kind.... What had existed under Lenin was carried by Stalin to such extremes that its very nature changed.”11

As we have seen, however, special approaches are reserved for interpreting Soviet history. One is the extraordinary deterministic and moncausal explanations on which the continuity thesis so often depends. The vocabulary used to posit a direct causal relationship between the “political dynamics” of Bolshevism and Stalinism, especially collectivization and the great terror of 1936–39, may be unique in modern-day political and historical studies. It abounds in the language of teleological determinism: “inner logic,” “inevitable totalitarian features,” “inevitable process,” “inescapable consequences,” “logical completion,” “inevitable stage,” and more. Or, to give a fuller illustration, a standard work explains that Stalin’s collectivization campaign of 1929–33 was the inevitable consequence of the triumph of the Bolshevik Party on November 7, 1917.”13

Serious questions about historical approach are involved here. For one thing, such language betrays a rigid determinism not unlike that which once prevailed in official Stalinist historiography and which was properly derided by Western scholars.16 For another, while claiming to explain so much, this sort of teleological interpretation actually explains very little. It is, as Hannah Arendt observed many years ago, more on the order of “axiomatic value-judgment” than authentic historical analysis.17 And it is vulnerable logically. Replying to similar arguments circulating in the Soviet Union, the dis-

Bolshevism and Stalinism

sident historian Roy Medvedev has pointed out that if Stalinism was predetermined by Bolshevism, if there were no alternatives after 1917, then 1917 and Bolshevism must have been predetermined by previous Russian history. In that case, “to explain Stalinism we have to return to earlier and earlier epochs ... very likely to the Tartar yoke.” He adds, on a political note, “That would be wrong ... a historical justification of Stalinism, not a condemnation.”18

At the root of all this is the Sovietological version of the Whig interpretation of history, which evaluates the past in terms of the present, antecedents in terms of outcomes.” It is true, as Carr reminded us, that all historians are influenced by the present and by established outcomes, and it is also true that contemporary insights may sometimes illuminate the past. But the Whig tradition in Soviet studies is at its worst on the subject of Bolshevism and Stalinism. Relying on some concept of predestination and projecting the Stalinist outcome backward on the Bolshevik past, it tends to Stalinize everything of significance in early Soviet history and politics; to ignore, in favor of a “straight line” back to 1917, the period 1929–33, when historical Stalinism actually first appeared; and, throughout, to interpret the Bolshevik or Communist Party ahistorically, as though it acted above society and outside history itself.

The Whig interpretation utilizes two familiar and equally questionable lines of analysis. One argues, of course, that the inner “political dynamics” (or “nature”) of the Bolshevik Party predetermined Stalinism. The other insists that changes in the Soviet political system under Bolshevism and Stalinism were superficial or secondary to continuities that were fundamental and observable. Whatever the partial truths of the first argument, it suffers from the implicit ahistorical conception of a basically unchanging party after 1917, an assumption easily refuted by evidence already in our literature. What is meant by “the party” as historical determinant when, for
example, the party’s membership, composition, organizational structure, internal political life, and outlook underwent far-reaching alterations between 1917 and 1921 alone.41

The causal “dynamic” cited most often is, of course, the party’s ideology.42 Several obvious objections can be raised against that explanation of social and political development. It is even more one-dimensional. It ignores the fact that a given ideology may influence events in different ways, Christianity having contributed to both compassion and inquisition, socialism to both social justice and tyranny. And it relies upon a self-serving definition of Bolshevik ideology as being concerned mainly with the “concentration of total social power.”43

More important, the nature of Bolshevik ideology was far less cohesive and fixed than the standard interpretation allows. If ideology influenced events, it was also shaped, and changed, by them. The Russian civil war, to take an early instance, had a major impact on Bolshevik outlook, reviving the self-conscious theory of an embattled vanguard developed by Lenin in 1902, which had been inoperative or inconsequential for at least a decade, and implanting in the once civilian-minded party what a leading Bolshevik called a “military-soviet culture.”44 Above all, official ideology changed radically under Stalin. Several of those changes have been noted by Western and Soviet scholars: the revival of nationalism, statism, anti-Semitism, and conservative, or reactionary, cultural and behavioral norms; the repeal of ideas and legislation favoring workers, women, schoolchildren, minority cultures, and egalitarianism, as well as a host of revolutionary and Bolshevik symbols; and a switch in emphasis from ordinary people to leaders and official bosses as the creators of history.45 They were not simply amendments but a new ideology that was “changed in its essence” and that did “not represent the same movement as that which took power in 1917.”46

Similar criticisms must be leveled against the other causal

“dynamic” usually cited, the party’s “organizational principles”—the implied theory that Stalinism originated in 1902 with What Is to Be Done?, in which Lenin sketched out his plan for a conspiratorial vanguard party that could inspire mass revolution while eluding tsarist police repression.47 It, too, is one-dimensional and ahistorical. Bolshevism’s organizational character evolved over the years, often in response to external events, from the unruly, loosely organized party participating successfully in democratic politics in 1917 to the centralized bureaucratic party of the 1920s to the terrorized party of the 1930s, many of whose executive committees and bureaus had been arrested and executed.48

Moreover, the argument is, in effect, an adaptation of Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy,” which was intended to be a generalization about all large political organizations and their tendency toward oligarchical rather than democratic politics. This may suggest a good deal about the evolution of the Bolshevik leadership’s relations with the party-at-large between 1917 and 1929, as it does about modern parties generally. But it tells us nothing directly about Stalinism, which was not oligarchical but autocratic politics,49 unless we conclude that the “iron law of oligarchy” is actually an iron law of autocracy.

The party’s growing centralization, bureaucratization, and administrative intolerance after 1917 certainly promoted authoritarianism in the one-party system and abetted Stalin’s rise. But to argue that these developments predetermined Stalinism is another matter. Even in the 1920s, after the bureaucratization and militarization fostered by the civil war, the high party elite was not (nor had it ever been) the disciplined vanguard fantasized in What Is to Be Done? It remained oligarchical, in the words of one of its leaders, “a negotiated federation between groups, groupings, factions, and tendencies.”50 In short, the party’s “organizational principles” did not produce Stalinism before 1929, nor have they since Stalin’s death in 1953.
There remains, then, the argument that discontinuities were secondary to continuities in the working of the Soviet political system under Bolshevism and Stalinism. Though ideally it is an empirical question, here, too, there would seem to be a critical methodological lapse. The importance of distinguishing between the official, or theatrical, facade and the inner (sometimes disguised) reality of politics has been evident at least since Walter Bagehot demolished the prevailing theory of English politics in 1867 by dissecting the system in terms of its “dignified” and “efficient” parts. The case made by Western scholars for fundamental continuities in the Soviet political system has rested largely on what Bagehot called “dignified,” merely apparent, or fictitious parts.

Looking at the “efficient,” or inner, reality, Robert C. Tucker came to a very different conclusion several years ago: “What we carelessly call ‘the Soviet political system’ is best seen and analyzed as an historical succession of political systems within a broadly continuous institutional framework.” The Bolshevist system had been one of party dictatorship characterized by oligarchical leadership politics in the ruling party. After 1936 and Stalin’s Great Purge, despite an outward “continuity of organizational forms and official nomenclature,” the “one-party system had given way to a one-person system, the ruling party to a ruling personage.” This was a ramifying change from an oligarchical party regime to an autocratic “Führerist” regime, and was “reflected in a whole system of changes in the political process, the ideological pattern, the organization of supreme power, and official patterns of behavior.”

The apparent continuities regularly itemized in Sovietological literature—leader, the party, terror, class war, censorship, Marxism-Leninism, purge, and so on—were synthetic and illusory. The terms may still have been applicable, but their meaning was different.

Tucker’s conclusion that Stalin’s terror “broke the back of the party, eliminated it as a ... ruling class,” has been amply confirmed by more recent evidence. After the purges swept away at least one million of its members between 1935 and 1939, the primacy of the party—the “essence” of Bolshevism-Leninism in most scholarly definitions—was no more. Its elite (massacred virtually as a whole), general membership (in 1939 70 percent had joined since 1929 or after), ethos, and role were no longer those of the old party, or even the party of 1934. Of course, the Communist Party still played a role in the Soviet system and remained enshrined in the official political culture. But even in its new Stalinist form, the party’s political importance fell well below that of the police, and its official esteem below that of the state. Its deliberative bodies—the party congress, the Central Committee, and eventually even the Politburo—rarely convened. Accordingly, the previous and different history of the party could no longer be written about, even to distort: between 1938 and 1953, only one Soviet doctoral dissertation was written on this once hallowed subject.

It is sometimes pointed out, as a final defense of the continuity thesis, that “Stalinism” was never acknowledged officially during Stalin’s reign, only “Maxism-Leninism.” With Bagehot’s method, of course, this tells us nothing. Moreover, it is not entirely accurate. As the cult of Stalin as infallible leader (which, it should be said, was very different from the earlier Bolshevist cult of a historically necessary, but not infallible, party) grew into literal deification after 1938, the adjective Stalinist was attached increasingly to people, institutions, orthodox ideas, events, and even history. This was a departure from even the early 1930s, when they were normally called Leninist, Bolshevist, or Soviet. It reflected, among other things, the sharp decline in Lenin’s own official standing. Catchphrases such as “the teachings of Lenin and Stalin” remained. But less ecumenical ones arose to characterize the building of Soviet socialism as “the great Stalinist cause,” Stalin alone as “the genius-architect of Communism,”
and Soviet history as the “epoch of Stalin.” The term “Stalinism” was prohibited from official public usage; but the concept was deeply ingrained, tacitly and officially.

If symbols can tell us anything about political reality, we do best to heed a Soviet dissident’s commentary on the statue of Prince Dolgoruky, which Stalin built on the site where Lenin had once unveiled a monument to the first Soviet constitution. “The monument to the bloody feudal prince has become a kind of personification of the grim epoch of the personality cult. The horse of the feudal prince has its back turned to the Central Party Archives, where the immortal works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin are preserved and where a beautiful statue of Lenin stands.”

Stalinism—The Program of October?

Underlying the other arguments of the continuity thesis is, finally, that of a programmatic “straight line” from 1917. It is the view, widespread in Sovietological literature, that Stalin’s wholesale collectivization and heavy industrialization drive of 1929–33, the paroxysmic upheaval he later properly called “revolution from above,” represented the continuation and fulfillment of Bolshevik thinking about modernizing, or building socialism in, Russia. In other words, even if it is conceded that the terror of 1936–39 was a break with original Bolshevism, what about the events of 1929–33?

The argument for programmatic continuity rests on interlocking interpretations of the two previous periods in Bolshevik policy: war communism—the extreme nationalization, grain requisitioning, and monopolistic state intervention effected during the civil war of 1918–20; and the New Economic Policy (NEP)—the moderate agricultural and industrial policies and mixed public-private economy of 1921–28. In its essentials, the argument runs as follows: War communism was mainly a product of the party’s original ideological-pro-

grammatic ideas (sometimes called “blueprints”), an eager crash program of socialism. Those frenzied policies collapsed in 1921 because of the population’s opposition, and the party was forced to retreat to a new economic policy of concessions to private enterprise in the countryside and cities. Accordingly, official Bolshevik policy during the eight years of NEP—and NEP itself as a social-political order—are interpreted in the literature as being “merely a breathing spell,” “a holding operation,” or “a strategic retreat, during which the forces of socialism in Russia would retrench, recuperate, and then resume their march.”

How these two interpretations converge into a single thesis of programmatic continuity between Bolshevism and Stalin’s revolution from above is illustrated by one of the standard general histories. War communism is presented as “an attempt, which proved premature, to realize the party’s stated ideological goals,” and NEP, in Bolshevik thinking, as “a tactical maneuver to be pursued only until the inevitable change of conditions which would make victory possible.” The author can then marvel over Stalin’s policies of 1929–33: “It is difficult to find a parallel for a regime or a party which held power for ten years, biding its time until it felt strong enough to fulfill its original program.” The problem with this interpretation is that it conflicts with much of the historical evidence. Having discussed these questions at some length elsewhere, I shall be concise.

There are three essential points to be made against locating the origins of war communism in an original Bolshevik program. First, odd as it may seem for a party so often described as “doctrinaire,” the Bolsheviks had no well-defined economic policies upon coming to office in October 1917. There were generally held Bolshevik goals and tenets—socialism, workers’ control, nationalization, large-scale farming, planning, and the like—but these were vague and subject to the most varying interpretations inside the party. Bolsheviks had
done little thinking about practical economic policies before October, and, as it turned out, there were few upon which they could agree.66

Second, the initial program of the Bolshevik government, in the sense of officially defined policy, was not war communism but what Lenin called in April–May 1918 “state capitalism,” a mixture of socialist measures and concessions to the existing capitalist structure and control of the economy.67 If that first Bolshevik program resembled anything that followed, it was NEP. And, third, the actual policies of war communism did not begin until June 1918, in response to the threat of prolonged civil war and diminishing supplies, a situation that immediately outdated Lenin’s conciliatory “state capitalism.”68

None of this is to say that war communism had no ideological component. As the civil war deepened into a great social conflict, official measures grew more extreme, and the meaning and the “defense of the revolution” became inseparable. Bolsheviks naturally infused these improvised policies with high theoretical and programmatic significance beyond military victory. They became ideological.69 The evolution of war communism, and its legacy in connection with Stalinism, require careful study (though the similarities should not be exaggerated). But the origins will not be found in a Bolshevik program of October.

The question of NEP is even more important. Not only were the official economic policies of 1921–28 distinctly unlike Stalin’s in 1929–33, but the social-political order of NEP, with its officially tolerated social pluralism in economic, cultural-intellectual, and even (in local soviets and high state agencies) political life, represents a historical model of Soviet Communist rule radically unlike Stalinism.70 In addition, the standard treatment of Bolshevik thinking about NEP is more complicated because all scholars are aware of the intense policy debates of the 1920s, a circumstance not easily reconciled with a simplistic interpretation of NEP as merely a programmatic bivouac, or the antechamber of Stalinism.

Tensions inherent in the interpretation are related to secondary but significant conventions in Sovietological literature on NEP. The programmatic debates of the 1920s are treated largely as an extension of, and in terms of, the Trotsky-Stalin rivalry (or, perpetuating the factional misnomers of the period, “permanent revolution” and “socialism in one country”). Trotsky and the Left opposition are said to have been anti-NEP and embryonically Stalinist, the progenitors of “almost every major item in the political program that Stalin later carried out.” Stalin is then said to have stolen, or adapted, Trotsky’s economic policies in 1929. Having portrayed a “basic affinity between Trotsky’s plans and Stalin’s actions” and having excluded any real alternatives, these secondary interpretations suggest at least a significant continuity between Stalinism and Bolshevik thinking in the 1920s and underlie the general interpretation of NEP.71 They are, however, factually incorrect.

The traditional treatment of the economic debates (we are not concerned here with the controversy over Comintern policy or the party bureaucracy) in terms of Trotsky and Stalin bears no relationship to the actual discussions of 1923–27. If the rival policies can be dichotomized and personified, they were Trotskyist and Bukharinist. Stalin’s public policies on industry, agriculture, and planning were those of the party’s leading theorist Nikolai Bukharin, that is, pro-NEP, moderate, evolutionary. That basic affinity was the cement of the Stalin-Bukharin duumvirate, which made official policy and led the party majority against the Left oppositions until early 1928. During those years, there were no public “Stalinist” ideas, apart from “socialism in one country,” which was also Bukharin’s.72 If “ism” is to be affixed, there was no Stalinism, only Bukharinism and Trotskyism, as was understood at the time. Thus, the opposition of 1925 complained, “Comrade
Stalin has become the total prisoner of this political line, the creator and genuine representative of which is Comrade Bukharin.” Stalin was no prisoner, but a willing adherent. He replied, “We stand, and we shall stand, for Bukharin.”

Bukharin’s economic proposals for modernizing and building socialism in Soviet Russia in the 1920s are clear enough. Developing the themes of Lenin’s last writings, which constituted both a defense and further elaboration of NEP as a road to socialism, and adding some of his own, Bukharin became the main theorist of NEP. Though his policies evolved between 1924 and 1928 toward great emphasis on planning, heavy industrial investment, and efforts to promote a partial and voluntary collective farm sector, he remained committed to the NEP economic framework of a state, or “socialist,” sector (mainly large-scale industry, transportation, and banking) and a private sector (peasant farms and small manufacturing, trade, and service enterprises) interacting through market relations. Even during the crisis of 1928–29, NEP was for the Bukharinists a viable developmental (not static) model, predicated on civil peace, that could reconcile Bolshevik aspirations and Russian social reality.

But what about Trotsky and the Left? Though his political rhetoric was often that of revolutionary heroism, Trotsky’s actual economic proposals in the 1920s were also based on NEP and its continuation. He urged greater attention to heavy industry and planning earlier than did Bukharin, and he worried more about the village “kulak”; but his remedies were moderate, market-oriented, or, as the expression went, “nepist.” Like Bukharin, he was a “reformist” in economic policy, looking to the evolution of NEP Russia toward industrialism and socialism.

Even Evgeny Preobrazhensky, the Left opposition’s avatar of “superindustrialization” whose fearful arguments about the necessity of “primitive socialist accumulation” based on “exploiting” the peasant sector are often cited as Stalin’s inspiration, accepted the hallmark of NEP economics. He wanted to “exploit” peasant agriculture through market relations by artificially fixing state industrial prices higher than agricultural prices.” Both he and Trotsky and the Bolshevik Left generally thought in terms of peasant farming for the foreseeable future. However inconsistent their ideas may have been, neither ever advocated imposed collectivization, much less wholesale collectivization as a system of requisitioning or a solution to industrial backwardness.

The debates between Bukharinists and Trotskyists in the 1920s represented the spectrum of high Bolshevik programmatic thinking, Right to Left. The two sides disagreed on important economic issues, from price policy and rural taxation to the prospects for comprehensive planning. But unlike the international and political issues that most embittered the factional struggle, these disagreements were limited, within the parameters of “nepism,” which both sides accepted, though with different levels of enthusiasm.

In fact, the revised Bukharinist program adopted as the first Five-Year Plan at the Fifteenth Party Congress in December 1927, which called for more ambitious industrial investment as well as partial voluntary collectivization, represented a kind of amalgam of Bukharinist-Trotskyist thinking as it had evolved in the debates of the 1920s. When Stalin abandoned that program a year and a half later, he abandoned mainstream Bolshevik thinking about economic and social change. After 1929 and the end of NEP, the Bolshevik programmatic alternative to Stalinism, in fact and as perceived inside the party, remained basically Bukharinist. From afar, the exiled Trotsky leveled his own accusations against Stalin’s regime, but his economic proposals in the early 1930s were, as they had been in the 1920s, far closer to, and now “entirely indistinguishable from,” Bukharin’s.

NEP had originated as an ignoble retreat in 1921, and resentment at NEP economics, politics, and culture continued throughout the 1920s. Those resentments were perpetuated in the heroic Bolshevik tradition of October and the civil war
and were probably strongest among cadres formed by the warfare experience of 1918–20 and the younger party generation. Stalin would tap these real sentiments for his civil-war reenactment of 1929–33. But, for reasons beyond our concern here, by 1924 NEP had acquired a general legitimacy among Bolshevik leaders. Not even Stalin dared challenge that legitimacy in his final contest with the Bukharinists in 1928–29. He campaigned and won not as the abolitionist of NEP or the proponent of “revolution from above,” but as a “calm and sober” leader who could make it work. Even after defeating the Bukharin group in April 1929, as NEP crumbled under Stalin’s radical policies, his editorials continued to insist that “NEP is the only correct policy of socialist construction,” a fiction still officially maintained as late as 1931.

The point here is not to explain the fateful events of 1928–29, but to emphasize that Stalin’s new policies of 1929–33, the “great change” as they became known, were a radical departure from Bolshevik programmatic thinking. No Bolshevik leader or faction had ever advocated anything akin to imposed collectivization, the “liquidation” of allegedly prosperous peasants (kulaks), breakneck heavy industrialization, the destruction of the entire market sector, and a “plan” that was in reality no plan at all, only hypercentralized control of the economy plus exhortations. These years of “revolution from above” were, historically and programmatically, the birth-period of Stalinism. From that first great discontinuity others would follow.

**Historical Stalinism**

By treating Stalinism as “full-blown” Bolshevism and the Soviet 1930s as a function and extension of 1917, the continuity thesis has discouraged close examination of Stalinism as a specific system with its own history and whose specific legacy still weighs heavily on the Soviet Union. It is certainly true, as Tucker has shown, that definitive, even essential, aspects of Stalinism, including critical turning points in its history and many of the “excesses,” cannot be understood apart from Stalin as a political personality. Nonetheless, many larger political, social, and historical factors that contributed to the complexity of Stalinism as a major historical and even contemporary phenomenon remain to be studied and understood. Those factors are coming into sharper focus owing to the availability of new materials, longer scholarly perspectives, and discussions of these same questions inside the Soviet Union during the last three decades.

It is important, first of all, to shed the ahistorical habit of thinking of the Stalinist system as an unchanging phenomenon. The historical development of Stalinism must be traced and analyzed through several stages, from the truly revolutionary events of the early 1930s to the rigidly conservative sociopolitical order of 1946–53. Indeed, that change from radical transformation to a profoundly conservative order must itself be the subject of closer examination, and we will return to it in Chapter 5. The 1930s themselves must be divided into periods, including at least the social upheaval of 1929–33; the interregnum of 1934–35, when future policy was being contested in the high leadership; and 1936–39, which witnessed the great terror against the old party elite, the final triumph of Stalinism over the Bolshevik tradition, and the political completion of revolution from above.

The years 1929–33, usually obscured in both Western and official Soviet theories of Stalinism, are especially important. They were the formative period of Stalinism as a system; they presaged and gave rise to much that followed. For example, several characteristic *idées fixes* of full Stalinism, including the murderous notion of an inevitable “intensification of the class struggle,” which became the ideology of mass terror by 1937, first appeared in Stalin’s campaign to discredit all Bukharinist and NEP ideas in 1928–30. Similarly, Stalin’s personal role in unleashing imposed collectivization and escalating
industrial targets in 1929, when he bypassed councils of party decisionmaking, augured his full autocracy of later years. More generally, as Moshe Lewin has shown in studies of the social history of 1929–33, many administrative, legislative, class, and ideological features of the mature Stalinist state took shape as makeshift solutions to the social chaos, the “quicksand society,” generated by the destruction of NEP institutions and processes during the initial wave of revolution from above. In Lewin’s view from below, the first in our literature and rich testimony to the importance of multidimensional social history, the Stalinist system was less a product of Bolshevik programs or planning than of desperate attempts to cope with the social pandemonium and crises created by the Stalinist leadership itself in 1929–33.

As for subsequent events, it would be a mistake to interpret Stalin’s terrorist assault on Soviet officialdom in 1936–39 as a “necessary” or “functional” by-product of the imposed social revolution of 1929–33. A very different course was advocated by many party leaders, probably a majority, in 1934–35. More telling, there is plain evidence that the purges were not, as some scholars have imagined, somehow rational in terms of modernization, a kind of terrorist Geritol that accelerated the process and weeded out obsolete functionaries. In reality, the terror wrecked or retarded many of the real achievements of 1929–36.

Nevertheless, there were important linkages between these two great upheavals, and they require careful study. The enormous expansion of police repression, security forces, and the archipelago of forced-labor camps in 1929–33 were part of the background and mechanism of 1936–39. There were also less obvious, but perhaps equally important, consequences. Even though forcible wholesale collectivization had not originated as a party, or even collective leadership, policy, the entire party elite, and probably the whole party, was implicated in the criminal and economic calamities of Stalin’s measures, which culminated in the terrible famine of 1932–33.

BOLSHEVISM AND STALINISM

Every semi-informed official must have known that collectivization was a disaster, wrecking agricultural production, savaging livestock herds, and killing millions of people.

In official ideology, however, it became obligatory to eulogize collectivization as a great accomplishment of Stalinist leadership. That bizarre discrepancy between official claims and social reality, uncharacteristic of original Bolshevism, was a major step in the progressive fictionalization of Soviet ideology under Stalin. It must have had a profoundly demoralizing effect on party officials, contributing to their apparently meager resistance when Stalin’s terror fell upon them in 1936–39. If nothing more, it implicated them in the cult of Stalin’s infallibility, which grew greater as disasters grew worse and which became an integral part of the Stalinist system.

The few authentic attempts to analyze Stalinism as a social-political system over the years have been mostly by critical Marxists who offer “new class” or “ruling bureaucracy” theories of the subject. That literature is fairly diverse and features wide-ranging disputes over whether the Stalinist bureaucracy can be viewed as a class or only as a stratum, and of what kind. It also contains valuable material on the sociology of Stalinism, a topic habitually ignored in academic studies, and reminds us that the new administrative strata created in the 1930s strongly influenced the nature of mature Stalinism, particularly its anti-egalitarianism, rigid stratification, and cultural and social conservatism.

As a theory or general interpretation of Stalinism, however, that approach is deeply flawed. The argument that a ruling bureaucracy-class was the animating force behind the events of 1929–39 makes no sense, logically or empirically. Quite apart from the demonstrable role of Stalin, who is reduced in these theories to a replicable chief bureaucrat, it remains to be explained how a bureaucracy, which is defined as being deeply conservative, could have decided and carried out policies so radical and dangerous as forcible collectivization.
And, indeed, Stalin’s repeated campaigns to radicalize and spur on officialdom in the years 1929–30 and after suggest a fearful, recalcitrant party-state bureaucracy, not an event-making one. Nor is it clear how this theory explains the mass slaughter of high Soviet officials in the 1936–39 period unless we conclude that the “ruling” bureaucracy-class committed suicide.

We are confronted here, as elsewhere, with the difficulty inherent in applying Western concepts, whether of the Marxist or modernization variety, to a Soviet political and social reality shaped by Russian historical and cultural traditions. One reason Western-inspired theories apply poorly to the Stalinist administrative elites created in the 1930s is that the latter were more akin to the traditional tsarist soslovie, an official privileged class that served the state—in this case a resurgent Russian state—and more than it ruled the state. Today there may be a Soviet ruling class or bureaucracy that has emancipated itself in recent decades; certainly, as we will see later, high officialdom has played a major role in the making and breaking of leadership policy since Stalin’s death. But during its formation and agony in the Stalin years, for all its high position and great power over those below, the bureaucracy did not ultimately rule.

A similar problem arises from relying uncritically on the quintessential Western concept of modernization to characterize everything that happened in the Stalinist 1930s. It is true, of course, that Stalin’s policies created important aspects of what is called modernity, including industrialism, technology, large cities, and mass literacy. It is also true, however, that Stalinism brought other important developments in economic, social, and political life that were neither “modern” nor “progressive,” but traditional and even retrogressive. Alongside the great factories, cities, and schools, there developed, for example, a tsarist-like political autocracy, a medieval-like leader cult, the semi-serfdom of collectivized peasants, and the widespread use of virtual slave labor. These systemic aspects of Stalinism were imposed anachronisms having more to do with the Russian past than with Western patterns of modernization; and they, too, remain a legacy of the 1930s. Fifty years later, it is still misleading to describe the Soviet Union simply as a “modernized” country. In reality, it remains two countries: one is modern and even Westernized, the other—including vast parts of the countryside, provinces, and economy, and involving large segments of the population—is more akin to what modernization theorists call the underdeveloped or third world.

Approaches to Stalinism that take into account Russian historical-cultural traditions are, therefore, essential though they, too, sometimes have been misused in Western scholarship. Early studies of the Stalin era in historical-cultural terms tended to become monocular interpretations of a Communist revolution inevitably undone or fatally transformed by the relentless force of Russian historical traditions. Instead of viewing tradition as contextual, those writers treated it as virtually autonomous and deterministic. “Every successful revolution has its Thermidor,” as Carr has pointed out. But the outcome is not predetermined by the past; it is a problematic admixture of new and old elements, and the nature of the outcome depends largely upon contemporary social and political circumstances. In 1932 and 1933, for example, the Stalinist leadership reinstated the internal passport system, once thought to typify tsarism and despised as such by all Russian revolutionaries, including the Bolsheviks. Here was an instance of revived tradition, but also of contemporary policy and crisis, for the retrogression came about in direct response to the social chaos, particularly wandering peasant masses in search of food, caused by collectivization.

Russia’s prerevolutionary traditions and political culture can help us understand many things, from Stalin’s personal outlook and autocracy, as Tucker has shown, to the social basis of Stalinism as a system. There is, in particular, the important question of Stalinism’s popular support in Soviet
society. The issue is largely ignored, or even denied, in older Sovietological literature because it is inconsistent with the imagery of a “totalitarian” regime dominating a hapless, “atomized” populace through power techniques alone. Though the coercive powers and everyday repression of the Stalinist system can scarcely be exaggerated, they are no more adequate as a full explanation of the relationship between the Stalinist party-state and society than would be a similar interpretation of Hitler’s Germany.

Although its nature and extent varied over the years, it is clear that there was substantial popular support for Stalinism from the beginning and through the very worst. Not all of that popular Stalinism, which we will need to examine more closely for its role in post-Stalin politics as well, is difficult to explain. Stalin’s revolution from above in the 1930s was imposed, but it required and found enthusiastic agents below, even if only a relatively small minority of citizens. Zealous officials, intellectuals, workers, and perhaps even some peasants came forward to fight and win on the cultural, industrial, rural, and purge “fronts,” as they were called. In addition, a revolution from above means a great expansion of the state and its functions, which means an equally great expansion of official jobs and privileges. Millions of people were victimized, but millions also benefited from Stalinism and thus identified with it—not just the plethora of “little Stalins” throughout Soviet administrative life, but the multitude of petty officials and workers who gained upward mobility and enhanced or even elite status. Even the blood purges, Medvedev suggests, may have found support among workers who saw in the sudden downfall of their bosses and bureaucrats “the underdog’s dream of retribution with the aid of a higher justice.”

Moreover, by the mid-1930s, all these formative events of Stalinism were unfolding in an official atmosphere of resurgent nationalism and traditional values, including a selective rehabilitation of tsarism itself. Increasingly, the Stalinist leadership identified its revolution from above less with original Bolshevik ideas than with tsarist Russia’s long history of state-building, struggle against backwardness, and aspirations to world power, which undoubtedly gained Stalinism still more popular support. Finally, the majestic upsurge of popular patriotism during the war against Germany in the years 1941–45, despite the initial disasters and more than 20 million casualties (or perhaps, because of them), translated into considerable new support for the still more nationalistic, and now victorious, Stalinist system.

Other aspects of Stalinism usually regarded as having been only imposed from above and thus without social roots also need to be reconsidered in a broader context and longer perspective, not only to understand the Stalin years but those that followed. The main carriers of cultural tradition are, of course, social groups and classes. In the 1930s, the rural and “petty bourgeois” majority of old Russia swarmed into the cities to form the new working class, middle classes, and party-state officialdom, the “philistine” majority that still frustrates official Soviet reformers and dissidents alike. If developments are viewed in that context, it is a mistake to interpret the whole of Stalinist popular and political culture as merely an artifice of state censorship and repression. Large parts of Stalinist culture—even the most cliché-ridden novels and chauvinistic assertions—probably had deep social roots in the newly risen and still insecure middle classes and sprawling officialdom, whose own authentic values, self-perceptions, and cultural Babbittian found expression there.

Indeed, the Stalin cult, in some ways the major institution of Stalin’s autocratic system, was a dramatic example of both cultural tradition and popular support. The Stalinist leadership promoted the cult from above, but it found fertile soil, becoming (as many Soviet sources tell us) an authentic social phenomenon. It grew from an internal party celebration of the new leader in 1929 into a kind of mass religion, a “peculiar form of secular worship.” Neither Bolshevik tradi-
tion, the once modest Lenin cult, nor Stalin's personal gratification can explain the popular dimensions it acquired. For that, we must take into account much older values and customs, "unwritten mandates borne by the wind." Not surprisingly, as we will discover in contemporary Soviet politics, those popular sentiments have outlived Stalin himself.

3

Bukharin, NEP, and the Idea of an Alternative to Stalinism

Why is it that [Bukharin's] heresy, so often condemned, so often refuted, so often punished, is so often resurrected? Why does this ghost not keep to his grave, though the stake is driven into his corpse again and again?  

BERTRAM D. WOLFE

Just as there is no iron-clad historical inevitability, there are always historical alternatives. History written without an exploration of lost or defeated alternatives is, therefore, neither a full account of the past nor a real explanation of what happened. It is merely the story of the outcome made to seem inevitable.

And yet for many years, most professional writing about Soviet history, in the West and in the Soviet Union, was based on the axiom that there had been no alternative to Stalinism. Ironically, despite their antithetical values and purposes, both Western Sovietologists and official Soviet scholars were proponents of a historical doctrine that excluded alternatives, though in different ways and for different reasons.¹

Soviet scholars had no choice. All ideas of such an alternative were banned and ruthlessly punished as criminal plots during Stalin's long rule. Whatever their private views, official Soviet writers were compelled always to exalt the first principle of Stalinism—that Stalin and his policies alone, including the most murderous ones, were the rightful culmination of