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Russian Government and Politics

Comparative Government and Politics

Eric Shiraev

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The development of the Soviet state

The first 28 years of the development of the Soviet state can be divided into several periods. The first was dominated by the Russian civil war. In the second, this was followed by almost a 20-year period of reconstruction and rebuilding which ended with the Second World War. In the third period, the invention of the atomic bomb after the war and changes in foreign policy made the country one of two most important players in global affairs. In just three decades after the end of the Civil War, Russia would become a superpower.

The civil war

The 1917 Revolution was a significant and traumatic event for the entire country. Millions of people accepted the rapid changes and began to participate in the creation of a new state. Others chose passive resistance. It has been estimated that 2 million people emigrated from Russia during that period (Sabennikova, 2002). Many others took arms against the new regime. A devastating civil war started in 1918 and lasted until 1923.

The war had several interconnected causes. Millions of people lost their property, possessions, and savings in 1917. The government established a rampant confiscatory policy. Peasants had to surrender large portions of their harvests and stock to representatives of the government. The scope and depth of the radical reforms affected all the key players in Russian politics. Most political parties were left out of power, which immediately created political tensions. The peace treaty signed with Germany was humiliating. Attempting to consolidate power, the new government launched a policy that became known as the red terror, establishing revolutionary tribunals and conducting executions. All these and other reasons caused people to resist, and this resistance rapidly grew into violent confrontation. The nation became divided into two large camps. **The Reds** supported the communist government and the general course of its reforms. **The Whites** opposed it. They had many internal differences, but were unified by the desire to end Bolshevik power. Russia had lived through many internal conflicts before, but this one was particularly monumental.

By the end of the civil war, the new Russian state had lost the territories of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, which became independent states. Portions of Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, and some territories in the Far East were occupied by neighboring states. About 25 million people had died since 1914. Production levels had plummeted 80 percent; agricultural output had dropped 40 percent compared

with the pre-First World War period. Scores of people became unemployed. Inflation was rampant and food shortages constant (Erllichman, 2004).

This was the sad legacy of the First World War and the civil war. Nevertheless, the country had a functional centralized government which had finally established control over the vast territory. Under these conditions, the state of the Soviet Union was officially formed on 30 December 1922.

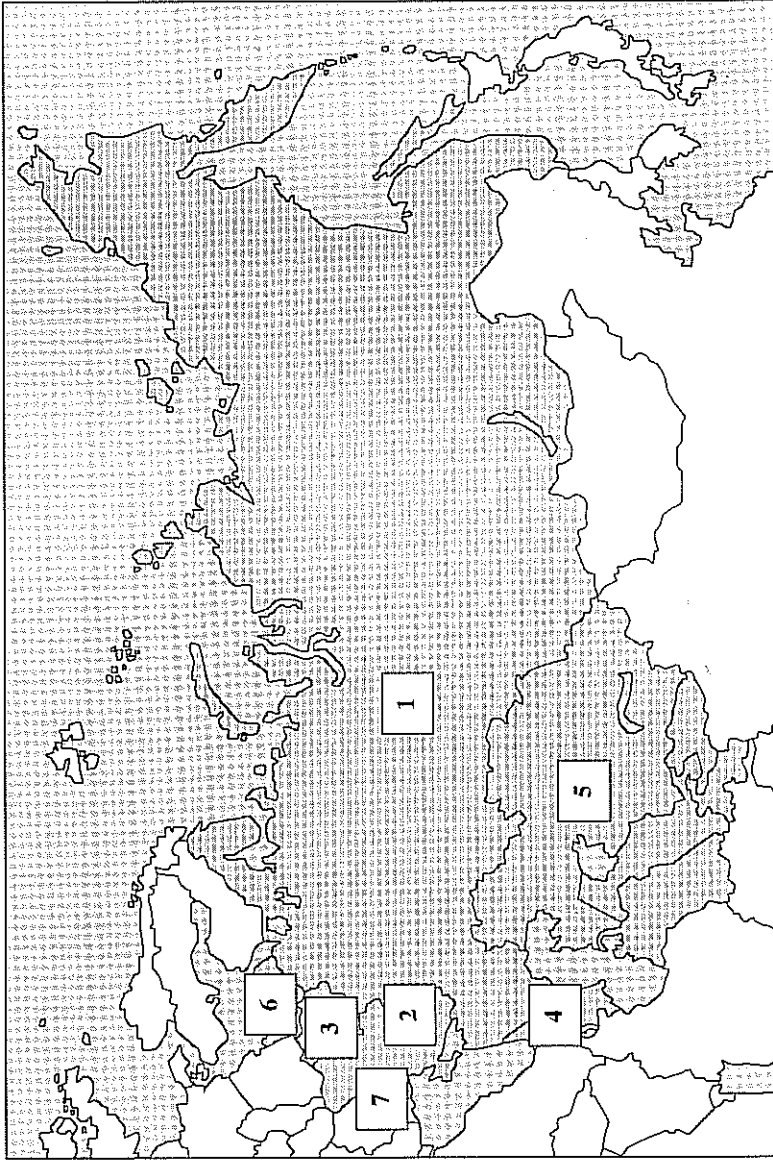
Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (his original last name was Ulyanov; Lenin was a pseudonym) was the first leader of the new Russian state and the Soviet Union. His government tenure was short. He suffered a series of strokes as early as in 1922, and died in 1924 at the age of 53. During his period in power, from 1917, he won practically unlimited power within the ruling party and government. How did he become a leader of such magnitude?

Lenin was born into an educated family from the provincial city of Simbirsk, located on the Volga River in the heart of Russia. His older brother, Alexander, was convicted and executed for his participation in an anti-government plot. In his student days and after obtaining a law degree, Lenin too participated in illegal political activities, for which he was arrested and sentenced. In 1900, he left Russia for Europe (although he returned briefly to Russia in 1905–07). There he worked on theoretical publications and began to put together a new political party. After the February Revolution he returned to Russia permanently. In a remarkably short period, he and his associates managed to assemble a large and efficient network protected by armed units. These units played a crucial role in the October Revolution of 1917. Lenin was personally involved in the creation of a new communist state. He supported extremely violent methods to implement his policies.

For almost 60 years after his death, the Soviet Union's official propaganda promoted an image of Lenin as a benevolent, intelligent, and caring individual with saint-like personal qualities. He became a symbol of the Soviet state. He was admired by millions of people in the Soviet Union and globally. Every Soviet city and town had a major street or square named after Lenin.

Lenin's opponents portrayed a different picture. To them, he was a brutal, shifty, and selfish individual driven by jealousy and vengeance (Solzhenitsyn, 1976; Avtorkhanov, 1990). Today, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation continues to glorify his name and his deeds, considering him one of the greatest political leaders of Russia, the founding father of the Soviet Union. Opinion polls show a mixed picture of support and rejection.

Map 3 The Soviet Union, showing its 15 republics



In 1922, the Russian (1), Ukrainian (2), Belorussian (3), and Caucasus Republics (4) formed a new Soviet state. Over the years, the number of the republics grew to 15. Notice that republics such as Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan did not have that status until 1936. Asian republics (5) received their status in the 1920s and 1930s. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (6) became Soviet republics in 1940 as the result of Soviet occupation. Moldova (7) became a republic in 1940 after Romania surrendered a portion of its territory to the Soviet Union.

Industrialization

In 1922, the Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, and Caucasus republics formed a new Soviet state. Over the years, the number of the republics grew to 15. Many smaller autonomous republics (with limited rights) were also created within the Soviet Union. In 1923, most of the central institutions of executive power were set up. They were called commissariats (but were later renamed ministries). The new constitution of 1924 declared the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) a federation of states. On paper, each state had the right to leave the federation. Each member-state also had the right to conduct its own educational, welfare, and labor policies. In reality, independence for these states was out of question and Moscow controlled local policies. The supreme legislative power belonged to the all-Union Congress of Soviets, with a Central Executive Committee remaining in charge between sessions of the Congress. The Council of People's Commissars possessed the executive power. The Constitution underlined the superior political rights of the working class, and denied voting rights to some categories of former private property owners as well as the clergy. The constitution officially proclaimed Moscow as the capital of the Soviet Union. The headquarters of Soviet leaders and many other government institutions was a large fortified complex at the heart of Moscow called the Kremlin, and the term "the Kremlin" usually refers to the national government from this period onwards.

An urgent task was to restore the economy, stimulate trade, and improve the worsening living standards of the population. As a start, in 1921 the government introduced a policy of economic liberalization called the New Economic Policy. This policy halted the massive and excessive confiscations of grain and stock in the countryside, and established a more moderate policy of taxation. By 1925, agricultural output surpassed the output of Czarist Russia (Orlov et al., 2008). The right to own private property, which had been abolished in 1918, was partially restored. Now people could own, sell, or lease bakeries, repair shops, restaurants, retail stores, and even small factories. The government abolished the mandatory labor duty for city residents and allowed foreign investments in the economy. The monetary reform of 1922 reduced inflation. By 1926 the government no longer needed to ration food in cities and towns. The living standards of most Russian citizens were improving.

After 1925 the government began to implement a policy of rapid and massive industrialization. According to the communist doctrine, the strength of a state is determined by the size and quality of its heavy industries. Therefore, the prime targets of the Soviet industrialization were heavy industries and the manufacturing of machinery. The changes demanded rapid development of the coal and oil industries, metallurgy,

road construction, and the extraction of natural resources. The Soviet economy began to switch to a highly centralized system of administration. Owned by the government, factories and plants became part of a sophisticated network administered by a centralized system of planning, production, distribution, and management. From the 1920s until the late 1980s, big cities and small towns were run by a centralized bureaucratic machine that was in charge of every aspect of planning and development (Ruble, 1990).

It was believed that economic planning was the key to economic success. The Soviet Union in 1929 introduced a new system of economic management based on five-year plans. These plans were prepared in Moscow, and contained detailed targets for production. Managers on all levels became responsible for the realization of the plans. Although the very ambitious targets of the first five-year plans were not fulfilled, over a very short period the Soviet Union developed an advanced industrial sector capable of competing with leading economic powers including the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States.

Agricultural policies

In 1927, the 15th Congress of the Communist Party proclaimed a new policy, by which peasants were to be organized on a massive scale into collective farms whose members shared property and land. Local committees of the party received instructions about the importance of this reorganization. In 1930, Moscow decided to accelerate the development of agricultural collectives, and established quotas for each region, with the purpose of achieving total collectivization by 1932. The official policy was to "liquidate" wealthy peasants as a social class. Although officially membership of collective farms was voluntary, in reality the process of collectivization turned violent and often deadly. Most peasants who did not want to join were forced to do so. The economically successful suffered the most. Based on new laws, the government imprisoned or forcibly relocated millions of well-to-do peasants and their families. Hundreds of thousands perished. Their property was confiscated and given to the collective farms. The Kremlin suppressed all negative information about collectivization. There were incidents of mass starvation in the 1930s in the Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, and some other regions (Shlapentokh et al., 2008: 58), but practically no reports of them emerged in Soviet newspapers.

The collectivization campaign set the foundation for Soviet agriculture for many years to come. Its negative consequences are still felt today in Russian villages. The government introduced mandatory quotas for harvests and established extremely low prices for agricultural products, and this significantly reduced the peasants' incentive to produce

(Conquest, 1986). The process also enabled the government to establish almost total control over the peasantry. Most importantly, the collectivization process was an act of genocide: it involved the purposeful extermination of people based on their social identity. That there was genocide in this period continues to be disputed by some officials and historians today in Russia. Although they accept that many peasants died, they argue that the deaths were the accidental result of the policy being carried out to excess in many places.

By the end of the 1930s, more than 90 percent of Soviet peasants lived and worked on collective farms (in which land and property were leased by the farm collective, which had obligations to the government) or soviet farms (in which land and property belonged to the government and the farm members were state employees).

Government bureaucracy

Both industrialization and collectivization required substantial support from the state. The government in Moscow needed to develop a new bureaucratic system capable of functioning in a new social and economic environment. It did so, and put the Communist Party at the center of it.

The Communist Party played a major role in all areas of economic and political life in the Soviet Union. The highest power in the party belonged to the Party Congresses, which were called regularly, usually once every few years. Between these meetings, an elected Central Committee was in charge. The Central Committee controlled numerous departments, each in control of a particular sector of the economy, area of social life, or policy. A few of the most powerful people comprised the managing body of the party, which was called different names at different times. The most recent was the Politburo (political bureau). In the regions, the party established regional committees (or republican committees in ethnic republics) for managing the party organizations in factories, schools, offices, and the armed forces.

The party established an official internal policy called **democratic centralism**. It was based on three key principles which were laid down early on in the Communist Party Regulations. The first was mandatory elections in all party organizations on all levels. The second was mandatory obedience to the majority in every organization, and the third principle underlined mandatory acceptance of the decisions of higher party organizations by its lower structures. The party regulations prohibited any factions or internal opposition.

Gradually, the core principles of party control of the government were established. The Communist Party installed its members in practically all important government positions and on all levels. There was no area of

social and economic life free of party control. Despite the declared principles of democratic rule, most party leaders could not be elected without the consent of higher leadership. Within the party, organizations at lower levels could not criticize the decisions of their superiors. The media had to follow instructions from local or state officials.

Political repression

To increase its grip on power, the government established a vast system of internal intelligence, security, and persecution. From an ideological standpoint, the focus on internal security was based on the mistaken assumption that in a growing socialist state, there would inevitably be an intensifying domestic political struggle. In the late 1920s and especially in the 1930s, the government launched a massive campaign against “enemies of the state” (the official label used in propaganda). The party itself underwent several “cleansing campaigns.” As a result, many prominent party leaders, factory managers, military commanders, and thousands of regular members were expelled from the party, imprisoned, or executed.

The cleansing campaigns did not spare non-party members. People were arrested, taken for interrogation, and never went back to their homes and families. Officials were often given quotas: told how many people they should find and arrest. Faced with threats against both themselves and their families, many signed forced “confessions” to crimes they had never committed. Many innocent people were found guilty on the basis of fabricated allegations. Some were executed, and many others were sent to labor camps (that is, prisons usually in remote areas, where they were forced to undertake hard labor). The government continued to maintain that these were necessary defensive measures against the growing number of enemies of the Soviet Union. The state-controlled press were not permitted to report on the state-sponsored violence, including most criminal prosecutions, imprisonments, mass deportations, and confiscations. Although historians both inside and outside Russia differ in their estimates of how many people were persecuted in the Soviet Union during this period, most believe that millions of people were victims (Shlapentokh et al., 2008).

What was the logic behind this policy of repression against Soviets themselves? Josef Stalin, who succeeded Lenin as the national leader, seems to have had several reasons. He used violence as a political tool, to rid the party of noncompliant members and unify its ranks. The terror policy was also a means of eliminating political opponents, both real and imagined. Many people believed the propaganda that the country was riddled with enemies who sought to destroy it, and the population rallied around the Kremlin and Stalin in particular. It is also quite possible that Stalin’s

personality—he was probably prone to unfounded suspicion and other paranoid ideas—played a part in his political decisions.

Political mobilization

To boost its support among ordinary people, the government sponsored many mass organizations to support the Communist Party and the Soviet government. Young people joined several youth leagues, the largest of which was called the Komsomol (translated literally as the Communist Union of the Young). There were several defense-oriented organizations, and party-controlled labor unions. Many people joined these organizations enthusiastically, while others simply had no other choice. Public schools and mass organizations began to serve as active promoters of communism. Many Soviet people supported the system wholeheartedly. They refused to see any deficiencies in their country, and believed that it was wrong for people to criticize the regime, which many of them had grown to love.

Atheism was an official policy of the Communist Party. Any public forms of religious expression were prohibited. Church property was confiscated, and priests were harassed, imprisoned, or executed. The government criminalized the production and distribution of religious literature. Under orders from Moscow, authorities across Russia began to demolish churches or convert them, for example into warehouses or swimming pools. The Soviet government declared war on organized religion. Only in the 1940s did the government permit some churches to open and their services to be restored. Stalin believed he needed the support of what remained of the Orthodox Church, provided it was loyal to his government, to encourage the country’s war efforts.

In 1936 a new constitution declared the creation of a socialist society in the Soviet Union. According to this document, the country had completed its transition from capitalism to socialism. A union between the working class and the peasantry became, according to this document, the social foundation of the state, which was seen as exercising the dictatorship of the proletariat (Constitution, 1936). Such constitutional declarations strengthened the legitimacy of the Communist Party. They also solidified the authority of its leader. The 1930s was the time of tremendous consolidation of power in the hands of Josef Stalin.

The Great Patriotic War

By the end of the 1930s the Soviet Union was a highly industrialized state with a educated multi-ethnic population. Russia dominated it economically and politically. The legal foundation of the government was a one-party

Lenin did not leave an official heir, but Josef Stalin, who had become general secretary of the Communist Party in 1922, gradually consolidated his position as the new leader of the Soviet Union. Although Lenin had been skeptical about Stalin's ability to head the party and the state, Stalin managed to sustain and strengthen his position, which he kept until 1953. What was his role in history?

As with Lenin, the name "Stalin" was a pseudonym. Josif Jugashvili (his real name) was born in the town of Gori in Georgia. Ethnically Georgian, Stalin spoke Russian fluently but with a heavy accent. He began his political activities early in life. In 1905, he met Lenin and they began to collaborate. Stalin became a member of the Central Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1912. At the same time he began contributing to *Pravda*, the newly created party newspaper. Between his initial appointment in 1917 and his inheritance of the party leadership in 1927, Stalin occupied many posts in the party. His power remained unchallenged from the late 1920s until his death in 1953.

Stalin initiated the policies of industrialization and collectivization. He also directed the massive and coordinated policy of intimidation and terror against his own people. During the war against Germany (1941–45), Stalin strategically revived Russian nationalism and directed the effort to defend the Russian homeland against the invading enemy. Like Lenin, by leading the country through times of great peril and hardship, he solidified his position in the Russian collective consciousness as father of the nation. Supporters of Stalin's repressive actions often suggest that he had very little choice but to resort to harsh policies in a country as large as the Soviet Union. Political violence was necessary to overcome the difficulties of the transitional period. Opponents of Stalin's policies strongly disagree. They portray him as a classic tyrant: that is, someone who rules without law, whose power is virtually unrestrained, and whose ambitions are unchecked (Haslam and Reicher, 2007).

Even today, there is no strong consensus about Stalin's role in Soviet history. Most Russians in surveys say that they think his impact was negative. However, there are many others who associate Stalin's name with the super-powerful and unified state that the Soviet Union used to be, and who continue to find justifications for, and even support, the repressive policies he carried out.

political system. Stalin began to turn away from the Soviet Union's initial policies of international self-isolation. For example, the Kremlin sanctioned hundreds of volunteers to fight on the side of the left-wing government in Spain during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). Moscow was involved in a military confrontation with Japan in 1938, and attacked Finland in 1939 and seized some of its territories. Stalin also sought and reached a political agreement with the increasingly powerful Nazi

Germany. After signing the Soviet–German pact in 1939, Russia moved troops into Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and portions of western Belarus and Ukraine. Using support from friendly communist leaders in the Baltic countries, the Soviet Union seized these territories. Supporters of these actions insist that this was a unification based on mutual agreement. Critics argue that the actions were illegal and immoral. Yet others maintain that although Russia's policies toward the Baltic States and Poland were questionable, they were necessary in order to protect the Soviet Union's security.

Unfortunately, the Soviet Union came to the major military confrontation of its history unprepared. In the 1930s the strength of the Red Army was built up, and there was an expansion of the military bureaucracy. However, Stalin removed and persecuted many top military commanders in 1937. This seemingly inexplicable political move seriously disrupted the country's defense policies and the process of modernization of the military. Although Stalin thought that a confrontation with Germany would be inevitable, he did not believe that it would start in the summer of 1941, when the army had still not been prepared to fight a war of this magnitude.

On June 22, 1941, Germany began military actions against the Soviet Union. This led to the most devastating war in the history of Russia. The German plan was for the Soviet Union to be destroyed militarily, occupied, broken into pieces, and converted into several vassal states. But the Soviet Union resisted fiercely, and things did not go according to this plan.

By the end of 1941 the Soviet Union had mobilized more than 14 million people between the ages of 18 and 61. Despite the mobilization of all available Soviet resources to try to prevent them, German troops reached Moscow and St Petersburg (which had been renamed Leningrad, though it resumed its original name in the final year of the Soviet Union) in the fall of 1941. The situation was critical, and the central government prepared for evacuation. However this never took place. Although the Soviet troops pushed the German armies back, by that winter Leningrad had been encircled by them and was under siege.

The siege of the city lasted for more than two years, and cost 1 million Russian lives, more than the combined total of British and US losses during the Second World War. In 1942, German troops pushed back in the southern part of Russia, captured several strategic regions in the Caucasus region and reached the major city of Stalingrad (as it was then called: formerly Tsaritsyn, it was renamed Volgograd in 1961). The Soviet Army defended the city in a historic battle, then began a full-scale counter-offensive in 1943, winning a decisive battle near the city of Kursk. In 1944 the army, aided by the British and American troops of the Second Front in Western Europe, began a decisive push. They ended the war in Europe in May 1945 by capturing Berlin.

For the Soviets, the victory was bittersweet. The whole European part of the Soviet Union was ruined and the country's resources exhausted. The country had lost about 26 million people, including about 11 million military casualties (Krivosheev, 2001). Yet the Second World War is widely considered today as one of the most glorious times in Russian history. Regardless of their political orientation, Russians are proud of the victory their troops helped to win. The many battles they fought, including those for Moscow, St Petersburg, Stalingrad, and Kursk, are glorified in the media and mass culture. Opinions vary, however, about many important details, and particularly the role of Stalin in the victory against Germany. His decisive role is as indisputable as it is controversial. He is credited as the supreme commander but criticized for making significant mistakes not just in the preparations (including the execution of commanders) but also in the conduct of the war, which contributed to the very heavy casualties.

On the whole, most Soviet people felt that the victory over Germany was a triumph not only for Russia but also for the Soviet system. They accept the view that was promoted in the Soviet Union, that the Soviet system acted as the defender of humankind against aggressors. The Soviet Union, in their view, also unified its many ethnic groups, who all fought shoulder-to-shoulder against the enemy. Nationalistic feelings grew: the war awakened Russian national self-identity (Grossman, 1970). Russians to this day are very sensitive about any evaluations of the Second World War that play down the role of the Soviet Union in ending the Nazi regime in Germany. Most Russians continue to emphasize the defeat of Germany as the main outcome of that war. They tend to give less weight to Stalin's mistakes and the aggressive nature of the Soviet Union's foreign policy after 1945.

Russians speak their mind ...

... On the Soviet occupation of Europe in 1945. Percentage of Russians saying that in 1945 the Soviet Army, after liberating Central Europe, established communist regimes there: 11. Percentage considering the actions of the Soviet Army as an act of "liberation": 77 percent.

Source: WCIOM (2009b).

The Soviet Union during the Cold War

After 1945, the Soviet Union emerged as a substantially weakened yet victorious nation, unified around its ruler. Although the leaders in Moscow, Washington, and London had established very productive relations during

the war, in 1945 they failed to create the conditions for lasting good relations. The period from the end of the war to the late 1980s is known as the Cold War. This describes the global state of tension (though not outright warfare) between the Soviet Union and its closest allies on the one hand, and the United States with its allies, on the other.

There were several causes of this bitter division. From an ideological standpoint, the United States and the Soviet Union were examples of different types of political system, and both claimed that the other's system was inhumane and dangerous. The Soviet ideology maintained a belief in the inevitability of a conflict between communism and imperialism. Anticommunism was an official policy in Washington. By August 1949 the Soviet Union had become a nuclear power, after the United States had developed (and used) its nuclear capabilities in 1945. The emerging nuclear competition brought fear and distrust to both countries. Personal factors also contributed to the tension. Stalin, for example, became increasingly fearful about a nuclear conflict with the west, and even believed that it was inevitable (Zubok, 2007).

For almost the entire second half of the 20th century, both countries engaged in an endless global competition. Mutual suspicions and fears drove the defense and security policies of both nations, and the build-up of arms in the "arms race" drained national resources. Russia became a major international player, and tried to counter any real or perceived advance of the United States and its allies, in almost every part of the world. The Soviet Union joined China and North Korea in their fight against troops from the United States and the United Nations in South Korea in 1950–53. In a similar way, Moscow sent instructors, military aircraft, weapons, food, and money to the Vietnamese forces fighting against the United States during the Vietnam War in the 1960s and early 1970s. The Soviet government sponsored communist parties in their attempts to win or retain power in countries in Central Europe. Moscow crushed anti-Communist revolts in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The Soviets openly supported Fidel Castro in Cuba, and placed nuclear missiles there in 1962, causing one of the most significant nuclear crises in history. In 1979 the Soviet military entered Afghanistan, and remained in the country for the next eight years. Moscow provided supplies and either openly or secretly participated in violent conflicts in Guatemala, Palestine, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, and many other countries.

The post-war reconstruction

Back in the 1940s, the Soviet Union needed to recover from the post-war economic crisis. Most attention was given to heavy industries, many of

which had been transferred temporarily during the war to eastern parts of Russia. The authorities continued to use semi-military policies. In some places, people who skipped work or underperformed were treated as criminals. The Kremlin continued to publish reports about hidden enemies, saboteurs, and foreign agents. In the countryside, because there was an acute shortage of laborers most small collective farms were reorganized and incorporated into larger collective or state farms. The number of these farms fell to 94,000, three times fewer than before the war (Orlov et al., 2008).

The economic situation began to improve in the late 1940s. The food rationing that had been introduced during the war was gradually eased, then abandoned. Monetary reform took place in 1947. State-controlled retail prices went down. Local governments began to restore ruined cities and towns, build new apartments, and distribute them for free among the neediest. However, there remained a housing shortage, and the lack of good-quality affordable housing is still a problem today.

The thaw

Stalin's death in 1953 was an agonizing event for the entire nation. He had been the country's supreme leader for more than 25 years. His name was commonly associated with his country's most spectacular achievements, including the victory in the war and the post-war reconstruction. Many people, particularly those who lived in large cities, genuinely believed that the political repressions that had taken place under Stalin's watch had been necessary. Some of them did not accept that innocent people had been persecuted, but believed all the victims had been criminals, saboteurs, wreckers, or spies (Davies, 1997). Others accepted that there had been massive abuses of power, but believed that Stalin had been unaware of all that was being done in his name. See Table 2.2.

However, a new and powerful political doctrine emerged in the middle of 1950s and shattered some of the pro-Stalinist beliefs. A new political leader,

Table 2.2 *The views of Russians today on Stalin*

Percentage agreeing with the following statements:	
Stalinist repressions were the right thing to do	2
Under Stalin, the country was moving in the right direction	37
The country under Stalin was moving in the wrong direction	48
Most victims of the repressions were innocent	51

Source: WCIOM (2008).

Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971), came to power in the Kremlin, assuming the posts of the General Secretary of the Communist Party and Chair of the Council of Ministers. A down-to-earth, energetic, accessible, and outspoken leader, he was a direct contrast to Stalin, who had seldom appeared in public and remained in many ways a mysterious figure. But personality was not the only difference between Khrushchev and Stalin: Khrushchev was a pragmatic and populist leader. He sincerely believed in communist ideas, but he also believed that the country needed to change its direction.

One of Khrushchev's major decisions was a daring attempt to demolish the "personality cult" that had grown up around his predecessor. At the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in 1956, Khrushchev delivered a secret speech in which he described Stalin's methods as serious violations of "true" communist methods of management, which were supposed to be transparent and democratic. The report mentioned the mass repressions and human right violations that had taken place in the Stalin era. Khrushchev stopped short of calling Stalin's behavior criminal, but the signal was clear. Soon Stalin's statues began to disappear from offices and city squares. Stalin's embalmed body was removed from the mausoleum near the Kremlin where it had been placed next to Lenin's body (which is still on show there today) and buried in a grave by the Kremlin wall. Khrushchev's new policies called for openness and collegiality in decisions.

People could now speak freely without fear of being interrogated or arrested. The ability to learn from past mistakes was largely attributed to the socialist system's capability for self-improvement. The party was returning to the "normal" course of life and work: no repressions, no political witch-hunt, and no new personality cult. Foreign policy was changing. A new concept of coexistence with the capitalist world emerged. By the end of the 1950s, the quality of life had improved substantially for most citizens. By the early 1960s, television had become affordable for many Soviet families. Technology also brought opportunities to listen to foreign radio (although this was not formally encouraged). The government began to allow some trusted people to travel abroad (which had been forbidden formerly), and opened up limited opportunities to participate in foreign student and professional exchanges, especially with socialist countries. All these developments helped people acquire a more realistic image of their life and society. So Khrushchev's ascension to power and the implementation of new policies created an atmosphere of hopeful anticipation of change (Zubok, 2009).

The stagnation period

However, many senior Communist leaders were unhappy with Khrushchev's hectic leadership style and reckless decisions, and they voted