STALINISM AND THE DILEMMAS OF REVOLUTION

I. Purpose and overview of lecture

A. To take a look at one of the most terrifying of modern dictators

B. To indicate how his rule was related to the dilemmas of revolution discussed last time:
   1. A party that was inclined to ever-narrowing dictatorship, though supposedly representing the will of the proletariat
   2. A revolution that was supposed to spread but didn’t

II. The puzzle of Stalin’s rise to power

A. Retrospectively, we now understand that it was Stalin who rose to the kind of dictatorship that Trotsky warned about before the revolution
   1. But that development was hardly obvious in the first years of the regime
   2. Indeed, insofar as there was worry about a dictator, Trotsky seemed the likely candidate

B. Stalin was little known in the West between 1917 and 1920

C. The famous figures were Lenin and Trotsky, above all, and then others like Zinoviev, Bukharin, Radek, Kamenev, etc.

D. Yet nine years later Stalin towered over all of them

E. And nine years after that—by 1938—he had physically eliminated nearly every conceivable rival
   1. Indeed, nearly every one of the Bolsheviks who had led the party through the revolution disappeared from view
   2. This was a remarkable achievement, especially for a man who was scarcely known in the years of the revolution

F. In order to understand how Stalin accomplished it, we need to know many things—about him, but also about conditions in Russia in the 1920s

G. We should begin by returning, then, to the dilemmas that the Bolsheviks faced in 1921
   1. Proletarian revolutionaries contradictorily in control of a peasant-bourgeois country
2. A dictatorially organized party that expected its dictatorship would no longer be necessary once revolution broke out in the West
   a) But revolution did not break out in the West
3. Thus, other solutions became necessary—and in that necessity for "other solutions" lies part of the explanation of Stalin’s success

III. Facing the dilemma: the need to industrialize

A. The failure of revolution in the West finally induced Lenin to retreat from War Communism to the New Economic Policy, or NEP
   1. That essentially meant re-establishing the free market in small-scale production, both in the countryside and in the cities
   2. The state was to retain the "commanding heights" of heavy industry
      a) But those "heights" in fact did not exist
         (1) Russia's prewar industrial economy was in ruins, producing something like 8% of what had been produced in 1911

B. Once it was squarely faced that revolution in the West was not to be expected in the immediate future, all factions of the Bolshevik Party agreed:
   1. Russia must begin to industrialize by itself, without aid from a socialist West, to recover and even to grow beyond the levels of the pre-war period

C. The big question was "how?"—how could capital be collected and effectively invested toward rapid growth in such a backward, war-ravaged, and isolated country?
   1. Again, however, there was wide agreement: Only by profits gained in the agricultural sector
   2. Other possibilities—foreign loans, savings of the wealthy classes—were not really open to Soviet Russia

D. Beyond these points of agreement, however, vehement disagreements developed
   1. The right or moderate wing of the party, led by Bukharin, insisted on the need for cooperation, not coercion, of the peasantry
2. He insisted that gaining capital for industrialization would require the willing cooperation of the peasants, especially the wealthier peasants
   a) "Cooperation" in this regard meant encouraging the peasants through market incentives to produce a surplus of goods in order that they could buy consumer goods produced by the industrial sector—in a kind of free market
   b) Peasants would "cooperate" only if the industrial sector produced the kind of consumer goods the peasants were interested in, rather than concentrating on heavy industry or producers' goods
   c) The trickle of profit earned in this exchange between agriculture and industry could then be put back into heavy industry or infrastructure
   d) But it was bound to be a slow, gradual process

E. Bukharin's position was essentially that of Lenin's NEP, of the notion of proletarian and peasant cooperation with market incentives rather than state planning and coercion, collective ownership, rapid industrialization
   1. Lenin, however, did not give direction to this policy for very long, since he fell ill to a series of strokes from 1922 to 1924
      a) He lingered on, unable really to lead the party, until his death in early 1924

F. Bukharin's position was also that of Stalin, or at least so it seemed
   1. Stalin in particular put special emphasis on the need to reconcile the peasantry to the rule of the party of the proletariat
      a) Indeed, he began to stress how some of the party's leaders, in his words, "underestimated the Russian peasant" (he had Trotsky and his followers especially in mind)
         (1) In other words, the Russian peasant, he argued, was socialistically inclined, would not be as hostile to the proletariat as peasants were in the West

G. One might say that to some degree older narodnik ideals were
finding a paradoxical expression the Bolshevik Party

1. The Russian peasant, so the argument went, was still at heart a socialist, because he had been for centuries part of collective institutions
   a) His commitment to bourgeois forms and ideals was relatively weak and quite recent
   b) He could then accept socialist ideals and cooperation with the proletariat, even if the "bourgeois" peasants of the West could not

H. Both Stalin and Bukharin also stressed that it was important to develop peaceful relations with the West, insofar as possible

1. Soviet Russia’s proclaimed policy was to build "socialism in one country"—not try to spread it to the West or the world
   a) The hope of course was that the West would then become less hostile to the Bolsheviks, trade with them, and not support efforts to bring them down

I. The position of the left wing of the party:

1. Bukharin’s ideas encountered widespread and influential opposition within the party

2. The opposition, or the "left," was repelled by the idea of such open cooperation not only with the peasants but with the rich peasants, or kulaks
   a) Such cooperation meant encouraging them to expand their production and their holdings, to make greater individual profits
   b) Such profits would then be used to by the products of the industrial sector

3. Thus, the Bolsheviks, the party of the proletariat, was getting into the business of encouraging small-scale rural capitalism
   a) And that also meant encouraging, or at least condoning, the exploitation of the rural poor, the agricultural workers, by the kulaks

4. The paradox was striking:
   a) The party of the oppressed, of the underdog; the party sworn to destroy capitalism and the exploitation of man by man—was now going to encourage it!
5. Such had been the very policy of the pre-war minister, Stolypin
   a) He believed that encouraging the kulak was sound conservative policy
   b) The kulak would be a natural supporter of tsarist autocracy, as the property-owning peasantry was a supporter of the established order in western Europe

J. Thus, the left described the NEP and Bukharin's ideas more generally as both dangerous and demoralizing—not only unsocialist but anti-socialist
   1. These ideas would encourage the growth of a naturally conservative class that would oppose socialism and communism
   2. They equally threatened to disillusion and demoralize those who had devoted their lives to the ideals of socialism
      a) And this aspect was particularly troubling in light of the overwhelming evidence of a loss of original idealism everywhere
      b) Corruption and cynicism, careerism and bureaucratization, were spreading throughout the party ranks

K. There was a further danger: The slow pace of Bukharin's model left Russia vulnerable to attack from the West
   1. The Bolsheviks lived in constant fear of an attack of the capitalist west to destroy the "bacillus" of socialist revolution
   2. The left of the party in particular did not believe it possible to reconcile western capitalists to "socialism in one country", at least not for long
      a) Thus, they also emphasized the need to export revolution, to build parties in the West capable of seizing power in the near future

L. The arguments of the left
   1. Trotsky was prominent among those who criticized Bukharin and the right
   2. He and the party left wing argued for a more aggressive, coercive policy
3. They argued that if communism were to survive in Russia it was necessary to "squeeze" the peasant, not condone or encourage his greedy instincts, using market incentives

   a) "Squeezing" could take on many forms, not simply forced requisitions (which had happened under War Communism, 1918-20)

   b) Generally it was seen in terms of heavy taxation, unfavorable exchange in a much more tightly controlled market

   c) Such "squeezing" would allow, so the left believed, a more rapid accumulation of capital by the state and a large-scale investment in heavy industry—building, or rebuilding, the infrastructure of an advanced economy

4. Similarly, the left argued that workers in industry would also have to be subjected to a harsher discipline than was the case under NEP

   a) In simple terms, the working class would have to work longer hours for less pay

   b) This, too, of course would help to generate capital for investment in heavy industry, increase productivity

M. The disadvantages of the left's policy

1. Bukharin and the right were not slow to point out the dangers of this path

2. It meant turning the Bolshevik Party against the overwhelming majority of the population, even more than was already the case

   a) Clearly, the policies of the left would not be popular either with the peasants or with the working class

3. Even on the left it was often recognized that the policy of rapid industrialization would finally need an iron dictator, a communist "tsar"

   a) Only a man who could inspire unquestioning and fanatical loyalties could make such a policy work

   b) And only a man with very great power would be able to see such a policy through its inevitable difficulties
IV. The struggle for power in the party

A. These debates were much intertwined with the struggle for power as Lenin lay dying

B. One of the principal fears, at least for many in the party, in regard to the policy of the left, was that the iron dictator would be Trotsky himself
   1. He was, it must be remembered, the man that most seemed like Napoleon
   2. He was the ruthless leader of the Red Army, the idol of Russia's intellectual youth, the brilliant leader of the October Revolution
      a) His arrogance, his disdain for many others in the party, his overpowering belief in the correctness of his ideas—all seemed the qualities of a future dictator

C. The Bolsheviks were avid students of history, and the danger of a "Thermidor" and a Bonaparte was something they now talked about constantly

D. No one at first suspected that Stalin could play such a role
   1. He was regarded as retiring, slow-witted, an unassertive
   2. Moreover, he stood at the right of the party on the issue of industrialization, thus was considered a "moderate"

E. However, he was gathering, slowly but surely, tremendous power into his hands, in the following areas:
   1. General secretary of the Bolshevik Party
      a) This gave him power in appointments, in putting his men into positions of power
   2. Commissar of Nationalities in the Council of People's Commissars (the executive organ of the state)
   3. Supervision of the secret police
      a) Something he at first used cautiously, but which he would later use with ruthlessness

F. Paradoxically, Trotsky's apparent strength was also a kind of weakness
   1. All of those who feared him—especially Zinoviev and Kamenev—allied with Stalin

G. By a complex and shrewd set of maneuvers, Stalin was able to
eliminate not only Trotsky but finally Kamenev and Zinoviev as well

1. Most observers believed that he would then continue with the policy of cooperation with the kulaks, slow industrialization
2. But here he surprised everyone
   a) Once he had destroyed the left as an organized faction, he took up its program—in an even more extreme form

V. The First Five Year Plan and Collectivization of Agriculture

A. The plan of the left, taken up by Stalin in 1928, had two aspects
   1. The organization of the "squeeze" of the peasants
   2. The organization of industry for rapid industrialization

B. Clearly, dealing with the peasants would be the most difficult and the most decisive
   1. They were the most numerous, the most dispersed, the most hostile
   2. The "squeeze" was effected by means of the kolkhoz or collective farm
      a) The formerly individual, privately-owned plots were joined together into collective units
      b) All the farmers in the area of those previously private plots were now to work in common
   3. The kolkhoz attempted to attack two basic problems
      a) The natural inefficiency of the small farm, which could not take advantage of the economies of scale, of machinery, fertilizers, etc.
      b) The difficulty of controlling, politically, many dispersed farmers
      c) The small farmer could more easily hoard grain, hide food
      d) Now, they were watched over by representatives of the government

C. In the abstract, the ideas behind the kolkhoz were sound
   1. But in actual practice these collective farms were utter disasters
a) In part because the peasants resisted tenaciously
b) In part because of the inefficiency and brutality of those that carried out the collectivization

2. In principle, the kolkhoz idea was supposed to appeal to the small and medium-sized farmers
   a) They were told that they would now be able to use the kulaks' tools, take over their land, etc
   b) The kulaks were to be "liquidated as a class" and chased from the land

3. In actual practice even the small and medium-sized peasants tenaciously resisted collectivization
   a) There were often pitched battles in the villages, with much bloodshed, before the peasants were successfully herded into the new farms
   b) The battles had disastrous repercussions: Many peasants slaughtered their animals, having a feast before government officials could stop them
   c) And the loss of the animals had further repercussions: There was no longer the power to pull plows, transport crops, provide fertilizer

4. Production in the countryside collapsed in many areas
   a) The loss of livestock was not made good until some time after World War II

5. Grain production, however, did recover substantially by the end of the First Five Year Plan

6. In the final analysis one may say that the collective farm achieved what was intended, for all the bungling and brutality
   a) The countryside was subjected to a more secure control by the state
   b) The peasants were put into a position where they could be more effectively "squeezed"

5. Their living standard dropped to a bare minimum, so that the city population could grow, the new factory proletarians be fed

7. Millions in fact starved to death in these terrible years

VI. The organization of industry
A. The organization of industry entailed basically a reproduction of many of the brutal conditions of early industrialization in the West or in Russia before the war

1. Workers were put under very severe discipline, required to speed up, work longer hours
2. They were also given lower wages, longer hours, generally shabby working conditions
3. Yet, unquestionably Russia's industrial productivity increased remarkably
   a) Russians could believe that their country was catching up with the West
4. Such was all the more the case, of course, since this was a time of world depression in the capitalist countries

VII. The Purges, 1934-38

A. Many have argued that what Stalin set into motion between 1928 and 1934 was "necessary"

1. Not in every detail, but in the sense of solving the political, agricultural, and industrial dilemmas of Russia, emerging out of the revolution

B. But relatively few have tried to argue that what Stalin orchestrated in the next four years was "necessary"

1. Stalin's tendencies to paranoia become ever more pronounced
2. And in his sick suspiciousness and jealousy he wiped out nearly the entire ruling and military caste of Russia

C. The year 1934 marked the end of the First Five Year Plan

1. Russia as a whole, and the Bolshevik Party in particular, breathed a sigh of relief: the plan was declared to be achieved
2. The 17th party congress, meeting in 1934, called itself the "congress of victors"
3. Everywhere was the expectation that with victory, with collectivization and the Five Year Plan, it would now be possible to relax somewhat
   a) And there were many signs that such would be the case
   b) Some of the former leaders (Zinoviev, Bukharin, Preobrazhensky, Radek) were even allowed to
address the congress

c) They acknowledged their past "errors" and praised the success of the Plan
d) They were allowed to assume modest positions of service in the party once again
e) Similarly, a more modest rate of growth was agreed upon for the Second Five Year Plan
f) The secret police was reorganized and put under closer control
g) In many other areas it seemed that a loosening up was under way

D. The assassination of Sergei Kirov

1. In the context of this euphoria, young Kirov was elected to the Central Committee with an ovation that many felt was equal to that of Stalin
   a) He seemed the choice of moderates as a successor to Stalin

2. He had much in his favor:
   a) He was young, handsome, a Russian (not a Jew or a member of another minority group, as so many Old Bolsheviks were; Stalin was a Georgian)
   b) He was very popular with the rank-and-file party member and with the broad masses
   c) He had apparently begun to say in private that the time had come to put an end to the strife in the country, which was a notably different tone from that of Stalin

3. On Dec. 1, 1934, Kirov was assassinated
   a) Evidence now strongly suggests that Stalin staged the whole thing, or gave tacit approval to those who did
   b) However, at the time he appeared grief-stricken and intent on vengeance
   c) Few in the party suspected him

4. Stalin blamed the assassination on a secret "Zinovievite" center of opposition

E. Now the purges began in earnest

1. With various pauses, Stalin proceeded to liquidate nearly
every figure who had led the party at Lenin's time

2. The purges reached a kind of climax from 1937 to 1939
3. The secret police spread terror throughout Russian society
   a) Mutual denunciations of "spies" snowballed into nightmarish dimensions

VIII. Results of the purges

A. Something like 35,000 military officers were arrested
   1. This included approximately 90% of the generals, 80% of the colonels

B. Out of 2,000 representatives to the Congress of Victors in 1934, over 1100 were arrested for counter-revolutionary crimes

C. Stalin as Vozhd'
   1. At the 18th party congress, which was not held until 1939, Stalin stood at the height of his powers
   2. Perhaps no man in history has ever exercised such power
   3. The representatives to the congress were cowed and submissive
      a) They gave unquestioned and enthusiastic support to Stalin's reports and to those of his lieutenants
   4. Stalin had by now become a leader of super-human dimensions
      a) He was the Vozhd' of Russia, just as Hitler was the Fuehrer, or Mussolini the Duce
   5. This was the man who was considered dull, slow-witted, and unambitious in 1920

D. But Russia was to face—very soon—new and even more fearsome trials
   1. And even more the country would need a man of steel to lead it, a man who could evoke unquestioning and fanatical devotion