

Introduction

The centrepiece of this history of contemporary Russia is the period of communist government. Before 1917 Russia and her empire were ruled by the tsars of the Romanov dynasty. Nicholas II was overthrown in the February Revolution, and the ensuing Provisional Government of liberals and socialists lasted merely a few months. Vladimir Lenin and his communist party organized the October Revolution in 1917 and established the world's first communist state, which survived until the USSR's abolition in 1991. A new compound of politics, society, economics and culture prevailed in the intervening years. The USSR was a highly centralized, one-party dictatorship. It enforced a single official ideology; it imposed severe restrictions on national, religious and cultural self-expression. Its economy was predominantly state-owned. This Soviet compound served as model for the many communist states created elsewhere.

The phases of the recent Russian past have passed with breathtaking rapidity. After the October Revolution a Civil War broke out across Russia and her former empire. Having won the military struggle, the communists themselves came close to being overthrown by popular rebellions. Lenin introduced a New Economic Policy in 1921 which made temporary concessions especially to the peasantry; but at the end of the same decade Iosif Stalin, who was emerging as the leading party figure after Lenin's death in 1924, hurled the country into a campaign for forced-rate industrialization and forcible agricultural collectivization. The Great Terror followed in the late 1930s. Then came the Second World War. After Germany's defeat in 1945, Stalin brought Eastern Europe under Soviet dominion and

undertook post-war reconstruction with his own brutal methods. Only after his death in 1953 could the party leadership under Nikita Khrushchëv begin to reform the Soviet order. But Khrushchëv's rule produced such political instability and resentment that in 1964 he was ousted by his colleagues.

His successor Leonid Brezhnev presided over a phase, and a lengthy phase at that, of uneasy stabilization. When he died in 1982, the struggle over the desirability of reform was resumed. Mikhail Gorbachëv became communist party leader in 1985 and introduced radical reforms of policies and institutions. A drastic transformation resulted. In 1989, after Gorbachëv had indicated that he would not use his armed forces to maintain Soviet political control in Eastern Europe, the communist regimes fell in quick succession. Russia's 'outer empire' crumbled. At home, too, Gorbachëv's measures undermined the status quo. Most of his central party and governmental associates were disconcerted by his reforms. In August 1991 some of them made a bungled attempt to stop the process through a *coup d'état*. Gorbachëv returned briefly to power, but was constrained to abandon his own Soviet communist party and accept the dissolution of the USSR.

Russia and other Soviet republics were independent by 1992, and Boris Yeltsin as Russian president proclaimed the de-communization of political and economic life as his strategic aim. Under his leadership a Commonwealth of Independent States was formed. But several fundamental difficulties endured. Economic decline sharply accelerated. The manufacturing sector collapsed. Social and administrative dislocation was acute. Criminality was pervasive. What is more, recurrent conflict among politicians led Yeltsin to order the storming of the Russian White House in October 1993 and the arrest of his opponents. He introduced a new constitution in December; but strong opposition to reform remained under him and his successor Vladimir Putin. Communism had not just been an ideology, a party and a state; it had become an entire order of society, and the attitudes, techniques and objective interests within this society were resistant to rapid dissolution. The path towards democracy and the market economy was bestrewn with obstacles.

So turbulent a history inevitably led to differing interpretations. Journalists and former diplomats published the initial accounts, and analytical sophistication was provided by Russian émigrés as they continued their political disputes abroad. The focus on Soviet affairs was sharpened after World War Two, which left the USSR as a world power at last. Research institutes were created in the USA, Western Europe and Japan; books and articles appeared in a publishing torrent. Debate was always lively, often polemical. Such discussions were severely curtailed for decades in Moscow by a regime seeking to impose doctrinal uniformity; but from the late 1980s Soviet writers too were permitted to publish the results of their thinking.

Official communist propagandists from 1917 to the mid-1980s claimed that there was nothing seriously wrong with the Soviet Union and that a perfectly functioning socialist order was within attainable range.¹ Such boasts were challenged from the very start. Anti-Bolshevik socialists such as Yuli Martov and Fëdor Dan asserted that Leninism, being based on dictatorship and bureaucracy, was a fundamental distortion of socialism.² By the end of the 1920s their position was shared by Lev Trotski, albeit with the proviso that it was Stalin's misapplication of Leninism rather than Leninism itself that had caused the distortion.³ Other writers, especially Ivan Ilin (and, most recently, the outstanding figure has been Alexander Solzhenitsyn), claimed that Leninism was an import entirely alien to traditional Russian virtues and customs.⁴ But this school of thought was challenged by the religious philosopher and socialist Nikolai Berdyaev who depicted the USSR as a reincarnation of Russian intellectual extremism. Berdyaev argued that the regime of Lenin and Stalin had reinforced the traditions of political repression, of ideological intolerance and of a passive, resentful society.⁵

Yet another interpretation was offered by Nikolai Trubetskoi, who had fled Russia after the communist seizure of power. He stressed that Russian history had always followed a path which was neither 'European' nor 'Asian' but a mixture of the two. From such ideas came the so-called Eurasianist school of thought. Trubetskoi and his disciples regarded a strong ruler and a centralized administrative order

as crucial to the country's well-being. They suggested that several basic features of Soviet life – the clan-like groups in politics, the ruthless suppression of opposition and the culture of unthinking obedience – were simply a continuation of ages-old tradition.⁶ Nikolai Ustryalov, another émigré, concurred that the communists were not as revolutionary as they seemed. But he and his fellow analysts in the 'Change of Landmarks' journal nevertheless insisted that communism in power was not merely traditionalist. Ustryalov, a conservative, celebrated Lenin's success in re-establishing a unitary state in the former Russian Empire. He perceived the communists as essentially the economic modernizers needed by society, and he predicted that the interests of Russia as a great power would mean steadily more to them than their Marxism.⁷

Both Trubetskoi and Ustryalov had a lasting influence. Eurasianism was further developed after World War Two by Lev Gumilëv, who praised the Mongol contribution to Russian political and cultural achievements.⁸ Such an idea was rejected in the 1950s by E. H. Carr and J. Barrington Moore. Instead they depicted Lenin and Stalin as authoritarian modernizers. While not condoning state terror, they treated communist rule as the sole effective modality for Russia to compete with the economy and culture of the West.⁹

Such a viewpoint appeared insipid to Franz Neumann, who in the late 1930s described the USSR as 'totalitarian'. Leonard Schapiro and others picked up this concept after the Second World War.¹⁰ They suggested that the USSR and Nazi Germany had invented a form of social order wherein power was exercised exclusively at the political centre and the state monopolized control over the means of coercion and public communication and intervened deeply in the economy. Such an order retained a willingness to use force against its citizens as a normal method of rule. Writers of this school contended that the outcome was the total subjection of the entire society to the demands of the supreme ruling group. Individual citizens were completely defenceless. The ruling group, supposedly, had made itself invulnerable to reactions in the broader state and society. In Stalin's USSR and Hitler's Germany the group was dominated by its dictator. But the system could be totalitarian even if

a single dictator was lacking. Schapiro insisted that the main aspects of the Soviet order remained intact after Stalin's death in 1953.

Taking a somewhat different stance, the Yugoslav former communist Milovan Djilas suggested that a new class had come into existence with its own interests and authority. Accordingly the USSR, far from moving towards a classless condition, had administrative élites capable of passing on their privileges from generation to generation.¹¹ While not repudiating Djilas's analysis, Daniel Bell argued that trends in contemporary industrial society were already pushing the Soviet leadership into slackening its authoritarianism – and Bell noted that Western capitalist societies were adopting many measures of state economic regulation and welfare provision favoured in the USSR. In this fashion, it was said, a so-called convergence of Soviet and Western types of society was occurring.¹² Jerry Hough contended that the economic and social interest groups which influenced politics in the West also functioned in the communist countries.¹³

Each of these interpretations successfully identified important aspects of Soviet reality. There was even a grain of validity in official Soviet claims that advances were made in popular welfare. Yet Martov and Dan were more convincing with their counter-claim that Lenin distorted socialist ideas and introduced policies that ruined the lives of millions of people; and as Solzhenitsyn later emphasized, many features of Soviet ideology originated outside Russia. Berdyaev for his part was right to argue that the USSR reproduced pre-revolutionary ideological and social traditions. Trubetskoi was justified in pointing to the impact of Russia's long encounter with Asia. So, too, was Ustryalov in claiming that the policies of communist leaders were increasingly motivated by considerations about the interests of the country as a Great Power. As Carr and Moore insisted, these leaders were also authoritarian modernizers. There was plausibility, moreover, in the respective arguments by Djilas that the Soviet administrative élites were turning into a distinct social class in the USSR and by Bell that modern industrial society produced social and economic pressures which could not entirely be rebuffed by the Kremlin leadership. And Neumann and Schapiro were overwhelmingly right to underline the

unprecedented oppressiveness of the Soviet order in its struggle for complete control of state and society.

This book incorporates the chief insights from such interpretations. Yet the interpretations often conflict with each other, and one interpretation – the totalitarianist one – seems to me to take the measure of the USSR better than the others. Admittedly there are several difficulties with totalitarianism as an analytical model. Comparison of Stalin's USSR and Hitler's Germany reveals differences as well as similarities. In Nazi Germany many traditions of a civil society survived. The economy remained largely a capitalist one and state ownership was never dominant. The churches continued to function; priests were arrested only if they criticized Nazism. Private associations and clubs were allowed to survive as long as they offered no direct challenge to Hitler's government. For most years of its existence the USSR had little trace of a civil society, capitalism, free religious observance or private clubs. This was true not only in the 1930s but also in the subsequent decades.¹⁴

The Soviet compound was indeed unrivalled in scope. The ingredients included a one-party state, dictatorship, administrative hyper-centralism, a state-dominated economy, restricted national self-expression, legal nihilism and a monopolistic ideology. Central power was not merely exercised ruthlessly: it penetrated politics, economics, administration and culture; it attacked religion and inhibited the expression of nationhood. The ingredients were stronger in some phases than in others. But even during the 1920s and 1970s, when the compound was at its weakest, communist rulers were deeply intrusive and repressive. Such a compound was patented by communism in the USSR and reproduced after World War Two in eastern Europe, China and eventually in Cuba and countries in Africa.

Unfortunately most works describing the USSR as totalitarian tend towards one-sidedness and exaggeration. In fact the Soviet political leadership never totally controlled the state and the state never totally controlled society. From the 1970s several writers in Western Europe and the USA argued that proponents of the 'totalitarianist model' were so preoccupied with Kremlin politicians

that they overlooked the significance of lower administrative levels, of 'the localities' and of broad social groups. 'History from below' was proposed as a corrective. This revisionism exposed the unknown USSR to the light. Worker and peasant life in 1917 at last started to be chronicled. Local party committees under Lenin were examined. Urban conditions in the 1930s, as industry expanded fast, came under scrutiny. Studies were made of industrial managers under Khrushchëv and provincial party secretaries under Brezhnev.¹⁵ This vibrant development in historiography was initially confined to the West. In the USSR it was anaesthetized until radical political reform began in the late 1980s. It has retained momentum among Russian historians since the Soviet Union's collapse.¹⁶

Revisionism, however, had weaknesses of its own. Its success in shining a lamp on neglected areas of the Soviet past could not disguise its failure to supply a general alternative to the totalitarianist model it cogently criticized. Furthermore, revisionist scholarship was internally divided. Sheila Fitzpatrick urged the need for social factors to take precedence over political ones in historical explanation. She and others also accorded little importance to dictatorship and terror and suggested that even Stalin's regime rested on strong popular approval.¹⁷ Her interpretation attracted diverse criticisms. Stephen Cohen, Moshe Lewin and R.W. Davies agreed with Fitzpatrick that Lenin's revolutionary strategy had much to be admired; but they objected to the gentle treatment of Stalin and his deeds.¹⁸ Others took a still dimmer view. Martin Malia and Richard Pipes castigated what they saw as a complete lapse of moral and historical perspective, and they reasserted the old totalitarianist case.¹⁹ Few debates among historians have produced polemics of such intensity.

What was ignored by many protagonists was that several innovative studies in the totalitarianist tradition, such as the early monographs of Robert Conquest and Merle Fainsod, had stressed that cracks existed in the USSR's monolith. They had drawn attention to the ceaseless dissension about policy and position among the Kremlin leaders. They had emphasized too that whole sectors of society and the economy in the Soviet Union proved resistant to official policy.²⁰ Archie Brown, indeed, insisted that whereas

totalitarianism was an apt description of Stalin's USSR, it lost its validity when Khrushchëv's reforms were introduced and the state remained extremely authoritarian but was no longer totalitarian.²¹ Geoffrey Hosking showed how pre-revolutionary attitudes of faith, nationhood and intellect survived in the Soviet decades and functioned as an impediment to the Politburo's commands.²²

Yet the totalitarianist theory, even in these looser applications, falls short of explaining the range and depth of resistance, non-compliance and apathy towards the demands of the state. The USSR was regulated to an exceptional degree in some ways and yet eluded central political control in others. Behind the façade of party congresses and Red Square parades there was greater disobedience to official authority than in most liberal-democratic countries even though the Soviet leadership could wield a panoply of dictatorial instruments. Informal and mainly illegal practices pervaded existence in the USSR. Clientelist politics and fraudulent economic management were ubiquitous and local agendas were pursued to the detriment of Kremlin policies. Misinformation was systematically supplied to superior bodies in each institution. Lack of conscientiousness at factory, farm and office was customary. A profound scepticism was widespread.²³ Such features had existed in the Russian Empire for centuries. But far from fading, they were strengthened under communism and were a constant part of the Soviet compound so long as the USSR lasted.

The core of my analysis is that these same features were not pieces of scrap metal flung into the machinery of state and society. They did not obstruct the camshafts, pulleys and engine. Quite the opposite: they were the lubricating oil essential for the machinery to function. Without them, as even Stalin came to learn by the end of the 1930s, everything would have clattered to a standstill. Thus the Soviet compound combined the formal with the informal, the official and constitutional with the unofficial and indeed the unplanned and illicit. This dualism was fundamental in the entire course of the USSR's history. And so if we are to use totalitarianism in description and analysis, the term needs to undergo fundamental redefinition. The unofficial, unplanned and illicit features of exist-

ence in the USSR were not 'lapses' or 'aberrations' from the essence of totalitarianist state and society: they were integral elements of totalitarianism.

Among the problems with alternative terms such as 'mono-organizational society', 'bureaucratic centralism' (or, for the period after Stalin, 'bureaucratic pluralism') is that they are altogether too bland. They fail to encapsulate the reality of the USSR, red in tooth and claw with its dictatorial party and security police, its labour camps and monopolistic ideology. Thus totalitarianism, suitably re-designated as involving insubordination and chaos as well as harshly imposed hierarchy, is the most suitable concept to characterize the USSR. The system of power, moreover, stood in place for seven decades. Undoubtedly the regimes of Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchëv and Brezhnev were distinguishable from each other. Yet the differences were less significant than the likenesses and this book postulates that the entire period of communist rule had a basic unity. Political dictatorship, administrative centralism, judicial arbitrariness, cramped national and religious self-expression, ideological uniformity and massive state economic intervention were durable ingredients of the Soviet compound. They were put into the crucible by Lenin and his party within a couple of years of the October Revolution; Gorbachëv's Politburo started to remove them only two or three years before the whole USSR was dissolved. The list of ingredients was remarkably constant from beginning to end.

Across the years, though, the central political leadership found that these same ingredients produced solvents which modified the original compound. The process was dynamic. Thus the consolidation of a one-party state had the unintended effect of encouraging individuals to join the party for the perks of membership. Quite apart from careerism, there was the difficulty that Marxism-Leninism was ambiguous in many fundamental ways. Nor could even a one-ideology state terminate disputes about ideas if central party leaders were among the participants in controversy. Furthermore, leaders in the localities as well as at the centre protected their personal interests by appointing friends and associates to posts within their administrative fiefdoms. Clientelism was rife. So, too, were attempts by officials

in each locality to combine to dull the edge of demands made upon them by the central leadership; and the absence of the rule of law, together with the ban on free elections, gave rise to a culture of corruption.

Mendacious reports to higher administrative authority were a conventional procedure. Accounts were fiddled; regulations on working practices were neglected. There were persistent grounds for worry, too, on the national question. Many peoples of the USSR enhanced their distinctness; some aspired to national independence. Official measures to de-nationalize society had the effect of strengthening nationalism.

Repeatedly the Soviet central authorities strove to re-activate the compound's elements. This sometimes led to purges of the party, mostly involving mere expulsion from the ranks but in the 1930s and the 1940s being accompanied by terror. Throughout the years after the October Revolution, furthermore, institutions were established to inspect and control other institutions. A central determination existed to set quantitative objectives to be attained by local government and party bodies in economic and political affairs. The Kremlin leaders resorted to exhortations, instructions and outright threats and gave preferential promotion in public life to those showing implicit obedience to them. Intrusive political campaigns were a standard feature; and exaggerated rhetoric was employed as the regime, centrally and locally, tried to impose its wishes within the structure of the compound created since the October Revolution.

Yet the re-activating measures induced individuals, institutions and nations to strive after a quiet life. Evasiveness and downright disruption were fostered locally. This in turn impelled the central leadership to strengthen the intrusiveness of official campaigns. Over the seven decades after 1917 the USSR experienced a cycle of activation, disruption and re-activation. There was an ineluctable logic to the process so long as the leadership aimed to preserve the compound of the Soviet order intact.

Consequently Soviet rulers never exercised a completely unrestrained authority. The jailers of the Leninist system of power were also its prisoners. But what jailers, what prisoners! Lenin, Stalin,

Khrushchëv and Gorbachëv have gripped the world's imagination. Even losers in the struggles of Soviet politics, such as Trotsky and Bukharin, have acquired an enduring reputation. And although a succession of Soviet central leaders fell short of their ambition in utterly dominating their societies, each leader wielded enormous power. The political system was centralized and authoritarian. It was also oligarchic: just a few individuals made the major decisions – and Stalin turned it into a personal despotism. So that the particularities of character were bound to have a deep effect on public life. The USSR would not have come into being without Lenin's intolerant confidence; and it would not have collapsed when and how it did without Gorbachëv's naïve audacity.

The idiosyncratic ideas of leaders, too, left their mark. Lenin's thinking about dictatorship, industrialization and nationality had a formative influence on the nature of the Soviet state; Stalin's grotesque enthusiasm for terror was no less momentous. Such figures shaped history, moreover, not only by their ideas but also by their actions. Stalin made a calamitous blunder in denying that Hitler was poised to invade the USSR in mid-1941; Khrushchëv's insistence in 1956 in breaking the official silence about the horrors of the 1930s brought enduring benefit to his country.

These were not the sole unpredictable factors that shaped twentieth-century Russian history. The factional struggles of the 1920s were complex processes, and it was not a foregone conclusion that Stalin would defeat Trotsky. The political culture, the institutional interests and the course of events in Russia and the rest of the world worked to Stalin's advantage. In addition, no communist in 1917 anticipated the measure of savagery of the Civil War. State and society were brutalized by this experience to an extent that made it easier for Stalin to impose forcible agricultural collectivization. Nor did Stalin and his generals foresee the measure of barbarity and destruction on the Eastern front in the Second World War. And, having industrialized their country in the 1930s, Soviet leaders did not understand that the nature of industrialism changes from generation to generation. In the 1980s they were taken aback when the advanced capitalist states of the West achieved a rapid diffusion of

computerized technology throughout the civilian sectors of their economies. Contingency was a major factor in the history of twentieth-century Russia.

Even as dominant a ruler as Stalin, however, eventually had to have an eye for the internal necessities of the system. The compound of the Soviet order was continuously imperilled, to a greater or less degree, by popular dissatisfaction. Stabilizing ingredients had to be introduced to preserve the compound, and an effort was needed to win the support from a large section of society for the maintenance of the status quo. Rewards had to be used as well as punishments.

The attempt at stabilization started soon after 1917 with the introduction of a tariff of privileges for the officials of party and government. Before the October Revolution there had been a tension in Leninist thought between hierarchical methods and egalitarian goals; but as soon as the communists actually held power, the choice was persistently made in favour of hierarchy. Officialdom did not have it entirely its own way. Far from it: in the late 1930s the life of a politician or an administrator became a cheap commodity. But the general tendency to give high remuneration to this stratum of the population was strengthened. The young promotees who stepped into dead men's shoes were also occupying their homes and using their special shops and special hospitals. Social equality had become the goal of an ever receding future, and Marxist professions of egalitarianism sounded ever more hollow: from Stalin to Gorbachëv they were little more than ritual incantations.

None the less the central political leaders also ensured that the tariff was not confined to officials but was extended lower into society. As early as the 1920s, those people who enrolled as ordinary party members were given enhanced opportunities for promotion at work and for leisure-time facilities. In most phases of the Soviet era there was positive discrimination in favour of the offspring of the working class and the peasantry. It was from among the ranks of such beneficiaries of the regime that its strongest support came.

Yet the nature of official policies meant that not everyone could live a cosseted life. Huge sacrifices were exacted from ordinary folk at times of crisis. Several basic amenities of existence were unavailable

to them during the Civil War, the First Five-Year Plan and the Second World War. But at other times the regime took care not to push its demands dangerously hard. Labour discipline was notoriously slack by the standards of modern industry elsewhere. Quality of workmanship was low, punctuality poor. In addition, there was more or less full employment in the USSR from the early 1930s; and a safety-net of minimal welfare benefits was erected even for the most disadvantaged members of society from the late 1950s. It was not a comfortable existence for most people, but the provision of a predictable level of food, clothing and housing helped to reconcile them to life under the Soviet order.

Even so, revolts occurred at the end of the Civil War and at the end of the 1920s, and urban disturbances took place sporadically in the mid-1960s, the 1970s and the late 1980s. But, on the whole, rebellion was rare. This infrequency resulted not only from the state's ruthless violence but also from its provision of primitive social security. There was a tacit contract between the regime and society which endured to the end of the communist era, a contract which has proved difficult for the country's subsequent governments to tear up.

Russians and other peoples of the USSR had always had ideas of social justice and been suspicious of their rulers, and the Soviet regime's repressiveness fortified this attitude. They also noted the communist party's failure, from one generation to another, to fulfil its promises. The USSR never became a land of plenty for most of its citizens, and the material and social benefits bestowed by communism were insufficient to disguise the unfairnesses pervading society. In time, moreover, a country of peasants was turned into an industrial, urban society. As in other countries, the inhabitants of the towns directed an ever greater cynicism at politicians. The increasing contact with Western countries added to the contempt felt for an ideology which had never been accepted in its entirety by most citizens. Russia, which was hard enough to tame in 1917-18, had become still less easy to hold in subjection by the late 1980s.

The problems faced by Russia's rulers were anyway not simply the consequences of 1917. The heritage of the more distant past also

bore down upon them. Russia's size, climate and ethnic diversity greatly complicated the tasks of government. She also lagged behind her major competitors in industrial and technological capacity; she was threatened by states to the West and the East and her frontiers were the longest in the world. Arbitrary state power was a dominant feature in public life. Official respect for legality was negligible and the political and administrative hierarchy was over-centralized. Russia, furthermore, had an administration which barely reached the lower social classes on a day-to-day basis. Most people were preoccupied by local affairs and were unresponsive to appeals to patriotism. Education was not widely spread; civic integration and inter-class tolerance were minimal. The potential for inter-ethnic conflict, too, was growing. Social relationships were extremely harsh, often violent.

Lenin and the communists came to power expecting to solve most of these problems quickly. Their October Revolution was meant to facilitate revolution throughout Europe and to re-set the agenda of politics, economics and culture around the globe. To their consternation, revolution did not break out across Europe and the central party leaders increasingly had to concentrate on problems inherited from the tsars.

In reality the actions of Lenin and his successors often aggravated rather than resolved the problems. Their theories even before the October Revolution had an inclination towards arbitrary, intolerant and violent modes of rule. While proclaiming the goal of a society devoid of oppression, they swiftly became oppressors to an unprecedented degree of intensity. Soviet communists, unconsciously or not, fortified the country's traditional political postures: the resort to police-state procedures, ideological persecution and anti-individualism derived as much from tsarist political and social precedents as from Marxism-Leninism. What is more, the concern lest Russia might lose her status as a Great Power was as important to Stalin and his successors as to the Romanov dynasty. The appeal to Russian national pride became a regular feature of governmental pronouncements. Office-holders thought of themselves as Marxist-

Leninists; but increasingly they behaved as if Russia's interests should have precedence over aspirations to worldwide revolution.

Russia, needless to add, was not the entire USSR and not all Soviet citizens were Russians. Furthermore, it was party policy throughout the USSR's history to transmute existing national identities into a sense of belonging to a supranational 'Soviet people'. This was part of a general endeavour by the state to eradicate any organizations or groupings independent of its control. The central politicians could not afford to let Russian national self-assertiveness get out of hand.

But what on earth was Russia? And what was Russia's part in the Soviet Union? These are questions which are much less easy to answer than they superficially appear. The borders of the Russian republic within the USSR were altered several times after 1917. Nearly every redefinition involved a loss of territory to the USSR's other republics. The status of ethnic Russians, too, changed under several political leaderships. Whereas Lenin was wary of Russian national self-assertiveness, Stalin sought to control and exploit it for his political purposes; and the Soviet communist leadership after Stalin's death, despite coming to rely politically upon the Russians more than upon other nationalities in the Soviet Union, never gave them outright mastery. Nor was Russian culture allowed to develop without restriction: the Orthodox Church, peasant traditions and a free-thinking intelligentsia were aspects of Mother Russia which no General Secretary until the accession of Gorbachëv was willing to foster. Russian national identity was perennially manipulated by official interventions.

For some witnesses the Soviet era was an assault on everything fundamentally Russian. For others, Russia under Stalin and Brezhnev attained her destiny as the dominant republic within a USSR. For yet others neither tsarism nor communism embodied the positive quintessence of Russianness. Consequently Russian history will remain as politically sensitive as it was under the Soviet communist party. This is not simply a case of public figures whipping up debate. Russians in general are interested in discussions of Nicholas II,

Lenin, Stalin and Gorbachëv; and the past and the present are enmeshed in the discussion.

Russia is under the spotlight in this book. But the history of Russia is inseparable from the history of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States. It would be artificial to deal exclusively with Russian themes in those many cases in which these themes are knotted together with the situation in adjacent areas. My rule of thumb has been to omit from the account those events and situations that had little impact upon 'Russia' and affected only the non-Russian areas of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States. On the other hand, the chapters are not designed as an account of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States with the 'Russian factor' being addressed only glancingly. For the general history of this huge area of Europe and Asia can be understood only when Russia's history is thrown into relief.

In still broader terms, the plan is to treat Soviet history as a unitary period and to explain the inner strengths and strains of the USSR. Recently it has become fashionable to assert that the communism in Russia could easily have been eradicated at any moment in its seventy years of existence. This is just as exaggerated a notion as the earlier conventional notion that the regime was impervious to any kind of domestic or foreign pressure.

But what kind of regime was the USSR? Continuities with the tsarist years are examined in the following chapters; so, too, are the surviving elements of the communist order in post-Soviet Russia. The shifting nature of Russian national identity is also highlighted. And an account is offered not only of the central political leadership but also of the entire regime as well as of the rest of society. This means that the focus is not confined to leading 'personalities' or to 'history from below'. Instead the purpose is to give an analysis of the complex interreaction between rulers and ruled, an interreaction that changed in nature over the decades. Not only politics but also economics, sociology and culture are examined. For it is an organizing principle of the book that we can unravel Russia's mysteries only by taking a panoramic viewpoint on twentieth-century Russia.

Greater attention is given to politics than to anything else. This is deliberate. The economic, social and cultural order in Russia in the twentieth century is quite incomprehensible without sustained attention to political developments. The policies and ideas of the party leadership counted greatly; it also mattered which leader was supreme at any given moment. Politics penetrated nearly all areas of Soviet society; and even though the purposes of the leadership were frequently and systematically thwarted, they never ceased to have a deep impact on society.

Russia has had an extraordinary century since 1900. Her transformation has been massive: from autocratic monarchy through communism to an elected president and parliament; from capitalist development through a centrally-owned, planned economy to market reforms; from a largely agrarian and uneducated society to urban industrialism and literacy. Russia has undergone revolutions, civil war and mass terror; her wars against foreign states have involved defence, liberation and conquest. In 1900 no one foresaw these abrupt turns of fortune with any precision. Nobody can be sure what the twenty-first century has in store. Yet few Russians want to repeat the experience of their parents and grandparents: they yearn for peaceful, gradual change. Among the factors that will affect their progress will be an ability to see the past through spectacles unblurred by mythology and unimpeded by obstacles to public debate and access to official documents. History matters.

Winston Churchill described Russia as 'a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma'. As many obscurities are being dispelled, we have never been in a better position to take the measure of a country whose history after 1917 turned the world upside down. For seven decades Soviet communism offered itself as a model of social organization; and even in transition from communism Russia has kept its general interest. It is a delusion of the age, after the dissolution of the USSR, to assume that capitalism has all the answers to the problems faced by our troubled world. Communism is the young god that failed; capitalism, an older deity, has yet to succeed for most of the world's people most of the time.