

Institution: University of Oxford
Unit of Assessment: 30
Title of case study: Explaining Soviet Communism
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>There is enormous public interest in the Russian Revolution and Soviet Communism. Robert Service's biographies of the three early Soviet leaders – Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky – together with his general histories of twentieth-century Russia have reached an international mass public and, in particular, have had a deep influence on the teaching of the subject in secondary schools and universities through the central place they occupy on A-level and degree-level history syllabi. In addition, Service is regularly invited to lecture to parliamentary select committees, the FCO, the Defence Academy and national business organisations.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The central question which underpins Service's work is: how much of the Russian historical experience in the twentieth – and increasingly in the twenty-first century – is attributable to the systemic requirements of establishing and maintaining a Communist system (and the legacy of that endeavour)? How much is attributable to particular historical circumstances, such as the impact of two world wars and economic backwardness, or Russian cultural and political traditions?</p> <p>The distinctiveness of Service's voice derives, in part, from the fact that he came to the study of Soviet high politics by looking at politics from below and his work is marked by attentiveness to the complexity of interactions between top-level decision-making and grass-roots economic, social and cultural realities. The latter tended to be ignored by the pioneer analysts of Soviet politics, such as Carr, Deutscher, Schapiro and Fainsod. At the same time, his insistence throughout his career on the centrality of high-level politics and ideology set him somewhat apart from 'revisionist' scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s. He insists, moreover, on the conceptual need to treat the Soviet decades as a single historical period and to see particular sub-periods, such as Stalin's years of rule, within the parameters of the system of power established in 1917-1919.</p> <p>Not least of the reasons for the influence of Service's work on school and university students and the general public is that he has chosen biography as a way of exploring the complexities of modern Russian history. The focus on the life and thought of three major Soviet leaders imparts a sense of the importance of individual personality, political choice and contingency to Soviet history, which is still often treated in deterministic terms, as a process driven by socio-economic forces or utopian ideology.</p> <p>The originality of Service's work derives, too, from his having fully exploited the material that became available when Soviet archives, principally RGASPI and GARF, opened up after 1991. Since 2004, he has complemented these sources with materials in the Hoover Institution at Stanford University – a complementarity that has become crucial as access to Russian archives had become more restricted in the current century.</p> <p>This research has been carried out while Service has been Professor of Russian and East European Studies at Oxford (1998-).</p>
<p>3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <p>All the following were published by major trade/academic presses. Robert Service was made a Fellow of the British Academy in recognition of his work.</p> <p>3.1. Lenin: A Biography (Macmillan: London, 2000) 'Service has diligently incorporated his archival findings into this work, which has enabled</p>

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him to take issue with the many biographies that tend to portray Lenin as either a sociopath or savior... This lucidly written, insightful biography will no doubt come to be regarded as a definitive interpretation of Lenin.' Rob Stout, *Central Europe Review*

3.2. Stalin: A Biography (Macmillan: London, 2004)

'Here is a life-and-times biography in the grand style: deeply researched, well written, brimming with interpretations.' Tony Wilson, *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 20060101

3.3. Trotsky: A Biography (Macmillan: London, 2008)

'Rigorously researched... Service is eminently qualified to set Trotsky in his historical context. Here Service surpasses himself... Service is always scrupulously balanced... he has given us the best biography of Trotsky to date' John Gray, *Literary Review*

3.4. A History of Modern Russia (3rd edition, revised, expanded and updated: Penguin: London 2009)

'Robert Service's synthesis of Western and Russian historical writings provides a balanced assessment of the political leadership's interaction with Russian society from the last tsar to Boris Yeltsin... Service's comprehensive and well-written book serves as a solid reference tool for the general public and historians alike' Isabel A. Tirado *American Historical Review*

3.5. The Russian Revolution (4th edition, revised, expanded and updated: Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2009)

'Ideally suited to undergraduate courses and to anyone interested in a brief, readable and balanced introduction to the Russian revolution.' Professor Andrew August, Penn State University, USA

3.6. Comrades: A World History of Communism (Macmillan: 2007)

'Dazzling synoptic pages of a book that bears all the hallmarks of a classic work of historical literature.' *New Statesman*

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Service's research has made three distinct kinds of contribution outside academia. First, it has had a wide-ranging influence on the public understanding of Russian history. Second, it has helped ensure that the teaching of Russian history is informed by rigorous specialist research in the subject. Finally, Service's work as an expert advisor to public bodies has supported the development of public policy on issues relating to Russia.

Public understanding of history:

All his books have been in foreign translations and Harvard University Press has published the American editions of the History of Modern Russia, Stalin (sales of around 15,000 copies) and Trotsky. Lenin has been translated into 17 languages, including Russian, and sales of translations have topped 270,000. The Polish edition of Comrades has sold some 17,000 copies. His biography of Lenin won the Winner of US ForeWord History Prize, and received starred reviews: eg, 'Immensely scholarly but also vivid and readable. This is a splendid book, much the best that I have ever read about Lenin... I was overwhelmed by the power and vividness of this portrait.' (Dominic Lieven, *Sunday Telegraph*). The next, *Stalin: A Biography*, was similarly strongly hailed in the media and by a mass readership: eg, 'This is effectively the first full biography since perestroika to encompass the economic, political, diplomatic, military, administrative and, above all, ideological dimensions, as well as the personal aspects of Stalin's colossal life... Gritty and unshowy, but enlightened by Service's compelling characterisation, magisterial analysis and dry wit, this outstanding biography of lightly worn authority, wide research and superb intuition will be read for decades' (Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Sunday Times*). The third in the trilogy of the early Soviet leadership, *Trotsky: A Biography*, won the Duff Cooper Prize (2010) and was runner-up for the Grand Prix pour la Biographie Politique. It too was published to critical acclaim: 'Service is never unkind to his subject, but nor is he an acolyte. One of the great functions his book performs, aside from being a compelling read, is to flesh out a non-Trotskyite version of Trotsky... There is no

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moralism in Robert Service's narrative - and there is no need. It is plain from the facts that Trotsky was a quite brilliant historical phenomenon; and not a very nice man.' (Paperback of the Week, *The Observer*).[5.i]

Furthermore, Service's research has led to his appearance on 'high-brow' and more 'popular' radio and television programmes. He introduced Lenin on In Our Time and Trotsky on Start the Week on Radio 4, and discussed his books on Sky TV and the Simon Mayo programme on Radio 5. He has also been interviewed about current Russian politics and Soviet history on Radio 4's *Today* programme.[5.ii]

Internationally, Service has discussed Stalin on US NPR and C-SPAN in 2004; his troika of biographies was the subject of an hour-long book C-SPAN programme Q&A with Brian Lamb in 2010. He debated Trotsky with Christopher Hitchens on Uncommon Knowledge in 2010, now available on YouTube.[5.iii] He did the same on Radio 4's Great Lives in 2009. In June 2011 he was interviewed by Estonian Acting PM, Mart Laar, at the Tallinn Literary Festival about the historical legacy of communism.[5.iv] His Stalin biography has been cited by the playwright John Hodges as an influence for *Collaborators*, performed at the National Theatre, London (25 Oct. 2011-31 March 2012)

Use of Service's research in secondary schools and HEI's:

Service's books are used in A level syllabi of Pearson Edexcel (units 'Russia in Revolution, 1861-1924' and 'Stalin's Russia') and AQA (units 'Tsarist Russia, 1855-1917', 'The Impact of Stalin's Leadership' and 'Triumph and Collapse, Russia and the USSR, 1941-1991') [5.v]

Service's Lenin is specified as one of four key texts for student use on the HIS1H: AS-History Resource List. It is described as a 'celebrated biography (that) drew on the previously unseen Lenin manuscripts' in Michael Lynch's A-level textbook, *Reaction and Revolution: Russia, 1894-1924* (Hodder, 2005). Brian Mimmack et al., *History: A Comprehensive Guide to Paper 1 for the International Baccalaureate* (Pearson, 2009), p.171 carries a long quotation from his *History of Modern Russia* on the impact of the 1973 oil shock on the Soviet economy. Alan White and Ben Gregory, *Student Support Materials for Edexcel AS History, Unit 1: D3, Russia in Revolution* (Collins, 2012), p.65 quote Service at length in a side panel, titled 'Essential Notes', on whether Lenin led to Stalin. [5.v]

Service has worked steadily on 'outreach' to sixth-formers, giving a minimum of four talks each year to organisations such as Sovereign Education. The latter, which draws up to 300 A-level students and teachers to its events, said: 'Professor Robert Service has worked with Sovereign Education for more than fifteen years ... His presentations have always been a highlight for the young people and their teachers. We are aware of the valuable contribution he has made to their A-level understanding and performance.' *A History of Modern Russia* and *Lenin* feature as textbooks in history syllabi in universities as diverse as New York University, Boston, Delhi, Western Ontario, Pennsylvania and Cambridge, Southampton and Sheffield in the UK.

Supporting the development of public policy on Russia:

Service is a frequent contributor to UK political discussion of Russian affairs. He gave testimony to the House of Lords Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee in 2009 [1] and led a seminar discussion in January 2012 at the FCO's Post-Soviet Affairs Training Course.[2] As a result of this work, Service was called upon as an expert witness to provide historical context in the High Court Case of *Berezovsky vs Abramovich* (June-December 2011). [3]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)*Testimony*

[1] Corroboration via Director of the Eastern Research Group, FCO

[2] Corroboration via Committee Specialist, EU Select Committee

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[3] Corroboration via Partner, Skaddens, Arps, Slate, Meagher and Flom LLP & Affiliates

Other evidence sources

[5.i] <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/may/30/paperback-of-the-week-robert-service-trotsky>

[5.ii] http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9744000/9744906.stm

[5.iii] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuzXR-5w4Qk>

[5.iv] <http://www.hoover.org/news/81266>

[5.v] <http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/subjects/AQA-2040-W-TRB-U01RL-HIS1H.PDF>

<http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/subjects/AQA-2040-W-TRB-U02RL-HIS2L.PDF>

<http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/subjects/AQA-2040-W-TRB-U03RL-HIS3K.PDF>