Discussing Stalinism

Problems and Approaches

Edited by Markku Kangaspuro and Vesa Oittinen

Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki
Contents

Foreword........................................................................................................................................5

Interpretations of Stalinism: Historiographical Patterns since the 1930s
 and the Role of the ‘Archival Revolution’ in the 1990s.........................................................11
Lennart Samuelson

Towards a Neo-Weberian Historical Sociology of Stalinism.................................42
Mikhail Maslovskiy

Stalin as ”World Spirit Embodied”: the Hegelian Interpretations of
 the Phenomenon of Stalinism in Brecht, Lukács and Bukharin.............57
Vesa Oittinen

Stalinism as a Structural Choice of Soviet Society and its Lost
Alternatives ..................................................................................................................................74
Markku Kangaspuro

Young Felix Dzerzhinsky and the Origins of Stalinism.................................93
Iain Lauchlan

Trotsky’s Thermidor Thesis: The Political Form of a Class State.............114
Carlos Eduardo Rebello de Mendonça

Contributors.................................................................................................................................122
Foreword

Although Stalinism may seem at first glance to be a rather well-defined historical and political phenomenon, no profound consensus on it exists among researchers. What was it actually all about? There has been a long-standing and cyclical debate from the early 1950s about the essence of the Soviet system and Stalinism as part of it. The debate has been cyclical in the sense that many of its basic, but old and contested, premises presented by the Totalitarianism and Revisionism schools can also be identified in the contemporary discussions.

George Breslauer has analysed the difference between these two schools of thought and summed them up in terms of two essential features. The older totalitarian school of the 1950s draws on an top-down analysis focusing on the ideological ‘genetic code’ of the Soviet ideational system and the politics of a monolithically understood party leadership. He also refers to that school as deductivist, since its method is to fit empiria into a “genetic code”, whereas revisionists, or “reductionists”, referring to Stephen Cohen, postulate their research from the bottom up, focusing on society empirically ‘in order to fill in the historical gaps in our factual knowledge about the interaction among politics, economics, and society’.

Breslauer points out that for the totalitarian...
ian school, the fall of the Soviet Union was proof of its unreformable nature, whereas revisionists have focused on the evolutionary development of the Soviet system and taken the choices of different agents and the consequences of these choices seriously.²

Of course, some main traits – an authoritarian one-party rule in the Soviet Union from the late 1920s to 1953, based on and legitimised by the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, persecution and terror of political adversaries – are generally agreed upon. But both the causes and the extent of the “Stalin phenomenon” are subject of highly divergent interpretations. The totalitarianism school saw in Stalinism only a form of a wider historical effect, “totalitarianism”, the roots of which it believed could be found either in Marx and Lenin’s Marxism (as Richard Pipes has insisted) or already in Rousseau’s volonté générale (especially Jacob Talmon in his once-influential book, The Totalitarian Democracy, 1952). Whilst the Soviet Union from the 1920s to the 1950s undoubtedly shared many of the traits that a ‘totalitarian’ society was assumed to have, the concept itself soon proved to be hopelessly unspecific, allowing quite different forms of society to be lumped together. Above all, the totalitarianism argument was not able to delineate any essential difference between Fascism and Stalinism, but declared them to be equally inimical – indeed, a Janus-faced threat – to liberal democracy.

Sheila Fitzpatrick has stated that the evolution of sovietology developed as a departure from the totalitarianist interpretation dominated by the political scientists, who were challenged by the new generation, mainly social historians, of the 1970s. They wanted to bring society back in and write ‘history from below’ as well as ‘from above’. The old disputes between the totalitarian and revisionist schools also carried a political dimension. The totalitarian school criticised revisionists for underestimating the scale of Stalin’s crimes and aiming to whitewash the Soviet Union. On the other hand, revisionists saw their critics as trapped in Cold War prejudices. However, the end of the Soviet Union rendered this highly politicised “for” or “against” dispute irrelevant. Fitzpatrick stated that the shift to the cultural approach constituted the third important post-Cold War shift in Soviet Studies.³

² The ‘genetic code’ concept has been used by Martin Malia. Breslauer 1992, pp. 199-200.
Stephen Kotkin is one of the new generation of historians who have applied the cultural approach in Soviet Studies and Stalinism. They have been trying to develop a theory of Stalinism as a specific form of (political) culture. Kotkin’s book *Magnetic Mountain* (1995) already expressed this new angle on the problem in its subtitle, *Stalinism as a Civilization*. Instead of understanding Stalinism as the creation of one single individual (or of a small circle of supporters), Kotkin identified the roots of the terrorist regime of the 1930s in a collective enterprise to create a new society. In the last instance, he too, blamed the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, instead of concrete institutions and organisations, for making Stalinist practices possible.

David L. Hoffman has applied a wider cultural explanation to Stalinism, placing it in the history of the European Enlightenment. He claimed that many features of the Stalinist culture constituted a particular version of modernity, resembling the European version in many of its features. His thesis was that Stalinism cannot be reduced back to the traditional prerevolutionary Russian choices (path dependency) or interpreted as the product of socialist ideology alone. His definition of Stalinism resided in the fact that it consists of both socialist values and of “the ambition to rationalize and reorder society like the intellectuals and social reformers throughout Europe in nineteenth and twentieth centuries”. The Stalinist system used traditional institutions and culture for modern mobilisational purposes in a similar way to how this was done in Europe after the First World War. Hoffman interpreted Stalinist culture as a “particular Soviet incarnation of modern mass culture”.4

One does not need to be a faithful Rousseauan or Marxist in order to find the old-school explanations of Stalinism’s ideological roots insufficient. In fact, the emergence of Stalinism was quite unexpected even for the Marxists, since the original Marxist doctrine contained nothing which would have sanctioned the extraordinary measures of violence used by Stalin and his followers, not to speak of Rousseau’s ideas. True, even traditional Marxist theory spoke of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” to be imposed on the bourgeoisie by the victorious proletariat after the revolution, but the very concept of a dictatorship still meant something different in the 19th century. Friedrich Engels, for example, stated that the Paris Commune of 1871 would serve well as a model of a proletarian dictatorship, and he especially praised

---

DISCUSSING STALINISM

its annulment of the apartment rents of the poor people as an example of an extraordinary measure surpassing bourgeois legality. In short, such explanations do not take into account the fact that Stalinism was a new phenomenon of a new modern epoch of European history, the brutality of which had been hitherto unseen. As the Soviet (and later Russian) historian Evgeniy Plimak wryly commented, the victims of the repressions conducted by the OGPU and NKVD security organs surpassed over a thousand times the amount of the victims of the Jacobin terror in 1793–1794.5

From the Marxist point of view, attempts have emerged to explain Stalinism as some kind of “deviation” from the original doctrine. Trotsky’s so-called "Thermidor thesis" is a similar account. According to Trotsky, Stalin’s rise to power equalled a counter-revolution in the USSR, analogical to the Thermidor coup in 1794 which toppled Robespierre’s leftist regime. This interpretation, which was subsequently upheld by many scholars with Trotskyist leanings in the West, too, alluded to the Soviet Union as a kind of “state-capitalist” country. Even this theory is not quite convincing, since it overlooks the clearly non-capitalist character of the Soviet economy and, even more importantly, does not sufficiently explain the social basis from which Stalinism emerged – actually, in some of its more simple versions it boils down to a conspiracy theory.

A more convincing interpretation of the phenomenon of Stalinism was recently offered by the German historian Jörg Baberowski. In his book *Verbrannte Erde. Stalins Herrschaft der Gewalt* (2012) he stated outright that one should not try to explain the violent excesses of Stalin’s regime by seeking some well-defined ideological motivation behind them: ‘The ideas do not kill’.6 According to Baberowski, violence – even political violence – cannot be adequately understood if one looks only for its first-instance motivation: actually, violence must be seen as a process, which gains strength and grows, since “violence is contagious” and, once begun, it is difficult to stop the rolling wheels.

Arch J. Getty and Oleg V. Naumov have also questioned the inescapable unfolding of terror as an inevitable result of Soviet politics, planned economy

---


and centralisation. They investigated empirically in detail the extent to which the road to terror was logical and well-planned, and concluded that Stalin and his closest circles were never very good at planning in general, and most of their politics was reactive and ad hoc in nature, spending ‘most of their time putting out fires’. Getty and Naumov emphasised that in the Stalin era, the politics was characterised by an interplay between intended and unintended results of agency. Their general conclusion was that because there was ‘no planning anywhere, we should not expect it when it comes to repression’. Their logic is consistent but not exhaustive, and leaves space for counterarguments and other conclusions.

Even if these previous interpretations gave us a better understanding than some others, there are other sides to the phenomenon of Stalinism which need further explanation. Stalinism did not mean only terror and violence: it left its mark on the cultural life and mentality of millions of people. In addition, some of the old topics have actualised during and because of Russia’s contemporary development and the increased tension between Russia and the West in recent years. This has brought back to the discussions such concepts as path dependency, totalitarianism (again!) and authoritarianism, modernisation or multiple modernisation and civilisational explanations paralleling culture-orientated approaches.

This book is rooted in a symposium held at the Aleksanteri Institute in 2011. Several texts (articles by Samuelson, Kangaspuro and Oittinen) have previously been published in German in a somewhat abridged version in the thematic issue on Stalinism of the journal Das Argument in 2014. Our intention is not to give a final or even preliminary answer on the essence of Stalinism; rather, we want to discuss different approaches to it and try to assess the extent to which they carry explanatory power in illuminating Stalinism as a socio-cultural phenomenon. The contributors represent several different areas of the social sciences and humanities; their methods of approaching the topic range from a psychohistory of Bolshevism, based on archival research, through historical sociology to philosophical assessments of Stalinism.


8 See Das Argument 306 (Heft 1/2014).
DISCUSSING STALINISM

The chapters discuss many aspects which are essential in the research agenda of the *The Finnish Centre of Excellence in Russian Studies – Choices of Russian Modernisation*, funded by the Academy of Finland for the period 2012–2017. The editors are grateful for the resources which the CoE has offered us, which have enabled us to finalise and publish this volume. In particular, we are indebted to the CoE for many discussions on the different interpretations of modernisation, the cultural approach to society and the validity of civilisational explanations of the Soviet Union.

Markku Kangaspuro and Vesa Oittinen
Helsinki, 22 September 2015
Lennart Samuelson

Interpretations of Stalinism: Historiographical Patterns since the 1930s and the Role of the ‘Archival Revolution’ in the 1990s

The historiography of Stalin and Stalinism could start with works of his contemporaries who already in the 1930s tried to assess his power-system and characterize the Soviet regime. It seemed evident to many foreign observers that Stalin had become the undisputed leader of the Soviet Union.

Most of these writings have lost their significance for today’s students since they often merely reflect attitudes in various circles at the time, be that Communist or sympathetic writers or, on the other hand, the enemies or merely opponents of the Soviet system, on the other hand. Glorification and hagiography existed side by side with demonization and propaganda. This phenomenon was especially obvious after Hitler’s rise to power, but also during the first years of the Cold War.

In this article, I have chosen to characterize some of the more influential books on Stalin and Stalinism that in my opinion did have a wider influence
DISCUSSING STALINISM

in Sweden and to some extent on an international scale. Several biographies of Stalin from the 1950s and onwards have on the other hand merely narrated a well-known story for a new audience. My article has set out to give a few landmarks, in order to highlight important works that marked some shifts in the historians’ debates. The major changes in academic paradigms and their influence on public since the fall of the Soviet Union are described. My survey intends to point out a few characteristics of the past two decades’ debates, and to accentuate areas that still call for the attention of the research community. For a more comprehensive investigation, we now have encyclopedias and excellent bibliographies on the history of Communism in general and Stalinism in particular.\(^1\) Several Russian encyclopedias treat the Stalin era in academic terms, while others present neo-Stalinist descriptions and interpretations.\(^2\) The annotated bibliography of David and Melinda Egan on articles in journals and newspapers, from the 1920s to the 2000s, includes over 1,700 items with many extra references.\(^3\) John Keep and Alter Litvin have surveyed the great mass of new literature on Stalinism published both in English and Russian since the opening of the archives of the former Soviet Union. Litvin’s part of the book concerns the Russian research, whereas Keep surveys the Western literature from a critical perspective.\(^4\)

Pioneering works on Stalin and Stalinism

Far too often it seems that today’s researchers neglect insights concerning Stalinism that were acquired already by the scholars of an earlier generation who worked under different conditions. Let me mention a few scholars’ books that have withstood the test of time can still be read for their open attitude to


the contradictory sources that were at hand for outside observers concerning the Soviet social system, the economic conditions, the foreign policy and the geopolitical strategy.

Already in the 1930s, full-scale serious biographies of Stalin were published, alongside hagiographies such as Henri Barbusse's *Staline: Un monde nouveau vu à travers un homme* (1935), also in English as *Stalin: A new world seen through the man* (New York 1935), and Communist journalism in the style of the emerging ‘personality cult’ which started at his 60th birthday in 1929. A serious pioneering historian was Boris Souvarine. He had been one of the founders of the French communist party but was later excluded for his support of the Left opposition in the Communist International. He had well-informed sources on Stalin and the underground revolutionary movement in Tsarist Russia, and also personal experience from the NEP-time realities in Moscow. He could therefore write a biography that includes a complex historical and social setting. Souvarine's *Staline. Aperçu historique du bolchevisme* was published in France in 1935. An abridged Swedish translation appeared in 1940, whereas his attempt to publish an English translation in 1941 in the USA was stopped as untimely, given the US support for Soviet Russia in the World War. Souvarine’s biography described Stalin’s youth, education and underground political activities before 1917. Souvarine combined his portrait of Stalin as the new leader of the Soviet state in the late 1920s and 1930s with a detailed description of the social and economic turmoil during the industrialization drive and forced collectivization.

Well aware of the difficulties in writing a biography of the then only 55-year old dictator, Souvarine wisely declared:

> Every picture of Stalin that does not include his downfall or death must be incomplete. The most important documents have been removed in the interest of the most concerned circles in society. His former comrades from the Caucasus are either in exile or have their mouths shut. *The archives of the party, the GPU and the Lenin Institute will not disclose their secrets until a complete historical turnover has been accomplished, provided that there will still be any secrets left*
DISCUSSING STALINISM

intact in their archives. The persons surrounding Stalin will keep silent as long as they fear the dictator or his creatures. (Emphasis added LS).5

Souvarine lived to see renewed editions of his biography published in the 1970s in Paris and is there considered as a classical work on Stalinism. His predictions concerning what access to Stalin’s archives would finally disclose have turned out to be correct: important sections of Stalin’s archive have most probably been destroyed either by himself or by his successors in the 1950s. Nonetheless, so much has been preserved that much earlier guesswork concerning his leadership and decision-making has recently been substituted by solid documentation. The often referred to ‘Soviet bureaucracy’ knew how to record its proceedings!6

The Swedish professor of Slavic languages and literature, and later chief editor of the newspaper Dagens Nyheter, Anton Karlgren had studied in Tsarist Russia already at the turn of the century. He had written extensively from his trips to Soviet Russia in the interwar period.7 His major work is a monumental biography of Stalin with the sub-title: ‘The development of Bolshevism from Leninism to Stalinism’. This subtitle hints to the fact that Karlgren was as interested in social changes and political conditions as he was in describing Stalin’s rise to power. Karlgren’s conclusions concerning the different stages of Bolshevism – Leninism – Stalinism, this differentiation would come to the forefront of debates much later initiated by Robert Tucker and Stephen Cohen, whereas mainstream Western analyses of Soviet history would rarely discern such discontinuities. Given his wide erudition and personal acquaintance with many Russians, Karlgren succinctly introduced dividing lines between the main stages of the Russian revolution and its implementation as

5 Boris Souvarine’s biography was first published in Paris in 1935 and three times re-published, with a new avant-propos and après-propos by the author that took the story up to the 1970s: Stalin: Aperçu historique du bolchévisme, Paris: IVREA 1992, for the latest, updated version. The quotation is from Souvarine’s note to the Swedish translation Stalin. En kritisk granskning av bolsjevismen, Stockholm 1940, p. 341.

6 On Souvarine’s importance for other scholars in the West, and for later deported Soviet dissidents, see Jean-Louis Panné’s biography, Boris Souvarine: Le premier désenchante du communisme, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1993, and in particular, pp. 222–226, for the history of the Stalin biography’s first appearance in France.

7 Anton Karlgren, Vinterdagar bland ryska bönder [Winter Days among Russian Peasants], Stockholm: Bonniers, 1907; idem, Bolsjevikernas Ryssland, [Bolshevik Russia], Stockholm: Albert Bonniers, 1925.
state-building. He was more interested in changes in society as reflected in demographic and economic statistics. He tried to measure popular attitudes and ambitions as these could be interpreted from letters to the editors of the daily press, and finally, he even questioned the official designation of Soviet society as socialist in the original Marxist sense of the ideological concept. Preceding such theorists as Michael Voslensky who was seen as pioneering with his refinement of Milovan Djilas’ concept of ‘the new class’ by describing instead ruling class as the *nomenklatura*\(^8\), Karlgren already in 1940, but with few followers outside Sweden remained unnoticed, as he described the new party elite that emerged after the purges as a ‘party bourgeoisie’ thus explicitly criticizing the official ideological framework of the Communist party.\(^9\)

Several other examples can be mentioned of specialists with detailed knowledge of the Russian society, who had learnt how to read official media ‘between the lines’ even in heavily censored media in the Soviet Union. Suffice it here to mention Charles Bettelheim’s dissertation from 1939 on the Soviet economic planning system, which was based on his wide-ranging reading in Paris and Moscow not only of official documents and publications but even on Leo Trotsky’s critical works, such as *The Revolution Betrayed*.\(^10\) Bettelheim had lived and work at a Moscow newspaper as translator in 1936–37 and much later felt free to describe the atmosphere during the terror.\(^11\) By then, he had also completed his own history of the Soviet Union in the interwar period, and tried to analyze the established social formation as a variant of ‘state capitalism’.\(^12\)

Appropriate observations on the Soviet realities, as they were presented in the mass media of those times, can likewise be found in Suzanne Labin’s *Staline le Terrible*, which was published in Paris in 1948 and thereafter in English with the less pertinent title, *Stalin’s Russia* but with a telling foreword by Arthur Koestler. Labin’s well documented analysis of the Stalinist regime was

---


DISCUSSING STALINISM

neglected as she turned from having been a member of the communist Union of French Students in the 1930s to the most outspoken anti-communist organization during the Cold war. She describes the enormous bureaucracy that hampered free development, the stratification of society and contrasts between the privileged groups and the broad masses, as well as the terror against large groups in the Soviet population. The wealth of practical information on the political and social conditions in the Soviet Union is also evident in a standard survey by the French historian Gabriel Jaray.

We can discern a certain influence in the academic community from Leo Trotsky’s interpretation of the ‘revolution betrayed’, and the character of the USSR as he assessed the country and political system in the late 1930s. Later, Trotsky’s followers were spellbound to his terminology, analogies between the French revolution and the ‘degeneration’ of the Bolshevik state, and to his denunciations of those among his one-time followers who considered the USSR to be a bourgeois society, albeit with some distinctive traits.

Other historians were less bound by doctrinaire attachment to Trotsky. In the late 1940s, the Polish émigré writer Isaac Deutscher wrote a biography of Stalin that tried to balance the obvious success story of the Soviet Union as victor in World War Two with the well-known terroristic aspects of Stalin’s personal regime. Deutscher had left the oppositionist Trotskyist movement in Poland and achieved a fairly objective approach to Stalin’s Russia, with an emphasis of the overcoming of underdevelopment through the forced industrialization. In the three-volume biography of Leon Trotsky, Deutscher would further refine his understanding of the Stalinist period, and often contrasting his own views with those of Trotsky, in particular on the character of the Soviet state. Whereas Trotsky in the mid- and late-1930s still characterized the USSR as a “workers’ state” albeit with a “bureaucratic deformation”, Deutscher


would look back on the social dynamism of the industrialization with a more positive estimate of the Soviet Union as more in line with the basic socialist ideology. Deutscher evidently felt free to have his own interpretation on Trotsky’s many forecasts on “whither Soviet Russia?” which could be seen as arguments in his on-going struggle with Stalin.16 In one of his last work, the Trevelyan Lectures at Oxford University, Deutscher touched on the character of the Soviet Union in a retrospect of the Stalin period, more akin to the official Soviet historiography as an aberration.17 David Caute has explored the controversies that Isaac Deutscher was involved with in the British academic community, in particular his debates on Soviet history with the philosopher Isaiah Berlin.18

The ‘Great Terror’ (Bolshoi terror) as a special concept was actually coined in 1968 by the British historian Robert Conquest in his book with the subtitle Stalin’s Purge in the Thirties, that became a classic account of the purges in the late 1930s and the rise of the forced labour camps. Conquest’s leading idea was that Stalin had ordered the murder of Leningrad Party Secretary Sergei Kirov in December 1934, and thereafter systematically eliminated his former and imagined presented foes in the communist party, the state apparatus and the Red Army. Conquest’s The Great Terror may be considered as the apex of what written sources, by Soviet defectors and witnesses during the ‘Thaw period’, could accomplish. At the same time, the recognized lack of original sources was also the great deficiency of his narrative. After the debates in the late 1980s that were spurred by the social history-oriented scholars in the United States, on the one hand, and by the revelations in the Soviet press under Gorbachev’s glasnost, Conquest published a revised edition, a reassessment that mainly served to confirm his earlier interpretations and with severe polemics against those who in the US academic community had challenged him. However, for the second revised edition, Conquest wrote a new preface that took into account many of the radical historiographical changes that the archival documentation from Russia had implied. His estimates on the proportions


between different social categories of victims of this state terror were based on a careful reading of the sources at hand, official statements, memoirs, revelations during Khrushchev’s ‘thaw period’ 1956 – 64.\(^{19}\)

Conquest’s interpretation of Stalin as having had a long-term plan of successive stages of terror and repression to consolidate his absolute power has turned out to be one of the most debated issues in recent historiography. On the other hand, Conquest’s descriptions in the 1960s and 1970s of the number of victims of the Great terror – allegedly 7–8 million arrested in 1937-38 of which at least one million were executed – and in the Gulag that he claimed from the late 1930s to the early 1950s had approximately 8 million prisoners and a mortality rate of 10 percent. In the much-disputed appendix to his monograph, Conquest concluded that at least 12 million prisoners had died in the Gulag. In his other study *Kolyma*, on the Gulag camps in the Soviet Far East, Conquest stated that approximately 3.5 million prisoners had been sent to the Kolyma camps from the mid-1930s to the early 1950s. He estimated that at least 3 million of them had died.\(^{20}\) I mention these figures to recapitulate the images in the West during the Cold War as to what were taken as ‘minimal, conservative estimates’ by many scholars. In itself, the repression waves under Stalinism were difficult to explain. The fact is that many specialists held on to these images handbooks on Soviet history, and anybody who doubted them – be it on scientific, demographic or economic reasons – could be branded as an apologist of the Soviet regime. However, these Cold War perceptions of the Great Terror and the Gulag camp system have proven totally off the mark when the archival documentation finally became available.

In the late 1960s, Western opinion became acquainted with the name Roy Medvedev and his protest against the strivings of the post-Khrushchev leadership’s attempts to rehabilitate the Stalin.\(^{21}\) It soon became known that Roy Medvedev had written a monumental history of Stalin and Stalinism, but then obviously without any prospects of having it published in the Soviet Union. The solid version in Russian, *K sudu istorii* with its over one thousand pages

---


was published in the USA. A robust, abridged but heavily edited English translation reached a broader audience. Medvedev to a certain extent had to adapt his conclusions with the ‘party line’ and the official wordings on the ‘cult of personality’. However, in many respects he had argued independently of the official, or rather superficial thesis that “Stalin’s personality cult” was merely an aberration on the individual leader style, and that as the official Party historians in the 1960s claimed, did not have any social roots nor did it influence the sound socialist structure of Soviet society and made pertinent historical assumptions precisely on the social, cultural and national preconditions for the specific forms of Stalin’s dictatorship. His many descriptions of the victims of the terror emphatically stated that Stalin was indeed the responsible for all arrests, interrogations and sentences.

Exiled historians like Mikhail Geller later revealed having been personally very critical of Medvedev’s biography of Stalin. However, such criticisms were uttered only in private correspondence so as not to jeopardize his position in the USSR. As many others, he understood that Roy Medvedev as the son of a rehabilitated Red Army commissar who had been executed in 1938 had obtained a rather privileged position inside the Soviet Union. Up to a certain point, Medvedev was allowed to publish his ‘dissident historical works’ abroad as long as they were edited by left-wing or communist publishing companies. It has even been suggested that he had support high up in the party for this continued striving along the resolutions of the 20th and 22th party congresses. Throughout the ‘stagnation period’ under Brezhnev, Roy Medvedev continued his writings on the fate of the October Revolution, on Bukharin and on the Stalinist ideology.

Stalin’s striving towards a personal dictatorship and his revenge motives in the 1930s against former oppositionist have been described as the key elements in the political system. As mentioned, Medvedev and many historians

DISCUSSING STALINISM

after him have strived to understand the social preconditions that made it possible for Stalin to achieve this one-man dominance. For the Marxist historian, this was the same dilemma that Plekhanov had formulated in his classical essay from 1898 on ‘the role of personality in history’. While historians often shudder at the paradigm of ‘great men who make history’, the analyses of the Stalin period have tended to be precisely and extremely focused on a single personality, and his character. Some of the myths that surrounded Stalin as leader have survived him, and it is not rare to find him described as an all-pervasive and all-present figure.

However, already in the 1970s, there were attempts to figure out the social preconditions that made possible Stalin’s triumph in the internal party struggle and the specific traits of the system in the 1930s. Mentioned should be Roger Pethybridge’s The Social Prelude to Stalinism, which although set in the political theory of totalitarianism and its determining the ideological factor as, points at the wider context that formed the Soviet society from 1917 onwards. Pethybridge in particular analyzed the social, Utopian visions of the Bolsheviks, their experiences during the Civil war and the struggle to administer a society of mainly illiterate peasants. The Czechoslovak émigré historian Michal Reiman emphasized that Stalin’s rise to one-man dictatorship took place in a context of a deep economic and social crisis in 1927-1929. Attention should even today be directed to Moshe Lewin’s efforts to understand the society that formed the basis for Stalin’s specific form of dictatorship in the 1930s, a theme that runs through most of Lewin’s research.

Stalinism as a separate stage in the history of the USSR

Before 1991, as the Soviet system was generally considered as a changeable, viable and durable social formation, a certain number of questions dominated


the debates among historians concerning Stalinism. Which were the specific traits of the Stalinist epoch, and what differed then compared to the previous decade and the period after Stalin’s death? An eternal question is to what extent Stalinism was a continuation of, or a break with the Leninist stage in Soviet history. Robert Tucker had started a vast biographical project on Stalin and his era. The first volume on Stalin’s youth and early revolutionary activities before 1917 was set in a psycho-historical framework. Working on the second volume on Stalin in power in the 1930s, Tucker convened a conference of scholars to discuss precisely the specific nature of the Stalinist period. The participants were Moshe Lewin, Stephen Cohen, Alexander Erlich and others. In the 1970s and 1980s, several attempts were made to sum up the shifting interpretations of Stalinism, depending on what social or political science perspective and theory it was regarded. It was also obvious to contemporary historiography that the interpretations of Stalinism had an ideological component, from variants of Marxism, Social democracy, liberalism or conservatism.

Stephen Cohen had during his research on his biography of Nikolai Bukharin accumulated a whole lot of considerations on Stalinism. Cohen’s book Reconsidering the Soviet Experience was a substantial criticism of the alleged unbroken continuity between Bolshevism of the pre-revolutionary period, through the Civil War and NEP to the fully-fledged Stalinist dictatorship. In his own analysis, several alternatives that were proposed and debated in the Communist party in the 1920s were viable, and would have led to another transformation of Soviet Russia into an industrialized society. Even if not everybody would subscribe to Cohen’s thesis that Bukharin’s program in the late 1920s was a feasible alternative, given the geopolitical situation of the USSR, it is undisputable that his criticism was correct of the essentially static theory of the totalitarian state. Only much later did the totalitarian theory’s main deficiency, its lack of dynamism become apparent. Cohen was very concerned in the 1980s of how the lack of understanding of the social forces in Soviet society, which was allegedly totally controlled from above by

---


DISCUSSING STALINISM

the party-state had regained acclaim in the new anti-détente era. This theory of totalitarianism prevented American analysts to perceive that undercurrents in Soviet debates that reflected strivings for changes and profound reforms.31

Although basically concerned with the terrorist phase in the late 1930s, Arch Getty’s path-breaking dissertation from 1979 and book from 1985 Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938,32 and Gábor Tamás Rittersporn’s book Simplifications stalinienes et complications soviétiques: Tensions sociales et conflits politiques en URSS 1933–1953,33 stirred up a wide-ranging debate on the character of Stalinism. Guided by paradigms from social history, these and other historians such as Roberta Manning and Robert Thurston, considered Stalin as more a product of a certain social transformation rather than as the creator of the system. Their basic tenets and new approaches were gathered in the volume Stalinist Terror: New Approaches.34 Thurston’s monograph on Life and Terror in Stalin’s Russia, 1934–1941 has been overduly criticized for certain formulations, whereas his main emphasis that even when the terror was at its peak in 1937, ‘everyday life’ was going on as usual for most Soviet citizens.35 This viewpoint has since then been developed in the grand synchronic study by Karl Schlögel on Moscow in 1937, with its insights at all levels and structures in the new metropolis, and where both ‘dreams’ and ‘terror’ coexisted.36 The original guiding-lines


35 Robert W. Thurston, Life and Terror in Stalin’s Russia, 1934–1941, New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 1996. It is worth mentioning, in this context, that this thesis is supported by the result of the huge interview project carried out by a team of scholars from Harvard University in the immediate after-World War Two period among ‘displaced persons’ from the USSR in the American, British and French occupation zones in Germany. Many interviewees could not specify any particular year or period, not even the year 1937, as characterized by widespread terror, and more often linked their memories to scattered events over time at their factories or offices. On these and other aspects of the ‘Harvard Project’, compare Evgenii V. Kodin, Garvardski Proekt, Moscow: Rosspen, 2003.

in Getty’s research on the terror and repression waves in the 1930s have, of course evolved as a result of the access to archives. His position at the end of the Soviet period concerning the role of Stalin himself, the regional party cadres and the secret police are found in the article ‘The Politics of Repression Revisited’. After a decade of research, Getty presented his new interpretations in a source volume with commentaries written jointly with Oleg V. Naumov. In this new documentation, it is evident that contrary to what was a viable hypothesis before glasnost and archival access, Stalin did indeed initiate the major purges and mass repression campaigns. Not for once did he lose control over or delegate the decision-making solely to the secret police.

A fundamental question for anyone writing on Stalin’s legacy is what role and importance in the Soviet social and political history, is to be ascribed to terror, violence and enforcement? Subsequent to this question is whether or not these elements were so specific to the Soviet era that they can be used to characterize its essence? Further, whether or not these were permanent features of the system?

Giuseppe Boffa was a veteran correspondent for the Italian communist party in Moscow and had followed the historical debates after the CPSU 20th congress with great interest. As he prepared a two-volume history of the USSR, he also wrote a comparative analysis of the main currents in the interpretation of Stalinism. His book on the ‘Stalin phenomenon’ was widely read in Italy as it laid a basis for the ongoing political formulation of an alternative to the ‘Soviet model’, that in due time would be formulated as ‘Euro-communism’ by party leaders in Spain, Italy and France. Boffa’s book was, however, more of a scholarly concern and in due time an English translation, updated by Boffa on the glasnost revelations, appeared. Boffa’s careful scrutiny of the main currents in Western, as well as Soviet and Communist party historiography concerning Stalinism is still unsurpassed as an overview of the widespread attempts by historian before the ‘archival revolution’ to explain the evolution and character of the Stalinist phenomenon. His updated summary gives an


idea of the research frontier and the questions that had dominated the debates by the end of the Soviet era around 1990.39

The archival revolution in Russia since the early 1990s

Already during glasnost, the leading Moscow newspapers and journals had published a substantial amount of data on Stalin and Stalinism. These glasnost revelations on the Stalin era and the terror-regime in particular constituted a goldmine for western historians who for the first time got documented confirmations on many events which had formerly been described only based on official Soviet media, defectors’ memoirs or hearsay. Much of what already Souvarine had written on the probable changes in historiography of Stalin only after a total shift of the political thus turned out to be fulfilled during glasnost and during the opening of the archives in Russia. For a certain time, these revelations had the character of sensations and were duly presented in the Western press and literature.40

A major event was the publication of general of the army, Dimitrii Volkogonov’s biography of Stalin in 1990, as he had received exclusive access to secret archives, and although his interpretations of the historical transformations was widely disputed by professional historians in Russian and the West, it was undoubtedly a book that contained sensationally many new archival findings. Volkogonov’s biography of Stalin was still set in a Communist party-oriented perspective, while his later written biographies of Trotsky and Lenin


show that Volkogonov had completely changed his mind-frame on Communism, Lenin and the October 1917 revolution.41

A vast field of historical research that has tended to be split up in subsections of political, military, social, economic and cultural history, and also according to the research school or paradigm that has been dominating in the institution where the scholars have been educated.

The publishing of documentary volumes, or source editions, that characterized the 1990s, and was an essential part of the ‘archival revolution’, have drastically promoted new research on Stalinism. An overview of published archival documents, Otkrytyi arkhiv, enumerates over 3,000 individual documents that have been published in Russian periodicals and newspapers since the late 1980s. Contrary to a widespread popular opinion in the West, there is not so much a lack of access to new source materials on Stalinism. In more organized archival projects, approximately 1 250 source volumes have been published in the 1990s and 2000s. There is rather a certain lag in the assimilation in the scholarly community of all these relevant source materials. Furthermore, a large number of memoirs on the Stalin era in general, on political repressions and individuals’ fates in the Gulag camps, in particular, have been published. Interview projects with elderly citizens, using the established norms for oral history have set up huge data bases that still look for their historians to use.42

Totalitarianism and new paradigms in Soviet historical research

The changing paradigms in Western studies on Stalinism, leaving the debates between the ‘totalitarian school’ and the ‘social history’ or ‘revisionists’ behind, as the new mass of evidence indicated that the Soviet state even in Stalin’s time was not as totalitarian as depicted earlier, nor that society was so passive as the totalitarian theory assumed. For a short time, some Rus-


sian scholars adopted much of the vocabulary of the totalitarian theory, although with a politicized slant. Much as the debates in the Western scholarly community abated, there was on the contrary a renewed interest in Russia in applying the theory of totalitarianism to analyze the Stalin period. This approach was accentuated in the works of Aleksandr Bakunin at the Academy of Sciences’ Historical institute in Ekaterinburg. His reinterpretation of Soviet history spurred ongoing discussions in the mid-1990s. Even more vivid debates in the scholarly community and the public was caused by the works of Irina Pavlova, whose kernel interest was the precise formation of the Stalin power center in the party during the 1920s. Her fundamental research in the former central party archives in Moscow and the regional archives led to her doctoral dissertation and book on the inner mechanisms of the Stalinist leadership. Her defence of the doctoral thesis in 2002 turned into a major debate with some of her Russian colleagues, while others wholeheartedly supported her efforts and well-known Western historians such as Robert Tucker, Niels Erik Rosenfeldt, Victor Zaslavsky and Richard Raack had submitted their positive reviews of her thesis. The weak points in her thesis concerned the hypothesis that Stalin had a long-term plan for aggressive wars against the West European countries. However, the argumentation on the power structure and the decision-making process contained many original insights in the Soviet bureaucracy.

The importance of the rehabilitation process for historical research

During the perestroika, Gorbachev hesitantly approached the historical questions that seemed crucial for his renewal program. Until at least 1987, when


46 Irina A. Pavlova, Mechaizm stalinskoi vlasti: Stanovlenie i funktsionirovanie 1917 – 1941, Novosibirsk, Dissertation for the doctoral degree, and a monograph with the same title, 2002.
he commemorated the 70th anniversary of the October revolution, Gorbachev does not seem to have held any far-reaching opinions. The first reconsiderations of the party’s official line were concerned mainly with the former oppositionists to the Left and Right, with Gorbachev’s emphasis on the socialist alternative allegedly represented in the late 1920s by Nikolai Bukharin’s program for a gradual transition to collective agriculture.

Under pressure from below, from former dissidents and nationalist writers in the peripheral republics, Gorbachev must let publish more and more of the earlier forbidden literature. Not only were the works of world famous authors translated, but the bulk of the Anglo-Saxon special literature was translated. The rehabilitation committee under the leadership of the party ideologue Aleksandr Yakovlev undertook a thorough search to free hundreds of thousands from the false accusations that had condemned them in the 1920s to the early 1950s to long camp sentences or to be executed.

The source volumes in the series edited under the guidance of Aleksandr Yakovlev on the rehabilitation process of victims of terror, from the 1950s to the 1990s. This series includes source volumes on the major political events in the Stalin era and the first post-Stalin decade.47 The contribution to explain the Stalinist phase in Soviet history was hindered from the beginning as the leadership consciously avoided any inquiring of the social or ideological roots of the repressions and violent changes. In essence, they simplified and attributed ‘excesses’ to Stalin as a lone culprit. Still, the mere number of disclosures in the press, periodical literature and speeches opened up for some Russian and many Western historians to engage in a more detailed description of the dramatic decades. It is today of mere curiosity whether or not Khrushchev might have gone further in the disclosure of the Stalinist crimes, had not the protests in 1956 against his anti-Stalin-campaign from French, Chinese and other Communist parties been so vehement. When the 22nd party congress was convened in 1961, the further disclosure did not meet the same resistance inside the USSR, which I would say was due to the fact that the party had coined a formula that ‘the personality cult’ did not, and could not wreck

the ‘sound foundations of socialism’ that allegedly had been established in the 1930s.

After the ousting of Khrushchev in 1964, the topic of Stalinism as such was absent in Soviet historiography for two decades, with only the ‘samizdat’ (published underground in the USSR) and ‘tamizdat’ (smuggled to and published in the West) carrying on the research on the lines established during the ‘thaw period’ and the 1960s.

The Stalinist power center reconsidered

Relatively less research has been done on the rise of Stalin in the party and his triumph over the oppositions. The leading historian of the Soviet countryside, Viktor Danilov (1925–2004) saw to it that the complete central committee proceedings in 1927–1929 were published so that the arguments of the Stalinist and Bukharinist lines on the collectivization could be definitely understood.48 Konstantin Skorkin has presented a far more complex picture of the Left and Trotskyist oppositions by a careful investigation on personal data concerning all those party members who took an active part in the oppositions from 1923 to 1929.49

An interesting research effort started already in the 1970s by the Danish historian Niels Erik Rosenfeldt who discerned a secret apparatus, beside the Politburo of the Central Committee, as ‘Stalin’s secret chancellery’, and based most of his conclusions on the scattered archival documents in the West, mainly in the Houghton Library at Harvard and the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford university.50 Rosenfeldt was on the track of the hidden power structures in the Stalinist hierarchy and the role of secret departments in the party organizations as key elements in a mobilization economy. When the archives opened in the 1990s, Rosenfeldt undertook a substantial research project on these topics and found the documents that


49 Konstantin V. Skorkin, Obrecheny proigrat: Vlast i oppozitsiia 1922–1934, Moscow: VividArt, 2011.

revised his earlier findings and set up a clear picture of the real secret ways of communication, decision-making and implementation of party policy.\textsuperscript{51}

The terror and repressions waves

In the early 1990s, the newly founded organization Memorial received support of the authorities to do research in the secret police archives.\textsuperscript{52} Nikita Petrov, Arsenii Roginskii and others who were the foremost representatives of Memorial in the last Soviet years were the first to get full access to the secret NKVD orders from the 1930s. Petrov and Roginskii thus could disclose the particular nature of the complex terror operations carried out in 1936–38. The NKVD orders as well as reports on the fulfilment of these orders, as shown in documents released by the KGB (later FSB) archives, turned out to have been more orderly prepared and bureaucratically implemented than most researchers had understood. They first got access to the inventory of the NKVD orders, only to find a certain amount of lacking orders, and when they asked the archivists to get these particular items, it turned out to be some of the most important documents on the state terror in the late 1930s. They were the orders No 00447, No 00489 and others, which concerned the mass operations against former kulaks and anti-social elements and the national operations against Soviet Germans, Letts, Poles, and Greeks.\textsuperscript{53}

The general consensus among scholars after assessing the new data on the Great Terror 1937 concerns the nature of the mass terror and consequently quite new interpretations compared to what was the dominating paradigm


DISCUSSING STALINISM

during the Cold War era, when Stalin’s fear of his former opponents in the Party was the dominant factor.

Many discussions up to the mid 1990’s were a long way of the mark as there was no precise knowledge of the character of the arrests of ordinary Soviet citizens who were not members of the Communist Party. The debates between Conquest, Getty, Hough and Wheatcroft at the time had all taken for granted that the purges – quantitatively – mainly concerned the Party and only to a lesser extent the State cadres. However, the archives clearly show that whereas circa forty thousand Party members and over five thousand Red Army officers were executed in 1937–38, the major terror waves struck against ordinary citizens, be they characterized as ‘former kulaks’, anti-social elements’ or considered as unreliable ethnic minorities. These categories make up for over 650 000 executions in the Great Terror.

The consensus interpretation is presented by Oleg Khlevniuk and Nicolas Werth. 54 Jens-Fietje Dwars has analyzed how to understand the contemporary reactions to the Moscow show trials in 1936–38 by Western intellectuals such as Lion Feuchtwanger, Ernst Bloch, Hermann Mann, Bertolt Brecht and André Gide.55

A very useful, chronicled reference book has been compiled by Wladislaw Hedeler that combines data for the years 1936 to 1938 from the Russian archives, the Soviet and Western press and a scholarly commentary on the major events.56 Hedeler edited articles from a Stalin historical conference in autumn 2000,57 with contributions by Reinhard Müller on the forms of torture used to extract ‘confessions’ and by Aleksander Vatlin on a case study


of the terror in a regional setting.\textsuperscript{58} Vatlin has also published a monograph of how the Great Terror was implemented in a Moscow region, and recently shown how one of the ‘national operations’ was carried out.\textsuperscript{59}

Of even more importance are the path-breaking volumes of archival documents from the Central FSB archive and the Presidential Archive edited by Vladimir Khaustov of the secret police – VChK-OGPU-NKVD-MGB – reports to Stalin that the dictator himself read carefully, added comments and gave advice to the state security officers. Although only those documents that bear Stalin’s remarks or resolutions have been included, these volumes have been crucial for better explanations of Stalin’s role during the Great Terror 1936 – 1938.\textsuperscript{60} Khaustov thereafter wrote a monograph on Stalin’s control, by his directives to the NKVD chiefs, over the high-level terror as well as over the show trials and the mass repression. Stalin was kept alert on the terror on a daily basis and he cross-checked records on arrests and protocols of interrogations.\textsuperscript{61}

These and other important revelations in the archives concern the directions of the terror in 1937–38, as it turned out that the purges of communist Party cadres – ca 40 000 purged – was far less than was assumed earlier by Conquest and others, whereas on the other hand, a number of mass operations directed against allegedly ‘anti-Soviet elements’, former kulaks and representatives of national minorities were much. These new data on the Great Terror have spurred historians to careful studies of the repression in regional


scale and with many separate studies of the mechanisms of terror on various levels of the state apparatus, institutions and factories.62

The scattered correspondence between Bolshevik leaders shed light on their personal styles and different approaches to the political situation. Among the source volumes, the correspondence among the Bolshevik leaders as well as a few of the satirical sketches that have been left in the archives from their meetings shed a new light on their mentality. Assuming that these unofficial letters, at least up to a certain point, were more frank and devoid of phraseology, they could be analyzed for the mentality and outlook of the top leadership.63

Boris Ilizarov and others have tried to understand Stalin’s changing worldview through an investigation of his reading habits. As many other Soviet leaders, Stalin over time gathered a large personal library and had exclusive access to such literature that was banned in the public and scientific libraries. Ilizarov has managed to uncover many traits in Stalin, who essentially was an autodidact in many disciplines throughout his life was an avid reader. Besides the enormous amount of reports that entered on his desk, he obviously – judging by his comments in the margins and underlinings – had time to read both fiction and scientific literature.64 Miklós Kun, the Hungarian historian who grew up in the Soviet Union, has managed to present a fascinating picture of the entourage of Stalin and the Kremlin leadership through a number of interviews with the sons and daughters of the Bolshevik leaders, including many who were repressed in the 1930s and 1940s as ‘members of a traitor’s family’. An excellent example of combining oral history – interviews with relatives and children of leading party members – with a scrutiny of the new archival findings of the 1990s.65


A new foundation for the research on the Gulag camp system

A pioneering statistical investigation on the repressions, the forced labour camps and the special settlements for ‘kulaks’ and ethnic minorities were published in a series of articles by Viktor Zemskov in *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, and caused some stir in the academic community in the early 1990s as his archival data disapproved so much that was considered established ‘truths’ in Western Sovietology. As the total extent of the terror had been in dispute, a long discussion followed on the first appearance of Zemskov’s and others’ articles. Certain German and Anglo-Saxon historians even wrote that these ‘documents’ could be exquisite forgeries recently fabricated for propaganda purposes by the KGB. However, as independent scholars, also from the West, got access to these materials in the Russian federal archives, there was no more doubt that the documents really were from the Gulag administration in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. The sources could thus be scrutinized with the same criteria as other historical documentation. A first summary of the archival data on Gulag and Stalinist terror was published in *American Historical Review* in 1993 by Zemskov, Arch Getty and Gábor Rittersporn.66

New interpretations of the role of personality in history

Several biographies of Stalin have been written since the opening of the archives and the access to sources that were hard to find in the Soviet period. Mention should be made of the interview project carried out by the above-mentioned Memorial organization, which has resulted in a special archive of hundreds of interviews with victims of state terror and their relatives. This archive has formed the base for several collections of articles by Memorial’s

member on individual Gulag camps, but also for monographs by Western scholars.⁶⁷

Among the crucial themes that researchers still have to cope with are the three grand Moscow show trials in 1936, 1937 and 1938. Given the new light that has been shed on the earlier trials in the 1920s against the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Shakhty show trial it is probably only the scope of the task that has so far hindered someone from taking on the task to study how the defendants were prepared for their appearances, how the various versions to be read out in public were rehearsed. Most of all one is interested to find out how Stalin intervened with the NKVD to instruct the prosecutors and what he especially wanted to have included in the ‘confessions’. A great forestudy to this project is the publication by Stephen Cohen and Gennadii Bordiugov of Nikolai Bukharin’s prison writings.⁶⁸

In the grand history of the Soviet Union, Manfred Hildermeier describes the broad social and economic trends that made Stalinism a separate phase in the history of the USSR, and discusses the character of the ‘revolution from above’ in the early 1930s and how social and political factors made Stalin’s one-man rule possible.⁶⁹ Hildermeier is also careful to indicate how the archival findings have made new assessments of the total number of victims of the Stalinist-era terror, whether executed or sentenced to Gulag camps.⁷⁰

As a result of the archival openings and the ongoing debates, historiography has been stripped of those myths and uncertain dates that were plentiful in the earlier works. At the turn of the century, several groups of researchers in Great Britain, Germany and France have published collected articles from their conferences on Stalinism. Attention should be directed at Stephan

---


⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 454.
Plaggenborg’s summarizing volume of new directions in German historical research on the Soviet Union.71

Throughout the 1990s, many contributions on the Stalinist phase of Soviet history were set in the ongoing debate on the super-paradigms: totalitarianism versus social historical interpretations. Sheila Fitzpatrick has vividly described the changes in the historians’ perspectives of Stalinism as the materials published in Russia during glasnost forced them to reconsider perceived knowledge.72 Fitzpatrick then gathered a number of younger scholars’ articles on various themes were the new research topics (denunciations, everyday life and consumerism, diary-writing in the USSR, ordinary and secret police operations, etc.) called for a new research format.73 These new research paradigms are represented in a complex collection of articles by several of the leading researchers in new fields and edited by Sarah Davies and James Harris.74 The book’s articles form a much more detailed portrait of Stalin’s role in the foreign policy, nationalities policy, economic decision-making process, as well as his thinking as Marxist or arbiter in cultural affairs.75

On the other hand, the massive new documentation on Stalin’s rise to power, the decision-making process and the character and scope of the repression has resulted in a great amount of new knowledge since 1991. Fundamental research since the early 1990s has allowed Oleg Khlevniuk to analyze in ever more nuanced and detailed form the changing character of the power nexus, the Communist party’s Politburo and Stalin’s control of the state administra-


DISCUSSING STALINISM

tion as it changed from the early 1930s to the outbreak of World War Two. A major source project that changed the assessment of Stalin’s working habits was the publication and analysis of the diaries of Stalin’s secretaries who noted all his visitors at the Kremlin office. In order to understand how Stalin and his closest comrades-in-arms changed their views of the Soviet society, another project has gathered all the top-secret messages and reports on conditions at factories, in the countryside and among various groups in society. This new source and the Stalin documents in the former party archive, today RGASPI, form the basis for Arfon Rees’ and Stephen Wheatcroft’s articles on the decision-making process and leadership style of Stalin. The recent additions to knowledge of Stalin’s leadership style are reflected in Hiroaki Kuromiya’s biography of Stalin. Kuromiya did research on the industrialization in the Donbass region and has also investigated a set of typical cases at the NKVD state security in the Great terror. Based on his research and new findings in the literature, Kuromiya portrays Stalin in a concise textbook and manages to deepen the understanding of Stalin’s way of reasoning.


77 First published in a series of articles in Istoricheskii arkhiv, these diaries were then edited in one volume by Anatoliy A. Chernobaev, Na Priëme u Stalina: Tetradi (zhurnaly) zapisei lits, prinimatkh I.V. Stalinyym (1924–1953), Moscow: Novyi Khronograf, 2008.


79 Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsialnoi i politicheskoi istorii, in the early 1990s called RTsKhIDNI, Rossiiskii Tsentr Khraneniia i Dokumentatsii Noveishei Istorii.


Moshe Lewin’s grand synthesis: The ‘Soviet century’ – encompassing the Stalin era

Moshe Lewin held a foremost position among the pioneers of Stalinist history. Since the publication of his analysis of the decision to collectivize agriculture and numerous articles and books on Soviet social, economic and political history, Lewin was well aware of the lacunae in the common understanding of the dynamics of the Soviet system. For this reason he focused on well-defined research topics in the Russian state and economic archives. The results were presented in his monograph *The Soviet Century*, which was actually first published in France in 2003, where it was a great success-story and appreciated as a welcome contrast to the dominant paradigm as set out by Francois Furet, Stephan Courtois, and others who had launched the ideological project that resulted in *Le Livre noir du communisme* (The Black Book of Communism) that stirred so many and hot debates in the late 1990s, albeit without contributing much with new knowledge. Lewin’s *The Soviet Century* can be read as the hitherto missing component to his earlier articles in economic and social history of the USSR.82 The characteristic of Lewin’s scholarship was his truly comprehensive grasp for a full history of Soviet state and society, where neither politics nor social relations could be studied in isolation as well as his succinct understanding of the role of ideology. It seems, however, that so far Moshe Lewin’s recent contributions – precisely for better explaining the rise of Stalin in the late 1920s and the character of his rule, as well as the social and military restrictions that set the general framework for his regime. Lewin’s archival-based chapters on the Soviet bureaucracy, militarization, and ideological changes have not made the same impact in the Anglo-Saxon world or in Russia as they did in France. According to Lewin, the reason for this was that the French ‘politically correct’ debates since the mid-90s had been dominated by conservative paradigms such as Francois Furet’s voluminous *Le Passé d’une illusion*, with the modest sub-title *Essai sur l’idée communiste au XXe siècle* and the collective work by Stephane Courtois, Nicolas Werth and others *Le Livre noir du communisme*, with its equally clear sub-title *Crime, terreur, répression*. Lewin’s book was therefore widely acclaimed for its multipolar analysis of the

whole social, economic and ideological framework of the Soviet regime. This complex analysis allowed Lewin to present a dynamic setting of how and to explain why the Communist party, the state bureaucracy as well as the Russian society as a whole had fundamentally changed over time. In comparison, Courtois’ genetic analysis tried to show an “inherent criminal gene” of communism – going back to the formulations in the 1840s by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, on the one hand, and static, unchanging preponderance for violent solutions in the USSR under both Lenin and Stalin. Nicolas Werth’s long essay on the Soviet Union, ‘Un régime contre son people” was not dialectically formulating how the Soviet Union could achieve its break-neck forced industrialization, triumph on the battlefields over Germany and achieve superpower status by the 1950s. In short, it lacked the analytical depth that readers found in Lewin’s *Le Siècle soviétique*. On the other hand, the Britain and the United States had already a substantial literature by younger scholars and veterans that reflected the situation after the “archival revolution” and the English translation *The Black Book of Communism* never made a serious impression on the informed readers, in particular as the English version had added articles of an even more politicized character by the former ‘perestroika ideologue’ Aleksandr Yakovlev and the American historian Martin Malia who had long advocated the ideological factor as a sole and sufficient factor to analyze Soviet history from 1917 to 1991.83

### The ‘Backlash’ in popular history of the Stalin era

In the early 2000s, it certain ‘backlash’ of pro-Stalinist currents was easily discerned in the Russian stream of popular publications and, more importantly, opinion polls and interviews with leading politicians showed that many were keen to review, once again, their general assessments of the Stalinist past. Whereas earlier only scattered books were published with hagiographic character on Stalin, the new decade has witnessed a plethora of books with laudatory praise of Stalin, outright falsifications of documents and tendentious

presentations of his role during the Great Terror and the Second World war. Suffice it here to mention that in the 1990s pro-Stalinist literature consisted mainly of collected articles or excerpts from authors who had met Stalin, or written in positive terms of him; Winston Churchill’s characterizations of Stalin being a favorite quotation. In recent years, however, Russian book shops are filled with title from series such as “Svetloe proshloe” (The bright Past, alluding to the refrain in “The International”), or seriously ironic titles such as Imperiia Dobra (The Empire of the Goodness, as opposed to President Ronald Reagan’s catchword in the Cold War period!). The demasking of Stalin’s terror by Khrushchev is ridiculed in a monograph called “Stalin in front of the court of pygmies”. It can also be remarked that the influential Communist party of the Russian Federation, KPRF, and its leader Ziuganov have openly “rehabilitated” Stalin.

Rosspen’s director Andrei Sorokin took the initiative to publish a 100-volume series on various aspects of the history of Stalinism. The series includes both re-editions of recently published Russian monographs and translations of works by Western scholars, but most of all a substantial amount of new monographs published for the first time in Russian. The importance of these volumes that are now a cornerstone in all Russian universities’ libraries (as the Eltsin Presidential Foundation has sponsored the all-Russian distribution of the series) can hardly be overestimated. Not only have a large number of firsthand Russian monographs been published, but also a substantial number of translations from English, French and German which means that for

84 Iurii Emelianov, Stalin pered sudom pigmeev, Moscow: Iauza / Eksmo, 2008. Compare also the outright ‘revisionist’ literature that denies the findings from archival sources on the extent of the Stalinist terror, e.g. Igor Pykhalov, Velikii obol’gannyi Vozhd: Lozh i Pravda o Staline, Moscow: Iauza, 2010; Konstantin Romanenko, “Edi by ne stalinskie repressii”: Kak Vozhd spas SSSR, Moscow: Iauza, 2011; Dmitrii Lyskov, “Stalinskie repressii”: Velikaia lozh XX veka, Moscow: Iauza/ Eksmo, 2009. Having said this, it should also be added that there will always be ample space, and maybe even legitimacy for popular historians such as Pykhalov to refute their liberal opponents, because far too many ‘mainstream liberals’ who discuss Stalinism tend to merely repeat Cold War propaganda clichés on the extent of the terror in 1937-38, even to refer to dubious statements on the Gulag camps that were based on fiction but refuted by archival research, or to state that the labour legislation in the 1940s was so draconian that workers were sent to long prison or camp terms just for being some twenty minutes late to their factory.

85 See e.g. Gennadii Ziuganov, Stalin i sovremennost, Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2008.

the first time do Russian readers have easy access to the recent debates in the Western historical community.87 These paradigmatic changes in Stalinist historiography have been discussed at conferences and in article collections. As a complement to these publications, annual international conferences on various aspects of Stalinism have been organized in cooperation with universities throughout Russia.88

Remarks for further studies on Stalin and Stalinism

Many problems will remain for a long time as controversial and hard to resolve. Other questions will be answered as more quantitative analyses and statistical surveys of representative selections of great data cohorts are produced. New solidly based generalizations will emerge instead of the still customary, rather sporadic or impressionistic descriptions that highlight certain aspects of the Stalinist system, government and society. Such pre-scientific methods are numerous even in Western scholarly publications, where even today fiction and other literary sources are sometimes relied upon as used to be the case before 1991. In particular, much more can be expected in economic and social history, where although no ‘exact measurement’ is due, but where we know that the reasonable intervals of probable figures can be established.89 On the other hand, many historical questions will be solved as documentation is revealed on concrete decisions by the Stalin secretariat, the leading party and state institutions, and research is done on a country-wide basis on the effects


of central politics. The primordial task of academic research is thus to set up a counter-example to those pro-Stalinist simplifications and distortions that have inundated the Russian book market in recent years. It may turn out to be fatal if too much of the widespread popular literature of a pro-Stalinist nature continues to be ignored by professional historians.

An equally important task as countering the ‘neo-Stalinist revisionism’ is to eliminate as much as possible of the myths that were coined earlier, based on hearsay or heavily censored, printed sources of Soviet origin. For example, the recent success of the British historian Simon Montefiore’s popular biography of Stalin gives a seemingly true, and lively picture of ‘the court of the Red Tsar’ but upon closer inspection turns out to be more like a card-house, because it is based on phrases from memoirs that purport to give correct quotations of what Stalin, Beria, Ezhov, Khrushchev or other leaders have said many years before. The scientific approach has to rely on the few written and uncorrected stenographic records that are preserved from Central committee and politburo meetings of the Communist party, and base their interpretations with due respect to what can actually be documented.


The gap between Soviet studies and historical sociology can be seen in the approaches to the phenomenon of Stalinism. Thus in an introduction to the book *Stalinism: New Directions* Sheila Fitzpatrick outlines the main stages of development of Stalinism studies and discusses the prospects for this field of research. As she notes, 'old-time Sovietology was dominated by model-oriented political scientists, revisionism by empirically-oriented social historians'. In the 1980s revisionists obtained a dominant position in the sphere of Soviet studies and in the 1990s there was a shift from social history towards a new cultural history of the Soviet period. What this outline implies is that historical sociology has not influenced to any great extent the main trends in the study of Stalinism.

In the 1980s the so-called New Historical Sociology became prominent in American and British social science. The authors most often referred to as representatives of this trend are Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol and Michael

---


Mann. These scholars were influenced in varying degrees by the Marxist and Weberian sociological traditions. In the 1990s the multiple modernities approach emerged in historical sociology. This perspective, developed by Shmuel Eisenstadt, Johann Arnason and Bjorn Wittrock, also drew on Weberian theory. The phenomenon of Stalinism was considered in the works of some leading representatives of New Historical Sociology and the multiple modernities perspective. Nevertheless, there were no attempts to provide a comparative analysis of their contributions to the study of this phenomenon. This paper evaluates the relevance of some of Max Weber’s concepts and the approaches of today’s neo-Weberian historical sociology for the study of Stalinism.

The Application of Weberian Concepts to the Soviet Political Regime

When the Soviet system was analysed on the basis of Weberian concepts the main problem was to establish which of the three types of legitimate domination would be most appropriate to characterise this political regime. Although one of the leading Weberian scholars, Reinhardt Bendix, once noted that the Soviet system lay outside Weber’s typology of the forms of legitimate domination, all Weber’s types were used in different combinations for the study of Soviet political institutions. It should be noted that Weberian concepts were seldom employed by specialists in Soviet history, old-style Sovietologists or revisionists. In the totalitarian school, Richard Pipes in particular applied Weber’s concepts to the Russian old regime and later discussed the affinities between tsarist patrimonialism and the Bolshevik regime. In the revisionist camp Moshe Lewin considered the relevance of Weberian concepts for the study of Stalinism. But it is characteristic that in many cases Lewin

DISCUSSING STALINISM

referred not to Weber’s writings but to interpretations of Weber by Marxist scholars.⁵

The early Bolshevik regime was generally regarded as charismatic or at least displaying some charismatic features. At the same time the concept of charismatic domination was subject to different interpretations. Naturally, it was Lenin who was believed to possess charisma. However, it was sometimes argued that Lenin lacked personal qualities distinguishing a true charismatic leader. From this viewpoint, his charisma was ‘a posthumous and ideologically motivated product of his followers’.⁶ It was claimed that the Soviet structure of authority rested not only on Lenin’s personal charisma but also on that of the Bolshevik party as an organisation. In addition, it was argued that the Bolshevik party embodied a special type of charisma – the ‘charisma of reason’.⁷

According to Weber, charisma can be ‘a gift that inheres in an object or person simply by virtue of natural endowment. Such primary charisma cannot be acquired by any means. But charisma of the other type may be produced artificially in an object or person’.⁸ Genuine charisma was characteristic of religious prophets and founders of empires. On the other hand, in modern political life charisma is manufactured with the use of the mass media. The concept of manufactured charisma has been applied to fascist regimes. Thus Breuer believes that the rise of Mussolini and Hitler ‘whose biography prior to their entry into politics is rather pale and below average’ was due to artificially produced charisma.⁹ Apparently this also applies to Stalin. In the early 1920s the Bolshevik leaders did not see Stalin as a potential head of the party. However, it was Stalin who was able to present himself as Lenin’s true heir. The construction of Stalin’s own cult based on manufactured charisma was intensified in the end of the 1920s when his rivals in the party leadership were defeated.

---


In Weber’s typology of domination, charisma represents an unstable force which is subject to routinisation. ‘It is the fate of charisma to recede before the powers of tradition or of rational association after it has entered the permanent structures of social action.’10 That is there are two possible ways of the routinisation of charisma and both of them were discussed by those who applied that Weberian concept to the Soviet system. On the one hand, Breuer argues that in the Bolshevik regime the form of routinisation involved is not a traditionalisation but a rationalisation. Nevertheless, as he admits, ‘it is true that the Bolshevik type of rationalisation remains strangely incomplete; indeed, that it even displays a tendency to negate itself’.11 On the other hand, it was claimed that Weber’s concept of patrimonialism as a sub-type of traditional domination could be applied to the Stalinist regime. According to Gill, although initially the central regime was not patrimonial, certain patrimonial features were present in the party bureaucracy at the local level from the outset of Bolshevik rule. Gill argues that Stalin had established a patrimonial regime at the centre by the end of the 1930s.12

Klaus-Georg Riegel has offered a Weberian analysis of Marxism-Leninism as a political religion. This scholar discusses the transition of the Bolshevik party from being a community of ‘ideological virtuosi’ into a ‘hierocracy’ under Stalin. Riegel argues that the Lenin cult already established during his own lifetime ‘laid the foundations for a political and sacral tradition which could be selectively used by the Stalinist hierocratic power’.13 Riegel draws a parallel with Weber’s analysis of the rise of a professional priesthood. For Weber, the emergence of a church is accompanied by a rationalisation of dogma and rituals. Accordingly, the Holy Scriptures are provided with commentaries and turned into objects of systematic education. As Riegel demonstrates, the formation of Stalin’s hierocracy included a selective reformulation of the Leninist legacy. Riegel claims that the new sacral tradition of Marxism-Leninism was invented by ideological experts of Stalinist orthodoxy. ‘The most impor-

tant tenet of faith in this invented sacral tradition of Marxism-Leninism was that Stalin alone qualified as the only true disciple of Lenin; the consequence thus being his monopoly of infallible interpretation of his holy scriptures.\textsuperscript{14}

Apparently one can speak of a clash between the impersonal charisma of reason of the ‘old Bolsheviks’ and the largely manufactured personal charisma of Stalin in the second half of the 1920s. By the middle of the 1930s the emphasis was shifted from manufacturing Stalin’s personal charisma to the invention of a new tradition. This culminated in the publication of the Stalinist ‘holy scripture’ \textit{The Short Course of History of the All-Union Communist Party} in 1938. The dissemination of Stalin’s version of the history of the Russian revolution was accompanied by ‘destroying, together with the older books and documents, their authors and readers’.\textsuperscript{15} The \textit{Short Course} published at the end of the great purge ‘gave the charismatic leadership a traditional basis through a mythical account of party history, and it stressed Stalin’s achievements as law-maker and state-builder’.\textsuperscript{16}

Weber’s concept of patrimonial bureaucracy can also be applied to the Stalinist regime.\textsuperscript{17} For Weber, patrimonial bureaucracy occupies an intermediate position between traditional patrimonialism and rational bureaucracy. Weber admits that a patrimonial ruler may develop ‘a rational system of administration with technically specialised officials’.\textsuperscript{18} However, this type of bureaucracy is always characterised by personal relationships between the ruler and his officials. While in rational bureaucracy formal regulations determine all the activities of the officials, in a patrimonial system everything depends on the personal relations between a ruler and his staff. The Stalinist system evidently possessed some essential features of a patrimonial-bureaucratic regime. Under that system the orders of the supreme leader took priority over formal rules. Party officials were supposed first of all to demonstrate their personal

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, p. 110.


loyalty to Stalin. Nevertheless, one might speak of patrimonial elements in the Soviet bureaucracy which might be more or less conspicuous at different stages of its development.

At the same time it has been argued that the Weberian theory of bureaucracy should be applied to the Stalinist regime in a modified version. Thus Yurii Davydov has formulated the concept of a totalitarian bureaucracy. Davydov draws not only on Weber but also on Arendt’s model of a totalitarian dictatorship. According to Davydov, a new type of bureaucracy emerged in Soviet society. The main characteristics of this type were its ‘omnipresence’ and ‘repressive orientation’. On the one hand, Soviet bureaucracy tried to regulate all spheres of social life. On the other hand, the repressive apparatus served as an ideal model for the bureaucracy as a whole. But Davydov did not clarify the relationship between this concept of totalitarian bureaucracy and Weber’s model of a rational bureaucracy. At the same time the main problem with the concept of a totalitarian bureaucracy is that it is based on elements drawn from two essentially different and in certain respects opposed theories. Hannah Arendt described Soviet bureaucracy as atomised and completely subordinated to the supreme leader. But Weber’s approach that focuses on the problem of bureaucratic power is quite different.

The relevance of the Weberian concept of bureaucracy for the study of Stalinism has also been considered by Anthony Giddens. In his book *The Nation-State and Violence* Giddens adds to the totalitarian model by providing his own analysis of the modern state employing Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power. For Giddens, totalitarianism could only emerge in the conditions of the modern nation-state. ‘The possibilities of totalitarian rule depend upon the existence of societies in which the state can successfully penetrate the day-to-day activities of most of its subject population. This, in turn, presumes a high level of surveillance.’ At the same time Giddens regards Weber’s analysis of bureaucracy as insufficient since, in his view, Weber tended to marginalise the problem of bureaucratic surveillance. But there is actually no contradiction between Weber’s concept of bureaucratic power as the power of specialist

---

DISCUSSING STALINISM

officials and the emphasis on surveillance. A more detailed analysis of the problem of surveillance can be added to Weber’s theory. In order to clarify the modern features of Stalinism we should turn to some approaches of today’s neo-Weberian historical sociology.

Michael Mann’s Neo-Weberian Historical Sociology of Nazism and Stalinism

A neo-Weberian analysis of the Stalinist regime has been offered by Michael Mann, who is one of the leading representatives of the New Historical Sociology. According to Tim Jacoby, there are four main features that distinguish Mann’s contribution from other neo-Weberian approaches in historical sociology: (1) an explicit commitment to empiricism; (2) a complex theoretical consideration of state power; (3) the rejection of the ‘extensive’ comparative method and a concentration on a limited number of historical cases; (4) a preference for ‘middle-range explanations’ of historical processes. These features can also be found in Mann’s analysis of the Stalinist political regime.

Mann’s most recent analysis of the rise of the Soviet system can be found in volume 3 of his monumental work *The Sources of Social Power*. However, his discussion of the phenomenon of Stalinism can be found in his earlier article ‘The Contradictions of Continuous Revolution’, which is devoted to a comparative study of Hitler’s and Stalin’s regimes. According to Mann, there were important differences between these regimes: ‘the Bolsheviks abolished capitalism, the Soviet Union was bigger, less industrialised and modern, more secular and ethnically diverse’. But, in Mann’s opinion, despite the differences between the Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships these two regimes ‘belong together’. What made both dictatorships historically unique was the unprecedented violence and terror directed at millions of their subjects.


Mann characterises different approaches to the study of Nazism and Stalinism including the totalitarian theory and recent revisionist historiography. He points out that totalitarian theorists correctly identified the main features of the two regimes: a revolutionary ideology, a single party and a centralised bureaucracy. Nevertheless, according to Mann, these theorists were wrong in that they attributed much more coherence to the regimes than they actually possessed. Mann regards the Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships as two subtypes of another category of regime, namely, the ‘regime of continuous revolution’. In his view, they resembled fluid revolutionary movements rather than institutionalised states. As he writes: ‘Instead of revolutionary ideology and party institutions smoothly combining to produce a totalitarian bureaucracy, they undercut each other to produce a less institutionalised, more dynamic and arbitrary despotism’.25

Unlike most contemporary historical sociologists, Mann pays considerable attention to revisionist accounts of Stalinism. In principle, Mann agrees with those historians who argue that Stalin possessed only limited control over the party apparatus. For Mann, it is not surprising that revisionist historians revealed fierce power struggles within the Nazi and Stalinist regimes. Mann accepts the arguments of critics of the totalitarian theory that Stalin was not able to penetrate into the infrastructures of regional and local administrations and was forced to use ‘shock-methods’ of control. As a result, violence could be seen ‘as proof of a weak not a strong regime’.26

Mann identifies the main methods of rule used by a regime of continuous revolution. He notes that Hitler and Stalin used the ‘divide and rule’ strategy encouraging rivalries among their subordinates. Mann emphasises that both dictators cultivated informal, personal networks around them. In addition, party officials did not so much follow formal rules but instead tried to guess their leader’s intentions. These officials could only look for hints at what might be the desired policy. ‘In the absence of information they complied with their superior’s orders if they recognised that his connections with higher-ups were better than theirs’.27 Obviously, these features of the regimes deviate considerably from the model of a rule-governed rational bureaucracy.

26 Ibid, p. 139.
27 Ibid, p. 147.
DISCUSSING STALINISM

In Mann’s article special attention is devoted to the new mobilisation techniques developed by the Nazis and Bolsheviks. Mann argues that propaganda techniques based on the use of mass meetings, radio and newspapers only had a limited influence on the population as a whole, although these techniques were more efficient within the party itself and its youth organisations. An essential feature of the Nazi and Bolshevik parties was that they were based on the cell. Presumably the party cells were able to exert surveillance and control at the workplace and in local neighbourhoods. However, the cell ‘strengthened the local party more than the centralised hierarchy. It gave some reality to the “democracy” of the Communist Party and to the “direct action orientation” of the Nazis. Thus some of their supposed “chaos” may be better described as strong party localism capable of continuously mobilising militants to achieve local goals, often at odds with the party or state hierarchy’.28 According to Mann, although the administrative methods of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes ‘generated not bureaucracy, but fluidity and violence’, they enabled these regimes ‘to achieve not quite permanent, but certainly continuing, revolution’.29

Actually Mann offers a middle-range sociological theory of Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships. This approach evidently has some advantages over the rigid totalitarian model. However, it may be argued that Mann’s analysis of Stalinism is applicable first of all to the period of the 1930s. In the subsequent stage of its development this regime can hardly be described as a fluid social movement. As Getty puts it, during and after the war a ‘petrification’ of the Stalinist system occurred.30 In the post-war period the regime strengthened its legitimacy and became much more institutionalised. Mann’s main concern is explaining mass terror under Nazism and Stalinism. That seems to be why he focuses on the more ‘chaotic’ phase of the dynamics of Stalin’s regime in the 1930s. Mann also included a chapter on mass terror under Communist regimes in his book devoted to ethnic cleansing and genocide.31

29 Ibid, p. 149.


However, what is lacking in Mann’s analysis of Stalinism is an appreciation of the cultural context. It has been argued that Mann’s approach tends ‘to limit the cultural dimensions to political or social interests and institutions rather than to consider also the relative autonomy of the cultural, religious and secular domain and the cultural contradictions as sources of political conflict and social change’.\(^{32}\) Mann concentrates on the institutional traits that were similar in both regimes of continuous revolution. At the same time he tends to diminish the role of ideology in Stalinism. Mann takes for granted the supposedly ‘revolutionary utopian tradition represented by Marxism and Bolshevism’, which, it is often argued, was ‘intensified and perverted’ by Stalinism.\(^{33}\) But he focuses mainly on the peculiarities of Nazi ‘nation-statist’ ideology. All in all in his analysis of the regimes of continuous revolution Mann devotes more attention to the Nazi dictatorship than to its Stalinist counterpart.

### Johann Arnason’s Multiple Modernities Approach to Stalinism

A new theoretical approach to the study of the Soviet system has been worked out within the multiple modernities perspective as part of civilisational analysis in historical sociology. This perspective focuses on cultural factors and their impact on the political sphere. The multiple modernities theory follows a critical approach to political power in ‘a neo-Weberian sense that concentrates on the institutional and cultural legitimacy structures of power’.\(^{34}\) The rise of this paradigm can be seen in the context of a more general trend connected with the ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences. The multiple modernities approach has been elaborated by Shmuel Eisenstadt, Johann Arnason and other scholars. In Wolfgang Knoebl’s view, Arnason’s theory is particularly

---


DISCUSSING STALINISM

relevant for the study of political processes and it can be regarded as ‘an attempt to “bring political power back” into civilisational analysis’.  

Arnason has paid considerable attention to the Soviet version of modernity. Thus in his book *The Future that Failed* he focuses on the imperial background and character of the Soviet regime. As Spohn argues, this work can be considered ‘a highly original civilisational approach to the communist regimes in Russia and other parts of the world that deserves further theoretical development and comparative research’. It is true that Arnason’s book was written before the full elaboration of his civilisational theory. However, he addressed the problem of communist modernity in several other works.

First of all Arnason considers the Russian cultural and political tradition, which combined a peripheral position within the western world with some traits of a separate civilisation. In particular, Arnason focuses on the character of imperial modernisation in Russia. He argues that the origins and later transformation of the totalitarian project can only be understood with reference to that background. For Arnason, the Soviet model incorporated both the legacy of imperial transformation from above and the revolutionary vision of a new society. Their synthesis led to a ‘reunified and re-articulated tradition’, which served ‘to structure a specific version of modernity’. Arnason regards the Soviet model as a configuration of political, economic and cultural patterns.

Arnason discusses the communist project of modernity, which was rooted both in Marxist theory and its more marginal Bolshevik version connected to the Russian tradition. While Arnason, regards Soviet Marxism as an ideology he is more cautious when he considers the possibility of identifying this ideology as a secular religion. In his view, there was rather ‘a partial functional equivalence between Marxism-Leninism and traditional theological


38 Johann P. Arnason, ‘Communism and Modernity’, p. 87.

52
Arnason emphasises that Soviet ideology continued both the scientific trend and ‘redemptive visions’ of Marxism. ‘In the Bolshevik context, the result was simultaneous scientisation and sacralisation of the revolutionary project as well as of the vanguard to which it was entrusted, and both aspects were reinforced by the Russian background.’

Three ‘reference points’ connected with the problem of the Soviet model are emphasised by Arnason: movements, empires and civilisations. As he argues, the impact of the imperial legacy was manifested in the fact that the Bolshevik government inherited not just the geopolitical situation and internal structural problems of the Russian empire but also the tradition of social transformation from above. In his view, the civilisational aspect of the Soviet model can be seen ‘in the twofold sense of a distinctive version of modernity and a set of traditional patterns which it perpetuated in a new setting.’

He also discusses the formation of the international communist movement, which came to be subordinated to the Soviet centre.

In his analysis of the Stalinist regime, Arnason draws on the theory of totalitarianism. The starting point for his discussion of totalitarianism was the approaches of Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis. However, Arnason has reworked Castoriadis’ approach in a ‘sociologically meaningful way.’ Arnason admits that one might speak of a totalitarian project rather than a fully-fledged totalitarian system. He focuses on the relation between the totalitarian project and the Soviet ‘counter-paradigm’ of modernity. Overall he agrees with Robert Tucker that Stalin’s ‘second revolution’ was the most decisive turn in Soviet history. In Arnason’s view, this second revolution finally took ‘a manifestly pathological turn that has never been adequately explained in structural or strategic terms.’ For Arnason, the attempts of some revisionist historians to present the purges of 1936-1938 as a result of social conflicts

40 Ibid, p. 117.
DISCUSSING STALINISM

does not look convincing. As a result, he tends to disregard revisionist social history and prefers a modified version of the totalitarian model.

Arnason analyses the impact of the Stalinist 'second revolution' on the political, economic and cultural spheres. In his view, while the political component remained decisive, there were some specific trends in the other two spheres. According to Arnason, the continuity with the pre-revolutionary past was most evident on the political level. On the other hand, the imperatives of modernisation were more pronounced in the economy. In the cultural sphere, Marxist-Leninist ideology 'drew on a revolutionary and utopian tradition, imported from the West but adapted to indigenous premises in such a way that it could serve to synthesise the conflicting strands of the Russian tradition. This cultural background co-determined the course of economic and political development'.

The fact that Arnason discusses the applicability of Weberian concepts to the Soviet model should be taken into account. As he writes: 'Although Weber's analysis and typology of domination is the most convenient frame of reference, it should not be regarded as an exhaustive inventory. In particular, the myth of the vanguard party represents a new mode of legitimation that has some affinity with each of Weber's three types, but also has some distinctive characteristics of its own.' Arnason concludes that the Soviet mode of legitimation included elements from all three Weberian types but that it, nevertheless, represented a new and original phenomenon. For Arnason, the Soviet regime was not simply a more extreme form of bureaucratic domination. Whilst the arbitrary rule of the party apparatus did not correspond to the standards of rational bureaucracy, its methods of control and mobilising capacity were beyond the classical Weberian model.

Arnason refers to a reactivation of the Russian tradition of imperial power by the Stalinist regime. At the same time he devotes particular attention to the charismatic mode of legitimation, which was, in his view, essential to the Stalinist autocracy. He believes that a new form of charismatic domination characterised Stalin's regime. For Arnason, the source of Stalin's charisma lay in his ability to synthesise the three main elements of the Soviet model. First, Stalin's revolution from above realigned the Bolshevik project with older pat-

terns of imperial modernisation. Second, the slogan of ‘socialism in one country’ justified the aims of the regime in the language of the world communist movement. Third, the idea of Leninism as the Marxism of a new epoch ‘gave the regime an ideological foundation for its claim to represent a new civilisation with a global mission’.\(^{47}\)

According to Arnason, there were significant differences between ‘the pre-war and the post-war constellation’. Thus, as he writes, ‘the autocratic regime and the enlarged empire seemed to reinforce each other: Stalin’s rule was re-legitimated by victory and expansion, and his charismatic leadership served to contain centrifugal trends within the bloc’.\(^{48}\) On the other hand, the imperial legacy re-emerged as a more independent factor after the ‘downgrading’ of the totalitarian project. During the stage of post-Stalinist ‘oligarchic stabilisation’, the Soviet system turned to global expansionism instead of internal mobilisation.\(^{49}\)

It should be noted that in the field of Soviet studies there was insufficient attention to historical sociology as a whole and to Arnason’s works in particular. In historical studies of Stalinism two distinct approaches can be identified which stress the modernity of the Stalinist regime or its neo-traditionalist aspects. On the one hand, the modernity approach focuses on such phenomena as ‘planning, scientific organisation principles, welfare-statism, and techniques of popular surveillance’.\(^{50}\) On the other hand, the neo-traditionalist approach concentrates on ‘the ‘archaicising’ phenomena that were also part of Stalinism: petitioning, patron-client networks, the ubiquity of other kinds of personalistic ties like blat, ascribed status categories, ‘court’ politics in the Kremlin, the mystification of power’.\(^{51}\)

In fact, this distinction reminds one of the discussion in Weberian sociology of the two possible ways of routinisation of charisma: rationalisation and traditionalisation. But most historians of the Soviet period hardly ever mention theories of historical sociology. However, it can be argued that the multiple modernities perspective in historical sociology, particularly Arnason’s work...
son’s work, can bridge the gap between these two approaches in Soviet studies. Arnason’s theory allows us to reconsider the Soviet system. From the multiple modernities perspective Arnason elaborated a new vision of Soviet modernity which is essential for the analysis of Stalinism.

Conclusion

The historical sociology of Stalinism can draw not only on Weber’s original concepts but also on their current interpretations and modifications. From this viewpoint, the Stalinist dictatorship can be seen as undergoing a transition from manufactured charisma to invented tradition resulting in a patrimonial-bureaucratic regime characterised by a specific combination of neo-traditionalist and modern traits. Apparently the concepts of manufactured charisma and invented tradition are applicable to the two consecutive phases of development of that regime. On the other hand, the relevance of the concept of totalitarian bureaucracy is less obvious. But while the use of Weberian concepts allows us to consider the charismatic and neo-traditionalist traits of Stalinism, it seems that these concepts are insufficient for the analysis of the modern features of that political regime.

In neo-Weberian historical sociology two main theoretical approaches have been elaborated. On the one hand, the structure-oriented approach concentrates on the influence of social structures on political institutions. On the other hand, the culture-oriented approach, represented by the multiple modernities theory, focuses on cultural mechanisms that programme the processes of social and political change. Arnason analysed Stalinism from the viewpoint of his general theory of the Soviet model of modernity, and Mann worked out a more empirically oriented middle-range sociological theory of regimes of continuous revolution. A Neo-Weberian historical sociology of Stalinism should combine both of these theoretical analyses. Whereas Arnason tends to disregard revisionist social history, Mann devotes insufficient attention to the cultural context of the dynamics of the Stalinist regime. It can be assumed that a neo-Weberian perspective in historical sociology of Stalinism should draw on the empirical findings of social history and should also be sensitive to the cultural context of the social and political transformations in the USSR.
The rise of repressive practices and structures in the Soviet Union from the end of the 1920s, when it became obvious that the use of terrorist methods was not endemically restricted to the Civil War and its immediate aftermath, put many Left intellectuals in a difficult position. The situation was further complicated after the seizure of power by the Nazis in Germany in 1933. Now it seemed that critique against the Soviet Union – which despite everything still stood firm as the most reliable anti-Fascist force in world politics – might benefit Nazi Germany and thus prove harmful for the “common cause” of the Left. The problem created a cul-de-sac somewhat like the dilemmas of game theory, with the distinction that it was even deeper, having not only political or theoretical aspects but even a moral dimension.

Although there are many studies on the political positions taken by Left intellectuals in 1930s Europe, most of them do not, in my opinion, take into
account the almost desperate dilemma in which they found themselves. Instead, their pro-Stalin statements and opinions are explained either as something ephemeral, as a kind of involuntary “ransom” dictated by the political constellations of the epoch, or then as an inexcusable fall to the temptation of “totalitarianism”. In both cases, the inner tensions created by the rise of Stalinism in the Marxist world outlook of the European intellectuals remain unanalysed and are replaced by simple schematic and reductionistic explanations.

Both Fascism and Stalinism were phenomena of a new kind, which critical Western intellectuals had never met before, and in that respect one could say that the emergence of repressive structures in the Soviet Union from the end of the 1920s onwards, especially the terror of the 1930s, was a mauvaise rencontre for most Left intellectuals. The main target of their critique was and remained Fascism, and many of them felt that to fight on two fronts simultaneously would exceed their capacity. For a Marxist analysis of these new political phenomena, some starting points might be found in Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire, which was an assessment of Louis Bonaparte’s rise to power in the aftermath of the 1848 revolution, and indeed one could point to some similarities between 19th century Bonapartism and 20th century fascist movements. But Stalinism defied attempts to explain it using the theoretical tools of the Marxism of those days.

Brecht’s “Dialectics of Stalinism”

One of the strategies to get out of the dilemma of the 1930s was followed by Bertolt Brecht. It is said that Brecht had painted on the ceiling of his study in his Danish exile the words ‘Truth is always concrete’, claiming that the quotation was from Hegel. Although such a formulation cannot, in these exact words, be found in Hegel’s texts, it undoubtedly reflects Hegel’s position in an authentic manner. For Brecht, too, the analysis of the concrete situation always took priority. The critique of Stalinism by Liberals and Social Democrats seemed to him to be too abstract. In order to protect the unity of the anti-Fascists, he never publicly attacked Stalin’s policy or the Soviet Union, but he nevertheless privately heavily criticised the excesses of Stalinism. So it is no wonder that especially those researchers which have studied his pro-
duction from a non-Marxist point of view, have been prone to accuse him of being a hanger-on of Stalinism. However, such an interpretation is not fair, since it does not take into account the aforementioned dilemmas of the epoch. Brecht formulated the international political situation quite clearly in a note written before World War II:

Many intellectuals are fighting against the Soviet Union with the motto For the Freedom! [...] In the case their adversaries, the Fascists, the bourgeois democrats and the Social Democrats, would take them as their allies, they would deny that they are fighting against the Soviet Union; they would say that they are only against [...] a bunch of powerful and violent people there, against one man only, against Stalin. But if the Soviet Union might end up in a war, they would have great difficulties with this distinction [...] And they cannot deny, that already the preparation of war against the Soviet Union is made easier by their argument “Against Stalin only”.

Brecht’s solidarity towards the Soviet Union became discernible even in the fact that he did not accept Trotsky’s critique of Stalin’s programme of building socialism in one country (despite the fact that he had earlier been close friends with Karl Korsch, who had taken a stance on this question similar to that of Trotsky, in asserting that instead of building socialism, the Soviets were creating a state capitalism). Brecht went as far as to find the Moscow trials of the late 1930s ‘understandable’, insofar that they could be interpreted as the ‘final aggravation’ of the struggle between the political lines of Trotsky and Stalin. When he heard about the arrests of old Soviet friends and colleagues, he tried ‘to be objective [...] despite personal embitterment’.

This objectivity, however, had its price: Brecht had to suppress not only his personal feelings, but even his moral scruples, in order to be able to examine the eventualities with a cold analytical gaze. When the conservative English essayist Paul Johnson gave the title Heart of Ice to his study of Brecht as an intellectual, this was quite apt, although Johnson does not seem to have understood Brecht’s deeper motives.

3 Bormans, op. cit., p. 60
Brecht’s “objective view” of the phenomenon of Stalinism is documented best in the unfinished work, *Me-ti*, which was not published during his lifetime. The work, begun already by the late 1920s, is an imitation of old Chinese philosophical literature in which contemporary politicians and theoreticians figure under thinly disguised names. During the writing process, which seems to have taken over two decades, Brecht comes repeatedly back to the problem of “building the socialism” in the Soviet Union (which in the book is called “the land of Su”), and Stalin’s role therein:

The veneration of Ni-en [Stalin] often assumed such forms that they could be equalled with the loss of honour of those who venerated him. Me-ti did not, however, become particularly concerned of this. He said: Ni-en is building up the great production. It is a very audacious work, because such has never been attempted nowhere before. It requires a big amount of trust from the people. Ni-en knows how to gain it. By what else than by production would the people become more wise and self-conscious?5

The historico-philosophical thesis which lies behind this evaluation is expressed in another locus of *Me-ti* as follows: “The most beneficent institutions are created by crooks, and not a few virtuous people are hindering the progress.”6 As such, the idea is of course not an original invention of Brecht. The first formulations of this paradox are encountered as early as the social and historical philosophies of the Enlightenment period. Maybe its best-known exponent is Bernard Mandeville, a Grub Street journalist, in his *Fable of the Bees* (1705), which claimed – as the subtitle of the poem “Knaves Turn’d Honest” alluded – that the socio-historical process has the capacity to turn “vices” into “benefits”. Luxury and debauchery have hitherto been condemned as vices, but in fact they lead to increased consumption and boost the economy of a country – thus, according to Mandeville,

The worst of all the Multitude
Did something for the common Good.7

---

7 One might say that Mandeville’s paradoxical “defence of vices” is only a new version of the old religious idea of providence. This of course is not quite wrong, but in that case it must be stressed that Mandeville’s poem gives expression to a non-religious theory and hence differs qualitatively from the old Christian idea of providence.
So there is, for Mandeville, no reason to moralise about the vices, since they actually boost the productive forces of society and accordingly contribute to the well-being of men. Further variations on the same theme are the Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” and Hegel’s “Cunning of Reason” (*List der Vernunft*). The figure of Mephistopheles in Goethe’s *Faust* is modelled according to this principle of Enlightenment utilitarianism, as he presents himself as ‘the one who always wills the evil and always creates the good’:

_Ein Theil von jener Kraft,
Die stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft._

Brecht’s “Chinese sage” Me-ti also interprets Stalin in a historical-dialectical manner as a modern Mephisto, who despite his rough methods, in the last instance increases the sum of human happiness by creating the material foundations of a just and classless society.

Brecht’s “dialectics” is here, however, not so much Hegelian: rather, it is utilitarian, as Me-ti repeatedly stresses the “utility” of Stalin’s politics. Brecht’s (or at least Me-ti’s, as his spokesperson) intention is clear: that even questions of morality should be evaluated from the utilitarian point of view. Me-ti contains a long passage with the title _Verurteilung der Ethiken_ (Adjudication of the Ethics), which seems to recommend a quite naturalistic and utilitarian position for the evaluation of historical and political events: “The old moral doctrines insisted, that only such virtues can come into question, which are ends in themselves. Ka-meh [Marx] warned the workers to abide by such virtues and advised them to follow only such virtues which would be useful to them. From this point of view, Stalin, too, can be judged as being “useful”: ‘One disciple of Ka-meh suggested, that Ni-en [Stalin] should not always be called “the Great”, but “The Useful”. But the time was not yet mature for such praise.”

This is not, however, the last word of Brecht’s “Dialectics of Stalinism”, because immediately after the quoted words he continues: ‘Me-ti, the pupil of Ka-meh, soon found that his proposition was unusable. He said himself: What I actually wanted was that the useful ones should be acknowledged as

---

9 Brecht, _Me-ti_, in: _op.cit._, p. 71
the great ones. But just this happens now with Ni-en. The handful of oppressors, which earlier had the power, has always tried to demonstrate to the oppressed, that the biggest oppressor in fact is very useful. Now one calls the useful for the great one.

These sentences remain somewhat cryptic, and this facet of Brecht’s attempts to explain the essence and historical role of Stalinism cannot be drawn with certainty. What he has Me-ti say cannot be interpreted as his definite thoughts on the subject, but are to be understood as thought experiments. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that the main goal of the book, named Me-ti by the publishers of Brecht’s Nachlass, is to outline a “dialectical” explanation of Stalinism. However, these attempts do not end in any definitive results, and the book remains an unfinished manuscript, although Brecht worked on it until the last days of his life. He acquiesces with paradoxical formulations, such as in the Arbeitsjournal: ‘One cannot say that in Russia, the workers’ state, there is freedom. But one can say: There is liberation’.10

The American scholar David Pike accuses Brecht of trying vainly to find reasons for Stalin’s terror, although the best and most simple explanation of it would have been to acknowledge its irrationality.11 According to Pike, Brecht was a kind of prisoner of dialectical dogmatism, which prevented him from seeing the truth:

Whatever he might have thought about the USSR, by 1938 he was certainly not giving in absolutely to the kind of illusions that would have caused the Soviet Union to take on the appearance of a fool’s paradise in his mind’s eye. Brecht’s troubling inability to come in terms with Soviet reality in Stalin’s time sprang, rather, from an intricate scheme of interwoven rationalizations. These were his dialectics, and he felt that dialectical thinking had bestowed upon him unique qualifications for untangling the meaning of the historical process. But Brecht’s dialectical dogmatics trapped him instead in a web of excuses and justifications that obliged him to regard the imprisonment of innocent persons from the vantage point of the greater historical good.12

11 David Pike, Lukács and Brecht, Chapel Hill and London: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1985, p. 239
12 Pike, op. cit., p. 245
Pike thus sees in Brecht's clinging to dialectics the reason for his inability to face the real nature of Stalinism. At least to some degree this is a misinterpretation, since Pike does not take into account the political situation of the age, the ambivalent situation of the Left intellectuals caught in the pincers between Nazism and Stalinism in the 1930s (and even later, during the Cold War, between the USA and USSR). This quite real political situation was the main source of Brecht's oscillating explanations of Stalinism, not some idées fixes of theory. One should not forget, too, that it was very difficult to get comprehensive information about what was happening in the Soviet Union in the 1930s: Khrushchev's revelations at the 20th Party Congress in 1956 were a shock for most Communists, even in the Soviet Union itself.

In addition, one should ask what kind of “dialectics” Brecht actually employed in his thought experiments on Stalinism. The hero of Me-ti is an ancient Chinese sage, whose wisdom gives expression to an archaic form of dialectics, not unlike that of Heraclitus. This kind of “dialectics” consists of simple oppositions in basic processes of nature and human life, such as day vs. night, sky vs. earth, life vs. death, and their interplays. It is not a very precise tool for analysing the complicated processes of modern history. The setting Brecht gives himself in Me-ti thus cannot lead to a satisfactory explanation of the Stalinism phenomenon, and it is no wonder that the book remained unfinished.

A further moment in the problematics of the “dialectics of Stalinism” in Brecht is that the idea of a Cunning of Reason generally gives an inadequate explanation of a historical process. It is, fundamentally, an idea coined in the Enlightenment period, but it has always had apologetic undertones, and in this respect it is akin to Leibniz’s thesis of the “best possible world”, another

---

13 This problem is well illustrated in the “dialectics” of Mao Zedong which, although they were declared to be the acme and apex of Marxism-Leninism during the Cultural Revolution, actually consisted of rather primitive principles such as ‘one divides into two’ and ‘there are contradictions everywhere’, principles which already existed in ancient Chinese philosophy and thought. Typical of Mao’s “dialectics” was further the pragmatic manner in which he and his followers applied these abstract principles to everything; for example, during the Cultural Revolution the “dialectics of car driving” or “dialectics of delivering the mail” (where undelivered letters turn into delivered ones) and so on were spoken of. This is not the place for a further discussion of Maoist dialectics, although its affinities with Stalin's Short Course pertain to the theme of this study; but see e.g. Robert Farle, Peter Schöttler, Chinas Weg – Marxismus oder Maoismus, Frankfurt/Main: Verlag Marxistische Blätter, (2nd ed.) 1971, chapter II.2, or M. Altaisky, V. Georgiev, The Philosophical Views of Mao Tse-tung, Moscow: Progress 1971.
apology for the wrongs in the world, so mercilessly denounced already by Voltaire. In the form in which the Cunning of Reason figures in both Mandeville and Hegel, Reason in fact is a halved and retrenched reason, unable to reckon with the “collateral damages” of its application in real life. One has to admit that the figure of the Cunning of Reason has a superficially “dialectical” character, as it is a figure in which one thing (the evil, the knave) turns into its opposite (the good, the virtuous man), but it has little explanatory force. Actually, the Cunning of Reason is a consequence of an utilitarian view of human affairs in which only the “utility” of the results, not the morality of the motives, counts.

Lukács, Hegel and Stalin

Georg Lukács’ strategy in trying to find a rationale for the Stalin phenomenon was similar to Brecht’s in that he, too, thought that it must be explained “dialectically”. However, unlike Brecht, he referred more straightforwardly to the philosophy of history of the great master of dialectics, Hegel, not only to the Cunning of Reason but especially to the concept of “world-historical personalities”. These two concepts are actually closely related in Hegel’s philosophy of history. Both are expressions of the fact that the agents of history act more or less unconsciously – they are not aware of the real results of their actions (this is indeed the main point when Hegel speaks of such persons as Julius Caesar or Napoleon).

Lukács appealed to figures of Hegelian philosophy of history above all in the darkening atmosphere of the 1930s. Later in his life, he offered other explanations of the phenomenon of Stalinism. As for Brecht, the concept of the Cunning of Reason provided a way out of the impasse of the 1930s for Lukács. Just as Hegel had unravelled the antagonisms of the rising Modernity by claiming that even from the conflicts of purely egoistic private interests there would in the last instance emerge a rational common interest, and that Reason would thus finally find its affirmation in the teleologico-historical process, so even Stalinism would, according to Lukács, in the end prove to have been in the service of the great goal of a socialist future, despite its singular atrocities during the present phase of history.
Coming to Moscow as an exile in the early 1930s, Lukács met with Mikhail Lifshits, with whom he collaborated for several years. Both wrote contributions to the journal Literaturnyi Kritik and shared, as it soon turned out, similar views on Marxist aesthetics and philosophy. Lifshits seems to have turned Lukács’s attentions to similarities between the Restoration in Europe after the Napoleonic Wars, on the one side, and the Soviet Union under Stalin, on the other: both were post-revolutionary situations. After the heroic days of the revolution, it was now the order of the day to begin constructive work. Although Hegel was not a theoretician of the Restoration (as his liberalist adversaries have claimed), his philosophy of history was nevertheless a theory of a post-revolutionary age, when the “time of fermentation” already belonged to the past. As the Hungarian scholar László Sziklai comments, ‘the Marxist thinkers of today, too, have no other task than to be philosophers of a post-revolutionary situation, according to Lifshits.’ It is very probable that Lifshits’s historico-philosophical views exerted influence upon Lukács and thrust him towards making Hegelianising analogies between the historical situations of the 1930s and the post-Napoleonic era.

It is thus not by mere chance that in one of his most important works, Der junge Hegel, which in principle had already been written by the end of the 1930s, although not published until 1948, which he dedicated to his friend Lifshits, Lukács picks up a quotation from the Heilige Familie of Marx and Engels, which resumes the course of history after the French Revolution: ‘Napoleon was the last fight of the revolutionary terrorism against the bourgeois society and its politics, which equally had been proclaimed by the revolution.’ It is to be particularly noted that Marx and Engels, when writing these lines, did not have any apology for Napoleon or his policy in mind; they did not view Napoleon as a “world-historical personality” in the sense in which Hegel did. But Lukács, following his usual schema of a Hegelian interpretation of Marxism, reads this so, and thus could the German researcher Udo Tietz write in article published immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1990,


DISCUSSING STALINISM

that if one replaces in the just-mentioned citation Napoleon with Stalin and bourgeois society with a socialist society, ‘one has with high certainty Lukács’s actual view of the situation’. Tietz summarizes Lukács’s position in the 30’s in the following manner:

Lukács hat ein […] Anliegen, das in gewisser Weise zu Hegels Haltung homolog ist […]. Wie nämlich für Hegel der revolutionäre Terror und später Napoleon Instrumente der Weltgeschichte, die Verkörperungen weltgeschichtlicher Vernünftigkeit sind, so sind für Lukács, der gerade zu dieser Zeit wiederholt auf die Rolle bedeutender Persönlichkeiten in der Geschichte aufmerksam macht, der Terror, Stalin und die kommunistische Partei Inkarnationen weltgeschichtlicher Vernunft! Hegels Weltgeist im Rücken und das Marxscbe Endziel der kommunistischen Gesellschaft vor Augen, akzeptierte er den Terror und den neuen Napoleon als notwendige Momente in der Verwirklichung der bolschewistischen Revolution.

Although Tietz captures, to my mind, some essential features of Lukács’s position, there are, however, some inaccuracies in his analysis. To begin with, Marx had scarcely – at least in his older days not – such a “final goal of Communism” in his mind which Tietz ascribes to him; rather, the idea of a “final goal” seems to go back to the earlier, “messianistic” phase of the young Lukács in the period of Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein (1923). In his works of the 1920s, Lukács imagined the proletariat as the historical subject which would in its practice realise the emancipatory promises of Marxist philosophy. In the 1930s, the historical subject is specified: now it is the Bolshevik party, led by Stalin, but otherwise, the constellation remains the same – if the tool of history in the 1920s was the proletariat, so in the 1930s it is Stalin’s party. It seems thus that Lukács’s interpretation of Stalinism in the 1930s was a reversion to his positions held in the 1920s.

17 Tietz, op. cit., p. 960
18 As is known, Lukács had a personal and political crisis in 1929/30, which led him to abandon the subjectivism and “messianism” of his earlier period and become a Communist in the “Leninist” sense. This new course was reinforced after his exile to the Soviet Union after 1933, when the Nazis had seized power in Germany.
Indeed, one can ask how Marxist it is at all is to draw analogies between Napoleon and Stalin, the Jacobin terror and NKVD’s terror. From a Marxist one would have expected an analysis of the phenomenon of Stalinism from the position of historical materialism, from the analysis of the “basic” material facts of production, class struggles and, finally, political interests derived from these. It is really striking that Lukács in the 1930s, in a *rencontre* with Stalinist politics, seems galvanised, unable to produce anything more than superficial historical analogies, which do not help us to explain the historically new elements contained in the phenomenon of Stalinism.

**Lukács and Kojève**

It is thus not quite a surprise, that the Lukácsian interpretation of the Stalin phenomenon coincides in many places with the views of Alexandre Kojève, a thinker whose opinions showed no affinity with Marxism. Kojève, a Russian turned French citizen (his original name was Kozhevnikov), attained fame through his lectures at the École des Hautes Études on Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, held regularly in the years 1933 to 1939. His interpretation of Hegel was, one must say, rather idiosyncratic, to the degree that some later commentators have called them “surrealism in philosophy”. The point which interests us here, however, is that Kojève made an attempt to “explain” Stalin using categories of Hegel’s philosophy of history, and in a manner which was much more consequent than Lukács’s.

Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, which strongly influenced later French existentialism, especially Sartre, was set in a certain historico-philosophical pattern. The main idea was that Hegel’s *Phenomenology* was an attempt to show how history reaches its concluding point in our times. According to Kojève, the world had, for Hegel, become “ready” (i.e. finished) after the French revolution – it had become a place where the Spirit finally can feel that it is “at home” (if one prefers Heideggerian language, one can speak of the *Heimat* in a conservative sense, and in fact Kojève has been one of the inspirations of Fukuyama’s much-adored neo-Conservative “end of history” thesis\(^\text{19}\)). The synthesis of modern times was embodied in the world-historical

\(^{19}\) As shown by the US politologist Shadia B. Drury in her study *Alexandre Kojève – The Roots of Postmodern Politics*, New York: St. Martin’s Press 1994
DISCUSSING STALINISM

personality of Napoleon, that “World Spirit on a horse” which Hegel saw riding through Jena in 1806, just at the same time as Hegel was writing the last lines of his Phenomenology. Hegel’s admiration for Napoleon is well-known, and the passage from his letter to his friend Niethammer is often cited: he related how previously in the same day he had seen the ‘Emperor – this World Spirit’ (den Kaiser – diese Weltseele), and continued with enthusiasm: ‘Es ist in der Tat eine wunderbare Empfindung, ein solches Individuum zu sehen, das hier auf einem Punkt konzentriert, auf einem Pferde sitzend, über die Welt übergreift und sie herrscht’.20 According to Kojève, Napoleon and Hegel are parallel historical phenomena: what Napoleon had achieved in practice, on the battlefields and in politics, Hegel had achieved in theory, as he had explained through his philosophy the sense and meaning of the great historical events since the French Revolution.

But Kojève’s interpretation does not stop here. In a new turn of argumentation, he declares that Hegel actually miscalculated the end of history by 150 years. In reality, history does not stop at Napoleon, but at Stalin. In his introduction to the German edition of Kojève’s lectures on Phenomenology, Iring Fetscher writes:

Der Inhalt des das mögliche Bewusstsein seiner Zeit artikulierenden Denkens kann daher auch als ‘der verstandene Napoleon’ bezeichnet werden. Es fügt der (unbewusst gestalteten) historischen Realität (die in Napoleon ihren Geschäf- stführer hat) das adäquate Bewusstsein hinzu [...] Immerhin stellt sich Kojève [...] auf den Standpunkt, dass nunmehr die historische Vollendung nicht der aus rechtsgleichen Citoyen-Bourgeois bestehende (Hegelsche) Staat, sondern eine egalitäre sozialistische und kommunistische Gesellschaft real gleicher (mit gleichen Rechten ausgestatteter) Individuen darzustellen habe. Mit anderen Worten: der reale Abschluss, dessen Bewusstsein Hegel bereits antizipiert habe, steht noch aus. Zugleich kann aber Stalin (!) 1937 als personaler Ausdruck der jetzt erreichten Stufe aus dem Weg zu diesem Ziel für das Denken der Zeitgenossen eine ähnliche Funktion haben, wie Napoleon für Hegel.21


This finalistic philosophy of history, which Kojève believes puts him in a privileged situation where he can have an overall view of the path hitherto traversed, simultaneously makes acceptance of the Stalinist terror an easy affair for him. The terror was nothing but a *malum necessarium* (a necessary evil), needed in order to attain the final goal of history.22

To my mind, the Lukács—Kojève parallel is remarkable just because it demonstrates the results to which a finalistic explanation of historical phenomena can lead. The Marxist Lukács, coming from the left, and the proto-existentialist Kojève, coming from the right, end up with the same explanation for the phenomenon of Stalinism: for both, it was a necessary, although maybe lamentable, phase in the path towards the “Great Society”. Yet more paradoxical is the fact that the “bourgeois” thinker Kojève seems to be a much more hard-boiled Stalinist than Lukács, who after all had some humanistic scruples and never praised the terror.23

It must be remembered, however, that the Lukács—Kojève parallel applies fully only to the position that Lukács took in the 1930s and 1940s. Later in life, he seems to have changed his mind as regards the essence of Stalinism. In the memoirs dictated shortly before his death in 1971, he defines Stalinism as a kind of hyper-rationalism and connects it to the themes of his book *Zerstörung der Vernunft*: ‘In Stalinism, there dominates, philosophically, a kind of hyper-rationalism […] With Stalin, the rationalism obtains a form in which it passes over into a certain absurdity’.24 Further specifying this characterisation of Stalinism, Lukács continues that the ‘actual essence of Stalin-
ism’ consisted in Stalin giving priority to the tactical problems in politics and submitting theoretical questions under these. Stalin thus reversed the order of things from how it was seen by Marx and Lenin, who considered strategic questions as primary and tactical questions as secondary.\(^{25}\) Stalinism is for Lukács now a voluntaristic deviation from true Marxism, moreover a deviation that seems to repeat itself in other countries, as with, for example, the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Although this description of Stalin’s approach may be quite adequate,\(^{26}\) it is far from an exhausting explanation of the phenomenon of Stalinism. In this respect, Lukács’s Hegelianising interpretations from the 1930s are more comprehensive attempts to understand Stalinism, despite their problems.

Be that as it may, this new critique of Stalinism as a subjectivistic reduction of theory into mere tactics seems to have formed one of the impulses behind Lukács’s grandiose project of a Marxist ontology, which he started in the early 1960s. The older Lukács’s turn to ontology has puzzled many researchers – after all, what sort of idea might it be to combine Marx’s theory with the ontological doctrine of such a half-forgotten neo-Kantian as Nicolai Hartmann? Lukács himself never gave reasons for his decision. But the ontological stance becomes more understandable if we assume that Lukács’s intention was to give the Marxist theory an objective basis which would prevent it lending support to such subjectivistic and voluntaristic excesses as one encounters in the phenomena of Stalinism and Maoism.\(^{27}\)

---

25 Lukács, op. cit., p. 171

26 The utilitarian form of dialectics applied both by Brecht’s Me-ti and Mao Zedong consists of the pragmatic preference to focus on the solution of tactical questions; the theoretical justification only follows afterwards and is secondary. A similar utilitarian approach is undoubtedly constitutive of the Stalinist frame of mind, too.

27 The thesis that the need to avoid a “Stalinist subjectivism” was the \textit{primus motor} of Lukács’s ontological project was first put forth by Erich Hahn and further developed by e.g. Frieder Otto Wolf (see F.O. Wolf, \textit{Die Tragfähigkeit der Wendung zur Ontologie: Lukács’ Kapital-Lektüre}, in: Frank Benseler, Rüdiger Dannemann (eds.), \textit{Lukács 2012/2013 - Jahrbuch der Internationalen Georg-Lukács-Gesellschaft}, 12/13, Bielefeld: Aisthesis Vlg. 2012, p. 198 sqq.). It should be stressed, however, that Lukács’s motives for drafting a Marxist ontology must have been versatile: he aimed, as Hans-Christoph Rauh rightly suggests, ‘at a theoretical renaissance of Marxism, combined with a democratic reform of the Soviet-style real socialism’ (H.-C. Rauh, \textit{Ontologie als Erneuerungsversuch des Marxismus ?}, in: Benseler, Dannemann, op. cit., p. 194).
Bukharin: “Unhappy Consciousness”

Nikolai Bukharin, the Bolshevik leader whose habitus was that of a member of the “intelligenciа” and who thus in this respect was quite different from the rough-hewn politicians of the “Stalin Guard” (Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, etc.), nevertheless had a more complicated relationship to Stalin and Stalinism than that of such intellectuals as Lukács. He had openly been an opponent to Stalin’s politics until his political defeat in 1929, and even in the 1930s he remained critical of it.

However, Bukharin’s anti-Stalinist stance should not be exaggerated, as, for example, Stephen F. Cohen does in his well-written and extremely informative biography of Bukharin. During his last trip abroad in 1936, he described Stalin to the exiled Menshevik leader F. Dan thus: ‘He’s a small malicious creature, no, not a human but a devil’, and during a walk in the Place de l’Odéon with André Malraux he is reported to have presaged his coming execution by Stalin’s henchmen.28 But on the other hand, Bukharin agreed with the world-historical significance of Stalin, quite like Lukács. After his defeat in 1929, he had practised political self-critique several times, and expressly in a way that meant that he had not seen the “telos” of the historical process – the vanguard role of the Soviet Union in building up a new, socialist society – in the correct way. He admitted that Stalin had estimated the situation better than he and that it was Stalin’s policy which proved successful for building socialism. In a CC meeting in January 1933, he distanced himself from his previous “mediating position” and conceded that he had stood in ‘quite erroneous positions’ in 1928/29.29 At the 17th Party Congress of the Bolsheviks in 1934 he capitulated completely to Stalin, calling him flatteringly “the Field Marshal of proletarian forces”.

How are these varying evaluations of Stalin to be explained? According to Bukharin’s biographer Cohen, all of these panegyrics to Stalin should be understood as simulations only: being forced to retire from open political struggle against Stalin, Bukharin masked his opposition and simulated a friendship with the mighty dictator, waiting for a suitable opportunity to strike back

29 Стивен Коэн, op. cit., p. 421
DISCUSSING STALINISM

again. For my part, I think that Bukharin’s dilemma was real. He had no illusions of Stalin as a person; this ‘Chenghiz Khan with a telephone’ (as Trotsky had once called him) might actually be nothing but the ‘malicious creature’ Bukharin had described to Dan. But, on the other hand, Bukharin shared the same finalistic and teleological idea of a historical process as that of Lukács. And from this Hegelian scheme it followed that even a malicious creature like Stalin could become the vehicle of history, a more or less unconscious tool of the Cunning of Reason.

I believe that Bukharin’s inconsistencies ultimately stem from what he must have recognised as a bitter fact: the Bolshevik party was à jour with the objective process of world history, but, unfortunately, world history happened at the moment to be embodied in the ‘malicious creature’. To remove the “creature”, as many other oppositional forces (such as the Riutiniuists in the mid-1930s) wanted, would mean a dangerous interference with the objective process of history. It is the same problematic situation which Bertolt Brecht noted in his Me-Ti: ‘Die segensreichsten Einrichtungen werden von Schurken geschaffen’ – a formulation which could have flown directly from the pen of Mandeville. Thus it seemed, once more that one had to accept Stalin’s atrocities in the name of a better future, and Bukharin found himself facing what was principally the same dilemma as the Western intellectuals in the 1930s; a cul-de-sac with no obvious exit.

I have analysed Bukharin’s dilemma more extensively elsewhere. Here I will point only to one aspect, which is of direct relevance to our present theme. In his final speech at the infamous Moscow process in March 1938, Bukharin first cites, significantly, the famous phrase from Hegel: ‘World history is the world judge’ (Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht) and then lauds Stalin, saying, among other things, that ‘in reality, the whole country stands behind Stalin; he is the hope of the world, its mouthpiece’. But then he goes on, describing his mental state as that of an ‘unhappy consciousness’. This is a term borrowed from Hegel’s Phenomenology, and interestingly, because of its “existentialist” colouring, a concept which had found but little use in the Marxist reception of Hegel. The chief prosecutor Vyshinski was not delighted

by what he considered to be Bukharin’s “speculations”, and urged him several times to stop quoting Hegel. It is possible that something Bukharin tried to say has been deleted from the process protocols, but there is enough left to reconstruct his main idea.

According to Bukharin, the “unhappy consciousness” was a “split” consciousness, an expression of the “double psychology” of a conspirer, although different from the “commonplace consciousness” only by the fact that it ‘at the same time was a criminal consciousness’. These formulations are not the clearest, but if one takes Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and checks the passages, Bukharin’s meaning becomes clearer. For Hegel, the “unhappy consciousness” is a phenomenological figure which came as the third moment of the historical process after the two main world outlooks of late antiquity, stoicism and scepticism – an unfruitful, sterile mode of consciousness. A man suffering from this state of mind is moving as in an eternal circle, without being able to break out. For Bukharin, the “unhappy consciousness” which he said he was suffering as a Bolshevik was of the same kind: a persistent state of a dilemma with no exit in sight.

Bukharin probably did not know that Hegel had coined his concept of the unhappy consciousness (*unglückliches Bewusstsein*) as a translation of the original Greek term *kakodaimonia*, “to be dominated by an evil spirit”, a concept with Gnostic allusions. But the concept describes well the “im-passe” situation of those who tried to explain the emerging of Stalinism in the compass of a teleological view, where certain political or social actors can be seen as “tools of history”. We can thus note that the explanation models which seemed to convince in an earlier period of Modernity, in the 18th and 19th centuries, viz. the “Cunning of Reason” or “invisible hand”, have become impossible in the 20th century.

31 I cite Bukharin’s last speech according to the version reconstructed by Wladislaw Hedeler, “Ave Caesar, morituri te salutant!” Nikolai Bucharins letztes Wort, in: *UTOPIE kreativ*, Iss. 89, March 1998.

Markku Kangaspuro

Stalinism as a Structural Choice of Soviet Society and its Lost Alternatives

In explaining the evolving conditions for the birth of Stalinism, the crucial feature of the structural choices of the Soviet Union is connected to decisions that from the late 1920s onwards changed the sensitive power balance between the centre and federal subjects, national republics and autonomies versus central federal institutions.

Stalinism has been approached using different frameworks. It has been analysed as a totalitarian meta ideology; a particularly harsh method of traditional Russian governance; as part of a path dependence from the czarist legacy of Russian underdeveloped democracy (zemstvo) and peasant society, if not so far away from the legacy of Mongol rule\(^1\) but also as a structural choice of society, its political and economic institutions. The Soviet Union has also often been analysed with an emphasis on the nationalities question and thus as a multinational and multicultural state on the one hand, and by focusing on the difficult centre-periphery relationship and its inappropriate, even dysfunctional administrational and vertical relations, on the other.

Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, Moshe Lewin and many others have paid attention to the somewhat contradictory efforts of the Soviet state, on the one hand, to execute a nationalities policy that underpinned the emancipation of minority nations and, on the other, to establish an efficient vertical power structure that sought to establish hierarchical centre-periphery relations. Carrère d’Encausse has pointed out that in principle these two aims could operate in harmony, but the reality of Soviet society meant that the government won out over national self-governance and the development of federalist institutions.²

Arch Getty has argued that studying Stalinism by concentrating only on the role of Stalin and the policy of circles close to him is not very productive. He and Moshe Lewin have underlined the constant process that affected the centre – periphery relationship in which the centre seeks both traditional (that is, the Russian tradition) and modern ways to obtain a firmer and tighter grip over the periphery. That in turn may be seen as the result of the obvious need on the part of the centre to bring some degree of order out of the chaos that affected this huge multicultural, socially and politically unevenly developed country after the disastrous Civil War.³ In many areas, in particular those located some distance from big cities, white groups and minority nations continued their resistance to Bolshevik rule until the late 1920s.

Moshe Lewin has underlined the legacy of the civil war for various social features in the internal development of the Bolshevik party. The political culture and social composition of the party changed significantly: it went from being a party of working-class and middle-class cadres to a mass party of first generation and politically inexperienced workers and peasant soldiers. Lewin emphasises the brutalising consequences of the long civil war, the fact that the majority of the population was uncivilised and illiterate, and the lack of experience in peacetime politics of the majority of party members. He has argued that, after the civil war, society was even more inclined to emphasise the need for a strong state and authoritarian leaders than had been the case in pre-revolutionary, agrarian Russia. After the civil war, the state bureaucracy

DISCUSSING STALINISM

was almost the only functioning institution that was left. For the new, inexperienced rulers leaning on the old state administration was quite natural way to organize governance. The logical consequence of this and the constant shortage of everyday consumer goods was a growth of bureaucracy, constant corruption and despotism. Some Bolshevik contemporaries also saw this and warned about it. Nikolay Bukharin accused the party leadership of establishing a “military-feudal” system of exploitation of the peasants, in which everything was subjugated under the state. Leo Trotsky harshly criticized Stalin and his closest allies for their use of bureaucratic methods of governing, which had actually changed the nature of the whole Soviet system. Instead of following a revolutionary route they had established a counter-revolutionary Soviet-Thermidor. These arguments actually have their roots in the discussion between Marxists and Populists in the nineteenth century over the development and future of Russia.

Until the 1870s, Marx’s attitude to Russia was ‘emotionally hostile’, but he became curious and even optimistic after he started corresponding with Russian leading Populists and Marxists and then later after he had met some of them. Marx started to consider and somehow also to believe in the potential of “lower, Russia’s level of socialism” based on peasants mir-system, collectively owned and used land, as Vesa Oittinen has pointed out. Later Marx adopted a twofold attitude to Russia. On the one hand, he entertained hopes of political change which would break the system of European reaction. And, on the other, Marx and Engels defined the Russian state as pre-modern, as “semi-Asiatic”, a form of “oriental despotism”. The same dilemma as to how to assess Russia was also common among Russian marxists. In the 1880s, Georgy Plekhanov vehemently criticized Russian “Blanquists”, who advocated “voluntarist” revolutionary activities and a model of socialism based

---

on peasant society. Plekhanov’s criticism is particularly significant in terms of the discussion of the social and institutional roots of Stalinism. He warned prophetically that ‘political authorities trying to organize from above socialist production in a backward country would be forced “to resort to the ideals of a patriarchal and authoritarian communism; the only change would be that the Peruvian ‘son’s of the Sun’ and their officials would be replaced by a socialist caste’’. Although Plehanov’s criticism and conclusions could not be more than a general warning due to a lack of empirical verification, his concern that an underdeveloped “patriarchal and authoritarian communism” would result in an estranged labouring class and a politically indifferent population was uncomfortably close to the mark.

However, there was another side to the coin with regard to the Bolsheviks’ brutal modernisation project. It resulted in a constant demand for civil servants and bureaucrats, huge construction works, industrialisation, the building of new cities in the middle of nowhere, and massive and speedy urbanisation. The purges of various stratas of society opened up opportunities for a new class of young Soviet professionals, evolving Soviet middle class. Sheila Fitzpatrick has pointed out that this circular process of social stratification (the purging of old classes and the forging of new ones) and the ever increasing opportunities that opened up for younger generations to climb the social ladder and thereby gain societal status for themselves generated genuine support for the Soviet system.10

From federalism to centralization

Probably the most important obstacle to strengthening the central power and facilitate the development of the unrestrained power of Stalin and his allies was the federalist state structure. The soviet and autonomous national republics and their institutionalised power structures with their own local party and Soviet elites acted as a counterbalance to centralization attempts. As long as power was decentralised to a variety of sometimes competing institutions at


the federal level, and the national republics and autonomous units also had, to some extent, areas of real self-governance, significant political decisions had to be made through negotiations. They had to be subsumed within the discussions of several interest groups at different levels. In the early 1920s interest groups evolved, on the one hand, out of ethnically established party, administrative and representative bodies, that is, elected or nominated soviets at different levels of society starting from the village and culminating in the All-Union federal level. On the other hand, in a socially quite undifferentiated society, the societally most advanced part of the working class in big cities was organized in self-governing trade unions and they were represented in both party organizations and in the soviets, whereas the peasants were not equally represented as a professional group although there were peasant committees in the countryside. The peasants voiced and advanced their interests almost without exception mainly in ethnically formed republics and autonomic areas: local soviets, republic party organisations and their branches of minority nationalities. In the central level politics was negotiated between different interest groups in party organisations, in the Soviet of Nationalities, in the Commissariat of Nationalities and other Commissariats as well as in the Central Executive Committee in which nationalities and federal republics and areas were represented. In general the work of these bodies was dominated by constant tension between the representatives of the central authorities and representatives of ethnic and social interests.

That is why already the embryonic stages of Soviet federalism caused political and national tensions throughout the whole Soviet system. Politics was given an ethnic dimension or character and, as a result of the decentralised federal system, institutions, the representation of interests and even social benefits were based on ethnicity. After the turn towards economic centralization and the launching of the First Five-Year plan in 1928/29, a political crisis developed, which led to substantive changes in the work of ruling bodies and their mutual relations, and in the way in which they exercised their powers. The situation resembled that mentioned by Plekhanov when he warned of the dangers that would occur if socialist production was organized in a top-down process by the political authorities. The change gave more impetus to those who promoted a strong, centralised and unitary state, and only agreed to a federal state system, including national self-governance for the national re-
The fact that party branches of minority nationalities also came to an end during the structural changes made to the system in the beginning of 1930s is illuminating example of structural choices from diversity to monolithic system the party conducted. Actually this was not a surprise, given the fact that, from the beginning, the role of the party had been to act as a counterbalance to the federal Soviet structure and to the ethnically based soviet institutions. The party’s development from being the vanguard of the working class to the guardian of state power, which sought to keep the various interests and subjects of the federation under the control of the centralized state, was an essential change. In the 1920s, the party, on the one hand, had to balance between pluralism based on federal state structures and the competing interests of different nationalities, the cities and the countryside, administrative areas and institutions, and, on the other, it sought to develop a strong centralised state. From the beginning of 1930s, the party turned more emphatically towards the second of these directions.

Making the birth of Stalinism and the most decisive structural choices more clear, in the next sections, this article focuses specifically on one national republic, namely, Soviet Karelia led by Edward Gylling and other Finnish communists, between the wars. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Soviet Karelia went through three critical reforms carried on all over in the USSR, which changed the institutions of the political system: the centralization of the economy, starting with a tax reform; a change of the legal-administrative status of the republic; and political changes of centres attitude to local, Karelia.

Economy

The fundamental basis of the autonomy of Soviet Karelia was first and foremost its economic self-determination granted by Moscow in the beginning
of the 1920s. After Soviet Russia established Karelian autonomy in 1920, for foreign policy reasons, the so-called Red Finns\(^\text{11}\) who had been nominated to leading posts in Karelia emphasised the vital importance of guaranteeing a wide range of real economic rights for the area. In negotiations on the content of autonomy, they succeeded in obtaining the same economic rights as those granted to Soviet Republics, which were in a higher level than autonomy in the Soviet hierarch of areas. Like Soviet Republics, the Autonomous Republic of Karelia got a Soviet of National Economy with branches covering industry, agriculture, work, transport, foreign trade and foodstuffs. Moreover Karelia was granted budget autonomy (right for taxation and main divisions of budget) and right for foreign trade. The latter one was exceptional solution because foreign trade was state monopoly and consequently led by Moscow.

The establishment of the Soviet of National Economy of Karelia established the basic institutional conditions in order to carry out Karelia’s own economic and social policies taking local reality into account. Adding to this the fact that her economic autonomy also included the right to levy taxes, the right to use 25 per cent of tax revenues to pay for imports from abroad and for the remission of tax payments to the All-Union budget until 1924, and we have a basic picture of the institutionalized guarantees of Karelia’s self-determination. In 1924 the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the Soviet Union cancelled Karelia’s tax remission and the right to use tax revenues to pay for imports. It was the first setback, although not yet final blow to Karelia’s autonomy. From 1925 Karelia had to contribute to the common budget of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), but it still kept the right to use any surplus taxes that it collected for its own budget and to decide independently how to allocate revenues. Another important aspect was that Karelia had its own commissars to govern its economic, social and cultural policies as well as a commissar for justice, who supervised the police and the courts.\(^\text{12}\)

One result of this institutionalized self-determination was that Karelia’s leadership had the administrational means and financial resources to carry out successful reform policy of economy and social and cultural sphere. It

---

\(^{11}\) After the Finnish Civil War in 1918, which the Reds lost, about 20,000 so-called Red Finns fled to Soviet Russia. About two thousand ended up to Soviet Karelia.

helped the Red Finns to win the consent of the local Karelian peasant population\textsuperscript{13} and it presented them with the chance to plan for economically sustainable development, taking local conditions and resources into consideration. Changes in power relations between centre and areas\textsuperscript{14} were still to be negotiated, but there was space for Karelia's leadership to utilize different institutions and channels to promote her interests. At that time Karelia was an arena for different and sometimes contradictory policies practised by several Moscow and Leningrad (as the local centre) based institutions and organs. In Karelia's economy, the first task was the modernization of the forest industry.\textsuperscript{15}

In terms of creating a sustainable economic and social policy, the modernization of agriculture and land reform were the main tasks. Both of them were closely connected to the improvement of the living conditions of the local Karelian peasantry. National autonomy and nationalities policy (korenitsatiya - Finnification) were crucial factors for the integration of ethnic Karelians politically and the building up of a new republic. Foreign policy was also an important factor in Karelia's political predicament. For People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (Narkomindel), Karelia's task was to guarantee that Finland was not given any reason to question the Dorpat Peace treaty (1920) or to protest the way in which the Soviet Union implemented her unilateral declaration of the self-determination of East Karelia, which was attached to the peace agreement protocol.

The first serious structural setbacks for Karelia's autonomy took place in 1926. Karelia's budget was incorporated into the budget of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and important economic decisions were subject to the approval of Russia's commissars. The decision was made after several rounds of negotiation in and between different central and local soviet organs including the Soviet Commissariat of Finance, Commissariat of Nationalities, different Commissariats of the RSFSR and Peoples Commissariat of Karelia and Executive Committee of Karelia. Karelia's determined defence of her interests eventually came to naught. Subsequently, Karelia's economic autonomy was vulnerable to changing political currents and considerations of different

\textsuperscript{13} It formed about half of the whole population of Karelia.

\textsuperscript{14} In this case areas mean Soviet Republics, Aunomonies and districts and institutions in which they were represented.

\textsuperscript{15} Karelia was on of the most important and developed areas producing timber for export.
DISCUSSING STALINISM

Russian and Soviet authorities. Gylling had declared already in 1922 that the economy solves 80-90 per cent of Karelia’s problems, whilst the rest have to be solved with the right nationalities policy.\textsuperscript{16}

The result of the 1926 decision was substantial for after that Karelia’s economic rights were no longer guaranteed but fell under the purview of constant negotiations with Russian and All-Union commissariats. The outcome of these negotiations depended on the power of the parties involved and their capability to create allies with other institutions/parties, to find common interests or to play different institutions off against each other.

 Probably the worst result of the 1926 decision for autonomy was that big Moscow-based companies, All-Union trusts, got a free hand to operate in Karelia. They were not subject to Karelia’s government and did not have any basic interest in following Karelia’s economic and social reform policies. Their interest was to maximise production (mostly in forestry and mining industry) at any cost, using the resources available without any concern for the sustainable development of the area.

In 1926-27 preparations began for the First Five-Year Plan for industrialisation and the collectivisation of agriculture. Machines and equipment had to be imported from abroad, which raised the question of how to increase exports and thus earn enough hard currency to pay for them. The natural choice was to focus on forestry. Forestry products were the third most important of the USSR’s exports after grain and oil. Actually the value of forest industry products (round timber) were almost as important as oil in terms of exports. For that reason the centre ordered that the Karelian Forest Trust (Karelles), had to give its whole production to the Soviet forest export company. The result was that Karelles, owned by the Karelian Sovnarkom, lost its profitable domestic markets\textsuperscript{17} and was forced to sell timber to the already saturated international markets at lower prices.

This was a serious economic blow to Karelia. After that, Karelles and its production was subject to the plans of the central authorities and it could no longer benefit from domestic market prices and develop its production ac-

\textsuperscript{16} Gylling 1922, Protokol zasedanija plenuma Karelskogo oblastnogo komiteta RKP ot 16 fevralja 1922 goda. RTsHIDNI, f. 17, op. 112, d. 296, l. 28ob.

\textsuperscript{17} Huge demand of timber in domestic markets kept prices high on the contrary of world markets in recession.
cording to domestic market demand. Karelles’s diminishing profits had direct consequences for Karelia’s budget. The taxes that Karelles had paid to Karelia had constituted about 60-80 per cent of all tax revenues and about 50-60 per cent of the whole budget’s income.18 Owing to the fact that the forest industry of the Soviet Union got its First Five-Year Plan already in 1927, Karelia’s economy became tied to the Soviet planned economy before it came into force in the Soviet Union as a whole in 1928. This seriously curtailed the economic resources and autonomy of the republic and witnessed power being centralised to a large degree in Moscow.

Moscow’s factual takeover of Karelles was so crucial that the leadership of Karelia decided to fight. They demanded that Moscow compensate Karelia for its losses and that it start to pay export subsidies to Karelles. Moscow had also threatened cancel Karelles’s budget autonomy a couple of times in 1924 and 1926. After difficult negotiations, Gylling succeeded in extending budget autonomy both times but only one year longer.19 Ultimately, the negotiations over compensation for Karelles’s lost revenues ended positively. However, it was a temporary victory with compensation only being paid for a couple of years until further structural changes were introduced.

The struggle for Karelia’s budget rights is a typical and illuminating case of how the political struggle played out in federal institutions. Politics was given an ethnic dimension or character as interest formation and their institutional articulation was framed into ethnically established federal subjects, their soviet and party organisations. In 1926 the Commissariat of Finance of the Soviet Union focused on the budget rights of Karelia and decided that they would not be extended another five years, as Karelia had proposed. The Commissariat did not see any particular reason for continuing exceptional policies in Karelia.

However, the Soviet Union had not yet evolved into a totalitarian society. Open competition between interest groups and their ability to influence the decision-making process was still a common feature. In the struggle over budget rights, Karelia appealed to the North West bureau of the communist

19 Gylling 1927, l. 7-8.
party and finally succeeded in winning it over to her side. She managed to create a new arrangement through negotiations and to get a new player involved in backing her demands. Ultimately, a regional party organisation of the RSFSR had come down on Karelia’s side and against the decisions of an All-Union ministry. After the North West bureau had questioned the All-Union decision, the issue received an extra dimension, and it had to be brought to the All-Union party’s politburo for its consideration. The politburo had to take political considerations into account, in contrast to the commissariat of finance. It arrived at a compromise and decided to prolong Karelia’s budget rights for one year. Karelia, now extremely self-confident, didn’t accept this decision, although it was in principal made by the highest and most authoritative party body. Edward Gylling appealed to the Council of Nationalities in June 1927. Interestingly, he did receive support for Karelia’s stance during the discussion, but the Council did not come to any decisions. The politburo’s decision stayed in force and resulted in repeated negotiations about Karelia’s budget rights over the next few years until they were removed once and for all in.

In fact Karelia’s special budget rights were never formally cancelled but abolished gradually by a series of decisions. The most important of these was the tax reform in 1930-31. It channelled Karelia’s tax revenues directly to the budget of the Russian federation. After that Karelia had to negotiate with the Russian federation about subsidies for its budget. The structure of Karelia’s budget was also now subject to the consideration of the Russian budget authorities. This dramatically changed Karelia’s position. She was no longer able to improve her economy and increase revenue by promoting more efficient and profitable production. As a result of this decision, she lost also one of the most important instruments for continuing social reforms, to develop the economy in a sustainable way and to continue to diversify her economy away from one based on producing raw materials to one based on industrial processing.

---

20 The North West bureau was the regional party organisation comprised of representatives of the North West area’s party organisations of the Soviet Union: Leningrad city organisation, Leningrad district, Karelia, Archangelsk and Murmansk.

The legal-administrative status of the republic

The crucial problem in guaranteeing the legal-administrative status of the republic was the lack of a constitution for Karelia. Ultimately, her status depended on political and administrational decision-making processes that were subject to change. This was well understood by the Finnish leadership of Karelia. Obtaining a constitutional status for Karelia was a constant preoccupation. The demand was based on their own experience with the Grand Duchy of Finland in the 19th century. They were well aware that Karelia’s autonomous status would be insecure if it was based only on political and administrational decisions without a legal base. Gylling made the first proposal concerning the constitutional status of Karelia to the party’s orgburo in 1922, but no decision was made.22 The next time that constitution was discussed was at the Central Executive Committee of the USSR when it decided to establish the Autonomous Socialist Republic of Karelia as part of the Russian Federative Socialist Republic in 1923. Before this final decision, Gylling had brought the question of a constitution for Karelia to the Council of Nationalities. It had established a commission to deal with the question.23 The Council of Nationalities and its commission did not finish their work before Sovnarkom and the Central Executive Committee came to the decision to establish Karelian Autonomous Republic without, however, a constitutional basis. The outcome was hybrid regime: broad autonomy which was limited by administrative means depending on political demand. Karelia received commissariats that were on an equal footing to those of higher hierarchy status Soviet republics, but, unlike them, Karelia’s commissariats were responsible to the corresponding Russian commissariats.24 This caused the first conflict between Russia and Karelia regarding Karelia’s contribution to the common budget of Russian Federation during the first budgetary year in 1924. Russia demanded, without any negotiations, that Karelia’s contribution to the Russian budget be increased, which caused

22 Gylling 1921, the Minutes of the 4th Conference of the Finnish Communist Party, 25.7.–7.8.1921. Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), f. 516, op. 2, 1921г, d. 17, ll. 207–8.

23 Vypiska iz protokola 36 zasedaniya prezidiuma VTsIK Sovetov 27.6.1923. (Sent to Chicherin). Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (AVP RF), f. 135, op. 7, 1923 г., папка 19, д. 9, л. 44.

DISCUSSING STALINISM

a wave of protest from Petrozavodsk. Karelia claimed that this decision and the procedure, which had led to it, was a blatant violation of Karelia’s right to self-determination. This seemed to show that Karelia’s leadership had been right to demand an institutional and constitutional basis for Karelia’s autonomous status.

The next time the constitution was under discussion was during the All-Karelian meeting of soviets in 1924. This meeting set up a commission to draft a constitution, but it was not able to formulate a proposal that was agreeable to all those involved. In 1925 the commission outlined two different drafts neither of which was based on a common understanding of Karelia’s budget rights or degree of economic self governance. The principal disagreement concerned whether Karelia should have a constitution and the same rights as the other Soviet Republics or whether it should be equal to the other Autonomous units of the Russian Federation, which status and rights were lower than the subjects of the USSR, the Soviet Republics. The latter line would mean autonomy with a separate council of national economy or economic self governance. In 1926, a third draft of a constitution appeared, which again took no stance on how Karelia’s economic autonomy should be arranged. Karelia simply had to wait for decisions from All-Union decision makers. The joint constitution commission of Russia and the Soviet Union (the commission was led by CEC chairman Mikhail Kalinin) was established, and constitutions for the various autonomous areas were on its working agenda. However, although All-Karelian congress of soviets didn’t came to an agreement on formulations of the constitution, the minority of delegates succeeded in getting a statement attached to a resolution that underlined the importance of Karelia having special budget rights.

Finally, none of the autonomous units of the Russian Federation received a constitutional status. Russia demanded that Russia’s commissariats had the right to give orders to the commissariats of the autonomous units and that Russia had the right to bypass the people’s commissariats, executive commissariats

25 Kangaspuro 2000, p. 133.

26 Projekt konstitutsi KASSR 1925 g. NARK, f. 689, op. 4, d. 1/1a, l. 4; Konstitutsi “Ob obrazovani Avtonomnoyi Karelskoy Sotsialistitcheskoy Sovetskoy Respubliki (Tipografiski ekzempliyar) 1925. NARK, f. 689, op. 4, d. 1/1a, l. 48.

and councils of national economy of the autonomous areas, and that these rights should be enshrined in any constitution. This was unacceptable to Karelia, and it was unanimously rejected in all future draft versions of Karelia’s constitutions.\(^\text{28}\)

The final blow came in 1928. The result of the discussions in Kalinin’s commission and the politburo’s discussions was that the status and rights of the autonomies were reduced to the status of autonomous areas of the Federation of Russia. Thus, the result was indeed opposite to that requested by the autonomous republics. Karelia was once again the exception and it retained its special budget rights for two years. However, Karelia and the other autonomies were included in larger Russian-led economic areas, which in practice nullified the last remnants of their autonomy.

In fact the result resembled, to a very large degree, the proposal Stalin made concerning the structure and constitution of the Soviet Union in the discussions of 1920-22. He proposed that all the other Soviet republics should join the Russian Federation and their autonomy would be limited mostly to cultural affairs with a limited degree of self-governance over the economy. That resembled somewhat the new unclear status of Karelia. According the new line of 1928, the autonomous republics of Russia were to have a status equal to that of the current autonomous areas.

**Administrative-political relations between the centre and areas**

Forced collectivisation is a good example, on the one side, of how structural decisions affected the local economy and in broader sense also society, and, on the other, how destructive hierarchical administrative-economic relations were for sustainable development at the local level. At a general level, forced collectivisation diminished significantly the political sphere of local decision-making and moved the focus to ruling by force. In Karelia the result was that the basis of the republican leadership’s reform policy was ruined. Forced collectivization with its corresponding centralization of the economy (that is the destruction of self-determination) made it impossible to continue a balanced development of the economy. The key factor was not the First Five-Year Plan

\^\text{28} Kangaspuro 2000, p. 141.
DISCUSSING STALINISM

in itself, but certain structural and institutional changes. There was a lack of dialogue in the planning process between the different parties and interest groups, unbalanced power relations as a result of a politically strengthened centre, and the institutional base from which one could defend and negotiate different interests was lost. This in effect constituted the structural and institutional foundation for the evolution away from what had been an authoritarian party system and to certain extent decentralized administration to Stalinism.

From the beginning, Karelia’s forest industry and agriculture were based on the same idea as in Finland and Sweden: independent small peasant farms established the basic reservoir from which the seasonal workforce for the forest industry was drawn, in particular the labour for the logging sites. The other side of the coin was that the model enabled Karelia to develop its peasant economy in a sustainable way in an area where conditions for cultivation were not the best, and, therefore where the concentration was on developing cattle and milk production. As peasants’ economic situation improved, so did their satisfaction, and there was no longer any political grounds for the sort of active resistance that had been seen in the early 1920s.

In Karelia, from Moscow’s perspective, collectivization was a method to guarantee a supply of cheap labour for forestry. The Five-Year Plan’s forest production quota for Karelia was so high that it was impossible to meet without substantially increasing the workforce. At that time, Karelia had approximately 400,000 inhabitants and the additional demand was for a workforce 100,000 lumberjacks. It was an impossible task, given the fact that Karelia had neither the infrastructure (accommodation, roads and means of transport to bring food to the logging sites) nor enough domestically produced food for that number of people. On the contrary, collectivization had seen a collapse in food production. Moreover a seasonal workforce recruited from outside Karelia became expensive for the forest companies. The cost of travelling from other parts of the Soviet Union were high, and the efficiency of unskilled workers was low. Moscow sought to increase forestry production substantially and to diminish production costs, but the result was increased costs and a failure to meet production quotas. As a result, in 1929 Karelles was given the task of reducing production costs by 7 per cent. Ultimately, all attempts to recruit the number of workers required failed every year. At best,

29 Karellesin koneiston puhdistus, Punainen Karjala 17.10.1929.
in 1932, Karelia managed to recruit 37,400 seasonal workers instead of the 101,200 required.  

Forest companies and the state tried to overcome the problem by accelerating collectivisation and increasing use of kolkhoz peasants’ work force. There was a crucial change in terms of the rights of the workforce. Forest companies didn’t recruit workers individually any more but started to make agreements with kolkhozes about the supply of labour. It was extremely cost efficient for the companies. Payments for kolkhozes’ labour were less than 50 per cent of the salary they had to pay for forestry workers recruited on the free labour market. Moreover, organisations and individuals who refused to follow the new rules and system of work could face prosecution under the criminal code. In a couple of years, kolkhoz peasants became the most important source of labour for the forest companies. In 1930 the local work force comprised 34 per cent of the forest companies’ work force but by 1933 it had increased to 70 per cent, two-thirds of which comprised kolkhoz peasants.

Besides labour from the kolkhozes, the Soviet Union started to use forced labour (GULAG) extensively in production. Forced labour was particularly important in extracting natural resources in remote areas and areas of hard working conditions and where unforced labour was not available. Several GULAG camps (forced labour camps) were located in Karelia. One of the first sites for a camp was the Solovetsky monastery, which was on an island, where a re-education camp for political prisons and criminals had been established in 1923. After the production quotas for the First Five-Years Plans had been set, the GULAG also began to play a bigger role in forestry work in Karelia. Extensive areas of forest were given over to it, and its importance in production quickly grew. In 1933 the GULAG administration covered about 30 per cent of Karelia’s forestry resources. In addition, the commissariat of the forestry industry ordered the GULAG to contribute to fulfilling the quotas

set down for Karelia’s forest trust Karelles.\textsuperscript{32} That was one step in the process whereby the difference between unforced and forced labour was blurred. This development was a crucial factor in brutalising social relations at work sites, demolishing the existing labour culture, and creating authoritarian Stalinist methods which drove labour and society in general by fear of punishment, top-down orders and formal administrative methods.

It was not just the peasantry but factory workers too that had a lot to complain about. The outcome of the campaign for lower production costs, increased production quotas and faster work rate caused dissatisfaction especially as salaries were cut or stayed at the same level.

The government responded to the workers’ dissatisfaction by strengthening the power of factory directors over the trade unions and their employees. In March 1929, factory directors received the right to impose disciplinary measures, including the dismissal of workers, without taking the issue to a conciliatory body, which had been the previous practice. After this decision, which the trade unions had resisted and had successfully managed to prevent being taken two years earlier, the unions and working class lost a crucial part of its capacity to influence society. The trade unions lost their essential purpose and the working class lost its capacity to defend its interests collectively.\textsuperscript{33}

In Karelia the turn can be seen also in taking a look at arbitration commission’s judges’ adjudications on conflicts between employees and chiefs. These conflicts increased substantially in 1927 compared to previous years, and the arbitration commission dealt with 90 per cent more cases than it had in 1926. The big difference was that whereas in 1926 most of the cases were decided upon in favour of the trade unions and the workers, in 1927 the trend was in the opposite direction in favour of the directors, enterprises and economic organisations. According to Karelia’s commissar of labour, the reason for this change was that in 1926 enterprises and economic organisations had had sufficient financial resources to make concessions to the trade unions, but that this was no longer the case in 1927, as a result of the budget cuts that had been


\textsuperscript{33} Lewin 1985, p. 252.
Hrisanof’s report in *Punainen Karjala* newspaper tells us not only about conflict of interest between workers and managers, but also about the following broader structural problems within the Soviet system.

The state played a dual role in labour conflicts: it was both the arbitrator of conflicts between managers and workers and, at the same time, it represented the interests of the managers, as the owner of the companies. Thus, the state of affairs that Hrisanof described in his report is not that surprising. The state as owner of the means of production set production targets and needed to make savings in production costs, which it achieved by intensifying the demand of employees work contribution and cutting salaries and other labour costs. The result was an increase in the number of labour conflicts, which state organs resolved in favour of its representatives in the field, that is, the factory directors. At the same time, new legislation and administrative practices severely restricted the labour force’s ability to defend its collective interests.

* * *

With these structural decisions, the Soviet Union moved significantly towards being a society dominated by a managerial and bureaucratic (including security organisations) class and the party. According to its publicly declared image and role, the party changed from being the representative of the working class to being the leading party of the state and society. The above-mentioned structural changes blurred the social and political contradictions that existed below the surface of the state’s bureaucratic organs and prohibited even a limited articulation of different interests and political lines. The system lost its capacity to rule by political means, and to formulate policies and correct mistakes in a process of negotiation between interest groups. At latest from the mid 1930s to the death of Stalin in 1953, the Soviet Union lost totally its orientation to trust on reform politics designed to reach the consent of the population. As a consequence of the failed economic reforms of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the First Five-Year Plans, the prospect of reform disappeared and the security organs and other organisations of state power obtained a more prominent role. In other words, Plekhanov’s warning that immature preconditions for building socialism would force rulers ‘to resort to the ideals

of a patriarchal and authoritarian communism, seems to be true of the USSR under Stalin.

However, it is still an open question whether this Stalinist path of development was unavoidable and whether the Soviet system lacked the potential to choose another route. My claim is that Stalinism was not predetermined and that the political dynamic and the structures that existed in the early years of the Soviet Union contained within themselves the potential for an alternative development. It is certain that this alternative path could not take place without political and economic difficulties and most probably also crises, in particular in agriculture, but there was still the potential for a less authoritarian and more flexible form of development. At the very least it would probably have required a sharing of political power if only between different factions of the Bolshevik party and other interests including the trade unions, the co-operatives and existed peasant organisations, which might in turn have enabled the development of a more multifaceted party system and more open competition in elections, the strengthening of the autonomy of the Soviet and autonomous republics and the developing of the federal structure of the state in order to ensure that different classes and minority nationalities could express their interests. All these preconditions for an alternative path of development existed in an embryonic state in the 1920s. However, it is unclear whether the maturing of these embryonic elements would have been sufficient to guarantee a more sustainable and humane path of development for the Soviet people.

---

35 Actually VKP(b) already consisted of several political lines and members of other parties at that time.
Iain Lauchlan

Young Felix Dzerzhinsky and the Origins of Stalinism

At the time of his death in 1953 the question of Joseph Stalin's place in history tended to polarise opinion: to the majority he was either a communist messiah or gravedigger of the revolution. These two opposite viewpoints were, oddly enough, not entirely incompatible – hagiographies and demonologies shared one common feature: regardless of whether he was thought of as a great prophet or an evil trickster, they both viewed Stalin as the lynchpin of the ruling system of thought and statecraft in the Soviet Union. Hence this system was referred to both on the right and the left as 'Stalinism' (even if in Leon Trotsky’s version the word signified that Stalin was merely the embodiment of a particular bureaucratic malaise). Consensus has slowly evaporated over subsequent decades, with some historians continuing to follow the Stalin-centred approach,1 whilst others point to evidence that this ideology and system of government was never simply the work of one man.2 The latter interpretation is supported by the fact that the leader himself did not appear

---


to be particularly enthusiastic about the term ‘Stalinism’ when eager toadies, such as Lazar Kaganovich, began using it in the 1930s. And he may not have been entirely disingenuous when he famously told his son, ‘I am not Stalin. Stalin is Soviet power.’ Some historians have looked for a more nuanced account of the origins of Stalinism in the evolution of institutional procedures: viewing it as the product of certain practices common to governments in the modern world (particularly during periods of crisis in state formation). Others trace the origins in the realm of ideas, viewing Stalinism as the confluence of various creeds, an East-West fusion of Jacobinism via Marxism with Russian Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality.

These multi-causal explanations correspond at least in part to Trotsky’s view on Stalin, ‘it was not he who created the machine, but the machine that created him.’ However, this doesn’t answer the question ‘who made the machine?’ Given the dictatorial nature of the regime, it is not surprising to find that a small group of senior Bolsheviks played a crucial role in the formation of Soviet statecraft. Richard Pipes has argued that biographical studies of Lenin are important because, ‘October institutionalised, as it were, his personality… The Bolshevik party was Lenin’s creation – as its founder he conceived it in his own image and, overcoming all opposition from within and without, kept it on the course he had charted. The same party, on seizing power in October 1917, promptly eliminated all rival parties and organisations… Communist Russia [was] from the beginning to an unusual extent a reflection of the mind and psyche of one man: his biography and its history are uniquely fused.’

This observation, whilst at first merely seeming to shift blame from Stalin to Lenin, need not entail jettisoning the multi-causal explanation of Stalinism. The new Soviet government was built in just a few years under intense pres-

3 See for example, Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin’s Police: Public Order and Mas Repression in the USSR, 1926-1941* (The John Hopkins UP, 2009); David R. Shearer, *Policing Stalin’s Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union* (Yale UP, 2009); Peter Holquist, ‘Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism? Russia in the Epoch of Violence,’ *Kritika*, vol.4, no.3 (Summer 2003); idem, ‘“Information is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work”: Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context,’ *Journal of Modern History*, vo.69 (Sept. 1997).

4 See for example, Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in Twentieth Century Revolutionary Patriotism* (London, 2002).

5 Introduction to Leon Trotsky’s unfinished pamphlet (interrupted by the infamous icepick), *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence* (1940).

sure of external invasion and internal opposition, in this milieu loyalty was considered the highest virtue a subordinate could possess, and so provincial Party bosses and the heads of the People’s Commissariats, recruiting from scratch, chose people they knew they could rely upon: old comrades with shared background and beliefs, their kith and kin. Cadres decided everything. Consequently, the institutionalisation of personality did not stop at Lenin, all major Soviet institutions tended to reflect the personalities of their various founders. This explains the contradictory nature of Stalinism: there was no single self-replicating prototype of the ideal Stalinist official in the style of Goethe’s enchanted broom, but rather a competing variety of them. Thus, Stalinism was never a static entity but rather a constantly shifting constellation of spheres of influence. At times the sorcerer’s apprentice, Stalin, attacked this tendency, particularly when he criticised nepotism in government on the eve of the Great Terror: ‘Most frequently, workers are selected not according to objective criteria, but according to accidental, subjective, narrow and provincial criteria: so-called acquaintances are chosen, personal friends, fellow townsmen, people who have shown personal devotion, ... these comrades evidently have wanted to create for themselves conditions which give them a certain independence both from the local people and from the Central Committee of the Party.’ Nevertheless, Stalin was more guilty than most in this regard: his inner circle were either comrades from the underground inside tsarist Russia (e.g., Molotov, Orjonikidze, and Vysinsky) or men with whom he shared civil war experience (Kirov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov and Mikoian). And even Stalin’s attempt to uproot these cliques in the Great Terror strengthened if anything the retreat into closed groups in the long-run, as officials


rebuilt patron-client networks to protect themselves from future denunciation and arrest.\(^9\)

As these individual fiefdoms were formed by the highly personalised system of government, ‘accidental, subjective, narrow and provincial criteria’ had a decisive influence on the development of statecraft. In light of this, there is a third approach to analysing the origins of Stalinist system which takes into account both its polycentric genesis through state practices and ideas and the central role of personality, that is to trace its roots in the lives of other Stalinists. This third way could be pursued either through prosopography (viz., a collective study of the parallel lives of a group of individuals to draw a picture of the group mentality of the ‘iron cohort’ of Bolsheviks which created the Stalinist system),\(^10\) or on a more modest level, and what I propose to do here, an individual case study.

The individual case study has the advantage of allowing for a closer psychological analysis of Stalinists, an approach which so far has mainly been applied to Stalin.\(^11\) This is essential in understanding the Stalinist mindset because its greatest conundrum is psychological: ‘How?’ is a more important question than ‘Why?’ The reasons why state descended into a system of violent tyranny in the 1930s are fairly straightforward: the drive to transform society and the economy at breakneck speed, and the pursuit of internal enemies, both immediate and potential, to strengthen the Soviet Union in preparation for an

---


imminent war. Yet many states in Europe pursued similar goals in a similar context at this time without resorting to violence on this scale. How was it that a group of apparently rational and even well meaning human beings sank to such levels of cruelty and delusion? How could they carry huge swathes of the Party and people with them in this venture? How did they arrive at the conclusion that the arbitrary blood purge was necessary to achieve apparently rational ends? To answer these questions requires psychological insight into how their minds worked.

The case of Felix Dzerzhinsky offers enlightenment in this regard for several reasons. His biography has been relatively neglected in English language publications, and there are now ample archival materials available on him, a large portion of which is of a highly personal nature. Most importantly of all he was the chief architect of the original punitive apparatus that played a central role in the Stalinist revolution. George Leggett’s study of the creation and evolution of the Cheka remains to this days the best single source on the earliest years of the Soviet security police, in it he argued that ‘all evidence points to Dzerzhinsky being the author of the Vecheka concept… On the consistent showing of Lenin’s pre-October doctrine, nothing could have been further from his intention, at that time, than the introduction of a political police


13 Dzerzhinsky fond (f.76) in the Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial’no-Politicheskoi Istori, Moscow [hereafter RGASPI]. His pre-1917 career was carefully monitored by the tsarist secret police (the Okhrana): See: ‘F.E.Dzerzhinskii po arkhivnym materialam,’ Krasnyi arkhiv, vol.16 (1926). Soviet hagiographies of him were produced by A.Khatskevich, N.Zubov, A.V.Tshkov.

14 F.E.Dzerzhinskii, Izbrannye stat’i i rechi, 1908-1926 (Moscow, 1947); idem, Dnevnik i pi’s’ma (Moscow, 1956); idem, Prison Diary and Letters (Moscow, 1959); idem, Izbrannye proizvedeniia (Moscow, 1967).

15 As Donald Rayfield put it in his book Stalin and his hangmen: an authoritative portrait of the tyrant and the men who served him (London, 2004), p.55: ‘It was the symbiosis of Dzierzynski and Stalin which would determine the fate of the USSR after Lenin fell ill and died.’
DISCUSSING STALINISM

system." The chekist system improvised by Dzerzhinsky was a governmental ethos which seemed to predate, anticipate and even create Stalinism. It was proto-Stalinist because it combined tyranny with populism and social engineering. The Cheka used coercion to build orphanages and organize famine relief, to secure food supplies, uproot corruption in government and make sure the trains ran on time. Dzerzhinsky was behind the first show trials, he had a hand in the theory of the intensification of the class struggle and the mummification of Lenin.

Yet the timing of his death has meant that Dzerzhinsky remains an enigmatic figure vis-à-vis Stalinism, leaving the stage at a crucial moment in the power struggle, July 1926. It is unclear which camp he would have joined two years later when Stalin and Bukharin fell out. In the last weeks of his life he appears to have grown weary of the inner-Party squabbles: 'If we do not find the correct policy and pace of development our opposition will grow and the country will find its dictator, the gravedigger of the Revolution irrespective of the beautiful feathers on his costume. Almost all dictators nowadays– Musolini, Pilsudski– are former reds.' Stalin clearly had some doubts as to whether his faith had been pure. In a speech to the Military Council on 2 June 1937 he

16 Leggett, The Cheka, p.19

17 On the need to engage popular support for the repressive actions of the security police see Dzerzhinsky's instructions to Menzhinsky, 24 Dec., 1924, RGASPI, f.76, op.3, d.345, ll.1-1ob.; & Dzerzhinsky to Unshlikht, 5 Sept.1922, RGASPI, f.76, op.3, d.303, ll.1-3.

18 For an excellent collection of documents on this subject see A.M. Plekhanov, VChK-OGPU v gody NEP, 1921-1928 (Moscow, 2006), pp.528-638.


20 RGASPI, f.17, op.84, d.228, l.52 – A joint circular by Dzerzhinsky and Molotov in February 1921: 'Having lost the battle on the external front, the counter-revolution is focusing its efforts on overthrowing Soviet power from within. It will use any means to attain this goal, drawing on all of its experience, all of its techniques of betrayal.' In other words, they asserted that the enemy became more secretive, devious and vicious the closer it came to defeat. On Stalin's advocacy of the theory see J.V. Stalin, Works, vol.12 (Moscow, 1954), pp.37-42. Bukharin quarrelled with Dzerzhinsky over this before he did with Stalin, see RGASPI, f.76, op.3, d.345, ll.1-2ob.


23 RGASPI, f.76, op.2, d.270, ll.32-33: Dzerzhinsky letter to Kuibyshev 3 July 1926.
claimed that Dzerzhinsky had at one stage been ‘an active Trotskyist who tried to use the GPU in defence of Trotsky.’

In this regard Dzerzhinsky embodies one of the central problems in understanding Stalinism: the transition from Leninism. He served Lenin and Stalin for equal periods of time, his loyalties divided almost equally between both. His experiment with the Cheka was a stage in the evolutionary process of natural selection, of trial and error, from Leninism to Stalinism. The psychological conundrum of this transition is perhaps more pronounced in his case than of any other leading Bolshevik, because the fall was more precipitous, as Isaac Deutscher observed: ‘[the Bolsheviks] looked for a man with absolutely clean hands to do the “dirty work” [of the secret police]; and they found such a man in Dzerzhinsky. He was incorruptible, selfless, and intrepid – a soul of deep poetic sensibility, constantly stirred to compassion for the weak and the suffering. At the same time his devotion to the cause was so intense that it made him a fanatic who would shrink from no act of terror as long he was convinced that it was necessary for the cause. Living in permanent tension between his lofty idealism and the butchery which was his daily job, high-strung, his life-force burning itself out like a flame, he was regarded by his comrades as the strange “saint of the revolution” of the Savonarola breed. It was his misfortune that his incorruptible character was not allied to a strong and discriminating mind.’

Thus, Dzerzhinsky’s biography reflects the Russian Revolution’s Faustian tragedy: the pact with violence, lawlessness and deceit that led to the descent into Stalinism. This story of degeneration from high utopian goals to sordid dystopian reality brings us a step closer to understanding the central problem of Stalinism – a question for all social projects inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment – as Solzhenitsyn put it: ‘Where

24 RGASPI f.558, op.11, d.1120, ll.29-32.


did this wolf-tribe appear from among our people? Does it really stem from our own roots? Our own blood?"\textsuperscript{27}

Children of the borderlands

The childhood of a biographical subject is essential in understanding the development of character through the interaction between temperament and experience. What we find in the case of Felix Dzerzhinsky is that it shares many parallels in this regard with those of both Lenin and Stalin. They came from roughly the same generation, Dzerzhinsky was born a year before Stalin, seven years after Lenin, on 11 September 1877, and whilst many of their experiences were merely coincidental to all of this period there are deeper connections which are so striking that they suggest something more than coincidence. They all grew up in provincial, but not remote, parts of the Russian empire. Like Lenin, Felix was raised in the peace and quiet of the countryside in an intellectual middle-class family (neighbours recalled that the Dzerzhinsky home was run like a schoolhouse), with claims to minor aristocratic status. Dzerzhinsky’s father, like Lenin’s, had been a Maths and Physics teacher (numbering Anton Chekhov among his pupils). Edmund Dzerzhinsky retired from his post in the Crimea due to ill-health to spend the last of his days on the family estate – Dzierzynowo – back in his native Poland, dying when Felix was just five. Their high-born and pedagogic origins were at the root of both Lenin and Dzerzhinsky’s approach to revolution: Lenin’s concept of Party membership – like some kind of exclusive order of samurai properly educated by him to a satisfactory level of ‘consciousness’ – was replicated in Dzerzhinsky’s schoolmasterly approach to training the chekist elite – like the sensei of an assassin’s guild littering his instructions with pithy aphorisms.

As far back as he could remember Felix lacked the restraining presence of a father, much like Joseph ‘Soso’ Dzhugashvili and (when he began to rebel) Lenin. Like Lenin, young Felix was surrounded by doting women and, unlike Stalin, he was not beaten as a child.\textsuperscript{28} He was his mother’s favourite and extremely close to his oldest sister, Aldona, who through most of his childhood acted as his tutor, and later during his years in prison as his principal contact.


with the outside world. Like the Orthodox matriarch Keke Dzhugashvili, Dzerzhinsky’s Catholic mother was very religious. Like Soso Dzhugashvili, Felix was an outsider, they were both non-Russians living on the borderlands of the tsarist empire, black sheep even amongst their own people.\textsuperscript{29} None of Felix’s seven brothers and sisters became a revolutionary. As children of the Russian Empire Dzerzhinsky and Stalin could be seen as cases of what Isaiah Berlin called ‘borderland syndrome’: ‘an exaggerated sentiment or contempt for the dominant majority.’\textsuperscript{30} With Dzerzhinsky and Stalin it was a bit of both. They were both unusual in their homelands in abandoning nationalism and in their ambivalent attitude to their fellow countrymen. Still the influence of their national origins remained crucial: the rise of the Beria clique was testament to the hold the Caucasus had on Stalin to the last, and Felix had been raised on his mother’s bedtime stories about the brutal tsarist repression of Polish independence and Catholic religion: ‘her stories taught me to hate every act of injustice. Their influence was such they helped make me a revolutionary.’\textsuperscript{31} He later confessed that ‘as a young boy, I dreamt of a cap of invisibility and of killing all Muscovites.’\textsuperscript{32} As a youth Muscovites simply morphed in his imagination into the bourgeoisie.

Even before he rebelled Felix was unusual amongst his immediate family for the depth of his piety – his brothers all went on to become scientists and engineers, whereas Canon Law was the only subject Dzerzhinsky excelled at in school. His mother, knowing Felix was too fond of the opposite sex ever to be truly happy as a Catholic priest, had to talk him out of his plans to enter a seminary. The vestigial influence of religion in his behaviour, beliefs and expressions in letters and speeches as a revolutionary are clear to see: in his oversensitised compassion and outrage at the suffering of others; his frequent use of religious language (redemption, sin, disciple, purity, hymn, paradise, hell, goodness, evil); repackaged Biblical morality (eg ‘a Chekist should have a fiery heart, a cool head and clean hands’ adapting the three theological virtues:


\textsuperscript{30} Isaiah Berlin, \textit{Against the Current} (London, 1980), p.258.


\textsuperscript{32} Quoted in Blobaum, \textit{Feliks Dzierzynski}, p.24.

101
DISCUSSING STALINISM

faith, hope and charity); his hermetic worldview (all evil had a single source: the capitalist system); his ascetic diet in mortification of the flesh; his fixation on personal morality rather than the Marxist laws of history (this gave him common ground with his pious sister: ‘I loathe with every fibre all injustice,’ the young revolutionary told her ‘crime, drunkenness, excess, extravagance, brothels in which people sell their bodies or souls, or both’);33 and his masochistic compulsion towards self-sacrifice, playing out his own melodramatic passion play in imitation of Christ (complete with the appearance of various Judas Iscariots).34

When he finally did abandon religion Felix was very specific about his reasons for doing so. Like Ivan Karamazov he suspected that the truly evil thing about the Church was that its grand inquisitors did not believe in God, and that they concealed the truth to preserve their power. ‘I detest priests,’ he told his sister in 1902 (after she had expressed the hope that the prodigal son would return to the bosom of Catholicism), ‘I hate them. They have cloaked the whole world in their black soutanes in which is concentrated all evil – crime, filth and prostitution; they spread darkness and preach submission.’35 It is tempting to infer from this that he was what George Orwell called, ‘the sort of atheist who does not so much disbelieve in God as personally dislike Him.’36 But it was deeper than that. He was angry at God, it seems, for not existing. ‘People have sought consolation and refuge from misfortune in thinking about a life in the hereafter, about justice beyond the grave,’ he wrote, ‘but for everyday purposes this is a sterile thought, because it cannot advance life and merely sanctifies and perpetuates misery, covering the earth in a mantle of mourning.’37 As a youth Dzerzhinsky’s eldest brother, Stanislaw, mocked his piety, asking what he would do if he ever stopped believing in God. Felix replied that he would blow his brains out. His later appetite for destruction – of himself and all that was corrupt in the world – suggests that he saw the

33 Dzerzhinsky, Prison Diary and Letters, p.147.
34 A photograph from the David King Collection of Dzerzhinsky in a strange Christ-like Last Supper pose can be found in the recent glossy FSB celebration of Dzerzhinsky’s life: Feliks Dzerzhinskii: K 130-letiu so dnia rozhdeniia (Moscow, 2007), p.55.
35 Dzerzhinsky, Prison diary and letters, p.176: Letter to Aldona, 6 October 1902.
36 George Orwell, Down and Out in Paris and London (1933), chpt.30.
revolution as a means of carrying out this bitter oath by other means. And he still staked everything on his beliefs: ‘Life would not be worth living,’ he wrote from his jail cell, ‘were it not for the light shown to humanity by the star of socialism, the star of the future.’

This attitude again suggests parallels with Stalin. Donald Rayfield has observed: “Stalin’s atheism was neither abrupt nor complete. His atheism was a rebellion against God rather than a disavowal of the deity... He took with him into power the deeply held conviction that the duty of the ruler was not to make his subjects happy but to prepare their souls for the next world.” In a similar vein, Felix acknowledged that it was his religious convictions which set him on the path to revolution, even describing his conversion to atheism in religious terms ‘now that I have tasted of the tree of knowledge I cannot turn back... [from the life of a revolutionary] ... to overturn the golden calf.”

He saw nothing contradictory in this: religion seemed at first the path to conquering his fear of death and making sense of suffering in the world, but this striving for meaning led him in adolescence to Darwin, Hegel, Marx and thus exposed the ‘scientific’ flaws in religion. Felix found meaning and purpose to continue his pious mission to do good in this world through the materialist and utilitarian philosophers, to be useful and thus ‘to be a bright torch for others, to be able to shed light– that is the supreme happiness which man can achieve. He who achieves this, fears neither suffering, nor pain, nor sorrow, nor need. Death no longer holds terrors for him...’ As with many of his soul-searching asides, this clearly echoes passages from the Bible: Proverbs 4:18 – ‘the path of the just is as the shining light, that shines more and more unto the perfect day’ – and Romans 3:13 – ‘rulers hold no terror for those who do right.’

And so even after Felix rejected organized religion his younger sister, Jadwiga, claimed: ‘He loved Jesus very much... his commandments were deeply

38 Ibid., pp.31-32: Prison diary entry, 10 May 1908.
41 Ibid., p.207: Letter to Aldona, 16 June 1913.
embedded in his heart... and he continued to respect Christ.’

The young atheist even confessed to slipping back into his old superstitious habits on occasion, for example when he narrowly escaped drowning whilst escaping from Siberia in 1902 Felix recalled that when he finally crawled up the river-bank to safety, ‘I crossed myself and thanked God for saving my life.’

Dzerzhinsky’s family was convinced that one day he would return to the fold. His eldest sister, Aldona, paid (till her dying day at the age of 96) for a regular Mass to pray for her godless brother’s soul in the hope of reducing the length of his stay in purgatory.

Dzerzhinsky’s life reflects the Stalinist shift in Russian society as a whole from Christianity to Communism. The mindset of the first generation of Soviet rulers and citizens was not a blank slate ready to passively accept the imprint of new ideas, but rather a partially erased palimpsest: new ink settled into old grooves as the ethics of the new Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist worldview flowed down neural pathways formed by a childhood education in religious dogma. Born into a spiritual age before Nietzsche’s ‘death of God’, the majority of young Communists were still traumatised by the departure of the eternal father figure; they were never going to find consolation in Lenin’s arid materialism.

There is an essential vagueness to Dzerzhinsky’s misty faith in the idea of revolution, a mysticism that would lead him to shift allegiance from Lenin to Stalin. Stalinism had at its heart the idea of submission to an unknowable higher authority. Dzerzhinsky surrendered himself to the idea of revolution without dwelling at any great length on what ‘revolution’ actually meant. He slid so easily into this pattern of submission because his vague notion of ‘revo-

---

42 Argumenty i fakty, 19 July 2006: Jadwiga went to explain his partial conversion: ‘In 1894 Felix became keen on the philosophical books... which, being materialistic, diverted his attention from religion. Yet Felix has respected the person of Christ for a long time, and maybe, I do not know for sure, up to his death.’

43 RGASPI, f.76, op.4, d.17, l.2.

ution’ filled a God-shaped hole. Communism was for Dzerzhinsky, as it was for Stalin, truly a political religion.45

Youth in the underground

Dzerzhinsky’s idyllic childhood ended in 1887 when he moved to Vil’no (Vilnius) to live with relatives and attend the prestigious high school. Like Lenin this meant he received a classical education, but like Stalin he planned to be a priest. Like Stalin, it was probably the oppressive atmosphere of school-life which turned him into a revolutionary: the enforced speaking of Russian, Orthodox services and prayers for the tsar, the informers, the corporal punishment, and even the schoolhouse itself was haunted by tsarist oppression, occupying buildings of the old university which had been closed down after the Polish uprising of 1863. But this was not the only reason why Dzerzhinsky strayed from the path of respectability – like both Lenin and Stalin, his conversion coincided with a teenage trauma: In 1892 he accidentally killed his sister Wanda whilst playing with a loaded rifle on the family estate. (He did not return home until 1919, in the wake of another family tragedy: his brother had been murdered the year before at Dzierzynowo by deserters from the Russian army.) By the mid-1890s Felix was losing interest in school and disciplined for unruly behaviour. At this point he became involved with radical groups of likeminded students. On Gediminas Hill, looking down on the old centre of Vil’no, Dzerzhinsky gathered with friends in 1894 and swore a solemn oath – in the style of Ogarev of Herzen on Moscow’s Sparrow Hills – to fight ‘evil’ for the rest of their days. The oath was prompted not by class war, but by the tsarist government’s policies of religious persecution in Lithuania. Felix later admitted that he had not yet identified the true enemy: ‘I reacted at once to every injustice and every humiliation suffered by the people, and I developed a loathing for evil. But I had to grope my way blindly, without any guidance or instruction’.46 Eventually he found directions to the path of the righteous in 1895 when he read the Erfurt Porgramme. Marxism clearly

45 The term ‘political religion’ dates back to Condorcet’s criticism of the education policies of the French Revolution in 1791. The first systematic work focussing on its application to totalitarianism was Eric Voegelin’s Die Politischen Religionen (Vienna, 1938).

pointed the way and so he joined the Social Democratic Party. In January 1896 his mother, from whom he'd hidden his atheism, died. Felix, eighteen years old and a devoted son, was devastated. He left school without graduating, gave himself body and soul to the revolutionary cause, and began work agitating in the local factories.

The simplest way to summarise Dzerzhinsky’s career from this time to the revolution is to look at it as a twenty year period of only intermittent activity, broken up by six arrests, three escapes and long sojourns in prison and exile – around eleven years in jail and Siberia: late 1897 to August 1899; February 1900 to August 1902; July 1905 to October 1905; December 1906 to June 1907; April 1908 to November 1909; September 1912 to March 1917.47 His experiences here are again similar to those of Stalin, and can be summed up in three themes: the close proximity of death, the omnipresence of violence, and the necessity of conspiracy. This infused Stalinism with three of its chief characteristics: impatience, the readiness to fall back on violence as a first (rather than a last) resort and paranoia.

Like both Lenin and Stalin, illness and mortality haunted Dzerzhinsky’s young adulthood. His case was if anything more pronounced because the life of a jailbird ruined his health. In August 1898 the twenty-year old began his first journey into internal exile, banished by the state to Viatka province. He was cooped up for most of the journey in the hold of steamboats in filthy and overcrowded conditions. As a result he developed trachoma in both of his eyes. The infection very nearly blinded him. Once he arrived at his place of exile he found work in a tobacco factory. This seriously damaged his lungs. He developed tuberculosis. The doctors told him that he did not have long to live. Felix took the news stoically: ‘He who lives as I do, ’ he told his sister ‘cannot live very long. ’48 After his second arrest in February 1900, Dzerzhinsky was consigned to the Warsaw fortress, and after two years he was sentenced to a further five years in Siberia, but escaped en route. Already coughing blood, Dzerzhinsky took the first of many rest-cures in Switzerland at the end of 1902, a second in the Polish mountain resort of Zakopane in May 1903, and

47 Escape from tsarist prisons appeared to be a relatively easy task. See: Edward Ellis Smith, The Young Stalin (London, 1968), pp.448-54: Stalin himself escaped form exile and prison on an estimated 13 occasions: Smith saw this as evidence that Stalin was an Okhrana agent.

a third in the summer of 1904 again in Switzerland with his fiancé, a Jewish revolutionary, Julia Goldman. She also suffered from tuberculosis, and died Dzerzhinsky’s arms on 4 June 1904. Three more years in prison followed. Like Dostoevsky, Felix called it ‘the house of the dead.’ Incarceration was a constant memento mori: ‘There is nothing to take the eye,’ he wrote, “nothing to soothe one’s frayed nerves, … the ceiling resembles a coffin lid, there is the treacherous peephole in the door, and the ghastly, pale daylight. And on the other side of the door the hushed tread of the gendarme who every now and then raises the flap of the peephole to make sure that the victim has not cheated the hangman.”

His prison diaries of 1908-09, written from his confinement in the Warsaw fortress, were accompanied by the sound of guards building scaffolds to execute revolutionaries. Hundreds passed through the ‘death-cells’ during his stay 1908-09. Felix was not alone in taking a macabre interest in the subject: ‘The prison authorities now make a detailed record of the way in which the doomed men behave during execution,’ he wrote, ‘their words are written down and their groans and death agony noted. This is done for “scientific” purposes.’

His final stay in prison from 1912 to 1917 was the most gruelling of all. He was placed in irons. This permanently damaged his leg muscles, and he spent most of 1916 in hospital, still in manacles. Too weak to carry out hard labour (katorga) he served the remainder of his time sewing buttons onto army uniforms.

Violence was also a constant feature of Dzerzhinsky’s life in the underground. His attempts at agitprop in the taverns of Vil’no and Kovno (Kaunas) regularly resulted in barroom brawls. Soviet biographers claimed that after his first arrest: ‘He was repeatedly locked up in the punishment cell without food or water, and was several times beaten unconscious.’ These were the first of many hidings he was to receive in prison. The last occurred in Butyrka in Moscow, 1914. It left him with few teeth, partially paralysed face muscles and a lopsided smile. The revolutionary struggle was more bloody on the

---

49 Ibid., p.34: diary entry 14 May 1908.
fringes of the tsarist empire, where Dzerzhinsky and Stalin came to manhood, than in the Russian heartland. Although maltreatment undoubtedly occurred throughout the prison system, it was not officially sanctioned. Clear evidence that the use of torture by police was commonplace is to be found only in the western borderlands: the Krakow newspaper ‘New Reform’ printed witness statements in 1910 that a Captain Aleksandrov in the Warsaw branch of the Okhrana had devised ‘machines for crushing and smashing fingers during questioning.’ Dzerzhinsky himself helped bring these stories to light, circulating them in his published prison diaries in 1909, reporting on the physical and mental torture – the sadism, the hangings, and the mock executions. These stories were corroborated by an Okhrana defector. There were some accusations of torture also at the Riga branch of the Okhrana: Iakov Peters, the future operational head of the Cheka, had his fingernails torn out whilst being interrogated there.

Peters’ and Dzerzhinsky’s experiences were typical of the majority of the senior ranks of the early Soviet security police: “In our Chekas,” Dzerzhinsky boasted, “the majority of workers are old revolutionaries who passed through the tsarist autocracy’s school of hard knocks [surovaia shkola].” The senior-most staff came almost exclusively from the borderlands: six Poles, three Latvians, eight Russians (one of them Jewish, one brought up abroad), one Ukrainian, one Armenian, and one Georgian. Past experience in the under-

54 GARF, f.102, op.260, d.17, Tsirkuliary, l.14 30 April 1907 reminds security police that according to the criminal code articles 1035 (11) and 1035 (20) prisoners have a right to ask for a witness to be present during interrogations.
55 Cutting from Nowa reforma (no.54) entitled ‘Secrets of the Security Section’, 1 Feb. 1910: GARF, f.102, op.240, d.38, l.19.
59 Dzerzhinsky’s speech at the Fourth Cheka Conference, 6 Feb.1920 in Tsentral’nyi Arkhiv Federal’noi Sluzhbi Bezopasnosti, Moscow [hereafter TsAFSB], f.1, op.4, d.6, ll.142-44.

108
ground was a priority in recruitment. A survey of the 69 senior-most chekists in 1920 found that all were Party members, and that 50 had joined before the October Revolution. The preference for veterans of the underground persisted throughout the 1920s.

Bukharin later claimed that the brutalisation of the secret police only occurred after Collectivization, which brought about a ‘profound psychological change in those Communists who took part in the campaign. Instead of going mad, they accepted terror as a normal administrative method.’ But most of the leaders of the original Cheka had grown used to violence as a normal part of the struggle even before the revolution. Their later experiences merely intensified this tendency. This is in marked contrast to the experiences of the intellectual émigrés around Lenin, Zinoviev, Bukharin and Trotsky, who chose to pursue a less perilous revolutionary struggle before 1917 outside the Russian empire. And this is the point where Dzerzhinsky’s chekist mindset departed from Leninism and fused with Stalinism. Stalin also placed particular emphasis on his heroic and brutal pre-revolutionary past fighting the tsar in the Caucasus. He, like Dzerzhinsky, tended to work closest with fellow veterans from his particular field of combat. This was the foundation of the bond between Dzerzhinsky and Stalin which began with their cooperation over the use of harsh repressive measures in Tsaritsyn and Perm in 1919: violence pur-

---


61 TsAFSB, f.1, op.4, d.6, l.160: ‘Iz otcheta mandatnoi komissii 4-i konferentsiia ChK, 6 Feb. 1920.’


65 On Stalinist terror as an outgrowth of the struggle in the Caucasus see Jörg Baberowski, Der Rote Terror: Die Geschichte des Stalinismus (Munich, 2003), pp.7-16.
sued in spite the complaints of leading Bolsheviks.\(^{66}\) This bond was sealed in November 1922 when Dzerzhinsky placed himself in Stalin’s camp against Lenin in defence of Stalin’s allies and their use of violence in the Caucasus.\(^{67}\)

Ultimately though, both Dzerzhinsky and Stalin’s temperaments were shaped not principally by the \textit{physical} hardship of life in the underground, but rather by the \textit{mental} scars that went with it.\(^{68}\) The necessity of conspiracy as a way of life was key to this.\(^{69}\) The secret revolutionary cells provided comradeship, but they were also riddled with police agents, this meant that the people who were closest to the young revolutionaries were also those who could do them the most harm. Dzerzhinsky’s first arrest was the result of betrayal by a comrade, and when he entered jail he found that ‘all the prisoners in my vicinity are the victims of informers.’\(^{70}\) Informers – ‘their faces are pale masks… with the mark of Cain on their brows’\(^{71}\) – also worked amongst the convicts and exiles in Siberia. Consequently young Felix avoided socializing. He broke off his relations with the first woman he loved in order to pursue his revolutionary career.\(^{72}\) And when he finally did wed he barely saw his wife for the first eight years of marriage, separated by prison and exile. His only child – born in prison – was seven years old before he first recalled meeting his father. Dzerzhinsky’s first escape from exile in August 1899 was motivated more than anything else by a sense of isolation, ‘the place,’ he wrote ‘was unendurably

---


\(^{68}\) On the formative imprint of Stalin’s pre-revolutionary life on Stalinism see in particular Simon Sebag-Montefiore, \textit{Young Stalin} (London, 2007).

\(^{69}\) See Edward Ellis Smith, \textit{The Young Stalin} (London, 1968), pp.448-54: Stalin spent as much time in the underground and prison as Dzerzhinsky, escaping on an estimated 13 occasions. Smith saw this as evidence that Stalin was even more heavily immersed in the world of conspiracy, working as an Okhrana agent. Cf. Jerzi Ochmanski, Rewolucyjna dzialalnosc Feliksa Dzierzynskiego na Litwie w koncu XIX wieku (Poznan, 1969).


\(^{71}\) Ibid., p.69: diary entry 6 September 1908.

lonely.’73 He confessed that ‘solitary confinement has left its mark’, both on his view of the world – ‘I can neither hate nor love by halves’ – and on his own temperament – ‘bouts of depression are followed by a feeling of being on top of the world.’74 He was torn between a love for humanity and a bitter thirst for revenge: ‘the day will come when I shall be free and they will pay for everything,’ he wrote.75 He even introspectively perceived his physical ailments in conspiratorial terms: ‘I am the carrier of an enemy within [viz., TB],’ he wrote, ‘an enemy who is constantly on the go, who may relinquish his attacks for a moment only to renew the struggle later on.’76

Stalin also suffered from an isolating, pathological suspiciousness to the point where he too saw enemies everywhere, as he told Khrushchev: “I’m a rotten person. I don’t trust anybody. I don’t even trust myself.”77 Like Dzerzhinsky, Stalin was a paradoxical youth and Stalinism was a paradoxical phenomenon – benevolent goals coupled with murderous methods, rationalist materialism coupled with a quasi-religious faith. J. Arch Getty has pointed out that Stalinism evolved in ‘zigs and zags’78 and was characterised by ‘schizophrenic discourse.’79 This has often been noticed, and consequently many historians have long asserted that Stalinism had psychological origins. Most (though not Getty) have tended to root it singly in Stalin’s own divided soul – his self-love battling with his self-loathing.80 The overlap of experience and temperament between Stalin and Dzerzhinsky suggests that Stalinism was more the product of a shared group mentality, rather than just that of an individual. This group psychology was most pronounced in the Soviet secret police, as Victor Serge

75 Ibid., p.132: Letter to Aldona, 19 Sept. 1898.
76 Dzerzhinsky, Prison Diary and Letters, p.181: Letter to Aldona, 8 May/25 April 1903.
79 Ibid., p.575.
DISCUSSING STALINISM

noted: “The only temperaments that devote themselves willingly and tenaciously to this task of ‘internal defence’ were those characterised by suspicion, embitterment, harshness and sadism. Long standing inferiority complexes and memories of humiliation and sufferings in the Tsar’s jails rendered them intractable, and since professional degeneration has rapid effects, the Chekas inevitably consisted of perverted men tending to see conspiracy everywhere and to live in the midst of perpetual conspiracy themselves.”

Thus the story of Dzerzhinsky’s youth is important because it describes the formative years of the kind of individual who made Stalinism possible. He is more typical in fact than Stalin himself, after all in Soviet propaganda Stalin and Lenin were held to be unique, only one man could be leader, their genius was for veneration not imitation. Whereas Dzerzhinsky was depicted as a loyal follower of the Party line, as such he ‘seems to have functioned as a mimetic figure, who, unlike Lenin, could be “cloned”’.

As Mayakovsky put it: “To any youth thinking over his future, deciding on whom to model his life, I shall tell, without hesitating, “Base it on Comrade Dzerzhinsky.”’ Iron Felix embodied the ideals that made Stalinism possible: ‘moral purity’, total loyalty, self-sacrifice, ruthlessness, tireless diligence and, crucially, after serving his purpose he died a timely death. The first half of Stalin’s reign was a morbid age, recognised even at the time as a hiatus between two world wars, the generation that advanced through this no-man’s land – exhausted, scarred and fatally sullied by the struggle – was expected to annihilate the previous generation and then sacrifice itself for the happiness of the next. Dzerzhinsky embraced and embodied this idea: ‘the fruits of the revolution should not go to us, but to them [the next generation].’ This was a truth widely acknowledged: ‘Lenin often ridiculed so-called old Bolsheviks,’ said Trotsky, ‘and even said that at fifty revolutionaries should be sent to join their forefathers.’

81 Quoted in Leggett, The Cheka, p.189.
84 Dzerzhinsky’s letter to Lunacharsky 21 January 1921 on the creation of orphanages, quoted A.I. Valakhanovich, Feliks Edmundovich Dzerzhinskii (Minsk, 1997), p.128.
was remarkably obliging in this regard, dying of a heart attack just a month shy of his forty-ninth birthday.\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{86} This article was completed thanks to funding from the British Academy Post-Doctoral Fellowships scheme, its Elisabeth Barker endowment and the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland.
Historically, most of the political analysis of Stalinism has centered on one chief issue: that of the growing estrangement between its nominal class basis and its outwardly political character, that is, on the development of an openly authoritarian bureaucratic apparatus, crowned by a personal dictatorship, ruling over the working classes it supposedly represented. In Weberian terminology, the history of Stalinism, as well as its sociology, is understood as a case-story of the development of a rational bureaucracy under a charismatic authority exercising a highly political form of leadership, both acting in an increasingly independent way from the social interests of the class that put them into power.

Therefore the fact that Trotsky’s “Thermidor” thesis – the idea that the Soviet state retained a clear-cut (working) class character, even when removed from the revolutionary surge that gave it birth, much in the way that the French bourgeois state retained its bourgeois character even when deliberately cut off from its Jacobin roots – has always appeared somewhat contrived, a kind of wishful thinking concocted by a revolutionary leader who was understandably reluctant to disown his revolutionary lifework. Already in the 1930s and 1940s, in Trotsky’s circle of associates and followers, there was already a clear-cut and bitter opposition to his thesis, which was seemingly a denial of the
obvious conclusions to be drawn from the actual evidence – acknowledged by Trotsky himself¹ – of the shut-in and independent character of Stalin’s, and his bureaucracy’s, political rule.

The problem is that whenever, historically, a “rational-legal” (in the sense of being guided by a set of impersonal regulations instead of personal whim alone) bureaucratic apparatus develops, it has always come to estrange itself from the social group from whence it grew, to be seen as pursuing interests and goals of its own, increasingly alien from those of “civil society”. In Stalinism, this rift between sociology and politics is at its widest, in that the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” appears to wither away and be supplanted by the dictatorship of the apparatus, whose relationship to the working class seems to be no more than a pious fiction, in that the working class as a whole appears powerless before an all-powerful bureaucracy. Therefore, if the socialist, class character of the Soviet system was ultimately an image d’Épinal, an inspiring idealized fiction, then the whole idea of a class state is open to question. If a state openly based on a class principle cannot avoid being politically hijacked by a dictatorial bureaucratic apparatus, then the Marxist notion of the class character of the state (any state) is in question. Therefore Trotsky’s position, that is, the need to reaffirm the class character of the Soviet state, even under Stalin, was linked to the need to affirm the viability of the Soviet project in general – as well as to Trotsky’s own need to keep his theory consistent with general Marxism, which requires that the analysis of any particular political apparatus must be tied to the relations of production as “the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure”².

Something different from this would be, for Trotsky, simply verbiage, no matter how well-meant: revulsion before Stalin’s rule, no matter how commendable in itself, does not allows for faulty theory. “[To] take away from the USSR the title [of] Workers’ State, as Stalin deprives a disgraced functionary of the Order of Lenin, I find […] a bit childish. Marxist sociology and hysteria are absolutely irreconcilable”³. To use G.A. Cohen’s terminology, if Trotsky could be dogmatic as far as his intellectual framework was concerned, he

DISCUSSING STALINISM

never indulged into “bullshit”. One of the most salient features of Trotsky’s Marxism is his willingness to strain his praxis to the breaking point between theory and actual practice.

Precisely because of this, the actual problem of the class nature of Stalinism (and, a fortiori, of all forms of “really existing socialism”) remains, and the fact that Trotsky’s personal legacy was at stake does not solve it: is it possible for a state to retain its socialist character when in fact its working class is politically disenfranchised and under the rule of an all-powerful bureaucracy that is not accountable to the class it supposedly represents?

It is interesting at this point to recall the conceptual apparatus of another Marxist thinker and Trotsky’s contemporary, the Italian Gramsci: for him, what is at stake is the notion of hegemony, meaning, above all, not the political power of a class as such, but its ability to shape all chief policy issues in general according to an unified principle – a concept already found in Lenin, who saw the hegemony of the Russian working class in terms of its ability to be the bearer of a general democratic principle, to direct the incoming Russian Revolution according to its own general programme. However, as Gramsci would warn the idealists of his age, the history of a given idea as such cannot take the place of History itself: the elitism of much of Lenin’s political thought – rooted as it is in the general political discourse of his time socialist as well as non-socialist (as in Sorel, Mosca, Pareto, and, last but not least, Michels) – as well as the existence of a common political culture within which Russian Communism in general operated, are important as far as the intellectual biographies of Lenin, Trotsky, or Stalin, are concerned. Nevertheless, such intellectual biographies cannot take the place of a History of the substantive issues of the time to which the leading bolsheviks applied themselves and their intellectual skills, no matter in how mediated a fashion. As Gramsci,


6 Putting into a nutshell, when during the Late Nineteenth Century Liberal-bourgeois politics broke out of its previous parliamentary shell into mass politics, it did so by becoming what Dr. Freud describes in Mass Psychology and the analysis of the Ego: the process of selection of an authoritarian leadership, the “Soft Bonapartism” of Domenico Losurdo (see Losurdo, Democracia e Bonapartismo. São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro: UNESP/UFRJ, 2004, Chapter 8). What in turn prompted, on the Left’s side, the counter-phenomena of the bureaucratized Social-Democracy of the German SPD type as well as Lenin’s vanguard party.
quoting Croce, writes, “poetry cannot beget poetry”: political conceptions are not generated by parthenogenesis. The fact that Stalinism eventually disconnected itself entirely from working-class politics does not invalidate the fact that it was specific working-class issues that gave birth to it. The principles of Stalinism (or the principles of Leninism, as seen by Stalin himself) justified themselves in that they corresponded to the principles of tangible working-class interests.

Therefore, the class character of a state resides in its ability to act according to a general principle: namely, the general form of property relations. Thus an absolutist state, no matter how disenfranchised its nobility in comparison to the actual power wielded by the court bureaucracy, is feudal as long as it upholds feudal property relations, and a capitalist state remains so as long as it grants that capitalist private property is the general form of property relations. As Trotsky remarked as early as 1933, the class nature of a state must of necessity have an abstract character: “the dictatorship of a class does not mean by a long shot that its entire mass always participates in the management of the state”: the undisputed political hegemony of the Nazi party in Hitler’s Germany does not diminish the bourgeois character of the German state – as long as “all the conditions of [the bourgeoisie’s] social hegemony have been preserved and strengthened”.

The class character of a state resides in the general character of the social relations acknowledged and upheld by this state. Only by this token, says Trotsky, can sociology and politics be articulated into a meaningful whole: otherwise, sociology would be simply apologetics for what is (Durkheimian social-fact-as-thing), while politics would hover above and beyond it, as the realm of fanciful metaphysics. The Stalin dictatorship wasn’t simply a dictatorship: it was a dictatorship geared to the achievement of particular goals, based on the existing social relations in general, especially on the existing property relations.

The state, in order to be other than a metaphysical category, must have tangible ends, rooted in the existing fabric of social relations. The Stalinist bureaucracy, therefore, owes its position as the bearer of a technique – the technique of class rule – i.e., the technique of the daily management of the


general class needs according to the various particular tasks of the moment, something acknowledged by Trotsky when he admits, with a Weberian slip, that “the existence of a bureaucracy, in all its variety of forms and differences in specific weight, characterizes every class regime”\(^9\). The class character of a workers’ state does not supersedes its actual need for paperwork and proper chains of command, and that is in itself reason enough for the existence of a Soviet bureaucracy. Bureaucratic activity, no matter how “unproductive” in Marxist terms, is nevertheless “as the supervision and the ideal recapitulation of the [production] process, [something that] becomes ever more necessary the more the process takes place on a social scale”\(^{10}\). The appropriation of a part of the social surplus by a bureaucracy, in itself, is simply a necessary condition for the performing of its actual tasks—specially in a modern economy—and as such is irrespective of its class character. The general function of any historical bureaucracy being the *inmaterial* management of the *material* process of production, it develops *from* the prevailing class relations, but not *in* it. Therefore, “this fact, of no small importance by itself, is entirely insufficient to transform the […] bureaucracy into an independent ruling class”\(^{11}\). Trotsky compares the bureaucracy to a clergy, which, notwithstanding its importance as an *ideological* apparatus, *precisely as such* cannot exist once the connections to the actual class structure are severed\(^{12}\).

In this notion, we find Trotsky’s analogue for what Gramsci calls hegemony: political rule being, above all, the building of a particular consensus on the general framework of social life.\(^{13}\)

In a class society, such a general framework has to do mostly, as we have already said, with the *general system of property relations* – the “relations of production” in Marxist terminology. Therefore the fact that, for Trotsky, the content of the actions of a state, as well as of its “political class” (the professional politicians as well as its professional bureaucracy) must, by force of objective necessity, conform to the existing property relations: in its choice of objective levers, checks and balances, the state cannot, viz., apply rules for

---


stimulating private investment when in fact there are no private investors available. Therefore, in the case of the socialist state, some kind of political stimulus – the appeal to collective interest, no matter how authoritarian — is necessary for the task of economic development, for “in contradistinction to capitalism, socialism is built not automatically but consciously”.

In Stalinism, of course, there is a sharp contradiction between its general collectivist character and the authoritarian mode through which such a collective system is politically managed. Hence its authoritarian character, in which the extensive use of repression is geared into blurring the contradiction between the collective ideological ideal on the one hand, and the bureaucratic and one-man rule on the other. Therefore, such a political system is, by force of its contradictory nature, necessarily unstable, as “a sphere balanced on the top of a pyramid must invariably roll down on one side or the other”. But the historical instability of the system is telling proof that the contradiction between its ideology and its actual mode of functioning demonstrates that the ideology, in this case, is not simply a “front”, a farce, but is the rationale of the whole system, which must be dealt with in order to keep it functioning. Therefore, also, the perennial crisis of legitimacy that the existence of such a bureaucracy entails: at the same time that the bureaucracy is actually interested in developing the productive forces – as “the higher the national income, the more copious its fund of privileges” – at the same time, “the economic and cultural uplift of the laboring masses must tend to undermine the very basis of bureaucratic domination”. Even in the eyes of its most able intellectual supporters, Stalinism never succeed in becoming something that “went without saying”: Althusser, during the 1960s, was so chagrîné - taken aback - by it as, say, Lukâcs during the 1930s.

In his 1936 analysis of Stalinism, The Revolution Betrayed, Trotsky summarizes the dual character of the Soviet system thus: the bureaucracy yields

15 Ibid., pp. 181-182.
17 For Althusser, post-Stalin slogans such as “socialist legality” and “socialist humanism” were justified as far as they played a necessary role as ideologies strictu sensu, as pious fictions: “En quoi les hommes soviétiques ont-ils ainsi besoin d’une idée de l’homme, c’est à dire d’une idée d’eux-mêmes qui les aide à vivre leur histoire ? » (Pour Marx. Paris : La Découverte, 1996, p. 245)
absolute, unchecked power – a power legitimized by the generally-held conviction that it works in the service of an egalitarian ideal; its power comes from the “iron necessity to give birth to and support a privileged minority so long as it is impossible to guarantee genuine equality”.18 The problem, however, is that the actual role of the bureaucracy stands on its ideal role of fostering and developing egalitarian social relations, but if the bureaucracy loses a discernible connection with that ideal, the legitimacy of its political role falls to the ground. The bureaucracy, in itself, is in no condition to achieve legitimacy by itself, in terms of its own selfish interests. In Trotsky’s words, it is doomed to act like a “tumor”: it can develop out of the existing organism, even kill it, but it can never take its place.19

Notwithstanding the fact that the founding Soviet ideology was honored increasingly in the breach, it was the abandonment of that ideology that sounded the death-knell for the Soviet Union itself: the bureaucracy’s power could not survive the absence of its legitimizing ideology – no matter the real contradiction between that ideology and actual practice. Therefore, in the surviving socialist states, the continuing existence of a Communist Party, of a rump of socialist ideology, is in itself not a relic kept out of mere reverence for a distant past, but the necessary condition for the preservation of the political system.

What conclusions can be drawn from this? Mostly, that the case of the Stalinist political system has to do with the superimposing of two very distinct ‘research programmes’: on the one hand, a “classical” run-of-the-mill Marxism, which sees in the analysis of social relations only the actual practice and tends to reject a legitimizing ideology as immaterial, a belated echo of objective practice and (class) interests; on the other, the Postmodern programme, that sees social life framed by “discourse”, the spoken (and unsaid) assumptions that inform and shape the practice of the unwitting (and supposedly conscious) subject, in what Foucault called “the death of Man” – that is, “Man” as a rational subject who shapes reality according to objective interest.20 In Stalinism – and in Trotsky’s analysis of it – we see, on the one hand, an increasingly immaterial ideology, in an ever sharpening contradiction to the

19 Trotsky, The Class nature of the Soviet State”; op.cit., p. 115.
20 Foucault, As Palavras e as Coisas. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2000, p. 536.
practice of the subjects, but which, nevertheless, acts as the material force that gives meaning and direction to the actual practice, which cannot survive in its absence. Something that asserts the continuing relevance of Marxism – even in a postmodern age such as ours.

To sum up and conclude: in Stalinism, in its demise and partial survival, what is to be seem, according to Trotsky’s view is a continuation, perhaps, of the same process of dialectical contradiction that moves forward the process of “Permanent Revolution”. In the same way as the process of Bourgeois Revolution posits the idea of a formal equality that eventually, propelled by the process of economic development, posits the notion of real equality – and therefore, by clashing with the existing class relations, at the same time turning the bourgeois and the socialist revolutions as parts of the same continuous revolutionary process, in Stalinism we have a political superstructure that receives its legitimacy from a class base with which it eventually enters in contradiction, this political form having to “choose” – depending on the politico-historical conjuncture – to which “side” it will ultimately “fall”; either to be “absorbed” by a capitalist restoration, or to break out of its authoritarian shell into emancipator politics. Only time – and future political struggles - will tell.

---

Contributors

Markku Kangaspuro – Ph.D., Professor, Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki.

Ian Lauchlan – Ph.D. School of History, Classics and Archaeology, the University of Edinburgh.

Mihail Maslovskiy – Dr., Professor, Higher School of Economics, St.Petersburg.

Carlos Eduardo Rebello de Mendonça – Dr., Associate Professor, Rio de Janeiro State University.

Vesa Oittinen – Ph.D., Professor, Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki.

Lennart Samuelson – Dr., Associate Professor, Stockholm School of Economics, and Researcher at the Stockholm Institute of Transition Economies.