

1 Joseph Stalin: power and ideas

Sarah Davies and James Harris

Stalin, like the other 'evil dictators' of the twentieth century, remains the subject of enduring public fascination.¹ Academic attention, however, has shifted away from the study of 'Great Men', including Stalin, towards the little men and women, such as the now celebrated Stepan Podlubnyi, and towards Stalinist political culture more generally.² Ironically this is at a time when we have unprecedented access to hitherto classified material on Stalin, the individual.³ The object of this volume is to reinvigorate scholarly interest in Stalin, his ideas, and the nature of his power. Although Stalin certainly did not single-handedly determine everything about the set of policies, practices, and ideas we have come to call Stalinism, it is now indisputable that in many respects his influence was decisive. A clearer understanding of his significance will allow more precise analysis of the origins and nature of Stalinism itself.

¹ Note the interest in several recent publications aimed primarily at a popular readership: Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002); Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003); Donald Rayfield, *Stalin and his Hangmen* (London: Viking, 2004).

² Podlubnyi has been made famous by Jochen Hellbeck in a number of publications, including 'Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, 1931–1939', *Jahrbucher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 44 (1996), 344–73. On the 'cultural turn' in Soviet history, see the introduction by Sheila Fitzpatrick in *Stalinism: New Directions* (London: Routledge, 2000).

³ Much of this is in the 'Stalin fond' in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii, henceforth RGASPI fond 558, opis' 11), which includes correspondence received from and sent to everyone from the members of his inner circle to peasants and foreign journalists; documents relating to Stalin's activities in the organisations in which he worked; speeches, articles, biographical materials, and so on. Some documents from this collection have been published, including the two important volumes: Lars Lih, Oleg V. Naumov, and Oleg V. Khlevniuk (eds.), *Stalin's Letters to Molotov, 1925–1936* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); R. W. Davies, O. Khlevniuk, E. A. Rees L. Kosheleva, and L. Rogovaia (eds.), *The Stalin–Kaganovich Correspondence, 1931–1936* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

'usually under a single leader'.¹¹ There was of course an assumption that the leader was critical to the workings of totalitarianism: at the apex of a monolithic, centralised, and hierarchical system, it was he who issued the orders which were fulfilled unquestioningly by his subordinates. However, adherents of the model were not generally concerned with the leader except in his capacity as a function of the system and its ideology. There was certainly little empirical analysis of the significance of individual leaders: the personalities or ideas of a Lenin or a Stalin were not considered critical to an understanding of the inner workings of totalitarianism.¹²

It was partly dissatisfaction with this approach which lay behind Robert Tucker's attempt to reassess the significance of the leader. The first volume of his Stalin biography argued that the personality of the dictator was central to understanding the development of Stalinism. Tucker distinguished between the impact of Lenin and that of Stalin, suggesting that the Stalinist outcome was far from inevitable and was dependent in large measure on Stalin's own drive for power. Delving into the uncharted waters of psychohistory, he sought the roots of Stalinism in Stalin's experiences in childhood and beyond.¹³ This was an important new departure, which coincided with other efforts to find alternatives to Stalinism, notably Stephen Cohen's study of Bukharin.¹⁴ Yet the psychohistory on which it depended was always rather speculative.¹⁵ The second volume of the biography was in many ways more rounded. *Stalin in Power* argued that Russia's authoritarian political culture and state-building traditions, as well as Stalin's personality, played a key role in shaping Stalinism.¹⁶

Tucker's work stressed the absolute nature of Stalin's power, an assumption which was increasingly challenged by later revisionist historians. In his *Origins of the Great Purges*, Arch Getty argued that the Soviet political system was chaotic, that institutions often escaped the control of the centre, and that Stalin's leadership consisted to a considerable extent in responding, on an *ad hoc* basis, to political crises as they arose.¹⁷

¹¹ C. J. Friedrich, *Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 52–3.

¹² Robert Tucker, *The Soviet Political Mind* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), p. 28.

¹³ Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary*.

¹⁴ S. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888–1938* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1973).

¹⁵ Although Tucker's approach was always much more historically grounded than the far less convincing psychoanalytical account offered by D. Rancour-Lafferiere in *The Mind of Stalin* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1988).

¹⁶ Tucker, *Stalin in Power*.

¹⁷ J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 4–9.

Getty's work was influenced by political science of the 1960s onwards, which, in a critique of the totalitarian model, began to consider the possibility that relatively autonomous bureaucratic institutions might have had some influence on policy-making at the highest level.¹⁸ In the 1970s, historians took up the implicit challenge and explored a variety of influences and pressures on decision-making.¹⁹ The 'discovery' of strong institutional interests and lively bureaucratic politics begged the question of whether Stalin did dominate the political system, or whether he was 'embattled', as one key study put it.²⁰

During the 'new Cold War' of the 1980s, the work of the revisionists became the object of heated controversy, accused of minimising Stalin's role, of downplaying the terror, and so on.²¹ With the collapse of the Soviet Union, some of the heat has gone out of the debate. After the initial wave of self-justificatory 'findings', the opening up of the archives has stimulated serious work with sources. The politicisation of the field has become noticeably less pronounced, particularly amongst a younger generation of scholars in both Russia and the West for whom the legitimacy of socialism and the USSR are no longer such critical issues. Political history in general has attracted fewer students in favour of the more intellectually fashionable cultural history. However, there are signs of the emergence of a renewed interest in political history, of which this volume is one example.²²

All the contributors to the volume represent the post-1991 wave of scholarship grounded in empirical work in the former Soviet archives. From North America and Europe, including Russia, they range from scholars who have been working on these problems for over half a century to those who have recently completed doctoral dissertations. Each

¹⁸ For example, Gordon Skilling, 'Interest Groups in Communist Politics', *World Politics* 3 (1966), 435–51.

¹⁹ See for example, Moshe Lewin, 'Taking Grain: Soviet Policies of Agricultural Procurements Before the War', in C. Abramsky (ed.), *Essays in Honour of E. H. Carr* (London: Macmillan, 1974); Jonathan Harris, 'The Origins of the Conflict Between Malenkov and Zhdanov, 1939–1941', *Slavic Review* 2 (1976), 287–303; Daniel Brower, 'Collectivized Agriculture in Smolensk: the Party, the Peasantry and the Crisis of 1932', *Russian Review* 2 (1977), 151–66; Sheila Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1978); Peter Solomon, 'Soviet Penal Policy, 1917–1934: A Reinterpretation', *Slavic Review* 2 (1980), 195–217; Werner Hahn, *Postwar Soviet Politics: The Fall of Zhdanov and the Defeat of Moderation, 1946–1953* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

²⁰ William O. McCagg, Jr, *Stalin Embattled, 1943–1948* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978). See also Gabor Rittersporn, 'L'état en lutte contre lui-même: Tensions sociales et conflits politiques en URSS, 1936–1938', *Libre* 4 (1978).

²¹ See, for example, the debates in *Russian Review* 4 (1986).

²² For discussions on 'The New Political History' see *Kritika* (1), 2004.

considers a specific facet of Stalin as politician and thinker. In the discussion which follows, we focus on what light these analyses shed on two important questions. The first, the nature of Stalin's power, has long been a central issue in the historiography. The second, Stalin's Marxism, and the relationship between ideas and mobilisation, has received much less attention.

The majority of what we know about Stalin concerns his years in power. While this focus of the historian's attention is entirely logical, it is easy to forget that by the time he defeated Bukharin and became the uncontested leader of the Bolshevik Party, Stalin was fifty years old. He had lived two-thirds of his life. It would be surprising indeed if by this time Stalin was not fully developed as a personality, a thinker, and a politician. And yet somehow, few works on Stalin pay much attention to his 'formative years'.²³ Alfred Rieber's chapter on Stalin's Georgian background shows why this has been the case. He explains why sources on Stalin's early years were particularly subject to manipulation and censorship. He makes use of published and unpublished memoirs to cut through the myth-making and cast new light on Stalin's early life and the formation of his identity. He shows how Stalin adapted his political persona, shaped by his 'frontier perspective' to benefit his career as a revolutionary and politician. His early experiences left him with a preference for decision-making in small informal groups in place of large committees, a conspiratorial mentality, and an acceptance of violence.

In his study of Stalin as Commissar of Nationalities, Jeremy Smith picks up this story of Stalin's formative years in the period just after the Revolution. He shows Stalin already confident and consistent in his ideas on nationalities policy, willing and able to stand up to Lenin on questions of policy towards the national minorities and the relationship between Russia and the other Soviet republics. The chapter by David Priestland echoes this impression that Stalin was confident in his ideas and quite willing and able to engage other leading Bolsheviks on key issues. This is consonant with growing evidence that policy debates played a much stronger role in the Lenin succession than we had imagined.²⁴ Machine politics did, nevertheless, play a crucial role in Stalin's ability to defeat his opponents. In his chapter, Smith also discusses Stalin's early experiences of high politics within the Bolshevik Party in power, particularly as they developed his skills of factional

²³ One recent Russian study begins 'Let us not detain ourselves with Stalin's early years, for they do not contribute anything to an understanding of his later attitudes and worldview.' Iu. Zhukov, *Inoi Stalin* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2003), p. 8.

²⁴ See, for example, Lih et al. (eds.), *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, pp. 25–6.

struggle and institutional empire-building. In observing the failure of the Commissariat of Nationalities to provide an adequate power base, he anticipates Harris' contribution on Stalin's next post, as General Secretary of the Party.

The idea that Stalin used his position as General Secretary to build a network of loyal political clients has long held a central place in our understanding of his rise to political supremacy. It has also shaped our sense of why the system evolved into a personal dictatorship, and how the system worked, suggesting that ideas did not matter as much as ruthless political manipulation behind closed doors. James Harris' study of Central Committee archives shows that the Secretariat played an important role in Stalin's rise, but not as we have commonly understood it. Harris argues that the Secretariat was barely able to cope with its tasks in the assignment and distribution of cadres. There is little evidence to suggest that Stalin was able to use it to build a personal following. The Secretariat was nevertheless invaluable to Stalin – as a source of information on the needs and wants of Party officialdom. In particular, he encouraged the common distaste for intra-Party democracy in order to harass and frustrate his rivals, to limit the dissemination of their ideas. In this way, the Secretariat played a critical role in Stalin's rise to power, though not as the source of the personalistic dictatorship which emerged in the 1930s. A substantial part of Party officialdom voted for him because they felt he served their interests. Harris observes that they were less sure that he did when he imposed the impossible targets of the First Five-Year Plan and the command-administrative system emerged. However, having themselves undermined intra-Party democracy and any prospect of questioning the 'Central Committee Line', there was little they could do.

While newly released archival materials on the 1920s have yet to attract much scholarly attention, there is already a considerable body of work on Soviet politics in the 1930s. We can now trace the steps by which Stalin achieved a steady concentration and personalisation of power. From the protocols of top Party organs and other materials, we can see in detail the steady decline in the consultative aspects of policy-making which characterised the 1920s. We knew that Party congresses and conferences were increasingly rare, as were meetings of the Central Committee. The meetings themselves ceased to involve any discussion of policy, but appear to have been orchestrated to publicise major policy shifts. We have learned that the Politburo stopped meeting formally by the middle of the 1930s as power shifted to an informal coterie around Stalin. The letters and other notes they exchanged has shown us that even with this group, relations were changing in the 1930s. The friendly informality that characterised

their exchanges with Stalin in the early 1930s was replaced with a distinctly sycophantic tone a decade later. While there is evidence of debate and disagreements with Stalin in the early thirties, within a few years his word had become law. More sinister evidence of the entrenchment of personal dictatorship is his increasing reliance on the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) as an instrument of rule.²⁵

This picture of the concentration of personal power can be misleading, however, if taken in isolation. The contributions to this volume examine the nature of Stalin's power, but without losing sight of the context in which it was exercised. Even Khlevniuk, who most emphatically asserts the vastness of Stalin's dictatorial powers, observes that neither in the early 1930s nor later in the decade could Stalin act alone. His inner circle and others close to the centre of power retained some influence and autonomy (though Getty and Khlevniuk, for example, disagree on just how much influence and autonomy they had). Nor could Stalin decide every matter of policy. His interventions were decisive, but there were substantial areas of policy that he left to others. Though Stalin's power was great, he could not always translate his ideas into action. Political and social structures were not soft putty for him to mould to his will. Stalin may have been an extremely powerful dictator, but he may not have felt as though he was, for his personal dictatorship took shape against a backdrop of revolutionary change, economic crisis, bureaucratic chaos, and a fear of enemies.

In his contribution on Stalin as 'Prime Minister', Arch Getty criticises those who regard the 'decline' of formal decision-making structures as synonymous with the accretion of total power by Stalin. Rather, Getty sees the emergence of a decision-making process similar in key respects to a cabinet, which Stalin, as the 'Prime Minister', dominated. The reduction in regular, formal meetings constituted what he calls the 'normalisation of the Politburo' as it adjusted to the great increase in decision-making in a centrally planned economy in the midst of a crash program of rapid industrialisation and collectivisation. Meetings were streamlined and made more frequent. Most issues were decided without discussion by means of a vote (*oprosov*). Members of the Politburo were responsible for key commissariats and areas of policy, thus retaining substantial power bases and influence over decisions. Considerable influence over decision-making would also have been retained by those individuals and institutions that provided information on the basis of which decisions were made.²⁶

²⁵ See Oleg Khlevniuk's contribution to this volume.

²⁶ Such as the Council of Peoples' Commissars, the Council of Labour and Defence, Commissariats and their commissars (including members of the Politburo, the Planning Commission, experts and advisors, temporary and permanent commissions

Rieber, Khlevniuk, and R. W. Davies share Getty's view that in areas where Stalin took an interest, he dominated policy-making absolutely. His views were rarely questioned. Particularly in the later 1930s, many of those around Stalin came to fear autonomous action, and merely tried to anticipate the leader's preferences. Where Stalin dominated policy, he could exhibit both flexibility and dogmatism. Rieber's second contribution to this volume provides a nuanced analysis of the apparent paradoxes of Stalin's security policy, showing where Stalin learned from his mistakes and where his ideas remained unchanged. In reference to intractable issues of economic policy, such as the function of money in a socialist economy, R. W. Davies observes Stalin's flexibility and ability to learn from experience, but he also points out occasions on which Stalin abjectly failed to anticipate the disastrous consequences of major decisions, such as the impact of swingeing grain collections in 1931 and 1932. Khlevniuk, in his contribution, refers to Stalin's propensity to shift his position in the face of such disasters as 'crisis pragmatism'.

Where Stalin did not actively intervene in policy, others filled the void. Working with Stalin's correspondence from his months on vacation in the mid-1930s, Getty observes the large number of decisions (89 per cent) taken by the Politburo without Stalin's participation. R. W. Davies' work on agricultural policy contrasts Stalin's detailed management of grain procurement campaigns with his relative lack of interest in livestock issues. Sarah Davies' contribution shows not only Stalin's extraordinary personal influence over film production, but also his desire to have a reliable lieutenant to realise his will, as well as the great difficulty of making individuals and institutions respond effectively to his will. Clearly, there existed coherent structures that allowed the system to function in his absence. Those structures served to implement the dictator's orders, but they could also act as a constraint on Stalin's freedom of action.

The idea that Stalin and the Soviet leadership had to contend with relatively autonomous institutions and groups is not new. In the 1950s, historians observed that technical specialists and managers did not always behave in ways the regime wanted.²⁷ In the 1970s and 80s, social historians observed that society was not a blank slate either, but only since the opening of the archives have we had the opportunity to study in depth the

established by the Politburo, and so on). G.M. Adibekov, K.M. Anderson, and L.A. Rogovaia (eds.), *Politbiuro TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b). Povestki dnia zasedanii, 1919–1952: Katalog*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Rosspen, 2000), I, pp. 18–19.

²⁷ David Granick, *Management of the Industrial Firm in the USSR* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954); Joseph Berliner, *Factory and Manager in the USSR* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957).

workings of institutions and officials higher up the administrative hierarchy. In this volume, Khlevniuk observes the strength of bureaucratic self-interest, or, as Stalin would have known it, 'departmentalism' (*vedomstvennost'*). Commissariats, planners, control organs, regional Party organisations, and other institutions were constantly angling to promote policies favourable to them and to limit their obligations, fighting amongst each other where their interests conflicted.²⁸ This can be viewed as an important source of Stalin's power, given that he was viewed, and acted, as supreme arbiter, but Stalin's persistent frustration with 'departmentalism' suggests that he considered it anything but a source of strength.

In spite of his uncontested position and immense political power, it seems that Stalin never felt entirely secure. The failure to contain institutional self-interest has something to do with this, as did the constant fear of war and of the infiltration of foreign enemies. Rieber's chapter on Stalin as a foreign policy-maker makes a compelling argument that beneath the surface of zigzags and contradictions in Soviet security policy lay Stalin's enduring fear about the vulnerability of the Soviet borderlands in the context of what he was convinced would be an inevitable war with the capitalist world. Nor can the Great Terror (1936–8) be understood except as a response to Stalin's insecurity. In his chapter on the changing image of the enemy in the three Moscow show trials, Chase shows Stalin at his most powerful and powerless, shaping and directing popular opinion in a massive and devastating campaign to unmask hidden enemies, while lashing out at chimerical enemies who were largely the product of his own conspiratorial mentality.

How much did Stalin's dictatorship change after the Terror? We still know almost nothing about the period from the curtailing of the 'mass operations' in late 1938 to the Nazi invasion in June 1941,²⁹ and only somewhat more about the structure of the dictatorship in the Second World War. The post-war period, often labelled 'High Stalinism' has generated more work and debate. As the label indicates, many historians argue that the period from 1945–53 marked the apogee of Stalin's personal dictatorship, his power reinforced by terror and victory in war, imposed at the expense of institutional coherence.³⁰ Others have questioned the image of the disintegration of political structures in the post-war period,

²⁸ See also Paul Gregory (ed.), *Behind the Façade of Stalin's Command Economy: Evidence from the Soviet State and Party Archives* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2001).

²⁹ One of the very few works on this period is Harris, 'The Origin of the Conflict'.

³⁰ See for example, Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (London: Hart-Davis, 1962), p. 73; Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* (London: Deutsch, 1971),

observing conflicts among powerful institutional interests and factions that shaped policy in the period.³¹

Recent archival research has tempered this debate somewhat. It has become clear that Stalin was feeling his age after the war and began to reduce his work schedule. The Council of Peoples' Commissars, renamed the Council of Ministers in 1946, was given almost exclusive control over economic issues, and some political issues, such as *nomenklatura* appointments, were passed to other organs within the Central Committee apparatus.³² While Stalin's involvement in day-to-day decision-making declined, he continued to keep a close eye on things, intervening occasionally and often violently.³³ His interventions remained decisive, but his withdrawal from day-to-day decision-making only strengthened institutional coherence and intensified struggles for power and for his favour.³⁴ Khlevniuk argues that Stalin's personal dictatorship had never challenged institutional coherence. Though his power was limitless, the complexity of decision-making had 'consistently and inevitably reproduced elements of oligarchical rule'. Put simply, Stalin had always needed an inner circle with close ties to strong bureaucratic institutions. According to Khlevniuk, Stalin's power was at its height in his role as arbiter of conflicting institutional interests. His semi-retirement in the late 1940s made that role more difficult, and he was more inclined to resort to violence in his occasional interventions. In response, his inner circle adopted mechanisms of collective decision-making on the basis of which the system was able to work smoothly without him when he died.

While the nature of Stalin's power has been a constant preoccupation of scholars, until recently, few studies have paid serious attention to Stalin as a Marxist. Only in 2002 did a systematic study of his political thought appear.³⁵ He is typically viewed as the quintessential pragmatic politician, interested primarily in power for its own sake, and only superficially

pp. 298–301. Also Roger Pethybridge, *A History of Postwar Russia* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966); Robert Conquest, *Power and Policy in the USSR* (London: Macmillan, 1961).

³¹ In *Stalin Embattled*, William O. McCagg went so far as to argue that Stalin's power was challenged by these groups. See also Timothy Dunmore, *The Stalinist Command Economy: The Soviet State Apparatus and Economic Policy, 1945–1953* (London: Macmillan, 1980); Hahn, *Postwar Soviet Politics*.

³² Yoram Gorzki, 'Ordinary Stalinism: The Council of Ministers and the Soviet Neopatrimonial State, 1946–1953', *Journal of Modern History* 4 (2002), 705–9, 715.

³³ Yoram Gorzki and Oleg Khlevniuk, *Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945–1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁴ Iurii Zhukov, 'Bor'ba za vlast' v rukovodstve SSSR v 1945–1952 godakh', *Voprosy istorii* 1 (1995), 23–39; O. Khlevniuk, 'Sovetskaia ekonomicheskaia politika na rubezhe 1940–1950-x godov i "Delo Gosplana"', *Otechestvennaia istoriia* 3 (2001), 77–89.

³⁵ Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).

committed to Marxist ideology. In public he invoked Marxist principles cynically and represented himself as a theorist to legitimate his power. His dismissive attitude to these principles is evident in the many ways in which he apparently distorted and abandoned them when political exigency required. He is widely accused of having betrayed the original Marxist ideals in favour of inegalitarianism, social conservatism, and, especially, Russian nationalism, described by Carr as 'the only political creed which moved him at all deeply'.³⁶

One of the advantages of the availability of new archival sources is the light they shed on this question of Stalin's relationship to ideology. If one accepts the argument above, one would have expected Stalin to invoke Marxist language in public, but not in private. Yet what is striking is that even in his most intimate correspondence with Molotov, Kaganovich, and others, Stalin did in fact continue to employ Marxist concepts and frameworks.³⁷ As Pollock points out in this volume, the USSR 'did not keep two sets of books, at least on ideological questions'.³⁸ It appears that adherence to Marxism was more than just a source of political legitimacy for Stalin. But what was the nature of his Marxism? Marxism itself is a diverse and in some respects inconsistent body of ideas. Which of these did Stalin draw on? How did his ideas evolve? And what was the relationship between the ideology and his political practice? Several of the contributors to this volume address these questions directly.

Erik van Ree is the author of the most comprehensive study to date of Stalin's political thought.³⁹ He has carried out extensive research in Stalin's unpublished papers, especially his library. What did Stalin read? How did this influence his thinking? Van Ree's research shows that his (non-fiction) library consisted of overwhelmingly Marxist works, which he continued to study and annotate until the end of his life.⁴⁰ Van Ree's conclusion is that these ideas mattered to Stalin, and that he remained a committed Marxist, if Marxism is defined in its broadest sense.

In his contribution to the present volume, van Ree grapples with the problem of the alleged Russification of Marxism under Stalin. He disagrees with a prevailing perception that Stalin fundamentally adapted and distorted Marxism to suit Russian conditions.⁴¹ Instead he concurs with such scholars as Leszek Kolakowski and Andrzej Walicki that Stalin did no

³⁶ Carr, *The Russian Revolution from Lenin to Stalin*, p. 170.

³⁷ Lih et al. (eds.), *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*; R. W. Davies et al. (eds.), *The Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence*.

³⁸ See also J. Arch Getty, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks 1932-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 22.

³⁹ Van Ree, *Political Thought*. ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 258-61. ⁴¹ Tucker, *Stalin in Power*.

substantially modify basic Marxist tenets.⁴² Van Ree goes much further than his predecessors in tracing the influences upon and evolution of Stalin's thought. Ideas such as 'revolution from above', 'socialism in one country', or the continuing need for a strong state and for the flourishing of nations under socialism were far from Stalinist innovations. All had antecedents in the thinking of Marx or his interpreters (including Engels, Vollmar, Bauer, Kautsky, Lenin), or, in some cases, other Western revolutionary traditions (such as Jacobinism) which themselves influenced the followers of Marx. Only the extreme chauvinism and anti-cosmopolitanism of the post-war years are difficult to reconcile with Marxist thinking, yet even these had anti-capitalist overtones consistent with a Marxist approach. It was precisely because Marxism was so elastic, encompassing such a variety of sometimes contradictory tendencies that Stalin was able to reject the more democratic, liberal strands in favour of those which seemed most compatible with Russian/Soviet development. Van Ree concludes that the Western revolutionary tradition was itself 'more permeated with "Stalinist" elements than we would like to think'. Stalin simply elevated many of these elements to the status of dogma.

Several authors follow van Ree in taking Stalin's Marxism seriously. Alfred Rieber, however, reminds us that the young Stalin's journey to Marxism was not as straightforward as its description in the official cult biographies discussed in David Brandenberger's chapter. Rieber casts doubt on Stalin's claim to have become involved in underground Marxist groups at the age of fifteen. In the rich frontier situation of Georgia, the adolescent Stalin absorbed a variety of other intellectual influences: populism, nationalism, as well as a specifically Georgian nationalist-inclined strain of Marxism. He was also drawn to romantic literature with its vivid depictions of heroes defending the poor. All these influences may have contributed not only to the obvious nationalist currents in his thinking, but also to the less obvious romantic, populist interpretation of Marxism to which he was attracted.

It is this 'Bolshevik romanticism' which David Priestland emphasises. His chapter draws our attention to tensions within Marxism-Leninism and how these played out in Stalin's own thinking in the period 1917–39. He distinguishes between Marxism's 'scientific and deterministic side' and its 'more voluntaristic and romantic side'. While the former accentuates the role of economic forces, technique (*tekhnika*) and so on, the latter focuses

⁴² Leszek Kolakowski, 'Marxist Roots of Stalinism', in R. Tucker (ed.), *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), pp. 283–98; Andrzej Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), ch. 5.

on the active role of the proletariat, of politics and consciousness. Although, like many other Bolsheviks, he oscillated between these two approaches, Stalin seems to have been most consistently attracted to the 'quasi-romantic' view with its emphasis on heroism and will.

This voluntarism left a strong mark on Stalin's attitude to mass mobilisation, which is examined in several of the contributions. Priestland highlights how the leader's populist, anti-bourgeois outlook made him a strong advocate of unleashing worker activism, particularly during the Cultural Revolution. In the later 1930s, he continued to stress the importance of ideological mobilisation of what were now more often termed 'the people', for example, during the Stakhanovite campaign.

Stalin's conviction, highlighted by Priestland, that 'the production of souls is more important than the production of tanks' explains his constant attention to cultural matters, which Sarah Davies examines in her chapter on Stalin's role as patron of cinema in the mid-1930s. She shows how Stalin devoted an extraordinary amount of time to what he described as 'helping' to turn Soviet cinema into a truly mass art, capable of mobilising the people for the goals of socialism. Not only did he offer financial support and promote the prestige of cinema, but he also participated actively in the making of films, trying to ensure that they convey suitable ideological messages packaged in an entertaining way.

Mass mobilisation was one important dimension of the Great Terror. Debates about the Terror have tended to focus on matters of power and security (see above). While these must of course be paramount in any explanation, they should not overshadow the ideological issues. Van Ree has suggested that Stalin's Marxist convictions led him to believe in the continued existence of a class struggle, and that this belief shaped the form that the terror assumed.⁴³ The question of belief is a complex one, but what is abundantly clear is that Stalin recognised the potential of the terror to mobilise the population against real or imagined 'enemies of the people' and for Stalin and the Soviet state.⁴⁴

Sarah Davies notes that Stalin was particularly concerned to shape the image of the internal and external enemy in films. Like films, the show trials served as powerful didactic tools. Bill Chase's chapter reveals the extent to which Stalin participated in the staging of the trials, both in Moscow and in the provinces. These performances provided an opportunity for the carefully orchestrated construction of threats to the public. Stalin was personally involved in the crafting of these threats, which changed markedly over the period 1936–8, as did the intended

⁴³ Van Ree, *Political Thought*, pp. 124–5.

⁴⁴ On the question of belief, see Getty's useful discussion in *Road to Terror* pp. 15–24.

audience. In 1936, the threat was defined as oppositionists turned enemy agents and terrorists, whose only aim was to seize power. The audience for this trial was primarily Party members. By 1937, the message had become more populist: the threat was now from Party officials who were engaging in terrorism, espionage, and wrecking in order to overturn the Soviet system and restore capitalism. This was designed to mobilise the 'little people', ordinary Soviet citizens, to unmask the 'enemies of the people' – scapegoats for economic failures. In 1938, the threat, and the audience, had turned truly global – a conspiracy of rightists and Trotskyists were allegedly intent on dismembering the USSR with the assistance of fascist and capitalist powers.

In Stalin's mind, the uncovering of such a vast conspiracy highlighted the need for a greater focus on the Marxist-Leninist education (*vospitanie*) of cadres. Priestland argues that Stalin attributed the ideological contamination of cadres to an excessive focus on *tekhnika* at the expense of *politika*. Henceforth ideas were to assume a much higher priority. The *Short Course* in Party history of 1938 was designed to be a primer in the theory and practice of Marxism-Leninism to inspire and instruct the intelligentsia, and to prevent them from going over to the enemy.

Stalin was sensitive to the limited appeal of the *Short Course* for the 'masses', however, appreciating that different approaches were required for different audiences. In his chapter, David Brandenberger argues that the Stalin cult – one of the most striking features of Stalinism – was part of a mobilisational strategy directed primarily towards 'the masses'. The cult appears to be a gross aberration from socialist ideals (although van Ree has argued that even this had antecedents within Marxist thought), and many historians have interpreted it as a symptom of Stalin's psychological need for self-aggrandisement.⁴⁵ While not denying that this may have played a role, Brandenberger maintains that Stalin himself was well aware of the problematic status of the cult of personality within Marxism. He justified the phenomenon as an effective way of appealing to ordinary workers and peasants for whom a heroic, biographical narrative was more inspiring than undiluted Marxism-Leninism. So while he deliberately removed from the draft of the *Short Course* sections which focused too closely on his own biography, he allowed the production of a separate Stalin biography for the 'simple people'. This finally appeared relatively late, at the end of 1939, partly because of the ideological and political turmoil of the 1930s. In Stalin's mind, the focus on personality was not incompatible with Marxist-Leninist

⁴⁵ Van Ree, *Political Thought*, ch. 12; Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary and Stalin in Power*.

teachings: 'the toiling masses and simple people cannot begin the study of Marxism-Leninism with Lenin's and Stalin's writings. They should start with the biography', he remarked in 1946.

Far from abandoning Marxism, Stalin remained committed to the ideology and to its dissemination amongst Soviet citizens. This was equally true of the post-war years which are often associated with Stalin's turn to extreme Russian nationalism. As van Ree has pointed out, the stress on nation in this period never replaced the emphasis on class. In his last years, Stalin spent much of his time intervening in academic disputes, from philosophy to genetics and linguistics. Ethan Pollock questions traditional assumptions that these interventions were simply 'the ultimate ravings of a dying megalomaniac', part of a campaign to intimidate the intelligentsia, an attempt to encourage conflict amongst his colleagues or to heat up the Cold War. Instead they represented Stalin's concern with the health of ideology and Soviet science.

Stalin recognised the existence of an ideological crisis in the post-war era. He sought to tackle this by reinvigorating a body of theory which he apparently recognised had become dogmatic. If Soviet science were to flourish, as it must with the development of the Cold War, then Marxist theory must be used creatively. Only then would scientific truths be uncovered. His forays into linguistics were apparently intended to curtail the Marxist monopoly over the discipline, and to encourage discussion of other approaches, with Stalin claiming that Marxism had to develop and change over time if it was to remain relevant. Likewise his meetings with political economists aimed to stimulate a genuinely fresh approach to the long-awaited textbook, rather than one which simply regurgitated Marxist-Leninist clichés. The problem, of course, was that Stalin's interventions tended to generate confusion rather than real debate, as everyone waited for an authoritative answer from on high. The crisis was thus deepened rather than resolved.

How is our image of Stalin changing following the opening up of the archives? We have only just begun to digest the extensive new materials already released, and more are likely to follow. Much work remains to be done on both the nature of Stalin's power, and the significance of his ideas. The related question of his political practices, touched on in some of the contributions to this volume, also requires more systematic study.⁴⁶ What is already clear is that the new materials do not paint a black-and-white picture of either an unbridled tyrant in the unprincipled

⁴⁶ Sheila Fitzpatrick offered some initial thoughts on the question of how to approach political practices in her paper 'Stalin, Molotov, and the Practice of Politics', presented

pursuit of power or an embattled leader reacting to uncontrollable forces. Stalin emerges as a far more contradictory and complex figure. As a leader, he ruthlessly destroyed his political rivals and built an unrivalled personal dictatorship, yet he was never secure in his power. He was obsessed with the division of the formal structures of power, but increasingly worked only in small informal groups. He wanted to delegate responsibilities, but never entirely trusted those who worked for him. He strove to be at the heart of every major political decision, and in the process directed some policy matters in great detail, while utterly ignoring others. He was a perceptive thinker, but also capable of failing to see what was right in front of him. He was genuinely driven by ideology, but flexible in his tactics. He was in some respects a conventional Marxist, but aggressively promoted the nation and the leader cult. He sought to disseminate Marxist ideas as a means of encouraging activism, but his methods often succeeded only in stifling initiative. Stalin's personal influence on the development of the Soviet Union was extraordinary, yet he did not operate in a vacuum and his ambitions were often thwarted. The studies that follow explore these complexities and contradictions.

to the conference 'Stalin: Power, Policy and Political Values', Durham, January 2003. See also her 'Politics as Practice. Thoughts on a New Soviet Political History', *Kritika* 1 (2004), 27–54.