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## **Ego and Politics in Stalin's Autocracy**

I. »The Soviet Century«, <sup>1</sup> is to be published in March 2003, by Fayard in Paris. The English edition, published by Columbia University Press is to appear later, at a still unspecified date. It goes without saying that my ideas are fully documented in the book, but in this article, that I consider to be an »essay« I allow myself to avoid footnoting.

Stalin died half a century ago but new materials keep emerging from the archives and many new books keep appearing. Despite this wealth of material his persona is still not easy to size up; assessments and direct testimonies give different pictures or snapshots of a »kaleidoscopic« character; a businesslike and well-informed top boss, polite, even at times benevolent. A »control freak«, distrusting everyone and everything, a cool manipulative tactician, an irate, vengeful monster, a rational man of state? Or a crazy arbitrary mass executioner and a man capable of large scale political stagecraft? Sometimes barely able to control his fits of rage or a great organiser? Was he a vulgar and perverse mediocrity or a genius however evil? Things get further complicated by the fact that observers who believed that they were dealing with one personality and style, later saw a different one, or simply, for whatever reasons, revised their initial impressions.

Such diametrically opposed appearances and evaluations, parts of them certainly real and natural, are bewildering. But could not a case be made, for an individual known for »planning« his persona, for temperamental mood swings that different observers might have seen were in fact true faces of the same man?

Without answering this question directly, let us, in the meantime, propose an obvious but broader observation, namely that the phenomenon (Stalinism) had a beginning and an end, dictated not only by the banal fact of mortality but also because the stage of systemic aberration, that the USSR went through under Stalin, was going to be replaced by something else. Our task therefore is to insert Stalin, however sketchily, into the historical flow from which he emerged, to which he contributed and from which, by natural death, he exited. The whole road was twisted, bloody, intensely dramatic, so intensely personal and yet part of

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<sup>1</sup> The ideas presented here are based, to a large extent, on this book. See: Moshe Lewin: *Le siècle soviétique*, traduit de l'anglais par Denis Paillard et Florence Prudhomme, Paris, Fayard/Le Monde diplomatique, 528 p.

a historical motherboard, i.e. also an impersonal product too, as we will try to suggest.

At the outset let us disentangle some supposed certainties (though doing it briefly is not easy): he was a member of the Bolshevik party, a Leninist, as was everybody else in the leadership. But members of this leadership were not all of the same mettle, and Stalin was, intellectually and politically, certainly different from most of the other figures of the initial Bolshevik movement.

An interplay of ego and politics, quite natural anywhere, is of a particular importance in the making of Stalinism, a specific form of power holding, of a despotic variety where personality features and personal relations were very tightly interconnected with the changing historical landscape, first in the making of Stalin as a ruler and next in the shape of the political system that emerged under his control.

The name of the game being autocracy, the more personalized (centralized) it is (degrees are still possible even in autocracy) the more the psychological portrait of the leader matters. As the personal urges, strengthened by an ever more pretentious self-image are »maturing«, the type of power he wants to obtain and how he wants it to be exercised would impact upon the itinerary he would follow once at the top. We can safely use this category of »self-image« as an important guide for understanding the person, in particular the case of a political player who operates on a large historical scene and wants to get the leading role whatever the price.

One can plausibly argue that the initial crystallization in Stalin's mind of an ambitious self-image of a great strategist occurred during the civil war, when he was entrusted with a number of military assignments and often fought in the Politburo and the Revolutionary-Military Council against Trotsky's strategic choices, proposing his own which he believed to be better. Trotsky's name leads us to yet another factor that played an important role in the making of Stalin's self-image and of his policies. Stalin's hatred of Trotsky and his scornful depiction of Trotsky as some kind of »paper-tiger« are well known but this factor is still worth underlining, firstly, for its role in the shaping of Stalin's furies that did not subside until this major irritant was physically eliminated at his direct order in 1929. Secondly, because it leads us to yet another discovery of the fateful interpersonal relations in the Bolshevik leadership.

It would be useful at this juncture to get the help from a »political psychologist« or psychiatrist, capable of assessing authoritarian types who are consumed by their lust of power. They constitute a special class of human characters that needs a specialized branch of psychology, even better psychiatry, to guide us in deciphering their actions. We are aware that »the authoritarian personality« was

already treated among other things in 1950 in a work by Theodor W. Adorno<sup>2</sup> and colleagues from the Frankfurt School. We now need more of such tools with the added input of the current state of the relevant scholarly disciplines to help us to cope with the often very complicated psyche of a dictator.

In the meantime, some amateurish observations of mine are based on ascertainable facts which lead to the conclusion that Stalin knew exactly where he wanted to go politically at some early point in his career. As said, we can tentatively place the emergence and crystallization of his ambitions from the moment that he began to see himself as a great strategist. Although no-one else had recognized this in him, except maybe those of the gang that he had assembled around him during those years. It seems that from this period on he began to both amass and to exercise power and acquire habits of commanding and organizing which he would then turn into »principles«. In addition to his crucial involvement in military affairs during the civil war, another important factor in the formation of his opinions on the future state to be erected was his experience in dealing with national questions, having been nominated to the position of Commissar of Nationalities in the very first Soviet government formed in October/November 1917. The multitude of conflicts, ambitions and urges for independence he was encountering and trying to handle instilled in him a deep distrust of the national factor as potentially dangerous, if given enough leeway, to the functioning of the central government of the whole country. Already then, if not much earlier, actual, and eventual, opponents and critics of his actions were getting a preview of Stalin's spiteful reactions towards them but probably they could not yet understand at that time that challenges against him would leave in Stalin's memory long-lasting grudges and a decision to pay the person back at the proper time. Concomitantly, his own failures and setbacks also left deep traces in his oversensitive ego causing frequent outbursts of a pathological, though often camouflaged, rage. These features, including brutality and animosity, were correctly noticed by Lenin, who wrote that animosity (*ozloblenie*) plays the worst possible role in politics. And this certainly contributed to Lenin's decision to remove Stalin from his position of general secretary to which he had been promoted to in early 1922. Therefore, facts from the crucial period of the civil war and the first years after can be seen as particularly important in shaping Stalin's aspirations, self-image and the way he intended, and soon began, to exercise power as he accumulated it in the following years.

It seems proper at this juncture to raise the broader problem of Stalin's relation to »Bolshevism«. My contention is that, in the conditions of the civil war, the camp of »the reds« was sufficiently variegated, with many different political potentials that would come to the fore with the onset of peace and would concern

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<sup>2</sup> Adorno, Theodor et al.: *The authoritarian personality*. New York 1950.

the regime's long-term political perspectives, strategies and ideologies. A quite broad range of potential programs, in the state of incubation, as it were, could be discerned during the open debate in preparation for the 10th party Congress where the appearance of a good dozen or so factions, or potential factions made Lenin aware that there was actually no unified party at that moment. The problems of nationalities and the type of statehood they may require once raised in connection with planning the new USSR in peacetime would bring to the surface even more trends and political blueprints that the civil war veterans probably did not expect.

We can set aside the task of ascertaining how many potential politico-ideological streams could be discerned in the ranks of the »red« camp, leaving out most of them except for the most pertinent to the subject at hand. With this in mind, it can be stated that coming out of the civil war, under the common name of »Bolsheviks« two separate main streams emerged, more clearly delineated than any others, with two radically opposed, actually hostile, state building programs formulated by Lenin and by Stalin.

These programs, and the course of the heated political clash, are documented, along others, in Lenin's texts containing his »testament« and materials on the debates pertaining to Stalin's and Lenin's views (with many other participants involved) on the way the new state, to be called the USSR, should be constructed.<sup>3</sup> I could not yet have known at that time the broader battle on ideology and strategy that would become available after the »perestroika«, notably in the very rich collection of articles and documents in A. P. Nenarokov, V. A. Gornyi, V. N. Dobrokhoto, A. I. Kozhokina, A. D. Kotykhov, A.I. Ushakov, Nesostoiavshiiia iubilei. Pochemu SSSR ne otprazdnoval svoego, semidesiatiletia, Moscow 1992. It is obvious now that the differences were far reaching and that hostility between the two, hidden from outsiders, even hidden from most insiders, were deeply personal and ideological, and again, they might have germinated earlier, during the civil war when Stalin's personal disrespect, probably even hatred of Lenin may have emerged in connection with Stalin's obsessive conflict with Trotsky. These debates conducted in the Military Revolutionary Council, often wandering over to the PB and TsK about strategy, drafting officers from the old tsarist armies, assessing results of campaigns, nominating top commanders, their successes or treason, and an endless list of other subjects, were constantly fuelling animosities and consolidating hostile factions.

As noted earlier, the aura of a great military strategist was an early aspiration, if not a fantasy, of Stalin's, and yet Trotsky was the creator of the Red Army and the War Commissar as well as a co-leader of the revolution. His name was hy-

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<sup>3</sup> Materials concerning Lenin's »testament« and clashes with Stalin can be seen in my: *Lenin's Last Struggle*. New York 1968.

phenated with Lenin's and repeated at party congresses, all over Russia and the world. It was this »hyphen« that was a permanent irritant for Stalin and might have been the source of the disappointment, criticism, and finally the disdain of Lenin who was being incessantly worked over by Stalin's group to eliminate Trotsky from his military position and from leadership, mostly, as we now know, unsuccessfully.

This factor in conjunction with what is known about the »testament« and the debate about »what kind of an USSR?« allows us to raise the problem of Stalin's growing anti-Bolshevism. It was not solely premised on his criticism and personal dislike of Lenin, Trotsky and other »old Bolshevik« leaders. It can be shown that by the time of, or shortly after, his nomination to the position of general secretary in 1922 the taciturn Stalin already harbored a firm conviction as to, firstly, what kind of state should be produced in post war Russia (an untrammelled, highly centralized one) and secondly, what kind of role he was interested in and how he would play it. This can be read and reconstituted from a set of »clusters« of themes, each containing types of actions, political pronouncements, personal relations and conflicts and documents that we will list here and then follow up by short comments.

The »cluster« containing his statements on cadres (we will be summarizing them shortly) are particularly remarkable for their brevity, containing more content than volumes can say. The elements implied in Trotsky's role in Stalin's psyche in another of our »clusters« were noticed and tackled by biographers of both men, but they are quite complex and allow for still more input by interested authors. Borrowing from the religious demonology it may be suggestive to ask: was not Trotsky playing, albeit unwittingly, the role of an equivalent of »anti-christ« in Stalin's gloomy two-dimensional scale (»he is my friend«, »he is, or he has become, my enemy« as his daughter Svetlana often heard from him, including about her own uncle who suddenly disappeared). There were never to be allowed any outstanding personalities around Stalin, nor even anyone of lesser stature but endowed with a measure of independence in their character and actions.

The curious manoeuvre with Lenin's oath (and the embalment that went against the family's protests) is yet another »cluster«, an action rich in meaning and suggestions about Stalin as politician. The well known speech honoring Lenin, after his death, constructed and delivered like a religious oration with a list of oaths to the dead leader vowing that his wishes would be realized. None of the aims listed in Stalin's »oath« actually belonged to Lenin's concrete political program and, of course, none of his real wishes and ideas expressed in his testament and »last struggle« were even mentioned. This was already a quite mendacious performance: Stalin was building a preposterous cult of Lenin that the family and many party leaders did not accept (or accepted under pressure), as a clever prepa-

ration for his own cult that he as »the sole real heir to Lenin« would inherit for himself. No doubt, a quite remarkable case of political stagecraft!

The fact that Stalin was attracted to the image of a Russian tsar might have been a later development, signs of which appeared in the later thirties and shall need to be assessed later. In the meantime his solo decision on the politics of »socialism in one country« is another indicator that helps to »read« Stalin after he declared, in substance: we can do it on our own without depending on others, i.e. on more advanced countries or the world's proletariat. It shows that ideology would be maneuvered as needed but it also hints at something more ominous: a foretaste of (the brewing) great-power chauvinism capable of seducing a good part of an audience composed mostly of victorious participants in the civil war. And this brand of ideology, justly castigated by Trotsky, would literally blossom at some later stage.

## II. »Cadres command everything!« (Do they?)

A systematically conducted policy, realized quite soon, to change the party into some other creature, say, his tool to control the state, was an intrinsic part of the emerging strategy. This was already visible quite early on, notably to different vocal and tacit oppositionists who began to mushroom at that time and realized by Stalin in full at the end of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Here the key to the »cipher« is the term *kadry*. The well known quote from a speech in which Stalin declared that »cadres are the overall decisive factor« (*kadry reshaiut vsël*) and that the enthusiasm and the quality of the cadres of builders, organizers, and leaders would actually decide about »everything«. The slogan seemed to contain a very positive and romantic sound. One could even say a »democratic« one. But Stalin had in mind something entirely different and made it abundantly clear in a few short statements. In a speech delivered in 1925 to the students of the Sverdlov University Stalin explained to them what the role of »cadres« (including the listeners once they graduate) was and what it should be. His reasoning, in substance, went like this: the so-called »objective obstacles« to any of our aims simply do not exist. If things do not go right it means that the cadres were inadequate to their task.

A similar statement on cadres delivered to a larger party audience was slightly more cautious (one could not yet tell the leading party personnel in 1925, still Marxist, at least to some extent, that »objective difficulties do not exist for us«). Here the emphasis was on the need for the cadres to execute orders that were for Stalin the essence of politics. It was already clearly formulated not only in his mind but also in public at the 12th party congress. Those cadres »are supposed to know how to execute directives, be capable of understanding them, to adopt

them as their own, to be dear to them and to be able to make them into part of their life. Otherwise politics loses its sense and consists only of flailing one's hands. This is why *uchraspred* (the party's personnel registration and assignment department) plays such a huge role – every functionary has to be studied from all sides in considerable detail.«<sup>4</sup>

These extremely concise statements contain a wealth of implications. The whole philosophy of Stalin's power is here fully revealed without writing some equivalent of »*Mein Kampf*«: a justification for an unerring leadership that cannot be faulted for its policies. The leader's policies are always right and if they fail the fault lies within »the cadres«.

What is pertinent here is the fact that »the cadres« means the party membership and all and any employees and functionaries from the highest to the lowest ranks in all the administrative and political agencies. Thus, there can be no agency, including the party, that has any autonomy whatsoever. The party is just composed of »cadres« obliged to obey, hence the thesis that I am proposing is that there was actually no party anymore in the political sense of this term. One did exist before Stalin's takeover and it was making decisions about policy and executing these decisions. It had gatherings as its statute required a conference every year, including during the civil war, a congress every year that elected its leadership, and debated broad and narrower items. So, such a party existed. All this was history by 1929. Stalin convened or did not convene any gatherings, those that were convened had no say in actual decision making, everything was preordained, down to the last speech and decision. This picture is well known to every student of the Stalinist period.

By this time Stalin's political philosophy concerning his vision of the state and his role in it is not only clear but also fully realized: he was aiming at sole leadership of a powerful centralized state without too much sentimentality about methods and means; a powerful war machine ready to do battle, in the first place with its own society. State and society needs would be formulated by him, sitting on top of the pyramid. Underlined in this scheme of autocracy is the priority of the state that becomes the main objective of the process, not anymore simply a tool to serve the *socium*. If the needs of the *socium* are to be defined by the autocrat who runs the state it would mean that both the state and the society defer to and depend on the decision of the unique power-holder, so they basically serve the summit of the state structure, and we are then far away from any concept Bolshevik, Marxist or socialist – for which in the final analysis the state and its leadership exist to mind the interest of society.

Stalin builds the state around himself and the special position he is holding. Such a status allows for this position to become a separate, in many ways isolated,

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted from Stalin: *Sochineniia*, vol. 5, pp. 210-211.

political institution or agency, a power cocoon containing one person that, by definition, shares power with nobody. With such an aberrational concentration of power this state, run by a one man institution, located at the summit of the mighty pyramid state, responsible to nobody and almost preaching though not in French, »l'Etat c'est moi«. It is even possible that Louis the XIV actually never said this, though it could be implied. Over the years with his cult flourishing our megalomaniac leader seems to have enlarged his vista that would justify him saying »l'Histoire c'est moi«, which actually is another way of implying that »objective difficulties do not exist for us«. All this would not be happening had a more collegial structure of government been adopted. The consequences of this modernizing despotism would not be long in coming.

### **III. Those 1930s - chilling a boiling cauldron!**

Our exposé has thus far been concerned mainly with the period ending in 1929. This allows us to now jump straight into the thirties, and into what I propose to call : the matrix for »a systemic paranoia«, characteristic of the years of Five Year Plans. Those were years of an unprecedented social flux, caused by a tempo imposed that the planners did not believe in, and a collectivization of the peasants - an act of social engineering launched so boldly and violently that it left the country without enough food just as it was engaging in an equally unprecedented industrial leap forward. The rationale of collectivization was part of the industrialization drive practiced as a myth, industrialize the agriculture simultaneously, as part of the deal, and the rural past would be soon gone but food would flow abundantly like from conveyers. Such an »idyll« was based on forgetting »a trifle«, namely that all this needed to be done by peasants (not to and against peasants). What followed was not so much an industrialization of agriculture – as its centralization, a different thing altogether, and an aspect of Stalinism that has been already hinted at.

But we should not disregard the objective rationale that Stalin expressed forcefully and succinctly, in 1929, saying that they have had a hundred or more years at their disposal, but we have to do it in ten! We can neither ironize nor mock him here. The accuracy of the guess was, of course, accidental, but the sense of gathering clouds was correct: a new world war was only ten years away. Already, in 1933, military and intelligence analysts (the brilliant Tukhachevskii among them) changed drastically their previous prognosis concerning »potential enemies«: the enemy to prepare for from now on would not be Poland or Rumania anymore (for which 800 000 soldiers would somehow do), it would be Germany – quite a different martial music! Such hard facts would have to be faced by whoever was running the show. Stalin did take notice and conducted the effort with fury, and

an outpouring of efforts that resembled sprinters' dashes suffused with coercion and terror in the Stalinist way again.

It would not be superfluous to debate whether a more rational and measured strategy was possible although we shall abstain from doing so in this text as our focus is on the reflection on the peculiarities of Stalin's rule as they unfolded.

The launching of the Stalin hagiography, for which Lenin's »cult« served as a precedent, occurred already earlier, (around the anniversary of his 50th birthday in 1929) and had no parallel with the previously used terms of praise showered on him. Now the term »Velikij« (»The Great«) appeared for the first time, that coincided with the launching of the two key innovations of »the big drive«, both large in scale and powerful in impact, namely collectivization and industrialization. The »social flux« and the need to control the ensuing socio-economic consequences, notably large scale population movements, produced a two (or three) prong strategy often endowed with contradictory pulls. First was the use of force in different forms the »storming« (shturmovshchina) and different forms of pressure tactics (nazhim) Next, efforts were undertaken to master the floods also by systematizing, routinizing, i.e. by building up administrations that were actually literally swelling – the two styles standing in each others way. I need not remind here that terror, a separate category in »the use of force« department, and also an almost convulsive sticking to, strengthening and relying on the center, as the sole reliable and trustworthy position in a magmatic situation was not illogical in itself because an effort like that could not have come nor could it be led locally. But the powerful center had a narrow apex and this configuration meant, quite naturally, that the assessment of the situation, its diagnosis, the very definition of reality so to speak and the policies to be adopted, depended on the opinions and perceptions of a very small number of leaders. As »the big leap« unfolded, the task of running this country before 1929 might have looked now to those leaders as simplicity itself. The object of rule was literally in perpetual motion. The monumental fluidity in society and in the institutions was, of course, a result of the speed and scale of transformation, by definition unavoidable and mendable in the longer run. But the regime had to tackle its vast industrial and other efforts in the present, and to live with the reality of massive social transformations and migrations, especially in the early 1930s, requiring the growth of a whole administrative framework with many agencies that were, on this scale, a novelty in themselves, and they were about to exhibit an amazing ability to manifest all kinds of appetites and inherent self-interested practices, even before they learned how to do their job properly.

So, the regime that triggered and shaped this reality was in turn being tested and forced to react, to one emergency after another, easily perceived as menace after menace, a perception that would become Stalinism's main motivation. Now these

menaces did not only exist, they also became essential. They would serve as a trigger for mass terror movements from below triggered by »the big leap«. Streams of wandering people, voluntary or coerced, the picture and reality of building sites, of shovel wielding masses digging foundation pits (kotlovany ) for factories, living often in dug-outs or inhabiting barracks in towns, all in the throes of an enormous labor turnover, many of them actual or fugitive kolkhozniks, results of this unprecedented social flux beamed back powerful pressures and messages. They kept unsettling old and new social and administrative institutions and this destabilizing factor was compounded by terror and camps that were supposed to help tame the tides and shape human conduct, and it all boomeranged now also on the state, constantly raising before the eyes of the leadership the specter of losing control over this social magma, of »nepravliamost«. The counter-measures consisted of deeper nationalization (»étatisation«) of most, if not all, aspects of life, more centralism, and a more aggressive creation and pampering of the system's ramparts, layers of bosses on all levels. The latter had its flip side: the bureaucracy is not a pliable tool. So the task of mastering the masters becomes now a specifically Stalinist conundrum, because the daunting tensions now reach and envelope the narrowest political summit itself. They amassed enormous power in their hands, easily justified by the specifics of the tasks, enormous pressure from above was the key strategy and had its logic. But the dependence of so many fateful decisions on the capacities and psychological make of a small central group and of each of the leaders personally, might have served as a unifier for the whole group and should have consolidated them. Yet amidst the whirlwind of the thirties, the more concentrated and the tighter their hold on power, the deeper the sense that it kept escaping from them every day. As they read reports, or traveled to inspect factories, villages and cities they realized how many agency and office holders did not do what they were expected to do, concealed reality as best they could (or simply just could not do so much that fast), how many thousands of orders and decrees issued were not even properly received, all this must have deepened the perception in the very top rank that their power was actually more fragile than it looked. This must have sown insecurity and disorientation, made some prominent top members raise doubts about the validity of the whole line or actually turn to oppose it, for which they paid mostly the ultimate price. What we observe here is the phenomenon that can be called for illustrative purposes »systemic paranoia«, a term characterizing this state of precariousness of power, because it served as an enabler, putting the finishing touches to Stalin's autocracy and his self-beatification.

Overwhelmed and uncertain, the highest echelon became more vulnerable to the influence of one of them that looked strong and determined enough to help the leadership to cope with the historical tides. That he was tough, even ruthless, seemed fitting for the tasks and the times. It was a classic moment, for a talented

master of intrigue and behind-the-scenes manipulation, to get into his hands all the keys - including this time the mastery over the personal fate of each and every other leader. At this point the personal, autocratic, power was at its peak. At the same time the fate of a country found itself, to a large extent, at the mercy of one psyche, a psyche of an already paranoia-prone personality.

A group leadership, if it could have been maintained, might have attenuated the effects of such tensions, but once power was allowed to get so deeply personalized, outbursts of different forms of irrationality, including murderous ones, were just waiting to happen. Hence personal spite, malice and deviousness all became, in many ways, components of the system's *modus operandi*.

Was he really the right person to handle a situation, where the more power that is amassed, the less mastery is obtained, the less power is delegated, the more it is appropriated lower down by stealth, from other, »Little Stalins«?

#### **IV. The gelding of governing bodies**

As these phenomena, personal and impersonal, unfolded the unavoidable liquidation of the party as an independent self governing body was proceeding at an accelerated pace. It transformed into a basically bureaucratic apparatus with a so called »membership« attached to it and treated with considerable disdain. Symptomatically, an old party principle called »partmaximum« was eliminated in 1932 (together with any remnants of the so-called »uravnilovka«, when party members, whatever their rank, were not allowed to earn more than a qualified worker), an egalitarian apparatus being as realistic as a square circle. The new guideline to motivate an apparatchik became, quite officially, the following: an apparatus is a hierarchy, climb the ladder of rank and privileges as high as you can!

The higher level bosses (party members mostly) were not playing proletarian brotherhood anymore with their subordinates, the call from above was for tough bosses (Stalin called them »commanders«) coagulating into a commanding stratum (*nachal'stvo*), themselves graded in ranks, throughout the system. They were supported and pampered, but not allowed to settle down and stabilize their status, a separate and specific ingredient of this dictatorship that did not exist before and was to be eliminated later. As Stalin tightened his grip, the dismantling of all previously flourishing party-state consultative and coordinating bodies that were to be systematically convened by the Politburo and a deliberate emasculation of all of the stronger institutions, including (astonishing as it may sound for any reader who did not know it already) the Politburo itself. This ruling agency was actually fractured and functioned, at Stalin's whim, as fragments, invited in small numbers to handle this or that, often during dinners at Stalin's dacha,

strictly for the »friends« (*druz'ia*), i.e. only those who enjoyed Stalin's favor at that moment.

As the party lost its political identity, the party's central apparatus grew and became a complicated (often changing) organism but even in this »headquarter« of the party and system (often called the party's *sancta sanctorum*) the logic of Stalin's autocracy was working in one direction: erecting yet another »special« super-apparat (sometimes called »*osobyi*«, sometimes »*politicheskii*«, finally »*obshchii*«) to serve Stalin personally, directly, and in secret from the rest of the apparatus, that is what »*osobyi*« or »*special*« means. Stalin's personal secretary the ubiquitous but tight-lipped, Poskrebyshev became its head.

Similar elements of undercutting viable and useful agencies went on in the Sovnarkom, a supposedly powerful administration with departments of specialists and consultants. However, the final decision making went on through a small super-secret agency and communication line strictly limited to just Molotov's and Stalin's use. Through this channel Molotov was submitting his proposals to Stalin. Stalin corrected, approved or disapproved and then sent his response back to Molotov as an order. Quite an intimate affair!

Broadly, Stalin's expanding power complex took on the form of a security state, capped by a self-made cult figure, engaged in a laborious, detailed and exhausting method of running the whole enterprise from the top down, increasing gluts and bottlenecks, responding, by emergency measures, to an incessant chain of crises. But let us single out a principle of administration from and by the center we just characterized as being »detailed and exhausting«: Stalin personally, the Politburo and the Orgburo, were engulfed in an effort of none less than a hands-on micromanaging of a continent! To understand it one should look at the Orgburo's protocols, to realize how the leaders and their apparatus did this »micromanaging« of areas, branches, institutions, dealing with political, economic, military and diplomatic issues is best illustrated by some of the numerous telegrams signed by Stalin to some factory-building site instructing them to deliver an amount of rails, nails or barbed wire to a particular building site and promising severe retribution in case of failure to execute his order. Studying the secretariat's and Orgburo agendas produces an impression of an overwhelming scope of activity.

Especially impressive is the effort to create courses, schools, academies, and universities to train people, as well as compiling lists of persons to be sent to study in those »academies«, lists of candidates to become teachers there, and help train cadres for the state and cadres to replace the layers upon layers of difficult to get professionals that had been engulfed by the phantom of Stalin's purges. Despite there also being blatant deficit of professionals of any kind in the first place. The »rationale« of Stalin's »purging« is expressed by yet another »jewel« of his cadres philosophy, namely that »there are no irreplaceable people« (*nezamen-*

imykhi liudej net). The sinister potential of this additional formula of despotism is self-explanatory, but such a potential of devouring cadres was inscribed in the very essence of Stalin's brand of despotism. An enormous effort to »catch up and overtake«, to prepare for the future menaces to the country was further exacerbated by the specific problem of the oversensitive chief's personal security inside his country. His absolute personal power led Stalin to identify his security with that of the system, thereby blurring the frontier between reality and myth and making the country pay a horrendous price for this mode of government. The strategy Stalin invented to achieve for himself an all-round and fullproof internal security; preventive strikes against potential internal enemies whom he »nominated« for this role (why wait until they really strike?) could not but harm and endanger the country, internally and internationally. The chimerical character of the whole show is further confirmed in the fact that there never was any attempt on Stalin's life, he was never in any real danger and rarely, if ever, exposed himself to any.

All the ingredients mentioned above, including a hands-on direct management, applied equally to managing culture and, of course, to handling cultural figures. Here we get another important insight into Stalin's search for mastery over his subjects' minds. Realizing that a hero of a good literary work had a deeper influence on the minds of millions of readers than the whole agitprop he tried, through his political power over writers of novels and plays to »manage« even their imagined, fictional figures in order to instill in citizens his own ideas, emotions and myths. Thus he personally corrected plays and discussed with novelists the behavior of their heroes – even these fictional heroes had to obey. Stalin did not have to be an artist to do this and no artist he had discussions with could ever remind him that he was not a writer. He was not a scientist either yet he personally edited Lysenko's lecture to the Academy of Science, not realizing of course that Lysenko was a fraud. He kept for himself the last word on economics, no need to mention history, it goes without saying – he was making it, why not also edit it? During his vacation in the Caucasus, he invited Zhdanov and Kirov to edit a history text book for schools. Kirov who tried to excuse himself because, he said, he was no historian, heard an encouraging »don't worry, you will do all right« (nichego, nichego, spravishsia!) - that was actually an order.

In short Stalin was a very hard working busybody of pathological proportions. Yes, he wanted to master some kind of a totality and to impose his terms on it. He played this game and got both imbued with and deeply corrupted by it. Could there be a case that he had his moments of doubt about his »infinite wisdom« and the solidity of his power? Here too artists were a resource, no one could do a better job of portraying his grandeur than talented artists with whom he was entering into convoluted dialogue-diatribic relations .

The making of his own image is here at its most perverse. The relative insecurity of an »image«, maybe even in his own eyes, forced him to keep it »fresh« all the time and this could have been the psychological reason why he needed an incessant flood of expressions of adulation towards him and he was not going to leave things to unreliable spontaneity. We know that Stalin was personally involved in examining and selecting the words of praise, terms and images concerning him, that were shown and used in films, in his biography, that he personally edited, with superlatives preserved or added, and a few toned down or even struck out, because of modesty, of course. Add to this the choice of titles and ranks and rituals of congresses and other public events. All this was obviously more than calculated political propaganda for keeping the popularity rating high, praise and sycophancy, seemingly without cease were »drugs« and he was hard at work to procure these »drugs« for himself. Was there somewhere in him a feeling of guilt, of fear, did he ever have bad dreams? But this theme has to be left at this point to experienced psychologists and to some lucky new discoveries in the archives.

The other leaders that performed most of the necessary work belonged to an entirely different league. Under Stalin their service was assured by yet another device in the »chimerical« category. Stalin persecuted their families (Kaganovich's three brothers were executed, Molotov's wife was arrested) as a preventive medicine and a deliberate »proper training« in infallible devotion to Stalin. This was understood by them; after the assassination of Kirov opened a new phase in the relations between Stalin and those directly below him. This position of top men in a system was unique; they could be likened to death row inmates with temporarily suspended sentences.

So, by now we are facing a very elaborate art of despotic rule by an able practitioner - with all breaks removed! In the service of what?

## **V. In search of a fitting past**

Considering that the images of himself were planned by Stalin himself, the avowed rationale being, that this was what they (the people) wanted and should be given (a Generalissimus at least), there is ground enough to surmise, as I have been suggesting, that it was something he himself wanted and was even something that he badly needed. Giving the people the images that they wanted was certainly good for the system's stability, but Stalin had a personal agenda that his psychological stability required: it was a battle with his past, one that he fought independently of the »needs of the people«. A good example being the quite unexpected spectacle of an oath to Lenin in 1924 (plus the mummification of his body), serving as a precedent in producing a cult for himself.

It gets clearer when raising the problem of Stalin's relation with his revolutionary past. It is easy to show that he destroyed most remnants of his so-called »Bolshevik past« and worked hard to create for himself not only a different system but also an entirely new pantheon. We can raise in this context the problem of »a historical alibi« that, Hitler did not have to bother about. Hitler did what he promised to do in »Mein Kampf«. Russian citizens had to figure Stalin out from snippets from a passage in a 1925 lecture or a speech, and from his later actions. The need of an alibi could be taken as one of the motivations of his purges of party cadres that he had been contemplating some amount of time well before 1937. Responding to an urge to get rid for good of a historical record caused by the fact that the leadership of the historical party had rejected him, that he was not the primary mover he wanted everyone to believe he was; he was not recognized as such and was actually destined to be fired, he undertook a meticulous preparation of a strategy aiming at renouncing for good his revolutionary past and political adherence by the final removal of this historical liability from his official historical record. This past had to be wiped out; dangerous witnesses had to disappear. The calculated and vengeful plotting that went into this strategy, during at least certain stages, was not always just cold blooded planning. It was often conducted in a state of heightened mental tension. The ritual of destroying a Bukharin (politically weak but intellectually far superior to Stalin, a historical founding father, »the party's darling«), required, in Stalin's view, inflicting on »the culprit« a protracted mental torture in public during a special convened TsK meeting, to be followed by the man's spectacular physical destruction. The way Stalin ran these sessions looks (to the reader of the TsK meeting's minutes) like a session conducted by at least a half-crazed medium, hell-bent on driving the audience of perfectly sane operators, the Central Committee members, into a state of a collective folly and forcing them to share his phantasms. What he had to say was illogical and incoherent gibberish, but in addition to destroying his enemy, he also had an additional well calculated hidden agenda, namely to test the TsK members personal loyalty to himself. Three versions of possible resolutions against Bukharin's »treason« were proposed and put to the vote, Stalin obviously wanted just the first one »arrest and turn over to the NKVD« (this meant a death sentence, preceded by torture). The other would stipulate »do not arrest but continue the investigation of the case by the NKVD«. The last proposed »do not arrest and let go free«. It was an all too obvious trap being laid for the chekisty, most of them certainly understood the game. Nobody dared to propose the third, but several opted for the second, and then died for it!

That is just a small, almost innocent, sample in the framework of the nightmarish quality of the 1937-38 purges; arrests, show trials, or sentencing without trials and massive death sentencing, all descending from Stalin signed documents or

from the conveyor like sentencing by the famous local »troiki« and the so-called »Special Session of the NKVD Court«, all on an enormous scale.

Some people ask: »what is the logic?« The logic is that of a man with immense power, that imagined endless hoards of enemies, because he needed them so badly that he kept inventing them at will, to prove that »they« existed and were being defeated and punished by a perverted secret police. The latter was to do the job and then also be purged by exactly the same procedures and techniques. Not exactly »a logic« of course, unless we add »perverted« or »delirious«.

Still, »the alibi« was not yet finally pieced together. Yet another grand maneuver of a politico-ideological character would be needed for the same purpose, of granting Stalin a self-administered final absolution from his political past.

The very construction of a fully cocooned one man power cell, free from any institutional constraints, was, in fact, inherently vulnerable, certainly so as seen by the individual in question. For whom an absolutist position was the only position acceptable, and he did achieve this. It all looked as if a paranoiac had constructed for himself a position to justify the delirium that was a symptom of his illness.

This actually might well have been the right diagnosis. Considering all that happened to menace, the isolated-insulated power bastion was a position all set to control whatever was happening as well as to distrust it at the same time. Thus, although he might have been thinking something on the line of »L'Etat c'est moi« (which incidentally was probably attributed to Louis XIV falsely), for our ruler such a motto would still not express the fullness of power he needed. »Moi« would have to own more than the state: »l'Histoire c'est moi« would be the best term, if the term »God« is deemed exaggerated. We do not need to polemicise here with this chief. Even if both putative statements could safely be ascribed to Stalin's way of operating his »despotism«, both were, to say the least, »a-historical«. This type of rule could last successfully only in an immobile social environment (in ancient Egypt maybe). Stalin(ism), specially towards the end of his »term« was still possessed by its initial developmental drive, but in conjunction with an ideology and a structure of power and symbolic scenarios that were borrowed from a much less mobile past and its outdated, archaic symbols.

So the system worked on its »dynamic« gear that was the birthmark of the Stalinist model and faltered on its other, equally deep facet: the archaic, almost shamanic insulation of chiefdom that was also »pre-installed« and could not but bring the system to a halt.

How do we classify this political system? Agrarian autocracy (or agrarian despotism)?

All this is quite specific to Russia's history, there is no need to look elsewhere, although there were enough kinships over the huge territories that harbored

agrarian autocracies, (the Middle East, Eastern Asia, and even a few neighbors to the west of Russia?). The making of Muscovy as a centralized state consisted, on one hand, of the »collecting« (sobiranie) of all kinds of separate (even if often related by kinship) principalities into one political unit. With this process went a degree of de-feudalization, in the sense of diminishing the splintering of feuding principalities, but also with the feature of feudalization, because of the growing enserfment of peasants on lands offered to a gentry in the making as payment for service to the Grand Prince. This way of »procuring cadres« for the state meant producing the serf-owners and the serfs. The growth of the Moscow ruler's personal domain englobed ipso facto both the building of an autocratic state, and the gradual formation of a nation over a huge territory through a colonization activity which is one of the main features in the making of Russia. The Russian historian S. M. Solov'ëv characterized this activity as »a long-term ›thin‹ process« (›extensive‹ may render this idea of ›thin‹ clearer) that quite naturally required a highly centralized state under, of course, a God-sent or anointed ruler, be it a great prince, tsar, or an emperor. This state experienced in the last century of its existence great difficulties in shedding the old agrarian imprint on its way of ruling and of its self-image, even as Europe was entering, for better or for worth, the 20th century. Incidentally, despotes means, quite prosaically, a household head ruling over his land, family and servants. Changes occurring over centuries but in particular after the emancipation of the peasants made this formula untenable, but poor Nikolai II (Nicky - as his cousin Willy nicknamed him) still stuck to the character of his historical »samoderzhavie« as a ruler of a state identified with a personal domain, trying to run it as one runs his household, even if there was no serfdom around anymore and the tsar owned much land but not the country's economy. Most importantly, and ominously, was the erosion of the affinity between the peasant and the patriarchal father and farm holder, the historical model of tsarist monarchism, the tsar' batiushka at the head of the state. Nicholas II was sure that the devotion of the rural population still held, but the peasants were ever less interested in this father-to-father analogy.

Against such a background of the previous system's decay, it seems puzzling to discover Stalin's growing tendency to assume tsarist imperial glory, and try to tap deep into historical traditions for the benefit of his regime, believing that they were still intact.

Assuming an affinity with the empire and claiming common historical roots, especially with the state building of the most cruel tsars, would allow a radical redefinition of his, and his system's ideological and political identity and roots, allowing to get rid of the liabilities created by the supposedly socialist promises that could not be kept. Lenin, we remember, called Stalin »a Russian bully« (Derzhimorda) and requested his removal from his job as being unfit for that level of power. But Stalin ended up in actually wanting to be a »Russian bully«,

endear himself to the authentic core nationality, even if this required a switch of his ideological identity. It was clearly expressed in the adoption of a chauvinistic Russian anthem, again, personally edited by Stalin and sounding like an oath to a mythical *Velikaia Rus'*, an almost provocative offense to all the non-Russian nationalities of the empire. It was also expressed by the orgy of nationalist outpourings (of the worst kind) during the well known battle against »the cosmopolites« after the Second World War. All those were parts of Stalin's design to leave the past behind him and switch over to the making of another. Just decimating the Bolshevik party's cadres was not enough. Talk about achieving or having achieved stage 1 or stage 2 of some socialism, was not needed anymore. The superstate he had created would now be unencumbered by any promises to anyone, and had an agrarian despotism that can be counted among the century's most amazing twists: Stalin's system restored and actually reinvigorated the old historical phenomenon or pattern (though more like a Xerxes than a Nikolai I or an Alexander III), through a hectic industrialization that neither a Xerxes nor a Nikolaj were capable of, and introduced a system of oppression for which »Oriental despotism« seemed the right term, according to Wittfogel.

However, »Oriental despotism« is missing one of Stalin's key features. The old despotisms changed their rural societies quite slowly, Stalin's system of »agrarian despotism« grew from and was attached to the rural past and traditions of the country which was still over 80 percent rural, mostly still so during the NEP, but it was an industrialization driven model, and this was to induce enormous changes in society taking it, in effect, to a different era even if, in the short run, it was still actually reinforcing the despotic and oppressive features of the regime. This was happening because the Stalinist system was now a product of the »marriage« between two structures: the growing industrial and the old static one, both deeply authoritarian systems, reinforcing each other, at least initially, and being welded into one state-organized and state-owned economy.

It is this amalgam of forms that allowed the making of a personal, cult despotism, with roots going back into a primitive past, temporarily reinforced and regenerated by the injection of the newest form of industrialism. A similar pattern, on a much smaller scale, could be observed during Peter the Great's modernization. Against this background and in this framework we can fit in the forced labor (Gulag) phenomenon, a despotism allowing an enormous scope for personal folly: purges, forced labor, exiling masses of people to remote places, a huge repressive complex.

It bears reminding that all the larger purges and show trials were personally planned (with the help of the likes of Vyshinskii or others) and supervised, again personally by Stalin. They became and stayed his *modus operandi*, maybe, in his eyes, his biggest and most effective political strategy, to which he became addicted because purges always »succeeded«, even when nothing else did.

## VI. A flourishing cult – a decaying system

The war rehabilitated, so to speak, Stalinism to a large extent, even on a world scale, just as it was beginning to decay, in fact losing the capacity of effectively ruling the country. The post-war anti-cosmopolitanism campaign, jingoist and quite overtly anti-semitic, accusing intellectuals of pandering to the West and disdain-ing the presumed »superiority« of their native Russian culture, exhibited the system's moral and ideological bankruptcy. It is here that we observe Stalin's last manipulation or effort to chose for himself a past according to his needs as if selecting one from a menu. We already followed the two first cases of fabricating pasts: the distorted and pseudo-religious ceremonial of »sanctifying« Lenin making him into Stalin's own predecessor through an elaborate maneuver and, then the manipulation of the past through the production of the »Short course of the History of the VKP(b)« - an utterly falsified history of the party, and of his own role in it. But the most dramatic was the selection of a third past that we have already discussed: the final switch of the system's and his own ideology away from Bolshevism and its symbols towards the tsarist past, culminating in exposing the essence of Stalinism as anti-Bolshevism, its supposed return to »national roots« of state building and state ideology, of police and ceremonial practices, resembling amazingly the Nikolaj I model. Stalin read books on tsarist history but it is not excluded that he spontaneously »re-invented« the ultra-conservative and secret police oriented system, before he adopted the old statist tradition (not too far, ideologically, from the »black hundred« version) quite openly. He expressed in the mid-30s during a family libation »that they need a tsar«, in fact, after a mass manifestation when people suddenly noticed him in the metro, which he was still sometimes travelling on in the earlier part of his rule, and began applauding him. This certainly was different from saying that they needed »a leader«, a tsar is anointed, the source of his power is God, thus enjoying a much higher degree of legitimation than the one depending on the will of the people but also allowing the chief to promote his own cult obviously, the cult is also probably »what the people need«. However, we have said enough to allow the reverse of the equation: here it was the power holder who seemed not to be able to govern without the cult.

After the revolutionary traditions were pushed aside, the victory in the war offered a new swell in Stalin's stature but »stature« was too secular a concept. Only a »cult« that takes a ruler the nearest to the pantheon, even when still alive, could offer Stalin's regime the required degree of legitimation. By turning to the tsarist past for his political ends he, paradoxically, almost rehabilitated it, by adopting for himself its most compromised feature its »cult« autocracy (samoderzhavie). Such a past offered a full justification for the very type of one-man rule Stalin was practicing. The tsar-image and its claims to terrestrial consecration suited Stalin's

interests – Russia could very well manage without it. The old form of ruling that did not claim any »emancipation« anymore was basically a form of domination, thus quite naturally congenial with Stalin's own form of despotic rule. That in his old age he missed the fact that »the past« he had now selected for himself had been afflicted by a deep crisis for about the last quarter of the 19th century was just an aside - we are not dealing here with historical analysis but with myth making and myth consuming. At the same time his own system was in a lamentable state and all the images of tough, cruel, God anointed tsars would not help at all.

During his last years in power the aging Stalin's health kept deteriorating but he continued to follow what he considered to be his secret of power, plotting new purges, eliminating enemies by »preventive« blows, allowing himself to be manipulated by Berija. Had Stalin been unearthing real enemies we would be dealing with a different system, even if it would still be a dictatorial one. New purges and arrests were being planned and only death probably prevented Stalin from executing his most Stalinist of friends, Berija himself, Molotov, Kaganovich amongst others.

We can now turn to the last point of our agenda. Whence came the success of Stalin's cult? Despite the aberrations, the Stalin cult, legend, aura and personality were widely accepted in Russia and elsewhere as great leadership by a *vozhd'* supposedly equal to none. This belief persisted in many minds in Russia despite Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and of the Stalinist atrocities. The reaction of the masses in Russia to the news of his death are well documented, there was an outpouring of grief, a sense of irreplaceable loss, of despair in the face of the unthinkable, the death of an immortal! All this makes one scratch one's head in disbelief, but still, this was how it was received, at home and also by many people abroad.

The causes of this phenomenon are numerous, a whole bundle in fact, and the elements of an answer can be presented only in steno style. We can begin by returning to the old rural patriarchal *khoziain* image and the acceptance by the masses of such a powerful *khoziain's* severe demeanor, provided he is somehow a just (*spravedlivyi*) ruler and not an arbitrary one, all this being well rooted in the political tradition of the country. The victory in the war was a powerful legitimization of Stalin (even when the regime was at that time decaying). The skillful image making was certainly a factor too, one which not a few sophisticated people succumbed. The awe-inspiring founder of a powerful *derzhava*, and the huge national value put on such an image, especially when actually there was also some reality to it, is another factor of importance worth attention. Lack of information and the immensity of the country, added to the mystery of the leader, who also knew how to appear, to reassure, to exude a sense of calm and strength; to charm, cheat and terrorize. The lack of information has to be emphasized: it was

actually almost inexistent or restricted and then wrapped up in or replaced by a mighty and effective propaganda. In my own experience of the Soviet reality during the war years and a shorter post war stay in the USSR, large masses of the population did not fully realize the horrors and could not fathom the idea that the state was run by a man who invented enemies and destroyed innocent people on a massive scale. Just compare this incredible image, with another; so timely, needed and credible when he appeared at the beginning of the war in a radio-address to the nation, appealing to his people as his »friends, brothers and sisters« and reassured them that those who came to enslave their motherland would be repelled and the country would still see the great victory holyday.<sup>5</sup> People heard and saw this, most knew nothing about the raging Stalin signing long lists with hundreds of names of people sentenced to die because of a whim. But what if they did know it, or some of it, specifically at this particular moment when the fate of Russia and of Europe hung in the balance? Important religious, Dostoevskian elements can be adduced here and there in our search for answers. In any case, many if not most of the best, the most honest, the brightest and most creative of people went through Stalinism and accepted it for a time, and the list of these examples is long.

The theme can be rounded up by underlining an aspect that we are now prepared for. I did not spare the reader Stalin's aberrations, but we remember that Stalinism was riding on two historical imperatives: the first one, to catch up industrially with the West, which was also a pre-condition to the second one of creating a mighty state. The image and reality of a powerful state, in fact of a *derzhava* (great power, super power) recovered, victorious and recognized as such the world over has to be underlined as an impressive, even hypnotizing factor for many citizens, both in the popular masses and especially in the political classes, including many Politburo and Central Committee members who hated Khrushchev for throwing down from the pedestal a gigantic state builder who was unprecedented in Russian history. Why should anyone care for the irrationalities committed if the aim was achieved and was there for everyone to see? We cannot pretend that such reasoning was confined only to Russia and its political classes. The insensitivity to victims of atrocities committed by a powerful state in the name of its, »strategic world interests«, is quite widespread in circles of statist everywhere, state power being considered the top value by many breeds of nationalisms and imperialisms. Nonetheless, Stalinism was riddled with irrationalities that made his system non-viable. The massive destruction of innocent citizens and hundreds of thousands of badly needed cadres could not be justified by any stretching and manipulating of the *raison d'état* concept, it was simply an orgy of crimes that was directly traceable to the deranged ruler.

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<sup>5</sup> I heard the speech on the radio in 1941 after the outbreak of the war and am just summarizing.

We cannot eliminate from history the historic traditions of the country, the rapid industrialization, their victory in the war, the creation of schools etc. But Stalin, the man, was at the same time a traitor to his cause, and an instigator of mass murder and acts of enslavement that had no other rationale than his own vision of his power. He was not »an accident« in the sense that the USSR had no other choices but authoritarian or »dictatorial« ones, but neither was he, as some have thought, »a necessary evil«, because dictatorships come in different shapes and the founding party was not strong enough to impose a more rational variant. Some shamanist spell was needed to get rid for good of Stalin's foul spirit and Khrushchev who followed popular beliefs used a popular method of chasing away evil spirits: after exhuming Stalin's body from the Mausoleum in order to re-bury him elsewhere, the body was carried out, not head but legs forward, the legs passing through the door first. In the rural demonology this way was believed to offer a guarantee against the dead spirit ever returning to haunt them. Getting rid of this specter, figuratively speaking, as Khrushchev intended, gave Soviet Russia another, rather resounding, even if relatively short-lived, chance.