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Review Article

The Causes and Consequences of Stalinism

Alter Litvin and John Keep, *Stalinism: Russian and Western Views at the Turn of the Millennium*, New York: Routledge, 2005; xiv + 248 pp; ISBN 0–415–35109-X (pbk).

Kevin McDermott, *Stalin*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006; xiii + 219 pp; ISBN 0–333–71122-X (pbk).

David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization: Ideas, Power, and Terror in Inter-War Russia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; xii + 487 pp; ISBN 978–0–19–924513–0 (hbk).

Lynne Viola, *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; xxv + 278 pp; ISBN 978–0–19–518769–4 (hbk).

Elizabeth Wood, *Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005; viii + 301 pp; ISBN 0–8014–4257–5 (hbk).

Stalinism represents one of the most violent episodes in all of human history — a time when the Soviet government, under the leadership of Joseph Stalin, deployed state coercion on an unprecedented scale. Why did a government purportedly dedicated to social harmony engage in extreme violence? Why did it systematically deport, incarcerate, and execute millions of people? And what were the consequences of Stalinism for the Soviet population? These questions have been central to the study of Soviet history for several generations, and with the opening of the former Soviet archives, historians now have a wealth of new information to draw upon. The five books under review here provide a good sample of the high-quality empirical and theoretical work now appearing on the topic, work that has vastly enriched our understanding of Stalinism.

Alter Litvin and John Keep's book, *Stalinism: Russian and Western Views at the Turn of the Millennium*, is an overview of recent scholarship on Stalinism. This collaborative effort has a wide scope, as Litvin surveys work by Russian scholars and Keep summarizes the work of western scholars. Keep's summary includes an extensive review of German-language books and articles, important scholarship that is often overlooked by Anglo-American scholars. Among the topics the authors address are Stalin's biography, the Great Terror, Soviet foreign policy, the Stalinist state, social history, gender studies, and religion

and culture. The result is a very comprehensive discussion of research on Stalinism, though Keep limits his coverage to books and articles published between 1997 and 2002.

Litvin begins his half of the book with a chapter on new sources — archival materials as well as published document collections, memoirs, diaries, and correspondence. Given the flood of declassified documents and primary source publications, Litvin's summary is very welcome. He discusses the twists and turns of archival declassification during the 1990s, with special attention to the fate of Stalin's personal papers. Citing Dmitrii Volkogonov, Litvin states that some of these papers were destroyed shortly after Stalin's death, but he goes on to explain that the bulk of Stalin's papers are preserved in the Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, while others have been transferred to the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History.

What have we learned from the new archival documents? In the second half of the book, Keep quotes Vojtech Mastny, who writes, 'The greatest surprise to have come out of the Russian archives is that there was no surprise' (200). Keep expounds on this point, stating that the declassification of archival documents has demonstrated that 'the private thoughts of Soviet leaders had conformed to what they had said in public; there was no "hidden agenda"; neither had there been a well-oiled machine to implement some grand design' (200). The old assumption that there was a Stalinist master plan reflected a basic misunderstanding of the Stalinist state, one that for years was fed by the totalitarian model and by images of Stalin as a Machiavellian genius. Regardless of how crafty or vindictive Stalin may have been, and he displayed ample evidence of both traits, he could not have foreseen all of the consequences of his turbulent policies, nor could he control precisely the thousands of officials and plenipotentiaries who carried out cataclysmic programs such as collectivization.

The one drawback with Litvin and Keep's book is that it inadequately synthesizes new scholarship on Stalinism. Much of the volume is made up of one-paragraph summaries of books and articles, and the result is a rich but rather fragmented treatment. Where the authors do provide generalizations about historiographical trends, they tend to oversimplify scholarly approaches and debates. Litvin divides the work of Russian scholars into two schools — 'patriots' who are nostalgic for the powerful Stalinist state and therefore inclined to whitewash Stalin's crimes; and liberals who view Stalinism as 'a melancholy time of despotic, totalitarian rule' (ix). Keep lumps together a range of social and cultural historians, some of whose interpretations are at odds with one another, into the category of postmodernists, whom he refers to as 'our PM-inspired colleagues' (94). Apart from this weakness, the book is an important resource on historiography published during the 1997–2002 period.

Stalin, by Kevin McDermott, also brings together much new research, but presents it in a far more integrated fashion. Intended as a brief biography that would be ideal for university courses, McDermott's book will also be of value to specialists who seek an up-to-date account of Stalinism. McDermott organizes his material chronologically, but in every chapter he raises central ques-

tions of interpretation. Succinctly summarizing recent historiographical debates, he invariably provides judicious assessments based on all available evidence. Scholars will moreover benefit from McDermott's overarching conceptual framework: what he terms the 'war-revolution model' (6).

While some historians have focused on Stalin's personality to explain his policies, McDermott arrives at a far more sophisticated understanding by analyzing the political and ideological context in which Stalin operated. McDermott writes that 'war and revolution were central to Stalin's and the Bolsheviks' lived experience and had a crucial impact on their thinking, self-perceptions and actions' (9–10). Indeed, the Soviet state itself was born at a moment of total war — the first world war and Russian Civil War — and total war practices became institutional fixtures within the Soviet system. Moreover, McDermott notes that Stalin and other Soviet leaders believed in the inevitability of war with capitalist countries, a belief essentially vindicated by the second world war. Coupled with this external threat in the minds of Soviet leaders was a threat from internal enemies, whom Stalin pursued relentlessly, first during the liquidation of 'class enemies' at the end of the 1920s, and then during the Great Terror of 1937–8, when 'enemies of the people', 'wreckers', and 'spies' were incarcerated or executed to eradicate potential fifth columnists.

McDermott also makes a convincing case that Stalin was a committed revolutionary. Here he is countering a well-established historiographical tradition that portrays Stalinism as a betrayal of the Revolution and as an ideologically conservative statism sanctioned by Stalin to buttress his power.¹ McDermott shows instead that Stalin was deeply influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideas, and that his primary commitment was to defending and furthering the Bolshevik Revolution. His collectivization and industrialization campaigns were 'an attempt, however distorted and brutal, to "construct socialism"' (162). His foreign policy remained informed by an ideological hostility to capitalist countries and a desire to defend the Soviet Union as the bastion of proletarian revolution. 'Even the Great Purge', writes McDermott, 'can in part be construed as an anti-bureaucratic revolution against "Menshevik" inertia, routine and cliques in the name of Bolshevik activism and ideological commitment' (9).

In addition to a compelling account of Stalin's rise to power and coercive policies, McDermott provides valuable discussions of Stalin's wartime and postwar leadership. He deftly debunks the theory that Stalin was planning to invade Germany in 1941. He explains Stalin's failure to heed intelligence warnings regarding the imminent nazi attack as a misapprehension that Hitler would never open a second front in the East without having first defeated Britain in the West. He presents a balanced assessment of Stalin's wartime role,

1 This line of argument extends back to Leon Trotsky, trans. Max Eastman, *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?* (New York 1937). In describing Stalin's policies as conservative, many scholars have used the framework or terminology of Nicholas S. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York 1946).

both his blunders at the outset and his ultimately victorious organization of the war effort. Finally, he describes Stalin's postwar machinations not only as a ceaseless drive to preserve his dictatorship, but as an effort to consolidate the socialist order in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. McDermott, then, has produced a brief but wide-ranging and insightful account of Stalin and Stalinism. Clearly written, well-argued, and based upon the latest scholarship, his book will be appreciated by specialists and non-specialists alike.

The remaining three books under review are all monographs, presenting new arguments based on original primary source research. The first, David Priestland's *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization: Ideas, Power, and Terror in Inter-War Russia*, is an intense examination of the ideology and high politics of Stalinism. Priestland focuses on various strains of bolshevik ideology, and how these structured the political decisions of Communist Party leaders and of Stalin in particular. Through a close reading of Party leaders' speeches, decrees, and policies, Priestland is able to provide a sophisticated framework of analysis. Contrary to scholars who have highlighted Stalin's personal paranoia, Priestland demonstrates that Stalin operated very much within the same framework as other Party leaders and that he pursued strategies of mobilization that had been debated by the bolsheviks since before the Revolution. Like McDermott, then, Priestland escapes the trap of over-emphasizing Stalin's personality and instead provides a rich ideological and political context for understanding Stalinism.

The dilemmas faced by Party leaders were genuine, and their policies can only be fully understood within the context of revolutionary politics. Before the Revolution, Russian Marxists had debated their relationship to the masses, with Lenin's famous emphasis on the Party and its vanguard role. After taking power, the bolsheviks wished to retain their links to the working class. Various factions within the Bolshevik Party put forward programs for creating and administering the new socialist society. One faction, the Workers' Opposition, argued for workers' participatory democracy with elected representatives in charge of the economy. Another faction, led by Leon Trotsky, advocated a revolutionary transformation based on hierarchy, discipline, and the militarization of labor. Lenin ultimately adopted a more gradualist approach — technocratic governance combined with the limited capitalism of the New Economic Policy.

Given their shared goals of modernizing and rationalizing Russian society, it is not surprising that some Party leaders and many non-Party specialists favored technocracy. A strong state bureaucracy, backed by the expertise of engineers and agronomists, could direct a technocratic transformation of the country and establish a productive economic and social order. But opposed to the ideal of technocracy was a strong Promethean strain within bolshevism. Some bolsheviks believed that they could unleash the creative energies of the working class and experience a quantum leap forward in economic development. Freed from the shackles of capitalist exploitation, workers were no longer limited by technical considerations, provided they were not constrained

by bureaucrats and ‘right deviationists’. Workers would break the bounds of time itself — ‘Fulfill the Five-Year Plan in Four Years’ — and, in the case of Stakhanovites, devise their own techniques to surpass all previous production records. Stalin’s socialist offensive at the end of the 1920s marked a rejection of NEP gradualism and technocracy in favor of a ‘Great Leap Forward’, to borrow a term used subsequently by Chinese Communist leaders.

Priestland terms this anti-gradualist thinking ‘revivalism’, as in a revival of the revolutionary advance. He further identifies two types of revivalism — elite revivalism and popular revivalism. Elite revivalism renewed Trotsky’s program of a highly centralized socio-economic transformation. Despite Trotsky’s defeat and expulsion from the country, other high-ranking Party officials, such as his former ally Georgii Piatakov, continued to push this program and played leading roles in the Soviet industrialization drive. Popular revivalism, by contrast, relied upon the energies of rank-and-file workers to effect a revolutionary advance. Given his distrust of specialists, Stalin favored this more populist, class-war approach, particularly because it seemed to unite Party leaders with the working class. Popular mobilization, however, proved difficult to control and extremely disruptive to economic production.

Priestland explains Stalin’s policies as oscillating between popular and elite revivalism. He shows how the chaos of the First Five-Year Plan eventually impelled Stalin to re-establish order and hierarchy. He goes on to hypothesize that by the mid-1930s Stalin had again become dissatisfied with a technicist approach and launched a series of anti-bureaucratic campaigns that, when resisted by Party bosses, culminated in the Great Terror. Priestland’s approach, then, offers an intricate explanation of Stalin’s shifting policies — his periodic assaults on political and technical élites, followed by attempts to re-establish order and hierarchy within the system. Whereas many Stalin biographers have viewed his variable course during the 1920s and 1930s as political maneuvering, designed to outflank and eliminate his rivals, Priestland demonstrates that Stalin had a consistent goal — a powerful state backed by a unified socialist society — but that he adopted differing and often contradictory strategies to achieve that goal.

The one major weakness of Priestland’s explanatory framework is that it does not adequately account for the differences between Stalinist state violence of the early and late 1930s. Despite the enormous coercion of the collectivization drive and the widespread persecution of technical élites in the wake of the Shakhty trial, the Soviet government executed relatively few people in this era. By contrast, the Great Terror of 1937–8 included some 700,000 executions.² How do we account for this fundamental difference? Clearly the Great Terror was not just another mobilizational campaign. While the tension between technocracy and popular mobilization continued throughout the Stalin era and even beyond, other factors influenced Party leaders’ policies, in particular their

2 Oleg V. Khlevniuk, trans. Vadim Stakhlo, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven, CT, 2004), 165.

sense of socio-economic transformation and their changing perception of internal and external threats.

Stalin and other Party leaders remained highly aware of their country's progress along an evolutionary timeline toward socialism. Collectivization and the establishment of a state-run economy during the First Five-Year Plan provided, in their eyes, the foundations of a socialist economic order. At the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934, Stalin proclaimed that socialism had been built. According to him, bourgeois classes and the remnants of capitalism had been eliminated.³ But despite this triumph, internal opposition to the Soviet system continued. Previously, anti-Soviet behavior could be attributed to the capitalist milieu of the New Economic Policy, and kulaks and NEPmen could supposedly be reformed through hard labor. Once petty capitalism had been outlawed and socialism attained, individuals who failed to comply with the Soviet order were considered inveterate enemies who had to be shot. The purported attainment of socialism and the ideal of a pure, unified socialist society were therefore central to the thinking behind the Great Terror of the late 1930s. In his book, McDermott quotes Stalin's 1937 statement: 'Anyone who threatens the unity of the socialist state, either in deed or in thought — yes, even in thought — will be mercilessly destroyed' (88).

The other key development in the late 1930s was the menacing international environment, and Priestland acknowledges the rising threat from Germany and Japan as crucial factors in the escalation of state violence. Had Priestland further highlighted the foreign threat and incorporated the purported attainment of socialism into his model, he might have more clearly delineated the differences between the coercion of the early and late 1930s. Nonetheless, Priestland's book is a significant and detailed investigation into the high politics of the interwar period, and it elucidates many key features of Stalinism. It will add much to current debates about Stalin's rise to power, his drive to industrialize the country, and his perpetration of massive state violence.

Elizabeth Wood's *Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia* actually falls outside the usual timeframe of Stalinism (1928–53), given that the book focuses on the 1920s. Nonetheless, Wood's research provides essential background for understanding another aspect of Stalinism — the show trials of the late 1920s and 1930s. Wood's book is the first to examine the Soviet government's use of fictional trials as a type of didactic theater, a dramatic means of inculcating Soviet political and cultural values in the population. As Wood demonstrates, Soviet officials created agitation trials on a wide range of topics, from political opposition during the Civil War to drunkenness and labor truancy. The purpose was to instruct people on politically acceptable behaviors and instill in them new values, though in practice these trials often vilified the characters on trial (drunks, smokers, and prostitutes).

While historians were aware of the agitation trials as a political and cultural practice in the Soviet Union, no one before Wood has studied their origins,

3 I.V. Stalin, 'Otchetnyi doklad XVII S"ezdu partii o rabote TsK VKP(b)' (26 January 1934), *Sochineniia* 13 (Moscow 1951), 308–9.

range, or consequences. Particularly impressive is her discussion of the pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary origins of the trials. While Soviet officials claimed that these trials were an entirely new form, in fact they drew from religious mystery plays, mock legal trials, and Silver Age literary critiques, all of which pre-dated the Revolution. Following the establishment of the Soviet state, officials began to devise agitation trials, particularly within the Red Army, to instruct the largely peasant population in new ways of thinking and behaving. Eventually, as Wood demonstrates, fictional trials were replaced by real show trials, beginning with the Shakhty trial in 1928 and culminating in the Moscow show trials of 1936–8. The trial genre and its rituals were thus utilized as a mass spectacle of Stalinist power.

In her conclusion, Wood analyzes the continuities between the fictional trials of the 1920s and the show trials of the Stalin era. She points out that they shared certain conventions and moral precepts. Both appealed to popular opinion and served a didactic function, seeking to inculcate Soviet values and loyalty. Both relied heavily on the public confession of the defendants. Over time agitation trials became harsher, as defendants' wrongdoings were made more melodramatic and fantastic in order to keep audiences' attention. As Wood argues, 'the trial format thus fostered a Manichean outlook in which the world was divided into prosecution and defense, which in turn became identified with good and evil' (217). This Manichean worldview was in fact central not only to the show trials but to Stalinist rule more generally.

Wood thus contributes a great deal to the study of Soviet official culture in the 1920s and 1930s. Through a careful examination of agitation trials, she is able to analyze the workings and symbolic meanings of these propaganda devices. She also provides an outstanding model of how to trace the development of cultural and political practices. Cultural history of this kind greatly enhances our understanding of Stalinism and its origins. Stalinism, ultimately, was not simply the product of Marxist ideology or of Stalin's will. It reflected a specific worldview, a set of practices, and a cluster of symbols and rituals. The Soviet project sought not only to create a new socio-economic order but to create the New Soviet Person as well. Agitation trials and other means by which Soviet officials strove to instill new values and behaviors played a crucial role in the genesis of the Stalinist system.

While the books by Priestland and Wood shed light primarily on Stalinism's causes, Lynne Viola's new book vividly depicts its horrendous consequences. *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements* is a study of the deportation of nearly two million peasants during collectivization. These 'kulaks' were stripped of their land, forced from their homes, and shipped in cattle cars to the far north and Siberia. There they had to build settlements and perform forced labor, cutting timber and mining minerals for the Soviet industrialization drive. Almost half a million of these dekulakized peasants died of exposure, disease, or starvation. While the Gulag prison camp system has been well chronicled, the 'unknown gulag' of the special settlements was previously unstudied. Viola's book therefore fills a crucial gap in the history of Stalinism.

Viola examines all aspects of the special settlements: policy formulation by Party leaders, chaotic planning by Moscow bureaucrats, policy implementation by local officials, and the terrible human suffering of the thousands of families who were deported. Stalin's call in late 1929 for 'the liquidation of the kulaks as a class' instigated the deportation of those labeled kulaks. He decreed the removal of these 'bourgeois elements' from the countryside in order to decapitate the traditional village leadership and intimidate other peasants into joining collective farms. Genrikh Iagoda, de facto head of the secret police, proposed that deportees be sent to settlements in remote regions, where they would provide a labor force while simultaneously supporting themselves through agriculture. In theory, forced labor could also help re-educate 'kulaks' and instill in them a proletarian consciousness.

Central bureaucrats hastily drew up detailed blueprints for the special settlements. They sought to instill in deportees a collectivist mentality by prescribing, for example, multi-family housing units laid out to maximize transparency and the regulation of space. But local officials could not come close to following these plans. They had to settle thousands of deportees in uninhabited regions that in some cases did not even have roads. Lacking basic building materials, it was impossible to construct adequate housing, let alone barns, bathhouses, schools, and hospitals. Expected to grow their own food, the settlers lacked livestock and equipment. Most spent the first two years just trying to clear land for agriculture, at the same time that they had to perform forced labor in timber and mining industries. Local administrators, themselves chronically short of personnel, exploited the special settlers mercilessly in order to fulfill their own production quotas.

Viola quotes extensively from letters, memoirs, and interviews of the deportees themselves in order to convey their experiences. These sources reveal the desperate poverty, cruelty, illness, and hunger of the special settlements. When they first arrived, special settlers often lived in shacks made from birch bark. They suffered from swarms of mosquitos in the summer and were afflicted by frostbite in the winter. Within months of their arrival, thousands of people began to die of starvation and disease. Viola, by including the voices of these victims of Stalinism, captures not only the appalling conditions in which they lived but the despair that permeated their lives.

Viola's book illustrates a great deal not only about the special settlements but about Stalinism in general. She points out that the Stalinist state was not the efficient totalitarian apparatus it was once believed to be. Despite its leaders' grand ambitions to reshape society, the Soviet system was characterized by bureaucratic conflicts and a weak infrastructure. Ironically, these weaknesses made the system even more brutal and lethal. Unable to administer the far-flung reaches of the country in an efficient manner, Party leaders relied upon coercive campaigns. Lacking the resources to enact their elaborate plans, they pushed ahead anyway, inflicting widespread suffering and death. Viola concludes:

the Stalinist state of the 1930s was capable of ruling its vast dominions only by repression — force, coercion, threats, penalties, arrests. The combination of an infrastructurally weak state, an interventionist state bent on a totalizing vision of societal transformation (all too often in the abstract), and an ideological Weltanschauung of prejudice, fear, and limitless hatreds were at the roots of Stalinist repression and the Gulag (190).

Viola's book is based upon a vast amount of research in Russian archives. When coupled with her two previous monographs on collectivization and the document collections she has co-edited, her scholarship marks a tremendous advance in the history of Stalinist policy toward the peasantry.⁴ As reflected in her book and the other books reviewed here, our knowledge of Stalinism has increased dramatically since the opening of the former Soviet archives. Those who went into the archives in search of shocking secrets or the Stalinist master plan were disappointed. Yet the painstaking research conducted by scholars over the past two decades has yielded an extremely detailed and complex picture of the Stalinist system and its lethality. While much research and conceptual work remains to be done, we now have a far more complete and nuanced understanding of Stalinism than ever before.

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4 Lynne Viola, *The Best Sons of the Fatherland: Workers in the Vanguard of Collectivization* (New York 1987); Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York 1996); V. P. Danilov, R. T. Manning, L. Viola (eds), *Tragediia Sovetskoi derevni: Kollektivizatsiia i raskulachivanie: Dokumenty i materialy, 1927–1939*, 5 vols (Moscow 1999–2006); Valerii Vasyli'ev and Lynne Viola, *Kollektivizatsiia i krest'ianskoe soprotivlenie na Ukraine: noiabr' 1929 — dekabr' 1930 g.g.* (Vinnytsia 1997); Lynne Viola, Sergei Zhuravlev, Tracy McDonald, and Andrei Mel'nik (eds), *Riazanskaia deruvia v 1929–1930 gg: Khronika golovokruzheniia. Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow 1998).