

STALIN'S WORLD

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STALIN'S WORLD

Dictating the
Soviet Order

Sarah Davies and
James Harris

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

List of Terms and Abbreviations xi

Introduction: Stalin's Vision i

PART I. INFORMATION AND INTERPRETATION

1. "Bolshevik" Leadership 19

2. Spymania 59

3. Capitalist Encirclement 92

PART II. THE POWER OF STALIN'S WORDS

4. The Leader Cult 133

5. The Working Class 183

6. Soviet Culture 231

Conclusion 274

Notes 279

Index 331

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TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Abwehr	German military intelligence
Agitprop	Department of Agitation and Propaganda of the CC
APRF	Archive of the President of the Russian Federation
ARCOS	All-Russian Cooperative Society
AVP RF	Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation
Basmachi	group fighting Soviet power in Central Asia during and after the Revolution
<i>batrak</i>	farm laborer
<i>bedniak</i>	poor peasant
<i>byvshie liudy</i>	“former people,” typically members of the pre-revolutionary elite
CC	Central Committee of the Communist Party
CCC	Central Control Commission
Comintern	Communist International
Donbas	Don Basin
Donugol’	Donbas Coal Trust
<i>dvurushnichestvo</i>	“double-dealing” (praising policy in public and working to undermine it in private)

<i>dvurushnik</i>	“double-dealer”
<i>edinolichnik</i>	independent farmer
<i>fond</i>	archival collection
FOSP	Federation of Organizations of Soviet Writers
FSB	Federal Security Service
gorkom	city committee of the Communist Party
Glavlit	Main Directorate for Literary and Publishing Affairs (state censorship)
Gosizdat	State Publishing House
Gosplan	State Planning Commission
GPU	State Political Administration
gubkom	regional committee of the Communist Party (until the late 1920s)
GUKF	Main Directorate for Cinematography and Photography Industry
Gulag	Chief Administration of Camps
Hetman	Ukrainian Cossack leader
IMEL	Institute of Marx-Engels-Lenin
INO OGPU	Foreign Department of the OGPU
<i>intelligent</i>	member of the intelligentsia
ITR	engineering and technical workers
<i>Izvestiia</i>	national state newspaper
Kadet	member of the Constitutional Democratic Party
<i>khoziaistvenniki</i>	leading economic officials
kolkhoz	collective farm
kolkhoznik	collective farmer
<i>komitety sodeistviia</i> (OGPU)	committees for cooperation with the OGPU
Komsomol (VLKSM)	All-Union Leninist Young Communist League
KPK	Party Control Commission
KR	counterrevolutionary
<i>krai</i>	territory
kraikom	territorial party committee

KRO (OGPU)	Counterintelligence Unit of the OGPU
KSK	Commission for State Control
kulak	wealthy peasant
Kul'tprop	Department of Culture and Propaganda of the CC
<i>kul'turnost'</i>	culturedness
<i>kustar'</i>	craftsman
KVZhD	Chinese Far Eastern Railway
Litfront	extreme left faction of RAPP
Lubianka	building containing the offices of the political police in Moscow
MKhAT	Moscow Art Theater
Narkompros	People's Commissariat of Enlightenment
Narkomzdrav	People's Commissariat of Health
NEP	New Economic Policy
NKID	People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs
NKVD	People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs
obkom	regional committee of the Communist Party
<i>oblast'</i>	region
oblispolkom	regional executive committee
OGPU	Consolidated State Political Directorate
Orgburo	Organizational Bureau of the CC
Orgkomitet	Organizational Committee of the Writers' Union
Osoaviakhim	Union of Societies of Assistance in Defense and Aviation-Chemical Construction in the USSR
<i>opis'</i>	inventory (of an archive collection)
ORPO	Department of Leading Party Organs of the CC
<i>otkhod</i>	seasonal departure of peasants to cities
<i>partiinnost'</i>	party spirit
<i>peredysbka</i>	breathing space
<i>perestroika</i>	reconstruction

Petliurovite	supporter of Simon Petliura's movement for Ukrainian independence
<i>piatiletka</i>	five-year plan
Pioneers	Soviet mass organization for children
Politburo	Political Bureau of the CC
<i>polpredstvo</i>	Soviet equivalent of an embassy in the early years after the Revolution
<i>polpred</i>	ambassador
<i>Pravda</i>	the Communist Party's national newspaper
Profintern	Trade Unions International
Proletkul't	Proletarian Culture Movement
Rabkrin (RKI)	Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate
<i>raion</i>	district
RAPP	Russian Association of Proletarian Writers
<i>revoliutsionnoe chut'ye</i>	revolutionary instinct
RGASPI	Russian State Archive for Social and Political History
RGVA	Russian State Military Archive
RSDWP	Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic
<i>samokritika</i>	self-criticism
Secretariat	Secretariat of the CC
<i>seredniak</i>	middle peasant
<i>skloki</i>	squabbles; factional infighting
<i>sluzhashchii</i>	white-collar worker
<i>Smena vekh, smenovekhovstvo</i>	"Change of Landmarks" movement
<i>smychka</i>	link
sovkhoz	state farm
Sovnarkom	Council of People's Commissars
SR	member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party
<i>stazh</i>	length of service
TASS	Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union

USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VChK (Cheka)	All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage.
VAPP	All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers
VKP(b) <i>vozhd'</i>	All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik) leader, chief
VSNTKh	Supreme Council of the National Economy
VTsSPS	All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions
White Guard	White forces during and after the civil war

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INTRODUCTION: STALIN'S VISION

Over the past twenty-five years, historians of the Stalin era have gained access to millions of archival files generated by the Communist Party and its leaders. It will take many years to digest this material, although we have made considerable progress. We have learned that Iosif Stalin was not a weak dictator, that he was not embattled or buffeted by factions, that he steadily accumulated personal power and exercised it vigorously. Few decisions of any importance were made without his consent or knowledge. No one would now contest that Stalinism—the set of policies, practices, and ideas associated with the period from the late 1920s to 1953—was at least in some measure a product of his influence: economy, society, culture, and politics all bear his imprint. The purpose of this book is simple: by drawing on little-known documentation we hope to broaden our understanding of the dictator's vision of the world, of how he interpreted the Soviet system he was trying to build and its wider international context.

We investigate Stalin's vision from two different but complementary angles.

We begin by addressing the question of how he interpreted information concerning matters of state. Stalin inhabited a world composed largely of written texts. Since he rarely left his offices, particularly after the mid-1920s, he comprehended Soviet and international affairs primarily through the prism of the documents that crossed his desk.¹ When we compare the material that he read from week to week with the decisions he subsequently

shaped, it is possible to draw conclusions about the way he understood and interpreted that information. By looking at information flows and the way information was processed, we can understand not only how he perceived the world but also how he *misperceived* it and the sometimes far-reaching consequences of those misperceptions.

After reviewing Stalin's interpretation of information, we then examine Stalin's efforts to establish what Pierre Bourdieu terms "a legitimate vision of the social world." Although Stalin was by no means solely responsible for this undertaking, his personal contributions did play a critically important role. In particular, he had to devote a vast amount of time to the whole business of generating authoritative *words*. This was necessary because, as Bourdieu puts it, "the categories of perception, the systems of classification, that is, essentially, the words, the names which construct social reality as much as they express it, are the crucial stakes of political struggle, which is a struggle to impose the legitimate principle of vision and division."² We argue, therefore, that Stalin's words deserve as much scholarly attention as his deeds; in a sense, his words *were* his deeds.³ John Lewis Gaddis is surely right when he contends that "it would be easy to make too much of Stalin's words, for reality always separates what people say from what they do. What is striking about Stalin, though, is how small that separation was. To a degree we are only now coming to realize, Stalin *literally* imposed his rhetoric upon the country he ran."⁴ To understand the nature of the dictator's power, we need to be attentive to the various ways in which he deployed words in the struggle to create and impose a compelling vision of the world.

We consider Stalin's vision through an examination of several important themes, all of which were at the forefront of the leader's attention and which continue to occupy the attention of scholars: Bolshevik leadership, spymania, capitalist encirclement, the leader cult, the working class, and Soviet culture.⁵ Since the archival material is richest for 1924–41, the era in which the Stalinist system was formed and consolidated, the primary chronological focus of the volume is on these formative years, although where feasible and appropriate, comparisons are drawn with earlier and later periods.

The study is based on extensive research in Stalin's personal archive, *fond* 558, particularly *opis'* 11, which was transferred to the Russian State

Archive for Social and Political History (RGASPI) from the Archive of the President of the Russian Federation (APRF) in 1999. *Opis'* 11 comprises a large number of files taken from the office of the General Secretary at the time of his death. Stalin evidently kept vast quantities of documentation to hand, some of which appears to have been transferred to other archives, with the remainder located in *opis'* 11. Probably only the staff of APRF know on what principle certain files were selected for retention in Stalin's personal archive. We cannot exclude the possibility that materials were chosen to present Stalin in a certain light, but the archive is of immense value to historians in any case, containing as it does a wealth of material, including the leader's unpublished correspondence, speeches, articles, and reports he received.⁶ In addition, we have examined unpublished materials from the Politburo, Secretariat, Orgburo, and Central Committee (CC), the personal archives of other party leaders, and various state archives. Recently published document collections and memoirs have also been an invaluable resource.

When the archives first opened, scholars expected that the previously unpublished, confidential papers—the “hidden transcripts”—would reveal Stalin's inner world, what he *really* believed. The consensus now is that the Bolsheviks' “public” and “private” materials actually differ very little from each other; for example, the latter are as saturated with Marxist-Leninist categories as the former.⁷ Although we would largely concur with this important finding, it would be a mistake to conclude that the unpublished materials are not revealing. They may not yield revelations of the sensational variety, but they certainly offer a fuller and more nuanced understanding of Stalin's vision of the world.

Information and Interpretation

Leaders faced with ambiguous or contradictory information tend to favor those interpretations that reinforce their preexisting assumptions. Some are better than others at reflecting on their assumptions. “Facts are stubborn things,” as John Adams, the second president of the United States, wrote in 1770. “Whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.” Ronald Reagan raised this dictum from its relative obscurity by misquoting

it at the 1988 Republican National Convention: “Facts,” he declared, “are *stupid* things.”⁸ Though this makes an amusing political anecdote, there is a weighty issue underlying it that deserves serious consideration. What was Stalin’s relationship with “facts”?

Stalin was exceptionally well informed about events both at home and abroad. He received regular reports from a vast array of agencies, including the information departments of the Central Committee, the political police, the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, Comintern, and the agencies checking the fulfillment of decisions. He also received many thousands of letters from Soviet citizens. Stalin had an extraordinary appetite for reading this material, as we can see in the *opisi* of documents he received while he was on vacation. Even then, he was reading hundreds of pages of material every day.⁹ How he interpreted that material is a crucial, though underdeveloped, subject in our field. There is an old and rather artificial debate about whether Stalin was driven by ideology or power-political considerations; the middle ground is to observe that both came into play.¹⁰ This answer does not address more than superficially the question of how Stalin interpreted the information he received. Ours is a question of perception and misperception. At the risk of sounding positivistic, let us state the question this way: How did Stalin interpret, or misinterpret, his world?

David Priestland has recently offered an intriguing approach to the question.¹¹ He observed a tension in Bolshevik, and indeed Marxist, thought between its scientific and voluntarist strands. Stalin, like many of his Bolshevik contemporaries, was determined to employ the latest technologies and techniques in order to build socialism according to rational, albeit noncapitalist, principles. But he was also prone to think of Marxism-Leninism as a system of thought, a clear understanding of which opened almost limitless possibilities. Priestland shows how the tension contributed to a deepening misperception of events that played a significant role in the Terror, the political violence of 1936–38. Stalin never quite grasped that the Marxism-Leninism did not cause basic problems of administration and governance to melt away. As his industrialization plans clattered into the fortress walls they were meant to storm, he was more inclined to assess blame than to reassess the principles underpinning his policies.

Andrea Graziosi provides another interpretation in a perceptive article on archival sources and the political history of the Stalin period. Writing

at a time when historians were gaining access to an ever wider range of documents from the locus of Soviet power under Stalin, Graziosi warns that the documents should not be read at face value: “Even in its bona fide, pre-1917 version, Marxism was an ideology in the Marxian sense, i.e. a fictitious, reassuring, self-gratifying and self-explanatory construction and, at the same time, a deceptive lens reproducing a distorted image of reality of such an atypical country from classical Marxism’s point of view, as the former tsarist empire.”¹² Graziosi is particularly interested in the ways the regime was drawn in by its own deliberate myth-building. Especially after 1917, the Soviet leadership applied labels to, and imposed ways of understanding on, certain phenomena that did not square nicely with Marxist categories. For example, it divided peasant society into classes according to a crude scheme (poor, middle, kulak) that merely served to obscure the complexities of social relations. The crude categorization was replicated in reports from local officials, thus serving further to convince the center of the objectivity of its scheme. Graziosi’s point is that the leadership wanted to understand what was happening in the country, but it tended to get drawn into the categories of its own propaganda as they were repeated by a deeply conformist bureaucracy:

[Stalin] did want the truth. Obviously, however, nobody was going to risk annoying or irritating him with unexpected news, so that the degree of falsity increased even more, thereby fuelling the despot’s rage, which in turn made people even more afraid, subservient and false in the most classic vicious cycle . . . The Soviet top leadership thus ended up feeding on its own propaganda . . . Inevitably, the system grew more and more inefficient. Nor could it be otherwise since its centre became blinder and blinder, gradually losing its capacity to see in a more or less objective way and thus to act in a more or less rational way. We are not far from the truth when we say that the Soviet state was the victim of its own lies and built its own trap.¹³

Graziosi’s warning has not been heeded consistently, nor have the dimensions and implications of the trap been adequately explored.

Understanding the trap is not easy. Stalin never left documents outlining how he interpreted his sources of information, let alone how he

misinterpreted what he read. Our approach to this thorny problem involves analyzing known streams of Stalin's sources of information available from the Stalin archive in the context of other documents, particularly the decisions and resolutions of upper party and state bodies. By analyzing information received in the context of decisions subsequently taken, we can build a picture of how that information was interpreted. In some cases, it is possible to add to that analysis Stalin's instructions on what information should be collected and how it should be prioritized, as well as correspondence and memoirs from those who supplied the leadership with information. In these cases we can clearly see how Stalin privileged certain types of information and dismissed others in a way that reinforced his prejudicial reading and made it difficult for information gatherers to support alternative viewpoints, as Graziosi has observed.

Understanding Stalin's interpretation and misinterpretation of information needs a further context beyond a reading of information and decisions. In most ways, Stalin was like other Bolshevik leaders. Broadly speaking, he shared their experiences, their aspirations, and their fears. He faced the same dilemmas of power, though they did not always share the same view of how to resolve them. When the Bolsheviks seized power in November 1917, they shared the aspiration to contribute to the spread of communism, both domestically and internationally. In the context of peasant Russia, this aim was ambitious in the extreme. Their hopes to trigger an international revolution were disappointed, and they were almost immediately faced with a struggle to survive a civil war and foreign intervention that was more ferociously violent than the world war that had immediately preceded it. Bolshevik ideology in part explains why. The Bolsheviks' prevalent understanding of the history of revolution and reaction dictated that they must not shrink from any means to preserve the Revolution. Against the odds, they emerged victorious from the civil war but considerably weakened and changed. The working class in whose name they had seized power had all but melted away amid economic collapse. The Bolsheviks could no longer rely on the benign neutrality of a peasantry angered by grain seizures and in the midst of a famine. The army was mutinous, and the apparatus of government and economic administration of necessity remained under the influence of a pre-revolutionary officialdom doubtful of, when not hostile to, Soviet power. This context is critical to

an understanding of the information-gathering systems the Bolsheviks created, which Stalin inherited and made his own.

Because the Bolsheviks aspired to a withering away of the state under communism, they never coherently engaged in state-building in the sense of establishing permanent, regular institutions with clearly defined powers. The implications are explored in chapter 1. Lenin, in his last writings at the end of the civil war, insisted that Soviet Communists had to learn about leadership and administration from Europe and America and not rashly plow forward without adequate skills and knowledge. His warnings went unheeded. Stalin was inhibited by Leon Trotsky's accusation that he was a mere bureaucrat. He could not have focused his energies on regularizing state structures without appearing to justify Trotsky's portrayal of him. And yet, again to borrow from Priestland, rather than study and apply the lessons of state-building in the developed world as the scientific vein of Bolshevik thought might dictate, Stalin was drawn to its more revivalist strand. His experience as General Secretary was convincing him that institutions in themselves, in the form of committees, councils, and commissariats, were prone to be dead weights of bureaucratism. But if the right person was put in the right position, officials could be made to work together such that any obstacle could be overcome.

Directly contradicting Lenin's injunction not to move forward rashly without developing an adequate machinery of state, Stalin insisted that "there are no fortresses that Bolsheviks cannot storm."¹⁴ At the end of the 1920s, he oversaw the confirmation of ever more ambitious economic plans, well beyond what could be achieved with every sinew strained. He made matters considerably worse for himself and the state when he declared in 1930 that officials could not cite "objective reasons" for any failure to achieve targets: "The party does not simply adapt to objective conditions. The party has the power to influence them, to change them, to find itself a more advantageous combination of objective conditions."¹⁵ Three years later, in the face of massive underfulfillment of quotas, production bottlenecks, and general confusion, plans were reduced, but Stalin never acknowledged that he had been wrong. Plans continued to be ambitious, and he continued to insist that they were realistic, that there could be no discussion of objective reasons for not fulfilling them. Put in an impossible position, officials at all levels adapted variously by misleading the center about

the real state of affairs locally, by degrading the quality of production, by hiding production capacity, and by otherwise subverting central directives that made it harder for them to meet the all-important targets.¹⁶ Stalin had a good sense that much of officialdom was engaging in corrupt and counterproductive practices, but he never seemed to grasp that these practices were largely a consequence of his policies. Rather, through the 1930s, Stalin railed against the “*dvurushnik*,” the “two-faced” officials who supported central policies in public and worked to subvert them in practice. Despite three years of solid economic growth between 1934 and 1937, Stalin ripped the heart out of the economic apparatus to wipe out the practices that his policies had engendered.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine other perceived threats to the Soviet system: spies, saboteurs, wreckers, and hostile capitalist states. In chapter 2, on spymania, we observe that Stalin was not alone in thinking that victory in the civil war did not mean that domestic and internal enemies of the Revolution would stop their efforts to undermine the new Soviet order. It was the head of the Cheka-GPU, Feliks Dzerzhinskii, who originally pressed this case, though Stalin shared his concerns from the start without apparent hesitation. Chapter 2 shows how early GPU operations such as Trest and Sindikat-2 generated an exaggerated picture of the threat posed by spies and saboteurs, but GPU leaders were not inclined to cast a critical eye on the evidence, because it helped them protect their organization from cuts to their budgets and efforts to restrict their powers. Stalin firmly defended them from both and rarely challenged the quality of the intelligence that the political police generated. He was not alone in thinking that enemies of the USSR were, as the Bolsheviks themselves had been before 1917, “experienced conspirators.” The GPU could not be expected to base its investigations on material evidence of counterrevolutionary crime, because the conspirators would not leave any behind. The political police were instructed to rely on “revolutionary instinct.” As in the darkest days of the civil war, they were told that they should be able to look a suspect in the eye and see if he or she was an enemy of the regime. They tended to rely heavily on circumstantial evidence and confessions obtained under torture. The unreliability of such evidence, combined with the self-interest of the political police in playing up threats and the conspiratorial mentality of the Bolsheviks, induced a fundamental misperception of the threat posed

by wreckers and saboteurs. Stalin was not the sole author of this institutional paranoia, but he contributed greatly to its spread and influence.

Chapter 3, on capitalist encirclement, presents a similar story. At the end of the civil war, Bolshevik leaders prudently assumed that even though the Whites and foreign armies had withdrawn, neither had surrendered the ambition to put an end to communism. Well before Stalin took power, the highest priority of intelligence-gathering agencies was the identification of threats to Soviet sovereignty. Once again, the sense of threat was exaggerated. Unlike in the story of spymania, though, there was not, at least initially, a strong institutional interest in the exaggeration of the threat. Rather, it was the intensity of the reaction against revolutionary events in the early 1920s, the strength of anti-communist sentiment in ruling circles, right-wing revanchism, and a fundamental misreading of diplomatic activity that contributed to this exaggeration. Most obviously, in the 1920s and into the 1930s, Soviet intelligence gatherers time and again misread measures to contain Germany as measures to build an anti-communist alliance. There were some dissenters, like Commissar for Foreign Affairs Georgii Chicherin, who was scathing in his criticism of this sort of conspiratorial viewpoint, but as in the spymania case, Stalin, as he confirmed his monopoly of power, made it ever more difficult for information gatherers to present evidence that contradicted his vision of the USSR as surrounded by capitalist powers bent on a new invasion. The materials in the Stalin archive indicate that there was not just one war scare in 1927 but a continuous fear, more intense at some moments than others, that the Soviet Union faced a new invasion. The view was almost wholly misguided, but information gatherers collected a steady stream of material that seemed to justify Stalin's view. By 1936, in the midst of an arms race and in the face of resurgent, fascist, passionately anti-communist revanchist states and the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, which locked communists and fascists in a struggle for supremacy, Stalin could be forgiven for thinking he had been right all along. There really was an imminent threat of invasion, and it came to pass in 1941.

Stalin appeared deeply troubled by the specter of an enemy, not realizing that it was ultimately the product of a faulty system of information gathering. The flaws in that system, particularly its excessive focus on identifying threats to the Revolution, pre-dated Stalin. Those flaws became more

pronounced as his personal dictatorship emerged. All of this is not to say that Stalin was paranoid, or that his misperception was pervasive. Even less is it our intention to argue that Stalin would not have murdered millions if he had just had accurate information. Stalin's vision of the world was shaped by Marxism-Leninism, by his personal experience, including his time with the revolutionary underground, by war, and by political struggle within the party. He was far from alone among Bolshevik leaders in taking a conspiratorial view of the world, in defending the Revolution with ruthless single-mindedness. The information-gathering system he inherited should have kept him extremely well informed and confident of the security of his position and the growing strength of the USSR. Instead, it gave him a consistent, detailed, and compelling picture of pervasive threat and vulnerability. Understanding how Stalin received and processed information is critical for our evaluation of the Stalin era more broadly.

The Power of Stalin's Words

Equally important is an understanding of Stalin's contribution to the process of creating and imposing an authoritative vision of the world. As the written and spoken utterances of the *vozhd'* were central to this process, Stalin was expected to pay particularly close attention to his choice of words and phrases. Whereas others have written at length about Stalin's "ideology," "beliefs," or "political thought," we focus more closely on his *words*.¹⁷

Words always mattered a great deal in the USSR. Natalia Kozlova goes so far as to claim that "Soviet society is often referred to as a society of ideas, but it is, rather, a society of words and word games."¹⁸ Soviet power was, or at least aspired to be, a dictatorship over words, and the establishment and enforcement of verbal orthodoxy was a high priority for Bolshevik "verbal imperialists" from the outset.¹⁹ R. V. Daniels, who identifies this early "concern for verbal correctness," observes that in the 1920s "party leaders manifested habits of thought not usually associated with the metaphysical materialism which they formally acknowledged. The word, the slogan, the formula, were in practice treated as the real thing."²⁰ Invented categories such as "kulak" or "middle peasant" acquired a "real" existence thanks to Bolshevik linguistic conjuring.²¹

This logocentrism—the privileging of the word—intensified in the 1930s in tandem with Stalin’s burgeoning dictatorship. Eric Naiman makes a persuasive case that Stalinist culture and Soviet ideology should be viewed as verbal phenomena. He points to the metadiscursive qualities of the leader’s own speeches and writings, such his notorious article “Dizzy with Success,” where he writes: “Everyone is *talking* about the successes of Soviet power in the area of the kolkhoz movement . . . What does this all *say*?” Naiman proposes that for Stalin, “events were primarily discursive and metadiscursive,” citing the preoccupation with slogans in his speech to the April 1929 party plenum: “Remember the latest events in our Party. Remember the latest *slogans*, which the Party has put forward lately in connection with the new class shifts in the country. I am *speaking* about *slogans*, such as the *slogan* of self-criticism, the *slogan* of heightened struggle with bureaucracy and the purge of the Soviet apparatus, the *slogan* of organization, etc.”²² As Naiman puts it, “The transition from slogans to events is almost a matter of synonymity in Stalin’s representation of Soviet realia.”²³

Katerina Clark and Evgenii Dobrenko also highlight the significance of the word in their reflections on the importance of authoritative written texts in the Stalin-era USSR, when “writing was a means for promulgating the Party’s ultimate authorship of Soviet reality.” The 1930s, a period of “textual obsession,” saw the publication of a succession of authoritative works, including the Stalin Constitution (1936) and the canonical *History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): Short Course* (1938). Hierarchies of power developed on the basis of who had access to texts, who had the right to author them, and who had the power to censor and edit them. Stalin stood at the apex of all these hierarchies as the supreme “guardian of the texts.”²⁴ Alexei Yurchak, drawing on Claude Lefort’s work, describes Stalin as the “master,” as the editorial voice that evaluated and legitimized Marxist-Leninist discourse from an ostensibly “external” position. The master was able to obscure the paradox that any modern ideology, including Marxism-Leninism, is based on claims about objective truths, which supposedly have an existence external to the terms of the ideological discourse itself. Without the external voice of Stalin, the legitimacy of the dominant ideology was bound to be undermined.²⁵

One particularly vivid illustration of the significance accorded to words in the 1930s, and the importance of Stalin as master of the word, is a conflict

in May 1934 centered on Nikolai Bukharin's choice of terminology in an article for *Izvestiia*, "The Economics of the Soviet Land."²⁶ Two prominent figures in the ideological establishment, the head of Kul'tprop (the culture and propaganda department of the Central Committee), Aleksei Stetskii, and the *Pravda* editor Lev Mekhlis, pounced on this article, flagging its supposedly unorthodox vocabulary for Stalin himself. Bukharin's use of the term "agrarian revolution" to describe collectivization and his description of one phase of the New Economic Policy (NEP) as "classical" were regarded as particularly suspect by Stetskii, who accused Bukharin of trying to be original (*On original'nichaiet*) and "to say 'new words.'" Stalin evidently took the matter seriously, forwarding Stetskii's note and a similar letter from Mekhlis to the Politburo. Bukharin, in his reply to Stalin, defended himself by rebutting Stetskii's points and questioning the latter's desire for verbal uniformity: "Maybe com. Stetskii wants *generally* to forbid the words 'agrarian revolution'?" He suggested that Stetskii was displeased because "I do not always use the *words* that he likes." He continued: "Stetskii is training for *words* instead of *thoughts*, and later the CC has to issue directives even for Pioneers against cramming *words*. From 'philology' and verbalistics, which are *worse* than scholastics (the latter had *concepts*, while Stetskii only has *words*), people's brains dry up and they become mentally sterile."

Stetskii retaliated with a further letter to Stalin accusing Bukharin, among other things, of excessive abstraction. One of the points that Bukharin had made in his own defense was that Marx had used the term "agrarian revolution," but clearly this appeal to the authority of Marx did not carry much weight with Stetskii at this stage. Observing that Marx was writing long ago, he argued that now they could use more precise terms: "'collectivization' and 'liquidation of the kulaks as a class'—these 'words,' as Bukharin says scornfully, are close and accessible to every toiler because they express the essence of the party's policy. Com. Bukharin evidently 'does not recognize' these new words: he prefers to speak of agrarian revolution and the expropriation of the kulaks." Stetskii proceeded to question Bukharin's use of the term "classical" before concluding: "He asserts that the arguments are about 'words.' But it's a matter of big words, which express the essence of policy . . . when characterizing the party's policies, com. Bukharin operates with such gutta-percha [rubbery] 'words,' which can

contain much, including com. Bukharin's former opportunistic views, or these gutta-percha formulations might be a loophole for further attempts by Bukharin to justify his former errors . . . Isn't it time for com. Bukharin . . . to speak the language of the party?"

Stetskii's point was clear: words mattered, and Bolsheviks were obliged to use the orthodox (Stalinist) lexicon, the language of the party, rather than invoke their own slippery terms. Stalin confirmed this in his own letter to the Politburo of 14 July, asserting categorically that "com. Stetskii is right, and not com. Bukharin," and reiterating many of Stetskii's points. He agreed that the term "agrarian revolution" was incorrect because it ignored the specifics of collectivization, explaining that "this is, of course, not an argument about 'words.' It's a question of clarity and definition in formulations. The Bolsheviks are strong because they do not ignore the demands of clarity and definition." Stalin also objected to Bukharin's misleading use of the term "classical": "It's wrong to speak of 'classical' and 'non-classical' NEP. It's wrong because it confuses the issues and might confuse people. 'New' words are necessary if they arise through necessity, create clarity, offer obvious advantages. They are harmful if they do not arise through necessity and create confusions. The Bolsheviks do not need a game of 'new little words' [*slovezhik*]."²⁷

We have dwelled on this incident because it reveals much about the significance of words in the eyes of the Stalinist leadership. The criticism of Bukharin was not simply another attempt to put the former oppositionist firmly in his place; it was also designed to convey a strong message about the need for verbal uniformity, for all to communicate in the authorized Bolshevik idiom, whose anointed custodian in chief at this point was Stalin.²⁸

As the period unfolded, Stalin's utterances came to be surrounded by a growing aura of sanctity and received correspondingly reverential treatment. The media were increasingly saturated with quotations from his speeches and writings; importantly, however, such quotations could be published only with official sanction, for his words were jealously guarded, and anyone daring to cite his unpublished pronouncements in print without permission was liable to be severely reprimanded. In 1929, for example, Ukraine's agitprop chief, A. Khvylya, was admonished for publishing excerpts from Stalin's speech to Ukrainian writers without the

authorization of the top party leadership. Even previously published speeches and writings were monitored: Lavrentii Beria's decision to republish some of Stalin's early writings in 1935 elicited a furious response from their author, who claimed that this had been done without proper care and insisted that he alone had the right to sanction the republication of his own work. The affair culminated in a Politburo resolution to publish a full edition of Stalin's *Works*, a complex undertaking that did not reach fruition until after the war.²⁹

As this episode suggests, Stalin himself took his responsibilities as master of the word extremely seriously.³⁰ Dmitrii Shepilov observed at firsthand how Stalin was "well aware of the significance that was attached not only to his every word but to his every nuance."³¹ Stalin was also comfortable handling the written word: like other leading Bolsheviks, he had notched up many years of experience as a writer, a journalist, and an editor before the Revolution. We now have at our disposal a large corpus of his hitherto unpublished writings, ranging from lengthy letters to laconic resolutions, and it is evident just how much time he devoted to the wording and structuring of these texts, writing for the most part, it seems, without much assistance.³²

Also available for the first time are the written records of many of his unpublished speeches and oral remarks. Although it is generally acknowledged that Stalin was no great orator, a number of witnesses attest to the scrupulous care he took over the formulation of his spoken as well as his written words.³³ Reflecting on his considered manner of speaking, Shepilov was impressed by "his extraordinarily keen sense of responsibility for his every word."³⁴ The German writer Lion Feuchtwanger was similarly struck: "Stalin speaks slowly in a low, rather colourless voice. He has no liking for a dialogue of short, excited questions, answers and interruptions, but prefers to string together slow, considered sentences. Often, what he says sounds ready for the press, as if he were dictating."³⁵ (Feuchtwanger's impression was quite accurate, for such utterances were indeed regularly reproduced almost verbatim in the form of articles, decrees, or resolutions.) Stalin was attentive to the wording of both his less formal remarks (conversations, interjections, and so on) and his more formal speeches. He prepared thoroughly for the latter, and the archival material shows how he edited the transcripts prior to their publication.

Finally, the archives contain abundant evidence of Stalin's role as editor in chief of the documents generated by others, ranging from decrees and party slogans to film scripts and works of history. Editing consumed Stalin's time right up to the final months of his life as he sought to ensure that others' words aligned with his dominant vision. As Leonid Maksimenkov puts it: "Stalin as a politician was above all the editor of a text prepared for confirmation . . . He perceived Russian [*rossiiskuiu*] political culture through the written text."³⁶

We draw on all these newly available sources, as well as Stalin's previously published *Works*, to analyze his words on three subjects that were the source of particular tension and uncertainty for the party in power: the place of leader cults within a Marxist polity, the status of the Soviet working class, and the relationship between the party-state and the arts.

As Stalin developed his vision, he had to balance Bolshevik ideological desiderata with the imperatives of Soviet state-building. Following the confrontational and destabilizing "class war" fervor of 1928–31, he sought to project a more inclusive vision designed to foster a sense of a unified "Soviet" political community.³⁷ At the core of the community was the burgeoning cult of Stalin, which is considered in chapter 4. Its existence in a nominally Marxist collectivist state created the potential for considerable tension, and although Stalin tacitly promoted the cult, he made a point of describing it as a concession to popular tradition, criticizing its excesses and insisting that cultic texts remained within acceptable parameters.

The heterogeneity inherent in Stalin's approach to the cult was also evident in his interpretations of class and Soviet culture. In chapter 5 we explore how Stalin dealt with the long-standing Bolshevik ambivalence toward the working class, and indeed the whole concept of class itself. Without ever abandoning the language of class, Stalin moved steadily toward a more inclusive vision of the Soviet people. Our primary focus is on his attempts to divert attention from a central Bolshevik symbol, the manual laborer, toward a newly legitimized "Soviet" or "people's" intelligentsia. The final chapter turns to the subject of the arts, another sphere in which Stalin strove to find words to unite instead of divide. We examine his efforts to justify a "Soviet" rather than a narrowly "proletarian" culture and to promote a heterogeneous vision of the USSR as a place where artists served the party-state yet also enjoyed creative freedom.

Stalin's interventions, clad in the mandatory yet reasonably flexible framework of Marxism-Leninism, aimed to provide authoritative interpretations and to smooth over the many tensions and ambiguities surrounding these issues. While some of his utterances were designed for more limited audiences and others were targeted at a wider public, all were intended, in various ways and with varying degrees of success, to produce and impose a distinctive vision of the world: Stalin's world.

PART

I

INFORMATION AND INTERPRETATION

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