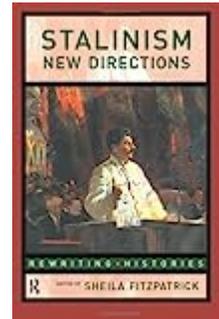




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Stalinism as a Culture

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Research on Stalinism has boomed during the last ten years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Scholars have been inspired not only by the opening of the formerly closed Soviet archives, but also by changes of interest and new approaches in general history. Younger historians in particular shifted away from social history, dominant in the 1960s and 1970s, towards a new cultural history including everyday life, mentalities, discourses, rituals, and social practices where Stalinism is understood as a “culture”.

Sheila Fitzpatrick, professor at the University of Chicago and well known for her books and articles on Stalinism, has now edited a volume with contributions reflecting these new approaches. Most of the authors are young historians from America, England, Germany, and Russia. Almost all of the articles have already been published elsewhere. The purpose of the book is to make these articles more easily available than in scattered issues of journals and various other publications.

The book draws together works on class, identity,

consumption culture, agency, terror and the nationalities policy. Works that do not fit the socio-cultural focus, notably studies of high politics, economics, demography, and foreign policy have been excluded. The articles are put together in five parts, to each of which the editor provides a short introduction of 2-3 pages and a small bibliography for further reading (consisting almost exclusively of titles in English). The five parts are: I) Social Identities, II) Private and Public Practices, III) Consumption and Civilisation, IV) Varieties of Terror, and V) Nationality as a Status. The thematic parts are contextualized by an introduction to the totalitarian/revisionist arguments and post-revisionist developments. Useful for the reader are an index and a glossary.

The first part (“Social identities”) deals with the notion of “class”. In the 1990s under the impact of E.P. Thompson’s suggestion that class consciousness is not a given but something that has to be formed, a new approach gained ground among historians of Soviet Russia, too. The basis of the new approach is the perception that class is not a fixed attribute of an individual but rather an identity that can be taken up, cast off, hidden, or learned.

Sheila Fitzpatrick exemplifies this approach in her own article “Ascribing Class: the Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia”. She argues that in Soviet Russia “class” was not an actual socio-economic attribute but an ascribed characteristic, whose primary function was to define an individual’s rights, privileges, and obligations towards the state. Russia’s class structure had never been highly developed, and in the social chaos following the revolution it came close to collapse. Yet according to the Bolsheviks’ Marxist premise, Russia had to be a class society: Otherwise, how had one been able to distinguish allies and enemies? Elaborate legal and administrative structures of class discrimination put in place in the 1920s led to a variety of peculiar practices such as “masking” (assuming an advantageous social identity) and “unmasking” (publicly revealing such deceptions).

In her contribution “Us Against Them - Social Identity in Soviet Russia, 1934-41,” Sarah Davies examines popular opinion and the popular construction of social identities in Leningrad in the 1930s. Her research is based on NKVD and party reports on the “mood of the population”, together with unpublished letters sent by citizens to the authorities. Davies found that—contrary to the official self-presentation of the Soviet Union as a classless society—many people continued to have a dualistic view of society as a dichotomy of persons without power (“us”, ordinary people) and those exercising power (“them” on the top). Ordinary people felt separated from the elite. These alone are not very surprising revelations but, as Davies points out, they help us to understand why in 1937 Stalin’s terror found noteworthy support in society: ordinary people saw a chance to take revenge on the most hated bosses and party officials.

In recent years one of the main debates concerning Stalinism has been the relation of private and public practices, of private and public spheres (Part II). Beginning with Stephen Kotkin’s thesis that Soviet citizens not only learned to “speak Bolshevik”, but also internalised Soviet values, scholars have argued how far this internalisation really went.[2] In “Fashioning the Stalinist soul: the Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, 1931-9,” Jochen Hellbeck studies the diary-writing of an individual and goes far in arguing for thorough internalisation of Soviet values.[3] He draws on the theories of Michel Foucault and the work of Stephen Greenblatt [4] and Stephen Kotkin. His diarist, Stepan Podlubnyi, was a young man who came from the countryside to Moscow and whose father had been expropriated as a *kulak*.

Podlubnyi used his diary-writing as a way of over-

coming this deficiency and re-creating himself as a true Soviet citizen and communist – and continued in feeling so even under the personal repression of the Great Terror. Hellbeck rejects the commonly-held notion that under Stalinism individuals told lies in public and the truth only in private. The diary of Podlubnyi connects the public and private spheres. Individual subjectivity was in Hellbeck’s view a constituent element of the Stalinist system. This argumentation is convincing in so far as it concerns the given diary, but the results from this singular source cannot simply be transferred to the Soviet population as a whole. So far, it is even controversial how typical Stepan Podlubnyi was of the minority he represented, namely the young communists (*komsomol'tsy*).[5]

The second contribution to Part II is entitled “Denunciation and its Functions in Soviet Governance: From the Archive of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs, 1944-53”. The author, Vladimir Kozlov, deputy director of the Archives of the Russian Federation (GARF), draws on materials of the NKVD that are still not freely available to scholars. Like Hellbeck he suggests that Soviet citizens not only spoke Bolshevik, but often “thought Bolshevik.” He classifies denunciations as “disinterested” and “interested”, showing that the first served an important function as a check on the abuses of local bureaucracy and a channel for the expression of popular grievances. Kozlov sees denunciation as a manifestation of “paternalistic statism in an underdeveloped country”. Denunciation was not only useful for the regime but also an important resource that helped to settle conflicts and to redress grievances.

Alexei Kojevnikov presents a contrasting picture of another facet of Stalinist society: Examining the public rituals of the Soviet scientific community (“Games of Stalinist Democracy: Ideological Discussions in Soviet Sciences, 1947-52”), he comes to the conclusion that the scientists’ use of officially endorsed practices such as “disputation” (*diskussii*) and “criticism and self-criticism” (*kritika i samokritika*) appears rather to be a rational adaptation to the official discourse than an internalisation of its values. Kojevnikov argues that the formula “the party dictated” does not provide an adequate explanation of the development of Soviet science. He investigates some key rituals of scientific life, notably disputations and “criticism and self-criticism”. These were borrowed from the sphere of party politics, but did not have purely a ceremonial character. Outcomes were not always predetermined. Substantive professional issues could be contested in such forums. What was obligatory was to play the game in the approved manner and end up

with a resolution: One side had to be judged right and the other wrong. There was no place for plurality.

Part III (“Consumption and Civilisation”) deals with the paradox that despite the notorious bad supply situation and contrary to formerly pronounced socialist principles, consumerism and a “cultured” life-style received official valorisation in the 1930s. The return to these “middle class” values has been associated with the emergence of the “new class” of bureaucrats in the sense that the regime made a deal with this new privileged class and agreed to endorse its bourgeois values.

Julie Hessler (“Cultured Trade: the Stalinist Turn Towards Consumerism”) analyses the process of the formal and informal distribution of goods in the Stalin period. The article is a chapter of her dissertation “Culture of Shortages”, dealing with the politics, economic structures, practices and discourses of Soviet trade 1917-1953. Hessler focuses on the discourse of consumerism associated with Stalin’s slogan from 1934/35 “Life has become better, comrades.” A key value in this discourse was modernity. In the mid-1930s consumer goods, and particularly the process of their sale in new large department stores, came to be valorised as modern and civilising, with America presented as the model.

The article is complemented by Vadim Volkov’s “The Concept of *Kul’turnost’*: Notes on the Stalinist Civilising Process”. Volkov explores the notion of “culturedness”, omnipresent in speeches, discussions and publications of the 1930s. He points out that the Soviet disciplines of civilisation (hygiene, manners of comporting oneself in public, modes of consumption) were specifically related to certain sociological developments: mass migration to the cities and large-scale upward mobility into the new elite.

Lewis H. Siegelbaum (“Dear Comrade, You Ask What we Need”: Socialist Paternalism and Soviet Rural ‘Notables’ in the mid-1930s”) deals with unpublished letters from award-winning peasant workers on state farms who were asked by their trade union to identify their needs with regard to housing, furniture, clothing, food, newspapers, books, and health care. The people requested winter clothes, shoes, beds, passes to sanatoriums, opportunities to go away and study. Their letters tell us much about how they constructed their needs and how they actually lived. Even these peasant writers often drew on the discourse of *kul’turnost’*. The union’s request that prize winners report on themselves and their bosses did not only make these workers more visible (as “notables”), but also enlisted them as agents of surveillance.

In return for information about what worked and what did not work on their farms and about their needs, prize winners could anticipate the union’s assistance.

For part IV (“Varieties of Terror”), the editor chose two articles examining detailed questions of the complex “Great Terror”, arguing that the historian must break down the big and until now not satisfactorily explained phenomenon into separate, analysable parts. The two articles each discern a coherent process that produced one kind of terror. They cannot and do not claim that the process uncovered was universal to the terror as a whole.

James R. Harris (“The Purging of Local Cliques in the Urals Region, 1936-7”) examines terror against regional leadership cliques in Sverdlovsk. Sverdlovsk had been a main target of industrial investment during the First Five-Year Plan. During the Second Five-Year Plan the Sverdlovsk leaders ran into big trouble, when Moscow started insisting on exact fulfilment of targets. Like other regional leaderships, the Sverdlovsk leadership constituted a clique that regularly engaged in self-protective practices to hide failures and problems from Moscow. When these efforts failed in 1936, the central party leaders came to believe that the Sverdlovsk clique was engaged in large-scale “conspiracy”, and the usual consequences of mass arrests of “enemies” followed.

Paul Hagenloh (“‘Socially Harmful Elements’ and the Great Terror”) looks at a quite different aspect of the Great Terror: the mass arrests of social outcasts (prostitutes, beggars, wanderers, horse thieves, religious sectarians) following secret instructions from the Politburo in July 1937 which were unknown until a few years ago. He shows how the state’s efforts towards effective social control via the passport system led to an ever more acute problem of what to do with social misfits and deviants. This process is very different from the processes of elite purging and therefore shows that the terror of 1937-8 hardly can be explained as a unitary phenomenon.

The last part of the volume consists of two contributions to Soviet nationalities policy. Yuri Slezkine (“The Soviet Union as a Communal Apartment, or how a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic particularism”) analyses how the Soviet regime, grounded in an ideology that condemned nationalism as pretty-bourgeois, nevertheless promoted ethnic and national particularism. The Bolsheviks privileged nationality and encouraged national identities of the smaller nations, because they feared the oppressive legacy of “great-Russian chauvinism”. The policy of fostering national cultures and national territorial administrations made nationality a key component

in a Soviet citizen's identity. So the Soviet Union, in the words of a Soviet author of 1924, became a "communal apartment" where the larger national "families" had their own rooms.

Slezkine pleads for recognising the earnestness of Bolshevik efforts on behalf of ethnic particularism. In his judgement even high Stalinism did not reverse the policy of nation building as most other authors argue. It drastically cut down the number of national units but never questioned the national essence of those units. Slezkine describes the Stalinist nationalities policy as something like a normalisation after what he calls a "carnival of nationalities" up to 1932: "The Soviet apartment as a whole was to have fewer rooms but the ones that remained were to be lavishly decorated with hometown memorabilia, grandfather clocks and lovingly preserved family portraits." (p. 334). Stalinism in this almost idyllic perspective appears as a sensible and moderate policy, benevolent towards the nationalities, a not very convincing interpretation that is only possible leaving aside the various deportations of nationalities in the 1930s and 1940s.

In his article "Modernization or Neo-traditionalism? Ascribed Nationality and Soviet Primordialism", Terry Martin, like Slezkine, describes the Soviet state as a promoter of nationality and national identities, but adds some important correctives. He shows how the Bolshevik conception of the nation in the 1930s dramatically shifted away from a sociological view of nations as modern constructs and only ascribed attributes towards an emphasis on supposed deep primordial roots of modern nations, a conception typical for nineteenth century nationalists.

Martin sees the cause for this paradoxical development in the extreme statism of the Soviet Union. All personnel forms had a line marked "nationality" which was not a neutral piece of information but often a crucial advantage or disadvantage and therefore reinforced a popular belief in primordial nationality. This primordialism, a relapse into neo-traditionalism, generated a previously absent category: the enemy nation. Enemy nations were primarily foreign nation-states, especially Germany, who were not only perceived as a threat to the present-day Soviet Union, but were imagined as primordial enemies of the Russian state. Some of these enemy states had substantial diaspora communities living within the Soviet borders. Given the new primordialism, it was assumed that these nationalities owed their highest loyalty to their "homelands" abroad and so represented an internal enemy. Therefore, beginning in 1935, these Soviet diaspora

nationalities began to be deported away from the border regions.

The series editor labels the volume a "provocative addition to the current debates related to the history of the Stalinist period", collecting the newest and most exciting work by young scholars. Without a doubt, the book presents an interesting and valuable collection of articles and is highly recommended to students and scholars of Soviet history, but one should be aware that it represents only a small choice of the current research on Stalinism.[6]

As most of the contributions have already been published some years ago, the provocativeness of the book is not so striking. Notwithstanding, not all articles offer new answers to the crucial questions about Stalin and Stalinism: why Stalin and his cohorts were able to establish their regime, why the regime developed in this specific manner, and how it managed to induce so many people –willingly or unwillingly (a crucial question, too) – to participate in it. The problem of what constituted Stalinism and what distinguishes it from the times before and after could have been discussed more thoroughly, too. The new cultural approaches doubtless enrich our knowledge of the period with questions and results that had been neglected before, but it would be a good idea for future studies to go more beyond description and to seek explanations more systematically that would help us to understand the complex phenomenon of "Stalinism". What we need are new models of how the Stalinist system and society functioned and how hard-core activists on the one side and ordinary people on the other side behaved in this society and made it possible.

Notes

[1]. Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London 1963.

[2]. Kotkin, Stephen. *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilization*. Berkeley 1995.

[3]. The whole diary has been published in German translation: *Tagebuch aus Moskau, 1931-1939*. Hg. v. Jochen Hellbeck. Muenchen 1996.

[4]. Greenblatt, Stephen: *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago 1980.

[5]. An attempt in this direction, i.e. an examination of motivations, attitudes and behavior patterns of young communists and ordinary workers in the context of their being tied up in mechanisms of power and con-

trol on the lowest levels is undertaken in Dietmar Neutatz, *Metrostroj. Der Bau der Moskauer Untergrundbahn von den ersten Projekten bis zur Inbetriebnahme. Eine Fallstudie zum Stalinismus (1897-1935)*. Koeln, Weimar, Wien 2000 (in print).

[6]. Further results and interim findings from forthcoming studies of young scholars are collected in: *Stalinismus vor dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. Neue Wege der*

Forschung. Stalinism before the Second World War. Ed. by Manfred Hildermeier. Muenchen 1998. *Stalinismus. Neue Forschungen und Konzepte*. Ed. by Stefan Plaggenborg. Berlin 1998.

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