



PROJECT MUSE®

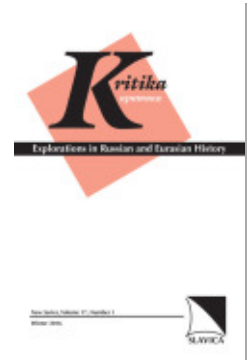
The Leader and the System

Michael David-Fox

Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History, Volume 17, Number 1, Winter 2016, pp. 119-129 (Review)

Published by Slavica Publishers

DOI: [10.1353/kri.2016.0009](https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2016.0009)



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/611031>

The Leader and the System

MICHAEL DAVID-FOX

Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*. Translated by Nora S. Favorov. xvi+ 380 pp. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. ISBN-13 978-0300163889. \$35.00.

Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin, 1: Paradoxes of Power, 1878–1928*. xiii + 949 pp. New York: Penguin, 2014. ISBN-13 978-1594203794. \$25.80.

Do new biographies of the dictator provoke deeper analysis of the Soviet system? Will the life of Stalin open up new ways of understanding Stalinism? Past experience, it has to be said, raises doubts. Of all the biographies of Stalin, few have integrated, much less altered, the state of the art in Soviet history.¹ The main reason for this fact also explains why so many Stalin biographies get written: they sell. The temptation is perennial for semilearned amateurs to pen sensationalist blockbusters. More sober-minded academic biographies, when written by those focused on the leader more than the system, tend to elide the much more difficult conceptual questions of how Stalin shaped—and, crucially, was shaped by—first revolutionary Russia and then the broader Soviet political system, culture, and ideology.

The Russian field has never had anything like Ian Kershaw's two-volume Hitler biography. Kershaw came to Hitler's life steeped in historiographical

This review essay was written when the author was a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and it was prepared within the framework of a subsidy granted to the National Research University—Higher School of Economics by the Government of the Russian Federation for the implementation of the Global Competitiveness Program.

¹ There are exceptions, such as Alfred J. Rieber, "Stalin: Man of the Borderlands," *American Historical Review* 106, 5 (2001): 1651–91; a number of the contributions in Sarah Davies and James Harris, eds., *Stalin: A New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Ronald Grigor Suny's forthcoming work on the young Stalin and the Georgian cultural context.

analysis: his interpretation of the literature on National Socialism went through four editions. Through his famous concept of “working toward the Führer,” Kershaw linked the Nazi system in new ways to the leader, thus helping to transcend the intentionalist–functionalist split.² If one were to pick any two Soviet historians capable of producing something analogous for our own field, it would be Stephen Kotkin, the American historian who helped the field move beyond the totalitarian–revisionist divide with his notion of “Stalinism as a civilization,” and Oleg Khlevniuk, the Russian authority on the archival holdings related to Stalin-era high politics and a world-renowned expert on Stalinism.

In many ways, the two works are very different. If Kotkin’s opus resembles a tank, seeking to awe if not shock the reader with its sheer scope and force, Khlevniuk’s deceptively simple craftsmanship is more akin to a fine watch. Kotkin’s sprawling 949 pages takes the story up until the onset of collectivization, constituting but one of three projected volumes. Yet one could justifiably say that volume 1 is really three books in one: the first, the biography of Stalin, is a story that develops very slowly, because the gradually increasing importance of the Georgian’s improbable trajectory is placed within the second book-within-a-book, a history of the Russian and Soviet states, punctuated by the history of the Russian Revolution. The third dimension is a geopolitical narrative about Russia, its foreign policy, and the world of the great powers. In a kind of treasure hunt for specialists, long textbook-like sections are strewn with brilliant insights, striking turns of phrase, and original interpretations; the research and synthetic interpretation of Stalin and his role are integrated into this *grand récit*. The modest and hardworking Khlevniuk, by contrast, delivers concise coverage of Stalin’s entire life and times in under 400 pages and delineates a consistent focus on Stalin’s political methods of rule, especially in terms of the top political elite.

Given these differences in form, the similarities and tacit consensus between them are just as striking. Both see the *vozhd’* emerge squarely from the revolutionary movement and political struggle rather than, say, the alleged abnormalities of his childhood or personality. Both focus on high politics, with Kotkin putting special stress on foreign policy and

² Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, 4th ed. (London: Arnold, 2000); Kershaw, *Hitler*, 2 vols. (London: Penguin, 2000). The concept was first elaborated in Kershaw, “‘Working Towards the Führer’: Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 2, 2 (1993): 103–18, esp. 116–17. Significantly, Kershaw had long researched topics that connected Hitler, Nazi ideology, and society. See, e.g., Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria, 1933–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983); and Kershaw, *The “Hitler Myth”: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

giving strong coverage to issues of empire and economics, while Khlevniuk highlights repressions and the Politburo elite. Both repudiate the tradition of depicting Stalin as a mediocrity or mere *praktik*. Both, quite rightly, take it as a given that, despite the condescension of elite Old Bolshevik theoreticians, he was very much a member of the party intelligentsia.³ For Kotkin, the seminarian was a striver with “tremendous dedication to self-improvement” who “devoured books, which, as a Marxist, he did so in order to change the world” (10). Khlevniuk, acutely aware of Stalin’s growing approval ratings in today’s Russia, makes more of a point of emphasizing the future theoretical genius’s intellectual deficiencies, such as his reduction of complex problems to simplistic slogans.⁴ But he sees Stalin’s attraction to the teacher-like role of the professional revolutionary as the primary reason he adhered to Leninism in the first place (24).

Both, at least on the level of causality, emphasize the importance of ideology. Kotkin depicts Stalin as literally “marinated” in a Marxism, or better to say Marxism-Leninism, that became a “key source of his power” (427, 470). What initially drove Bolshevik state building was neither extreme statism nor, primarily, the circumstances of total war and revolution: “Rather, it was a combination of ideas or habits of thought, especially profound antipathy to markets and all things bourgeois, as well as no-holds-barred revolutionary methods, which exacerbated the catastrophe in a self-reinforcing loop” (290). Khlevniuk, in turn, sees Stalin’s “theoretical dogmatism” at the “root of the violence that defined his regime” (7). Given the analytical weight paid to ideology, it is striking that neither biographer’s attention is long delayed by researching in depth Stalin’s activities as an ideologist, at the ideological apparatus of the party-state, or at Stalinism itself as an ideology.⁵ As a corollary, one might add that both historians bring in “the masses” intelligently but

³ Here see esp. Erik van Ree, “The Stalinist Self: The Case of Ioseb Jughashvili,” *Kritika* 11, 2 (2010): 257–82.

⁴ The Russian edition of Khlevniuk’s biography contains an additional section, “Mif Stalina,” that directly addresses post-Soviet Russian myths about the positive nature of Stalin’s rule (Oleg Khlevniuk, *Stalin: Zhizn’ odnogo vozhdia* [Moscow: AST, 2015], 443–52).

⁵ As in, for example, the work of Ethan Pollock, *Stalin and the Soviet Science Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), and David Brandenberger, most recently in *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1928–1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Brandenberger and M. V. Zelenov, eds., *Kratkii kurs istorii VKP(b): Tekst i ego istoriia*, vol. 1 (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2014); and Brandenberger and Zelenov, “Stalin’s Answer to the Nationality Question: A Case Study in the Editing of the 1938 *Short Course*,” *Slavic Review* 73, 4 (2014): 859–80. For what might be called an intellectual history of Stalinist ideology, see Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in Twentieth-Century Revolutionary Patriotism* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002). Of course, for Kotkin this may be premature, and he may yet give a fuller treatment of Stalinist ideology in vols. 2 and 3.

only episodically, and neither integrates culture or cultural history into the analytical mix. In the end, however, both historians convey something approaching Stalin's ideology-as-worldview.⁶ Both stress how Stalin's outlook and ideas—such as, for example, his deeply antimarket instincts and his views of the peasantry—closed off policy options and influenced such momentous shifts as the end of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Both bring out Stalin's closeness to Lenin and Leninism and his role as lieutenant and disciple. However, Kotkin wishes to obliterate the shreds of any dichotomy between Lenin and Stalin, while Khlevniuk, as we shall see, carefully sets forth key differences between the two.

Kotkin for the first time lays out his understanding of late imperial Russia in great depth, and it is a vision shaped by a notion of a partially achieved yet ultimately failed modernity. In his 2001 "Modern Times," Kotkin analyzed Soviet modernity in terms of the triad of mass production, mass culture, and mass politics. In some respects, such as the adoption of industrial Fordism or the political mobilization of mass culture, the Soviet Union's communist-statist version of modernity, aided by its revolutionary statism and elimination of private property, was actually able to reach past its rivals in the interwar conjuncture. But with ultimately fatal consequences, Stalin reconstructed the USSR's interwar version of modernity in the rapidly changing postwar era.⁷ (Khlevniuk, by contrast, is concerned rather with debunking current Russian theories of the "modernizing Stalin" [x] that justify his catastrophic "great leap" policies.) In an important addendum to his earlier work, Kotkin now lays out a geopolitical understanding of modernity and applies it to imperial Russia. The very same triad, he now writes, made up those "difficult-to-obtain attributes" that the greatest powers mastered in an international contest. Implicitly tilting against the social theorists who have dominated the discussion of modernity, Kotkin maintains that becoming modern was not a mere "sociological" transition from traditional society. Modernity was rather "a geopolitical process, a matter of acquiring what it took to join the great powers, or fall victim to them" (63). In the event, tsarist Russia kept up with its rivals relatively well in economic and military terms, but its deliberately archaic autocracy failed above all politically, by failing to develop the modern state's capacity to inspire and mobilize the masses (470). The strength of Kotkin's geopolitical definition is its insistence that modernity

⁶ On ideology-as-worldview, see Michael David-Fox, "The Blind Men and the Elephant: Six Faces of Ideology in the Soviet Context," chap. 3 of *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015).

⁷ Stephen Kotkin, "Modern Times: The Soviet Union and the Interwar Conjuncture," *Kritika* 2, 1 (2001): 111–64.

evolves in an international system in distinct phases, and that this evolution was prompted by the imperatives of geopolitical competition. However, was it really just as simple as do or die? The dog-eat-dog contest is portrayed in such Darwinian terms that it is reminiscent of Stalin's own famous February 1931 warning about impending extinction: "We are 50–100 years behind the leading countries. We have to cover this distance in ten years. Either we do it, or they crush us."⁸

How do states actually adapt to models of the modern within the framework of international competition? This involves often intricate processes of looking across borders. Borrowing always involves adaptation and domestication, and these were processes increasingly carried out not just by politicians but by armies of experts, scientists, and even cultural image makers. How should we factor into this complex process of circulatory geopolitical surveillance those ideologies that, in other contexts, Kotkin sees as so decisive? Strong state interventionism animated many modern projects, especially after 1914, but in many countries experts could convert from one political ideology to another in part because those ideologies sometimes shared the same lineages. Grappling with this dimension of international competition, I would argue, engages not geopolitical but transnational history. The third part of Kotkin's triad, mass culture, remains unexplored in *Stalin*. Given elites' widespread disdain for much of it, and not only in Russia, it is unclear how it became the object of geopolitical emulation on the state level.

In the second, Soviet half of the book, Kotkin continues to develop the geopolitical theme, but now *sans* modernity (esp. 553–58). At the same time, he strongly integrates geopolitics in setting forth his most important interpretive framework for connecting the postrevolutionary Stalin to the Soviet system. This revolves around what he felicitously terms the "supremacy-insecurity dyad." A distinctive combination of expansive ambition and siege mentality, he writes, was already present in Russia's great-power history in Eurasia. But the combination was radically heightened in the Soviet period. Just as Stalin's own political triumph was pockmarked by the drawn-out vulnerability stemming from Lenin's Testament, the revolutionary triumph of the supposedly inevitable Soviet socialism was always undercut by an acute fear of capitalist encirclement. What Kotkin calls Soviet geopolitics—with its genuine need for enemies, its theoretical "breakthrough" in linking revolution not just to class but to war, and its "defensive" expansionism through world revolution—helped define both Stalin's own "inner regime" and the communist regime writ large (530, 556, 558). "Both the revolution as

⁸ I. V. Stalin, "O zadachakh khoziaistvennikov," *Sochineniia* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1953), 13:38–39.

a whole, and Stalin's personal dictatorship," Kotkin writes in one of his most evocative passages, "found themselves locked in a kind of in-built, structural paranoia" (530). Stalin's waxing suspiciousness was not a personality disorder but "fundamentally political"; it "closely mirrored the Bolshevik revolution's in-built structural paranoia, the predicament of a Communist regime in an overwhelmingly capitalist world, surrounded by, penetrated by enemies" (736). The work's subtitle, referring to the paradoxes of Stalin's power, derives from this rare combination of "supremacy and siege" (659).

In this discussion, however, modernity is striking for its absence. One is left to wonder how the supremacy-insecurity dialectic should affect our understandings of the specific contours of Soviet modernity.⁹ Do those specificities not imply that Soviet modernity was different, if not unique, within the international system? Must we not, then, explicitly define modernities as multiple—shaped in particular, and not always European or Western, historical and cultural trajectories—rather than replicated in a universalistic fashion?

In a conventional academic work, the analysis needs to be consistently developed throughout. One would have to return to the discussion of modernity raised at the outset. The attributes of the blockbuster genre are in this regard more liberating, although they require more space spent on strategies designed to hold the nonacademic reader's attention, such as physical descriptions and biographical detail. Insofar as the geopolitical conception of modernity is a major part of Kotkin's vision, however, it maintains a presence in this book's treatment of the Soviet period despite its formal absence. One can also not exclude the possibility that the pieces that make up this first volume will appear differently configured once they are part of the three-volume opus.

As we have seen, Kotkin ascribes a prominent role to Lenin's Testament in the emergence of Stalin's supremacy-insecurity dyad. Kotkin's treatment of the inner-party struggles is heavily influenced by V. A. Sakharov's "*Politicheskoe zaveschchanie*" *Lenina*.¹⁰ Chapter 11 cites this one work by Sakharov, who has taught at Moscow State University since 1978, no less than 43 times. Kotkin takes from Sakharov's turgid, textological tome, which sometimes seems to come through a time warp from the late Brezhnev era, his contention that

⁹ In *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), my term for this phenomenon was the "Stalinist superiority complex," which arose to suppress the complex of inferiority that always accompanied it (285–86).

¹⁰ V. A. Sakharov, "*Politicheskoe zaveschchanie*" *Lenina: Realnost' istorii i mify politiki* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2003).

parts of the late Lenin's dictated interventions were concocted by Nadezhda Krupskaja, Lenin's secretariat, and perhaps Lev Trotskii (494). Moving deep into the weeds of the party leaders' machinations after Lenin's incapacitation, Kotkin certainly selects and adapts what he takes from Sakharov for his own conception. This revolves around Trotskii's attempt to create his own dictatorship of industry to trump Stalin's dictatorship of the party apparatus; the war commissar's putative economic dictatorship, as opposed to the general secretary's cadre machine, by necessity required an end to NEP (487). Even so, building on Sakharov's implications turns the conventional understanding of Politburo politics in 1924 on its head. Khlevniuk, for example, is quite certain that Sakharov is wrong: "there is no question that Lenin took steps against Stalin during the final weeks of his active life" (73).

It is worth noting that Khlevniuk, while upholding the traditional interpretation, nonetheless advances his own, rather convincing take on the testament, which flows from his own long-standing focus on the relationship between leader and elites. For Khlevniuk, Lenin's political interventions at the end of his life were just a typical maneuver designed to rebalance power relations, but his final incapacitation suddenly gave them unique significance. "That Stalin bore the brunt of Lenin's manipulations appears to be largely a matter of chance," Khlevniuk writes, explaining why the briefly reactivated Lenin probably had no intention of actually removing Stalin from the top elite (74).

If the testament were a forgery, one does wonder, along with Khlevniuk, why a conspirator of Stalin's cunning could not avoid falling victim to it and why no top Bolsheviks contested it in the 1920s (73). That said, it would probably take months of archival and textual work to develop a truly informed opinion about Sakharov's work and Kotkin's subsequent slap in the face of scholarly taste. I do find two features of Kotkin's treatment curious. First, he does not discuss two very critical assessments of Sakharov published in 2005 in Russia's leading historical journal, *Otechestvennaia istoriia*.¹¹ Second, the master of teasing out the political ramifications of other historians' scholarly discussions never finds it necessary to address Sakharov's not overly sophisticated anti-Trotskii and pro-Stalin sympathies. These sentiments are not at all hidden in Sakharov's book and would seem to at least require some explanation.¹² Khlevniuk, for his part, finds the political goals of Sakharov's revisionism clear: to "demonstrate that evidence of a rupture between the two

¹¹ "Prodolzhenie sporov vokrug 'Politicheskogo zaveshchaniia' V. I. Lenina: Chetyre vzgliada na odnu knigu," *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, no. 2 (2005): 162–74. Without identifying it, Kotkin does cite this exchange, but only to back up a detail (882 n. 82).

¹² Sakharov, "*Politicheskoe zaveshchanie*" *Lenina*.

men was fabricated” (73). There is a reason Sakharov’s work appears on all sorts of Russian neo-Stalinist websites.

Whatever one thinks of the testament, Kotkin’s supremacy-insecurity dyad does not stand on its veracity but rather on the drawn-out political fallout that entrenched Stalin’s sense of grievance and victimization. This would have been all the more potent, in fact, if the testament were genuine. As Khlevniuk also underscores, even Stalin’s “masterful handling” of the political crisis provoked by the testament could not eliminate the power-hungry leader’s vulnerability. He therefore nursed acute resentment even of those Bolshevik hands that fed him (79). It was not long before Stalin began to bite.

As Kotkin ends *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power*, he drives home the point that it was not just the wild gamble of collectivization that distinguished the *vozhd*’ but his sheer will to see it through in the face of catastrophe (734, 739). In recounting Stalin’s landmark speech on collectivization at the Institute of Red Professors (IKP), one part of the enormous marshaling of sources required by a study of this scope, Kotkin spices up the story with piquant details from a “young Chechen” student eyewitness to the red professors’ anti-Stalin proclivities (706). It goes unremarked that this youngster was the famous émigré Sovietologist Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov, publishing his fanciful yet widely known recollections in Munich in 1959 after serving the Communists, Nazis, and Americans in the course of two decades. Avtorkhanov’s IKP archival file calls into question his published accounts, and the archives do not corroborate the young Chechen’s extended presence in Moscow before 1934. In fact, they place the self-described anti-Stalinist in the North Caucasus during the brutal implementation of collectivization, when he was serving in the Chechen party obkom.¹³ For two decades now, students of Soviet politics have refrained from using his *Tekhnologiya vlasti*.¹⁴

The major contribution of Kotkin’s first volume is to expose the parallel insecurities haunting the ambitions of the revolution and its leader or, put another way, to interrelate the personal and structural trajectories of Stalin’s power and the party-state. Khlevniuk’s work, narrating the life of Stalin primarily in regard to his methods of rule and relations with the top elite, prompts us to think more systematically about the implications specifically

¹³ Michael David-Fox, “Memory, Archives, Politics: The Rise of Stalin in Avtorkhanov’s *Technology of Power*,” *Slavic Review* 54, 4 (1995): 988–1003. Avtorkhanov’s book was published in English as *Stalin and the Communist Party: A Study in the Technology of Power* (Munich: Institut zur Erforschung der UdSSR, 1959).

¹⁴ Ehren Park and David Brandenberger, “Imagined Community? Rethinking the Nationalist Origins of the Contemporary Chechen Crisis,” *Kritika* 5, 3 (2004): 543–60, esp. 550.

of one-man dictatorship for the Soviet system. To Khlevniuk, “Lenin was a different sort of leader” from his pupil and successor, in that he “used a combination of hard-line intransigence and conciliation.... Lenin moved cautiously, always allowing his opponents to save face. Instead of driving them into a corner, he promoted them to top party positions” (46). With Lenin gone in the mid-1920s, a “little-studied” system of collective leadership arose. Scholars may find his assessment that this was relatively “flexible and well-balanced”—in the sense that agencies were relatively autonomous, party-state dualism was relatively well preserved, and interest group politics were marked by compromise (80–81)—a bit rosy. Part of the issue is that Khlevniuk’s study analyzes Stalin without in-depth consideration of the institutions of the party-state. (Kotkin, perhaps reacting to recent understandings of the Soviet political system that stress patrimonial relations to the exclusion of all else, underscores that the Soviet system made patron-client relations “strongly institutional,” 469.) Khlevniuk calls Stalin’s “second revolution” a recapitulation of Lenin’s first revolutionary strategy, which undercut moderates and mobilized radicals for leftist excesses (102). But in his wager on a second revolutionary upheaval at the end of NEP, Stalin was also “intentionally destroying the system of collective leadership” (101). By the same token, a new “oligarchy” reemerged within days of Stalin’s death in 1953, with the inclusion of the demoted Viacheslav Molotov and Anastas Mikoian symbolic of a deliberate attempt to “restore the old collective leadership” (311).

Between the end of NEP and Stalin’s death, as Khlevniuk’s work clarifies, lay the evolution of a one-man dictatorship that was marked by a remarkably consistent set of political tools and methods. These included not only terror and repression but the genuine if naïve belief that coercion could mold economics. The carrot as well as the stick was extended to privileged groups and areas. But the logic of Stalin’s politics revolved around an obsessive prime objective to consolidate and retain power (309). To achieve this, Stalin pursued a consistent approach of shakeups and intimidation of the top elite. By interspersing his chronological chapters with a series of excursions into topics suggested by the events of Stalin’s last days, Khlevniuk vividly conveys the learned helplessness and political pathologies that accompanied the leader’s never-ending quest for centralizing power in his own hands, which was halted only by the ultimate impediment of his own death. His strategy involved “unrelenting oversight” of the secret police and the components of the party-state, playing them off against one another (303). In terms of policy, the package of policies toward agriculture and industry deployed in the prewar upheaval had coalesced into an “extraordinarily conservative”

postwar economic-political recipe book, a core component of which was the psychological mobilization for war and against internal and external enemies. All these elements formed part of Stalin's political grand strategy.

The notion of this kind of overarching political formula undergirding Stalinism meshes well with the new findings of David R. Shearer and Vladimir Khaustov. From the 1920s until the day he died, Stalin "manipulated" the balance between the secret police and Party by using each to purge and control the other. Much was known earlier about this "secret to Stalin's undisputed authority," but it is nonetheless striking how consistently and systematically Stalin applied it in a calibrated fashion over the course of virtually three decades. This underlines just how much his purging was an approach and a strategy, rather than the result of paranoia or the immediate historical conjuncture.¹⁵

By focusing on the inexorable logic behind Stalin's political-institutional drive for power, Khlevniuk adheres to what might be called a neototalitarian approach. Since Stalin constantly monitored and reshaped the pillars of his power—the secret police, the Party, and, later, the military—there was great consistency, even a unilinear logic behind the political methods of his one-person rule. But it is important to factor into the analysis the fact that Stalin's violent, ersatz internal war against enemies lurched from one social and economic crisis to another, driven by unintended consequences. There emerged vast cultural and ideological inconsistencies between the early and late parts of the Stalin period, as well as the very different subperiods that compose his reign. This cyclical oscillation between periods of revolutionary advance or crackdown and those of consolidation and partial relaxation not only were present between 1929 and 1953 but also represented a particular modification of the cycles of reform and reaction long before and after. While Khlevniuk treats Stalinism as highly consistent because of Stalin's unchanging quest for political control at the top, Stalinism in terms of culture and ideology is better conceived as a volatile, evolving, and often contradictory mix.

It is fitting to conclude with one key example related to the leader and the system. Both biographers see as a constant Stalin's suspiciousness of experts and intellectuals, and both emphasize the formative influence of his "Tsaritsyn approach," the Civil War commissar's 1918 combination of harsh maneuvers against military specialists and fabricated counterrevolutionary plots on the Southern Front (Khlevniuk, 55–59, quotation 57; Kotkin, 300–7). But Stalin, of course, went on to tolerate the NEP-era *modus vivendi*

¹⁵ David R. Shearer and Vladimir Khaustov, eds., *Stalin and the Lubianka: A Documentary History of the Political Police and Security Organs in the Soviet Union, 1922–1953* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), x, 309.

with the specialists and then launched a great attack on specialists during the Great Break; he rehabilitated the old specialists in 1932, creating vast new privileges for the intelligentsia during the two decades that followed, yet purged intelligentsia elites disproportionately during the Great Terror. As Erik van Ree has written, Stalin, himself a revolutionary *intelligent* who had adopted the persona of a teacher vis-à-vis the workers, was “no Mao, no Pol Pot: he targeted these people not because they were an intelligentsia but because they were an intelligentsia of the wrong kind. To educate a politically reliable new intelligentsia was even more important for him than to crush the old one.”¹⁶ But the issue goes beyond Stalin’s own outlook and intentions, much as they were inextricably intertwined with the twists and turns of his era. For example, the leveling, class-war collectivism of the revolutionary Great Break upheaval with which the Stalin period began differed vastly from the hierarchical, conservative patriotism of the postwar “ice age of Sovietism” with which it ended.¹⁷ How to reconcile the consistency of power politics and the logic of one-man dictatorship with the cyclical oscillations and ideological shifts of the Stalin period remains a revealing issue to confront. Over the long run, one might even conclude, there were systemic aspects of Stalinism that even Stalin could not grasp.

Dept. of History and School of Foreign Service
Georgetown University
P. O. Box 571035
Washington DC 20057-1035 USA
md672@georgetown.edu

¹⁶ Van Ree, “Stalinist Self,” 280.

¹⁷ The phrase comes from Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 292. On the cyclical nature of the subperiods of Stalinism, their connection to similar cycles before and after, and Stalinism as a volatile and often contradictory mix, see David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, chap. 8.