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Inside the
Stalin Archives

*Discovering the
New Russia*

Jonathan Brent

for Franny

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Introduction

I threw myself at the hangman's feet,
You are my son, my horror.
Everything's mixed up for me forever,
And who is a man and who a beast
Will never now be clear . . .

—Anna Akhmatova, *Requiem*, 1937

At the funeral of Josef Stalin on March 9, 1953, Vyacheslav Molotov, Stalin's comrade since the revolution, bid farewell to his beloved *vozhd*, his leader, with the words: "The immortal name of Stalin will always live in our hearts, in the hearts of the Soviet people and of all progressive humanity." Even though Stalin had imprisoned Molotov's wife in 1949 and sent her into exile; even though Molotov had seen many signs that he himself was out of favor with the master and in imminent danger of being purged and possibly executed, his complete devotion to Stalin never wavered to the end of his long life in 1986.

Molotov was not alone. Two days later, on March 11, Ilya Ehrenburg, the Jewish journalist and writer who found himself on the verge of arrest many times in the 1930s, wrote in *Pravda*:

These words of Stalin were uttered at his grave: “We are the true servants of the people, and the people want peace and hate war. Yes, all of us are dedicated to the desire of the people not to allow the spilling of blood of millions and to safeguard the peaceful structure of a happy life.” These were the thoughts of Comrade Stalin, his care, his will. . . . These words touch every simple person and together with us they say: “Stalin lives.”

“Stalin lives”—something mesmerizing shines in those words. On February 3, 1940, Nikolai Yezhov, the man who had directed the secret police during the height of the Great Terror and who knew intimately all of Stalin’s secret methods and designs, begged the court at the end of his trial—during which he had been falsely accused of, among other things, being an English spy—to “tell Stalin that I shall die with his name on my lips.” “I am a victim of circumstances and nothing more,” he told the court, “yet here enemies I have overlooked may have also had a hand in this.” He was shot the next day. It was incomprehensible to him that he could have been abandoned and betrayed by the very man for whom he had executed so many so ruthlessly, and Yezhov clung to the belief that only “enemies” he may have overlooked could have been responsible for the judgment against him. “At the preliminary investigation,” Yezhov told the court, “I said that I was not a spy, that I was not a terrorist, but they didn’t believe me and beat me up horribly. During the twenty-five years of my party work I have fought honorably against enemies and have exterminated them. I have committed crimes for which I might well

be executed.” What were these crimes? “My great guilt lies in the fact that I purged so few [from the security services].” Yezhov arrested and executed some 3,800 security officials in 1937 and 5,600 in 1938, including criminals, police, and firemen, along with millions of Communist Party members and ordinary people. Estimations of the number of Stalin’s victims over his twenty-five-year reign, from 1928 to 1953, vary widely, but 20 million is now considered the minimum. He has been called the greatest mass murderer in European civilization.

Yet fifty-five years after Stalin’s death, the place of Stalin in Russian life remains enigmatic, and many in Russia and around the world might utter the same words as Yezhov at his trial; there are many for whom “Stalin lives.” How can this be? After Khrushchev’s secret speech in 1956 denouncing the cult of personality, Stalin’s crimes became public knowledge and his body was removed from the Lenin Mausoleum; after the revelations of glasnost, outrage against the cruelties and stupidities of the Soviet police state was publicly aired; after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, the nation that Stalin had killed and tortured so mercilessly to construct seemed a thing of the past. How could anyone believe any longer in Stalin’s vision of the “peaceful structure of a happy life”? Facts and figures do not explain it.

When I recently asked an officer from the the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB; one of the successor organizations to the KGB) whether he thought Stalin could be rehabilitated, he looked at me in horror. “No,” he said. “Impossible. It would be like rehabilitating Hitler.” He spoke for many, yet the numerous books published in Russia and

elsewhere in recent years praising Stalin signify something else. While new extremist political groups make undisguised use of Stalin's image and accomplishments, and his picture can be found on a box of chocolates today on sale at the duty-free shop at Sheremetyevo Airport outside Moscow, few would wish a return to the dark days of the 1930s. Nevertheless, it is fair to ask whether an airport in Berlin, Frankfurt, or Munich could sell a box of chocolates bearing Hitler's image. Though long ago removed from public buildings, Stalin's name and sayings remain on the lips of ordinary people, and in remote districts busts and statues of Stalin can still be found.

Could the legacy of Stalin be on the verge of a rebirth, and if so, in what form? Did it never die in the hearts of "progressive humanity?" Would it be like "rehabilitating Hitler"? If we follow the long road Russia has traveled since the Soviet Union was dissolved by Boris Yeltsin in December 1991, do we end up close to where we began? These questions have haunted the history of the "new" Russia and bear upon Yale University Press's sixteen-year project of publishing material from the Soviet archives—a task that has now culminated in the Russian government's approval to publish Stalin's personal archive.

When Yeltsin decreed that the previously secret Soviet state and party archives would be opened, researchers from around the world began to flock to Moscow in anticipation, and ordinary Russian citizens along with scholars, politicians, partisans—victimizers as well as victims—impatiently awaited the opportunity to scrutinize these secret books and files, gain access to KGB dossiers and interrogations, and read

for the first time speeches, diaries, and letters of Kremlin leaders. Secret Central Committee decrees, deliberations of the Communist International (Comintern), and directives of the intelligence organizations, along with the daily traffic of the inner party bureaucracy that once determined so much for so many lives would now be openly studied.

With these perhaps naively euphoric expectations, I flew to Moscow in January 1992 to initiate the *Annals of Communism* project for Yale University Press. My purpose was to publish documents from the Soviet period that would help explain abiding questions of twentieth-century Soviet history: Was the 1934 murder of Sergei Kirov (first secretary of the Leningrad Regional Committee and secretary to the Communist Party Central Committee) the work of a lone assassin or a conspiracy that reached to Stalin? Was there a rupture between Lenin and Stalin or was there continuity? Did the U.S. Communist Party (CPUSA) engage in espionage? What was the real role of the Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War? Why did Stalin not act on the intelligence he received daily before the Nazi invasion of June 1941? Who initiated and controlled the Great Terror of 1936–1938? How and why did the tragedy of the Katyn massacre of Polish officers take place? Was the 1932–1933 famine in the Ukraine and elsewhere a natural disaster or a politically motivated, state-sponsored mass murder? These were among the questions I hoped the *Annals* project would answer.

Answers were, inevitably, not easy to produce. The Central Party Archive alone held some 250 million documents, very few of which might be considered “smoking guns.” Many

essential high-level decisions were never written down; some documents had been destroyed. All this pointed to the need for a long-term program of painstaking research and integration of materials from many disparate sources. Over time, a larger question began to take shape: what was the mechanism by which the Soviet system operated as a whole? Understanding that mechanism eventually became the overriding goal of the *Annals* series. The project continues to this day and has now published over twenty-five separate volumes with many others still under contract.

“Everything should take place slowly and incorrectly so that man doesn’t get a chance to start feeling proud, so that man is sad and perplexed,” Venedikt Erofeev reflected in his masterpiece, *Moskva petushki* (*Moscow to the End of the Line*), through his tragicomic hero, Venechka. I have kept these beautiful words before me over the past sixteen years of working in the Soviet archives, and I remain humble before the immensity of reconstructing the history of the Soviet period. During this time the situation in Russia itself has been perplexing and often sad. The slow and difficult rebuilding of the Russian nation has left many in despair, and while events often seem to have overtaken all predictions, the country finds itself poised in what Alexander Yakovlev evocatively called a “twilight”—the threshold between old and new, past and future, authoritarianism and freedom, between dreams of past glory and the reality of its present difficult economic and geopolitical place at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Though much has changed, much remains unchanged in fundamental outlook, or what the Russians call “mentality,” prompting one Russian scholar

to warn me that total disclosure of the Soviet period is simply not possible at the present time because of a fear of “analogies” between past and present. What analogies? Whose fears? No one can say with certainty.

What’s clear is that Soviet Marxism simply did not work. By 1987 the Soviet Union couldn’t support its army or its social welfare programs; it couldn’t raise the standard of living of its people beyond a certain base level. Pragmatists understood this, and soon after Yeltsin declared the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991, many people, both in Russia and abroad, believed that the country could become a Western-style, liberal democracy with a flourishing economy.

But for many the goal of the Soviet system was not merely to “work”; it was to achieve the greatness and power that Stalin had envisioned and once had been theirs. Lines were soon drawn between the remnants of the Communist Party, who had joined with various nationalist groups, and reformers like Alexander Yakovlev, who developed the concept of perestroika during the Gorbachev period. Yakovlev wished to purge the country of its Bolshevik legacy, atone for the crimes of the Soviet system, and develop a society based on the rule of law. He and others hoped this transformation would be publicly institutionalized through the trial of the Communist Party begun in September 1992. Their efforts did not succeed, and Russia’s equivalent of the Nuremberg trials was abandoned less than midway through the process. Today the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, or KPRF, remains a legal Russian party. No other state-sponsored project of national introspection

and reconciliation has ever taken place. Unlike Germany, de-Nazified after World War II, Russia has never been completely de-Bolshevized. Instead, a widespread effort is underway to “normalize” the Soviet past.

According to provincial church records, Josef Vissarionovich Djugashvili was born in Gori, Georgia, on December 18, 1878 (December 6 by the old calendar), in the aftermath of the disastrous Russo-Turkish War, a time that marked both the height of imperial Russian power and the onset of its twisting pathway into impotence and eventual dissolution. Unlike his mentor, Vladimir Lenin, whose family was bourgeois and well-educated, Josef Djugashvili was born into impoverished circumstances, the son of a shoemaker given to heavy drinking and violent outbursts against both his son and his wife, and who was left by them to die alone in a Tiflis apartment. According to Stalin’s biographer, Dmitri Volkogonov, after 1903, when Stalin became a revolutionary, he may not have seen his mother more than four or five times. He did not attend her funeral in 1937.

Stalin stood five feet four inches tall. Two toes on his left foot were fused. His sallow complexion was heavily marked by the smallpox he suffered as a child. But he possessed penetrating black eyes and the confidence of a man possessed by history. To the end of his life he wore his thick, black hair combed back, revealing a prominent widow’s peak. Whether from childhood accident or disease, he had a slightly withered left arm, which he generally kept less exposed to public view, and his left hand often curled inward like an injured paw.

Stalin's life was marked by contradictions and continuous efforts at self-reinvention. In 1912, Djughashvili became Stalin, the "Man of steel." He became general secretary of the Communist Party in 1922, and then, after Lenin's death in 1924, he and Leon Trotsky struggled for control of the Soviet state. Trotsky was expelled from the party in 1927 and exiled from the Soviet Union in 1929. Stalin, victorious, changed the date of his birth to December 21, 1879, possibly so that his fiftieth jubilee could be celebrated in 1929, after he had firmly consolidated his rule. By 1937, together with Marx and Lenin, the image of this small, pockmarked son of an illiterate shoemaker billowed on giant banners over Moscow's Red Square during parades or floated in the sky on giant blimps; by 1953, the year of his death, his visage was identified in the minds of people all over the world with political terror on an unprecedented scale. As he reinvented himself, he reinvented Russia, transforming his nation into a military power with the ability to reach around the globe. Unlike Hitler, Stalin died in his bed.

The image of Stalin's strength, however, always seemed paired with the fact of his withered limb, and it may not be too great an overstatement to suggest that it was this often invisible hand that held so much of Soviet and world history in its grasp.

Toward the end of 1930, Stalin wrote to Maxim Gorky, the world-famous Russian writer who emigrated to Italy after the revolution, hoping to lure him home:

Things aren't going badly here. In industry and in agriculture the successes are undeniable. Let them, each

and every medieval fossil, caterwaul there in Europe, at the tops of their voices, about the “downfall” of the USSR. They aren’t going to change our plans or our affairs one iota that way. The USSR is going to be a first-rate country with the biggest technically equipped industrial and agricultural production. Socialism is invincible. There’s not going to be any more “*beggarly*” Russia. That’s over! There’s going to be a mighty and plentiful *vanguard* Russia.

Not long after Stalin’s confident vision of “a first-rate country with the biggest technically equipped industrial and agricultural production,” the writer Isaac Babel returned to Moscow from a tour of the famine-stricken Ukraine. He confided to a friend that he had witnessed things impossible to speak or write about—cannibalism and inhuman destitution. After a similar trip, Boris Pasternak wrote to a friend, “There was such inhuman, unimaginable misery, such a terrible disaster, that it began to seem almost abstract, it would not fit within the bounds of consciousness. I fell ill. For an entire year I could not write.” What made it worse was the suspicion that this “inhuman, unimaginable misery” was somehow being engineered or at least managed by the government, by Stalin, for reasons no one could understand. Stalin’s “vanguard Russia” would never be realized.

But the cruelty underlying that vision was not Stalin’s alone. Lenin invoked it in 1922 when he ordered a final assault on the Orthodox Church for the purpose of confiscating its immense wealth. The document issuing this order was

discovered by Richard Pipes in the secret Lenin archive in Moscow; it was published for the first time in 1996 in the Annals of Communism volume *The Unknown Lenin*.

I think that here our enemy [the church] is committing an enormous strategic mistake in trying to drag us into a decisive battle at a time when it is particularly hopeless and particularly disadvantageous for him. On the contrary, for us this moment is not only exceptionally favorable but generally the only moment when we can, with ninety-nine out of a hundred chances of total success, smash the enemy and secure for ourselves an indispensable position for many decades to come. It is precisely now and only now, when in the starving regions people are eating human flesh, and hundreds if not thousands of corpses are littering the roads, that we can (and therefore must) carry out the confiscation of church valuables with the most savage and merciless energy, not stopping [short of] crushing any resistance.

We must, come what may, carry out the confiscation of church valuables in the most decisive and rapid manner, so as to secure for ourselves a fund of several hundred million gold rubles (one must recall the gigantic wealth of some of the monasteries and abbeys). . . . All considerations indicate that later we will be unable to do this, because no other moment except that of desperate hunger will give us a mood among the broad peasant masses that will guarantee us the sympathy of these masses or at least their neutrality.

The state must assert its full power “with the most savage and merciless energy.” It can hope to triumph with “ninety-nine out of a hundred chances of total success” only when “people are eating human flesh” and “hundreds if not thousands of corpses” litter the roads. This is the paw inside the sleeve of Soviet power. Neither personal cruelty nor the desire for revenge explains these actions of the Bolsheviks. Rather, they had been prepared by a way of thinking based upon an ideology that freed Lenin and the Bolshevik state from both the substance and the vocabulary of traditional morality—from the “medieval” fossils caterwauling in Europe, as Stalin put it. But what gave Lenin this freedom paradoxically also gave him no options: “we can (and therefore must),” he writes. Sixteen years after Lenin’s secret decree to confiscate church valuables, at the height of the Great Terror, Andrei Vyshinsky, procurator of the Soviet Union and later ambassador to the United Nations, described his recent inspection tour of various camps in the gulag. In a 1938 memorandum to Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the NKVD (the KGB at the time), he wrote:

Among the prisoners there are some so ragged and lice-ridden that they pose a sanitary danger to the rest. These prisoners have deteriorated to the point of losing any resemblance to human beings. Lacking food . . . they collect orts [refuse] and, according to some prisoners, eat rats and dogs.

Vyshinsky quotes the chief procurator of the Bamlag camp:

“In the infirmary, there are prisoners lying naked on long bunks, literally packed like sardines in a barrel. They are not taken to the bathhouse for weeks owing to the lack of underwear and bedsheets. In some rooms, women are lying on the bunks in the same room as men. A syphilis patient lies side by side with a tubercular patient. In a common room, there are patients with erysipelas (infectious) packed with stomach patients. . . . Those who arrive have no underwear, nothing but rags. The terrible thing is that there is not a single change of underwear, boots, or clothes in the Bamlag. Their bodies are covered with scabs, but they do not take a bath, because they are not provided with underwear. Their tatters are full of hundreds of lice. There is no soap. Many have nothing to put on to go out to the bathroom. . . . They resemble humans or, more likely, savages, or people of the Stone Age. . . . And new trainloads of people without clothes keep coming, and people go on the road barefoot, unclothed, and we have minus twenty to minus fifty degrees centigrade here.”

These people only “resemble humans”; they are “savages, or people of the Stone Age.” A member of the Central Committee, Vyshinsky was able to put into words what Isaac Babel could not and concludes that “somebody—obviously hostile—is arranging for people to die en route and to die upon arrival.” It could not occur to him that it was the system itself that was producing this horror. Belief in the ideology was so strong that, like Yezhov in 1940, it was inconceivable that the party itself, rather than hostile enemies, could have produced these results. The great experiment

of “progressive humanity”—to create a vanguard nation according to scientific laws of dialectical materialism and become a “first-rate country”—could fail only as a result of enemies from without; as a consequence, the system created endless waves of such enemies and drove numberless masses to destitution and death.

In October 1952, Stalin called in the head of the security services and the interrogators who had failed to make significant progress in obtaining confessions in the so-called “Doctors’ Plot.” Many doctors were arrested and tortured when Stalin claimed that the Jews among them had led a conspiracy to murder Politburo leaders. After Stalin’s death, the Soviet government repudiated the “plot,” blaming it on renegade security officers and releasing the doctors from prison. At the 1952 meeting, Stalin demanded that the interrogators beat the physicians:

“Beat them!”—[Stalin] demanded from us, declaring: “What are you? Do you want to be more humanistic than Lenin who ordered Dzerzhinsky to throw Savinkov out a window?”

They did as Stalin demanded, and one interrogator stated after Stalin’s death that during a torture session the elderly Dr. Vasilenko “lost his entire human aspect” begging for mercy. Days and nights of physical and mental torture, sleeplessness and humiliation had reduced him to one of those Vyshinsky observed in the gulag in 1938—literally a nonperson.

Exercising “the most savage and merciless energy” against those who have been reduced to “nonpeople” or creatures

from the Stone Age was possible once they were identified as enemies. This process of identification was not simple, but once accomplished it was lethal and irreversible. The mechanism of this process lies at the heart of the Stalinist state. It fused a way of thinking, a way of seeing, with a set of powerful political ideas. At the heart of this way of thinking is Josef Stalin.