

# STALIN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRATIC REFORM-I

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*[It appears from archival materials that Stalin seriously tried to reform the Soviet Constitution with the avowed objective of introducing general election-based multi-party system. But the first secretaries, having vested interests in the existing system and nomination method foiled his endeavours. This article outlines Joseph Stalin's attempts, from the 1930s until his death, to democratise Soviet Union. In many places research notes as they are, are fragmented, leaving much to read between the lines.]*

This statement, and the article, will astonish many, an outrage some. This story is well known in Russia, where respect for, even admiration of Stalin is so high and the notion of Stalin as Democrat got wide currencies in recent years. However, this story and the facts that sustain it are virtually unknown outside Russia.

The Khrushchevite interpretation of Stalin as power-hungry dictator, betrayer of Lenin, needs of the Communist Party's nomenklatura in the 1950s is well known. But it shows close similarities, and canonical discourse on Stalin inherited from the Cold War.

It also suits the Trotskyists' need to argue that the defeat of Trotsky, the "true revolutionary" in the hand of a dictator who, it is assumed, violated every principle for which the revolution had.

The view of Stalin outlined in this essay is compatible with a number of otherwise Anti-revisionist and post-Maoist communist interpretations of Soviet history that sees Stalin as a saviour, heir to Lenin's legacy. Meanwhile, many Russian nationalists, while hardly would like to be called communists respect Stalin as the figure most responsible for the establishment of Russia as a major power. Stalin is a foundational figure for both, albeit in very different ways. This article is no attempt to "rehabilitate" Stalin.

During the period with which this essay is concerned, the Stalin leadership was concerned with the governance of the state, and to foster inner-party democracy as well. This important and re-study, and this essay does not centrally address it. However the concept of "democracy" is under different meaning in the context of a democratic-centralist party of voluntary members than in basis of political agreement can be presupposed.

This article draws upon primary sources whenever possible. But it relies most heavily on historians who have access to unpublished or recently-published documents from Soviet archives. A great many others remain "classified," including much of Stalin's personal archive, the pre-trial, investigative materials relating to the military purges or "Tukhachevskii Affair" of 1937.

With the beginning of perestroika, one of the slogans of which was 'glasnost'... was liquidated. Its holdings began to be relocated in various public archives completed.

Without any publicity or explanation of any kind in 1996 the most important, pivotal material was hidden away in the archive of the President of the Russian Federation. Soon it permitted the resurrection of one of the two old and very shabby myths.

By these myths Zhukov means “Stalin the villain,” and “Stalin the great leader.” But both schools are well represented in Independent States.

One of Zhukov’s books, and the basis of much of this article, is titled ‘Inoy Stalin’—from either myth, closer to the truth, based upon recently declassified archival documents. Only rarely does Zhukov use secondary cites unpublished archival material, or archival documents only recently declassified and published.

Zhukov ends his Introduction with these words : ‘I make no claim to finality or incontrovertibility. I attempt only one task: to try to reconstruct the past, once well known, but now intentionally forgotten’. Following Zhukov, this article also attempts to steer clear of both myths.

Under such conditions all conclusions must remain tentative. The research this article summarises has important consequences for those who concern analysis of history, including of the history of the Soviet Union.

The Cold War-Khrushchevite paradigm has been the prevailing view of the history reported on here which can contribute towards a “clearing of the ground,” a “beginning all over again finally emerges will also have great meaning for the Marxist project of understanding the world of a classless society of social and economic justice”.

### **A New Constitution**

In December 1936 the Extraordinary 8th Congress of Soviets approved the draft of the constitution for secret ballot and contested elections. (Zhukov, Inoy 307-9)

Candidates were to be allowed not only from the Bolshevik Party-called the All-Union that time-but from other citizens’ groups as well, based on residence, affiliation (such as organisations). This last provision was never put into effect. Contested elections were never held.

The democratic aspects of the Constitution were inserted at the express insistence of Stalin’s closest supporters in the Politburo of the Bolshevik Party. Stalin fought tenaciously to keep them and they, yielded only when confronted by the complete refusal by the Party’s Central Committee’s discovery of serious conspiracies, in collaboration with Japanese and German fascism, to overthrow the soviet regime.

In January 1935 the Politburo assigned the task of outlining the contents of a new constitution, some months later, returned with a suggestion for open, uncontested elections. Almost immediately Stalin expressed his disagreement with Yenukidze’s proposal, insisting upon secret elections. (Zhukov)

Stalin made this disagreement public in a dramatic manner in a March 1936 interview with Howard. Stalin declared that the Soviet constitution would guarantee that all voting would be on an equal basis, with a peasant vote counting as much as that of a worker's on a territorial basis according to status (as during Czarist times) or place of employment; and direct—all Soviets themselves, not indirectly by representatives. (Stalin-Howard Interview; Zhukov), To quotes Stalin : “We shall probably adopt our new constitution at the end of this year. The commission is working and should finish its labors soon. As has been announced already, according to the new constitution election would be universal, equal, direct, and secret.” (Stalin-Howard Interview 13) Most important, Stalin declared that all elections would be contested.

One may be puzzled by the fact that only one party will come forward at elections. “Evidently, candidates will be put forward not only by the Communist Party organizations. And we have hundreds of them. We have no contending parties any more than contending against a working class which is exploited by the capitalists. Our society consists of workers, peasants, intellectuals. Each of these strata may have its special interest, numerous public organisations that exist.” (13-14)

Different citizens' organisations would be able to set forth candidates to run against the communists. Citizens would cross off the names of all candidates except those they wished. He also stressed the importance of contested elections in fighting bureaucracy.

“You think that there will be no election contests. But there will be, and I foresee very lively few institutions in our country which work badly. Cases occur when this or that local government...the multifarious and growing requirements of the toilers of town and country. Have you built a improved housing conditions? Are you a bureaucrat? Have you helped to make our labor more effective. Such will be the criteria with which millions of electors will measure the fitness of candidates, their names from candidates' lists, and promote and nominate the best. Yes, election campaigns conducted around numerous, very acute problems, principally of a practical nature, of first class new electoral system will tighten up all institutions and organizations and compel them to improve their work. Universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage in the USSR. will be a whip in the organs of government which work badly. In my opinion our new Soviet constitution will be the model in the world.”

From this point on, Stalin and his closest Politburo associates Vyache-slav Molotov supported contested elections in all discussions within the Party leadership. (Zhukov, Inoy 207-10)

Stalin also insisted that many Soviet citizens who had been deprived of the franchise, members of former exploiting classes such as former landlords, and those who had fought against war of 1918-1921, known as “White Guardists”, as well as those convicted of certain crimes be allowed to vote.

These electoral reforms would have been unnecessary unless the Stalin leadership wanted Soviet Union was governed. They wanted to get the Communist Party out of the business of direct governance.

During the Russian Revolution and the critical years that followed, the USSR had seen hierarchy of Soviets (councils), from local to national level, with the Supreme Soviet as the Council (= soviet) of People's Commissars as the executive body, and the Chairman of this Council in reality, at every level, choice of these officials had always been in the hands of the Bolsheviks direct nomination by Party leaders, called "cooptation", was also common.

To the Bolsheviks, this had made sense. It was the form that the dictatorship of the proletariat influenced policy, historical conditions of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary Soviet Union. Under the New Economic Policy skills of former and current exploiters were needed. But they had to be used only to serve socialism. They were not to be permitted to rebuild capitalist relationships beyond certain level.

Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s the Bolshevik Party recruited aggressively, most Party members were workers and a high percentage of workers were in the Party. This attempts at political education took place at the same time as the tremendous upheavals of the industrialisation, and largely forced collectivisation of individual farms into collective (Bolshevik leadership was both sincere in its attempt to "proletarianize" their Party).

Stalin and his supporters on the Politburo gave a number of reasons for wanting to democratise the constitution. The reasons reflected the Stalin leadership's belief that a new state of socialism had been reached.

Most peasants were in collective farms. With fewer individual peasant farms that the peasants no longer constituted a separate socio-economic class.

Stalin argued that, with the rapid growth of Soviet industry, and especially with the power through the Bolshevik Party, the word "proletariat" was no longer accurate. "Proletariat", working class under capitalist exploitation, or working under capitalist-type relations of production in first dozen years of the Soviet Union, especially under the NEP. But with direct exploitation now abolished, the working class should no longer be called the "proletariat."

According to this view, exploiters of labour no longer existed. Workers, now running the govt. through the Bolshevik Party, were no longer like the classic "proletariat". Therefore, the "dictatorship of the proletariat was no longer an adequate concept. These new conditions called for a new kind of state. (Zhukov, Inoy).

### **The Anti-Bureaucracy Struggle**

The Stalin's leadership was also concerned about the Party's role in this new stage of a fight against "bureau-cratism" with great vigour as early as his Report to the 17th Party

Congress and others called the new electoral system a “weapon against bureaucratization.”

Party leaders controlled the government both by determining who entered the Soviets and oversee or review over what the government ministries did. Speaking at the 17th Congress of Soviet party he said that secret elections “will strike with great force against bureaucratic elements but Yenukidze’s report had not recommended, or even mentioned, secret elections and the widening of 17th PC”. (Zhukov, Inoy 124)

Government ministers and their staffs had to know something about the affairs in production. This meant education, usually technical education, in their field, their careers by advancement through Party positions alone. No technical expertise was needed but political criteria were required. These Party officials exercised control,...but theory could not make them skilled at supervision. (Stalin-Howard Interview; Zhukov, Inoy 3)

This is, apparently, what the Stalin leadership meant by the term “bureaucratism.” Those as, indeed, all Marxists did — they believed it was not inevitable. Rather, they thought that role of the Party in socialist society.

The concept of democracy that Stalin and his supporters in the Party leadership wished would necessarily involve a qualitative change in the societal role of the Bolshevik Party.

Those documents that were accessible to researchers did allow readers to understand...that already determined attempts were being undertaken to separate the Party from the state and to limit its role in the life of the country. (Zhukov, Inoy 8)

Stalin and his supporters continued this struggle against opposition from other elements in the Bolshevik Party diminishing chances for success, until Stalin died in March 1953. Lavrentii Beria’s determination seems to be the real reason Khrushchev and others murdered him, either judicially, by trial on or — as much evidence suggests — through literal murder, the previous June.

Article 3 of the 1936 Constitution reads, “In the U.S.S.R. all power belongs to the workers represented by the Soviets of Working People’s Deputies. The Communist Party is mentioned in helping working people in their struggle to strengthen and develop the socialist system and is to lead working people, both public and state. That is, the Party was to lead organizations, but not the organs of the state. (1936 Constitution; Zhukov, Inoy 29-30)

Stalin seems to have believed that, once the Party was out of direct control over society, the Party would revert to its essential function of winning people to the ideals of communism. This would mean the end of cushy sinecure-type jobs, and a reversion to the style of hard work that characterised the Bolsheviks during the Tsarist period, the Revolution and Civil War, the period of crash industrialisation and collectivisation. During these periods Party membership, for most often among non-Party members, many of whom were hostile to the Bolsheviks.

Stalin insisted that Communists should be hard-working, educated people, able to make the creation of a communist society. Stalin himself was an indefatigable student.

To summarise, the evidence suggests that Stalin intended the new electoral system to be liberal and democratic.

Make sure that only technically trained people led, in production and in Soviet society at large. Stop the degeneration of the Bolshevik Party, and return Party members, especially leaders, to political and moral leadership, by example and persuasion, to the rest of society; Strengthen the Party's mass work; Win the support of the country's citizens behind the government; Create the basis for a classless, communist society.

### **Stalin's Defeat**

During 1935, under the aegis of Andrei Vyshinski, Chief Prosecutor of the USSR, many communists were imprisoned, and-most significantly were deprived of the franchise. But former kulaks, richer farmers who were the main target of collectivisation, and of those who were resisting collectivisation in some way, were freed. Vyshinsky severely criticised the NKVD (People's Affairs, including internal security) for "a series of the crudest errors and miscalculations" from Leningrad after the December 1934 assassination of Kirov. The enfranchised population expanded by the time had reason to feel that State and Party had treated them unfairly. (Thurston 69; Zhukov, KP No Nov. 19 02; Zhukov, Inoy 187; Zhukov, "Repressii" 7)

Stalin's original proposal for the new constitution had not included contested elections as revealed in interview with Roy Howard on March 1, 1936. At the June 1937 Central Committee Plenum Yakovlev together with Stalin, worked most closely on the draft of the new constitution (cf. Zhukov, Inoy) for contested elections was made by Stalin himself. This suggestion seems to have met with wide opposition from the regional Party leaders, the First Secretaries, or "partocracy," as Zhukov calls them. Not even the nominal praise or support for Stalin's statement about contested elections—Pravda carried one article only, on March 10.

From all this Zhukov concludes:

This could mean only one thing. Not only the 'broad leadership' [the regional First Secretaries, Central Committee apparatus, Agitprop under Stetskii and Tal, did not accept Stalin's innovation as a purely formal manner, contested elections, dangerous to many, which, as followed from those who underscore, directly threatened the positions and real power of the First Secretaries-the central communist parties, the regional, city, and area committees. (Inoy 211)

The Party First Secretaries held Party offices, from which they could not be removed by Soviets they might enter. But the immense local power they held stemmed mainly from the Party's economy and state apparatus-kolkhoz, factory, education, military. The new electoral system of their automatic positions as delegates to the Soviets, and of their

ability to simply choose themselves or of “their” candidates (the Party candidates) in elections to the Soviets would be out of work. A First Secretary whose candidates were defeated at the polls by non-Party candidates would have no ties to the masses. During the campaigns, opposition candidates were sure to make campaign issues—authoritarianism, or incompetence they observed among Party officials. Defeated candidates would have shown up to have serious weaknesses as communists, and this would probably lead to their being defeated. (Inoy 226; cf. Getty, “Excesses” 122-3)

Senior Party leaders were usually Party members of many years’ standing, veterans of the times, the Revolution, the Civil War, and collectivisation, when to be a communist was fraught with little formal education. Unlike Stalin, Kirov or Beria, it seems that most of them were unwilling through self-education. (Mukhin, *Ubiystvo* 37; Dimitrov 33-4; Stalin, *Zastol’nye* 235-6).

All of these men were long-time supporters of Stalin’s policies. They had implemented peasantry, during which hundreds of thousands had been deported. During 1932-33 many people, died by a famine that had been real rather than “man-made,” but one made more severe for the people’s expropriation of grain to feed the workers in the cities, or in armed peasant rebellions (which These Party leaders had been in charge of crash industrialisation, again under harsh conditions and medical care, low pay and few goods to buy with it. (Tauger; Anderson S Silver; Zhukov, KP)

Now they faced elections in which those formerly deprived of the franchise because of these Soviet policies would suddenly have the right to vote restored. It’s likely that they feared candidates, or against any Bolshevik candidate. If so, they stood to be demoted, or worse. They would lose position, or-at worst-some kind of job. The new “Stalin” Constitution guaranteed every Soviet citizen with medical care, pensions, education, etc. But these men (virtually all were men) were used to believe that they were threatened by defeat of their candidates at the polls. (Zhukov, KP Nov. 13 02; 1936 Const)

Plans for the new constitution and elections had been outlined during the June 1936 Plenum. The de-legates unanimously approved the draft Constitution. But none of them spoke up in favour of it; service to a Stalin proposal certainly indicated “latent opposition from the broad leadership.” (Zhukov, Inoy 232, 236; “Repressii” 10-11)

During the 8th All-Russian Congress of Soviets meeting in November-December 1936 Stalin stressed on the value of widening the franchise and of secret and contested elections. In the spirit of Stalin’s idea the Congress again stressed the beneficial effect, for the Party, of permitting non-communist candidates for govt.

‘This system...cannot but strike against those who have become bureaucratized, alienated from the masses, the promotion of new forces ... must come forth to replace backward or bureaucratized system with the new form of elections, the election of enemy elements is possible. But even this danger, in the long run will help us, insofar as it will serve as a lash to those organizations that need it, and to [Party]’ (Zhukov, “Repressii” 15).

Stalin himself put it even more strongly:

“Some say that this is dangerous, since elements hostile to Soviet power could sneak into the power literally-White Guardists, kulaks, priests, and so on. But really, what is there to fear? For one thing, not all former kulaks, White Guardists, and priests are hostile to Soviet system. Here and there elected hostile forces, this will mean that our agitational work which is poorly organized deserved this disgrace.” (Zhukov, Inoy 293; Stalin, “Draft”)

Once again the First Secretaries showed tacit hostility. The December 1936 Central Committee meeting overlapped with the Congress, met on December 4th. But there was virtually no discussion of the Constitution. Yezhov’s report, “On Trotskyite and Right Anti-Soviet Organizations,” got major concerns. (“Fragmenty” 4-5; Zhukov, Inoy 310-11).

On December 5, 1936 the Congress approved the draft of the new Constitution. But there instead, the delegates-Party leaders—had emphasised the threats from enemies, foreign and local speeches of approval for the Constitution, which was the main topic reported on by Stalin, Molotov, the delegates virtually ignored it. A Commission was set up for further study of the contested elections. (Zhukov, Inoy 294; 298; 309)

The international situation was indeed tense. Victory for fascism in the Spanish Civil war! The Soviet Union was surrounded by hostile powers. By the second half of the 1930s all of these authoritarian, militaristic, anti-communist and anti-Soviet regimes were active. In October 1936 the “Berlin-Rome Axis” was formed by Hitler and Mussolini. A month later, Japan joined Italy to form the “Anti-Comintern Pact.” Soviet efforts at military alliances against Nazi Germany were ignored by capitals of the West. (Zhukov, Inoy 285-309).

While the Congress was attending to the new Constitution, the Soviet leadership was busy with Moscow Trials. Zinoviev and Kamenev had gone on trial along with some others in August 1936. Those involved some of the major followers of Trotsky, led by Yuri Piatakov.

The February-March 1937 Central Committee Plenum dramatised the contradiction within the party against internal enemies, and the need to prepare for secret, contested elections under the new constitution became urgent as gradual discovery of more and more groups conspiring to overthrow the Soviet government demanded truly democratic elections to the government, and to improve inner-party democracy—a theme, closest to Stalin in the Politburo—required the opposite: openness to criticism and self-criticism by rank-and-file Party members, and an end to “cooptation” by First Secretaries.

This Plenum, the longest ever held in the history of the USSR, dragged on for two weeks, not much was published about it until 1992, when the Plenum’s huge transcript began to be published in *Voprosy Istorii* almost four years to complete.



Yezhov's report about the continuing investigations into conspiracies within the country accused Bukharin, who, in loquacious attempts confessed past misdeeds, distanced himself from his current loyalty, managed only to incriminate himself further. (Thurston, 40-42; Getty and N)

After three whole days of this, Zhdanov spoke about the need for greater democracy, invoking the struggle against bureaucracy and the need for closer ties to the masses.

The new electoral system will give a powerful push towards the improvement of the work of Soviet bureaucratic bodies, the liquidation of bureaucratic shortcomings, and deformations in the work of these shortcomings, as you know, are very substantial.

There can be no doubt that Zhdanov, speaking for the Stalin leadership, foresaw real candidates that seriously opposed developments in the Soviet Union. This fact alone is utterly Khrushchevite accounts.

Zhdanov also emphasised, at length, the need to develop democratic norms within the Bolshevik Party, "If we want to win the respect of our Soviet and Party workers to our laws, and the masses-we must guarantee the restructuring [peres-troika] of Party work on the basis of ...inner-party democracy, which is outlined in the bylaws of our Party."

And he enumerated the essential measures, already contained in the draft resolution to his optation; a ban on voting by slates; a guarantee "of the unlimited right for members of the Party candidates and of the unlimited right to criticize these candidates." (Zhukov, Inoy 345)

Molotov replied with a report stressing, once again, the development and strengthening of party opposed the search for "enemies":

"There's no point in searching for people to blame, comrades. If you prefer, all of us here are Party's central institutions and ending with the lowest Party organizations." (Zhukov, Inoy 349)

But those who followed Molotov to the podium ignored his report and continued to harp 'enemies,' of exposing 'wreckers,' and the struggle against 'wrecking.' (352)

Stalin's speech of March 3 was likewise divided, returning at the end to the need to locate incapable Party members and replacing them with new ones.

From the beginning of the discussions Stalin's fears were understandable. It seemed he had run of the unwillingness of the CC members, who heard in the report just what they wanted to hear. Of the 24 persons who took part in the discussions, 15 spoke mainly about "enemies of the party". They spoke with conviction, aggressively, just as they had

after the reports by Zhdanov and Molotov to one-the necessity of searching out “enemies”. And practically none of them recalled Stalin’s shortcomings in the work of Party organisations, about preparation for the elections to the Supreme Soviet.

*(To be concluded)*