Review of Robert Service's Stalin: A Biography–Part One

Harvard University Press, 2005, 715 pages

Fred Williams
2 June 2005

The following is the first part of a two-part article. The second and concluding part *will be posted Friday, June 3.*

In recent years, the covers and inside flaps of most books on Soviet history have contained the inescapable blurb: "based on new material from recently opened Soviet archives." It would be wonderful if these words guaranteed a certain degree of historical accuracy. Unfortunately they do not. Nor does access to new archival documents say much about a historian's ability to create a new synthesis of material that genuinely contributes to a deeper understanding of an historical epoch, event, movement, or individual figure.

Writings on Soviet history have always been politically charged, and they often suffer from the ravages of Stalinism, the ideological battles of the Cold War, the institutional demands of academia (usually negative), and, almost always, from the lack of access to archival material. When Gorbachev declared in 1985 that "glasnost," or openness, would be a vital component of his professed attempts to deepen, accelerate and humanize socialism, a small but significant number of new documents about party history started to appear, under the watchful eye of the Communist Party. Soon, journals and newspapers were captivating their readers with startling new material in issue after issue.

A relatively unknown newspaper, *Arguments and Facts*, saw its circulation grow to 33 million! Entirely new publications came into being to satisfy the insatiable demands of people clamoring for historical truth. The Communist Party, long known for its shameless falsification of history, tried to gain a degree of credibility by opening its archives a bit wider.

In 1989, for instance, its new journal, *Izvestiia [Information] of the Central Committee of the CPSU*, published monthly selections of new documents. Of course, the process was uneven, and there were hard-liners who feared the opening of a Pandora's box. Many of them participated actively in the failed putsch of August 1991. Then, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, an extremely chaotic period ensued with regard to the archives which mirrored the general chaos and uncertainty in post-Soviet society as a whole.

Many curious phenomena could be observed throughout the 1990s. There was the tug-of-war between the old Stalinist minders and the newly emerging "democrats" (such as Yuri Afanasiev or Rudolph Pikhoia). Then the former Central Party Archive in Moscow, which contains the world's richest collection of documents about the history of socialism and revolutionary movements, agreed to provide libraries in the West with copies of its hitherto secret material.

The Hoover Institution in California, for instance, the most anticommunist research center in the world, purchased several million copies of documents about Marxism, the history of Communist parties internationally, individual revolutionists, etc.[1] The commodification of truly priceless documents raised more than a few eyebrows, but the post-Soviet directors of archives were not known for shying away from the cash deals being offered by their American and European counterparts. Most contracts, of course, were concluded well out of the purview of the general public. What this eventually meant for historians everywhere was potential access to an archival embarrassment of riches, but it also brought new responsibilities and possible pitfalls.

One obvious question arose: would access to these archives really be free and unrestricted? Were the ideological and financial constraints of places like Hoover apt to guarantee convenient and affordable access to interested scholars?

Then there is a somewhat more theoretical concern. To put it simply, there is the danger, when confronting a mass of new material, "not to see the forest for the trees." If one does not have a sound theoretical basis for the research one is engaged in, a mass of new details may actually become an impediment to historical judgment. This danger exists for even the most well-intentioned historian. It becomes much more of an issue if one has, going into a major project, a flawed agenda, or a set of erroneous preconceptions. However, even in this instance—even if the historian presents new material within a weak or erroneous conceptual framework—it may be possible to produce a readable book.

There is, however, the deplorable instance of the historian with reactionary ideological conceptions who fails to meet accepted standards of historical research and writing. Unfortunately, Robert Service falls into this last category.

At first, the reader might protest: "How could this be?" Service is a professor of Russian history at St. Antony's College, Oxford University, one of the preeminent universities in the world, with presumably high academic standards. In addition, his new book on Stalin is printed by Harvard University Press, the publishing arm of another highly distinguished university; certainly, such a venerable press has editors and proofreaders who would prevent a shoddy work from appearing under its imprimatur.

Once again, unfortunately this is not so. Let us proceed to a preliminary analysis of Service's new book.

Acknowledgements and stated goals

The list of people whom Service thanks for helping in some aspect of his book is rather imposing. He names more than 50 people: a wide assortment of professors, historians, research specialists, translators, tour guides and editors. Then he lists an equally impressive array of institutes,

© World Socialist Web Site

universities, research centers, libraries, and exotic locales, all of which suggest to the reader that Service has not only traveled far and wide in his research, but benefited from invaluable assistance. Several people, for instance, translated Georgian material for him, and one person even translated a Swedish newspaper article into English. Good enough. Let's see if Service put this generous assistance to good use.

At first glance, the stated goals of the book don't seem to be overly objectionable. Service writes: "The line of influential interpretations of Stalin and his career has remarkable homogeneity in several basic features overdue for challenge. This book is aimed at showing that Stalin was a more dynamic and diverse figure than has conventionally been supposed" [p. x].[2] Hmm... this could easily slip into Stalinist apologetics, but let us see how Service proceeds.

"Stalin was a bureaucrat and a killer; he was also a leader, a writer and editor, a theorist (of sorts), a bit of a poet (when young), a follower of the arts, a family man and even a charmer. The other pressing reason for writing this biography is that the doors of Russian archives have been prised ajar since the late 1980s.... Historians and archivists of the Russian Federation in particular have been doing significant work which has yet to be widely discussed" [Ibid.].

So the tasks are set. Service promises to challenge the as yet unnamed but assuredly influential interpretations of Stalin and his career, and to incorporate new archival material in the process. Daunting goals, which, if accomplished, would make for an admirable book.

Sources

Whenever a new book appears which promises so much, it is always interesting to look at the bibliography to identify newly published sources, particularly those that were unavailable to earlier historians. Although admittedly Service provides only a "Select Bibliography," he does explain the selection principle: it is "confined to works referred to in the notes."

If he is a conscientious historian, and we have few reasons to doubt his credentials at this point, certainly any "new" material would merit a note. And indeed, the bibliography is impressive—it stretches over almost 20 pages and includes Archives, Museums and Unpublished Works; Newspapers and Periodicals; Documentary Collections; Contemporary Works; Memoirs and Diaries; and lastly, Secondary Works. One wonders how Service managed to digest so much material. [The Russians, after all, have an apposite saying: "You can't embrace the unembraceable."] Of course, it could be that he relies on some sources more than others. That would be understandable. Even so, there are some curious omissions.

The key to some of the omissions is on page 6: "Writers in Russia have taken their opportunity. Their forerunner was the Soviet communist dissenter Roy Medvedev, who wrote a denunciation of Stalin in the mid-1960s.... Under Gorbachev there were further attempts to analyse Stalin. Dmitri Volkogonov, while showing that Stalin was a murderous dictator, called for his virtues as an industrialiser and a military leader also to be acknowledged. Later biographers objected to such equivocation, and Edvard Radzinski produced a popular account that focused attention on the psychotic peculiarities of his subject. While adding new factual details, Volkogonov and Radzinski offered nothing in their analyses not already available in the West." Period.

What is missing? From 1992 to 1998, Vadim Rogovin, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, published six volumes devoted to Soviet history from 1923-1940; the seventh and last volume appeared posthumously in 2002. Rogovin offers a vast amount of material which he gathered and analyzed over decades. Robert Service, to his shame, pretends that these works simply do not exist. In his 600 pages of text, there is not a single reference to Rogovin's books. The reason for this omission will become clearer in a few moments.

Of the three figures Service does name, Medvedev is only mentioned six times in the first 400 pages (which take the reader up to World War II). The treatment of Volkogonov is even starker. As Rogovin pointed out in lectures given in the UK, Australia, Germany and the US, Volkogonov united three important strands of the Soviet bureaucracy: the academic (he taught at various institutes), the military (he was a general) and the party bureaucracy (he was a well-vetted Communist Party member).

At the time Volkogonov worked on his trilogy on Stalin (in the 1980s), he was granted unprecedented access to closed archives. Even if one disagreed with Volkogonov's approach as an historian (as this reviewer does), one simply could not ignore the source material he uncovered. Service, however, refers very rarely to Volkogonov's biography of Stalin, and even less so to his biographies of Lenin and Trotsky. Puzzling.

As for Radzinski, Service wisely chooses to ignore his Stalin biography. Radzinski's book reads like a cheap novel, and is notoriously unreliable. What, then, does Service rely on for new source material?

Not surprisingly, since he promises to look closely at Stalin's formative years, Service pays considerable attention to memoirs of people who knew Stalin in childhood or who were in his family circle. Relying on family memoirs is a dangerous game, especially when the family is as dysfunctional as Stalin's apparently was. It becomes particularly irritating, however, when some of the documents Service relies on heavily are the undated, unpublished memoirs of Fedor Alliluev, Stalin's brother-in-law [Nadezhda Allilueva's brother]. And it is only after quoting him more than 15 times that Service mentions, quite nonchalantly, that Fedor Alliluev had a nervous breakdown after the Civil War when Kamo threatened to shoot him. If it is true that Fedor Alliluev never recovered from this breakdown, and we must take Svetlana Allilueva's word for it [in *Twenty Letters to a Friend*], one wonders how wise it is to offer quotations from these memoirs as if they were established fact.

There are other new offerings. Service readily accepts almost anything written by Kaganovich, Molotov, Dimitrov and other members of Stalin's inner circle. While there may be some value in quoting these figures, they were notorious in repeating the foulest falsifications of history, something that became an industry in the Soviet Union from 1924 to 1991. Anything new, therefore, should be treated with great caution and be corroborated if at all possible. This is something Service almost never does. Let us turn, however, to some of the most objectionable aspects of Service's book.

Stalin the intellectual

Service spares no effort in trying to show that Stalin was a major, if underappreciated, intellectual. But his argumentation gets off to an inauspicious start: "He was not an original scholar. Far from it: his few innovations in ideology were crude, dubious developments of Marxism. Sometimes the innovations arose from political self-interest more than intellectual sincerity. But about the genuineness of Stalin's fascination with ideas there can be no doubt. He read voraciously and actively" [p. 6].

There is more. "He was obviously capable of going on to university and had an acute analytical mind"; [p. 42] "He read voraciously" [p. 108]; "he was an excellent editor of Russian-language manuscripts" [p. 115]; "Stalin defended his ideas&SHY;-and it was not he but Lenin who eventually had to amend his position" [p. 128]; "In fact, Stalin was a fluent and thoughtful writer even though he was no stylist" [p. 221]; "He read avidly about Genghis Khan" [p. 322]; "Stalin was an avid reader of books about Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great" [p. 333].

To be fair, Service points out that "Lenin told Maria [his sister] that

© World Socialist Web Site

Stalin was ‘not intelligent’” [p. 191]; one of his major works, On Questions of Leninism, “was indeed a work of codification and little else” [p. 244]; “He knew little German, less English and no French” [p. 245]; “his Marxism lacked epistemological awareness” [p. 245].

After stating that Stalin “not only wrote a chapter in the *Short Course* but also edited the book’s entire text five times” [p. 361], Service does admit that “tendentiousness and mendacity were the book’s hallmarks” [p. 361]. One wonders if Service believes tendentiousness and mendacity to be the hallmarks of an intellectual.

By the time we read, “Stalin was a maestro of historical fabrication, and mere facts would not have inhibited him from inventing a wholly fictional biography” [p. 363], the question arises: what is left of “Stalin the intellectual”?

The question becomes all the more poignant if Stalin is compared to the genuine traditions of the Russian intelligentsia. He does not compare favorably with Belinsky, Herzen, Ogarev, Pisarev, Dobroliubov, Chernyshevsky and many, many others. For the term “intellectual” in Russian implies not only that the person is probably well-educated, certainly well-read and usually productive as a writer, but that he possesses a basic honesty and sense of morality. Stalin had few, if any, of these traits.

Stalin fares no better when compared to leading Marxists outside Russia [Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Mehring, Bebel, Luxemburg], nor does he stack up well against those inside Russia: Plekhanov, Lenin, Trotsky, Lunacharsky, Kamenev and Bukharin, let alone lesser known Bolshevik intellectuals such as Riazanov, Ter-Vaganian, Preobrazhensky, Voronsky, Rakovsky, Ioffe, or Vorovsky. Unfortunately, it is hard to show the true achievements of many of these figures, for when Stalin had them killed in the 1930s the NKVD seized their notes, manuscripts, correspondence, diaries, etc., and usually burned them. Stalin’s “works” suffered no such fate, but one is hard pressed to use them to present Stalin as an intellectual.

Not that Service doesn’t try. Let us take two examples. On page 85, Service writes: “His 1913 booklet *The National Question and Social-Democracy* was to do much to raise his reputation in the party; it solidified his relationship with Lenin, who described him in a letter to the writer Maxim Gorki as ‘the wonderful Georgian.’” Service later devotes five pages [96-100] to an analysis of this work.

Much has been said about Stalin’s 1913 booklet on the national question. In his biography of Bukharin, Stephen Cohen writes: “In January 1913, a Georgian Bolshevik, Iosif Stalin, came to Vienna on Lenin’s instructions to prepare a programmatic article on ‘Marxism and the National Question.’ Bukharin assisted Stalin (who knew no Western languages), a collaboration producing no recorded disagreements between them or Lenin, who approved the final product.”[3]

Service is very touchy about the fact that Stalin had no knowledge of Western languages. [As noted earlier, he even makes it sound on page 245 as though Stalin knew *some* German, which is a conscious deception. Stalin did not have even an elementary reading knowledge of German]. Unlike Cohen, Service does not mention that Bukharin was one of several Bolsheviks assigned to help Stalin gather material from journals such as *Die Neue Zeit*, the German-language theoretical journal which Stalin could not read.

A more extensive and insightful account is given by Trotsky in his unfinished biography of Stalin. Illustration of this point will require a few fairly lengthy quotes, but the reader will hopefully not object:

“*Marxism and the National Problem* is undoubtedly Stalin’s most important—rather, his one and only—theoretical work. On the basis of that single article, which was forty printed pages long, its author is entitled to recognition as an outstanding theoretician. What is rather mystifying is why he did not write anything else of even remotely comparable quality either before or after. The key to the mystery is hidden away in this, that Stalin’s work was wholly inspired by Lenin, written under his unremitting supervisions and edited by him line by line.”[4]

Trotsky then quotes a few line from Lenin’s widow, Krupskaya, and explains their significance:

“‘This time,” recalls Krupskaya, ‘Ilyich talked a lot with Stalin about the national problem, was glad to find a man who was seriously interested in this problem and knew his way about in it. Prior to that Stalin lived approximately two months in Vienna, studying the national problem there, became well acquainted with our Viennese public, with Bukharin, with Troyanovsky.’ Some things were left unsaid. ‘Ilyich talked a lot with Stalin’—that means: he gave him the key ideas, shed light on all their aspects, explained misconceptions, suggested the literature, looked over the first drafts and made corrections...”[5]

Trotsky continues:

“Stalin’s progress on his article is pictured for us with sufficient clarity. At first, leading conversations with Lenin in Cracow, the outlining of the dominating ideas and of the research material. Later Stalin’s journey to Vienna, into the heart of the ‘Austrian school.’ Since he did not know German, Stalin could not cope with his source material. But there was Bukharin, who unquestionably had a head for theory, knew languages, knew the literature of the subject, knew how to use documents. Bukharin, like Troyanovsky, was under instructions from Lenin to help the ‘splendid’ but poorly educated Georgian. Evidently, the selection of the most important quotations was their handiwork. The logical construction of the article, not devoid of pedantry, is due most likely to the influence of Bukharin, who inclined toward professorial ways, in distinction from Lenin, for whom the structure of a composition was determined by its political or polemical interest. Bukharin’s influence did not go beyond that, since on the problem of nationalities he was much closer to Rosa Luxemburg than to Lenin...

“From Vienna Stalin returned with his material to Cracow. Here again came Lenin’s turn, the turn of the attentive and tireless editor. The stamp of his thought and the traces of his pen are readily discoverable on every page. Certain phrases, mechanically incorporated by the author, or certain lines, obviously written in by the editor, seem unexpected or incomprehensible without reference to the corresponding works of Lenin. ‘Not the national but the agrarian problem decides the fate of progress in Russia,’ writes Stalin without any explanations. ‘The national problem is subsidiary to it.’ This correct and profound thought about the relative effect of the agrarian and national problems on the course of the Russian Revolution is entirely Lenin’s and was expounded by him innumerable times during the years of reaction. In Italy and in Germany the struggle for national liberation and unification was at one time the crux of the bourgeois revolution. It was otherwise in Russia, where the dominating nationality, the Great-Russian, did not experience national oppression, but, on the contrary, oppressed others; yet it was none other than the vast peasant mass of the Great-Russians themselves that had experienced the profound oppression of serfdom. Such complex and seriously considered thoughts would never have been expressed by their real author as if in passing, as a generality, without proofs and commentaries.”[6]

Trotsky proceeds to adduce persuasive examples of Lenin’s corrections, which look “like bright patches on dilapidated tatters.” He concludes:

“Stalin did not write like that. On the other hand, throughout the entire work, notwithstanding its numerous angularities, we find no chameleons assuming the hue of rabbits, no underground swallows, no screens made of tears: Lenin had expunged all these seminarist embellishments. The original manuscript with its corrections can, of course, be hidden. But it is impossible to hide the fact that throughout all the years of his imprisonment and exile Stalin produced nothing which even remotely resembles the work he wrote in the course of a few weeks in Vienna and Cracow.”[7]

Sixty-five years after they were written, there is no need to amend any

© World Socialist Web Site

of these lines. And one will find more insights into Stalin's intellectual abilities in these few paragraphs belonging to Trotsky's pen ... than in the 700 pages of Service's book.

Much later in the biography, Service returns to extolling Stalin as an intellectual. He writes: "*Marxism and Problems of Linguistics* has been unjustly ignored.... Stalin wrote the work by himself; and he did nothing without a purpose" [p. 565]. The assertion that Stalin wrote the work by himself comes as a surprise. Certainly a consensus persists among historians that Stalin, who did not even rise to the level of a dilettante in linguistics, was assisted by others in writing these articles. Medvedev, for instance, suggests: "An obvious lack of originality also marked Stalin's long overdue criticism of N. Ya. Marr's school of linguistics. Long before 1950, when Stalin published his articles on linguistics, the ideas he endorsed had been repeatedly argued by Marr's opponents, including Academician V.V. Vinogradov and Professor A.S. Chikobava, who gave Stalin much help in preparing the articles."[8]

In his own biography of Stalin, Isaac Deutscher gives a trenchant assessment of Stalin's foray into linguistics:

"In a series of letters, filling many pages in an enlarged edition of *Pravda*, he attacked the academic school of N.Y. Marr, which had for nearly three decades been the authorized Marxist interpreter of language. Stalin, uninhibited by the scantiness of his own knowledge—he had only the rudiments of one foreign language—expatiated on the philosophy of linguistics, the relationship between language, slang, and dialect, the thought processes of the deaf and dumb, and the single world language that would come into being in a remote future, when mankind would be united in communism."[9]

Oddly enough, Stalin's ruminations on "the single world language" impress Service the most. He is clearly discomforted by the Great-Russian chauvinism unabashedly evinced by Stalin after World War II (and before). He therefore eagerly latches on to these views to prove that Stalin was not a "nationalist," but an underappreciated "Marxist:"

"[T]his fascination with the 'Russian question' did not exclude a concern with communism and globalism. Stalin in fact asserted that eventually national languages would disappear as socialism covered the world. In their place would arise a single language for all humanity, evolving from 'zonal' languages which in turn had arisen from those of particular nations. The widely held notion that Stalin's ideology had turned into an undiluted nationalism cannot be substantiated. He no longer espoused the case for Esperanto. But his current zeal to play up Russia's virtues did not put an end to his Marxist belief that the ultimate stage in world history would bring about a society of post-national globalism" [p. 565].

One wonders if this passage testifies more to Stalin's intellectual impoverishment or Service's incompetence in understanding Marxism.

After a scathing review of Stalin's theoretical errors, Medvedev noted long ago: "If it is possible to speak of a Stalinist stage in the theoretical field, it is one of decline and stagnation."[10] Service would do well to ponder these words rather than create a false image of Stalin as an intellectual.

Service on Lenin

This review will spend little time on what Service says about Lenin in his Stalin biography, because he has produced four volumes on Lenin over the past 20 years, and they should be dealt with separately. Some of the latest claims about Lenin are highly questionable, however, and others are simply outlandish.

On page 158, Service opens a paragraph analyzing the issues that confronted the new Bolshevik regime at the end of 1917 with the sentence: "Yet it was in foreign policy that Lenin most appreciated Stalin." [!!] Anyone remotely familiar with early Soviet foreign policy would be stunned by these words. Lenin had lived in exile for many years prior to the October Revolution of 1917. He knew almost all the leaders of the European parties of Social Democracy. He followed the European press in several languages, and had considerable knowledge of foreign affairs. There are many Bolsheviks with whom Lenin would consult on these issues, but there is no indication, nor could there be, that "it was in foreign policy that Lenin most appreciated Stalin." Service does almost nothing to substantiate his claim.

Whenever Service compares Lenin to Stalin, the latter almost always emerges in a more favorable light. Consider this sentence, describing Stalin's alleged behavior during the Civil War: "...he put Lenin, Kamenev, Zinoviev and Bukharin in the shade by refusing to shirk wartime jeopardy" [p. 165]. This is the first time that the reviewer has ever encountered the suggestion, ridiculous on the face of it, that Lenin (or any other leading Bolshevik at the time) "shirked wartime jeopardy." Need it be said that Lenin led the party during the entire Civil War, and if the war had ended in defeat, Lenin would have been the first to be strung up by victorious reaction? By Service's estimate, however, Lenin shirked wartime jeopardy ... while Stalin led a heroic life at the front.

One thing that must be said is that Service is consistently contemptuous of Lenin throughout his book. At one point, he refers to "Lenin's ragbag of writings, speeches and policies..." [p. 222]. Here, Service's ignorance is only matched by his impudence. His efforts become laughable, however, when he tries to emphasize Stalin's intellectual prowess at the expense of the founder of the Bolshevik Party (and not just Lenin). In the incredible Chapter 9, "Koba and Bolshevism," Service writes: "Scarcely any leading figure in the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party made an original intellectual contribution. Plekhanov, Lenin and Trotski were brilliant synthesizers of the ideas of others—and not all of these others were Marxists" [p. 92]. This statement sets the tone for the rest of the book. But from that point on, Stalin's mediocre writings are inordinately praised, and Lenin's writings are unjustifiably ridiculed.

Service seems particularly determined to debunk Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. Before passing on to an analysis of that work, however, Service describes the only other figure besides Stalin who is consistently praised at Lenin's expense: "Only Bogdanov can be categorized as an original thinker. Bogdanov's amalgam of Marx and Engels with the epistemology of Ernst Mach led him to reject economic determinism in favour of a dynamic interplay of objective and subjective factors in social 'science.' He made a serious contribution through his work on the importance of ideas for the control of societies by their elites across the course of human history. Bogdanov's *Empiriomonism* was a *tour de force*" [p. 92]. As if this isn't enough, in the endnote to this passage, Service assures the reader that "the neglect of [Bogdanov's] ideas has delayed the philosophical demise of fashionable postmodernism" (!!) [p. 617].

In marked contrast is Service's denigration of Lenin's efforts. His vulgarization of Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* is not worth repeating *in toto*. Let the reader consider just one sentence: "He insisted that the mind functioned like a photographic apparatus accurately registering and relaying data of absolute truth" [p. 95]. With this sophomoric understanding of Lenin's book, it is no wonder that Service quickly notes: "Stalin thought Lenin was wasting his time on topics of marginal importance for the Revolution. In a letter to Vladimir Bobrovski from Solvychegodsk in January 1911 he declared the epistemological controversy 'a storm in a tea-cup'" [p. 95]. [A more colloquial translation, by the way, would be "tempest in a tea pot."]

It would be tempting to say that Service agrees with Stalin about the "storm in a tea-cup." After all, he more than once returns to "that crude

© World Socialist Web Site

work on epistemology which Stalin had dismissed when it appeared in 1909" [p. 270]. In one instance, however, he suggests: "[Stalin's] style of thinking can be glimpsed in the jottings he made in the 1939 edition of Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. Stalin studied this dour work on epistemology despite all the practical matters of state he had to decide" [p. 341]. One is prepared to be impressed by Stalin's insightful marginalia, but the notes Service adduces are: "Ha-Ha" and "Oi-mama" [Ibid.].

It doesn't stop there. Amazingly enough, the reader is told somewhat later that Lenin's 1909 book on epistemology almost prevented Soviet scientists from ... inventing the atomic bomb!!! Service writes: "Having recently re-read Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, [Stalin] was convinced that space and time were absolute, unchallengeable concepts in all human endeavours.... Einsteinian physics were therefore to be regarded as a bourgeois mystification. The problem was that such physics were crucial to the completion of the A-bomb project. Beria, caught between wanting to appear as Stalin's ideological apostle and wishing to produce an A-bomb for him, decided he needed clearance from the Boss for the Soviet physicists to use Einstein's equations. Stalin, ever the pragmatist in matters of power, gave his jovial assent: 'Leave them in peace. We can always shoot them later'" [p. 508]. The idiocy of this passage is self-explanatory.

One more example involving Lenin will suffice. Lenin had his first major stroke in May 1922. He spent several months recovering in Gorki, outside Moscow, before returning to work in the fall of 1922. There are many elements of tragedy in the last year-and-a-half of Lenin's life, but Service has little feeling for them. In any case, he uses one document to show that Lenin allegedly had almost lost his mind in the summer of 1922:

"Lenin's capriciousness grew. Exasperated by his comrades' refusal to accede to his preferences on policy, he proposed a total reorganization of the Central Committee. His preposterous suggestion was to sack most of its members. The veterans should be removed forthwith and replaced by Vyacheslav Molotov, Aleksei Rykov and Valeryan Kuibyshev. Out, then, would go not only Stalin but also Trotski, Kamenev and Zinoviev" [p. 193].

If what Service alleges is true, one might conclude that Lenin had made a "preposterous suggestion." The truth is far less sensational. The note to the above passage refers us to an issue of the journal, *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, published in 1991. The main body of the letter which Lenin wrote is as follows:

"12/VII. Comrade Kamenev! In view of the exceedingly auspicious situation conveyed to me yesterday by Stalin regarding the internal life of our CC, I propose to reduce the CC to Molotov, Rykov and Kuibyshev, with Kamenev, Zinoviev and Tomsky as candidates. All the others should rest, and get medical treatment. Allow Stalin to come to the August conference. To delay things would be good, by the way, from a diplomatic standpoint. Yours, Lenin."[11]

Anyone even remotely familiar with living conditions in Moscow during the summer [even in 1922], would understand this letter. If possible, people get out of town, especially in the hot and muggy months of July and August, and spend as much time as possible at country cottages (dachas). In this case, Lenin, who had recently suffered a stroke, is simply suggesting that Central Committee members, many of whom were themselves in ill health after the years of revolution and civil war, should try to get some rest and medical care. He is not proposing "a total [and presumably permanent] reorganization" of the central committee, or to "sack most of its members." Yet Service seems excited by his "discovery" of Lenin's "capriciousness" and "preposterous" behavior. When he reiterates his assessment a few pages later, its purpose becomes clear.

In discussing Lenin's proposal, on January 4, 1923, to remove Stalin from the post of general secretary, Service writes: "His scheme was limited in scope. He was not proposing Stalin's removal from the central party leadership, still less from the party as a whole. Such an idea would have been treated with the disdain which had met his request in July 1922 to dismiss most members of the Central Committee" [p. 209].

Service is trying to soften the impact of Lenin's proposal to remove Stalin as general secretary of the party. He likens it to an imaginary proposal that had been met with equally imaginary disdain six months earlier. This is a dishonest and irresponsible misreading of a document, for which Service has no explanation.

Service on Trotsky

It should come as no surprise that Service's disdain for Lenin is surpassed only by his contempt for Trotsky. At first, Service makes comments that he simply never substantiates, and for good reason. They are lies or deliberate obfuscations. Here are some examples: "Like most other leading Bolsheviks, Stalin disliked and distrusted Trotski..." [p. 159]. (This is false and unsubstantiated). "Lenin distrusted Trotski after the trade union dispute. What also worried him was that Trotski wished to raise the influence of state economic planning in the NEP" [pp.188-89]. (False and unsubstantiated). "Trotski led the military offensive on Kronstadt" [pp. 188]. (False. As Trotsky later explained in a 1938 article, he deliberately appointed Tukhachevsky to lead the military offensive on Kronstadt, since he did not want to be seen as taking revenge on people in Petrograd for supporting Zinoviev and not him in the bitter trade union debate which had recently concluded. As a member of the Central Committee, Trotsky voted for the suppression of the rebellion, hence taking full political responsibility. But he did not personally lead the military assault. Many newly published documents clearly show that Tukhachevsky, as head of the 7th Army, organized military operations.)[12]

Service continues: "Trotski ... [was] the likeliest candidate for Bonaparte" [pp. 167]; and "Too many leaders at the central level and in the provinces had identified Trotski as the Bonaparte-like figure who might lead the armed forces against the Revolution's main objectives" [p. 213].

These sentences are odd, because the actual Bonapartist figure was Stalin, but Service stubbornly insists that the most likely candidate was ... Trotsky. And he is strangely reticent in naming the "too many leaders at the central level and in the provinces" who allegedly feared Trotsky's "Bonapartism."

There are other statements which ascribe some of Stalin's negative traits to Trotsky: "Only Trotski with his demands for political commissars to be shot alongside army officers if unsanctioned retreats occurred was remotely near to him in bloodthirstiness—and Trotski also introduced the Roman policy of decimating regiments which failed to carry out higher commands" [p. 171]. Both of these issues have been dealt with at length by reliable sources. It is curious that Service does not substantiate these charges, but simply states them as fact.

One more example: "... and, still more than Trotski, [Stalin] had a tendency to regard anyone who failed to show him respect as an enemy of the people" [p. 173]. Once again, while the statement may be true of Stalin, especially in the 1930s, Service does not provide a single example where Trotsky regarded "anyone who failed to show him respect as an enemy of the people."

Many historians have shown that Lenin and Trotsky were drawing much more closely together in their negative assessment of Stalin in the last two years of Lenin's political life, and that a serious rift developed between

© World Socialist Web Site

Lenin and Stalin in 1923. Two books worth studying on this question are Moshe Lewin's *Lenin's Last Struggle* and R.V. Daniels' *Conscience of the Revolution*. Indeed, Moshe Lewin has recently deepened this analysis in *The Soviet Century*.

Service adopts quite another view. Not long after a poor analysis of the debate over the monopoly of foreign trade [p. 193], Service makes the astonishing assertion: "Stalin and Lenin agreed about basic politics.... They had also reached an implicit agreement that Stalin had an important job in the central party apparatus to block the advance of the Trotskyists and tighten the whole administrative order" [p. 195]. Unfortunately, Service does not and cannot offer a single document substantiating these claims. To suggest that Lenin was depending on Stalin to "block the advance of the Trotskyists" is a new form of falsification.

There are equally galling statements. On page 171, Service writes: "Trotski, who had joined the Bolsheviks late in his career, paid little attention to the party..." Here Service can only hope that no one is familiar with Trotsky's writings. If one examines *The New Course* alone, one is struck by the careful thought Trotsky devotes to the problems of building the party, the role of inner-party democracy, the problem of generations in the party, etc.

Later on, when attempting to show Stalin's "modesty," Service writes: "Stalin even refused to sanction a complete edition of his collected works (whereas Trotski had already published twenty-one volumes of his writings before falling from grace)" [p. 357]. First of all, Trotsky had published 12, not 21, volumes of his *Works* before Stalin stopped them; three of them appeared in two parts, for a total of 15 books. The plan for this series projected 23 volumes, of which volume XVIII, prepared but never published, is entitled, "On Party Themes." Strange that Trotsky, who had already written hundreds of pages on the party by 1927, "paid little attention to the party..."

One larger question, Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution and Stalin's theory of socialism in one country, will be dealt with in the section on "Service and intellectual history."

To be continued

Notes:

1. For one almost surreal description of these transactions, see: Bernard Butcher's article, "Cracking the Kremlin Files,".
2. All references to Service's book are to the following edition: Robert Service, *Stalin. A Biography*, Harvard University Press, 2005. In all direct citations I retain Service's spelling, hence the commingling of Trotski/Trotsky and other versions of Russian names, as well as English and American variants of commonly used words.
3. Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution. A Political Biography, 1888-1938*, Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 21.
4. Leon Trotsky, *Stalin. An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence*, tr. by Charles Malamuth, NY: Stein and Day, 1970, p. 157.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., pp. 157-58.
7. Ibid., p. 159.
8. Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge. The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, pp. 822-23.
9. Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin. A Political Biography*, Second Edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 615.
10. Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge. The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, p. 827. The entire chapter, "The Impact of Stalinism on Science and Art," is a useful survey of Stalin's intellectual blunders.
11. Note 146, "Izvestiia TsK KPSS," April 1991, no. 4, p. 188.
12. See: Leon Trotsky, "More on the Suppression of Kronstadt. July 6, 1938," in: V.I. Lenin & Leon Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, NY: Monad Press, 1979, pp. 95-97.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site