

# Stalin and the Struggle for Democratic Reform (Part Two)

Grover Furr



"Famous People of the Land of Soviets"  
By Vasilii Efanov

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## During the War

Toward the end of the Second World War Stalin and his supporters on the Politburo made one more attempt to get the Bolshevik Party out of direct control over the Soviet government. Here is how Yuri Zhukov describes this incident:

In January 1944 . . . for the first time during the war there was a joint convocation of both the [Central Committee] Plenum and a session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. Molotov and Malenkov prepared a draft of a Central Committee decree according to which the Party would be legally distanced from power. It would retain only agitation and propaganda; no one would deprive it of these normal party matters, and participation in the

selection of cadres, which was also completely natural. *But it simply forbade the Party from interfering in economics and the working of the organs of the state.* Stalin read the draft, changed six words in it, and wrote "Agreed" on it. What happened next remains a mystery. . . .

. . . This was a new attempt to lead the Party into the State stable, retaining for it only those functions it really fulfilled during the war. The draft has five signatures: Molotov, Malenkov, Stalin, Khrushchev, Andreev. There was no stenographic record, and we can only guess how others voted. Alas, even the all-powerful State Committee for Defense, with all four members in the Politburo of the Central Committee, could not shatter the old order of things. *This proves yet one more time that Stalin never had the power that both anti-Stalinists and Stalinists attribute to him.* (Zhukov, Kul'tovaia; emphasis added)[1](#)

We do not know how this "distancing" of the Party from economics and the state was to have been effected. Presumably, though, some other method of staffing the state organs would have been envisaged. Would this have meant a return to elections as specified in the 1936 Constitution?

Whatever the answers to these questions, it seems likely that the Central Committee, made up largely of Party First Secretaries, once again rebuffed the Stalin leadership's plans for fundamental change in the Soviet system. In his "Secret Speech" Khrushchev denied that any such Plenum had taken place at all! Since most of the C.C. members in the audience had to have known this was a lie, it may be that the purpose of this lie was to tacitly signal them that this dangerous move against their power was now formally "buried."

## After the War

As we've seen, Stalin believed an important problem for both the USSR and the Bolshevik Party was the situation of "dual power." The Party, not the government, really ruled society. Increasingly, the Party officials exercised control by oversight, or supervision, rather than as managers of production.

Getting the party out of direct control of the state would serve a number of purposes:

- It would institute the 1936 Constitution and strengthen the ties of the Soviet population to the Soviet state.
- It would return the running of state institutions to those who were really qualified.
- It would save the Party from degenerating -- in its upper levels -- into a caste of parasitical and corrupt careerists.

Until the war the Politburo had met at least twice a week. In May 1941 Stalin became the official head of the Soviet state, replacing Molotov as Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, or Sovnarkom, the official executive body of the government of the USSR.

But during the war the USSR was in reality run neither by this body nor by the Party, but by the State Committee for Defense composed of Stalin and three of his closest

associates. During the war the Central Committee held only one Plenum, while not only during the war, but also after it, the Politburo met rarely. According to Pyzhikov, "the Politburo, for all practical purposes, did not function." Soviet dissident Zhores Medvedev believes that the Politburo met only 6 times in 1950, 5 times in 1951, and 4 times in 1952.<sup>2</sup> That is, Stalin took the Politburo out of the running of the state (Pyzhikov, 100; Medvedev, *Sekretnyi*).

Stalin seems to have neglected his role as head of the Party. CC Plenums became rare. No Party Congress was held for the thirteen years between 1939 and 1952. After the war Stalin signed joint decisions of the Party and government simply as Chairman of the Council of Ministers (the renamed Council of Peoples' Commissars), leaving one of the other Party secretaries, Zhdanov or Malenkov, to sign on behalf of the Party (Pyzhikov 100)

The Party's authority remained high. But perhaps this was so only because Stalin was still General Secretary of the Party. He was the only Allied leader to remain in office after the war: Roosevelt had died, and Churchill was voted out of office in 1945. It is no exaggeration to say that, among working people, Stalin was the most famous, and most respected, person in the world. The communist movement he headed was the hope of hundreds of millions of people. It had expanded tremendously as a result of the victory over fascism. Stalin's great prestige as head of state gave authority to the Party apparatus (Mukhin, *Ubiystvo* 622; Ch. 13 *passim*).

Stalin's actions suggest that he was still trying to remove the Party from direct rule over the state. However, if this was so he went about it cautiously. Perhaps we can infer some reasons for this caution:

- Showing an unwarranted lack of trust in the Party would be a bad example to the other countries of the world, where the Communist Parties had not seized power yet.
- The Central Committee and *nomenklatura* would oppose it, as they had before the war.

Therefore, this would have to be done quietly, with as little disruption as possible. (Mukhin, *Ubiystvo* 611)

### **The 1947 Draft of the Party Program**

There is probably more to the Stalin leadership's plans for democratization than we know about today. Aleksandr Pyzhikov, a very anti-communist and anti-Stalin historian, has quoted tantalizing selections of a 1947 draft of a Party program to promote further democracy and egalitarianism in the USSR. This fascinating and hitherto utterly unknown plan has never been published and is, evidently, not yet available to other researchers.

Here is the section quoted verbatim by Pyzhikov:

The development of socialist democracy on the basis of the completion of the construction of a classless socialist society will increasingly convert the dictatorship of the proletariat into the dictatorship of the Soviet people. As each member of the whole population is gradually drawn into the day

to day management of state affairs, the growth of the population's communist consciousness and culture, and the development of socialist democracy will lead to the progressive dying out of forms of compulsion in the dictatorship of the Soviet people, and to a progressive replacement of measures of compulsion by the influence of public opinion, to a progressive narrowing of the political functions of the state, and to the conversion of the state into, in the main, an organ of the management of the economic life of society.

Pyzhikov summarizes other sections of this unpublished document as follows:

In particular [the draft] concerned the development of the democratization of the Soviet order. This plan recognized as essential a universal process of drawing workers into the running of the state, into daily active state and social activity on the basis of a steady development of the cultural level of the masses and a maximal simplification of the functions of state management. It proposed in practice to proceed to the unification of productive work with participation in the management of state affairs, with the transition to the successive carrying out of the functions of [state] management by all working people. It also expatiated upon the idea of the introduction of direct legislative activity by the people, for which the following were considered essential:

- a) to implement universal voting and decision-making on the majority of the most important questions of governmental life in both the social and economic spheres, as well as in questions of living conditions and cultural development;
- b) to widely develop legislative initiative from below, by means of granting to social organizations the rights to submit to the Supreme Soviet proposals for new legislation;
- c) to confirm the right of citizens and social organizations to directly submit proposals to the Supreme Soviet on the most important questions of international and internal policy.

Nor was the principle of election of managers ignored. The plan of the Party program raised the issue of the realization, according to the degree of development towards communism, of *the selection of all responsible members of the state apparatus by election*, of changes in the functioning of a series of state organs in the direction of converting them increasingly into institutions in charge of accounting and supervision of the economy as a whole. For this the maximum possible development of independent voluntary organizations was seen as important. Attention was paid to the strengthening of the significance of social opinion in the realization of the communist transformation of the population's consciousness, of the development, on the basis of socialist democracy among the broad popular masses, of "socialist citizenship," "the heroism of work," and "valor of the Red Army." [emphasis added, GF]

Again according to Pyzhikov, Zhdanov reported on the work of the planning commission at the February 1947 Central Committee Plenum. He proposed convening the 19th Party Congress at the end of 1947 or 1948. He also set forth a plan for a simplified order of convocations of party conferences once a year, with "compulsory

renewal" of not less than one-sixth of the membership of the Central Committee per year. If put into effect, and if "renewal" actually resulted in more turnover of C.C. members, this would have meant that First Secretaries and other Party leaders in the C.C. would have been less entrenched in their positions, making room for new blood in the Party's leading body, facilitating rank-and-file criticism of Party leaders (Pyzhikov 96).

This bold plan echoes many of the ideas of the "withering away of the state" envisaged in Lenin's seminal work *The State and Revolution*, which in its turn develops ideas Lenin found in Marx and Engels. In proposing direct democratic participation in all vital state decisions by the Soviet people and their popular organizations, and "renewal" - - with at least the possibility of replacement -- of no less than 1/6 of the Central Committee every year through a Party Conference, this Party plan envisaged the development of democracy from below in both the state and in the Party itself.

But this plan came to nothing. As with the previous proposals for democratization of the Soviet state and Party outlined previously, we don't know the details of how this happened. Probably it was rejected at the Central Committee Plenum. The 19th Party Congress was postponed until 1952. Again, we do not know why. The nature of the draft Party plan suggests that opposition from the Central Committee -- the First Secretaries -- may have been responsible.<sup>3</sup>

### The Nineteenth Party Congress

It appears that the Stalin leadership made one last effort at separating the Party from direct control over the State at the 19th Party Congress in 1952 and the Central Committee Plenum immediately following it. Beginning with Khrushchev, the Party *nomenklatura* tried to destroy any memory of this Congress, and moved immediately to eradicate what was done at it. Under Brezhnev the transcripts of all the Party Congresses up through the 18th were published. That of the 19th Congress has never been published to this day. Stalin gave only a short speech at the Congress -- which was published. But he gave a 90-minute speech at the Central Committee Plenum that followed it immediately. That speech has never been published, except for very short extracts, and neither has the transcript of this Plenum.<sup>4</sup>

Stalin called the Congress to change the status of the Party and its organizational structure. Among those changes:

- The Party's name was officially changed from "All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik) to "Communist Party of the Soviet Union." This mirrored the names of most other communist parties in the world, tying the Party to the state.<sup>5</sup>
- A "Presidium" replaced the Politburo of the Central Committee. This name denoted the representatives of another representative organ (the C.C.) -- like, for example, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. It also got the "political" out of the name -- after all, the whole Party was political, not just the leading body.

No doubt it also better suggested a body that rules the Party only, not party and state. The Politburo had been a body of mixed membership. It had included the Chairman of the Council of Ministers (the head of the executive body of the state -- that is, head of state); the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet (head of the legislative body); the General Secretary of the Party (Stalin); one or two more Party secretaries; and

one or two government ministers. Decisions of the Politburo were effective for both government and party.[4](#)

Therefore, in comparison to the Politburo's virtually supreme position in the country, the role of the Presidium was greatly reduced. Since the head of state and head of the Supreme Soviet did not have reserved seats in it, the Presidium was to be the leading body of the Communist Party only.

Other changes were made:

The post of General Secretary -- Stalin's own post -- was abolished. Now Stalin was only one of 10 Party secretaries,[6](#) all of whom were in the new Presidium, which now contained 25 members and 11 candidate-members. This was much larger than 9-11 members of the former Politburo. Its large size would make it more of a deliberative, interim body, rather than one in which many executive decisions could be routinely and swiftly made.

Most of these Presidium members seem to have been government officials, not top Party leaders. Khrushchev and Malenkov later wondered how Stalin could even have heard of the people whom he suggested for the first Presidium, since they were not well-known Party leaders (i.e. not First Secretaries). Presumably, Stalin nominated them because of their positions in the State -- as opposed to the Party -- leadership.[7](#)

Stalin followed up his resignation as General Secretary of the Party, which took place at the 19th Congress, with his proposal, at the CC Plenum right after it, to resign from the Central Committee altogether, remaining only as Head of State (Chairman of the Council of Ministers).

If Stalin were not in the Central Committee, but were only Head of State, government officials would no longer feel they had to report to the Presidium, the Party's highest body. Stalin's act would remove authority from the Party's officials, whose "oversight" role in the State was unnecessary, in terms of production. Without Stalin as the head of the Party the Party leadership, the *nomenklatura*, would have less prestige. Rank-and-file Party members would no longer feel compelled to "elect" -- that is, to merely confirm -- the candidates recommended by the First Secretaries and the Central Committee.

Viewed in this light Stalin's resignation from the Central Committee might be a disaster for the *nomenklatura*. They might have felt that they were protected from merciless criticism by rank-and-file communists only by "Stalin's shadow." It would mean that, in future, only intelligent and capable people would survive in the Party *nomenklatura*, as in the State apparatus (Mukhin, *Ubiystvo* 618-23).

The lack of a published transcript suggests that things occurred at this Plenum, and Stalin said things in his speech, that the *nomenklatura* did not wish to make public. It also indicates -- and it's important to stress this -- that Stalin was not "all-powerful. For example, Stalin's serious criticism of Molotov and Mikoian at this Plenum was not published till long after his death.[8](#)

The famous Soviet writer Konstantin Simonov was present as a C.C. member. He recorded Malenkov's shocked and panicked reaction when Stalin proposed a vote on freeing him from the post of secretary of the Central Committee. (Simonov, 244-5) Faced with vociferous opposition, Stalin didn't insist.[9](#)

As soon as they possibly could do so the Party leadership took steps to annul the decisions of the 19th Party Congress. At its meeting of March 2, with Stalin still alive though unconscious, an abbreviated Presidium -- essentially, the old Politburo members - met at Stalin's dacha. There they made the decision to reduce the Presidium back to 10 members, instead of 25. This was, basically, the old Politburo again. The number of Party secretaries was reduced once again to five. Khrushchev was made the "coordinator" of the secretariat, and then, five months later, "first secretary." Finally in 1966 the name Presidium was changed back to Politburo.

During the rest of the history of the USSR the Party continued to rule Soviet society, its upper ranks becoming a corrupt, self-selected, self-aggrandizing stratum of privileged elitists. Under Gorbachev this ruling group abolished the USSR, giving itself the economic wealth and political leadership of the new capitalist society. At the same time it destroyed the savings of, and stole the social benefits from, the Soviet working class and peasants, whose labor had built everything, while it appropriated the immense publicly-created wealth of the USSR. This same former *nomenklatura* continues to run the post-Soviet states today.

### **Lavrentii Beria**[10](#)

Beria is the most calumniated figure in Soviet history. Therefore the reversal of historical judgment about Beria's career that began abruptly after the end of the Soviet Union has been even more dramatic than the scholarly re-evaluation of Stalin's role that is the main subject of these articles.

Beria's "Hundred Days" -- really, 112 days, from Stalin's death on March 5 1953 to Beria's removal on June 26 -- witnessed the inception of a large number of dramatic reforms. Had the Soviet leadership permitted these reforms to fully develop, the history of the Soviet Union, the international communist movement, the Cold War -- in short, of the last half of the 20th century - would have been dramatically different.

Beria's reform initiatives included at least the following, all of which merit, and some of which are now receiving, special study even while the Russian government keeps most vital primary sources about them closed even to trusted researchers:

- The reunification of Germany as a non-socialist, neutralist state, a step that would have been wildly popular among Germans, and one distinctly unwelcome to the NATO allies, including the USA.
- Normalization of relations with Yugoslavia, which promised to pull it back from its tacit alliance with the West towards the Cominform.
- A nationalities policy that opposed "russification" in the recently-annexed areas of Western Ukraine and the Baltic states, together with the goal of reaching out to some, at least, of the nationalist émigré groups. A reformed nationalities policy in other non-Russian areas including Georgia and Belorussia.
- Rehabilitations and compensation for those unjustly convicted by special judicial bodies (*troikas* and the NKVD "Special Commissions") during the 1930s and 1940s. Under Beria this process would have been done very differently from the way it was later carried out under Khrushchev, who "rehabilitated" many who were unquestionably guilty.

Some of Beria's other reforms were largely carried out, including

- Amnesty for a million of those imprisoned for crimes against the state.
- An end to the investigation of the "Doctors' Plot;" together with admission that the accusations had been unjust and punishment of the NKVD officials involved, including the removal of Kruglov, former NKVD head, from the Central Committee altogether.[11](#)
- Curbing the authority of the "Special Commission" of the NKVD to sentence people to death or long prison terms.
- In a move not only against the Stalin "cult" but against "cults" of leaders generally, forbidding the display of portraits of leaders at holiday rallies. This was rescinded by the Party leadership shortly after Beria's removal.

### **Beria's Moves towards Democratic Reform**

Officially, Beria was arrested by his fellow Politburo members plus some generals on June 26, 1953. But the details of this supposed arrest are murky, and contradictory versions exist.[12](#) In any event, during the July 1953 CC Plenum devoted to accusing Beria of various crimes, Mikoyan said:

When he [Beria] made his presentation on Red Square over the grave of Comrade Stalin, after his speech I said: 'In your speech there is a place in which you guarantee each citizen the rights and freedoms foreseen in the Constitution. Even in the speech of a simple orator that is no empty phrase, and in the speech of a minister of internal affairs -- that is a program of action, you must fulfill it.' He answered me: 'And I will fulfill it.' (Beria 308-9; Mukhin 178)

Beria had said something that had alarmed Mikoyan. Apparently it was the fact that, at this crucial place in his Red Square speech and with reference to the Constitution, Beria omitted any reference to the Communist Party, and spoke only about the Soviet government. Beria spoke second after Malenkov, a public sign that he was now the second-ranking person in the Soviet state. He had said:

The workers, the kolkhoz peasants, the intelligentsia of our country can work peacefully and with confidence, knowing that the Soviet Government will diligently and untiringly guarantee their rights as written in the Stalin Constitution. . . . And henceforth the foreign policy of the Soviet Government will be that of the Leninist-Stalinist policy of the retention and strengthening of peace . . . (Beria, Speech).

Mukhin suggests the following plausible understanding of this passage:

The simple people hardly understood the meaning of what Beria said, but for the Party *nomenklatura* this was a sharp blow. Beria intended to lead the country ahead without the Party, i.e. without them; he promised the people to guard their rights, which were not given them by the Party, but by some Constitution! (Mukhin, 179)

At this same June 1953 Plenum, Khrushchev said



Remember, then Rakosi [Hungarian Communist leader] said: I'd like to know what is decided in the Council of Ministers and what in the Central Committee, what kind of division there should be. . . . Beria then carelessly said: What Central Committee? Let the Council of Ministers decide, and let the Central Committee concern itself with cadre and propaganda. (Beria 91)

Later at this same Plenum Lazar Kaganovich expanded on Khrushchev's point:

The Party for us is the highest thing. No one is permitted to speak as that scoundrel [Beria] said: the Central Committee [for] cadres and propaganda, not political leadership, not the leadership of all life as we, Bolsheviks, understand it. (Beria 138)

These men seem to have believed that Beria intended to get the Party out of the process of directly running the country. This was very similar to what Stalin and his associates had struggled for during the Constitutional discussions of 1935-37. One can discern it again in the 1947 draft Party program and in Stalin's restructuring of the Bolshevik Party during the 19th Party Congress and succeeding Central Committee Plenum only a few months before.

Beria's son Sergo asserts that his father and Stalin agreed about the need to get the Party out of direct management of Soviet society.

My father's relations with the Party organs were complicated. . . . [H]e never hid his relations with the Party apparatus. For example, he told Khrushchev and Malenkov directly that the Party apparatus corrupts people. It was all appropriate for earlier times, when the Soviet state had just been formed. But, my father asked them, who needs these controllers today?

He had the same kind of frank talks with directors of industries and factories who, naturally, did not care at all for the do-nothings from the Central Committee.

Father was just as frank to Stalin too. Joseph Vissarionovich agreed that the Party apparatus had removed itself from responsibility for concrete matters and had nothing to do but talk. I know that a year before his death, when Stalin presented the new makeup of the Presidium of the Central Committee, he gave a speech in which the main point was that it was necessary to find new forms of running the country, that the old ways were not the best. A serious discussion took place at that time about the Party's activity. (Sergo Beria, *Moy Otets Lavrentii Beria*)

Beria's planned restructuring of the State-Party relationship would have probably been very popular with rank-and-file communists, to say nothing of the majority of non-party Soviet citizens. But to the *nomenklatura* it was very threatening.

Mukhin puts it this way:

Beria did not hold back in putting into people's minds the idea that the country ought to be ruled, in the center and in the localities, by the

Soviets, as the Constitution provided, and the party ought to be an ideological organ that would, through propaganda, guarantee that by its aid the deputies of the Soviets at all levels would be communists. Beria proposed to resurrect the functioning of the Constitution in its full sense, its slogan -- "All Power to the Soviets!" While Beria was operating exclusively in the sphere of ideas, this might have been unpleasant for the *nomenklatura*, but hardly frightening. Since they had power, they would have selected delegates to the Supreme Soviet and instruct them in such a way that Beria's ideas could not be put into effect. But, if Beria did not permit the secretaries and the Central Committee to direct the elections and the session of the Supreme Soviet, then what kind of decisions would the deputies reach? (*Ubiystvo* 363-4)

Logically this would have seriously alienated Beria from most of the Party *nomenklatura*. (*Ubiystvo* 380) Khrushchev led, and represented the interests of, this group or, at the very least, of a large and activist part of it. And Khrushchev had quite a different concept of "democracy." Famous film director Mikhail Romm recorded Khrushchev's words at a meeting with intellectuals:

Of course all of us here have listened to you, spoken with you. But who will decide? In our country the people must decide. And the people -- who is that? That is the Party. And who is the Party? That is us. We are the Party. That means that we will decide. I will decide. Understand?  
(Alikhanov)

As Mukhin puts it: "The Party, as an organization of millions of communists, was at an end. The group of people at its summit became the Party." (Mukhin, *Ubiystvo* 494)

### Deaths of Stalin and Beria . . . and Others?

In addition to the mysterious circumstances of Beria's death there is considerable evidence that Stalin was either left to die on the floor of the office in his dacha after suffering a stroke or, perhaps, even poisoned. We don't have time or space to summarize this question here.

However, for our present purposes it is not necessary. The wide circulation and credence given to these stories among Russians of all political camps show that many Russians believe Stalin's and Beria's deaths were all too convenient for the *nomenklatura*. The evidence that Beria, like Stalin, wanted a communist *perestroika* -- a "restructuring," albeit of political, not economic, power, instead of the capitalist super-exploitation and fleeing of the country that has gone under that name since the late 1980s -- is quite independent of any evidence that they may have been murdered.

The immediate result of Stalin's and Beria's failures at democratization was to leave the USSR in the hands of the Party leadership. No workers' democracy came to pass in the Soviet Union. Top Party leaders continued to monopolize all important positions, including those in the state and the economy, and developed into a fully parasitical, exploitative stratum with strong similarities to their counterparts in frankly capitalist countries.

In a real sense this stratum is still in power today. Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Putin, and the rest of the leaders of Russia and of the post-Soviet states are all former members of the

Party leadership. They long milked the Soviet Union's citizens as super-privileged functionaries. Then, under Gorbachev's leadership, they presided over the privatization of all the collectively-produced property that belonged to the working class of the USSR, impoverishing not only the workers, but the large middle class in the process. This has been called the greatest expropriation in the history of the world.<sup>13</sup> The Party *nomenklatura* destroyed the Soviet Union. (Bivens & Bernstein; O'Meara; Williamson)

To cover up their own roles in the massive executions of the 1930s, their successes in frustrating Stalin's attempts at democratization, their refusals to implement Stalin's and Beria's reforms -- in short, to cover up their refusal to democratize the Soviet Union -- Khrushchev and the top party leaders blamed Stalin for everything, lying about the existence of serious conspiracies in the USSR in the 1930s, and covering up their own roles in the mass executions that ensued.

Khrushchev's "secret speech" of 1956 was the single greatest blow to the world communist movement in history. It gave encouragement to anti-communists everywhere, who decided that for once here was a communist leader they could believe. Documents released since the end of the USSR make it clear that virtually every accusation Khrushchev leveled at Stalin in this speech was a lie. This realization, in turn, compels us to inquire into Khrushchev's real reasons for attacking Stalin the way he did.<sup>14</sup> Russian researchers have already shown that the "official" charges against Beria cited by Khrushchev and his cohorts in the Soviet leadership are either false, or wholly lacking in evidence. Beria was judicially murdered for reasons that his murderers never revealed. The "bodyguard of lies" surrounding both of these events compel us to ask: What was *really* going on? The present essay suggests one answer.

## Conclusions and Future Research

Given that Stalin explicitly ruled out competing political *parties* in his plan for contested elections, it is fair to ask: How "democratic" would the result have been, if Stalin had had his way? Answers to questions about democracy have to begin with another question: "What do you mean by 'democracy'?"

In the industrial capitalist world it means a system where political parties compete in elections, but in which all the political parties are controlled by elite, extremely wealthy, and highly authoritarian, people and groups. Nor does "democracy" mean that capitalism itself could ever be "voted out" of power. This "democracy" is a *form* and a *technique* of capitalist class rule -- in short, of "lack of democracy."

Could contested elections among citizens and citizen groups, within the limits of acceptance of working-class rule, have worked in the USSR? Could they work in some future socialist society? What is the role of "representative democracy," that is, of elections, in a society that aims at classlessness? Because these provisions of the 1936 Constitution were never put into effect in the USSR, we can never know what the strengths and weaknesses of this proposal would have been. Marx and Engels made important deductions about the nature of proletarian democracy based upon their study of the practice of the Paris Commune. It is a tragedy that we do not have a parallel experience of contested elections in the Soviet Union in Stalin's time. No doubt there would have been both strengths and weaknesses, from which we could have learned much.

Scholars motivated by political anti-communism will continue to breathe life into the old and false, but not yet sufficiently discredited, Khrushchev / Cold War "anti-Stalin" paradigm. But the process of re-interpreting the history of the Soviet Union in the light of the flood of formerly secret Soviet documents has long since begun in Russia. It will soon take hold elsewhere. A primary purpose of this essay is to introduce others to this development.

One point will strike almost every reader right away. According to the "cult of personality," of adulation that surrounded Stalin, we have been conditioned to think of Stalin as an "all-powerful dictator." This foundational falsehood of the Cold War / Khrushchevite historical paradigm, exploded by the research reported here, has fatally distorted our understanding of Soviet history. In fact, Stalin was never "all-powerful." He was stymied by the combined efforts of other Party leaders. He was never able to attain his goal of constitutional reforms. Nor was he able to control the First Secretaries and the local NKVD.

The "cult" disguised these political struggles. Transcripts of Central Committee Plena show that, though at times Bolshevik leaders did directly disagree with Stalin, this occurred rarely. Political disputes could not be brought out into the open and resolved. Instead they were dealt with in other venues. Some of these venues were informal, as evidently in the case of the First Secretaries in July 1937. Some were dealt with by police methods, political disagreement being interpreted as hostile opposition.

Whatever the mechanism, the effect of the "cult" was authoritarian, and deeply anti-democratic. Stalin seems to be one of the few Soviet leaders to have understood this to a degree. Throughout his life he condemned the "cult" many times.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, though, he never fully recognized how harmful it would inevitably be.

The conclusions reached here, almost entirely on the basis of others' research, suggest a few important areas for further exploration.

- What form can "democracy" take in a socialist society with a goal of developing towards a classless society? Would the implementation of the 1936 Constitution as envisaged by Stalin have worked, both to democratize the Soviet Union, and to restore the Bolshevik Party to its original role, as an organization of dedicated revolutionaries whose primary job was to lead the country towards communism? Or did this model already incorporate so many aspects of bourgeois capitalist concepts of democracy that it might have hastened, rather than impeded, the evolution of the USSR towards capitalism?
- What is the proper role of a communist party in such a society? What are the specific forms of political leadership that are compatible with democratic empowerment of the working class? What forms of political (and economic) leadership are in contradiction with these goals?

Once we question the idea that elections and "representative" government are sufficient to make the state express the interests of the workers and peasants, it follows that the 1936 Constitution, even if implemented, would not have accomplished this either. This might suggest that the "solution" is not to make the state stronger and the Party weaker -- as it appears Stalin and Beria thought. Marxists believe that the state will be run by some class or other, so if a new ruling class arises from the top stratum of the Party, or from any other part of society, it will rule, and will change the state to make that

rule more effective. This in turn suggests that the Party -- State distinction is artificial and deceptive, and should be done away with.

- The term "bureaucratism" / "bureaucracy," while it points to one kind of problem, conceals others. I suggest that the two questions above -- democracy and the role of the party -- indicate more fruitful, and more materialist, ways of thinking about the problem of the relationship between the organized, politically conscious part of the population of a socialist or communist society, and the less organized and politically conscious, but still economically productive majority.
- The Bolsheviks generally and Stalin specifically made a big distinction between politics and technical skill or education. But they never dealt adequately with the contradiction between "Red" and "expert," as this dilemma was termed during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The idea shared by virtually all socialists that political "oversight" or "supervision" could be separated from technical knowledge and production reflected, in part, the mistaken notion that "technique" -- science -- was politically neutral, and that if done efficiently, economic production itself was politically "left" or "communist." The dilemma of the State -- Party contradiction followed from this.
- What does "inner-party democracy" mean in the context of a communist party? In the USSR, many of the oppositional forces whose views were defeated at the Party Conferences and Congresses of the 1920s developed into conspiracies, ultimately aiming at assassination of the Party leadership, a *coup d'état*, and collaboration with and espionage for hostile capitalist powers. At the same time, local Party leaders developed dictatorial habits, which alienated them from the Party rank-and-file (and of course from the much more numerous non-communist population as well), while guaranteeing them material privileges.

The material benefits of high Party office must have played an important, even a decisive, role in the development of the stratum called the *nomenklatura*. Likewise, Stalin's evident goal of removing the Party from *direct* rule and returning it to "agitation and propaganda" might suggest some awareness of this contradiction by Stalin himself, and perhaps by others too. To what extent were large pay differentials essential to stimulate industrialization in the USSR? If they were essential, was it an error to permit Party members access to material privileges -- high pay, better housing, special stores, etc.? The political context in which these decisions were made, in the late '20s and early '30s, needs to be more fully explored. The discussions, now unavailable, around ending the "Party Maximum" wage sometime in the early '30s, need to be discovered and studied.

Zhukov and Mukhin seem to believe that the tactic they perceive, and attribute to Stalin and Beria -- that of getting the party leaders out of the business of running the state -- was indeed the best chance of preventing the Party from degenerating. As I suggest above, perhaps the real cause of degeneration is the defense of their own privileges, rather than the "Red vs expert" contradiction in itself.

Of course, material incentives had been thought necessary, first, to recruit skilled but bourgeois, anti-communist and anti-working-class intellectuals into helping build the USSR's industrial base. From there it could be argued that higher pay was necessary to encourage technically-skilled people (including skilled workers) to join the Bolshevik

Party; or, to work hard under adverse living and working conditions, often at danger to one's health and at the cost of sacrificing one's family life. From there the whole panoply of capitalist-like inequalities could be, and were, justified.

Maybe Stalin and Beria believed that returning the Party alone to a "purely political" function could have prevented its degeneration. Since this plan -- if it was theirs -- was never put into effect, we can't really know. But I suspect that the issue of "material incentives," i.e. economic inequality, is the fundamental one. In conversations with Felix Chuev the aged Molotov mused about the need for more and more "equalization," and worried about the future of socialism in the USSR as he saw inequality increasing. Molotov did not trace the roots of this development back into Stalin's or Lenin's day. In fact Molotov, like Stalin, was unable to look at Lenin's legacy critically, though the need to preserve and expand inequalities in order to stimulate production can be traced at least to Lenin, if not to the Marx of the *Critique of the Gotha Program*.

The questions one asks inevitably reflect and expose one's own political concerns, and mine are no exception. I believe that the history of the Bolshevik Party during Stalin's years -- a history obfuscated by anti-communist lies and as yet to be written -- has a lot to teach future generations. Political activists who look to the past for guidance, and politically-conscious scholars who believe their greatest contributions towards a better world can be made through study of such struggles in the past, have a great deal to learn from the legacy of the Soviet Union.

Like medieval mariners whose maps were more imagination than fact, we have been misled by canonical histories of the USSR that are mainly false. The process of discovering the real history of the world's first socialist experiment has scarcely begun. As any reader of this essay will realize, I believe this is of immense importance for our future.

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## Notes

1 Full text of the resolution is in Zhukov, Stalin. See also Zhukov's earlier treatment in *Tayny 270-276*, where the text is also reproduced.

2 Another reading of the archives suggests the numbers might be 6, 6 and 5. See Khlevniuk O., et al. eds, *Politburo TsK VKP(b) i Sovet Ministrov SSSR 1945-1953*. Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2002, 428-431.

3 Pyzhikov attributes this democratic strain to Leningraders, especially to Voznesensky. (See also his article "N.A. Voznesenski" at <http://www.akdi.ru/id/new/ek5.htm>). This would imply Zhdanov's support for it too, although Zhdanov's sponsorship would not "fit" Pyzhikov's theory about the most pro-capitalist forces -- Voznesenskii and his fellow "Leningraders" -- being the most "democratic." Nor, since the "Leningraders" remained strong through 1947, does it explain why the draft was not adopted. Nor does it indicate, much less prove, any necessary connection between the pro-capitalist and "consumer-goods" orientation Voznesensky was famous for, and political democracy. Finally, it certainly does not indicate that Stalin did not support it.

4 According to Zhores Medvedev, Stalin's personal archive was destroyed immediately after his death (Medvedev, *Sekretnyi*). If so, it's reasonable to assume, as Mukhin does (*Ubiystvo* 612) that some of his ideas must have been thought very dangerous, and among them, the ideas expressed at these two meetings. My analysis here and below mainly follows Mukhin, Ch. 13 and Medvedev, *op. cit.*

5 It was surely meant as a unifying measure. Each of the constituent Republics in the USSR retained its own Party: the Communist Party of the Ukraine, of Georgia, etc. This had led some Party leaders to think that Russia, the largest of the Republics but the one that had no Party "of its own," was at a disadvantage. Apparently one of the most serious charges against the Party leaders tried and executed in the postwar "Leningrad Affair" was that they were planning to set up a Russian Party and moving the capital of the Russian Republic (not the USSR itself) to Leningrad. Arguably this might have made Russia even more powerful and exacerbated Great Russian chauvinism, when what was needed was to cement the various Soviet nationalities closer together. See David Brandenberger, "Stalin, the Leningrad Affair, and the Limits of Postwar Russocentrism," *Russian Review* 63 (2004), 241-255.

6 The post of "First Secretary" was only created after Stalin's death, for Khrushchev.

7 Cited in Mukhin, *Ubiystvo* 617.

8 The earliest publication I have found is in the leftwing newspaper *Sovetskaia Rossiia* of January 13, 2000, at <http://www.kprf.ru/analytics/10828.shtml>; in English, at <http://www.northstarcompass.org/nsc0004/stal1952.htm>.

9 Mukhin believes this was a fatal mistake. He argues that it was in the interest of the Party nomenklatura that Stalin die while still both a secretary of the Central Committee (though he was no longer "General Secretary") and Head of State -- in other words, while he still united, in one person, head of the Party and head of the whole country. Then his successor as secretary of the C.C. would most likely be accepted by the country and the government as head of state as well. If that happened, the movement to get the Party nomenklatura out of running the country would be at an end (Mukhin, *Ubiystvo*, 604 & Ch. 13 *passim*).

10 I have drawn on the longer treatments of Beria's reforms, both those effected and those he proposed, in Kokurin and Pozhalov, Starkov, Knight, and Mukhin, *Ubiystvo*. All the recent books on Beria cited in the Bibliography discuss them as well.

11 In his "Secret Speech" Khrushchev also denounced the "Doctors' Plot" as a frameup. But he had the effrontery to put the blame on -- Beria, who had in fact liquidated the investigation, while praising Kruglov, the NKVD head in charge of this frameup, whom Khrushchev restored to C.C. membership and who was seated in the audience as Khrushchev spoke.

12 There is much evidence to suggest that Beria was in fact murdered on the day of his arrest. His son Sergo Beria, in his own memoirs, states he was told by officials at the "trial" that his father was not present. Mukhin says that Baybakov, the last living C.C. member from 1953, told him Beria was already dead at the time of the July 1953 Plenum, but the members did not know it at the time (Sergo Beria; Mukhin, *Ubiystvo* 375). Amy Knight, p. 220, reports that Khrushchev himself twice stated Beria had been killed on June 26, 1953, but later changed his story. Meanwhile, the Beria trial documents are said

to have been "stolen" from their archive, so even their existence cannot be verified (Khinshtein 2003). However some researchers, like Andrei Sukhomlinov (pp. 61-2), continue to find the evidence for Beria's murder unconvincing.

13 This term, "the greatest theft in history," is widely used to describe the "privatization" of the collectively-created and, formerly, collectively-owned, state property of the USSR. For a few examples only, see "The Russian Oligarchy: Welcome to the Real World," *The Russian Journal* March 17 2003, at <<http://www.russiajournal.com/news/cnews-article.shtml?nd=36013>>; Raymond Baker, Centre for International Policy, "A Clear and Present Danger," Australian Broadcasting Corp, 2003, at <<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/s296563.htm>>.

14 As of November 2005 I am preparing an article documenting Khrushchev's lies in the "Secret Speech," with publication planned for February 2006, the 50th anniversary of Khrushchev's speech.

15 Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, quotes a number of passages in which Stalin does this. See pp. 150, 507, 512, 538, 547 of the 1971 Knopf edition. Still others have come to light since the end of the USSR. For an example, see *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov 1933-1949*, ed. & intro. Ivo Banac (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 66-67.

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