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## The New Soviet History

Daniel T. Orlovsky  
*Southern Methodist University*, dorlovsk@smu.edu

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## Review Article

# The New Soviet History

Daniel T. Orlovsky  
*Southern Methodist University*

The fields of late Imperial Russian and Soviet history have reached a new plateau. Recent scholarship—particularly in the areas of social history of late Imperial Russia, the historiography of the Russian revolutions of 1917, and the post-1917 history of the Soviet Union—has broken new conceptual ground and, at least in the case of post-1917 history, has opened entire new areas of enquiry. These developments often have run well ahead of corresponding openings in the current Soviet discourse of historians and publicists. There, the tendency has been to blame present-day problems and moral failures of the party on Stalin and his personal regime and on the “administrative command” system.<sup>1</sup> It is convenient to begin Soviet history in 1928 or 1929 with Stalin’s “great change,” but it is the investigation of the formative years of Soviet power, which must include the revolutionary tradition going back to 1905–7 and 1917 through the end of the twenties, that will supply the insight into basic Soviet political and social institutions. Only very recently have professional historians in the USSR begun to call for abandoning the hoary official historiography of the October Revolution and reassessing the role of Lenin.<sup>2</sup> With the events of the past eighteen months in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, some have already proclaimed “the end of history” and have argued that one need not bother explaining how the Soviet Union came to be, how its basic social and political institutions (totalitarian or not) were created, how they developed, and how they launched and nurtured the processes that have brought us to the present watershed. It is as if by labeling the period a totalitarian or utopian disaster one is no longer required to explain its sources or how it worked. This is a peculiar form of moral blindness, for it surely

<sup>1</sup> A good summary of the discussion in the Soviet Union and the basically conservative approach of the historical profession to the major issues of Soviet history may be found in Mark von Hagen, “History and Politics under Gorbachev: Professional Autonomy and Democratization,” *Harriman Institute Forum* 1 (1988): 1–8. See also Aleksandr Nekrich, “Perestroika in History: The First Phase,” *Survey* 30, no. 4 (June 1989): 22–43.

<sup>2</sup> See V. Startsev, “Istoriia oktiabria v noveishei literature,” *Kommunist* 15 (1988): 117–21; P. Volobuev, “Obrashchais’ k velikomu opyту: sovremennye zadachi i metodologii izucheniia oktiabria,” *Kommunist* 16 (1988): 90–101. For a particularly bold discussion of the origins of Stalinism that places its roots deeply in the period 1917–24 (a view that derives the nature of Stalinism from the moral shortcomings of bolshevism as ideology and the early practices and policies of the Bolshevik regime under Lenin), see A. Tsytko, “Istoki Stalinizma,” *Nauka i zhizn’* (November–December 1988), pp. 40–48.

will blunt our critical faculties and prevent us from understanding similar phenomena wherever they may occur.

In the West, the field of Soviet history has been marked by two paradigmatic shifts, the first from the eclecticism that produced the handful of first-rate life-and-times biographies of revolutionary leaders and the basic political histories centered around the Communist party to social history broadly conceived (embracing what is now called the “new cultural history”), and the second from the history of Imperial Russia and the 1917 revolutions to the history of the post-1917 Soviet period itself. These shifts have been propelled by new questions and the use of new sources, but by no means have changing scholarly fashions produced consensus on key historical issues of the revolutionary era (1900–1930). Such basic questions as the origins of Bolshevik authoritarianism, the nature of the Stalin regime, the question of “alternatives,” the contours of the basic social movements of the era and their connection to politics and culture are still very hotly debated despite the growing literature that takes revolution (conceived of as completed transformation) as its point of departure. There remains a problem of perspective, of pinning down degree and kind in speaking of the influence of the prerevolutionary past on revolutionary outcomes. The problem of continuity—or, to use Lenin’s term, “survivals” (*perezhitki*)—has not been solved despite the heroic efforts of historians convinced that revolutionary transformation is to be understood in its own terms. Basic concepts and categories, such as state versus society, totalitarianism, Stalinism, and “civil society,” have been deconstructed, torn down, unmasked, and rebuilt leaving only the vaguest sense of closure on the debates. The interested reader faces a growing mass of publications (a good number of them outside the ordinary realm of academic discourse and more properly categorized either as *publitsistika* or as what used to be known as “unofficial history”) and the academic works under review here provide clear examples of current strengths and some weaknesses of a very dynamic field. I should emphasize at the outset that these academic works go far to advance our knowledge and to deepen discussion—farther than some of the recent debates carried on in print on the nature of Stalinism, the great terror, and the like.<sup>3</sup>

## I. RESTORING THE REVOLUTIONARY TRADITION

In the rush to exploit new openings in post-1917 Soviet history, scholars have nearly succumbed to the danger of ignoring the foundations of the subject—the revolutionary processes that led to the collapse of the Old Regime in February 1917 and the establishment of Soviet power in October.<sup>4</sup> It is gratifying, then, to read the work of Abraham Ascher on the 1905–7 revolution, Tim McDaniel’s

<sup>3</sup> See especially the debates in the *Russian Review* 45 (1986): 357–413 and 46 (1987): 375–431.

<sup>4</sup> Most graduate students in major Russian history programs these days choose to write on post-1917 topics, especially focusing on the 1920s and 1930s. Original research on the Old Regime or, more surprising, on the 1917 revolutions is now rare.

historical and sociological analysis of the labor question in revolutionary Russia, and Allan Wildman's second volume on the revolution in the army during the summer and autumn of 1917. A fourth book, Richard Abraham's hagiographic study of Alexander Kerensky, is far less rewarding.<sup>5</sup>

Ascher offers a thoughtful and elegant study on what must be the starting point for coming to terms with revolution in twentieth-century Russia. The events of 1905–7 constituted a violent upheaval in the cities and countryside and a powerful merging of revolutionary social forces drawn from artisans, blue- and white-collar workers, the free professions and intelligentsia, and the peasantry. It shaped fundamental attitudes, ideologies, and institutions—the new political parties, trade unions, and Soviets, as well as the quasi-constitutional system launched by the October Manifesto and the policies of the autocracy, including those of Stolypin, for example—and was in every sense a powerful model for the actors of 1917. Ascher has produced a masterful synthesis in narrative form of the 1905 events. (A second volume will cover 1906–7.)

The 1905 revolution was indeed “unique” and “unprecedented in scale and ferocity.”<sup>6</sup> From its origins in the social fragmentation generated by rapid industrialization in an agrarian society and the growing hostility between educated elites and the bureaucratic and military foundations of tsarist authority, the revolution—which really began in the autumn of 1904 with the banquet campaigns of “liberal” intelligentsia and professionals—cut a bloody swathe through Russia that momentarily united the twin streams of the plebian (workers, peasants, white-collar workers) and liberal social movements. To this volatile mixture was added the grievances of the nationalities. Ascher well understands the ambiguous outcome of the 1905 events, which resulted in “only a partial victory for the opposition.” For him, 1905 produced “no fundamental changes in the economic and social structure of society” and political changes “so general” that their ultimate significance could only be worked out in the less than favorable circumstances of post-1905 autocratic retrenchment and the experiments of Stolypin. Ascher downplays the power of social movements in 1905 and advances such traditional explanations for the ambiguous outcomes as the stubborn unwillingness of the autocrat (and certain key supporters of “unlimited autocracy”) to make timely concessions, the lack of coordination (not to mention different interests) of the social and national movements, and “society’s deep distrust of the authorities,” which, when combined with the lack of political experience of ministers and opposition leaders alike, led to the party leaders missing the opportunity to join a Witte cabinet in the fall of 1905. In *The Revolution of 1905* Ascher provides the full panoply of events and movements, yet the reader comes away feeling somewhat shortchanged by the lack of new

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Ascher, *The Revolution of 1905: Russia in Disarray* (Stanford, Calif., 1988), Ascher’s book will be followed with a second volume covering the continuation of the revolution and restoration of authority in 1906–7; Tim McDaniel, *Autocracy, Capitalism and Revolution in Russia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988); Allan K. Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army*, vol. 2, *The Road to Soviet Power and Peace* (Princeton, N.J., 1987); Richard Abraham, *Alexander Kerensky: The First Love of the Revolution* (New York, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Ascher, p. 341.

interpretations and the failure to establish some sort of hierarchy in the impact of social factors upon politics.

The ambiguities of 1905–7 worked themselves out in the revolutions of 1917. The autocracy collapsed under the weight of World War I and the mass discontent of workers, peasants, and the army. The “liberals” did come to power, if only briefly, and the various parties and social movements crystallized around the discourse of class struggle. In 1917, however, the plebeians turned the tables on “propertied” Russia and all those above them in the workplace and social hierarchies. Fueled by massive peasant unrest, a remarkably well-organized labor movement that embraced both blue- and white-collar workers, and the continuing revolution in the army (and navy), the October Revolution produced a Bolshevik government, or “Soviet power,” which can be seen at least in political terms as a resolution of the problem of unstable state power dating back to the 1905 period. The October Revolution, which of course cannot be reduced to events in October 1917, was a seminal process in twentieth-century history not simply because it became a global model for plebeian revolution but also because it contained the origins of the basic social, economic, and political institutions of the Soviet Union. The truly exciting openings into Soviet history must take as their point of departure the revolutionary processes that came to fruition in October.

Here McDaniel’s bold conceptual work makes an important contribution. Drawing heavily on social theory, including the unlikely but uncommonly fruitful combination of Tocqueville and Trotsky, McDaniel develops a sophisticated argument about the uniqueness of Russia’s labor movement, a “combined” movement that was marked by an “exceptional though uneven militancy and solidarity” (p. 51). He traces the source of these characteristics to the Trotskyite notion of “autocratic capitalism,” a form of economic development that promoted a thirst among workers for a unitary worldview even though their social reality was marked by fragmentation and their organizations by atomization. In 1917, workers were strongly attracted to socialism, and eventually to the Bolshevik variant, in part because they had already been conditioned to reject liberal politics, the rule of law, and parliamentary procedure and had found very attractive a view of state power that was by no means anarchist or antistate. Indeed, the working class wished for a strong state that would protect *them* and represent *only* their own class interest. For McDaniel, the language and reality of class conflict were indeed the motor forces of history in 1917, but not in a crudely deterministic sense. Russia’s workers were neither the anarchic mass portrayed by the Mensheviks, liberals, and right-wingers nor the self-conscious class described by the Bolsheviks and some recent labor historians. The workers organized into a “combined movement quite united in its radicalism, yet socially fragmented” (p. 351). Here McDaniel slips into the determinist camp. Given the nature of the Russian labor movement and the structures within which it operated, neither the Mensheviks nor the Provisional Government ever really had a chance. McDaniel goes out of his way to exonerate the Mensheviks and the Provisional Government, with their well-conceived and logical positions that could not gain working-class allegiance. Bolshevism took advantage of the situation and offered a break with the past, a consistently static model of modernization “based on a rigid doctrine

of harmony.” For McDaniel, Bolshevism played upon the centralizing and bureaucratic tendencies already inherent in the labor movement and succeeded in the aftermath of October in virtually destroying any notion of “civil society.” But again McDaniel rejects the idea that Russian history developed in a linear fashion, from the police state of the tsars to that of the Soviets. He is interested in the texture of change, in the unusual combination of capitalism and tradition that led to a “new and insoluble set of social and political challenges.” The historian’s mission is to document and understand those challenges.

The works of Wildman and Abraham provide a study in contrasting styles and subject matter. If Wildman carries the banner of the social historians who reveal the power of the “revolution from below,” Abraham is a throwback to an earlier historiography that produced biographies of the revolution’s leaders and ignored society altogether. Wildman carries out his mandate far more successfully. The second volume of his magisterial *The End of the Russian Imperial Army* offers a vivid panorama of the workings of the committee structure in the army and is arguably the best case study yet of the institutional/social nexus that made October possible. Here we see the workings of a nascent “civil society” brought forth and nurtured in the crucible of revolution. Wildman shows the rich array of social forces at work in the various army committees and their response to the political issues of the period. The maximalism of many soldiers and officers was tempered by a desire for structure and order as well as a burning quest for social justice.

Abraham, unfortunately, is handicapped by his subject, Alexander Kerensky, who despite his enormous visibility in 1917 produced a record of political ineptitude, theoretical primitiveness, and even deviousness that make it difficult to enshrine him, even if only sentimentally, as a hero. Abraham nonetheless tries to do so with a considerable amount of energy and good will. He does succeed in bringing together for the first time in any language the salient facts and a good deal of the pathos of Kerensky’s life, though these facts do not at all prove the author’s point. For example, Abraham performs an important service by laying out Kerensky’s many organizational activities in the revolutionary underground during the war prior to the February Revolution. But his evidence in no way justifies the assertion that Kerensky was Russia’s leading revolutionary during the war.

The date October 1917 has served to separate artificially the revolutionary tradition and an entire range of social and cultural movements from their evolution and fate under Soviet power. That is why we must not lose sight of the roots of Soviet history in the late Imperial period and in 1917—hence the importance of the works discussed above for the study of Soviet history proper. Those who want to restore or create “civil society” in today’s Soviet Union would do well to examine carefully the record of social activism and civic consciousness displayed by a wide variety of social groups from 1905 through 1917. The failure of the democratically oriented civic elements in 1917 is perhaps the principal tragedy of that Revolution. The reasons for their failure transcend the October demarcation and must remain high on the historical agenda for the period 1917–29.

## II. THE NEW SOVIET HISTORY

In recent years historians have brought the methods of social and cultural history and the excitement of discovery to the post-October period. They have shown fantastic energy and ingenuity in exploiting new sources and tackling problems and issues central to what should become a new set of explanations of how the Soviet Union developed first into an extremely authoritarian party/state and then into the troubled but reforming global power of today. The richness of this historical scholarship may yet allow us to view the real content of Soviet social and political institutions, to better understand how things worked in their own terms, how people lived, suffered, and made their way in the world. The works under review here explore a variety of structures and movements that refocus our understanding of such issues as state versus society, the role of culture, and the origins and meaning of Stalinism. Here we have a new wave of scholars building upon the works of such pioneers as Moshe Lewin, Loren Graham, David Joravsky, and Sheila Fitzpatrick. (Fortunately, all of these pacesetters are still very much engaged in redefining the field.) The books considered here include two important works on the Civil War/War Communism period (1918–21),<sup>7</sup> a study of private traders and entrepreneurs during the 1920s,<sup>8</sup> two works that deal directly with Stalin and Stalinism,<sup>9</sup> and three that seek to explain Stalinism as a cultural system and manner of governance by exploring specific areas of social, economic, and cultural life.<sup>10</sup> Finally, we have a detailed study of the Stalin regime in action at the moment of its greatest challenge, during the first two years of domestic mobilization after the German invasion on June 22, 1941.<sup>11</sup>

Particularly rich are the studies now being produced on the social and cultural dimensions of revolutionary state building, its twin process society building, and their impact on politics. This new work is marked by scrupulous attention to untapped published (and in some cases archival) sources and a mission to look behind the conventional labels of “state,” “society,” and “party,” reexamining the role of the leader figures, Lenin and Stalin, and redefining such paradigms as totalitarianism and, especially, Stalinism. Most of post-1917 Soviet history has been a series of blank pages that are just now being filled in. Even old questions such as the nature of Leninism, the relationship of Leninism and the early years of Soviet power to the Stalin regime, and the social and cultural content of

<sup>7</sup> Isabel A. Tirado, *Young Guard! The Communist Youth League of Petrograd, 1917–1920* (New York, 1988); and Richard Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power: A Study of Moscow during the Civil War, 1918–21* (New York, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Alan M. Ball, *Russia's Last Capitalists: The Nepmen, 1921–1929* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Michal Reiman, *The Birth of Stalinism: The USSR on the Eve of the “Second Revolution”* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987); and Robert McNeal, *Stalin: Man and Ruler* (New York, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York, 1989); Douglas Weiner, *Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988); and Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity* (Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Klaus Segbers, *Die Sowjetunion im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Die Mobilisierung von Verwaltung, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft im “Grossen Vaterländischen Krieg,” 1941–1943* (Munich, 1987).



Stalinism provoke new answers when examined through the lens of fresh sources and topics. Studies of Stalin and Stalinism have long passed beyond the immediate post-World War II totalitarian school in which social scientific models coexisted uneasily with classic life-and-times biographical studies of the great leaders of the revolution.<sup>12</sup> In the mid-1970s and early 1980s three important books took a fresh look at “Stalinism” and came up with a variety of abstract commentaries on Soviet history during the Stalin period.<sup>13</sup> Important models were put forth portraying Stalinism as a “mono-organizational society” or as “revolution from above.” Seweryn Bialer defined “mature Stalinism” by such traits as “mass terror,” “the extinction of the party as a movement,” “the shapelessness of the macropolitical organization,” “the extreme mobilizational model of economic growth,” “a heterogeneous value system which favored economic status and power stratification, fostered extraordinary cultural conformity, and was tied to extreme nationalism,” “the end of the revolutionary impulse to change society and the persistence of a conservative status quo attitude toward existing institutions,” and “the system of personal dictatorship as a symbol of general arbitrary use of power.”<sup>14</sup> The problem with such a finely honed list is that it fails to distinguish between Stalin the person and Stalinism as a governing system. This model seems to fit any period of Soviet history (at least through the Brezhnev regime). It comes remarkably close to the classic characteristics of totalitarianism.<sup>15</sup>

Any new understanding of the Stalin regime will require a large dose of discovery, of the writing of history from below, and of the unusual patterns of mutual influence of “state” and “society.” New work—sometimes called revisionist—on the purges and collectivization, for example, has begun to lay these foundations—and, despite loud protests about the moral insensitivity of discussing social support for Stalinism, describing the purges of the 1930s as not entirely planned or centralized, and promulgating a vision of Stalinism as the “state against itself,” the historiography is growing bolder and is maturing. Ideas once regarded in some quarters as revisionist (and not without suspicion or even outright hostility)—for example, that the center was not always in control of the

<sup>12</sup> For a review of the role of the totalitarian model and its critics, see Stephen F. Cohen, “Scholarly Missions: Sovietology as a Vocation,” in his *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History since 1917* (New York, 1985), pp. 3–37. Recently Jerry Hough, an astute critic of the limitations of the totalitarian model, has raised it again as a valid model for understanding both the Lenin and Stalin regimes and for comparisons of the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany (see *Russia and the West: Gorbachev and the Politics of Reform* [New York, 1988]). For a thoughtful statement on the cultural and historical origins and role of the totalitarian model, see Abbott Gleason, “‘Totalitarianism’ in 1984,” *Russian Review* 43 (1984): 145–59. Gleason argues that any concept that could have caught the attention of so many intelligent observers must have some validity.

<sup>13</sup> Robert C. Tucker, ed., *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation* (New York, 1977); Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931* (Bloomington, Ind., 1978); and Seweryn Bialer, *Stalin’s Successors: Leadership, Stability and Change in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, 1980).

<sup>14</sup> Bialer, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> This is Henry Reichman’s argument in his article “Reconsidering ‘Stalinism,’” *Theory and Society* 17 (1988): 57–89.

periphery; that central state authorities often had a dim vision of their goals and an even dimmer one of how to arrive at them; that Stalin's policies generated genuine enthusiasm and popular support; that politics did exist under Stalin; that social groups could do the police work of the state; and that conservative cultural norms had some foundation in social reality—are now informing the work of many serious scholars, who with patience and perseverance are mining the newly opened archives and recently more hospitable libraries of the Soviet Union. In the works of many "Soviet" historians, such views are not meant to absolve Stalin or the "center" of moral culpability in the horrors of the Stalin years. All this implies that further breakthroughs are possible.

Richard Sakwa explores the origins of Bolshevik government in Moscow during the era of War Communism and the Civil War. The question is the origins of Bolshevik authoritarianism during this period, and Sakwa sets forth a biting argument to show that authoritarian government was primarily a product of Bolshevik ideology and not simply a response to the requirements of fighting the Civil War. Sakwa sets out to attack Soviet and Western historians who like to portray the earliest months of rule by Lenin's party, November 1917–April 1918, as moderate and as an early version of the nonauthoritarian New Economic Policy (NEP) that was interrupted by the almost fanatical claims of War Communism—a set of policies not to be equated with those of mainstream Leninism. Sakwa relentlessly pursues *ideology* as the chief cause of Bolshevik excess during the Civil War. He rejects notions of Russian backwardness and post-1917 continuities with the Old Regime in institutions and political culture, preferring instead to view the revolution as a sharp break with the past: "Whatever the previous level of development of civil society, the Bolshevik regime destroyed not only the old state system but also the features of civil society as it had developed not only as part of the bourgeois system but also within the workers' movement and ultimately within the Bolshevik party itself."<sup>16</sup>

The "fusion of politics and ideology" becomes the framework that encompasses much important material about the emergence of municipal, state, and party institutions in Moscow during 1918–21. This powerful argument about ideology reminds us of the need for "total history," of the importance of not compartmentalizing the realm of ideas from either politics or society. One can deconstruct Lenin's "What Is to Be Done?" with its bold assertions about *consciousness* and *spontaneity*, and see through the rhetoric to a fundamental cultural obsession with control and power. But this kind of analysis requires firm links with social groups, the actors or bearers of the cultural norms. Here Sakwa falls short. His vision of ideology is far too literal, and he explicitly rejects the possibility that social forces might have any role at all in his story. This is most certainly not an exercise in the New Cultural History.

For Sakwa there is a direct connection between Lenin and Stalin, especially in the authoritarian institutions spawned by Bolshevik ideology. State and party bureaucracies quickly negated the democratic and grass roots impulses momen-

<sup>16</sup> Sakwa (n. 7 above), p. 14.

tarily nurtured in soviets and other “genuine mass popular organizations” (p. 273). He argues that “in a sense the Bolshevik project was a thoroughly bureaucratized one from the first, and hence the idea of a later degeneration must be treated with skepticism. The party organisation and its committees from the first absorbed or destroyed all intermediary aggregations between themselves and society.” For all his important research in the intricacies of Moscow institution building and politics during the Civil War period, Sakwa returns to traditional interpretations of Bolshevik authoritarianism built upon the radical separation of state and society.

This is the opposite of Tirado’s view that it was the Civil War that produced the authoritarianism that changed what she sees as an independent and vital youth movement into the hierarchical party instrument of the Komsomol. The beauty of Tirado’s book is precisely its emphasis on youth. It looks at a vital and, indeed, powerful social group that cuts across class lines and moves the discussion away from the all too frequent tendency to view the revolution entirely in terms of workers or peasants. It also shows how social movements are transformed by the revolution and how in the youth movement, as in so many other spheres (e.g., cultural and economic policy, to name just two), the Bolshevik outcome was built upon earlier left-wing, radical youth organizations that had staked out potent roles independent of the party during 1917–18. The attractiveness of nonclass social and political organizations to working-class youth was limited, however. During 1917, such youth organizations as the Socialist League of Young Workers quickly began to attract more students and white-collar workers than factory workers. Still, Russian youth organized into yet another “spontaneous” social force that began even in 1917 to evolve into a more structured organization of “the politically committed.” Vague sympathies with the Bolsheviks and the revolution generated concrete programs of support, a change of name to the Communist Youth League (dominated by party members, of course), and eventually elitism, exclusivity, and bureaucratic control.

We still need a new rendering of the Soviet state that probes more deeply its cultural and social roots to discover how social forces unleashed or uplifted by revolution infused the structures of the state. What Sakwa does show, however, is the remarkable conflict that surrounded institution building during this formative period of Soviet history. Conflict took place both among and within the Komsomol and the party and trade unions, for example, with the forces of “reform” and “democracy” emerging as losers by 1921. It was as if politics had become firmly rooted in a corporative, bureaucratic polity that pitted rival groups of nonworkers (with or without worker allies) against one another. With the bourgeoisie (and the nobility) gone, class politics were no longer appropriate; indeed, class identity itself would become increasingly problematic.<sup>17</sup> It would

<sup>17</sup> See the discussion of Leopold H. Haimson, “The Problem of Social Identities in Early Twentieth-Century Russia,” pp. 3–20; William G. Rosenberg, “Identities, Power and Social Interaction in Revolutionary Russia,” pp. 21–28; and Alfred J. Rieber, “Landed Property, State Authority, and Civil War,” pp. 29–38—all in *Slavic Review*, vol. 47, no. 1 (Spring 1988); and the discussion of Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Bolsheviks’ Dilemma: Class, Culture, and Politics in

not be too farfetched to say that some of the energies of class conflict became absorbed in the corporate struggles within the party and state institutions that had co-opted the infrastructure of the intelligentsia, the lower middle strata, and the working class.<sup>18</sup>

Michal Reiman and Alan M. Ball break new ground in their studies of NEP society and politics.<sup>19</sup> Reiman's book caused a stir when first published in Germany in 1979. It is based on hitherto unexploited copies of Soviet documents (key State Political Directorate [GPU] [political police and forerunner of the Committee for State Security (KGB)] reports and correspondence, e.g.) found in the archive of the German foreign ministry. These documents permit the author to trace the step-by-step reaction of the Stalin-dominated party leadership to what Reiman sees as a deepening social crisis at the end of NEP. Reiman wants to document the birth of Stalinism, by which he means the regime's political choice to respond to a largely self-generated crisis with a program of social terror. He sheds new light on the role of the GPU in the late 1920s and particularly on the role of its leader, V. Menzhinsky, as a key supporter of the emerging Stalin coalition. Menzhinsky was a major player in debates over economic policy and its relationship to diplomacy. In 1928 he garnered support for expanded GPU coercive powers to extricate the Soviet Union from a life-threatening economic crisis. The working class in 1928 was suffering its own crisis—a combination of severe hardship and a crisis of identity that pitted generations against each other. For a time, the GPU stepped in to support managers and specialists in order to keep industrial enterprises alive. Reiman tells a compelling story that brings out the connections between foreign and trade policy and the regime's manipulation of the threat of foreign encirclement and internal opposition, fostering a mood that rapidly came to hold the regime itself as prisoner. For Reiman, the "Stalin leap forward" at the end of the twenties had nothing to do with socialism, and therefore the entire Stalin experience should not be cited as proof of Marxism's failure in the twentieth century. Further, Reiman maintains that the essence of Stalinism was its social dimension, the combination of purposefully unmanaged crisis and the emergence of a stratum of bureaucrats cut off from the masses. Here he firmly rejects the view of Roy Medvedev, whom he labels an apologist for an idealized Leninism, or the true socialism that was distorted by the evil Stalin. Still, questions remain about the reliability of Reiman's handful of documents and the relative weight that should be given to the views expressed therein. The book is weakest when it tries to connect the momentous social process of industrialization in the late 1920s to the realm of high politics.

Questions of class identity, the nature of NEP society, and the problem of alternatives come to the fore in Alan Ball's study of the Nepmen (and women).

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the Early Soviet Years," pp. 599–613; Ronald Grigor Suny, "Class and State in the Early Soviet Period: A Reply to Sheila Fitzpatrick," pp. 614–19; and Daniel Orlovsky, "Social History and Its Categories," pp. 620–23; and Fitzpatrick's reply (pp. 624–26)—all in *Slavic Review*, vol. 47, no. 4 (Winter 1988).

<sup>18</sup> This comes close to the "state against itself" formulation of Gabor T. Rittersporn, "Soviet Politics in the 1930's: Rehabilitating Society," *Studies in Comparative Communism* 19, no. 2 (1986): 105–28, and "Rethinking Stalinism," *Russian History* 11, no. 4 (1984): 343–61.

<sup>19</sup> Ball (n. 8 above); and Reiman (n. 9 above).

Who were these people, suddenly liberated from the oppression of the class war to produce, buy, sell, employ, and otherwise try to put their stamp upon the emerging socialist society? Were they only survivors, trying to stay afloat against impossible odds, or did they have larger designs upon the socialist polity? What was their function? Ball provides the answers in a well-researched and well-crafted study of the group of 500,000 or so individuals who manufactured, managed, bartered, and traded in the quasi-markets of the 1920s. This is fresh material. We learn that unemployed women and former merchants, shop employees, and artisans were most active in these new economic activities. Further, we see just how important their efforts were for the population at large and even for the state or socialist sector. The Nepmen supplied much to the state and provided the goods and services that the unproductive state and cooperative sectors could not offer—and this was part of the enormous resentment, class envy and animosity, insecurity, and marginality that festered throughout the 1920s in relation to NEP and those who made it work. Ball's work is outstanding in documenting the lack of security, institutional guarantees, and social legitimacy that afflicted the Nepmen. From this perspective, the rapidity and violence with which they were dispatched in the reheated class war of the late 1920s was a perfectly logical outcome.

The social and cultural dimensions of the Russian Revolution and the nature of the Stalin regime—what we have come to call “Stalinism”—is the subject of three exciting and original books by Stites, Weiner, and Siegelbaum. Each author addresses the issue of politics through the lenses of society and culture. Stites's *Revolutionary Dreams* is a moving and passionate study of the utopian impulses that fueled the revolutionary process during and after 1917 and their fate during the 1920s and early 1930s. For Stites, utopianism, defined as “social and cultural experimentation, and drastic self-conscious innovation—symbolic and concrete,” is central to all “major social revolutions of modern times.”<sup>20</sup> This living experimentalism in the arts, popular culture, religion, life-styles, architecture, mythmaking, the organization of labor and management, and the like was a particularly strong motive force in the Russian Revolution as “both a product of the revolutionary upheaval and a part of its force and emotional content.” Stites locates the roots of revolutionary utopianism in the religious and popular utopias of Old Regime Russia, and he brilliantly demonstrates how the way was paved for Stalin's own powerful counterutopia by a deeply rooted Russian state tradition of “administrative utopia” with “its peculiar blend of symmetry, brute force, and benevolence.”<sup>21</sup> Stites writes movingly about the entire range of experiments in the post-October period, ranging from iconoclasm and festivals to the god-building of Lunacharsky and Bogdanov. The latter held the view that the essence of religion, its spiritual human bond, could be attained without God. They foresaw, even before 1917, a world of dreams, myths, sounds, and rituals that would elevate humanity to divine status and bring about collective immortality. Stites offers a superb analysis of Emilian Yaroslavsky's League of the Militant Godless with its relatively noncoercive agitational approach of converting people

<sup>20</sup> Stites (n. 10 above), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

to the view that science was adequate to explain all phenomena. His descriptions of the rituals of birth, marriage, and death are priceless entrees into the energized world of social revolution. We learn of Octoberings (the revolutionary equivalent of baptisms) with children receiving such names as Traktorina, Tekstil, Robesper, Marks, Engelina, Barrikada, and the like. There is the touching story of the first recorded Octobering in Kharkov in 1923 with its gifts of portraits of the infant Lenin, solemn parental promises to raise their child in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism, and singing of the *Internationale* along with folk songs. Stites is careful not to confuse the peasants' "fantastic ability to absorb new faiths and rituals" with claims that bolshevism actually constituted a religion. In this he follows Maurice Hindus, who called it a "nonfaith because it was not forgiving, possessed no deity, exalted science and nature, and possessed a 'revolutionary' system of ethics instead of a humane one. It lacked beauty, dignity and spirit"; the philosopher Berdyaev, who emphasized its lack of "inward drama and depth, its weakness in religious psychology, and its pedantry"; and Mao Zedong, who said simply, "Marxism-Leninism has no beauty, nor has it any mystical value. It is only extremely useful."<sup>22</sup>

For Stites, Stalinism is the central trope, the historical reality that stands in opposition to the creative, life-promoting, energetic nature of the pre-1929 communist society. For Stites, this revolutionary, proletarian morality was "modern, full spirited, humane, rational and healthy." Stalinism represents the "deutopianizing of the revolution."<sup>23</sup> The "cultural revolution" of 1928–31 marked the turning point. Stites brilliantly shows in semiotic terms how the Stalinist revolution co-opted and destroyed the earlier utopianism by replacing the eclectic, *spontaneous* communalism of the early revolution with a "directed, imposed, monolithic version for the sake of a collective goal defined by leaders and the deified 'I.'" For Stites, Stalinism is a "wholly appropriate name for the new political culture born in the 1930's," consisting of (1) the ever-present authoritarian elements in bolshevism; (2) the military zeal generated to control and orchestrate the transformation (collectivization and industrialization); (3) Stalin's personal despotism; (4) the persistent Russian state bureaucratic heritage; and (5) the social authoritarianism of the Russian people themselves.<sup>24</sup> Stalin's revolutionary utopia was different from that of the tsars in its dynamism and in its ability, generated by Stalin's personal role, to magnify the natural elements of fantasy that must accompany all radical change. Stalin's self-image as father, ruler, elder of the collective resonated widely throughout the social and cultural field, and Stites is particularly sharp in marshalling his material concerning the astonishingly powerful Stalin cult of the 1930s. Stites succeeds in filling the abstract vessel of Stalinism with social and cultural content, though in using the term he runs the risk of ignoring the roots of the Stalinist counterutopia in Lenin's basic dichotomy in "What Is to Be Done?"—consciousness/spontaneity—and in the intricate history of the party and the state from 1917 to 1928. Of course, Stites's themes

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 226–27.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

must be placed in the full context of the 1920s. One must weigh 1920s utopianism against the depth of the pluralism of the 1920s and ask how important conductorless orchestras and plans for megacities, complete with “graphs of life” that attempted to join daily communal life and architectural planning, were in relation to such powerful issues as state building, social movements (formation and reformation of social and occupational groups, including workers and bureaucrats), the emergence of a new Soviet intelligentsia, agriculture, and the party’s own intolerance of dissent.

One of Stites’s most important contributions is his analysis of the cult of the machine and of organizations launched by Gastev and Kerzhentsev to spread Taylorist visions of a self-regulating, technocratic society among the still largely agrarian and relatively unsophisticated Soviet workers and managers. The stories of Gastev’s Scientific Organization of Labor (NOT) movement, his Central Institute of Labor (1920–38), and Kerzhentsev’s League of Time (the attempt to move Taylorism from the factories to all spheres of everyday life) offer insights into today’s dilemmas in the USSR. They provide examples of the facility with which conservative counterutopias can be built upon liberationist foundations.<sup>25</sup>

Douglas Weiner’s study of the ecology and conservation movements of the 1920s fits rather neatly into a similar framework. Once again, a flourishing prerevolutionary cultural movement (this time in the scientific realm) is even further liberated by the revolution and assumes a vibrant place in the still pluralistic scientific community of the 1920s. The life sciences became a major ideological battleground during the cultural revolution. Particularly disturbing to certain Bolsheviks and their minions in the scientific community was the notion that all people were not biologically identical and that human nature, “whatever it might be,” was a roadblock to the egalitarianism and collectivism espoused by the more rabid proponents of “the great change.”

The Stalinists rejected theory (in the form of bourgeois science) and promoted miracles: vernalization, acclimatization, and the attendant social miracle of collectivization of agriculture, which were to be produced or assisted by a purely utilitarian science. The search for miracles took place behind the mask of revolutionary utilitarianism and practicality. According to Weiner, the Stalinist view (espoused by little Stalin-scientists) was “not willing to accept Biology’s limited ability to know, predict and control events and unable to live with the limitations of acting in a statistically probabalistic middle ground.”<sup>26</sup> Nature was meant to be transformed, and the ecological view that promoted the healthy functioning of natural systems was deemed not useful enough—indeed, it was a point of view that could only be espoused by the class enemy.

The attack on science became part of the larger attack on NEP. Weiner argues convincingly that the new Stalinist science violated the commitment of earlier

<sup>25</sup> For another first-rate examination of the issue of revolution and culture, see Zenovia A. Sochor, *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988); and the more recent book by Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletcult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990); Mark Von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990).

<sup>26</sup> Weiner (n. 10 above), p. 130.

radical Russian scientists to use the study of nature to “draw conclusions about the larger social and political world.” The cultural revolutionists wanted a science limited to the role of “handmaiden to technology.” The larger social and political questions were to be left to the metascience of Marxist dialectical materialism.

The Lysenkos and Prezents (leading figures in the new Stalinist scientific establishment) flourished in such an atmosphere, as did yet another version of the state against itself. Weiner tells a highly original tale of institutional empire building and turf wars that began soon after the October Revolution. The various commissariats controlled extensive networks and resources, including educational and research institutions and even the nature reserves (*zapovedniki*) that were so central to the conservation movement. Weiner documents the role of professional organizations and congresses and of the professional press in promoting Stalinist science. This was another example of revolution from below, or perhaps revolution from within.<sup>27</sup> Dialectics became the measuring rod of proletarian morality and scientific truth. Even the moderate “mechanists” who considered dialectics a proper guiding philosophical worldview, but one that should not be consciously imposed on an empirical science that was entirely capable of ascertaining the dialectical structure of nature, were beaten by the Deborinites, who saw them as the antidialectical favorites of the “bourgeois professoriate.”<sup>28</sup> The door was now open to the condemnation of entire scientific fields, not to mention generations of talented individuals. Nature too was a victim, as can be seen from present day ecological disasters in the Soviet Union. The growing ecological movement in the Soviet Union today owes much to the vision, courage, and sound scientific methods of its early Soviet predecessors.

Rethinking Stalinism requires a deeper understanding of the basic social and political processes of the entire Soviet period. Lewis Siegelbaum takes the exploration beyond the cultural revolution into the industrialization process of the 1930s. His subject is Stakhanovism, that stunning myth of mass mobilization named for the miner Aleksei Stakhanov, who on the night of August 30–31, 1935 hewed 102 tons of coal, or fourteen times his quota.<sup>29</sup> Stakhanov’s example was quickly taken up by authorities eager to motivate workers and managers alike, and in this sense the mass movement they forged of those who exceeded their norms may be seen as one more in a long series of largely unsuccessful attempts to overcome the market. Here we are drawn into the sinews of Soviet society during the Stalin years—the factory workplace with its nexus of laborers, foremen, technical personnel, and management; the place of Stakhanovite workers in the larger society; the cultural implications of the movement; and the relationship of the surprisingly fragmented central party and state organs to these social groups and institutions. This is the “politics of productivity,” the maneuvering and

<sup>27</sup> For a particularly good discussion of the issue of the sources of self-censorship, of the capacity of professional groups of intelligentsia to create a Stalinist line from below, that is, to think and act in Stalinist terms, see Leonid Heller, “Restructuring Literary Memory in the USSR,” *Survey* 30, no. 4 (June 1989): 44–65.

<sup>28</sup> Weiner, p. 126.

<sup>29</sup> Siegelbaum (n. 10 above), p. 2.



accommodation that infused the industrialization drive of the 1930s in which “society” succeeded in contaminating the “state.” State and society become mutually interpenetrating entities manifested at all levels, from the workplace up through the ministries. Stalinism for Siegelbaum is “an amalgam of practices that both impinged on and were subjected to appropriation by different groups and institutions.”<sup>30</sup>

Siegelbaum rejects earlier Western interpretations of the Stakhanovite movement. These include the view that it was a generally positive rationalization of the workplace made necessary by the inefficiency and laziness of the average Russian worker; the negative view that it exacerbated the “lack of proportionality among different enterprises and sectors, thus intensifying the planlessness of the entire system”;<sup>31</sup> and that it resulted in serious disruptions in production, the increases ascribed to the productivity of Stakhanovites in fact being the result of “thoroughgoing modernization of plant that brought improvements in the technical organization of production.”<sup>32</sup> A corollary to this view is that Stakhanovism had a political function: it allowed the regime to create a privileged caste of industrial workers. This comes close to Trotsky’s view that Stakhanovism represented the apotheosis of piece rates and that it was a planned attempt to undermine working-class solidarity by the creation of a labor aristocracy.

In an argument that sheds much light on the workings of the Stalin regime, Siegelbaum shows that Stakhanovism was not a strategy developed by a government that had a clear idea of what it wanted to accomplish. Nor was it directed solely at workers. It was an ad hoc response to long-standing control and motivational problems in the workplace that had been compounded by rapid industrialization and the constantly shifting composition (in terms of social class and levels of skill and education) of labor and management.<sup>33</sup> The fact that the state had wavered between conditional support and outright hostility in its relationships to both groups reinforced a politics of protection and informal patronage that tended to preserve considerable autonomy for local interests. The lineage of Stakhanovism extended back to the socialist competition and shock work of the 1920s, which expressed the energy and ambition of new cadres of skilled workers, especially toward the end of that decade. But these mobilizations went nowhere because of bureaucratization and the creation of false campaigns and production results through the collusion of the trade unions, enterprise management, and party cells, who all felt the pressure of higher norms. Management was free to reward the labor it found worthy, and it often rewarded the bootlickers or simply made everyone a shockworker, thereby deflating the concept.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> This was the view of the Menshevik labor activist Solomon Schwarz, writing in *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik*, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> The argument of Donald Filtzer in *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization: The Formation of Modern Soviet Production Relations* (Armonk, N.Y., 1986).

<sup>33</sup> Siegelbaum’s book should be read along with the superb work of Hiroaki Kuromiya on the political and social dimensions of Stalin’s industrial drive, 1928–32 (Kuromiya, *Stalin’s Industrial Revolution: Politics and Workers, 1928–1932* [Cambridge, 1988]).

Siegelbaum's lively story unmask the deed itself, Stakhanov's apparently heroic feat. The fact is that Stakhanov's achievement was something of a Potemkin village. He did not work alone, as was implied in initial reports and later propaganda. His hewing of coal depended on the teamwork of several other workers and supervisors, and indeed the entire performance was stage-managed from the outset to gain optimal results. In no way could his accomplishment be reproduced, even by the most zealous workers functioning in the normal workplace. What, then, did the state supporters of this stunt have in mind? Siegelbaum has discerned four motives: (1) to create a mass movement; (2) to overcome chronic stoppages in production flow (perceived as the result of informal conditions on the shop floor and inadequately trained personnel); (3) to test the commitment of production specialists (technical personnel and managers); and (4) to assault existing shop floor practices by turning the unusual Stakhanovite moment into the norm.

What did the freshly minted Stakhanovite workers gain? For the most fortunate (and these were a distinct minority) there were promotions into various lower level managerial positions and a bevy of consumer goods, all providing grist for the propaganda mill and images of workers living the middle-class dream. For the rest, there was the resentment of fellow workers (and managers) and the unrealized dreams of material gains brought on by a troubled economy and the onset of war. The sorry fact is that Stakhanovism did not begin to address the structural problems of labor productivity or any other large issue in Soviet industry. It was a classic lesson in the weakness of the mobilizational mode of overcoming the market, a lesson that unfortunately has not been learned to the present day.

All of these volumes point toward a more complete understanding of the Stalin era and of the dictator's personal role. They revise the revisionists in that they argue that the center (Stalin or his governing bloc) had a large responsibility for the most extreme domestic policies of cultural revolution, industrialization, collectivization, and the purges. This is true even if the center's policies were unplanned or furthered by a large segment of society. These works reject the notion of a diffuse responsibility and causality that portrays Stalin as only a distant figure chairing an executive board or as a mediator of rival groups or factions. In these studies Stalin's role is integrated into its various contexts. One comes away realizing that the driving force or the essence of Soviet history is certainly larger than Stalin alone, that society and culture and local politics also mattered, but that one can't reduce Stalinism to a purely social or administrative phenomenon that artificially seals off politics from culture or the center from the periphery. Stalin was far more than "chairman of the board," someone who mediated and harmonized a variety of institutional and politburo viewpoints. His role was more forceful and influential. He set the tone, fixed and sent the signals, blatant and subtle, which in the political culture of the period were readily picked up by thousands of smaller or would-be Stalins in the party and state apparatus. Yet political institutions were fragmented, and such historical phenomena as Stakhanovism and perhaps even the purges developed with a logic that was not fully determined by Stalin's direct intervention.

Among the legacies of the 1930s was a docile, traumatized, and insecure population and a new cadre of managers (and workers) whose uncertainties and anxieties were a way of life despite their empowerment within the bureaucratized structures of heavy industry. This bureaucratic system and the larger society were in a macabre fashion well prepared for the new wave of total mobilizations called forth by the Nazi invasion in 1941. This is a major theme in Klaus Segbers's important study of wartime economic administration. Segbers reveals in massive detail the institutional, social, and political dimensions of the mobilization of Soviet heavy industry, transport, and society for the unparalleled conflict against Nazi Germany. The record was impressive, though not as impressive as official Soviet mythmakers would have us believe. The positive results of wartime mobilization were due neither to the genius of Stalin/Party/People (the official line) nor to the accomplishments of the centrally planned economy (Vosnesensky's analysis). Rather, the successes resulted from the flexibility and ingenuity with which the apparently bloated and rigidly centralized bureaucracy of the thirties gave way to new institutions, methods of mobilization, and informal patterns of operation that made the economy function. Stalin, according to Segbers, was a very important figure in all this, but "no more and no less" (p. 298). A large group of industrial administrators and planners as well as other high-ranking government and party officials had enormous influence on the successful effort. The war thus represented a kind of liberation, a heady time of extreme challenge and loosening of the most stifling restraints within the economic and administrative mechanisms. Segbers is especially good on unintended consequences. Concerning the labor force, for example, he shows that the influx into factories of massive numbers of women and peasants eased the process of breaking up older workplace patterns (remember Stakhanovism) and introducing more efficient production technologies.

It is heartening to think that "spontaneous" forces of local or midlevel social and bureaucratic initiative did indeed exist after the horrors of the 1930s and that they might exist even today. But there were failures, too. Segbers shows that despite the relocation of some fifteen hundred factories from the front-line war zones to the Urals and beyond, many more thousands of factories and people failed to survive evacuation efforts. Segbers makes a major contribution by carefully defining the innovations in wartime administration and balancing them against the inheritance of war communism and later modes of economic administration. He concludes that the creative improvisations of 1941–44 were the apogee of prior practice. Their legacy was mixed, however. New geographical areas of the Soviet Union and industries were opened to development after the war, but the relatively decentralized and flexible institutions of the war years quickly gave way to an ossified administrative command structure that dragged the economy into its present morass. Segbers's book reminds us of the very high quality of German contributions to late Imperial Russian and Soviet history, a fact all too often ignored among English-speaking academics.

Despite these pathbreaking works, the field cries out for synthesis as well as new research, for harmonizing the roles of the leading actors (not just Stalin) and social movements, politics and society, ideas and action, and so on. We need a

complete map of the social terrain and many more studies of the politics of discrete areas of institutional life. The late Robert McNeal bravely attempted such a synthesis in his biography *Stalin: Man and Ruler*.<sup>34</sup> McNeal provides a fresh and sober reading of many traditional sources as well as the new scholarship and recently published memoirs. McNeal explicitly rejects attempts at psychological explanations of Stalin's cruel and morbid personality, yet he accepts such a personality as fact. He works throughout to relate the record of terror and Stalin's enormous political skills with larger social, cultural, and institutional factors. He puts it bluntly: "There is no point in trying to rehabilitate Stalin. The established impression that he slaughtered, tortured, imprisoned and oppressed on a grand scale is not in error. On the other hand it is impossible to understand this immensely gifted politician by attributing solely to him all the crimes and suffering of his era, or to conceive him simply as a monster and a mental case. From youth until death he was a fighter in what he, and many others, regarded as a just war."<sup>35</sup>

McNeal agrees with Khrushchev's assessment that Stalin was "incorruptible and irreconcilable in class questions. It was one of his strongest qualities and he was greatly respected for it."<sup>36</sup> The problem with McNeal's book comes when one looks for answers to some of the historiographical disputes concerning the Stalin era. On the question of the end of NEP, for example, McNeal maintains that there was an economic crisis and that the idea of a new class war had social support particularly among younger Komsomol and Party activists who were motivated by genuine idealism. On collectivization, he similarly tries to reconcile the idea that initiatives sometimes came from the middle and lower levels of the power structure with the long-held view of Stalin as mastermind of every move. But this is biography and not solely a dry discussion of domestic policy. In a chapter entitled "Murder" (following chap. 8, "Builder"), McNeal takes up the violent nature of Stalin's personality and tries to pin down the dictator's responsibility. Basically, he argues that Stalin was "more or less responsible for the killing of a large number of the enemy" (p. 161). This refers to the author's vision of Stalin as a self-proclaimed combatant in the class struggle seen as the highest form of war. But in this chapter McNeal also takes up the issue of individual murders, specifically the deaths of Stalin's first wife Nedezhda Allilueva and Sergei Kirov, Stalin's crony and possible rival.

McNeal believes Allilueva's death in 1932 to have been suicide, and he rightly points out that subsequent events gave rise to a wide array of rumors about murder that spread in the Gulag camps, among émigrés, and the like. The "morbid deterioration" of Stalin's relations with his comrades dated not from this tragedy but from the Kirov murder on December 1, 1934. Here again, McNeal finds that the best evidence for Stalin as murderer is only circumstantial. There is good evidence of conspiratorial activity in the security apparatus. On the other hand, McNeal argues that the evidence for Kirov having been the leader of an organized

<sup>34</sup> McNeal (n. 9 above).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

opposition to Stalin, or a “liberal alternative,” is thin and suggests that such a conclusion is largely the product of the wishful thinking of such dissident (now establishment) historians as Roy Medvedev.<sup>37</sup> Still, McNeal seems to find Stalin guilty because of Kirov’s status as a potential rival. McNeal finds the pattern of Stalin’s response to events at this time to be indicative of a new ruthless and paranoid attitude toward former comrades, and he uses Stalin’s humiliation of Abel Enukidze as the example that closes out the chapter. McNeal presents and weighs the evidence on all sides of these issues, but in the end we are no closer to definitive answers to the historiographical riddles.

Given Stalin’s commitment to class war and his personal vindictiveness, what does McNeal make of the purges of the 1930s? He comes down on the side of traditional interpretations, namely, that the worst excesses of the 1936–38 period were orchestrated from the center; indeed, in the case of the *Ezhovshchina*, Stalin was “personally responsible for its design.”<sup>38</sup> But was Stalin mad, as Khrushchev implied in his “secret speech”? Again McNeal gives a judicious but evasive answer, noting that Stalin was remarkably effective in projecting his “own reality” (possibly madness) onto large numbers of people. “And so terror, rationality and insanity appear as inextricably intertwined in Soviet society under Stalin as in his persona.” McNeal downplays the record on center-periphery relations and the arguments of Arch Getty on the relatively autonomous workings of the purges away from the center,<sup>39</sup> preferring to speak only of the *Ezhovshchina*—the well-publicized purges in which he finds Stalin’s personal involvement paramount. So in a sense he sidesteps the issue of the purges in general as well as Getty’s argument that, even if the *Ezhovshchina* is separate from the larger issue of purges, it too ought to be redefined as a radical response to real problems of bureaucratization. Here and on the subject of collectivization McNeal’s analysis loses its focus. He wants to recognize the haphazard, unplanned nature of collectivization, for example, arguing that Stalin came late to a hard line on forcing the pace and attacking the Kulaks and that much can be blamed on other politburo members and provincial officials. Yet Taniuchi’s work on the Ural-Siberian method implies a more clear-cut central government policy on forced local mobilizations, with the transformation of the local party organizations into more viable central government agents as a result. McNeal’s cautious work is impressive, yet the field of Soviet history is too fresh to permit closure on the Stalin problem.

<sup>37</sup> Here the debate focuses on the votes Stalin garnered at the seventeenth party congress for reelection to the central committee, a prerequisite for retaining his post as general secretary. In a recent interview in the leading Soviet academic historical journal, Medvedev and the first Soviet biographer of Stalin, General D. Volkogonov, both agreed heartily that Western scholarship had contributed little to an understanding of Stalin or of the Stalin problem. In fact, Medvedev went so far as to claim that Westerners had little business entering the debates. If such intolerant attitudes manifest themselves in the new leadership of Soviet academic institutions, the promise of a pluralist Soviet historiography of the revolutionary era will never be realized. “O Staline i Stalinizme: Beseda s D. A. Volkogonovym i R. D. Medvedevym,” *Istoriia SSSR* 3 (1989): 89–108.

<sup>38</sup> McNeal, p. 200.

<sup>39</sup> J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (Cambridge, 1985).

Exciting vistas have opened in Soviet history, and the field now has an unprecedented opportunity to further its agendas. The opening of the state and many regional archives (although the Party archives remain closed to foreign researchers); a new degree of cooperation from Soviet libraries; the outpouring of documentary and memoir publications in the USSR; the existence there of a trained cadre of brilliant intellectuals formerly working in the underground but now able to collect materials, oral histories, documents, and the like; the formation of new organizations of Soviet historians ready and able to engage in dialogue; and the numerous new possibilities for exchange and collaboration with established Soviet historians and archivists and their supporting institutions—all point the way toward the further development of the field. Still, one must be wary of the pitfalls. Among these are the use of stale categories, periodizations, and problematics (sometimes taken over from the most mainstream traditions of Soviet scholarship); failure to decode the language of Soviet sources; a too narrow definition of what is “Soviet” that limits the field of inquiry to the 1920s or 1930s as if all history began in 1921 or 1929; rejection of the relevance of the rich historiography of the decades leading to 1917; and the parochialism of Soviet-centeredness that denies any comparative dimension. Recent challenges to the imperial nature of the USSR should also spur a reconsideration of the construction of Russian and Soviet self and national identity. It is clear that the imperial project of 1918–24 was at every juncture related to the construction of state, society, and party. It was Stalin, after all, who as head of the Peoples’ Commissariat of Nationalities (*Narkomnats*) was largely responsible for the peculiar forms adopted for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. This solution may be viewed as an early, but profound, post-Leninist watershed for the emerging Stalin governing bloc. It was Stalin, for example, who led the onslaught against Sultan Galiev and his brand of Muslim national communism. The Stalin-orchestrated show trial of Sultan Galiev in 1923 and the naming of his ideas as an “ism”—a different, deeply threatening, and intolerable variant of communism that could only be utterly destroyed by the centralized empire in Soviet guise—illustrate the kinds of connections that can inform and enrich our understanding of Soviet history.<sup>40</sup> Historians of twentieth-century Russia have worked wonders. May the field flourish.

<sup>40</sup> See Steven Blank’s forthcoming book on Stalin and *Narkomnats* to be published by Northern Illinois University Press.