

From the Archive

Robert Service reconsiders Norman Pereira's revisionist account of Stalin's pursuit of power in the aftermath of the

Russian Revolution, first published in *History Today* in 1992.

Bad But Brilliant

Norman Pereira's essay on Stalin's rise to power in the USSR was a cautious attempt to challenge consensus. From the 1930s onwards, under the influence of Trotsky's autobiography, even most anti-Communists subscribed to a condescending analysis of how Stalin had won the struggle against his great rival. The generally agreed picture was simple. Stalin was ill-educated, un-intellectual and uninterested in ideas. He was an arch-bureaucrat who put together a coalition of party secretaries who had no truly revolutionary intent and were preoccupied by a concern for bureaucratic privilege. By putting himself forward as their spokesman he transformed the Soviet Union into a state whose nature was at odds with the one that Lenin and Trotsky had in mind in the years after the October 1917 Revolution.

This consensual analysis was never properly substantiated, but it had a wide following among historians and political scientists despite the several bricks pulled out of the wall since the late 1970s, when many long-standing features of conventional historiography came under attack.

Pereira expressed unease about how Stalin had been portrayed. He gave emphasis to the lengthy and impressive leading role played before the First World War when the general secretary had been entrusted with important duties in the Bolshevik faction. He noted that Lenin had recognised Stalin's talent after 1917; Stalin was people's commissar of nationalities affairs, served as a political commissar on several military fronts and joined the earliest permanent politburo. Pereira highlighted the careful improvement in Stalin's skills as an orator in the two decades after the revolution.

Using one of the books he cited, he could have gone further. Robert Tucker's biography of Stalin, published in 1973, introduced the idea that Stalin was no mere administrator but a

talented leader who could quickly make up his mind about policy and assemble a dynamic political team to carry it out. The fact that his factional adversaries – Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Bukharin – denied this said more about their ineptitude and condescension than about Stalin.

Perhaps, though, even Tucker held back from a radical revision of the politics of the 1920s. In trying to account for Stalin's campaign for dominance he turned to psycho-analysis, speculating that the general secretary had a subconscious son-father obsession with Lenin. Once Lenin had died, Stalin supposedly engaged in an attempt to prove that he was as least as great a revolutionary hero. Tucker saw the so-called second revolution of 1928 as Stalin's bid to demonstrate that he could modernise the USSR by casting aside the New Economic Policy. In so far as Stalin had a personal ideology, he supposedly was permanently transfixed by the objective of building 'socialism in a single country' and steadily mutated into a Russian nationalist leader.

Increasingly it is asked whether this interpretation withstands scrutiny. One of the problems is what might be called the 'Bolshevism question'. Even before the documentary revelations of the late 1980s under Mikhail Gorbachev there was convincing evidence that the Bolshevik leaders agreed about fundamental aspects of the Soviet order more than they disagreed. Once the Central Committee and Politburo records started to become accessible this standpoint became widely accepted. Factional strife certainly divided Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Stalin and Bukharin. But they concurred about dictatorship, the one-party state, revolutionary justice and the ultimate need for comprehensive state control of the economy.

It is also more widely recognised, I



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hope, that not even Stalin thought it possible for the USSR to exist as the solitary anti-capitalist state forever. Even he had expansionist ambitions. The difference between him and the rest of the Politburo in the 1920s was of a practical nature. Stalin frequently judged that Europe was not yet 'ripe' for revolution. Nevertheless he kept looking for chances to expand Communism beyond the Soviet frontiers, as he showed when he invaded Finland and the Baltic States in 1939-40 and when the Soviets occupied Eastern Europe in the late 1940s.

From its early years the Politburo had to decide a huge range of external and internal policies. Its remit covered politics, security, international subversion, culture, economics, ideology, diplomacy and the military. Stalin was a mass terrorist with a gross personality disorder. It is a pity that he ever lived. But he was able to do what he did because he was also a leader of exceptional talent.

On Second Thoughts...

STALIN AND THE COMMUNIST PARTY IN THE 1920S

Did the system spawn a monster – or a monster the system? Norman Pereira re-evaluates the road to totalitarianism in the Soviet Union after the Revolution, and Stalin's part in it.

The chief policy of most of the 1920s in Soviet Russia was the rise to supreme power of Joseph Stalin and the defeat of his rivals. This study – which reveals how Stalin's rise to power was the result of Lenin's successor – depicts the Bolshevik Central Committee in 1929 and the first national revolutionary congress in 1930. It also shows many of the new regional centres during the new state.

In the end, Stalin has been depicted as a sinister figure, virtually unknown

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