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# From Stalin to Gorbachev:

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## Reflections on the Personality

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### of Leaders in Soviet History

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IAN D. THATCHER

- Sarah Davies and James Harris, eds., *Stalin: A New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 295 pp., £20.99 (pb), ISBN 0521616530.
- Nikita Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, Volume 1: Commissar (1918–1945)*, ed. Sergei Khrushchev, trans. George Shriver (memoirs) and Stephen Shenfield (supplementary material) (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 935 pp., \$61.95 (hb), ISBN 0271023325.
- Nikita Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, Volume 2: Reformer (1945–1964)*, ed. Sergei Khrushchev, trans. George Shriver (memoirs) and Stephen Shenfield (supplementary material) (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 856 pp., \$72.95 (hb), ISBN 0271028610.
- Nikita Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, Volume 3: Statesman (1953–1964)*, ed. Sergei Khrushchev, trans. George Shriver (memoirs) and Stephen Shenfield (supplementary material) (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 1126 pp., \$65.00 (hb), ISBN 0271029351.
- Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 715 pp., \$19.95 (pb), ISBN 0674022580.
- Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 467 pp., \$39.95 (hb), ISBN 0807830987.

Alec Nove began a popular account of Stalin and the post-Stalin Soviet Union with a list of the key questions that needed to be addressed to explain Stalinism and how it was modified after 1953. Alongside ‘impersonal’ factors, such as the impact of Russian history, the problems of carrying out a Marxist revolution in isolation and when the majority of the population were peasants not proletarians, there was the issue of personality. How vital was the impact of Stalin’s peculiar personality in establishing Stalinism, or that of his successors in their alterations? It is reasonable to focus on the nature of the leader, but it is a particularly hard task for the researcher of the

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Soviet political elite. The world of Soviet politics was noted for hidden motivations, the discrepancy between private words and public deeds, and for politicians whose personal safety meant that they had no interest in keeping a written record of their true feelings. As Nove noted of Stalin, ‘Since he did not speak his mind, we must again reconstruct his thought processes from indirect evidence. The following might be a reasonable interpretation, but others are possible.’<sup>1</sup>

Nove penned these lines over thirty years ago, on a Hebridean island. Since then, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the greater access to archives has led to a boom in studies of Stalin and Stalinism.<sup>2</sup> And yet today’s biographer of Stalin is still very much in the same position as Nove. Robert Service argues that previous works on Stalin either have focused on his personality or are more of a general history of the USSR. For Service, ‘neither category is adequate by itself and I offer a synthesis in the following chapters’ (p. x). But reaching a credible synthesis is no easy task, for reliable sources on Stalin’s personality simply do not exist. It is only in the middle of the biography that Service admits that Stalin

seldom exposed his mental processes in public. He did not keep a diary, and the letters to his wife Nadya add little to what is known about his innermost thinking: at most he would refer briefly to his health, mood or the weather . . . it would be foolish to forget that, when he spoke, he usually concealed something . . . even many of the intimate files are ambiguous evidence on the workings of Stalin’s mind.

The material that is available is sufficient only for ‘subsequent generations to make plausible guesses’ (pp. 336–7).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the weakest aspect of recent writings on Stalin is when authors engage in flights of fancy about the extent of Stalin’s ‘personality disorder’ and how this was a motivating factor in the events for which Stalin and his rule are infamous, most notably the scale of repression. Service makes much of his subject’s damaged soul, its inner need for recognition and its ability to remember the smallest slight and to wait for revenge. This can all easily be discarded. At the outset Service notes that Stalin was ‘unhealthy in mind and body’ and that he ‘was a killer’ (p. 12). To the best of my knowledge Stalin did not personally kill anyone. Like numerous politicians he murdered by proxy. If psychology did play a part in starting the Terror, as Service contends (‘Stalin had the opportunity to act out his own psychological damage by persecuting millions of his people’, p. 343), one wonders if it provided the desired psychological buzz. It could easily have produced none at all. It is precisely the distance, not experiencing the killings directly, that makes it easier

<sup>1</sup> Alec Nove, *Stalinism and After* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975), 58.

<sup>2</sup> The review articles that have attempted to keep readers abreast of this voluminous literature include Edward Acton, ‘Understanding Stalin’s Catastrophe’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 36, 3 (2001), 531–40; Daniel Beer, ‘Origins, Modernity and Resistance in the Historiography of Stalinism’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40, 2 (2005), 363–79; Caroline Brooke, ‘“May You Live in Interesting Times”’: Recent Literature on the Stalin Era’, *Contemporary European History*, 12, 1 (2003), 119–27; Hiroaki Kuromiya, ‘Stalin and His Era’, *Historical Journal*, 50, 3 (2007), 711–24; Norman N. Naimark, ‘Cold War Studies and New Archival Material on Stalin’, *Russian Review*, 61, 1 (2002), 1–15; Ian D. Thatcher, ‘Stalin and Stalinism: A Review Article’, *Europe–Asia Studies*, 56, 6 (2004), 907–19.

for the killer politician of any personality or belief to sleep soundly, convinced that they are safeguarding the interests of the state. In this sense the ‘evil dictator’ Stalin is on a par with the ‘good democrats’ George W. Bush and Tony Blair, believing Christians who nevertheless used armed might as a foreign policy tool. In both cases, leaders’ policies were responsible for the deaths of people unknown to them, even if these occurred in greater quantities under Stalin. Furthermore, one does not have to be a despotic dictator to cause mass destruction; it was the mature democracy the United States that developed and twice dropped the atomic bomb; indeed, the United States remains a deeply militaristic society. As Service well knows, violence was an accepted means for implementing the state policy not only of the USSR but of the leading democracies of Stalin’s time – indeed, ‘the point for Stalin was that violence was an effective weapon for capitalism and had to be adopted by the Soviet revolutionary state for its own purposes’ (p. 158). In thinking this Stalin was not alone; there was a set of ‘operational assumptions’ that went far beyond Stalin (pp. 263–4). Even the relatively decent Khrushchev issued the necessary orders to keep the Terror moving (p. 281). Stalin had an inner life about which we know little and its influence on policy in the USSR is unknown. It is clear, however, that there were explanations outside the personal that in and of themselves seem sufficient to explain what happened when and why.<sup>3</sup> Here Service could have adopted Kershaw’s approach in his biography of Hitler – that is, ‘the answer must be sought chiefly in German society – in the social and political motivations which went into the making of Hitler’.<sup>4</sup>

The general readership that the publishers and agent had in mind for Service’s biography will no doubt enjoy the amateur psychology and may not notice the occasional tension in Service’s treatment of it (‘The history of the twentieth century would have been a lot less bloody if Joseph Dzhughashvili had been a better Georgian’ (p. 27); ‘Was it perhaps a residue of Stalin’s extreme attitude to his upbringing in Georgia, where, at least in the mountains, the traditions of blood feud persisted?’ (p. 340)). The popular market will also relish the references to landscape (pp. 14–15), food (p. 16), and Stalin’s sexual perversions, most notably a penchant for adolescent girls (pp. 79–80, 107, 132–4, 237). Service’s preference for liberal capitalism will also not upset the reader’s sensibilities, even if to write that the Stalin regime’s ‘patterns of thought and action ultimately precluded the dynamic, open-ended developments characteristic of liberal democratic, capitalist countries. He had saved and consolidated the Soviet order at the expense of making it durably competitive with its main rivals’ (p. 602) is to miss the point of Stalin’s politics altogether. As Service is aware, Stalin thought that he was engaged in a project to build a better society (pp. 300, 405, 491–2), but that this project was in constant danger from enemies within and without (pp. 11, 170, 243, 286–7, 365). Of course Stalin was prepared to contemplate the

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, an excellent account of the Terror that does not make reference to Stalin’s ‘paranoia’: Oleg Khlevnyuk, ‘The Objectives of the Great Terror, 1937–38’, in Julian Copper, Maureen Perrie and E. A. Rees, eds., *Soviet History, 1917–1953 Essays in Honour of R. W. Davies* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 158–76.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1998), xii.

toughest of options to promote and defend this; he was at war and the battle was for the future of humanity. Service offers various interpretations of why Stalin clung to power so ferociously, from a personal need (pp. 480, 498, 527) to the interests of the revolution (pp. 274–5, 351, 394, 438, 457). It was surely the latter that dominated, especially given what power did to Stalin, not least the illnesses and the gruelling work regime (pp. 231, 434–5).<sup>5</sup> If Stalin and other Russian Marxists had thought that from the outset their efforts would be not only futile but a retrograde step, then they would have been politicians of a different persuasion, but they were not. In this context it is worth noting that one should not always allow the Terror to dominate interpretations of Stalin's thought. In a speech in June 1945 celebrating the victory over Nazism, Stalin declared, 'I offer a toast to those simple, ordinary, modest people, to the "little cogs" who keep our great state mechanism in an active condition in all fields of science, economy and military affairs. There are lots of them'. Service comments, 'The "people" for him were mere cogs in the machinery of state and not individuals and groups of flesh and blood with social, cultural and psychological needs and aspirations' (p. 482). Yes, Stalin thought in grand categories and not at the level of the individual; this is what made his leadership so decisive and daring. In 1945 he gave an insight, however involuntarily, into what made Stalin and Stalinism possible: not his individual psychology but, as Nove pointed out many years ago, that there were 'enough people willing to do his bidding'. Indeed, the social origins of the Soviet state, broadly defined, 'help to explain important elements of Stalinism, and also the crude ways in which power and privilege were used'.<sup>6</sup>

Service is keen to demolish wherever possible certain myths about Stalin. This is particularly the case regarding representations of Stalin as inherently stupid, or as an anonymous front for the bureaucracy. This is excellent, but there are some myths and mysteries that could also have been tackled. Service repeats Trotsky's assertion that he was kept away from Lenin's funeral by a telegram from Stalin in which the wrong date for the funeral was given. Service follows Trotsky in accepting that the latter's absence was not the decisive factor in the power struggle, but he adds that 'The advice had hostile intent: Stalin knew Trotsky would attract all the attention if he appeared in Moscow for the ceremony' (p. 219). A closer investigation of this incident reveals that Stalin acted as quickly as possible to inform Trotsky of Lenin's death and gave the date of the funeral that was agreed by an emergency meeting of the central committee on 21–22 January, most likely in the expectation that Trotsky would wish to return to Moscow (at that point there was still sufficient time).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note instances in which Stalin seemed ready to relinquish power, most notably during the opening skirmishes of the Great Patriotic War (Service, pp. 414–15). What happened then to the personal need for power?

<sup>6</sup> Nove, *Stalinism and After*, 62.

<sup>7</sup> Stalin's telegram to Trotsky was first published in Dimitri Volkogonov, *Trotsky: The Eternal Revolutionary* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 266. The decisions of the Central Committee at its meeting of 21–22 January are available at RGASPI, f 17, o 2, d 100, in Moscow or at Rosarkhiv/Hoover Institution, Archives of the Soviet Communist Party (Moscow and Stanford, CA, 1996), film no. 2.2438. See, further, Ian D. Thatcher, 'Trotskii and Lenin's Funeral, 27 January 1924: A Brief Note', *History*, 94, 2 (2009), 194–202.

fact that Trotsky chose not to return to the capital to attend Lenin's funeral did not mean that he was excluded from the marking of Lenin's passing. The first issues of the national press that informed the population of Lenin's death carried an obituary from Trotsky, printed prominently on the lead or second page. There was no devious cunning from Stalin here, but an example of a conscientious carrying out of duty. Service highlights numerous instances of Stalin's hatred for Trotsky, but does not mention nor explain why Stalin should have been so kind to Trotsky's leadership in October 1917 in an anniversary article one year later.<sup>8</sup> Service may return to this issue in the biography of Trotsky on which he is currently working, but in the book under review it is claimed that in the 1920s Trotsky was still popular with members of the Inter-District organisation that merged with the Bolsheviks in 1917. In my investigation of this group I found no such solidarity, in networks or allegiance. Trotsky was not that closely associated with this group and was never its leader, and the vast majority of its supporters had only the briefest of associations with it in 1917. It is unlikely that it was still a factor of any note in the politics of the 1920s.<sup>9</sup>

Service is at his best when he engages in the historical scholarship for which he is renowned: locating Stalin's thought and actions in the broader contemporary context. Here there are valuable insights and some interesting comparisons with the conclusions of the essays collected by Davies and Harris. Service notes Stalin's thirst for knowledge and learning, which made him an independent thinker and actor. One should appreciate how Stalin reached his own conclusions and how he could argue his corner, even in opposition to Lenin. Stalin was far from the hesitant militant of 1905 and 1917 as depicted by Trotsky. Indeed, Stalin's position on the peasantry in 1917 won out over Lenin's, and it was Stalin more than any other Bolshevik who in 1917 understood that Bolshevism had to respond to the needs of the nationalities if it was to have a broad appeal. Given Service's upgrading of Stalin's status as thinker and the comment that Bolshevism contained no real political philosophers of note (p. 92), he would probably concur with Erik van Ree that there is no reason why Stalin should not be accepted as a Marxist (Davies and Harris, pp. 159–180). There is much overlap between Service and Alfred J. Rieber on Stalin as Georgian (Davies and Harris, pp. 18–44), although more emphasis should surely be placed on an aside in Service's biography regarding the proletarian aspect of Stalin's identity (p. 44). Service (pp. 224–5, 228, 246) and Harris (Davies and Harris, pp. 63–82) are both correct in asserting that Stalin's triumph in the power struggles of the 1920s was not exclusively because he manipulated appointments courtesy of his position of party general secretary. There was also a perceived sharing of interests between Stalin and local party secretaries, when Stalin was seen as the candidate most likely to protect and extend the autonomy of the localities. Sarah Davies (Davies and Harris, pp. 202–25) and R. W. Davies (Davies and Harris, pp. 121–39) provide detailed

<sup>8</sup> 'The October Insurrection', *Pravda*, No. 241, 6 November 1918, in Joseph Stalin, *The October Revolution* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1936), 28–30.

<sup>9</sup> Ian D. Thatcher, 'The St. Petersburg/Petrograd Mezhrainka, 1913–1917: The Rise and Fall of a Movement for Social-Democratic Unity', *Slavonic & East European Review*, 87, 2 (2009), 284–321.

case studies of Stalin's intense, if irregular, interest in cultural and economic policy also noted by Service. Despite Jeremy Smith's efforts to refocus attention on the significance of Stalin at the Commissariat for Nationality Affairs in 1918–22 (Davies and Harris, pp. 45–62), Service (pp. 163–74) and other scholars are right that the civil war, and especially the events at Tsaritsyn, had a greater influence on Stalin and his subsequent career.<sup>10</sup> Oleg Khlevniuk (Davies and Harris, pp. 108–20) concurs with Service's depiction of Stalin as a personal dictator (p. 370). J. Arch Getty makes an original argument that Stalin was as contemptuous as Lenin of the Politburo (Davies and Harris, pp. 83–107); the practice of reaching decisions on important matters in pre-meetings was common to both. This should not detract from the fact that, as Service points out, Stalin took new initiatives that made the situation in the ruling elite very different from that under Lenin. This is evident in how, for example, Stalin undertook grain requisitioning without prior approval from the Politburo (p. 258).

Arch Getty's analysis of the continuity from Lenin to Stalin in their attitude to the party's leading bodies would most likely have offended Nikita Khrushchev. The first post-Stalin Soviet leader perceived a sharp break between the legality of Lenin's period in office and the illegality of Stalin's rule. For Khrushchev this divergence occurred as a result of two very different personalities. Lenin had a 'great modesty', was a 'patient educator', and displayed a 'keen and solicitous concern for people'; Stalin was a 'very distrustful man, sickly suspicious' who suffered from a 'mania for greatness'.<sup>11</sup> But if personality could have such a profound impact on the development of the October Revolution, what of Khrushchev? Do his memoirs offer an insight into the role of his personality?

The scholarly consensus is sceptical; Khrushchev's memoirs are largely dismissed as a reliable source. Service lumps them together with Trotsky's biography of his arch-enemy and describes both as 'pervaded by political hostility' (p. 7). Others point out that the memoirs were dictated without recourse to documents and therefore 'could not help but contain numerous omissions and errors'.<sup>12</sup> An award-winning biography by William Taubman states that Khrushchev's memoirs were motivated by a 'deep need to justify himself to future generations'. This is evident above all for Taubman in the sections on the Terror, in which Khrushchev sought to obscure his own role through a mixture of deception and self-deception.<sup>13</sup>

The publication of what will no doubt be the fullest version to be made available in English and for which everyone involved deserves the highest praise shows that Khrushchev's memoirs are about as honest an appraisal that one could expect from a former Soviet leader surveying and reflecting on things past. The trilogy will

<sup>10</sup> Robert Argenbright, 'Red Tsaritsyn: Precursor to Stalinist Terror', *Revolutionary Russia*, 4, 2 (1991), 157–83.

<sup>11</sup> Nikita S. Khrushchev, 'Secret Report to the 20th Party Congress of the CPSU', in Tariq Ali, ed., *The Stalinist Legacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 222, 228, 243, 256.

<sup>12</sup> William Taubman, Sergei Khrushchev and Abbott Gleason, eds., *Nikita Khrushchev* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>13</sup> William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (London: Free Press, 2003), xiv, 100–3.

be essential reading for all students seeking an insight into the remarkable events of Khrushchev's political life as seen through an individual's experience. They also illustrate a leader grappling with broader political, societal and systemic pressures and failing to exert individual control.

The depiction of the relationship to Stalin and Stalinism is subtle and believable. The seemingly genuine enthusiasm for the construction of socialism Stalin-style and the awe in which Khrushchev held Stalin never disappears, even after the denunciation of the Stalinist killings. Khrushchev asked, what really was Stalin's role? was it positive or not? He answered that 'his role was positive in the sense that he remained a Marxist in his basic approach to history' (*Memoirs* 2, p. 155). Stalin was not condemned absolutely and completely. 'Stalin did remain in theory a Marxist (although not in his concrete actions)' (*Memoirs* 2, p. 161). The parentheses contain a very significant qualification, but it is clear that Stalin's good opinion of Khrushchev remained important to Khrushchev to the end (*Memoirs* 2, pp. 170–82). Khrushchev also argued that Stalin had the attributes of a leader on a grand scale: 'his ability to lead the country, his ability to subordinate others to himself, to promote people' (*Memoirs* 2, p. 204).

It is little wonder that Khrushchev's brain and the memoirs were saturated with the attempt to come to terms with the period 1928–53. The Terror is not avoided but faced head-on, in both the 1930s and the post-war period. In the immediate aftermath of the Kirov assassination (1934), Khrushchev argued that lists of 'parasitic elements and speculators', persons who needed to be 'cleaned out', were correctly drawn up for expulsion (*Memoirs* 1, p. 78). Later, during the 'political repressions', Khrushchev added his voice to those denouncing the wreckers, spies and traitors. He admitted that at the time he had no sympathy for those denounced. On the contrary he felt genuine indignation: 'we condemned those who had been arrested . . . every kind of epithet was put to use, condemning and denouncing these people and branding them with shame' (*Memoirs* 1, p. 112). Khrushchev stated that he believed the confessions as accurate accounts of a person's guilt. Despite the fact that comrades he had considered good and honest were now exposed as enemies, Khrushchev chose to believe the confessions of guilt: 'no distrust arose in me' (*Memoirs* 1, p. 113). Khrushchev even recounted visiting prisons in which the accused were held in appalling conditions. Here he met comrades known to him who declared their innocence. The Chekist response, 'Comrade Khrushchev, they all talk like that; they deny everything. They're simply lying' (*Memoirs* 1, p. 50), made more sense to Khrushchev. After all, there were confessions, and the party hierarchy was leading a campaign against enemies who had wormed their way into the Soviet body politic. As a loyal Stalinist Khrushchev was willing to support the line of the central committee. At one point he discussed a reproach aimed at Khrushchev for not exposing an enemy in the Moscow organisation (Ugarov). Khrushchev's defence, that he had moved to Kiev and did not maintain contact with Moscow and that 'when I'm in Kiev, it's more difficult for me to expose Moscow people' (*Memoirs* 1, p. 193) is the closest we get to Khrushchev pointing to his own role in making specific denunciations. Implicitly he admits that when in Moscow he unearthed some enemies as he must have done in Kiev.

In the pre-war era Khrushchev could claim to have been acting in good faith at a time of unheard-of change through industrialisation and collectivisation, particularly at a period of the rise of fascism in Europe. By the post-war years he had seen a marked change in Stalin and become disillusioned with many aspects of the dictator's personality and policies. Nevertheless Khrushchev admits to taking full part in the repressions of the final years of Stalin's rule. He participated in the interrogations of the accused and would add his signature agreeing to sentences, even when he suspected that the 'evidence' was from forced confessions (*Memoirs 2*, pp. 31, 35, 65, 109). Although Khrushchev, like Service, states that ultimate responsibility lay with Stalin as the person who began and directed the Terror, Khrushchev evidently felt his own guilt. Why else recall the numerous comrades who were unjustly repressed, to comment that 'all these things lay like a heavy weight on my soul' (*Memoirs 1*, p. 113).

In many ways, however, it is the Great Patriotic War that was a decisive influence on Khrushchev. It was then that the first cracks in an idealised view of Stalin appeared. There was a change in Stalin's personality. Being in the leader's company was an awful burden as guests were forced to drink to excess. Added to this were serious errors in policy; the missed opportunities to strengthen Soviet defences from 1939 to 1941 and the failure to sign the peace treaty with Japan. The Great Patriotic War seems to have consolidated Khrushchev's view of international relations as a zero-sum game of superpower competition in which the interests of Soviet security were paramount. He felt that the Western powers never comprehended the sacrifices the USSR made in the defeat of Hitler. At the same time victory in the war confirmed a belief in the strength of Soviet socialism. If it could be correctly organised it could repel anything that capitalism could hurl at it. This would be especially so if the people could join forces with the party. Khrushchev felt that in the war he saw first-hand the tremendous effort and pride of fellow citizens. He recounted meeting a youngster who had the following account of survival in Stalingrad: 'I ate dead things. Later at the leather factory I found all sorts of leather lying around. I took the leather, sliced it up and boiled it, and then I ate and drank the bullion [*sic*]. That's how I lived' (*Memoirs 1*, p. 482). Despite such hardships the boy was proud of the fact that he had killed a 'Fritz'. Service writes of the hopes for liberalisation that pervaded Soviet society during and after World War II. Under Stalin such expectations were dashed. Khrushchev in contrast claimed to have discovered a profound faith in the 'people', in their abilities and sense of justice. He liked to present himself as a man 'of the people' and this may have played its role in an ideological initiative of the Khrushchev era, of the 'all-people's state'.

But if the people were to have an interest in the state, for Khrushchev they had to enjoy above anything else an improved standard of living, particularly since consumption in the USSR was behind not only the contemporary West but also tsarist Russia (*Memoirs 2*, pp. 166, 249–50, 283, 300). Khrushchev was very aware of the problems of the Soviet system. He mentioned, for example, the arbitrarily set plan targets and the blindness of central bureaucrats to conditions in the country (*Memoirs 2*, pp. 4–5); the lack of accurate statistical data, partly because it was manipulated for



political reasons (*Memoirs* 2, pp. 355, 409); the poor labour discipline linked to the lack of incentives and the shoddy workmanship not helped by low-quality materials (*Memoirs* 2, pp. 272–3, 410); and collective farms that were ‘miserable’ and ‘poverty-stricken’, lacking an infrastructure for ‘production, storage, distribution’ (*Memoirs* 2, pp. 308–15).

But how would Khrushchev use his power to improve matters? His agenda was staggering in its ambition and daring. The goals were (i) to free the USSR from the excesses of Stalin and Stalinism; (ii) to transform Soviet society, economy and politics for the Soviet Union to be, if not the richest and most attractive place on earth, then at least decent enough to deserve respect and support from its inhabitants; and (iii) to outsmart and beat any competitor, East or West, for hegemony in international affairs. Stalin’s prediction that his successors would not know how to defend the USSR would be refuted (*Memoirs* 3, pp. 14, 100, 173, 725).

Khrushchev is often ridiculed in the secondary literature for the pace and hare-brained scheming of his period in office. The historical consensus is that the plotters were right to remove Khrushchev for his numerous flaws. Nove, for example, summed Khrushchev up as ‘wilful, crude, lacking in dignity, unpredictable, a muddler’.<sup>14</sup> Such judgements are devoid of any sympathy for Khrushchev’s position as the first post-Stalin Soviet leader, attempting to keep the Soviet experiment alive while painfully aware of shortages and imbalances at home and stiff competition from abroad. In these circumstances Khrushchev attempted to succeed in various ways, above all on the cheap and quickly. He was always on the lookout (and unlike Stalin he certainly got out of the Kremlin) for ‘new and progressive methods that would be more economical’ (*Memoirs* 2, p. 261).

Khrushchev admitted that poor quality and investment shortfalls hampered priority projects such as housing construction and the virgin lands programme, but there is a strident defence of and not a little pride in policies that were seen by Khrushchev as the best possible response to the reasonable demands of the Soviet population for more housing and food. It is bordering on the nonsensical to say of Khrushchev, as Taubman does, that ‘all too often Khrushchev hadn’t taken the time to do things right. Instead of thinking things through, he could rarely sit still.’<sup>15</sup> Time is the one thing that Khrushchev had in very short supply. Here he was no different from the Tsarist-era premier Peter Stolypin, who was not granted the twenty years of peace that he sought to transform communal agriculture into individual farmsteads, or Gorbachev, who famously once asked for ‘time, time, time’. It is also fairly meaningless to criticise the Khrushchev leadership for seeking administrative solutions to the problems of post-Stalin economic development rather than more fundamental structural reform. After all, there was no model of transition that outlined how to undertake fundamental reform to ensure a painless transformation of the command-administrative system to a new form of socialist economy, let alone while simultaneously winning the cold war. Had such a model existed then one could criticise Khrushchev for ignoring it.

<sup>14</sup> Nove, *Stalinism and After*, 155.

<sup>15</sup> Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 5.

In its absence Khrushchev adopted policies that made most sense to him, given his knowledge of the Soviet system as was.<sup>16</sup>

As leader Khrushchev tried to boost Soviet economic performance by depending on expertise. The memoirs are full of fond memories, not of Khrushchev's political allies, but of specialists, particularly engineers, designers and scientists. On the construction engineer Lagutenko: 'this remarkable innovator, who skilfully promoted mechanization in the production of prefabricated building components of reinforced concrete. I had always searched for people like him' (*Memoirs 2*, p. 270). Various reforms, from the decentralization of economic councils to the division of the party into sections for industry and for agriculture, are explained as attempts to ensure that the correct level of knowledge was being applied at an appropriate level of command, with the appropriate safeguards for responsibility and accountability.

Over the period 1956–64 Khrushchev learned some harsh facts about the reality of being head of the USSR. One of the most important was the relative independence of the nomenklatura (party and state officials), who could subvert the leader's policies in a number of ways. It could put on a show during a visit to create a false impression; it could nod its agreement and then simply ignore any instructions; it could take an encouragement (e.g. to plant corn) to extremes and compromise a policy by applying it to areas for which it was not intended. Khrushchev recognised that in his time in office he was 'unable to find the appropriate lever that would enable us to move things forward' (*Memoirs 2*, p. 380). He admired the profit motive in capitalism and how it helped make his favourite US farmer, Garst, an incredibly good agriculturalist. As head of the USSR he could not create a market economy to produce 'Russian Garsts', but considered that the goal of efficient entrepreneurs could be achieved by 'selecting cadres and training them' (*Memoirs 2*, p. 414). If Khrushchev had remained in office the search for the correct administrative form would have no doubt continued. The memoirs hint that this would have been 'an agency that can supervise and manage production and monitor the economy' (*Memoirs 2*, p. 402).

It is not clear that this agency would have been the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev seems to have invited specialists to attend meetings of the central committee and presidium because he thought that there was more sense to be gained from listening to specialists than to party comrades. When the presidium discussed the issue of missile technology Khrushchev insisted that the rocket specialist V. N. Chelomei give a report. Khrushchev commented: 'Presidium members had poor knowledge of questions having to do with weapons, and so no one expressed great enthusiasm, but there were also no objections' (*Memoirs 2*, pp. 466–7). Khrushchev was not much more impressed by the way in which local party secretaries gave insufficient care and attention to rational and profitable production. Party chiefs 'on the ground' wanted an 'easy life', were more concerned with filling in forms to make themselves look good on paper than having a serious attitude towards work. In the midst of a discussion of opposition to his proposal to follow US good practice and establish agricultural colleges in the countryside so that graduates could have

<sup>16</sup> For some very sensible remarks on this point see Nove, *Stalinism and After*, 117.

theoretical and practical knowledge, for example, Khrushchev despairs at officials who agreed but were not willing to put in the effort to make the suggestion happen (*Memoirs* 3, pp. 155–6).

It may be the case, not that Khrushchev had a penchant for hare-brained schemes, but that he was continually looking for the best way to ensure expertise and accountability. In their absence his policies could be harmful not because of personal failings – in Taubman's estimation he 'made a bad situation worse'<sup>17</sup> – but because they became subject to the irrationalities of the Soviet system, both political and economic. Khrushchev's removal was a sign of how frightened the party nomenklatura had become by the leader's determination to bring it to account. Time limits on office and new responsibilities were to be avoided. In its self-interest it may have acted just in time.

Khrushchev reflected on the fact that a dictator had established personal control with very negative consequences not only in the history of the Russian Revolution but also in China and in Albania. Indeed, any communist party as then constituted could, he reckoned, fall hostage to a dictator. This was because the organisational system of a 'centralized, disciplined party welded together by a single aspiration . . . [can] allow a single individual to use it for the sake of his own personal power' (*Memoirs* 3, p. 493). Khrushchev recounted Lenin's attempt to deal with corruption through bureaucratic agencies such as the Central Control Commission, but these in turn became corrupt. He concluded that 'more effective means of control from below over the leaders is necessary – that is, genuine democracy is needed' (*Memoirs* 3, p. 494). This sounds very close to Gorbachev's conclusion and we all now know where that led. Khrushchev may have been removed not for what he had done but for what he might have gone on to do, driven by a much more radical-democratic reformist zeal.

Despite the numerous frustrations and disappointments at home, Khrushchev was convinced that his rule marked a crucial period in deciding which system would prevail across the globe – socialism or capitalism (*Memoirs* 3, p. 355). In this context, it was, for Khrushchev, the West that had forced the cold war on the USSR (*Memoirs* 3, p. 392), and it was the United States and its imperialist allies that were forcing an arms race to bleed the USSR white (*Memoirs* 2, pp. 431–2). For Vladislav Zubok Khrushchev's outlook was an integral part of a revolutionary-imperial paradigm – an amalgam of state security and a messianic ideology – that conditioned Soviet foreign policy from 1945 onwards. Indeed, a better title for Zubok's book might well be 'the rise and fall of the revolutionary-imperial paradigm'; established by Stalin, it was abandoned by Gorbachev, with the result that the USSR 'committed suicide' (p. 344).

The revolutionary-imperial paradigm is not defined by Zubok in any great depth (pp. x, 336), and it is unclear whether there was an underpinning coherent and developed logic to which all members of the Soviet elite subscribed. There was rather a remarkable heritage of the Second World War, in that the Bolsheviks, whom

<sup>17</sup> Taubman, *Khrushchev*, xix.

many a commentator had thought would not survive long after October 1917, stood triumphant after a war with *Germany*. One should not underestimate what Germany meant in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century socialist politics. It was seen as *the* country to resolve the fate of socialism in Europe and from this continent the world. One should, furthermore, not underestimate the consequences of the Second World War not in terms of the expansion of Soviet socialism but as a transformative experience for Soviet Bolsheviks in reaffirming their faith in Stalin and Stalinism. That said, there were differences within the elite about how best to protect and further expand Soviet communism.

Zubok's primary interest is in detailing the way in which leaders from Stalin to Gorbachev influenced the direction and outcome of Soviet foreign policy. For Zubok, the nature of the Soviet system meant that there were few restraints on a leader's will. It is therefore an area of study that provides examples of the role of individuals in history. In part he draws on James Goldgeier's (for me not convincing)<sup>18</sup> thesis that the Party general secretaries took the lessons of their domestic rise to power and applied them to international relations (Zubok, p. 18). Mainly, though, Zubok charts the actions of leaders in and of themselves. In Stalin's case, a 'dark, mistrusting mind and cruel, vindictive personality made a powerful imprint on his international vision' (p. 18). Khrushchev's stormy period of brinkmanship was an outcome of his crudeness, lack of education and inability to listen to colleagues (pp. 138–9, 142–3, 168). Brezhnev's major contribution was to the achievement of *détente* (pp. 223, 339), a commitment that had its roots in a dislike of war that began with a life-changing conversation with his father in the 1930s (p. 202). One may question the significance of details of Brezhnev's biography, as Zubok claims, but the presentation of Brezhnev as 'confident' and 'energetic' (p. 218) adds to recent attempts to reassess the Brezhnev period not as one of a blanket 'stagnation'.<sup>19</sup> The revolutionary-imperial paradigm crashed with Gorbachev because he abandoned such central tenets as a Stalinist bipolar worldview (pp. 282, 285–6). Most importantly, Gorbachev refused to use force when it could have saved the USSR (pp. 318–21); the end of the cold war is thus intimately linked to the 'self-image of Gorbachev as leader' (p. 314).

Zubok's book cannot be reduced to the (misquoted) couplet, 'geography is about maps and history is about chaps'. There are chapters on the changing nature of Soviet society. The Khrushchev 'thaw' is viewed as particularly significant, for it produced the 'men and women of the sixties' who provided the 'essential background for the dramatic shift in Soviet international behaviour under Mikhail Gorbachev' (p. 165). But Zubok self-consciously limits society to 'elite groups and networks that emerged in the late 1950s', for it was these people, in Zubok's account, who were at the centre of political life for the endgame of the cold war drama (p. 164). Here there is room in cultural history for disagreement. Much is made of the publication of *One Day of the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and the extent to which it overshadowed the Cuban missile crisis (p. 163). A recent study of how Solzhenitsyn's novella about the camps was received in

<sup>18</sup> See my review in *Europe-Asia Studies*, 47, 5 (1995), 895–6.

<sup>19</sup> Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle, eds., *Brezhnev Reconsidered* (London: Palgrave, 2002).

Soviet society points to the way in which it offended conceptions of Soviet 'decency'; a liberal versus conservative model does not encompass the broad range of responses that Solzhenitsyn provoked.<sup>20</sup> One could also ask if Zubok's consideration of society could not have been broadened. The absence of the working class, for example, is striking. Yet it may be the crucial group for understanding the decline of the USSR and the end of the cold war.

In the early 1970s Hillel Ticktin developed an original insight into the decline of Stalinism. He wrote that the USSR 'is not a historically viable system and is inherently unstable... the Soviet Union has nowhere to go other than repression together with gradual attempts at the market'.<sup>21</sup> One of the elite's biggest problems was the fact that the working class had no incentive to produce, so there was massive waste. It was on this analysis, and not because of imperial overstretch, that the defence burden and generous subsidies to allies across the globe spelled disaster for the Soviet economy and hence for Soviet power. It was the fact that the revolution, and the revolutionary working class, had been defeated and disempowered by Stalinism, and that in doing so Stalinism dug its own grave. It is via a more radical investigation of Soviet society that we achieve a fuller understanding of why the USSR 'lost' and the United States 'won' the cold war. Zubok correctly states that the cold war was a battle of ideologies, but one must critique the ideologies in order to place the history of ideas and of the individuals who espouse them in their proper social context.

This does not mean that we must write the Soviet leader out of history. It is, however, devilishly difficult to resolve the conundrum of the individual in history, especially when the focus is on personality. What is the connection between psychology, personality and the power of the individual to make a difference? How do we move from the former to the latter? What of instances in which leaders act out of character – Stalin sending grain back to the villages, Khrushchev's zigzags in cultural destalinisation, the cautious Brezhnev marching into Afghanistan, and Gorbachev sending the army into the Baltic? Each event has to be examined separately, but it seems to me that we should look to ideology, Soviet politics and Soviet society for the basic mechanisms determining the actions of Soviet leaders. Leon Trotsky wrote numerous sketches of leading politicians, penned an autobiography and worked on biographies of Lenin and Stalin. His reflection on the personal versus the impersonal or the subjective versus the objective offers an apt conclusion:

I cannot deny that my life has not followed quite the ordinary course. The reasons for that are inherent in the conditions of the time, rather than in me... Above the subjective there rises the objective, and in the final reckoning it is the objective that decides.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Miriam Dobson, 'Contesting the Paradigms of De-Stalinization: Readers' Responses to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*', *Slavic Review*, 64, 3 (2005), 580–600.

<sup>21</sup> Hillel H. Ticktin, 'Towards a Political Economy of the USSR', *Critique*, 1 (1973), 23–4. Zubok is influenced by Archie Brown's argument in favour of a 'Gorbachev factor' (p. 304). For Ticktin's response to this see his review of Brown in *Europe-Asia Studies*, 49, 2 (1997), 317–323.

<sup>22</sup> Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), xxxix.