Stalin’s History of the Soviet Union: A Critical Edition of Shestakov’s 1937 Short Course on the History of the USSR

Officially little more than just an elementary school textbook, Andrei Shestakov’s Short Course on the History of the USSR formed a central part of the Stalinist ideological canon between 1937 and 1956. Millions of copies of the textbook were published for use in the public schools, Red Army study circles and political literacy courses. That said, surprisingly little has been written about this infamous volume in the years since. Filling a major gap in the scholarly literature, Stalin’s History of the Soviet Union will supply a critical edition of this textbook that both analyzes the text and places it within its proper historical context. This book realizes three objectives. First, it uncovers the ideological origins of this infamous textbook. Second, it reveals the enormous scale of Stalin’s personal involvement in the narrative’s construction. Third, it documents the dictator’s goals for the transformation of the Soviet historical imagination—an issue of striking relevance today as these plans are revived by Vladimir Putin’s increasingly nationalistic regime.

PROBLEMATICA

It has long been known that the Stalinist party leadership appropriated heroes, myths and iconography from the ancien régime. Engaging with a fifty-year debate over the nature and significance of this flirtation with the Russian national past, I argued in my 2002 monograph National Bolshevism that this appropriation of the prerevolutionary past should be seen as a major ideological about-face.\(^1\) Stridently populist and unabashedly pragmatic, this new approach to rallying popular opinion had a huge effect on Russo-Soviet society, precipitating the formation of a modern sense of Russian national identity that remains with us to the present day.

The central text of this ideological coup d’état was Shestakov’s 1937 History of the USSR. It resolved the party leadership’s long-standing dilemma over how to mobilize support within a society that was too poorly-educated to be inspired by Marxism alone. It represented a newly pragmatic approach to history, which integrated Soviet socialism into a thousand-year narrative that selectively rehabilitated famous personalities and symbols from the Russian national past. It epitomized Stalin’s decision to break with fifteen years of idealistic, utopian sloganeering and refashioned the “Soviet experiment” in conventional, etatist terms. Ultimately, it would be no exaggeration to conclude that Shestakov’s History of the USSR completed Stalin’s “search for a usable past.”\(^2\)

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Although Shestakov’s textbook officially boasted the imprimatur of an “All-Union Governmental Editing Commission,” rumors have long alleged that Stalin played a major behind-the-scenes role in its compilation. While working in Moscow in the former Central Party Archive in the 1990s, I investigated the textbook’s origins, noting the part that party bosses like Andrei Zhdanov played in its editing. A few years later, after my book National Bolshevism appeared in print, a new tranche of material from Stalin’s personal archive was declassified that allowed scholars a closer look at the general secretary’s role in the development of this text for the first time. Most valuable among these documents are copies of the Shestakov textbook galleys that Stalin personally edited by hand during the summer of 1937.

The importance of Stalin’s editing of this text is hard to exaggerate. Although at times routine and pedantic, Stalin’s interventions are often politically-charged. In the years since 2002, I have noticed several key ideological themes within the general secretary’s editing. First, Stalin consistently strengthened etatist aspects of this historical narrative, enhancing aspects of Russian history connected to the consolidation of central political authority. This put the communist leader in the awkward position of defending the historical legacies of not only the tsars and their servitors, but the Russian Orthodox Church as well. It also led Stalin to delete gratuitous, compromising and salacious detail about some of these historical protagonists, inasmuch as he preferred to focus on their professional successes rather than their personal failings. This theme also led Stalin to systematically stress the importance of the central party organization within the Soviet portions of the narrative, downgrading the importance of grassroots activism and regional or foreign communist movements in the process.

Second, Stalin’s editing reveals a strong pivot away from the Marxist-Leninist stress on proletarian internationalism toward a sort of Russocentric autarchy. Despite lip service to slogans such as “Workers of the World, Unite!,” the general secretary systematically deleted portions of the text dealing with world history and events in foreign lands—even those describing worker unrest abroad or international support for the Bolshevik revolution. At the same time, he highlighted the singularity and uniqueness of Russia’s thousand-year experience with statehood and its transformation into the Soviet Union after 1917 under the leadership of the Bolshevik party—another historical agent that Stalin considered to be without precedent in world history. The end result of this set of editorial interventions was the consistent assertion throughout the book of a sort of Russo-Soviet exceptionalism that was absent until 1937 in party ideology and propaganda.

Other aspects of Stalin’s editing offer a unique opportunity to test long-standing assumptions about the general secretary’s supposedly halting, instrumental grasp of ideology. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Stalin’s editing turns out to have been heavily informed by Marxism-Leninism. For instance, both Marx and Lenin argue that that only a working class party could precipitate truly revolutionary events, insofar as they believed that rural, agrarian populations lacked the ideological vision, political consciousness and practical organization to press for fundamental change. Stalin thoroughly interpolated this
thesis into Shestakov’s historical narrative, creating a theoretical red thread running throughout the book that would explain why the Russian peasantry’s frequent revolts against tsarist authority were doomed to failure. Such editing reveals Shestakov’s manuscript to have been strikingly under-theorized when it landed on Stalin’s desk during the summer of 1937. Only by merit of the dictator’s red pencil did this textbook acquire an internally-consistent line and sense of ideological vision.

Finally, Stalin’s editing of the text will force historians to rethink their assumptions about his cult of personality. Indeed perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Stalin’s editing is the extent to which he deleted biographical and celebratory detail about himself. Such editing indicates that Stalin was neither craven nor single-minded about the propagation of his cult. Instead, he appears to have been annoyed by such attention and preoccupied by something else entirely: the task of enhancing the historical agency attributed to the central party leadership and the broader Bolshevik establishment as a whole.

SPECIFICS
Publishing an annotated critical edition of Shestakov’s history in English would create an appealing volume for specialist and non-specialist audiences alike. First, it would provide an introduction to the official Soviet perspective on the history of Russia and the USSR from prehistoric times through 1956. This is important not only for what it reveals about the politicization of the past under Stalin, but for what it can say about the superficial way in which Soviet history was destalinized between the late 1950s and the late 1980s (and how this narrative is being actively revived today). Second, as noted above, publication of this critical edition would provide unusual insight into how Stalin personally shaped the evolution of this storyline—something of interest to both academia and the broader reading public. The potential for these factors to draw audiences is further bolstered by the accessibility of the material itself: inasmuch as Shestakov’s textbook was written for everyone from schoolchildren to Red Army draftees, Stalin’s History of the Soviet Union would work well within both classroom and non-academic contexts.

As important as Shestakov’s textbook is, it is curious how rarely it has been discussed in the scholarly literature only rarely, even in passing. Aside from my preliminary discussions in 2002, only two little-known Russian studies has made any real attempt to address the subject—a preliminary article in 1991 and A. M. Dubrovsky’s 2005 monograph on the Stalin-era historical profession.3

METHODOLOGY AND PROGRESS-TO-DATE

Methodologically, this critical edition is based on an approach I developed for a similar book that is presently forthcoming from Yale University Press. At its core, *Stalin’s History of the Soviet Union* stems from the official 1938 English language translation of the 1937 textbook, which I have digitized into word processing files through a combination of flatbed scanning, Optical Character Recognition and meticulous hand correction. Stalin’s editorial interpolations and excisions will be highlighted through the use of italics and strikethrough text. Similarly highlighted within the text will be other aspects of the general secretary’s editorial interventions, particular his commentary and marginalia. Despite the fact that *Stalin’s History of the Soviet Union* embraces an approach to typographical representation normally reserved for critical editions of poetry and prose, it should produce a revealing and accessible volume. In particular, it will convey in an engaging way not only Stalin’s contributions to the text, but the graphic, violent way in which he stripped it of material and illustrations that he found disagreeable.

In many senses, this is already quite a mature project. I have spent years thinking about this material since 2002 and have already identified all the archival documents needed to draft a broad, accessible introduction to the volume. I have also already obtained copies of all Stalin’s original publisher’s galleys and prepared a number of sample chapters in both Russian and English to test my methodology and layout strategy. I estimate that I should be able to complete a 95,000 word critical edition of the Shestakov text, complete with introduction and annotation, over the course of about a year of sustained work.

SIGNIFICANCE

*Stalin’s History of the Soviet Union* has much to offer a broad audience of both academic specialists and the general reading public. First and foremost, this critical edition concerns Stalin, who continues to captivate audiences with his heavy-handed, dictatorial leadership style. Second, the book foregrounds the rewriting of history—something that in this case resulted in the Stalinization of the Soviet past into a catechism that would define public indoctrination in the USSR for over fifteen years. Third, it identifies for the reader those aspects of this triumphalist storyline that survived the dictator’s death in 1953 to reign over the Soviet historical imagination until 1991. Finally, it exposes the origins of the conservative, statist approach to the Russian national past that Vladimir Putin is today actively fashioning into a new nationalistic ideology.

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