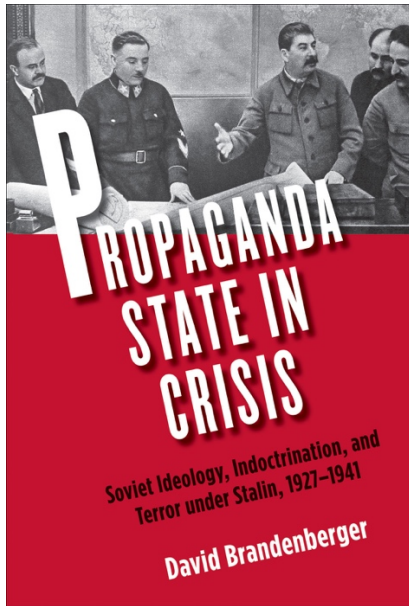


# Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination and Terror under Stalin, 1927-1941

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The party's striking failure to promote a popular sense of loyalty to the Soviet cause has long been overlooked in the ongoing debate over the nature of Stalinism. Paradoxical within a society that was ostensibly organized along Marxist-Leninist lines, this shortcoming is all the more curious in light of the fact that the party allocated virtually unlimited resources to the cause of ideological indoctrination during these years. Yet despite this massive investment, Stalinist ideologists were repeatedly frustrated in their attempts to promote a coherent sense of Soviet identity and popularize the philosophical tenets of Marxism-

Leninism—failures which led to a crisis in Soviet public life during the mid-to-late 1930s.

*Propaganda State in Crisis* explores this heretofore unacknowledged weakness at the core of the Soviet “experiment” by examining the construction of Soviet propaganda on high, its dissemination within society, and its reception on the popular level. An expose of the surprisingly marginal efficacy of Soviet indoctrinational efforts during the 1930s, it also details the ramifications of this ideological impotency for the society as a whole over the course of the entire Stalin period.

## PROBLEMATICA

During the past decade, many scholars have focused on the subject of identity and popular opinion under Stalin. Some have contended that ordinary Soviets were remarkably pragmatic and savvy about the nature of the system and found a myriad of ways to live more-or-less normal lives in these extraordinary times.<sup>1</sup> Others have called for new

<sup>1</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism—Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); *Tear Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Golfo Alexopoulos, “Portrait of a Con Artist as a Soviet Man,” *Slavic Review* 57:4 (1998): 774-790.

approaches to the study of individual subjectivity and collective identities in the USSR, pointing to crucial differences between the Soviet experience and that of more traditionally liberal societies.<sup>2</sup> According to such analysis, the ideologically-charged rhetoric surrounding industrialization and socialist construction was ubiquitous enough to decisively influence the formation of ordinary Soviet citizens' sense of self. Indeed, Soviet citizens during 1920s and '30s literally began to "speak Bolshevik," displaying beliefs that were Soviet in form if not in content.<sup>3</sup>

Still other specialists have demonstrated that Stalinist rule led to the coalescing of ethnic identities. Although class-consciousness ostensibly lay at the philosophical foundation of the Soviet experiment, these authors argue that in practice, Stalin and his entourage actually behaved like "nationalists," actively promoting nation-building throughout the USSR.<sup>4</sup> According to this line of reasoning, early Soviet policies in the 1920s first celebrated non-Russian ethnic diversity, and then embraced countervailing russificatory, populist tendencies during the mid-to-late 1930s.<sup>5</sup> In my first book, I explored how an ideological current of "national Bolshevism" matured during the late 1930s to survive the war and stretch deep into the 1950s.<sup>6</sup>

Aside from these two schools of thought, other scholars have traced identity formation under Stalin to a variety of other factors, from generational cohort<sup>7</sup> and the party press<sup>8</sup> to various aspects of everyday life.<sup>9</sup> Exceptional experiences like that of the purges<sup>10</sup> and the

<sup>2</sup> Anna Krylova, "The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies," *Kritika* 1:1 (2000): 119-46.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995); also David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: the Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). Somewhat different approaches are reflected in Jochen Hellbeck, "Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi," *Jahrbuecher fuer Geschichte Osteuropas* 44:4 (1996): 233-73; idem, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53:2 (1994): 414.

<sup>5</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Ethnicity and the Soviet State, 1923-1938* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Anna Krylova, "Identity, Agency and the 'First Soviet Generation,'" in *Generations in Twentieth Century Europe*, ed. Stephen Lovell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007), 101-120.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Brooks, *"Thank You, Comrade Stalin": Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); *Stalinism as a Way of Life*, eds. Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); etc.

<sup>10</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007); Hiroaki Kuromiya, *The Voices of the Dead: Stalin's Great Terror in the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

Second World War<sup>11</sup> are also described as key to social identity in the USSR. Although the varied nature of these findings may seem inconsistent and confusing at first glance, upon closer examination, it is striking how compatible they actually are. On a fundamental level, Soviet society was remarkably diverse and Soviet social identity extraordinarily multivalent.

But absent throughout all of these studies is attention paid to the party's failure to promote a more explicitly Soviet sense of social identity, grounded in the tenets of class consciousness, socialist construction, Marxism-Leninism and militant proletarian internationalism.<sup>12</sup> *Propaganda State in Crisis* supplies the missing piece of this jigsaw puzzle by analyzing official efforts between the 1920s and late 1930s to inculcate Soviet values and priorities into society at large. Its research reveals that over the course of nearly a decade, members of the ideological establishment came to embrace a populist approach to propaganda and mobilization that focused on everyday heroism and patriotic love of country. They were rewarded for this rather questionably-Marxist innovation with a remarkable outpouring of popular support for the regime, which lasted until this new campaign was disemboweled by the Great Terror. Ultimately, the impact of the purges between 1936 and 1938 proved severe enough to cripple the entire indoctrinational system.

The importance of this ideological crisis during the mid-to-late 1930s is difficult to exaggerate. It was, after all, the failure of indoctrinational efforts that forced the party to resort to ad-hoc mobilizational drives that distorted key aspects of the Soviet experiment. Scholars have long been aware of the party hierarchy's encouragement of economic stratification and gender inequality, as well as its heretical flirtation with Russian nationalism and the Orthodox church. That said, these practices have often been written-off as examples of Stalinist pragmatism or the exigencies of war. *Propaganda State in Crisis* ties these compromises directly to the party's failure to promote a more ideologically-consistent sense of social identity and argues that this lack of a unifying principle ultimately undermined the most revolutionary dimensions of the Soviet order.

#### METHODOLOGY & OVERVIEW

This book makes its case by combining an archivally-based archeology of the Stalin-era ideological establishment with an interdisciplinary investigation of the official line, as represented in party study circles, the all-union press, middle-brow literature, theater, film

<sup>11</sup> Amir Weiner, "The Making of a Dominant Myth: The Second World War and the Construction of Political Identities within the Soviet Polity," *Russian Review* 55:4 (1996): 638-60; idem, *Making Sense of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). See also Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Elena Zubkova, *Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obshchestvo: politika i povsednevnost', 1945-1953* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Recent studies that restrict their analysis to ideological developments within the Stalin elite appear to be unaware of the party's failure to popularize its core tenets on the mass level. See Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Andrzej Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

and museum exhibition. It then complements this examination of the construction and dissemination of ideology with a special investigation into the popular reception of this rhetoric and imagery. Intent on determining how ordinary Soviet citizens reacted to the wax and wane of the official line, this study surveys an array of letters, diaries and memoirs, as well as denunciations, secret police reports and interviews conducted during Stalin's lifetime. Such sources preserve "authentic" voices from the 1930s that allow *Propaganda State in Crisis* to gauge the popular resonance of ideologically-charged propaganda during this critical decade.

Chapter One begins by investigating the approach that Soviet authorities took to mass mobilization during the 1920s, both within traditional contexts (e.g. public rallies, study circles, the press, poster art) and less conventional forums (art, literature, drama, film, museum exhibition, etc.). These venues' embrace of abstract materialism and the avant garde produced an inaccessible mélange of schematicism and anonymous social forces that inhibited the regime's mobilizational propaganda—something visible in the collapse of Soviet morale on the eve of the tenth anniversary of the revolution in 1927. Focusing on the aftermath of this fiasco, Chapters Two and Three trace how party authorities began to modulate their representation of the official line in order to enhance its accessibility and evocative power. Journalists, for instance, redesigned their reportage to court party activists. Party historians attempted to identify a "usable past" that would make the annals of the Russian revolutionary movement more relevant to Soviet society at large.<sup>13</sup> Propagandists augmented these efforts by launching an ambitious personality cult based on the veneration of Lenin that styled Stalin as the living personification of the Soviet experiment.

None of these approaches proved easy to put into practice, however. Indeed, it appears that party historians and ideologists struggled for years between the late 1920s and mid-1930s in order to reconcile their long-standing commitment to Marxism-Leninism with these newer, seemingly "bourgeois" approaches to mass mobilization. What's more, Chapters Four and Five reveal that the first to arrive at a truly accessible version of the Soviet "usable past" were not members of the party's ideological establishment at all, but instead hailed from the journalistic and literary ranks of the creative intelligentsia. Their approach, which celebrated contemporary individual heroism and the long-taboo notion of patriotism, met with resistance on the part of veteran ideologists and party historians on account of its use of conventional, non-Marxist appeals. But as indicated in Chapter Six, this new mobilizational strategy elicited a surprisingly strong reaction from Soviet society at large, popularizing regime values and priorities on the mass level with remarkable effectiveness.

<sup>13</sup> This expression was coined in 1918 but popularized more recently—see Van Wyk Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," *Dial* 64 (1918): 337-341; Henry Steele Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past and Other Essays in Historiography* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 3-27.

Chapter Seven interrupts the success story surrounding the new Soviet pantheon of everyday patriots, heroes and role models with the realization that no sooner had this populist line come into its own than it was blindsided by the most brutal dimensions of the Great Terror. “Unmasked” as enemies of the people between 1936 and 1938, many members of the new Soviet Olympus lapsed into disgrace or disappeared entirely, taking with them an entire generation of fictional bestsellers, textbooks and popular dramas for the stage and silver screen. Chapters Nine and Ten demonstrate that public opinion was profoundly shaken by the Terror’s slaughter of the society’s heroes and role models. Worse, this bloodletting forced the ideological establishment to abandon its hard-won emphasis on heroes and heroism and lapse back into discussions of sterile schemata and anonymous social forces. A turn of events epitomized by the notorious 1938 *Short Course on the History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)*, it destroyed years of work on societal mobilization and identity formation.

Chapter Eleven argues that the destruction of the Soviet usable past between 1936-1938 resulted in a broad ossification of the official line in mass culture. It also clarifies why the party hierarchs rushed to rehabilitate an array of non-Marxist heroes from the annals of the Russian national past even before the launch of the Short Course. Ultimately, as the book’s Conclusion notes, the party’s failure to inculcate a popular sense of Soviet identity during the late 1930s forced it to search for new mobilizational slogans and propaganda at a time when war seemed imminent. This can explain the party’s resort to russocentric imagery, rhetoric and iconography during the late 1930s, a populist bid for hearts and minds which was guaranteed to encourage emotions like nativism, jingoism and nationalism that had long been considered antithetical to the Soviet experiment.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

An important contribution in its own right, *Propaganda State in Crisis* has few competitors within the long-neglected literature on ideology, agitation and propaganda in interwar Soviet society. Indeed, these fields have been overshadowed by political, social and cultural history for so long that only five books for English-speaking audiences in the past decade have even touched upon the issues addressed in this volume: Erik van Rees’ *Political Thought of Joseph Stalin*, David Priestland’s *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization*, Evgeny Dobrenko’s *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, Matthew Lenoe’s *Closer to the Masses* and my own *National Bolshevism*.<sup>14</sup> Broader, more interdisciplinary and more archivally-grounded than these other books, *Propaganda State in Crisis* will appeal to specialists, students and interested laymen alike.

<sup>14</sup> Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: a Study in Twentieth-Century Revolutionary Patriotism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization: Ideas, Power and Terror in Inter-war Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Matthew Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses: Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution and Soviet Newspapers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

In its contribution to the discipline's on-going inquiry into social identity under Stalin, *Propaganda State in Crisis* explores an ideological disaster that crippled indoctrinational efforts oriented around Soviet values and priorities. Ripe with implications for the study of Stalin-era mobilizational campaigns and identity-building projects as a whole, this book is also relevant to the study of the post-Stalin period as well. First, it helps clarify why N. S. Khrushchev proved unable to foster a supra-national sense of identity revolving around membership in the "Soviet people" [*Sovetskii narod*] during the post-Stalin "Thaw." Second, it explains why the Brezhnev-era party found it so tempting to rely on the memorialization of the Second World War and the selective use of Russian nationalist appeals in order to bolster its legitimacy. Third, it explains the failure of communist idealists like Andropov and Gorbachev to find common cause with the Soviet population. Fourth, it explains why Communist politicians in post-Soviet Russia resort so frequently to Russian nationalist sloganeering. Detailing the party's failure to promote a sense of ideologically-charged identity during the Stalinist 1930s, *Propaganda State in Crisis* speaks to one of the core dysfunctions of the Soviet experiment across the span of the twentieth century.

[2011]