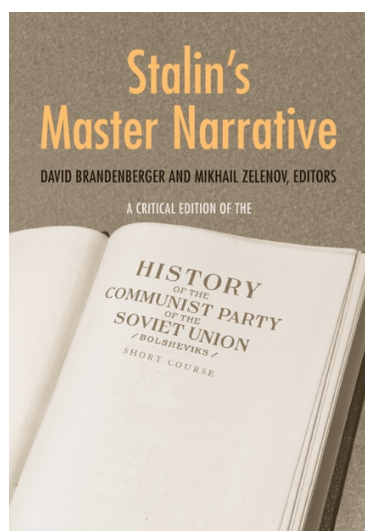


Stalin's Master Narrative: A Critical Edition of the Short Course on the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)

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The central text of the Stalin-era canon, the *Short Course on the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)*, was compulsory reading for Soviet citizens in all walks of life between 1938 and 1956. Over forty million copies of the textbook were published in the USSR during Stalin's reign, and hundreds of thousands more appeared in places as far flung as Prague, Beijing, London, New York and San Francisco.¹ Yet surprisingly little is known about the origins of this infamous volume. *Stalin's Master Narrative* supplies a new critical edition

of the *Short Course*, accompanied by a scholarly introduction and needed annotation, in order to analyze the text and place it within its historical context. Ultimately, it reveals no less than the full extent of Stalin's plans for the transformation of the Soviet historical imagination.

A long-needed inquiry into a key text of twentieth century modernity, this project's emphasis on ideology also restores a sense of balance to the literature on Stalinism. After all, if early postwar Sovietologists looked to ideology to explain all the idiosyncrasies of the USSR, more recent generations of scholars have redirected the field toward the study of more pragmatic political practices (e.g. factionalism, patron-client networks) and normative socio-cultural dynamics (upward mobility, etc.). *Stalin's Master Narrative* reorients debate on the nature of Stalinism through its documentation of the sheer scale

¹ T. Zelenov, "Bibliografiia," *Bol'shevik* 23 (1949): 89-90. The *Short Course* was published annually in the USSR between 1938 and 1955 in Russian and a variety of union languages. See also *Dejiny Vsesvazove Komunistické Strany (Bol'seviku): strucny vyklad* (Prague: Svoboda, 1950); *Lian gong (Bu) dang shi jian ming jiao cheng di yi zhang zhi ba zhang ming ci jie shi* (Beijing: Zhongguo qing nian chu ban she, 1954); various reprints of the 1939 Moscow English language edition, *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)* (London: Red Star, 1939, 1943, 1976; New York: International, 1939, 1975; San Francisco: Proletarian, 1939, 1972, 1976); etc.

of the party's search for a "usable past"² and the extent to which Stalin himself personally participated in the writing of the party canon.

Aside from ideological issues, *Stalin's Master Narrative* also challenges the field to rethink reigning assumptions about the general secretary's personality cult and his supposedly marginal, instrumental grasp of Marxism. One of the most fascinating aspects of Stalin's editing of the *Short Course* turns out to be the vast amounts of biographical and celebratory detail about himself that he excised from the volume in 1938. Apparently, he was neither single-minded nor mercenary in his advancement of the cult. Moreover, although the *Short Course* has often been used to illustrate the schematic, dogmatic nature of Stalin's Marxism, it is only now possible to test this thesis by comparing Stalin's version of the text against the prototype that was delivered to him before publication. Such a comparison reveals that the manuscript that landed on Stalin's desk for editing at the height of the purges in 1938 was not only bloated and plodding, but strikingly under-theorized. It was Stalin's red pencil and editorial interventions—something which ultimately affected about 40% of the book—that gave the *Short Course* its clear sense of vision and economical, internally-consistent narrative.

Such a critical edition of this text has become possible only recently. For the first decade after the opening of the archives in 1991, access limitations forced work on the *Short Course* to be brief and general;³ more recent work by M. V. Zelenov suffered from similar restrictions.⁴ But my discovery between 2006-2009 of an array of long-lost plans, outlines, drafts and correspondence now provides Zelenov and me with the ability to answer crucial questions about the *Short Course*'s structure, emplotment and central themes. These materials also allow us to outline the role that the text was to play within the party's broader indoctrinational program. Finally, they offer us a chance to describe how Soviet society responded to the emergence of the *Short Course*.

An important study in its own right, the need for a book like *Stalin's Master Narrative* is compounded by a lack of similar texts in the field. Ideology has been neglected for such a long time that only a handful of English-language books have even flirted with the subjects that are to be dealt with in this volume in the past ten years, including Erik van Rees' *Political Thought of Joseph Stalin*, David Priestland's *Stalinism and the Politics of*

² 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.

³ N. N. Maslov, "'Kratkii kurs istorii VKP(b)'—entsiklopediia kul'ta lichnosti Stalina," *Voprosy istorii KPSS* 11 (1988): 51-67; S. V. Sukharev, "Predtecha 'Kratkogo kursa' v litsakh i dokumentakh," *Voprosy istorii KPSS* 8 (1991): 110-120; etc.

⁴ See *Voprosy istorii* 11, 12 (2002); 3, 4 (2003); I. V. Stalin, *Istoricheskaia ideologiia v SSSR v 1920-1950-e gody: Perepiska s istorikami, stat'i i zametki po istorii, stenogrammy vystuplenii—sbornik dokumentov i materialov*, vol. 1, 1920-1930-e gody, ed. M. V. Zelenov (St. Petersburg: Nauka-Piter, 2006). Medvedev's recent work on the *Short Course* is derivative and littered with errors—see *Istoriia VKP(b): reprintnoe izdanie* (Moscow: Logos, 2004), iii-xliv; R. A. Medvedev, *Chto chital Stalin* (Moscow: Prava cheloveka, 2005), 196-248.

Mobilization, Evgeny Dobrenko's *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, and my own *National Bolshevism*.⁵ Even more remarkably, none of these studies devotes more than passing mention to the *Short Course*, in large part due to longstanding assumptions about the incompleteness of the archival record.

Ultimately, such dynamic work prioritized the compilation of a critical edition of the *Short Course*. After all, as the most frequently published book in eastern Europe in the twentieth century, the *Short Course* occupies a unique place in the history of ideology, propaganda, mass culture and popular indoctrination. It also should be considered one of the great showcase projects of the Stalin era, alongside the first Five-Year Plan, the Baltic-White Sea Canal, Magnitogorsk, the defense of Stalingrad and the development of the atom bomb. But if the *Short Course* is the most tangible and accessible of these Stalinist epics (particularly for foreign audiences), it is also the least understood. *Stalin's Master Narrative*, therefore, fills a gaping void in the literature and supply answers to some of the most enduring questions surrounding the nature of Stalinism and the Stalin era.

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⁵ 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).