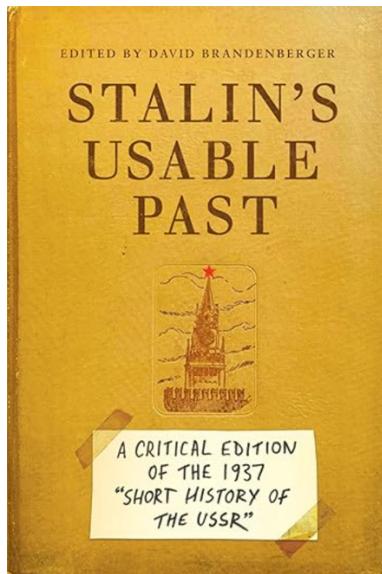


Stalin's Usable Past: A Critical Edition of Shestakov's 1937 *Short History of the USSR*

Edited by David Brandenberger

Stanford University Press, forthcoming 2024



At the height of the Great Terror in 1937, Joseph Stalin took a break from the purges to edit a new textbook on the history of the USSR. Published shortly thereafter, the *Short History of the USSR* amounted to an ideological sea change. Stalin had literally rewritten Russo-Soviet History, breaking with two decades of Bolshevik propaganda that styled the 1917 Revolution as the start of a new era. In its place, he established a thousand-year pedigree for the Soviet state that stretched back through the Russian empire and Muscovy to the very dawn of Slavic civilization. Appearing in million-copy print runs through 1955, the

Short History transformed how a generation of Soviet citizens were to understand the past, not only in public school and adult indoctrination courses, but on the printed page, the theatrical stage, and the silver screen.

Stalin's Usable Past supplies a critical edition of the *Short History* that both analyzes the text and places it in historical context. By highlighting Stalin's precise redactions and embellishments, this book reveals the scope of Stalin's personal involvement in the textbook's development, documenting in unprecedented detail his plans for the transformation of Soviet society's historical imagination.

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

¹ David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

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 *Short History*. 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 *Short History* completed Stalin's "search for a usable past."²

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 identified 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

² See Henry Steele Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past and Other Essays in Historiography* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 3-27.

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 forces 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

As important as Shestakov’s textbook is, it is curious how overlooked it’s been in the field until now, 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

³ A. M. Dubrovskii, *Istorik i vlast’: istoricheskaiia nauka v SSSR i kontseptsiiia istorii feodal’noi Rossii v kontekste politiki i ideologii, 1930-1950 gg.* (Briansk: BGU, 2005). This book was republished in a second edition in 2017. A preliminary and now obsolete article appeared two decades ago: A. N. Artizov, “V ugodu vzgliadam vozhdia (Konkurs 1936 g. na uchebnik po istorii SSSR),” *Kentavr* 1 (1991): 120-135.

This annotated critical edition of Shestakov's history in English is intended for specialist and non-specialist audiences alike. First, it provides 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 says about the superficial way in which Soviet history was destalinized between the late 1950s and the late 1980s (as well as the way this narrative is being actively revived today). Second, as noted above, publication of this critical edition provides unusual insight into how Stalin personally shaped the evolution of this storyline—something of interest to both academia and the broader reading public. Third, the appeal of the volume 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 Usable Past* should also find broad readership with the classroom and non-academic contexts.

Methodologically, this critical edition is based on an approach I developed for a similar book published by Yale University Press in 2019.⁴ At its core, *Stalin's Usable Past* is based on the official 1938 English language translation of the 1937 textbook.⁵ Stalin's editorial interpolations and excisions are highlighted in the text through the use of italics and strikethrough text. Annotations convey other aspects of the general secretary's editorial interventions, particularly his commentary and marginalia. In the end, this volume's embrace of an approach to page layout normally reserved for literary criticism is quite dramatic, characterizing not only Stalin's contributions to the text, but the graphic, violent way in which he stripped this history of material he found disagreeable.

SIGNIFICANCE

Stalin's Usable Past has much to offer a broad audience of both academic specialists and the general reading public. First and foremost, the book focuses on Stalin, who continues to captivate audiences 70 years after his death with his heavy-handed, authoritarian style of leadership. 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 national past that today Vladimir Putin is again actively promoting in Russian public life.

© David Brandenberger, 2024

⁴ *Stalin's Master Narrative: a Critical Edition of the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)—Short Course*, co-edited with M. V. Zelenov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

⁵ *A Short History of the USSR: A Textbook for 3rd and 4th Classes*, ed. A. V. Shestakov (Moscow: Cooperative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR, 1938).