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1 Joseph Stalin: power and ideas

Sarah Davies and James Harris

Stalin, like the other 'evil dictators' of the twentieth century, remains the subject of enduring public fascination.[1] Academic attention, however, has shifted away from the study of 'Great Men', including Stalin, towards the little men and women, such as the now celebrated Stepan Podlubnyi, and towards Stalinist political culture more generally.[2] Ironically this is at a time when we have unprecedented access to hitherto classified material on Stalin, the individual.[3] The object of this volume is to reinvigorate scholarly interest in Stalin, his ideas, and the nature of his power. Although Stalin certainly did not single-handedly determine everything about the set of policies, practices, and ideas we have come to call Stalinism, it is now indisputable that in many respects his influence was decisive. A clearer understanding of his significance will allow more precise analysis of the origins and nature of Stalinism itself.

[1] Note the interest in several recent publications aimed primarily at a popular readership: Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002); Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003); Donald Rayfield, *Stalin and his Hangmen* (London: Viking, 2004).

[2] Podlubnyi has been made famous by Jochen Hellbeck in a number of publications, including 'Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi, 1931–1939', *Jahrbucher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 44 (1996), 344–73. On the 'cultural turn' in Soviet history, see the introduction by Sheila Fitzpatrick in *Stalinism: New Directions* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[3] Much of this is in the 'Stalin *fond*' in the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii, henceforth RGASPI fond 558, opis' 11), which includes correspondence received from and sent to everyone from the members of his inner circle to peasants and foreign journalists; documents relating to Stalin's activities in the organisations in which he worked; speeches, articles, biographical materials, and so on. Some documents from this collection have been published, including the two important volumes: Lars Lih, Oleg V. Naumov, and Oleg V. Khlevniuk (eds.), *Stalin's Letters to Molotov, 1925–1936* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); R. W. Davies, O. Khlevniuk, E. A. Rees L. Kosheleva, and L. Rogovaia (eds.), *The Stalin–Kaganovich Correspondence, 1931–1936* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

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The contributors to the volume do not subscribe to any single 'model'. Instead, they share a common agenda: to examine the new archival materials, as well as the old, with the aim of rethinking some of the stereotypes and assumptions about Stalin that have accumulated in the historiography. The vast literature on Stalin is of varying quality, including journalistic speculations, sensationalist potboilers, and political diatribes, as well as the important studies by Isaac Deutscher, Robert Tucker, and others.[4] Much of the work to date has been affected by both limited access to primary sources and the unusually intense politicisation of the field of Soviet studies.

The Soviet regime was obsessed with secrecy. Historians had to rely on a narrow group of useful sources, including published resolutions and decisions, stenographic reports of some major Party meetings, and published speeches of prominent officials. While these sorts of sources could be quite useful, they tended to reveal more about what was happening in the lower echelons of power. They divulged little or nothing about Stalin and his inner circle. Although the post-Stalin period saw limited selected archival access, as well as the increasing availability of memoirs, *samizdat*, and émigré sources, the thoughts and actions of the political elite remained largely a matter of speculation. In the polarised political climate of much of the twentieth century, it was not uncommon for scholars and other observers to see what confirmed their assumptions and prejudices.

The political context left a strong mark on both Soviet and western interpretations. Soviet historians were forced to conform to whatever happened to be the Party's current political line on Stalin, and produced what was essentially propaganda for the regime. Exceptions included the dissident Marxist Roy Medvedev, whose work, based primarily on Khrushchev-era reminiscences, went far beyond what was officially permissible in its criticism of Stalin for his distortion of Lenin's original project.[5] While Western analysts were not under such overt pressure, their interpretations were also heavily dependent on changing political circumstances. For example, the politically charged 1930s saw the publication in France of, on the one hand, the sycophantic biography of Stalin by the Communist Henri Barbusse, and on the other, the former

[4] Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography*, rev. edn. (London: Penguin, 1984); Robert Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879–1929. A Study in History and Personality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973) and *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990); Adam Ulam, *Stalin: The Man and His Era*, 2nd edn. (London: I. B. Tauris, 1989); R. McNeal, *Stalin: Man and Ruler* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

[5] R. Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). This was first published in 1971.

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Communist Boris Souvarine's vitriolic anti-Stalin study.[6] During the wartime alliance with Stalin, a spate of sympathetic evaluations appeared in the USA and Great Britain, which quickly evaporated as the Cold War began.[7] Academic Sovietology, a child of the early Cold War, was dominated by the 'totalitarian model' of Soviet politics. Until the 1960s it was almost impossible to advance any other interpretation, in the USA at least. It was the changing political climate from the 1960s, as well as the influence of new social science methodologies, which fostered the development of revisionist challenges to the totalitarian orthodoxy.

Over the course of these years, a number of influential studies of Stalin appeared, whose interpretations hinged on particular understandings of the relationship between the individual and his political, social, economic, ideological, and cultural context. One of the earliest was that of Trotsky, who advanced the notion of the 'impersonal Stalin' – a mediocrity who lacked any of his own ideas but who acted as the perfect representative of the collective interests of the new bureaucracy.[8] The Trotskyist sympathiser, Isaac Deutscher, writing after the war, was much more willing than Trotsky to credit Stalin's achievements, yet his Stalin was also to a great extent a product of circumstances. In Deutscher's view, the policy of collectivisation was dictated by the danger of famine conditions at the end of the 1920s. Stalin was a necessary agent of modernisation a man of 'almost impersonal personality.'[9] Likewise, E. H. Carr, while recognising Stalin's greatness, nevertheless stressed the historical logic of rapid modernisation: collectivisation and industrialisation 'were imposed by the objective situation which Soviet Russia in the later 1920s had to face'.[10]

While these analyses focused on the socio-economic circumstances which produced the Stalin phenomenon, totalitarian theories accentuated the functioning of the political and ideological system. In 1953, Carl Friedrich characterised totalitarian systems in terms of five points: an official ideology, control of weapons and of media, use of terror, and a single mass party

[6] H. Barbusse, *Stalin: A New World Seen Through One Man* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1935); B. Souvarine, *Stalin: A Critical Study of Bolshevism* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1939).
[7] For example, J. T. Murphy, *Stalin 1879–1944* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1945).
[8] L. Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and his Influence* (London: Harper and Bros. 1941).
[9] Deutscher, *Stalin*, p. 275.
[10] E. H. Carr, 'Stalin Victorious', *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 June 1949. In his introduction to a new edition of *The Russian Revolution from Lenin to Stalin*, R. W. Davies notes that Carr's understanding of Stalin's role shifted in later years. E. H. Carr, *The Russian Revolution from Lenin to Stalin, 1917–1929* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. xxxiv–xxxv.

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'usually under a single leader'.[11] There was of course an assumption that the leader was critical to the workings of totalitarianism: at the apex of a monolithic, centralised, and hierarchical system, it was he who issued the orders which were fulfilled unquestioningly by his subordinates. However, adherents of the model were not generally concerned with the leader except in his capacity as a function of the system and its ideology. There was certainly little empirical analysis of the significance of individual leaders: the personalities or ideas of a Lenin or a Stalin were not considered critical to an understanding of the inner workings of totalitarianism.[12]

It was partly dissatisfaction with this approach which lay behind Robert Tucker's attempt to reassess the significance of the leader. The first volume of his Stalin biography argued that the personality of the dictator was central to understanding the development of Stalinism. Tucker distinguished between the impact of Lenin and that of Stalin, suggesting that the Stalinist outcome was far from inevitable and was dependent in large measure on Stalin's own drive for power. Delving into the uncharted waters of psychohistory, he sought the roots of Stalinism in Stalin's experiences in childhood and beyond.[13] This was an important new departure, which coincided with other efforts to find alternatives to Stalinism, notably Stephen Cohen's study of Bukharin.[14] Yet the psychohistory on which it depended was always rather speculative.[15] The second volume of the biography was in many ways more rounded. *Stalin in Power* argued that Russia's authoritarian political culture and state-building traditions, as well as Stalin's personality, played a key role in shaping Stalinism.[16]

Tucker's work stressed the absolute nature of Stalin's power, an assumption which was increasingly challenged by later revisionist historians. In his *Origins of the Great Purges*, Arch Getty argued that the Soviet political system was chaotic, that institutions often escaped the control of the centre, and that Stalin's leadership consisted to a considerable extent in responding, on an *ad hoc* basis, to political crises as they arose.[17]

[11] C. J. Friedrich, *Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 52–3.
[12] Robert Tucker, *The Soviet Political Mind* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), p. 28.
[13] Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary*.
[14] S. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888–1938* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1973).
[15] Although Tucker's approach was always much more historically grounded than the far less convincing psychoanalytical account offered by D. Rancour-Lafferiere in *The Mind of Stalin* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1988).
[16] Tucker, *Stalin in Power*.
[17] J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 4–9.

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Getty's work was influenced by political science of the 1960s onwards, which, in a critique of the totalitarian model, began to consider the possibility that relatively autonomous bureaucratic institutions might have had some influence on policy-making at the highest level.[18] In the 1970s, historians took up the implicit challenge and explored a variety of influences and pressures on decision-making.[19] The 'discovery' of strong institutional interests and lively bureaucratic politics begged the question of whether Stalin did dominate the political system, or whether he was 'embattled', as one key study put it.[20]

During the 'new Cold War' of the 1980s, the work of the revisionists became the object of heated controversy, accused of minimising Stalin's role, of downplaying the terror, and so on.[21] With the the collapse of the Soviet Union, some of the heat has gone out of the debate. After the initial wave of self-justificatory 'findings', the opening up of the archives has stimulated serious work with sources. The politicisation of the field has become noticeably less pronounced, particularly amongst a younger generation of scholars in both Russia and the West for whom the legitimacy of socialism and the USSR are no longer such critical issues. Political history in general has attracted fewer students in favour of the more intellectually fashionable cultural history. However, there are signs of the emergence of a renewed interest in political history, of which this volume is one example.[22]

All the contributors to the volume represent the post-1991 wave of scholarship grounded in empirical work in the former Soviet archives. From North America and Europe, including Russia, they range from scholars who have been working on these problems for over half a century to those who have recently completed doctoral dissertations. Each

[18] For example, Gordon Skilling, 'Interest Groups in Communist Politics', *World Politics* 3 (1966), 435–51.

[19] See for example, Moshe Lewin, 'Taking Grain: Soviet Policies of Agricultural Procurements Before the War', in C. Abramsky (ed.), *Essays in Honour of E. H. Carr* (London: Macmillan, 1974); Jonathan Harris, 'The Origins of the Conflict Between Malenkov and Zhdanov, 1939–1941', *Slavic Review* 2 (1976), 287–303; Daniel Brower, 'Collectivized Agriculture in Smolensk: the Party, the Peasantry and the Crisis of 1932', *Russian Review* 2 (1977), 151–66; Sheila Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1978); Peter Solomon, 'Soviet Penal Policy, 1917–1934: A Reinterpretation', *Slavic Review* 2 (1980), 195–217; Werner Hahn, *Postwar Soviet Politics: The Fall of Zhdanov and the Defeat of Moderation, 1946–1953* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

[20] William O. McCagg, Jr, *Stalin Embattled, 1943–1948* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978). See also Gabor Rittersporn, 'L'état en lutte contre lui-même: Tensions sociales et conflits politiques en URSS, 1936–1938', *Libre* 4 (1978).

[21] See, for example, the debates in *Russian Review* 4 (1986).

[22] For discussions on 'The New Political History' see *Kritika* (1), 2004.

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considers a specific facet of Stalin as politician and thinker. In the discussion which follows, we focus on what light these analyses shed on two important questions. The first, the nature of Stalin's power, has long been a central issue in the historiography. The second, Stalin's Marxism, and the relationship between ideas and mobilisation, has received much less attention.

The majority of what we know about Stalin concerns his years in power. While this focus of the historian's attention is entirely logical, it is easy to forget that by the time he defeated Bukharin and became the uncontested leader of the Bolshevik Party, Stalin was fifty years old. He had lived two-thirds of his life. It would be surprising indeed if by this time Stalin was not fully developed as a personality, a thinker, and a politician. And yet somehow, few works on Stalin pay much attention to his 'formative years'.[23] Alfred Rieber's chapter on Stalin's Georgian background shows why this has been the case. He explains why sources on Stalin's early years were particularly subject to manipulation and censorship. He makes use of published and unpublished memoirs to cut through the myth-making and cast new light on Stalin's early life and the formation of his identity. He shows how Stalin adapted his political persona, shaped by his 'frontier perspective' to benefit his career as a revolutionary and politician. His early experiences left him with a preference for decision-making in small informal groups in place of large committees, a conspiratorial mentality, and an acceptance of violence.

In his study of Stalin as Commissar of Nationalities, Jeremy Smith picks up this story of Stalin's formative years in the period just after the Revolution. He shows Stalin already confident and consistent in his ideas on nationalities policy, willing and able to stand up to Lenin on questions of policy towards the national minorities and the relationship between Russia and the other Soviet republics. The chapter by David Priestland echoes this impression that Stalin was confident in his ideas and quite willing and able to engage other leading Bolsheviks on key issues. This is consonant with growing evidence that policy debates played a much stronger role in the Lenin succession than we had imagined.[24] Machine politics did, nevertheless, play a crucial role in Stalin's ability to defeat his opponents. In his chapter, Smith also discusses Stalin's early experiences of high politics within the Bolshevik Party in power, particularly as they developed his skills of factional

[23] One recent Russian study begins 'Let us not detain ourselves with Stalin's early years, for they do not contribute anything to an understanding of his later attitudes and worldview.' Iu. Zhukov, *Inoi Stalin* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2003), p. 8.

[24] See, for example, Lih et al. (eds.), *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, pp. 25–6.

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struggle and institutional empire-building. In observing the failure of the Commissariat of Nationalities to provide an adequate power base, he anticipates Harris' contribution on Stalin's next post, as General Secretary of the Party.

The idea that Stalin used his position as General Secretary to build a network of loyal political clients has long held a central place in our understanding of his rise to political supremacy. It has also shaped our sense of why the system evolved into a personal dictatorship, and how the system worked, suggesting that ideas did not matter as much as ruthless political manipulation behind closed doors. James Harris' study of Central Committee archives shows that the Secretariat played an important role in Stalin's rise, but not as we have commonly understood it. Harris argues that the Secretariat was barely able to cope with its tasks in the assignment and distribution of cadres. There is little evidence to suggest that Stalin was able to use it to build a personal following. The Secretariat was nevertheless invaluable to Stalin – as a source of information on the needs and wants of Party officialdom. In particular, he encouraged the common distaste for intra-Party democracy in order to harass and frustrate his rivals, to limit the dissemination of their ideas. In this way, the Secretariat played a critical role in Stalin's rise to power, though not as the source of the personalistic dictatorship which emerged in the 1930s. A substantial part of Party officialdom voted for him because they felt he served their interests. Harris observes that they were less sure that he did when he imposed the impossible targets of the First Five-Year Plan and the command-administrative system emerged. However, having themselves undermined intra-Party democracy and any prospect of questioning the 'Central Committee Line', there was little they could do.

While newly released archival materials on the 1920s have yet to attract much scholarly attention, there is already a considerable body of work on Soviet politics in the 1930s. We can now trace the steps by which Stalin achieved a steady concentration and personalisation of power. From the protocols of top Party organs and other materials, we can see in detail the steady decline in the consultative aspects of policy-making which characterised the 1920s. We knew that Party congresses and conferences were increasingly rare, as were meetings of the Central Committee. The meetings themselves ceased to involve any discussion of policy, but appear to have been orchestrated to publicise major policy shifts. We have learned that the Politburo stopped meeting formally by the middle of the 1930s as power shifted to an informal coterie around Stalin. The letters and other notes they exchanged has shown us that even with this group, relations were changing in the 1930s. The friendly informality that characterised

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their exchanges with Stalin in the early 1930s was replaced with a distinctly sycophantic tone a decade later. While there is evidence of debate and disagreements with Stalin in the early thirties, within a few years his word had become law. More sinister evidence of the entrenchment of personal dictatorship is his increasing reliance on the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) as an instrument of rule.[25]

This picture of the concentration of personal power can be misleading, however, if taken in isolation. The contributions to this volume examine the nature of Stalin's power, but without losing sight of the context in which it was exercised. Even Khlevniuk, who most emphatically asserts the vastness of Stalin's dictatorial powers, observes that neither in the early 1930s nor later in the decade could Stalin act alone. His inner circle and others close to the centre of power retained some influence and autonomy (though Getty and Khlevniuk, for example, disagree on just how much influence and autonomy they had). Nor could Stalin decide every matter of policy. His interventions were decisive, but there were substantial areas of policy that he left to others. Though Stalin's power was great, he could not always translate his ideas into action. Political and social structures were not soft putty for him to mould to his will. Stalin may have been an extremely powerful dictator, but he may not have felt as though he was, for his personal dictatorship took shape against a backdrop of revolutionary change, economic crisis, bureaucratic chaos, and a fear of enemies.

In his contribution on Stalin as 'Prime Minister', Arch Getty criticises those who regard the 'decline' of formal decision-making structures as synonymous with the accretion of total power by Stalin. Rather, Getty sees the emergence of a decision-making process similar in key respects to a cabinet, which Stalin, as the 'Prime Minister', dominated. The reduction in regular, formal meetings constituted what he calls the 'normalisation of the Politburo' as it adjusted to the great increase in decision-making in a centrally planned economy in the midst of a crash program of rapid industrialisation and collectivisation. Meetings were streamlined and made more frequent. Most issues were decided without discussion by means of a vote (*oprosom*). Members of the Politburo were responsible for key commissariats and areas of policy, thus retaining substantial power bases and influence over decisions. Considerable influence over decision-making would also have been retained by those individuals and institutions that provided information on the basis of which decisions were made.[26]

[25] See Oleg Khlevniuk's contribution to this volume.

[26] Such as the Council of Peoples' Commissars, the Council of Labour and Defence, Commissariats and their commissars (including members of the Politburo, the Planning Commission, experts and advisors, temporary and permanent commissions

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Rieber, Khlevniuk, and R. W. Davies share Getty's view that in areas where Stalin took an interest, he dominated policy-making absolutely. His views were rarely questioned. Particularly in the later 1930s, many of those around Stalin came to fear autonomous action, and merely tried to anticipate the leader's preferences. Where Stalin dominated policy, he could exhibit both flexibility and dogmatism. Rieber's second contribution to this volume provides a nuanced analysis of the apparent paradoxes of Stalin's security policy, showing where Stalin learned from his mistakes and where his ideas remained unchanged. In reference to intractable issues of economic policy, such as the function of money in a socialist economy, R. W. Davies observes Stalin's flexibility and ability to learn from experience, but he also points out occasions on which Stalin abjectly failed to anticipate the disastrous consequences of major decisions, such as the impact of swingeing grain collections in 1931 and 1932. Khlevniuk, in his contribution, refers to Stalin's propensity to shift his position in the face of such disasters as 'crisis pragmatism'.

Where Stalin did not actively intervene in policy, others filled the void. Working with Stalin's correspondence from his months on vacation in the mid-1930s, Getty observes the large number of decisions (89 per cent) taken by the Politburo without Stalin's participation. R. W. Davies' work on agricultural policy contrasts Stalin's detailed management of grain procurement campaigns with his relative lack of interest in livestock issues. Sarah Davies' contribution shows not only Stalin's extraordinary personal influence over film production, but also his desire to have a reliable lieutenant to realise his will, as well as the great difficulty of making individuals and institutions respond effectively to his will. Clearly, there existed coherent structures that allowed the system to function in his absence. Those structures served to implement the dictator's orders, but they could also act as a constraint on Stalin's freedom of action.

The idea that Stalin and the Soviet leadership had to contend with relatively autonomous institutions and groups is not new. In the 1950s, historians observed that technical specialists and managers did not always behave in ways the regime wanted.[27] In the 1970s and 80s, social historians observed that society was not a blank slate either, but only since the opening of the archives have we had the opportunity to study in depth the

established by the Politburo, and so on). G. M. Adibekov, K. M. Anderson, and L. A. Rogovaia (eds.), *Politbiuro TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b). Povestki dnia zasedanii, 1919–1952: Katalog*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Rosspen, 2000), I, pp. 18–19.

[27] David Granick, *Management of the Industrial Firm in the USSR* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954); Joseph Berliner, *Factory and Manager in the USSR* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957).

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workings of institutions and officials higher up the administrative hierarchy. In this volume, Khlevniuk observes the strength of bureaucratic self-interest, or, as Stalin would have known it, 'departmentalism' (*vedomstvennost'*). Commissariats, planners, control organs, regional Party organisations, and other institutions were constantly angling to promote policies favourable to them and to limit their obligations, fighting amongst each other where their interests conflicted.[28] This can be viewed as an important source of Stalin's power, given that he was viewed, and acted, as supreme arbiter, but Stalin's persistent frustration with 'departmentalism' suggests that he considered it anything but a source of strength.

In spite of his uncontested position and immense political power, it seems that Stalin never felt entirely secure. The failure to contain institutional self-interest has something to do with this, as did the constant fear of war and of the infiltration of foreign enemies. Rieber's chapter on Stalin as a foreign policy-maker makes a compelling argument that beneath the surface of zigzags and contradictions in Soviet security policy lay Stalin's enduring fear about the vulnerability of the Soviet borderlands in the context of what he was convinced would be an inevitable war with the capitalist world. Nor can the Great Terror (1936–8) be understood except as a response to Stalin's insecurity. In his chapter on the changing image of the enemy in the three Moscow show trials, Chase shows Stalin at his most powerful and powerless, shaping and directing popular opinion in a massive and devastating campaign to unmask hidden enemies, while lashing out at chimerical enemies who were largely the product of his own conspiratorial mentality.

How much did Stalin's dictatorship change after the Terror? We still know almost nothing about the period from the curtailing of the 'mass operations' in late 1938 to the Nazi invasion in June 1941,[29] and only somewhat more about the structure of the dictatorship in the Second World War. The post-war period, often labelled 'High Stalinism' has generated more work and debate. As the label indicates, many historians argue that the period from 1945–53 marked the apogee of Stalin's personal dictatorship, his power reinforced by terror and victory in war, imposed at the expense of institutional coherence.[30] Others have questioned the image of the disintegration of political structures in the post-war period,

[28] See also Paul Gregory (ed.), *Behind the Façade of Stalin's Command Economy: Evidence from the Soviet State and Party Archives* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2001).
[29] One of the very few works on this period is Harris, 'The Origin of the Conflict'.
[30] See for example, Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (London: Hart-Davis, 1962), p. 73; Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* (London: Deutsch, 1971),

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