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Alexander Dallin, F. I. Firsov, eds. *Dimitrov and Stalin, 1934-1943: Letters from the Soviet Archives.* Russian documents translated by Vadim A. Staklo, Annals of Communism Series. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. xxx + 278 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08021-6.

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Documents of Communist Red Tape

Perhaps the main quality of compendiums of letters is not only their ability to render the immediacy of momentous events, but also (in lieu of hindsight) the ease with which they evoke the complexities and uncertainties underlying particular historical developments. Thus, though an event might subsequently be interpreted as part of a grand strategy or an overarching scheme, epistolary evidence could prove that it was subject to contingency and ambiguity. In this respect, the correspondence of two of the most influential figures in the communist movement in the first half of the twentieth century–Georgi Dimitrov and Joseph Stalin–both conforms to and confirms this characteristic of volumes of collected letters. The balanced and circumspect editorial work of Alexander Dallin and Fridrikh Firsov ensures that the fifty or so letters are put in the context of the complex symbiosis between the Communist International (Comintern) and the leadership of the Soviet Union.

Georgi Dimitrov was the so-called Leipzig hero who in 1933 defied Nazi allegations that he and a group of Communists had orchestrated the burning of the Reichstag (the German Parliament). His brashness and outspoken criticism of the Nazi regime at the Leipzig Trial made him something of a celebrity–and not just among supporters of the international communist movement–and turned him into a symbol of the burgeoning resistance to Nazism.[1] Following his acquittal, Dimitrov was welcomed to the Soviet Union by Joseph Stalin and appointed General Secretary of the Comintern in 1934, a position that he held until the dissolution of the organization in 1943. In this period he not only oversaw the policies of the Comintern, but also managed to gain the confidence of Stalin himself.

Unfortunately, the collected letters do not seem to throw much light on the interpersonal interaction and the relationship between Dimitrov and Stalin. Apart from one occasion, on which Stalin provides a written response to a letter by Dimitrov, the rest of the collection reads more like a one-sided monologue. In the majority of the cases, Stalin only scribbles curt (frequently one-word) responses on the margins of Dimitrov's letters. For instance, in a letter from July 1, 1934, Dimitrov queries "whether it is correct to consider social democracy everywhere and at all times the main social base of the bourgeoisie," to which Stalin responds, "Of course, not in Persia" (p. 13). In this respect, *Letters from Dimitrov to Stalin* would have seemed like a more appropriate title for the volume. Therefore, those searching for psychological insight into the relationship between the two men would most likely be disappointed by Dallin and Firsov's *Dimitrov and Stalin, 1934-1943.* Instead, they should peruse *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, edited by Ivo Banac (2003).

Yet, the inquiry into the private lives and thoughts of Dimitrov and Stalin does not seem to be at the center of Dallin and Firsov's endeavor. Rather, the editors seem to have focused on the complex bureaucratization of power within the international communist movement. The collection of letters illuminates the dependence of the Comintern on the Soviet leadership. Dimitrov's plea, "We beg you, Comrade Stalin, to give your advice and directives" (p. 28), seems to capture the tone of his letters to the Soviet leader. In this respect, Dallin and Firsov's volume should not be interpreted as a form of epistolary history of the Comintern from 1934 to 1943, but rather as an illustration of its intimate administrative association with Moscow. Therefore, Stalin's quirky retorts on the margins of Dimitrov's letters provide unusual insight into the development (as well as the absence) of Soviet strategy on a wide variety of issues.

The editors arranged the correspondence in several thematic sections. The first one details the shift in Comintern policy at its Seventh Congress and the development of a "new antifascist united-front line" (p. 12). The

second one focuses on the Spanish Civil War and documents Moscow's difficulty in coming to grips with the complexity of the situation. In this respect, despite the liberal amount of advice provided by the Comintern to the Spanish Communists, Dimitrov's letters suggest that the Soviet leadership lacked a clear strategy for Spain, not least because of the Kremlin's preoccupation with mounting purge trials (p. 50). The third thematic section details the problematic interactions between the Soviet Union, the Comintern, and the Chinese Communists. The difficulty emerged from the distinct place occupied by the Chinese Communists within the Comintern; their party had "its own traditions, its own modus operandi, a remarkable record of military and political struggle, and a greater degree of distance from Moscow, not only geographically but also in attitude and autonomy" (p. 83). The letters betray that this awkward positioning of the Chinese Communists within the world communist movement tended to underpin the inconsistent, contradictory, and often inadequate policies on the part of the Soviet leadership.

The fourth thematic section focuses on the "strange interlude" (p. 148) between the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939 and the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. The strangeness of this period was caused by the need for a complete reversal of Comintern policies, which until that time had presented Nazism as an archenemy of world communism. Dimitrov refers to the awkwardness of the situation by acknowledging the "exceptional difficulties" (p. 151) in formulating policy statements. The fifth section details the "war years" (p. 189) and in particular the challenges posed by the need to reverse Comintern policies yet again. The invasion of the Soviet Union demanded a return to the earlier line of united antifascist front. At the same time, Dimitrov's letters also reflect Stalin's gradual downgrading of the role of the Comintern. The next thematic section describes the Comintern's relationship with Yugoslavia during World War II. What is perhaps most striking is that Dimitrov's correspondence reveals how little the Soviet leadership new about the Yugoslav Communists and, in particular, about Josip Broz Tito (p. 208). Such ignorance might help explain the differences in perceptions and understanding that emerged between the Yugoslavs and Moscow. The final section focuses on the dissolution of the Comintern. Dimitrov's letters elaborate on Stalin's insistence for re-nationalizing the various communist parties so that they could gain more prominence among their own constituencies. In this respect, the Comintern was perceived as an obstacle to Soviet policies and, therefore, it had to be dismantled.

This thematic organization of the letters collected in Dallin and Firsov's *Dimitrov and Stalin, 1934-1943* facilitates the understanding of the gradual bureaucratization of the international communist movement, which persisted despite the dissolution of the Comintern and the emergence of various forms of national communism.[2] As the editors point out, the documentary record provided by this collection of letters highlights that Moscow's strategy and tactics were less consistent than it is usually expected (or claimed) and instead were characterized by "dilemmas and ambiguities in decision-making" (p. xx). In this respect, this volume would be of interest to all those interested in the foreign-policymaking of the Soviet Union, its links to other Communist parties, and, particularly, the history of the Comintern. At the same time, it is expected that the portraits of Dimitrov and Stalin as Communist bureaucrats drawn by the letters collected in Dallin and Firsov's volume would be of interest to any scholar researching their personalities.

Notes

[1]. Marin Pundeff, "Dimitrov at Leipzig: Was There a Deal?" *Slavic Review* 45 (1986): 545-549.

[2]. Milovan Djilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957).

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