

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.



Reviewed by Barbara Keys

Published on H-Russia (September, 2000)

Portrait of a Bureaucrat

When Milovan Djilas met Georgi Dimitrov in 1944, the former head of the Comintern looked "prematurely old, almost crushed." At the age of 62, Dimitrov was "a sick man. His breathing was asthmatic, the color of his skin an unhealthy red and pale, and spots around his ears were dried up as if from eczema. His hair was so sparse that it left exposed his withered yellow scalp." [1] Ten years earlier, Dimitrov had arrived in Moscow as the celebrated hero of the Leipzig trial, where he had cleverly outflanked Hermann Goering's clumsy efforts to convict him of burning the Reichstag. Eager to capitalize on the respect and goodwill Dimitrov's daring performance had won in communist circles and beyond, Stalin had immediately tapped him to head the Comintern.

Now, in the waning years of the war, the Comintern (the Third, or Communist, International) had been dissolved, and Dimitrov had been relegated to a minor role in the Soviet apparatus. Dividing his time between the hospital and his luxurious dacha, Dimitrov watched from the sidelines as the Red Army wrought the transformation the

Comintern had so resoundingly failed to achieve: the spread of communist governments. Dimitrov himself, as head of the Bulgarian Communist Party, would lead one of these new governments until his death in 1949. It seems to have been a hollow victory: the triumph of communism in Eastern Europe left him a sad and broken man.

Stalin, as Lars Lih has recently argued, may have remained committed to the goal of world revolution in the 1920s, [2] but he had considerable disdain for the Comintern as the instrument of this transformation. As his preoccupation with Soviet security mounted in the second half of the 1930s, he increasingly disregarded the organization. He nevertheless maintained a close relationship with Dimitrov, whom he held in high regard and found easy to work with. Djilas observed that Dimitrov, for his part, admired and respected Stalin, but spoke of him "without any conspicuous flattery or reverence." To Djilas it seemed that Dimitrov's relationship to Stalin "was palpably that of a revolutionary who gave disciplined submission to the leader, but a revolutionary who did his own thinking." [3]

Conspicuous flattery is indeed lacking in the fifty or so letters from Dimitrov to Stalin that appear in the latest installment of the *Annals of Communism* series, but the letters are also short on what Djilas saw as Dimitrov's capacity for independent thinking. The letters confirm what no one can any longer doubt: that the Comintern was thoroughly subservient to Soviet leadership, and that Dimitrov turned to Stalin and his inner circle for instructions on matters large and small. (On two remarkable occasions in 1939 and 1940, when Stalin was distracted by more pressing matters, he told Dimitrov to "decide by yourselves" [pp. 39, 122].) The letters, though they are a small selection of what was a voluminous correspondence, indicate a striking lack of initiative on Dimitrov's part. He rarely emerges as a strong advocate for one position or another, preferring, as the editors note, to pose as a neutral bureaucrat (a trait that may well have been one of the keys to his longevity).

For this reason the letters convey little, at least overtly, about Dimitrov's character and beliefs. They reveal even less about Stalin's. The preface somewhat misleadingly makes the claim that the volume reproduces letters from Dimitrov to Stalin "along with Stalin's responses" (p. xvii). Only in one case did Stalin respond with a handwritten note (here reproduced in facsimile, and perhaps most interesting for Stalin's rather extended apology for replying tardily). In three cases, Stalin returned documents with brief marginal notations. For all the other documents reproduced here, written responses are lacking (either they were never made or are still secreted in the Presidential Archives), and the editors have had to deduce whether Stalin approved or disapproved of a document from other sources.

The letters, most of them previously unpublished, are culled from the files of the Comintern and the Central Committee of the Communist Party at the former party archives (now RGASPI).[4] They have been capably edited by Fridrikh I.

Firsov, former head of the Comintern research group at RGASPI and probably the world's leading expert on the Comintern, and Alexander Dallin, who provide background information on events and succinctly place each document in context. The documents begin with Dimitrov's arrival in Moscow in February 1934 after his acquittal in the Leipzig trial, when he became de facto head of the Comintern (he was not formally appointed until the Seventh Congress in 1935), and extend until the organization's dissolution in May 1943. Without attempting to cover any policy or country comprehensively, the editors have selected sources that touch on a very wide range of Comintern activities.

Three chapters trace shifts in Comintern policies: the adoption of the popular front strategy in 1934-35, the abrupt reversal occasioned by the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939, and the lurch back to anti-fascism in 1941. The first document, Dimitrov's July 1934 proposal on the shift to a popular front, has long been available, but only now includes Stalin's annotations, which illuminate the extent to which he equivocated about the new policy.[5] Other documents convey the dilemmas that arose in the course of implementing the policy, with an emphasis on Comintern directives to the French Communist Party. For ambiguities and contradictions, however, nothing would match the balancing act required by the Nazi-Soviet Pact. In a long chapter, again with considerable information on France, the editors have marshaled a set of documents that lay out in impressive detail just how difficult a period this was for policymaking at the Comintern. Combining these with the documents in the first volume of *Komintern i vtoraiia mirovaia voina* [The Comintern and the Second World War] (1994), we now have a very rich picture of high-level decision-making in the Comintern for the years 1939-1941.[6]

The chapter covering the years after the Nazi invasion is thin, reflecting the Comintern's increasing irrelevance in Stalin's calculations. A

subsequent chapter on the dissolution of the Comintern notes that Stalin began to talk about disbanding the organization as early as 1940, when the Soviet Union annexed the Baltic states, but deferred action to avoid the impression that it was being taken under pressure from Germany. Stalin raised the issue again in April 1941, suggesting that the Comintern had become an obstacle to the critical task of building strong national communist parties. The Nazi invasion two months later again derailed any moves in this direction, and it was not until May 1943 that Molotov informed Dimitrov that the final decision to dissolve the Comintern had been made. Dimitrov did not display obvious qualms as he drew up the resolution that would end the organization to which he had devoted twenty years of his life.

Stalin, according to Dimitrov's diary, offered the following rationale for the dissolution of the Comintern: "When we created the CI [Comintern] and thought we could direct the movement in all countries, we were overestimating our forces. That was our error. The further existence of the CI would discredit the idea of the international. . . . There is also another motive for the dissolution . . . and that is the fact that the [communist parties] that belong in the CI are falsely accused of being the agents of a foreign state, and this hinders their work among the masses. By dissolving the CI we are knocking this ace out of the enemies' hand" (p. 238).

Additional chapters examine specific episodes in detail. A chapter on the Spanish Civil War (the bulk of which reproduces documents written by Comintern agents other than Dimitrov, but which are fitted under the rubric of Dimitrov-Stalin correspondence on the basis of a cover note from Dimitrov) provides details on Moscow's maneuvering with regard to the composition of the Republican government and on the provision of aid. (Yale University Press is also producing a separate volume, edited by Ron Radosh and Mary Habeck, of documents on the Spanish Civil War, and an ad-

ditional volume, edited by William Chase, will cover the repression in the Comintern. Both are in production and will appear in Fall 2001.) A chapter deals with relations between the Comintern's Executive Committee and the Chinese Communist Party from 1936-1941, outlining their disagreements over the proper attitude toward Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese Nationalists. An additional chapter covers Soviet aid (or the lack of it, despite Dimitrov's efforts) to Tito's partisans in Yugoslavia during the war. Specialists on Spain, China, and Yugoslavia will find material of interest in these chapters, not just in the documents but also in the text, which summarizes many documents that were not reproduced due to space limitations. The collection is all the more valuable because the scaling back of access at Russian archives since the early 1990s has hit the Comintern collection especially hard, and ordinary researchers can no longer gain access to the *opisi* that these documents are drawn from (those of Dimitrov's secretariat and the Executive Committee's ciphered telegrams).

It is less clear that the volume will be of interest to a broader audience. Inevitably in a volume that covers ten years in the life of an organization with global reach, a vast amount of Comintern history is left out. The documents provide in-depth glimpses into some key moments and policy areas, but the significance of many documents will not be obvious to a reader who does not already have a comprehensive knowledge of Comintern activities. Unlike some of the earlier volumes in the *Annals* series that are now essential reading in the field of Soviet history, this volume tends more toward the illumination of narrow issues and less toward providing insights on fundamental issues of Soviet governance.

As with any collection of Soviet documents, this volume has critical limitations. Exclusive reliance on the holdings in RGASPI, as the editors acknowledge, provides only a partial picture of policymaking. Some of the sources we do have

clearly indicate the existence of other important documents that have not yet been found, and which may be held in the Presidential Archives or in other still-restricted repositories. Including only Dimitrov's letters to Stalin also provides an incomplete view of top-level decision-making, because Dimitrov used a variety of channels to convey information and to receive instructions, both communicating through his deputy, Dmitrii Manuilskii, who had his own contacts in the party hierarchy and the NKVD, and frequently writing to Molotov, Zhdanov, or other Soviet leaders on important matters. (Restricting the collection to letters addressed to Stalin therefore seems a bit odd—unless one considers the marketing cachet of having "Stalin" in the book's title.)

The most critical limitation in any documentary collection, however, is that much that went on in the highest echelons of Soviet power was never committed to paper. Many important decisions were made in conversations, either over the telephone or face-to-face, for which there is no written record. In this case, though, Dallin and Firsov are blessed with having Dimitrov's diary, which records many of these conversations, and they have made extensive use of this source to flesh out the story presented in the documents. Indeed, for the general reader, the handful of quotations from the diary may well be of greater interest than the documents themselves.

Some of these quotations have begun appearing sporadically in other publications and promise to become familiar staples in works of Soviet history. Stalin's remarks on the outbreak of World War II are a prime example. According to Dimitrov's diary, on 7 September 1939, Stalin commented that the war was a struggle between two groups of capitalist countries for the repartition of the world and that the Soviet Union had "no objection to their having a good fight, weakening each other. It wouldn't be bad if by the hands of Germany the position of the richest capitalist countries (especially England) [was] shattered.

Without himself understanding it or wishing it, Hitler upsets, undermines the capitalist system." The goal of the Soviet Union, Stalin explained, was to "maneuver, nudging one side against the other so that they come to bigger blows. To some degree the nonaggression pact helps Germany. The next step is to nudge the other side forward" (pp. 151-2).

As Andrea Graziosi recently lamented, "we have almost no direct or indirect records of private discussions between party leaders." [7] Dimitrov's diary is one very important exception. With due caveats about the limitations inherent in any such source, scholars who have studied the diary rate it as extremely valuable. Dallin and Firsov write that the diary, which spans the years 1933-1949, demonstrates Dimitrov's "superb memory and capacity to reproduce conversations and documents accurately" (p. xviii). Kevin McDermott has called it a "treasure trove." [8] It seems to be more uneven than, for example, the diary that Joseph Goebbels kept during the same years. The entries are often laconic, and large gaps appear in various spots during the years 1935-38.

Yet it can still be an extraordinary fruitful source: think of the realms of information Laurel Thatcher Ulrich was able to glean from her penetrating study of Martha Ballard's terse diary. Dimitrov's *dnevnik*, long held in a secret personal fond in the Bulgarian central party archives, was published in a Bulgarian edition in 1997. [9] It's an indication, however, of the delays that have plagued the *Annals of Communism* series that the citations to the diary in the Dallin and Firsov volume -- which was originally scheduled to appear in 1996 -- refer to the archival copy in Sofia and not to the published version. [10] Given the diary's importance, the text ought to have clearly noted its publication. Yale has commissioned Ivo Banac to produce an abridged English edition of the diary, which is currently estimated to be out in Fall 2001 or later. In the meantime, interested scholars ought to get hold of a Bulgarian dictionary.

Notes

[1]. Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin*, trans. Michael B. Petrovich (San Diego: Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1962), 31.

[2]. Lars T. Lih, Oleg V. Naumov, and Oleg V. Khlevniuk, eds., *Stalin's Letters to Molotov, 1925-1936* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 34-6.

[3]. Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin*, 38. Djilas writes that "Dimitrov was a person who enjoyed Stalin's rare regard" (p. 33) and that Stalin commented that "it is easy to work with Dimitrov" (p. 80).

[4]. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History).

[5]. Dimitrov's proposal, with Stalin's annotations, also appears in *Komintern protiv fashizma* (Moscow: Nauka, 1999), 326-9.

[6]. N. S. Lebedeva and M. M. Narinskii, eds., *Komintern i vtoraiia mirovaia voina. Chast' 1: do 22 iuniia 1941 g.* (Moscow: "Pamiatniki istoricheskoi mysli," 1994). Anticipating the publication of the volume under review, Lebedeva and Narinskii specifically excluded Dimitrov's letters to Stalin. It's also worth noting the new, 1120-page survey of Comintern history by Pierre Broue, *Histoire de l'Internationale Communiste, 1919-1943* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), which is rather polemical but has extremely useful appendices, including an extensive bibliography, a chronology of events, a key to pseudonyms, and a 150-page biographical index.

[7]. Andrea Graziosi, "The New Soviet Archival Sources: Hypotheses for a Critical Assessment," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 40, nos. 1-2 (1999), 28.

[8]. Kevin McDermott, "The History of the Comintern in Light of New Documents," in *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919-43*, eds. Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 35.

[9]. Georgi Dimitrov, *Dnevnik (9 mart 1933 - 6 fevruari 1949)* (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo "Sv. Kliment Okhridski," 1997). Russian speakers will find that the Bulgarian can be deciphered fairly readily.

[10]. There is one exception: footnote 18 on page 224 refers to the published version. A reader who missed this footnote would have no way of guessing that the diary has been published.

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Citation: Barbara Keys. Review of Dallin, Alexander; Firsov, F. I., eds. *Dimitrov and Stalin, 1934-1943: Letters from the Soviet Archives*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. September, 2000.

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