How Much Self-Reflection Does Stalinism Studies Need?

In spite of its grave consequences for the course of the 20th century, "Stalinism" remains a fuzzy concept.[1] The term is used in various publications to designate a particular type of ideology, regime, state, society, civilization, political religion or culture, a certain "order," or "a history of violence," and in many its connotation is unclear. [2]

The fact that this uncertainty about "Stalinism" has continued long after the archives have opened indicates that the confusion about the notion derives not just from decades of unavailability of crucial primary sources to researchers, and the impossibility to exchange freely ideas across the Iron Curtain. Basic elements of the concept of "Stalinism" as a heuristic tool directing research—such as its domain, genus proximum, place on the right-left spectrum, or origins—are still nebulous and contested. There are, to be sure, somewhat similar controversies and misunderstandings in related fields, such as in the study of Italian Fascism and German Nazism.[3] Many of the latter disputes, however, seem to encompass a rather narrower range of disagreement than the debates about what "Stalinism" is, and where it came from.

In the 1990s, Chris Ward provided with Stalin's Russia, and especially with its second edition of 1999, a well-structured, useful textbook that should be welcome to teachers of modern Russian history. His book sets an example of historical writing that currently seems especially serviceable to the field of Stalinism studies. Ward neither presents nor analyzes entirely new data. Nor does he develop a truly novel interpretation of Stalinism. His study essentially constitutes a long review essay on the literature on Stalinism, and an extensive general introduction to the field. This determines his structuring of the book.

The chapters do not follow an exclusively chronological line, but refer to the issues of contention and various sub-debates in Soviet studies. After an outline, in the introduction, of the changes in the source base of Stalinism studies in pre- and post-glasnost Russia, the chapters discuss:
- various explanations of the rise of Stalin, 1917-29 (ch. 1); - conflicting assessments of the industrialization campaign, 1924-41 (ch. 2); - contending accounts of the reasons for, and results of, the collectivization drive, 1927-41 (ch. 3); - diverging views on the origins and nature of the purges, 1928-41 (ch. 4); - different evaluations of the sources, successes, and failures of Stalinist foreign policy, 1922-41 (ch. 5); - opposing appraisals of the war period and late Stalinism, 1941-53 (ch. 6); and - competing interpretations of the role of, and changes in, Soviet culture and society during Stalin's rule, 1928-53 (ch. 7).

The conclusion, "History and Stalin's Russia," juxtaposes the consequences of different historiographical approaches for understanding the Stalinist period. It finally gives an outlook where future research into Stalinism may and should go.

The chapters are uniformly structured into sections called "Narrative," "Interpretations," "Evaluations," and "Suggestions for Further Reading." The first section links the crucial dates, events, names, and numbers; the following two discuss diverging conceptualizations and explanations of the data. The section "Interpretations" reconstructs the respective debate in the--primarily academic English-language--literature. In "Evaluations," Ward criticizes the various approaches and presents his own--sometimes reconciling, sometimes partisan--solutions. In "Suggestion for Further Reading," Ward lists selected, important books and articles, and summarizes their content or locates them within the debates. The book is thus as much devoted to the historiography of Stalinism as to the phenomenon itself. It is a guide-book to the literature, as much as a textbook, on Stalinism.

Some may argue that Ward's focus on academic quarrels is not what serious historical writing should be about: The historian's craft is to write the history of the countries and events she or he studies, and not of her or his discipline. Yet, if one compares the literature on, for instance, generic fascism with that on Stalinism, it is striking how little academic self-reflection there has been in the latter field so far--in spite of the fact that some debates in Stalinism studies seem to have been at least as intense as those in comparative fascism studies. There are dozens of articles and books concerned less with the rise and fall of Nazism, Italian Fascism, etc. per se than with different theories of the emergence of fascist movements and regimes, and diverging conceptualizations of fascist ideology and rule.[4] Seminal texts have been reprinted in numerous collections (sometimes several times), schools identified, paradigms delineated, contradictions made explicit, the heuristic value of different concepts weighed, and the explanatory power of different metatheoretical approaches compared. The literature on Hitler's biography and personality alone has been already the subject of several comprehensive survey books and review essays.[5]

To be sure there has been some writing in Stalinism studies that did concern itself explicitly with competing interpretations rather than with the phenomenon itself.[6] Also, labels like "revisionist school" or "totalitarian school" have become widely used to conceptualize a certain dimension of disagreement. Notably, a seminal essay collection of the 1970s edited by Robert C. Tucker on the interpretation of Stalinism has been recently re-printed.[7]

In addition, one may contend that the appropriate sub-discipline with which to compare Stalinism studies would have to be, in line with, for instance, Ian Kershaw's and Moshe Lewin's suggestion,[8] the field of Nazism studies rather than comparative fascism as a whole. One could further hold that enough self-reflection concerning research into the Stalin era is provided in the numerous historiographic accounts and conceptual analyses within comparative socialism, communism, and totalitarianism studies,[9] as well as in general Sovietology.
However, as indicated by the appearance of several new monographs, essay collections, and comparative explorations of Stalinism, this phenomenon appears too "big," distinct, and peculiar to be merely interpreted within more encompassing fields.[10] Stalinism studies has produced a sufficiently large number of narrowly focused scholarly and publicistic books and articles of its own to warrant a special historiographic literature. The distinctiveness of the regime's structure, of state-society relations, and of the cultural transformations under Stalin have led researchers of different dimensions of that period to consistently apply the term "Stalinist" rather than more general terms like "communist" or "socialist." By making this terminological differentiation, many scholars distinguish implicitly or explicitly not only between Stalinist and other periods in Soviet history as such, but also between the nature of the particular aspect of Stalin's rule under scrutiny and the essence of comparable features of Soviet history before and (to a lesser degree) after Stalin's rule.

Such a tendency seems to indicate that it may be less problematic to conceptualize Nazism unequivocally as a sub-type of generic fascism, i.e. as German fascism, than to understand Stalinism as a Russian permutation of generic Marxism, socialism, or communism. Robert C. Tucker argued as early as 1961 that the history of the Soviet Union should, in general, be seen as a succession of different regime types rather than merely as one regime's adaptation to different conditions.[11] The perestroika-phase in Soviet history, and the subsequent transformation of many communist parties in Eastern and Western Europe into social-democratic parties--one now headed by the last General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU himself--seem to support such an approach.[12]

If one regarded Nazism--and not comparative fascism--studies as the more appropriate other sub-field to juxtapose Stalinism studies to, the state of self-reflection within Stalinism studies would still compare unfavorably to the discussion of various interpretations of the Third Reich. As noted above, there are several historiographic surveys of the debate over Hitler's personality and role. Controversies within Nazism studies have been examined not only in the historiographic literature on generic fascism, but also in numerous review essays and surveys specifically on theories and conceptualizations of Nazi ideology and rule.[13] The famous German Historikerstreit (quarrel of the historians) of the 1980s, in particular, focused attention on the theoretical, interpretative, and normative aspects of research into the Nazi era. Since then, this debate has been continued under different headings, in connection with such events as an exhibition documenting the involvement of the Wehrmacht in crimes against humanity during World War II, the appearance of Daniel J. Goldhagen's disputed Hitler's Willing Executioners, and other incidents raising the issue of how the German should "come to terms with their past" (Vergangenheitsbewältigung).[14] Since the mid-1980s, Nazism studies has seen, almost every year, at least one large update on its own historiography coming out. The Historikerstreit itself has become the subject of several historiographic analyses.[15]

Against this background, Stalinism studies appears insufficiently self-reflective, which is why Ward's study would seem to be especially valuable. To German readers, his book is even more welcome in view of the growing controversy in German mass media, and Osteuropakunde (East European studies), since the publication of the German translation of the well-known Black Book on Communism in spring 1998. Numerous review essays, at least three collections of commentaries on the Black Book by prominent German and some non-German authors, as well as a special edition of Germany's major journal Osteuropa on the Black Book debate have been published. In Germany nowadays, an appropriate interpretation and evaluation of the crimes of Soviet-type
regimes, and especially those of Stalin's, have become a major subject of intellectual and public discourse.[16]

Ward's historiographic account is particularly useful in that it demonstrates the sophistication of the decade-long scholarly debate on the nature and causes of the Soviet Union's massive population losses, "repressions," and brainwashing under Stalin. The very existence of, and fundamental disagreements within, this debate are not sufficiently reflected in the Black Book, which is why it appeared to many scholars to be out-of-date.

Ward's reading of the literature also indicates that the Black Book failed to deal adequately with the continuities between Stalinist and pre-revolutionary Russian policies, and with Stalinism's similarities not only to the administrative-practical aspects, but also to the ideological foundations of other European political mass murders in the 20th century. In his evaluation of the reasons, context, and nature of the collectivization campaign, Ward mentions, among others, Alec Nove's location of its origins not only in the Bolshevik Weltanschauung but also in "the cultural inheritance bequeathed by tsarist absolutism" (p. 90). The Stalinist state's reply to what was seen as a "kulak sabotage" in the late 1920s was the "kind of measures reminiscent of tsarism, though on a far more brutal and aggressive scale.... All Russian governments were aware of the intimate connection between agrarian reform, domestic tranquility, economic strength and military prestige, and no Russian government--least of all the Bolshevik government--dared run the risk of neglecting the country's defences" (pp. 90 and 96). A Tsarist Minister of Finance once remarked: "[W]e ourselves might not eat, but we shall export grain" (as quoted on p. 96).

The roots of other aspects of the disastrous Stalinist economic policy can also not be located solely within Marxist thinking. "[P]lanning (or at least state-directed economic activity), though refracted through the ideological registers of emergent Stalinism, was a traditional Russian response to the dilemmas of modernization..." (p. 67). The notorious internal passport system for peasants introduced in 1932 had a predecessor in the internal passports once issued by the Tsar's interior ministry (p. 83).

Unlike some other interpreters of Stalinist economic thinking, Ward draws a clear line between, on the one side, Molotov's and Stalin's ideas on the link between collectivization and industrialization, and, on the other side, not only Bukharin's "right-wing," but also Preobrazhenskii's "left-wing" views. "Preobrazhenskii [though promoting "primitive socialist accumulation"] never advocated coercion" (p. 88). He, like Bukharin, did not anticipate or desire the use of force on a massive scale (p. 89). That Stalin's later onslaught on his political foes on the "right" and "left" in the party-leadership was rooted not just in personal animosities or psychopathology seems to be indicated by the fact that, in 1935, the so-called "old Leninist guard" was also deprived of its institutional basis when the Society of Old Bolsheviks (founded 1921) and the Society of Former Political Prisoners (founded in 1918) were disbanded (pp. 110-111).

Ward reminds us that Stalin as early as 1931 disavowed egalitarianism in the treatment of different kinds of employees (p. 48)--an approach that was later extended to, among others, educational policy when fees were introduced in secondary education in 1940 (p. 231). History syllabi were rewritten in a nationalist fashion, and Russian language forcefully introduced as the lingua franca of the Soviet Union. Family policies turned conservative, and male homosexuality was re-criminalized. After the war, the Zhdanovshchina continued earlier trends in Stalinist cultural policy promoting nationalism, xenophobia, and ethnic bigotry. Soviet patriotism merged further with Russian nationalism, and an only thinly disguised antisemitic campaign characterized the last years of Stalin's rule (pp. 228-243). A "new conservative
ethos" replaced militant radicalism, and "Russian nationalism displaced socialist internationalism" (p. 247).

An interpretation of Stalinism focusing on these aspects adds a dimension of disagreement in the field that stands somewhat apart from the totalitarianism/revisionism dichotomy. It focuses, instead, on different approaches to the conflict in the Soviet leadership between officially universalistic aspirations, on the one side, and different kinds of--sometimes more, sometimes less cryptic--particularistic tendencies (elitism, traditionalism, sexism, nationalism, racism, etc.), on the other. Membership of scholars in these different camps of conceptualization of Stalinist ideology may be crosscutting. Supporters of the totalitarian interpretation, for instance, might emphasize both the nationalistic-particularistic aspects, or socialist-universalistic aspects of the Soviet regime under Stalin. Other issues of contention in the interpretation of Stalinist rule, too, might cut across the two classical camps of totalitarianism and revisionism. It would be helpful for both specialists and newcomers to the field if these different dimensions of disagreement and their relation to each other were to become more clearly identified, better known, and evaluated. Moreover, a new generation of Russian researchers that has been joining the international scholarly community since the late 1980s needs to be made quickly familiar with the Western discourse. Chris Ward's contribution makes an important step in this direction.

Notes


[3]. For recent updates on the debates in comparative fascist studies, see, for instance, Wolf-


[10]. Comparative explorations using the concept of "Stalinism" rather than "communism" include Kershaw and Lewin, eds., *Stalinism and Nazism*; Vetter, ed., *Stalinismus und Nationalsozialismus*. Stefan Plaggenborg argues that Stalinism "is the central theme not only of the twentieth century, but of modern Russian history in general [...]. When looking back after the destruction of the socialist experiment in Soviet Union, it appears that [...] even the revolutionary year of 1917 pales in comparison to Stalinism. [...] Not the October Revolution, but Stalinism has remodeled first the remainders of the Russian Empire, and later Eastern Europe including everything to the south of Finland and to the north of Greece." See his "Stalinismusforschung: Wie weiter?," in: Plaggenborg, ed., *Stalinismus*, p. 443.


[12]. Mikhail Gorbachev is the head of a new umbrella organization of the social-democratic parties of Russia created in 1999.


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