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PROPAGANDA STATE IN CRISIS

SOVIET IDEOLOGY, INDOCTRINATION, AND
TERROR UNDER STALIN, 1927-1941

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Introduction: Ideology, Propaganda, and Mass Mobilization

THE USSR UNDER LENIN AND STALIN is often referred to as the world's first propaganda state. That said, if ideology, propaganda, and mass indoctrination are often considered key characteristics of the Soviet "experiment," they've received surprisingly little scholarly attention in recent years. Although many early Sovietologists looked to ideology to explain virtually all the idiosyncrasies of this state and society,¹ more recent generations of scholars have tended to "normalize" Soviet society by focusing on pragmatic political practices (e.g., clientalism, patronage, factionalism, patrimonialism) and normative socio-cultural dynamics (upward mobility, resistance, accommodation, criminality).² Under the influence of this work, the Soviet experience has assumed a veneer of "everydayness," transforming Stalinism into the history of "ordinary lives in extraordinary times."³ This book returns ideology to center stage by revealing the scale and uniqueness of the party hierarchy's engagement with propaganda and indoctrination, as well as the extent to which Stalin and his entourage personally participated in the creation of the official line and party canon.

Authoritarian and ruthless, Stalin and his inner circle were also true believers living in what they believed to be an ideologically charged world.⁴ Not only did they see themselves as actors within an epic struggle governed by the Marxist-Leninist historical dialectic, but they be-

lieved that an understanding of their historical experience was fundamental to Soviet citizens' formation of a distinctive sense of self. Untold resources were to be devoted to the task of indoctrination, whether through propaganda, education, or mass culture. Still more was to be spent purging the Soviet public sphere of any material that might contradict the official line. Ultimately, the propaganda campaigns of the 1930s that climaxed with the publication of the infamous *Short Course on the History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)* deserve to be considered among the defining projects of the Stalin period, alongside the first Five-Year Plan, the Baltic–White Sea Canal, Magnitogorsk, the defense of Stalingrad, and the storming of Berlin.

But if this book argues that ideology ought to be regarded as one of Stalinism's central characteristics, it does not treat the issue in a monolithic fashion. Instead, it argues that ideology is best addressed from three different perspectives relating to its production, projection, and popular reception. Such three-dimensional analysis reveals that despite the priority that the party hierarchy placed on ideology, it was often treated in a clumsy, haphazard way by members of the ideological establishment, the creative intelligentsia, the press, and party activists. What's more, it was received and internalized by society at the grassroots in ways that can only be regarded as selective, inconsistent, and superficial. In other words, although ideology meant a lot to Stalin and his entourage, it meant less—sometimes a lot less—to the society over which they ruled.

This failure of the party hierarchy to popularize its ideological worldview and promote a mass sense of revolutionary socialist identity sheds light on many of the distinctive traits that the Soviet experiment assumed during this period. Historically, a number of theories have been advanced to explain the Bolsheviks' hesitancy to pursue more single-minded, radical objectives. Some have argued that the party hierarchs were more interested in political power than they were in revolution and were willing to do virtually anything to retain it.⁵ Others have contended that this pragmatism stemmed from the Stalinist elite's revision of Marxist principles, the emergence of domestic etatism, eroding prospects for world revolution, the triumph of administrative power over revolutionary utopianism, and the emergence of nationalist sympathies within the party hierarchy.⁶ Still others associate the transformation with increasing threats from the outside world (principally

Hitler's rise to power in 1933) or the exigencies of war after 1941.⁷ Some even explain policy moderation by questioning whether the Bolsheviks actually possessed the power to put truly radical ideas into practice.⁸ And this position contrasts with those who assert that these programs actually *were* radical in the context of other industrial societies at the time.⁹ According to this last interpretation, even though the party hierarchy reversed itself on ethnic, gender, and social equality during the 1930s, such modulations should not be seen as incompatible with the overall Soviet project. Rather, they should be viewed in the context of "a strategic shift from the task of building socialism to that of defending socialism."¹⁰

This book, by contrast, contends that it was the party hierarchy's failure to popularize a more revolutionary sense of Soviet ideology that necessitated its populist revisionism in the first place. *Propaganda State in Crisis* makes its case by combining an archivally based archeology of the Stalin-era ideological establishment with an interdisciplinary focus on the official line as represented in party study circles, the all-union press, middle-brow literature, theater, film, and museum exhibition. It then complements this examination of the construction and dissemination of ideology with a special investigation into the popular reception of regime rhetoric and imagery. Intent on determining how ordinary Soviet citizens reacted to the wax and wane of the official line, this study focuses on an array of letters, diaries, and memoirs, as well as denunciations, secret police reports, and rare sociological interviews conducted during Stalin's lifetime. Such sources preserve echoes of "authentic" voices from the 1930s that allow for an analysis of the popular resonance of ideologically charged propaganda on the mass level.

Chapter One begins by investigating the approach that Soviet authorities took to mass mobilization during the 1920s, both within traditional contexts (e.g., public rallies, study circles, the press, poster art) and less conventional forums (art, literature, drama, film, museum exhibition, etc.). These venues' embrace of abstract materialism and the avant garde produced an inaccessible mélange of schematicism and anonymous social forces that functioned poorly as mobilizational propaganda—something visible in the collapse of Soviet morale on the eve of the tenth anniversary of the revolution. Focusing on the aftermath of this fiasco, Chapters Two and Three trace how party authorities began to modulate their representation of the official line in order to enhance

its accessibility and evocative power. Journalists, for instance, redesigned their reportage in order to court party activists. Party historians attempted to identify a “usable past” that would make the annals of the Russian revolutionary movement more relevant to Soviet society at large.¹¹ Propagandists augmented these efforts by launching an ambitious Lenin-based personality cult that styled Stalin as the living personification of the Soviet experiment.

None of these approaches proved easy to put into practice, however. Indeed, it appears that veteran party historians and ideologists struggled for years between the late 1920s and mid-1930s to reconcile their long-standing commitment to Marxism-Leninism with the newer, seemingly “bourgeois” approaches to mass mobilization. What’s more, Chapters Four and Five reveal that the first to arrive at a truly accessible version of the Soviet usable past were not members of the party’s ideological establishment at all, but instead innovators who hailed from the journalistic and literary ranks of the creative intelligentsia. Their approach, which celebrated contemporary individual heroism and the long-taboo notion of patriotism, met with resistance from party veterans on account of their recourse to conventional, non-Marxist appeals. But as demonstrated in Chapter Six, this new mobilizational strategy elicited a surprisingly strong reaction from the society at large, popularizing regime values and priorities on the mass level with remarkable effectiveness.

Chapters Seven and Eight interrupt this success story surrounding the new pantheon of everyday patriots, heroes, and role models with the realization that no sooner had this populist line come into its own than it was blindsided by the most brutal dimensions of the Great Terror. “Unmasked” as enemies of the people between 1936 and 1938, many of the members of the new Soviet Olympus fell into disgrace or disappeared entirely, taking with them an entire generation of bestsellers, textbooks, and popular dramas for the stage and silver screen. Chapters Nine and Ten demonstrate that public opinion was profoundly shaken by the Terror’s slaughter of the society’s heroes and role models. Worse, this bloodletting forced the ideological establishment to abandon its hard-won emphasis on heroes and individual heroism and retreat back to sterile schemata and anonymous social forces. A turn of events epitomized by the notorious 1938 *Short Course on the History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)*, it destroyed years of work on societal mobilization and identity formation.¹²

Chapter Eleven argues that the destruction of the party's usable past between 1936 and 1938 resulted in a broad ossification of the official line in Soviet mass culture. It also clarifies why the party hierarchs rushed to embrace non-Marxist heroes drawn from the annals of the Russian national past even before the release of the *Short Course*. Ultimately, this book concludes that it was the paralysis of the propaganda state during the mid-to-late 1930s that forced the party hierarchs to avail themselves of an array of mobilizational surrogates in order to rally the society. Most controversial among these concessions was their turn to a heavy investment in Russian national imagery, rhetoric, and iconography in a desperate bid for hearts and minds. This sea-change in official propaganda—long assumed by specialists to stem from either cynicism on Stalin's part or exigencies connected with war in 1941—is thus attributed in the present study to a surprisingly contingent, panicky turnabout in official propaganda and ideology. As is clear from early critiques of this transformation—N. S. Timasheff's "Great Retreat" and L. D. Trotsky's "Revolution Betrayed"—the irony of this promotion of nativist, russocentric, and jingoistic emotions was not lost on its contemporaries.

Several terms require clarification before continuing. "Propaganda state" is a turn of phrase that is used in this study to denote political systems that distinguish themselves by their co-option and harnessing of mass culture, educational institutions, and the press for the purpose of popular indoctrination. By nature a top-down governing paradigm, it is promoted by a tight, consensus-driven elite possessing an articulate political ideology and the aspiration to shape public opinion or society itself. A familiar concept in the contemporary world, it was a revolutionary proposal when advanced by the Bolsheviks in the aftermath of 1917. As with other expressions used in this study, the term "propaganda state" is used on the pages that follow in a neutral sense without pejorative inflection or judgment, despite its frequent use in that way during the early years of the Cold War.¹³

"Ideology," according to the official 1940 Soviet definition, is a value-neutral term for a worldview or "a system of opinions, ideas, understandings, and impressions" found in fields such as philosophy, ethics, law, art, science, and religion. Political ideology, therefore, refers to a set of ideas, principles, priorities, and discourses that guide decision-

making, legitimate the exercise of power and governance, and aid in the construction of governing culture and practice.¹⁴ According to Terry Eagleton, ideology allows the modern state to reinforce its authority by “*promoting* beliefs and values congenial to it; *naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; *denigrating* ideas which may challenge it; *excluding* rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself.”¹⁵ Put another way, ideology serves as both ends and means, not only defining political objectives and worldviews, but also acting as a vehicle for the realization of these objectives. Ronald Grigor Suny notes that “ideologies are tools for mobilizing populations, and like political parties they function to coordinate diverse opinions and people.” In this vein, according to Suny, modern elites and political entrepreneurs have come to regard ideology—whether defined narrowly as dogma or broadly as political culture—as virtually indispensable.¹⁶ In the context of such modern, social science-informed discussions, ideology in western liberal societies is seen as something almost as ubiquitous and multivalent as discourse and power relations. This is less the case for authoritarian societies and for this reason, the present study treats ideology in the USSR more or less as Stalin-era ideologists did: as both an official political culture and a “top-down” tool for popular indoctrination and mobilization.

“Propaganda,” a term closely associated with ideology, describes a deliberate and concerted attempt to use political sloganeering, imagery, and iconography in order to advance a systematic message designed to influence and shape popular beliefs, attitudes, and behavior.¹⁷ Propaganda’s persuasive appeal can be direct or oblique and typically assumes one of two modes, emphasizing either rational argumentation or the rallying of sympathy through a variety of emotional registers.¹⁸ Like ideology, the term propaganda is used in here in a sense similar to that current during the Stalin period—as a neutral term without the negative connotations that the word often possesses in modern colloquial English. Officially, the Soviet definition distinguished propaganda from agitation, propaganda denoting a complex, well-rounded set of ideological arguments designed to persuade through educational indoctrination, while agitation described a more simplistic, rabble-rousing sort of sloganeering. A largely heuristic distinction that Lenin originally borrowed from G. V. Plekhanov, this did not prevent Soviet authorities

from using the terms interchangeably—a convention that this study likewise adopts.¹⁹

“Indoctrination,” a concept that came into popular currency in the United States during the 1950s, refers to a persuasive process by which ideology is inculcated in the popular mind by means of propaganda and a pervasive political culture. Although it is a neutral term, its semantic reliance on the word “doctrine” suggests that the indoctrinational process is an inherently political one, designed to propagandize a coherent set of ideological principles or ideas at the expense of all other competing worldviews and principles.

“Ideological establishment” is used in this study as an aggregate term for a variety of official circles associated with the production and dissemination of regime propaganda and the official ideological line. Headed by the propaganda and agitational arm of the party’s Central Committee, it also included the political directorate of the Red Army, the Commissariat of Education, ranking party historians and Marxist-Leninist philosophers, leading journals and their editorial boards, major newspapers and their editors, and “court” writers and intellectuals. The term distinguishes between these official and semi-official spokespeople and other, lower-ranking non-executive personnel, whether educators, activists, artists, or members of the creative intelligentsia.

“Party hierarchy” is another aggregate turn of phrase that identifies the party and state leaders who devised the official line and supervised its development and maintenance within the ideological establishment. This term improves upon more traditional nomenclature used to describe the decision-making elite in the USSR, inasmuch as while Stalin wielded enormous power during his reign, it would be simplistic and reductionist to attribute to him every decision made during his tenure. Such a puppet-master paradigm not only mythologizes Stalin’s leadership capacities (in a perverse inversion of his personality cult), but it also obscures the decisive roles played by ranking party members like A. I. Stetsky, L. M. Kaganovich, and A. A. Zhdanov. Thus “party hierarchy” is used in the pages that follow to signify the small, exclusive group of party members in Stalin’s entourage who wielded power in Soviet society during the 1930s.

All of these institutions and practices were designed to influence “social identity,” the last of this study’s key terms. Identity, as such, refers to the essence of individual or group consciousness—those factors

which define the individual's uniqueness and differentiate the "self" or group from others.²⁰ This, of course, is not to suggest that identity is the sole product of fixed, objective characteristics like ethnicity, gender, or class. Indeed, while this study concentrates on political aspects of the Soviet "self" experienced among Russian speakers in Stalinist society between 1928 and 1941, it readily concedes that identity itself—whether individual or collective—is a much larger, unstable constellation of subjective characteristics that undergoes continuous renegotiation. In other words, this study limits its investigation to political aspects of individual and group identity during the 1930s, rather than attempting to map Soviet identity as a whole. What's more, because this study concerns itself chiefly with *popular* identity and mass consciousness, it focuses on views and attitudes that were broadly held and consistently understood by constituents from all social strata in the interwar USSR. Although elites figure prominently in the pages that follow, this study's scope of inquiry has been designed to focus on opinions and beliefs expressed outside the intelligentsia and party hierarchy.

In its investigation of ideological indoctrination under Stalin, this book exposes a long-overlooked failure that took a massive toll on mobilizational efforts within the world's first propaganda state. Such a fiasco can explain the regime's near-continuous resort to various forms of populist imagery and sloganeering after the start of the 1930s—whether concerning ethnicity, gender, or class. It also provides a new explanation for why propaganda in the USSR paid so little attention to revolutionary values and mores, whether during the Second World War or the postwar's "return to orthodoxy" between 1945 and 1953. Finally, it provides clues to why N. S. Khrushchev and his communist-idealist successors from Yu. N. Andropov to M. S. Gorbachev proved unable to draw upon an enduring sense of mass identity revolving around membership in a common socialist endeavor. Detailing the party hierarchy's failure to promote a sense of revolutionary Soviet identity during the 1930s, this book speaks to one of the core dysfunctions of propaganda and ideology in the USSR over the course of the twentieth century.