

2005

Stalin as Symbol: a Case Study of the Cult of Personality and its Construction

David Brandenberger

University of Richmond, dbranden@richmond.eduFollow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/history-faculty-publications>Part of the [European History Commons](#), and the [Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brandenberger, David. *Stalin: A New History*. Edited by Sarah Davies and James R. Harris. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 249-70.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the History at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

13 Stalin as symbol: a case study of the personality cult and its construction

David Brandenberger

In 1956, N. S. Khrushchev denounced Stalin's cult of personality as a psychosis having little connection to Soviet ideology as a whole. Arguing that the cult 'took on such monstrous proportions because Stalin himself supported the glorification of his own person, using all available methods,' Khrushchev illustrated his contention with reference to Stalin's official *Short Biography*.¹ Few since have questioned this characterisation of the cult, in part because of the difficulty of reconciling the promotion of a tsar-like figure with the egalitarian ideals of Soviet socialism.

Although the cult of personality certainly owed something to Stalin's affinity for self-aggrandisement, modern social science literature suggests that it was designed to perform an entirely different ideological function. Personality cults promoting charismatic leadership are typically found in developing societies where ruling cliques aspire to cultivate a sense of popular legitimacy.² Scholars since Max Weber have observed that charismatic leadership plays a particularly crucial role in societies that are either poorly integrated or lack regularised administrative institutions. In such situations, loyalty to an inspiring leader can induce even the most fragmented polities to acknowledge the authority of the central state despite the absence of a greater sense of patriotism, community, or rule

Research for this chapter was supported by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the United States Department of State, which administers the Russian, Eurasian, and East European Research Program (Title VIII). It has benefited from comments by Katia Dianina, Loren Graham, A. M. Dubrovskii, Adam Ulam, and participants in the 2003 conference of the Study Group on the Russian Revolution 'Stalin: Power, Policy, and Political Values.'

¹ "O kul'te lichnosti i ego posledstviakh": Doklad Pervogo sekretaria TsK KPSS tov. Khrushcheva N. S. XX s"ezdu Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuza, *Izvestiia TsK KPSS* 3 (1989), 157. Despite the influential nature of Khrushchev's analysis, it is doubtful that he actually subscribed to such a view. P. N. Pospelov, his ghost-writer, certainly understood the cult's function, having been one of its chief architects.

² See Immanuel Wallerstein, *Africa – The Politics of Independence: An Interpretation of Modern African History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 99; Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 121–48.

of law.³ The cult performed precisely such a function in the USSR during the interwar years, serving – in the words of one commentator – as an unifying mechanism at a time when ‘most of the components of civil society or of the modern state were missing: a reliable bureaucracy, a unitary consistent notion of citizenship or polity ... or even a sense of psychological inclusion’.⁴

Of course, this view of the personality cult is a distinctly modern one, grounded in social anthropology and cross-cultural analysis. Yet Stalin seems to have had a similar understanding of the cult’s role in Soviet society. In the mid-1930s, he commented to M. A. Svanidze that ‘the people need a tsar, i.e., someone to revere and in whose name to live and labour’.⁵ Shortly thereafter, Stalin elaborated on this point with Leon Feuchtwanger, contending that the cult did not focus personally on him so much as on his role as the personification of socialist state-building in the USSR.⁶ This conflation of the cult with broader Soviet propaganda efforts became so routine over time that Stalin eventually assigned his own *Short Biography* a central role in the Party catechism.⁷ Such gestures, despite their obvious immodesty, reveal that the cult was designed to serve as a mechanism for political mobilisation by advancing a larger-than-life hero capable of embodying the power, legitimacy and appeal of the Soviet ‘experiment’.

Although a connection has long been posited between the cult and the idea of charismatic leadership,⁸ this is the first investigation of its kind to focus tightly on the question of agency within the Stalinist ideological establishment. It links the emergence of the Stalin cult to the party’s inability to rally popular support by more orthodox Marxist-Leninist

³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), III, pp. 1111–26.

⁴ J. Arch Getty, ‘The Politics of Stalinism’, in Alec Nove (ed.), *The Stalin Phenomenon* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), p. 119.

⁵ 25 April 1935 diary entry published in Iu. G. Murin and V. N. Denisov (eds.), *Iosif Stalin v ob’iatiakh sem’i: iz lichnogo arkhiva. Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow: Rodina, 1993), p. 176.

⁶ Lion Feikhtvanger (Leon Feuchtwanger), *Moskva 1937 goda* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1937), pp. 64–5.

⁷ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (henceforth RGASPI) f. 629, op. 1, d. 54, l. 23.

⁸ See Getty, ‘The Politics of Stalinism,’ p. 119; Moshe Lewin, ‘Stalin in the Mirror of the Other’, in Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (eds.), *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 107–34; Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia: Terror, Propaganda, and Dissent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 163, 167; Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 59; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 24.

means during the mid-to-late 1920s. In the context of failed grain procurement campaigns, the 1927 war scare and difficulties associated with the First Five-Year Plan, the cult – much like party's subsequent indulgence in populism and russocentrism during the so-called Great Retreat – is best seen as a desperate attempt to mobilise a society that was too poorly educated to grasp the philosophical tenets of the Party line.⁹ Blaming the ineffectiveness of indoctrinational efforts on the abstraction of early Soviet propaganda, Party ideologists after 1929 turned to the Stalin cult as a new way of bolstering popular loyalty to the Party and state.

The construction of Stalin's official biography provides an ideal case study for appreciating the charismatic dimensions of the cult of personality. Not only was the *Short Biography* a seminal propaganda text of its day, but its publication history dovetailed with the rise and fall of the cult itself. Moreover, Stalin's biographers left behind a detailed paper trail at a time when Soviet publishing houses' routine destruction of manuscripts and correspondence swept away most traces of the cult's internal dynamics.¹⁰ But perhaps most important is the fact that biography as a genre lies very close to the heart of the personality cult. One of the most ancient forms of literary composition, its pedigree dates back to early religious hagiography. In modern times, biography has come to enjoy almost unparalleled popularity within non-fictional literature because of its compelling subjects, its emphasis on temperament, character and accomplishment, and its tight narrative focus on a single protagonist. Few other genres, it would seem, are so suited to the promotion of charismatic authority.¹¹ Ultimately, the fact that both Stalin and Khrushchev singled out the *Short Biography* as epitomising the very essence of the personality cult makes this text an ideal vehicle for the ensuing investigation.

⁹ On this shift from materialism to populism, see David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), chs. 1–3.

¹⁰ Two models pervade the secondary literature on the inner workings of the cult: George Orwell's depiction of an efficient, totalitarian monolith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Khrushchev's image of Stalin as the cult's meticulous editor-in-chief in the Secret Speech. See Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 817–19; D. A. Volkogonov, *Triumf i tragediia: Politicheskii portret I. V. Stalina* (Moscow: Novosti, 1989), I, p. 387; Arkady Belinikov and Max Hayward in M. Dewhurst and R. Farrel (eds.), *The Soviet Censorship* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1973), p. 17. This study reveals the Stalin cult to have been rife with political intrigue, and at least as ad hoc and poorly organised as other major projects of the era. Stalin's own participation in the cult turns out to have been no more consistent. While his role is best described as supervisory, such a description fails to capture the arbitrariness of his involvement.

¹¹ The arts may rival biography in this regard. See Evgenii Gromov, *Stalin: Vlast' i iskusstvo* (Moscow: Respublika, 1998); Jan Plamper, 'The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts, 1929–1953' (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Berkeley, 2001).

Although commentary on Stalin was not uncommon in the USSR in the years following the October 1917 Revolution, it was not until almost a decade later that the compilation of several hundred descriptive profiles of leading Bolsheviks for the *Granat Encyclopedic Dictionary* necessitated the production of a serious biographical statement.¹² I. P. Tovstukha, a secretary of Stalin's closely associated with the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute (IMEL), drafted the manuscript. The final result, describing Stalin's career through 1924, boasted a narrative which – if almost entirely fictional – was at least quite accessible. It appeared in 1927, both in the encyclopedia, and as a separate fourteen-page brochure, complete with frontispiece, entitled *Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin: A Short Biography*. Published in large, bold type in a modest print run of 50,000, this pamphlet was a relatively unassuming production.¹³

Slightly enlarged and re-edited to cover the 1924–8 period, Tovstukha's biography resurfaced in 1929 during the commemoration of the General Secretary's fiftieth birthday, when it ran in *Pravda* on 21 December as an unsigned 'official' complement to articles by L. M. Kaganovich, K. E. Voroshilov, and others in the paper's jubilee double edition. On the back page, OGIZ, the state publishing house, advertised the original 1927 pamphlet and heralded the imminent publication of a new, more elaborate biography. Aimed at a wide audience, it had been 'designed for every literate worker and peasant' and was to be printed in massive numbers.¹⁴

Such priorities were indicative of a broader reorientation of Soviet ideological efforts underway during these years. Difficulties with social mobilisation had already compelled Soviet ideologists to search for new ways of rallying popular support in the late 1920s. Fundamentally, their problem was one of educational level, as most Soviet citizens were only functionally literate and few had had more than a few grades of formal schooling. Even among urban residents and Party members, rates were not much higher.¹⁵ This meant that Soviet propaganda's longstanding

¹² Until 1926, such sketches of Stalin were brief, e.g. B. Volin (ed.), *12 biografii* (Moscow: Rabochaia Moskva, 1924), pp. 46–51.

¹³ I. Tovstukha, 'Stalin', in *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' Granat* (Moscow: Russkii biografiicheskii institut Granat, 1927), XLI, sect. 3, pp. 107–10; I. Tovstukha (ed.), *Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin (Kratkaia biografiia)* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1927). On its development, see RGASPI f. 558, op. 11, dd. 1277–8; and Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as a Revolutionary, 1879–1929: A Study in History and Personality* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), p. 428.

¹⁴ 'Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin (Biografiia)', *Pravda*, 21 December 1929, p. 4 (excerpted in *Trud and Komsomol'skaia pravda*); 'Knigi I. V. Stalina', *Pravda*, 21 December 1929, p. 8.

¹⁵ Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Interwar History of Soviet Russia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), pp. 39–41, 209–40; K. B. Litvak, 'K voprosu o partiinykh perepisiakh i kul'turnom urovne kommunistov v 20-e gody', *Voprosy istorii*

focus on materialism and anonymous social forces was simply too arcane for most to grasp.¹⁶ As early as 1929, M. Gorky and others concerned with mass mobilisation had begun to talk – hesitantly at first – about promoting famous names from the Revolution, Civil War, and ongoing socialist construction as heroes who could personify the official line in more accessible terms.¹⁷ It was this new approach to propaganda that led OGIz to advertise its forthcoming Stalin biography.

Despite all assurances to the contrary, the biography never saw the light of day. This is rather curious, because Stalin's 1929 jubilee is generally considered to mark the launching of the Stalin cult and Tovstukha's thin brochure was clearly insufficient to play a central role in the new campaign. But aside from the publication of a small, impenetrable article in the *Minor Soviet Encyclopedia*,¹⁸ nothing even vaguely reminiscent of a Stalin biography rolled off the presses during these years.

What can explain this peculiar absence? Although some have attributed the lack of an official biography during the early 1930s to modesty on Stalin's part, this conclusion seems unsatisfactory.¹⁹ By 1934, sixteen and a half million copies of Stalin's various works were in circulation, complemented by increasingly large amounts of hagiography in the party press.²⁰ Modesty, then, did not prevent the production of a new biographical statement.

A better explanation points to the fact that between the late 1920s and the early 1930s, Soviet ideologists – like many others in society – were caught in the throes of cultural revolution. Confusion reigned. One of the biggest controversies concerned how best to characterise the role of the individual in history. Officially, the materialist tenets of Marxism-Leninism had long stressed the primacy of anonymous social forces as described in *The Communist Manifesto* ('the history of all hitherto existing

KPSS 2 (1991), 79–92; John Barber, 'Working Class Culture and Political Culture in the 1930s', in Hans Gunther (ed.), *The Culture of the Stalin Period* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 3–14.

¹⁶ Witnessing this confusion firsthand, John Scott commented later that 'to give students of a very limited general education "Anti-Duehrung," [sic] "The Dialectics of Nature," or "Materialism and Empiro-Criticism" to read was only to invite blatant superficiality.' See John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Engineer in Russia's City of Steel*, ed. Stephen Kotkin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 45.

¹⁷ 'Iz perepiski A. M. Gor'kogo', *Izvestiia TsK KPSS* 3 (1989), 183–7; S. V. Zhuravlev, *Fenomen 'Istorii fabrik i zavodov'* (Moscow: IRI RAN, 1997), pp. 4–5, 153–4, 180–1.

¹⁸ M. V. Vol'fson, 'Stalin', in *Malaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1930), VIII, pp. 406–12. The only other biographical statements to be published before the end of the decade consisted of short chapters or sub-chapters in party history textbooks and even more brief entries in the collected works of prominent party leaders.

¹⁹ Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, pp. 817–18.

²⁰ *XVII s'ezd vsesoiuznoi kommunisticheskoi partii(b) 26 ianvaria–10 fevralia 1934 g. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Partizdat, 1934), p. 620.

societies is the history of class struggle'). Yet propaganda constructed according to this principle tended to be too abstract to resonate with the USSR's poorly educated population. Moreover, the official veneration of Lenin since 1924 had followed a very different, individualistic trajectory. After considerable hesitation, Soviet ideologists apparently decided to invest in Stalin-centered propaganda patterned after the Lenin cult in order to augment the inscrutable nature of Marxism-Leninism with the celebration of a tangible, living hero familiar to one and all.²¹

But if Stalin's OGIz biographers found their assignment challenging from an ideological standpoint, the situation was further complicated in October 1931 with the publication of Stalin's infamous letter to the journal *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*. Provoked by Party historians' apparent willingness to second-guess Lenin, Stalin assailed the Soviet ideological establishment as a whole, defaming even fanatic loyalists like E. M. Iaroslavskii as 'archival rats'. Declaring Lenin's legacy to be unimpeachable, Stalin ordered ideologists to devote their attention to the heroic deeds of Party leaders rather than to source-study and other academic exercises. While there is some controversy over what precisely precipitated Stalin's intervention, and even what his intentions were, the ramifications of the letter are clear.²² Encouraged by the machinations of Stalin's inner circle, the letter triggered a witch hunt in the lower ranks of the historical profession that decimated the discipline over the next several years, rendering virtually all existing work on Party history and the Soviet leadership obsolete.²³ Elites understood the *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* letter to be a 'turning point'. From that time, discussions

²¹ Although there was little room for individual actors in the classic Marxist understanding of historical materialism, in 1931 Stalin identified a prominent role for decisive leaders from among the people who grasped the possibilities and limitations of their historical contexts. See 'Beseda s nemetskim pisatelem Emilem Liudvigom', *Bol'shevik* 8 (1932), 33; also I. Merzon, 'Kak pokazyvat' istoricheskikh deiatelei v shkol'nom prepodavanii istorii', *Bor'ba klassov* 5 (1935), 53-9; *Istoriia Vsesoiuznoi kommunisticheskoi partii (bol'shevikov): Kratkii kurs* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1938), p. 16. Gorky and A. N. Tolstoi, among others, promoted the new interest in heroes with the support of A. A. Zhdanov. See *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei, 1934: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1934), pp. 8, 17, 417-19, etc.

²² Compare John Barber, 'Stalin's Letter to the Editors of Proletarskaya Revolyutsiia', *Soviet Studies* 1 (1976), 39-41; and Robert C. Tucker, 'The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult', *American Historical Review* 2 (1979), 355-8.

²³ Longtime rivalries within the discipline contributed to the firestorm. See George Enteen, 'Marxist Historians during the Cultural Revolution: A Case-Study in Professional Infighting', in S. Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 154-79; Entin (Enteen), 'Intellektual'nye predposylki utverzheniia stalinizma v sovetskoi istoriografii', *Voprosy istorii* 5-6 (1995), 149-55; A. N. Artizov, 'Kritika M. N. Pokrovskogo i ego shkoly', *Istoriia SSSR* 1 (1991), 103-6.

concerning the Party and its leaders were no longer to be dispassionate or diverge from the official line.²⁴

Although this crisis seems to have stymied OGIZ's Stalin biographers, it had the effect of stimulating the growth of the cult as a whole as members of the Soviet establishment attempted to prove their loyalty in a frenzy of deferential writing.²⁵ Such panegyrics were reinforced in the next two years by the Party hierarchs' call for a broad reconceptualisation of Party and civic history,²⁶ as well as their official endorsement of Socialist Realism in literature and the arts.²⁷ As Stalin somewhat laconically explained during a private critique of Comintern propaganda during these years, orthodox materialism was unpopular on the mass level because 'the people do not like Marxist analysis, big phrases and generalized statements'.²⁸ Instead, he and other party bosses demanded that propagandists break with the focus on abstract schematicism and anonymous social forces and produce animated narratives, populated by identifiable heroes and villains. Unsurprisingly, the General Secretary and his entourage were to occupy a central position in this new Soviet Olympus – as P. F. Iudin declared in early 1934,

the greatest people of the epoch stand alongside us – we had Lenin and we now have Stalin, Molotov, Kaganovich, and Voroshilov. But people with such intelligence or revolutionary sweep-of-the-hand as our leaders don't yet figure into our artistic literature. It is imperative to represent such people in our literature.²⁹

Kaganovich was even more direct, noting that 'the role of Comrade Stalin still awaits its comprehensive and profound evaluation. We not only

²⁴ Nadezhda Mandelshtam, *Vospominaniia* (New York: Izdatel'stvo im. Chekhova, 1970), p. 277.

²⁵ Although Tucker's conclusion that Stalin geared the whole process toward promoting the personality cult probably overestimates the leader's foresight and ability to control events, the cult did at least haphazardly begin to take shape in the wake of this affair.

²⁶ See the Central Committee resolution of 17 January 1932 'Ob usilenii Kul'tropotdela TsK rabotnikami i o perestroike raboty Kul'tropa v dukhe sistematicheskoi propagandy marksizma-leninizma', in *Spravochnik partiinogo rabotnika* (Moscow: Partizdat, 1934), vyp. 8, p. 288; 'Razvernut' rabotu po izucheniiu istorii partii', *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* 4 (1934), 9; Central Committee resolution of 15 May 1934 'O prepodavanii grazhdanskoi istorii v shkolakh SSSR', *Pravda*, 16 May 1934, p. 1.

²⁷ On the rise of the hero in Socialist Realism, see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 8–10, 34–5, 72, 119, 136–48; Katerina Clark, 'Little Heroes and Big Deeds: Literature Responds to the First Five-Year Plan', in Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Cultural Revolution*, pp. 205–6.

²⁸ 7 April 1934 entry in Georgi Dimitrov, *Dnevnik (9 Mart 1933–6 Fevruari 1949)* (Sophia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo 'Sv. Kliment Okhridski', 1997), p. 101. The author is grateful to Terry Martin for this reference.

²⁹ 'Novaia, nevidannaia literatura: vystuplenie tov. P. Iudina', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 22 January 1934, p. 3.

know of Comrade Stalin's role, but we feel it as well – it is in our heart and in our soul'.³⁰

Despite the priority of this agenda, efforts to develop more animated, evocative propaganda did not immediately produce results during the mid-1930s. Although Party ideologists and historians struggled to reframe their Marxist-Leninist analysis in more populist terms, political literature remained dominated by arcane theoretical tracts, poorly annotated speeches and crude sloganeering. Chronic indoctrinational problems persisted as a result: when a certain Petrushenko was asked who Stalin was in a study circle in 1935, his answer – 'someone like the tsar used to be' – got him reported all the way to Moscow.³¹ Petrushenko's example illustrates why the absence of a Stalin biography was so keenly felt. Such a narrative promised to synthesise the Party's corpus of abstract theory and lofty rhetoric into a coherent, compelling statement on what it meant to be Soviet.³²

Of course, it was not for lack of trying that such a book failed to appear. Pursued vigorously, the project suffered a stunning series of setbacks. Several accounts exist of S. M. Kirov being dragooned into writing a biography in the early-to-mid 1930s before an assassin's bullet cut short his nascent literary career. Gorky, the most revered of the court litterateurs, also considered working on a manuscript before his death in 1936, as did M. A. Bulgakov before dying in 1940.³³ Little came of these efforts, however.

More fruitful biographical projects involved less visible members of the Soviet elite. While still a rising Party boss in Georgia, L. P. Beria engineered the establishment of the Tbilisi Stalin Institute in February 1932. Its charter declared that:

along with the collection of all materials pertaining to the revolutionary activity of Comrade Stalin, the institute is also given the task of organising scholarly research to work out issues concerned with Stalin's biography and his role as theoretician

³⁰ 'Ot shest'nadtsatogo k sem'nadtsatomu s"ezdu partii: doklad L. M. Kaganovicha o rabote TsK VKP(b) na Moskovskoi ob"edinennoi IV oblastnoi i III gorodskoi partiinnoi konferentsii 17 ianvaria 1934 g.', *Pravda*, 22 January 1934, p. 4.

³¹ RGASPI f. 17, op. 120, d. 176, l. 45. For other examples, see Davies, *Popular Opinion*, pp. 168–9.

³² Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941* (New York: Norton, 1990), p. 333.

³³ Amy Knight, *Beria: Stalin's First Lieutenant* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 57–8; Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, p. 335n. 109; Edvard Radzinskii, *Stalin* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1997), pp. 13–15; *Dnevnik Eleny Bulgakovoi* (Moscow: Knizhnaia palata, 1990), pp. 272–9, 284, 383–4. On Bulgakov's Stalin-centered play *Batum*, see M. A. Bulgakov, *P'esy 1930-kh godov* (St. Petersburg: Iskustvo-SPb, 1994), pp. 211–56, 498–548.

and organiser of the party, particularly including the study of Stalin's role as organiser of the revolutionary workers' movement in the Transcaucasus.³⁴

Tbilisi did not monopolise the research for long, however. Tovstukha joined the fray in 1932, resuming his role as *de facto* official biographer despite serious illness. One of his first moves was to begin shifting relevant documents from Georgia to the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow in order to prepare for the publication of Stalin's collected works.³⁵ Within a year, however, territoriality became an issue when M. G. Toroshelidze took control of the Tbilisi institute with the intention of producing a Stalin biography of his own. He, in turn, was checked by Beria, who also fancied writing a book on Stalin's exploits in the Transcaucasian revolutionary underground. Beria's rising prestige in the Party gave him a tremendous advantage, allowing him to make short work of his rivals and even publish an article of his own in the Party's flagship, *Bol'shevik*, in mid-1934. In the wake of this coup, he placed his ghost-writer, E. A. Bediia, in command of the Tbilisi institute and instructed him to use the resources at his disposal to expand his Stalin-centred history of the Bolshevik movement in the Transcaucasus.³⁶

Tbilisi was not the only scene of intrigue. In Moscow, Iaroslavskii began gathering material for a book about Stalin through official and unofficial channels, apparently believing that such a project would restore his good name within the Soviet ideological establishment. 'I am working on a book that I am certain will be useful to the entire party as well as to the Transcaucasian comrades,' he wrote to a Georgian Party official in early 1935.³⁷ Writing to Tovstukha, Iaroslavskii asked for help and advice, speaking of the need to publish 'a fairly detailed, popularised biography'. Tovstukha responded rudely that while there was no doubt about the pressing need for such a book, Iaroslavskii was the wrong man

³⁴ Beria's patronage over the Georgian Stalin cult included support for the collection of oral histories, the creation of a museum, and the erection of a marble pavilion over Stalin's humble childhood home. See S. V. Sukharev, 'Litsedeistvo na poprishche istorii [Beria – apologet kul'ta lichnosti Stalina]', *Voprosy istorii KPSS* 3 (1990), 105–6.

³⁵ Willi Munzenberg, a German communist, had urged Tovstukha to return to the project in 1931, asking him to have IMEL publish a 'communist-written' biography in order to refute exposés being published in Germany by renegades like Boris Bazhanov, Stalin's former secretary. See RGASPI f. 155, op. 1, d. 85, ll. 1, 3. For the vast materials Tovstukha assembled, see f. 71, op. 10, dd. 192–218, 364–73.

³⁶ L. P. Beria, 'Bol'sheviki Zakavkaz'ia v bor'be za sotsializm', *Bol'shevik* 11 (1934), 24–37. Beria was not the only biographer to undermine his rival. Both Toroshelidze and Iaroslavskii eagerly attacked their competitors as well. See Sukharev, 'Litsedeistvo', pp. 105–7, 110–11, 116.

³⁷ RGASPI f. 89, op. 8, d. 1001, ll. 7. See also l. 5 and more generally, dd. 1001–14.

for the job. 'It will not turn out as a *biography* of Stalin – it will just be another history of the party and Stalin's role therein'. 'A detailed biography of Stalin', averred Tovstukha, 'one exceptionally vivid and rich in facts', would take years to complete. Denying that he was writing a Stalin biography of his own, Tovstukha flatly refused Iaroslavskii's request for assistance.³⁸

Insulted by Tovstukha's tone, Iaroslavskii refused to be discouraged. Instead, he wrote back, threatening that he had allies in the Politburo and that he would proceed with his planned biography with or without Tovstukha's assistance.³⁹ Unbeknownst to Iaroslavskii, however, it was actually Tovstukha who enjoyed favour in the Party hierarchy,⁴⁰ and he found Iaroslavskii's demands presumptuous and threatening. Determined to check-mate his rival, Tovstukha wrote to V. V. Adoratskii, the then director of IMEL, that 'if Iaroslavskii moves toward what I am working on ... please steer him away decisively ... In particular, he must not get any hint of the translations of [Stalin's] articles from Georgian'.⁴¹

Stymied by this stonewalling, Iaroslavskii attempted during the following months to convince his patrons in the Politburo to overrule Tovstukha and Adoratskii. In August 1935, he finally appealed directly to Stalin himself:

C[omrade] Stalin! Sergo [Ordzhonikidze] called me today ... and said that he had talked to you about my planned book *Stalin*. Only you can remove the exceptional obstacles that he told you about – it is imperative that either you or Comrade Poskrebyshchev order IMEL or the Archive of the October Revolution to allow me to use *all* the available materials and documents. Otherwise, they will not permit me to make use of them.

Stalin's response, scrawled across Iaroslavskii's letter, was as decisive as it was duplicitous. 'I am against the idea of a biography about me,' he wrote. 'Maksim Gorky had a plan like yours, and he also asked me, but I have backed away from this issue. I don't think the time has come for a Stalin biography.'⁴² Not one written by Iaroslavskii, in any case.

³⁸ RGASPI f. 155, op. 1, d. 88, l. 1; f. 89, op. 8, d. 1001, ll. 23–4; f. 155, op. 1, d. 90, ll. 1–1ob.

³⁹ RGASPI f. 155, op. 1, d. 88, l. 2.

⁴⁰ In early 1935, Tovstukha confidentially relayed to V. V. Adoratskii that '[A. I.] Stetskii recently proposed that I write a biography of Stalin. This is thus the *fourth* such offer I have received in the past year, suggesting that the issue is already fully mature.' See RGASPI f. 155, op. 1, d. 70, l. 28. Stetskii had apparently discussed the matter with Stalin a day after his fifty-fifth birthday. See 'Posetiteli kremlevskogo kabineta I. V. Stalina', *Istoricheskii arkhiv* 3 (1995), 149.

⁴¹ RGASPI f. 155, op. 1, d. 70, ll. 33–4ob.

⁴² RGASPI f. 558, op. 1, d. 5089, l. 1 (the draft is at f. 89, op. 8, d. 1020, l. 1). Volkogonov misquotes the letter and errs with its citation in *Triumf i tragediia*, I, pp. 338–9.

Ironically, despite all of Iaroslavskii's and Tovstukha's efforts, it was ultimately Beria who succeeded in publishing the first major biographical statement on Stalin. After delivering an address on Stalin's early revolutionary career in Tbilisi in July 1935, Beria promptly produced a book-size manuscript on the subject entitled *On the Question of the History of Bolshevik Organizations in the Transcaucasus*.⁴³ Clever and resourceful, the Georgian party boss' ghost-writers had produced a narrative that charted Stalin's past and established a firm chronology for his professional activities through the prism of Transcaucasian party history. Moreover, by focusing on the Transcaucasus and relying on the testimony of hand-picked local Party veterans, the book's authors were able to skirt later, more controversial episodes in the General Secretary's career that were confounding his other potential biographers. Published in *Pravda* and then promptly in a massive hardcover edition, Beria's book won the immediate endorsement of the Central Committee.⁴⁴ Organisations were instructed to have their 'activists, propagandists and party members study Comrade Beria's presentation ... which has provided new material of the richest kind on the role of Comrade Stalin as our party's leader and theoretician ... Comrade Beria's presentation is to be used in future courses as mandatory reading material'.⁴⁵

The presence of a detailed account of Stalin's early career and repeated calls from the Central Committee for additional new materials⁴⁶ heightened the need for a more comprehensive biography at a time when other projects were faltering. Tovstukha succumbed to illness and died. Toroshelidze's grumbling about Beria's book (or rumours to that effect) precipitated his arrest.⁴⁷ Iaroslavskii was drafted to help compile what was to be the Party's central ideological text, the *History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): Short Course*.⁴⁸ Ultimately, a full biography would not appear until 1936, and even then, from a rather unexpected

⁴³ Sukharev, 'Litsedeistvo', pp. 112–13.

⁴⁴ See *Pravda*, 29 July to 5 August, 1935, and L. P. Beria, *K voprosu ob istorii bol'shevistskikh organizatsii v Zakavkaz'e* (Moscow: Partizdat, 1935). On its development, see RGASPI f. 558, op. 11, dd. 704–5; op. 4, d. 662, l. 428.

⁴⁵ *Zaria Vostoka*, 2 September 1935, cited in Sukharev, 'Litsedeistvo', pp. 115–16. On its use as a biography, see A. G. Solov'ev, 'Tetradi krasnogo professora (1912–1941 gg.)', in *Neizvestnaia Rossiia – XX vek* (Moscow: Istoricheskoe nasledie, 1993), IV, p. 189.

⁴⁶ Central Committee resolution of 14 June 1935 'O propagandistskoi rabote v blizhaishem vremia', detailed in N. Rubinshtein, 'Nedostatki v prepodavanii istorii VKP(b)', *Bol'shevik* 8 (1936), 32–42.

⁴⁷ Sukharev, 'Litsedeistvo', p. 106.

⁴⁸ Iaroslavskii was recruited to work with P. N. Pospelov and V. G. Knorin (although Knorin was purged in summer 1937). See RGASPI f. 17, op. 120, d. 383, l. 1.

source. Roy Medvedev explains that after repeated failures among Stalin's potential Soviet biographers,

the search spread to distinguished Western authors. In early 1936 a biography of Stalin by the prominent French writer Henri Barbusse was published as a serial in the large-circulation periodical *Roman-gazeta*. Barbusse received all the material he needed for this book directly from the party's Central Committee. However, within a year the book was removed from all the libraries because it referred to dozens of Stalin's 'comrades-in-arms' who had been arrested soon after the book appeared.⁴⁹

The effect of the Great Terror on this and similar projects is difficult to overestimate. As Medvedev and others have observed, the unpredictable nature of the purges within the Soviet elite made it virtually impossible to describe the General Secretary's Party career in print without risking accidental mention of enemies of the people.

To a certain extent, the Barbusse debacle was eclipsed by the continuing success of Beria's book and other new Stalin-centred histories of the Civil War and the Red Army by Gorky and Voroshilov, respectively.⁵⁰ The publication of the long-awaited *Short Course* in 1938 also helped the situation. The fact that these institutional histories were appearing at a time when few other propaganda texts made it past the state censor should not be particularly surprising, of course. Unlike traditional biographies, institutional histories did not have to detail Stalin's personal relationship with the Party and military elite. Instead, they focused on Stalin and Soviet leadership in general terms and survived the Great Terror by avoiding mention of the rank-and-file by name whenever possible.

Such volumes were, however, only a temporary solution to the problem. Not only did they make for difficult reading, but, with the exception of the *Short Course*, they proved to be too narrow and bloodless to offer an overall sense of the era. In fact, this literature actually had the effect of stimulating new calls for a major Stalin biography.⁵¹ But if there was little doubt about the priority of releasing a comprehensive biography, the task of writing it remained something akin to Russian roulette. The greatest

⁴⁹ Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, pp. 817–18; Anri Barbius (Barbusse), *Stalin: Chelovek, cherez kotorogo raskryvaetsia novyi mir* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1936). On the text's development, see RGASPI f. 558, op. 11, dd. 699–700; more generally, see Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, pp. 335–6. On efforts to recruit Feuchtwanger and André Gide, see A. Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 228.

⁵⁰ *Istoriia grazhdanskoi voiny v SSSR*, I, *Podgotovka Velikoi Proletarskoi revoliutsii* (Moscow: Istoriia grazhdanskoi voiny, 1935, 1938); K. E. Voroshilov, *Stalin i Krasnaia Armiia* (Moscow: Partizdat, 1936).

⁵¹ RGASPI f. 17, op. 120, d. 307, l. 269.

threat stemmed from the Terror, as each wave of arrests immediately transformed everything even mentioning its victims from prescribed literature into proscribed contraband.⁵² But excessive veneration could also create problems for prospective biographers. In 1938, for instance, Stalin sharply rebuked Detizdat, the Children's Publishing House, for a book demonstrating a clearly 'Socialist-Revolutionary tone':

I am decisively opposed to the publication of *Stories of Stalin's Childhood*.

The little book is filled with a mass of factual errors, distortions, exaggerations and undeserved praise. The author has been misled by fairy tale enthusiasts, liars (perhaps 'honest' liars) and sycophants. A pity for the author, but facts are facts.

But that is not most important. Most important is that the book has a tendency to inculcate in the consciousness of Soviet children (and people in general) a cult of personalities, great leaders [*vozhdai*] and infallible heroes. That is dangerous and harmful. The theory of the 'heroes' and the 'mob' is not a Bolshevik theory but an SR one. *The SRs say that 'Heroes make a people, transform a mob into a people.'* 'The people make their heroes,' *say the Bolsheviks.* This little book will assist the SRs. Every such book will contribute to the SRs and *will harm* our general Bolshevik cause.

I advise you to burn the book.

I. Stalin.

16/II 1938.⁵³

Stalin's rejection of this paradigm must have caused his potential biographers to despair. Of course, Stalin was technically correct: the Party line on historic individuals had stated quite clearly since 1932 that leaders emerge from among the people, though Soviet mass culture had rarely followed this directive and routinely characterised Stalin as playing a paternalistic role in relation to Soviet society. Such an erratic attitude

⁵² Glavlit censored manuscripts and withdrew books according to a constantly changing list of prohibited names, themes, and events. See A. V. Blium, *Sovetskaia tsenzura v epokhu total'nogo terrora, 1929–1953* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000).

⁵³ RGASPI f. 558, op. 1, d. 3218, ll. 1–4, published in P. N. Pospelov, 'Piat' desiat' let Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuza', *Voprosy istorii* 11 (1953), 21. See also Tsentr khraneniia dokumentov molodezhnykh organizatsii (henceforth TsKhDMO), f. 1, op. 23, d. 1304, ll. 57–8; d. 1251, l. 126. Although Stalin clearly understood the logic behind the personality cult, he also objected to its excesses. In 1933, he wrote to the Society of Old Bolsheviks to protest the launch of several projects devoted to his career: 'I am against them as such undertakings will lead to a strengthening of the "cult of personalities", something which is dangerous and incompatible with the spirit of our Party.' Two years later, he took a dislike to a picture of himself leading the famous 1902 Batum demonstration in a draft textbook on Party history by Iaroslavskii, Knorin, and Pospelov, scribbling into the margin: " ? there was no such thing." He struck out similar passages in an early draft of A. V. Shestakov's 1937 *Short Course on the History of the USSR*. See RGASPI f. 558, op. 1, d. 1572, quoted in Sukharev, 'Litsedeistvo', p. 104; RGASPI f. 558, op. 3, d. 74, l. 81; d. 374, ll. 115–16, 139, 175. See also Gromov, *Stalin: Vlast' i iskusstvo*, pp. 143–4.

toward the literary dimensions of the personality cult ultimately limited biographical material in the mid-to-late 1930s to institutional histories like the *Short Course* and books by Beria, Gorky, and Voroshilov.⁵⁴

Things changed with the end of the Great Terror in 1939. Iaroslavskii, at the height of his career following the successful release of the *Short Course*, eagerly returned to the idea of writing a Stalin biography. Although much of the Stalin material that he had attempted to interpolate into the *Short Course* had been cut during the final stages of the book's editing,⁵⁵ now the *Minor Soviet Encyclopedia* and other publications were urgently requesting new biographical articles to mark the leader's sixtieth jubilee late that December. Aspiring to fill a specific void in the existing Party literature, Iaroslavskii wrote to A. A. Zhdanov that 'the need for a biography is colossal, especially in the newly liberated regions of Poland, the army, the schools and the collective farms.' Favourable initial reviews of Iaroslavskii's biography manuscript faded, however, as his editors expressed concern over its bulk and density. With the deadline nearing that fall, they demanded that Iaroslavskii make the piece more accessible. A stalemate ensued when his revisions proved unsatisfactory.⁵⁶ Frustrated, Iaroslavskii appealed to Stalin two months later for permission to publish his manuscript separately as a short book, stressing the importance of getting a biography into circulation and assuring his erstwhile patron that it had been written in a 'simple style accessible to the masses.'⁵⁷

Although the book, *On Comrade Stalin*, did ultimately appear in print in late 1939,⁵⁸ Iaroslavskii's triumph was short-lived, insofar as his biography was immediately upstaged by another project bursting onto the scene at the same time. Unbeknownst to Iaroslavskii, M. D. Mitin, P. N. Pospelov, G. F. Aleksandrov, and I. I. Mints had been working in parallel on another biographical statement at IMEL with the help of the Central Committee directorate of propaganda and agitation.⁵⁹ Completed just weeks before

⁵⁴ See Iu. Polevoi, 'Chto chitat' o zhizni i deiatel'nosti tovarishcha Stalina', in *K shestidesiatletiiu so dnia rozhdeniia Iosifa Vissarionovicha Stalina (V pomoshch' agitatoram)* (Ulan Ude: n.p., 1939), pp. 36–67. Exceptions include *Stalin i Khashim (1901–1902 gody)* (Sukhumi: n.p., 1934); *Rasskazy starykh rabochikh Zakavkaz'ia o velikom Staline* (Moscow: Partizdat, 1937); *Batumskaia demonstratsiia 1902 goda* (Moscow: Partizdat, 1937).

⁵⁵ [M. V. Zelenov,] 'I. V. Stalin v rabote nad "Kratkim kursom istorii VKP(b)"', *Voprosy istorii* 11 (2002), 6.

⁵⁶ RGASPI f. 89, op. 8, dd. 996, 1017–18; d. 1016, l. 1. On Iaroslavskii's correspondence with the encyclopedia, see d. 1017, ll. 14–19.

⁵⁷ RGASPI f. 89, op. 8, d. 1020, ll. 2–3. The book's drafts are at d. 995.

⁵⁸ E. Iaroslavskii, *O tovarishche Staline* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1939). Print-runs never exceeded 200,000.

⁵⁹ The 1939 text was written by M. S. Pozner, P. S. Cheremnykh, M. S. Volin, and V. D. Mochalov and edited by Mitin, Aleksandrov, Pospelov, and Mints. See RGASPI f. 629,

Stalin's jubilee, the proofs were hurriedly circulated for review within the Party hierarchy.⁶⁰ When a copy was sent to Iaroslavskii, the latter realized that he had again been outflanked and wrote back bitterly:

I am saddened that IMEL has taken such a wrongful position in regard to me, that *only at the last moment, 9 days before Comrade Stalin's 60th birthday, I receive an invitation to make some comments* – all the more because long ago I wrote to you personally and said that I have been working in this area and could take part in the compilation of a biography. This isn't [just] a personal insult, as I look upon the writing of Stalin's biography as *a serious Party affair*.

After making a number of recommendations, Iaroslavskii begged Mitin to go over the text 'again and again . . . as it is going to the masses. The masses must sense in every line a deep love for Comrade Stalin'.⁶¹ While Iaroslavskii was scribbling away, another copy landed on Stalin's desk, as was typical for the pre-war years with manuscripts of this importance. Equally typical, Stalin returned it to IMEL unread, a note jotted on the cover page stating bluntly: 'no time to look at it'.⁶²

Gambling on its acceptability, IMEL advanced the biography into production, to be published a day before Stalin's birthday in *Pravda*, *Bol'shevik* and *Partiinoe stroitel'stvo* under the title 'Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin: A Short Biography'. Attributed anonymously to IMEL, the piece was a bloodless institutional history of Stalin's Party career based on a plagiarism of Tovstukha's 1927 prototype and the materials that the latter had collected before his death. Released as a hardcover in the last week of 1939 and printed throughout 1940, the book scrupulously reproduced the *Pravda* text. Comprised of eighty-eight pages of dense type with ten chapters, forty-eight footnotes, and a new frontispiece, it appeared in a run of more than 1.2 million copies.⁶³ Even more telling of

op. 1, d. 55, l. 52; R. Koniushaia, 'Iz vospominanii ob izdanii sochinenii I. V. Stalina i ego kratkoi biografii', *Edinstvo*, 19 January 1995, p. 3. Ironically, Iaroslavskii has traditionally been given credit for writing the *Short Biography* with Mitin and Pospelov. See A. Antonov-Ovseyenko, *The Time of Stalin: Portrait of a Tyranny* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), pp. 198, 201, 233. Several other unpublished manuscripts languish in the former Party archives: RGASPI f. 71, op. 10, d. 257, ll. 9–161; f. 558, op. 11, dd. 1497–8, 1500–3.

⁶⁰ Copies of the IMEL draft from early December 1939 are stored at RGASPI under f. 71, op. 10, d. 258, ll. 1–43, 46–122, 123–211; f. 558, op. 11, d. 1279.

⁶¹ RGASPI f. 89, op. 8, d. 1022, ll. 1–2; f. 71, op. 10, d. 258, ll. 42, 44.

⁶² RGASPI f. 558, op. 1, d. 3226, l. 1. Stalin is often described as a meticulous editor. Although he did occasionally live up to this reputation (e.g., with the 1938 *Short Course*), his library is full of books in which the corrections fade after the first few pages, testifying to a lack of time or patience (or both). See, for example, op. 3, dd. 74, 350, 374, and 381.

⁶³ 'Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin (Kratkaia biografiia)', *Pravda*, 20 December 1939, pp. 2–6; also in *Bol'shevik* 23–24 (1939), 12–56; and *Partiinoe stroitel'stvo* 23–4 (1939), 7–41; 'Kratkaia biografiia tovarishcha I. V. Stalina', *Pravda*, 26 December 1939, p. 4; *Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin (Kratkaia biografiia)* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1939).

the prominence of the IMEL biography is that it, and not Iaroslavskii's piece, eventually appeared in the *Minor Soviet Encyclopedia*. Recommended reading lists for the study of the *Short Course* were also reissued in order to include references to the *Short Biography*.⁶⁴ Supplying a much needed component of the Party catechism, this text effectively ended the search for an official Stalin biography.

While Iaroslavskii's piece was probably the better of the two in literary terms, *On Comrade Stalin* was too complicated and detailed to remain current in the shifting geopolitical context of the early 1940s.⁶⁵ The *Short Biography*, by contrast, skirted controversial issues with remarkable dexterity and remained in print. Half-a-million copies rolled off the presses between 1942 and 1944, with another 500,000 following in 1945 – significant numbers under wartime conditions.⁶⁶ And although the *Short Biography* must have made peculiar wartime reading, insofar as it made no mention of the ongoing hostilities with Nazi Germany, it enjoyed a prominent place in Soviet society. D. A. Volkogonov recalls being presented with a copy in school in 1943 as a reward for good grades.⁶⁷

Although Party propaganda and agitation waned amid the exigencies of war, it returned to the fore after 1945. In particular, efforts were made to balance the russocentrism of the wartime period with other sorts of sloganeering – an impulse that quickly returned the cult to centre stage.⁶⁸ As a part of this campaign, IMEL launched its long-planned

⁶⁴ 'Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin (Kratkaia biografiia)', in *Malaia sovskaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1940), X, pp.319–92; P. Pospelov and G. Aleksandrov (eds.), *Ukazatel' osnovnykh pervoistochnikov v pomoshch' izuchaiushchim 'Kratkii kurs istorii VKP(b)'* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1940), pp.25, 50, 61. The only other biographical statement published in 1939 was printed in A. V. Shestakov (ed.), *Istoriiko-revoliutsionnyi kalendar'* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1939), pp.631–49, reprinted in *K shestidesiatletiiu so dnia rozhdeniia Iosifa Vissarionovicha Stalina*, pp.1–35.

⁶⁵ Before a second edition could be released, Iaroslavskii had to adjust passages on Japan, the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, and the Polish campaign and add new commentary on Finland and the concept of Soviet patriotism. See pp.138, 145, and 113 of the draft at RGASPI f. 89, op. 8, d. 995, l. 29, d. 1015.

⁶⁶ The number of pages differed, but the text was identical – see *Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin (Kratkaia biografiia)* (Moscow (printed in Kuibyshev): Gospolitizdat, 1942); *Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin (Kratkaia biografiia)* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1944, 1945). It was reprinted in abbreviated form as 'I. V. Stalin (Kratkaia biografiia)', *Sputnik agitatora* 44 (1944); and *I. V. Stalin (Kratkaia biografiia)* (Moscow: n.p., 1945). See RGASPI f. 71, op. 10, d. 268, ll. 10–16, 26, 29–31. The official biography was also published in fifteen union and foreign languages. See f. 17, op. 125, d. 355, l. 18.

⁶⁷ D. A. Volkogonov, *Sem' vozhdiei: galereia liderov SSSR* (Moscow: Novosti, 1996), I, p. 258.

⁶⁸ The extent to which Party ideology returned to an orthodox line oriented around Marxism-Leninism and party-mindedness should not be exaggerated. As before the war, postwar ideologists attempted to enhance the persuasive appeal of the official line with populist imagery drawn from the Russian national past, the war, and the Stalin cult.

publication of Stalin's collected works and decided to update the biography as well. As Stalin's sixty-seventh birthday approached in 1946, a second edition of the IMEL biography was prepared, boasting two new chapters and a rewritten conclusion.⁶⁹ Stalin, however, refused to authorise the manuscript's publication, poring over its proofs for several weeks before calling Pospelov on the day after his birthday to complain about its shortcomings. Stalin concluded this conversation by summoning the entire editorial brigade to the Kremlin for a collective dressing-down. 'There's some idiocy in the biography draft,' he noted. 'And it is [Agitprop chief] Aleksandrov who is responsible for this idiocy.'⁷⁰

The next day, 23 December 1946, Pospelov, Aleksandrov, and eight other leading ideologists assembled in Stalin's office.⁷¹ According to Pospelov's handwritten notes, the session began with Stalin explaining that his biography was to play an introductory role in Soviet indoctrinational efforts. After all, 'the toiling masses and simple people cannot begin the study of Marxism-Leninism with Lenin's and Stalin's writings. They should start with the biography. The biography is a very serious issue – it has enormous meaning for the Marxist enlightenment of the simple people.'⁷²

Digressing, Stalin turned to the subject of Lenin's biography. Attacking several books by the now deceased Iaroslavskii and P. M. Kerzhentsev that had long enjoyed canonical status, Stalin declared them to have lapsed into obsolescence. When Aleksandrov interjected that IMEL had developed a short Lenin biography to match their work on Stalin, the General Secretary responded curtly that 'we need a detailed biography – not a short one'. Asserting that such books were 'a proven way of helping the simple people begin their study of Marx[ism]', he then commanded Agitprop to 'prepare a good, responsible biography of Lenin'.⁷³

Compare R. G. Pikhoia, *Sovetskii soiuz: Istoriia vlasti, 1945–1991* (Moscow: RAGS pri Prezidente RF, 1998), p. 62; Timothy Dunmore, *Soviet Politics, 1945–53* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), p. 130; William McCagg, *Stalin Embattled, 1943–1948* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), pp. 98–117, 249–54; with Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, chs. 11–14; Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin*, ch. 8.

⁶⁹ V. S. Kruzhkov, the director of IMEL, informed A. N. Poskrebyshv of the biography's completion in November 1946. The text had been reworked by S. B. Sutotskii, M. R. Galaktionov, and G. A. Obichkin, and re-edited by Aleksandrov, P. N. Fedoseev, and Kruzhkov. See RGASPI f. 629, op. 1, d. 55, l. 52.

⁷⁰ RGASPI f. 629, op. 1, d. 54, l. 22.

⁷¹ Present were Pospelov, Aleksandrov, A. A. Kuznetsov, N. S. Patolichev, Fedoseev, M. T. Iovchuk, Mitin, Kruzhkov, Galaktionov, and Mochalov, as well as Poskrebyshv. See 'Posetiteli kremlevskogo kabineta I. V. Stalina', *Istoricheskii arkhiv* 4 (1996), 130. Stalin's harsh treatment of Aleksandrov foreshadowed his denunciation of Aleksandrov's *History of Western European Philosophy* during the second half of the meeting. See Ethan Pollock, 'The Politics of Knowledge: Party Ideology and Soviet Science, 1945–1953' (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Berkeley, 2000), pp. 44–6.

⁷² RGASPI f. 629, op. 1, d. 54, l. 23. ⁷³ *Ibid.*, ll. 23–4.

Having already hinted at his dissatisfaction with IMEL's work on his own biography, Stalin attacked the manuscript head-on. His chief complaint was that the biography was 'SRish,' echoing objections that he had raised before the war about *Stories of Stalin's Childhood*. By 'SRish', he apparently meant that too much of the book focused solely on his accomplishments as leader without connecting his feats to those of the Party and society as a whole. A number of the biography's subsections were particularly weak in this regard, ranging from the historical origins of the Russian revolutionary movement to commentary concerning collectivisation, industrialisation, state-building, and 'the victory of communism in one country'.⁷⁴

Irritated with the obsequiousness of the manuscript, he sneered that it 'attributes to Stalin many teachings, up to 10 teachings'. Similar shortcomings marred the treatment of historical events in the narrative. On the subject of the Transcaucasian underground, for example, he demanded that the authors 'add more leading figures in Baku. It's as if [Stalin] arrived and did everything on his own. There were many people and they ought to have been listed. There were both Russians and Muslims. These people should have been included.'⁷⁵ Skipping ahead, he noted that 'you don't make any mention of people like Dzerzhinskii, Frunze and Kuibyshev after Lenin's death. There should be a discussion of those who took up Lenin's banner.'⁷⁶ A more diverse cast of characters was to be added to the chapter on the war as well, specifically those who 'gathered around the Supr[eme] Command'.⁷⁷ He also noted as an afterthought

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1. 24; Koniushaia, 'Iz vospominanii', p. 3.

⁷⁵ RGASPI f. 629, op. 1, d. 54, l. 25. The following names were subsequently added to the text: I. T. Fioletov, V. F. Saratovets (Efimov), I. P. Vatssek, I. V. Bokov, I. V. Malygin, P. A. Dzhaparidze, Khanlar (*sic*, Kh. Safaraliev), Memedov (*sic*, M. Mamedliarov), M. A. Azizbekov, and Kiazzi-Mamed (*sic*, K. Mamedov). See G. F. Aleksandrov, M. R. Galaktionov, V. S. Kruzhkov, M. B. Mitin, V. D. Mochalov, and P. N. Pospelov (eds.), *Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin: Kratkaia biografiia*, 2nd edn., corrected and enlarged (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1947), p. 46.

⁷⁶ RGASPI f. 629, op. 1, d. 54, l. 25; Koniushaia, 'Iz vospominanii', p. 3. Fifteen names were subsequently added to the text: V. M. Molotov, M. I. Kalinin, K. E. Voroshilov, V. V. Kuibyshev, M. V. Frunze, F. E. Dzerzhinskii, L. M. Kaganovich, G. K. Ordzhonikidze, S. M. Kirov, E. M. Iaroslavskii, A. I. Mikoian, A. A. Andreev, N. M. Shvernik, A. A. Zhdanov, and M. F. Shkiriakov. See *Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin: Kratkaia biografiia*, p. 105.

⁷⁷ RGASPI f. 629, op. 1, d. 54, l. 26. Twenty-eight new names were promptly added to the text: N. A. Bulganin, V. V. Vasilevskii, I. S. Konev, L. A. Govorov, G. K. Zhukov, Vatutin (*sic*, L. S. Vaturin), I. D. Cherniakhovskii, A. I. Antonov, V. D. Sokolovskii, K. A. Meretskov, K. K. Rokossovskii, R. Ia. Malinovskii, N. N. Voronov, F. I. Tolbukhin, N. D. Iakovlev, M. S. Malinin, K. N. Galitskii, S. G. Trofimenko, A. V. Gorbатов, S. M. Shtemenko, V. V. Kurasov, S. I. Vershinin, A. E. Golovanov, Ia. N. Fedorenko, P. S. Rybalko, A. Bogdanov, M. E. Katukov, and D. D. Leliushenko. See *Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin: Kratkaia biografiia*, p. 220.

that 'something should have been added about the role of women'.⁷⁸ These suggestions reflected Stalin's belief that his *Short Biography* was to function as a beginners' course in Soviet social studies and that expanding the book's pantheon of heroes would not only strengthen readers' familiarity with the Soviet elite, but ultimately make the text more accessible and persuasive as well.

These directives and Stalin's extensive line-editing of the biography's proofs probably caused the IMEL brigade considerable anxiety in the days and weeks that followed.⁷⁹ Aleksandrov was particularly hard-pressed. Not only had he been repeatedly criticised during the Kremlin meeting, but as head of Agitprop, he had been tasked with the preparation of a Central Committee resolution that would accompany the *Short Biography's* imminent release. Presented to the Orgburo only on 3 February 1947, this draft resolution went on at considerable length about how the uninitiated would henceforth be introduced to Party history and Marxism-Leninism through the lives of the Party leaders. To this end, Aleksandrov proposed that the new *Short Biography* be heralded by a massive barrage of articles in the press that would encourage the study of Lenin's and Stalin's biographies throughout Soviet educational institutions.⁸⁰ Aleksandrov's inclusion of Lenin's biography here was somewhat optimistic, as such a volume would not be ready for release until the early 1950s.⁸¹ A month later, the Orgburo granted the proposal its tentative approval, assigning the final editing of the resolution to Aleksandrov, Zhdanov, and M. F. Shkiriatov.⁸² Stripped of much of Aleksandrov's grandiloquence and detail, the resolution ultimately couched the campaign in surprisingly straightforward rhetoric:

For many workers and peasants, the study of Lenin's and Stalin's writings is a difficult and inaccessible affair. The study of V. I. Lenin's and I. V. Stalin's biographies will provide them with serious help. The biographies, which illuminate the lives and professional activities of the leaders of the Bolshevik party in a simple and

⁷⁸ RGASPI f. 629, op. 1, d. 54, l. 26; Koniushaia, 'Iz vospominanii', p. 3. Women subsequently received substantial coverage. See *Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin: Kratkaia biografia*, pp. 120–5.

⁷⁹ Koniushaia, 'Iz vospominanii', p. 3. Stalin's manuscript copy, a 1939 *Short Biography* with editorial insertions glued into the margins, is stored at RGASPI f. 558, op. 11, dd. 1281–3; Pospelov's copy is at f. 629, op. 1, d. 55, ll. 2–49. See V. A. Belianov, "I. V. Stalin sam o sebe: redaktsionnaia pravka sobstvennoi biografii," *Izvestiia TsK KPSS* 9 (1990), 113–29.

⁸⁰ RGASPI f. 17, op. 125, d. 503, ll. 18–19.

⁸¹ On the stalling of a new Lenin biography, see RGASPI f. 17, op. 132, d. 105, ll. 138–41; Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (henceforth RGANI) f. 5, op. 30, d. 51, l. 126; d. 7, ll. 122–6; d. 90, ll. 59–62, 110–12.

⁸² RGASPI f. 17, op. 117, d. 697, l. 1. For the draft resolutions, see f. 17, op. 117, dd. 697, 708; f. 17, op. 125, d. 503.

accessible form, will help the toilers to prepare for the study of V. I. Lenin's and I. V. Stalin's writings and will thus serve as a stimulating means of promoting the study of [Marxist-Leninist] theory and provide the key to its fundamental principles.

Ordering all provincial, regional, and republican Party organisations to publicise the biography and facilitate its study, the resolution also instructed non-Russian organisations to translate it quickly into their respective languages.⁸³ A million copies were ordered in Russian alone.⁸⁴

Within weeks, the *Short Biography's* second edition emerged amid great fanfare as a handsome, 244-page simulated leather volume designed to accompany Stalin's collected works. Illustrated with thirteen pictures, it also boasted a heavily retouched reprint of the frontispiece that had graced Tovstukha's original 1927 biography.⁸⁵ Accompanying press coverage described the central role that the biography was to play in indoctrinational efforts without mentioning the Party's lack of faith in its population.⁸⁶ Between 1947 and 1948, the *Short Biography* was issued in a massive printing of over 3.25 million copies. Further unacknowledged refinements were made to a run of 1.5 million in celebration of Stalin's seventieth birthday in 1949, with four million more coming off the presses before the leader's death in 1953. Estimates of the total print-run of the *Short Biography* go as high as eighteen million volumes, making it one of the most widely published books in the world at mid-century.⁸⁷ As V. A. Belianov concludes:

the multimillion-copy print-runs of this book can be explained by the fact that it was mandatory for pupils' and students' studies in all educational institutions, as well as those studying in the Party and Komsomol education systems and even in the numerous preparatory and refresher training courses for personnel. In other words, I. V. Stalin's biography became something of a 'catechism' for society. Its study formed a framework for understanding the history and structure of society, as well as its laws, values and operative principles. In this it essentially complemented the

⁸³ RGASPI f. 17, op. 116, d. 300, l. 2. ⁸⁴ RGASPI f. 17, op. 117, d. 708, l. 73.

⁸⁵ *Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin: Kratkaia biografiiia*, reprinted in *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1947), III, pp. 535–622. A third edition was planned after Stalin's death in 1953 that would have increased the party's visibility – see RGANI f. 5, op. 30, d. 7, ll. 49–50; also RGASPI f. 558, op. 11, dd. 1284–6.

⁸⁶ E. Gorodetskii, 'Vtoroe izdanie biografii tovarishcha I. V. Stalina', *Kul'tura i zhizn'*, 31 January 1947, p. 3; E. Burdzhilov, 'Vtoroe izdanie biografii I. V. Stalina', *Partiinaia zhizn'* 2 (1947), 15–31.

⁸⁷ Print-run estimates are based on a survey of weekly editions of *Knizhnaia letopis'* between 1939 and 1954. The *Short Course* was the most widely published book in Russian in 1949 with slightly fewer than forty million copies in print; Stalin's *Problems of Leninism* and *On the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union* followed with roughly seventeen million each. Although the *Short Biography* ranked fourth in 1949, its large print-runs in the early 1950s may have catapulted it into second place. T. Zelenov, 'Bibliografiia', *Bol'shevik* 23 (1949), 89–90. See also Volkogonov, *Sem' vozhdai*, I, p. 174.

1938 *Short Course* by means of its account and evaluation of the prewar period, the course and results of the Great Patriotic War, and the first postwar years.⁸⁸

In such a discussion of Stalin's cult of personality, it is of course important not to conflate the construction of the cult with its popular reception,⁸⁹ insofar as it is surprisingly difficult to gauge the extent to which the *Short Biography* actually catalysed support for the regime on the mass level. Anecdotal evidence indicates that although the IMEL brigade succeeded in framing Party history and ideology within a fairly conventional biographical context, Soviet citizens tended to read the book rather selectively. Contrary to official expectations, familiarity with Stalin's revolutionary career did not automatically translate into a broader appreciation of the philosophical tenets of Marxism-Leninism, nor did it necessarily give rise to a strong patriotic affinity for the Soviet cause. Instead, when Soviets talked about Stalin's service to the Party and state, they expressed themselves in formulaic, clichéd terms that hint at a rather equivocal pattern of popular reception.⁹⁰

There are several possible explanations for this ambivalence. Despite its populist agenda, the biography was written in remarkably ponderous, stultifying prose. This shortcoming was compounded, in turn, by the dogmatism and rote learning that marred political education efforts in Party study circles.⁹¹ But popular ambivalence *vis-à-vis* the cult may have also stemmed from the inability of Stalin's biographers to emplot their narrative as a Socialist Realist *Bildungsroman* – something which inhibited the book's potential to intrigue and inspire.⁹² Unable to diverge from Stalin's traditional depiction as an infallible, unwavering, iconic representative of Soviet power, Party ideologists failed to take advantage of the biographical genre in order to characterise the General Secretary in more accessible, 'literary' terms. Even Bulgakov's famous attempt to cast Stalin as a romantic hero in his 1939 play *Batum* was met with a stinging rebuke from the Party authorities.⁹³ As Tovstukha had predicted years earlier, this state of affairs ultimately doomed the *Short Biography* to be little more

⁸⁸ Belianov, 'I. V. Stalin sam o sebe', p. 113.

⁸⁹ On the distinction, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. xii–xiii and ch. 3; Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, ch. 6.

⁹⁰ See, for instance, Tsentral'nyi arkhiv obshchestvennykh dvizhenii Moskvyy (henceforth TsAODM) f. 4, op. 39, d. 165, l. 4; d. 196, ll. 7–37; Davies, *Popular Opinion*, pp. 167–82.

⁹¹ See TsAODM f. 3, op. 81, d. 225, l. 64; f. 4, op. 39, d. 196, ll. 3–5; d. 201, ll. 70–93.

⁹² See Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, pp. 14–15, 57. For a similar interpretation of the cult's aesthetic limitations, see Plamper, 'The Stalin Cult in the Visual Arts', p. 11.

⁹³ 17 August 1939 diary entry published in *Dnevnik Eleny Bulgakovoi*, p. 279.

than a Party history textbook, a fate that clarifies its poor reception on the popular level all too well.

But if this may call for a broader reevaluation of the resonance that the cult of personality elicited within Soviet society, it does not alter the fact that between 1929 and 1953 the Party hierarchy invested heavily in the Stalin cult in general, and in his official biography in particular. This case study has demonstrated that the cult was much more of a populist effort than it was an exercise in self-aggrandisement. Stalin and his lieutenants clearly viewed the promotion of charismatic leadership as a way of bolstering the authority and legitimacy of the Soviet system. A reaction to Party ideologists' frustration with more orthodox Marxist-Leninist propaganda during the 1920s, the Stalin cult was intended to celebrate an individual who would symbolise the Soviet experiment in familiar, personal terms. Regardless of the cult's actual reception on the mass level, the timing and nature of its emergence indicate that it was genuinely expected to win the hearts and minds of the Soviet populace.