

Gregory, Paul R. and Naimark, Norman (eds). *The Lost Politburo Transcripts: From Collective Rule to Stalin's Dictatorship*. The Yale-Hoover Series on Stalin, Stalinism, and the Cold War. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT and London, 2008. viii + 271 pp. Tables. Figures. Notes. Bibliography. Index. £35.00.

THIS volume of twelve essays is a welcome contribution to the historiography of interwar Soviet history. It is a somewhat unique collection in that each of the essays analyses one or more of the so-called 'lost' Politburo stenographic transcripts from a specific vantage point. These documents were never 'lost'; they were just not declassified until recently. The misleading use of 'lost' in the title is annoying. Fortunately, the essays are anything but annoying; on the contrary, they are intellectually stimulating and provocative. Each has a sharp focus and collectively they challenge some long-held assumptions about interwar Soviet politics. Sadly, no short review can do justice to, or even address, all of the contributions.

Paul Gregory's introductory essay provides a lucid discussion of the available transcripts and how they came to be publically accessible. Transcripts of Politburo discussions were not the norm; Politburo members had to request them. Gregory discusses how few transcripts there are, the editing of the transcripts, and issues relating to distribution. The transcripts that form the basis for this book run from 1923 to 1932, plus one transcript from 1938. As Gregory notes, the transcripts are snapshots of the Politburo in action that offer insights into the Politburo's role. Subsequent contributions are divided into three topical parts: The Power Struggle; Discourse, Ideology, and Propaganda; and Economic Policy.

The four essays that comprise the section on the power struggle illuminate several important points. Hiroaki Kuromiya argues that Stalin was 'a skillful and tactical politician' whose 'overarching concern' was the 'survival of the Soviet Union (p. 54), a point Robert Service reinforces. Too rarely do scholars use the label politician to describe Stalin, yet he clearly was an astute politician. The essays by Alexander Vatlin (on the 1926 British General Strike and the formation of the United Opposition), Oleg Khlevniuk (on the Syrtsov-Lominadze affair), and Charters Wynn (on the Smirnov-Eismont-Tolmachev affair) each illustrate Stalin's political behaviour and skills, but they also illuminate some intriguing political and personal aspects of the intra-party struggles that had heretofore remained fuzzy. One conclusion that many contributors share is that intra-party struggles were 'an authentic expression of internal party factionalism' (p. 132). Of the intra-party struggles of the 1920s, Service asserts: 'It is not the bureaucratic clampdown that catches the eye about Bolshevik disputes of the period but the political latitude offered to the United Opposition [of Trotskii, Zinoviev, et al.] to say what they wished at the highest levels of the party' (p. 124). In fact, in the 1920s, it is Trotskii and his allies who often appear unreasonable. In 1930–32, it is the Stalinists who dominate the Politburo who are the unreasonable ones. As Khlevniuk and Wynn demonstrate, the Stalinists were politically insecure and viewed challenges to their policy as anti-party conspiracies. They were not forgiving.

One theme that many authors make clear is that ‘Bolshevik leaders spoke behind closed doors just like they did in public forums’ (p. 102), although the tone in Politburo meetings could be acerbic. It is all the more interesting then that the transcripts were not intended to be ‘lost’, rather they were widely distributed to hundreds of party officials. Politburo members had good reasons for wanting lower level officials to know the substance of Politburo discussions and decisions.

The three essays on economic policy reveal several important aspects of policy formulation and implementation. The essays of R. W. Davies, David M. Woodruff and Mark Harrison each show the importance of institutional interests in policy deliberations and how political, and at times personal, differences played out in the deliberations. Woodruff’s and Harrison’s essays underscore not only the ways in which participants protected their institutional interests, but also the seriousness with which Politburo members considered multiple aspects of issues. Each challenges certain implicit assumptions of some historians about policy debates in a one-party system. Were we to change the names, one might think that one was reading about cabinet meeting discussions in a multi-party state. Harrison’s contribution suggests the ways by which incremental decisions over certain economic policies led inexorably to Stalin’s command economy.

Although Harrison avers a direct statement about the ‘inevitability’ of Stalin’s victory, Gregory and Service have no such hesitation. Gregory writes of ‘the inevitability of the emergence of one-man rule’ (p. 34), while Service argues that: ‘Stalin and his faction came out on top. There was nothing inevitable about this’ (p. 133).

The editors deserve our congratulations for selecting such fine authors and for letting them reach their own conclusions.

*Department of History*  
*University of Pittsburgh*

WILLIAM J. CHASE