

The Liberals Fight Back: The Moscow Conference on Stalinism

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This was not the usual Russian academic conference. An honor roll of esteemed Russian and foreign Stalin scholars had been invited. There were not the usual digs either: instead of the dreary Akademichesky Hotel, participants were dazzled by the marbled luxury of the Olympic Renaissance, with its spacious meeting halls, sumptuous buffets, and huge pool. Incredibly, the costs were borne by the Russians, namely, the Yelstin Foundation—a first-time experience for most foreign scholars. The organizers included members of the venerable Memorial Society (whose Petersburg offices were raided during the conference), the Russian commissioner on human rights, and personnel from the state archives, and the leading publisher of scholarly works on Soviet history.

The goal of the conference was to “narrow the gap between the (widening) scientific viewpoint and the everyday understanding of Stalinism in the public mind,” which “peddles dictatorship and historical justification of violence, millions of victims, and cleansing through social purges.” Clearly Stalin’s recent soaring public opinion rating had become too much for liberals and Stalin’s victims to bear. The rowdy uncertainty of the Yeltsin years had also started to look good to some, compared with the strong hand of Putin and Medvedev.

The very announcement of the December 5–7 conference set off heated media exchanges that served to heighten interest in it. Specialists from elite North American, European, and Asian universities and institutes were invited to contribute their archival research, and Russian specialists from the regions flooded in by train and air to report on

research from their archives. All complained about the lack of access to documents in the Presidential Archive and in the FSB Archive.

Conference organizers reserved large conference rooms to facilitate the more than four hundred people who signed up. Others, including some disappointed journalists, had to be turned away.

As an invited specialist on the Stalin economy and the purges, my role was to address the opening session and coorganize session number five, on the political economy of Stalinism. My enthusiasm waned after being caught in a Moscow-wide traffic jam, which turned what should have been a one-hour trip from Domodedovo Airport into four. Seasoned Moscow drivers left their cars to stroll around until the traffic inched forward again. “My last Moscow conference ever,” I muttered to myself.

Mercifully, the plenary session did not begin until two p.m. the next day, giving me time to recover. To a packed crowd, Russia’s top archival historian, Oleg Khelvnnyuk, began by listing Stalin’s various “mass operations” against peasants, “marginal” urban residents, the party itself, the military command, and the front and in border regions, not including the six million or more famine victims of 1932–33. The dumping ground for those not executed or deported was the gulag, which at its peak numbered more than two and a half million inmates. There were no gasps from the audience at the victim totals of more than ten million, not counting, of course, war dead. The numbers were by now familiar, indisputably drawn from OGPU, NKVD, and MVD official sources.

We then turned from those horrors to Stalin’s reign. We learned from Alexander Chubarian that Stalin’s diplomatic skills were good and from Valery Tishkov that his approach to Russia’s multiple nationalities was tolerable if not enlightened. Chicago

University's renowned Sheila Fitzpatrick reminded the audience that postwar studies of former Soviet prisoners of war showed them to be relatively happy with their life in the USSR but unhappy with the need to live a double life of official belief and private skepticism.

My presentation steered the audience toward a simple question, suggested more forty years ago by the Sovietologist Alec Nove: "Was Stalin really Necessary?" which I related to the "strong hand" arguments being put forward by the Putin regime. I suggested considering the costs and benefits of Stalin and trying to draw a balance. The benefits are those cheerfully recited by Stalin's apologists: rapid industrialization, the victory over Hitler in World War II, and Soviet achievements in space. Were these truly unadulterated successes? Among other things, I brought up Stalin's known bungling of the war effort, which was clearly not helped by his exterminating the entire command structure in purges of the military in 1937 and 1938. The costs, I suggested, were the immense and unnecessary loss of human life, the long-term destruction of agriculture, and the introduction of a dysfunctional economy.

The plenary session ended with an impassioned address by the Arsenii Roginsky, director of the Memorial Society, on the Stalin paradox: that there were millions of victims but no criminals! Not one of Stalin's henchmen was convicted of any crime related to the immense human losses. Instead of "crimes without victims" Stalin somehow produced "victims without criminals." He achieved this masterly accomplishment by requiring that his Politburo colleagues to sign off on his terror operations, creating a form of collective guilt for those who ran Russia after his death.

Between sessions, the vaunted “Koffe brek” reminded Western participants that Russia is the smoker’s last refuge. Animated discussions were punctuated by ashes being flicked into the deep carpet of the Renaissance Hotel.

The second day was devoted to breakout sessions, with participants choosing from a menu, including politics, international policies, life under dictatorship, political economy (my session), the nationality question, and memories of Stalin. An agitated journalist reported that her apartment had just been ransacked; Was it retribution for her attending the conference? she wondered. Wandering from session to session, it was clear that some vocal Stalinists had penetrated the conference (“Did you not know that under Soviet rule we had everything!”). As is common in such Russian conferences, eccentrics grabbed the floor to spin wild theories as anxious moderators attempted to wrest the microphone from their resistant hands.

The concluding session was devoted to summaries of findings and their relevance to contemporary Russian politics and society. My impression was that, if an ordinary Russian observer had happened on this scene, he or she would have left wondering whether Stalin was a positive or negative historical figure. The mass of details and information was overwhelming but without an answer to the key question. Scholars, then, are unable to compete with the pseudo-scientific literature; we are too nuanced and cautious.

The conference’s high point was a round table of eyewitnesses to Stalinism made up of distinguished writers, filmmakers, lawyers, and journalists. The moderator, Nikolai Svanidze, a prominent television commentator from (believe it or not) state television, did his best to keep the crowded auditorium under control. Speakers were given seven

minutes to explain in their own words who and what Stalin was and the meaning of Stalinism. Danil Granin, a war veteran “frontovik,” who went on to a distinguished career in literature, recounted the creation of the myth of Stalin as a great war leader. Until war’s end, it was Marshall Zhukov, noted for his willingness to sacrifice his troops, who was considered the author of the victory. With the war successfully concluded, however, Stalin exiled Zhukov (the equivalent of Truman’s banishing Eisenhower to Mexico), and his press declared that Stalin’s “great military genius” had won the war. (It should be noted that in 1937–38 Stalin annihilated his general staff down to the rank of major in a horrendous act aimed at ensuring his security.)

Sigurd Schmidt, the son of Otto Schmidt, the noted arctic explorer and scholar, spoke of seeing Stalin close-up and in person—perhaps the only conference participant to have done so. His main recollection was that, when the party purges began in 1935, people simply stopped talking to each other for fear of being incriminated by association. Although Otto occupied a position equivalent in rank to minister, visitors stopped coming to his office, and he no longer associated with longtime comrades. People withdrew into their shells. Russian human rights commissioner Vladimir Lukin, a child at the time, related that his father and mother, both dedicated Communists, were imprisoned. He was sent to his grandmother who lived on a bustling street where he was frightened by the terrible racket of the trolley that passed by. His grandmother, who had seen her innocent son and daughter-in-law imprisoned, comforted him by saying that Soviet engineers had designed a quiet trolley but that “enemies of the people” had sabotaged it to make it noisy. Lukin’s parents were released after the arrest of NKVD chief Nikolai Ezhov.

Lukin's uncle, an NKVD officer, was imprisoned as an Ezhov associate. The two brothers (Lukin's father and uncle) survived but never spoke again.

Noted film director Peter Todorovsky spoke of the continuing Stalinist legacy of distrust and suspicion. In his most recent venture—an anti-Stalinist movie—he wished to film in a building that had an appropriate atmosphere for the scene. An elderly building superintendent demanded official papers stating that the filmmakers were not violating state or other secrets. When they attempted to arrange for such papers at the local municipal offices, they were told by puzzled officials that this was an ordinary building: Why would anyone ask for such papers? Only a survivor of Stalin's Russia.

The greatest fireworks were reserved for the minister of education and science, Andrei Fursenko, who, perhaps reluctantly, had agreed to be part of the round table. The minister's presentation was repeatedly interrupted by shouts: "And what about the textbook?" (The textbook in question had been written by a little-known historian and approved for use in Russian schools, thus representing the "knowledge" about Stalin to be taught to the next generation.) As the moderator restored order, participants were told to write out questions and pass them to the front—not interrupt the meeting. Many folded pieces of paper intended for the minister were passed down the aisles. The sputtering minister explained to the angry crowd that the text had been approved by a meeting of teachers (an old Stalin trick) and that worse texts could have been chosen. That answer did not quiet the crowd. As the next speaker was introduced, Fursenko quietly left the hall.

The text defended by Fursenko presents Stalin as a leader who was forced by impending war to embark on bold policies, such as rapid industrialization and

collectivization. These measures, regrettably, demanded masses of victims, but, alas, such losses were unavoidable. Putin is represented as another bold leader whose strong hand saved Russia from the chaos and humiliation of the Yeltsin years, restored Russian national pride, and is preserving Russia's rightful territory.

Did the conference achieve its goal of presenting the "truth" about Stalin and his regime? My impression is that the scholarly community clearly has the facts on its side. Those facts have been marshaled and published in books by scholarly presses but are read by, at best, a few thousand readers. The books are often dense and engage debates that are primarily of interest to scholars. Moreover, scholars are notoriously cautious and rarely willing to take a strong position. The pro-Stalinist pseudo-scientific literature, by contrast, can be bought on every street corner. The covers are bright; they are short, written in simple language; the pictures of Stalin are heroic and inspiring. The archives of which scholars speak, the pseudo-scientific writers claim, are forgeries or gross misinterpretations by unpatriotic Russians. In the closing session, I agreed with my Russian coorganizer, Leonid Borodkin of Moscow Lomonosov University, that he should summarize our results on "Was Stalin Necessary" in a direct and unequivocal manner. After he had done so, he informed me that two participants had accused him of "insufficient Russian patriotism" in his remarks.

Until archival scholars find a way of communicating with a broader public, Stalin will continue to be regarded as a positive political figure. The Putins and Medvedevs can continue to argue that Russia needs a strong hand, unfettered by the disorder of true democracy. Stalin's importance actually transcends his metaphoric role in modern Russian politics. As Jonathan Brent, the editor of Yale University Press's *Annals of*

Communism and the Yale–]Hoover Press Stalin, Stalinism, and Cold War series, pointed out to the conference: Stalin’s appeal continues throughout the world based not on what he did but on what he was purportedly trying to do: create a world of communism. It is for this reason that many give Stalin, but not Hitler, a pass on his atrocities.

I close with abridged translations of two documents from Stalin’s party archives, readily accessible to any curious researcher. I would like the reader to imagine that these secret documents have just been published by a distinguished news organization and signed by some modern dictator. The first document reads: “It has come to our attention that enemies of the state have been accumulating in the regions. We hereby order each regional party and secret police leader to send us lists of such enemies, dividing them into two groups—one to be shot, the other sentenced to prison without any court trial.” The second document is a request from the chief of the secret police approved by the dictator in his own hand: “We have under our control 32,000 citizens of country X. Given that they are our unredeemable enemies, I request your permission to shoot them without any court proceeding.” The first document is the notorious Order Number 00447 of July 1937 that initiated the Great Terror. The second is the March 5, 1940, request of NKVD chief Lavrentii Beria to execute Polish prisoners of war and civilian authorities held in western regions of the USSR, now called the Katyn massacre.

In his remarks to the conference, the minister of education called for scholars not to engage in polemics but to gather facts. These two documents above symbolize the facts about Stalin. Thus I found appropriate an exclamation from the crowd in response to the minister’s suggestion that we should just gather the facts: “Do we need to gather the

‘facts’ about Hitler?” Yes, we do, but we need not reserve judgment of Hitler, as we have done in the case of Stalin.