

# Who is Stalin, What is He?

Lars T. Lih

## Abstract:

Who was Stalin, what was he? We examine a number of attempts from the years 1938-1949 to give an answer to this question: *Life Magazine* and its photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White, Soviet composers Sergei Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich who celebrated Stalin in choral compositions, and Stalin's own comments on the notorious *Short Course* of party history—that is, a visual, an aural, and a textual case study. In their different ways, the three case studies touch on the theme of the connection between the ruler and the sacred: a legitimate ruler as guarantee of community's moral and material prosperity, the importance of being in right with the forces of nature, the laws of history as source of the sacred. Sometimes Stalin is clearly a mythical figure that has little to do with the actual individual; sometimes observers try to say something about his concrete reality. Even Stalin himself seems to have had difficulty separating the two. An unexpected link between the three case studies is the presence of the episode where Stalin made his most explicit contact with the sacred: the oath he swore in the name of the Soviet community immediately after Lenin's death in 1924.

## Keywords:

Stalin; Stalinism; cult of personality; Prokofiev; Shostakovich; *Short Course* (Bolshevik history textbook).

The aim of this essay is not to give a direct answer to the title question, but rather to look at some answers given by others: *Life Magazine* and its photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White, Soviet composers celebrating Stalin in choral compositions, and Stalin's own comments on the notorious *Short Course* of party history—a visual, an aural, and a textual case study. These three topics have no direct connection beyond the fact that they all come from the Stalin era itself. Although each item in the series has its own peculiar interest, I hope that each gains from unexpected refractions from all the others.

After writing up the three mini-essays, I discovered an unexpected link that unifies them. In many times and cultures, the existence of a prosperous, united, independent and happy community is guaranteed by the presence of a legitimate ruler, one in touch with the sacred. Such a ruler benefits the community, not only or even primarily he makes wise decisions (although “happy is the people whose Prince is a sage man”), but because his alignment with the sacred means that the forces of nature work with and not against the community.<sup>1</sup> To those steeped in a

.....  
1 The quoted words come from a sung text found in the mid-sixteenth century Wanley Partbooks; my thanks to the Montreal early music group One Equal Musick for bringing this text to my attention.

Marxist perspective (but not only them), the sacred will often appear as the deep forces of history. In their different ways, each of the following case studies brings up this kind of theme: the legitimate ruler as guarantee of community's moral and material prosperity, the importance of being in right with the forces of nature, the laws of history as source of the sacred. A visible link is the presence in each case study of the episode where Stalin made his most explicit contact with the sacred: the oath he swore in the name of the Soviet community immediately after Lenin's death in 1924.

*Life Magazine: Special Issue USSR, 1943*

On the cover of *Life Magazine's* "Special Issue USSR," published on 29 March 1943 is a striking and effective portrait of Stalin by the great photojournalist, Margaret Bourke-White. There is no need to ask ourselves why an American mass-market magazine owned by conservative Republicans would published on entire issue favorable to the USSR in 1943. The Soviet Union had emerged triumphant from the battle of Stalingrad, and was a valiant, indeed necessary, ally for the USA in the war against Hitler.

The entire issue is a fascinating artifact in itself, not least because of the constant clash between the photographic evocations of Soviet life and the picture of American society that arises from the advertisements found on most pages. The advertisements appeal to insecurities of every kind, from bad breath to cultural tastes (see the ads for classical LPs). The editors who were so skillful in creating photo layouts for the main articles seemed to have no eye for, or no control over, the incongruities arising from this clash. The most grimly surreal example is on the two-page spread found on pp. 26-7. On the left side, a full-page black and white photograph of scattered corpses, with only the following text: "Since 1941 violent death has come to 10,000,000 of Russia's people." This is by far the most gruesome photograph in the issue. On the right side, a full-page color ad for Campbell's Vegetable Soup: "Build your wartime meals around soups like these ..." (ellipsis in original). Three large pictures of hearty soups, plus smiling picture of happy civilians—fathers, mothers, and kids—each serving the war effort in their own way.

The main thrust of the issue is to celebrate Soviet achievements in modernizing the country. This message is set out in the introductory editorial:

[The Russians] live under a system of tight state-controlled information. But probably the attitude to take toward this is not to get too excited about it. When we take account of what the USSR has accomplished in the 20 years of its existence we can make allowances for certain shortcomings, however deplorable. For that matter, even 15 years ago the Russian economy had scarcely yet changed from the days of the Czars, and the kulaks of the steppes were still treating modern industrial machines like new toys. In 1929 the Soviet Union did not have a single

automobile or tractor plant and did not produce high-grade steel of ball bearings.

Today the USSR ranks among the top three or four nations in industrial power. She has improved her health, built libraries, raised her literacy to about 80%--and trained one of the most formidable armies on earth. It is safe to say that no nation in history has ever done so much so fast. If the Soviet leaders tell us that the control of information was necessary to get this job done, we can afford to take their word for it for the time being. We who know the power of free speech, and the necessity for it, may assume that if those leaders are sincere in their work of emancipating the Russian people they will swing around toward free speech—and soon.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, photographic essays are devoted to industrialization, literacy, cultural and sports programs, and collectivization. The photo essay on agriculture is entitled "Collective Farms Feed the Nation." The reader is informed that during collectivization, "the wealthier farmers, called kulaks, were brutally liquidated by death, exile or coercion." Nevertheless, the bottom line is that "whatever the cost of farm collectivization, in terms of human life and individual liberty, the historic fact is that it worked ... Russia could not have built the industry which turned out the munitions which stopped the German army."<sup>3</sup>

In an extensive photo-essay devoted to Lenin's life, he is presented as "perhaps the greatest man of modern times." "Lenin was the rarest of men, an absolutely unselfconscious and unselfish man who had a passionate respect for ideas, but even more respect for deeds ... He was a normal, well-balanced man." A normal, well-balanced man! How shocking such an assertion sounds today! In contrast, Trotsky was "a thinker and a dreamer ... He went into exile, leaving behind a secret network of opposition which strove for years to undermine the government." His rival, Joseph Stalin, was a "strong, tough silent proletarian man of action" who proceeded to "ruthlessly eliminate the so-called Trotskyist fifth column." In a four-page spread, Stalin's top leadership team is presented as "tough, loyal, capable administrators." Lavrentia Beria, for example, heads the NKVD, identified as "a national police similar to the FBI." His assignment at the present time is "enforcement of Stalin's scorched-earth policy and tracking down of traitors."<sup>4</sup>

Until I sat down to describe this issue, I didn't realize how little it contained about Stalin himself—apart, of course, from the striking cover photograph. This photograph has a gritty realism that was conspicuously absent from visual images of the leader circulating in the Soviet Union. In

.....  
2 *Life Magazine* 1943, p. 20.

3 *Life Magazine* 1943, p. 4.

4 *Life Magazine* 1943, pp. 29, 36, 40.

particular, his pockmarked face was not hidden. For a foreign audience, these pockmarks added to the impressiveness. As Bourke-White herself wrote in a book published in 1942, “his rough pitted face was so strong that it looked as if it had been carved out of stone.”<sup>5</sup>

The only eye-witness description of Stalin as a person in the *Life* issue is a little anecdote about the taking of this photograph: “Joseph Stalin is properly on the cover of this Russian issue of LIFE. This portrait was taken by LIFE Photographer Margaret Bourke-White two years ago in the Kremlin. Stalin’s granite face kept breaking into a grin at Miss Bourke-White’s photographic antics. He seemed very tired and drawn, with a whole night’s work ahead of him.”<sup>6</sup>

When we compare this anecdote to Bourke-White’s own account in her 1942 book *Shooting the Russian War*, we find that the *Life* editors evidently added the details about the repeated grins and the “whole night’s work ahead of him”—Bourke-White just observed that he looked very tired. Her overall impression of her subject match those of more than one observer:

As I crouched on my hands and knees from one low camera angle to another, Stalin thought it was funny and started to laugh.

When his face lighted up with a smile, the change was miraculous. It was though a second personality had come to the front, genial, cordial and kindly. I pressed on through two more expressions, until I got the expression I wanted.

I got ready to go, and threw my stuff back into the camera case; then I noticed a peculiar thing about Stalin’s face. When the smile ended, it was though a veil had been drawn over his features. Again he looked as if he had been turned into granite, and I went away thinking that this was the strongest and most determined face I had ever seen.<sup>7</sup>

From various scattered comments throughout the issue about Stalin’s career, we gather that he was much more interested in Russian national strength than world revolution. Eliding the chaotic years from 1928 to 1933, the editors give the impression of a steady retreat from the alleged radicalism that marked the period of Lenin’s death in 1924 (the middle of NEP is described as if it were an era of heightened class struggle). Other than these few remarks made in passing, there is remarkably little discussion of Stalin directly, whether praise or condemnation.

Nevertheless, Stalin casts a long shadow over the issue, because he

5 Bourke-White 1942, p. 213. The photograph of Stalin found in this book is not the one used for the 1943 *Life* cover. In a work in progress about communist leader cults generally, Kevin Morgan discusses the role of photography and Bourke-White’s photograph in particular; my thanks to Kevin Morgan for letting me see chapters in advance.

6 *Life Magazine* 1943, p. 8.

7 Bourke-White 1942, p. 217.

is so much part of the visual landscape. We have a few other photographs of Stalin, particularly at funerals (Lenin in 1924 and Sergo Ordzhonikidze in 1937). We see him in various historical paintings (for example, shaking hands with Lenin at their first meeting in 1905). A meeting hall has huge banners of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. The Leningrad Public Library has two large drawings of Lenin and Stalin on the wall. A group of smiling women athletes stand underneath what seems to be a huge tapestry with Stalin’s portrait. A gargantuan status of Stalin stands in the Agriculture Exhibit in Moscow, along with a more-than-life-size portrait of Stalin made out of flowers. This last portrait contains a line from Stalin’s funeral oration that we shall be meeting again: “We vow to you, Comrade Lenin!”

Perhaps because of her professional flair for the visual, the effects of Stalin’s ubiquity is well described by Bourke-White:

A striking innovation since my previous visits to the Soviet Union, in the early 1930s, was the appearance everywhere of gigantic statues of Stalin ... At any mass meeting the speakers stand against the backdrop on which the official portrait is reproduced on such a gargantuan scale that the human performers could comfortably fit into Stalin’s eye.

These representations gave me a curious feeling about Stalin. He is so seldom seen, so rarely heard, and yet so much quoted that one comes to think of him as an ever-present yet fleshless spirit, a kind of superman so big that no human force can hold him, so powerful that everything down to the smallest action is guided by him.<sup>8</sup>

We now see Stalin’s iconic ubiquity as manifestations of the cult of personality, but these various items are presented by the *Life* editors without comment and without, I think, any intent to be satiric. The ubiquity of Stalin just seems to be a fact of life about the Soviet Union, one that, if anything, shows a patriotic and united society, and thus a worthy ally.

This issue of *Life* is a somewhat unsettling journey to a forgotten past. Perhaps the issue is even somewhat embarrassing, but why, and to whom? Is it embarrassing to the USA business elite that showed it could whitewash Stalin’s crimes as well as any wooly-headed leftist fellow-traveler? Or is it a disturbing reminder of the present-day cultural amnesia about the time when the Soviet Union was a valued ally, when Soviet achievements were seen positively—and thus a reminder of the fact that we in the Western democracies directly benefitted from the huge sacrifices of a society and a system that today excites little beyond

8 Bourke-White 1942, pp. 195-7. These observations parallel the impressions I received from reading press accounts of the Bukharin show-trial in 1938: “Stalin himself had a very low profile in the coverage of the trial; he is mentioned only in passing as one of the intended victims back in 1918, along with Lenin and Sverdlov. While Stalin had very few speaking lines, he was a ubiquitous part of the environment in his adjectival form. The continual use of ‘stalinskii’ has an effect that is difficult to reproduce in English with its different rules about turning names into adjectives. *Stalinskii narkom* (Ezhov, People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs), *Stalinskii Tsentralnyi Komitet*, *Stalinskaia Konstitutsiia*, *stalinskoe zadanie* (“Stalin assignment”): these and similar locutions make Stalin less an individual character and more of a ground of being for the virtuous community” (Lih 2002).

condemnation and mockery.

### Sacred Cantatas

The figure of Stalin plays a major role in three choral cantatas by the great composers of the Soviet era: Sergei Prokofiev's *Cantata on the Twentieth Anniversary of the Russian Revolution* (1938) and *Zdravitsa* (Birthday Ode to Stalin, 1939), and Dmitri Shostakovich's *Song of the Forests* (1949). These works stand out among productions of the cult of personality because they are the work of artists of the first rank. They pose an immense critical problem, since we cannot simply dismiss them as hackwork, and indeed all three still find appreciative audiences today (performances can easily be found on YouTube).<sup>9</sup> Three main approaches are evident. First, enjoy the stirring music and dismiss the Stalin connection as irrelevant. Second, defend the artistic merit of the cantatas, but show that they are not really productions of the cult. For example, they are not really about Stalin but about the people, or, they avoid the usual musical clichés associated with other musical tributes. Third, deny that Prokofiev and Shostakovich even wanted these works to have any merit as integral artistic productions, since they could have had nothing but contempt and derision for the text, and so they torpedoed their own works. The main English-language academic articles on the Prokofiev cantatas seem to me to take this approach.<sup>10</sup>

I take a fourth line of approach. I count myself among the “defenders, who stubbornly insist on [the] artistic value” of these works (in the words of Vladimir Orlov).<sup>11</sup> The Anniversary Cantata is a great work, the Birthday Ode is a very good work, and the Song of the Forests is more than listenable. These works achieve their artistic merit not in spite of the texts, but because of them. In particular, the works achieve their resonance because they are about Stalin, the incarnation of the great cause. Of course, the Stalin figure in these works has about as much to do with the empirical Stalin as Spenser's Faerie Queene had to do with the empirical Elizabeth I. The texts incorporate Stalin into a powerful myth of a national community that is aligned with the sacred and therefore able to attain prosperity and greatness. The composers could and did respond to this mythic level wholeheartedly.<sup>12</sup>

9 Viewing these works in live performance best gives a sense of their potential power. Recommended for YouTube viewing is Valery Gergiev for the Anniversary Cantata (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r1adsrxz5c>), Gennady Rozhdestvensky for Birthday Ode (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLg7cmqlln0>), and Yuri Temirkanov for Song of the Forests ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmZJelmdz0g&list=PLEGKOC7mvop\\_oW2-s5lzaq5PomscA\\_wBp](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmZJelmdz0g&list=PLEGKOC7mvop_oW2-s5lzaq5PomscA_wBp)).

10 Morrison and Kravetz 2006; Orlov 2007; Orlov 2013.

11 Orlov 2013.

12 Some of the ideas behind my analysis are taken from Marghescu 2014 (despite the title, this book is mainly about nineteenth-century Russian opera) and Tertz 1965.

I hope someday to offer extensive analyses of these works. Here I will only point briefly to the underlying mythic framework by putting the cantatas into a context wider than the cult of personality of the Soviet era. A major theme—perhaps the major theme—of Russian opera and choral cantatas is the contrast between the community that is in contact with the sacred and the community that has lost this contact. This theme finds a seminal expression—where else?—in the work of Alexander Pushkin, and in particular his late masterpiece *The Bronze Horseman*. This work of 481 lines consists of two contrasting parts: a Preface in which the positive achievements of Peter the Great are extolled, and a narrative in which Peter's city is portrayed as a malevolent and anti-human force.

In the Preface (96 lines), Pushkin shows us Peter as he contemplates the savage forest that forms the site of the future Petersburg: “On the shore of the desolate waves he stood, filled with great thoughts [*dum velikikh poln*].” Pushkin then celebrates the splendor of contemporary Petersburg—a shining, vivid, prosperous community that is in line with the sacred—a status it enjoys in and through the wise founder who understands the direction of history. Thus the Preface shows us the community aligned with the sacred owing to a legitimate ruler who is himself aligned with underlying historical processes. In contrast, the narrative sections of the poem show us a community that has lost touch with the sacred, so that the cosmic forces of nature and history have become malevolent and demonic: Peter's equestrian statue comes to life and threatens to trample and destroy a poor, solitary and eventually insane inhabitant of the city. Thus the narrative part of the poem shows us a dysfunctional community in which enormous energy cannot find the proper sacred channels and becomes wasteful, chaotic and dysfunctional.

The first great Russian opera, Glinka's *Life for the Tsar*, continues the theme of Pushkin's Preface: a community in which sacred ruler and population are aligned.<sup>13</sup> The patriotic and patriarchal peasant Ivan Susanin explicitly ties the fertility of the community to the presence of the sacred ruler, since he refuses to sanction his daughter's marriage until a new dynasty is established by crowning a legitimate ruler, thus putting an end to Russia's Time of Troubles (the opera celebrates the founding of the Romanov dynasty in 1613).

Most of the great Russian operas that followed portray a community that has lost its touch with the sacred. The foundational work in this branch of the tradition is Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. The ruler Godunov is not a bad man, but he is barred from genuine legitimacy because the ancient dynasty has collapsed and Godunov's attempts to found a new one are unable to reestablish the connection between the population

13 *Life for the Tsar* was first performed in 1836; Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman* was completed in 1833 but only published in 1837, after the poet's death. I am not arguing for any direct and explicit influence of the *Bronze Horseman* on Russian opera composers, although this possibility should not be ruled out.

and the sacred. Although Boris is himself an effective ruler, his reign is cursed by famines and other manifestations of a disordered cosmos. The rebellious forces that rise up to challenge his lack of legitimacy are themselves without a firm connection to the sacred and so they promise only further chaos. Other operas and choral works that portray the dysfunctional community are Rimsky-Korsakov's *Golden Cockerel* (1909), Prokofiev's *Love of Three Oranges* (1921), Shostakovich's *The Nose* (1929), and even the émigré Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1927), to name only some twentieth-century examples.

With this framework established, we can now put the Stalin-era cantatas into context. They represent a return to Pushkin's Preface and to Glinka's *Life for the Tsar*, a return to the community in alignment with the sacred and thereby flourishing. The connection with the sacred is channeled and guaranteed by the legitimate ruler, that is, one who is in touch with the deep currents of history. Each of the three cantatas presents this connection in different ways, but all end up in the same place: a mighty chorus of affirmation in C major, ending in long-held chords sung and played at top volume.

Prokofiev's Anniversary Cantata was composed in 1938 soon after the composer's return to the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> Prokofiev was strongly committed to the project and fought hard for it—that is, it was not some piece of hackwork assigned to him. He wanted to undertake the challenge of setting political prose to music, and so chose passages directly from the works of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. In the literature on the Cantata one often finds the assertion that the composition was banned because the idea of setting Stalin's actual words seemed sacrilegious to bureaucrats with control over its fate. There is no evidence for this claim, which seems to be one of those memes that flourish and cannot be stamped out because they sound right.<sup>15</sup> What is true is that the Cantata was not performed in Prokofiev's lifetime. It does not seem ever to have been directly banned, and more than one reason (for instance, the vast performing resources required) may have been responsible for the failure to reach an audience.

The Cantata consist of ten movements of interspersed choral and orchestral numbers. The opening orchestral prelude has these words as an epigraph: "A specter is haunting Europe, the specter of communism." The music is appropriately spectral. There follows a choral movement based on another famous statement from Marx: "the philosophers have

14 The score for the Anniversary Cantata has not been published. Thanks to the good offices of Julie Carmen Lefebvre, head of the Gertrude Whitney Performance Library at the Schulich School of Music, McGill University, I was able to examine a score provided by G. Schirmer, Inc.

15 This meme seems to go back to a passing remark made by Maksimenkov 1997 and endorsed by Morrison and Kravetz 2006. Maksimenkov is an archival historian, but in this case provides no basis for an assertion that contradicts other known facts.

interpreted the world in various ways, but the point is to change it." The text of the next three choral movements are taken from Lenin—and, speaking as a Lenin expert, I must say that the particular passages are well chosen and give a coherent and defensible vision of Lenin as Founder of the Soviet Union. The first Lenin movement is based on a passage from *What is To be Done?* (1902), a passage that was much better known in the Soviet Union than it is in the West, even among those who know something about the book. It starts off: "We move in a tight little band." In much more metaphorical language than is usual for Lenin, the passage goes on to describe the lonely and precarious position of the pioneers of what will become a mighty mass movement. Even few as they are, this little band of pioneers is in tune with the sacred—the underlying movement of history—and thus the force was with them (to allude to another popular myth).

The next Lenin movement is based on texts from September/October 1917, when Lenin was advocating an armed uprising; Prokofiev provides a tremendously driving, energetic and wonderfully pull-out-all-stops evocation of popular revolution. The texts for the final Lenin movement come from 1920, when the civil war was ending in victory and the immense job of reconstruction loomed before the country. These texts include appropriate images of ice breaking and spring returning to a devastated land, inspiring one of Prokofiev's gorgeous sweeping melodies (a similar one is found in the Birthday Ode).

All of the Lenin movements carry a great sense of forward movement, but the two Stalin choral movements are much more static. The chosen texts were already canonical within Soviet society: Stalin's oath, sworn to the deceased Lenin at his funeral, to continue the work of the great cause (we saw this oath before in a flower portrait of Stalin that appeared in *Life*), and his speech of December 1936 celebrating the new Constitution as a summation of Soviet achievements. In between these two moments of renewed dedication is a propulsive orchestral movement that supplies the requisite dynamism to the final third of the Cantata.

Thus the Cantata as a whole has an epic sweep that starts with the prophetic words of Marx and ends with their triumphal embodiment in Soviet society. The only other production of Soviet art with this kind of epic sweep that I know of is Mayakovsky's long poem *Lenin* (1924), which perforce ends with Lenin's death. The texts for the Anniversary Cantata do not describe the sacred in terms of socialist ideals, class struggle, and the like—rather, they take this content as given and describe instead the effort to create a community dedicated to realizing these ideals. The focus is on community solidarity, and enemies are mentioned only in passing (mostly in the Revolution movement). At the beginning, the sacred principle is disembodied, a specter. It enters the empirical world in the guise of Lenin's "tight band" of devoted revolutionaries. The Revolution movement shows us the sacred principle fighting its way to

becoming a reality in the world as an established political community—and here as elsewhere, the emphasis of the text and the musical setting is much more on the “we” of the community than on the exact nature of the enemy or even of the community’s positive socialist ideals. The sacred principle becomes fully embodied in the final chorus of affirmation that looks forward to the world victory of communism—the ideal which we first saw as a disembodied specter.

In this epic, Stalin appears as hierophant, as high priest, one who represents the sacred to the community and the community to the sacred. Stalin’s oath at Lenin’s death uses explicitly liturgical language and rhythm: “In leaving us, comrade Lenin left us the behest” to accomplish various tasks, and in response, “we vow to you, Comrade Lenin, that we shall honorably fulfill this your commandment.” Like a litany, Lenin’s behests and the corresponding vows follow one after the other in call-response fashion. The behests cover the key points of the world-historical mission of the Soviet Union: dictatorship of the proletariat, alliance of workers and peasants, unity of the various Soviet nationalities, and finally the Communist International—that is, the sacred mission in its most global and abstract form. The religious overtones in Prokofiev’s musical treatment are more explicit here than in other movements, since the composer appropriately writes a funeral march and brings out the litany-like repetitions with his musical setting.

Prokofiev also preserves the call and response pattern of Stalin’s text. The call texts—those starting off with “In leaving us, comrade Lenin ...”—are not given to soloists (there are none in the cantata), but rather to one or to various combinations of the four choral parts (soprano, alto, tenor, bass). The response is usually given to the full SATB choir. In this way, the “call” function is not given to a determinate voice or set of voices that might represent an officiating priest. The calls are instead distributed throughout the choral community, thus making the communal “we” dominate for both call and response.

The orchestral interlude that follows depicts the renewed outburst of creative energy that follows this moment of rededication and affirmation of mission. The final movement uses Stalin’s speech in December 1936 (and thus almost contemporary with Prokofiev’s composition) about the adoption of a new Constitution (usually called the Stalin Constitution), an event given an enormous amount of publicity despite the document’s remoteness from the realities of Soviet life. The text begins: “As a result of the path of struggle and suffering that we have travelled, it is pleasant and joyful [*priyatno i radostno*] to have our own Constitution that enshrines the fruits of our victories.”

The prose is somewhat ungainly, but it serves its purpose as a fitting end to Prokofiev’s epic. It maintains the liturgical ambiance by the repetition of “*priyatno i radostno*” [“pleasant and joyful”] and “eto” [“it is ...”]. This almost incantatory reliance on anaphora (the use of a repetition

as a rhetorical figure of speech) is the most striking feature of Stalin’s personal style in general. The text talks about “spiritual” rearmament and “world-historical victories.” Stalin maintains his hierophantic stance by talking about the sacrifice of “our people”: he is spokesman for the community as he directs its gaze to the sacred.

This final movement is in the genre of the overpowering affirmative chorus that gradually pulls out all stops and ends with the enormous performing ensemble playing and singing together at top volume, holding triumphant C-major chords for as long as possible (all three cantatas end in C major, and their final pages look very similar.) In composing this sort of final chorus, Soviet composers could look to models such as Handel’s *Messiah*, Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, and Rossini’s *Guillaume Tell*. The foundational Russian example, unsurprisingly, comes from Glinka’s *Life for the Tsar*.

There is no direct praise of Stalin in the Anniversary Cantata, and he is not really presented as a political speaker delivering a message to an audience. Rather, he provides words *for* the choir: his use of “we” and “us” makes his text usable for the huge choir that stands for the united and joyful (after long battles) community. Of course, the empirical historical occasions on which these words were originally spoken are important—but they are important insofar as they point to a symbolical, mythical level that is itself detached from empirical realities.

Stalin is even more detached from empirical reality in Prokofiev’s Birthday Ode, written only a year after the Anniversary Cantata but a very different sort of work.<sup>16</sup> Here we are less in the realm of Marx and Lenin than of Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. Stalin becomes a sort of vegetation god who guarantees fertility and growth. The libretto of the Birthday Ode labels itself as the folklore-like expression of the Soviet people (especially the more unsophisticated among them) as they contemplate their great leader. The style and content of the text is no doubt primitive and more than faintly silly. Yet it provides just enough entrée to a genuine mythic level to allow Prokofiev to write some great music.

The fifteen-minute cantata is in one continuous movement that sets a number of distinct texts. An orchestral prelude has a sweeping life-force melody similar to the one heard in the Victory movement of the Anniversary Cantata, a melody that returns periodically throughout. In the first section of the text, we step immediately into vegetation imagery, with evocations of green fields and full granaries. This section ends: “The sun now shines differently to us on earth. Know this: it is with Stalin in the Kremlin.” We then move directly to the fertility of the community itself: “I sing, rocking my son in my arms: ‘You are growing like ears of

.....  
16 The score and text for the Birthday Ode can be found at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6pl7apTMK4>.

grain among the purple flowers. Stalin will be the first words on our lips!” In the following section, there is a return of the life-force melody, with particularly strong emphasis given to the words “it bloomed” [*rastsveli*].

We next have our first evocation of youth and sex: “If my eyes were flashing as they were at seventeen, if my cheeks were still rosy,” I would go to Moscow to visit Stalin. The mention of Moscow triggers another theme: movement toward the sacred center. When in Moscow, the principles of an orderly community are paraded in an alarmingly straightforward fashion: everybody gets rewarded for good work. A familial image of the community is manifested by the paterfamilias Stalin who is hospitable and asks after everyone’s welfare. (I especially like the rendition of the text provided by one English subtitle: “And he personally gives you sensible guidance”—who could ask for more?)<sup>17</sup>

At the next stage, the community almost literally marries Stalin. The words say: We celebrate and dress our Aksina as a bride—although she isn’t actually getting married, she’s going off to visit Stalin. At this point, only one thing is lacking for a full and complete vegetation god: a portrayal of dying and rebirth. And we are given this by a reference to Stalin’s sufferings under the tsar, when “he took upon himself much torment for the sake of the people.” The Birthday Ode ends with a triumphant return of the life-force theme.

Watching a performance of the Birthday Ode on YouTube or DVD is a strange experience—much stranger than the other cantatas discussed here. On the one hand, the words are so over-the-top that one wonders how the performers keep a straight face (I am sure strict orders were given to not crack even the hint of a smile). On the other hand, conductor and chorus are clearly enjoying themselves, and it is a hard-hearted listener who is not swept along with the music. I will leave it as a possibility that Prokofiev responded to a mythic level hidden behind the surface silliness.

Shostakovich’s *Song of the Forests* (*Pesn’ o lesakh*) was composed in 1949 in celebration of one of the last of Stalin’s grand schemes, a vast project of reforestation.<sup>18</sup> The words were provided by a competent official poet, Evgenii Dolmatovsky, who had visited the steppes where reforestation was taking place. The work was awarded the Stalin prize, a much-needed gesture of official approval for the harassed composer. The libretto is at its best when it evokes a fairy-tale atmosphere around the “marvelous garden” that will be created by the reforestation project: the blighted, drought-threatened land it will replace, the childlike enthusiasm of its builders (“Shostakovich himself asked to have a movement for children’s

17 The Russian text is “sam daet sovetu mudrye.” The subtitles are found on the performance conducted by Gennady Rozhdestvensky on the DVD *Notes Interdites* (Ideale Audience / ARTE France: 2003).

18 For the score and text of *Pesn’ o lesakh*, see Shostakovich 1999.

chorus after reading in his daughter’s school newspaper of the groups of young ‘Pioneers’ involved in the planting project”), and the fabulous growth expected in the future.<sup>19</sup>

The passages devoted explicitly to Stalin are few in quantity but establish a strong framework. The first of seven movements shows Stalin (identified not by name but only as “the great leader,” *velikii vozhd*) in front of a map, substituting the red flags of war for the green flags of peace and reforestation. In the middle of the cantata (fifth movement) is a short but weighty couplet:

We’re simple Soviet people, communism is our glory and honor.  
If Stalin says: this will be, we reply: it exists!

The final movement ends with a *Slava* (“Glory”) chorus with Stalin and the *narod* (the people) sharing top billing, with Stalin clearly in first place: “*Slava* to Lenin’s party! *Slava* to the *narod* forever! *Slava* to the wise Stalin! *Slava*!”

The text and music make clear references to the pre-revolutionary tradition discussed earlier. Pushkin’s Peter the Great is evoked by Dolmatovsky’s Stalin, who also stands in solitude and thinks great thoughts: “In the Kremlin, morning flashed with dawn. The Great Leader, sunk in wise thoughts [*v razdume mudrom*], went up to the huge map.” The cantata also situates itself in the Russian opera tradition, especially *Boris Godunov*. Both Boris and Iosif gaze at maps that portray Russia. When *Song of the Forests* describes the bad old days of drought and devastation, it uses the image of a bent beggar traveling over Rus’ (the poetic name for old Russia) with an empty bag. This image responds directly to the scene in the Mussorgsky opera in front of the Cathedral, where a hungry crowd begs for food in time of famine, but it also responds indirectly to all the portrayals of Russia on the move that fill *Boris Godunov*. Shostakovich’s final *Slava* chorus recalls not only Boris’s coronation but many other Russian operas: it is a rare Russian opera indeed without a *Slava* chorus of some kind.<sup>20</sup>

All these allusions are meant to point up contrast rather than continuity. Peter’s great project is to remove a forest associated with darkness and primitiveness, Iosif’s project is to build a forest associated with light and progress. Peter’s motives are imperial, and Stalin’s main motive in the cantata—“happiness for the *narod*”—is absent from the tsar’s calculations. Boris is a doomed tsar whose inability to connect with the sacred ensures that his realm is off-kilter with nature. Stalin’s forests will end the suffering pilgrimages of Rus’, and the movement of the people is now shown as purposeful, organized, and successful. Boris’s enthusiasm for his son’s map-making is shot through with irony, due to

19 Quoted words are taken from the useful liner notes by Steven Ledbetter to the CD performance by Yuri Temirkanov for RCA Victor Red Seal.

20 The Russianness of *Oedipus Rex* is further confirmed by its “Gloria” chorus.

his complete failure to found a new dynasty. Shostakovich's *Slava* chorus is "pure affirmation" without irony.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, as a ruler, Shostakovich's Stalin trumps Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov at every turn. In *Song of the Forests*, Stalin appears as an imperial ruler whose connection with the sacred guarantees that the bounty of nature will bless the land. Stalin and Godunov faced a similar challenge: each had to establish legitimacy after the collapse of a centuries-old dynasty. If the Shostakovich cantata is to be believed, Stalin succeeded where the doomed tsar failed.

I will discuss only one feature of the musical setting, namely, Shostakovich's use of a children's choir. A choir is a good medium for representing the entire community fulfilling its sacred function, and not just because a choir *is* a human community. The articulation into men and women, and high and low, helps the choir symbolize the community as a whole. The addition of a children's chorus expands this symbolism even further. The Soviet imagery of "young Pioneers" (the organization for children from ten to fifteen years of age and mostly remembered for its summer camps) is mobilized by librettist and composer to provide a rather rare feature in this genre: charm.<sup>22</sup> Thus the turning point in the cantata is the beginning of the fourth movement, "The Pioneers Plant the Forests": a little trumpet figure begins to pierce through the remnants of the Mussorgskian music of suffering. A page or so of coexistence between the two themes, and then the children's chorus enters and we are in a new world.

During the Stalin era, Glinka's *Life for the Tsar* was overhauled to remove all references to the tsar, a massive operation that entailed moving the date of the story (thus ensuring that the action did not take place in the physical and symbolic spring). The retitled *Ivan Susanin* portrayed sacrifices for the *narod*, rather than for the tsar. But "the whirligig of time brings in its revenges" and the sanitizing Stalin era was itself sanitized: Shostakovich's *Song of the Forest* was destalinized for performance after the dictator's death. The overhaul was not as drastic as in Glinka's case, since the explicit Stalin references are quantitatively few (although it was also felt necessary to transform the "Stalingradtsy," people of Stalingrad, to "Komsomoltsy," the Soviet youth movement for those past Pioneer years). Once again, the *narod* stood in for the previously sacred but now disgraced leader. Only after the collapse of Soviet rule do we find performances using the original text for both Glinka and Shostakovich (although the Internet documents an American

21 I am again quoting Stephen Ledbetter's liner notes.

22 For a look at how Soviet Pioneers were portrayed in films, see [http://rbth.com/multimedia/video/2014/08/07/cinematryoshka\\_7\\_common\\_character\\_types\\_from\\_movies\\_about\\_pi\\_38827](http://rbth.com/multimedia/video/2014/08/07/cinematryoshka_7_common_character_types_from_movies_about_pi_38827) (*Russia Beyond the Headlines*).

performance in 2009 that uses the post-Stalin bowdlerization).<sup>23</sup>

The three cantatas we have discussed are unique products of the Stalin cult because they are kept alive, not for political, historical, or nostalgic reasons, but because people enjoy them. We should not be too dogmatic about how to approach this phenomenon. Some people boycott these works for political reasons. Others respond to them as guilty pleasures and try to ignore the presence of Stalin. I do not see these reactions as illegitimate. In these remarks, I have tried to account for the undeniable power of the cantatas by taking Stalin into account. The Stalin figure found in these works is an entryway into myth—a symbol whose meanings can only be grasped through knowledge of the Stalin of history, but whose ramifications far transcend him.

#### *Stalin and the Short Course*

The years 1937-1938 saw the terrible series of events that I call Stalin's "purification campaign": show trials at the top, mass arrests at the bottom, and physical elimination of various marginal categories. In the summer of 1938, the campaign was being allowed to wind down, and war was on the horizon, so for several months Stalin focused his main attention on—the massive rewrite and launching of a new textbook on party history! This astonishing choice of priorities led to the publication of *The History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks), Short Course* in November 1938. The *Short Course* became a veritable bible of Bolshevism for the rest of the Stalin era and some time afterward. Though mostly unread today, it still exerts a massive influence—all the more powerful because unperceived—on the historiography of the Soviet Union, very much including Western academic history and historians in the Trotskyist tradition.<sup>24</sup>

For a long time, Stalin's role in the creation for the *Short Course* was cloudy. His authorship of the famous section on dialectical materialism was generally acknowledged, but the book as a whole was officially credited to a "commission of the Central Committee" and little was known beyond that. Over the last decade or so, archival research has filled out the picture, and a fascinating and unexpected picture it is. In early summer 1938, Stalin was given a committee-composed draft of a new textbook that had been in the pipeline for several years. Dissatisfied with this draft, Stalin embarked on a massive rewrite. Some sections he left untouched, he made numerous corrections to others, and he simply tossed out some crucial sections and replaced them with his own draft. These brand-new sections bear the unmistakable imprint of Stalin's very

23 [http://www.grantparkmusicfestival.com/uploads/pdf/Program\\_2.pdf](http://www.grantparkmusicfestival.com/uploads/pdf/Program_2.pdf) (This source contains the text of the post-Stalin libretto.) The other two Stalin cantatas discussed here also underwent bowdlerization of various kinds.

24 The full text of the *Short Course* can be found in the Marxists Internet Archive at this link: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1939/x01/>.

idiosyncratic style. Following the creation of a final draft, Stalin gave much attention to the launching of the new textbook in autumn 1938. He was rather impressively involved with the nuts and bolts of “propaganda” (seen in the positive Soviet sense of inculcating a correct world-view in depth). He also expressed his personal and rather utopian vision of what he hoped the new textbook would accomplish, and more than once he expressed frustration with the incomprehension of the propaganda officials of his aims.

The scholars who have done the most to uncover and publish this material are the Russian historian Mikhail Zelenov and the American historian David Brandenberger. A “critical edition” of the *Short Course* is forthcoming from Yale University Press (my thanks to the Press and to David Brandenberger for letting me see some of this material in advance). The following speculative remarks are based primarily on the various rationales provided by Stalin in autumn 1938 and published in a 2014 volume edited by Zelenov and Brendenberger.<sup>25</sup>

One of the surprises that emerge from our new knowledge of the editing process is how much Stalin removed laudatory references to himself. One reason for this is that he did not want a textbook based on the heroic deeds of this or that individual (mostly himself in the committee draft), nor one that simply recounted events. The glory of the new textbook in Stalin’s eyes was that it showed *theory* as realized in action. For Stalin, “theory” was defined primarily as knowledge of the laws of history. Among these laws of history were the reasons why so many people opposed the party that best understood these laws, namely, the Bolsheviks. Thus the Bolsheviks were forced to make their way forever combatting this or that misunderstanding of “theory,” and so their story was one long battle against ever recurring deviations. If people didn’t understand the reason why all these battles were necessary, the Bolsheviks might appear as indefatigable squabblers.

In Stalin’s vision, the *Short Course* taught theory by living example, and this had a value for the present and future as well as the historical past. Stalin hoped that the new textbook would give party and state cadres the tool for orienting themselves (*orientirovka*) in any situation. He protested a fair amount in this period against a nihilist attitude toward the new “intelligentsia,” that is, the generation of state officials that had grown up under Soviet rule. The main benefit the new intelligentsia received from Stalin’s positive evaluation was to become a target audience for the new textbook.

Besides the positive aim of orienting the new intelligentsia, Stalin was motivated by a drive to prevent the reoccurrence of a very unfortunate phenomenon: the degeneration of previously loyal party members and citizens into *dvurushniki* (“doubledealers,” hypocritical

.....  
25 Zelenov and Brandenberger 2014.

oppositionists who mask their real views) and finally into traitors. In Stalin’s view, this process of degeneration was generated by a misperception of the laws of history. Because these do not know these laws, the oppositionists reject the party line and predict disaster. When their skepticism is belied by the success of the party line, they turn sour and become more and more embittered. The presence of these embittered opportunists within the party and state bureaucracy led to the painful necessity of the purification campaign of 1937-1938—or so Stalin saw it.

A snapshot of the process of degeneration can be found in the *Short Course*’s description of the oppositionists at the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934, that is, after the main collectivization battles had been fought. All the material quoted here was added by Stalin himself to the final draft in 1938. The title of the section is: “Degeneration of the Bukharinists into political *dvurushniki* (double-dealers). Degeneration of the Trotskyist *dvurushniki* into a White Guard band of murders and spies. Foul Murder of S. M. Kirov. The party’s measures to strengthen the vigilance of the Bolsheviks.” Here we see two precisely delineated stages of degeneration: the opposition led by Bukharin that is now degenerating into *dvurushnichestvo*, in contrast to the Trotskyists, who are already *dvurushniki* but who now degenerate even further into a White Guard band of murderers and spies.

Instead of evaluating the success of the collectivization drive from the point of view of the people (the *Short Course* narrative continues), the oppositionists saw only the collapse of their own policies; they evaluated everything from the point of view of their own “pitiful factional group and were cut off from real life and thoroughly rotten” (the supercharged language of abuse is a specialty of Stalin’s prose). The oppositionists refuse to admit even the most evident facts. In order to revenge themselves on the party and the people, they resort to “wrecking activities”: arson, explosions, and the like. At the same time, they hypocritically toady up to the party. Their speeches of praise for the party and its leadership at the Congress were outright acts of defiance that instructed their followers outside the Congress *not* to lay down their arms but rather to become *dvurushniki* like themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Looking back in 1938, Stalin felt that some of these people could have been saved, since they had started off as “our people” but then were misled by their leaders and their own ignorance of the laws of history (Stalin’s remarks are from an uncorrected stenographic record):

If we talk about wreckers, about Trotskyists, then keep in mind that not all of these people were Trotskyist-Bukharinist wreckers, not all of them were spies. The top leaders are the ones who became spies, calling it collaboration with fascist governments. But they also had, so to speak, their constituency [*massa*]. I wouldn’t say that these people [who made

.....  
26 *Short Course*, Chapter 11, Section 4.

up the constituency] were spies, they were our people, but then they lost their bearings [svikhnulis]. Why? Because they weren't real Marxists, they were theoretically weak.

What is theory? It is knowledge of the laws of the development of society, and this knowledge allows us to orient ourselves in situations—but this ability to orient themselves is what they didn't have, they were poor Marxists, very poor—but we ourselves did a poor job of educating them. And this one reason, among others, why it is necessary to put the emphasis [in the new *Short Course*] on theoretical preparation of our cadres, on the theoretical Marxist orientation of our cadres. If some actual fascist appears, our cadres should know how to fight against him, not be frightened of him, not backtrack and kowtow before him, as happened with a significant portion of our Trotskyists and Bukharinists, who were formerly our people and then went over to the other side. And don't think that all these cadres, the ones who helped the Trotskyists and Bukharinists, were *their* cadres. Among them are our people who lost their bearings—and will continue to lose their bearings if we don't fill this lacuna in the theoretical preparation of our cadres.<sup>27</sup>

Stalin's scenario of degeneration is given vivid expression in the 1946 film *The Oath (Kliatva)*. *The Oath* is the first of a trilogy of films by Mikhail Chiaureli that portrayed Stalin at various points in his invariably heroic career. The oath of the title is of course the one made by Stalin after Lenin's death and later set to music by Prokofiev in his Anniversary Cantata. The film follows the fortunes of a family in Stalingrad from 1924 to the end of the war. At the beginning of the story, two young men are equally discouraged because the chances for Russia's economic growth seem so slim when they look at the poverty and backwardness around them and the power and wealth of the Western countries.

The paths of the two young men diverge, because one keeps his faith in Stalin's visions and plans even if he doesn't fully understand them, and the other cannot get past his skepticism and continues to scoff as the first Five Year Plan gets underway in the early thirties. Bukharin himself makes a cameo appearance as a scoffer among the top leadership. Eventually the Stalingrad scoffer resorts to arson, as per Stalin's script, while his more optimistic friend ends up in the sort of mass reception at the Kremlin evoked in Prokofiev's Birthday Ode. Chiaureli was one of Stalin's favorite movie directors, and *The Oath* shows that he truly understood the leader's melodramatic scenario of degeneration vs. redemption.

When considering this problem of cadres who lost faith because they didn't grasp the laws of history, Stalin had one particular, paradigmatic case in mind: collectivization. Stalin regarded

<sup>27</sup> Zelenov and Brandenberger 2014, pp. 429-30; see also p. 479, and p. 537 for the same idea in a published party resolution.

collectivization as his proudest achievement and his particular claim to greatness. An indication of his feelings is found in the mirror provided by a collection of tribute articles issued on the occasion of Stalin's sixtieth birthday in 1939 (published in English in 1940). The authors of these articles were the leader's top lieutenants who had been with him for many years. These red courtiers understood Stalin's self-image and reflected it back at him.

Yes (said the eulogizers), he led the industrialization drive, but this achievement, great as it was, merely carried out Lenin's plan. In contrast, collectivization was Stalin's brainchild. As Lazar Kaganovich described the collectivization campaign, using an overwrought "locomotive of history" metaphor: Stalin "had theoretically to plan the track and lay the rails so that the locomotive could move on other routes for which the theoretical rails had not yet been laid, and for which even the track had only been generally indicated." We further learn from these tributes that the collectivization drive was theoretically innovative, a new kind of revolution from above that was equal to the October revolution, and a feat that made a truly socialist society possible. In fact, Kaganovich assures us, "we, Comrade Stalin's immediate pupils, can say without exaggeration that there is not a field of socialist construction into which Comrade Stalin has put so much energy, labor and care as he put in the field of collective farm development."<sup>28</sup> If Stalin knew that collectivization was deeply unpopular, it didn't faze him—he was happy to own it.

A question arises: if Stalin had it all planned out ahead of time, whence all the chaos, contingency, improvisation and repression? Yes, there was some of that, admitted the eulogizers, but it was entirely due to the class enemy: "All the brutal remnants of capitalism, all the elements of ignorance and vileness left over from the old system were mobilized with the assistance of foreign imperialists to prevent the socialist reconstruction of our country ... There was not a crime that these monsters hesitated to commit: terrorism, the assassination of some of our best people, blowing up factories, train wrecking, incendiaryism, poisoning cattle—everything was brought into play."<sup>29</sup>

We cannot discuss here Stalin's rationale for collectivization nor whether the rationale was justified by Bolshevik tradition. Our focus is on the way Stalin used this issue to illustrate his scenario of the degeneration caused by incomprehension of the laws of history. As he explained in late 1938 in the course of his remarks on the *Short Course* and its ambitious goals:

How do we explain that some of them [among the larger constituency of the Right Opposition] became spies and intelligence

<sup>28</sup> Molotov, Kaganovich et al. 1940., p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> Molotov, Kaganovich et al. 1940., p. 46-7.

agents? I mean, some of them were our people and afterwards went over to the other side. Why—because they were politically ungrounded, they were theoretically uneducated, they were people who did not know the laws of political development, and because of this they were not able to digest the sharp turn toward the collective farms ... Many of our cadres lacked grounding politically, they were poorly prepared theoretically, and so they thought that nothing would come of [the collectivization drive], and because of this we lost a fairly significant number of cadres, capable people ... We have to lead the country through the government apparatus, and in this apparatus are many people foreign to us—people who followed us before collectivization and who went away from us during collectivization.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the triumphal language he used about collectivization, Stalin evidently still felt defensive about the critique of the Right Opposition—partly, I speculate, because in his heart of hearts he respected them more than he did the “Trotskyists,” and partly because he knew that their doubts were still shared by wide circles in the party and among the people.<sup>31</sup> These painful realizations led to a remarkable outburst, almost a *cri de coeur*, at a combined meeting of the Politburo with propaganda experts in October 1938:

You know that the Rights explained our sharp turn to the collective farms by pointing to some sort of peculiar ideological itch on our part—this was the reason that we decided to get all the muzhiks into collective farms. From the testimony of the Rights we know that they declared: the Russian spirit has nothing in common with any sort of collectivization ...

[Chapter 11 of the *Short Course*] is key: why did we go over to the collective farms? What was this? Was it the caprice of the leaders, the [ideological] itch of the leaders, who (so we are told) read through Marx, drew conclusions, and then, if you please, restructured the whole country according to those conclusions. Was collectivization just something made-up—or was it necessity? Those who didn't understand a damn thing about economics—all those Rights, who didn't have the slightest understanding of our society either theoretically or economically, nor the slightest understanding of the laws of historical development, nor the essence of Marxism—they could say such things as suggesting that we turn away from the collective farms and take the capitalist path of development in agriculture.<sup>32</sup>

In 1938, half a decade after the collectivization drive, Stalin realized that the peasants still needed to be convinced that economic necessity,

30 Zelenov and Brandenberger 2014, p. 479.

31 I put “Trotskyist” in quotation marks, because Stalin included leaders such as Zinoviev and Kamenev who are not usually categorized in this way.

32 Zelenov and Brandenberger 2014, p. 494-5.

not ideological caprice, lay behind collectivization: “It is very important to explain this to the muzhik.” After running through the economic rationale (the inefficiency of small peasant farms, the tendency toward further division of the land, the need for larger production units, the horrors of taking the capitalist path), Stalin concluded “how much expense, how much blood would have been demanded if we had taken the capitalist path! But the path of the collective farms meant less blood: not the impoverishment of the peasants, but their unification ... All this needs to be explained to the muzhik, he'll understand it.”<sup>33</sup>

Some historians have called the *Short Course* an autobiography of Joseph Stalin. In support of this, they pointed to the many mentions of Stalin personally and his heroic exploits.<sup>34</sup> Archival research has vastly complicated this picture of a self-glorifying Stalin, since we now know he removed a great many references to himself and explicitly rebutted an inflated view of, say, his organizing activities as a young Bolshevik back in Baku. But there is a deeper sense in which these historians are correct: the *Short Course* is indeed Stalin's autobiography.

The real hero of the *Short Course* is the Bolshevik party line. The party line, based solidly on a knowledge of the laws of history, is forced to fight against innumerable critics and scoffers from right and left and goes on from triumph to triumph—this is the narrative of the *Short Course*. And as it happens, Stalin was almost always a conscious defender of the party line during Lenin's lifetime (with a few small and unimportant exceptions). Of course, after Lenin's death, Stalin was himself the principal architect of the party line. Stalin's attitude toward the party line was therefore the same as W. S. Gilbert's Lord High Chancellor toward the law:

The law is the true embodiment  
Of everything that's excellent  
It has no kind of fault or flaw  
And I, my Lords, embody the law.

Even during Stalin's lifetime, he was known to be the author of the *Short Course's* famous section on dialectical materialism. Looking past all the abstractions about quantity turning into quality and the like, we find the argument that any leader who does not align themselves with the laws of history—no matter how talented, brilliant and popular these leaders are—will go down to defeat and disgrace. Trotsky and Bukharin are just such leaders. In contrast, a leader who aligns himself to these same laws will be carried by the tidal force of history from obscurity to world leadership. How modest is a Christian statesman who piously

33 Zelenov and Brandenberger 2014, p. 494-5.

34 Tucker 1990, pp. 532-36.

explains his triumphs by saying, “Not I, but God”? How modest is Stalin when he describes himself—in my view, with complete sincerity—by saying, “I am not a theoretician [*teoretik*], but a *praktik* who knows theory”?<sup>35</sup>

C  
R  
I  
S  
I  
S

&

C  
R  
I  
T  
I  
Q  
U  
E

/

Volume 3 /  
Issue 1

### **Bibliography**

- Bourke-White, Margaret, *Shooting the Russian War*, New York: Simon and Schuster. 1942.
- Life Magazine*, ‘Special Issue USSR,’ 29 March 1943.
- Lih, Lars T. 2002, ‘Melodrama and the Myth of the Soviet Union,’ in *Imitations of Life: Two Centuries of Melodrama in Russia*, Joan Neuberger and Louise McReynolds, eds., Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Maksimenkov, Leonid, *Sumbur vmesto muzyki: stalinskaia kul’turnaia revoliutsiia, 1936-1938*, Moscow: Iuridicheskaiia kniga. 1997.
- Marghescu, Mircea, *Pourquoi la littérature?*, Paris, Kimé. 2014.
- Molotov, V. M., Kaganovich, L. M. et al. 1940, *Stalin*, New York: Workers Library Publishers. 1940.
- Morrison, Simon and Kravetz, Nelly 2006, ‘The Cantata for the Twentieth Anniversary of October, or How the Specter of Communism Haunted Prokofiev,’ *The Journal of Musicology*, 23,2: 227-62.
- Orlov, Vladimir 2007, ‘Prokofiev and the Myth of Revolution: The Cantata for the Twentieth Anniversary of the October Revolution,’ *Three Oranges Journal*, no. 13, pp. 14-21.
- 2013, ‘Prokofiev and the Myth of the Father of Nations: The Cantata *Zdravitsa*,’ *The Journal of Musicology*, 30,4: 577-620.
- Shostakovich, Dmitri 1999, *Song of the Forests. Oratorio, Op. 81*, Koichi Owa, ed., Tokyo: Zen-On Music Company.
- Tertz, Abram, *On Socialist Realism*, New York: Vintage Books. 1965.
- Tucker, Robert C., *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above*, New York: Norton. 1990.
- Zelenov, Mikhail and Brandenberger, David 2014, “*Kratkii kurs istorii VKP(b)*”: *Tekst i ego istoriia v 2 chastiakh*, Chast’ 1, Moscow: Rosspen, 2014.

.....  
<sup>35</sup> Zelenov and Brandenberger 2014, p. 420. Stalin goes on to say, “these are the kind of people we want to have: *praktiki* with a knowledge of theory.”