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Publication date
2002

Published in
Kritika

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Ree, E. (2002). Stalin as Writer and Thinker. *Kritika*, 3(4), 699-714.

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JOURNAL OFFPRINT

Kritika

vol.3, nr.4, Fall 2002

Stalin as Writer and Thinker

Erik van Ree

Mikhail Vaiskopf, *Pisatel' Stalin*. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2002. 380 pp. ISBN 5-86793-167-6.

Valerii Aleksandrovich Torchinov and Aleksei Mikhailovich Leontiuk, *Vokrug Stalina: Istoriko-biograficheskii spravocchnik*. St. Petersburg: Filologicheskii fakul'tet Sankt-Peterburgskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2000. 606 pp. ISBN 5-8465-0005-6.

Konstantin Aleksandrovich Zalesskii, *Imperiia Stalina: Biograficheskii entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*. Moscow: Veche, 2000. 605 pp. ISBN 5-7838-0716-8.

Mikhail Vaiskopf's *Pisatel' Stalin* is a pathbreaking study, though no easy nut to crack. The Israeli Slavist, author of books on Gogol' and Maiakovskii, treats Stalin's style of writing and the structure of his thought. The baroque style of the book does not contribute to its readability. Vaiskopf should have presented his arguments in a less esoteric and more systematic way, avoiding the twists and turns which at times make the book hard to follow. As it now stands, it is to be feared that even in an English translation its audience will remain limited.

This said, the book is extraordinarily rich and sets Stalin's thinking in a new light. For his sources, Vaiskopf relies almost exclusively on the *Sochineniia*. Other material is discussed only sporadically. In itself this is unfortunate. But the author argues that for his purposes the *Sochineniia* will do, which seems true enough. An enormous number of new "Stalin works" (speeches, letters, transcripts of discussions, etc.) have been published during the past decade, but important though they are, they will not make much difference when it comes to the topic treated by Vaiskopf.¹

The author takes issue with Dmitrii Antonovich Volkogonov, who characterizes the leader's intellectual style as one-dimensional. Its secret lay, on the contrary, precisely in an "ambivalent shifting of the finest nuances" (80). This is not to deny that the Soviet leader was a demagogue; but there was, as it were, depth and method in his crazy sophisms. *Pisatel' Stalin* further makes a fresh analysis of the Orthodox influence on Stalinism. Finally, it treats the system of metaphors

¹ See the appendix attached to this review for recent important source publications on Stalin.

used by the dictator, in which epic-mythological and biological-organic themes predominate. Vaiskopf identifies ancient Georgian and North Caucasian epics as the source of these themes.



Vaiskopf's originality lies, first of all, in taking Stalin's sophistry seriously and laying it out before us. The leader's system rests on absolutes, which are unconditionally correct or incorrect. He refers to them with terms like the "source," the "basis" (*osnova*), the "root," or the "ground" (*pochva*). Leninism is, for example, an unquestionable source of truth, and lack of faith in the proletariat is an equally unconditional source of error. On this basis Stalin erects tautological constructions, in which he proves something by taking it for granted. "Is this definition correct? I think it is correct ... because it correctly points to ..." Or: "That in life which is being born and grows from day to day is insurmountable.... Why? Because it grows."

As a counterpoint to these closed schemes, Stalin's own concepts were "super-elastic" (80 f.). He kept them deliberately vague so as to preserve a maximum freedom of maneuver. His definitions were so encompassing as to include the way a thing behaves. It could therefore be proved that something has acted in a certain way simply by spelling out its definition. Conversely, if a thing did not behave as it should, it was no longer that thing. If a communist party – Josip Broz Tito's, for example – was taken over by enemies, it ceased to be a communist party. Stalin denied that Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great had been industrializers: "Not every kind of industrial development is industrialization." The wrong kind is *no* industrialization. Stalin was in the odd habit of putting words such as "work" and "theory" in quotation marks if they referred to the activities of opponents.

Vaiskopf lists the main argumentative constructions used by Stalin. His typical approach was "cumulative" (57, 98 f., 310 f.) through "hyperbolic criminalization" (94). Opponents' arguments are driven to their counterrevolutionary conclusion, through consecutive quasi-logical steps that blow the original thesis out of all proportion. If one does not believe in the possibility of "socialism in one country," then the October Revolution has been pointless – "there you have the conclusion to which the logic of [Grigorii Evseevich] Zinov'ev's argument leads." There may even be a complete "inversion" (93–95, 157) of the hostile argument: Zinov'ev finds "socialism in one country" a nationalist doctrine. But whoever does not believe in the possibility of autarkic socialism indirectly supports the international counterrevolution, and "does this person not inevitably *abandon internationalism?*" The following is a classic of such "cumulative" reasoning. According to Lev Borisovich Kamenev, the party was adopting a national-reformist perspective:

But because our party is the party of Lenin, because ... it relies ... on well-known theses of Lenin, it follows that the Leninist theory ... is a national-reformist theory. Lenin is a "national-reformist" – there you have the nonsense Kamenev treats us to.

One recognizes a perverted variety of the argument that if A is B, and B is not the case, then A cannot be the case. Similarly, with his favorite "either-or" scheme, the dictator misguidedly applied the "law of the excluded third" to contrasting positions in which the third was in fact not excluded at all. Complex political appraisals are reduced to extreme binaries. The opposition will either recognize the mistake of its own position openly, or it will refuse to do so – in which case it must be expelled. The third option, that of preserving the unrepentant in the party, is alleged to be a logical impossibility.

The author lists numerous other architectural elements of Stalin's thought. For example, echoing the Aristotelian *entelecheia*, concepts are separated from their empirical substratum and animated. In the formula "either the party or the opposition," the party no longer refers to the empirical majority of that organization, but turns into a living abstraction. Stalin's animation of concepts on occasion took quite extreme forms, as when he noted that "the base creates the superstructure in order to be served by it," but this does not mean that the superstructure "is indifferent to the fate of its base." Mentioning himself in the third person, Stalin hovers above himself as a "sacral subject" (70). The dictator uses "dialectical oxymorons" (97), such as the state dying by getting ever stronger. In a "concentric dynamic" (101), a thing or situation is visualized as a system of expanding concentric circles – the leader, the party, the class, etc. Stalin's preference for the "center" – compare the Aristotelian notion of the "golden mean" – also found expression when he presented himself as taking the optimum position between two incorrect extremes. Vaiskopf further discovers "chronophobia" (117f.) in the dictator's works. The present is teleologically included in the past, and then projected back into it: Carl von Clausewitz confirmed Marxist theses.²

All in all, Stalin's argumentation was predominantly deductive rather than empirical. Vaiskopf treats it mainly as badly digested Aristotelian-theological

² Vaiskopf's work parallels Mikhail Naumovich Epstein's analysis of the logic of Soviet-totalitarian language. Epstein discusses "ideologemes," that is, words with combined conceptual and evaluative meanings. Soviet language rested on binary and tetradic groups of such words (for example, internationalism, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and patriotism), which provided it with extraordinary fluidity. See Mikhail Naumovich Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, trans. Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), chap. 4.

logic, reflecting his years at seminary.³ The author finds the Orthodox influence particularly significant. But he emphatically rejects the thesis, defended first by Lev Davidovich Trotskii and later in various forms by several distinguished authors, of discontinuity between a European and internationalist Leninism, on the one hand, and an Orthodox and Russian Stalinism, on the other.⁴ Vaiskopf stands in the scholarly tradition of double continuity – from tsarist and Orthodox Russia to Lenin to Stalin. He supports Nina Tumarkin's conclusion that Bolshevism began to assume cultic-Orthodox forms almost immediately after the revolution.⁵ This was even the case among Russian Marxists before the revolution. However, the seminarian Stalin drove the process, already clearly visible in Plekhanov and Lenin, to grotesque extremes.

The main Orthodox influence on Stalin acknowledged by the author is the leader's insistent demand for *belief*. Demanding unanimity, he reconstructed the party psychology along the lines of a Manichean dichotomy in which belief, honesty, and modesty were contrasted with doubt, disloyalty, and arrogance. "Sinners" were subjected to a confessional practice of "self-criticism." The Soviet dictator routinely accused his opponents of displaying undue despair, arising from "lack of belief" in the cause. That was the reason why they could not reach correct strategic conclusions. For Vaiskopf this latter point characterizes Stalin's "primacy of belief over understanding" (40, 132 f.).

In his own day Lenin, too, had been accused of transforming the party into an Orthodox community of faith. He, too, characterized *neverie* as a Menshevik "sin." Vaiskopf treats this in the context of Bolshevism's claim to represent Marxism's "spirit" (*dukh*) or "soul" (*dusha*) against bookish, "Pharisaic," and

³ As an interesting sidelight, the seminary provided a course in logic in the third year. Iosif Dzhugashvili took tests on the three Aristotelian laws and related points; he scored 4.5 on a scale of 5 as his overall average. See *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii* (RGASPI) f. 558, op. 4, dd. 37–38.

⁴ See Nicholas Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1946); Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History since 1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Dmitrii Antonovich Volkogonov, *Triumf i Tragediia: Politicheskii Portret I. V. Stalina*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Agentstva pechati Novosti, 1989); and Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990).

⁵ See Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); see also Mikhail Agursky, *The Third Rome: National Bolshevism in the USSR* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987); and Richard Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

"Talmudistic" Mensheviks dogmatically sticking to the dead letter. Interestingly, the author discovers an anti-Judaic subtext: the Bolsheviks, and Stalin among them, identified themselves in some ways with the early Christians. In their view the Mensheviks, then, repeated the performance of the fossilized Judaism of antiquity. Once again the Spirit, Grace, confronted the Law.

As a former seminarian, the Soviet dictator was acquainted with St. Paul's notion of the church as a body united in one spirit. Though Stalin never acknowledged this, it must have played a part in his developing the ideal of a closed party firmly united in one belief and with practices that enforced unanimity. Nevertheless, Vaiskopf seems to overstate the case. Stalin did not really stand for a "primacy of belief." His crusades against "unbelief" notwithstanding, he was convinced that everything in which he believed could be proved by Marxist laws of history. He would have found any belief without (what he saw as) scientific basis to be childish nonsense. He was never really a fideist, but remained a believer in an odd kind of scientism. Vaiskopf's thesis regarding Bolshevism's indebtedness to Christianity on the question of *vera* is not completely convincing.

Vaiskopf astutely observes important parallels between Orthodox and Stalinist dogmas. In December 1929 Stalin thanked all comrades for their birthday congratulations. They were, in reality, meant for the party that created him "in its image." Thus, Stalin presented himself as the embodiment of the party, on the model of mankind as God's creation. In fact, metaphorically Stalin was God. He stylized himself as Christ, prepared to sacrifice his own blood "drop by drop." In contrast, in Stalin's modest insistence that there was only *one* "teacher" — Lenin — Vaiskopf recognizes yet another harking back to biblical injunctions, in this case, that no one but Jesus should call himself a teacher. The author suggests that the ambivalent presentation of Stalin in his cult as both modest common man and great historical leader echoed the concept of Christ's dual nature.

Vaiskopf further points to deep similarities between the structures of Stalinist and Orthodox dogma. In the Stalinist doctrine of leadership, each consecutive higher level — the leader, the party, the class, the masses — was considered to be not simply a product of the level below it, but also that level's concentrated embodiment, over which it therefore had authority. At the same time, all levels were considered of one essence. They were all united in the common proletarian cause. Vaiskopf observes a parallel between this doctrine and Orthodox dogmas, especially the dogma of the Trinity. Stalinism and Orthodoxy share a particular concentric style, in which relations between persons and organs are conceptualized in terms of consecutive embodiments and substantial unity.

But, again, Vaiskopf seems to overstate his case. The main problem is that there are no hierarchical relations inside the Trinity. In their cults Lenin and

Stalin were treated as the conscious expressions of the unconscious masses. The author finds this reminiscent of the Word as the embodiment of God the Father. Following up on the "godbuilders" notion of the people as a new god, Lenin became the Son. However, the Christian Son did not lead his Father. Vaiskopf further observes a parallel between, on the one hand, Stalin's formula that Leninism and Bolshevism are one, and, on the other hand, the Christian idea of the Trinitarian unity. But, for Stalin, Leninism and Bolshevism were not only one in substance but completely identical. Then again, as a seminarian Stalin should have understood the parallel between the dialectical triad and the Trinity; and between the "negation of the negation" and certain biblical formulas. But these concepts and formulas were structurally very different, not to mention the fact that Stalin never recognized either the triad or the double negation as valid dialectics. Upon closer examination, Vaiskopf's parallels partially disintegrate.

Following Max Weber, Robert C. Tucker argues that cults of charismatic personality naturally arise within social movements that are radically opposed to the existing order.⁶ According to this analytical model, Bolshevism produced a cult not primarily because it was influenced by Orthodoxy, but because of its own radical nature. The striking parallels between Bolshevik and Orthodox cults are not primarily caused by the latter's influence on the former, but by the fact that both involve essentially similar processes within what were originally radical movements. In its early days, the Christian movement produced its own enduring hero cults of Jesus and the saints.

The leadership cults, in which with Lenin and Stalin appeared as the conscious embodiments of the unconscious masses, can also to a significant degree be understood in terms of the Marxist belief in the science of history. Following Plekhanov and Lenin, Stalin argued that the laws of history allowed for a specific kind of historical hero: the person who understands these laws and on that basis knows how to surf the waves of history. This person embodies history and becomes the conscious expression of both it and of the masses that unconsciously make it. On the level of practice, Bolshevik democratic centralism represented a dictatorial formula. In a classical dictatorship power is not self-based, as in a tyranny, but is transferred by democratic organs to a leader who becomes plenipotentiary for the duration of the state of emergency. In other words, dictatorship has the same deep structure of embodiment and substantial unity: the dictator is

⁶ Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879–1929: A Study in History and Personality* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1973), 32 n. Following this model, Maureen Perrie points out that other totalitarian systems, such as the Italian and German, produced similar cults. See Perrie, "The Tsar, the Emperor, the Leader: Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great and Anatolii Rybakov's Stalin," in *Stalinism: Its Nature and Aftermath. Essays in Honour of Moshe Lewin*, ed. Nick Lampert and Gábor T. Rittersporn (Houndmills, UK: MacMillan, 1992), 77–100. See also Tumarkin on the cults of personality in the French and American revolutions.

all-powerful because he allegedly represents those he rules. In that sense we can grasp the Bolshevik model of leadership on its own dictatorial terms.

Vaiskopf's study provokes the same kind of questions as Oleg Kharkhordin's recent book.⁷ Kharkhordin analyzes the process of individuation in Soviet Russia, as produced mainly in the practices of Stalinist "criticism and self-criticism," in the educational system of Anton Semenovich Makarenko, and in Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev's campaigns of popular mutual surveillance. He concludes that they revived Russian Orthodox traditions of ecclesiastical courts, monastic ideals and organizational principles, public penitential practices, Christian self-perfection and self-transformation, and so on. This analysis is, again, part of an established scholarly tradition of treating revolutionary Russia as resurrecting Orthodox or sectarian practices and ideologies in a new, perhaps perverted, form.⁸

Works in this tradition are quite fruitful in pointing attention to striking parallels between communist practices and ideologies and those of its predecessors. However, more often than not they fail to make a plausible case for the Communists being inspired by their Christian predecessors and adversaries. Stalin spoke of "sins" and "sinners," and he surely realized that his treatment of oppositionists was in some respects not unlike the treatment to which heretics were subjected in the old days. But there is no evidence that he ever looked upon church practices as an interesting model from which he could draw advice and wisdom. Even though two consecutive phenomena may have strong similarities, one should still acknowledge the possibility that the second one was not produced by the first. Perhaps the supposed causality is just an optical illusion, and a common, third factor underlies them both. Tucker's model of understanding leadership cults as functional aspects of social movements which are radically opposed to the existing order may also be applicable to other aspects of such movements, such as a hierarchical and concentric organizational structure; harsh treatment of deviants in the name of the ideal of monolithic unanimity; individuation in a collectivist setting; and a tendency for its doctrines to take dogmatic forms. This does not, of course, alter the fact that the Russian tradition may still be unusually fertile soil for radical movements, religious and secular alike, to take root, and that such movements may in addition influence each other.

⁷ Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁸ See, for instance, René Fülöp-Miller, *Geist und Gesicht des Bolschewismus: Darstellung und Kritik des kulturellen Lebens in Sowjet-Russland* (Zurich: Amalthea-Verlag, 1926); Nikolai Aleksandrovich Berdiaev, *Wahrheit und Lüge des Kommunismus*, trans. Ives Schor (Lucerne: Vita Nova, 1934); and Emanuel Sarkisyanz, *Russland und der Messianismus des Ostens: Sendungsbewusstsein und politischer Chiliasmus des Ostens* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1955).

With its thesis of the close indebtedness of Bolshevik doctrine to Orthodoxy, *Pisatel' Stalin* tries to prove too much. Vaiskopf's case would have been stronger had he limited himself to the claim that the traditional Russian religious frame of mind corresponded in important respects with the Marxist mode of thinking and therefore came to react with, influence, and fortify it. Nevertheless, Vaiskopf presents a deeper view of these correspondences and the interactions between Christian and communist doctrines than previous students of Stalinism have done.



According to Vaiskopf, Stalinism further represents a specific variant of the old "East Slavic dual belief [*dvoeverie*]," (129) fusing Orthodox with pagan-folkloric elements. Again, the author recognizes that the dictator was not unique among Marxists in this fusion. He rather took an existing pattern in the revolutionary movement to extremes. Stalin's metaphoric system has an epic as well as a biological flavor. The two components are intertwined, such as when he compares Lenin in one breath with a "mountain eagle" and a "titan," whose logic crushes you with its "almighty tentacles." There is a vitalist tone of "living life" in Stalin, and in his bestiary we have treacherous chameleons, revolutionaries fighting like lions, imperialist wolves, reactionaries shedding crocodile tears, Trotskyites to be shot like wild dogs, and White Guard insects. Technology must be "saddled" like a horse. In his prerevolutionary days, the young Stalin portrayed the tsar and the classes supporting him as spiders, snakes, predators, cannibals, dragons, and vampires, sucking the blood and the "juices" of the Russian people.

Titans and giants are generally positive figures in Stalin's universe, standing for proletarian heroes and the like. Vaiskopf places his call to the party to remain in touch with the masses – in the same way as the titan Antaeus should have remained close to his mother, Earth – in a new light. First, he observes a parallel with the argumentative style proceeding from a "ground" or "root." Second, in Stalin's metaphoric system *the source of strength is always below*. Useful things, ideas, and technologies "do not fall from the sky." In the dictator's works, "heaven" stands for the bad and "earth" for the good. "The opposition [...] is as far removed from Leninism as heaven from earth." It is never the other way around. Stalin's antic cosmopolitan abhorrence of the "rootless" fits into this pattern as well. This earthly theme is fused with "vampiric biologism." The forces of good as well as those of evil were said to draw their strength not only from below, but also from larger bodies on which they prey. Stalin mentions the "living human environment, with the elements and juices off which the [Red] army feeds [...] itself." Likewise, the imperialist armies "suck the juices from the Ukrainian people." They eat from the "living body of China, cutting it into pieces."

The revolution, too, comes from below. In periods of ebb, the “subterranean forces of the revolution” live under the earth like a “mole,” biding their time. There is a cycle of life ending in violent death and of those deaths flowering into new life. Life grows from the grave. The bones of the oppressors, as well as of the oppressed, fertilize what Vaiskopf calls the “infernal-vulcanic” (300, 311) revolutionary forces lurking below the ground: “the ground of the autocracy of the people is fertilized by the blood of the oppressors.” Expressed poetically, on the day of reckoning the fallen revolutionaries will be resurrected to the struggle.

Throughout his life the Soviet dictator insisted on the huge importance of training new cadres. Old comrades easily descend into their graves, and every effort should be made to make young ones “rise” to replace the old. The process of cadre formation is again formulated in earthly terms. In two ways – biological and industrial – cadres come, metaphorically, from under the ground. First, a wise leader is like a gardener: “One must carefully and attentively cultivate people, like a gardener cultivates beloved fruit trees.” Second, new people, specialists, armies, commanders, are “forged.” They are made of iron and steel. Anastas Ivanovich Mikoian is a “steel soldier of the party.” Stalin, of course, is the ultimate man of steel. Ordinary people are the state’s “little screws.” All of them are forged from the metallic ores dug up from under the earth’s surface.

In an act of “barbarian syncretism” (343), Stalin fuses technological and organic images into one. He routinely combines the two metaphoric forms. The party can be seen “as an ‘organism’ and [...] as an apparatus.” One day “technology decides everything” and the next day everything is decided by “cadres.” Or the equation is made between “new people” and “new technical norms.” Whereas people fertilize industry, industrial technology in turn forges them anew. Underlying this is, again, the idea of a cycle, with nature giving rise – from below, through mining – to industry, and industry in turn subjecting nature.



Putting all this in context, Vaiskopf recognizes the influence of two pagan-folkloric bodies of literature. First, he points to the Georgian lay of Amirani, liberator of the people from monsters and dragons, and teacher of the arts of fire and metal. He is punished like Prometheus. Second, there are the Nart epics, shared in local variations by all North Caucasian people. The Narts are the hundred giant sons of one mother – the Ossetians call her Satana. Though they are a race of warriors, the trade of the blacksmith and the art of metallurgy are also particularly honored by them. One of the Narts, Soslan, is an illegitimate child and, except for one of his legs, is all covered in steel.⁹

⁹ See Sh. Kh. Salakaia, *Abkhazskii nartskii epos* (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1976); and M. Ia Chikovani, *Narodnyi gruzinskii epos o prikovannom Amirani* (Moscow: Nauka, 1966).

There are striking similarities between these epics and the Stalinist metaphoric system: earthly instead of celestial orientation, centrality of metals and metallurgy, heroic battles of titans and giants against monsters and dragons. Vaiskopf notes several intriguing points to strengthen the case for the influence of these epics over Stalin. The dictator's "gerontophobia" (330), expressed in his insistence on permanently rejuvenating the apparatus, is at odds with traditional Caucasian patriarchalism. But the Nart epics reflect a more ancient tradition with their cult of youth. The Narts kill their elderly. Likewise, Amirani hopes to castrate the old celestial beings. The author further identifies the "folkloric-cumulative narrative" (99–100) as one of the sources of Stalin's endless tautological chains. He suggests that his use of animated concepts may be partly rooted in the animistic tradition of the Nart epics, in which all objects are alive with a spirit of their own.

In the days of Stalin's youth the Nart epics were popular in the North Caucasus. They were present in school libraries and retold in ethnographic publications and newspapers, even in Georgia. Gori was a centre of collection of Georgian folklore. Somewhat disappointingly, however, there is no direct evidence that Stalin read this material. Nor did he ever refer to it. Vaiskopf notes that the pseudonym Stalin (as well as Soso, Soselo, Salin, and Solin) sounds like the "steel" Soslan. Another of his pseudonyms, Besoshvili, "son of a devil," is fitting for Satana's son. Furthermore, on occasion he called his daughter Svetlana by the nickname Satanka or Setanka-Khoziaika. In the epic we have Satana-Khoziaika, Mistress Satana. But, as Vaiskopf is well aware, Stalin is also a fitting pseudonym in a proletarian movement;¹⁰ Soso and Soselo are diminutives of Iosif; Stalin's father was called Beso; and Khoziaika is a pun on his own moniker *khoziain*.

Vaiskopf does not systematically investigate other possible sources of inspiration for Stalin's organic-epic metaphoric system. It is well known that he read Georgian Romantic and nationalist literature. He was, furthermore, acquainted with Greek mythology.¹¹ There is, in particular, the important option of a modernist rather than traditionalist reading of Stalin. The industrial-metallurgical metaphor is fitting for a proletarian-socialist movement. In part due to the influence of Charles Darwin, organicist modes of analysis were quite common in the Marxist movement throughout Europe. Karl Kautsky and Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Bogdanov come to mind. We know that as a young man Stalin was al-

¹⁰ Stalin himself was not very informative. In 1933 he told Walter Duranty that his "comrades" gave him the nickname because they thought it suited him. "Imia eto ko mne podkhodit': I. V. Stalin o svoem psevdonime," *Istochnik*, no. 5 (1999), 79.

¹¹ As a seminarian Stalin read Homer (parts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as works by several other classical authors) in the original Greek. See RGASPI f. 558, op. 4, dd. 29, 37, 48.

ready fascinated by Darwin and Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck. For Zygmunt Bauman, Stalin's gardening metaphors would not express the influence of epic traditions but, on the contrary, be indicative of a typically *modern* project of utopian perfectionism and social engineering, the "gardening" state, in which society is viewed as an object of designing, cultivating, and weed-poisoning, and which was also embraced by the Nazis.¹²

Then again, Vaiskopf does not necessarily deny the significance of other factors or other frameworks of analysis. He points to an additional source of understanding Stalin's frame of mind. Although it cannot be conclusively proven, his Caucasian epic connection is worthy of further research. Vaiskopf's case for Orthodox philosophical and epic influences on Stalin remains somewhat speculative, but the undoubted merit of this book is that it lays out Stalin's style of thinking, argumentation, and metaphor in a much fuller way than has been done before.



Vokrug Stalina and *Imperiia Stalina* are the first biographical dictionaries exclusively dedicated to the Stalin era and which use the new information that has appeared since the Gorbachev years.¹³ We did already have several useful publications covering the Soviet party and state elite, which included the Stalin period in their purview.¹⁴ The personnel of the intelligence services under Stalin are

¹² Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

¹³ Helen Rappaport's *Joseph Stalin: A Biographical Companion* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1999) is not really a biographical dictionary. It has only about 65 entries for people. Other entries include "Family Life," "Fellow Travellers," "The Great Turn," and other important themes from the leader's life. J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) has a useful biographical appendix providing brief sketches of public figures from the terror years.

¹⁴ Alla Alekseevna Kirilina et al., *Politbiuro, Orgbiuro, i Sekretariat TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b)–KPSS: Spravochnik* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990); Anatolii Dement'evich Chernev, ed., *229 kremlevskikh vozhdai: Politbiuro, Orgbiuro, Sekretariat TsK Kommunisticheskoi partii v litsakh i tsifrakh* (Moscow: Rodina and Russika, 1996); Vladimir Ivanovich Ivkin, "Rukovoditeli Sovetskogo pravitel'stva (1923–1991 gg.): Istoriko-biograficheskaia spravka," *Istochnik*, no. 4 (1996), 152–92 and no. 5 (1996), 135–60; idem., "Vysshie organy predstavitel'noi vlasti SSSR (Istoriko-biograficheskaia spravka)," *Istochnik*, no. 2 (1997), 128–60, and no. 3 (1997), 148–60; and Sergei Dmitrievich Garniuk, *Sovet narodnykh komissarov SSSR, Sovet ministrov SSSR, Kabinet ministrov SSSR, 1923–1991 gg.: Entsiklopedicheskii spravochnik* (Moscow: Mosgorarkhiv, 1999). See also "O sud'be chlenov i kandidatov v chleny TsK VKP(b), izbrannogo XVII s'ezdom partii," *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 12 (1989), 82–113; and Pavel Vasil'evich Volobuev et al., eds., *Politicheskie deiateli Rossii 1917: Biograficheskii slovar'* (Moscow: Bol'shaia Rossiiskaia Entsiklopediia, 1993).

relatively well covered.¹⁵ Vitaly Shentalinsky's study has a small biographical addendum treating writers and state figures with responsibilities for the literary world.¹⁶ But in view of the relative lack of biographical reference works which take account of the newly available materials, the two books are most welcome.

Imperiia Stalina is a conventional biographical dictionary. It also provides useful appendices with a list of the ranks in the Soviet armed forces between 1935 and 1953; of the personnel of the main party, state, and security organs between 1922 and 1953; and of the staff of Red Army fronts and armies during 1941–45. The list of sources used consists, first, of encyclopedia and other biographical dictionaries; and, second, of a number of memoirs, collections of documents, and scholarly studies of the Stalin era. This second group of publications is extremely limited and strangely arbitrary. For example, Zalesskii uses Feliks Ivanovich Chuev's *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym*, but not that same author's *Tak govoril Kaganovich*, whereas he does use Stuart Kahan's *The Wolf of the Kremlin*, which does not qualify as a serious source by any standard.

Imperiia Stalina has over 900 entries, including party, state, and military leaders as well as important figures from the world of culture. The accent, however, is strongly on the political apparatus. The strong suit of this dictionary is that it provides on the whole reasonably accurate information about the dates and careers of the main Stalinist functionaries. The choice of cultural figures is, however, limited and arbitrary. For example, although Mikhail Aleksandrovich Sholokhov and Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Fadeev are given, one looks in vain for Vladimir Vladimirovich Maiakovskii, Mikhail Mikhailovich Zoshchenko, Anna Andreevna Akhmatova, Boris Leonidovich Pasternak, Isaak Emmanuilovich Babel', and Osip Emil'evich Mandel'shtam. Sculptor Vera Ignat'evna Mukhina, architect Boris Mikhailovich Iofan, and painter Aleksandr Mikhailovich Gerasimov are included, but not Vsevolod Emil'evich Meierkhol'd, Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenshtein, Dmitrii Dmitrievich Shostakovich, or Sergei Sergeevich Prokof'ev.

Vokrug Stalina avoids this one-sidedness. Although it has slightly fewer entries (850), its main selective criterion is whether people were important in Stalin's own life. It treats not only figures from the hierarchy, but also people like

¹⁵ Aleksandr I. Kokurin and N. V. Petrov, eds., *Lubianka: VChK–OGPU–NKVD–MGB–MVD–KGB, 1917–1960 gg. Spravochnik* (Moscow: Demokratiia, 1997); N. V. Petrov and K. V. Skorkin, *Kto rukovodil NKVD, 1934–1941 gg.: Spravochnik* (Moscow: Zven'ia, 1999); Aleksandr Kolpakidi and Dmitrii Prokhorov, *Imperiia GRU: Ocherki istorii rossiiskoi voennoi razvedki*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Olma-Press, 2001); and idem, *Vneshniaia razvedka Rossii* (Moscow: Olma-Press, 2001). See also Michael Parrish, *Soviet Security and Intelligence Organizations, 1917–1990: A Biographical Dictionary and Review of Literature in English* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992).

¹⁶ Vitaly A. Shentalinsky, *The KGB's Literary Archive*, trans. and ed. John Crowfoot (London: Harvill Press, 1995).

Valentina Istomina, who cleaned the leader's house; Nikolai Przheval'skii, the man who, according to legend, fathered Stalin; Zaza Dzhughashvili, the leader's great-grandfather; and foreigners as diverse as Mao Zedong, Harry Hopkins, and Emil Ludwig. The largest entry is for Stalin himself, with extracts from comments on him by experts and people who knew him. Also included are some Stalin scholars, such as Robert Conquest and Robert C. Tucker. Torchinov and Leontiuk use a much wider source base than Zalesskii, but they use it indiscriminately. On the positive side, they always mention their sources, so the reader can judge for him- or herself; but the information provided here should be treated with caution.

Vokrug Stalina provides less factual information than *Imperiia Stalina*, but adds something else. The entries are not dry compilations of dates, positions, and functions, but little essays, which often include statements by and comments on the respective person. For example, the entry "Iurii Zhdanov" not only provides the man's main functions, but also extracts from a letter he wrote to Stalin and remarks by his wife Svetlana on their marriage. With this structure, *Vokrug Stalina* could have become an aid for those interested in the mental universe of the Soviet dictator and the world in which he lived. But in that sense the book is disappointing. As analytical essays, its entries are of little value. The tone is set by anecdotes – some better substantiated than others – rather than by thoughtful accounts of the influence of the persons treated here in the life and thought of the leader. The book has undoubted value for those who want quick information about the people who played a role in Stalin's life, but one should not expect enlightening assessments of the kind of problems treated in Vaiskopf's work.

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