



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Stalin and Marxism: a research note

van Ree, E.

DOI

[10.1023/A:1017935822255](https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1017935822255)

Publication date

1997

Published in

Studies in East-European thought

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Ree, E. (1997). Stalin and Marxism: a research note. *Studies in East-European thought*, 49(1), 23-33. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1017935822255>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

E. VAN REE

STALIN AND MARXISM: A RESEARCH NOTE*

ABSTRACT. This article concerns the research done by the author in Stalin's private library. The notes made in the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin suggest that until the end of his life Stalin felt himself in general agreement with these "classics." The choice of books and the notes support the thesis that, despite his historical interest and his identification with some of the tsars as powerful rulers, Stalin always continued to consider himself a Marxist, and that he was uninterested in other systems of thought, including those of traditional Russia.

KEY WORDS: Stalin, Marxism, Leninism, Russian philosophy, the state, Stalin's Library

Joseph Stalin presented himself as a Marxist to the world, though it has always been clear that he injected the Russian tradition into his Marxism. In his *Stalin in Power* Robert Tucker has given what is probably the most up-to-date analysis of the fusion. He shows that Stalin admired tsars like Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, and consciously emulated part of their policies.¹ However, the book does not answer the question of the extent to which the mature Stalin still considered himself as the Marxist and the "pupil of Lenin" which he publicly claimed to be, or whether he used Leninism only cynically as a signboard for his Russian chauvinism. My research in Stalin's private library (in the period of January-March 1994) supports the thesis that the Soviet leader always continued to consider himself a Marxist and that he was uninterested in other systems of thought, including those of traditional Russia.

1. STALIN'S LIBRARY

As Stalin was always on the run, in jail or in exile, he did not have the opportunity to build up a collection of books prior to the revolution. The history of his library, as it still exists, has been sketched by the late Leonid Spirin of the former *Institut Marksizma-Leninizma* (IML) in his article for *Nezavisimaia gazeta*.² The random collecting of books began after the October Revolution. In May 1925 Stalin composed a systematic classification according to 32

subjects, and twelve authors whom he wanted to be listed separately. The handwritten document has been published in Dmitrii Volkogonov's *Triumf i Tragediia*.³ The named authors were Marx and Engels, three other foreign Marxists (Kautsky, Lafargue, Luxemburg) and Plekhanov, Lenin, Trotskii, Radek, Zinov'ev, Kamenev and Bukharin. This is in itself interesting because it highlights a narrow focus on Marxism. According to Spirin's estimate, the library contained around 19,500 titles at the dictator's death. Fourteen thousand were later handed over to various libraries: Stalin's huge collection of Russian and world literature, books on art and science, and many brochures, albums and atlases on various subjects. The remaining 5,500 titles are at present in the *Gosudarstvennaia obshchestvenno-politicheskaia biblioteka*, the former library of the IML, at Wilhelm Pieck Street. However, 390 titles containing handwritten notes have been taken out. They form the third *opis'* of the *fond Stalina* at the *Rossiiskii Tsentr Khraneniia i Izucheniia Dokumentov Noveishei Istorii* (RTsKhIDNI).

The library, as it exists now, is still a valuable source of information about its former owner. Since mainly literary works and books of reference were taken out, what remains still gives an impression of what Stalin read in other than literary fields (which is the theme to which the present note confines itself). Stalin did not, of course, read only books from his own library, but any pronounced interest in a particular author would most likely have been reflected in his personal collection because he had the opportunity to obtain any book he wanted at a moment's notice.

Roughly three-quarters of the 390 titles in the *fond Stalina* concerned communist ideology and tactics. Leaving these aside, there remained according to my classification: one book on (non-military) technology, two on juridical matters, three on languages, four on geography, eight on philosophy (including historical materialism), 23 on military history, military technology and the art of war, 27 on economic science, and 36 on history (excluding histories of the communist party and military history, but including diplomatic history). Among these hundred odd books not directly concerned with communism there are relatively few of real quality or historical interest. There are exceptions, such as Clausewitz's *On War* in a Russian translation in two volumes, Ludendorff's memoirs of the First World

War, Moltke's history of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, and R. Vipper's *Ocherki rimskoi imperii* (1908) and his *Istoriia Gretsii v klassicheskuiu epokhu IX-IV vv do P.Kh.* (1916).⁴ But most of the books on history were Soviet ones, published in the USSR after 1917. Furthermore, nineteen out of the 36 titles on history were text-books or schoolbooks. The Soviet leader was often asked to comment on them and apparently he considered them interesting enough to keep in his library for his own reference.

If one looks at the part of Stalin's library in the RTsKhIDNI not from the thematic perspective, but from that of its ideological colouring, one is immediately struck by its Marxist content. Among the 390 titles with Stalin's notes, there are 69 by Lenin and twelve by Marx. Other important Marxists are represented as follows: Trotskii (8), Kautsky (7), Bogdanov (5), Bukharin and Engels (4), and one each by Kamenev, Luxemburg, Plekhanov, Radek and Zinov'ev. There are in the *fond Stalina* only two titles about non-Marxist political or philosophical thinkers: Kamenev's *Chernyshevskii* (1933) and G. Aleksandrov's *Filosofskie predshestvenniki marksizma* (1940).⁵

If we take the books without notes, at Wilhelm Pieck Street, this impression of extreme one-sidedness is mitigated only marginally. The library contained one or two books about the following Russian non-Marxists: Nechaev, Herzen, Chernyshevskii, Belinskii, Lavrov, Kliuchevskii and Lappo-Danilevskii. I found one or two titles about the following non-Russians: Democritus, Spinoza, Hobbes, Holbach, de la Mettrie, Ricardo, Marat, Hegel, Darwin, Lassalle and Spengler. This is a more or less complete list, not counting works on literary figures. The library further contained some of the writings of the following non-Marxist Russian political thinkers: Bakunin, Belinskii, Herzen and Kropotkin. Foreigners were represented by a few translations from the Webbs, Hegel, Feuerbach, de la Mettrie, Lassalle, Weber, Sombart and Spengler. This is a very meagre harvest in a library of over 5,000 titles. Moreover, most of these thinkers can be put in the broad category of materialists, socialists and "forerunners of Marxism." Furthermore, Stalin probably did not read any of these works because these are the kind of books one reads with pencil in hand. And the Soviet leader had the habit of making notes.

In sum, judging from the available titles, Stalin's library does not give any serious indication that its owner was interested in other sys-

tems of thought than Marxism. This is, incidentally, confirmed by the almost complete absence of references to non-Marxist philosophers or theorists in the *Sochineniia*, even negative ones. It is particularly interesting to establish that the library contained nothing at all written by Slavophiles, Panslavists or adherents to other conservative Russian tendencies of thought. This seems to put the established fact of Stalin's inspiration by the Russian past in a somewhat different light. He may have learned a lot about it, inspired as he was by its imperial glamour, and, admiring the tsars for their heavy-handed policies, he emulated them, but he was simply not interested in the *systems of thought* which traditional Russia produced.

2. STALIN AND THE "CLASSICS OF MARXISM": MARX AND ENGELS

The books in the *fond Stalina* are interesting for giving us a feeling of what the "classics of Marxism" meant to Stalin. The notes in the books give us an impression of the remarkable degree to which the Soviet leader felt himself in agreement with Marx, Engels and Lenin. I did not find a single critical remark by Stalin in any of the twelve works by Marx in the library, though he put many small notes and pencil lines in them. Moreover, I found that the Soviet dictator in his old age still read the first "classic" attentively, for instance his *Critique of the Gotha Program*. In a 1951 copy of it he marked large sections with pencil. One of the passages he underlined was the remark that between capitalist and communist society there can be nothing "*but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.*" He also underlined sections where Marx wrote that in communist society products are no longer exchanged and individual labor is collectivized.⁶ Stalin was also reading Engels until the end of his life. There is a 1950 copy of Engels' *Anti-Dühring* in the library which is covered with red pencil lines and sentences like "*The true unity of the world consists in its materiality.*"⁷

Of the three "classics" Engels was the only one whom Stalin felt free to slight. In the 1951 copy of Marx' *Critique* the Soviet leader did not agree with Engels, when the latter wrote in his introduction to the essay that he had omitted Marx' sharp expressions and personal attacks. "Well, well [*Ish'-ty*]...Why?," Stalin wrote in the margin.⁸ The Soviet leader felt free to be ironic towards Engels.

In a 1937 copy of his *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staates* Engels called the ancient Athenian state a “democratic republic.” Stalin underlined “*democratic*” and added “ha-ha...” The book is full of “Ha-ha,” “Not very convincing,” “So what?,” and other such remarks. Sometimes he was more explicitly critical. Where Engels wrote that in a class society every advance in production signified “a regress in the situation of the oppressed class,” Stalin added in the margin: “Not completely.”⁹ This different attitude towards Engels, in comparison to Marx and Lenin, which Stalin showed in his private study, corresponded to a different public posture. On several occasions the Soviet leader chose Engels as the anvil to strike on, when he proclaimed a deviation from Marxist orthodoxy. It was always Engels, not Marx or Lenin, who had been “not completely clear,” or “correct at that time” but now no more etc.

3. STALIN AND THE “CLASSICS OF MARXISM”: LENIN

Stalin’s treatment of Lenin’s works is revealing. More or less all of the latter’s writings were represented in his successor’s library. Thousands of pages contain Stalin’s marks and notes. Very often these notes took the form of outlining short passages with brackets, while marking such texts with a diagonal line through it. Usually he marked the outlined passage with a word, such as “party,” “tactical leadership,” “dictatorship,” “strategy,” “peasantry,” etc. Often he added numbers in the margin. A good example of this approach is to be found in a 1923 copy of *Shag vpered – dva shaga nazad*. It contains sixteen such quotes outlined by blue pencil brackets and the word “party.” Two examples of these bracketed pieces are “the transformation of the authority of ideas into the authority of power” and “The Jacobin, closely linked with the organization of the proletariat, which is aware of its class interest – that’s precisely the revolutionary Social-Democrat.”¹⁰ Here we see vividly how Stalin read Lenin. He searched for *formulae* which he carefully isolated from the rest of the text, as the precious pearls containing the essence of truth. Stalin’s notes in Lenin’s writings are remarkable for their lack of criticism. In most of the intensively read books by his predecessor there is no hint of it at all. And as with Marx and Engels, Stalin did not stop

reading Lenin in his last years. For instance, several chapters of a 1947 copy of *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* were intensively underlined.¹¹ Stalin's endless, faithful underlining and summarizing in short words creates the impression of a man who did, indeed, consider himself as "Lenin's pupil" till the end of his life.

There is one field, though, where Stalin was capable of repeated and more or less coherent criticism of Lenin: the state. But here Stalin still appears, surprisingly, as a man who took the public claims of Marxism seriously. A good example are his notes on the question of the nature of the proletarian dictatorship and the Soviet state. In the debate with Zinov'ev in the mid-twenties Stalin attacked the former for identifying the proletarian dictatorship with one by the party. In this matter Zinov'ev had merely repeated earlier remarks to the same effect by Lenin. But according to Stalin, who did not acknowledge Zinov'ev's debt to Lenin, it would be wrong to say that the party was a collective dictator, because that would include dictatorial rule over the working class too, which contradicted the party's principles.¹²

It is interesting to see that this is exactly what the Soviet leader wrote in his private books too. On the back flap of a 1919 copy of Lenin's *Gosudarstvo i revoliutsiia* he wrote: "One should not oppose the dict. of the party to the dictatorship of the class. That's true, if one understands under dict. of the party leadership by the party." But he added that one could not speak of a dictatorship of the party "in the strict sense of the word" because that would raise the unsolvable question of *which* dictatorship, that of the party or that of the class, was the more "real."¹³ In a 1922 edition of volume XV of Lenin's Collected Works Stalin commented on the former's plea in 1918 that the proletarian dictatorship did not contradict a personal dictatorship: "Does this mean that the dict. of the pr. is a dict. of particular people? Of course not," and "The one does not contradict the other, but the one does not equal the other [either], one should not mix them up."¹⁴ In a 1923 edition of volume XVII he commented on Lenin's remark of 23 July 1920 that the dictatorship of the proletariat equalled the dictatorship of the party: "Under dictatorship of the party we understand its leadership." And when Lenin said that the party led the class, Stalin commented, "Yes, but that is no *dictatorship* of the party."¹⁵ In sum, Stalin seems to have taken Marx' concept of "class dictatorship" *more* seriously than Lenin had. This probably

reflected the fact that Stalin attached even greater importance to gaining working class support for the party dictatorship than his predecessor did.

Stalin was also critical of Lenin when it came to another matter concerning the form of the Soviet state. Marx and Lenin had held that the proletarian state should consist of workers. As far as professional administrators were still necessary they would have to be as close to the workers as possible. Under Lenin this principle had in practice been abandoned immediately, and even in theory it had been severely hemmed in by the principle of party leadership. But it was Stalin who really threw it overboard. And he was aware of the fact that he differed with Lenin. Where the latter wrote in an edition of *Gosudarstvo i revoliutsiia* in a 1935 copy of volume XXI of Lenin's *Sochineniia* that the *whole* population should participate in the running of the state, that officials should work for workers' wages and be recallable at all times, that the "armed proletariat" should control the economy and that the state itself should consist of "armed workers," Stalin commented each time "Nu...", expressing great hesitation.¹⁶

At the same time, however, Stalin did not deny the need of a "Soviet" type of state as such. He remained an orthodox Marxist in the sense that he remained convinced that nothing good could come from the "bourgeois" state. He was even holier than the pope on this point, as appears from his notes in a collection of articles by Marx and Engels edited by G. Dunker, *Marks i Engel's o programme i taktike sotsial-demokratii* (1930). It contains an article by Engels with a critique of the Social-Democratic program of 1891, which had been published in *Neue Zeit* in 1901. Where Engels wrote that he could imagine a peaceful road to socialism in France and America, Stalin added in the margin: "Can we 'imagine' that? No, that is not true." Where Engels wrote that the democratic republic was the "specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat," Stalin added: "*And the Par. commune!* Today this is no longer true. Today we have to speak of the soviets."¹⁷ In the same 1935 edition of *State and Revolution* from which I quoted above, the author referred to Engels and Marx to the effect that the democratic republic was the best way to approach the proletarian dictatorship. Stalin bluntly commented in the margin: "Not so."¹⁸ In other words, Stalin continued to believe that commu-

nism was realizable only under the conditions of a soviet type of state machinery, of which the Commune had been the prototype.

4. STALIN AND THE CLASS NATURE OF THE STATE

Stalin's principal and most fundamental digression from "Marxism-Leninism" on the question of the state is contained in his well-known speech of 10 March 1939 at the 18th Party Congress. It was there, that he explained why the state had not "withered away" after private ownership of the means of production had been liquidated. His explanation basically came down to the thesis that class oppression was not the sole function of the state. States also served to defend their countries against outside powers (or to attack them) and to lead the economic and cultural life of the nation. Once antagonistic classes disappeared these two functions would not automatically go too. As long as the world around was capitalist, the state would stay, even under complete communism. Only after the world revolution had succeeded would the state disappear forever.¹⁹ It appears from the notes in his library that Stalin toyed with this notion long before 1939.

In a copy of *Gosudarstvo i revoliutsiia* from 1923 Stalin made a note in the margin of a passage where Lenin quoted Engels to the effect that every state is an instrument to suppress a subjected class. The passage also held: "Therefore every state is unfree and unpopular." Stalin twice underlined "every," put two quotation marks in the margin and wrote in red pencil "and the dictatorship of the proletariat?"²⁰ The note clearly expressed doubt as to whether class oppression was, indeed, an inevitable feature of every state. On this matter Stalin became gradually more outspoken. In the same 1935 version of *Gosudarstvo i revoliutsiia* from which I quoted above, the Soviet leader had become very critical of Lenin. When the latter wrote that states existed only under the condition of class contradictions Stalin illogically commented "This concerns states of exploiters." And then there was the same passage about all states being instruments to hold down an oppressed class and being unfree and unpopular. By now Stalin had become firm in his critique. He wrote in the margin: "under capitalism" and "No!." Where Lenin quoted Engels to the

effect that the state was at best a necessary evil, Stalin commented “That’s not true.”²¹

But from his notes in this 1935 volume it appears that Stalin thought that it was Engels, to whom the exaggerated anti-étatisme could be mainly attributed. When Lenin quoted the *Communist Manifesto* where it held that, after expropriating the capitalists, the state should develop production to a maximum, Stalin wrote in the margin “Marx = better than Engels.” Two pages later Lenin wrote that the proletariat needed the state not only for the purpose of striking down the resistance of the exploiters, but also for the purpose of leading the peasants to socialism. Stalin added here: “Lenin + Marx,” which I interpret as another implicit slight at Engels’ address. At one place Lenin asked himself whether Marx had been more of an “étatist [*gosudarstvennik*]” than Engels, because the former had even spoken (in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*) of the “future *gosudarstvennost*’ [*Staatswesen*] of communist society.” Lenin subsequently denied that this would be a fair judgment, but this possibility of a difference between Marx and Engels was enthusiastically received by Stalin. He put brackets around the quotation from the *Critique* and put two “B [*Vnimanie*]” marks in the margin of the whole passage.²² Then again, in a 1937 copy of Marx’ *Der Bürgerkrieg in Frankreich* Stalin underlined a passage in Engels’ introduction to the essay: “In fact the state is nothing but *a machine for one class to suppress another.*” Stalin added in the margin: “*not only.*”²³

Stalin did break with Lenin’s theoretical approach by denying that class was the only factor determining the state. Yet the “Stalinist” theory of the state, however critical it was of some of the accepted Marxist theses, never made a clean break with the Marxist framework. Psychologically Stalin’s attempts to present Marx and Lenin as “better” than Engels show that he wanted to remain within that framework. He suggested, that it was Engels rather than he who had crossed its boundaries. Furthermore, the theoretical concept of the Soviet state continued to be set in class terms, because, though from the *internal* perspective it had lost its class character, it remained a class state in the *international* context. It was seen as a state of “workers and peasants” (though run by their *intelligentsia*), opposed to the state of foreign capitalists.

I found no indication in any of the books in the *fond Stalina* that Stalin broke with the Marxist concept of the *ultimate* “withering away” of the state. According to Nikolai Simonov, the Soviet leader wrote on the front flap of a 1923 issue of *State and Revolution*: “The theory of the abolition [of the state?] is a dangerous [*giblaia*] theory.”²⁴ However, this is not as clear as it seems. The word *giblaia* is, in fact, practically unreadable. It could also read *gnilaia* or even *chastnaia*. In the latter case the meaning would, of course, change altogether. Furthermore, the sentence quoted is the first in an argument demonstrating why it is good that the Bolsheviks expelled the Mensheviks from their party. It is more plausible that Stalin intended the sentence as a quotation of *Menshevik* ideas on the state which Lenin criticized in the book. Stalin marked passages in the book itself where Lenin said that under communism the state withers away, with pencil lines and a # sign, but without critical implications, as far as one can ascertain now.²⁵ Shortly before his death Stalin wrote in a letter to A.V. Sanina and V.G. Venzher, published in *Pravda* on 4 October 1952, that under communism the state would, indeed, disappear, though it would be replaced by “society itself in the person of its central, leading economical organ.”²⁶ In sum, my work in Stalin’s library suggests that its owner rarely disagreed with Marx, Engels and Lenin, and when he did, he consciously tried to remain within a Marxist context. All this suggests the need for further research into the precise relation between Stalin’s Marxism and his Russian traditionalism.

NOTES

* My research in Moscow was made possible by grants from the University of Amsterdam, Nuffic and the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

¹ Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power. The Revolution from Above 1928–1941*, New York/London, 1990.

² Leonid Sprin, ‘Glazami knig. Lichnaia biblioteka Stalina’, in: *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 25 May 1993.

³ F. 558, op. 1, d. 2510. See: Dmitrii Volkogonov, *Triumfi Tragediia. Politicheskii Portret I.V. Stalina v 2-kh Knigakh*. vol. 1. *Chast’ 2*, Moscow, 1989, pp. 119–20.

⁴ F. 558, op. 3, dd.94, 95, 224, 195, 36, 38. All further references to *dela* are from *fond 558, opis’ 3*.

⁵ DD. 1, 84.

⁶ D. 207, pp. 13, 25.

⁷ D. 377, p. 42.

⁸ D. 207.

⁹ D. 378, pp. 157, 234.

¹⁰ D. 114, pp. 442, 455.

¹¹ D. 153.

¹² See, for instance, I.V. Stalin, *Sochineniia*, vol. 8, 1926, *ianvar'-noiabr'*, Moscow, 1948, pp. 31f.

¹³ D. 156.

¹⁴ D. 126, pp. 218, 224.

¹⁵ D. 131, pp. 270–71.

¹⁶ D. 143, pp. 399, 404, 437.

¹⁷ D. 211, pp. 64–65.

¹⁸ D. 143, p. 418.

¹⁹ See: I.V. Stalin, *Sochineniia*, vol. 1 [XIV], 1934–1940, Stanford, California, 1967, pp. 384f [*Sochineniia*].

²⁰ D. 157, p. 23.

²¹ D. 143, pp. 372, 382, 424.

²² D. 143, pp. 384, 386, 427.

²³ D. 202, p. 21.

²⁴ Nikolai Simonov, 'Razmyshleniia o pometkakh Stalina na poliakh marksistskoi literatury', in: *Kommunist*, no. 18 (December 1990), p. 72.

²⁵ D. 157, p. 87.

²⁶ *Sochineniia*, vol. 3 [XVI], p. 295.