

Introduction: the political imperatives of the postwar recovery

In early May 1990, just before the traditional 9 May Victory Day celebrations marking the 45th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe, *Komsomol'skaya pravda* published a lengthy interview with the Soviet historian Gennadii Bordyugov, under the title 'The Stolen Victory'.¹ In it Bordyugov advanced the idea that, far from the Stalinist government and the Soviet people having forged an unbreakable unity to defeat the Nazi aggressors, there were serious conflicts and divergences between them. Basing his argument on recently uncovered documents which attested to significant popular discontent both during and after the war, he argued that what he called 'the people' and the Stalinist regime had fought the war with different sets of objectives. The people's aim had been the liberation of their country, and having accomplished that goal they believed that they would be able to create a freer (if not totally free) society. In part they were reacting against what they saw as the incompetence of the national government in the early days of the war, and the open corruption of local officials throughout its duration; in part they based their expectations on various relaxations in regime policy which Stalin had introduced in order to forge a stronger national unity, and which they believed would continue. Stalin and the leadership, however, had other war aims, namely the survival of their system of power. From this point of view the changes Stalin made, such as the relaxation of state control over the collective farms, the rapprochement with the Russian Orthodox Church, the modicum of intellectual freedom granted to the intelligentsia, and the displacement of revolutionary rhetoric by appeals to national pride and open nationalism, were not reforms of the system, but tactical manoeuvres made in the interests of victory. In Bordyugov's view, the regime and the population had emerged from the war with different agendas, and it was Stalin's that prevailed.

¹ Interview between Gennadii Bordyugov and Aleksandr Afanas'ev, *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 5 May 1990.

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This interpretation directly challenged an assumption commonly held in both the former USSR and the West, that the Soviet Union's victory had won for Stalin and his regime massive and unquestioning popular support. This assumption, however, had always sat alongside another one which at first view would seem to be in direct contradiction to the first, namely that the postwar period marked the apex of what Western historians labelled 'High Stalinism'. Until relatively recently most studies of these years concentrated on high politics and the waves of repression that Stalin and the leadership meted out against suspect groups within the population and even against the elite's own members. We know, for instance, that national minorities were subjected to sustained persecution during the war and afterwards – they made up the vast bulk of those sent into internal exile as 'special settlers'. We also know that many Soviet soldiers and civilians who had been captured by the Nazis or deported into the Reich as forced labourers were sent to labour camps upon their repatriation.² In 1948 Andrei Zhdanov, the member of the inner circle who was responsible for ideological matters, launched a vicious campaign to stifle any semblance of independent thinking within the intelligentsia, a campaign which to this day carries his name, the *zhdanovshchina*. Its attack on all things Western and, more importantly, on anyone accused of sympathy with Western ideas or cultural trends meshed closely with the openly anti-Semitic campaign against so-called cosmopolitans, which at its low point saw the persecution and execution of leaders of the Soviet Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. If softness towards the West or Jewishness did not provide sufficient pretext for persecution, it was always possible to be branded a 'Titoist', in the wake of Stalin's humiliation at the hands of the leader of the Yugoslav Communist Party, who had had the temerity to assert his independence from Moscow. Following Zhdanov's death in late 1948, a wave of intrigue gripped the leadership itself, as Georgii Malenkov, a rival of Zhdanov's, reasserted his ascendancy within the Party Secretariat and the Council of Ministers by purging – and executing – many of Zhdanov's former allies (some on charges of 'Titoism'). And when it must have seemed that the blood-letting was finally coming to an end, a few months before Stalin died we had the infamous 'Doctors' Plot', where a group of mainly Jewish Kremlin doctors were arrested and accused of plotting to murder Stalin and the rest of the Kremlin leadership. Taken together it all adds up to a grim picture of what in reality was a very grim time.³

² Davies, *Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era*, p. 167.

³ On the politics of this period, see Carrère d'Encausse; Conquest; Dunmore, *The Stalinist Command Economy* and *Soviet Politics, 1945–1953*; Gorlizki, 'Party Revivalism' and 'Stalin's Cabinet'; Hahn; Kostyrchenko; McCagg; and Rapoport.

The obvious question here is, if there had been such close identification between populace and regime after the war, why such extensive terror was necessary. The account given by Bordyugov suggests a resolution of the contradiction by challenging the essential premise: the identification did not exist or, if it did, it was sufficiently tenuous that the regime could not take for granted that its political domination was secure. On this interpretation, the leadership needed to resort to terror in order to reestablish its political preeminence and control over society. Bordyugov was not, in fact, the first to pose this possibility. Back in the 1970s, Vera Dunham, who was not a historian but a literary specialist, had produced a highly insightful and provocative analysis of the social relations of late Stalinist society based on the evidence provided by Soviet fiction.⁴ Her book has subsequently become a classic text in the methodology of social and literary analysis, but what perhaps escaped the attention of most historians was the book's introduction, in which she set out her underpinning interpretation of what she saw as a conflict between leadership and populace immediately after World War II. The causes for that conflict were not, in her view, difficult to trace, nor were the Stalinist regime's reactions. The war, she argued, had unleashed 'obstreperous elements' within the population, whose aspirations and behaviour provoked widespread fear of dissent within the regime, which responded by 'swelling the size of the concentration camp population'. Dunham's main argument was that force alone was not sufficient to restore the regime to a position of unchallenged authority. It needed to go further and create a social base for itself within what she called the new 'middle class', similar, in fact, to what the regime had done during the industrialization of the 1930s when it promoted hundreds of thousands of young people from working-class and peasant backgrounds into the ranks of management and the technical intelligentsia. In the postwar period the regime would accomplish this task through what Dunham called 'The Big Deal', that is, the promise of 'middle-class' lifestyles to this stratum, in the midst of general deprivation.⁵

Given that Dunham had constructed this argument without access to any historical documentation, but strictly on the basis of personal observation and a close analysis of Soviet fiction, it is remarkable how accurate it turned out to be. She may have overestimated the extent of popular discontent after the war, the homogeneity of the demands and aspirations which different sections of the populace articulated, and even perhaps the size of the repression, but in its general contours she was, in my view, correct.⁶

⁴ Dunham. ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

⁶ Dunham's thesis has recently been taken up and approached from an entirely different standpoint in the book by J. Eric Duskin, *Stalinist Reconstruction*. Duskin seeks to show

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It was left to a later Soviet/Russian historian, Elena Zubkova, to take advantage of the limited access to archives permitted under *perestroika* and develop the idea of the ‘Stolen Victory’ with historiographical rigour and the necessary attention to detail. Not long after Bordyugov’s *Komsomol’skaya pravda* interview, Zubkova began publishing a series of path-breaking articles in the journal *Bol’shevik* and its post-Soviet successor, *Svobodnaya mysl’*.⁷ Following along the lines set out by Bordyugov, she posed the question of why the various pressures and discontents outlined by Dunham had failed to lead to a concerted movement for reform. The answer may seem obvious, given the enormous power of the Stalinist repressive apparatus, but this was not, in fact, how events unfolded. For Zubkova the main potential vehicles for change were the returning veterans, the *frontoviki* (literally, those who had served at the front). The solidarity they experienced in the trenches, their growing accustomed to taking their own decisions and to speaking amongst each other with relative freedom, the disillusion they experienced when they marched into Central Europe, and the feelings of self-confidence they enjoyed as the ones who had won the victory all made them a difficult element to integrate back into society. Moreover, they continued to mingle with one another after the war: in communal flats, in dormitories, and even in squalid beer cellars known as ‘Blue Danubes’. The other side of this equation was that the Stalinist regime’s mechanisms of social control were themselves less than secure. During the 1946 elections for the USSR Supreme Soviet people readily expressed dissent, including the view that the elections were a waste of time and money, since the Party would impose its own candidates anyway. Zubkova cites similar outbursts at factory meetings. Nor was the regime’s army of propagandists and political educators particularly adept at explaining the leadership’s position:

that after the war the leadership deliberately cultivated the technical intelligentsia as a privileged social group by abandoning what he calls the voluntarism and class-based foundations of its prewar promotion policies in favour of a new emphasis on professionalism and scientific-technical training. Thus the intelligentsia saw its social role enhanced not simply through higher consumption, but by acknowledgement of its professional status and the greater managerial authority it was given on the shop floor. The book is also worthy of interest because, although it appeared in 1999, the research for it was clearly done when access to archives was still limited. Duskin has used some archives, but extracts most of his evidence from published sources. In an era when the use of archives has become almost a fetish it is gratifying to see that it is still possible to derive an understanding of key social processes in the USSR through a careful reading and piecing together of what the censors allowed into print. More extensive use of archives might have allowed Duskin to provide additional detail and to write a longer and perhaps more interesting book, but I doubt that it would have led him to a different analysis. This analysis may indeed be flawed – I am not fully competent to judge – but if so it is not because of the sources he chose.

⁷ See the list of Zubkova’s publications on this theme in the bibliography.

their own political literacy was extremely rudimentary and many simply did not know what particular line they were supposed to take.⁸

If change did not come about it was not, according to Zubkova, because the regime immediately launched a wave of arrests and repression directed at the general population. In almost a mirror image of Dunham's argument, which stressed the privileges offered to an aspiring 'middle class', Zubkova identifies popular exhaustion and poverty. For ordinary people, their main hope was that the extreme hardships and strains should end, that they should be left in peace to try to rebuild something. When the harvest failure of 1946 crushed these hopes and instead sent living standards plummeting further, the result was deep popular demoralization which gave the regime additional breathing space. It was only then, essentially from 1948 onwards, that the regime felt sufficiently confident to assert its political grip and resort to the open repression which I briefly described above.⁹ The significance of this repression for Zubkova was that, with the manifest popular exhaustion and dissipation of political energy, the only social group from which any pressures for reform might have come was now the intelligentsia, and it was they who were its main victims. They were not, however, its sole or even primary target for, in attacking the intelligentsia and reasserting the role of the Party leadership as the sole arbiter of what was correct and safe to think, the regime was demonstrating to all of society, not just the intellectuals, that dissent and opposition were futile. 'One should not think that everyone was ruled only by fear. Fear, of course, was there, but even stronger (or in any case, more weighty) was, in my view, the consciousness of the fact that struggle was hopeless.'¹⁰

It was this, in Zubkova's view, that led 'High Stalinism' into its dead end. The regime may have achieved a political victory, but the fundamental economic and social crises facing the country were not going to go away. Instead they continued to ripen. The popular energies which

⁸ Zubkova, 'Obshchestvennaya atmosfera posle voyny (1945–1946)', p. 12; 'Obshchestvennaya atmosfera posle voyny (1948–1952)', p. 83. Amir Weiner, in his recent study, *Making Sense of War*, draws rather different conclusions from similar observations about the *frontoviki*. The book is an analysis of the postwar reconstruction of Soviet political institutions in Vinnitsa oblast' in Ukraine, and in it Weiner argues that for both returning soldiers and their families the war experience served to bind them to the Soviet system, a fact which helps explain the weakness of Ukrainian nationalism in that region. Ironically, in Vinnitsa it was the partisans who were seen as untrustworthy because of their independence and wartime exposure to anti-Soviet propaganda, although this was not necessarily true of other oblasti in that part of Ukraine. See in particular ch. 1, afterword, and pp. 305, 312, 326–8. The argument of the book is beautifully constructed but whether it has a wider relevance to anywhere else in the USSR outside Vinnitsa oblast' is open to question.

⁹ Zubkova, 'Obshchestvennaya atmosfera posle voyny (1945–1946)', pp. 4–14.

¹⁰ Zubkova, 'Obshchestvennaya atmosfera posle voyny (1948–1952)', p. 86.

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might have provided the basis for solving them had been scattered and coerced into quiescence. This left the only possibility of change within the leadership itself, and this was impossible so long as Stalin remained alive.¹¹

It is now over twenty years since Dunham published *In Stalin's Time* and over ten years since Zubkova's first article appeared in *Bol'shevik*. Since that time interest in the postwar reconstruction among both Western and Russian scholars has broadened considerably, although much of it is still work in progress by Ph.D students or is only now being published. But we already know that, as in the USSR in the 1930s, the society was not passive and that the institutions through which the leadership needed to transmit and enforce its policies were far from monolithic. Much of this book is devoted to demonstrating both of these points.

In their different ways both Dunham and Zubkova argue that following the war the Stalinist regime faced a political crisis. That crisis never reached a point at which it threatened to topple the elite from power, but so long as it persisted the elite could not exercise effective control over the society. The regime thus faced a political imperative not just to reassert that control, but to do so through the political institutions and hierarchies of power through which it had ruled before the war. What this book argues is that the regime faced a parallel crisis within the economy, and that the resolutions of these twin crises were intimately linked.

The process of industrialization during the early 1930s can be viewed as the period of what we might term 'primitive Stalinist accumulation'. By forcing down consumption, driving millions of peasants off the land into industry or into the slave labour sector, and by destroying the working class as an independent social and political entity, the emerging Soviet elite had been able to lay the economic foundations of a specifically Soviet system of production through which it could reproduce its control over the surplus product and the extraction of its privileges. By the end of the 1930s this system had achieved a position of relative stability, perhaps even reproducibility. It faced no organized opposition from either the working class or the peasantry, both of which had been effectively atomized. In the wake of the purges it had restored some degree of continuity and stability to industrial management. Granted, the economy faced serious structural problems. Agricultural productivity was still low in the wake of the calamity of collectivization. Production within industrial enterprises was badly organized and suffered from chronic shortages of materials, frequent breakdowns of machinery, and poor quality of both inputs and outputs. Innovation and technological modernization

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

were haphazard, if they occurred at all. Although no one could have understood this at the time, these were permanent structural flaws within the Stalinist system, which imbedded within it a long-term tendency towards slower growth and loss of dynamic, but *within* that system the elite's privileges and those of its social support in the managerial and technical intelligentsia appeared secure.

World War II threw all of this into chaos. Economic priorities and production profiles had to be radically regearred to the war effort. The country lost large tracts of its principal agricultural and industrial regions. Wherever possible factories were physically dismantled and carted thousands of kilometres eastwards into the Ural mountains or beyond, where they were hastily reassembled. There were huge population movements, some planned, others totally spontaneous. Lines of command, both political and economic, were altered, so that greater centralization of key decision-making at the very top coexisted with greater latitude and freedom for local political officials and managers. Without such decentralization it would have been impossible to prosecute the war effort. Thus the war brought not simply massive physical destruction, the contours of which I outline at the beginning of chapter 1, but disruption to the whole political and decision-making edifice through which the elite had transmitted its decisions to lower echelons and through which it had expected those decisions to be enforced.

What this meant was that, when the war ended, the regime faced a crisis not just of acceptance and popular expectations, but of monumental physical and institutional proportions. It had to restore a shattered economy, and at the same time it had to reconstruct the institutional foundations through which it had managed that economy. This was not an administrative or organizational issue. It was highly political. The reconsolidation of the elite's political control over society required the rapid restoration of the system of production on which that control had been based. In this sense the postwar period saw a partial repetition of the process of primitive accumulation which had been effected during the first two five-year plans of 1928–37. Living standards were forced down; millions of peasants were conscripted, cajoled, or driven by economic necessity into abandoning the land for work in industry and construction; and the slave labour sector was considerably expanded – all so that 'capital' and labour power could be concentrated in core sectors of mining, iron and steel, construction, and machine-building.

To accomplish this in a society that was also in tremendous flux and whose political docility and loyalty were not entirely secure added both urgency and complexity to the task. In the regime's eyes it demanded an almost unprecedented degree of control over labour power.

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To understand this we need to appreciate a fundamental change that took place in the prewar and postwar position of Soviet workers. One of the most important differences between the process of accumulation in the 1930s and that which took place after the war was the erosion of the distinction between slave and free labour. At the risk of oversimplification, until 1940, when unauthorized job-changing was made a criminal offence and the regime introduced compulsory labour conscription for rural teenagers,¹² the regime had maintained a fairly clear distinction between the two categories. Free labourers were keenly aware that they had virtually no political liberty and that if they even discussed the possibility of organizing a strike or some other form of industrial action they would either lose their lives or join the slave labour sector. But so long as they abjured activity which the regime might deem politically dangerous or escaped arbitrary denunciation during the terror of 1936–8, they were pretty much left alone. They could change jobs as often as they wished, they could violate labour discipline regulations and suffer only relatively minor, non-judicial sanctions, and they could exercise considerable control over the organization and execution of their work. The main weapons which the regime employed to try to force workers to conform to its desires and demands were economic, in particular yearly rises in output quotas ('norms' in Russian) and wage cuts through which the elite tried to increase the intensity of labour and the rate of exploitation.

During the war this distinction became blurred, as workers in all but the most peripheral industries were declared to have been mobilized and could be sent to work wherever the regime chose to direct them. In the postwar period these regulations were left in force, and in certain respects even augmented. When workers had faced a catastrophic fall in their standard of living during the First Five-Year Plan (1928–32) they had responded with a combination of strikes and mass protests and by simply quitting their jobs and seeking employment somewhere where conditions might be less intolerable. There was also a dramatic decline of discipline and order in the factories through absenteeism and insubordination. In the postwar period neither of these avenues was available. There was simply no question of strikes or mass protests – the power of the state even in the uncertain postwar situation was simply too great. Job-changing and absenteeism were not just criminal offences: industrial workers who left their employment faced a spell in a labour camp of between five and eight years; workers on rail or water transport would receive three to ten years. To this extent the regime should have found it easier to impose its control over labour power and to extract from it a greater surplus product.

¹² For a fuller discussion of these laws, see ch. 5.

This, as we shall see, was the main objective of regime policy. The actual implementation of this policy was far less straightforward. It provoked tremendous social strains and upheavals. Perhaps the most obvious and dramatic was the spontaneous flight from the factories which workers and industrial trainees undertook in defiance of the draconian penalties. Other stresses were less overt but probably had more long-term consequences, in particular the difficulties which the regime had in socializing the millions of young labour conscripts whom it dragged out of the village to work in its factories, mines, and construction sites.

In the end, of course, the elite did succeed in putting the Stalinist ‘mode of production’ back together again, but its victory came at a high cost. No less than during the 1930s, the Stalinist system was riven by polycratic tendencies not just at the level of political relations within the leadership, or between the leadership and its agents at local level, but more fundamentally in its relations with society at large. A system that aspired to near-total control over its subjects singularly failed to achieve it. Political opposition within society, and among industrial workers in particular, may have been virtually nonexistent, but the repression and material deprivation through which the elite attempted to demoralize society and thereby to render it harmless provoked millions of individuals to take spontaneous actions which undermined the economic reconstruction and which the regime proved unable to curb or control. More durably, insofar as the Soviet Union’s structural, as opposed to conjunctural, economic problems emanated directly from the Stalinist political system, the victory of that system effectively rendered it permanently vulnerable to long-term decline, an issue which I analyse in more detail in the conclusion.

The plan of the book is as follows. The first chapter analyses the sources from which the regime drew most of the new workers for industry, construction, and transport, in particular the different roles played by the slave labour sector, that is, the prisoners in the labour camps run by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the large army of what I call indentured labourers, that is, workers who were nominally free, but who were effectively coerced into entering the workforce and who were bound to their place of work under threat of harsh criminal sanctions if they left. The two main categories of indentured labourers were so-called organized recruitment, and the network of vocational training schools under the USSR Ministry of Labour Reserves.

Chapters 2 and 3 analyse workers’ living conditions. Chapter 2 examines the food crisis of 1946–7. The crisis began with the harvest failure of 1946, which led to a famine in rural regions of Ukraine and Moldavia,

but its ramifications extended way beyond this to virtually every sector of the non-agricultural economy and over the entire territory of the USSR. The crisis took on the severity that it did because the regime, which very probably had the reserves of food needed to avert rural starvation and urban malnutrition, refused to tap these reserves, but instead pushed down consumption by reducing or removing altogether workers' entitlements to rations. Chapter 3 takes the story into the second half of the period, from the end of rationing in 1948 through to Stalin's death. It argues that there was a significant improvement in living standards, but that consumption of both food and consumer items remained at a very basic level. It also looks at two other aspects of living standards, namely housing conditions and health care, and concludes that the rate of improvement in these areas was significantly slower than the increase in food supplies. I therefore label this period one of 'attenuated recovery'.

Chapter 4 examines the special position of young workers. They were one of the two main sources of new labour power in this period, and they suffered intense deprivation. Moreover, their standard of living improved far more slowly than did that of other workers. Labour turnover among this group was very high, and remained so even when illegal job-changing among adult workers dropped to almost insignificant levels. Their poverty, their generally abysmal housing conditions, and the discrimination they suffered at work from factory managers created serious barriers to the regime's attempts to socialize them into what we might term model Stalinist citizens.

Chapter 5 analyses one of the least known and most intriguing aspects of the postwar period, the mass defiance of the wartime laws against job-changing. Workers in coal mining and construction, and for a time also metallurgy, fled their jobs and went back to the villages from which they had been recruited or conscripted. So, too, did the young students in the vocational training schools attached to these industries. What we shall see, however, is that few of them were ever apprehended and brought before the courts. Serious conflicts erupted between the industrial managers and vocational school commandants, on the one hand, and the village authorities, on the other. The village officials – including police, public prosecutors, and collective farm managers – hid the runaways and protected them from capture. It is an interesting story in its own right, but it also sheds a great deal of light on institutional conflicts within the structures of the Stalinist state.

Chapter 6 takes a detailed look at the industrial enterprise. It begins with an overview of working conditions, and then analyses the main features of work organization and the endemic structural problems which limited industrial efficiency. It closes by examining the arena of so-called