

Adapting to Russia's changing approaches to its past: the Western historiography of Stalin and Stalinism

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Abstract

This article aims to highlight that the historiography of Stalin and Stalinism produced in the West from the 1930s until the present day can tell us much about the lives and times of those writing about Stalin, and is in effect a reflection of the adaptation of non-Russian historians to the volume and content of the material available to them, itself regulated by shifting Soviet and Russian attitudes to Stalin. Through a concise case study of the historiography of the young Stalin, the guiding idea of this paper is that by addressing those difficulties faced by Western historians in the face of the gradual and limited release of facts and information from the Soviet Union, we can establish that Western Stalinist historiography is in fact inextricably linked to the shifting attitudes of Russia's changing political regimes towards their own past.

The study of Stalin and Stalinism has, over the course of nearly a century, presented Western historians with some serious challenges: a shortage of accurate information, concealment and destruction of relevant documentation, falsification of facts, figures and events, and the changing attitude of Russia's political leadership towards one of the most traumatic episodes of its own history. The resulting Western historiography on this subject is hugely varied, contradictory, and home to ongoing debates as to who Stalin was, and exactly what he did and how during his regime. This article aims to highlight that the historiography around Stalin and Stalinism produced in the West from the 1930s until the present day can tell us much about the times of those writing about him, and is in effect a reflection of the adaptation of non-Russian historians to the volume and content of the material available to them, itself regulated by shifting Soviet and Russian attitudes to Stalin. Through a concise case study of the historiography of the young Stalin, the guiding idea of this paper is that by addressing those difficulties faced by past Western historians in the face of the gradual and limited release of facts and information from the Soviet Union, we can establish that Western Stalinist historiography is in fact inextricably linked to the shifting attitudes of Russia's changing political regimes towards their own past.

In order to provide a selective but illustrative overview of the historiography of the young Stalin, key works and their chronological and contextual positions have been identified in this article, albeit very briefly due to space constraints. This helps us to determine the links between the information available to Western or émigré scholars and writers, and their publications over the course of this period. It also enables us to chart how the historiography has evolved over time, reacting to the gradual and irregular release of new information. This method however must be used

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carefully, and in a larger study special care must be given not to define works solely through the period in which they were written, but also through content, referencing, ideas and methodology.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Stalinist regime was at full throttle: the Great Terror was at its apex and the work of the great Soviet propaganda machine had successfully created around Stalin a personality cult of gigantic proportions. Only the exact details that Stalin wanted to be published about himself would be, and this is reflected directly in the official biographies of the time¹. We also know thanks to records held in the Russian National Archive for Social and Political History (RGASPI)² that Stalin personally annotated, edited, censored and sometimes even banned biographical work written on him by fellow members of the Soviet government. In the West however, historians and writers adapted as best they could to these difficult circumstances. This is illustrated for example by the French author and supporter of Stalin Henri Barbusse's 1935 biography *Staline: Un Monde Nouveau Vu A Travers Un Homme*³. Barbusse drew on the Georgian memoirs of Stalin's childhood friends⁴, official biographies and the pivotal Emil Ludwig interview⁵, using the sources uncritically, and often without reference. It is only through familiarising oneself with those earlier works that it becomes evident to what extent they were later used by Western historians researching Stalin, who desperately lacked reliable and new source material. Ludwig's interview, for example, appears time and time again: it was (and still is) particularly important to historians because it provides the only record of Stalin publicly addressing the question of his parents, and crucially it provides evidence that he unhesitatingly and actively concealed the truth about the

¹ Two biographies of Stalin were approved by him to be published inside the Soviet Union and abroad: The Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute (1940) *Joseph Stalin – A Short Biography*, Lawrence & Wishart Ltd, London and Various (1930) *The Life of Stalin – A Symposium*, Modern Books Ltd, London (co-written by four of Stalin's closest colleagues: Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Ordzhonikidze and Enukidze).

² In Russian RGASPI stands for 'Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii'. Here are housed several key Stalin-related document collections, notably in Fonds 71 and 558.

³ Barbusse H. (1935) *Staline: Un Monde Nouveau Vu A Travers Un Homme*, Ernest Flammarion, Paris.

⁴ Two key works can be identified regarding Joseph Stalin's very early life, and both were written by exiled Georgian childhood friends of Stalin's. Joseph Iremashvili's *Stalin Und Die Trogodie Georgiens* (1932), Volksblatt-Druckerei, Berlin, and Joseph Davrichewy's *Ah! Ce qu'on rigolait bien avec mon copain Staline* (1972), Jean-Claude Simoën, Paris) provided vital sources of biographical information on Stalin, specifically relating to his very early years. Even after the opening of the State archives in the 1990s, these important testimonies of Stalin's early life have remained vital and irreplaceable primary sources, still relied on today. They are based on first-hand knowledge by people who knew Stalin at this time of his life. Given Stalin's later extreme reticence to make any of these events public, the memoirs are rare and essential sources to those investigating Stalin's youth. Vitaly, these memoirs were published abroad, and their existence, and the lives of their authors, are inextricably linked with the regime that was in place at that time. Both Davrichewy and Iremashvili had left Russia because they did not support Stalin's regime, and for this reason were obliged to publish their memoirs abroad. The detail with which they report is in stark contrast to the official publications being released inside and outside of the Soviet Union while Stalin was in power.

⁵ Stalin, J. (1932) *An Interview with the German author Emil Ludwig*, Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R., Moscow. Ludwig was granted an interview with Stalin in December 1931, and was granted an interview with Stalin at the Kremlin. At a time when all information about Stalin was heavily checked and edited by his entourage and by himself, the Ludwig interview was published almost exactly as it had happened, with only a couple of minor stylistic corrections. This work is of particular relevance in the historiography of Stalin's childhood because it was the only time he was questioned directly about his early youth.

nature of his relationship with them.⁶ However the rest of the key works written in the West during Stalin's lifetime, such as those of Leon Trotsky, Isaac Deutscher, Eugene Lyons and Boris Souvarine⁷ do not offer any drastic new information about Stalin's childhood in the way that the Georgian memoirists had. These historians, adapting to the lack of information available to them, embarked on a methodological change in their biographical research on Stalin. They began piecing together the most probable facts through previous works such as the Georgian memoirs and official biographies, all the while making their reader aware of the processes, sources and judgements they had used to come to their conclusions. Here, in the absence of new primary sources we see in effect the apparition of the first secondary sources on Stalin's youth.

After Stalin's death in 1953, the process of de-Stalinisation and the stagnating Brezhnev era had little impact on the historiography of Stalin's youth. Practically no new information was released: while Nikita Khrushchev⁸ advocated de-Stalinisation, he did not allow classified information to be released any more readily to Western historians. Under Leonid Brezhnev⁹, any advances which had begun in terms of Russia facing her past were soon discontinued. This for the most part did not stop Western historians from tackling the issue of Stalin and Stalinism, and in regards to his youth, despite the lack of new information, a few writers continued to attempt to piece together his early life such as Edward Ellis Smith.¹⁰ However despite Smith's impressive effort which resulted in an entire volume on the young Stalin, it failed, as the others did, to offer any new information or methods. The most notable works of this period, then, were those of Svetlana Allilueva, Stalin's daughter: she was the only person to provide new material on Stalin for historians at this time. Escaped from Russia and newly ensconced in America, her memoirs in the form of two books, *Twenty Letters to A Friend* and *Only One Year*, provided for the first time in thirty odd years a relatively viable primary source¹¹. They gave an unprecedented first-hand, candid account of the man behind the politician. Not Stalin as leader so much as Stalin as a father, husband, son and friend. Crucially, the Soviet government of the

⁶ When Ludwig asked him: 'What led you to become a rebel? Was it, perhaps, because your parents treated you so badly?' Stalin, somewhat surprisingly, answered the question directly: 'No. My parents were uneducated people, but they did not treat me badly by any means.' See Stalin (1932) p. 11. Thanks to other works such as Iremashvili and Davrichewy, we know that Stalin's father was in fact brutally violent towards him.

⁷ See Trotsky L. (1947) *Stalin – An Appraisal of the Man and his Influence*, Hollis and Carter, London; Deutscher, I. (1949) *Stalin - A Political Biography*, Oxford University Press, London; Lyons, E. (1940) *Stalin - Czar of All The Russias*, George G. Harrap & Company Ltd, London; Souvarine, B. (1977) *Staline: aperçu historique du bolchévisme*, Éditions Champ Libre, Paris. English edition (1939) *Stalin – A Critical Survey Bolshevism*, Secker & Warburg, London.

⁸ Nikita Khrushchev became leader of the party shortly after Stalin's death. In February 1956, he made a secret speech to the 20th Party Congress, denouncing Stalin. It caused a sensation in the Communist Party and in the West, although Khrushchev failed to mention his own role in the Stalinist terror. The speech initiated a campaign of 'de-Stalinisation'. Khrushchev also attempted to improve Soviet living standards and allow greater freedom in cultural and intellectual life. He left office in 1964.

⁹ Leonid Brezhnev was leader of the Soviet Union from 1964 until his death in 1982. He has been criticised for causing the economic and social stagnation of the Soviet Union (and causing problems central to its eventual demise) by overlooking crucial economic, social and cultural problems. He also put an end to the de-Stalinisation process and to cultural freedom after the relative tolerance established under Khrushchev.

¹⁰ Smith, E. E. (1968) *The Young Stalin: The Early Years of an Elusive Revolutionary*, Cassel & Company, London.

¹¹ Allilueva, S. (1969) *Only One Year*, Hutchinson & Company, London and Allilueva S. (1968) *Twenty Letters To A Friend*, Penguin Books, London.

time was horrified at their publication, reinforcing the notion that at this time such works could still only be published outside of the Soviet Union.

The advent of Glasnost and Perestroika¹² provided Western historians with huge new resources with which to investigate Stalin's life and career. Most importantly for those researching Stalin's youth, the opening of not only the archives, but Russia itself to foreigners enabled them to access documents and people, and to travel relatively easily around the country and the Republics. While there is no vast amount of documentation held about Stalin's early life specifically, access to many local Gori¹³ records and police records, and documents relating to the publication of information and the editing of the story of Stalin's life, have all allowed historians to finally fill in the blanks in a way that previously could only be done very suggestively, bearing the danger of being inaccurate. Today the works of Robert Service, Robert C. Tucker, Miklos Kun, Simon Sebag Montefiore¹⁴ amongst others provide us with colourful, detailed accounts of the boisterous, difficult Joseph growing up in his volatile household, to become a young Seminarist who rejected his clerical path to join the Revolutionary movement¹⁵. The local council records, Okhrana¹⁶ and Party records have all meant that previous information has now been largely re-examined and reassessed in terms of accuracy, and consolidated into what can mostly be considered a truthful history of this time.

The chronological approach I have favoured here highlights a key issue in the evolution of the Western historiography of Stalin: is it key works or key events that changed the way young Stalin was written about? Certainly, historical distance allowed writers from the late 1930s to begin analysing previous material critically. Equally Trotsky's definition of Stalin as a mediocrity became a long-standing, principal school of thought opposed to a more widespread view that Stalin was the driving force behind his regime. However there are clear parallels to be drawn between the regime in place at the time in the Soviet Union, and the nature of the works which were produced. The Georgian memoirs published abroad by exiled old friends, and the eulogistic propagandist works published inside and outside the Soviet Union by sympathisers and fellow Communist Parties which barely addressed the question of his youth, were all linked inextricably to what was happening inside the Soviet Union. Stalin did not want any detailed information on his childhood to be released, and so it could only be done outside of the country. The works published between his death and Gorbachev's accession to power and the fall of the Soviet Union are, overall, representative of the way that Khrushchev and Brezhnev approached Russia's then recent past. Despite his denunciation of Stalin, Khrushchev's policy of increased communication with other countries did not stretch

¹² Glasnost was the Soviet policy of the 1980s which advocated the open acknowledgement and discussion of the Soviet Union's economic and social problems, and instigated larger cultural and personal freedom for Soviets. Perestroika was the economic and political reform policy initiated by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (in office 1985-1991) from 1986. It included de-centralising the control of industry and agriculture, and allowing some private ownership.

¹³ Gori is the small town in Georgia where Stalin was born and spent his schooldays.

¹⁴ In relation to young Stalin see in particular: Service, R. (2004) *Stalin – A Biography*, Macmillan, London; Sebag Montefiore, S. (2007) *Young Stalin*, W&N, London; Kun, M. (2003) *Stalin – An Unknown Portrait*, Central European University Press, Budapest

¹⁵ As a teenager Stalin attended the Theological Seminary in Tiflis (Tbilisi). He left before taking his final exams, and joined the embryonic Social Democratic movement in Georgia.

¹⁶ The Okhrana was the Tsarist secret police.

so far as allowing them access to the Party archives, the documents within which would implicate many of those still alive and in power in heinous crimes against their own people. Brezhnev's era only exacerbated the issue of there being virtually no new important sources available to Western historians. Only the publication of Svetlana's Allilueva's works allowed facts regarding Stalin's parents and childhood to be confirmed at this unlikely time. It was, truly, the opening of the archives that gave new blood to what had become the relatively stagnant development of the historiography of Stalin's childhood and youth. The Russia of the nineties was determined to expose, face and learn from her past, and historians were finally able to access, examine, interpret and publish the documents that would allow Stalin's youth to come alive to the reader. The detailed, exciting and often humorous accounts we find today of Stalin's youth are in some ways not so far removed from those of Davrichewy and Iremashvili who, drawing on personal experiences were able to write lively and accessible works.

The historiography of the young Stalin has thus evolved and adapted in time with the gradual release of information, itself a direct reflection of the changing governmental systems in place in the Soviet Union (and later, Russia) over this period. The limitations of the method of analysis used here lies principally in that this is a comparatively small part of the larger historiography. However, when studied in conjunction with other aspects of Stalin and his regime – such as Stalin as a man and politician, or Stalinism as a distinct historical phenomenon, for example – the historiography of Stalin's youth undeniably contributes to the evidence that the changing regimes in place in the Soviet Union and Russia, and the particularities of source accessibility to which Western historians adapted, directly impacted on the evolution of the larger historiography of Stalin and Stalinism.

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