

Practicing Stalinism: Bolsheviks, Boyars, and the Persistence of Tradition

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Recent developments in Ukraine and Crimea have raised a number of questions about Russia and her political machinations. Some of the most perceptive reports have noted that Vladimir Putin's inner circle, his decision-making core, appears to have shrunk or concentrated over recent months; now centring around a loyal contingent of hardliners, including friends and former classmates of Russia's über male leader dating back to his years at the KGB Higher School in Leningrad. The implication being that where Putin once acted as a mediator between the different factions of his power network, those that owed their position and/or wealth to his patronage, he is currently aligning himself with the *siloviki* ('strong ones') – formed predominantly from his connections with former Soviet security personnel, many of whom tend to consider the fall of the USSR as a national disaster for Russia and continue to maintain genuine suspicion of the West.

These unspoken connections and informal networks of power are key to understanding the various twists and turns of Russian policy. Russia is a country where institutions often seem to matter less than clientism. The functioning and historic links of network-based governance forms the focus of J. Arch Getty's latest book, *Practicing Stalinism: Bolsheviks, Boyars, and the Persistence of Tradition*. Here he argues that while we must acknowledge distinct periods and breaks in history, we should not ignore the persistence of certain political practices. It is striking, suggests Getty, that despite various efforts to introduce rule-bound bureaucracy and formal systems of authority, personalised structures remain integral to Russia's political operations. 'The clientism of rulers Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Putin', notes Getty, recall 'patterns not only

under Stalin but from the nineteenth century and earlier' (p. 4). Where the history of 'Great Men' once dominated, Getty seems to be saying, we now attribute too much to the power of ideas over *habitus* and practice. This book challenges reductive readings of Weber that emphasise the distinction between premodern and modern. 'Modern ideology', stresses Getty, 'does not guarantee modernity' (p. 21). Instead, the Russian example seems to support the notion that old and new – the residual and the emergent – will often intersect, together forming the world around us. Stalinism – no exception – is thus presented as a product of modern socialism and traditional patrimonial structures.

Getty's opening two chapters provide a thematic overview of Russian political conventions. He uses the examples of petitioning, patron-anointed awards, kinship, and personality cults to highlight the 'deep structures' and 'personalisation' of Russian politics (p. 25). Not without provocative intent, some of these practices are traced back to 16th-century Muscovy. Be it a letter sent to a Grand Prince or the voice of a citizen partaking in one of Putin's televised call-in sessions, Getty notes the same patrimonial language and understanding of power. Typical rhetorical features and the formula for redress include fulsome salutations, emphasis of the subject's lowly position, the faceless nature of their injustice (the improper workings of noble or bureaucratic systems), and the notion that justice is 'a gift based on mercy and power' (p. 33). This speaks to the Russian tradition of viewing the tsar as *Batiushka* ('little father'), an omnipotent yet just figure not associated with daily travails and the failings of government; a caring father that would solve all problems, if only he were made aware of them! Getty demonstrates that the form and content of Soviet-era letters, with their appeals to 'Kindred Father Iosif Vissarionovich [Stalin]!' (p. 28), often exhibited the same characteristics as their pre-revolutionary counterparts.

Likewise, we are shown that the Bolsheviks were not able to escape traditional Russian assumptions about governance. From their roots in the political underground of late imperial Russia, the Bolsheviks operated through loyal connections and local associations. Despite Lenin's attempts to establish a new rational mechanism of government in 1917 (he even suggested the German Post Office as an example of a modern bureaucratic structure), the Old Bolsheviks, those with experience of clandestine politics and pre-revolutionary habits, continued to exercise power through established patronages. Again, Getty cites comparisons with Muscovy, suggesting that the Old Bolsheviks resembled early Russian boyars (barons or nobles), who, like little tsars, stood atop a patrician network of clients, relatives, and supporters. This was a system of *who you know*, which revolved around loyalty, protection, and the physical embodiment of power within individuals. To get things done in medieval Russia one had to mobilise these networks, invoking the implicit promise of reciprocal favour and greater proximity to power. The Bolsheviks were not unaware of these parallels. As Nadezhda Mandelstam recalled, 'the [Soviet] state encouraged people to behave like boyars in medieval Russia who fought each other over their place at the Tsar's table' (p. 53).

The Old Bolsheviks did not model themselves on Russian nobility, and as committed Marxists most would have certainly denied any such comparison, but the practices of the past are hard to shake off. In the end, as Getty affirms at various points in the book, power remained as it always had, a personalised affair. For centuries, he explains, 'patrimony had been as much a part of Russia as speaking the Russian language'. So much so, that when Gorbachev tried to change the nature of Soviet politics in the 1980s, we are told, 'he may as well have been speaking Swahili' (p. 95). Taking heed of his own assessment, Getty continues to use the vocabulary of Russian patrimony – 'noble', 'clan', 'chief', 'courtier', 'prince', 'knight', and 'boyar' – throughout the book as a means of illuminating the patrimonial practices of Stalinism.

In chapters three and four attention turns to the detailed assessment of party structures, personnel allocation, and the everyday workings of the Soviet system during the Stalin period. After years of working his way through the old Party Archive in Moscow, Getty has come to the conclusion that at every level there was an implicit understanding – 'but no written rules, at least none that were consistently followed' – about how to proceed with any given query or dispute. What particular committee or Bolshevik grandee should hear or decide certain cases remained ill-defined; party officials 'knew it when they saw it' (p. 99). In this reading the three highest party bodies – Politburo, Orgburo, and Secretariat – functioned as a symbol rather than a channel of power. An indeterminacy in the agenda and competence of official bodies developed because institutional structures masked a continued reliance on informal networks. In addition, personal references

and the recommendations of a Bolshevik 'boyar' seemed to matter just as much, if not more, than qualification or skill when it came to job allocation. Unsurprisingly, errors were frequent. On one occasion in 1935, the lowly subject of dental education found its way onto the agenda of the highest organs, alongside a proposal to sentence a group of Trotskyists to death (p. 107).

Getty strikes upon a central tension at the heart of the Soviet system: the visible insufficiencies of patrimony were not enough to end Russia's inexorable reliance on informal procedure. Those that operated at the lower levels, including Orgrasred personnel charged with drafting orders and managing party communication, bemoaned the lack of rule-bound regularity. But the higher echelons preferred to work with the devil they knew, maintaining personal networks and their own positions within the existing system. The end result, as the Soviet system gradually evolved, was an infamously complex and sprawling bureaucracy that only secured the necessity of informal channels.

Chapter five brings the 'clans' of Soviet Russia into sharp focus. It shows individual power, pride, and honour permeating every crack of the Soviet Union. Personal networks are shown to have developed at every level, from Moscow to the provinces; inside the central committee and police services. In this vein, the power struggle of the 1920s cannot be understood without first acknowledging the role of 'clan politics'. But this was not a simple story about Stalin's ruthless ability to manipulate rivals. To those in the provinces, with their own entrenched patronages, the power struggle in Moscow caused alarm. As Getty insists, their concerns about 'oppositionists' and instability were genuine, which helps to explain why Stalin received so many of their votes before going on to secure his place as the unrivalled leader of the party. In this scenario, Stalin represented the status quo, in contrast to figures such as Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Kamenev, who threatened to democratise procedures and break up established cliques.

Centre-periphery clan relations remained an issue throughout the Stalin period. From the 1920s, Moscow had found itself bargaining with regional networks, or 'chiefdoms', in an attempted to secure stability and implement party policy. Even as the leader of the party, argues Getty, Stalin still had to 'move carefully to reduce the power of the provincial clans' (p. 179). At the same time, the self-serving police networks and the powerful clans developing around figures such as Iagoda, demanded constant attention – enough to drive anyone to paranoia! As such, Getty's Stalin is not the omnipotent devil of the old totalitarian literature. We get the sense that he was as much prisoner as perpetrator in this particular system.

Extending on the theme of 'clan' management, the final three chapters of the book chart Stalin's epic struggle to secure Moscow's dominance over the regional party bosses. Each chapter marks a distinct stage in this battle of attrition. With the introduction of rapid industrialisation and the national imperatives of the First Five-Year Plan, centre-periphery relations had become increasingly strained. While regional organisations had been permitted the use of force and terror to see through policy objectives, there was a concern that they had become too powerful. And despite Stalin's best efforts to call them to heel, the regional 'barons' and 'chiefs' proved remarkably resilient during these years. Looking to the mid-1930s, Getty notes that Stalin struck upon the idea of infiltrating the regions with his own inspectors and plenipotentiaries. Referring to these representatives as the 'king's men', Getty equates these actions to that of an early modern monarch, such as Ivan the Terrible or Louis XIV, seeking to reduce 'the power of regional aristocracies' (p. 183). However, it appears that local party leaders managed to fend off these advances too. Occasionally co-opting the 'king's men' into their own clans, to boot.

Shedding new light on the much-discussed topic of the Great Terror, Getty then draws our attention to the year 1936 and the Stalin Constitution. While this document is usually seen as an example of Soviet propaganda – announcing the country's democratic credentials to a West looking for a plausible ally to confront Nazi Germany – Getty notes that the constitution actually carried with it real political effects. Stalin himself said that the electoral reforms proposed in the Constitution were designed to curb the power of regional leaders. From this perspective, the Constitution marks part of a second wave in Stalin's attempt to rein in the regions. Nevertheless, local leaders continued to resist reform, simply ignoring certain orders and/or failing to organise effective discussion of the Constitution. In the process of negotiating constitutional reforms, we see Stalin as a figure frustrated by regional 'clan politics' – a politics that persisted with the

personal rivalries and denunciations seen at the start of the 1930s. Getty also adds some weight to the argument that the terror spiralled beyond original intentions, explaining that while regional powers eventually had to swallow the Constitution, they managed to retain the right to deploy lethal violence, which contributed to the 'excesses' and mounting horror 1937–8.

Stalin had tried penetrating the regional barons, as well as 'holding their feet to the fire with electoral campaigns' (p. 261). The final attempt to temper these networks saw Moscow engage in the verbal and public reproach of local leaders. This was a tried and tested, yet dangerous tactic. It signalled permission for open criticism from below. Many Bolshevik grandees were forced to defend their positions, and at times they struggled to protect their supporters. But while Moscow succeeded in destabilising the regions amid a maelstrom of accusations, it failed to oust the regional leaders themselves, many of whom, insists Getty, proved willing to hold on to power at any cost. It was perhaps the very instability of the situation, plus the lack of immediate results, that eventually persuaded Stalin to take the most destructive and bloody option available to him: beheading the networks.

In these latter chapters, arguably the strongest in the book, Getty proffers the idea that the key to explaining the Great Terror lies in the personal politics and centre-periphery clashes of Russian patronage. From his first book, *Origins of the Great Purges* (1), Getty has highlighted the ad hoc nature of Soviet government, as well as the relative autonomy enjoyed by local officials in the 1930s. This book adds a new and significant dimension to this vision of Stalinism and the Terror. Not all will attribute as much weight to patrimonial forces. But, all the same, Getty's assessment makes an important contribution to our understanding of this particularly brutal episode in Soviet history.

In the end, *Practicing Stalinism* brings the Soviet political world to life through tales of intrigue and personal animosity. It adds momentum to a growing literature determined to more accurately reflect, even to humanise, the realities of the Russian and Soviet political experience. Getty himself acknowledges the work of Alena Ledeneva, who has shown that informal networks are still at the heart of contemporary Russian political and business operations. And while Getty's approach to Soviet history might differ from many recent studies, including David Brandenberger's *Propaganda State in Crisis* (2), which looks at the contradictions inherent in the Soviet Union's indoctrination programme, it nevertheless shares in a desire to highlight the indeterminacies of the system. This is not the perfectly controlled, efficient killing-machine that one might associate with the accounts of early Sovietology; it is a far more chaotic system, fuelled by human interactions and the unacknowledged weaknesses of institutional establishment.

This book will not be without critics and queries, however. Some may find that it brushes aside the difficulties of Russia's modernisation narrative, or that it is too reliant on generalisations when explaining pre-revolutionary practices. After all, scholars, such as Steve Smith, have begun to question the veracity of the claim that late imperial Russia was beholden to the societal norms, reciprocal loyalty, and patron-worship that define the 'moral economy' model. It is also fair to say that Getty's account underplays the importance of ideology. Indeed, the book sometimes privileges cases of patronage at the expense of broader contexts. Others may ask: how *Russian* is this? It would be naive to suggest that such practices are specific to Russia, or worse, to claim that this is what makes Russia 'exotic'. Similar happenings might be observed, for instance, in the political cabals of pre-democratic Europe, or much closer to home, the informal connections and networks that sustain British public life today.

But Getty, an experienced and entertaining practitioner of his craft, will not have been ignorant of these questions. This is an historian that has compared the workings of Stalin-era politics with that of the Thatcher cabinet. Ultimately, his approach and selection of cases, mostly thematic in nature, only make for a more coherent, direct, and lively argument. While he advocates a view of history as the intersection or blend of old and new, it is clear that Getty's prime objective here is to emphasise traditional factors and human interactions as ballast to a historiography that has recently privileged the untethered power of modern ideology. Getty encourages us to open our eyes to the hidden and dirty world of personal politics, writing patrimonial practices back into the political culture of Soviet history, while challenging some of our assumptions about the development of Stalinism and the Great Terror in the process. Accepting this book on

its own terms, it offers a fascinating and highly readable account that will challenge scholars to complicate their understanding of the Russian and Soviet political world.

Notes

1. J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (Cambridge, 1985).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927-1941* (New Haven, CT, 2012).[Back to \(1\)](#)

The author (like all authors) is pleased to read a fair review by someone who actually read the book thoroughly. He does not wish to comment further.

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