

Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945–1953

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In spring 2004, Chris Ward argued in *Rethinking History* that writing on late Stalinism ‘focuses almost exclusively on “high politics”’.⁽¹⁾ Despite the publication of a handful of works that explore the social and cultural history of post-war era – in particular monographs by Amir Weiner, Donald Filtzer and Elena Zubkova – this has remained true for a surprisingly long time.⁽²⁾ Until recently, western study of the post-war era focused on the intrigues of the Kremlin which foreign scholars sought to reconstruct through the tentative unpicking of the Soviet press and the de-coding of hidden messages. In terms of subject-matter, Gorlizki and Khlevniuk’s *Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945–53* follows in this tradition, and their narrative is shaped around the key events, political intrigues and purges we have come to expect: post-war re-centralisation, the anti-cosmopolitan campaigns, the Leningrad Affair, the Doctor’s Plot and Stalin’s death. However, their work represents a break with earlier western writing in two significant ways. First, it is the fruit of a British-Russian collaboration, and effectively positions its argument within both Anglo-American and recent Russian historiographical traditions. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it is based on the expert reading of a wealth of documents, the like of which earlier scholars could only dream of. Through its meticulous examination of an enormous body of archival material, this book offers new and compelling answers to questions that have long mystified students of Soviet politics. Moreover, this great wealth of new information does not overwhelm the reader, but has been fashioned into a coherent, readable text.

The account begins with the close of WWII and the challenges of post-war reconstruction. Reconstruction entailed not only the rebuilding of a devastated nation, but also the reconfiguration of the political elite. If, during the contingencies of war, Stalin’s deputies had been allowed greater leeway, Stalin was now

determined to reassert his own personal regime. According to Gorlizki and Khlevniuk, this series of attacks on members of his ruling circle was never intended to wipe out his subalterns, but served to ‘resurrect the severe, patriarchal relationships of the late 1930s’ (pp. 17–8). Chapter 2 shows, however, that the reassertion of Stalin’s personal power was only part of the story. The authors maintain that ‘formal and routine committees were very much a feature of high-level decision-making in the late Stalin era’ (p. 45) and demonstrate how the Council of Ministers (Sovmin) – successor to the pre-war body, the Sovnarkom – was given extensive decision-making powers in the economic sphere. The Sovmin personnel contained not only leading political figures such as Malenkov, Beria, Mikoian, Kaganovich et al., but also younger members of the political elite who came from a technical background and had important specialist know-how. In the administration of this enormous, industrial, modernising nation, Stalin was apparently ready to abdicate from some questions and delegate responsibility to others in some select areas.

Chapter 3 focuses predominantly on the explosive year 1949, when escalation of the cold war led to Stalin ‘finally snapping’ (p. 80) and the most damaging of the post-war purges: the Leningrad and Gosplan Affairs. According to the authors, these attacks – by reminding Stalin’s colleagues of his potential for violence – then led to a period of relative stability within the Kremlin, as the ruling elite became reluctant to let any rivalries escalate. Chapter 4 shows how the Sovmin now became the site of an embryonic form of ‘collective leadership’. When Stalin was away from Moscow, the Bureau of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers often acted as a ‘genuinely collective agency’ with questions fully debated and authentic fact-finding commissions regularly set up.

Chapter 5 takes a rather different approach. Here the scope of the research is expanded and the authors consider the effect of Stalinist leadership on society more broadly, focusing in particular on policies towards the Gulag and agriculture. Gorlizki and Khlevniuk suggest that both Beria and Malenkov were aware that a policy shake-up was needed in these areas, but were impotent when faced with Stalin’s opposition to any significant change. The final chapter similarly presents the years 1952–3 as ones of continuity not change. Through detailed exploration of the XIX Party Congress and the infamous Doctors’ Plot they suggest that even in the last year of his life, Stalin’s actions were consistent with the style of rule he had fashioned throughout the post-war period: through denunciations and the unmasking of plots, he effectively maintained control over the security agencies; he dominated the ideological content of the Party Congress; he moved leading politicians ‘from office to office like marionettes’, and staved off any thoughts of succession. This final part thus helps us understand the events that followed Stalin’s death on 5 March 1953. *Cold Peace* suggests that in the last years of Stalin’s life the seeds of collective leadership had been sown by the autonomy Sovmin was – at times – granted, and that leading members of Sovmin were well-informed of the strife afflicting the nation and aware of the need for radical policy initiative; both were kept in check until the spring of 1953 by Stalin’s insistence on the primacy of his own personal power.

Gorlizki and Khlevniuk do much more than merely present the reader with new findings from the archives. Indeed in the book’s introduction, they suggest that its originality lies not only in its sources, but also in the kind of interpretation given to them. As an example, let us take their account of Andrei Zhdanov’s role in the radical crackdown on culture that occurred in the summer of 1946, with his notorious assault on the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*, and personal attacks on the poet Anna Akhmatova and the writer Mikhail Zoshchenko. Although traditionally he has been considered the architect of these campaigns, Gorlizki and Khlevniuk argue that Zhdanov actually had very few policy ideas of his own, instead acting as Stalin’s mouthpiece. Using the records of a key meeting of the Orgburo at which the vitriolic denunciation of the journals took place, they argue that Stalin took the most aggressive stance towards Akhmatova, while Zhdanov was unusually silent. When in 1947 the campaign deepened with an attack on two key scientists now accused of revealing secrets to western colleagues, documents again show that Zhdanov played a minimal role. Gorlizki and Khlevniuk use correspondence between Zhdanov and Stalin to suggest that the key impetus came from Stalin, and that Zhdanov acted in ‘in accordance’ with his ‘instructions’. The document trail leads the authors to argue that far from heading up the campaigns, Zhdanov instead took a backseat, ultimately finding his political reputation dented by many of the events of 1946–7.

A firm line of argument about the nature of Soviet high politics holds the text together. In this example, and

throughout the text, the authors maintain that the politically distinct factions or groupings identified by some scholars were not in evidence. Instead Gorlizki and Khlevniuk argue that the internecine fighting was choreographed by Stalin as a technique for maintaining his particular form of personal rule. Yet they do not simply look to personal psychology for their explanations. Instead of emphasising his personal tendency to paranoia or the possibility of impending senility, they depict him as a pragmatic leader. They draw on the concept of ‘neo-patrimonialism’ to show that while, on the one hand, Stalin used unpredictable and violent measures to retain ultimate political power and prevent any potential rivals emerging, he also created a modern system of administration which would allow the effective running of the country.

The concept of neo-patrimonialism first of all suggests the existence of the kind of patriarchal authority that the Tsar might once have enjoyed. It implies that the will of the leader was supreme, and that the ‘exercise of political power was thus discretionary and treated as the “private” affair of the ruler’. Examples of this kind of patrimonial authority are advanced throughout the book: his random demotion of figures fallen out of favour (Zhukov in 1946); the arrest of colleagues’ family members (Molotov’s wife Polina Zhemchuzhina in 1949); the discrediting of fellow leaders by removing their associates (the attacks on the Mingrelian officials to unsettle Beria); and in the worst cases, the physical destruction of those he had turned on (Voznesenskii and Kuznetsov in 1950). However, the story told in *Cold Peace* shows the existence of other more ‘modern’ forms of governance. Stalin’s personal rule proved compatible with more rational and predictable forms of administration, particularly outside of his immediate clique. Alongside the story of Stalin’s purges and intrigues, they also recount the development of Sovmin, in which decision-making was at least in part shared by skilled functionaries who brought technical expertise to the business of ruling.

Neo-patrimonialism proves a useful tool for explaining the contradictory, and complex, way power functioned in this post-war period. The authors suggest that two spheres emerged: one, the political domain in which Stalin dominated absolutely, the other, economic, where Sovmin committees were decisive. The boundary between the two could, of course, never be firm. Even where he had conceded power to Sovmin, Stalin could always intervene, and on occasion did indeed seize back the initiative (for example with the currency reform he initiated in 1947). Recognising the tenuous nature of this division, Gorlizki and Khlevniuk suggest that the system of ‘neo-patrimonialism’ was always fragile. Although stability was achieved – the Great Terror of 1937 was not revived – it was ‘a peace that always appeared to teeter on the edge of violence’ (p. 11).

Gorlizki and Khlevniuk explain the rationale behind this dual system by suggesting that ‘the despot never transgressed two principal parameters – one was pursuit of the country’s superpower ambitions; the other was the dictator’s unshakeable will to secure his own power in conditions of advanced age and ill health’ (p. 11). The goals are thus largely geo-political: the maintenance of global power on the one hand, and the individual authority of the leader on the other. This assertion underlies much of the book. The authors consistently show that Stalin’s purges and plots had a certain internal logic in his battle to retain power, whilst the perilous international situation often proved critical in driving Stalin to some of his more extreme actions. For some readers, what will be missing from this interpretation is a greater sense of how the broader domestic situation might have influenced the course of high politics.

It is perhaps in this regard that this work will prove the most controversial. In an article published last year in *Russian Review*, David Brandenberger offers a rather different reading of the Leningrad Affair than the one provided in *Cold Peace*. While Gorlizki and Khlevniuk argue that the rivalry between two factions within the ruling circle – one originating in Leningrad (Voznesenskii, Kuznetsov and Kosygin), the other headed up by Politburo old-timers (Malenkov and Beria) – erupted when Stalin’s faith in Voznesenskii was shaken by errors he committed as leader of Gosplan, Brandenberger maintains that more fundamental ideological issues were at stake. Although he recognises the importance of the factional hostilities, Brandenberger argues that Kuznetsov was targeted because of his belief that a committee should be created to organise party matters within the RSFSR, perhaps even that a Russian party should be formed. He argues that ‘attributing the whole Leningrad Affair to factional infighting in the Kremlin – a single grand narrative played out over the course of many years – ignores the ideological dimensions of the purge, particularly the idiosyncratic charges of “Russian nationalism” and RKP (b) factionalism that circulated during the affair’.⁽³⁾

It is a position that already has its critics. In a response in January 2005, Richard Bidlack argued that the purge was aimed at the ‘Leningrad cabal’, not at an ‘ideological deviation’.⁽⁴⁾ While *Cold Peace* is similarly committed to the argument that there were no programmatic differences between the political actors, it is not a line that will go unchallenged. Indeed, there are even moments in the course of the book where a slightly different picture of life in the Kremlin can be glimpsed. In the fascinating fifth chapter the authors explore the difficulties presented by the Gulag and agricultural sector, and suggest that Beria and Malenkov were already developing reform plans, though they realised the futility – and danger – of conveying them to Stalin. In this chapter, the reader starts to sense that Stalin’s right-hand men perhaps had more capacity for independent reflection than is allowed elsewhere in the book.

Although almost all historians of Soviet politics are now using unpublished governmental and party documents to re-examine earlier narratives, the scope of the archival work carried out for this book is exceptional. As a result, it represents a highly detailed, grounded and sophisticated account of how the Stalinist government might have functioned in the post-war era. Although it is a compelling version of events, it is not the final word – and nor, of course, does it claim to be. Indeed the current debate between Brandenberger and Bidlack demonstrates how the new discoveries in the archives are allowing historians to enter into productive exchange over the meaning of key events such as the Leningrad Affair. *Cold Peace* not only does an excellent job of revealing what we can learn from the archives, but also offers an interpretation of the sources that will play a very key role in these emerging debates. As both an effective narrative in its own right, and an invitation to consider further the nature of Soviet political culture in the post-war years, this book will be an extremely important text for scholars and students of Soviet history alike.

Notes

1. Chris Ward, 'What is History?: The Case of Late Stalinism', *Rethinking History*, 8 (2004), 439–458. Although Ward's highly original article uses Hayden White's work to fundamentally question the worth of this kind of narrative of the post-war era, the implications are not explored in detail here. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, N.J., 2001); Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism: Labour and the Restoration of the Stalinist System after World War II* (Cambridge, 2002); Elena Zubkova, *Russia after the War: Hopes, Illusions and Disappointments, 1945–1957* (trans. Hugh Ragsdale, Armonk, N.Y., 1998). The earlier emphasis on high politics is something that is changing very rapidly, however. Several recent dissertations have explored aspects of the post-war period. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David Brandenberger, 'Stalin, the Leningrad Affair, and the Limits of Postwar Reconstruction', *Russian Review*, 63 (2004), 241–255, at p. 246. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Richard Bidlack, 'Ideological or Political Origins of the Leningrad Affair? A Response to David Brandenberger', *Russian Review*, 64 (2005), 90–95. [Back to \(4\)](#)

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