

## *Chapters 9*

# The Making of Foreign Policy under Stalin

Jonathan HASLAM

### 1. The Inherent Flaw in Biography

The issue as to how Soviet foreign policy was made during the period of Stalin's dictatorship will seem a trifle redundant. Surely the dictator decided upon foreign policy and that was that? This has certainly been the view conventionally adopted by the dictator's biographers. But those biographers have not generally specialised in any one area of Soviet policy and have therefore not actually seen policy-making in any detail. Theirs is all too often the view from on high rather than that at eye level. This approach makes certain assumptions about Stalin's position within the structure and about Stalin himself: for example, that the Stalin of 1929 to 1939 was exactly the same man as the supremely self-confident and apparently very well informed "generalissimo" who sat with Churchill and Roosevelt to carve up the world; that Stalin was always interested in international relations; that from the outset he always had his own ideas about the conduct of foreign policy; that he would not allow others to influence the course of events. This mythical Stalin is unchanging, by all accounts a most exceptional man who escaped the impact of experience unlike almost everyone else in history; a man never given to doubt, a man who never acted on advice, a man who never gained confidence in spheres that originally lay far beyond his own limited realm. But perhaps we should not be too

surprised. This is the Stalin recreated by political scientists rather than historians; and if there is one obvious weakness in western social science, it is that it is static and insensible to the changing impact of events. But why not pause to reconsider the nature of Stalin's dictatorship and the mechanisms other than pure terror by which Stalin assured his predominance?

Because of the somewhat sensational claims made by Professor Getty<sup>1</sup> from the United States about Stalin's place within the structure of power, which in my view falsely eliminate Stalin from full responsibility for the terror unleashed from 1936, it is best to state from the outset that although the case to be made with respect to foreign policy decision-making calls for a more open-minded and enquiring view onto the functioning of the entire dictatorship, this writer is unalterably convinced that Stalin *was* directly and personally responsible for the terror campaign in those years; as all the evidence so far released from the newly opened Russian archives testifies. He was plainly an evil man. Having established that much, however, is it really necessary to insist that all policies carried out by the Soviet regime from 1929 to 1953 were products of *his* thinking, were *his* personal inspiration; that there was no significant contribution of others? To read his biographers, one would indeed assume so. And it seems to me that this line of reasoning — unsupported by evidence and taken for granted — is fundamentally flawed with respect to the way Stalin operated; and betrays a fundamental misunderstanding about the manner in which any political system makes policy, whether totalitarian or democratic.

## 2. The Inadequacy of Political Science

Perhaps the most baffling characterisation of foreign policy making by a prominent sovietologist can be found in a piece by Leonard Schapiro, who emerged in 1980 with a new discovery: "Totalitarianism in Foreign Policy."<sup>2</sup> Whatever the merits of

his treatment of the Brezhnev era — and what we now know is that it certainly was not Brezhnev alone who made foreign policy — his discussion pays no attention whatever to how foreign policy is normally made in the West; had he done so, certainly with respect to Britain, and France under the fifth republic, he may have found at least as much in common between the processes of totalitarian states and their democratic counterparts as their differences, not least because public opinion has traditionally been excluded or manipulated (as over Irangate and British arms sales to Iraq), Ministers lie to Parliament, and decisions have been concentrated into the hands of very few: this makes any notion of effective democracy in foreign policy somewhat tenuous, in Europe at least, and therefore the notion of totalitarianism in foreign policy making a matter of degree, not absolutes. What is also worrying about this characterisation of the processes in Moscow is the naive assumption that in day-to-day matters one can simply conduct policy without delegating power; yet this is definitely not like working a machine, for even the most lowly official has to interpret the policy laid down in what is often a rapidly changing context.

Schapiro gave us a general conception of Soviet foreign policy making. Robert C. Tucker gives us an eloquent but flawed portrait of Stalin and Stalin's methods both in his early essays and more recently in his full length biography, most importantly in volume two: *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941*.<sup>3</sup> His approach to Stalin is clearly marked out from that adopted by E.H. Carr and Isaac Deutscher who, borrowing from Trotsky, see Stalin largely in impersonal terms: not a man of ideas but a man almost devoid of original thought, and a politician who was the product of his times rather than the *deus ex machina* that others have usually presented.<sup>4</sup> Under Trotsky's persuasive influence, these historians undoubtedly underrated the impact of Stalin's personality. But — and this is where Tucker marches rather too far out ahead of the evidence — having established that Stalin was less the product of, than the maker of, the system,

he goes on to assert that the system created was nothing but a blind creature of Stalin's.

This position has its roots far back into the past, in Tucker's personal experience of Stalin's dictatorship while serving at the US embassy in Moscow during the early Cold War. Haunted by this bitter experience, he formulated this conception of the dictatorship not many years later. It is in an essay on "The Politics of Soviet De-Stalinisation" published in *World Politics* in October 1959 that he makes the classic formulation of the Soviet regime as a totalitarian structure:

Every true totalitarianism is a one-man system and comes to power through the subversion of a pre-existing political regime...after Stalin's blood purges of the middle 1930s, there was no longer in any real sense a ruling party, just as there was no real ruling class; there was at most a privileged stratum of bureaucratic serving-men who lived well and wore medals but who were instrumentalities rather than real holders or sharers of power.<sup>5</sup>

Tucker thus insists that from 1936 no one *shared* power with Stalin. How, then, did Stalin rule? Through the so-called Special Sector, Tucker tells us:

All directives for trials and purges were funneled through it. All information was channelled into it. It had a foreign section through which Stalin conducted foreign policy, and so on... It was, as it were, a little gear box through which the massive machinery of Soviet rule of over nearly 900 million human beings on about one-third of the earth's surface was operated. By manipulating the levers in the control panel, Stalin could cause all kinds of things to happen. He could play politics as though playing a piano, touching a key here and striking a chord there, with results as diverse as a blast in *Pravda* against Churchill, a purge in the Ukraine, a plan for a new power station on the Volga, a propaganda campaign about germ warfare, a re-evaluation of Einstein, or a government change in Bulgaria.<sup>6</sup>

It would be idle to deny that this portrayal does, of course, provide an explanation for much that happened. But one has to ask how complete it is as an explanation. The image is surely too simplistic. Stalin alone seems to do everything in relation to policy; others merely execute it. This claim is not new. It is the Stalin that was presented to us daily through the adulatory organs of the Soviet press from 1929 to 1953. It is also the Stalin that Khrushchev describes as the sole villain of the piece in his secret speech of 1956. As the leader of the Italian Communist Party Palmiro Togliatti put it: "At first, all that was good was put down to the superhuman positive qualities of one man; now, all that was bad comes to be attributed to the as many exceptional and even astonishing of his defects."<sup>7</sup> The adulation and the condemnation both served useful political purposes, both suspect, though perhaps not equally so; but was this approach ever adequate as an explanation as to how the system really worked?

It is striking to note that the view of the Stalinist system presented by Merle Fainsod was a more nuanced and sophisticated one:

The formula of totalitarian rule as it took shape under Stalin's ministrations was a complex one. It represented, in one aspect, a drive to safeguard his own security by obliterating all actual or competing centers of power... In this system of institutionalized mutual suspicion, the competing hierarchies of Party, police, army, and administration were kept in purposeful conflict and provided with no point of final resolution short of Stalin and his trusted henchmen in the Politburo. The concentration of power in Stalin's hands rested on the dispersal of power among his subordinates.<sup>8</sup>

This general comment with respect to "Stalin's Totalitarian Formula" seems much closer to reality than that presented by Tucker. For in Tucker there is no "dispersal of power"; there are not really any henchmen, either — at least, after 1929-30. Stalin's closest associates are mentioned without being discussed: Litvinov and Molotov, Dimitrov and Radek, all

appear and disappear from the pages of the text without any serious attention to their personalities, their power and their true influence. Since Stalin knows what he is going to do from the outset in every sphere of Soviet life and politics, what is the point of discussing the role of mere subordinates whose job it was just to execute policy, not think about it and guide Stalin's judgements?

For the characterisation given in *World Politics* in 1959, a good six years after Fainsod's portrayal of the system but with no reference to the alternative view he presents, is fully consonant with the Stalin presented in volume two of the biography. We are soon informed that Stalin "had his own distinctive orientation and... during the 1920s he worked out a policy program that gave concrete expression to it."<sup>9</sup> In respect of foreign policy, Tucker claims Stalin had a peculiarly "German orientation."<sup>10</sup> To make clear what his orientation was, whether in foreign or domestic policy, Tucker lack any direct evidence. What we "can" do, he suggests, is to "piece it together from various statements that he made during that decade."<sup>11</sup> This, it has to be said, is rather dubious methodologically. For he *assumes* that Stalin knew from the outset what he would do; he does not prove it. He then attempts to illustrate this assumption by means of very selective quotation. With respect to foreign policy this has an odd, but not altogether unexpected, result. Since the general line laid down by Lenin in foreign policy was that of an orientation towards Weimar Germany — the so-called Rapallo relationship — based on a common hostility to the Versailles peace settlement, it is as easy to find pro-German statements by Stalin as it is by everyone else; and extremely difficult to find anything said in public which contradicts it. The quotations from Stalin's public statements of the 1920s are therefore worthless as evidence of a personal orientation.

The Rapallo relationship underpinned the Soviet priority of keeping the capitalist camp divided; there is nothing odd in the fact that Stalin continued that line after he achieved personal supremacy in 1929. There is, however, no evidence to

suggest any particular personal attachment to that line or any other orientation in foreign policy. Indeed, what is most noticeable throughout the period of Stalin's supremacy is a marked reluctance to say anything coherent about foreign policy in public and an equally marked reluctance to meet foreign ambassadors, leaders or journalists, for discussions on the subject, with the notable exception of the period 1941-45. It is that image of the generalissimo taken from World War II projected back into the past which is so misleading.

### 3. Stalin's Immediate Entourage

The evidence of Stalin's own predetermined orientation lacking, what of those around him? It is, in my view, here that we find the sources of Stalin's position on any given question. First there is the issue of the strategy of collective security which Litvinov originated. Tucker informs us that "in the new atmosphere following January 1933, Litvinov and others were bound to be attracted to the idea of a new diplomacy of cooperation with those European states that had cause to fear Hitler's Germany. Stalin, however, had other ideas..."<sup>12</sup> But if Stalin had supreme power, how was it that the policy was adopted in December 1933? And statements Stalin made in support of the policy — most notably to Kollontai, the Soviet ambassador to Sweden — are ignored.<sup>13</sup> There is also the adoption of the Popular Front policy by the Comintern. Tucker passes by the evidence concerning major disputes over the direction Comintern should take and the fact that Stalin had favoured a continuation of the old line of class against class without comment.<sup>14</sup> Then there is the role of Vyacheslav Molotov. Born on 9 March 1890 Molotov joined the Bolsheviks at only sixteen years of age. Like Stalin he formed part of the internal emigration and therefore lost the opportunity to know what the outside world was really like. He became closely associated with Stalin in 1921 and Politburo member in January 1926. Stalin felt he could count on Molotov's political loyalty and it was for this reason and certainly no other that

he charged him with responsibility for the Comintern after Bukharin's removal in 1928-29. Then in 1930 he took over from Rykov as chairman of the Council of People's Commissars. Traditionary Molotov has always been assumed to have been a mere mouthpiece of Stalin's. New evidence has come to light that this was not so. We have Molotov's own testimony, for example. In conversation with Felix Chuyev in June 1977, he said the following with reference to his relationship with Stalin which had broken down after 1949:

I criticised certain views of Stalin's even before, and I told him in person. I consider that a Communist, a member of the Politburo, thirty years there but with no opinions of his own, is a chatterbox. Thus I consider that Stalin valued me, the fact that I had some kind of opinion, some understanding of the issues. Well, he did not always agree with me, but I have to say that he largely agreed with me. Otherwise we could not have worked together for 30 years.<sup>15</sup>

Yet when he considers a statement by Molotov on policy towards Germany that contradicts the basic line of Soviet foreign policy — notably when in 1936 Molotov tells a French journalist that "the chief tendency, and the one determining the Soviet Government's policy, thinks an improvements in Soviet-German relations possible" — Tucker immediately leaps to the conclusion that "Stalin made his position public via Molotov."<sup>16</sup> But this is an assumption, not a statement of fact. Why is it not equally possible that Molotov held to a strongly pro-German line, and that he had managed to convince an agnostic Stalin that now was the time to make it more public? This would, of course, flatly contradict Tucker's assumption that from the outset Stalin had a strategy of dragging the West into a war with Germany.<sup>17</sup> This is exactly what Stalin feared the West might be contemplating with respect to Russia and Germany. Nonetheless Litvinov had persuaded him to take a forward position in favour of the containment of Germany even at the risk of provoking Berlin.<sup>18</sup> And in this writer's view it was only in August 1939



that Stalin finally gave up that option and switched decisively to the other side.<sup>19</sup>

There is other testimony that Molotov had open disagreements with Stalin over policy. "I would say," recalls Khrushchev, "that he [Molotov] was the only person in the Politburo who opposed Stalin on this or that question for the second time."<sup>20</sup> In the opinion of Marshal Zhukov, who observed Molotov and Stalin at close quarters for the first time in 1940-41, Molotov "exerted serious influence over Stalin, particularly in questions of foreign policy, in which Stalin then, until the war, considered him [Molotov] competent." When attacked by Stalin, "Molotov by no means always remained silent." Indeed, "at times it reached the point where Stalin raised his voice and even lost all self-control, and Molotov, smiling, rose from behind the table and held firm to his point of view."<sup>21</sup>

There is evidence that Stalin was indecisive on matters of foreign policy. This emerges most clearly in respect of relations with Japan. The Japanese assault on Manchuria from September 1931 threatened to evolve into a campaign against the Soviet Far East. In Moscow this jeopardised completion of the first five-year plan and forced the speeding-up of preparations for war. The thorny question was: should the Russians appease the Japanese until they were ready for war or should they make a show of standing firm and risk war even though defence preparations were far from adequate? There is no evidence that Stalin took a decisive position either way. And there is abundant evidence that his subordinates were bickering with one another over the right path to take; in itself an unambiguous sign that Stalin found it difficult to make up his mind. The issue was further complicated when Hitler took power in January 1933. Those who argued that Germany now presented a threat to Soviet security — as Litvinov predicted it would when Hitler took power — pressed for continued appeasement of Japan; those who were more rabidly anti-Japanese found a further reason for continuing to sustain close relations with Germany. The Soviet Union did

not have the power to contemplate a war on two fronts; so a decision was required between the two orientations. Early in 1932 the French ambassador to Moscow reported a clash of opinion between those advocating a forward policy in the East, including the Deputy Commissar for Foreign Affairs Lev Karakhan, and those advocating a more passive line, first and foremost Litvinov. Thereafter foreign embassies picked up frequent signs of discord among leading officials.<sup>22</sup>

#### **4. The Postwar Period**

We have spoken entirely about pre-war Stalin and emphasised here and elsewhere that he may well have been rather a different figure in relation to foreign policy than the Stalin of the war and after, in that it took time for him to take a direct grip on all aspects of foreign policy; and that partly from lack of interest and partly also from lack of direct knowledge, he diffused control among his immediate entourage, adopted policies proposed by others on a trial and error basis, and ultimately only took more operational control after the dismissal of Litvinov in May 1939. On this view the difference between pre-war and postwar Stalin was one of degree. He appears never to have handed over a degree of operational control to Molotov and Vyshinsky to the same extent that he did to Litvinov. On the other hand, the signs are that debates over policy continued — indeed intensified — into the early Cold War; and that the great battles of the 1950s over whether to pursue detente with the West and, if so, how far to go, fought out between Malenkov and Molotov, and then Khrushchev and Molotov, were to some extent prefigured in these earlier debates.

Much of this will, of course, remain speculative until the Politburo papers on the foreign policy issues of the period are opened.<sup>23</sup> But then Stalin's biographers have not shunned speculation, even if it is presented as hard fact. The evidence in US diplomatic archives is that there were, indeed, some intense debates in Moscow over the line to take from 1945.

Walter Bedell-Smith, who served as US ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1946-1949 before heading the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency, wrote memoirs which appeared in 1950. There he had some interesting reflections on the structure of power and decision in the Kremlin. He describes Stalin thus: "Courageous but cautious; suspicious, revengeful and quick to anger, but coldly ruthless and pitilessly realistic; decisive and swift in the execution of his plans when the objective is clear, but patient, deceptive and Fabian in his tactics when the situation is obscure..."<sup>24</sup> Because he centralised power, and because the officials down below dare not communicate the unadorned truth, even if their indoctrination allowed them to see it, "Stalin must be by character, experience and environment, almost completely dependent on a few close friends and advisers within the walls of the Kremlin." Bedell-Smith continues: "It is not only in authoritarian states that the continuous struggle for access to the Chief of State, and for control of his sources of information, is a major factor in political life. In the Soviet Union, where secrecy and suspicion are rife, this must be particularly intense. Because of Stalin's ignorance of the West, his suspicious Georgian character and his isolation, the power of his few political intimates must be very great. It is in the character of these advisers, and in their relationship with Stalin, that we must seek the answers to many of the perplexing manifestations of Soviet foreign policy and of the Soviet attitude toward the United States and Western Europe."<sup>25</sup> "My own impression," wrote Bedell-Smith, "is that there really was a decided difference of opinion in the Politburo concerning relations with the West."<sup>26</sup> Interestingly he saw opinions cluster around two distinct groups within Stalin's entourage: the "Moderates," who believed the Soviet Union needed to buy more time before confronting the West and should therefore require a "closer understanding" with the United States and its allies; and the hardliners, who favoured a more pro-active policy of "constant pressure, aggressive action and intransigence." The more militant group

he saw clustered around Molotov and included Zhdanov — "one of the most anti-Western and anti-foreign members of the upper Soviet hierarchy"<sup>27</sup> — and Beria; the more moderate element he saw grouped around Malenkov. When set against what we know of the events that followed Stalin's death and the struggle over the direction of Soviet foreign policy between Molotov and Malenkov from 1953-55 (and then between Molotov and Khrushchev from 1955-56 and later), Bedell-Smith's conclusions carry an undeniable authority. And his conclusions were not mere speculation. Some concrete evidence had come to his notice with respect to the "events which preceded Zhdanov's death [31 August 1948]," which "reflected some discord in the ranks of the Politburo."<sup>28</sup> And the continuation of the debate concerning the thesis by Eugene Varga that the capitalist world was entering a new period of stabilisation gives added support to the notion of a clash of views on the future direction of foreign policy. For if the West was restabilising and unlikely to re-divide in further internecine warfare, then the Soviet Union would be wiser to come to terms with it in the spirit of compromise; if the opposite were true, as Varga's opponents argued, then the Russians could afford to pursue their goals entirely unilaterally confident that a Western bloc could not come into being and confident that capitalism would sooner rather than later collapse. As Bedell-Smith noted in 1948: the ultimate fate of the Varga group "may therefore well serve as a weathercock of party attitudes toward [the] western world..."<sup>29</sup>

Of course, these internal differences were never permitted except as Stalin's own peculiar means of ensuring that he never received a monolithic set of advice on important questions; and by setting his entourage at loggerheads, he could also ultimately ensure that they would always require him to reach a neutral decision. The means of making decisions was thus in a fundamental sense intimately connected with the means of assuring continued supremacy; the terror was too blunt a tool to serve all purposes and might in the end ensure he never had alternative options presented

from which he could, in his more Fabian moods, select the right course. Perhaps this is the least misleading way in which to view the operations of the Soviet dictatorship under Stalin; certainly it is a hypothesis that fits the known facts more adequately than the alternatives presented. But above all we should not be intimidated into thinking that any reformulation of our ideas on this subject is somehow tantamount to Stalin's rehabilitation; for if we are to work in fear of this, we might as well be living in a totalitarian system ourselves.

### Notes

- 1 J.A. Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: the Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 2 K. London (ed.), *The Soviet Union in World Politics* (Westview and Croom Helm, Boulder and London, 1980), pp. 3-24.
- 3 Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above 1928-1941* (Norton, New York and London, 1990).
- 4 For Carr's portrayal: E.H. Carr, *Socialism in One Country 1924-1926*, Vol. 1 (Macmillan, London, 1958), pp. 174-1,86.  
For  
Deutscher's: I. Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography* (Oxford University Press, London, 1949), pp. 273,295,318,322 and 326. And for Tucker's criticism of this approach: Tucker, *The Soviet Political Mind*, pp. 108-112. This criticism is repeated in Tucker's biography of Stalin: *Stalin in Power*, p. 145.
- 5 Reprinted in R.C. Tucker, *The Soviet Political Mind: Stalinism and Post-Stalin Change* (revised edition, Norton, London, 1972), pp. 178-179.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- 7 Intervista a Nuovi argomenti, No. 20, May-June 1956: reprinted in P.Togliatti, G. Santomassimo (ed.), *Opere scelte* (Editori Riuniti, Rome, 1974), p. 716.
- 8 M. Fainsod, *How RUSSIA is Ruled* (Revised edition, Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 109.
- 9 Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, p. 40.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 226.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 12 Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, p. 233.
- 13 Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933-39* (Macmillan, London; St. Martin's Press, New York, 1984), p. 41.

- 14 For the disputes: Haslam, "The Comintern and the Origins of the Popular Front 1934-1935," *The Historical Journal*, 22, 3 (1979), pp. 673-691.
- 15 Interview, 16 June 1977: *Sto sorok besed s Molotvym* (Terra, Moscow, 1991), p. 370.
- 16 Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, p. 350.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 342 and 345.
- 18 See Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe 1933-39* (Macmillan, London and St. Martin's Press, New York, 1984).
- 19 The latest evidence on this supports that view: see the documents recently published from the Narkomindel files and now open to readers in the archives — V. Komplektov et al. (eds.), *Dokumenty Vneshnei Politiki 1939 god*, Vol. 1 (Mezhdunarodnaia otnosheniia, Moscow, 1992).
- 20 Quoted in Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Threat from the East, 1933-41: Moscow, Tokyo and the Prelude to the Pacific War* (Macmillan, London, and Pittsburgh University Press, 1992), p. 17.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19 and 21-22.
- 23 The decisions on foreign, defence and intelligence policies are not recorded in the regular minutes, but in another category — *osobaia papka* (special file). The category is apparently being released to readers only for the pre-war period; moreover, it is said that the supporting position papers that underlay the final decisions are to remain closed. That files of the Foreign Ministry for the early Cold War are now declassified (1945-49) with the exception — an important and extremely frustrating exception — of the ciphered correspondence, which remains closed. It is said that the ciphered correspondence for the years 1917-41 will now be declassified. But we have no promises with regard to the subsequent period.
- 24 W. Bedell-Smith, *Moscow Mission 1946-1949* (Heinemann, London, 1950), p. 51.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 29 Bedell-Smith (Moscow) to Marshall (Washington), 6 December 1948: *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948, Vol. IV: Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union* (USGPO, Washington, 1974), p. 942.