

Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion: Elite Power Struggles in the Soviet Union and China after Stalin and Mao

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In *Prestige, Manipulation, and Coercion: Elite Power Struggles in the Soviet Union and China after Stalin and Mao*, Joseph Torigian makes a major contribution to the literature on authoritarian politics. Through two sets of carefully researched case studies of the Soviet Union after Stalin and China after Mao, he shows that leadership prestige and ability to mobilize coercive agencies determined who triumphed in power struggles after the death of incumbent dictators. Instead of forming coalitions through offering the best policy options to an audience of powerful officials, Torigian argues that potential dictators manipulate information and mobilize their supporters in the military or the secret police to carry out naked power struggles against competitors. This is a helpful corrective to a literature that has focused on formal institutions and coalition formation. Also, by presenting two key cases across two different one-party regimes, Torigian heightens both the persuasiveness and readability of the book, which is an important work of scholarship for both China and Soviet specialists.

Torigian's book is most persuasive in the discussion of the policies and attempts at coalition formation by failed candidates for the top position in one-party regimes. Beria, after Stalin's death, suddenly became a reasonable chap who was open to liberalization and greater flexibility in economic policies. Yet, he ended up being secretly executed by fellow Presidium members due to his reputation as a mass murderer whom no one could trust. Likewise, in Torigian's persuasive rendition of events, Jiang Qing and Zhang Chunqiao also were open to some adjustments in economic policies and presumed that they would have to share power with Hua Guofeng and other elites. In reality, they had no design to replace Hua Guofeng, and thought that their quibbling with Hua only served to limit his power. Jiang Qing even made some attempts to court the military. Yet, the Gang of Four was unceremoniously arrested by troops from the Central Guard Unit under the command of a coalition of Hua Guofeng and Long March veterans. Clearly, the outcomes for these losers cannot be explained by their formal positions in the Party or by their policies alone.

Another important aspect of the book centres on the role of the power ministries. Some of the existing literature in authoritarian politics indeed treats senior officials in the armed forces or in the Secret Police as simple "actors" in the elite political game, similar to other senior officials. Torigian shows persuasively that they in fact were crucial figures in both post-Stalin and post-Mao politics precisely because they had command over armed forces. This provided them with important bargaining power and made them necessary members of any winning coalition. Despite attempts by authoritarian theorists to abstract away from the power of the gun, Torigian shows that one really cannot do so without losing crucial aspects of non-democratic politics.

Yet, I find that the dismissal of the role of institutions in the main argument goes too far. Torigian states at the beginning that "weak institutions are unable to provide a serious platform for policy deliberation or to convey 'rational-legal' authority to leaders" (p. 3). However, throughout the book, formal and informal institutions appear to play important roles in the events described. To begin, Torigian argues that strong institutions only exist if a strong third party were to enforce them (p. 6). Yet, a strand in the institutional literature suggests that actors, through following institutional rules and procedures,



can make them more credible over time and can increase the costs of deviating from these institutions, even if no strong external power enforced them (see Kathleen Thelen, *How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States and Japan*, Cambridge University Press, 2004). The prestige of Long March veterans, who formed an informal institution, was enforced by senior Long March veterans in the Party through the daily practice of denigrating those outside of the group. In the case of both post-Stalin USSR and post-Mao China, the underlying hierarchical order of the Party, which only allowed a small number of individuals entry to the elite political game, also remained largely intact. This was why the power struggles were between a small handful of elites in these regimes – Beria, Khrushchev, Molotov, Malenkov, Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping. No junior county chief emerged from an outlying province to challenge those in authority in Beijing because the Party's basic hierarchy remained strong. There were some worries that members of the Central Committee, just one layer below the top elite, might be introduced into top-level elite competition. Yet, the Party constitution in China at least allowed for it. Also, generals which commanded hundreds of thousands of troops such as Chen Xilian and Zhukov, never had designs for the top position themselves because the institution of "party controlling the guns" was deeply ingrained in both China and in the USSR. To be sure, the manners in which Beria and the Gang of Four were removed deviated sharply from formal institutions. Yet, the basic competition in post-Stalin USSR and post-Mao China was shaped by formal institutions.

The historical details that Torigian introduces to the two cases are rich and in some cases novel. For example, more so than any other works I have seen, the book's treatment of the elite manoeuvring, or lack thereof, by Hua Guofeng is engrossing and convincing. Yet, there are some glaring holes in the book's accounts, which future research hopefully will address. In discussing the relationship between the Gang of Four and the PLA, the otherwise detailed account does not discuss the Gang's relationship with General Ding Sheng, the Commander of the Nanjing Military Region in the mid-1970s. Even by Ding's own account, he got on very well with Zhang Chunqiao and even Jiang Qing (see Ding Sheng, *Luolan yingxiong: Ding Sheng jiangjun huiyi lu (A Hero in Trouble: The Memoirs of General Ding Sheng)*, Hong Kong: Xingke'er Publisher, 2008). Given this important link, why couldn't the Gang of Four defend themselves better? Was it mainly because of Wang Dongxing's proximity to the leadership and his enthusiasm toward removing the Gang of Four, which finally led to their arrests?

Another missing piece is the role of the police in the politics of the immediate post-Mao years. Under Xie Fuzhi, the Ministry of Public Security and the Special Case Groups had grown into a fearsome political organ with wide-ranging powers to investigate, detain and incarcerate. Why didn't the Gang of Four cultivate the ministry and the special case groups into a powerful secret police organ? For that matter, Hua Guofeng, who served as the minister of public security for a few years, also did not transform the ministry into a main weapon of political struggle. Why? And in relation to that, why was the secret police important in the post-Stalin power struggle but similar organs were not important in the post-Mao power struggle? The book is silent on these issues which await future scholarship.

In sum, Torigian's book provides a helpful corrective to the literature on authoritarian politics, highlighting the roles of prestige and ability to control core coercive organs in determining the outcomes of power struggles. Future research still needs to clarify how power struggles still took place within the broad confines of core party institutions and norms and how the military and the police were mobilized during power struggles.