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“Basically, it’s a History of the Russian State”: Russocentrism, Etatism, and the Ukrainian Question in Stalin’s Editing of the 1937 *Short History of the USSR*

David Brandenberger 

University of Richmond, VA, USA
Email: dbranden@richmond.edu

Abstract

Joseph Stalin and the Soviet party leadership launched a major propaganda campaign in 1931 that called for a new approach to Soviet history, not only for scholars and pedagogues but for society as a whole. A veritable “search for a usable past,” this initiative was to bolster the authority and legitimacy of the state and rally the population together in patriotic unity by connecting the prerevolutionary past to the Stalinist present. When this new historical line was finally unveiled in 1937, it challenged earlier Soviet sloganeering on subjects like nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism. This article examines how Stalin attempted to reconcile his new “usable past” with these other ideological priorities, focusing on a case study of the so-called Ukrainian question within the context of the USSR’s broader reevaluation of tsarist-era imperialism and colonial policy.

Keywords: USSR; Russia; Ukraine; Stalin; Nationality policy; History; “usable past”; etatism; imperialism; colonialism; nationalism

On July 12, 2021, V. V. Putin published a treatise entitled “On the Historical Unity of the Russians and Ukrainians” (Putin 2021). In this essay, he presents a primordialist view of the historical origins of eastern Slavic society that stresses Russians’ common heritage with two other eastern Slavic peoples—the Ukrainians and Belarusians.¹ According to Putin, Russians and Ukrainians have felt a sense of ethnic unity for over a millennium—a sense of community reinforced by a shared faith in Orthodox Christianity. Throughout this history of togetherness, the essay asserts, Ukraine has repeatedly looked to Russia for leadership and historical agency. And during much of this time, Putin contends, foreign powers have attempted to undermine this sense of common cause by fomenting division in Ukrainian society to transform it into something he refers to as an “anti--Russia.”

A byproduct of Putin’s two-decade “search for a usable past” (Weiss-Wendt and Adler 2021; more generally, Brooks 1918), this programmatic intervention into the politics of history evokes associations with another official initiative on the historical front begun some 90 years ago. It was in 1931, after all, that Joseph Stalin and the party leadership began to call for a new approach to the teaching of history in the public schools that by 1934 would lead to the commissioning of a new historical narrative. In time, it became clear that the new official line was to connect the Soviet present to the prerevolutionary past in ways that would enhance state authority and legitimacy while also promoting patriotic unity. A pragmatic gamble to enhance the mobilizational potential of Soviet propaganda, it led to the release of a new historical line in 1937 that advanced these priorities

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at the expense of traditional sloganeering that had long celebrated internationalism and condemned nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism.

Recent scholarship has explored much of this campaign, focusing on its etatist and russocentric dimensions. It's also highlighted the dynamic role played by Stalin in the process, revealing that he not only supervised the historical campaigns of the 1930s but personally edited and even selectively rewrote elements of the developing line (Brandenberger 2002, *forthcoming*; Dubrovskii 2017; Tikhonov 2021). That said, much less is known about how this new historical propaganda represented prerevolutionary Ukraine and its relationship with its regional neighbors (generally, Yekelchik 2004). How did Stalin feel about the entangled history of the eastern Slavic peoples who slowly converged over the course of a thousand years into modern Russians and Ukrainians? How did he regard the Ukrainians themselves in historical perspective? How did Stalin reconcile the Ukrainian historical experience with his increasingly statist, russocentric world view? And how did the Soviet dictator address the issue of Russian imperialism and colonialism within this ostensibly revolutionary narrative?

This article examines Stalin's beliefs about the historical relationship between the Russian and Ukrainian peoples through a case study of his editing of A. V. Shestakov's seminal *Short History of the USSR* (Shestakov 1937). Officially released as a textbook for the public schools in 1937, this volume took on a much larger role after it entered circulation that fall. The only officially approved account of Stalin's new "usable past," it quickly came to structure not only classroom instruction for Soviet youth and political literacy courses for their parents but all other historical work on the printed page, theatrical stage, and silver screen. K. F. Shtepa, who taught at Kiev State University during the late 1930s recalled later that "it was the only material on Russian history" available to educators even on the collegiate level. "Only by means of this little book," Shtepa averred, "was it possible to orient oneself regarding the demands of Party policy with respect to any historical question, phenomenon, or event" (Shtepa 1962, 128–129). Shestakov's *Short History*, then, offers a unique opportunity to characterize the official Stalinist line on the historical relationship between the Russians and Ukrainians.

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Between 1931 and 1937, the Soviet party leadership repeatedly intervened into the way that the past was officially depicted, narrated, and taught in the USSR. During these years, historians, ideologues, writers, and pedagogues were recruited to create a new thousand-year narrative on the prerevolutionary origins of Soviet statehood—a program that was to reinforce the authority and legitimacy of Stalin's rule while at the same time supplying this diverse society with a sense of unity and group identity (Brandenberger 2002, *forthcoming*).

This agenda posed an implicit challenge to much of the country's Marxist-Leninist historical canon, which dated back to before the revolution. Epitomized by the writings of M. N. Pokrovskii, this corpus of work typically depicted imperial Russia as dominating the prerevolutionary history of the region (Pokrovskii 1932). A rapacious empire driven first by conquest and then by commercial capital, it was held to be as chauvinistic at home (a veritable "prison of peoples") as it was reactionary abroad ("the Gendarme of Europe"). Pokrovskii framed much of his exposé of Russian tyranny according to the laws of historical materialism—an approach that sometimes seemed overly "sociological," schematic, and inaccessible. And although Ukrainian and other non-Russian scholars hailed his criticism of tsarist-era colonialism, they noted that he focused more attention on the system of exploitation than he did on the experience of those it exploited (Mace 1982; Chernobaev 1992; Velychenko 1993; Amacher 2018; Golubev 2023).

Many of the historians tasked with breaking with Pokrovskii during the mid-1930s struggled to grasp the new useable past's stress on historical unity. Was the new line to be based on a people's history that traced exploitation and class conflict from the dawn of recorded history through 1917? Or was it to balance such coverage with a more nuanced accounting of political leadership and state-building? And how was this new focus on unity to treat the former empire's ethnographic diversity and the relationship between the Russian and non-Russian peoples? Was the Pokrovskiiian critique

of Russian chauvinism to be maintained or was it to be recast into a less divisive story of interethnic cooperation?

These thematic questions were compounded by others of a more historiographic nature. Was the usable past still to privilege historical materialism's reliance on economic drivers to explain change over time? Or were individual leaders now to be endowed with actual historical agency? And was the narrative to be emplotted according to a single, linear storyline, which would steadily incorporate more and more of the region's diverse peoples? Or was the official line to be composed of multiple, parallel narratives that would only slowly converge into one historical arc?

During the initial stages of this search for a usable past, the party leadership appeared committed to preserving at least some of the elements of the 1920s canon (generally, Tikhonov 2021). That said, behind the scenes, Stalin expressed an increasingly strong preference for an emphasis on Russian state builders and the state they built (Dubrovskii and Brandenberger 1998; Brandenberger 2002, 30–37, 43–50). At the same time, Stalin clarified that the narrative that he had in mind consisted of a single historical arc, focusing on the history of Russia rather than a collection of separate storylines that would come together on the eve of October 1917. Echoing an idea that he first expressed in 1913, Stalin declared that the “Russian people in the past gathered together the other peoples and they have begun this sort of gathering again now” (Litvin, Dubrovskii, and Brandenberger 2009, 505–507). As A. A. Zhdanov would later reiterate, “the most important historical factor is the gathering of Rus’.”²

Although the official historical line was ultimately to produce a linear, thousand-year narrative based on Russian history, this russocentrism ought not be confused with russification or Russian nationalism. According to Stalin, the narrative was, by definition, inherently and inescapably russocentric because of the nature of the historical context: “in Russia, it was the Great Russians, and their historically formed, powerful and well-organized aristocratic military bureaucracy, who took on the role of uniting of the nationalities” (Stalin 1937, 10). There was, in Stalin's mind, simply no other correct way of thinking about regional history.

This changing approach to the past corresponded to changes in Soviet nationality policy. Initially designed to promote the socialist development and self-actualization of each of the non-Russian nationalities, it was reframed by Stalin in 1935 to provide a source of “internationalist” unity under the “Friendship of the Peoples” slogan (Stalin 1935; generally, Martin 2001, 432–437). Such a stress on domestic interethnic bonds allowed the party leadership to celebrate national differences while at the same time discouraging excessive talk of cultural autonomy (Martin 2001, chaps. 6–7).

According to the Soviet press, the Friendship of the Peoples was inherently different from nationalism and imperialism, insofar as this sense of internationalism promoted diversity in an inclusive way that celebrated not only ethnic pride but mutual respect and acceptance as well. At least in theory, such an approach to identity politics provided for a dynamic new sense of domestic unity while precluding tendencies commonly associated with nationalism and imperialism that precipitated chauvinism, inequality, and assimilation (Brandenberger 2021, 569).

If the Friendship of the Peoples initially focused on the celebration of non-Russian activism within the context of the “Soviet experiment,” this ethic shifted in the press in 1937 to publicly identify a leading role for the Russian people to perform in the process. Something hinted at in public as early as 1936, this domestic russocentric internationalism differed from most conventional forms of nationalism insofar as it granted the Russian people a position of ideological, political, and cultural leadership within the Soviet family of nations without endowing them with special rights, privileges, or autonomy. Instead, the Russians were merely termed the first among equals—an ethnic group that was officially credited first with leadership in the revolutionary struggle and then, in time, with much broader accomplishments within prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary Soviet society. An unusual model of interethnic relations in which an exclusive sense of Russian primacy was balanced by inclusive, all-encompassing Russian altruism, it was described in the official press as the antithesis of chauvinism, nationalism, and imperialism (Brandenberger 2021, 570). It was this sense of internationalist russocentrism that was to animate the new history of the USSR.³

Narrating that history, however, proved easier said than done. Official efforts to commission a new historical narrative struggled between 1934 and 1935, producing a half-dozen manuscripts that at best incompletely broke with Pokrovskii's line on the past—something that often alternated between schematic economic determinism and a divisive indictment of Russian chauvinism.

Adopting a different approach to its search for a usable past in 1936, the party leadership announced a public competition to identify a new narrative for the preceding millennium. Here too, many of the manuscripts solicited by the competition tended to focus more on rebellion, revolution, and social change than state-building or social unity (Tikhonov, 2021). Frustrated, Stalin asked Agitprop chief A. I. Stetskii to survey textbooks from the state school of prerevolutionary Russian historiography during the spring of 1937 to see if any of them were suitable for rerelease. Stetskii's reply was dismissive: they were dated and full of "religious-monarchist notions," "reworking these textbooks would be just as difficult as publishing new textbooks."⁴

In the end, Stalin and his comrades in arms concluded that one of the competition's finalists—a manuscript developed by an editorial brigade under the historian A. V. Shestakov—was acceptable enough to be revised into an official statement on the past. Shestakov and his brigade then spent several months working in tandem with their party handlers and other professional historians to bring their text into conformity with the party leadership's expectations (Dubrovskii 2017, 139–233).

Stalin took a look at a mature set of the publisher's galleys in early June and objected to the attention that it devoted to his cult of personality and the way that it exaggerated the revolutionary nature of premodern peasant uprisings.⁵ Zhdanov and other party bosses conveyed an array of other correctives to Shestakov as well (Dubrovskii 2017, 229–233). The end result was a second bound set of publisher's galleys that was disseminated for review within the party leadership in early July.⁶ Stalin took a close interest in what was assumed to be the final version of the text and spent hours early that month first marking up the galleys and then meeting with Zhdanov to discuss further revisions suggested by other party bosses and professional historians.⁷

How, then, did Shestakov depict the historical relationship between the Russian and Ukrainian peoples within the context of his story of state building over the preceding millennium? And how did Stalin react to this narrative?

Shestakov and his brigade began the first chapter of his textbook with commentary on the prehistory of the territory that in 1937 made up the USSR. After detailing the earliest peoples to populate the north shore of the Black Sea and the steppe beyond—Greeks, Scythians, Huns, Khazars, and Bulgars—Shestakov noted that they soon came into contact with an array of Slavic agriculturalists. According to Shestakov, these Slavic tribes were the forefathers of the modern Russian people. The Slavs waged war against the Khazars and Bulgars as well as against the Byzantine Greeks; in the west, other Slavs challenged the dominance of local Germanic tribes and Scandinavian Varangians. According to Shestakov, the Slavic tribes grew steadily in strength and number; by the 8th century AD, they possessed some 15 towns and had entered into a trade relationship with Byzantium.⁸

Stalin approved of the way that Shestakov and his brigade framed their discussion of the early peoples of the region—particularly the predecessors of Soviet peoples such as the Georgians, Armenians, Uzbeks, and Slavs. This at least in part stemmed from an interest in supporting their autochthonic claims to the area and refuting competing notions of Persian, Turkic, and Germanic influence. Zhdanov supported Stalin's interest in reinforcing the permanence of the region's ethnopolitical order by stressing that the Slavic tribes were the ancestors of not only the Russian people but the Ukrainians and Belarusians as well. At the same time, Zhdanov—probably in consultation with his historian consultants—scaled back Shestakov's exaggeration of the Slavs' early economic development and urbanization.⁹

In Shestakov's second chapter, the historian detailed how in the 9th century AD the Varangians conquered first the northern-most Slavic tribes in the Novgorod area and then in the ensuing century extended their power south along the Dnieper to found a state that he termed Kiev Rus'.¹⁰

According to Shestakov, the Varangians expanded the region's trade with Byzantium and intermarried into the local Slavic population. In time, their Slavic heirs grew strong enough to even lay siege to Constantinople. Soon thereafter, Byzantium became more than just a source of wealth, supplying the rulers of Kiev Rus' with secular traditions of statecraft and religious traditions associated with Christianity that the latter used to reinforce their authority and legitimacy.¹¹

According to Shestakov, the unity of this Slavic polity was fleeting, however. First, the rulers of Kiev and Novgorod were challenged by commoners rebelling against the exploitation of the nobility. Then, in the 12th century, internecine fighting among the heirs to the Kievan throne led to the city's decline and the emergence of several new centers of power. In the west, Galician Volynia took shape, balanced in the northeast by the rise of Rostov-Suzdal. To the northwest, Novgorod reasserted its dominant role in regional foreign trade. Long considered a backwater, the Rostov-Suzdal region rose to relative prominence later in the 12th century, when a series of influential princes moved their seat of power first to Vladimir and then to Moscow. That said, according to Shestakov, these new rulers struggled to control their subordinate princelings and nobles and again collapsed into internecine warfare by the end of the 12th century. Only a few decades later this fragmented region was overrun by invading Tatar-Mongolian forces.¹²

Stalin sanctioned much of Shestakov's second chapter. That said, when vetting his treatment of Kievan prince Vladimir's decision to baptize his subjects, Stalin increased the stress that the text placed on the "pagan" nature of the Slavs' religious beliefs and how the coming of the Orthodox Christianity was progressive in Marxist-Leninist terms. "For its time, Christianity," Stalin wrote into the margins, "was in comparison with paganism a step forward in the development of Russia" (see [Figure 1](#)) Aside from Stalin's endorsement of Christianity, this passage marked the first of many instances of his anachronistic use of the term "Russia."¹³

Stalin also cited Marxism-Leninism to clarify the ineffectiveness of popular uprisings during these centuries. According to Stalin, the grassroots rebellions in Kiev and Novgorod failed because they were "spontaneous" and "unconscious." Stalin would repeat these observations about the limits of grassroots action over and over again in subsequent chapters.¹⁴

When Zhdanov turned to work on Chapter Two, he made an array of small changes that stressed the importance of the Kievan state and Novgorod's role in international trade. This editing implicitly compared this polity's early geopolitical successes with its later disunion and decline, adding several sentences to the end of the chapter about how ceaseless internecine warfare in the region had weakened the local nobility and ruined the peasantry. Such a collapse of regional unity and governing institutions, averred Zhdanov, was disastrous, as it left the Slavic lands vulnerable to Tatar-Mongol attack.¹⁵

Shestakov and his brigade opened their third chapter with a discussion of the rise of the Mongol empire. According to the historians, these nomads first subjugated Central Asia and the Transcaucasus in the early 13th century under Genghiz Khan, before overrunning the eastern Slavic principalities in 1240—principalities that Shestakov anachronistically referred to as "Russian." The Mongols then sacked Kiev and invaded central Europe. Over the course of the next 200 years, the Mongols and their Tatar allies would plunder the region, subjugating the "Russian" princes and forcing them to aid the Golden Horde in its collection of tribute. In the wake of Kiev's decline, the text's shift in focus from Slavs to Russians signaled a permanent downgrading of Ukraine as a site of regional political history.¹⁶

Instead, it was now Moscow for Shestakov that emerged as the leading principality during these difficult years. Prince Ivan "Kalita" was especially successful in this respect, using his role as a Tatar vassal to enrich himself and expand the size of his holdings. This record led the khan to elevate him above all the other Russian princes, signifying the growing importance of Moscow. By 1380, Kalita's grandson, Dmitrii, proved able to challenge the hegemony of his Tatar overlords on the Don River at the Battle of Kulikovo Field. According to Shestakov, his victory allowed the prince, subsequently known as Dmitrii Donskoi, to temporarily throw off the so-called Tatar Yoke.¹⁷

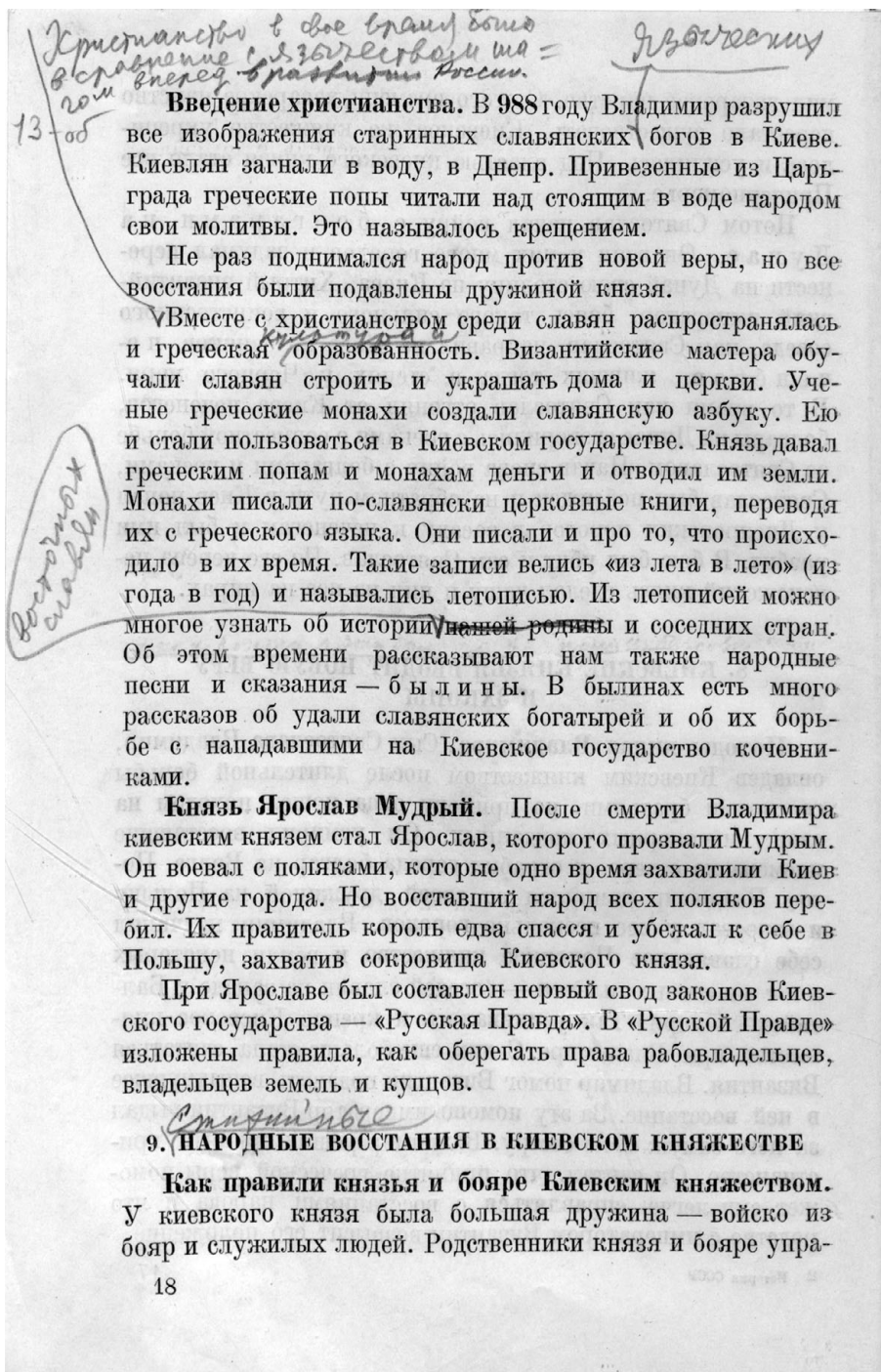


Figure 1. Stalin's interpolations to Shestakov's second chapter describing Christianity as a historically progressive phenomenon. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, l. 13ob.

Although the decline of the Tatar-Mongol Yoke allowed the “Russian” principalities to reassert their independence, they faced new challenges in the west. There, the union of two kingdoms into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth produced a powerful new state that enserfed local Russian,

Ukrainian, and Belarusian peasants and forced them to convert to Catholicism. According to Shestakov, only the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's ongoing conflict with the Germanic Livonian order kept it from attacking Moscow.¹⁸

When Stalin turned to Chapter Three, he focused on issues associated with Muscovite state-building. First, he emphasized the fact that it was the "Russians" that Tatar-Mongol forces had attacked in 1240 rather than a more heterogeneous group of principalities. Then, once Ivan Kalita began to accumulate power, Stalin insisted that he be understood as having accumulated wealth "for himself and his principality." This, according to Stalin, meant that although the grand prince may have been greedy and unscrupulous, he nevertheless had the best interests of "Russia" in mind. Stalin reinforced this point by adding a new conclusion to the section: "Thus, resorting to every means necessary, Kalita gathered the disunited Russian principalities into a single state with Moscow as its center" (see Figure 2). Such anachronistic revisions should come as no surprise, as Stalin and his advisors had stressed the importance of the "gathering of Rus'" since at least 1934 and here sought to show the Marxist transition from feudal fragmentation to patrimonial monarchy.¹⁹

Shestakov's fourth chapter, entitled "The Rise of the Russian National State," focused on Ivan III's consolidation of regional principalities including Novgorod into a single unified polity. This allowed Ivan III to defend the realm from the Poles and Lithuanians and finally break all ties with the Golden Horde in 1480. These developments led Shestakov to apply a Marxist term to Muscovy—the "Russian national state"—that Stalin had adapted in 1913 to differentiate the state building of decentralized, fragmented feudal polities from that of their more centralized, absolutist successors.²⁰ Unsurprisingly, Stalin agreed with this labeling of Muscovy and the distinction that it drew between it and its predecessors. Enthusiastic about Ivan III's declaration of Muscovite independence from the Golden Horde, Stalin strengthened the textbook's appraisal of the tsar by dubbing him the "victor" in his final standoff with the khan. According to Stalin, it was thanks to Ivan that "the yoke of the Tatar-Mongols, which Russia had borne for over two hundred years, was thrown off."²¹

This pattern according to which Stalin and Zhdanov systematically strengthened Shestakov's statist account of Muscovite state-building efforts continued into Chapter Five—the "Expansion of the Russian National State"—where the narrative focused on Ivan the Terrible. Here, Shestakov was careful to balance his focus on the "terrible tsar's" successes (chiefly his conquest of the khanates of Kazan' and Astrakhan) with accounts of his failures (his wars against the Baltic Germans, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and his own nobility). Although Shestakov noted that Ivan IV transformed Muscovy into one of the largest states in the world over the course of his reign, he stressed that this expansion came at the cost of the total enserfment of the country's peasant population. Ukraine factored into the narrative only as a place where fugitive peasants might flee this centralizing process to join the Cossacks.²²

In his revisions to the chapter, Stalin supported Shestakov's characterization of Ivan IV's reign but took steps to reduce the text's attention to the tsar's cruelty. In the first set of textbook galleys that June, Stalin had deleted a reproduction of I. E. Repin's famous canvas depicting Ivan's murder of his first son, presumably believing it to be gratuitous.²³ Now, he deleted a similarly prejudicial line about Ivan's forces butchering the entire population of Kazan' in 1552. Instead, he opted to stress the tsar's progressive, centralizing program, writing into the margins that "He thus completed, as it were, the work started by Ivan Kalita of gathering together the scattered appanage principalities into one strong state" (see Figure 3). Stalin's avoidance of the term "national state" here is instructive, insofar as he believed that Ivan the Terrible's conquests of non-Russian lands had begun the process of transforming Russia into a multinational empire.²⁴

Zhdanov followed the general secretary's lead in his editing and deleted Shestakov's colloquial reference to Ivan as the terrible tsar, insisting that the autocrat be referred to by his more traditional epithet. He also objected to the description of the *oprichnina* guards as dressing exclusively in black and ordered this hyperbole struck from the text.²⁵ Finally, he toyed with the idea of reversing the order of the chapter's opening illustrations to foreground V. M. Vasnetsov's noble portrait of the tsar—a decision he finalized in August 1937.²⁶ The end result was the depiction of a tsar who—like his

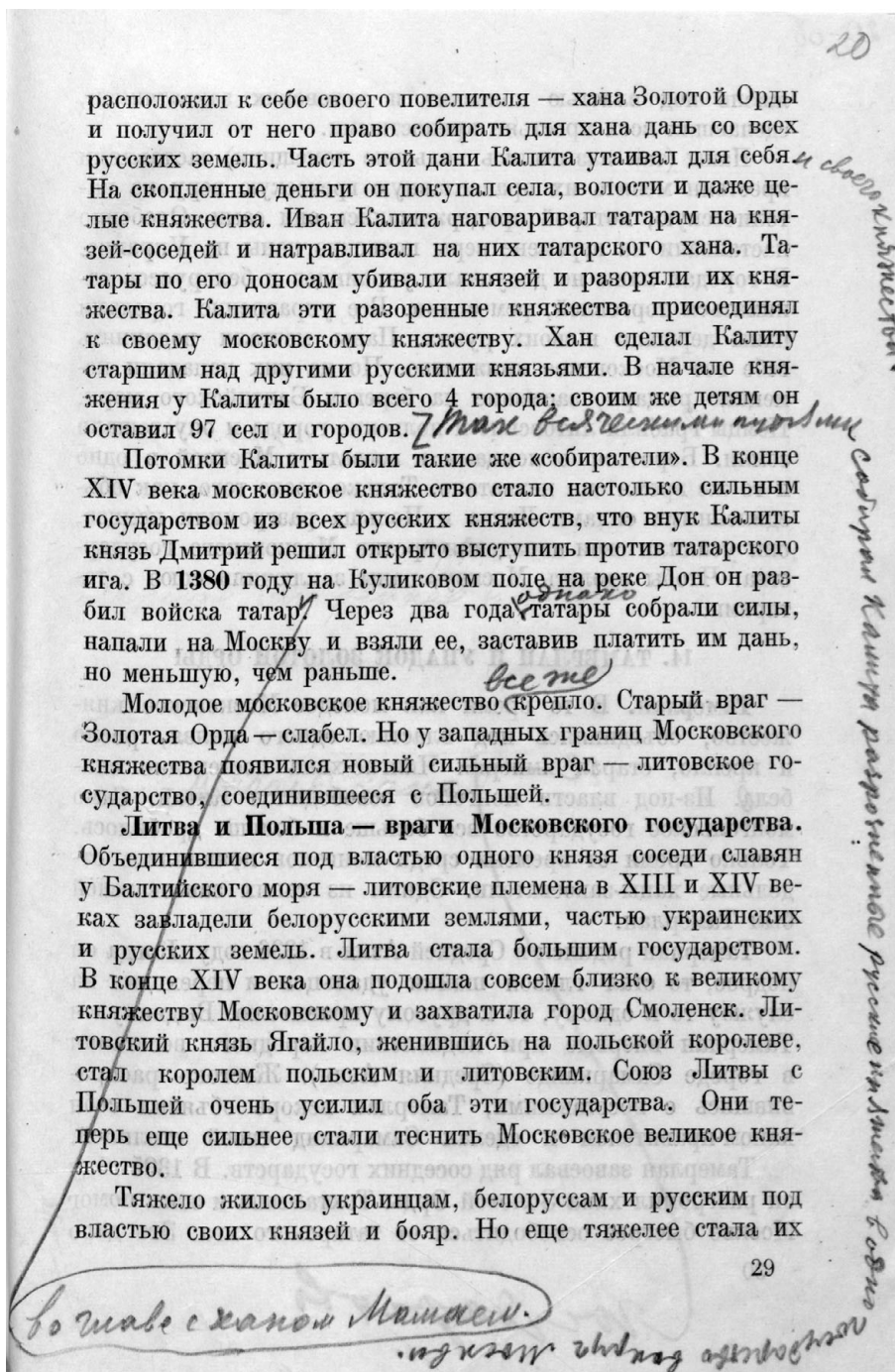


Figure 2. Stalin's editing of Shestakov's third chapter stressing Ivan Kalita's identity as a state builder. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, l. 20.

ancestors—was brutal but historically progressive, insofar as he relentlessly pursued the expansion of the Russian state. It was in this way, according to Stalin and Zhdanov, that Muscovy reached the apogee of estates-representative monarchy and began the transition to monarchical absolutism.



Figure 3. Stalin's editing of Shestakov's fifth chapter crediting Ivan the Terrible with completing Ivan Kalita's gathering of the "Russian" lands. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, l. 25ob.

Shestakov's sixth chapter focused on Muscovy's descent into chaos during the so-called Time of Troubles in the early 17th century. His narrative focused on how infighting and disunity at home exposed the country to repeated invasion from abroad. Particularly pernicious was the role of the

Poles, who meddled in Muscovite politics by promoting a pretender to the throne who drew support from disaffected Ukrainian Cossacks and unpatriotic Russian elites. Stalin generally agreed with this dialectic of disunity and vulnerability, although he insisted on adding detail distinguishing premodern peasant rebellions from more modern social revolutions. The peasants, he averred, were instinctively monarchist and rebelled to place a “good tsar” on the throne rather than to overthrow the tsarist order as a whole. What’s more, even if they had wanted to alter the system more profoundly, they would have failed due to their lack of visionary leadership and class consciousness. This, according to Stalin, was “not surprising.” After all, they “had no such ally and leader as the working class,” which would only later possess the education and organization necessary to change the world.²⁷

After the restoration of Russian statehood that followed the end of the Time of Troubles and the election of Mikhail Romanov to the throne, Shestakov noted that the Muscovite government struggled to recentralize its authority and suppress the popular unrest of disaffected peasants and Cossacks. Similar unrest was sparked in the territory of present-day Ukraine in 1648 when the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth attempted to enserf the local population and convert the region to Catholicism. This popular resistance was led first by the Zaporozhian Cossack hetman Bogdan Khmel’nitskii and then, when he waivered, by the commoner Maksim Krivonos. According to Shestakov, the conflict ended only in 1654 when Khmel’nitskii succumbed to popular pressure and signed the Treaty of Pereiaslav with Muscovy to allow for the establishment of a protectorate over the Ukrainian Cossack lands.²⁸

As with other historians, Shestakov and his brigade had agonized over how to describe the 1654 treaty as something other than the Muscovite colonization of Ukraine. In December 1936, Zhdanov—presumably quoting Stalin—had recommended that the historians frame Khmel’nitskii’s decision at Pereiaslav as having been governed by the principle of the “lesser evil.” Insofar as an independent Ukraine was apparently an impossible dream within the context of the mid-17th century, the hetman had had to choose between uniting with his Muscovite coreligionists to the north or submitting to the Catholic Poles to the west. Ultimately, Zhdanov felt that this principle could help Shestakov reframe the incorporation of Ukraine into the Russian empire in a way that Marxists would find acceptable.²⁹

In the end, Stalin approved of how Shestakov narrated Ukraine’s dilemma and its resolution in Chapter Six. Zhdanov agreed, although he made two rather important changes to clarify the nature of the colonial annexation. First, he cut a line that called into question Khmel’nitskii’s support among the peasantry on the eve of the treaty’s signing to suggest a common desire for the protectorate. Second, he deleted an illustration of the hetman leading his Cossack host against the Poles (see [Figure 4](#))—editing that reinforced the message that 17th-century Ukraine was unable to fend for itself without help from its Orthodox brethren in Muscovy.³⁰

In Shestakov’s seventh chapter, he focused on the reign of Peter I and the “empire of the landlords and merchants.” Again centering his narrative on state-building, he described how the demands of defense and conquest drove Peter to institute a broad program of reform and modernization. Winning wars in the north and southwest against Sweden and its allies—the “Turks and the Ukrainian hetman Mazepa after his ‘betrayal’”—Peter lost other campaigns in the east and endured several major popular uprisings, particularly under the Cossack Kondratii Bulavin between 1707 and 1709. Shestakov summarized Peter’s accomplishments as a bitter victory but not a pyrrhic one:

Under the reign of Peter I, Russia made great progress; nevertheless, it remained a country in which serf oppression and the tyranny of the tsar reigned supreme. The Russian Empire was enlarged and strengthened at the cost of the lives of hundreds of thousands of toilers and the impoverishment of the entire people.

In the end, Peter completed the consolidation of a very specific sort of absolutist monarchy.³¹

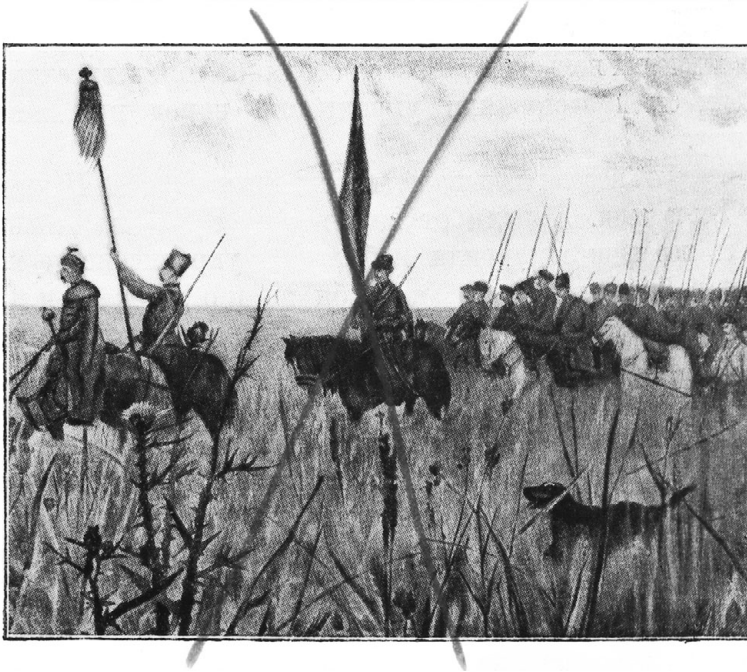


Figure 4. Zhdanov's deletion of an illustration captioned, "The Zaporozhian Cossacks Join the Campaign under Khmel'nitskii's Leadership." RGASPI, f. 77, op. 1, d. 854, l. 25ob.

Peter's heirs, according to Shestakov, transformed his state into a "national state of the landlords and merchants," a turn of phrase that captured the degree to which the absolutism of the preceding century was being reconfigured into a broader system of elite privilege and exploitation. Spending very little time on the leadership of either Elizabeth I or Catherine II, Shestakov concentrated on the way that the empire in the 18th century completed the pacification of the Cossack hosts, the annexation of Ukraine, and the acquisition of new territory in Crimea, Kazakhstan, and the Caucasus.³²

Stalin generally agreed with Shestakov's assessment of the reign of Peter and his heirs as resulting in both progressive state-building and reactionary exploitation of the peasantry. This should come as no surprise, insofar as these two aspects of the period were closely related in a Marxist-Leninist sense. Therefore, when Stalin turned to the textbook's treatment of the Bulavin and, later, the Pugachev rebellions, he explicitly connected the lessons of these failed peasant uprisings to those detailed in earlier chapters. Although Shestakov was more explicit about the futility of Emelian Pugachev's rebellion than he had been about earlier peasant uprisings, Stalin nevertheless reiterated his position that all such movements were crippled by a lack of working-class leadership.

Stalin made two other major technical changes to the narrative in Chapter Seven. First, he rewrote Shestakov's term for 18th-century Russia from the "national state of the landlords and merchants" to the "state of the landlords and merchants." A change similar to an earlier one that Stalin made in passing at the end of Chapter Six, it allowed him to highlight two major shifts in the country's history between the 17th and 18th centuries: the transformation of the Russian ruling class from a narrow feudal elite to a broader, more protocapitalist clique and Russia's evolution from a national state into a multinational empire.³³

Second, Stalin objected to Shestakov's statement at the conclusion of the chapter that Russia had colonized part of Kazakhstan at the close of the 18th century. According to Stalin, it was the Russian tsar, not the Russian people, who had colonized these peoples and lands. This distinction between

the Russian imperial elite and the rest of the society would grow in importance for Stalin in the next several chapters.³⁴

In the wake of the Russian empire's assimilation of Ukraine and Crimea in the late 18th century, these lands ceased to play an active role in Shestakov's narrative. Perhaps the only exception to this rule was when Shestakov and his brigade included T. G. Shevchenko in Chapter Eight in a list of progressive 19th-century literary elites hounded by Nicholas I, noting that the Ukrainian writer was known for his celebration of the lives of common people. Stalin approved of this stress on Shevchenko's ethnicity because he fit well alongside Russian liberals such as A. I. Herzen and N. G. Chernyshevskii and rewrote a subheading in Chapter Eight to draw attention to it.³⁵ Neither Shestakov nor Stalin were interested in a more political role for Ukraine or its people, however.

Ukrainian themes then disappear from the Shestakov text for two long chapters—a narrative choice that elided all mention of developments such as the rise of the Ukrainian national movement or the tsarist state's efforts to suppress it—particularly the 1863 Valuev Circular, which banned most publishing in the Ukrainian language. Shestakov never explicitly justified this omission, but his reasoning was likely governed by three factors. First, in terms of narrative emplotment, Shestakov had described Ukrainian elites as having committed to the Russian empire in 1654 as the lesser of two evils. Discussion of Ukrainian nationalism in the 19th century would have undermined the nature of that decision, as would have mention of the heavy-handed Valuev Circular. Second, acknowledgment of the national movement would have challenged the notion that 19th-century Ukrainian social thought was best personified by Shevchenko and his common cause with Russian thinkers in the struggle against tsarism. Finally, Shestakov would have found it very challenging to discuss more independently minded Ukrainian activists in 1937, insofar as this sort of thought was labeled “bourgeois nationalism” during the Great Terror and regarded as a form of false consciousness promoted by capitalist holdovers at home and imperialists abroad.³⁶

Uninterested in such divisiveness, Shestakov next mentioned Ukraine in the text only in connection with the Revolution of 1905. Here, he noted parenthetically that Ukrainian and other non-Russian workers and peasants rose up against the tsarist system under the leadership of the Russian workers. Fascinatingly, Stalin objected to this mention of interethnic cooperation and deleted it from the text. At first glance, this decision would seem to suggest that Stalin wished to credit the Ukrainian militants with their own revolutionary initiative. That said, Stalin's editing here should probably be read as less congratulatory. After all, the general secretary is known to have believed that one of the reasons for the failure of the 1905 Revolution was its lack of coordination between rebels in the non-Russian regions and those in more central areas of the empire. In other words, Stalin's crediting of the Ukrainian militants with their own uprising was actually a way of displacing blame more than it was any recognition of their service and sacrifice.³⁷

Shestakov showed little further interest in Ukraine after the 1905 Revolution as he turned to the years leading up to the revolutions of 1917. Passing mention was afforded to Ukrainian uprisings against the Provisional Government on the eve of the October revolution, which Shestakov again suggested were coordinated by Russian workers to complement similar rebellions elsewhere in the country. Stalin approved of the notion that the militancy in 1917 was better organized than in 1905 but then anachronistically credited the Soviet government with this planning instead of the Russian working class.³⁸

Shestakov's next significant mention of Ukraine occurred in the next chapter regarding the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, when imperial Germany, despite the terms of this agreement, quickly moved to transform Ukraine into a colony. According to Shestakov, the Germans installed a puppet government under P. P. Skoropadskii in Kiev but struggled in the face of popular Ukrainian resistance in Donetsk and elsewhere under the leadership of K. E. Voroshilov and N. A. Shchors.³⁹

When Stalin turned to work on this chapter in July 1937, he retitled it to emphasize the role that foreign imperialists had played in starting the 1918–1921 Civil War. As the narrative progressed, Stalin emphasized again and again the degree to which domestic anti-Bolshevik forces were dependent on foreign imperialist support. Not only were L. D. Trotskii and N. I. Bukharin held

to have served German interests at Brest-Litovsk, but Ukrainian representatives were also said to have sold out their Bolshevik comrades. According to Stalin,

[a]lthough the Brest Peace that was concluded between the Soviet government and the Germans applied to the whole territory of the Soviet state, including Ukraine, several Ukrainian delegates, who had been bribed by the Germans, refused to recognize the Soviet government and concluded a separate peace treaty. In this treacherous treaty Ukraine was declared to be a bourgeois republic rather than a Soviet one and the Germans pledged to provide military assistance to the Ukrainian bourgeois government—the Ukrainian Rada—if the Soviets resisted. The rapacious German militarists then took advantage of this treaty to send troops into Ukraine.

Stalin then left unchanged the rest of Shestakov's account of how the Germans installed Skoropadskii as hetman of the new German colony and returned the Ukrainian landlords and bourgeoisie to power. In his discussion of the situation in Ukraine, Stalin was careful to differentiate the loyalties of these Ukrainian elites from those of more common people, declaring that that “the German soldiers found it very hard to contend with the rebellious Ukrainian workers and peasants.”⁴⁰

After the German protectorate over Ukraine collapsed in late 1918, Shestakov made only passing reference to the republic and its people. According to the historian, Poland attempted to seize Ukrainian territory in 1920 during the last stages of the Civil War, but the Red Army successfully repulsed the invading forces and then counterattacked deep into Poland. When a peace settlement was negotiated later that year, the Bolsheviks proved able to save most of the Ukrainian territory from the Poles, regrettably leaving a portion in enemy hands.⁴¹

During the period of reconstruction that followed the Civil War, Shestakov mentioned Ukraine regarding its formal founding as a Soviet republic, its population's interest in the building of socialism in one country, and the investments and infrastructure that went along with this development. According to the textbook,

[t]he peoples of the USSR began to live as a friendly and joyous family. Under tsarism many nationalities risked extinction—they were downtrodden and illiterate—but now they came back to life and began to build socialism in a fraternal alliance with all the other nationalities. The development of national culture made rapid progress in all the republics. Many schools, universities and libraries were opened; theaters were built, and many books began to be printed in the languages of the various nationalities. [...] The peoples' culture blossomed forth.⁴²

No mention was made of the Ukrainian experience with indigenization and national communism or of the intensity of the region's resistance to collectivization and dekulakization. Needless to say, not even a hint appeared in the text about the catastrophic famine that paralyzed Ukraine and other Soviet agricultural areas between 1932 and 1933. Even the USSR's supposed solution to the national question received only passing mention in the claim that “nowhere in the world is there such friendship and mutual confidence between various nationalities as in the USSR.” Shestakov's final mention of the republic occurred within the context of his discussion of the Great Purge in 1937–1938, when he described the successful exposure of anti-Soviet conspiracies that threatened to detach Ukraine from the USSR and return it to its former status as a German colony.⁴³ Stalin found this subordinate role for the Ukrainian republic to match his understanding of the historical process and left it unaltered.

* * *

Ultimately, Stalin's editing of Shestakov's treatment of the Russian-Ukrainian entangled past suggests that he intended to advance a number of important themes within the *Short History*.

Most obviously, Stalin presided over the construction of a dominantly russocentric narrative in which the prerevolutionary history of the USSR ran linearly back through the Romanov empire to the founding of Muscovy and the “gathering of Rus’.” True, the first two chapters of the textbook concerned regional and eastern Slavic times before the advent of Muscovy, but many of these developments were deliberately described as the precursors of subsequent Russian ones. What’s more, the construction of this narrative pivoted not only on Russia-centered events but on Russian historical agents and Russian historical agency as well. Although non-Russian historical developments and personalities did appear frequently in the text, the timing of their appearance and their role in the narrative was governed by a Russian point of view.⁴⁴

Such a stress on Russianness was in many senses rather counterintuitive, insofar as Ukrainian history would seem to have had much to offer to any definitive account of the prerevolutionary history of the USSR. Nevertheless, Shestakov’s and Stalin’s version of the usable past made only passing references to Ukrainian affairs, which was done in a way that was so disconnected and disjointed that it complicated the creation of an independent narrative of its own.⁴⁵ Needless to say, the subordination of such themes had the effect of undercutting Ukrainians’ historical agency over the course of the storyline.⁴⁶

The russocentrism inherent to the *Short History* was, of course, not solely a product of Stalin’s July 1937 editing of the text. Shestakov and his brigade had organized their narrative in this way under the guidance of their party handlers long before the text ever reached Stalin’s desk. This is clear from a review of Shestakov’s first set of publisher’s galleys written by V. P. Zatonskii, a Ukrainian party boss and the commissar of education for that republic. Explicitly objecting to the russocentrism of the narrative, Zatonskii complained that during the redrafting of the Shestakov text, the simplification and popularization of the narrative had taken place at the expense of the non-Russian peoples. Denouncing a historical storyline that he felt virtually ignored the Ukrainians and Belarusians, much less the other non-Slavic peoples of the USSR, Zatonskii mourned: “it hasn’t turned out to be a history of the USSR at all so far. Basically, it’s a history of the Russian state. Only a few pages at the beginning are given over for decorum to the Transcaucasus, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, and Siberia.”⁴⁷ Of course, although Zatonskii was correct in his judgement, he ought not to have been too surprised by the narrative’s russocentrism. Stalin, after all, had been calling for a usable past focused on Russian historical agency since 1934 and had identified the Russian people as playing a central role in regional state-building as early as 1913. And this approach to history evoked the Moscow-centric narrative popularized a generation earlier by classics like V. O. Kliuchevskii.⁴⁸

Zatonskii was also right about a second major theme of the narrative: its etatism. Stalin had encouraged a focus on state-building since 1934, and he and Zhdanov enhanced this theme over and over again during their editing of the Shestakov text. For them, tsars like Ivan the Great and Ivan the Terrible epitomized the growth of state power. And most of the other thematic elements of the narrative—particularly the importance of central leadership, national defense, and domestic unity in the face of threats from abroad—should be seen as contributing to this etatism.

Such themes tended to eclipse earlier Marxist, materialist aspects of the storyline that had played a prominent role in historical work during the 1920s and early 1930s. Marxist periodization based on stages of historical development (“feudal fragmentation,” “manorial feudalism,” “feudal absolutism,” etc.) were retained, but subordinated to a political narrative governed by tsars, landlords, and merchants. Similarly downgraded were Marxist-Leninist critiques of Russian imperialism and colonial policy, as was this ideology’s stress on the revolution as emancipationist in both class and national terms. Finally, revolutionary internationalism—the connectedness of Russo-Soviet events with global and transnational historical developments—was also downplayed. The end result was the claim that Russia had followed its own unique *Sonderweg* rather than a more universal revolutionary trajectory.

Of course, some elements of Marxist-Leninist thought were retained by Shestakov’s history. First, his storyline obliquely endorsed G. V. Plekhanov’s Marxist teachings on the role of the

individual in history. According to this theory, activists and thinkers who understand their historical context unusually are well able to catalyze revolutionary change. This meant that nonproletarian historical figures—even feudal princes and tsars—could be considered progressive if they contributed to important historical developments such as the centralization of the state, the expansion of the empire, the systemization of the economy, or the defense of realm. It was this approach to the past that allowed the text to pay so much attention to historical personalities like Ivan the Terrible and Peter I; it was also this logic that enabled Stalin to celebrate at such figures without ever actually identifying with them (generally, Stalin 1932; Plekhanov 1938).

Second, Marxist-Leninist thought explains Shestakov's and Stalin's relatively low level of interest in peasant and Cossack uprisings before the end of the 19th century. Both knew that although such rebellions could be used to gauge levels of popular discontent and exploitation, they were not—in a Marxist-Leninist sense—to be considered particularly progressive or revolutionary. According to Marx and Lenin, neither peasants nor Cossacks possessed the education or class consciousness that workers would acquire later on. This meant that such premodern rebellions were unable to bring about revolutionary change on their own and were to be treated differently from the 19th century working-class struggle that culminated in the Bolshevik movement.

Third, Marxist-Leninist thought explains Shestakov's and Stalin's surprisingly sparse, fleeting attention to interethnic relations in general and Russian-Ukrainian unity in particular. Neither Marx nor Lenin had ever been very interested in these subjects, and Shestakov and Stalin were too preoccupied with issues like state-building for anything more than lip service regarding the "Friendship of the Peoples" or Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood.⁴⁹

Such a discussion of Stalin's understanding of Russian-Ukrainian history invites several brief comparisons with Putin's 2021 historical revisionism (Putin 2021). The Russian president, it would seem, shares with Stalin a primordialist view of Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian origins, according to which these peoples harken back to the eastern Slavs of Kiev Rus' and enjoy an autochthonic claim to the region. A dated, static view of how national identity develops over time, it ignores the ethnographic diversity of the region and the entangled history that the eastern Slavic peoples shared with their Tatar, Turkic, Finno-Ugric, and Germanic neighbors.

Putin also structures his historical narrative in ways that are reminiscent of what Stalin endorsed in 1937. In his account, Putin celebrates the consolidation of the Russian state and empire; he also pays close attention to the historical challenges that threatened the unity of this polity (the Tatar-Mongol Yoke, the Germanic Livonian Order, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Catholic church, etc.). For Putin, key moments of Russian-Ukrainian solidarity, such as the 1654 Pereiaslav Treaty, are balanced by epic betrayals, such as that of Ivan Mazepa in 1709 or the Ukrainian Rada in 1918.

That said, it would be incautious to conclude that Putin's account is truly Stalinist. First and foremost, Putin is not a Marxist, nor is his understanding of the historical process. Although he shares many of the etatist sympathies found in the Shestakov text, Putin styles himself as more of a populist and pays much more attention to social history than does the Stalin-era account. As a result, the theme of grassroots Russian-Ukrainian unity occupies a much more central place in Putin's narrative than it does in Shestakov's. This distinction is also found in their treatment of religion, where Putin stresses the dynamic historical role played by popular religiosity rather than the institutional one found in the Stalinist narrative. In this vein, the 1654 Treaty of Pereiaslav is described by Putin as a genuine reunion of coreligionists rather than as a calculated choice of evils.⁵⁰

Paradoxically, as much as Putin foregrounds the theme of Russian-Ukrainian historical unity, he does not grant the Ukrainians in this relationship much historical agency—significantly less, it turns out, than what Shestakov and Stalin afforded them in 1937. This, of course, is deliberate on Putin's part: by describing Ukrainians as having been dependent on their Russian brethren for historical progress over the course of the past millennium, he justifies his questioning of the Ukrainians' capacity for self-determination and political independence today.⁵¹

In sum, while Putin shares with Stalin an interest in mobilizing the usable past to advance contemporary political objectives, the specific nature of his revisionism differs in important ways from his predecessor's. This case study of Stalin's editing of Shestakov's *Short History of the USSR* demonstrates the dictator to have supported an etatist, russocentric storyline that included Ukrainian history only when it was judged to contribute to the overall state-building narrative. As selective as this appears in hindsight, it is a different kind of historical opportunism than Putin has promoted many decades later to justify his invasion of Ukraine.

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Notes

- 1 Primordialists consider national and ethnic identities to be fixed, natural and ancient. Although primordialist assumptions are common in everyday society, primordialism is widely rejected by scholars of nationalism and ethnicity, who view national and ethnic identities as being socially constructed (see, for instance, Smith 1998).
- 2 Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (hereafter cited as RGASPI), f. 17, op. 120, d. 359, ll. 13–14. Although unacknowledged, Stalin and Zhdanov's preference for a single-stream history evoked associations with the 19th-century "state school" of Russian historiography (see Sanders 1999; Plokhy 2005).
- 3 Many scholars contend that terms like "nationalism" and "imperialism" best describe the Stalin era's embrace of Russianness in the late 1930s. Recalling Ernest Gellner's well-known definition of nationalism as a political principle that holds that "the political and the national unit should be congruent," I think there's good reason to question the application of this term to the USSR, where no ethnic groups enjoyed the right to autonomy or self-governance. I am similarly skeptical about the use of the term "empire" for the USSR (even in Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper's broad definition as a system that "perpetuates difference and hierarchy"), insofar as Russians never enjoyed any special rights or privileges. Instead, I contend here and elsewhere that the term "russocentrism" best captures the idiosyncratic nature of the "Soviet experiment" (see Gellner 1983, 1; Burbank and Cooper 2011, 8).
- 4 Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv (hereafter cited as RGVA), f. 9, op. 29s, d. 323, ll. 110, 115.
- 5 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 3, d. 374, ll. 53, 114–116, 139, 175; d. 375, ll. 4, 116, 139, 175.
- 6 For Stalin's copy, see RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584; for Zhdanov's, see f. 77, op. 1, d. 854.
- 7 Stalin appears to have read the text and marked it up alone—perhaps at his dacha on July 6, insofar as his Kremlin office calendar indicates that he did not hold any meetings on that day. He then evidently met with Zhdanov to pass along his markup of the galley and explain the nature of his revisions. Available documentation does not indicate when this meeting took place, but it may well have occurred at the general secretary's dacha on July 12, when his office calendar again indicates that he was not receiving guests in the Kremlin. Zhdanov then apparently integrated Stalin's editorial revisions with his own, mostly drawn from other reviews that he had solicited from historians such as S. V. Bakhrushin, K. V. Bazilevich, and N. M. Druzhinin. At the end of this intensive editorial process, Zhdanov appears to have had an assistant prepare a master set of corrections by gluing blank pages of notepaper into the margins of an unbound copy of the prototype text and then recopying both Stalin's and Zhdanov's comments onto them in neat handwriting. Zhdanov then almost certainly met again with Stalin to go over these final revisions to the text once more. The resulting set of loose-leaf, edited galley was then probably

recopied again and passed along to the State Pedagogical Publishing House in late July or early August for typesetting (see Chernobaev 2008, 214–215).

- 8 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 6–10.
- 9 RGASPI, f. 77, op. 1, d. 854, ll. 3ob–5.
- 10 This article renders Ukrainian place and family names (Kyiv, Khmel’nyts’kyi, etc.) in Russian to capture the russocentrism of the Stalin period and avoid anachronism.
- 11 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 10ob–13ob. This cautious rehabilitation of the church as a progressive institution in Russian history had begun only in 1937 (see Bakhrushin 1937).
- 12 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 13ob–16ob.
- 13 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, l. 13ob.
- 14 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 14ob, 15ob; Marx and Engels (1933, vol. 4, 42).
- 15 RGASPI, f. 77, op. 1, d. 854, ll. 9ob–11ob.
- 16 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 17–19.
- 17 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 19–20.
- 18 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 20–21.
- 19 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 17ob, 20.
- 20 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 21ob–23ob. Soviet historians debated how to periodize the growth of Muscovite statehood during the mid–1930s. Slowly, a position that Stalin articulated first in 1913 came to prevail, which differentiated between western and eastern Europe. In the west, polities consolidated into national states as they transitioned from feudalism to capitalism; in the less developed east, some consolidated first into national states and then into multinational ones before the end of the feudal period (see Stalin 1937, 10–15; more generally, Iurganov 2011, 15–226).
- 21 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, l. 22.
- 22 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 24–25ob.
- 23 The reference is to I. E. Repin’s 1883–1885 canvas “Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan, November 16, 1561.” See RGASPI, f. 558, op. 3, d. 374, l. 109.
- 24 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, l. 25ob; Stalin (1937, 10).
- 25 RGASPI, f. 77, op. 1, d. 854, ll. 18, 19ob.
- 26 RGASPI, f. 17, op. 120, d. 373, ll. 110.
- 27 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, l. 29.
- 28 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 32–33.
- 29 A. S. Bubnov recorded Zhdanov’s instructions in notes dated December 9–10, 1936. See RGASPI, f. 17, op. 120, d. 359, l. 14. Although Zhdanov’s comment is the first recorded mention of the “lesser evil” theory, M. V. Nechkina attributed it to Stalin (see Nechkina 1962, 74). Nechkina’s source for this information may have been her husband at the time, Ia. A. Iakovlev, who was a member of the party leadership involved in Stalin’s historical planning.
- 30 RGASPI, f. 77, op. 1, d. 854, l. 25ob.
- 31 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 37–40.
- 32 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 40–44ob.
- 33 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 38ob, 43, 40, 36ob. Interestingly, Stalin had used the expression “national state of the landlords and merchants” regarding Peter I and his heirs in a 1931 interview with the German biographer Emil Ludwig. Now, he apparently saw a difference between Muscovy and what followed it—a shift in emphasis from an elite national project to an elite imperial one (see Stalin 1932, 30).
- 34 Stalin here made oblique reference to Lenin, who argued that there were actually two nations in every modern polity: a reactionary nation that defended the state, its exploitative economy, and oppressive apparatus and a more democratic, organic one, consisting of commoners and those who supported their cause (see Lenin [Ilyn] 1913a, 1913b, 1913c).

- 35 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 52ob–53. N. V. Gogol was also included in this group, although Shestakov grouped him together with Russian writers and did not draw attention to his Ukrainian ancestry.
- 36 Interestingly, a more advanced textbook published first in 1940 by A. M. Pankratova mentioned both subjects in passing. The Ukrainian national movement was described as a form of bourgeois nationalism that divided Ukrainian activists from their brethren who shared a social agenda with like-minded Russians. The Valuev Circular was characterized as a clumsy tsarist attempt to suppress the Ukrainian national movement that ultimately backfired (see Pankratova et al. 1941, vol. 2, 282–283).
- 37 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, l. 78ob. Stalin was more explicit about the problems caused by a lack of coordination between worker revolts in the central lands of the empire and on the periphery in his 1938 *Short Course* on party history (see Brandenberger and Zelenov 2019, 215).
- 38 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, l. 94.
- 39 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 95ob–96ob.
- 40 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, ll. 95–96ob.
- 41 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, l. 102ob–103. The 1941 edition of the text celebrated the reunion of these lost lands with their Soviet brethren as a result of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty (see Shestakov 1941, 216–217).
- 42 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, l. 107.
- 43 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1584, l. 117ob.
- 44 Compare this discussion of the text’s inherent russocentrism to Politdrug (2014).
- 45 Although there were calls after the publication of the Shestakov text for the production of an array of republican-level histories, only one—about Ukraine—was completed before the outset of war in 1941. Unsurprisingly, this narrative embraced the official line’s russocentric paradigm, according to which Ukraine owed much of its historical progress to its altruistic Russian “elder brother” (see Bilousov et al., 1940; more generally, Yekelchuk 2004, 25; Iurkova 2015).
- 46 It’s worth noting that although Stalin encouraged Shestakov’s downgrading of Ukrainian historical agency in the narrative, he does not appear to have done this out of a sense of distrust for contemporary Ukrainian political developments—whether the national communist movement of the 1920s or peasant resistance to collectivization in the early 1930s. Nowhere in the text are Ukrainians characterized as unusually nationalistic, militant or eager to collaborate with the Poles, Germans, or Japanese.
- 47 RGASPI, f. 77, op. 1, d. 847, l. 5. Ironically, the sections in the manuscript that Zatonskii had criticized for their tokenistic treatment of non-Russian minorities were pared down even further before the final typesetting began. On the reediting, compare chap. 1 of the May 1937 draft at f. 558, op. 3, d. 374 with that of a subsequent draft from July 1937 at f. 77, op. 1, d. 854. There were similar complaints about the russocentrism of earlier textbook drafts (see Tikhonov 2021, 80).
- 48 Although Shestakov accepted Kliuchevskii’s “Great Russian” narrative structure, he criticized the historian for other issues related to interpretation and periodization (see Kliuchevskii 1904–1922; Plokhyy 2005, 97–103; Fuks 2009). Interestingly, Kliuchevskii’s five-volume survey of Russian history was also republished in the USSR during the fall of 1937, although it never enjoyed the official endorsement that Shestakov’s textbook did.
- 49 Stalin followed Lenin in his differentiation of the Russian people from the Ukrainians (see Lenin 1914; Shporliuk 2006).
- 50 In many senses, Putin’s view of the history of Russian-Ukrainian relations owes more to the post-Stalin “Great Friendship” myth than the Stalin-era “lesser evil” thesis. Although the transition between these two readings of the usable past is poorly understood, it dates back to 1950, when Azerbaidzhani first party secretary M. D. Bagirov denounced the “lesser evil” thesis in regard to the Caucasus and demanded a more russocentric, apologetic interpretation of Russian colonialism in the region. This sparked considerable debate in Soviet scholarship about the continuing relevance of the thesis to other former colonial histories. In October 1952,

Ukrainian first party secretary L. G. Mel'nik wrote to Stalin proposing to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Pereiaslav Treaty in a memo that echoed Bagirov's concerns. Although Stalin ignored Mel'nik, his initiative was revived in mid-1953 after the dictator's death by the new Ukrainian first secretary A. I. Kirchenko, whose proposal led to the inauguration of the new Great Friendship myth of Russo-Ukrainian brotherhood in January 1954 (see Bagirov 1950; Nechkina 1951; Bagirov 1952; Chernobaev 2002).

- 51 Putin's intolerant attitude regarding Ukrainian independence is matched by a similarly extreme stance regarding the outside world. Although Shestakov and Stalin repeatedly noted foreign powers' interference in Ukrainian affairs, neither went so far as to posit—as Putin did in 2021—the existence of an intergenerational plot dating back to the 16th century to turn Ukraine against Russia.

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