

OXFORD HISTORICAL MONOGRAPHS

BEING SOVIET

Identity, Rumour, and Everyday Life under Stalin

1939–1953



**Timothy
Johnston**

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under Stalin 1939–1953*

TIMOTHY JOHNSTON

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For Joy

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Preface

‘Being Soviet’ is the product of many months spent in the former Soviet archives in Moscow, Arkhangel’sk, Kiev, and Simferopol. It sets about the ambitious task of evaluating what it meant to ‘be Soviet’ in the tumultuous years between 1939 and 1953. With so much scholarly attention focused on the importance of Russian and other nationalisms in the Stalin-era USSR, this book argues that Soviet identity was a vital and vibrant sphere of identity in that era. It goes on to explore how ordinary Soviet citizens responded to the shifting rhetoric of Sovietness between the Nazi–Soviet Pact and Stalin’s death.

The current historiography of the Stalin years is often polarized around the debate over the relative prominence of ‘resistance’ versus the power of official discourse to shape all aspects of Soviet life. *‘Being Soviet’* takes a fresh approach. It argues that most Soviet citizens did not fit easily into either category. Their relationship with Soviet power was defined by a series of subtle ‘tactics of the habitat’ (Kotkin) that enabled them to stay fed, informed, and entertained in these difficult times. Those everyday strategies of getting by are explored via the rumours, jokes, hairstyles, musical tastes, sexual relationships, and political campaigning of the era. Each chapter finishes with an examination of what that ‘tactical’ behaviour tells us about the collective *mentalité* of the Stalin era.

Britain and America are at the heart of this book. The two great capitalist states provided a vital frame of reference for Soviet self-construction throughout the period. Their evolution from the betrayal at Munich to wartime allies and then Cold War antipathy played a vital role in shaping what it meant to be Soviet in these years. Nazi Germany, Communist China, and Eastern Europe are only touched on in brief in the interests of time and coherence. They all played a key role in defining what it meant to be Soviet, but the Anglo-Saxon states provided the most complex and contentious palette from which elements of Soviet identity could be constructed in this period.

It is my hope that *Being Soviet* will provide a provocative reference work for undergraduates, graduates, and scholars alike. The scope of the book is perhaps wider than some monographs. Whereas Soviet historiography has traditionally ‘Balkanized’ into a series of confined periods:

NEP; the Great Break; the 30s; the war; late-Stalinism; the Khrushchev years, this book deliberately traverses those boundaries. In doing so it explores some of the continuities and discontinuities that shaped the Soviet experience. It also grapples with a number of big themes about the nature and working of Soviet society, while hopefully shining some light into previously underexplored corners of the Stalin era. It offers the first book-length exploration of the place of rumour in Soviet society. Chapter 3 also offers the first archivally based English-language research concerning the life of the wartime Arctic convoyers ashore in Arkhangel'sk and Murmansk. In the balancing act between breadth and depth I have often chosen breadth. I hope that that breadth makes *Being Soviet* a valuable and accessible resource at all levels of study.

Part I examines the under-discussed Pact Period from August 1939 to June 1941. Official Soviet Identity in this period boasted of the success of Stalin's 'peace' policy in these years, but the Soviet rumour network was alive with tales of invasion and future conflict.

Part II addresses the years of the Great Patriotic War. Chapter 2 examines the wartime diplomatic identity of the USSR and suggests that Soviet citizens often took a more negative view of the Grand Alliance partners than the official press encouraged. Chapter 3 looks at the place of culture, technology, and inter-allied personal relationships within wartime Soviet identity.

Part III moves on into the post-war years. Chapter 4 examines the war rumours and war panics of the post-1945 era and suggests that they provide the key to understanding the success of the post-1948 peace campaigns. Chapter 5 discusses the ideological campaigns against capitalist civilization and culture that began in 1946. It suggests that Soviet scientists, artists, and ordinary people skilfully deployed the 'tactics of the habitat' in order to negotiate the challenges presented by the new version of Cold War Sovietness.

Tim Johnston

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Thanks are also due to those who have enlivened my moments in the archives: Jenny Smith stands out amongst many. This book would also not be what it is without the advice and support of Juliane Fürst, who encouraged me in my thoughts, suggested fresh directions, and knew the archives like the back of her hand.

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On a personal level, my parents, Anthony and Janet Johnston, have been lifelong cheerleaders and encouraged me to follow my nose and take up Soviet History.

A final word of gratitude to my wife, Joy. Joy moved to Moscow and Arkhangel'sk for a year and then endured the long grind of writing up. She also read and commented on the text. Her encouragement to keep going and then to follow my nose again into pastures new has been priceless. This book is dedicated to her.

Contents

<i>Illustrations</i>	xiii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xiv

Introduction	xvii
The historiography of the Stalin era: where have we got to?	xvii
Official Soviet Identity and the ‘tactics of the habitat’	xxv
<i>Mentalité</i> and sources	xliii
Chronology	xlvii

I. BEING SOVIET IN THE PRE-WAR ERA

1. The Liberator State? The Crisis of Official Soviet Identity during the Pact Period 1939–1941	3
Official Soviet Identity in the Pact Period	5
The diplomatic identity of the USSR	7
The identity of the USSR as a Civilization	16
Being Soviet in the ‘Pact Period’: ordinary citizens and the ‘little tactics of the habitat’ 1939–1941	20
Conclusion	41

II. BEING SOVIET DURING THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

2. Perfidious Allies? Britain, America, and Official Soviet Diplomatic Identity 1941–1945	45
Official Soviet Identity and the image of the Allies 1941–1945	47
The Grand Alliance in the Soviet collective imagination	61
Soviet wartime <i>mentalité</i> : the allied states and the rumour network	78
3. Patrons or Predators? Foreign Servicemen, Technology, and Art within Official Soviet Cultural Identity, 1941–1945	83
Official Soviet Identity and Western science and culture	84
Lend Lease: gift or payment?	91

Lend Lease within the Soviet wartime imagination	95
Anglo-American servicemen in the wartime USSR	100
Soviet wartime <i>mentalité</i> : the glamour of the outside world	121
Conclusion	123
III. BEING SOVIET IN THE POST-WAR YEARS	
4. Panics, Peace, and Pacifism: Official Soviet Diplomatic Identity in the late-Stalin Years 1945–1953	127
From allies to enemies: Britain and America, May 1945–September 1947	129
A peace-loving superpower: Soviet diplomatic identity in the early Cold War: 1947–1953	141
‘Struggling for peace’ or pacifism? Popular participation in the peace campaigns	149
Soviet <i>mentalité</i> during the early Cold War: the outside world as a threatening place	160
Conclusion	165
5. Subversive Styles? Official Soviet Cultural Identity in the late-Stalin Years 1945–1953	167
The Cold War attack on capitalist life	169
Jazz, style, and science: interacting with post-war Soviet identity as a civilization	181
Soviet <i>mentalité</i> during the early Cold War: foreign chic and foreign quality	205
Conclusion	207
Conclusion	209
<i>Appendix: Interview Technique and Questions Used</i>	213
<i>Bibliography</i>	217
<i>Index</i>	237

Illustrations

- 2.1 Churchill and Roosevelt literally look up to Stalin. *Ogonëk* 12.1943: 49, p. 1. 57
- 2.2 N. Denisov and N. Vatolina 1941. 'Don't Chatter!' This famous wartime poster warns that it is a short distance from chatter and gossip to treason. 63
- 4.1 'European Cooperation'. I. Semenov (1952). Western 'collaboration' masks 'deception in your thoughts and a knife behind your back!' 143
- 4.2 'The People of the world don't want a repeat of the calamity of war.' I. Gaif (1949). A brave worker rebuffs Uncle Sam's attempts to bribe him with eggs in order to involve him in a conflict. In the background French workers demonstrate on behalf of the USSR. 148
- 5.1 'The way of talent in capitalist countries'; 'Show talent the way in the socialist countries.' V. Koretskii, 1948. Struggling artists in the West enjoy none of the opportunities of those in the socialist world. 171
- 5.2 'Chatter Aids the Enemy!' V. Koretskii, (1954). Capitalist enemies lurked malevolently inside the USSR during the early Cold War years. 175

List of Abbreviations

ARCHIVAL ABBREVIATIONS

GARF	Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii
GAAO	Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Arkhangel'skoi Oblasti
GAOPDiFAO	Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Obshchestvenno-Politicheskikh Dvizhenii i Formirovaniu Arkhangel'skoi Oblasti
GAARK	Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv v Avtonomnoi Respublike Krym
RGASPI	Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii
RGANI	Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii
RGALI	Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Literatury i Iskusstva
TsDAHOU	Tsentral'nyi Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Hromads'kykh Ob'iednan' Ukrainy

SOURCE ABBREVIATIONS

A system of abbreviations is used throughout the book to specify what kind of source is being cited.

Proc.	Case files of the State Prosecution Organ of the Soviet Union
Let.	Letters sent by Soviet citizens to political leaders in Moscow
Sv.	Reports on the mood of the Soviet population (<i>svodki</i>)
Inf.	Information reports created by party and state organizations
HIP	Interview transcripts collected during the Harvard Interview Project on the Soviet Social System
Mem.	Memoirs and diaries of individuals who lived in, or visited, the USSR in this period
Int.	Interviews conducted between November 2003 and September 2005 in the former USSR

TERMINOLOGY

Agitprop	Agitation and Propaganda
FZO	Fabrichno-Zavodskoe Obuchenie (Higher Technical School)
MGB	Ministerstvo Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti (Ministry of State Security)

MOPR	Mezhdunarodnoe Obshchestvo Pomoshchi Revoliutsioneram (International Organization for Aid to Revolutionaries)
NKID	Narodnyi Kommissariat Inostrannykh Del (Foreign Ministry)
NKVD	Narodnyi Kommissariat Vnutrennykh Del (Interior Ministry)
Obkom	Oblastnyi Komitet (<i>Oblast'</i> Committee)
Raikom	Raionnyi Komitet (<i>Raion</i> Committee)
TASS	Telegrafnoe Agenstvo Sovetskogo Soiuza (Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union)

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Introduction

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE STALIN ERA: WHERE HAVE WE GOT TO?

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 facilitated a double revolution in the historiography of the Stalin years. First, historians gained access to a wealth of previously inaccessible archival material. Secondly, the Cold War driven debates about the relationship between Stalinism and Leninism and the ‘totalitarian’ nature of the era became less pressing. As a result, the last twenty years have been a disorderly and highly creative time within Soviet historiography. The literature concerning the Stalin era has crystallized in three key areas: the logic and language of the Soviet government in the Stalin era; the mechanisms by which the Soviet government ruled in the Stalin era; and the experiences of ordinary people in the Stalin era, in particular how they related to Soviet power.

This book contributes to two of those three key areas of discussion. It describes the evolution of state-sponsored rhetoric concerning Sovietness (Official Soviet Identity) between the Nazi–Soviet Pact (1939), and Stalin’s death (1953), and also how ordinary citizens interacted with that language. In terms of the logic and language of the Soviet regime, it challenges the current historiographical emphasis on Russian nationalism at the expense of other identities: Soviet patriotism was an important feature of the landscape in this period. It also offers a new approach to the question of the relationship between Soviet citizens and Soviet power. Ordinary members of the Soviet population deployed a number of ‘tactics of the habitat’ (Kotkin) in order to negotiate their relationship with the state that ruled them. Their behaviour was characterized by a careful creativity that belied the twin poles of support and resistance.

The logic and language of Soviet government in the Stalin era

The debate concerning the logic and language of Soviet government has largely focused on the pre-war 1930s. One aspect of that discussion has focused on the thinking and reasoning of the Soviet elites.

The political thought of Josef Stalin and the nature of Soviet high politics have been thoroughly re-evaluated since 1991.¹ There has also been a fresh attempt to take seriously the propaganda of the Stalin era. Recent work has moved beyond the narrow notion of propaganda as a mechanism for control, and paid more attention to the content of Soviet film, newsprint, literature, popular culture, and science policy.²

The most widely discussed feature of the Soviet linguistic landscape has been nationality policy. This flurry of interest in nationality policy reflects the, sometimes tacit, assumption that ultimately it was nationalism that pulled the Soviet state apart under Gorbachev. Slezkine's seminal article, describing the 'chronic ethnophilia' of the Stalin era, set the stage for others to follow.³ Indeed nationalism has been so prominent in recent years that it has begun to eclipse class as the primary critical tool for evaluating the actions of the Soviet state. One of the key contributions of this book is to suggest that, whilst nationalist rhetoric was an important feature of the post-1939 landscape, the government also invested great efforts in formulating and promoting a version of Sovietness that was supposed to operate over and above the national identities that distinguished Soviet citizens from one another.

¹ R. Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (London, 2004); E. van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in Twentieth-Century Revolutionary Patriotism* (London, 2002); J. A. Getty, and V. Naumov, *The Road to the Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks* (New Haven, 1996); Y. Gorlizki and O. Khlevniuk, *Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945–1953* (Oxford, 2004); D. Priestland, *Stalin and the Politics of Mobilisation: Ideas, Power, and Terror in Inter-war Russia* (Oxford, 2007).

² J. von Geldern and R. Stites, ed., *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia: Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays and Folklore, 1917–1953* (Bloomington, 1995); J. Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, 2000); E. Pollock, *Stalin and the Soviet Science Wars* (Princeton, 2008); N. Krementsov, *Stalinist Science* (Princeton, 1997).

³ Y. Slezkine, 'The Soviet Union as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism', in S. Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism New Directions* (London, 2000), 313–47; T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union 1923–1939* (Ithaca, 2001); G. Hosking, *Rulers and Victims: The Russians in the Soviet Union* (London, 2006); S. Yekelchik, *Stalin's Empire of Memory: Russian-Ukrainian Relations in the Soviet Historical Imagination* (Toronto, 2004); D. Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity 1931–56* (Cambridge Mass., 2002).

The mechanisms by which the Soviet government ruled in the Stalin era

Nationality policy has also played a central role in the second question that has dominated post-1991 historiography: the mechanisms by which the Soviet state ruled in the Stalin era. Hirsch's work has led the way, arguing that Bolshevik nationalities policy was a new form of imperialism: it provided a mechanism for counting, controlling, and sponsoring the development of certain groups.⁴ This approach is typical of a wider tendency to stress the similarities between the technologies of government employed by both the USSR and other 'modern' states in this era. Under the influence of Bauman, Mazower, and Foucault, Soviet historians have argued that state surveillance, mass communication, and 'weeding' of the citizenry were not unique to the USSR; instead they were common features of a wider Enlightenment project in the early twentieth century.⁵ Weiner has been one of the most prominent proponents of this model in the Stalin era, arguing that Stalin-era state violence was typical of the wider Enlightenment aspiration to remake society along rational lines.⁶ That 'impulse to remake and improve society' has also been identified in campaigns for sobriety, literacy, and cleanliness.⁷

This approach has not sought to justify but rather to contextualize the excesses of the Stalin era. However, its weakness lies in its incapacity to explain what was distinctive about the Bolshevik state. As Engelstein argues, it is unsatisfactory to describe the Purges as simply mainstream state violence.⁸ At the very least, the Stalin-era government fashioned its citizenry with more vigour and more brutality than most. Whether

⁴ F. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005).

⁵ Z. Bauman, *Modernity and The Holocaust* (Ithaca, 1989); M. Mazower, *Dark Continents: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London, 1998); M. Foucault, trans., A. Sheridan, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London, 1977); D. Beer, *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity, 1880–1930* (Ithaca, 2008); Paul Hagenloh, "Socially Harmful Elements" and the Great Terror', in S. Fitzpatrick, *Stalinism*, 286–308; P. Holquist, "Information is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work": Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context', *The Journal of Modern History*, 69.3 (1997), 415–50.

⁶ A. Weiner, ed., *Landscaping the Human Garden: Twentieth Century Population Management in Perspective* (Stanford, 2003).

⁷ D. Hoffman, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941* (Ithaca, 2001).

⁸ L. Engelstein, 'Weapon of the Weak (Apologies to James Scott): Violence in Russian History', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 4.3 (2003), 679–93.