

## The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: a Study in Twentieth-Century Revolutionary Patriotism

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**Reviewer:** Mark Sandle

I suppose a slight confession is in order before I begin. This is a book that I had hoped to write, but for a variety of reasons it never transpired. To me, it seemed to be a glaring omission in the literature on Stalin. Bookshops were awash with biographies of Stalin. Appraisals of the Stalinist system were as numerous as medals on Brezhnev's chest. Yet why nothing on the thought of one of the most prominent figures in recent history? Surely an assessment of Stalin's place in the pantheon of twentieth-century Marxist-Leninist thought was a worthy topic for academic consideration, even if I had trouble persuading friends and family of its merits? The usual response of colleagues when informed of the project to write on Stalin's thought was, 'well, that should be a short book .'.

Thankfully Erik van Ree **has** written the book, and an excellent one it is too: erudite, meticulously researched and full of interesting detail. It provides fascinating insights on some of the puzzles surrounding Stalin, and gives us fresh perspectives on Stalin the person, Stalin the leader and the system over which he presided. That is not to say that there are not lots of disputable issues in here (that is one of its delights). But it adds a great deal to our overall understanding of the man and the era. Get hold of a copy.

Now, I obviously need no persuading of the relevance of the work. But for the doubters out there, how does van Ree seek to persuade of its merits? In his introduction he addresses this issue, although I think a discussion of the deeper historiographical context of studies of Stalin would have been useful. He argues, correctly in my view, that western scholars have approached this question from the mistaken angle that Stalin was interested in power and power alone. Doctrine was secondary, derivative, irrelevant. Van Ree insists that Stalin did not simply adjust his ideas in an ad hoc, arbitrary fashion to fit the changing circumstances in which he found himself. On the contrary, van Ree's argument is founded on the notion that Stalin often stuck to his basic ideas and concepts even when all the evidence suggested he should abandon them.

What van Ree does not discuss in his very illuminating introductory chapter is **why** this assumption of western scholars - that Stalin was all about naked power and had no interest in ideas per se - has proved so enduring and so difficult to dislodge. What is/was it about the Western Sovietological community, scholars of Marxism, biographers of Stalin, and others that just accepted this unquestioningly? Have we all been

victims of Trotskii's damning verdicts on Stalin? Or does it say more about the western intellectual community itself? Was it more comforting for us to think that a dictatorial, brutal, mass murderer could not possibly be an intellectual, be interested in philosophy or doctrine or conceptual questions? Or that his crimes were derived from something primeval, uncivilised, barbaric, something Eastern/Russian/Georgian, surely something unthinkable for a 'westernised', 'civilised' man of ideas?

The book is all about filiations and fidelities. Who is the rightful parent of Stalin's ideas? Was Stalin a faithful disciple of Marx, Engels and Lenin, or a perverter of the Holy Canon? The thrust of Van Ree's approach is to examine the factors that shaped the development of Stalin's political thought. He sets out to explore whether Stalin was influenced more by the western (mainly though not wholly, German) revolutionary traditions embodied in the ideas of Marx, Engels *et al*, or by the native Russian philosophical/doctrinal/political traditions of statism, bureaucratic centralism and mobilisation of society for regime-defined goals. He sets this story within the wider context of the continuity/discontinuity thesis: how far was the regime which emerged out of 1917 an outgrowth of the pre-1917 Russian traditions and practices, or was it instead a new order? Van Ree on the whole rejects the continuity thesis, arguing instead that Stalinism was a part of modernity, in contradistinction to the *ancien regime* pre-modernity of tsarism. Concomitantly, Stalin's thought was not part of a continuity with earlier patterns of Russian thought, but was derived from the western revolutionary tradition. This review (thankfully!) is not going to explore these murky waters, except to make one general point. The distinction - modern equals Stalin, pre-modern equals Tsarism - drawn here by van Ree is too rigid and something of a caricature, especially of late Tsarism. The Tsarist state was acquiring many of the characteristics normally associated with 'modern' states: increasingly centralised and bureaucratised, characterised by state economic interventionism, industrialising, and with a high proportion of resources devoted to defence prior to 1914. The dichotomy of modernity (Stalinism) and pre-modernity (Tsarism) is too stark.

Turning to the specific doctrinal sphere, the 'standard' story of the development of Marxist thought in Russia outlines that as the imported ideas from Europe were grafted onto the native Russian revolutionary plant, the graft gradually took on the characteristics of the native plant, until it was almost unrecognisable. First Lenin introduced ideas (the vanguard party, the revolution in a non-western industrialised power) that deviated from the classical canon of Marxism. Stalin then took this further (socialism in one country, Russian nationalism, excessive centralism) until nothing was left of the 'original' Marxism, having been displaced by elements of the native Russian tradition. But van Ree (contentiously perhaps, but persuasively in my view) argues that 'there is no fundamental doctrine in the work of Lenin and Stalin that cannot be found in the Western European revolutionary tradition - Jacobin, Marxist or otherwise.' (p. 14) He is not saying that Stalinism is the only outcome, or indeed an inevitable outcome, but was one possible outcome of the Western European revolutionary tradition. The standard story, for the author, rests on a far too narrow reading of the Western tradition, in particular the Marxist view of the state and the Marxist view of the nation and its historic role. As a result, Stalin and Stalinist doctrine have been placed firmly in the Russian tradition because there was nowhere else to put them once they are denied the status of children of Marxism. Interestingly van Ree describes how his own belief that Stalinism was a direct product of the Russian tradition was seriously undermined when he visited Stalin's private library. There he found the works to be almost exclusively those of Marx, Engels and Lenin, all with hand-written notes in the margin. Stalin's mental world, right up to his death, was wholly Marxist. This is not to say that the Russian tradition had no influence, but that this had always to be fitted in around his Marxist framework.

What then is Van Ree's argument? His belief is that Stalin's thought evolved into a 'strange compound of Marxism and nationalism'. (p. 17) He terms this 'revolutionary patriotism', whereby the interests of the nation are best served by revolutionary change. It was not a conservative nationalism though, but rather a revolutionary nationalism, derived in part from Marxism and in part from European Jacobin traditions. Stalin's Marxism was derived mainly from Marx, Engels and Lenin. They were the only people, according to van Ree, that Stalin ever acknowledged as intellectual influences upon him. Even here though, Stalin assigned a higher status to Marx and Lenin than to Engels, whom he argued had misinterpreted Marx.<sup>(1)</sup> But van Ree also uncovered in Stalin's work reflections of other Marxist figures: the Georgians (Zhordaniia,

Makharadze and Shaumian); Austro-Marxists (Bauer and Renner); and Russians (Bogdanov, Plekhanov, Preobrazhenskii, Bukharin and Trotskii). I think there is also a wider point here that perhaps needs greater emphasis in van Ree's argument. The lines of filiation are drawn from Marx/ Engels/ Lenin to Stalin. But there needs to be a sustained discussion of the nature of Bolshevism as a set of political doctrines and practices. Leninism was just one strand of Bolshevism, and Stalin's thought needs to be seen within the context of the diverse Bolshevik mental universe.

Stalin's nationalism emerged during his years in power. The patriotic, nationalistic elements in Stalin's thought were gradually absorbed into his thinking, co-existing uneasily with his Marxist ideals. It was the experiences of the USSR during the Great Patriotic War that convinced him of the potential that lay within the patriotic motif. In the post-war years Stalin held up the nation and its national community as the main source of hope for defeating the bourgeoisie. Socialism allied with patriotism was the best way to defend the interests of the nation.

The book is structured thematically. The first six chapters of the book explore the intellectual forebears of Stalin's ideas, explicitly selecting from the outset those streams that, directly or indirectly, flowed into the river that became Stalin's political thought: namely,

Jacobinism (as an early example of revolutionary patriotism, combining centralisation, government by terror, patriotism);

The state in the thought of Marx and Lenin (centralised, minority rule, bureaucratic);

The notion of a proletarian revolution in a backward country (this was a central part of Marx's ideas, not a Leninist ingrafting);

Marxist nationalism (Marxism actually contained a strong nationalist element, and so Stalin's emphasis on the power and utility of nationalism for a revolutionary movement was entirely consonant with Marxism, not a perversion of it);

Stalin's intellectual development before October and under Lenin (in particular his views on the national question).

There are many interesting insights here. For example, on the issue of nationalism within Marxism, van Ree argues that this had two strands. Firstly, Marx and Engels appeared to see the proletariat as a force for 'patriotic regeneration'. Secondly, they did not value all nations equally. A dividing line could be drawn between those nations representing progress, civilisation, modernity and those representing barbarism, reaction and darkness. The former nations were to be supported, as they pointed history towards its final goal of internationalism. If the latter type of nation was to triumph, then the march of history would be held back.

This accounts for Stalin's view that Russian culture was superior to the other national cultures in the Tsarist empire and that assimilation of non-Russian cultures into Russia would be a progressive step on their path to modernity, civilisation and eventually socialism and communism. Stalin's own views on the nation evolved from hostility to the whole concept in 1904, through a partial culturalist approach to nations in his 1913 pamphlet to his support for central authority and local autonomy by 1923. This is a key point for understanding not only Stalin's views, but also for our understanding of the evolution of the nationalities policy of the Soviet state. In van Ree's view, Stalin's 'Red Patriotism' as People's Commissar for Nationalities - his advocacy of central authority and Russian predominance - was not really news. This was fully in line with his pre-revolutionary writings. But, for van Ree, 'the new thing was that *despite this* he agreed to federalism and cultural autonomy for the non-Russian nations.' (p. 82; emphasis in the original)

The main section of the book explores the key themes in Stalin's thought, including: the state; the economy; class struggle; socialism in one country; the cult of personality; society, culture and science; world revolution. It concludes with two chapters that explore the content and philosophy of his concept of

revolutionary patriotism. A broad-ranging conclusion draws together the strands, and poses some difficult questions. There is a very full bibliography, which is invaluable for the researcher working on Stalin. So what are the main strengths and weaknesses?

The strength of the opening section is the very clear way in which van Ree sets out the lines running from Marxism and Jacobinism, to the ideas of Stalin via Lenin. Yet I also think that, paradoxically, this may be a weakness of the text, on two counts. Firstly, while there is a conceptual neatness in being able to identify the straight lines running from Jacobinism through Marx and Lenin, in life things are rarely that neat. A greater awareness of the ambiguities and tensions in the writings of all these figures might point us to why (and how) these particular interpretations gained hegemony at that time in that place. Secondly, by focusing upon the debate about whether Stalin's thought derives from Marxist or Russian traditions, there is not enough attention paid to the nature and development of Stalin's thought *on its own terms*. The particular qualities of Stalin's ideas, the different modes of expression he deployed, the rhetorical devices, the use of polemic and the influence of context, audience, language and so on in the development and expression of his ideas do not get the attention they warrant. Two points flow from this.

The first relates to the modes of expression or the language used by Stalin and the effect this may have had. For example, is there sufficient attention paid to the intellectual development of the young Koba, and in particular the type of education and revolutionary training he underwent? How might his seminarian training have influenced the manner in which he approached the texts of Marx, Engels and Lenin as well as the way in which his ideas were expressed and his arguments formulated? The catechismal style - so evident in the *kratkii kurs* - was surely evidence of the modes of thinking inculcated in Orthodox seminaries.<sup>(2)</sup> How might Stalin's style have aided him in his schemes to seize power, win support and destroy the arguments of his opponents? This in turn raises questions about how this may have influenced those who have read and interpreted Stalin's works. Did this style of expression lead theorists to the conclusion that Stalin's writings were dogmatic, simplistic and thus unworthy of serious academic analysis, unlike the works of Trotskii, Lenin or Bukharin? Did the way Stalin expressed his ideas prevent scholars from looking beyond the surface?

The second point relates to the questions of purpose and context. A focus on the ideological parentage of Stalin's ideas can take the eye away from the immediate context. Stalin, like most Bolsheviks, was no detached philosopher. He was a revolutionary. His doctrine was always to have a practical application, even if this was only the destruction of the ideas of a rival or their faction. A full account of the development of Stalin's thought needs a detailed awareness of the purpose to which Stalin's ideas were aimed, the context within which it occurred and the audience to which it was directed. Appraising Stalin's political thought would then also need to include the extent to which as a piece of polemic, say, it was effective or persuasive. Or how the 'rules' of polemical engagement may have significantly affected the way that Stalin expressed his ideas, simplifying, exaggerating, caricaturing, embellishing and so on? This shifts the focus away from the Marxist/Russian nexus, and gives us a broader perspective on Stalin's thought, its strengths, patterns and sources.

The chapter on 'Socialism in One Country' is a good illustration of the points made above. Van Ree produces a fine sustained analysis of Stalin's thoughts on this issue, and takes the trouble to pursue this beyond the 1920s, a point usually ignored by others. However, the context within which this debate took place - the factional struggle for control of the party - was largely absent. The debate was set largely in the context of the other strand of this debate, about how best to build socialism in Soviet Russia. But the two aspects are indissolubly linked. The factional struggles meant that much of the discussion was carried out polemically, and this context is absolutely crucial.

Moreover, the use of doctrine by Stalin to win power for himself, to construct his cult of personality and to project an image of himself as a faithful disciple also perhaps needs further discussion. This is touched upon in the chapter on the cult of personality, but more needs to be said about the 'Foundations of Leninism' pamphlet (how far was Stalin actually responsible for these lectures?). How did Stalin come to the decision

as to what to include in his *Sochineniia*? What does this tell us about Stalin's own perception of his contribution to Soviet Marxism-Leninism?

One final point to be made is that at times there is a lack of detail. An example of this comes in the chapter on Stalin's economic thought. Tracing the developments in Stalin's thinking across the 1920s and up to the pamphlet *The Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR* (on which incidentally Van Ree provides a highly illuminating commentary) the author identifies the main points of continuity with the works of Marx and Lenin. But a more specific analysis of key moments would have been useful. The best example of this is the decision to collectivise. The background to Stalin's adoption of the idea of involuntary collectivisation is related. But the thinking behind why it was carried out in that particular way, at that particular time is frustratingly absent. Why did Stalin take the decision suddenly and without warning at the end of 1929? Why did he choose to do it rapidly, coercively? Why was it undertaken via a war against the kulaks? Where was the doctrinal basis, if any, for the specifics of this decision? The details here are crucial. Stalin inherited the broad prescription about how socialists should socialise the rural sector. But by carrying it out, Stalin resolved many of the ambiguities in Bolshevik thinking and also provided a model for further socialist states as well as an understanding of what collectivisation actually meant. It fell to Stalin to convert the general prescriptions of Bolshevism into a tangible plan for how to get Soviet Russia from where it was to socialism. In so doing he specified both the theory and practice of socialism in Marxist-Leninist discourse.

But aside from this, the book provides some wonderful insights and bravely tackles some contentious issues. In particular, van Ree notes that Stalin took his publicly avowed doctrines seriously. This is a highly significant argument. Stalin's world-view of struggle, resistance and opposition was not some elaborate deceit. He also argues that Stalin was no autocrat: that the USSR remained a party dictatorship. In his conclusion, van Ree argues that Stalinism was a synthesis of Marxism and Jacobinism, and that it stood centrally within the tradition of the Western European Enlightenment. It was a wild, extreme version of the aspiration to construct a rational, just social order, but it was part of that tradition nevertheless. The lesson that van Ree draws from this is a potentially highly uncomfortable one: 'Stalinism is about our own origins'. (p. 286) It is a lesson we all need to heed.

## Notes

1. This is a little ironic, given that Engels played a central role in codifying Marxism, and in developing a particular interpretation of Marx, which was fundamentally the one adopted by the Russian Marxists.
2. This topic is mentioned, but it needs further elaboration. See p. 167.[Back to \(1\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review. For reasons of time only he is unable to comment further.  
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