

CONTINUITIES — DISCONTINUITIES

Edited by
GYÖRGY GYARMATI
and
MÁRIA PALASIK

SECRET SERVICES AFTER STALIN'S DEATH
IN COMMUNIST CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE



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Table of Contents

Continuities and Discontinuities after Stalin's Death. A Foreword by the Editors	7
GYÖRGY GYARMATI–MÁRIA PALASIK Hectic De-Stalinization and the Secret Services in Hungary, 1953–56	25
ROGER ENGELMANN The Realignment of the State Security Service of the GDR as a result of the De-Stalinization Crisis, 1953–56	47
PAWEŁ SASANKA From the Defection of Józef Światło to Moczar's Ministry of Internal Affairs – Polish Security Apparatus Collapse and Restoration (1954–64)	61
MILAN BÁRTA Finding a way State Security in the Period of Rudolf Barák, 1953–61	83
JERGUŠ SIVOŠ The Reorganization of Czechoslovak Security Apparatus in 1953	103

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BORIS MIHAYLOV	
The Bulgarian 1956	123
GYÖRGY GYARMATI	
“The Thaw” Through the Eyes of a Hungarian Writer. Sándor Márai’s Chronicles of the Beginnings of Hungarian Post-Stalinism	131
Abbreviations	149
Index of Names	153
About the Contributors	157
Publications by the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security	161

Continuities and Discontinuities after Stalin's Death

A Foreword by the Editors

On March 2, 1835, the day of the death of Francis I, Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary, a large crowd had gathered in the courtyard of the Hofburg Palace in Vienna. When the proclamation was made, many people burst into tears, at which point the court chamberlain who had made the proclamation tried to console them by saying,

"Do not cry, everything shall remain the same."

To which a voice from the mourning crowd replied,

"We know, that's why we're crying!"

According to our current historical knowledge, the above quoted anecdote received no "encore" in March 1953, in the days when the Soviet Union and its satellite states cried crocodile tears under the guise of the "statewide mourning" of Stalin. We do know, however, that due to a misprint, the Hungarian daily newspaper *Népszava* ['The Word of the People'] informed Budapest not of the "astonished mourning" of the people ['megrendült gyász'], but of an "ordered mourning" ['megrendelt gyász'].¹

The works of Hanna Arendt, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Carl Joachim Friedrich have traced the general characteristics of

¹ *Népszava*, March 6, 1953. Béla Bodó, the editor of the day, was imprisoned for six months by the State Security Authority for the misprint. See Murányi, Gábor. 2004. "A múzsa puszija" ['A Peck from the Muse']. In Murányi, Gábor: *A múlt szövedéke* ['The Plexus of the Past']. Budapest: Noran, p. 374.

totalitarianism from the past to the present, which are as follows: (1) a closed, exclusivist ideology; (2) a one-party system; (3) central direction and control of the economy through state planning; (4) a monopoly on culture and the means of communication; and (5) a secret police network infiltrating every social sphere of life. Despite the inevitably static nature of politological typifications, these characteristics also correspond with Stalinism, although the model does not seem to fit the extremities of Stalinism, such as the “cult of personality,” which was unique even within the concept of the cult of leadership, or the way Soviet national Bolshevism was implemented without any theoretical questioning of internationalism (or perhaps to outright replace it.)

The model mapped from the rigid snapshot of totalitarianism described above might comprehend the general theme of our present inquiries, which is Stalinism and the De-Stalinization process within the Soviet Bloc, but from a historical perspective, we cannot ignore the fact that the basic criteria of totalitarianism were also characteristic of the systems operating within the control radius of the Soviet communist project, both during and after Stalinism (and in the case of Soviet Russia, even *before* the implementation of the Stalinist system). Therefore, with regard to our research on certain branches of the De-Stalinization process, we must also determine the unique characteristics of Stalinism within the conceptual framework of totalitarianism, as the various satellite states implemented different political measures at different times to suppress these specificities, with the purpose of legitimizing the “original characteristics” of autochthonous Soviet (Bolshevik) communism.

The apparent mismatch between traditional notions of totalitarianism and the unique characteristics of Stalinism might be responsible for the emergence of different interpretations as to where Stalinism should be placed within the framework of Soviet communism. According to traditional, contemporary explanations, Stalinism was a deviation, an extreme derivation of the Marxist-Leninist theoretical vision of communism, and an excessive reign of terror compared to the first decade of the Bolshevik one-party regime. (For now, we shall not discuss the differences between the original

Marxist scenario and the Bolshevik reign implemented by Lenin in Russia.) To use an awkward comparison to the French Revolution, contemporaries believed that the thirty years of the Stalinist regime constituted a Jacobin dictatorship between two *Girondes*, where the death of Stalin (and the execution of Lavrentiy Beria), the newly formed collective leadership (the Directory or Presidium), and the speech of Nikita Khrushchev in February 1956 was the turn that attempted to reverse the *Thermidor*. (They promised rehabilitations, and to go “Back to Lenin!” with a bit of Marxist renaissance thrown in.) However, this contemporary explanation had been lopsided, partial, and inconsistent from the beginning, and continued to be so, mostly due to practical considerations: namely that all subsequent brands of Soviet leadership, whether motivated by domestic political reasons or the necessity of social legitimacy, continued to heavily rely on Stalin, the leader who had transformed the Soviet Union into a superpower during World War II.²

Recently, Stalinism has also been discussed as an independent “civilizational paradigm,”³ which does not override the credo of totalitarianism discussed above, but at the same time “socializes” our modernist notions of dictatorships in general. In the case of Russia, it seems reasonable that a civilization that had been historically steeped in caesaropapism could have hardly given birth to anything else than an ideologically revised and more centralized and militarized “new edition” of that grand tradition. In our view, however, the above mentioned “civilizational paradigm” should be used for the entire period of the Soviet Russian communist one-party regime, where Stalinism was but an extreme variant of the standard totalitarian model.

2 Moreover, this trend seems to have made a comeback in the current Stalinist renaissance in Russia, where Putin’s geostrategic ambitions suggest an equally serious claim to global prestige.

3 One of the representatives of this new, comprehensive approach is Steven Kotkin. See Kotkin, Stephen. 1997. *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*. Oakland: University of California Press; see also Bartha, Eszter. 2003. “A sztálinizmus a régi és az új historiográfiában” [‘Stalinism in Old and New Historiographies’]. In Krausz, Tamás (ed.) *A sztálinizmus hétköznapijai* [‘Everyday Life under Stalinism’]. Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, pp. 15–40.

The rise of Stalinism might seem historically predictable on Russian soil, but what about the victims of the westward penetration of Stalinism after World War II? According to the *bon mot* of Polish poet Czesław Miłosz, “Stalinism was not simply forced onto Central Eastern European societies, but built up from within,” but what does that mean for historians who are trying to reconstruct the Stalinist and post-Stalinist history of the satellite states lying west of the Soviet Union’s borders? The starting point, of course, is timeliness, or the way these states were “introduced” to the Soviet system and the Stalinist model, which then raises the issue of the distinction to be made between the general term *Sovietization*, and the more specific term *Stalinization*, because following World War II, the western states of the Soviet Bloc were forced to adapt the relevant or Stalinist version of the Sovietization process.

With regard to the Stalinization of the Central Eastern European satellite states, we cannot ignore the different historical and civilizational circumstances of these states at the time of the Soviet penetration, including their different postwar international legal statuses resulting from their participation in World War II – in other words, their varying potential for sovereignty on account of being victors, losers, or by-victors and by-losers of the war. Compared to our previous politological modeling, these characteristics presented a kaleidoscopic diversity, the exact sort of potential satellite pluralism that the “Pax Sovietica” and the Stalinization process were adamant to squeeze into a singular Stalinist mold. (Or, as regional urban slang has it, “the by-victorious Czechs and Poles received as their reward what the by-losing Hungarians and Romanians received as punishment.”) It is important to note that from the perspective of the bourgeoisie and urbanization of prominent Central Eastern European centers (as opposed to the neglected periphery), the Stalinization process meant a form of regression – the “refeudalization” of certain civilized and somewhat modernized regions, if you will. Such states included Bohemia, the Sudetenland, the more industrialized regions of Poland and Hungary, and the artificially created East German state mutation known as the German Democratic Republic.

We have no pretensions or means of settling the age-old debate of Stalinism, where the ideological explanation goes that Stalin and his “ism” constituted a secularized “anti-Christ” compared to (malleable) Marxist-Leninist notions of atheistic socialism and communism, which is what had theoretically led to the excommunication of Stalinism. However, more practical approaches suggest that on account of the (Russian) circumstances of the implementation of the grand communist project, Stalinism turned out to be an extreme but nonetheless “source coded” derivation of Bolshevism in power. To put it differently, Stalin’s institutionalized state terror was an immanent part of the system turned rampant, which was to be neutralized by the politically ambitious De-Stalinization process and its technical adjustments to power and control. This version does seem to be closer to a historical approach of Stalinism, but its realization is no less controversial than the theoretical discourse that surrounds it. However, we might be able to move forward by considering those Stalinist mechanisms of power that have been confirmed as deviations from the previously mentioned systemic characteristics of totalitarianism.

The satellite states that were forced to adopt the Stalinist model and eventually produced their own “nationally tinted” versions of it also raise interesting questions. Even if we were to accept the Soviet Russian melting pot as an autochthonous civilizational paradigm, would this also hold true for the second generation of “aftermarket” satellite states, or should the latter be considered a case of “the rockiest road (or roads) leading from capitalism and back again?” In other words, the question is whether we consider the different satellite state versions of the Stalinist model to be political “excursions” – not necessarily integral or constrained, mind you –, which ultimately became part of the various national histories.

Following Stalin’s death, the revival of the proposition of a “collective leadership” is usually traced back to the idea that none of the potential successors had the personal power or prestige once commanded by Stalin, so the “logic” of the war of succession – supposing it had been driven by logic – dictated the division of the competencies of power. Still, such a division of competencies did not