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# STALIN: THE DISLOYAL PATRON?

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Stalin's victory in the power struggles of the 1920s owed a great deal to his success in building up and deploying a vast patronage network while maneuvering his chief clients into key positions, but once he had achieved supreme power he proved a fickle and disloyal patron. In the words Charles de Gaulle is said to have used of himself, he confounded his supporters with his ingratitutde. With the exception of the egregious Vyacheslav Molotov and perhaps one or two other hatchet-men, Stalin was constantly discarding his older supporters once they had served their purpose or run foul of his morbid suspicion or arbitrary ill-will and replacing them with younger and ever more pliable adherents who rode high for a few months or a few years before they, too, were consigned to oblivion.

This is the conventional wisdom, and it contains a most important element of truth, to which there are some impressive witnesses, beginning with Lenin who in his so-called 'Testament' dwelt specifically on Stalin's capriciousness and disloyalty. Khrushchev has left many bitter words in his secret report to the Twentieth Congress and in his memoirs about his old boss's arbitrary, suspicious and cruel treatment of his entourage. Over forty years ago Boris Souvarine in his still invaluable biography of Stalin summed it up as follows:

> Stalin incites and provokes his auxiliaries, stirs up rival passions, exploits rancour and hatred in order to guarantee in his own way the continuance of his despotism and the unique position of the supreme arbiter. He cuts short differences, separates the protagonists, and profits from the situation to impose new men. Not knowing in whom to trust and seeing traitors on all sides, he keeps changing his favourites without changing his methods, and always with identical results. (Boris Souvarine, Stalin. A Critical Survey of Bolshevism, Sydney-London, 1940, p. 580).

And more recently George F. Kennan, in the course of his brilliant characterization of Stalin, described him as:

> . . . a man of incredible criminality . . . without pity or mercy; a man in whose entourage no one was ever safe; a man whose hand was set against all that could not be useful to him at the moment; a man who was most dangerous of all to those who were his closest collaborators in crime, because he liked to be the sole custodian of his own secrets, and disliked to share his memories or his responsiblity with others who, being still alive, had tongues and consciences and might still be susceptible to the human weaknesses of remorse or indiscretion. (George F. Kennan, Russian and the West under Lenin and Stalin, Boston-Toronto, 1961, p. 254-255).

Similar characterizations can be found in the pages of other leading students of Stalin and the Stalin era, and there is no shortage of evidence to support them, evidence perhaps best collected and collated in Roy Medvedev's Let History Judge.

What follows in no way calls in question the predominant view of Stalin as a man totally lacking in moral scruples and compassion, deceitful, manipulative and vengeful in his dealings with allies and supporters, deviously setting one against the other, and capable of acts of egregious treachery and disloyalty.

The question here is rather whether it is the whole truth, all we need to know in order to characterize the record of the dictator's relationships with his principle supporters and leading officials. In pursuing this question I propose to confront this record with two propositions commonly associated with this conventional wisdom, namely that there was an exceptionally high turnover in the Soviet political elite under Stalin, and that this was most marked among the longest tenured and most senior of them. For the sake of the argument I will call these two propositions our 'hypotheses'.

Let us start by taking a fairly close look at what happened in the 1930s and especially during the Great Purge -- at who survived and who did not. Now we all know that by the time of the 16th Party Congress in 1930 all the so-called oppositionist leaders had been removed from the Politburo, their places taken by supporters of Stalin, and their adherents cleared out of nearly all second-level jobs carrying Central Committee status. In the course of the 1920s Stalin had progressively stacked the Central Committee with his followers -- that is to say with his direct clients or proteges or the clients of his clients -- and when we come to the Central Committee elected in 1930 the process is virtually complete. Four years later he had the opportunity for a final mopping up and for bringing in some younger blood to replace some of his older supporters.

It is when we compare the actual membership in 1930 and 1934 that we encounter the first piece of counter-evidence to our hypotheses. The Central Committee consisted of 71 full members in both years, and there were 67 candidate members in 1930 and one more in 1934. Now according to our hypothetical picture of Stalin as patron we should expect a higher turnover among the full members -- who tended to be older, longer-term officials, more privy to what had been going on at high levels in the 1920s -- than among the rising and ambitious but less tainted candidates. This is in fact not the case. Of the 71 full members in 1930, 50 were reelected full members in 1934, six as candidate members, and only 15 disappeared into obscurity. Of the 67 candidate members, 29 remained candidates in 1934, seven were promoted to full membership, and fully 31 were removed from the Central Committee altogether: in other words the more junior candidates were twice as likely to be discarded by Stalin as were the more senior full members. What is more, when we look at the 28 candidates who made it to the Central Committee <u>for the first time</u> in 1930, and who must therefore be seen in terms of our hypotheses as enjoying especially high chances of political survival and advancement, we find that no less that 12 of them have already faded out by 1934, almost as high a casualty rate as among the old hands who were carry-overs from the 1920s -- 43 percent as against 46 percent.

But surely, you may say, this is rather small beer compared with the cataclysmic changes of the 1930s, and when we compare the Central Committee that emerged from the 18th Congress in in 1939 with the membership in 1934 it does indeed, on the face of it, confirm our hypotheses: four-fifths of the 1934 Central Committee, practically all of whom were Bolsheviks of pre-revolutionary or Civil War vintage who had boarded the General Secretary's bandwagon during the 1920s or been co-opted by him in the early 1930s, were swept away, most of them to a cruel and sordid death, to be replaced by a second generation of Stalinists rapidly advanced from obscurity and half of them not even party members before Lenin's death 15 years earlier.

But there <u>were</u> survivors, and if we take a good look at these we will encounter some further problems for our hypotheses. To start with, the generally younger, more junior candidates again had a worse survival rate that the full members -- and by survival here I mean staying in the Central Committee rather than staying alive, although in most cases it amounted to the same thing. Only ten percent of the 1934 candidates were reelected candidates or members in 1939, compared with 22.5 percent of the full members. And now let us look in particular at our cohorts of 1930 and 1934 -- those co-opted to the Central Committee for the first time at the 16th or 17th Congresses -- the rising stars of the first years of Stalin's dictatorship. According to our hypotheses, they should have had a distinctly

better survival rate than the older Stalinists who had come to prominence in the 1920s. But they did not. In fact those elected for the first time in 1930 and reelected in 1934 were particularly badly mauled during the purges -- only eight percent were still in the Central Committee by 1939. Those elected for the first time in 1934 did rather better -- 21 percent of them were again chosen in 1939. So comparison of the 1930 and 1934 cohorts does offer some support to our hypotheses, but it is not very compelling when one compares the 21 percent of the 1934 cohort with the 17 percent of the whole 1934 Central Committee. And when you combine the 1930 and 1934 cohorts, as might seem reasonable since they both entered the Central Committee in the same phase of the consolidation of Stalin's power, you find that their survival rate was not, as our hypotheses would lead us to predict, better than that of those 1934 members and candidates who had been co-opted to the Central Committee back in the twenties, but in fact slightly worse.

A further, most important, point about the survivors of the Great Purge suggests itself from a simple scrutiny of their names. Here were the people who were full members in 1934 and retained their full membership in 1939:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A.A. Andreev | L.M. Kaganovich | A.I. Mikoyan |
| A.E. Badaev | M.M. Kaganovich | V.M. Molotov |
| L.P. Beria | M.I. Kalinin | K.I. Nikolaeva |
| K.E. Voroshilov | M.M. Litvinov | N.S. Khrushchev |
| A.A. Zhdanov | D.Z. Manuilsky | N.M. Shvernik |

and of course Stalin himself.

The five 1934 candidates who were made full members in 1939 were:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| M.D. Bagirov | N.A. Bulganin | A.N. Poskrebyshev |
| S.M. Budenny | L.Z. Mekhlis | |

And there was just one the the 1934 candidates who remained a candidate in 1939, namely G.D. Veinberg.

One does not need to be a Sovietologist to recognize here quite a few familiar names, and for a very clear reason: the majority of the Central Committee members who survived the Great Purge politically and physically were indeed men who had already been part of Stalin's inner circle during the twenties or who were drawn into it in the years preceeding the Purge. There were exceptions. Klavdia Nikolaeva, an ex-Zinovievite who threw in her lot with Stalin and was rewarded with a series of party posts and made a trade union boss in 1936, may have owed her survival to the Great Male Chauvinist's need for at least one high status woman to prove the absence of sexual discrimination in the USSR. Similarly, Maksim Litvinov 'ought' to have died along with most of the diplomatic corps, but Stalin probably decided he must keep <u>someone</u> with international standing and experience for negotiating with the British and French. If Nikolaeva was kept on as a token woman and Litvinov as a token gentleman, Badaev was probably retained as a token Old Bolshevik -- he had been one of the Bolshevik members of the Duma and Stalin used him both for internal and foreign consumption as a symbol of

respectability and continuity, making him Chairman of the Presidency of the Russian Republic. Mikhail Kaganovich evidently enjoyed the protection of his brother Lazar, one of Stalin's closest comrades-in-arms, as the official formula had it (although Lazar was later made to swallow Mikhail's arrest). Bagirov was a leading protege of Stalin's new police chief Beria. Why Veinberg survived I can only guess at: he had been a leading trade union official till 1937, when he was reduced to a minor administrative position in one of the commissariats, a post which by no stretch of the imagination justified keeping his candidate membership of the Central Committee. Perhaps he also had some symbolic use which it would take more digging to discover. Or perhaps Lazar Kaganovich protected nim as well, however out of character this may seem, for as young men the two had worked together in the Bolshevik underground in Kiev.

These were the exceptions. The rest were all big wheels in the Stalin machine. Molotov, Voroshilov, Andreev, Kaganovich and Kalinin were all full members of Stalin's Politburo by the early 1930s, and Mikoyan was a candidate member -- he became a full member in 1935. Khrushchev was Kaganovich's right-hand man in the Moscow party organization in the early 1930s and became its First Secretary in 1935: in January 1938 he was made a candidate member of the Politburo and sent to take over the party organization in the Ukraine. Andrei Zhdanov had been

for many years Stalin's man in Nizhny-Novgorod (Gorky), which had the largest party organization in Russia proper after Moscow and Leningrad, and on Kirov's assassination succeeded the latter as Secretary of the Central Committee and the Leningrad party organization, he too being made a candidate member of the Politburo in 1935. Nikolai Bulganin was another of Kaganovich's boys in the Moscow organization -- he ran the Executive Committee of the Moscow Soviet from 1931 to 1937 and then became a deputy premier for several years. Nikolai Shvernik was Stalin's nominee to take over the leadership of the trade unions from Tomsky in 1930, a job he held till 1944, and at the same time was made a member of the Orgburo. Lavrenti Beria was Stalin's party boss in Georgia from 1931 and early in 1938 was brought up to Moscow to take over the NKVD. Semen Budenny had long been Stalin's favourite Army commander, was Inspector of Cavalry from 1924, Commander of the Moscow Military District from 1937 and Deputy Commissar for Defense from 1939. Dmitri Manuilsky took over control of the Comintern on Stalin's behalf in 1928 and ran it till its abolition in 1943. Lev Mekhlis worked in Stalin's Personal Secretariat during the 1920s, then took charge of the Central Committee Press Department and was Stalin's chief man on Pravda, and headed the Political Directorate of the armed forces from 1937 to 1940, when Stalin was busy purging and restaffing the High Command. Finally there was the execrable Aleksandr Poskrebyshev, a longtime official of Stalin's Personal Secretariat and in charge of it from about 1930 on.

These fifteen, then -- and they constituted practically three quarters of all the 1934 Central Committee members and candidates who retained their membership in 1939 -- were all men who had not only been prominent supporters of Stalin for years preceeding the Purge, but most of them had been in constant, almost daily contact with Stalin throughout the period of the Purge. Now, closeness to Stalin was by no means a guarantee against falling victim to the terror machine. But contrary to common opinion it evidently helped. The chances of survival of all full members of the Central Committee were less than one in four; amongst those of them who were also full members of the Politburo it was at least better than even.

There is just one more point to note before we leave our comparison of the 1934 and 1939 Central Committees, and it is this: all five of the 1934 candidates who were promoted to full members in 1939 had been made candidates for the first time in 1934. At first glance this looks like a point in favour of our somewhat battered hypotheses: the newer men doing better than the older ones. But it appears in a different light when we recall that the candidates as a whole did so much worse than the older, more senior full members. What it really means is that for the candidates, even more than for the full members, you had little chance of surviving the Great Purge unless you could make it quickly to the Dictator's inner circle.

Well, it might be objected, he had to keep some people around him on whom he could rely while he cleaned out all the power structures -- party, government, economic administration, police, armed forces, scientific and cultural establishment, and so on -- and staffed them with a new generation of totally dependent, totally subservient young officials; but once he had done that, what then? How long would his entourage of 1939 last once the dust settled and he could groom the cream of this younger generation to replace them? And as to the next level down, i.e., the second-level central and provincial officials who made up the full Central Committee of 1939, how long would they stay in the charmed circle, how long before they, too, succumbed to what Brzezinski following Souvarine called "the permanent purge"? How long before the next round in Stalin's contrived "circulation of elites"?

The answer is, a very long time. In fact nearly two-thirds of the 1939 full members were still full members when Stalin died fourteen years later: the precise proportion is 61 percent, which means an attrition rate averaging under three percent a year. The survival rate was much less among the candidate members -- only 28 percent -- which again shows that the higher up you were the better your chance of staying put. In fact, once the Great Purge had run its course, a high official under Stalin stood a much <u>better</u> chance of remaining a high official than he did under Stalin's immediate successors. As mentioned, the attrition rate among full Central Committee

members averaged under three percent a year between 1939 and Stalin's death, whereas from 1952 to 1956 it averaged over eight percent a year, and from 1956 to 1961, Khrushchev's vintage years, it averaged twelve percent a year -- four times the rate under the post-purge Stalin. And what if we compare it with the Brezhnev era, the period usually regarded as having manifested exceptional and unprecedented 'stability of cadres'? Well, 44 percent of the full members of Brezhnev's first Central Committee in 1966 were still there after the 26th Congress fifteen years later, which represents an average attrition rate of almost four percent a year. Of course, the Central Committee members of the 1970s tended to be 10-15 years older than their predecessors of the 1940s, but there is little evidence here for the widespread assumption that security of office was incomparably greater under Brezhnev than it was under Stalin.

Turning now to those who were within Stalin's inner circle at the end of the purges, we find that their survival rate was even more spectacular than that of the wider group we have just been considering. All but two of the eleven full and candidate members of the Politburo as constituted in 1939 outlived Stalin and retained their places on the Politburo up to its merging in the new Central Committee Presidium shortly before Stalin's death. The two exceptions were Kalinin and Zhdanov, both of whom, so far as we know, died of natural causes in the 1940s (although some of us have suspicions about Zhdanov). Again, comparison with what happened under Stalin's

successors will help to bring out the significance of this. Of the fourteen full and candidate members of the Central Committee Presidium (as the Politburo was retitled) immediately after Stalin's death in 1953, only three retained their membership in 1964. Of the nineteen full and candidate members of the reconstituted Politburo of 1966, seven were no longer there fifteen years later, and only two of these cases were due to death.

The conventional wisdom about what it was like to enjoy Stalin's favour and hold high office under him is aptly summed up by the old Russian folk adage: blizhe k kniazyu, blizhe k smerti (the closer you are to the prince, the closer you are to death). As we have seen, the truth is nearer the reverse: the closer you were to the summit of power under Stalin, the better your chances of surviving and retaining high office. In fact the most striking thing is the durability of Stalin's inner clientele. Molotov, Voroshilov, Kaganovich, Andreev and Mikoyan had all entered the circle of Stalin's closest supporters by the early 1920s, and all were still in his Politburo thirty years later. How many other tyrants does history record who have been so 'loyal' to their lieutenants?

What lies behind this 'loyalty'? A mutual commitment resting on prolonged association, on past dangers faced together and past victories won together, on shared complicities and shared enemies, can generate powerful bonds of loyalty between

patron and clients in any setting, and I believe it often does so in the ranks of Soviet officialdom. There is not much to suggest it in the case of Stalin. Perhaps he was not entirely lacking in a sense of gratitude or obligation towards those who had rendered him special services in the past, although most scholars would reject the notion, and Roy Medvedev takes the trouble to examine what evidence there is for it and explains why he is unconvinced by it. A sentiment of loyalty is a very dubious explanation of Stalin's behaviour. On the other hand, a relatively high level of objective loyalty, in the sense of persistence in an established relationship of patron and client, of boss and follower, or of master and servant, if you prefer, this seems difficult to deny. We know from the study of patron-client relationships in other settings that an affective bond is not an essential ingredient of such objective loyalty, which may rest on purely pragmatic grounds: you can work more efficiently with people whose strengths and weaknesses you are thoroughly familiar with, they have formed a sensitive understanding of your needs and found effective ways of serving them, and so on.

Nobody appreciated better than Stalin the truth summed up in Al Capone's reported reply when asked what he thought of the prospects of Benito Mussolini. 'He'll be O.K.,' said Al, 'so long as he can keep de boys in line.' Stalin knew he needed his boys -- kadry reshayut vse, he was wont to say, which may be freely translated as 'it all depends on de boys ya got.'

But he also knew full well you had to keep them in line. Keeping them in line presented quite different problems at different periods. In the 1920s, when Stalin was locked in successive struggles with the 'Trotskyites,' 'Zinovievites' and 'Bukharinites,' his supporters for the most part stayed in line because if he were to go down they would go down with him. After 1930, when the last of these opposition groupings was ousted and their places taken by Stalinists, the problem took on a completely different character.

On the one hand Stalin's numerous clientele now filling all the key positions at the centre and in the provinces were no longer threatened with loss of these positions to followers of a rival faction, and on the other hand not all of the Stalin 'boys' who inherited the places on the Politburo vacated by the Zinovievs and Bukharins were equally content to act just as executants of the boss's policies -- and he was now being called 'the boss' (khozyain) -- some of them, it seems, even aspired to a say in these policies. In a sense, then, Stalin now became expendable. But after defeating all his main rivals Stalin himself certainly had no intention of settling for the role of just first among equals in a Whitehall-like cabinet, his continued primacy dependent on retaining the voluntary support of the party magnates assembled in the Central Committee. He would be satisfied with nothing less than unchallenged personal rule, and awareness of this and the dangers it might

entail was undoubtedly at the core of the now fairly well-attested questioning of his leadership in the upper ranks of the party during 1934 and the discreet soundings among Central Committee members about replacing him by Kirov.

'The boys' were now clearly stepping out of line, and Stalin could have been in no doubt that new means must urgently be found to knock them back into line and keep them there. We all know what means he used: very simple, very traditional, and perfectly rational and understandable to an Al Capone if not so obvious to a Beatrice Webb. The secondary purpose of the Great Purge was to wreak sweet vengeance upon all those who had actually opposed, crossed or scorned Stalin in the past; its primary purpose was to destroy the generation of his own supporters who had shown signs of wavering in their loyalty and by this demonstration of his terrible power to ensure against any wavering in the future. Those in the Boss's immediate circle willing to serve as mere instruments of his will and to display such a willingness unqualified by any prior commitment to person or principle did survive. It was precisely those members of the Politburo thought to have expressed misgivings about some of Stalin's actions and policies -- namely Kirov, Kuibyshev and Ordzhonikidze -- who failed to survive and whose deaths were probably connived at by Stalin. As for the four-fifths of the Central Committee who perished and the many thousands at lower levels, they

died not for what they had done but for what some of them, at least, were contemplating doing and pour encourager les autres. The survivors among them, along with the new generation who stepped into dead men's shoes, thoroughly understood what was expected of them. The Great Purge developed many irrational aspects but it had a rational core: it knocked the boys back into line, and provided the means to keep them there.

Fear was a major ingredient in Stalin's method of rule. But once that fear had taken firm root, both among the general population and within the political elite, a far more modest level of actual repression sufficed to maintain it. If the majority of Stalin's 1939 Central Committee survived to be reelected in 1952, a few of their number had meanwhile been arrested and shot. Within the dictator's entourage, the sad case of the young Nikolai Voznesensky -- rocketed into the Politburo in the 1940s only to be executed in 1950 -- was an effective reminder of their utter dependence on the Boss's grace. The lesson was underlined by occasional arrests of their prominent supporters or even close relatives (Molotov's wife, Kaganovich's brother). And the personnel and organizational changes on the eve of his death, together with the vigilance campaign associated with the 'doctor's plot' allegations, evidently sharpened their sense of vulnerability (this may, indeed, have signalled a break with the established

pattern of combining intimidation with 'loyalty', but I do not wish to speculate on this here).

This paper, then, does not challenge the view of Stalin as a cruel and ruthless tyrant, "a man," in George Kennan's words, "in whose entourage no one was ever safe." But it does call in question the widely held belief that this entailed a constantly high and lethal turnover within the political elite under Stalin, affecting particularly its longer tenured and most senior members.

Stalin demanded unquestioning obedience and objective loyalty from his supporters, but his formula of rule also included a relatively high level of objective loyalty to those who feared and obeyed him.

# TABLES

One. Persons elected to the Central Committee for the first time in 1930 or 1934 or promoted from candidate to full member who were reelected in 1939

## The '1930 cohort'

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Elected candidate 1930, reelected candidate 1934 | : | 13, | of whom | 1 | reelec. 1939 |
| Elected candidate 1930, promoted member 1934 | : | 3, | " | 0 | " " |
| Formerly candidate, elected member 1930 and 1934 | : | 6, | " | 1 | " " |
| Elected member 1930, reelected member 1934 | : | 3 | " | 0 | " " |
| Total | | 25 | | 2 | |

## The '1934 cohort'

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Elected candidate 1934 | : | 34, | of whom | 5 | elec. members 1939 |
| | | | and | 1 | reelec. cand. 1939 |
| Elected member 1934 | : | 9, | of whom | 3 | " members 1939 |
| Total | | 43 | | 9 | |

Two. Carryovers in Central Committee 1930-1981

| | Percentage Carried Over | |
|---|---|---|
| | Of Members | Of Candidates |
| 1930-34 (16th-17th Congress) | 79 | 54 |
| 1934-39 (17th-18th Congress) | 23 | 10 |
| 1939-52 (18th-19th Congress) | 61 | 28 |
| 1952-56 (19th-20th Congress) | 66 | 54 |
| 1956-61 (20th-22nd Congress) | 52 | 48 |
| 1966-81 (23rd-26th Congress) | 44 | 42 |