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Book Review I

Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945-1953

By Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg Khlevniuk



Reviewed by Michael McCabe '12

Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945-1953, by Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg Khlevniuk, is a monograph of Stalin's reign after the end of World War II until the death of the dictator in 1953. While not the first book to examine Stalin's relationship to his inner-circle, *Cold Peace* breaks substantially with existing historiography on the subject in two major ways. First, Gorlizki and Khlevniuk had access to a significantly greater amount of primary sources than previous historians. Previous books primarily relied on newspaper articles and a very small amount of leaked reports; however, *Cold Peace* notably builds upon the existing source material through "a rich vein of archival, memoir, and publish materials that were unavailable to earlier authors" (11). In addition, Gorlizki and Khlevniuk were able to gain access to several unpublished Central Committee resolutions.

Second, the thesis Khlevniuk and Gorlizki put forth differs drastically from other historians on the end of the Stalinist era. *Cold Peace* dispels any notion that Stalin was not in complete control of major policies enacted by the Soviet Union or that there were rivals to Stalin's leadership. As the authors state "in contrast to recent accounts, which discern a general radicalization of policies and perceptions in the postwar period, our book suggests that in terms of governmental practices and procedures, as well as of some substantive policy discussions, the postwar period was one of relative equilibrium and institutional consolidation" (12). The authors would reject any argument suggesting Stalin's actions did not follow a political logical and solely stemmed from his paranoia and insecurities.

The two authors are both highly qualified to undertake such a work. Yoram Gorlizki is a professor at the University of Manchester (UK) and has authored two other books—both of which were initially published in Russian. Some of his other work includes "Stalin and His Circle" (a journal article coauthored with Khlevniuk), "The Political (Dis)Orders of Stalinism and National Socialism," and "Ordinary Stalinism: The Council of Ministers in Stalin's last years"—along with many other articles published in

both English and Russian.¹ Oleg Khlevniuk is a senior researcher at the State Archive of the Russian Federation, Moscow. In addition to the several pieces he has coauthored with Gorlizki, he wrote *The History of the Gulag*, which was originally published in Russian and later translated to English.² Both authors specialize in the reign of Stalin and *Cold Peace* builds upon their previous work.

In the book Gorlizki and Khlevniuk argue that Stalin created a monopoly of political power. There was no dissent by his lieutenants and rarely did any of his entourage push forward a major-policy initiative. While Stalin ‘reformed’ the Politburo, it was always “entirely obedient to Stalin’s whims” (45). Unlike previous historians, the authors do not contribute Stalin’s power politics solely to his suspicious, paranoid, or vindictive nature. Gorlizki and Khlevniuk believe that every action undertaken by Stalin after the war followed a certain political logic. Stalin’s reign was marked by contradictions, and his final years are no exception. At times contrary to his monopoly on power, post-war Stalinism was marked by dedication to creating and maintaining an efficient economy.

The authors separate *Cold Peace* into three sections to breakdown Stalin’s final years in power—1945-1948, 1949-1951, and 1952-1953. Each of these sections is covered in two chapters. The first section details Stalin’s efforts in recreating the Soviet hierarchy after the allies’ victory. During this time Stalin undertook a campaign to discredit every member of his inner circle. While some historians have seen Stalin’s actions being derived from paranoid fear of his followers, Gorlizki and Khlevniuk argue that these actions were carefully planned by Stalin. The attacks on his entire inner-circle, but specifically Malenkov and Beria, “were part of a broader action by Stalin to destroy the system of leadership that had emerged in wartime. Stalin sought to nip in the bud any signs of autonomy within the ruling group and to restore the Politburo to the norms of the immediate post-purge period” (29). Stalin simultaneously reorganized the high-level political structure and subjugated the Politburo. Still the authors admit there was an element of randomness to Stalin’s methods of governance, simultaneously moving between different elements (64).

The second portion of the book details the last of Stalin’s purges from 1949-1951. The authors argue that there were growing challenges confronting Soviet authority both internationally and within the Bloc. The United States and its allies formed NATO as a military alliance to challenge the Soviet Union in Europe. Additionally, Germany was partitioned in 1949, giving the allies a foothold in Central Europe. As tension increased with the west so too did the challenge within the Bloc, as relations with Yugoslavia became strained after a personal dispute between Stalin and Tito. The authors argue that in response to these external disputes of Stalin’s power, Stalin ordered his last purges “to prevent disobedience and to harden official discipline” (70). Stemming from these international challenges purges in nearly all of the Bloc states governments occurred, replacing the former leaders with new ones who were more compliant to Stalin’s will. Gorlizki and Khlevniuk argue that Stalin’s purges fit in with his post-war attitude because they carried a political logic.

¹ University of Manchester, “Prof Yoram Gorlizki—publications,” Accessed online April 25, 2012, <http://www.manchester.ac.uk/research/yoram.gorlizki/publications>

² Yale University Press, “The History of the Gulag,” Accessed online April 25, 2012, <http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/book.asp?isbn=9780300092844>

The final piece of Gorlizki and Khlevniuk's argument surrounds Stalin's final years and his legacy. The authors argue that the end of Stalin's reign was significantly marked by two features: the Gulag and lack of food (124). In the case of the labor camps, almost five million individuals at the beginning of 1953 were imprisoned, required to move into special settlements, or forced to labor for the Soviet state. The authors argue that Stalin's devotion to the penal labor system never trickled down to the members of his inner-circle. In fact, immediately after Stalin's death, Beria launched a major offensive aimed at dismantling the Gulag (131). However, given Stalin's monopoly on power and his dedicated to his Gulag no one in his inner circle dared to speak out against him.

Gorlizki and Khlevniuk counter Stalin's unrelenting control of the Gulag with the Soviet crisis in agricultural product following the end of World War II. Unlike the Gulag, discussions over agricultural reform between Stalin and his lieutenants occurred before Stalin's death. Despite these dialogues the authors argued that Stalin continued to view "any challenges to his long-cherished policy principles with extreme suspicion and hostility" (141). Despite Stalin's stubborn unyielding nature, he continued to protect his power with extreme energy until the day he died. The authors argue that Stalin followed Lenin's blueprint when he denounced Molotov and Mikoian, and flooded the Soviet leadership with relatively unknown individuals (144). Despite his failing health Stalin continued to push the "apparatus of repression and ideological discipline into one final offensive" (163).

Skeptics of Gorlizki and Khlevniuk's work might point out that when hooves are heard in Central Park think horses, not zebras—meaning the Stalin's actions in the post-war years derived simply from paranoia, not from a grand political scheme. It is very hard to assess the psychological motivations of historical characters because primary sources may not give complete insight into the thought process of those characters; moreover, modern psychologists have a difficult time placing motives behind people's actions during a psychological interview, let alone when assessing someone who lived over half a century ago. What has made it so difficult to derive a motive from Stalin's actions has stemmed from how contradictory his actions were. The authors admit that there was a random element to many of Stalin's decisions; however, Gorlizki and Khlevniuk effectively respond to this claim in *Cold Peace* by justifying every major decision by Stalin by stating the political ramifications of that decision. For example, the authors justify Stalin's discrediting of several members of the Politburo in 1951 due to the fact the created a balance of power between Stalin's inner-circle that suited Stalin's political game (113).

One of the most impressive elements of the book is that the monograph draws from a substantial amount of archival sources—sources that were previously not open to the public. Earlier historians on the inner workings of the Stalin era have been accused of creating a patchwork story. Historian T.H. Rigby states that Gorlizki and Khlevniuk's account not only supplements these previous works, but supplants them through the authors' use of archival sources, and newly published and unpublished materials to create a "comprehensive analytical narrative."³ It is a short, compact work with a giant impact for the historiography of the post-War Stalin years.

³ T.H. Rigby, "Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945-1952 by Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg Khlevniuk," in *Russian Review* 64.1, January 2005, 159.

Historians have widely accepted and promoted the thesis of Gorlizki and Khlevniuk; however, there have been some criticisms. Historian Norman Naimark correctly criticizes the title of the work. Naimark claims that *Cold Peace* deceives the reader into believing the work would detail the beginning years of the Cold War from an international perspective, not from the inner workings of the Soviet States (and not mentioning the United States in any significant detail).⁴ Additionally Naimark correctly points out at times Gorlizki and Khlevniuk argue that Cold War events are pretexts for Stalin's domestic agenda and at other times that they are causes.⁵ Gorlizki and Khlevniuk might have been better served either avoiding completely the international politics of the Cold War or lengthening their work to give a broader history from an international perspective. That criticism aside, *Cold Peace* is an excellent addition to the historiography of the final years of Stalinism.

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⁴ Norman M. Naimark, Reviewed work(s): *Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945–1953*. By Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg Khlevniuk, in *The Journal of Modern History* 78.1, March 2006, 285.

⁵ *Ibid.*

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