

Radio Free Europe/Munich
Research and Evaluation Department
Background Information USSR

29 June 1962

PRAVDA PREVIEWS FURTHER DESTALINIZATION

Further downgrading of Stalin, based on "previously unknown or only slightly known" materials, is foreseen by a Pravda article of 22 and 24 June -- "Toward the Forthcoming Edition of the Multivolume History of the CPSU." Although a proper balance of Stalin's positive and negative role is to be maintained, apparently the entire period of his career in the Party is now to be submitted to extensive criticism -- his early years in the Party, his activities during the events of 1917, and his role in the Civil War and World War II, as well as his mistakes "in foreign policy, leadership of agriculture and other questions." This continuation of destalinization, which promises to widen even further the gap between the process in the Soviet Union on the one hand and that carried out by several retarded Bloc regimes on the other, will be expressed in a new, six-volume (nine books) history of the CPSU which "should be completed by the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution in 1967."

Multivolume Party histories have been planned previously, in the 1920's and 1930's, and the task was never completed, a fact which may cause us to regard the 1967 completion date with some scepticism. The most recent to date in a line of ill-fated one-volume Party histories, the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was published in 1959. The proposed expanded coverage of the new history may be explained in part by Soviet sensitivity to charges of rewriting Party history so soon after the appearance of the 1959 history, but it appears largely to be an effort to produce the authoritative Khrushchevian Party history -- one which would stand, on its massiveness if not on its objective historical merits, for a considerable time after Khrushchev's disappearance from the scene. Based on the rather sketchy material available in the Pravda article one may tentatively conclude that the plan is for the new history to bring to light officially much of the material which was contained in Khrushchev's 1956 "secret speech," some information which was not included in the secret speech but which has generally been known to Western scholars, and apparently some details on Stalin's negative role which have heretofore been unknown in the West. Through this preview of the new Party history, a fitting crown on Khrushchev's career, one receives the impression that Khrushchev intends to carry out the final stages of his destalinization program over the next several years, a period which he may justifiably consider to encompass the closing years of his leadership.

First, a rather lengthy quote of the relevant passages from the Pravda article, followed by a discussion of the more significant points:

"...It is necessary to completely eliminate the crude subjective distortions in the illumination of historical events which existed during the period of the cult of personality, to assure a truly Party-like evaluation of the events and people at each stage of Party history.

"One must study basically and objectively all the recently available materials, documents, and letters, which were only slightly known or not known at all, which give witness to the mistakes and vacillations of Stalin, for example, in the period of philosophical discussions (1908-1909); on questions of the struggle with liquidationism; in March-April 1917; in the period of the VI Party Congress; his conciliatory relationship with the strikebreakers of October -- Kamenev and Zinoviev, which was expressed particularly in the Pravda editorial of 20 October 1917 and his positions at the 20 October 1917 session of the Central Committee; in the Civil War period, especially on the southern and south-western fronts, etc.

"It is necessary to submit to especially sharp criticism Stalin's serious breaches of Leninist precepts, abuses of power, political and military mistakes before the war and during the war, mistakes which resulted in terrible defeats which could have been avoided if Stalin had understood the real situation at the front and had reckoned with the proposals of the military councils at the front (for example, the catastrophe at Kiev in 1941 and the catastrophe at Kharkov in the spring of 1942, as a result of which the fascist troops reached the Volga, could have been avoided.) It is necessary to speak of Stalin's responsibility for the repressions against the Party, state and military cadres, and also to show Stalin's mistakes in questions of foreign policy, leadership in agriculture, and other questions." (my underlining -- rc)

One may question Pravda's wisdom in raising so many sensitive questions without providing guidance or limits for the lively discussion which is bound to ensue in the USSR and Eastern Europe, but one can hardly resist the temptation to speculate on how far the new Party history will go in dealing with each of these intriguing topics.

Philosophical Discussions of 1908-1909; the Struggle with Liquidationism

The chief subjects of dissention within Russian Social Democratic ranks during 1908-1909 were the questions of "liquidationism" and "otzovism" (recallism). Following the failure

of the 1905 revolution and the Tsar's concession to "parliamentary" rule (the Duma), Menshevik writers proposed the liquidation (hence "liquidationism") of the underground socialist movement.¹ Stalin, the underground revolutionary "par excellence," has not previously been charged with wavering on this issue, nor does it seem reasonable that he can objectively be so charged now. One can only wonder if the new Party history will present some new evidence to compromise Stalin with this Menshevik position.

After the primary elections to the Duma in September 1907 Stalin turned his activity toward labor conflicts in the Baku oil industry; several months later he was imprisoned and later was deported to Vologda province where he remained until his escape in June 1909. Arriving again in Baku he was greatly disturbed by the deterioration in Bolshevik activities and by the factional bickerings among the exile groups. Lenin's group, then established at Longjumeau near Paris, was engaged in bitter polemics with the "otzovists" (recallers), who were opposed to the continued use of legal (as opposed to illegal) means of struggle inside Russia and who proposed the "recall" of the Bolshevik deputies to the Duma. Stalin, although he agreed with Lenin's positions, anonymously criticized Lenin in the pages of Bakinskiy Proletarii (Baku Proletariat) for expelling the "otzovists" from the Party, and suggested the two factions should work together. However, in his November-December 1909 "Letters from the Caucasus" of the same period there was no hint of criticism of Lenin.² The Party's apparent intention to expand this expression of irritation on Stalin's party into an "error" of some importance portends an extensive, if balanced, denigration of Stalin's entire career.

Although the Pravda article does not mention the subject, we are also likely to see an expansion of Stalin's mistake at the Party's Stockholm Congress in 1906. Stalin, influenced by his peasant background and by his assumption that a long period of bourgeois government would follow the overthrow of Tsarism, opposed Lenin's policy of nationalization of the land. He and his associates were stigmatized by Lenin as "divisionists" (i.e. of the land). Stalin himself admitted this mistake forty years later in his Collected Works (1946)³ and the error was briefly mentioned in the 1959 official Party history.⁴

1 Stalin, A Political Biography, Deutscher, Oxford University Press, New York and London, 1949, p. 94.

2 Deutscher, pp. 82-83.

3 Ibid., p. 82.

4 History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, English edition, Moscow, 1960, p. 120.

March-April 1917

In the three weeks immediately preceding Lenin's return to Petrograd from Switzerland on 16 April 1917, Stalin was the virtual leader of the Party. He was still thinking in terms of a long period of bourgeois government, a fact which influenced his "middle of the road" attitude toward the crucial questions of Bolshevik attitude toward the war and toward relations with the Provisional Government. Stalin wrote in Pravda on 29 March that the slogan "down with the war" was useless, urging that the Party put pressure on the Provisional Government (rather than ignoring it) to open peace negotiations.⁵ When Lenin returned, sharply reversing these policies, Stalin remained silent only for a few days before demonstrating his solidarity with Lenin.⁶ Here one should perhaps enter a plea in Stalin's defense, because his thinking was typical of a majority of the Party before Lenin's sudden and unexpected shift in line.

VI Party Congress

It is difficult to imagine what fault the new Party history will find with Stalin's role at the VI Party Congress, held in Petrograd two weeks after the abortive and unplanned mass uprising of July 1917. Lenin and other Party leaders had gone into hiding, and Stalin was left with the task of quelling the panic which was spreading in the Party ranks. At this Congress he succeeded in having a resolution unanimously passed embodying Lenin's decision to jettison the slogan "All Power to the Soviets." (Following the abortive uprising, the Bolsheviks had lost influence in the Soviets which thus could no longer serve them as an instrument for the seizure of power.) Ironically, it was at this Congress presided over by Stalin that the Trotsky group joined the Bolsheviks.⁷ Can this be the error alluded to by Pravda?

The Strikebreakers of October (1917)

On October 10, 1917 Lenin succeeded in winning a majority of the Central Committee, including Stalin, to his view that an armed insurrection should be carried out immediately. This decision was confirmed by another Central Committee session on October 16, but the two dissenters, Kamenev and Zinoviev, brought the issue into the open in the October 17 issue of Gorky's newspaper Novaya Zhizn (New Life). Lenin was enraged

5 The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Shapiro, Random House, New York, 1959, pp. 161-62.

6 Deutscher, pp. 138-139.

7 Ibid., p. 150.

to find that these "strikebreakers" had publicly revealed the secret. Stalin published Lenin's denunciation of them in the Party paper Rabochiy Put (Workers' Way)* of 20 October, but in an editorial comment he softened Lenin's impact, trying to reconcile the conflicting viewpoints.⁸ As Trotsky said later "the cautious schemer preferred to stay on the fence at the crucial moment."⁹ Stalin himself admitted in his later writings that he and other "practical workers" had had reservations about the "counsels of an outsider,"¹⁰ i.e. Lenin, and his words apparently will be elaborated in the new history.

The Civil War

Stalin's role in the Civil War was destalinized to a considerable degree in the 1959 Party history, although by deemphasis and transfer of credit rather than by direct accusations of misdeeds. For example, the credit for the defense of Tsaritsin (Stalingrad, Volgograd) was transferred from Stalin to "workers' detachments."¹¹ Although we cannot be certain, Pravda's reference to Stalin's Civil War mistakes "especially on the southern and southwestern fronts, etc." may refer to the unsuccessful Soviet military incursion into Poland in the summer of 1920. At that time Stalin was in his headquarters on the southern front and the Red Army under Tukhachevsky was approaching Warsaw. Then the Poles counterattacked. The Supreme Soviet Command ordered the southern army to come to Tukhachevsky's assistance, but Stalin disregarded the order and encouraged Yegorov and Budenny to move against Lvov. When Tukhachevsky was defeated in the battle of the Vistula, Stalin changed his mind and sent support. But it was already too late and the Red Army was in retreat.¹² However, to lay this error at Stalin's door, although there is truth in it, would be a gross and unjust oversimplification. The basic error, the decision to invade Poland, was Lenin's and this view was rigorously opposed by Stalin for a time until he allowed Lenin to influence his better judgment.

⁸ Deutscher, pp. 162-165.

⁹ Ibid., p. 168.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 164.

¹¹ History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, English edition, Moscow, 1960, p. 304.

¹² Deutscher, pp. 216-217.

* The Pravda article mistakenly refers to the newspaper as Pravda of that date.

Lenin's main preoccupation at this time was to join together the revolutionary forces of Russia and Germany, through Poland, thus escaping from isolation; therefore he favored the continuation of the Soviet offensive into Polish lands. Stalin, on the other hand, had warned against such a move in Pravda before the Soviet capture of Kiev from the Poles:

"The hinterland of the Polish forces is...to Poland's advantage... It is nationally uniform and coherent... Its predominate attitude is...patriotic... If the Polish forces were to operate in Poland it would undoubtedly be difficult to fight against them." (J. Stalin, Sochineniya, Vol. IV, p. 323)¹³

World War II

The new Party history's expanded criticism of Stalin may well follow the general line of Khrushchev's secret speech. At least, one gains that impression from comparing the Pravda article with the text of the 1956 speech. The "catastrophe at Kiev in 1941" presumably refers to the incident of Khrushchev's telephone request from Kiev to Malenkov in Moscow requesting arms, a request which was refused according to Khrushchev.¹⁴ The "catastrophe at Kharkov" apparently alludes to Khrushchev's telephone plea to Stalin to call off the ill-fated Soviet plan to encircle the city. (Stalin even refused to accept the call, and "consequently the Germans surrounded our armies.../and/ we lost hundreds of thousands of men. This is Stalin's military genius and this is what it cost us.")¹⁵

Repressions against Cadres

Stalin's "repressions against Party, state, and military cadres" were discussed extensively in Khrushchev's 27 October 1961 speech to the XXII Congress. Although it seems certain that this material will be included in the new history, one cannot conclude from the Pravda article whether or not additional material will be published.

Leadership of Agriculture

Stalin is hardly likely to be criticized for his decision to collectivize agriculture, although the blame for undue

¹³ Deutscher, pp. 215-216.

¹⁴ The Anti-Stalin Campaign and International Communism (which contains the full text of the Secret Speech), Russian Institute, Columbia University, New York, 1956, p. 47.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

haste and harsh methods, attributed by Stalin to lower officials in his "Dizzy With Success" speech, may now pass to its rightful owner. To the extent to which the new Party history follows the secret speech, it will concentrate on Stalin's ignorance of the situation in the countryside ("Stalin never traveled anywhere... The last time he visited a village was in January 1928")¹⁶ and his frustration of the efforts of Khrushchev and others to solve the agricultural problem:

"We had proposed to raise the prices of such produce (meat products) in order to create material incentives for the kolkhoz, MTS, and sovkhos workers in the development of cattle breeding. But our project was not accepted and in February 1953 was laid aside entirely."¹⁷

Foreign Policy

Stalin's mistakes in foreign policy could fill a good portion of the six volumes, but we should not anticipate the inclusion of such blunders as the Canton Commune debacle of 11-14 December 1927, the Berlin blockage of 1948 or the launching of the Korean War in 1950. It is possible, however, that the history will condemn Stalin's German policy of 1939-1941 -- his earlier evaluation of Naziism as a progressive step in the decline of German capitalism, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement of August 1939, and his repeated dismissal of warnings of the impending German attack in 1941. The disastrous results of Stalin's refusal to accept these warnings were stressed in the secret speech.¹⁸ Another likely subject (Pravda refers to "foreign policy mistakes" -- in the plural) is Stalin's policy toward Yugoslavia. In the secret speech Khrushchev, quoting Stalin, said:

"'I will shake my little finger and there will be no more Tito. He will fall.' We have paid dearly for this 'shaking of the little finger'... But this did not happen to Tito... Why? The reason was that, in this case of disagreement with the Yugoslav comrades, Tito had behind him a state and a people who had gone through a severe school of fighting for liberty and independence, a people who gave support to its leaders.

"You can see where Stalin's mania for greatness led. He demonstrated his suspicion and haughtiness not only in relation to individuals, but in relation to whole parties and nations."¹⁹

The present official explanation of the split with Yugoslavia, made by Khrushchev on his arrival at the Belgrad airport on

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 63.

26 May 1955,²⁰ still attributes the blame to "Beria, Abakumov and others." The new Party history will probably tell us who one of the "others" is.

Khrushchev's use of the plural -- "whole parties and nations" -- at the end of the preceding quote from the Secret Speech raises the question whether the new Party history will cast blame upon Stalin for his errors regarding other countries in Eastern Europe, errors which currently are contributing to Moscow's difficulties in economic integration efforts of the Soviet Bloc, but one can only speculate until the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Moscow brings forth the first fruits of its labor.

Although we may hear little more of Stalin's errors until the appearance of the first volume of the history, it seems probable that the debates which will logically ensue from the Pravda article will provoke the Party into releasing more information at an earlier date, even though this were not the original intent. The future course of destalinization in the Soviet Union must thus remain speculative for the present, but this speculation itself will act as a force to carry the process to a new level.

rc

²⁰ The Soviet-Yugoslav Controversy, 1948-1958; a Documentary Record; Bass and Marbury, 1959, p. 53.