

R.W. Davies, Oleg V. Khlevniuk, E.A. Rees, Liudmila P. Kosheleva, and Larisa A. Rogovaya, eds, *The Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence, 1931-36* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. Pp. xviii+431. £35.00)

Every summer until 1937 Stalin left Moscow for a lengthy vacation on the Black Sea coast. On holiday, Stalin required regular reports from Moscow and himself continued to decide many major and minor matters by correspondence. In the 1920s Viacheslav Molotov acted for Stalin in party matters while he was away (see Lars T. Lih, Oleg V. Khlevniuk, and Oleg V. Naumov, eds, *Stalin's Letters to Molotov: 1925-1936*, Yale University Press, 1995). When Molotov became prime minister in 1930 Lazar Kaganovich took his place. By 1936 the telephone was beginning to replace written correspondence; when Stalin resumed his holidays in the autumn of 1945 the letters were no longer needed. The *Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence* is therefore our last opportunity to view the most intimate written records of the Soviet dictator at work.

The present volume is a fine translation of a Russian volume published by ROSSPEN in Moscow in 2001 that has been slightly abridged. The letters are arranged and numbered chronologically, year by year. In addition to the editors' preface, each year is introduced separately and the year's documents are set in context. Matters in each letter that would otherwise be obscure are annotated. There is an extended biographical essay on Kaganovich as well as photographs of the main characters and a name index with further biographic notes. There are notes on the administrative structure of the Soviet state and a glossary of Soviet abbreviations and acronyms. Thus, the book comes with all the apparatus that the student may require.

The letters reveal important features of Stalin's rule. As the editors observe, by 1931 his colleagues were the chief remaining obstacle to his personal dictatorship. Through Kaganovich's often lengthy reports and other documents that he received he watched them, and in his own replies he regulated disputes, settled arguments, evaluated their conduct, reprimanded errant behaviour, and helped to form a self-justifying view of the progress of policy at home and in the world.

The narrative that Stalin creates was based on a brutal and cynical view of humanity. To Stalin loyalty was worth nothing if it was not personal and unconditional. He saw wavering and incompetence as the first stage of betrayal. Without vigilance the party and state would pass directly into the hands of "bunglers (or covert enemies)" or "conscious and unconscious" enemies whom he linked frequently with foreign powers; he left it to the others to find the supporting evidence. The theme of incompetence as the first stage of betrayal provides an ominous context for his personal relations with Kaganovich and his other close colleagues: in the correspondence he did not accuse them of betrayal but he often charged them with incompetence, and for some the implicit threat would be realised in 1937.

The letters throw light on the making of policy. Stalin involved himself in matters large and small that ranged from peace and war in the far east to the allocation of a few buses. Since Stalin had the power to arbitrate on any issue his subordinates preferred to refer every contentious issue to him, no matter how trivial, and Paul Gregory has described his overburdening with trivia as "the dictator's curse". But Stalin preferred this to a system in which others could resolve issues without him, and in the end he accepted the curse willingly,

Stalin did not involve himself equally in everything. It is sometimes difficult to determine his priorities because of some selection biases. The letters were written in the summer months so the progress of the harvest and food collections feature prominently and their critical importance to Stalin's plans is never far from the surface. Stalin gave little attention to industry at this time, perhaps because he still trusted his industrial tsar "Sergo" Ordzhonikidze. At least, he trusted Ordzhonikidze but not the people that Ordzhonikidze appointed below him. In Stalin's eyes

Ordzhonikidze habitually promoted cronies who proved incompetent or corrupt. This takes on significance with hindsight because it was Ordzhonikidze's defence of his subordinates that led to the breakdown of his relationship with Stalin and his suicide in 1937. On the other hand Stalin gave detailed attention to foreign affairs, perhaps because he distrusted his foreign minister Litvinov; it may have helped Litvinov to survive that he never had Stalin's trust to lose.

Stalin appears to have resolved many quantitative matters such as the level of grain and cotton collections, the use of foreign currency, or the allocation of tractors, in an arbitrary way. His decisions were arbitrary in the sense that he had acquired the power to decide anything he liked, and any rules of thumb that guided him are not apparent from the letters. To some extent it may have suited him from time to time to decide matters capriciously, and therefore unexpectedly, in order to limit his subordinates' ability to predict, bet on, or insure against his decisions. There is plenty of scope here for more research.

In summary, future generations of students and scholars will thank the editors for opening up this exceptionally rich lode of documentation. It is hard to overstate its value and interest.

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