

The Inner Life of a Dictatorship

MICHAEL GIBBS

Review of Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*
(Yale University Press, reprint edition, 2016)

It is an unusual choice to begin a biography with the subject's last supper. Yet the opening pages of Oleg V. Khlevniuk's *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator* kicks off with a final meeting of the "Five"—the then-current ad hoc ruling group, one of a number of such temporary configurations created by Stalin—shortly before Stalin's stroke. Khlevniuk, a senior researcher at the State Archive in Moscow, divides his chapters using the story of those final four days of Stalin's life. In addition to providing color, each section serves as a microcosm of the broader themes of the great despot's rule: pervasive fear, concentration of authority, and deinstitutionalization and the creation of ad hoc groups, yet an ever-present role for underlings to implement the decrees of the *vozhd* (literally "leader").

Khlevniuk's book is not the only recent tome to address Stalin's rule. Stephen Kotkin has published the first of a three-volume series, and William Zimmerman's recent *Ruling Russia* contains several chapters on Stalin and the reverberations of his rule. Given these—along with older

works by Simon Sebag Montefiore, Robert Service, and Robert C. Tucker—is there any need to invest time and money in Khlevniuk's book?

On a practical level, Khlevniuk provides a level of detail unmatched in the other volumes. Benefitting from his position as a state archivist, Khlevniuk had access to a wider swath of the minutia of rule—speeches, ministerial documents, visitors' logs, correspondence, reports presented to Stalin, and even letters from old Bolshevik comrades—than non-Russian writers. His familiarity with this material, as well as his interactions over the decades with other archivists and members of the Russian (and ex-Soviet) political elite, allowed him to access, manage, and verify the material in ways not possible for a foreign researcher. This personal connection is reinforced by Khlevniuk, who comments critically on the credulity of some authors (though not Kotkin, Zimmerman, or Tucker) in their treatment of unverified sources.

This comparative advantage translates into a book focused on Stalin the

man. Unlike Kotkin, Khlevniuk avoids discussions of policy shifts or broader implications for the Soviet Union or international politics. Instead, policy is viewed through the lens of personal and elite political battles. He seeks to peer into the mind of Stalin, building a narrative of what Stalin knew and when as much as possible. This information is used to construct a “logic of action,” seeking to answer why the *vozhd* decided upon a particular approach in a particular situation. The book is written as a rebuttal, a reminder for those apologists within Russia today who canonize Stalin the modernizer and Stalin the savior of Russia from the Fascist threat. As such, it often reads as an indictment of Stalin, repeatedly raising his complicity or control over the human degradations that marked his rule. In his discussion of the Great Terror, Khlevniuk states that “the documentary evidence shows that large-scale operations rarely deviated from Stalin’s orders” (157) and that “Stalin received regular reports on the pacification of mutinous areas” (268), a campaign that cost a million lives in the Baltic Republics and Western Ukraine. He details Stalin’s close personal involvement in the trials during his reign (both the Great Terror and the numerous small intra-party purges) noting that Stalin “obsessively presided over the fabrication of evidence against Jewish doctors and their supposed patrons” (307) in the months before his death. For someone interested in the minutia of imperial, despotic rule and what Michael Mann, in his seminal 1984 *European Journal of Sociology* article, “The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms, and Results,” would call dictatorial power, this book provides anecdotes aplenty.

Implicit in this narrative is the Great Man tradition in which Stalin’s choices, rather than broad sweeps of history or structural forces, determine the fate of the Soviet people. Institutions in this book are only obstacles to be overcome, a historiographic

approach that perhaps reflects how Stalin saw the world (something echoed in other biographies, but to nowhere near this extent). Khlevniuk addresses a familiar list of foes who fall sequentially before Stalin: Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Kamenev; Rykov and Bukharin; and finally the remainder of the Old Bolsheviks and Red Army leadership in the Great Terror. He adds the incipient moves against Molotov and Mikoyan, whose demotion and possible demise were interrupted only by Stalin’s declining health. It is a portrait of a world in which paranoia intersects with structural instability and ideological certainty, creating a dramatic imbalance in personal power.

What emerges from these passages, and what makes Khlevniuk’s work a useful, albeit not groundbreaking, read is its contribution to the lived life of the man at the dictatorship’s apex. Works on authoritarian regimes are often constrained, torn between the structures and statistics of quantitative political science (e.g., Milan W. Svoblik’s *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*) and a general psychological perspective of a system in which so much is determined by the will of one man (e.g., Jessica L.P. Week’s *Dictators at War and Peace*). Khlevniuk makes no attempt to speak to the broader literature; his work is aimed at a popular audience, either those who want a limited glimpse into Stalin’s life (at 408 pages, the work is shorter than any of Tucker’s volumes, and less than half of Kotkin’s first volume) or those who have already studied the system and now want a better view of the man.

For those with such aims, the book succeeds, albeit by way of some speculation. As Khlevniuk openly acknowledges (and repeats throughout the book, regularly commenting on sources’ availability or lack thereof), much information about Stalin is still secret or simply nonexistent. None of Stalin’s close associates were able to write freely during

his reign and in the aftermath all had motives to portray their actions in the noblest light possible. Khlevniuk attempts to “triangulate” the truth through these overlapping, self-interested claims, but the effort to engage with the psychological aspects of rule has a natural limit, one the reader encounters every few pages.

For all these limitations, *New Biography of a Dictator* does make a valuable contribution to the corpus on Stalin’s life and power. Along with the discussions of Stalin’s personal power, the adaptable cadre of underlings features prominently in the book. Although the casual reader may be numbed by the stream of names, what matters is not the individuals but instead the way Stalin used and broke these men in his ascent to power. In Khlevniuk’s telling, the constant shuffles at the top met both structural and personal needs—structural in preventing any actor from amassing competing power, personal in fulfilling Stalin’s own paranoia and need for control.

The mobilization, anti-peasant campaigns, and vicissitudes of policy formation are addressed solely from Stalin’s perspective, however. Where Kotkin describes an ideological creature attempting to fit a complex, changing state to his exacting theology—Marxism-Leninism—Khlevniuk, by contrast, sees Stalin as motivated primarily by power.

This debate and its consequences are what make *New Biography of a Dictator* a powerful read. In the Kotkin and Tucker accounts, the *vozhd* responded to ideology, facts, pressure, and competing demands—responding, in other words, to inputs from the rest of the system. Khlevniuk, on the other hand, sees a man who marches to his own beat. Once ensconced, he relentlessly manipulated those nearest the throne to the personal end of preserving his power. Policy was thus a tool of personality. One analytic result of this approach is, for example, that Khlevniuk

doesn’t see ending the terror and slowing collectivization as a recognition of policy failure. Instead, they represent merely a brief hiatus until sufficient resources are once again available to staff the gulags and crush the peasants. Although the temporary result is the same, the process—and what it says about the system—is completely different. It is a telling commentary, ultimately, on the loneliness of absolute power, and the risks posed by staying in office too long.

The book is worth reading for precisely this reason. If a reader’s understanding of modern dictatorships assumes the structural model of a *Svolik*, this work will have little value (save for its depictions of how a leader can solve his problems of authoritarian power-sharing), as it will not be considered revelatory within such a model of authoritarianism and power. However, if in studying the modern-day autocrat, a reader believes that personality plays a dominant role, Khlevniuk’s contribution becomes far more revelatory and valuable. And it would indeed appear that an understanding of the minutia of power is critical, as also an understanding of the incremental changes in Stalin’s authority as his rule progresses. While headlines and quantitative analyses tend to focus on the big events in domestic politics—coups, assassinations, large-scale purges—what emerges from this book is the important work of slow, bureaucratic trench warfare. In that case, might insights gained from Khlevniuk’s methodology apply beyond Stalin? Perhaps. To understand the hold of Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping, for example, Khlevniuk would suggest tracing the careers of those who came to power with them. Their stability and private fiefdoms are the primary check on the ruler’s power, and a growing gap between the leader and the elite suggests a growth in unconstrained power. In such a world, this psychological profile of the man who climbs to the top, and the corruption visited upon him by absolute power, becomes useful indeed.

This realignment is noticeable in today's Russia, particularly in the case of the new National Guard and Dmitry Medvedev's demotion to the premiership. As Khlevniuk notes, the more chairs there are at the table, the more informal alliances the *vozhd* can forge. While militarily the National Guard calls to mind other coup- and protest-proofing organizations (e.g. the IRGC in Iran, or Saddam's Fedayeen and Republican Guard), Khlevniuk would also note its impact on elite politics. Each additional actor among the power ministries (defense, intelligence, interior, and other armed elements) reduces the leverage of the rest. Just as Stalin recruited his allies' supporters to remove other elites, a broader power elite enhances Putin's ability to regulate his allies. While Russia's new National Guard likely has a population control function, Khlevniuk would emphasize its role in the upper echelons of power as well.

Ultimately, *New Biography of a Dictator* is worth a read for the insight it provides into the personalities around a dictatorship. For aficionados of Soviet history, the book provides yet one more contribution, even if not a definitive text. While historical circumstances have changed, many of the power dynamics

that Khlevniuk identifies are relevant in modern autocracies, and the reader can draw insights for themselves on the regime of their choosing. Further, Khlevniuk's reminders about sources provide a useful warning to the credulous consumer of insider reports from Russia, China, or other states today to keep in mind the inherent flaws in such works. Despite the brevity of the text and lack of attention to context, *New Biography of a Dictator*—as a history, a warning, and a guide to current events—is worth reading.

Michael Gibbs is a PhD student at the University of Texas at Austin in the Government Department, studying the security services of authoritarian regimes. He is the Brumley Next Generation Fellow for International Security and Law at the Robert Strauss Center and UT Austin's Intelligence Studies Project. Prior to joining UT, he worked at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and Washington Institute for Near East Policy before serving in the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone.

Cite as Michael Gibbs, *The Inner Life of a Dictatorship*, Lawfare, Nov. 22, 2016, <https://lawfareblog.com/inner-life-dictatorship>.