Stalinism Revisited

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“I am too busy defending innocents claiming their innocence to waste my time with guilty individuals claiming their guilt.”
(Paul Eluard refusing to sign a petition against the hanging of Czech surrealist poet Zavis Kalandra)

“Lucreţiu Pătrăşcanu died as a soldier serving his political ideals which he pursued through darkness, underground, and palaces, tenaciously, fiercely and fanatically.”
(Petre Pandrea)

In order to understand the dynamics of the Stalinist experiment in Eastern Europe, one needs to take into account the prevailing role of direct Soviet intervention and intimidation. Local communist formations were pursuing the Stalinist model of systematic destruction of non-communist parties, the disintegration of civil society, and the monopolistic occupation of the public space through state-controlled ideological rituals and coercive institutions. The overall goal was to build a passive consensus based on unlimited commitment to the ideocratic political program of the ruling elite. The true content of the political regime is described by the “cult of personality” system. The personalization of political power, its concentration in the hands of a demigod,

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led to forcible religious adoration and the masochistic humiliation of its subjects. The symbolic vehicle for this moral and political regimentation was the Stalinist definition of internationalism as unbounded allegiance to the USSR (the “touchstone theory”). To keep strict control over all mechanisms that guaranteed social reproduction and preserved the matrix of domination in such a system, the party had to play the central role. Based on my own research in the Romanian Communist Party’s archives, it appears that no segment of the body social, economic, cultural, as well as no repressive institution escaped continuous and systematic party intervention. Even during the climatic years of the Terror (1948–53), the secret police served as the party’s obedient instrument and not the other way around. Ideological purity and revolutionary vigilance were imposed as main political imperatives. Political police, cast in the Soviet mold and controlled by Soviet advisers, took care to fulfill the ideological desiderata. The political content of that ideology in its radical incarnation (the first five years) was sheer terror and permanent propaganda warfare waged within a personalized dictatorship embodied by local “little Stalins.”

The main weakness of this system was its chronic deficit of legitimacy. Under mature Stalinism, both in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, autocratic despotism managed to ruin the functioning of the party as an autonomous institution—its potential for “charismatic impersonalism” intrinsic to Leninism as an organizational model. This last phenomenon explains the neotraditionalist features of Stalinism. If one is to follow Ken Jowitt’s argument, the mutation of the definition of revolutionary heroism (initially belonging to the Party, but now the prerogative of one)—cancelled the fundamental characteristic of novelty to Leninism as an ideopolitical form of aggregation.3 In this monolithic structure dominated by the revolutionary phalanx, the plans to reshape man, nature, and society were frantically pursued. Stalinism as a political religion overturned traditional morality: good and evil, vice and virtue, were drastically revalued.4 The goal was to create a sys-

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tem that managed to unify victim and torturer, to abolish the tradition-
oral moral taboos and set a different code, with different prescriptions
and prohibitions. The dramaturgy of show trials with their “infernal
pedagogy”\(^5\) was a crucial component of this system based on universal
fear, duplicity, and suspicion.

The “oceanic feeling,” the ecstasy of solidarity, the desire to dis-
solve one’s autonomy into the mystical transindividual entity of the
Party, aptly described by Arthur Koestler, was the emotional ground
for a chiliastic type of revolutionary commitment.\(^6\) In his conversations
with Czeslaw Milosz, Aleksander Wat formulated a memorable evalua-
tion of the phenomenon:

communism is the enemy of interiorization, of the inner man […] But
today we know what exteriorization leads to: the killing of the inner
man, and that is the essence of Stalinism. The essence of Stalinism is
the poisoning of the inner man so that it becomes shrunken the way
headhunters shrink heads—those shriveled little heads—and then dis-
appears entirely […] The inner man must be killed for the communist
Decalogue to be lodged in the soul.\(^7\)

Community, defined in terms of class, was the antipode of the execrated
egotism of the bourgeois individual. The self had to be denied in order
to achieve real fraternité. Generations of Marxist intellectuals hastened
to annihilate their dignity in this apocalyptic race for ultimate certi-

\(^{5}\) This term adapted from Annie Kriegel, *Les grands procès dans les pays commu-
nistes: La pédagogie infernale* [The great trials of the communist countries: the

\(^{6}\) Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Me-
dieval and Reformation Europe and its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements*
(New York: Harper and Row, 1961); Arthur Koestler, *The Invisible Writing*

\(^{7}\) Aleksander Wat, *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual* (Berkeley:
tudes. The whole heritage of Western skeptical rationalism was easily dismissed in the name of the revealed light emanating from the Kremlin. The Age of Reason was thus to culminate in the frozen universe of rational terror. The subject, the human being—totally ignored at the level of the philosophical discourse—was eventually abolished as a physical entity in the vortex of the “great purges.” Jochen Hellbeck, correctly remarked, in his analysis of autobiographies during Stalinism, that “an individual living under the Bolshevik system could not conceivably formulate a notion of himself independently of the program promulgated by the Bolshevik state. An individual and the political system in which he lived cannot be viewed as two separate entities.” These images were more than metaphors, since metaphor suggests an ineffable appearance of reality, whereas what happened under Stalin was awfully visible and immediate. It can hardly be denied that Stalinism is the antithesis of the Western humanist legacy and should be described as such.

At the same time, François Furet and Pierre Hassner are right to emphasize the nature of Leninism/Stalinism as a pathology of universalism, a derailed (devoyé) offspring of the Enlightenment. Naturally, it would be preposterous to restrict ourselves to mere ethical condemnation. But it would not be, by any means, commendable to gloss over the moral implications of Stalinism, or, echoing a famous essay by the young Georg Lukács, the dilemmas of “Bolshevism as a moral problem.” It is important, when pondering the fate of Marxism in the 20th century, to grasp the split of personalities, the clash between lofty ideals and palpable practices, and the methods of the Stalinist terrorist pedagogy in its endeavor to produce a new type of human being whose loyalties and beliefs would be decreed by the party. Revenge of history on its worshipers—thus could the terrorist psychosis of the Stalinist massacres be depicted. To quote Alvin W. Goulder’s perceptive interpretation: “The central strategy of the Marxist project, its concern with seeking a remedy to unnecessary suffering, was thus in the end susceptible to a misuse that betrayed its own highest avowals. The root of the

trouble was that this conception of its own project redefined pity... The human condition was rejected on behalf of the historical condition.”

As Koestler once pointed out (in his 1938 letter of resignation from the exiled German Communist Writers’ Union), for Lenin it was not enough to smash his enemy—he wanted to make him look contemptible. Rajk, Pătrășcanu, Slansky, Ana Pauker, Vladimir Clementis, Kostov, Geminder, London, Rudolf Margolius, etc.—all of them had to be portrayed as despicable scoundrels and scurrilous vermin. Yesterday heroes were today’s scum. Especially after 1951, the Stalinist anti-Western, anti-intellectual, and anti-Titoist obsessions merged with an increasingly rabid anti-Semitism:

Stalin feared that other peace champ countries would follow the independent Yugoslav model and break away from the influential sphere of the Soviet Union. He instigated the terror of political trials to uncover “enemies” within each Communist Party in order to discourage dissent. Victims were sought out and accused of connection with Tito’s opposition attitudes and treachery. In later cases, the Soviets turned to Zionism and its supposed link with Western imperialism as the cause of the Communist betrayal. The show trial was a propaganda arm of political terror. Its aim was to personalize an abstract political enemy, to place it in the dock in flesh and blood and, with the aid of a perverted system of justice, to transform abstract political-ideological differences into easily intelligible common crimes. It both incited the masses against the evil embodied by defendants and frightened them away from supporting any potential opposition.

The magic impact of power in classical Stalinism would have been unthinkable in the absence of ideology. They breed and feed upon each other; power derives its mesmerizing force from the seductive potential of ideology. Man is proclaimed omnipotent, and ideology supervises the identification of abstract man with concrete power. Veneration of power is rooted in contempt for traditional values, including those as-

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associated with the survival of reason. It is important therefore to repress
the temptation of critical thought, since reason is the enemy of total
regimentation. In one of his late aphorisms, Max Horkheimer hinted at
the philosophical revolution provoked by Marxism. Defending the digni-
yty of the individual subject becomes a seditious undertaking, a chal-
lenge to the prevailing myth of homogeneity: “however socially condi-
tioned the individual’s thinking may be, however necessarily it may
relate to social questions, to political action, it remains the thought of
the individual which is not just the effect of collective processes but
can also take them as its object.”13 Political shamanism, practiced by
alleged adversaries of any mysticism, thwarts the attempts to resist the
continual assault on the mind. Marxism–Leninism, which was the code
name for the ideology of the nomenklatura, aimed to dominate both
the public and the private spheres of social life. Man, both as an indi-
vidual and as a citoyen, had to be massified. The cult of violence and
the sacralization of the infallible “party line” created totally submissive
individuals for whom any crime ordered by the upper echelons was
justified in the name of the “glowing tomorrows.” As in the case of the
ideologically-driven Eichmann, Stalin’s “willing executioners” acted on
the base of what Hannah Arendt diagnosed as “thoughtlessness.”14

A climate of fear is needed to preserve monolithism. To cement
this frail cohesion, the Stalinist “warfare personality” contrived the dia-
bolical figure of the traitor:

the characteristically paranoid perception of the world as an arena of
deadly hostilities being conducted conspiratorially by an insidious and
implacable enemy against the self finds highly systematized expression
in terms of political and ideological symbols that are widely under-
stood and accepted in the given social milieu. Through a special and
radical form of displacement of private affects upon public objects,
this world-image is politicized. In the resulting vision of reality, both
attacker and intended victim are projected on the scale of large hu-
man collectivities.15

In the fullest Girardian sense, scapegoating\textsuperscript{16} fed the utopia of a society freed of exploitation, antagonism and the imperative of necessity. The origin of this exclusionary logic is of course Lenin’s combatant, intrasignent Manichaeism (*kto kogo*).\textsuperscript{17} Who are the enemies? Where do they come from? What are their purposes? Providing answers to these questions was the main function of the show trials. Maintaining vigilance and preserving the psychology of universal anguish, those were the tasks Stalin had assigned to the masterminds of successive purges. No fissures are admitted in the Bolshevik shield, no doubt can arise that does not conceal some mischievous stratagems aimed at undermining the system. Time and again the refrain was harangued by restless sycophants: we are surrounded by sworn enemies, we are invincible only inasmuch as we are united. Expressing dissenting views necessarily means weakening the revolutionary avant-garde. Breaking ranks is considered a mortal sin, and suspiciousness is the ultimate revolutionary virtue. When acquiescence is the golden rule, it takes great moral courage to assume the status of the rebel. In the homogenous space of totalitarian domination, opposition amounts to crime and opponents are treated as mere criminals. They incarnate the figure of difference and are therefore seen as outcasts. Ostracization leads ultimately to the mental emancipation, the autonomy of the mind acquired by Solzhenitsyn’s *zeks*, the population of Stalin’s *gulag*. The barbed wire is thus the symbol of a new kind of boundary: that between absolute victims and relative accomplices of evil. The whole tragedy of communism lies in the core tenets that condition its political practice: the vision of a superior elite whose utopian goals sanctify the most barbaric methods; the denial of the right to life of those who are defined as “degenerate parasites and predators,” the deliberate de-humanization of the victims, and what Alain Besançon correctly identifies as the ideological perversity at the heart of totalitarian thinking: the falsification of the idea of good (*la falsification du bien*).

\textsuperscript{16} James G. Williams ed., *The Girard Reader* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996), pp. 97–141. The same type of mechanism is present in the process of imagining the categories of “saboteur” and “kulak” after 1929 in the USSR.

The image of man as a mechanism put forward by French *philosophes* found its strange echo in this all-pervading technology of socially-oriented murder. That was the acme of radical utopianism, when nothing could deter or resist the perpetual motion of foul play. Marxist eschatology was substituted through Stalinist demonology. Igal Halfin eminently presents the process by which, through cyclical purges in the Soviet Union (one can consider their embryonic stage as 1920–21), Marxist eschatology morphed into a demonology that reached its discursive, hyper-transformist, and criminal maturity with the Second Socialist Transformation triggered by the *pyatiletka* unleashed to build socialism in one country.\(^{18}\) The public discourse was saturated with frightening images of deviators, heretics, spies, agents, and other scoundrels. A phenomenology of treason was devised to justify carnage and there was no paucity of intellectuals to support this morbid scenario. A lingering sentiment that there was after all something moral in the Bolshevik utopianism, plus the exploitation of anti-Fascist emotions, led to a persistent failure to acknowledge the basic fact that from its inception, Sovietism was a criminal system.

In Stalin’s mind the purges were means of political consolidation and authority-building, a springboard for newcomers and time-servers. They were bound to secure the human basis for effective control over society. In one of his most poignant essays published before World War II in *Partisan Review*, Phillip Rahv put forward a thorough interpretation of the mechanism that led to the “great terror”:

> these are trials of the mind and of the human spirit... In the Soviet Union, for the first time in history, the individual has been deprived of every conceivable means of resistance. Authority is monolithic: property and politics are one. Under circumstances it becomes impossible to defy the organization; to set one’s will against it. One cannot escape it: not only does it absorb the whole of life it also seeks to model the shapes of death.\(^{19}\)


Without the purges the system would have looked radically different. In other words, both victims and beneficiaries of the murderous mechanism were lumped together by this sacrificial ritual. For some of the Bolshevik militants liquidated or deported during the great purge, the terrorist ordeal amounted to necessary self-deprecation and self-abasement. Moreover, it was an opportunity to attain the long-awaited absolutism for those moments of “derailment” when they had dared to oppose Stalin. Zbigniew Brzeziński systematically listed long ago the main objectives of the purge: “the cleansing of the party, the restoration of its vigor and monolithic unity, the elimination of enemies, and the establishment of the correctness of its line and the primacy of the leadership.”20 An entire phenomenology came about in the process of massacring society and it was regrettably generously reproduced by too many intellectuals, who had accepted such morbid practices. Nostalgia, or the hope for elusive crumbs of morality within the communist utopia, combined with a Machiavellian exploitation of anti-fascist sentiment, led to numerous intellectuals’ resilient failure to come to terms, or acknowledge, the criminal nature of the soviet experiment.

The problem with Leninism (as evinced in 1918 by Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg) was the sanctification of ultimate ends, and thus the creation of an amoral universe in which the most terrible crimes could be justified in the name of the radiant future. In practice, the elimination of politics seemed a logical terminus, for the Party was the embodiment of an extremist collective will.21 This fixation on ends and the readiness to use the most atrocious means to attain them is a feature of many ideological utopias, but in the Leninist experience it reached grotesquely tragic limits. No less important, the appeals of communism were linked to the extraordinary power of its ideology (and the core myth of the Party as carrier of Reason in History). No other revolutionary movement has been as successful as Leninism in turning the gnostic creed into a self-hypnotizing weapon. Leninist militants worldwide believed in the myth of the Party with an ardor comparable only to the illuminates of religious millennial sects. It is impor-

tant to insist on both the ideological and institutional foundations of Leninism when we try to fathom the mystery of Leninism’s endurance in the twentieth century. The myth of the Party as the repository of historical wisdom and rationality is the key to grasping the dynamics and finally the decay and extinction of Leninism. The key of the latter phenomenon lies in the ideo-political complex of the Party as locus of historical reason and knowledge. Leninism, in its various phases, was what Ken Jowitt coined as a “catholic moment” in history, when “a universal ‘word’ becomes institutional ‘flesh,’ an authoritatively standardized and centered institutional format dominates a highly diverse set of cultures.” The Althusserian interpretation remains valid only if one performs a phraseological inversion: Leninism was a new type of praxis of philosophy. The explanation of its longevity in the 20th century can therefore be found in “the promise of the Great October Revolution […] of a Soviet Union as socialist hierophany.”

The biographies of the ideological elites in Soviet-type regimes were usually colorless and lacked any moment of real distinction. Speaking about Eastern Europe, one would notice that the ideological watchdogs were recruited from the Muscovite factions of the ruling parties. In Hungary, József Révai, who had once been one of Lukács’s most promising disciples, became the scourge of intellectual life. Révai was a member of the Hungarian delegation to various Cominform meetings and enthusiastically implemented the Zhdanovist strategy. In Romania, the tandem Iosif Chișinevschi/Leonte Răutu forced the national culture into a mortal impasse. Similar denial of genuine national traditions and an apocryphal sense of internationalism were promoted by ideological bureaucracies in Czechoslovakia (Vilem Kopecky, Jiri Hendrich) and East Germany (Gerhart Eisner, Albert Norden, Kurt

22 Jowitt, op. cit, pp. 249–83.
24 For a detailed description of the position of “party intellectuals” within the general Czechoslovak debates over national identity in the post-1945 period, under circumstances of a widespread perception among the elites of the interwar republic as a compromised state project, see Bradley F. Abrams, The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation: Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).
All devices were convenient when it came to uprooting the vicious deviationist temptations. “Bourgeois nationalism” was fused with “rootless cosmopolitanism” in the diabolical figure of the malignant enemy. In the meantime, socialist nationalism was thriving. The members of the ideological army were willingly officiating the rites of the cult. Deprived of their own personality, they were glad to identify with and invest in Stalin’s superpersonality. After the terrorist dissolution of the ego it was normal for the apparatchiks to project themselves into Stalin’s myth as an institutionalized superego.

The Cominform emerged in September 1947 as the first attempt to institutionalize the satellitization of Eastern Europe, and it represented an initiative to contain and annihilate the centrifugal trends within world communism (the “domesticist” temptation and the search for a “national path to socialism” championed by militants as different as Gottwald, Gomulka, or Pătrășcanu). It laid the foundation for future frameworks of supra-governmental domination and ideological hegemony from the part of the CPSU. Paradoxically, the Cominform, brought about the first instance of dissent and revisionism from a “party-state” (the Titoist “heresy”). In Tito’s case there was a significant level of ambivalence: he enthusiastically supported Stalin’s new orientation (Zhdanov’s “two camp theory”), but thought the moment was propitious for furthering his own hegemonic agenda in Southeastern Europe (the Balkans). One could call such a “syndrome” a strategy of parallel hegemonism. The irony of the situation was that the break between the two leaders happened at a time when Soviet and Yugoslav visions over class struggle at the world level were mirror images of each other. In 1947–48, Tito underestimated the level of total monopoly of power achieved by the Kremlin tyrant and he fancied himself as the beneficiary of certain leverage in regional decision-making. Ivo Banac excellently diagnosed the paradox: “the dramatic denouement of 1948 was directly connected with Stalin’s fears that Yugoslavia began to take on a role of regional communist center and the inherent potential provocations against the West that such position entailed.”

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the leader of the League of Communists in Yugoslavia (until 1952 the Yugoslav Communist Party) carried along with his plans of creating a communist Danubian confederation (which was to incorporate Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Romania) while simultaneously persevering in the assimilation of the Albanian Communist Party (which in 1948 became the Albanian party of Labor).

The conflict with Yugoslavia and Tito’s excommunication from the Cominform in June 1948 gave the signal for the beginning of dramatic purges within Eastern European communist parties. It also indicated that Moscow’s hegemony could not completely suppress domestic tendencies even within the most pro-Soviet communist factions. In Stalin’s view, it was a particularly dangerous time, when the imperialists had decided to intensify their aggressive actions against the budding “people’s democracies” and the threat of a new world war was looming large, no country or leader should be allowed to engage in national communist experiments. Those identified as nationalists could be charged with the most fantastic sins. After all, the sole principle of legitimation for the ruling communist parties in the Soviet bloc was their unreserved attachment to the Soviet Union, their readiness to carry out unflinchingly all of Stalin’s directives. The harshness of Stalin’s reaction can be explained by the fact that the CPS (Communist Party of the United States) leadership reactivated the geopolitical motif of “capitalist encirclement.” In this vein, the end of the Second World War triggered a new imperialist offensive against communism in general and against “the young popular democracies” in particular, which, according to Stalin, signaled an imminent global armed conflict. Under the circumstances, any national-communist temptations had to be nipped in the bud. Therefore, within the various countries of the Soviet bloc, party leaders would be allowed to enjoy the adoration of their subordinates, but their cults were only echoes of the true faith: unswerving love for Stalin. In the words of Władysław Gomułka, the

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27 During his trip to Moscow, via Bucharest, in January 1948, Georgi Dimitrov visited his old friend Petre Pandrea (Pătrășcanu’s brother-in-law) and talked about issues related to the emerging conflict between Tito and Stalin. They knew each other from the early 1930s Berlin where Pandrea studied law and Dimitrov was active with the Comintern’s Balkan Bureau. See Petre Pandrea, *Memoriile mandarinului valah* (Bucharest: Albatros, 2000).
cult of the local leaders “could be called only a reflected brilliance, a borrowed light. It shone as the moon does.”

Links with Tito, of course, were used as arguments to demonstrate the political unreliability of certain East European leaders (e.g., László Rajk in Hungary, who fought in the Spanish Civil War and had maintained friendly relations with members of Tito’s entourage). It is worth discussing in this context the following analysis of forced confessions proposed by Erica Glaser Wallach, Noel Field’s foster daughter, whose parents had been themselves members of the medical units associated with the International Brigades in Spain:

That depends on you, confess your crimes, cooperate with us, and we shall do anything in our power to help you. We might even consider letting you go free if we are satisfied that you have left the enemy camp and have honestly contributed to the cause of justice and progress. We are no man-eaters, and we are not interested in revenge. Besides you are not the real enemy; we are not interested in you but in the criminals behind you, the sinister forces of imperialism and war. You do not have to defend them; they will fight their own losing battle. People like you we want to help—and we do frequently—to find their way back to a normal life and a decent place in society… You want to know what a capitalist snake looks like? Take a look at her, at that bag of filth standing over there. You will never see such a low and abominable creature… Take that dirty smile off your face, you American stooge… You are a prostitute! That’s what you are. Worse than that: prostitutes sell only their bodies: you sold your soul. For American dollars, stinking American dollars...

28 Brzeziński, op. cit, p. 65.
29 Erica Wallach, Light at Midnight (New York: Doubleday, 1967), quoted by Ivan Margolius, Reflections of Prague: Journeys through the 20th Century (London: Wiley, 2006), p. 193. A personal element: my mother and Erica Wallach were friends during the Spanish Civil War when my mother worked as a nurse under the supervision of Doctor Glaser, Erica’s father. In as much as I know, during the 1951–52 investigations at the Party Control Commission in Bucharest, my mother was questioned regarding her Glaser Slansky connections. During World War II, both my parents worked for Radio Moscow’s Romanian service, which was part of the Balkan Department subordinated to the Central-East European Section headed by Rudolf Slansky. For show trials and the psychology of true believers, see Egon Balas, Will to Freedom: A Perilous Journey Through Fascism and Communism (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 219.
Domesticism, according to Zbigniew Brzeziński, was an exaggerated, even if frequently unconscious, “preoccupation with local, domestic communist objectives, at the expense of broader, international Soviet goals.”\(^{30}\) It was not an elaborate philosophy of opposition to Soviet hegemony, but a conviction on the part of some East European leaders, like Gomulka in Poland, Lucreţiu Pătrăşcanu in Romania, and Traicho Kostov in Bulgaria, that national interests were not necessarily incompatible with the Soviet agenda and that such purposes could therefore be pursued with impunity. Henceforth, the Cominform’s main task—if not its only task—was to suppress such domestic ambitions. The fulfillment of the Stalinist design for Eastern Europe included the pursuit of a singular strategy that could eventually transform the various national political cultures into carbon copies of the “advanced” Soviet experience. Local communist parties engaged in frantic attempts to imitate the Stalinist model, transplanting and sometimes enhancing the most repulsive characteristics of the Soviet totalitarian system. The purpose of the show trials that took place in the people’s democracies was to create a national consensus surrounding the top communist elite and to maintain a state of panic and fear among the population. According to George H. Hodos, a survivor of the 1949 László Rajk trial in Hungary, those frame-ups were signals addressed at all potential freethinkers and heretics in the satellite countries. The trials also “attempted to brand anyone who displayed differences of opinion as common criminal and/or agent of imperialism, to distort tactical differences as betrayal, sabotage, and espionage.”\(^{31}\)

But those trials were not a simple repetition of the bloody purges that had devastated the Soviet body politic in the 1930s. Between 1949 and 1951 the main victims of the trials were members of the “national communist elites”, or “home communists,” as opposed to doctrinaire Stalin loyalists. Koci Xoxe, Traicho Kostov, Lucreţiu Pătrăşcanu, Władysław Gomulka, and László Rajk had all spent the war years in their own countries. They had participated in the anti-Nazi resistance movement. Unlike their Moscow-trained colleagues, they could invoke a source of legitimacy from direct involvement in the partisan movement.

\(^{30}\) Brzeziński, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

Some of these “home-grown” communists may have even resented the condescending attitudes of the “Muscovites,” who relied on their better connections with Moscow and treated the home communists like junior partners. Stalin was aware of those factional rivalries and used them to initiate the permanent purges in the satellite countries.

In the early 1950s Stalin became increasingly concerned with the role of the Jews as carriers of a “cosmopolitan world view” and as “objective” supporters of the West. For the communists, it did not matter whether an individual was “subjectively” against the system, but rather what he or she might have thought and done by virtue of his or her “objective” status (coming from a bourgeois family, having studied in the West, belonging to a certain minority, and so forth). While there is growing and impressive literature dealing with Stalin’s anti-Semitism during the later years of his reign, there is a regrettable scarcity of either analysis or interpretation regarding the salience of anti-Semitism as a defining feature of post-1948 political culture in the East European satellites. In a general assessment about the specifics of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, William Korey made in 1972 an interesting observation:

Anti-Jewish discrimination had become an integral part of Soviet state policy ever since the late thirties. What it lacked then was an official ideology rationalizing the exclusion of Jews from certain positions or justifying the suspicion focused upon them. First during 1949–1953, and then more fully elaborated since 1967, the “corporate Jew,” whether “cosmopolitan” or “Zionist,” became identified as the enemy. Popular anti-Semitic stereotyping had been absorbed into official channels, generated by chauvinist needs and totalitarian requirements. [...] The ideology of the “corporate Jew” was not and is not fully integrated into Soviet thought. It functions on a purely pragmatic level—to fulfill limited, though clearly defined, domestic purposes. This suggests the possibility that it may be set aside when those purposes need no longer be served.\footnote{William Korey, “The Origins and Development of Soviet Anti-Semitism: An Analysis,” p. 135, \textit{Slavic Review}, Vol. 31, No. 1. (March, 1972): 111–135. A year later, Korey developed his article into a book: William Korey, \textit{The Soviet Cage: Anti-Semitism in Russia} (New York: Viking, 1973).}

While the specter of a massive pogrom loomed over the Soviet Jewish population, in the people’s democracies, the struggle against “rootless
cosmopolitanism” allowed certain local leaders to engage in an elite purge against the “Muscovite” factions dominated by communists of Jewish extraction (many of whom had fled fascism and had sought refuge in the Soviet Union between the two wars). The elimination of those otherwise totally loyal Stalinists reached a spectacular level in Czechoslovakia, where the chief defendant was Rudolf Slansky, who until September 1951 had been the General Secretary of the ruling communist party and in that capacity had presided over the ruthless persecution of communists and non-communists. Since the trial had to confirm Stalin’s conviction about the existence of a worldwide conspiracy determined to unsettle the communist bloc, there was no way to exonerate any of the defendants. Furthermore, the anti-Semitic charges were bound to appeal to procommunist chauvinistic prejudices in the whole region.

A purge-trial that was a direct consequence of the Slansky events in Czechoslovakia was that of Paul Merker, member of the Central Committee of the SED since 1946. His initial downfall came about because of his relationship during the Second World War with Noel Field and Otto Katz (included in the group tried and executed in Prague in 1951). However, the crux of the accusations against Merker was his opinions and positions on the Jewish question in post-1945 Germany. In 1952, the SED’s Central Party Control Commission produced a document that detailed Merker’s errors and the mischief. Unsurprisingly it was entitled “Lessons of the Trial against the Slansky Conspiracy Centre.” It insisted that Merker was involved in “the criminal activity of Zionist organizations,” which, allied with “American agents,” aimed at destroying the “people’s democracies” in Eastern Europe. Additionally, it also claimed that Merker tried “winning over SED comrades of Jewish descent.” During interrogation (both by Stasi and

34 Merker himself was not of Jewish origin, but other high-profile people associated by the Stasi (and NKVD) to his trial were Lex Ende, Leo Bauer, or
NKVD), Merker was stamped with the label of *Judenknecht* (servant of the Jews). In an interesting twist, even after the 1954 resolution of Noel Field case, Merker was not released. On the contrary, now his whole trial was focused on his alleged collaboration with the Jewish capitalist/cosmopolitan circles. He was sentenced to eight years in prison in 1955, but was released in 1956 without ever being fully rehabilitated. Nevertheless, Merker and his spouse never attempted to flee to West Germany afterwards. Adopting an exemplarily Rubashov-like attitude, Merker stated: “In the trial against me, I did without a defense lawyer in order to help keep the proceedings absolutely secret.” Again, the (il)logic of Stalinism was at work: “He had made efforts to prevent “enemies of the DDR” from using his case, and he and his wife had been and would remain silent about the case.”

His trial, sentence, and interrogation minutes were indeed kept secret, becoming known only after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In May, 1952, the Romanian media announced the elimination of three members of the Politburo, two of whom had been the leaders of the party’s Moscow émigré center during World War II. All three had been party secretaries and had shared absolute power with the leader of the domestic faction, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. Ana Pauker, a veteran communist leader who long had been lionized by international

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35 Paul Merker was in Mexico City from 1942 until 1945 and through his articles in *Freies Deutschland* was the only one member of the KPD’s Politbüro who insisted on the central role of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany and on the special status of the Jews among Hitler’s victims. This was in sharp contrast with Walter Ulbricht’s writings and public stances on the nature of fascism, of Germany’s war crimes, and of collective responsibility. Moreover, after 1948, Merker was sharply diverging from the Soviet policy of refusing special status and retribution to Jews among Hitler’s victims. For the definitive work on Paul Merker’s case, see Jeffrey Herf, “East German Communists and the Jewish Question: The Case of Paul Merker,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (October, 1994): 627–61; but also Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Jeffrey Herf, “The Emergence and Legacies of Divided Memory: Germany and the Holocaust after 1945,” in Jan-Werner Müller ed., *Memory and Power in Postwar in Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 184–205.
communist propaganda as an impeccable communist fighter, lost her job as Minister of Foreign Affairs and was put under house arrest. Her Muscovite ally, the Hungarian-born Vasile Luca, was accused of economic sabotage during his tenure as Minister of Finance and collaboration with the bourgeois police during the party’s underground activity. Luca was arrested and died in prison in the early 1960s. The third member of the group, Teohari Georgescu, a home communist and former Minister of Internal Affairs whose principal fault consisted in his close association with the Pauker–Luca faction, was also jailed but was soon released, though never reinstated in party positions. The Romanian case is the perfect example of country dynamics determined by party factionalism and sectarianism. It can be said that the more marginal and less historically representative a communist party was, the more profound its sectarianism was. The Romanian Communist Party (RCP), torn apart by internal struggles among its three centers during the underground period, preserved a besieged fortress mentality even after World War II. Given that in the pre-1945 period mutual accusations had usually resulted in the expulsion of the members of the defeated faction, once the party was in power, the effects of the continued struggles were catastrophic. Once established as a ruling party, the RCP projected a vision based on exclusiveness, fierce dogmatism, and universal suspicion at the national level. The mystique of the party called for complete abrogation of its members’ critical faculties. As Franz Borkenau put it, communism, “a Utopia based upon the belief in the omnipotence of the ‘vanguard,’” cannot live without a scapegoat, and the procedures applied to detect them, invent them, become only more cruel and reckless.” For all practical purposes, the political history of the international communist movement is the history of continuous purges of different factions branded by the victors as “anti-party deviations.” Those defeated in party power struggles were labeled factionalists, whereas the winners were lionized as champions of the “holy cause” of party unity.

36 For a detailed explanation of power struggles in the 1930s and 1940s, see the chapter “A Messianic Sect: The Underground Romanian Communist Party, 1921–1944,” in my book Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Whereas the Slansky trial and the “doctors’ plot” seem to represent the limits of the Stalinist systems irrationality, the purge of the Pauker–Luca–Georgescu group appears more an expression of domestic revolutionary pragmatism. The latter process was accompanied by massive purges of the Jewish Democratic Committee and in the Hungarian Committee, suggesting a concerted campaign of weakening the Moscow faction. In the Byzantine schemes that devoured the Romanian communist elite, the mystical internationalism of the Comintern period was gradually replaced by a cynical position embellished with nationalist, even xenophobic, motifs. Gheorghiu-Dej and his acolytes not only speculated about Stalin’s anti-Semitism but did not hesitate to play the same card.  

The stakes were absolute power, and the Jewishness of rivals was an argument that could be used with the Soviet dictator. If the national Stalinists were the prime beneficiaries of Stalin’s warning not to transform the party from a “social and class party into a race party” they were neither its initiators nor its architects. No less caught up in the same perverse mechanism of self-humiliation than their Polish and Hungarian colleagues, the Romanian Stalinists—Gheorghiu-Dej, Chişinevschi, and Ceauşescu, as much as Ana Pauker and Vasile Luca—were willing perpetrators of Stalin’s designs. They were allowed by the Soviet dictator to gain autonomy not from the center but from another generation of the center’s agents. It was indeed a sort of moment of emancipation, but one that signaled the fact that Moscow sanctioned the coming of age of a new Stalinist elite in Romania. The history of the Stalinist ruling group in various other East-Central European countries is strikingly similar. There is the same sense of political predestination, the same lack of interest in national values, the same obsequiousness vis-à-vis the Kremlin.


An indicator of the continuous Stalinist nature of the Romanian regime, of its permanent purge mentalité, is Leonte Răutu’s fateful longevity within the highest power echelons, the high priest of a cultural revolution à la roumaine. A prominent party veteran of Bessarabian-Jewish origin, perfectly fluent in Russian, he was the architect of anti-cultural politics of Stalinism in Romania. Until his removal from the Political Executive Committee in the summer of 1981, he was the epitome for a perinde ac cadaver commitment to the Marxist-Leninist cause. He was the most significant figure of the category of “party intellectuals,” who produced, reproduced, and instrumentalized ideological orthodoxy. A professional survivor prone to the most surreal dialectical acrobatics, Leonte Răutu adjusted and took advantage of the regime’s gradual systemic degeneration, making the successful transition from the position of professional revolutionary to that of a cunning and slippery bureaucrat always ready to hunt down heretics among party ranks and within the society as whole. Born in 1910, Răutu joined the RCP in 1929 (while still a student in mathematics at Bucharest University) and in the 1930s he became head of the propaganda and agitation department. In Doftana Prison he entered in direct contact with Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceaușescu. In the following years he became the editor of Scanteia, the party’s illegal newspaper. In 1940 he left Romania and took refuge to the USSR, becoming the director of the Romanian section of Radio Moscow. He returned to the country at the same time as Ana Pauker, Vasile Luca, Valter Roman, etc., where he initiated a domestic version of Zhdanovism. In one of his most vehemently Zhdanovite speeches, “Against Cosmopolitanism and Objectivism in Social Sciences,” Răutu declared war on everything that was valued in the national culture:

The channels by which cosmopolitan views become pervasive, especially among intellectuals, are well known: servility to and kowtowing bourgeois culture, the empty talk of the so-called community of progressive

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40 For a detailed presentation of Leonte Răutu’s role in the power politics of Romanian communism see Vladimir Tismaneanu and Cristian Vasile, Perfectul Acrobat: Leonte Răutu, Măștile Răului (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008).
41 This article was published both in the Central Committee official journal Lupta de clasă, No. 4, October 1949, and as a brochure at the R.W.P. Publishing house in 1949.
scientists and the representatives of reactionary, bourgeois science, national nihilism, meaning the negation of all that is valuable and progressive for each people in their culture and history, the contempt for the people’s language, hate against the building of socialism, the defamation of all that is new and developing, replacing the partinost with bourgeois objectivism, which ignores the fundamental difference between socialist, progressive culture and bourgeois, reactionary culture.\textsuperscript{42}

After 1953, he pursued a seemingly more balanced approach as defense mechanism in the context of de-Stalinization. His main weapon in these changing times was that of manipulation. The individual was always a tool with no distinct personality (being rather a complex of acquired/ascribed features); when s/he displayed the will for autonomous action, s/he became victim of the diabolical logic of the purge (an excellent example for this situation is the career of Mihai Beniuc, the “little tyrant from the Writers’ Union” as veteran communist poet Miron Radu Paraschivescu once called him). Răutu’s cynicism and opportunism were flagrantly apparent in 1964 when Răutu, the same individual who directed the Sovietization of Romanian culture, initiated a strident campaign against the academia, whom he unmasked and accused of “having forgotten the true national values” and of “shamelessly showing fealty to even the slightest Soviet achievement.” Leonte Răutu’s career was fundamentally characterized by an extraordinary capacity of siding with those in power within the RCP. He first became a favorite of Ana Pauker and Vasile Luca, obtaining his position at Radio Moscow and his initial nominations in Romania because of this connection. By 1952, he knew when to jump into Dej’s boat, being, along with Miron Constantinescu, the author of the May–June Plenary Session resolution, the text on which the purge proceedings were based (what came to be known as “the June nights”). His inquisitorial contribution to the Pauker case was not the first (see his involvement into unmasking Pătrăşcanu’s intellectual “crimes”) and would not be the last type of such activity. In 1957, he could be found again on the prosecutor’s bench during the party action against Chişinevschi-Constantinescu (these events are often labeled in Romanian historiography as “a failed de-Stalinization”). After the downfall of the two, who previously were direct competitors in the struggle for supremacy in administering

\textsuperscript{42} Tismaneanu and Vasile, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 224.
and ruling the cultural front, Răutu became the unchallenged patriarch of communist politics of culture. With the exception of the moment when he had to share power with Grigore Preoteasa, Răutu created an apparatus manned by mediocre individuals, whose ego would only equal their incompetence (e.g., M. Roller or P. Țugui). The biography and actions of Leonte Răutu are the perfect expression of the perverse game of Stalinist masks. Dissimulation, ethical posturing and hypocrisy were the only constants of the apparatchik’s existence, a full-blown retreat from any moral imperative. Răutu was the incarnation of the diabolical anti-logic of Stalinism: an individual experiencing an irresistible process of personal decomposition based upon the unswerving subordination to the party leader beyond considerations such as reason, honor and dignity.

The mind of the Stalinist elites in Eastern Europe was impressively revealed by the Polish journalist Teresa Toranska in a series of interviews conducted in the early 1980s with some of the former leaders of the Polish communist party. The most striking and illuminating of the interviews is with the former Politburo member and Central Committee Secretary Jakub Berman, who tried to defend the options and actions of his political generation. According to Berman, Polish communists were right in championing Stalin’s policies in Poland because, he claimed, the Soviets guaranteed his country’s social and national liberation. The leaders of the Soviet-bloc communist parties were convinced, like Lenin the moment he founded the Bolshevik party, that the people needed an external force to enlighten and teach them, and that without such a vanguard party there was no hope of true emancipation. Berman was convinced that a day would come when mankind would do justice to this chiliastic dream of global revolution, and all the atrocities and crimes of Stalinism would be remembered only as passing incidents: “I am nonetheless convinced that the sum of our actions, skillfully and consistently carried out, will finally produce results and create a new Polish consciousness; because all the advantages flowing from our new path will be borne out, must be borne out, and [...] there will finally be a breakthrough in mentality which will give it an entirely new content and quality.”

In his absolute belief that history was on his and his comrades’ side, Berman was not alone. His was a mindset characteristic of the communist elites in all Soviet satellite countries. Such (il)logic explains the frenzy of submission syndrome: the readiness to engage in any form of self-debasement and self-deprecation as long as such gestures were required by the Party. The East European communist leaders were seasoned militants for whom Stalin’s personality was an example of correct revolutionary conduct. They admired the Soviet leader’s intransigence and his uncompromising struggle against oppositional factions, and they shared his hostility to the West. They believed in the theory of permanent intensification of the class struggle and did their best to create a repressive system where all the critical tendencies could be immediately weeded out. Their minds were Manichean: socialism was right, capitalism was wrong, and there was no middle road between the two. During their communist underground service, the Soviet-bloc communists had learned to see Stalin’s catechistic formulations as the best formulations of their own thoughts and beliefs. They fully internalized a diabolical pedagogy based upon a belief in being ordained as both juror and executioner, for their legitimacy drew from a frantic obedience to the vozhd. When Stalin died, his East European disciples suffered like orphans: more than their parties’ supporter, they lost their protector, the very embodiment of their highest dreams, the hero they had come to revere, the symbol of their vigor, passion, and boundless enthusiasm.

The logic of Stalinism excluded vacillation and hesitation, numbed critical reasoning and intelligence and instituted Soviet-style Marxism as a system of universal truth inimical to any form of doubt. The mech-


44 Vladimir Tismaneanu, Ghilotina de scrum (Bucharest: Polirom, 2002).
anism of permanent purging, the basic technique of Stalinist demon-
ology, was the modern equivalent of the medieval witch-hunt. It was
eagerly adopted by Stalin’s East European apprentices and adapted for
their own purposes. Echoing Stalin’s fervid cult, East European leaders
gineered similar campaigns of praise and idolatry in their own coun-
tries. The party was identified with the supreme leader, whose chief
merit consisted in having correctly applied the Stalinist line. The solu-
tions to all disturbing questions could be found in Stalin’s writings,
and those who failed to discover the answers were branded “enemies of
the people.” Members of the traditional political elites, members of the
clergy, and representatives of the nationalist intelligentsia who had re-
fused to collaborate with the new regimes were sentenced to long term
prison terms following dramatic show trials or cursory camera trials.
That was the first stage of the purges in Eastern Europe. After 1949
the purges fed upon the communist elites themselves, and through
them many faithful Stalinists experienced firsthand the effects of the
unstoppable terrorist machine they had helped set in motion. Accord-
ing to Leszek Kolakowski, the purges had an integrative function, con-
tributing to the destruction of the last vestiges of subjective autono-
my and creating a social climate where no one would even dream of
criticism: “the object of a totalitarian system is to destroy all forms of
communal life that are not imposed by the state and closely controlled
by it, so that individuals are isolated from one another and become
mere instruments in the hands of the state. The citizen belongs to the
state and must have no other loyalty, not even to the state ideology.”

The communist victims belonged to a category described by Stalin-
ist legal theory as “objective enemies.” They were people who once in
their lives may have expressed reservations about the sagacity of Soviet
policies, or, even worse, may have criticized Stalin personally. Stalinism
functioned on the basis of an exhaustively repressive strategy displaying
pedagogical ambitions and vaunting itself as the triumph of the ethical
spirit and of egalitarian collectivism. Nicolas Werth enunciated, along
these lines, the following diagnosis:

45 Leszek Kolakowski, Main Currents of Marxism, Vol. II: The Golden Age (Ox-
throughout Stalin’s dictatorship of a quarter of a century, repressive phenomena varied, evolved, and took on different forms and scope. They reflected transformations of the regime itself in a changing world. This adaptable violence was characterized by various levels of intensity, continual displacements, shifting targets, often unpredictable sequences, and excesses that blurred the line between the legal and extralegal.\footnote{Nicolas Werth, “Strategies of Violence in the Stalinist USSR”, p. 75, in Henry Russo ed., \textit{Stalinism & Nazism. History and Memory Compared} (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pp. 73–95.}

Maniacal purging consummate with self-devouring was both the praxis and the theoretical “legitimation” of this extremist and exterminist system. To paraphrase the title of a famous novel of Stalin’s era, this is \textit{How the Steel Was Tempered}.
EASTERN EUROPE