

From Benito Mussolini to
Hugo Chavez

*Intellectuals and a Century of
Political Hero Worship*

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Stalin, Rakosi, Soviet Communism, and Intellectuals

This was a man ... dominated by an insatiable vanity and love of power ... an inordinate touchiness, an endless vindictiveness, an inability to forget an insult or a slight ... [who] once observed that there was nothing sweeter in life than to bide the proper moment for revenge, to insert the knife, to turn it around and to go home for a good night's sleep ... a man apparently foreign to the very experience of love, without pity or mercy ... As the outlines of Stalin's personal actions begin to emerge ... we are confronted with a record beside which the wildest murder mystery seems banal.

George F. Kennan¹

[T]o him [Stalin] will fall the glory of being the greatest criminal in history ... He was one of those rare terrible dogmatists capable of destroying nine tenths of the human race to "make happy" the one tenth.

Milovan Djilas²

Two general propositions may explain the *durable attraction of communist dictators*, such as Stalin, for many Western intellectuals.³ The first is the profound ignorance of the personalities, policies, and intentions

¹ George F. Kennan: "Criminality Enthroned," in T.H. Rigby ed.: *Stalin*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1966, 168-169, 173, 174.

² Milovan Djilas: *Conversations with Stalin*, New York 1962, 187, 190.

³ We may need a different explanation for the durable affection of non-intellectuals and especially of the people these dictators ruled. For instance in post-communist Russia there remains a great deal of nostalgia and a reservoir of seemingly incomprehensible affection for Stalin. The latter are likely to be associated with the former superpower status of Russia (when it was the dominant part of the USSR), a militant patriotism, and the stability and modest security the Soviet system seemed to guarantee to ordinary people. Thus even in post-communist Russia, the qualities of Stalin described by Kennan and Djilas have been overlooked, and would likely be denied by large portions of the population.



FIGURE 5. Typical symbolic representation of Stalin guiding his people and basking in their admiration; text on poster: "Under the Leadership of the Great Stalin – Forward to Communism!"



FIGURE 6. Acclaimed by joyous children embodying authenticity and purity.

of these dictators. The other is a remarkable capacity for projection and wishful thinking on the part of many intellectuals (of all human beings) for attributing qualities they highly value to individuals they were disposed to admire. Even when such circumstances are taken into account, the gulf between the reality (as summarized, for example, in the assessments of Kennan and Djilas) and the deluded positive views of Stalin (to be sampled below) is so enormous that its satisfactory explanation and understanding requires both considerable effort and imagination.

It is of course easier to account for the reverence and the susceptibility to his cult on the part of the Soviet population, intellectuals included. The Soviet public could not avoid daily exposure to the systematic and thorough bombardment by the deified images of Stalin disseminated by the institutions of propaganda and education. At the same time it could also be argued that the cult might have encountered greater resistance among Soviet citizens who had intimate, daily personal experience of the many discrepancies between the promises of the authorities, Stalin included, and the disillusioning realities of their life – economic as well as political. We can only speculate about the nature of popular sentiments toward Stalin while he was in power since obviously public expression of unfavorable sentiments was (to say the least) discouraged by the authorities and independent opinion research did not exist.

In any event it is important to note that “the development of the popular cult [of Stalin] was permeated, as in [Hitler’s] Germany, with metaphors that were unashamedly sacred”⁴ – that is to say, the cult tapped into religious traditions and forms of worship including that of the Tsar. Even some intellectuals absorbed the deified image of Stalin, as Soviet writers took the lead in singing his praises. A poignant example is Konstantin Simonov (sometime favorite of Stalin, who late in life renounced his own servile political attitudes). He wrote: “The whole people/Are His friends:/You cannot count them,/They are like drops of water in the sea.”⁵ Ilia Ehrenburg, another prominent Soviet author, wrote: “I often think of the man [Stalin], his courage and grandeur, who took upon himself an enormous burden. The wind will always blow, people carry on their daily activities ... nurse children ... or sleep peacefully while He stands at the helm.” He further averred that Stalin “suffered with everyone and

triumphed with everyone.”⁶ In his memoirs he acknowledged that “he thought of Stalin as a kind of Old Testament God.”⁷

Richard Overy provides a broader background for these attitudes: “a tradition of systematic adulation existed long before 1917 ... [this] adulation survived the revolution, transferred to new leaders.” In particular the image of the care-giving, tirelessly solicitous leader was time and again projected upon Stalin. A poet honoring him on his birthday in 1939 wrote: “Moscow is asleep ... Stalin is the only one awake/At this late hour/He thinks of us ... He can even hear the song/Which a shepherd sings in the steppe/The little boy will write a letter to Stalin/And will always receive a reply from the Kremlin.”⁸

Walter Laqueur suggested that Stalin’s cult may better be understood when compared to those of Mussolini and Hitler (as will also be done in this study). Laqueur found numerous similarities between these cults and the particular attributes projected upon the three dictators. The major difference, in his view, was that the Nazi and Italian Fascist systems were far more the creations of their founders and leaders, and far more dependent on them, than was the case with Stalin and the Soviet system.⁹ The Soviet system was in existence well over a decade before Stalin became its undisputed leader, whereas the creation of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy was inseparable from the rise to power of their respective leaders.

Stalin was the first of several communist dictators who inspired the admiration and reverence of many notable Western intellectuals, and for obvious reasons much more was written about him than Lenin. Correspondingly the misperceptions of Stalin have been more striking, more abundant, and enduring. To be sure, Lenin too inspired reverence (except in Bertrand Russell, who met him), but his tenure in power was short whereas Stalin was a living presence for decades and in charge of major social-political transformations that thrilled these intellectuals. Some of them expressed their respect of Lenin posthumously, visiting the mausoleum where his embalmed body was displayed. Among them, Corliss and Margaret Lamont, inspecting his remains, were impressed by “his impersonally beautiful and resolute face.” Edmund Wilson also

⁴ Richard Overy: *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia*, New York 2004, 121.

⁵ Quoted in David Satter: *It Was a Long Time Ago, and It Never Happened: Russia and the Communist Past*, New Haven CT 2012, 166.

⁶ Quoted from Ilia Ehrenburg: “Nagy Erzesek” [Strong Feelings], *Szabad Nep*, December 20, 1949. The source was the daily newspaper of the Hungarian Communist Party; “Merhetetlen Szeretet” [Boundless Affection], *Szabad Nep*, December 14, 1949 (translation from Hungarian by the author).

⁷ Alan Bullock: *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives*, New York 1991, 366.

⁸ Overy, 106.

⁹ Walter Laqueur: *Stalin: The Glasnost Revelations*, New York 1990, 184–188.

thought that he had “a beautiful face of exquisite firmness” that was “profoundly aristocratic” in a uniquely authentic manner.¹⁰ G.B. Shaw was struck by what he saw as Lenin’s aristocratic traits: “A true intellectual type ... that is the true aristocracy.”¹¹ Pablo Neruda discerned Lenin’s posthumous “presence” in Soviet life while watching a parade in Moscow’s Red Square celebrating the anniversary of the October Revolution: “They marched with sure and firm step ... They were being observed by the sharp eyes of a man dead many years, the founder of this security, this joy, this strength ... immortal Lenin.”¹² Neruda was also deeply moved by the passing of Stalin, writing in his obituary that he was an exemplar of “sincere intensity” and advised to “take pride in the title ‘Stalinist.’”¹³ It was a piece of advice not widely taken.

WESTERN ADMIRERS OF STALIN AND THE SOVIET SYSTEM

Perhaps the most grotesque misconception of Stalin was that he had little interest in power. Emil Ludwig (cited earlier on Mussolini), upon visiting Stalin, “found a lonely man who is not influenced by money or pleasure or even ambition. Though he holds enormous power he takes no pride in its possession.” Lion Feuchtwanger, another well-known German writer of the period, considered Stalin “the most unpretentious” of all the men known to him who held power.¹⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois believed that “He [Stalin] asked for neither adulation nor vengeance. He was reasonable and conciliatory.”¹⁵ Sidney and Beatrice Webb averred that “Stalin is not a dictator ... he is the duly elected representative of one of the Moscow constituencies to the Supreme Soviet ... [he] has persistently asserted ... that as a member of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR he is merely a colleague of thirty other members.”¹⁶

The Webbs were also impressed by what they saw as Stalin’s caring attitude: “As Stalin said ‘man must be grown carefully and attentively as a gardener grows his favorite fruit tree.’”¹⁷ Jerome Davis, a professor at

¹⁰ Corliss and Margaret Lamont: *Russia Day by Day*, New York 1933, 63; Edmund Wilson: *Travel in Two Democracies*, New York 1936, 322.

¹¹ G.B. Shaw: *The Rationalization of Russia*, Bloomington IN 1964 (first published 1931), 18.

¹² Pablo Neruda: *Memoirs*, New York 1977, 250.

¹³ Quoted in Robert Conquest: *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*, New York 2000, 138.

¹⁴ Emil Ludwig: *Nine Etched From Life*, Freeport NY 1969, 348 (first published New York 1934); Lion Feuchtwanger: *Moscow 1937*, London 1937, 76.

¹⁵ *The Thought and Writing of W.E.B. Du Bois*, Vol. II, New York 1971, 619.

¹⁶ Sidney and Beatrice Webb: *The Truth about Soviet Russia*, London 1942, 16, 18.

¹⁷ Sidney and Beatrice Webb: *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?* London 1936, 804.

Yale Divinity School, reached the conclusion that “it would be an error to consider the Soviet leader [Stalin] a willful man who believes in forcing his ideas upon others.”¹⁸ J.D. Bernal, the British scientist, believed that Stalin “combined as no man had before his time, a deep theoretical understanding with unfailing mastery of practice ... [and] a deeply scientific approach to all problems with his capacity for feeling.”¹⁹ In Neruda’s estimation Stalin was “a good natured man of principles, as sober as a hermit, a titanic defender of the Russian Revolution ... [who] had become a giant in wartime.”²⁰

Shaw’s admiration of Stalin was an integral part of his disposition to think well of a variety of dictators of different ideological persuasions: “Mussolini, Kemal, Pilsudski, Hitler and the rest can all depend on me to judge them by their ability to deliver the goods ... Stalin has delivered the goods to an extent that seemed impossible ten years ago; and I take off my hat to him accordingly.”²¹

Walter Duranty, who used to be considered “one of the great foreign correspondents of modern times” and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1932 as the best news correspondent, was another influential admirer of Stalin.²² His reputation as an expert on Soviet affairs was such that F.D. Roosevelt, while campaigning for the presidency as governor of New York, “summoned him to the governor’s mansion to talk over the Russian situation.” Stalin granted Duranty two interviews and Duranty described him in his dispatches “as a wise and perceptive leader capable of great powers of understanding: ‘a quiet, unobtrusive man ... who saw much but said little.’”²³ He believed that “there was an indomitable

¹⁸ Jerome Davis: *Behind Soviet Power: Stalin and the Russians*, New York 1946, 12.

¹⁹ Bernal quoted in Gary Werskey: *The Visible College: The Collective Biography of British Scientific Socialists of the 1930s*, London 1978, 318.

²⁰ Neruda, 319.

²¹ Quoted in G.B. Shaw, J.M. Keynes et al. *Stalin-Wells Talk: The Verbatim Report and Discussion*, London 1934, 47.

²² In 2004 Mark von Hagen, a historian of Russia and professor at Columbia University in New York, examined and refuted many of Duranty’s assertions and distortions about conditions in the Soviet Union and concluded that his Pulitzer Prize “should be rescinded.” Bill Keller, executive editor of the *New York Times*, refused to do so (see Anthony DePalma: *The Man Who Invented Fidel: Cuba, Castro and Herbert L. Matthews of the New York Times*, New York 2006, 268). The Pulitzer Prize Committee issued a statement admitting that Duranty’s reporting “falls seriously short” but refused to rescind the prize on the ground there was “no clear and convincing evidence of deliberate deception on his part” (*Statement on Walter Duranty*, Columbia University, November 21, 2003).

²³ S.J. Taylor: *Stalin’s Apologist: Walter Duranty, the New York Times’s Man in Moscow*, New York 1990, 2, 167–168, 182, 184.

purpose in his [Stalin's] heart" as well as a "vindictive willingness to bide his time."²⁴

Stalin appreciated the favorable publicity Duranty provided. He wrote to him: "You have done a good job reporting the USSR ... because you try to tell the truth about our country and to understand it and explain it to your readers ... you bet on our horse to win when others thought it had no chance."²⁵

Duranty's reverence for Stalin was closely linked to his sanguine assessments of the progress made under his leadership that overshadowed the great human costs that Duranty was well aware of:

In a bare quarter century the USSR has accomplished ages of growth. The most ignorant and backward of all the white nations has moved into the forefront of social, economic and political consciousness. Its obsolete agricultural system has been modernized ... its small ... industry has become gigantic and self-supporting; its illiterate masses have been educated and disciplined to appreciate and enjoy the benefits of collective effort.²⁶

Far more recently (and overlooking, or dismissing, vast amounts of disconfirming evidence), Fredric Jameson, the American literary critic, concurred with Duranty as he claimed that "Stalinism was a 'success,' having 'fulfilled its historical mission to force rapid industrialization of an underdeveloped country.'"²⁷

Of the collectivization of agriculture (one of the most brutal and destructive chapters in Soviet history), Duranty wrote:

Future historians ... may well regard the Russian struggle for collectivization as a heroic period in human progress ... The most backward section of the population would have the chance to obtain what it most needed, namely education ... women would have the chance for leisure and freedom as well ... whether the villages preferred their dirt and ignorance to Progress or not, Progress would be thrust upon them.²⁸

Duranty also believed in the necessity of the purges and the Moscow Trials, justifying them as essential for defeating traitors and saboteurs and "taking at face value the government's contention of actual widespread conspiracy which involved many men in the highest echelons of government," his biographer wrote.²⁹ He pleaded for understanding the

²⁴ Walter Duranty: *I Write as I Please*, New York 1935, 180, 181.

²⁵ Taylor, 192.

²⁶ Quoted in Taylor, 305.

²⁷ Quoted in Conquest, 149.

²⁸ Duranty 1935, 286-287.

²⁹ Taylor, 270.

Soviet judicial system as one very different from the Western kind, and professed to believe that the confessions at these trials were genuine:

No one who heard Piatakof or Muralov could doubt for a moment that what they said was true ... Their words rang true, and it is absurd to suggest or imagine that men like this could yield to any influence against their own strong hearts ... It is unthinkable that Stalin and Voroshilov and Budenny and the Court Marshall could have sentenced their friends to death unless the proofs of guilt were overwhelming.³⁰

It is conceivable, even likely, that at the time Duranty believed what he wrote, given the novelty of the staged confessions and unfamiliarity with the ways they were obtained. In doing so he had to choose between two scenarios: one was that the old revolutionaries, with a lifelong commitment to the Party and the Soviet system, actually became traitors (or managed to conceal their treacherousness for decades); the second possibility to consider was that Stalin ruthlessly and deceitfully framed and destroyed loyal fighters for the same cause, for no comprehensible reason, other than his overwhelming personal ambition and seemingly unquenchable thirst for power. Duranty was constrained to believe that if Stalin was willing to sacrifice high-ranking, time-tested members of the political elite, they had to be guilty of the most heinous crimes. Had he not been sympathetic toward the regime and Stalin to begin with, he would not have been able to accept that these deeply committed members of the highest echelons were determined to undermine and sabotage the system.

It would be interesting to know whether or not Duranty ever read (or heard of) Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, which provided the most plausible theory of the motivation of the highly placed, former revolutionaries who made the staged confessions, and if he had, would it have made a dent in his belief in the authenticity of the confessions? In any event Duranty was firmly and explicitly committed to the idea that great ends justify sordid means, encapsulated in his infamous omelette-making metaphor: "to put it brutally - you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs and the Bolshevik leaders are just as indifferent to the casualties ... involved in the drive toward socialism as any General during the World War who ordered a costly attack." Elsewhere (in a poem) he wrote: "Russians may be hungry and short of clothes and comfort, But you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs." This attitude explains his indifference to the sufferings brought about by the forcible collectivization of agriculture. A trainload of

³⁰ Walter Duranty: *The Kremlin and the People*, New York 1941, 49, 65.

starved people being deported that he saw were, in his own words, "more like caged animals than human beings" – they were "victims of the March of Progress." This was not an ironic and critical comment. He "dismissed their suffering, noting that he had 'seen worse debris than that, trains full of wounded from the Front in France'."³¹

According to his biographer,

Duranty consistently discarded "moral issues" believing them to be irrelevant to the job of a reporter ... [he] affected immunity from any kind of morality ... The deeply held moral convictions of other men served only to make Duranty uncomfortable, and he liked to believe that he was better than they were because he was free from the bonds that tied their hands.³²

Duranty himself informed his readers that he "pride[d] himself on having no bowels of compassion to weep over ruined homes and broken hearts." Accordingly he asserted that industrialization and collectivization were successful, but admitted that "their cost in blood and tears and ... human suffering has been prodigious ... In a world where there is so much waste and muddle it may perhaps be true that any plan, however rigid, is better than no plan at all and that any altruistic end, however remote, may justify any means, however cruel."³³

His overall assessment of the Soviet system remained positive and he concluded his book by averring that

In the USSR ... there is full real Socialism, in that all the dynamic forces of the country ... are applied for and by the community instead of for and by individuals ... Looking backwards over the fourteen years I have spent in Russia, I cannot escape the conclusion that this period has been a heroic chapter in the life of Humanity. During these years the first true Socialist State ... was constructed ... I am profoundly convinced that the USSR is only just beginning to exercise its tremendous potentialities ... This progress ... has been paralleled by a remarkable advance of the Soviet leaders in knowledge and wisdom.³⁴

He kept returning to the issue of ends and means:

I suppose that the real answer to the problem of end [*sic*] and means is belief, and passionate single-minded earnestness ... Whether one approves of the Bolsheviks and their methods or not, the fact remains that they have applied, developed and set going ... the only form of complete national collectivism which the world has known since the Inca civilization.

³¹ Quoted in Taylor, 164, 185, 207.

³² *Ibid.*, 232.

³³ Duranty 1935, 301–302.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 339–340.

Duranty's awareness of the costs of "the Soviet experiment" set him apart from many of the other admirers of Stalin and the Soviet system, who were similarly infused with moral impulses and ideals and dreamed of a social system morally superior to their own but knew little of the human costs of the attempt to create such a system.

It should also be pointed out that Duranty's positive views of Stalin and the Soviet system were intertwined with his personal and professional interests, opportunities, and well-being. As the long-term resident correspondent of the *New York Times* in Moscow, with access to Stalin and other major political figures, he led a privileged life that conveniently dovetailed with his favorable assessments of the social-political system that enabled him to lead this charmed existence. His household in Moscow included a "chauffeur, a charlady, his cook and mistress Katya." He had access to the State-run Commission shops "where foreigners could pick up amazing bargains for foreign currency." He came to view himself as "the intimate of presidents and dictators, the matchmaker for the marriage of convenience between two superpowers ... and a world figure of sufficient importance to influence the outcome of major social and economic issues." He became an especially valuable and favored source of information for those on the left, as he "told them what they wanted to hear ... Everybody quoted Duranty – Edmund Wilson, Beatrice Webb, the entire group of intellectuals who admired the Soviet experiment."³⁵

Duranty also differed from other favorably disposed intellectuals because he spent many years in the Soviet Union and was bound to learn something about the human costs of the "Soviet experiment." He did not seem particularly idealistic but nonetheless his moral calculus – if that is what it was – reflected an unshaken conviction that the ends justified the means. The rare privilege to interview Stalin on two occasions is likely to be among the circumstances that had a major influence on his views of him and the system he presided over.

Joseph E. Davies, US ambassador to the Soviet Union 1936–1938, was another prominent public figure (if not an intellectual) who, despite an extended period of living in the Soviet Union, managed to remain impressively uninformed about the nature of the Soviet system and Stalin, both of which he admired. He wrote of his meeting him:

He greeted me cordially with a smile and with great simplicity but also with a real dignity. He gives the impression of a strong mind which is composed and

³⁵ Quoted in Taylor, 176, 190, 224, 249.

wise. His brown eye is exceedingly kindly and gentle. A child would like to sit in his lap and a dog would sidle up to him ... [the meeting] was really an intellectual feast ... Throughout it we joked and laughed at times. He has a sly humor. He has a very great mentality [*sic*]. It is sharp, shrewd, and, above all things else, wise.³⁶

Davies also believed that Stalin was a democrat at heart for whom autocratic ways of governing were distasteful: "Stalin, it was reported, insisted upon liberalism of the constitution even though it hazarded his power and party control ... It is stated that Stalin himself decided the issue of projecting actual secret and universal suffrage which the new constitution calls for." Evidently it did not occur to Davies that "secret and universal suffrage" had little meaning and made little difference in a one-party system. The reader is not informed where or when "it was stated" that Stalin made the alleged decisions about voting. Given these groundless beliefs about Stalin and his system, it was not altogether surprising that Davies had no doubts about the authenticity of the Moscow Trials taking place while he was ambassador:

To assume that this proceeding was invented and staged ... would be to pre-suppose the creative genius of Shakespeare and the genius of Belasco in stage production ... There can be no doubt that the Kremlin authorities were greatly alarmed by these disclosures and confessions of the defendants ... The attorney general [Andrei Vyshinski] is calm, dispassionate, intellectual, able and wise. He conducted the treason trial in a manner that won my respect and admiration as a lawyer ... [his attitude] was entirely free of brow-beating ... [he] conducted the case with admirable moderation.³⁷

This delusional characterization of Vyshinski set a new record in misperception and projection. It was intended to describe a man who in court routinely denounced the defendants as dogs, rats, snakes, brigands, degenerates, and vermin.

Similarly remarkable was the assessment of these trials by John Strachey, the influential British author and Labour Party politician: "I believe that no one who had not unalterably fixed his mind on the contrary opinion could read the verbatim reports of these trials without being wholly convinced of the authenticity of the confessions ... I can only say that no man can advance his political education more than by studying this supreme historical document of our time."³⁸

³⁶ Joseph E. Davis: *Mission to Moscow*, New York 1943, 8, 72.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 25, 26, 29, 46, 168, 169.

³⁸ Strachey quoted in Conquest, 129.

Misapprehensions of Soviet-style show trials persisted after World War II when Julian Benda (of all people) "approved of the death sentence passed on Rajk," the key figure in the 1949 Hungarian show trial, modeled on the Soviet ones. He wrote in a French publication: "Voltaire was true to his role when he took up the Calais affair. So was Zola in the Dreyfus scandal. I claim to be like them when I defend the Hungarian verdict, whose justice only the prejudiced seem to deny."³⁹

Lillian Hellman was among the American fellow travelers whose support of the Soviet system extended to the acceptance and justification of the Moscow show trials: "along with 150 other artists, writers and scientists, [she] signed a letter declaring their faith in the guilt of the defendants and accepting the trials as necessary to preserve progressive democracy in the Soviet Union." The letter was published in the *New Masses* on April 3, 1938. Even in the wake of the Soviet-Nazi Pact of 1939, "Hellman sided with the Soviets ... she did not withdraw from the Communist Party ... she did not condemn the Soviet Union's ruthless betrayal of its own principles and its callous division of Polish territory with the Germans." She was one of many on the left who "clung to the idea that, whatever the defects of the Soviet Union, the idea of communism remained the last, best hope for a socialist nirvana."⁴⁰

Apparently Hellman was attracted to the Soviet system because of a desire to "claim the moral high ground" that entailed commitment to social justice and fierce opposition to what she considered the grave moral defects of American society. She joined the Communist Party of the United States (it is not clear how long she stayed in it), visited the Soviet Union in 1944, was a major organizer of and speaker at the pro-Soviet 1949 Waldorf-Astoria conference, which, in the words of the historian John Diggins, brought "communist cultural celebrities together to defend the USSR." She was also a prominent supporter of Henry Wallace when he was running for president. As she and other fellow travelers of the period saw it, "only the Soviet Union provided a living example of this idea," that is to say, of the striving for social justice and equality.

In 1944 she was invited by the Soviet embassy in Washington to visit the Soviet Union and "accepted the invitation with alacrity." Her impressions

³⁹ Benda quoted in Arpad Kadarkay: *Georg Lukacs: Life, Thought, and Politics*, Cambridge MA 1991, 404.

⁴⁰ Alice Kessler-Harris: *A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman*, New York 2012, 123, 126, 234. For a critical assessment of Hellman's politics, see Sidney Hook: "The Scoundrel in the Looking Glass," in his *Philosophy and Public Policy*, Carbondale IL 1980.

were predictably favorable and similar to those of other favorably disposed visitors. Of those she met, or observed, she wrote: "these are warm, strong men ... who know they are men and act with simplicity and tenderness ... Russians have the best natural manners in the world ... All Russians have a sense of humor." After being taken for a visit to the front lines she was ready to project upon the Russian soldiers her imaginary positive stereotypes: they were "open and informed about 'political issues at home and abroad.' They speak 'without self-consciousness and without fake toughness; they speak simply, like healthy people who have never ... learned to be ashamed of emotion.'"⁴¹

Like other sympathetic visitors she was in search of authenticity and succeeded in finding it, conflating fantasy with reality. She was also among numerous American intellectuals whose personal success was irrelevant to their profound dissatisfaction with American society and who believed that the Soviet Union even under Stalin offered an inspiring model to be emulated.

Henry Barbusse (1873–1935), the famous French writer, provides another example of the close connection between the veneration of a dictator and the admiration of the political system he symbolized. Barbusse was among many Western intellectuals whose rejection of capitalism, intensified by the economic crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s, led them to embrace the Soviet system, the apparent, superior alternative. He was outraged, among other things, by the spectacle of farmers in capitalist countries destroying the food they could not sell:

carefully arranged catastrophes ... are taking place at a time when there is a serious shortage of these destroyed commodities ... whilst famines are decimating crowds of people, whilst in China and India hundreds of millions of human beings are eating grass and tree bark, and whilst the unemployed and undernourished swarm over the very land where these murders of commodities ... take place.

There was more to blame capitalism for: "Who knows what goes on in all the capitalist gaols of the universe, and who can give us insight into the thousands and thousands of hellish and bestial scenes for which the guardians of class order and their sadistic genius for human suffering are responsible!"

As Barbusse saw it, in the Western world, "for reasons which a child could understand, ... there is nothing but disorder and decline ... [whereas] Over there [in the Soviet Union, that is] everything is order and progress."

⁴¹ Quoted in Kessler-Harris, 10, 48, 109, 132, 135.

In the latter, Barbusse firmly believed, the planned economy was triumphant: "Every detail of execution and every wheel in the machinery fit together. The single centralized management never loses sight of the nation as a whole." Under these blissful conditions, "the look of pride and happiness ... shines from the faces of Soviet workers," Barbusse testified following a visit. Most important, in "Soviet society ... everyone looks after everyone else." Barbusse came to the conclusion that "The October Revolution really did bring about a purification of morals and of the public spirit, which no other religious or political reform ever before succeeded in doing."⁴²

Barbusse entertained these delusional views in the early and mid-1930s, at a time when some of the most violent and destructive chapters in Soviet history were unfolding. They included the coercive collectivization of agriculture and the attendant famines, the beginnings of the Great Purges, the Moscow Trials, the growing power of the agencies of repression as well as the overall totalitarian regimentation of Soviet society. It was an invincible combination of wishful thinking and profound ignorance of existing conditions that enabled Barbusse to entertain unhesitatingly his illusions.

He gave full credit to Stalin, "the man at the wheel," for the wondrous conditions and transformations he observed:

He is as strong and yet as flexible as steel. His power lies in his formidable intelligence, the breadth of his knowledge, the amazing orderliness of his mind, his passion for precision, his inexorable spirit of progress, the rapidity, sureness and intensity of his decisions, and his constant care to choose the right men ... This frank and brilliant man is ... a simple man ... He laughs like a child ... People who laugh like children love children ... One of his main objects seems to be never try to shine, and never make himself conspicuous.

Barbusse also believed that Stalin "looks after everything and everybody ... He has saved Russia in the past and he will save it in the future."⁴³

We do not know how Barbusse came to attribute modesty (among other things) to Stalin nor how he succeeded in overlooking the immense official cult that surrounded him, his virtual deification. He might have believed that Stalin objected to the cult but resigned himself to it since

⁴² Henry Barbusse: *Stalin: A New World Seen Through One Man*, New York 1935, 197, 212, 232, 233, 269, 272, 325.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 75, 280, 291.

it reflected the outpourings of the love of his people.⁴⁴ More plausibly Walter Laqueur suggested that

gradually their innate megalomania [that is, of dictators including Stalin – P.H.], reinforced by their political victories, seems to have persuaded them that the cult was not just a political-educational necessity but a natural expression of the true state of affairs. Constant repetition of their greatness came to persuade them that they were all that their lackeys proclaimed them to be.⁴⁵

In the concluding, effusive lines of the book, Barbusse expressed his veneration of both Lenin and Stalin in words that are redolent with quasi-religious sentiments:

When one passes at night through the Red Square ... it seems as though the man who lies in the tomb [i.e., Lenin], in the center of that nocturnal, deserted square, is the only person in the world who is not asleep, and who watches over everything around him, in the towns and fields ... he is the paternal brother who is really watching over everyone. Although you don't know him, he knows you and is thinking of you ... Whoever you may be, the finest part of your destiny is in the hands of that other man [presumably that is Stalin] who also watches over you and who works for you – the man with a scholar's mind, a workman's face and the dress of a private soldier.⁴⁶

As these words suggest, Barbusse at last succumbed to his religious yearnings as he transformed, in his imagination, these mortal leaders into omniscient, omnipresent deities.

It is not easy to reconcile the impressions Victor Serge (a supporter and later critic of the Soviet Union) had of Barbusse with the idealistic image Barbusse projected of himself. Serge met him when he was touring the Soviet Union. Serge wrote:

Right from the first I saw him as a ... person concerned above all not to be involved ... concerned above all to disguise opinions he could no longer express openly, sliding past any direct questioning ... and all with the real aim of making himself the accomplice of the winning side! Since it was not yet known whether

⁴⁴ Martin Amis wrote that Stalin "always said that the cult of personality, while useful politically, was distasteful to him." He also quoted Robert Conquest, who observed that Stalin's "sporadic and ineffectual criticism of the cult may be seen as a ploy to add modesty to the rest of the panoply of his virtues" (*Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million*, New York 2002, 136).

⁴⁵ Laqueur 1990, 185. Louis Fisher, who became disillusioned with the Soviet Union, also questioned Stalin's modesty: "From being the modest, retiring leader ... he has in recent months stepped forth into the brightest limelight and seems to enjoy it. He has become the object of thickly smeared praise, fawning adulation" (see "Why Stalin Won," *Nation*, August 13, 1930, 176).

⁴⁶ Barbusse, 282–283.

the struggle had been definitely settled, he had just dedicated a book, at great length to Trotsky, whom he did not dare to visit for fear of compromising himself. When I told him about the persecution, he pretended to have a headache or not to hear ... "Tragic destiny of revolutions ... yes ... Ah, my friend!" My jaws shuddered as I realized that I was face to face with hypocrisy itself.⁴⁷

Romain Rolland (1866–1944), another well-known French writer of the same period, also admired Stalin, at any rate as far as his public statements indicate. On his 1935 visit to the Soviet Union, he too was granted the privilege of meeting him:

Rolland was received like royalty, bombarded with kindness, and assailed by delegations of flatterers staggering under fabricated laudatory speeches, which nonetheless tickled his vanity. The high point of the visit was a two-hour *tete-a-tete* with Stalin, who also spared no effort and greeted his visitor with the words, "I am happy to chat with the greatest writer in the world."⁴⁸

Stalin's tribute to Rolland suggests another explanation of, or contributing factor to, the favorable assessment of the dictators and their system by many intellectuals – namely, the flattering treatment they received during their visits to the countries concerned. I called these treatments "the techniques of hospitality."⁴⁹ Meeting Stalin and being complimented by him was a rare privilege, but, more generally speaking, being "bombarded with kindness" (as Furet put it) was an essential part of the hospitality. Although most of the intellectuals here discussed were, to begin with, favorably disposed toward the system and its leader, the flattery and carefully devised itineraries confirmed and deepened the favorable predisposition.

During his four-week visit Rolland stayed with Maxim Gorky, the most famous and officially celebrated Soviet writer of the period, and he met, in addition to Stalin, numerous high-level officials including members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

Rolland was better informed than most pro-Soviet intellectuals about Soviet political realities and at times privately agonized over them but refused to be critical in public.⁵⁰ He did, however, intervene with the

⁴⁷ Victor Serge: *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, London 1984, 328.

⁴⁸ Francois Furet: *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, Chicago 1999, 276.

⁴⁹ See *Political Pilgrims*, ch. 8, 347–399.

⁵⁰ Richard Wolin wrote: "he [Rolland] was silent about the distortions of Soviet communism. To have publicly condemned the internal or foreign policies of the Soviet Union would inevitably have weakened the antifascist cause," Rolland believed (*The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism*, Princeton NJ 2004, 266).

Soviet authorities on behalf of Victor Serge, although “‘not from humanitarian convictions’ he said, ‘but under pressure from his many friends in the West.’”⁵¹ Not as blinkered and rigidly loyal to the Soviet system as Barbusse, he nonetheless also took every opportunity to defend it in public, express support of its policies, and find excuses for its misdeeds in the glorious objectives pursued. His biographer wrote:

Romain Rolland viewed political repression in fascist regimes as typical of both the ideology and politics of fascism ... Yet as a fellow traveler, he separated Soviet abuses from Soviet construction acknowledging acts of cruelty but seeing them as oversights, not representative policy ... In the Soviet Union, the whole was considerably greater than the parts, the socialist humanist core compensating for the internal errors, violence and deformations ... The Gandhian Romain Rolland was less easily disgusted by the role of expediency and less moralistic about the role of compromise and coercion in the work of social reconstruction. “One has no right to be squeamish because the builders had to soil their hands.”

He also believed that “the Soviet Union was an open-ended experiment capable of rectifying itself.” His credulousness went so far that after studying the French translation of the court proceedings of the Moscow Trials (of the alleged Trotskyite conspirators), “he accepted the theory that a real conspiracy existed against the Soviet system ... [and] was convinced that the accused had committed villainous acts.”⁵²

Like many other intellectuals supportive of ostensibly idealistic political systems using dubious means in pursuit of their lofty goals, Rolland too found it morally unproblematic – at any rate in his public statements – to separate idealistic ends from reprehensible means, and he succeeded in avoiding doubts about goals that required such profoundly tainted means to accomplish. Even his sympathetic political biographer pointed out that “his idea of the USSR remained mythical: a society founded on socialist humanist principles.” Projecting attributes he cherished upon Soviet society was an essential component of his admiration, as for example the quaint belief that the Soviet Union “fortified the intellectual capacities and nourished the emotional needs of its citizens,” as opposed to corresponding conditions in “decadent Europe.”

Rolland was also among the Western intellectuals who believed that intellectuals in the Soviet Union enjoyed an enviable and important position: “By forging a community of mental and manual labor, the Soviets

showed their understanding of the seminal role of the politically active writer, those ‘engineers of souls’ who helped to ‘inaugurate a more just, freer, better ordered humanity.’”⁵³

While he expressed reservations about Stalin in his journal, for public consumption he had only good things to say about him and his associates:

Stalin and his “great Bolshevik companions” were ... fearless optimists, without illusions. Orienting themselves to the future, they anchored their social construction to the “Marxist Gospel” ... If they were “realists,” the Soviet leaders were also motivated by a “social idea of justice and panhumanism that is more idealist than human dreams.” ... Soviet success was bound up with the “best hopes of the world.”

Rolland vigorously disputed Andre Gide’s critique of the Soviet system, including his assessments of Stalin. Unlike Gide, Rolland found Stalin “accessible and unpretentious” and “quoted Stalin’s phrase ‘Modesty is the ornament of the true Bolshevik’” as he sought to refute Gide’s observations about the cult of personality.

While his private correspondence made clear that he “knew much more about deformations of the Russian Revolution under Stalin than he stated in public” and that he privately entertained occasional doubts and reservations about the system, “regardless of Moscow’s treatment of individuals ... [he] remained convinced that the general cause transcended specific injustices.”⁵⁴

H.G. Wells was also among those granted the privilege of meeting Stalin, as well as Lenin, and he too appreciated the “ego massage” conferred by such meetings. As Furet put it, “Wells was no stranger to the kind of status seeking that drew certain men of letters to heads of state so that they might bring home the photograph that would broadcast their rank.”⁵⁵

After his audience with Stalin, Wells said that he had “never met a man more candid, fair and honest,” attributes accounting for “his remarkable ascendancy over the country since no one is afraid of him and everybody trusts him”⁵⁶ – an observation so profoundly mistaken in every one of its particulars that it deserves to be preserved for posterity as a reminder of the ability of some intellectuals to radically misread the nature of other human beings.

⁵¹ Quoted in Maurice Nadeau: “Romain Rolland,” in Walter Laqueur and George L. Mosse eds.: *Literature and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, New York 1967, 209.

⁵² David James Fisher: *Romain Rolland and the Politics of Intellectual Engagement*, Berkeley CA 1988, 217, 220, 240, 274.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 221–222, 223, 252.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 249–250, 270, 276, 278.

⁵⁵ Furet, 151.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Conquest, 21.

In the course of an earlier (1920) visit, Wells came to the conclusion that the Red Terror, although "fanatical," was "honest" and "apart from individual atrocities it did on the whole kill for a reason and to an end", that is to say, good intentions redeemed it. He found the Bolsheviks authentic, that is, "very much of what they profess to be ... straightforward people," "essentially ... honest," and capable of "recivilising Russia." He understood and respected their spirit while rejecting their Marxist beliefs – an unusual position among Western intellectuals. Wells considered himself "neither Marxist nor Communist but a Collectivist." Also unlike most intellectuals sympathetic toward the Soviet system, he expressed a dim view of Russian peasants: "absolutely illiterate and collectively stupid ... incapable of comprehensive foresight and organization. They will become a sort of human swamp."⁵⁷

Emil Ludwig's views of Stalin (based largely on his conversation with him) are a blend of ludicrous misperceptions and some insightful observations. His peculiar characterizations (in addition to Stalin's alleged lack of interest in power, noted earlier) included the idea that Stalin found his official worship (later called the "cult of personality" by Khrushchev) distasteful and it had nothing to do with his real personality, or his own intentions. Ludwig believed that Stalin was "a particular victim of public craze," of "public hero worship," and Soviet journalists gave the wrong impression of him that was "unreal and untrue."

Ludwig further revealed that, contrary to his own expectations to "meet a Grand Duke of the old regime," he found himself "face to face with a dictator to whose care I would readily confide the education of my children." It was his "intuition" that "Stalin is naturally good-hearted. But his position has made him hard and unyielding ... He is not ambitious but he is ruthless toward his opponents." Stalin was certainly ruthless, but the attribution of "good-heartedness" is grotesque unless Ludwig had a rather unusual notion of what it meant. But he was on target in judging Stalin to be supremely patient and "innately" mistrustful of everybody. More questionable, though perhaps partly true, was that "the mission to which he has devoted his life has made him cold and reserved." Likewise, "absolute severity and intransigence" – intolerance might have been a better word – were essential "to get ahead," as Ludwig put it, given the ideologically inspired goals he sought to achieve.⁵⁸ It remains hard to determine to what degree ruthlessness and intolerance were essential

or innate parts of his personality, or traits he gradually acquired in the course of pursuing his over-ambitious political objectives.

It is likely that Ludwig's assessments of Stalin's personality were influenced by his limited grasp of the nature of the Soviet system Stalin created and molded. Thus, in such a system there could not have been any public worship of Stalin if it had truly displeased him. Democratic, pluralistic decision-making procedures, such as Stalin claimed to characterize the Soviet system in his conversation with Ludwig, did not exist. Ludwig was in no position to know how political decisions or policies were made and evinced no skepticism about Stalin's assertion that 85 percent of the population not only wholeheartedly supported him but favored even more radical policies. Ludwig did not wonder, or ask Stalin, about the validity of one-party elections either, in which 99 percent of the voters chose the official candidates. He also seemed to accept Stalin's insistence that the population was not intimidated and it was impossible to intimidate the Russian masses!

Clearly, Ludwig was unaware of, and evidently not alerted by anyone to, Stalin's superb ability to deceive and put on airs calculated to make the appropriate impression on his interlocutor. This may also explain his peculiar belief that Stalin was easily embarrassed. He wrote: "A certain degree of embarrassment is as graceful in a man of power as it is in a beautiful woman. In the case of Stalin it did not surprise me at all because he scarcely ever sees people from the West." We do not know if Stalin showed any sign of embarrassment upon meeting Ludwig (as Ludwig alleged, see 367), or if he put on an overly courteous demeanor that Ludwig misinterpreted as embarrassment.

There is at last a curious claim Ludwig made about the ease with which he could enter the Kremlin: "It seemed to me that almost anybody who had laid a plan for the assassination of the chief personalities in the Kremlin could very simply gain entrance."⁵⁹ This comment was based on the fact that the guard only asked for his name and not his passport.

Of more recent vintage, Theodore Von Laue's perceptions and assessments of the Soviet system and Stalin are among the most explicit and unembarrassed attempts to lift the burden of moral responsibility from the system and its leaders. This is all the more unusual since they were made well after Stalin's death and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, at a time when huge amounts of data became available for the evaluation of Stalin's rule, eroding the basis of apologetics.

⁵⁷ H.G. Wells: *Russia in the Shadows*, London 1920, 64, 66, 75, 117, 146.

⁵⁸ Ludwig, 346, 346–347, 348, 349.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 366–368, 372–375.

Unlike many other sympathizers, Von Laue was a historian knowledgeable of Soviet-Russian realities. He was not unaware of, and did not dispute, the atrocities and moral outrages that took place under Stalin, although he preferred not to dwell on them: "There is no need here to go into detail on this subject [terror] as it has been highly dramatized," he remarks. Apparently he felt that dwelling on or detailing the terror was unnecessary and its extent or impact was exaggerated. Designating such discussions as "dramatized" reveals his disapproval of dwelling on and deploring Soviet terror.

As the rest of his article makes clear, Von Laue regarded the Soviet terror as both inevitable and essential for the survival of the system and no more deplorable than other instances of political bloodletting in modern history. An unmistakable determination to mitigate and morally neutralize the outrages of the Soviet system permeates his attempt to "reconsider" Soviet history.⁶⁰

To start with, Von Laue questions the right and the capability of (non-Soviet) outsiders to make moral judgments about matters that were totally outside the scope of their own experiences and alien to their own (Western) societies. Second, he insistently argues that the Soviet leaders, Lenin and Stalin in particular, had no choice but to act in the way they did under the circumstances – making autonomous moral choices was not an option. Pursuing these points with fervor and conviction, Von Laue emerges as an unrestrained believer in historical determinism and the inevitability of reprehensible and destructive policies (inspired by desirable goals) for which no human beings ought to be held responsible.

The point of departure for his plea for a major reconsideration of the Soviet system is the following:

Proper evaluation of the Soviet experiment ... requires that it be set into the broad context of the twentieth century, a century of unprecedented bloodshed. Such an evaluation reveals that far from being the monsters they are often portrayed as, Soviet leaders such as Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin followed the only practical course of action to ensure the survival of their country.

This sweeping relativization of the misdeeds of the Soviet rulers is thus accomplished by placing them in the context of the "unprecedented bloodshed" of their times and, again, by designating Lenin's terror as "a minor cruelty amidst the continuing battles of war." In the same spirit, moral indignation about the Holocaust can be tempered by reminding

⁶⁰ Theodore von Laue: "A Perspective on History: The Soviet System Reconsidered," *Historian*, Vol. 61, Winter 1999, 388.

ourselves that on the battlefields of World War II (another period of "unprecedented bloodshed") far more people were killed than in the Nazi death camps.

Von Laue proffers an impressive list of circumstances that are intended to exculpate the Soviet leaders: "Catastrophic mistakes and chaotic mismanagement were *inevitable* given the urgency of the change, the total lack of experience, and the *vindictive temper of the times*." Especially intriguing here is the reference to the "vindictive temper of the times" – a rather elusive concept ("the times") that he adds to the other circumstances that absolve the actual human beings of responsibility for their murderous policies. Elsewhere, commenting in the same spirit on Stalin's "assistants in his campaigns of terror," Von Laue suggests that their "wolfish brutality" was rooted in Russian life." What precisely he means by "Russian life" we do not learn, nor of the way it *compelled* [my emphasis] "wolfish brutality." The most important reason for suspending moral judgment, Von Laue argues (as did other apologists), is that "Western experience ... is inapplicable to the Soviet Union. No European country had suffered as much as Russia in the First World War; Soviet leaders were fighting to save their country from utter collapse ... In Russia necessary changes could be accomplished only by a highly centralized dictatorship"⁶¹ – the latter an especially unverifiable assertion.

Von Laue never tires of telling his readers that moral judgments cannot be made, or must be suspended, when a country, a group, a political movement, or an individual is victimized – that once human beings have been victimized they are automatically and decisively absolved of the responsibility and capacity of making moral choices.

Chaos and feeling threatened are added to the circumstances that legitimate political repression. Thus, "the Leninist model offered the only rational alternative to chaos." He further raises the rhetorical question: "given the threat to the country's survival, how much of the anachronistic and individualistic tradition was worth preserving in this backward country threatened with political destruction?"

Von Laue was assured that the "inevitably" harsh policies and human sacrifices were balanced by the benefits brought by the regime: "Soviet citizens had access to music, ballet and theater. Physicists and engineers were trained for the future glory of the Soviet Union, and all citizens enjoyed a degree of economic security." He detected no moral problems balancing ends and means: "although the price was brutal, Stalin had

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 383, 385, 387, 388.

opened to them [the Soviet people] a source of confidence and patriotic pride ... Though his achievements were at the cost of exorbitant sacrifice of human beings and natural resources, they were on a scale commensurate with the cruelty of two world wars." The readers are not informed how this moral calculus was made.

Soviet policies are further excused by the leaders' alleged efforts to emulate Western models and ideas "under non-Western conditions in perilously critical times." He does not explain, or specify, in what way the West was "the proud source of Stalin's model."⁶²

Von Laue even rebukes Soviet dissidents for their critique of the Soviet system under Stalin, although he cannot disqualify them as outsiders (ignorant, judgmental Westerners) unfamiliar with Soviet-Russian conditions:

Modern Russian intellectuals' blindness about world affairs is appalling; none of the ... intellectuals who condemn Stalin's policies – Alexander Solzhenitsyn foremost – have shown any sensibility about their country's external insecurity at that time ... [By contrast] In his grasp of global realities, Stalin clearly outshone all his contemporaries. Carrying Lenin's prescription to its extreme, he aimed at total control not for his own ego but to guide his ignorant country firmly through a necessary cultural transformation.

Evidently Von Laue had no difficulty reading Stalin's mind and reaching the conclusion that his ego played no part in his thirst for "total control." Equally remarkable is his dismissal of the rest of Russia as an "ignorant country" in no position to offer any alternative to Stalin's policies.

Stalin's liquidation of his former comrades-in-arms is written off by the proposition that "Remembering his adversaries in the early days of Soviet rule, Stalin had reason to distrust his comrades especially in this time of perilous change." Apparently only Stalin and Von Laue were qualified to determine what were the reasons for such a distrust, what threatened the survival of the country, and what measures would forestall the threat.

Von Laue never tires of reminding his readers of the irrelevance of "Western standards" for judging anything Soviet, including Stalin himself: "Stalin's style of leadership although crude by Western standards, was persuasive among his disoriented people ... However brutal, it was a remarkable human achievement despite its flaws." Not only was Von Laue assured that this style of leadership met the needs and approval of his people, but he also offers even more startling and implausible conjectures about Stalin's self-conception: "though he knew how to act his public

⁶² Ibid., 386, 387, 388, 389, 390.

role, Stalin himself retained a sense of fallibility and imperfection, remaining remarkably humble."

These bewildering and misguided exertions on behalf of Stalin and his system conclude with a sentence that may shed some light on the roots of Von Laue's seemingly inexplicable uncritical disposition: "We need first of all to let a loving compassion open our eyes to the alien realities in Russian Eurasia and to the helplessness of its people, just as Goethe advised 200 years ago."⁶³

It appears that the "loving compassion" here advocated was, for the most part, reserved for Stalin and Lenin and their functionaries rather than the people they dominated and brutalized, whom Von Laue often characterized as benighted, backward, ignorant, helpless, and unaware of their true interests. Von Laue thus emerges as embodying what might be called an elitist idealism that is compatible with sympathy for ruthless dictators and condescension for the masses they dominate. This outlook seems rooted in an unfathomable incomprehension of the way sordid means discredit even the loftiest ends, let alone the questionable ones that were pursued by the Soviet leaders.

Noel Field – a far from well-known figure with an unusual career – shared what might be called an "elitist idealism" and a Quaker background with Von Laue, but in other respects he personifies a far more unusual expression of idealism. Field's career began as an employee of the State Department who became a friend of Alger Hiss, his colleague, a more important and better-known agent of the Soviet intelligence services.⁶⁴ Following his work at the State Department, Field had a job at the League of Nations in Geneva and later worked for the Unitarian Service Committee, helping refugees in Europe during and after World War II. After losing the latter job he sought employment in Eastern Europe, a quest that took him to Prague in 1949. In doing so he was also motivated by the desire to remove himself from the United States where the trial of Alger Hiss was taking place and might have implicated him. He disappeared from Prague in May 1949 – abducted by Soviet and Hungarian agents and taken to Hungary, destined to play an important part in the forthcoming show trial of Laszlo Rajk, a high-ranking communist

⁶³ Ibid., 386, 386–387, 387, 391. For a lengthier exposition of similar views, see his *Why Lenin? Why Stalin? A Reappraisal of the Russian Revolution 1900–1930*, Philadelphia 1964.

⁶⁴ On the Hiss–Field connection, see Maria Schmidt: "The Hiss Dossier," *New Republic*, November 8, 1993; see also Flora Lewis: *Red Pawn*, New York 1965, 7–58, 74–75, 194–195, 257–258.

functionary. Although never brought to court, Field was forced to act as witness against several of the accused. He spent five years in prison in Hungary (as did his wife) and in 1954 was released and "rehabilitated" and given a comfortable job at a Hungarian state foreign language publishing house. He spent the rest of his life in Hungary, unwavering in his political beliefs and commitments. The authorities, in appreciation of his services, provided him with "an elegantly furnished villa, 100,000 forint in one-time compensation and 10,000 forint monthly salary," later reduced to 7,500 at his request. In 1954, 1,080 forint was the average monthly income in Hungary.⁶⁵ Upon his release he was "shaken by sobs" when he learned about the passing of Stalin.⁶⁶

Unlike most of those dealt with in this volume, Field sought to serve actively the idealized political system by becoming its clandestine agent.⁶⁷ Coming from a Quaker family that "had always prided itself on being liberal, open-minded people who would never condemn ... an idea that seemed to stem from aspirations to goodness," Field was determined to dedicate his life to such "aspirations to goodness." In his college days he labeled himself a "pacifist idealist" while at the same time "he had growing doubts that peace could be achieved without some form of revolution."⁶⁸

Also characteristic of Field's disposition and especially his thirst for community – and reminiscent of similar sentiments expressed by Eric

⁶⁵ Maria Schmidt: *A Titkoszolgálatok Kulisszai Mogott* [Behind the Props of the Intelligence Services], Budapest 2006, 200. The author of this book is probably the only person (other than former employees of the Hungarian political police and some high-level party functionaries) who had access to the archives of the defunct Hungarian political police (AVO, AVH), sometimes erroneously called "secret police." There was nothing "secret" about it, its personnel had a distinctive uniform, the location of its headquarters and local detachments were not concealed and were well-known, and the official media of communications often referred to it.

⁶⁶ Noel Field: "Hitching Our Wagon to a Star," *Mainstream*, January 1961, 9.

⁶⁷ Stephen Koch suggested that this was a broader phenomenon, that there was a connection between alienation, the adversarial disposition, idealism, and spying. He wrote: "Precisely the same people who instituted the Cambridge penetrations (Kim Philby et al.) supervised parallel operations in New York and Washington, in the Ivy League and at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* ... behind all such operations was the simple recognition of an essential bond between the so-called 'establishment' ... and what Lionel Trilling called the 'adversary culture' ... The recruitment of the Cambridge spies and similar agents in all the democracies was based on this simple insight: The adversary culture is an elite ... to organize the elite meant organizing on the assumption that artistic and political radicalism were really the same things" (Stephen Koch: *Double Lives: Spies and Writers in the Secret Soviet War of Ideas Against the West*, New York 1994, 154, 229).

⁶⁸ Lewis, 36, 41.

Hobsbawm⁶⁹ – was that as a young man he relished participation in a protest march of unemployed veterans in Washington DC in 1932: "His eyes shining with excitement ... He was immensely proud of what he had done. Joining the marchers gave him sense of pitching in, of striking a blow for his ideals."⁷⁰

Like other true believers, Field easily transcended the problem of ends and means:

When he found somebody who would listen he argued endlessly about the ideals of communism and the fine things it would bring to the world when the war was over. He called himself a communist, even a Stalinist and huffily rejected as hopelessly naive any protests that the communists who had hurt so many people had gravely impaired their claim to discovery of the formula for a perfect society.⁷¹

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., upon meeting him, was struck by "his self-righteous stupidity ... [and] 'arrogance of humility.' He was a Quaker Communist filled with smugness and sacrifice."⁷²

The Sacco-Vanzetti case made a huge impact on Field's social-political outlook and contributed to his identification with the left. His biographer wrote:

The night that Sacco and Vanzetti were executed, Noel sat by the radio in a state of shock. He never forgot the date, even remembering a quarter century later ... in his own prison cell. The two Italians became ... his personal martyred saints, and he felt a tremendous urge to pattern his life so as to be worthy of them.

The execution strengthened his growing political commitments since he "had always felt a moral obligation to be involved if he passed by and saw the devil grappling with angels, and a revulsion of mere spectatorship."⁷³

In becoming a Soviet agent propelled by lofty ideals, Field followed in the footsteps of better-known "idealists" of this type who became spies, such as the British Kim Philby and his fellow graduates of Cambridge University. In the course of his work for the League of Nations (preceded by his years in the State Department), Field's political beliefs solidified.

⁶⁹ Hobsbawm wrote: "Next to sex, the activity combining bodily experience and intense emotion to the highest degree is the participation in a mass demonstration at a time of great public exaltation ... It implies some physical action – marching, chanting slogans, singing – through which the merger of the individual in the mass ... finds expression. The occasion has remained unforgettable" (*Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life*, New York 2002, 73).

⁷⁰ Lewis, 46.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁷² Arthur Schlesinger Jr.: "Left Field," *New York Review of Books*, February 11, 1965.

⁷³ Lewis, 36–37, 37.

Flora Lewis wrote: "for Noel, though the misery and brutality he saw [in Spain – P.H.] filled him with compassion, it was an exhilarating relief to be involved. From then on, any lingering emotional doubts or ties of nation and family were overwhelmed by a sense of total commitment. To a cause. In Spain he completed his full dedication to communism."⁷⁴ Many years later Field wrote that his months in Spain "resolved my wife's and my lingering hesitations, and by the time the Second World War broke out, we had advanced from emotional anti-fascists to communists in thought and action." Later, while working for the Unitarian Service Commission in Europe, he reached the conclusion that "communists ... [were] the truest humanitarians of our age."⁷⁵

A more unusual part of Field's story is that for several years he was treated by the communist authorities as an enemy of the political system he admired and tried to serve. His 1949 abduction from Prague was followed by imprisonment (without trial or conviction) for five years in Hungary. He was assigned the role of an alleged "master spy" of the United States. His loyalty to the Soviet Union did not save him from being used as a (false) witness to incriminate defendants in the post-World War II show trials in Eastern Europe. Lewis wrote: "His interrogations were the longest and most intensive, for he was the vital hub to hold together a thousand wild stories."⁷⁶

Unlike many Western idealists whose admiration rested on profound ignorance of the nature of communist states and their methods, Noel Field had insider knowledge of the system he sought to serve, being involuntarily enlightened in the course of his prolonged imprisonment and interrogations. Despite these experiences Field preserved intact his beliefs and commitments for the rest of his life, personifying the purest incarnation of the true believer. He also excelled in handling cognitive dissonance, that is to say, "occasions when actual events ... [the true believers] experience contradict their beliefs and view of the world."⁷⁷ As Field explained later: "My accusers have the same conviction that I do, they hate the same things and the same people I hate – the conscious enemies

⁷⁴ Quoted in Lewis, 105.

⁷⁵ Field, 6.

⁷⁶ Lewis, 204–205.

⁷⁷ John Gray offers a persuasive explanation of the way such dissonance is handled: "Human beings do not deal with conflicting beliefs and perceptions by testing them against facts. They reduce the conflict by reinterpreting facts that challenge the beliefs they are most attached to ... The confounding of all their expectations only led them to cling more tightly to their faiths" (John Gray: *The Silence of Animals*, New York 2013, 72–73).

of socialism, the fascists, the renegades, the traitors. Given their belief in my guilt, I cannot blame them." Moreover, he wrote, "the wrongs we had undergone had been righted, the wrongdoers punished, our innocence recognized."⁷⁸

Not even the post-Stalin revelations made a dent in Field's faith. The new evidence of the human costs of the policies he had zealously supported registered mainly as "openings for the poison of a skillful enemy! For a short time ... the eyes of many have become riveted to what was evil and have lost sight of the good. The former was sick excrescence, tragic but curable. The latter intrinsic. Of this I am sure." He was assured of "the regenerative power of essential health within the socialist body."⁷⁹

Field discussed his political motives and career with his interrogators during his imprisonment in Hungary:

Beginning in 1927 besides my official life I also led a separate, illegal life ... Gathering information amounted to spying. At the time I did not realize that my confidential activities on behalf of the Soviet Union should have been evaluated by political criteria ... At last I succeeded in overcoming my inhibitions and undertook the information gathering task for the Soviet intelligence service. My wife was also present when I agreed to engage in these activities ... Even earlier I recognized that this was honorable work.⁸⁰

As Stephen Koch wrote:

[Field] never looked back. One might suppose that the experience (of being used in the preparation of the trials and jailed for five years) could have left an "idealist" like Noel Field with a second thought or two about Stalin's justice. Not at all. While Hungary slowly de-Stalinized, Noel lived on in Budapest, more loyal than the regime. He never returned to the West, even when it would have been perfectly safe or him to do so. He never gave any historian or journalist an interview about his life.⁸¹

In 1960 Field refused to meet Flora Lewis, who waited outside his villa in Budapest intent on interviewing him for the book she was writing.⁸²

Apparently it was an easy decision for Field and his wife to stay in communist Hungary, having been assured by their "new friends" (erstwhile captors) that they would be welcome to do so: "Our first spontaneous reaction is: Let us stay here!" He insisted that it was a decision they "have not, for one moment, regretted" and he also averred, more

⁷⁸ Field, 4, 14.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 9, 14, 15, 16.

⁸¹ Koch, 172.

⁸² Lewis, 264.

implausibly, that "to the depths of our being we have the sense of 'belonging'." As to the 1956 Revolution, Field sincerely believed that "the Soviet troops came in defense of socialism ... They – and not those poor misled youngsters ... – are the real 'freedom fighters.'" As of 1961 he insisted that

it is here [in Hungary] that we have witnessed the marvelous years of consolidation and then of constant advance, of promises held, of plans fulfilled, of doubt converted into confidence all around us ... Each day brings new achievements that make us want to live to be a hundred, so that we too may continue to delight in the fruits of peaceful socialist labor.

Field favorably contrasted Hungary under Kadar with the United States: "most important of all, the sense of insecurity, so characteristic of the lives of millions in America, has been converted [in Hungary] into a priceless sense of security for the individual and his family."⁸³

These statements show how profoundly Field was insulated from Hungarian realities while living in the country. There is no doubt that Field believed what he said, seeking and finding vindication for his lifelong commitments, sufferings in jail, and decision to stay in Hungary.

Maria Schmidt, a Hungarian historian, too concluded that Field was

a communist true believer. He took pride in the fact that despite his middle class background he became a loyal fighter of the party ... His faith was not shaken by being treated as an agent of imperialism, imprisoned for five years without trial and held in solitary confinement ... He believed that questionable means served lofty ends ... He kept his faith until his death ... Only those were capable of such persistence who had a singular focus on the future and paid no attention to present day reality.⁸⁴

Field himself confirmed these assessments as he wrote (while in jail):

in my own smaller ... way I have remained true to the beliefs that began to take shape ... [following the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti – P.H.] It took a decade for those views to ripen into conviction and further years for them to result in consistent action. Many an inner conflict had to be fought out and overcome before the pacifist idealist – a typical middle class intellectual and son of a middle class intellectual – could become the militant communist of later years and of the present.

While in prison he expressed fleeting bewilderment about his fate, quickly followed by the successful effort to banish doubts:

⁸³ Field, 9, 13–16.

⁸⁴ Schmidt 2006 [in Hungarian], 117–119. Quotations translated by author.

Did I, perchance, enter a fool's paradise? Before my mental eyes pass the wonderful men and women – comrades ... who were my friends and with whom I worked for a better world. No, they cannot have been wrong [i.e., *he* could not have been wrong – P.H.]. Steadfast, clear-sighted, they were my guides and mentors. I revere them still. And the Marxist works, the Soviet novels I am privileged to read in my cell – are they not even more convincing, more inspiring than when I read them as a free man? Whatever mistakes, whatever crimes have been committed, they cannot affect the fundamental truths that began to dawn on me a quarter of a century ago. These truths will inevitably win out over temporary aberrations.

After his (and his wife's) release from prison, Field wrote:

A new life is about to begin for us, right here in this land ... we shall study and revalue the past ... We shall be wiser than we were, discard beliefs that have proved to be fallible, replace them by knowledge more solidly founded. But *fundamentally we shall find our convictions justified, strengthened, unchallengeable* ... And once more we shall contribute our mite, however small, towards a happier future for all mankind.⁸⁵

GEORG LUKACS AND OTHER EAST EUROPEAN INTELLECTUALS

The life and beliefs of Georg Lukacs, the Hungarian philosopher and literary historian, provide one of the most remarkable examples of the complex and lifelong bond between some twentieth-century intellectuals and what they believed to be an idealistic dictatorship devoted to both the eradication of social injustices and the transformation of human nature. Lukacs joined the Hungarian Communist Party after World War I and was deputy commissioner of education in the short-lived Hungarian Communist government in 1919. Subsequently he went into exile in Austria, Germany, and finally the Soviet Union, where he lived between 1930 and 1945. He returned to Hungary from the Soviet Union in 1945 with other communist exiles and was appointed to the chair of aesthetics and cultural policy at the University of Budapest. During the 1956 Hungarian Revolution he briefly joined the revolutionary government as minister of education and was subsequently detained in Romania for six months.

Although a lifelong, committed supporter of the Soviet Union and the Hungarian Communist Party, he was forced on several occasions to engage in self-criticism on account of his allegedly deviant ideological

⁸⁵ Field, 4, 6, 7, 11 (emphasis added).

positions that included "idealism," "cosmopolitanism," "revisionism," and insufficient appreciation of Soviet socialist realist literature. After 1956, resulting from his short-lived participation in the revolutionary government, he was expelled from the party and "in effect excommunicated, [yet] remained a believer with faith." Arpad Kadarkay, his biographer, further wrote that "It is a testimony to Lukacs's duality that he could convert his dissatisfaction with communist realities ... into a conviction that a 'renaissance of Marxism' was forthcoming ... [he] had an unshakeable faith in Marxism."

Lukacs came from a wealthy Jewish family and was from an early age profoundly alienated from it and the social class it represented. As Kadarkay put it: "Lukacs incarnated alienation in its deepest and broadest sense ... [his] moral vocabulary expanded ... early on with savage parodies, indignation and resentment at unmerited privilege and wealth ... Born with an existential discontent, he hardly needed Marx's evidence in order to feel the need to 'change' the world."⁸⁶

In 1969 Lukacs wrote:

It is well known that I come from a capitalist, Lipotvaros [a district of Budapest] family ... ever since my childhood, I was profoundly dissatisfied with this "Lipotvaros" way of life. Resulting from my father's economic activities we were in regular contact with the urban patrician and bureaucratic elements and my rejection [of our way of life] extended to them.⁸⁷

As Kadarkay wrote, at an early age he rebelled against the prevailing "social norms and conventions." As a young man "disgusted with the chaotic, prosaic and life-denying bourgeois world, he domiciled himself in philosophy and sought refuge in pure spirit." Later in life he "considered his earlier life, his pre-Marxist stage, of no value, better buried and forgotten."⁸⁸

World War I played an important part in his evolving attraction to the communist movement and Marxism-Leninism. He recalled:

The imperialist war elicited a profound crisis in my world view; the latter had earlier manifested itself in disavowing the pacifist-bourgeois rejection of the war and in the pessimistic critique of bourgeois culture. Only in the second half of the war did these attitudes acquire a political character under the impact of the

Russian Revolution and the writings of Rosa Luxemburg. My opposition to the ruling order intensified and I began to seek connections with leftist radical circles.⁸⁹

Reading Lenin's *State and Revolution* and various communist publications led him "to the realization that only the communists have the solution for the situation and only they possess the determination to proceed." In the last year of his life, when he began to work on his memoirs, he averred that "there is no doubt that becoming a communist was the most significant turning point of my life."⁹⁰ His praise of Jenő Landler, a fellow activist in the communist movement, provides a revealing summary of Lukacs' conception of the ideal human being and his way of life:

His [Landler's] capacity to seamlessly become one with the movement relegating private matters to lesser importance did not make him an ascetic. He loved life, his family and friends but this love was an integral part of the single greatest devotion of his life: the devotion to the working class and his fanatical commitment to its liberation and a fierce hatred of the obstacles to this liberation. A few days before he died he said to his wife that she should join the party and work in the party. He could not think of a more precious advice to bequeath to his widowed partner in life.⁹¹

Lukacs himself did not quite live up to this ideal of the total subordination of the private to the political realm, but evidently admired those who were capable of it. In any event he did profess to place political or public concerns above personal ones. Thus he wrote that, in light of the rise of Nazism, all personal decisions "had to be subordinated" to these grave conditions and "I considered the central task of my life to apply properly the Marxist-Leninist worldview to areas of life I was familiar with."⁹² More generally, he used his professional standing and reputation "not only to promote an ideal he believed in, but also to cover up terrible crimes ... he kept silent about obvious lies and repeated empty slogans."⁹³

As early as in 1921 Lukacs settled the issue of ends and means, as reflected in his response to the question of an interviewer about the propriety of lying and cheating by the party leaders: "Communist ethics make it the highest duty to accept the necessity of acting wickedly. This, he [Lukacs] said, was the greatest sacrifice the revolution demanded from us."⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Lukacs, 463.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 464, 27.

⁹¹ Kadarkay 1991, 92-93.

⁹² Lukacs, 228.

⁹³ Tamas Aczel and Tibor Meray: *Tisztító Vihar: Adalekok egy korszak történetéhez* [Cleansing Storm: Data for the History of an Era], Munich 1978, 63-64.

⁹⁴ Quoted in George Lichtheim: *George Lukacs*, New York 1970, 46.

⁸⁶ Arpad Kadarkay: *Georg Lukacs: Life, Thought, and Politics*, Cambridge MA 1991, 3, 11, 340, 441, 461.

⁸⁷ Georg Lukacs: *Curriculum Vitae* [in Hungarian], Budapest 1982, 380-381. Quotations translated by author.

⁸⁸ Arpad Kadarkay ed.: "Introduction," in *The Lukacs Reader*, Cambridge MA 1995, 3, 4-5, 5.

A key to Lukacs' lifelong loyalty to the Soviet system and its founding ideals was his remarkable capacity to overlook, or altogether ignore, the moral significance of actual events or political developments, and the manifestations of human suffering associated with them.⁹⁵ He was enabled to do so by a blinding idealism, a devotion to ends pursued by sordid means whose moral or ethical importance he seemed able to dismiss. As Kadarkay puts it, "common sense was not one of Lukacs's virtues. He considered empirical reality an impediment to the aesthetics of totality."⁹⁶ "Totality" (an obscure concept, favored by Marxist intellectuals) was the sum total of the original ideals and conceptions of the superior social system to be built. Kadarkay believes that "Lukacs ... craved 'totality' and accepted with a good conscience the sacrifices he felt it demanded."

He venerated "the actual and attempted moral justification of historical necessity," which is another way of saying that *perceived* historical necessity justified everything. Lukacs mystified historical necessity and the historical process: "the absoluteness of the party's political power, embodied in Stalin, could not be impugned without impugning the 'rightness' of the historical process." Kadarkay sums it up: "faith replaced reason."⁹⁷

Once more Orwell's observation comes to mind, namely, that one had to be an intellectual to believe all this ("historical necessity" in particular) and utilize highly abstract concepts to justify concrete and tangible realities that otherwise would be deemed morally intolerable and impermissible. It is unlikely that Lukacs ever had a conversation with a real worker or peasant, or had any specific knowledge or experience of how such people lived, either in the Soviet Union or Hungary.

The true believers' thinking – such as that of Lukacs – about historical necessities was circular: the party and its leader were the best, indeed the only infallible judges of what constituted historical necessity, while at the same time "historical necessity" created the party and placed its leader into the position he occupied.

Late in life Lukacs made an attempt to better explain his lifelong political subservience: "Inasmuch as my activity coincided with the world

⁹⁵ Or, as Roger Scruton put it, once his political commitment took "the form of an immovable religion ... the surrounding world lost all claim over Lukacs's conscience. All was to be swept away in the refining fire of revolution" (see *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands*, London 2015, 119). For further incisive comments on Lukacs's detestation of capitalism and quasi-religious worldview, see also *ibid.*, 118–120).

⁹⁶ Kadarkay 1991, 304.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 312.

historical significance of socialism in one country [i.e., the Soviet system], and the struggle for its interest, it is natural that all my concerns, including those of my work, were subordinate to this consideration." As his biographer writes: "Lukacs found the 'moral necessity' to suspend all criticism of the Soviet Union. Even when Stalin's crimes were exposed by the Party itself, Lukacs wrote, 'It is my long-held position that even at its worst, it is better to live under socialism than under the best of capitalism.'"⁹⁸ The latter affirmation brings to mind another of his remarks (made in 1967), namely that "even if every empirical prediction of Marxism were invalidated, he would still hold Marxism to be true."⁹⁹

Lukacs' subservience to party doctrine was also reflected in his repeated insistence that Soviet socialist realist fiction was "essentially" superior to Western classics – a position all the more striking since he was intimately familiar with and appreciative of Western literature. In 1950 he engaged in self-criticism for insufficiently emphasizing the superiority of Soviet literature over the bourgeois classics: "The superiority of socialist realism over all older forms of realism ... pertains to the totality of literature ... This superiority follows from the higher accomplishments of socialism."¹⁰⁰

This assertion was part of the dubious logic Lukacs employed: since socialism is superior to capitalism (a dubious premise to start with), it follows that socialist realist literature, that is, an integral part and product of socialism, is also bound to be superior to capitalist literature.

Leszek Kolakowski offered a penetrating critical assessment of the political disposition of Lukacs:

[he] accepted Communism whole-heartedly as a moral, intellectual and political solution. Despite various philosophical adventures, he completely identified himself with the Communist movement for the rest of his life. He believed that Marxism was the final answer to the problem of history, that Communism guaranteed the final reconciliation of all human forces and the free play on all human possibilities; that the conflict between the individual and society ... had in principle been resolved.¹⁰¹

These basic commitments and beliefs account for the willed, voluntary politicization of his personality and way of life and his willingness to suspend, or suppress, on many occasions, his capacity for critical thinking.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Kadarkay 1991, 326, 327.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Conquest 2000, 44.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁰¹ Leszek Kolakowski: *Main Currents of Marxism*, New York 2005, 993.

For example, he claimed that he “considered every engagement abroad [that is, in the West] an opportunity to participate in the class struggle and fight the class enemy.” Until the beginning of the official Soviet de-Stalinization campaign in 1956, he displayed abject loyalty to Stalin and his policies. Writing about Stalin’s book, *The Foundations of Leninism*, in 1930 he proposed that the book “showed us the self-evident truth that the teachings of Lenin constitute a total system ... providing a method to find concrete *answers to all questions of life* ... [my emphasis – P.H.] Our entire Marxist thinking has been resting on these foundations Stalin broadened and deepened.”

Seeking to explain in the summer of 1956 his past support of Stalin’s policies and his silence during the campaign of extermination of alleged Trotskyites, Lukacs said (at a meeting of the Hungarian Institute of Party History):

the Soviet Union was, at the time, directly anticipating a life and death struggle with fascism. Therefore a communist of strong commitments could only say “Right or Wrong my party.” [English in the original] Whatever the Party, led by Stalin, did under these circumstances ... we had to display unconditional solidarity in this struggle and rank this solidarity above everything else.

He offered a similar justification for his unwillingness to question the Moscow (Show) Trials that coincided with the VIIth Congress of the Communist International and its advocacy of a broad popular front against fascism:

Like many others in that period I also considered it my sacred [*sic*] duty to abstain from making any statement that could have been viewed in the West as advising patience towards Hitler. I evaluated the (Moscow) Trials in this light: as revolutionary retribution against the active opponents of existing socialism. That the means used in this process were in many ways rather problematic [*sic*] could not shake the fundamentals of my disposition at the time.

Lukacs further proposed that while the intensification of Stalin’s campaign against Trotskyism stimulated an internal moral and intellectual critique, “as far as its public expression was concerned it was mandatory to remain silent since the struggle against Hitler was the most important.”¹⁰² While it is understandable that as a resident in the Soviet Union at the time it would have been suicidal for Lukacs to question the Moscow Trials or the persecution of Trotskyites, he was far from

¹⁰² Lukacs, 117–118, 147.

persuasive in implying that a critique of Stalin would have been incompatible with opposing fascism on *moral grounds*.

Furet suggests that for Lukacs “Stalin incarnated world-historical reason, which the philosopher had adopted as his own principle ... Lukacs was a Stalinist not out of cynicism but out of wisdom – not the wisdom of resignation but that of philosophy.” Furet further argues that Lukacs, as other true believers, made his huge and durable “psychological investment” in communism (that is, Marxism-Leninism) because “it appeared to unite science and morals – a miraculous combination.”¹⁰³

While Lukacs somewhat modified his views of Stalin over time, his admiration of Lenin remained unshakeable. As of 1967 he wrote: “Lenin, as the embodiment of a permanent readiness to take action represents an indestructible value: Lenin’s disposition typifies a new and exemplary relationship between action and reality.”

Late in life, Lukacs made clear that notwithstanding his acknowledged political illusions and errors of the past, he would refuse “to choose the path of Koestler. I could never accept critiques [such as those of Koestler – P.H.] which combined the rejection of the methods of Stalin with that of socialism.” This remark, as other expressions of his deepest beliefs, reflects how Lukacs (as other true believers) handled the dissonance between ends and means. He would not allow sordid means to discredit the glorious ends, even when their attainment kept being postponed.

Following Khrushchev’s famous speech at the 20th Party Congress in 1956, Lukacs shifted gear. But instead of expressing distress over the horrors of Stalin’s policies and abuses of power revealed by Khrushchev, he averred that the Congress opened up new “prospects for the triumphs of Marxism-Leninism,” especially for the younger generations.¹⁰⁴ As Kadarkay pointed out, Lukacs “could convert his dissatisfaction with communist realities ... into a conviction that a ‘renaissance of Marxism’ was forthcoming.”¹⁰⁵ In Kolakowski’s words, “He maintained the belief that socialism ... would liberate itself from the aftermath of Stalinist ‘distortions’ and return to the path of ‘true’ Marxism. He stated in an interview that the worst socialism was better than the best capitalism.”¹⁰⁶

Another reflection of his political disposition, Lukacs, rather implausibly, became a defender of Angela Davis, insisting that her case was comparable to those of Dreyfus and Sacco and Vanzetti, and expressed alarm

¹⁰³ Furet, 121.

¹⁰⁴ Lukacs, 159, 346, 378.

¹⁰⁵ Kadarkay 1991, 461.

¹⁰⁶ Kolakowski, 997.

that her "judicial murder" was imminent. Confusing American judicial-political practices with those in the Soviet Union he was familiar with, he believed that "the verdict is predictable"¹⁰⁷ and politically ordained and that only worldwide protest would save the life of Angela Davis. We do not know what he thought when she was acquitted of all charges by a friendly jury.

In the final analysis it becomes clear that Lukacs was a highly sophisticated "true believer" fixated on the idealized ends, who always found ways to avoid disillusionment with or questioning the ends by resolutely and rigidly overlooking the practices they inspired and legitimated. Furet wrote:

he never wavered from the conviction that he would reaffirm on his deathbed: "I have always thought that the worst form of socialism was better to live in than the best form of capitalism" ... Lukacs thus presents a prime example of a political belief that would survive more than a half-century of observation and even experience ... He never stopped digging for the meaning of Marxism, without ever questioning Bolshevism ... he was never tempted to renounce the idea of the *essential superiority* of Stalinist socialism over liberal democracy, or to question the ideological foundations of Bolshevism ... The end of his life revealed the internal captivity that bound him to an idea of the Soviet Union so potent that it had annulled his knowledge of history.¹⁰⁸

Kolakowski persuasively identified the motives and thought processes that enabled Lukacs to persist in his beliefs: "As long as the world is torn by the struggle between capitalism and socialism, and if socialism is assumed on philosophical grounds to be an essentially superior system irrespective of any empirical facts, then clearly any internal opposition to socialism as it exists at any given time is a blow struck in favor of the enemy." Kolakowski, a former Marxist, also recognized that Lukacs, as other true believers, could also fall back on the conviction that "Marxism ... is an understanding of the world that can only be enjoyed within that movement and in political commitment to it. Marxism in this sense is invulnerable to rational argument [as all religious beliefs are - P.H.]: outsiders cannot understand it correctly, and therefore cannot criticize it."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Kadarkay 1991, 367.

¹⁰⁸ Furet, 117, 122, 123 (emphasis added). Daniel Bell also believed that Lukacs was "in the grip of 'messianic utopianism'" motivated by unshakeable quasi- or secular-religious convictions and commitments (quoted in George Urban: "A Conversation with Daniel Bell," *Encounter*, February 1983, 20-21).

¹⁰⁹ Kolakowski, 1025, 1029.

The entire life, political beliefs, and political behavior of Lukacs prove conclusively that a refined intellect, an exceptional knowledge of literature, philosophy and modern history, as well as a capacity for critical thinking are compatible with deep-seated, unshakeable, and irrational ideological convictions unsupported by empirical realities or evidence.

Lukacs was by no means the only Hungarian intellectual who admired Stalin and his system. Between the late 1940s and mid 1950s many Hungarian intellectuals and especially writers rallied around the party and displayed worshipful attitudes toward Stalin, modeled on, and virtually identical with, those of their Soviet counterparts. Most well-known Hungarian writers were enthusiastic supporters of the communist government, and its policies, until disillusionment set in following Stalin's death and the more permissive policies which allowed the expression of doubts about prevailing conditions. In evaluating these attitudes we must keep in mind that, as in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, in the communist countries too it was difficult to differentiate committed, idealistic support from careerism or opportunism. Unlike in pluralistic Western societies where political sympathies or affiliations had little if any bearing on one's professional life, in communist countries vocal support of the authorities was an essential precondition of getting published and gaining access to desirable positions in academic institutions, publishing houses, journals, or cultural organizations affiliated with the state or the party.

In addition to the influence of access to such privileges, there was also an element of idealism motivating prominent Hungarian writers in their vocal support of the communist government. This idealism found expression in the fact that many of them, disregarding and endangering their privileged positions, became outspoken critics of the system and subsequently supporters of the 1956 Revolution. Thomas Aczel and Tibor Meray wrote:

As they looked back on past years, they were horrified to realize that they not merely approved of all that happened but were helpers, promoters, propagandist for all that took place ... They came to hate themselves, as feelings of guilt and shame converged ... the trouble was not merely that they believed ... But that they believed blindly ... suddenly it became clear what transpired with their help ... The process that altered ... the psychology of the Hungarian communist writers took little time.

What made them true believers, for a period of time, in the first place? Aczel and Meray suggest that it had to do with "the longing of the lonely human being for an imagined community ... [and] with a religious

yearning for a universalistic view of the world that had answers for every question."¹¹⁰

One of the best-known among these intellectuals, the writer Tibor Dery, longtime supporter of the communist movement and party member, provided a remarkable example of such dramatic reversal of attitudes. A major voice for reform after the death of Stalin, and, later, supporter of the 1956 Revolution, he was imprisoned for four years after 1956. A few years earlier he was among the sycophantic worshippers, deifiers, of Stalin as he wrote: "We celebrate a man who destroys with one hand to build with the other; who recognizes and demolishes that which is disintegrating, who makes the perishable perish ... We celebrate the man who built himself so that he could build later a whole world."¹¹¹

A volume of Hungarian writers celebrating Stalin's seventieth birthday¹¹² was an authentic product of the official cult as originally conceived in the Soviet Union. These poems, by authors largely forgotten in Hungary and unknown outside of it, include such lines, reminiscent of prayers:

Your steadfast hand remolded old earth ... You hand planted trees in the desert, harnessed wild rivers with dams, your hand supports and protects us, at waving your finger light and abundance burst forth ... In Stalin's name rejoices the Earth and its wide spaces thunder and tremble ... Every city, village the land and the factory salutes Stalin, the machines are throbbing with his name ... Stalin's name is burning in our soul ... That I exist, that I write my poems, that I can breathe today ... it is your work Stalin!

All nations praise you ... Look at your eternal work ... Unfailing you point the direction.

Another poem in the same volume describes "a thoughtful mother, studying the life of Comrade Stalin and holding her little son on her lap telling a story of the Soviets ... My dear son you can smile, your mother can tell you stories, the battle was fought for us at Caricin and Stalingrad."¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Aczel and Meray, 229–230, 235, 237, 295.

¹¹¹ Tibor Dery: "Unnep" [Celebration], *Csillag* [Star, a literary journal], January 1953, Budapest.

¹¹² *Stalint Koszontjuk – Magyar Koltok Versei a Hetven Eves Sztalinhoz* [We Salute Stalin: Hungarian Poets Addressing Stalin], Budapest 1949.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 7, 14, 33, 36, 45–46. In the Hungarian original these poems are not quite as bad as they are in the English translation I provided. Since I am not a poet my translations tend to be more literal than poetic and cannot do justice to the original. At the same time it is difficult to separate the literary qualities of these poems from their intended message: the glorification of one of the most unscrupulous and ruthless dictators.

The case of Maxim Gorky, the Russian writer, an old revolutionary and opponent of the Tsarist system, has some similarities with that of Lukacs. He too was, in more than one way, a captive of the system and its lifelong supporter with some reservations. He was, according to Stephen Koch, "the house humanist among the Bolsheviks."¹¹⁴ He lived abroad until 1932, when he returned responding to Stalin's warm personal invitation. On one of his visits to the Soviet Union in 1929 he was taken on a conducted tour of the first Gulag, established in the Solovki Islands. He wrote in the Visitor's Book:

I am not in a state of mind to express my impressions in just a few words. I wouldn't want ... to permit myself banal praise of the remarkable energy of people who, while remaining vigilant and tireless sentinels of the Revolution [members of the NKVD guarding the inmates – P.H.], are able, at the same time, to be remarkably bold creators of culture.

These comments were preceded by a conversation he had with a fourteen-year-old boy in the Children's Colony who told him about the stage-managed aspects of his visit ("Everything you see here is false").¹¹⁵

Gorky was also the co-editor of and contributor to the volume entitled *The White Sea–Baltic Canal* published in 1934 that contained the writings of thirty-six Soviet authors who had visited the canal built by slave labor in 1933. In their writings they testified to the miraculous transformation of the prisoners who built it into upright Soviet citizens. Gorky also seized this opportunity to praise the GPU for "reeducat[ing] people."¹¹⁶

We do not know what, late in his life, Gorky thought of Stalin following his return and of the accelerating deformation of the Soviet system, or to what degree his views were influenced by his new eminence in the Soviet Union following his return. In any event,

Stalin lavished on [him] everything the Soviet world could offer any writer ... he became the object of ... a kind of literary "cult of personality" ... and lived with every privilege the regime had to offer ... He was supplied with a palatial country estate and a town house in Moscow. His books were published in huge editions ... Cities, streets and squares began to be named after him ... Gorky's original vision of his role reached a kind of grotesque fulfillment.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Koch, 249.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: *The Gulag Archipelago*, Vol. II, New York 1975, 62–63, 62.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 81, 85. The English translation of the book edited by Amabel Williams-Ellis was entitled *Belomor: An Account of the Construction of the New Canal Between the White Sea and the Baltic Sea*, New York 1935.

¹¹⁷ Koch, 250.

THE CULT OF MATHIAS RAKOSI IN HUNGARY

It is of some historical significance that the Stalin cult was replicated in the cults of lesser communist leaders in Eastern Europe, such as Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania, Vulko Chervenkov of Bulgaria, Klement Gottwald of Czechoslovakia, Enver Hodza of Albania, Mathias Rakosi of Hungary, and Walter Ulbricht of East Germany. In all these countries the politicized intellectuals made substantial contributions to these cults. In the following I will only discuss the cult of Mathias Rakosi, head of the Hungarian Communist Party, described by a historian as "the Hungarian Stalin."¹¹⁸

A faithful reflection of the similarities between Rakosi's cult and that of Stalin can be found in a collection of writings produced by Hungarian writers to honor Rakosi on his sixtieth birthday.¹¹⁹ As will be seen below, his attributes bear striking resemblance to those projected onto Stalin by the Soviet writers. I translated these poetic effusions from Hungarian and, arguably, the original may sound somewhat better. Here are some samples:

In his hands a lovely stalk of wheat: the radiant fate of the nation. He is never frightened and confronts storms with courage. He takes to his heart the troubles of millions.

Today Rakosi speaks on the radio ... The wind subsides, and the heart of the country is throbbing in the palm of his hand ...

[Y]ou are watching over me, brother, father, my lucky star ... Only now do I have a true father! Adopt me as your faithful son, you who feed me and take care of us ... I love you. You gave your sixty years – what shall I give?

[W]hen ... he returned to his country, his people, clutched his strong hand like a small child does his father's. The gentle strictness of teachers radiated from him ... When we rejoiced, he rejoiced with us, when we suffered he suffered with us.

Miraculously I talked to him so calmly as I did with my father. He exuded tranquility. I was tired and gained strength.

In another poem Rakosi stands by the bed of an orphaned North Korean child, who is asleep, and covers her up, caressing her and telling her fairy tales.¹²⁰ (During the Korean War Hungary had many North Korean refugees.)

The adulation of Rakosi was not limited to literary projects. At official functions and celebrations the admiration expressed by those attending

¹¹⁸ Peter Kenéz: *Hungary from the Nazis to the Soviets: The Establishment of the Communist Regime in Hungary, 1944–1948*, New York 2006, 20.

¹¹⁹ *Magyar Irok Rakosi Matyasrol* [Hungarian Writers on Mathias Rakosi], Budapest 1952.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 52, 139, 175, 255, 266, 321.

approximated the kind of adulation genuinely charismatic leaders received from larger crowds of more diverse composition. Those here described were mostly party functionaries, government officials, and members of other privileged groups, including intellectuals loyal to the party. Thomas Aczel and Tibor Meray¹²¹ described one such highly orchestrated celebration of Rakosi at the opera house in Budapest:

It was an expression of a kind of religious fervor that converted obligatory respect into a delirious rapture, [it was] the bliss of the crowd, its gratitude toward the leader who lifted the burden of thinking and provided clear channels for action, who undertook to redeem their lives and whose strength, knowledge and power was far superior to those of ordinary mortals, and who personified intelligence, toughness, superiority as well as humility, unwavering faith and perfect certitude.¹²²

Rakosi's designation as Stalin's foremost Hungarian disciple and recipient of his alleged unconditional trust was integral to his cult, as were the numerous attributions of genius. Aczel and Meray wrote: "It would not have been surprising if it turned out that, even biologically speaking, comrade Rakosi had a life different from those of ordinary mortals ... The true believers were tremendously proud that the country was blessed by a leader such as Mathias Rakosi." Rakosi, like Stalin, was credited with being omniscient, omnipresent, powerful, just, kind, and caring. He too got by with minimal sleep; stayed in his office from early morning until late night; managed to read several hundred pages a day, which included politics, history, science, and fiction, including poetry; he perused early in the morning not only *Pravda* and *Szabad Nep* (official daily newspapers of the Soviet and Hungarian communist parties respectively) but also the *Manchester Guardian*, *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, and *Unita*.¹²³

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that admiration of Stalin was not stimulated by his charisma, such as that possessed by Mussolini, Hitler, and Castro. Unlike them he rarely spoke to crowds, and when did he was by no means an electrifying speaker. Nor did he project a heroic, dynamic demeanor. Charisma, as generally understood, played

¹²¹ Like Dery, both Aczel and Meray used to be devoted supporters of the regime and party members until the early 1950s. Aczel was the only Hungarian writer who was awarded the Stalin prize. Meray, a journalist, was distinguished by reporting at great length on the biological warfare – an invention of communist propaganda – supposedly engaged in by the United States during the Korean war.

¹²² Aczel and Meray, 152.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 157, 159, 160.

little if any part in his rise to power and worship. Rather, it was a deified image, part father figure, that was the source of his attraction. The central themes of the official cult are reflected in the following statement of the Central Committee of the Party:

You, Comrade Stalin were, with Lenin the inspiring leader of the great socialist revolution of October ... Your wisdom, boundless energy and iron will contributed to each and every step ... that made our country more powerful ... Under your leadership ... the Soviet Union has become an enormous, invincible force ... Every honest individual and generation all over the world will praise the Soviet Union and your name, as the man who rescued world civilization from the fascist warlords ... your name is the most precious for our people and for all the ordinary people of the world.¹²⁴

While the misconceptions and idealization of Stalin here sampled were largely products of predisposition and ignorance, Stalin's remarkable capacity to deceive those whom he met also played a part. Maria Joffe, widow of Adolf Joffe, the prominent Soviet diplomat and former revolutionary who met Stalin on numerous occasions, recalled: "Stalin was an actor of rare talent. Capable of changing his mask to suit any circumstance. And one of his favorite masks was ... the simple, ordinary, good fellow wearing his heart on his sleeve."¹²⁵ A Soviet historian and former Gulag inmate, Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko, wrote:

With time, hypocrisy and dissembling became second nature to him. Whether he was playing the role of the straightforward, good-hearted fellow, or the strict and serious enforcer of party rules, or the omnipotent leader, Stalin entered into each part so thoroughly that he sincerely began to believe it. Nature itself blessed him with this unusual capacity to assume many roles.¹²⁶

Milovan Djilas, who met Stalin on several occasions, came to the conclusion that "with him, pretense was so spontaneous that it seemed he himself became convinced of the truth and sincerity of what he was saying. He very easily adapted himself to every turn in the discussion of any new topic, and even to every new personality."¹²⁷

¹²⁴ The Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party and the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union on the occasion of Stalin's 70th Birthday. Quoted in Dmitrii Volkogonov: *Gyozelem es Tragedia: Stalin Politikai Arckepe* [Victory and Tragedy: The Political Portrait of Stalin], Budapest 1990, 8.

¹²⁵ Quoted in Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko: *The Time of Stalin: Portrait of a Tyranny*, New York 1980, 245.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 45.

¹²⁷ Djilas, 97.

It also needs to be emphasized once more that the admiration of Stalin on the part of Western intellectuals, while inseparable from their support for the system he symbolized, was strengthened by their readiness to embrace a political leader whose accomplishments and personal qualities appeared to be greatly superior to the familiar political leaders of their own countries. It is of further importance that the favorable predispositions and sentiments regarding Stalin (as well as the other dictators here considered) were hardly ever challenged by knowledge of social and political realities. The intellectuals here discussed were isolated from dissonant experiences that could have prompted them to reexamine and reevaluate their beliefs or disposition. Last but not least, they were not anxious to gain access to information that would have undermined their beliefs.

Finally, it is important to reemphasize the religious affinities and undercurrents of these political cults, including that of Stalin. Richard Overy wrote:

Cults are conventionally religious rather than political phenomena. In both Germany and the Soviet Union the distinction between the two became blurred ... In the Soviet Union direct reference to Christian imagery was more difficult in a state that was at least officially atheist. Nevertheless the development of the popular [Stalin] cult was permeated, as in Germany, with metaphors that were unashamedly sacred. The ideas of Stalin as savior, as the source of a supernatural power, as prophet or redeemer, were borrowed from traditions in Russian popular religion.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Overy, 120-121.