



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <http://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Stalin's World and Dictatorship in Modern Times

Institution: Princeton University

Project Director: Stephen Kotkin

Grant Program: Fellowships Program

STALIN'S WORLD

Stephen Kotkin

I. The Problem: Dictatorship

My book project, "Stalin's World," offers an analysis of the phenomenon of dictatorship in modern times, through the extraordinary case of Communism, notable for its powerful globalism as well as its core squalor. It makes use of extensive primary sources and multiple cross-country comparisons.

Americans tend to study democratization in the world, especially, it seems, in places where nothing of the sort is taking place. Unfortunately, authoritarianism has been the most prevalent form of political organization through the modern era, and there is no sign of its eclipse. Dictatorship constitutes a special form of authoritarianism. It is not the absence of democracy. Nor does the collapse of democracy (as in Weimar Germany) automatically lead to dictatorship, let alone to a mass mobilizational one (such as Hitler's) that can goad millions to kill or die for a cause. Mass dictatorships, like dictators, are made, not born. And as tough as dictatorships are to create, they are even tougher to sustain, since they must be maintained indefatigably, even as the mechanisms for doing so are double-edged. There is often an official ideology, a staggering investment of time and resources whose content must be shifted endlessly even as its alterability must be vehemently denied, and a secret police and military, which must acquire formidable force, but be constantly kept off-balance, even undermined, lest their members conspire against the dictator. Dictatorship, in other words, is deliberately inefficient, and often volatile.

The twentieth century saw a surfeit of long-lasting despotisms, such as Rafael Trujillo's tiny Dominican Republic (1930-61) and Francisco Franco's still comparatively small Spain (1938-75), and many large-scale, short-lived tyrannies, such as Hitler's Germany and Hirohito's Japan, but one dictatorship was both long-lasting and large-scale: Stalin's. In 1900, if someone living in the Romanov empire had fallen asleep, and then awoken thirty or forty years later, that person could only have been dumbfounded – there was now a Georgian tsar. A book on Stalin's dictatorship must encompass his origins in the borderlands, but also all of Eurasia, just as Stalin in power did – from Mongolia (a Soviet satellite from the 1920s) to Poland, from Central Asia to Soviet Karelia and the Soviet Far East. Furthermore, not just politics, economics, and foreign affairs but also culture dominated Stalin's daily agenda and informed the breadth of the dictatorship. In culture the big story was the explosion of something new in the Soviet Union, just as in other countries – mass culture, from radios (soon ubiquitous) to cinema, photography, periodicals. Many avant-garde types eagerly embraced new mass media, and well after these artists' supposed demise, some explored techniques for the masses. Voluminous as the literature is on Stalin's dictatorship, it rarely brings together all three of these features of this part of the world – enduring political autocracy, the Eurasian mosaic, and the cultural explosion. The literature is also not systematically comparative.

I have been contemplating and researching this book my whole scholarly life. Since 1989, I have been teaching at Princeton (two months into my first semester the Berlin Wall fell). My courses include "Soviet Eurasia," "Avant-Garde and Dictatorship,"

“Moscow: Eight Centuries,” “Dictators and Dictatorships,” and “World History since Chinggis Khan.” I am completing a book entitled “Impaled Horses: Labyrinths of the Ob River Valley,” an archivally based treatment of the many different layers that over the centuries got folded into what we call Russia and the Soviet Union. Having worked in just about every Soviet-era archive, I am familiar with the key source materials – not just what is there, but what is not there. I am also versed in the scholarly literature covering the expanse of Eurasia, from international affairs to economics and culture, and I am eager to continue pursuing cross-country comparisons, as I have always done. In 2008-9, I have sabbatical.

II. The Book: an Outline

Part I – Empire, War, Revolution: This section treats of Eurasia’s entangled histories – former steppe empires, Islam, Buddhism, the Orthodox seminary that Stalin attended, the circumstance that Russia had more Turks than the Ottoman empire, how “Russification” in the Baltic provinces entailed deliberately promoting increased predominance of Estonians, how modern terrorism arose in the tsarist Russia. After setting up the imperial grid and its volatile politics, the book moves to the catastrophe that was the Great War, when Eurasia descended into the de-industrialization, civil war, famine, and typhus known as the Russian Revolution. Back in July 1914, a conservative had warned that “in the event of defeat, the possibility of which in a struggle with a foe like Germany cannot be overlooked, social revolution in its most extreme form is inevitable.” The empire, he added, “would be flung into hopeless anarchy, the outcome of which cannot be foreseen.”

Part II – Achieving Dictatorship: Tsar Nicholas II – “the Autocrat of all Russia” – opened and answered his mail, being without a personal secretariat. Stalin had more than 100 functionaries in his personal secretariat – in addition to the populous apparatuses of the Politburo/Central Committee and Council of Ministers, which also answered to him. Stalin’s functionaries were skilled, worked long hours, and followed through on everything from aircraft designs to first-grade textbooks, but above all on personnel matters (the more officials disappeared the previous night, the more new ones had to be found). Whereas Hitler abhorred conflicts, Stalin – whom Hitler deemed “half beast, half genius” – loved to create overlapping agencies, then incite rivalries among his minions. An ostensible monolith, Stalin’s regime was a congeries of institutional fiefs, crisscrossed by informal networks of personal followings. Inefficiency was not a byproduct but the cultivated essence of the system. And even on the inside, few knew what was going on.

Part III – Socialist Modernity: At the end of the 1920s Stalin and his entourage launched a sixth of the earth on a quest for building socialism. No one had a clue what socialism was. What Stalin and the masses did know was that socialism could not look like capitalism. Capitalism had bourgeois parliaments, socialism would have radical democratic councils (soviets); capitalism had private property and markets, socialism would have state or collective property and planning. But was jazz bourgeois, in which case it was banned, or just modern, in which case it was compatible with socialism? Was the family compatible with socialism? It, too, seemed bourgeois, but how would society work without families? How did a non-imperialist empire or Union function? Stalin presided over a process of violent experimentation, which brought about a Soviet version

of the repertoire of interwar modernity (mass production, mass politics, mass society, mass culture), replete with borrowings from analogous trends outside Soviet borders.

Part IV – World War: Hitler decisively won WWII. By early 1941, through conquests, annexations, and alliances, Nazi Germany controlled all of Europe from the English Channel to the Soviet border. The defiant Brits, an irritant, posed no threat, and the compliant Soviets were obediently fulfilling non-aggression and trade pacts with their Nazi comrades. But Hitler invaded the one country that could, conceivably, defeat the Nazi land army, calling forth an epochal defensive war that, unexpectedly, implanted the Soviets in Berlin. The crusade that Hitler thrust upon the Soviets afforded the latter the transcendent purpose and geopolitical aggrandizement that Communist ideology professed but that the Soviets had to that point achieved mostly just in their urban centers. This section takes up the seemingly confounding circumstance that while the tsarist polity collapsed utterly under the strain of World War I, the purge-torn Soviet polity survived the far greater strain of World War II.

Part V – Second World: The victory came at such high cost that in the 1990s, after censorship had been lifted, many took to questioning whether it was a victory at all. The devastating war also constituted its own revolution. The advent of satellite regimes in Eastern Europe and the onset of Cold War was not solely a question of Stalin's intentions. When Soviet soldiers occupied eastern parts of Germany, they instinctively Sovietized their zone – because, as Norman Naimark has written, that was the only way they knew how to organize society. In North Korea, in parallel, an indigenous leftist revolution took place, rooted in the experience of guerilla warfare in Manchuria against Japanese colonial rule (the German Communists whom Stalin had not executed had spent the war years in Moscow). In other words, even before Stalin made the major decision to create clone regimes, much of the work had been done in the *normal* course of Soviet military occupation and by indigenous forces. With Mao's 1949 Communist revolution, we have the formation of a much enlarged "second world," which appears simultaneously improbable, given the postwar reconstruction challenge as well as the raping, and virtually inevitable, given the dynamics of war, occupation, and Stalin's proclivities.

Part VI – Third Rome or new Mongol Empire? If Stalin's job as dictator seemed impossible to perform in 1930 or 1940, by 1950 his day involved not just decisions on the planned economy for the entire Soviet Union, but the economies of Eastern Europe and much of Asia. Personnel matters entailed not just Kazakhstan, Georgia, or Belarus, but Poland, North Korea, China. Foreign policy, too, was global. The Gulag was bigger, everything was bigger. Perhaps Stalin, aged and infirm, was superhuman. Or perhaps his dictatorship already operated in various post-Stalinist (that is, *sans* Stalin) ways while he was still alive. Above all, the book will show that the dictatorship produced a shared material culture and a deep institutional harmonization that spanned the landmass from Pyongyang to Prague. In the center, the city of Moscow became a great collective work, evocative of old Muscovy, but also of the modern, and of a kind of trans-Eurasian civilization. Dictatorship as a form of rule is profoundly unstable, but many elements of this dictatorship-created world would outlast not only Stalin but also the Soviet Union. Such is the background for today's brittle authoritarianisms and copycats.

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