# Heroes and Merchants
## Stalin's Understanding of National Character

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In his *Händler und Helden* (1915), the German economist and sociologist Werner Sombart interpreted the Great War as an existential battle not just between nations but between cultures and worldviews. According to Sombart, West European civilization was based on the ideas of 1789 and on commercial values, which he identified with the Jewish spirit. The typical West European was a merchant, exclusively interested in what life could offer him in terms of goods and comfort. In contrast, Germany was a nation of heroes, who were prepared to sacrifice themselves for higher ideals.[1]

With his book, Sombart contributed to the radical right-wing tendency of the so-called Conservative Revolution in Germany, leading ideologists of which were Oswald Spengler, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, and Ernst Jünger. Surprisingly, though he matured and operated within a very different political tradition, Iosif Stalin's views about the mentality of the nations of Europe were very similar.[2]

This is not to say that the Soviet dictator was of one mind with the Conservative Revolutionaries in all respects. He would certainly never have

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[1] Werner Sombart, *Händler und Helden: Patriotische Besinningen* (Munich: Duncker and Humblot, 1915). See also Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 144. For an illuminating analysis of Sombart's ideas on heroes and merchants, see Rolf Peter Sieferle, *Die Konservative Revolution: Fünf biografische Skizzen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1995), 83–92. The hero–merchant duality comes from Arthur Moeller van den Bruck (Otto-Ernst Schüddekopf, *Linke Leute von rechts: Die nationalrevolutionäre Minderheiten und der Kommunismus in der Weimarer Republik* [Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1960], 36). Moeller contrasted the "young peoples" (Germany and Russia) with the "old," materialist West (Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 37; Stefan Breuer, *Anatomie der konservativen Revolution* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993], 40).

[2] For an analysis of the similarities between right- and left-wing anti-Westernism, see Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

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classified "the ideas of 1789" as decadent. For him, they were precisely the higher values for which one should sacrifice oneself. It was the greedy capitalists with their commercial mentality who had betrayed the revolutionary ideals. The Communists had inherited the mantle of the French Revolution.

In his own way, Stalin might even be called "pro-Western"—in the sense that he was an ardent modernizer and a jealous admirer of Western progress. Typically, in February 1947 he remarked to Sergei Eisenstein that it was impossible to deny the progressive role of the Christianization of Russia. It "marked the Russian state's shift toward joining up with the West, instead of an orientation toward the East."[3] Until his death, it remained Stalin's fond goal to overtake the West in terms of civilization and technology. Russia's backwardness deeply troubled him, as is evident in his well-known speech of February 1931 about the causes of Russian historical defeats.[4] The Soviet leader betrayed his insecurity with remarks such as those made to a Polish delegation in April 1945: "the Polish workers are good workers. They are more cultured than ours. The proximity of the West makes itself felt."[5]

Stalin did his best to convince himself that East Europeans were culturally no less developed than their Western counterparts. At a meeting of economic leaders and Stakhanovites in the Kremlin in October 1937, he admitted that Russians remained "culturally behind," but in terms of *political* culture they were ahead. "In the West people don't throw cigarette stubs on the floor, but the working people over there are slaves of capital."[6] He once told Andrei Gromyko that "the Bulgarian people are not at all at a lower level of general development than the Germans. In times long ago, when the ancestors of the Germans still lived in the woods, the Bulgarians already had a high culture."[7] But Stalin did not really believe this himself. During the hysterical anti-cosmopolitan campaigns of his last years, the dictator insisted that the Russians had always been the world's greatest pioneers. But the very fact that he reiterated Russian "superiority" so emphatically confirmed that he realized that this priority had not yet been achieved.

That said, the parallels between Stalin's views and Sombart's are indeed striking. Like Sombart, the Soviet leader celebrated the heroic spirit of sacrifice, and he acknowledged that Western culture overvalued comfort compared to struggle. Like Sombart, he abhorred the commercial spirit. For a

[3] Andrei Artizov and Oleg Naumov, eds., *Vlast´ i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia: Dokumenty TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b), VChK-OGPU-NKVD o kul´turnoi politike, 1917–1953 gg.* (Moscow: Demokratiia, 1999), 613.

[4] I. V. Stalin, *Sochineniia*, 15 vols. (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel´stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1949–), 13: 38 (hereafter *Sochineniia*).

[5] V. A. Malyshev, "Dnevnik narkoma: 'Proidet desiatok let, i eti vstrechi ne vosstanovish´ uzhe v pamiati,'" *Istochnik*, no. 5 (1997): 129.

[6] V. A. Nevezhin, *Zastol´nye rechi Stalina: Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow: AIRO-XX, 2003), 128.

[7] A. A. Gromyko, *Pamiatnoe* (Moscow: Izdatel´stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1988), 1: 201.

Communist, Stalin put a remarkable emphasis on the cultural, as opposed to the socio-economic, downside of capitalism. He criticized Europe as a capitalist *culture*, condemning it as a *morally* defective system. Capitalism denied people the possibility of becoming heroes and thereby sapped its own vital strength.

On 17 March 1938, Stalin received the polar explorer I. D. Papanin and three of his comrades in the Great Kremlin Palace. They had been saved from a floe of ice floating in the open sea and had been safely delivered to port by the icebreaker *Ermak*. Stalin was in high spirits and remarked:

> There in the West, in France, in Germany, in England, in America they make no heroes. […] The Norwegians turned to us with a proposal of assistance. […] We know that these bastards […] cannot offer any significant assistance. They only pretend. For what advantages, speaking in the terms of the foreigners [*po-inostrannomu*], what earnings would be in it for them? […] We decided to spare no amount of money and no icebreakers. […] What is an act of heroism, what is it worth? Not a single American, not a single Frenchman, not a single Englishman will be able to tell you, because he has only one currency: the dollar, the sterling, the franc.[8]

Here we have Sombart's contrast between the easygoing mercantile societies of the West, with their taste for profit, and the heroic society (Soviet-Russian, not German) driven by the spirit of sacrifice. What Stalin said in March 1938 was not exceptional. Time and again, his contempt for the mercantile spirit showed, as for example during the war when the Yugoslav Communist Milovan Djilas offered to repay him for his arms deliveries. The Soviet leader became unexpectedly angry: "You insult me. You are shedding your blood, and you expect me to charge you for the weapons. I am not a merchant, we are not merchants."[9]

Although he acknowledged the Russian people's backwardness, Stalin admitted to an intense admiration for its heroic qualities. Klaus Mehnert, Terry Martin, and David Brandenberger, among others, have discussed his conception of Russian heroism.[10] The Soviet leader saw the Russians as a

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[8] Nevezhin, *Zastol'nye rechi*, 189–91.

[9] Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1962), 63–64.

[10] Klaus Mehnert, *Stalin versus Marx: The Stalinist Historical Doctrine* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1952); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 451ff; David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

nation by character opposed to slavishness and traditional routines, active, steadfast, revolutionary, and with a talent for waging war.[11]

The present article takes a closer look at Stalin's assessment of the national characters of European nations. The materials brought together here come from various times and places, but that does not make their presentation arbitrary. On the contrary, it is remarkable to see how consistent Stalin was in attributing character traits to these nations. To be sure, when he made his high or low opinions of one or another nation known to others, Stalin often seemed to operate with a hidden political agenda. Nevertheless, his assessments hardly varied over time but generally remained the same, independent of the occasion when he chose to present them.

The Bolshevik leader's remarks for the most part took the form of informal comments. He felt uncomfortable seeing his views of specific nations laid down in official documents, especially if they were deprecatory. He voiced such views predominantly in casual conversations with party comrades; with state officials or delegations from various segments of Soviet society; with Soviet and foreign journalists, writers, and other artists; and with visiting foreign Communists, diplomats, and statesmen. But despite the "table-talk" character of his observations, the pattern in them is clear enough.

I conclude that the March 1938 speech about the heroic Soviet people and decadent Westerners did, indeed, represent Stalin's thinking all along. Though his national essentialism did not end in full-fledged racism, Stalin, like the Conservative Revolutionaries, routinely operated with powerful national stereotypes, dividing up the European nations with archetypal images of the hero and the merchant. I argue that this habit can in part be understood against the background of his upbringing and early political activity in the Transcaucasus. His Georgian background provided Stalin's Bolshevism with a relatively more heroic and nationalist imprint than Lenin's. Furthermore, I argue that for Stalin as state leader, national stereotyping served mainly mobilizational purposes. He aimed to instill a heroic, fighting mentality into the people. This was part of his romanticist approach to politics.

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[11] See Stalin, "Ob osnovakh leninizma" (1924), *Sochineniia*, 6: 186. In 1930, Stalin criticized the proletarian writer Dem´ian Bednyi for suggesting that the Russians were still the same lazy Oblomovs of old (*Sochineniia*, 13: 25). For similar statements, see Artizov and Naumov, eds., *Vlast´ i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia*, 136; *Sochineniia*, 13: 110–11; and Nevezhin, *Zastol´nye rechi*, 44–45. For his famous May 1945 toast to the Russian nation, see Stalin, *Sochineniia*, 2 [15]: 203–4. When Charles de Gaulle asked Stalin why he always worked so hard, he answered that this was "a bad Russian habit" ("'Oshibki imeiutsia i u menia, i u moikh sotrudnikov': Zapis´ besedy I. V. Stalina i Sharlia de Gollia," *Istochnik*, no. 5 [1996]: 106). The Soviet leader was exorcizing the spirit of Oblomovism.

## The Merchant Nations

Among the peoples living in Europe about whom Stalin had the strongest views were the Jews. They were for him the model commercial nation. According to the Menshevik Razhden Arsenidze, he described them in 1905 as follows: "Just try and work with them. They are no good in a battle, nor for having fun together. Cowards and petty dealers!"[12] In his "Marxism and the National Question" (1913), Stalin noted that there were few Jewish peasants. The Jews typically served "alien" nations "as industrialists and traders, as well as people of the liberal professions."[13]

Stalin felt a profound contempt for the supposedly money-loving Jews. In December 1941, he told a Polish delegation that before World War I he had once tried to travel illegally to Poland. When he arrived in an unknown border town, some Jews offered to help him. "But I […] did not trust these Jews. It was written on their faces that they were prepared to hand me over to the Russian gendarmes for money. In the end, I found a Pole with an honest face."[14] At Yalta in February 1945, he informed Roosevelt that Jews were in his opinion "middlemen, profiteers, and parasites."[15] Although they could be convinced to take up agriculture, they remained "natural traders" with a preference for the cities.[16] At the end of his life, when Soviet antisemitism developed into a campaign, the same point was on Stalin's mind. In December 1952, he told the party Presidium: "All Jews are nationalists […] The Jewish nat[ionalists] believe that the United States saved their nation (out there you can become rich, bourgeois, etc.)."[17]

Stalin's opinion of Americans in some ways paralleled his views of the Jews. In 1924, he praised them for their "efficiency," though that easily degenerated into something "narrow and unprincipled."[18] Americans were hard workers, but they were not very farsighted. Stalin told Emil Ludwig in 1931 that he appreciated their "informality" (*prostota*) and their "democratism,"

[12] Razhden Arsenidze, "Iz vospominanii o Staline," *New Review/Novyi zhurnal* 72 (June 1963): 221.

[13] Stalin, *Sochineniia*, 2: 333–34.

[14] Nevezhin, *Zastol'nye rechi*, 302.

[15] Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History. 1929–1969* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 203.

[16] *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers. The Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1955), 924. Stalin's closest Jewish comrade, Lazar' Kaganovich, did not admit that his boss was an antisemite, but he did point to the latter's concern that there were too many "petty-bourgeois elements" among the Jews. See Feliks Chuev, *Tak govoril Kaganovich: Ispoved' stalinskogo apostola* (Moscow: Otechestvo, 1992), 128. According to Molotov, Stalin appreciated the following qualities in the Jews: "diligence, unanimity [*spaiannost'*], political activism" (Feliks Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym: Iz dnevnika F. Chueva* [Moscow: Terra, 1991], 274).

[17] Malyshev, "Dnevnik narkoma," 140–41.

[18] Stalin, *Sochineniia*, 6: 187–88.

traits explained by the absence of a feudal aristocracy in the United States.[19] But at the end of his life, Stalin lost much of his respect for the Americans. In August 1951, he told the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai that he did not expect the Korean War to turn into a global conflagration. The Americans preferred to rely on their nuclear weapons and air force instead of on the infantry.

> Americans are merchants. Every American soldier is a speculator, occupied with buying and selling. [The] Germans conquered France in 20 days. It's been already two years, and [the] USA [has] still not subdued little Korea. What kind of strength is that? America's primary weapons […] are stockings, cigarettes, and other merchandise. They want to subjugate the world, yet they cannot subdue little Korea. […] They are fighting with little Korea, and already people are weeping in the USA. What will happen if they start a large-scale war? Then, perhaps, everyone will weep.[20]

Like the Jews, the Americans were a nation of traders and cowards—not soldiers.

The theme returned in Stalin's characterization of the French and the British. There are intriguing remarks, probably made by Stalin and written down by the party secretary Andrei Zhdanov, before the conclusion of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact in 1939: England and "syphilitic Europe" allegedly hoped to send the "tigers"—that is, Nazi Germany—to the east.[21] The image of "syphilitic Europe" expressed a perceived weakness and lack of resolve combined with a shrewd scheming to let others do the fighting. In August 1939, Stalin told Ribbentrop that British power was based on bluff, stupidly taken for real strength by other nations. The French were also too weak to wage war. Stalin once again vented his conviction that merchants have no backbone, noting as he did "that the Anti-Comintern Pact had in fact frightened principally the City of London and the small British merchants."[22] In his discussion with Ribbentrop in September 1939, he described

[19] Ibid., 13: 114–15.

[20] "Stalin's Conversations with Chinese Leaders: Talks with Mao Zedong. December 1949–January 1950, and with Zhou Enlai, August–September 1952," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, nos. 6–7 (1995–96): 12–13.

[21] L. A. Bezymenskii, "Sekretnyi pakt s Gitlerom pisal lichno Stalin," *Novoe vremia*, no. 1 (1998): 31.

[22] Gustav Hilger, *Wir und der Kreml: Deutsch-sowjetische Beziehungen 1918–1941. Erinnerungen eines deutschen Diplomaten* (Frankfurt am Main: Alfred Metzner, 1955), 291; Raymond James Sontag and James Stuart Beddie, eds., *Nazi–Soviet Relations, 1939–1941: Documents from the Archives of the German Foreign Office as Released by the Department of State* (New York: Didier, 1948), 74–75.

Britain, the United States, and France as "satiated states" and spoke of "typical French claptrap."[23]

Addressing graduates of the Academy of the Red Army on 5 May 1941, Stalin remarked that after World War I, Britain and France had begun to neglect their armed forces. Their victory had made them overconfident. The French had now been defeated by the Germans because they had lost interest in their own army. The people had started to look down on the commanders "as losers [*neudachniki*], the lowest kind of people [*poslednie liudi*], who were obliged to go into the army because they had no factories, plants, banks, [or] shops."[24] His contempt for the soft French came out once more when Stalin's Hungarian comrade Mátyás Rákosi paid him a compliment. He sharply interrupted him and said, "Listen, I'm no Frenchman, you shouldn't pay me compliments!"[25]

Stalin also despised other West European nations for their lack of backbone. We already heard him accuse the Norwegians of cowardice. In March 1945, he told Czechoslovak president Eduard Beneš that the Slavs had suffered most in the war. "Did France suffer more? No. The French opened the front for the Germans. […] And Belgium and Holland immediately put their feet into the air and lay down for the Germans."[26] In October 1945, Stalin had this to say to a delegation from the society "Finland-USSR":

> Compare, for instance, Finland and Belgium. The Belgians regard the Finns as a semi-peasant people without culture. But the Finnish people develop their country and wouldn't behave the way the Belgians behaved during the war. The Belgians considered themselves one of the most cultured peoples of Europe, but when war came they surrendered.[27]

In the years after the war, Stalin became painfully aware of the attractiveness of Western culture. But he stuck to his view that this culture was fatally flawed. Expressing his unease about the fact that millions of Soviet citizens had seen life abroad as soldiers, he told Zhdanov in September 1947, "There is only one thing that these gentlemen who long for the 'Western way

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[23] Ingeborg Fleischhauer, "The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact: The German Version," *International Affairs*, no. 8 (1991): 128–29.

[24] A. A. Pechenkin, "'Sovremennaia armiia—armiia nastupatel´naia': Vystupleniia I. V. Stalina na prieme v Kremle pered vypusknikami voennykh akademii. Mai 1941 g.," *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, no. 2 (1995): 28; Malyshev, "Dnevnik narkoma," 115–16.

[25] "'Videl, kak voznikaet kul´t lichnosti': Mat´iash Rakoshi o Staline i o sebe," *Istochnik*, no. 1 (1997): 119.

[26] Malyshev, "Dnevnik narkoma," 128.

[27] Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial´no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI) f. 558, op. 1, d. 5379, l. 8.

of life' cannot explain: why we beat Hitler."[28] Attractive though it was, the soft West was less equipped for war than were the Russians.

## The Hero Nations

Stalin admired the East European nations for their military qualities. We have seen him calling the Finns brave, and he admired the Yugoslavs for their fighting spirit. As he told his comrade Josip Broz Tito in May 1946, they were a "strong people" and a "hardy nation."[29] So were the Slovaks. In December 1943, Stalin advised Beneš to keep a firm grip on these combative people to prevent their separatism from undermining the unity of the state. He warned that during the fighting in the North Caucasus his military men had noted "that the Slovak soldier is a good [soldier]."[30] The Albanians, too, were a fierce people. In 1949, Stalin told communist leader Enver Hoxha that the survival of the Albanian language "proves the endurance of your people, the great strength of their resistance to assimilation despite the storms that have swept over them."[31] But he seems to have appreciated the Albanians less than the Slavs.[32]

The oddest hero nations were the Poles and the Germans. In October 1923, the Politburo discussed whether the application of pressure could successfully influence Poland. Stalin believed it could not. He scribbled the following note on a piece of paper: "You can frighten the Latvians, push them to the wall, etc. But you can't do that with the Poles. […] Isolate the Poles. Buy off (and scare) the Latvians. Buy off the Romanians."[33] The Poles were not for sale, and could not easily be scared off either. In December 1941, Stalin told the Polish general Władysław Anders that he saw the ethnic Poles as better soldiers than Poland's Belorussians, Ukrainians, or Jews.[34] In April 1944, he told a Polish visitor that "the Polish people are good people. The

[28] D. T. Shepilov, "Vospominaniia," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 5 (1998): 11–12.

[29] Leonid Gibianskii, "The Soviet Bloc and the Initial Stage of the Cold War: Archival Documents on Stalin's Meetings with Communist Leaders of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, 1946–1948," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 10 (1998): 120–21.

[30] V. V. Mar´ina, "Peregovory E. Benesha v Moskve (dekabr´ 1943 g.)," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 3 (2001): 15.

[31] Enver Hoxha, *With Stalin: Memoirs* (Tirana: 8 Nëntori, 1979), 120.

[32] In a discussion with Milovan Djilas (*Conversations with Stalin*, 79) about the Albanians in June 1944, Stalin said, "I had hoped that the Albanians were at least a little Slavic." On 3 January 1946, Stalin had a meeting with Leo Krzycki, chairman of the All-Slav Congress of the United States, who informed him that the American Slavs were very fertile and gave the American army many soldiers, as well as donating an unusual amount of blood to the Red Cross for the war effort. Stalin commented that "the Slavic nations are young and healthy." Quoted in Leonid Maksimenkov, "'Slavianskie natsii—molodye i zdorovye,'" *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 31 January 2006.

[33] Dmitrii Volkogonov, *Sem´ vozhdei: Galereia liderov SSSR*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), 1: 234.

[34] Nevezhin, *Zastol´nye rechi Stalina*, 300.

Poles are brave warriors."[35] In early 1945, Andrei Gromyko heard him say that the Russians were the "most steadfast" soldiers in the world, followed by the Germans and Poles, in that order.[36]

Although Stalin admired the Poles, he did not like them. They were an unruly people of natural anarchists whose heroism easily degenerated into heroics. In a way, they liked fighting *too* much, taking it to the point where they fought among themselves. As Stalin expressed it to Winston Churchill in October 1944, "if a Pole is on his own, then he gets into a quarrel with himself."[37] At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, he shared his thoughts about the Polish character with Churchill once again: "There are some very good people among the Poles. They are good fighters. Of course, they fight among themselves too."[38]

For Stalin, the Germans were the strangest people of all. He told Emil Ludwig in 1931 that he loved no nation as much. They gave the world Marx and Engels.[39] Stalin nurtured an immense respect for the Germans as soldiers. In his conversation with the British ambassador, Stafford Cripps, in July 1940, he called them a "military people."[40] When Charles de Gaulle once asked him how he felt about the Germans, Stalin answered that "there are good people in Germany, but not many." Nonetheless, he respected them as warriors. To be killed, they literally had to be cut to pieces.[41] In a conversation with Beneš on 28 March 1945, he said: "*I hate the Germans*. But hatred must not hinder us from objectively appreciating the Germans. The Germans are a great people. Very good technical people [*tekhniki*] and organizers. Good, courageous, born soldiers."[42] They could even overdo it. In December 1948 Stalin accused SED leaders of operating without tactical finesse. "The ancient Teutons entered battle with the Romans naked, but they suffered losses." Stalin acknowledged that the Teutons were "very brave," but not shrewd enough to take on the Romans. The German Communists were, he believed, like them.[43]

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[35] T. V. Volokitina et al., eds., *Vostochnaia Evropa v dokumentakh rossiiskikh arkhivov, 1944–1953 gg.*(Moscow and Novosibirsk: Sibirskii khronograf, 1997), 1: *1944–1948 gg.*, 40.

[36] Gromyko, *Pamiatnoe*, 201–2.

[37] "Zapis′ besedy tovarishcha I. V. Stalina s Cherchillem: 9 oktiabria 1944 g. v 22 chasa," *Istochnik*, no. 2 (2003): 49.

[38] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 853.

[39] Stalin, *Sochineniia*, 13: 115.

[40] V. Ia. Sipols, "Missiia Krippsa v 1940 g.: Beseda so Stalinym," *Novaia i noveishaia istoriia*, no. 5 (1992): 34.

[41] "'Oshibki imeiutsia i u menia,'" 105–6.

[42] Malyshev, "Dnevnik narkoma," 128. Emphasis in orig.

[43] "'Nuzhno idti k sotsializmu ne priamo, a zigzagami': Zapis′ besedy I. V. Stalina s rukovoditeliami SEPG. Dekabr′ 1948g.," *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, no. 5 (2002): 8. In a discussion with a Polish government delegation in August 1944, Stalin had said that communism fitted the Germans "like a saddle [fits] a cow." See T. V. Volokitina et al., eds., *Sovetskii faktor v*

In 1913, Stalin classified the Germans, along with Magyars and Russians, as nations "the most suited to organize states."[44] In part, he attributed this to their relatively high level of development. At the Tenth Party Congress in 1921, he noted that the multinational empires of Eastern Europe had been formed "with one, more developed nation at the head."[45] In April 1945, he told Milovan Djilas that "[the Germans] will recover, and very quickly. That is a highly developed industrial country with a large and extremely skilled working class and technical intelligentsia."[46]

But German resilience was also a matter of psychology. In January 1943, Stalin told Comintern leader Georgii Dimitrov that the majority of the German workers apparently enjoyed being a "*ruling nation*."[47] In November of that year, he informed Churchill and Roosevelt that there was no hope of reforming the German national character.[48] As he told Beneš in December 1943, the Germans were "under the influence of state fetishism." This "strong and talented people" could imagine its relations with other nations only in terms of subjugation. The Germans would go to war again. "You cannot change the Germans" (*Nemtsev ne izmenit'*).[49]

Apart from their great and heroic qualities, however, the Germans suffered from a serious character flaw. Oddly, they were natural slaves as much as natural masters. Stalin told Djilas in June 1944 that he remembered being at a congress in Germany when a group of German Social Democrats had arrived late because they had had to wait to have their tickets confirmed. There would never be a German revolution, "because you would have to step on the lawns." The Germans were "a queer people, like sheep. I remember from childhood: wherever the ram went, all the rest followed."[50] During the Yalta Conference of February 1945, Stalin reminded Churchill of the "extraordinary discipline in the Germany of the *Kaiser*." He repeated the same story that he had told Djilas about the Germans "obediently" waiting

*vostochnoi Evrope: 1944–1953* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1999), 1: *1944–1948*, 87. That did not stop him from pushing East Germany onto the communist road when the time was ripe.

[44] Stalin, *Sochineniia*, 2: 304.

[45] Ibid., 5: 34, 46.

[46] Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin*, 114. In his discussion with the SED leadership on 4 July 1952, Stalin confirmed his faith in German capabilities: "It would be wrong to think that the Hungarians are more capable than Germans." See "Conversation between Joseph V. Stalin and SED Leadership," 4 July 1952. Library of Congress, Dmitrii Volkogonov Collection [Cold War International History Project]. Available at wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.home.

[47] Bernhard H. Bayerlein, ed., *Georgi Dimitroff: Tagebücher 1933–1943* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2000), 641.

[48] See Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, *Stalin's Cold War: Soviet Strategies in Europe, 1943 to 1956* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995), 42.

[49] Mar'ina, "Peregovory E. Benesha," 15; and Mar'ina, "Peregovory E. Benesha v Moskve (dekabr' 1943 g.), *Voprosy istorii*, no. 1 (2001): 16.

[50] Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin*, 79.

on the platform until their tickets were checked.[51] The Germans were unique in being heroes and slaves at one and the same time.[52]

## The Georgian Background

To sum up, Stalin divided the nations of Europe, roughly, into those of the East and those of the West, measuring them along two axes, civilization and strength of character, which were more or less negatively correlated. The Eastern nations, with possible exceptions like the Latvians and Romanians, were believed to be relatively uncivilized but endowed with impressive martial qualities. Despite their character flaws, the developed Germans and relatively developed Poles formed part of the heroic East. The Western nations (including the Americans and the Jews, who by character were part of the Western world) were considered the more developed, but with their commercial orientation they suffered from a deplorable lack of firmness. This routine stereotyping of nations justifies the conclusion that Stalin was emotionally stamped by a powerful cultural-psychological essentialism.

It would be misleading, though, to assume that, in praising and slighting nations, the Soviet dictator was driven only by ingrained prejudices, powerful as they were. His remarks were also inspired by strategic considerations and by his understanding of politics as mobilization. The circumstances in which he made his remarks more often than not suggested a political agenda. His good words about the Yugoslavs, Poles, Finns, and Albanians were directed mostly to politicians and delegations from these countries. It was his way of providing his allies with confidence in their own strength. By describing the Soviet people and their allies as heroes, he hoped to instill a fighting spirit into them. His disdainful remarks about Western decadence were also made mainly in discussions with representatives of the Soviet public, and with allied politicians from Eastern Europe and the People's Republic of China. Describing the capitalist nations as flabby merchants, again, served the dual purpose of providing his own people with confidence and of rooting out the decadent mentality that would hamper their fighting abilities.

Stalin's remarks about the European nations thus did not only reflect what he thought these nations were but also what he wanted them to become. As leader of the USSR and then of the socialist camp, he hoped to see

[51] Nevezhin, *Zastol'nye rechi Stalina*, 438. Stalin made the following note in an undated copy of Karl Kautsky's 1919 *Terrorism and Communism*. When Kautsky quoted Marx to the effect that the German workers tended to follow "a savior (like Lassalle)," Stalin commented in the margin: "the old sin" (RGASPI f. 558, op. 3, d. 91, l. 156).

[52] In August–September 1911, Stalin read P. S. Kogan's *Ocherki po istorii zapadnoevropeiskikh literatur*, 1 (for the date of his reading, see comments by his acquaintance P. B. Onufrieva in RGASPI f. 558, op. 4, d. 647). On 346, the author notes that the French national spirit was classicist, logical, and schematic, whereas romanticism harmonized with the "dreamy" German character. Stalin commented "nonsense [*gluposti*]!" in the margins (RGASPI f. 558, op. 1, d. 32).

the West as morally weakened and therefore easy to defeat. Conversely, by convincing the Soviet people and their allies that they were of a heroic stock, he attempted to make them adopt the mentality he considered an essential condition for attaining victory.

In Stalin's views of the character of nations, two things stand out: first, the self-evident ease with which he stereotyped nations; and second, the extraordinary significance he attributed to the heroic mentality. The degree to which he thought in these terms characterizes him as a Bolshevik of a somewhat different brand from Lenin. It seems to me that this can be understood in the light of his personal history and background, especially of the fact that he lived and worked for 30 years in the Transcaucaus.

Significantly, we know for certain that Stalin's admiration for the heroic, martial character was no late development but was in place from the days of his youth, which refers us precisely to his Georgian background. To be sure, Bolshevism from the outset promoted the cult of the heroic personality.[53] Lenin admired the 19th-century populist-terrorist heroes, and his vanguard model was marked by their influence. But in Stalin heroism immediately took on an extreme form. During the first few years of the 20th century, the young Stalin produced a number of pamphlets whose most striking feature was to convey a feeling of intense hatred, a yearning for bloody revenge, and a fascination with physical violence. They glorified life as struggle, courage, sacrifice, the preparedness to shed blood, strength, hardness, and laughter in vitalistic terms; they were full of contempt for cowardice, weakness, and sorrow.[54]

Ronald Suny and Alfred Rieber point out that Georgians in the late 19th century still prided themselves on their warrior culture. Stalin matured in a masculinist "honor and shame" society that still knew the custom of the blood revenge. Men were expected to be fearless, resolute, and assertive.[55] The Georgian nationalist novels and poems Stalin read as a youngster figured courageous free spirits fighting for freedom and taking revenge for social injustices. In the works of Georgian neo-Romantics such as Rapiel

[53] See, for example, Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 12–18, 28–40. Alain Besançon (*The Intellectual Origins of Leninism*, trans. Sarah Matthews [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981]) discusses the Leninist cult of the heroic personality as a modern form of *gnosis*. The influence of the Leninist hero-cult on Stalin has been classically analyzed in Robert Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879–1929: A Study in History and Personality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973).

[54] For a discussion of the pamphlets, see Erik van Ree, "Stalin's Bolshevism: The First Decade," *International Review of Social History* 39, 3 (1994): 361–81.

[55] Ronald Grigor Suny, "Beyond Psychohistory: The Young Stalin in Georgia," *Slavic Review* 50, 1 (1991): 53; Alfred J. Rieber, "Stalin, Man of the Borderlands," *American Historical Review* 106, 5 (2001): 1660; Rieber, "Stalin as Georgian: The Formative Years," in *Stalin: A New History*, ed. Sarah Davies and James Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 19–20.

Eristavi, Aleksandre Qazbegi, and Vazha-Pshavela, the fierce traditions of the mountain people were glorified.[56] As we know, the young Stalin chose the Koba figure, an avenging hero and Caucasian mountaineer from one of Qazbegi's books, as a role model.[57]

The Georgian background may help us explain not only the heavy emphasis on the heroic ideal but also Stalin's abhorrence of the commercial mentality and his habit of linking it to particular nations. This would have come very naturally to a young Georgian from poor circumstances. Georgian industry and commerce were dominated by Armenians, whom many Georgians resented for this. The commercial mentality, associated with the Armenians, was widely considered shameful and undignified.[58] Stalin learned to appreciate national communities as strong or weak, friend or foe, in everyday life on the street. For national-minority party members such as he, the "national question" was not abstract strategy but their direct life-experience, something to be handled on a daily basis. As a Georgian, Stalin was subjected to the oppressive, Russifying regime of Alexander III; as a Marxist activist, he was regularly confronted with inter-ethnic conflicts among Georgians, Armenians, and Muslims, which sometimes exploded into violence and always provided acute political and organizational problems to be solved. Many of Stalin's later comrades such as Anastas Mikoian, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, and Lazar′ Kaganovich shared these or similar experiences. It made them different from "Europeans" like Lenin, who, through their upbringing and émigré experience in the cities of Western Europe, remained much more aloof from inter-ethnic conflict. This is not to say that Lenin denied the significance of the national question. He, too, was fully prepared to play the national card. But it would not have been in his bones, as it was for a long-standing Tbilisi and Baku activist like Iosif Stalin.[59]

Another point that possibly intensified Stalin's nationalist prejudices (and distinguished him from Lenin and those like him) was that he acquired his first, rudimentary political experience in a nationalist milieu. The degree of his involvement as a 17-year-old in the Georgian nationalist movement, of which the writer Ilia Chavchavadze was the most prominent figure, is

[56] James William Robert Parsons, "The Emergence and Development of the National Question in Georgia, 1801–1921" (Ph.D. diss., University of Glasgow, 1987), 219, 224, 250, 269, 273–74; Donald Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia: A History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 167, 174–99, 207–17; David Marshall Lang, *A Modern History of Georgia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), 99–102, 109–15.

[57] See Rieber, "Stalin, Man of the Borderlands," 1657–60; and Rieber, "Stalin as Georgian," 20.

[58] Parsons, "The Emergence and Development," 33, 54, 104, 131, 205; Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1989), 112–22.

[59] This is not to suggest that the two categories of Bolsheviks mentioned here were mutually exclusive and without overlap, or that there would not have been other types in terms of their prerevolutionary careers.

still unclear. But it is a fact that in 1895–96 the young Stalin published five poems in the journal *Iveria*, edited by Chavchavadze. His final 1896 poem was published in Georgii Tsereteli's journal *Kvali*. Tsereteli and his friends wanted Georgia to become an industrialized national state with Georgian predominance in the towns. They resented the Armenian, Greek, and Jewish monopolization of commerce and found the commercialism of these groups parasitical and unhealthy for national development.[60]

Stalin's Georgian background was important not only as a matter of prejudice being established but also in terms of conceptualizing national character. The first occasion for Stalin to be told that there existed something like nations with unique characteristics must have been in this Georgian-nationalist setting. The terms he used many years later are strikingly reminiscent of the way Georgian patriots such as Chavchavadze and his friend Akaki Tsereteli formulated the matter in their time. Chavchavadze wrote: "Every nation has its own individual character, its own inner hopes, desires, aspirations, and its own innate worth," and Tsereteli reiterated, "Mankind consists of various nations and nationalities, each of which must contribute its piece, its creative share, to the treasure house of humanity."[61]

Now hear Stalin in October 1945, when he informed a delegation of the society "Finland-USSR" that "each people, small as well as large, has its worth and makes its contribution to the historical development of humanity."[62] In subsequent years, he turned this into a solemn formula, repeating it ritually to visiting foreign delegations. Each nation had "certain particularities characteristic only to it," which represented the "contribution that each nation makes to the common treasure house of world culture."[63]

All this, however, does not justify a classification of Stalin solely in terms of a "non-European" experience. The idea of nations as mankind's unique individualities, each with a mentality of its own, was by no means a Georgian invention. It was classically formulated by Johann Gottfried Herder. "Diversitarianism," as Arthur Lovejoy calls it, was adopted by romantic nationalists all over Europe, from Giuseppe Mazzini to Jules Michelet

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[60] Parsons, "The Emergence and Development," 276–85.

[61] Ibid., 225, 264. See also V. A. Gagoidze, *Osnovnye napravleniia filosofskoi mysli v Gruzii XIX veka* (abstract, doctor of philosophical sciences diss., Tbilisi, 1963), 27; and Mikhail Gaprindashvili, *Gruzinskoe prosvetitel'stvo* (Tbilisi: Ganatleba, 1977), 111–12.

[62] RGASPI f. 558, op. 1, d. 5379, l. 1.

[63] For two occasions in 1948, see Nevezhin, *Zastol'nye rechi Stalina*, 503, 508. Perhaps the first systematic discussion of Stalin's views of nations as the individualities of humanity is to be found in Mehnert, *Stalin versus Marx*, 29 ff. There are indications that Stalin in his later years continued to appreciate Chavchavadze's ideology. See Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in Twentieth-Century Revolutionary Patriotism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 178–79.

and Adam Mickiewicz.[64] James Parsons observes that Chavchavadze and Tsereteli drew part of their inspiration from these European romantic nationalists (mentioning specifically Mazzini, Garibaldi, and Kossuth), or precisely from the milieu where the cult of unique national characters was most outspoken.[65] Through his Georgian nationalist roots, therefore, the young Stalin became linked to the European nationalist movement, of which the Georgians were remote members.

## Was Stalin a Racist?

Stalin's early experience in Georgian society, where heroic and martial qualities were highly valued for a man, and market activities were correspondingly undervalued; his early affiliation with a romantic nationalist movement; and his regular experience of intense ethnic conflict with the concomitant national prejudices—all these factors must have predisposed him to have a very open eye to the practical use of the cult of heroism and of national sentiments.

But did Stalin's national essentialism develop to the point of racism? My tentative conclusion is that this was not the case, and in that sense Stalin's national Bolshevism differed in degree but not in kind from Lenin's.

In recent years, historians have debated whether Stalin attributed the characters of nations to their racial makeup. Francine Hirsch argues convincingly that Stalin-era scientists and policymakers did not consider biological race a determinant of psychological and cultural traits and regarded nations and nationalities altogether as different entities from races.[66] Eric Weitz argues, nevertheless, that under Stalin national characters were not deduced from the circumstances in which particular nations found themselves but were considered fixed givens. Nations were, in other words, themselves "racialized." In Weitz's definition, racism is not necessarily about skin color. "Race is present when a defined population group is seen to have particular characteristics that are indelible, immutable, and transgenerational."[67] Weitz refers to Étienne Balibar's concept of "'culturalist' racism" and to Balibar's argument that "biological or genetical naturalism is not the only means of naturalizing human behavior […] *culture can also function like a nature*." Culture, no less than race, may lock individuals immutably into a

[64] Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), chap. 10. See also Andrzej Walicki, *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism: The Case of Poland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 74–85.

[65] Parsons, "The Emergence and Development," 253–54.

[66] Francine Hirsch, "Race without the Practice of Racial Politics," *Slavic Review* 61, 1 (2002): 30–43. See also Amir Weiner, "Nothing but Certainty," ibid., 44–53; and Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), pt. 3.

[67] Eric D. Weitz, "Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges," *Slavic Review* 61, 1 (2002): 3, 7–8.

genealogy.[68] The problem with this definition is that, without the racist hypothesis of heredity, it is hard to come up with another plausible mechanism by which cultures could ever become immutable and all-encompassing. It is, in other words, hard to avoid the conclusion that in fact nurture *cannot* function like nature.[69]

Stalin, for one, did acknowledge that national characters were not fixed once and for all but were developing and thus required an explanation. To be fair, the casual comments he made on this matter over the years were not unambiguous. They betray a certain fuzziness of thinking and little interest in consistency. Sometimes it seems as if national character is indeed a given rather than an *explanandum*. It is, for example, unclear whether in Stalin's perception the Jews had a mercantile character because they were employed in this sphere, or *vice versa*. The Germans were still the same foolhardy Teutons they had been 2,000 years ago: "You can't change the Germans."

Indeed, Stalin did on occasion suggest that race underlay the stability of popular character. In 1944, he told a Polish delegation that the Slavic peoples were close to each other in "*kin, blood*, language, character, deep humanity, and an understanding of the idea of progress," but he did not elaborate on this.[70] When, in November 1947, the French communist leader Maurice Thorez told him that the Belgian Communists were stronger in the French-speaking regions than in the Flemish parts of the country, Stalin casually remarked "that in the racial respect the Flemish are closer to the Germans." What, if anything, he implied by this remained unclear.[71]

As noted above, there is no doubt that Stalin believed in the concept and the reality of national character. In his 1913 fundamental text about the nation, he defined it as "neither racial nor tribal," but as an essentially modern formation. The nation was a "*historically formed, stable community of people*" which arose on the basis of a "*community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup, manifesting itself in a community of culture*." This definition left no doubt that without such a thing as national character,

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[68] Étienne Balibar, "Y a-t-il un 'neo-racisme'?" in *Race, nation, classe: Les identités ambigües*, ed. Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 1988), 34, 37. Ital. in orig.

[69] Weitz furthermore refers to George M. Frederickson, who argues that racism can be said to exist in all cases where ethnic groups assert their superiority vis-à-vis other groups who are thought "because of defective ancestry, to possess a set of socially relevant characteristics that disqualify them." See Fredrickson, *The Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, and Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 85. Because ancestry remains central to Frederickson's model, it does not completely sever the link with biological heredity. Race is only expanded to embrace any ethnic group with supposedly hereditary psycho-cultural traits.

[70] RGASPI f. 558, op. 4, d. 612, ll. 4–6. Emphasis added.

[71] "Zapis′ besedy tovarishcha I. V. Stalina s sekretarem TsK Frantsuzskoi kompartii Torezom," *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, no. 1 (1996): 11.

without a unique psychology of its own, a community could not even be considered a nation to begin with. What is more, national characters were shared by all members of the nation; they formed a "mentality [*dukhovnyi oblik*] of the people who come together in a nation." This "stable" mentality was furthermore transmitted over time, as a "psychological makeup [*psikhicheskii sklad*] that was formed among them from generation to generation as a result of identical conditions of existence."[72]

Nonetheless, for all its stability and scope, national character was not racially determined but remained "a reflection of the conditions of life" of a nation. Stalin described it as a "lump of impressions received from the surrounding environment." Consequently, national character did in his view "not constitute something given once and for all, but change[d] together with the conditions of life." The main example he discussed was that of the Jews. Their diasporic condition and their living a common economic life with the nations among whom they settled unavoidably affected their national character, which could not be preserved unchanged.[73] Two decades later, Stalin explained how habits were formed, taking within the nature–nurture debate a primitive position on the nurture side. In May 1933, he enlightened a foreign visitor as follows:

> I believe you should not put the question as if the workers of some nation would be incapable of mastering new technology. You can look at the matter from a racist point of view, like in America for instance, where the negroes are considered the "lowest people"—but they master technology no worse than whites. [This] is no biological question, no question of heredity, but a question of time: today they have not mastered [technology], tomorrow they will learn it and master it.[74]

Stalin often repeated that Marxism explains human phenomena from the point of view of sociology, not biology.[75] In his last years, the environmental

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[72] Stalin, *Sochineniia*, 2: 293, 296, 301. Though he did not admit it, Stalin copied the concept of "national character" straight from the Austro-Marxist texts he was attacking. See Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917–1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 39–40; Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary*, 153 ff; Georges Haupt, Michael Löwy, and Claudie Weill, *Les marxistes et la question nationale 1848–1914: Études et textes* (Paris: François Maspero, 1974), 60 n., 307, 386; and Erik van Ree, "Stalin and the National Question," *Revolutionary Russia* 7, 2 (1994): 226–27.

[73] Stalin, *Sochineniia*, 2: 296, 299–300.

[74] Ibid., 13: 264–65.

[75] For example, see Stalin's remarks at a meeting of the Military Council of the Commissariat of Defense in June 1937: Iurii G. Murin, "'Nevol´niki v rukakh germanskogo Reikhsvera': Rech´ I. V. Stalina v Narkomate oborony," *Istochnik*, no. 3 (1994): 74. In November 1944, Stalin noted that "Soviet patriotism" did not have "racial or nationalist prejudices for its basis" (*Sochineniia*, 2 [15]: 161). See also his remarks to the Romanian party leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej in 1947: Volokitina et al., eds., *Vostochnaia Evropa*, 565, 582. For other

basis of national characters was perhaps even more strongly emphasized. By putting his weight behind Trofim Lysenko's neo-Lamarckian biology, he supported a theory that underscored the malleability of human heredity. The idea of national communities with fixed psychological characteristics was decried as racist.[76]

If the differences between the West and East European nations were not racialist in nature, what then were the particular "conditions of life" that gave rise to these differences? To my knowledge, Stalin never systematically discussed this, but the drift of his thinking is clear enough. As he saw it, the capitalist system inevitably produced a commercial mentality that prioritized financial motives and thereby undermined the popular character. The mechanism operated at the level of individuals, too. Solomon Volkov quotes a typical anecdote of the leader at the 1933 All-Union Music Performance Competitions, when he handed over a large cash prize to an 11-year-old boy, commenting jokingly: "Well, Busia, now you're a capitalist and probably will become so conceited that you won't want to invite me to visit you."[77] In his November 1947 conversation with the French communist leader Thorez, he said, "when a person gets dollars his head will get empty. A full pocket makes for an empty head."[78] The delayed socio-economic development of Eastern Europe happily saved it from the psychological degradation that the advances of capitalism brought on the West.

To this one must add Stalin's personal insights into human psychology as another powerful element. When he noted that British and French resolve had been weakened due to the overconfidence generated by their victory in the Great War, he was reiterating a general truth that guided him throughout his life: success tends to make people rest on their laurels. The matter points to a deep paradox in Stalin's thinking. As a historical optimist, he felt that all nations had a holy obligation to develop powerful modern states. But success tended to make people overconfident. To be sure, Stalin did acknowledge that decadence was not inevitable. Under communism's developed "conditions of

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occasions when Stalin expressed himself against racism, see Nevezhin, *Zastol´nye rechi*, 258, 332.

[76] Nikolai Krementsov, *Stalinist Science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 204–7, 260–75, discusses Soviet attempts to reformulate pedagogy and human physiology in Lysenkoist terms. For Lysenkoism and racism, see also Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 314. Robert Tucker, *The Soviet Political Mind: Stalinism and Post-Stalin Change*, rev. ed. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), 143, 151 ff., discusses Stalinist "transformism" and the uses of Pavlovian physiology to underscore the idea that humans were infinitely malleable through the "conditioned reflex." See also Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 238 ff.

[77] Solomon Volkov, *Shostakovich and Stalin: The Extraordinary Relationship between the Great Composer and the Brutal Dictator* (London: Little, Brown, 2004), 131.

[78] "Zapis´ besedy … Stalina s … Torezom," 17.

life," demoralization was avoidable. But the "satiated" nations of the West would have been much more at risk of developing a flabby mentality and a faltering will than East Europeans, who could not afford complacency.

## The Question of Romanticism

As mentioned earlier, in commenting on other nations as well as on his own, Stalin did more than merely express his own private prejudices. He was rather putting those prejudices to work: by instilling national pride among the Soviet nations and their allies; by stimulating a spirit of heroic sacrifice among them; and by teaching them to despise their opponents as lacking in strength and moral fiber. National prejudice served purposes of political mobilization.

This raises the question as to the best terms in which to understand this mobilizing effort. In the past decade, important studies have analyzed Stalinism in terms of a repressive modernity. The system is presented as revealing the dark potential of rationalism and the Enlightenment, a new civilization dedicated to ruthless social engineering.[79] I continue to believe that Max Weber's analysis of modernity in terms of rational order and bureaucracy is particularly apropos here. What Stalin basically had in mind was to transform society into a closely integrated, efficient productive organism. The foundation of this structure was the Marxist concept of expropriation of capital and the subsequent welding together of the whole economy and population into one scientifically managed, planned whole.[80] But when it came to the ways of reaching these goals, Stalin went beyond ultra-rationalistic social engineering. In appealing to a sense of national superiority and community

[79] See, for example: Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*; David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Hoffmann and Yanni Kotsonis, eds., *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices* (Basingstoke, UK: MacMillan, 2000); Peter Holquist, "To Count, to Extract, to Exterminate: Population Statistics and Population Politics in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia," in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 111–44; Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). This approach owes much to Zygmunt Bauman's concept of the "gardening state" in his *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). James C. Scott's "high modernism" refers basically to the same phenomenon (*Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998]). The aspect of modernity that involves increasing control over the individual and expanding surveillance has been discussed both by postmodernists and scholars in the totalitarian school.

[80] See van Ree, *Political Thought*, 283–87.

and in furthering belief in the heroic, superhuman capabilities of his own people, he appealed to the *sentiments*.

Several authors have pointed to the romantic element in Stalinism.[81] David Priestland notes that, in employing mass mobilizing techniques that emphasized heroism, social commitment, will, and struggle, Stalin followed a romanticist approach.[82] Indeed, pointing to the romantic contribution to totalitarian systems has a respectable tradition.[83] The thesis has been criticized because of the undeniable and wide divergence of modern repressive systems from the original romantic movement and its intentions. Jacques Barzun sees the emphasis on the emotions as essential to the romantic spirit. The emotions are admired both in terms of "energy, moral enthusiasm, and original genius" and in terms of a deep sense of the tragic and of man's misery. Romanticism is furthermore characterized by a celebration of difference and irregularity and by its eccentric individualism. Barzun concludes that romanticism

> implies not only risk, effort, energy; it implies also creation, diversity, and individual genius. […] In their heroism and energy, then, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic regime *resembled* romantic undertakings. […] Once again we see why it is so plausible nowadays to call totalitarian imperialisms romantic […] but […] a program of mass achievement through coercion is not a new romanticism, for its premises, methods, and goal are precisely the opposite. […] That essential part of romanticism, the worth of the individual and of his testimony, could not be tolerated.[84]

In their definitions of romanticism, other authors have equally emphasized the two sides of emotional emphasis and individualism. John Halsted sees the anti-rationalistic "cult of the heart" as central. Furthermore, a

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[81] See, for example, Katerina Clark, *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World: From Nietzsche to Stalinism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

[82] David Priestland, "Stalin as Bolshevik Romantic: Ideology and Mobilisation, 1917–1939," in *Stalin: A New History*, 181–201. For an interpretation of Stalin and Stalinism in terms of a culture of violence, martyrdom, and "passion [*pafos*]," see Michael G. Smith, "Stalin's Martyrs: The Tragic Romance of the Russian Revolution," in *Redefining Stalinism*, ed. Harold Shukman (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 95–126.

[83] See for example, J. L. Talmon, *Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960); and Talmon, *The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution: The Origins of Ideological Polarisation in the Twentieth Century* (London: Secker and Warburg; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

[84] Jacques Barzun, *Classic, Romantic, and Modern* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), chaps. 1, 3; quotation 133–34 (ital. in orig.). For the problems of defining romanticism, see Arthur Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960), 228–53.

profound admiration for diversity expressed itself in "passionately individualistic" personal ideals.[85] The individualistic character of the romanticist ideal cannot be denied, but there is, nevertheless, something strained in Barzun's denial of the romantic side of "totalitarian imperialisms." The organic state was *also* the dominant entity in the romantic conservatism of such figures as Edmund Burke, Joseph de Maistre, and Adam Müller. In the left-wing romantic nationalism of Mazzini, Mickiewicz, and Michelet, moreover, the idea of inalienable human rights was preserved, yet the individual was nonetheless treated merely as a part of the greater national community.[86] To make a preponderant individualism a condition of political romanticism means to run the risk of eliminating its historical reality altogether.

Franklin Baumer remarks perceptively, "emphasis on community did not constitute a negation of romantic individuality." In the area of social thought, romanticism found an outlet not in the individualism of rights but in "a growing awareness of the differences between peoples and nations," and in the belief that the national community was necessary for individual fulfilment.[87] When translated to the political sphere, romanticism's individual emotion is transformed into a collective one. Collective objects of allegiance (be they monarchic or heroic leadership, tradition, religion, or unique national communities) are set up to replace the sensitive individual. Thus the longing for diversity and irregularity is preserved at a higher level, but the eccentric individualism of poetic romanticism is lost. Characteristically, the hyper-individualistic romantic, Rousseau, admired the closely integrated patriotic community as a political philosopher.

Baumer notes that political romantics "usually put up some sort of organic theory emphasizing men's emotional ties to a historically growing community and its institutions."[88] As Jacques Droz formulates it in his discussion of romanticism in political thought, "the State would impose itself

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[85] John B. Halsted, ed., *Romanticism* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 12–13, 36. In Franklin Baumer's interpretation, in Romantic Man "reason" was not preeminent but "took orders from the deepest feelings or intuitions." Because of the emphasis on feeling and the titanic will, there was an insistence on man's individuality and his freedom of will. "Romanticism (ca. 1780–ca. 1830)," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 4: 202. Maurice Cranston characterizes the romantic spirit by "its pursuit of the truths of feeling and imagination, its inwardness and subjectivity" (*The Romantic Movement* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1994], 138).

[86] See Halsted, *Romanticism*, 24–30; Baumer, "Romanticism," 203–4; and Jacques Droz, "Romanticism in Political Thought," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, 4: 205–8. For an analysis of the French revolutionary leadership type in terms of romanticism, see Howard Mumford Jones, *Revolution and Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

[87] Baumer, "Romanticism," 203.

[88] Ibid. For a similar approach, see Halsted, *Romanticism*, 24–30.

on its citizens through sentiments of devotion, faith, and love which it would instigate."[89] This is what I propose to take as the essential tenet of political romanticism: to proceed from the assumption that the state is held together not primarily by reason but by shared emotions.

Stalin was keenly aware of the mobilizational role of the emotions. In January 1929, he noted, for example, that "every period in a national development knows its pathos. In Russia we now have a pathos of construction."[90] Priestland quotes him to the effect that the "idealisation" of man and of the new social system could be used to create "the sort of romanticism that would move us forward."[91]

All this opens the way to acknowledging the romanticist side of the basically rationalist project that Stalinism was. Emotionally charged mobilization was considered a vital instrument to accomplish ultra-rationalistic goals. The heroic national stereotyping discussed in the present article formed part of a whole approach to politics in which unusually ambitious goals were brought within reach through a "fortress storming" mentality, to be applied in all fields of state life, from the economy and culture to military affairs. This mentality was believed to be instrumental in overcoming the otherwise insurmountable obstacles that blocked the road to the goal. Heroes—from Lenin and Stalin to tsarist generals, Stakhanovite workers, and gloriously fertile Mothers—were set up to lead the way and as inspiring examples epitomizing the national spirit.

## Conclusion

I have discussed Stalin's stereotyping of nations in terms of heroes and merchants from two angles. Historically, I believe it found its roots in his Georgian background. Leninism was a "heroic" ideology, too. Lenin, too, had a wide open eye for the strategic significance of the national question. In that sense, Leninism was not very different from what Stalin and his comrades later made of it. However, Stalin provided heroism and nationalism with a much more emotional and fierce outlook, peppered by primitive prejudices. He grew up in a society where premodern warrior traditions and the ethics of "honor and shame" were still alive, and where commercialism was identified with a hated Armenian elite. Not only did he belong to a national minority in the Russian empire, but he also became politically aware as an

[89] Droz, "Romanticism in Political Thought," 206.

[90] Stalin, *Sochineniia*, 13: 149. "Pathos" was for Stalin in an important criterion to judge the value of nations. In a speech on the *Kratkii kurs* in September 1938 he noted that German history was "very poor." The Germans had some "moments of pathos" but the story of their past did not compare to Russian history. See "I. V. Stalin v rabote nad 'Kratkim kursom istorii VKP(b)': Okonchanie," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 4 (2003): 5.

[91] Priestland, "Stalin as Bolshevik Romantic," 194.

adolescent while operating at the margins of a nationalist movement; and for years he had to work in an environment of intense inter-ethnic conflicts.

The second angle has been to emphasize the mobilizational function of heroic national stereotyping. Stalin hoped to urge the Russians and other peoples on to activity by imaging them as heroes with great martial qualities and their potential opponents as a decadent species spoiled by a profit-seeking mentality. In doing so, Stalin followed a "romanticist" strategy, if we define political romanticism in terms of tying citizens to the state through an appeal to the emotions.

The rise of the odd Stalinist compound of rationalistic goals and romanticist methods might be understood in the context of the specific historical circumstances of Soviet Russia, of a socio-economically backward country with a leadership that set itself the goal of making the country catch up with the West in the race to modernity. The Bolsheviks felt that, by following the worn, market-capitalist path of the West, it would be impossible to overcome the country's backwardness in a short period of time. For the project to stand any chance of success, new sources of development had to be tapped; an extraordinary effort at mobilization had to be made. The result was a peculiar strategy of an alternative, "heroic modernity"—modernity to be achieved through heroic means.

This perspective may, finally, help us understand the striking parallels between Stalinist and Conservative Revolutionary heroism and anti-commercialism. It seems to me that we should not in the first place be looking for Stalin's intellectual inspiration in Nietzsche or the Conservative Revolution. An intriguing link between him and German right-wing thinking does exist, but it is thin and indirect. The prerevolutionary Left Bolshevik tendency of Aleksandr Bogdanov and the "godbuilders" Anatolii Lunacharskii and Maksim Gor´kii has been described in the literature as "Nietzschean Marxism" and was directly influenced by the ideal of the superman.[92] Bernice Rosenthal and Katerina Clark show that this heroic ideology was influenced by the same Europe-wide *fin de siècle* phenomena that influenced the Conservative Revolution. There was a cultural shift toward fascination with war and the savage. Rosenthal observes Nietzschean influences among Russian symbolists, philosophers, and futurists as well as

[92] George L. Kline, *Religious and Anti-Religious Thought in Russia: The Weil Lectures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 103, 106, 114, 119; Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ed., *Nietzsche in Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 14–15, and chaps. by Mary Louise Loe ("Gorky and Nietzsche: The Quest for a Russian Superman," 251–73), Zenovia A. Sochor ("A. A. Bogdanov: In Search of Cultural Liberation," 293–311), and A. L. Tait (Lunacharsky: A 'Nietzschean Marxist?'" 275–92); Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World*, 73, 78, 81.

Marxists.[93] Clark used the term "romantic anticapitalism" to capture the trend of European artistic circles rejecting commercialism and the search for comfort.[94]

In the mid-1900s the young Stalin was for a time close to the Bogdanovites.[95] That he felt attracted to them is, indeed, significant and understandable in the light of the vitalistic heroism showing through in his earliest publications. But, as far as we know now, neither then nor later in life did he ever show an interest in either Nietzsche or the Conservative Revolution.[96] Direct intellectual influences would be very hard to discover.

It seems to me that, rather than being the fruit of ideological interaction, the remarkably analogous Stalinist and Conservative Revolutionary national stereotyping, and their common usage of hero and merchant archetypes, represent a case of similar responses to similar circumstances. From the perspective of radical nationalists, the situation of Germany and Soviet Russia was defined as one of inferiority relative to the advanced West, from which one could escape only through extraordinary mobilizational means. In this unfavorable situation, the only possible way to catch up with the West was to cultivate a spirit of battle and sacrifice, rooting out the profiteering mentality that made the nation waste precious energy in the futile search for comfort.

In the German case, there was no socio-economic backwardness to be overcome. It was the deep national trauma of the lost war, to be followed by the establishment of overwhelming Western military superiority after the Great War, that locked Germany in a collision course with the West. Realizing that they could not defeat the Western powers without a powerful army, most of

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[93] See Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World*, 30–31, 33, 42, 45, 95, 101, 151–53; Evelyn Bristol, "Blok between Nietzsche and Soloviev," in Rosenthal, ed., *Nietzsche in Russia*, 149–59; Virginia Bennett, "Esthetic Theories from *The Birth of Tragedy* in Andrei Bely's Critical Articles, 1904–1908,"in Rosenthal, ed., *Nietzsche in Russia*, 162–79.

[94] Clark, *Petersburg*, introduction. Compare Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 24.

[95] See Robert C. Williams, *The Other Bolsheviks: Lenin and His Critics, 1904–1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 119 ff; Robert Himmer, "On the Origin and Significance of the Name Stalin," *Russian Review* 45, 3 (1986): 269–86; and van Ree, "Stalin's Bolshevism." Hans Günther observes a continuity running from Maksim Gor´kii's early works, with their contrasting of the heroic to petty bourgeois, slavish, and decadent culture, to the later Stalinist hero-cult. *Der Sozialistische Übermensch: M. Gor´kij und der Sowjetische Heldenmythos* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1993), 8–9; 14–30, 46–58, 89–90.

[96] Among the 390 titles that are preserved from Stalin's library and contain his handwritten notes, Nietzsche and Sombart are not represented. See RGASPI f. 558, op. 3. The cards for the remaining 5,500 titles of books without his notes were preserved in the former library of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism. Among these there are two books that might be relevant, namely a 1922 translation of Oswald Spengler's 1920 *Preussentum und Sozialismus* and several volumes of Sombart's 1916 *Der Moderne Kapitalismus* (1930–31). But even in this large collection of books there is no Nietzsche. We may safely assume that, whatever indirect influence Nietzsche may have had on Stalin, the latter was not overly interested in the former's thinking.

the romantically inclined German Conservative Revolutionaries embraced modern technological rationality.[97] At the same time, they continued to regard heroic mobilization as the other crucial condition to escape from their predicament. The superior Western powers could only be overcome by bringing into play the extra moral factor of Germany's militaristic tradition. Like the Stalinists, they felt that only the warrior mentality could sufficiently focus the nation to give it a chance of victory. Perhaps Stalin would secretly have been pleasantly surprised by Sombart's *Händler und Helden*, but he did not need to have read the book to reach the same conclusions.

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[97] For discussions of the Conservative Revolution and modernity, especially regarding views of technology, see Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*; Breuer, *Anatomie*, 70–78; Sieferle, *Die Konservative Revolution*. See also Armin Mohler, *Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland. 1918–1932* (Stuttgart: Friedrich Vorwerk Verlag, 1950); and Roger Woods, *The Conservative Revolution in the Weimar Republic* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2001).