

Sources. Stalin, Molotov, Kaganovich and Russia

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Stalin's correspondence with Molotov and Kaganovich is published

ROBERT TUCKER DESCRIBED STALIN as 'Indefatigable in his striving to function as a leader' and, certainly, no leading Bolshevik took so seriously the problem of how to rule the USSR. The two to three month vacations he took at his dacha in Sochi on the Black Sea coast were a major opportunity to think out his political positions on men and events. There was no let up in his control of affairs. Because there was no reliable telephone link between Sochi and Moscow until 1935, Stalin communicated his political will through confidential letters and coded telegrams to his key henchmen Molotov and Kaganovich. Thanks to the Yale University Press series 'Annals of Communism' there are now two valuable new sources: *Stalin's letters to Molotov*, which cover chiefly the years 1925-30 and *The Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence 1931-1936*, effectively their continuation. In the 1920s Molotov remained in Moscow and acted as Stalin's deputy in the party. Kaganovich took over that role when Molotov was appointed chairman of Sovnarkom, the supreme government body, in December 1930. The first collection includes only Stalin's own letters but in the second Kaganovich's replies to Stalin are included and this enhances the value of the Stalin correspondence.

Molotov 1890-1986

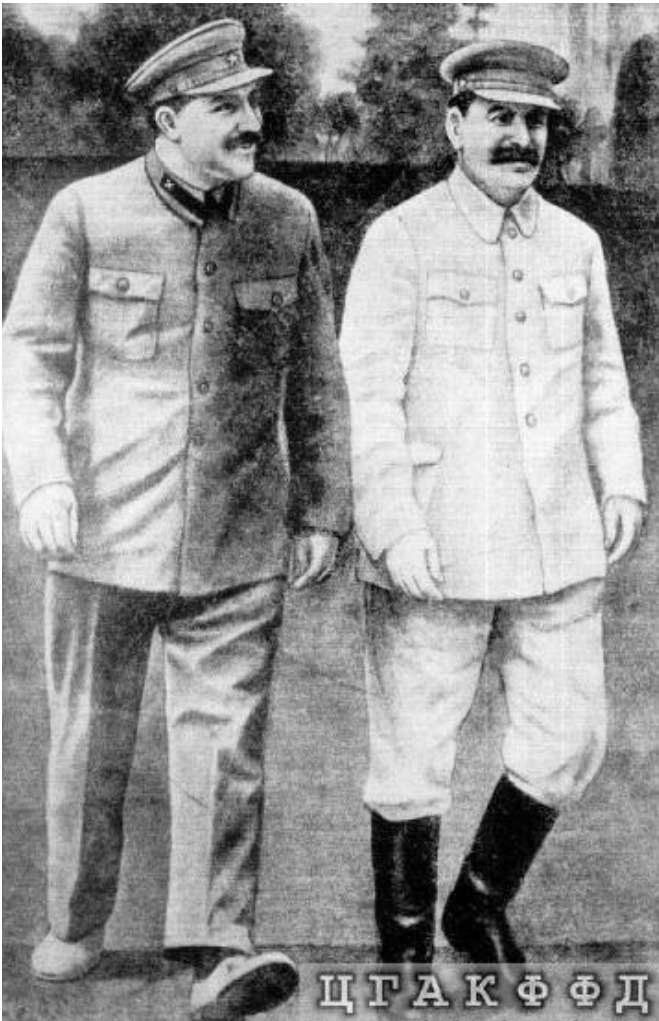
Vyacheslav Molotov, born Skriabin, joined the Bolsheviks aged 16. His revolutionary name meant 'the hammer', though it was more crudely translated as 'stone arse' and he was known as 'the runner' by the tsarist secret police, the Okhrana, because he walked so fast. Molotov first met Stalin in 1912, and Simon Sebag Montefiore describes him as 'almost love struck': 'They shared Marxist fanaticism, a head for boozing, a Robespierrian belief in terror, a vindictive inferiority-complex and a belief in Stalin's mastery.' Molotov was Stalin's deputy when Stalin became General Secretary of the party in 1922. Lenin may have called Molotov 'the best filing clerk in Russia', but to Stalin he was much more. In Wheatcroft's view, 'The intense Stalin/Molotov consultative relationship was the major constant feature of the Stalinist decision-making system.' In the power struggle Molotov led the successful defence against Zinoviev and Kamenev at the 14th Party Congress (1925) and the attack on Bukharin in 1928-9. He was appointed the equivalent of Prime Minister in December 1930 when Rykov was dismissed. Molotov played a major role in pushing through collectivisation and the terror in the 1930s, signing many death warrants. Foreign Minister from March 1939 until 1949 he signed the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Devoted to his wife, Polina, he could not save her from being arrested in December 1948; she was released on Stalin's death. Indeed, Stalin's death in 1953 probably saved Molotov from being purged. Molotov remained an unrepentant Stalinist



Molotov and Stalin. Molotov was a primary lieutenant to Stalin until his own death in 1986, convinced that the terror was a correct and necessary policy.

Kaganovich 1893-1991

Lazar Kaganovich's origins were proletarian and he was largely self-educated. He joined the party in 1911, and Lenin sent him to Nizhny Novgorod in 1918 to oversee mass terror and to extinguish the threat of counter-revolution. It proved a formative experience for this abrasive, energetic and authoritarian man, who emerged as an extremely effective organiser. Appointed to the party secretariat in Moscow, he played a key role in the development of the nomenklatura system for the central appointment of state and party officials which contributed to Stalin's power base. He followed closely every shift in Stalin's line and was one of the first to embrace the Left turn in 1928. He enforced the Urals Siberian method and then collectivisation ruthlessly. In July 1930 he became a full member of the Politburo and, when he became Stalin's deputy in party affairs, occupied third place after Stalin and Molotov in the Soviet hierarchy. He had become by 1932-3 the party's leading troubleshooter and was given many of the most unpleasant tasks. Stalin called him 'Iron Lazar'. Molotov, with whom his relations were difficult, called him a '200 per cent Stalinist'. A ruthless suppressor of internal dissent and staunch believer in centralisation and strict control, he played a full part in the Great Terror. His career went into decline after 1941.



Stalin and Kaganovich, probably from a publicity poster

What the letters tell us

They show Stalin's belief that organisational issues were decisive, 'since the organisational issue signifies the *implementation*, the *fulfilment* of the requirements of the correct policy', and they show, also, Stalin's angry and vindictive nature. In one letter to Kaganovich, the Zinovieites and Trotskyites are referred to as scum three times in four lines. Force, pressure and checking up pervade the letters: 'you cannot daydream and sleep when you are in power!' There are regular instructions to fulfil decisions with 'unrelenting firmness and ruthlessness', and attacks on the bureaucracy and the defence of departmental interest. In a letter to Kaganovich in July 1932 Stalin writes:

There are abominations occurring in the supply of metal for the Stalingrad Tractor Plant (STP) and the Moscow and Gorky auto plants. It is a disgrace that the windbags at the People's Commissariat of Heavy Industry have still not gotten around to straightening out the supply system. Let the Central Committee place under its *continuous* supervision, without delay, the plants that are supplying them and make up for this disruption.

In another, the following year, Stalin writes:

The situation with artillery is very bad. Sergo

(Ordzhonikidze) should be flogged for entrusting a major section to two or three of his favourite fools, showing that he is prepared to sacrifice the state's interests to these fools.

In the passages that follow, two particular issues will be considered. First, Stalin's struggles with opponents and, second, Stalin and economic crisis, 1930-2.

The struggle against opponents

The letters of 1926 show that Stalin's main concern was the struggle against the united opposition and that he had identified Zinoviev as a more serious threat than any previous opposition. As Lih writes in his introduction, the letter of 25 June to Molotov, Rykov, Bukharin and other friends shows that Stalin 'was no amateur at political infighting', he was 'not making any secret of his tactics ... eliminating a rival ... but also working toward a goal of preserving a united leadership team'. He analysed the situation and devised a course of action in familiar numbered paragraphs:

- 3) [the Zinoviev group] ... has become the leader of all the splitting tendencies in the party.
- 4) This role fell to Zinoviev's group because a) it is better acquainted with our methods than any other group, b) it is stronger in general than the other groups and has control of the Comintern Executive Committee [Zinoviev is the Chairman], which represents a serious force; c) because of this it behaves more arrogantly than any other group providing examples of 'boldness' and 'determination' to those with other tendencies;
- 5) Therefore the Zinoviev group is now the most harmful, and the blow must be struck against this group
- 6) ... Zinoviev should be removed from the Politburo ...
- 9) I assure you no one will feel sorry for Zinoviev because they know him well.

Stalin finished by referring to the ban on factions and arguing they should change the plan to concentrate on Zinoviev and then break the others individually, which 'will be better at this stage'.

The correspondence with Kaganovich includes the end of Zinoviev in the first show trial in August 1936. Stalin had prepared it personally, and then went on vacation just before leaving Kaganovich in charge. Kaganovich reported to Stalin on the proceedings in detail daily and emphasised the reaction of the foreign press, who had been invited on Stalin's orders. Stalin insisted after the trial that the proceedings should be translated into foreign languages, 'as soon as possible and widely disseminated abroad'. Two separate letters in cipher on 23 August show how Stalin continued to micromanage from afar and prepare for further assaults on former opposition leaders.

First, the draft of the verdict is essentially correct, but needs stylistic polishing Third, we should strike out the concluding words: 'the verdict is final

belonging to *co-operatives* and *collective farms*. The thefts are organised by kulaks and other *anti-social* elements who are trying to *undermine our new system* ... make the theft (or stealing) of property in the above-mentioned categories punishable by a *minimum* of ten years' imprisonment, and as a rule, by *death* Without these (and similar) Draconian *socialist* measures, it is impossible to uphold and strengthen our new system.

We must not delay, it seems to me, the promulgation of such a law.

Grain collections were Stalin's greatest concern. He was relentless. In a letter, sent 13 September 1934, Stalin criticised Kaganovich sharply for his proposal to reduce deliveries from Ukraine, 'a gross violation of the decisions of the Sovnarkom and the CC (Central Committee)'.

No more cuts be allowed for the *collective-farm* and *peasant sector* We demand *unconditional* fulfilment of the plan, and those regions that fail to fulfil the plan be held accountable by the CC for *poor work* and *be cited in the press*.

22 August 1935

You must push hard on the grain procurements and on getting the [grain] loans repaid. You must especially push the Ukrainians who have been corrupted by our concessions, as well as the Omsk region and other eastern regions. Send Kleiner to the Omsk region, somebody else to the Bashkir region and push hard.

Thus the language after 1933 became more laconic and imperative and Kaganovich's replies less independent and more flattering. Kaganovich was constantly asking for Stalin's opinion and on 28 August 1934 he wrote gushingly:

Your warning alarm bell is not only timely but it is an outright act of salvation for the cause of the successful completion of grain procurements.

Conclusion

The letters show Stalin dealing with the whole range of problems facing a ruler of Russia with far more attention to foreign policy issues than previously thought. The extracts quoted here are typical in the way they show a ruthless, 'hands-on' leader who viewed government, in Lih's words, as 'an eternal battle in which noble intentions were continually thwarted by the ill will of saboteurs'. His solution was usually pressure and force. He was a vindictive man who did not forget, and the brief biographies at the back of the Kaganovich volume reveal just how many of those who Stalin criticised in the letters were repressed. Much of the correspondence in 1936 is devoted to political repression. However, for all his power over life and death, Stalin was unable to make people do what he wanted them to do and there is an angry frustration in many of the letters. The correspondence came to an end in October 1936. Stalin did

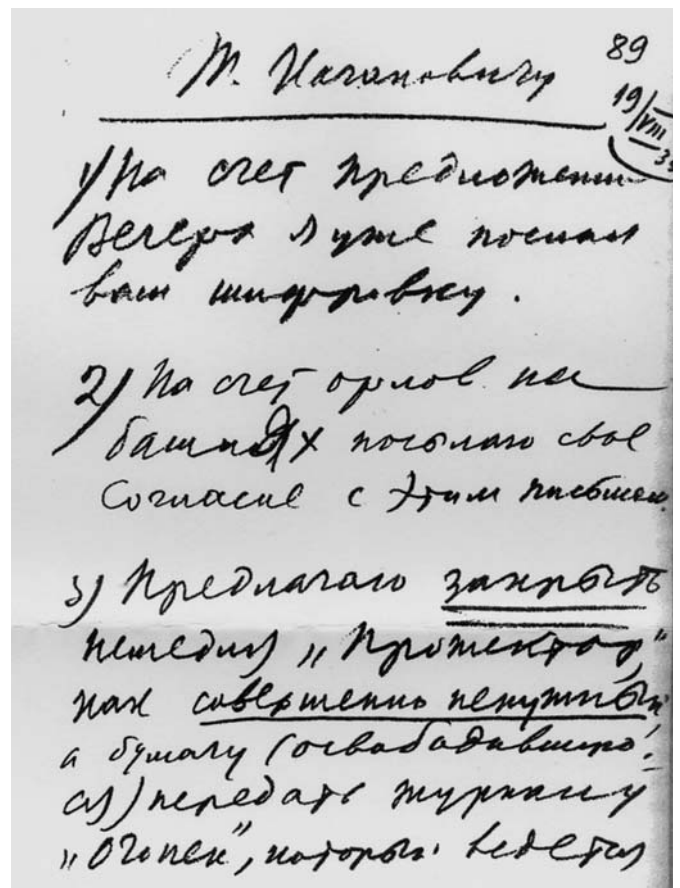


Stalin's dacha at Sochi as it is today. Sochi is on the Black Sea

not go on holiday in the south until the end of the Second World War and he never again engaged in such detailed correspondence with his colleagues.

FURTHER READING: Ed. Lars Lih, Oleg Naumov and Oleg Khlevniuk, *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, Yale University Press 1995; R.W. Davies, Oleg Khlevniuk, E.A. Rees (ed), *The Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence 1931-1936*, Yale University Press, 2003. Ian Thatcher has written a useful review article on Stalin and Stalinism in *Europe-Asia Studies*, September 2004.

Chris Corin taught History at Worthing College. He is the author, with Terry Fiehn, of *Communist Russia under Lenin and Stalin*, John Murray, 2002.



The first page of a letter from Stalin to Kaganovich, August 1935