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CRITICAL FORUM: CRUCIBLES OF POWER

The Smolensk Story

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Abstract

This article contributes to a journal discussion of Michael David-Fox's new book, Crucible of Power. The book brings together the major phenomena of the 20th century: Stalinism, Nazism, WWII and the Holocaust. Emphasizing the richness of material and thought, the article focuses on such key points of the book as the dilemma of choice in people's decisions to either resist or collaborate, the role of Nazi ideology in the self-destruction of the Nazi regime and the synergy of waves of colossal Nazi crimes. In its critical comments, the article notes a marginalization of economic issues. To further conceptualize the socio-economic narrative presented in the book, the article proposes a reinterpretation of the nature of the Stalinist/Soviet economy as a symbiosis of state regulations and the market, thereby challenging the rigid bipolar vision entrenched in Cold War terminology and narratives.

Keywords: Stalinism; Nazism; WWII; Holocaust; Soviet economy

Crucibles of Power: Smolensk under Stalinist and Nazi Rule by David Michael-Fox deserves every praise for its wealth of material and thought. Covering a historical period that determined the fate of not only the USSR but the entire world, and drawing on an impressive base of sources, this book brings together the major phenomena of the twentieth century: Stalinism, Nazism, World War II and the Holocaust, evoking Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* as one of the best literary embodiments of these tragedies. The fact that the Smolensk region changed hands during the war, and was sometimes "shared," with one part under the Soviets and the other under the Nazis, allowed the author to compare the functioning of the Stalinist and Nazi regimes not as separate geographical and chronological entities, as is often done, but in their direct interaction in one place and time.

The book integrates approaches from many disciplines: political, social, cultural, economic, oral histories, gender/sexuality, resistance, behavioral and everyday studies, and more. As a drop of water reflects the world, this regional study reflects major themes and conceptual debates of the current historiography and contributes to many of them. Among the conceptual issues discussed are: "banal nationalism/Stalinism/Nazism," the role of women in WWII, "path dependency" and other factors in people's choices made during dramatic events, the causes and effects of Stalin's Great Terror, nature/agents of power, concepts of "little Stalins" and "Stalinism without Stalin," the phenomenon of imposture, synergies of waves of Nazi violence, Soviet involvement in WWII as the Great Patriotic war vs. the Civil war, the successes and failures of Soviet social engineering, the reasons for ultimate Soviet victory and German defeat, factors of survival, adaptability and the regenerational capacity of the Stalinist regime, the notion of a "weak dictator," internal vs. external colonization of the regimes, the notion of culturedness (*kul'turnost'*), post-war myths of the

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war ... and the list goes on. Among this wealth of facts and concepts, the following themes stood out for me as the highlights of the book.

The Dilemma of Choice

The life trajectories of major characters that traverse the book from the prologue to the epilogue made one of its best parts. The most puzzling are the life choices made by Boris Men′shagin, a Soviet defense lawyer who during the Great Terror was not afraid to appeal to Vyshinskii on behalf of defendants facing fabricated charges but later agreed to become the mayor of occupied Smolensk and thereby stained himself with crimes, this time the Nazi's. In his final fateful decision, made in safety after Germany's defeat, he surrendered to the Soviets on his own initiative believing (wrongly) that they had captured his wife and daughter.[1]

As the author notes, it is difficult not to ask yourself: if caught between Nazi mass murder and the brutality of the Stalinist regime, "What would I have done?" The deepest depths of the human soul, which at decisive moments manifest themselves either as nobility or villainy, often to the surprise of the human himself, are worthy of the pen of Fedor Dostoevskii. The author's analysis reveals the factors that determined people's decisions to either resist or collaborate: the whims of circumstances, pre-war experience, Soviet upbringing and propaganda, nationality, class, age, political orientation, or simply geography. Moreover, these very decisions themselves became a factor of "path dependency": "the road chosen was difficult to swerve from" (16). But as the book shows, people were never truly choiceless. The lives of underground activists like Liudmila Madziuk, as well as the life of Vasilii Maslennikov—a peasant, village teacher, partisan, and then POW who, being in a Nazi concentration camp, chose not to collaborate—are proof of this.[2] Between these extremes of heroic and diabolical choices lay a vast grey zone of human strategy and tactics.

Ideology as a Suicidal Function of the Nazi Regime

Many scholars have emphasized the mobilization potential of Stalinism and its centralized state economy. *Crucibles of Power* supports this view. The Stalinist regime demonstrated a certain degree of practicality, adaptability, and ability for the ideological compromises necessary to win the war, primarily by loosening controls on society and allowing greater initiative and freedom.

On the other side of the front line, as the book shows, some representatives of the Nazi leadership and the occupation administration in Smolensk turned to the "Russian question" and sought to create a functional occupation regime, limiting mass violence in order to increase the number of local collaborators, and negotiating concessions to the Russian and Belarusian anti-Soviet and anti-Stalin nationalists who flooded Smolensk under the Nazis. However, the unwillingness of Hitler and the conservative part of his leadership to make compromises and deviate from their racial ideology of total exclusion, mass genocide, and economic exploitation, and to recognize "subhumans" as "little brothers" contributed to the growth of anti-Nazi sentiments even among those who initially welcomed the Germans on Soviet soil. Victory required a radical revision of Nazi policy towards the Soviet population and the full use of nationalist movements, but Nazi ideology

[1] Men′shagin's wife and newborn daughter fled to Munich and, in the early 1950s, settled in the US while he spent many years in Soviet captivity.

[2] As a result, Maslennikov spent years in captivity and forced labor in Saxony, and nearly died from sickness and malnutrition (243).

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prevented this, contrary to the needs of the war thus testifying to the self-destructive nature of the regime. Communist ideology, being more inclusive than the Nazi racial order, proved more attractive and effective in recruiting supporters.

The Synergies of Violence

The author devotes many pages to the Holocaust, revealing its stages, dynamics, and scale in the Smolensk region. He achieves even more by showing the synergy of the waves of colossal Nazi crimes that overlapped, interacted, and reinforced each other, leading to further escalation of mass atrocities (everyday violence, repression against communists, partisans, women, children, and others). The "Final Solution"—the extermination of Soviet Jews—was carried out in conjunction with other forms of violence. In this synergy, the mass extermination of Soviet prisoners of war in death marches and concentration camps—an understudied episode of WWII—is horrifying in its scale: "As of March 1942, approximately 2 million Soviet POWs had perished in camps. By the war's end in 1945, 5.7 million POWs had been taken and up to 3.3 million had perished" (177). The sheer scale of this war crime calls into question the limits of the existing definitions of genocide and crimes against humanity. "Even if it was not genocide or genocidal," the author concludes, "it was a war crime of genocidal proportions" (188).[3]

Critical Remarks

The richness of the material and the chronological scope of the book allow for a panoramic view of the historical period, even within the framework of one region. However, attempts to embrace the immensity are fraught with consequences. The extensive multi-plot narrative sometimes appears mosaic and fragmentary; important conceptual issues are scattered and buried in the abundance of facts and events or are noted only in passing. One possible solution to this problem could be special theoretical chapters placed in the appropriate places in the book.

As a socio-economic historian, I was particularly interested in economic issues, especially since the author views power as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. However, the economic dimension of power is one of the least developed in the book. The scant bibliographic references to the economic literature are indicative in this regard. The book provides some insights on the Soviet and Nazi economies (economic factors and consequences of (de)collectivization, dekulakization, WWII; supply, consumption, and shortages; the German agrarian order in the occupied territories; comparative levels of resource extraction from the countryside by Soviet and Nazi authorities; people's economic strategies/economic crimes) and offers some conceptualization. Thus, Soviet collectivization and the Nazi occupation regime are understood, respectively, as internal and external colonization with specific economic goals. However, most of the economic information in the book is fragmentary and requires further consideration. In the final part of this review, I would like to discuss the further conceptual implications of the economic narrative presented in the book.

Frenemies: State Centralization and Market

According to the author's central concept, power is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional phenomenon, "more complex than Stalin or the Kremlin acting alone" (10). This

[3] The genocidal potential of the German treatment of prisoners of war was undermined after 1941–42 only by the need to recruit collaborators on a wider scale (189).

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understanding of power is applicable to its economic dimension as well. The author shows that not only authorities at all levels, but also ordinary people constituted an active economic force. Grassroots activity became the driving force behind the development of the legal and black markets, the social fabric of which was woven from people's strategies for survival and enrichment in an economy of chronic shortages, rationing, and recurrent famines.

The existence of the market and entrepreneurial initiative in the Soviet economy indicates that the state-centralized system was not monolithic. One observation on the interrelations between state centralization and the market made in the book was of particular interest to me.[4] The author explains the scale and success of imposture by "the fact that *the illegal "shadow economy" paralleled and intersected with legal state-run structures* ... Political imposture mimicked and exploited official ideological and cultural norms, *just as the shadow economy fed off state economic structures"* (315–16, emphasis is mine). These insights, although fragmentary in the book, are important and consistent with contemporary economic literature and deserve more attention.

The latest literature on the market in the Stalinist economy—*Crucibles of Power* contributes to it—fills the historiographical gap between the more developed market studies of NEP and the Brezhnev period.[5] It documents that the state centralized regulations and the market functioned under Stalin not as two separate economies that paralleled and occasionally intersected or overlapped but in symbiosis, forming one single whole: the Soviet economy.[6] The state centralized system could not survive without the market. This explains

[4] It concerns a certain Golovachev/Matveenko, an identity thief posing as a hero of Stalingrad, who made a successful, albeit short-lived, career in liberated Smolensk (see his story in Ch. 9).

[5] For the most recent historiographical analysis see: Elena Osokina, "Phoenix from the Ashes: The Market in the Stalinist 'Non-Market' Economy," forthcoming in a "state of the field" issue of *Kritika: Explorations in Russian Eurasian History*. For the earlier *historiographical analysis* see: Michael Ellman, "The Political Economy of Stalinism in the Light of the Archival Revolution," *Journal of Institutional Economics* 4, no. 1 (April 2008): 99–125; Paul Gregory and Mark Harrison, "Allocation under Dictatorship: Research in Stalin's Archives," *Journal of Economic Literature* 43, no. 3 (September 2005): 721–61; Sh. Merl′, "Sovetskaia ekonomika. Sovremennye otsenki," *Ekonomicheskaia Istoriia. Ezhegodnik. 2016/2017* (Moscow 2017): 303–49; and the special economic issues of: *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2014); *Histoires Économiques de l'Union Soviétique / Economic Histories of The Soviet Union*, special issue of *Cahiers du monde russe* 64, no. 1 (January-March 2023); *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 43, no. 3 (October 2016); and *Hors plan: L'économie informelle en URSS*, special issue of *Cahiers du monde russe* 59, no. 2/3 (April-September 2018). On the legal/black market and entrepreneurship: Juliette Cadiot, "L'affaire Hain: Kyiv, hiver 1952," in *Hors plan: L'économie informelle en URSS*, special issue of *Cahier du monde russe* 59, no. 2/3 (April-September 2018): 255–88; I.V. Govorov and S.B. Kokuev, "Tenevaia ekonomika i bor′ba s nei v Leningrade v 1930–1940-kh gg.," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 12 (December 2008): 24–35; James Heinzen, "Soviet Entrepreneurs in the Late Socialist Shadow Economy: The Case of the Kyrgyz Affair," *Slavic Review* 79, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 544–65; Julie Hessler, *A Social History of Soviet Trade: Trade Policy, Retail Practices, and Consumption, 1917–1953* (Princeton, 2004); Oleg Khlevniuk, *Korporatsiia samozvantsev. Tenevaia ekonomika i korruptsiia v stalinskom SSSR* (Moscow, 2023); V.A. Osipov, *Chastnaia khoziaistvennaia deiatel′nost′ v sovetskoi ekonomike v 1945–1960 gg. (Na materialakh Zapadnoi Sibiri)* (Kemerovo, 2003); Elena Osokina, *Za fasadom "stalinskogo izobiliia." Raspredelenie i rynok v snabzhenii naseleniia v gody industrializatsii, 1927–1941* (Moscow, 1998); A.A. Pass, *Drugaia ekonomika: Proizvodstvennye i torgovye kooperativy na Urale v 1939–1945 godakh* (Cheliabinsk, 2002); and others. On the state's use of economic levers: Giovanni Cadioli, "'Economic levers' in the Soviet Union in the late 1940s," *Cahiers du monde russe* 64, no. 1 (January 2023): 135–70; Yakov Feygin, *Building a Ruin: The Cold War Politics of Soviet Economic Reform* (Cambridge, MA, 2024); Kristy Ironside, *A Full-Value Ruble: The Promise of Prosperity in the Postwar Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA, 2021); and others.

[6] In this regard, the terms "second economy," "parallel economy," "other economy," or "shadow economy" can be misleading, since they create an image of two separate economies—state-centralized and market-based—developing alongside or separately from each other, rather than in a symbiotic union. Although not the same, state centralization and the market were two elements of the same Soviet economy. Otherwise, the question arises: if there were, in the USSR, two separate economies, the first (state-centralized) and the second (market, not directly controlled by the state), which of them should be called the Soviet economy and what is the Soviet economy, after all?

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why, despite constant attempts to strengthen centralization, Stalin's leadership with the same constancy came to recognize the need for a market, and why the market, even under the most severe repressions, did not disappear (it went underground) and with the ease of economic dictate resurged like the legendary Phoenix from the ashes.

While recognizing people as a powerful force in market development, the new scholarship also shows that the state played a more significant role in the market than previously thought. This role was not limited to anti-market repression and partial market reforms. When the situation required it, the Stalinist state acted as a large-scale entrepreneur and market speculator.[7] This adds another dimension to the phenomenon: Stalinism as a network of socio-economic institutions based on a variety of marketing strategies.

The presence of both elements—state regulation and the market—does not make western capitalist and Soviet economies identical. In different historical conditions, these elements formed distinctive entities. While not twins, the western and Soviet economic systems were nevertheless related. Their similarities were determined by their belonging to the same era, the requirements for an efficient economy, and a common goal: the creation of modern industrial urban societies. Their difference was not that the Soviet economy lacked a market but in the different ratio between state regulations and the market, as well as the different balance of the legal and illegal market sectors.

Documenting the vital role of the market in the Stalinist economy, new scholarship rejects its definition as "non-market" and challenges the bipolar vision imbedded in Cold War terminology and narratives that presented Soviet and western economies as antipodes: capitalism meant the market, socialism its negation. The terms "capitalism" understood as "market" and "socialism" understood as "plan and no-market" served the political and ideological goals of the Cold war, alienating the USSR and the west during their hostility. A closer look at how the Stalinist economy *really* worked produced new narratives, *Crucibles of Power* included. The understanding of the Stalinist economy as a symbiosis of state regulation and the market requires a rethinking of traditional terminology with its entrenched old narratives, as well as a rereading of the economic history of Stalinism and a richer conceptual diversity in the economic understanding of Soviet socialism.[8]

In conclusion, there is no doubt that readers will benefit from *Crucibles of Power*'s wealth of facts and themes and its thought-provoking ideas.

[7] On the state's accumulation, by market mechanisms, of currency valuables for Soviet industrialization, see: Elena Osokina, *Stalin's Quest for Gold: The Torgsin Hard-Currency Shops and Soviet Industrialization* (Ithaca, NY, 2021). On the role of Stalin's leadership in creating a world market for Russian religious art, see: Elena Osokina, *Nebesnaiia golubizna angel'skikh odezhd. Sud'ba proizvedenii drevnerusskoi zhivopisi, 1920–1930-e gody* (Moscow, 2018).

[8] These conclusions of market studies of Stalinism are consistent with recent social and socio-cultural studies that emphasize the non-monolithic nature of Soviet socialism, "disrupt the persistent master-narrative of the twentieth century as a radical opposition between socialist and capitalist modernities" and require reconceptualization of the Soviet socialist project and critical assessment of what we mean under "socialist" and "Soviet." Anna Krylova, "Imagining Socialism in the Soviet century," *Social History* 42, no. 3 (August 2017): 321.

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