Stambler, Russian History Essay 1

The various authors which we read in class present differing arguments and opinions as to how someone like Stalin was able to obtain unlimited power over the Russian Empire. Brooks and Chernyavskiy argue that Leninism paved the way towards Stalinism. However, Khlevniuk and Zubok highlight how Stalin excelled at micromanaging people to ensure his absolute power. Brooks argues that Stalin’s effective use of the media and his cult of personality helped him secure total control over the Soviet population. Furthermore, Brooks, Zubok, and Khlevniuk largely agree that the Russian sense of the “Eurasian problem” paved the way towards Stalin’s rise.

Brooks and Chernyavskiy argue that Stalin’s rise to power was an outgrowth of Leninism. Lenin, despite being more of an ideologue than Stalin, was responsible for consolidating Bolshevik power, which paved the way for Stalin to become dictator. Lenin believed that only a small educated group of elites should rule over a communist state. According to Brooks and Chernyavskiy (p 73), when the Bolsheviks seized power following the October Revolution, Lenin immediately began cracking down on opposing parties. Brooks and Chernyavskiy also state that Lenin viewed democracy as a threat to Bolshevik rule. In 1921, he banned inner party factions. Moreover, Khlevniuk and Brooks and Chernyavskiy agree that Lenin was distrustful of his subordinates, whom he felt were gaining too much power. Brooks and Chernyavskiy conclude that Stalin felt similar distrust towards his subordinates.

Brooks and Chernyavskiy also state that Lenin embraced violence and thus created the idea that the Soviet Union is always at war. They state that Stalin later used this tone during WWII to rally the masses. Brooks and Chernyavskiy argue that Lenin used the “White” rebellions to implement his War Communism plan of forced collectivization and wage a brutal war. Khelvniuk, despite giving less credit to Leninism for Stalin’s rise to power, concedes (p 119) that Stalin was inspired by War Communism when he implemented the Five Year Plan to wage war on the peasantry. In addition, Lenin banned free speech. Anyone who spoke out or was perceived to be against the Bolsheviks was deemed an “enemy of the people” and indiscriminately executed by the secret police, the Cheka. Teffi, (p 147)confirms that the Soviet government’s tight monitoring of its people created an atmosphere of fear. Both Brooks, and Brooks and Chernyavskiy believe that Lenin’s system allowed Stalin to gain unprecedented power.

Khlevniuk argues that Stalin’s organizational skills helped him gain unlimited power. By contrast, Brooks points out that Stalin mismanaged the Soviet economy and the war effort at the start of WWII. Nevertheless, he agrees with Khlevniuk that Stalin was an expert on micromanaging his subordinates and colleagues. Khlevniuk describes (p 91) how during the years of collective leadership, Stalin was able to pit his fellow Bolsheviks against one another to further advance his status. Zubok agrees with Khlevniuk that Stalin was a realist when it came to politics, as Stalin supported the NEP in order to oppose Trotsky. Shortly afterwards, Stalin opposed the NEP as a means to remove Bukharin from power. Thus, Khlevniuk argues that Stalin had a powerful advantage over the other Bolsheviks by not being tied down to ideology. Brooks, however, doesn’t make Stalin out to be as much a realist as Zubok does since he attributes some of Stalin’s actions to paranoia rather than pragmatism.

Khlevniuk states that Stalin was able to keep his grip on his dictatorial power through constant purges and shake ups of the military, the secret police, and the Party. Brooks and Khlevniuk agree that Stalin saw the military as a threat and constantly demoted or killed talented officers to keep it under control. Also, Khlevniuk states that Stalin maintained a tight grip on the secret police and the Party through constant purges at the top level. Furthermore, Khlevniuk and Brooks agree that Stalin constantly overworked and rotated his subordinates through various positions to keep them in check. If at any point, one of his subordinates would become too influential, Stalin would either demote them or execute them. Thus, Khlevniuk states that Stalin’s subordinates constantly lived in fear, as one misstep would cost them their lives.

In addition, Brooks argues that Stalin effectively used the media for self-promotion to establish himself as the supreme ruler of the USSR. Brooks, and Brooks and Zhuk state that Stalin, despite lacking charisma, used the cult of personality to glorify himself as a savior of the Soviet people. The authors state that when Stalin appeared in public, he acted humble to garner respect. Brooks presents “The Economy of the Gift” as a great method of showing all Soviet people that they owed Stalin an eternal debt for everything they had. Brooks argues that following WWII, Stalin used the Press to credit his “brilliant leadership” for the victory over Germany. Brooks and Khlevniuk concur that Stalin gave himself all the credit for the victory when he took on the title of “Generalissimo.” Brooks also argues (p 106) that Stalin effectively used literature, the arts, and the film industry to further his cult of personality. Thus, Brooks states that by the late 1940s, Stalin was perceived by many throughout the USSR as an irreplaceable patriarch. However, Zubok, Brooks and Zhuk, and Khlevniuk note that many people throughout the USSR held a deep resentment towards Stalin. Zubok argues that after seeing that those in Western Europe lived much better lives, many soldiers became disillusioned with Stalin’s government. Brooks and Zhuk note how Khrushchev was able to de-Stalinize the USSR in less than a decade. Moreover, Khlevniuk notes how many people like Akhmatova kept their criticism to themselves until the Thaw. Brooks agrees that the cult of personality fell quickly after Stalin died. But, Brooks stresses that Stalin was able to hold onto power while alive through control of the media.

Finally Brooks, Zubok, and Khlevniuk all agree that Stalin was the Russian solution to the “Eurasian problem.” Khlevniuk and Zubok argue that Stalin, unlike other Bolsheviks who wished to see a more industrialized nation lead the Communist movement, favored the concept of a Socialist empire led by the USSR. Khlevniuk argues that Russia, being a multiethnic empire with a history of invasion, needed a strong government and therefore many Russians felt that Stalin’s Five year plan was a necessary step to achieving greatness. Zubok states (p 53) that the concept of the “Eurasian problem” is why Stalin desired to continuously expand into both Asia and Europe. Both authors agree that this imperialist thought appealed to many ethnic Russians. Furthermore, as Brooks states, Stalin made sure to shine the spotlight on the many ethnic groups such as the Jews, Georgians, and Azerbaijanis of the USSR to highlight how these groups could only thrive in this Multiethnic Socialist Empire. Ilf and Petrov greatly explore this theme of diversity by showcasing the different ethnicities of the USSR. However, Brooks and Zubok argue that Stalin oftentimes appealed to Russian nationalism by scapegoating these same groups.

Despite their differing opinions, all the authors concur that during the first few decades of the USSR, the combination of the opportunities that existed and Stalin’s personality led to his gain of unlimited power. While authors like Khlevniuk give more credit to Stalin’s managerial skills, and Brooks to Stalin’s control over the media, they agree that Stalin’s rise to power was a combination of the different arguments. Overall, all historians also concur that Stalin appealed to the Russian sense of a multiethnic empire.