

Stalin's Great Terror Inspires the *Short Course*: A New Perspective on the Soviet Communist Party

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OFTEN considered the founder of communism, Karl Marx coined the term “superstructure” to refer to the philosophical beliefs that legitimize the credibility of an authoritarian figure or power, often a government. The most direct attempt by the Soviet Communist Party to create a superstructure, that is an indoctrinating, compelling story of its rise to power, can be best symbolized by the *Short Course of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*. This book was orchestrated by Joseph Stalin, who ruled over the world's first communist state, the Soviet Union, from 1924 until his death in 1953. In addition to controlling a powerful, centrally planned government, Stalin also purged anyone that he believed opposed his regime during a period known as the reign of Great Terror. Stalin justified the Great Terror by saying that those arrested were spies, traitors, and enemies of Vladimir Lenin, Karl Marx, and the Communist Party. Stalin also believed that people turned against the Party due to their lack of knowledge about the history of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. Ultimately, Stalin wanted to correct for this misguidance through the *Short Course*. In short, realizing that the Soviet Union lacked a historical narrative, Stalin desperately needed a way to convince his own people, as well as the rest of the world, that his regime was legitimate and noble.

Upon researching the various secondary sources available, I discovered several competing historiographical interpretations of the *Short Course*. David Brandenberger, Professor at the University of Richmond considered to be the most knowledgeable historian on this topic, believes that the *Short Course* symbolizes the larger movement of Soviet patriotism.¹ While Brandenberger does emphasize the Great Terror in his discussion of the historical background of the *Short Course*, he does not discuss the fact that the Great Terror actually laid the seeds for the *Short Course*. Another historian, Rusteem Nureev, Professor of Economics at Moscow Higher School of Economics, provided Stalin's speeches to the Politburo to convey Stalin's rationale for the *Short Course*.² Stalin realized that no dictator could hold power if he was not supported by the nation's intelligentsia.

By eliminating anyone that opposed him during the purges, Stalin had successfully erased the historical accounts of many people that defied the Stalinist regime. In a way, the *Short Course* symbolizes the notion that the victors do indeed write history. This point is proven by the fact that Stalin played such a huge role in directing, writing, and editing the *Short Course*. Stalin knew that controlling the knowledge of his people was the best way to reinforce his own power. Ultimately, Stalin dedicated so many hours to the publication of the book because he believed that the Soviet Communist Party had failed to produce a thorough story of its rise to power.

This essay will not only elucidate the extent to which Stalin played a vital role in the *Short Course*, but it will also provide insights into why Stalin felt that controlling the masses could best be done by establishing an indoctrinating and compelling version of party history. I will first discuss the countless revisions of the *Short Course* and then transition into Stalin's own editing of the manuscript. The best sources for this essay come from the Russian Digital Archive, sponsored by the Russian State Archive of Social Political History (RGASPI) which include Stalin's edits of the second edition as well as Stalin's letter to the writers of the second edition of the *Short Course*, Iaroslavskii and Pospelov. With the help of Professor Adrienne Edgar and Google Translate I was able to translate portions of these texts. These sources illustrate the notion that Stalin became monomaniacal with the book and spent many months editing it. Furthermore, evidence from the *Lost Politburo Transcripts* will prove that Stalin himself saw the *Short Course* as an inevitable consequence of the Great Terror.

In essence, the *Short Course* functions as the bible of the Soviet Union. Stalin's strategy to reinforce his power was twofold. First, to eliminate the opposition during the Great Terror, and second, to rewrite history with the *Short Course*. For this reason, the Great Terror and the *Short Course* share a dependent historical relationship. Without the Great Terror, members of the opposition would still be alive to defy Stalin, and the book would have faced stronger defiance and controversy. Without the book, Stalin would not have been able to justify

¹Brandenberger, David, *National Bolshevism*

²Gregory, Paul. *The Lost Politburo Transcripts*

his own regime after the controversial purges. One unusual aspect of the *Short Course* is that it was not designed for the working class but rather the emerging Soviet intelligentsia. In doing so, Stalin embraced a trickle down approach, realizing that to convince the masses he first needed to indoctrinate the educators. Ultimately, the *Short Course* symbolizes Stalin's attempt to legitimize his own regime after the Great Terror and provides valuable insights into how Stalin wanted to portray himself to the rest of the world.

Historical Background

In order to understand the relevance of the *Short Course*, it is essential to provide some historical background regarding communism. In 1848, with their work *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels strongly advocated that communism was an inevitable social-political advancement because industry-fueled capitalism would fail to fairly distribute economic growth. Although these intellectuals helped to spread communism, a book about party history in the Soviet Union had failed to exist in the mid-late 1930s. Stalin saw the failure to produce an accurate history as one of the greatest downfalls of the Communist Party. Ultimately, the *Short Course* served as the most authoritative textbook on the history of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union after Stalin's reign of Great Terror. This was partly due to the fact that the Communist Party had recently decided to disseminate the party's ideologies, considering the millions of children that needed to be educated and indoctrinated into Stalin's communist system.³ Additionally, Stalin was greatly concerned with protecting his own image after the purges and did so by promoting his own propaganda. As a result, historians often regard the Soviet Union as the world's first true propaganda state. Stalin also used his power to institute a series of Five Year Plans, massive industrialization projects, and collective farming. Through his own speeches to the Politburo in 1938, Stalin stated that he believed this misguidance could have been prevented if the *Short Course* had been written earlier.⁴ In a way, this textbook symbolizes Stalin's attempt to correct the critical mistake that caused the purges.

Historically, David Brandenberger discussed the deficiencies of the educational system that swept the Soviet Union in the mid-1930s. In addition, the widespread famine and purges of the 1930s led to a strictly polarized political environment characterized by the emergence of radical factions within the party. These officials often had contrasting views about the proper interpretation of communism, and could not reach an agreement about how to teach communism in educational institutions. As a result, textbook

publishers failed to develop adequate textbooks for Soviet education.⁵ This problem was compounded by the fact that the emerging industrial society of the Soviet Union in the 1930s resulted in population growth, which created an even larger demand for educational resources. Consequently, there existed an entire generation of students that needed guidance about the history of the Communist Party. The official communist party newspaper expressed this concern by publishing, "Thirty million school children need to be brought up in the spirit of boundless love for the motherland and devotion to the party of Lenin and Stalin."⁶ For all of these reasons, *The Short Course* was a long-awaited history textbook for many people. Thus, when the book was finally published, it was widely embraced by intellectuals, educators, and the political elite.

The Origins of the First Edition

The origins of the first edition of the *Short Course* were inspired by the Politburo in 1936. On March 3rd, 1936, the Politburo decided to launch a competition for the best narrative of political history in the Soviet Union. The Politburo created a committee of judges to assess the narratives and it was decided that the winning manuscript would be made the Soviet Union's primary textbook on party history. The Communist Party lacked a historical narrative and a central doctrine. This competition directly laid the seeds for the *Short Course* by asking intellectuals, historians, and public officials to write informative overviews of the Soviet Union. In response to its call-to-action, the Politburo received 42 manuscripts and selected seven to advance to the second stage of the competition.⁷ The jury assigned to the competition chose to withhold the first and second place prizes to emphasize that the winner needed to drastically edit the version; they did not consider any of the manuscripts worthy of first place. However, the jury did in fact award a third prize to A.S. Shestakov *To the Happiest Children in the World*.⁸ The competition then entered its third and final stage: the revision of the two best manuscripts.

The competition was interrupted because the timing between the second and the third stage of the competition marked the height of the Great Terror. This may have persuaded A.S. Shestakov to craftily revise his original work in a way that supported Stalin. In spite of the Great Terror, the competition resumed on August 22, 1937 and the revised A.S. Shestakov's text, now called the original *Short Course of the Communist Party*, was awarded second place and won

⁵Brandenberger, David, *National Bolshevism*, p. 63

⁶Brandenberger, David, *National Bolshevism*, p. 64

⁷Banerji, Arup. *Writing History in the Soviet Union: Making the Past Work*. p. 66

⁸Banerji, Arup. *Writing History in the Soviet Union: Making the Past Work*. p. 67

³Brandenberger, David, *National Bolshevism*, p. 62

⁴Gregory, Paul. *The Lost Politburo Transcripts*, p. 165

75,000 roubles.⁹ The jury, once again, chose not to select a first place and instead decided to publish Shestakov's version. Furthermore, A.S. Shestakov co-wrote this book alongside N.G. Tarasov, N.D. Kuznetsov, and A.S. Nifontov, members of the Moscow Pedagogical Institute. These members were heavily involved in Soviet patriotism and propaganda and had served the Communist Party since Lenin. Additionally, Andrei Zhanov, the Party Manager of Leningrad, led these authors during the revision process and personally wrote many sections of the book himself.

After being revised for many months, the book was published in September 1937. The closing chapter of the introduction revealed the overall purpose of the book. The text read: "We love our motherland, and we must know her remarkable history well. Whoever knows history will better understand current life, will fight the enemies of our country better, and will consolidate socialism."¹⁰ This could be viewed as the maxim of the *Short Course* and clarifies that its function is to influence and to be shared. When the first edition was released, publishing firms could not keep up with the high demand for the *Short Course* because the book was used by political study circles in factories and also by the armed forces.¹¹ For example, The Red Army forced its soldiers to recite passages from the book, which eventually turned into patriotic chants. Nonetheless, A.S. Shestakov's first edition was controversial and Stalin wanted to play an extremely large role in editing the original version of the book, which, when edited, was later referred to as the *Short Course of the Communist Party VKP(b)*.

Stalin's Letter to the Writers of the Second Edition

On April 6th, 1937, Stalin wrote a letter to Iaroslavskii and Pospelov in order to discuss some of the changes he wanted to see in their revised version. This letter was obtained from the Stalin Digital Archive and was translated by Google Translate. In the opening of the letter, Stalin revealed his frustrations with the current textbooks and stated,

"I think our textbooks on the history of the VKP(b) are unsatisfactory for three principal reasons. They are unsatisfactory because they present the history of the VKP(b) without a connection to the country's history; or because they confine themselves to an account, a simple description of the events and facts of the struggle among currents without providing the necessary Marxist explanation; or because they suffer from

an incorrect construction and an incorrect periodization of events."¹²

This quote shows that Stalin wanted the textbook to be grounded by history and through Marxist ideology. In fact, Stalin's main proposal in this letter was to add a paragraph to each section that provided the reader with historical context as well as an explanation of Marxist ideologies. To exemplify this, Comrade Zelenov translated a segment of the letter and wrote,

"Stalin went on to write above the text on the proof of the article (l. 34)." Each chapter (or section) of the textbook must be prefaced with a historical background on the country's economic and political situation. Without this, the history of the VKP(b) will look not like history but like a lightweight account of past events."¹³

Indeed, Stalin wanted the *Short Course* to appear as factual as possible and did this by requiring that each section of the book include a historical background. In this letter, Stalin also included an outline to the book that completely reorganized the order of the chapters:

"It is necessary, secondly, not only to present facts that demonstrate the abundance of factions in the party and in the working class during the period of capitalism in the USSR but also to provide a Marxist explanation of these facts."¹⁴

This passage reveals how Stalin wanted to portray himself throughout the book. In essence, Stalin wanted to show that his regime was grounded by Marxist ideology. At the same time, Stalin knew that the best way to support his regime was to argue that it was a rational extension of Marxist ideology.

The Second Edition

In April 1937, Stalin called for the second edition of the *Short Course* to be commissioned to leading historians Emil'ian M. Iaroslavskii and Peter N. Pospelov. The original manuscript exceeded 800 pages and Stalin found many errors within the original text. Iaroslavskii, Pospelov, and a throng of historians from the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute spent many months revising the first copy to Stalin's standards. Stalin was

¹²Stalin, Joseph (1937), *Stalin's letter IV members of the Politburo of the CPSU (b), and the compilers of the textbook History of the CPSU (b)*, Stalin Digital Archive

¹³Stalin, Joseph (1937), *Stalin's letter IV members of the Politburo of the CPSU (b), and the compilers of the textbook History of the CPSU (b)*, Stalin Digital Archive

¹⁴Stalin, Joseph (1937), *Stalin's letter IV members of the Politburo of the CPSU (b), and the compilers of the textbook History of the CPSU (b)*, Stalin Digital Archive

⁹Banerji, Arup. *Writing History in the Soviet Union: Making the Past Work*. p. 68

¹⁰Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1939). *The Short Course VCP(b)*, p. 25

¹¹Gregory, Paul. *The Lost Politburo Transcripts*, p. 69

deeply involved in editing the text and cut the original version by over 500 pages, inserting his own sections into the book.

Ultimately, Stalin drastically changed the political narrative of the Soviet Union by rewriting history itself. After the Great Terror, many historians were executed and Stalin successfully intimidated members of his own party, achieving total compliance. He was now in a position to rewrite history. Stalin met with the Central Committee in March 1937 to propose “an ambitious new two-tiered party education system.” The Politburo, almost entirely made up of sycophants, ratified Stalin’s proposals on April 16, 1937. These proposals called for “another set of curricular reforms” and identified “new indoctrination materials to be published before that fall.”¹⁵ The *Short Course* was successfully able to finesse “a delicate paradox: how could a historical interpretation so much geared toward the valorization of state authority explain the rise of antiestablishment revolutionary movements.”¹⁶

An analysis of certain passages from the second version of the *Short Course* depicts the party history as emerging from a proletariat revolution. The first chapter discusses the abolition of serfdom and the rise of industry in 19th century Russia. In the author’s view, capitalism would inevitably produce an elite class and would cause “the working class to develop its class consciousness, to organize it, and to help it to create its own working party.”¹⁷ The book goes on to explain how the Bolshevik’s October Revolution of 1917 was about fighting for the rights of workers and peasants. One month after the October Revolution, the newly formed Soviet Union entered into a Civil War. The Bolsheviks, represented by the Red Army, fought the White Army in a series of battles that lasted over three years.

The Bolsheviks responded to the demands of war by adopting a policy known as War Communism. This policy was highly controversial because it made the government extremely powerful through the control of all industry and agriculture. In a way, War Communism was a predecessor to Stalin’s massive industrialization plans and collective farming. However, War Communism was detrimental to the peasants because it required the seizure of portions of their crops. The *Short Course* states that this system “introduced a state monopoly of the grain trade and required peasants to be registered by the state”.¹⁸ Furthermore, the Bolsheviks had just seized power and it was essential that they won the war. According to the text, “the Bolsheviks undertook intense preparations for a protracted war and decided to place the whole country at the service of the front.”

¹⁹ War Communism was presented in a factual manner that explained the necessities of the controversial policy. However, the book does not address details like compensation for the workers and farmers impacted by the policy, or the effect of the policy on their standard of living.

Recognizing his audience, Stalin realized that the only way to win over his people was to show a deep respect for Vladimir Lenin. Stalin eulogized, “Departing from us, Comrade Lenin adjured us to remain faithful to the principles of the Communist International. We vow to you, Comrade Lenin, that we will not spare our lives to strengthen and extend the union of the toilers of the whole world.”²⁰ However, the book does not contain any information about how Stalin rose to power and skips from discussions about Lenin’s legacy to socialist industrialization without discussing Stalin’s rise to power. Stalin did not see this as important, and instead choose to simply stress the fact that he was a follower of Lenin. Furthermore, Stalin also wanted to avoid any of the controversial stories that could arise from explaining how he became the leader of the Soviet Union.

The final chapter ends with a discussion of the widespread acceptance of the Bolshevik Party in the Supreme Soviet election of 1937. There were 94 million voters and nearly 96.8 percent of them voted for the Communist Party. This was considered “a triumph for the Bolshevik Party. It was a brilliant confirmation of the moral and political unity of the Soviet people.”²¹ This statistic is skewed by the fact that the vote was conducted during the height of the Great Terror, and Stalin had terrified the masses into aligning with the beliefs and ideologies of the Soviet Communist Party.

Stalin’s Revision of the Second Edition

Stalin made countless edits in the book and played an extremely important role in the second edition. Evidence from Stalin’s appointment books show that he had very few meetings scheduled in mid-May, mid-June, and mid-July, suggesting “that it was during this time that he focused on the textbook”.²² When revising the original text, Stalin “struck entire paragraphs, pages, and subsections of the manuscript-tens of thousands of words in all.”²³ Stalin often portrayed traitors within his own party as being “well-organized domestic opposition with ties to enemies abroad”. Furthermore, Stalin’s editing of the original account eliminated “bourgeois nationalist conspiracies during the Terror.”

As a result, Stalin’s careful selection of Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s original version emerged as

¹⁵Brandenberger, David. *Stalin’s Answer the National Question*

¹⁶Brandenberger, David. *National Bolshevism*, p. 53

¹⁷Banerji, Arup. *Writing History in the Soviet Union: Making the Past Work*, p. 67

¹⁸Bolsheviks, *The Short Course of the CPSU ACP(b)*, p. 229

¹⁹Bolsheviks, *The Short Course of the CPSU ACP(b)*, p. 229

²⁰Ibid, p. 269

²¹Ibid, p. 352

²²Brandenberger, David. *Stalin’s Answer the National Question*, p. 869

²³Brandenberger, David. *Stalin’s Answer the National Question*, p. 873

a more direct form of propaganda. Stalin managed to trim a fact-based document down to the portions that supported his own regime. Stalin's revised version failed to include any "mention of non-Russians; political, economic, and cultural modernization but also the entire subsection of Chapter 12 dedicated to the friendships of his peoples."²⁴ Stalin also edited the new version of the *Short Course* and cut hundreds of pages from the first edition.

Historiographically, The Yale University Press collaborated with the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI) and translated certain sections of Stalin's handwriting. Arguably, Stalin's propaganda, ideology, and strategy to reinforce his power were successful because he ruled the Soviet Union for over 25 years. The last portion of this section will provide some of the direct writing from Stalin as he edited the second edition. For example, Stalin decided to delete the text below from the second edition:

"Already in this period of these enemies of Bolshevism, despite the "nuances" of their views, disbelief in the victory of the socialist proletariat revolution is born. The Party, under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin, had successfully organized workers and toiling peasants for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the landlords."²⁵

Stalin had recently executed millions of his opponents, successfully erasing accounts of his opposition from history. By launching the purges, Stalin put himself in the unique position of being able to rewrite history to his own liking. Consequently, the *Short Course VKB (b)* would eventually become the sole textbook for all grades, ranging from elementary to graduate schools.

Foreign affairs also influenced the revisions of the text, particularly Germany's rise to prominence in the late 1930's. By the end of the decade, Hitler had transformed Germany into one of the most industrialized, militarized superpowers in the world. Stalin was fearful that the Germans would spread their ideology to the Soviet Union in an attempt to destroy the Soviet Communist Party. Toward the end of the *Short Course*, Stalin inserted the following passage:

"The victory of fascism in Germany must be regarded not only as a sign of weakness of the working class and the result of changes of social democracy to the working class, which paved the way for fascism. It must also be regarded as a sign of weakness of the bourgeoisie, as a sign that the bourgeoisie is already unable to rule by the old methods

of parliamentary and bourgeois democracy, which is why it is forced to resort to domestic policy to terrorist methods of management ..."²⁶

This passage also illustrates Stalin's advocacy of the proletariat. Stalin wanted his people to believe that he truly valued the working class, and was in accordance with Marx's vision that the proletariat should overthrow the bourgeoisie. Additionally, Stalin also wanted to show his own people that his political party and his regime were grounded by the tenets of true Marxism.

To this end, Stalin discussed at length the reasons why the kulak class was destructive and detrimental to the Soviet people. For example, Stalin wrote, "It eliminated the most numerous class of exploiters in our country, the class of the kulaks... It furnished the Soviet regime with a Socialist base in the most extensive in the most necessary, but also in the most backward areas of the economy- agriculture."²⁷ The insights gained from these revisions show how Stalin wanted to rewrite history to his own agenda. Stalin felt so strongly about the *Short Course* that he spent months editing it to his liking. In short, the *Short Course* best symbolizes the larger movement of nationalism inspired by Soviet propaganda and indoctrination.

It is important to emphasize the fact that this archival source is very incomplete because it provides less than twenty percent of Stalin's original edits. As a result, it is difficult to draw conclusions from the quotes found above. Furthermore, only certain portions of the archive had been translated. Stalin's handwriting is notoriously bad, and it has been difficult for translators to understand many aspects of the text. These are some of the limitations of this source. However, the source itself does illustrate the incredible amount of time Stalin spent revising the course, and sparked new questions for my research. For example, why was Stalin interested in this particular book when he had an entire nation to lead? When in modern day history have we seen a leader spend so much time on a history textbook?

Stalin's Speeches to the Politburo

Stalin wanted the book to be directed toward the emerging Soviet intelligentsia. The Politburo, regarded as the main authority of Soviet ideology and propaganda, held a session to address the publication of the *Short Course* from October 22nd to October 23rd, 1938. The session was called, "On the Question of Party Propaganda in the Press Associated with the

²⁴Brandenberger, David. *Stalin's Answer to the National Question*, p. 873

²⁵Stalin, Joseph. *The Original Text of the Short Course*, Stalin Digital Archive: RGASPI and the Yale University Press. F. 558 op. 11. d.1211

²⁶Stalin, Joseph. *The Original Text of the Short Course*, Stalin Digital Archive: RGASPI and the Yale University Press. F. 558 op. 11. d.1211

²⁷Stalin, Joseph. *The Original Text of the Short Course*, Stalin Digital Archive: RGASPI and the Yale University Press. F. 558 op. 11. d.1211

Publication of the *Short Course*, and was presented by Andrei Zhdanov, now Stalin's main advisor on propaganda."²⁸ Stalin himself played an essential role in the meeting. The *Lost Politburo Transcripts* provides Stalin's speeches, which are particularly revealing of his intentions with the *Short Course*. He discussed the function of the book and whom he wanted to most strongly influence. During the opening discussion, Andrei Zhdanov stressed the fact that the *Short Course* was "targeted primarily at our leading officials, at our Soviet intelligentsia." Similarly, Stalin stated,

"For whom is this book? It is for the cadres, for our cadres. And what are cadres? They are the command staff, the lower, middle, and higher command staff of the entire status apparatus. From now on our propaganda should address our intellectual cadres."²⁹

Soviet education was rapidly improving during the 1930's and a larger class of intellectuals began to sweep across the Soviet Union. Thus, Stalin realized that the support of the intelligentsia was integral for the continuation of his regime. Similarly, Stalin addressed the Politburo, "There is no class that can maintain its domination and rule the state if it is not capable of creating its own intelligentsia."³⁰ Stalin believed that the intellectuals strongly influenced the masses by serving as either public officials or by organizing the proletariat into political groups. Most importantly, these intellectuals had tremendous power over the worker's understanding of Stalin's regime. However, Stalin also believed that the intellectuals were plagued by a lack of knowledge about the history of the Communist Party. He described this problem to the Politburo when he stated,

"An official is an individual who makes conscious decisions. He wants to know what is going on, he raises questions, gets confused because he does not have adequate understanding of politics, preoccupies himself with petty trifles, exhausts himself; finally he loses interest in Marxism and in his bolshevization. We ought to compensate for this failure of ours and the best way to begin is to publish the *Short Course*."³¹

This quote proves that Stalin's main purpose in writing the *Short Course* was to provide a detailed history about the Soviet Communist Party in order to persuade intellectuals and public officials to support his regime. Furthermore, the motivation for propaganda that addressed the intellectual elite was partly grounded by Stalin's purges, which lasted from

1936 to 1938. As a result, Stalin appointed authorities who not only agreed with everything he said, but who were also terrified to disagree. For example, Comrade Andropov from the Orel Party Committee, who headed the propaganda department, reported to Stalin, "If you take the case of editors, then we have 99 percent new cadres."³² Stalin addressed the need for these purges at the Politburo meeting and declared,

"The most serious evil, which we uncovered in the recent past, was that our cadres were not satisfactorily equipped. These were cadres that could not digest the sharp turn to collective farms, they could not envision such a change because they were not politically equipped."³³

Stalin rationalized that the purpose of the purges was to dispel the Communist Party of members that were not "politically equipped." These were cadres that had a lack of understanding about collective farms and rapid industrialization and lost sight of Stalin's goals. Stalin believed that these members were misguided because they did not have a central authoritative book on the history of the last 20 years. Previously, the main book that intellectuals read that reinforced the tenets of communism was Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels *Communist Manifesto*. The *Communist Manifesto* was powerful because it convinced intellectuals and the proletariat to pursue communism. However, while this book explained the central belief that communism was an inevitable step in political development in a highly industrialized world, and that capitalism would fail to distribute economic growth among the masses, it did not provide an authoritative account of the history of the first communist state. In response to these circumstances, Stalin stated,

"They did not know the laws of societal development, of economic development, of political development. How can we explain that some of them became spies and intelligence agents? Some were our own people, who went over to them. Why? It appears that they were not politically equipped."³⁴

This shows that Stalin believed that people who opposed him were widely dispersed in his own party and that they even served as spies and traitors. Stalin also discussed that the purges created some positive opportunities for his new vision of the Soviet Union. Stalin expressed these positive opportunities and also believed that if the *Short Course* had been written earlier, the Soviet Communist Party could have prevented the purges,

²⁸Gregory, Paul, *The Lost Politburo Transcripts*. p.166

²⁹Ibid, p. 169

³⁰Ibid, p. 168. p.166

³¹Gregory, Paul. *The Lost Politburo Transcripts*. p. 171

³²Gregory, Paul. *The Lost Politburo Transcripts*. p. 166

³³Gregory, Paul. *The Lost Politburo Transcripts*. p. 166

³⁴Gregory, Paul. *The Lost Politburo Transcripts*. p. 170

“At this time, we lost a part of our cadres, but we gained an enormous number of lower-level workers, we got new cadres, we won over the people to collective farms, we won over the peasantry. They must be directed through the administration, but in this administration, there were it appears, the wrong people. In this fashion, in winning the people we let an opportunity slip by our cadres. We must recognize this fact, and we must correct this mistake.”³⁵

The phrase “they must be directed through administration” illustrated Stalin’s strong desire for the creation of the *Short Course*. By failing to win the support of the Soviet people with a political narrative, Stalin realized that he had people in the administration that were seen as the “wrong people”, and hoped that the creation of the *Short Course* would “correct this mistake.” This verifies the historical interdependence of the *Short Course* and the Great Terror. In essence, Stalin wanted to use the *Short Course* as a means to win over the people and to prevent future purges.

Rustem Nureev, Professor of Economics at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, supported this notion when he wrote, “the implication of Stalin’s indirect remarks on the Great Terror is that if there had been a *Short Course* earlier, cadres would have understood his policies better, would have supported them, and mass purges would not have been necessary.”³⁶ Stalin confirmed this when he told the Politburo,

“Correcting this mistake begins with the publication of the *Short Course*. This book demonstrates the basic ideas of Marxism-Leninism on the basis of historical facts. Because it demonstrates its theses with historical facts, it will be convincing for our cadres, who work with their intellects, for thinking people who will not blindly follow. We have not paid sufficient attention to this matter and now we must complete it”.³⁷

Stalin also realized that the creation of the *Short Course* was only going to be successful if it was widely embraced by intellectuals. To this end, Stalin summoned hundreds of party propaganda workers to his meeting with the Politburo, and dedicated part of the meeting to addressing the efficiency of the workers. For example, Rustem Nureev wrote, “Were those party officials responsible for the dissemination of ideology up to the task? The party leadership realized the discrepancy between the rising cultural level of the workers and the intelligentsia and the reasons to doubt their effectiveness.”³⁸ Soviet officials assessed the

effectiveness of propaganda workers by the number of attendees at their meeting. The Ivanovo Party Committee told Stalin that the number of people at their mandatory reading of the *Short Course* had risen from 48,000 to 104,000 in only three months.³⁹

Additionally, Rustem Nureev analyzed Stalin’s transcript to the Politburo and stated, “Stalin’s message called in the declining days of the Great Terror, was that he was ready to turn from physical elimination of enemies to enemy prevention.”⁴⁰ The purges were over and Stalin had successfully wiped the slate clean for the Soviet Communist Party to rewrite history. Now that all the disbelievers were dispelled, Stalin was able to start over and indoctrinate intellectuals with his own version of party history. The *Short Course* was, in a way, an inevitable consequence of the purges. Stalin realized that the “mistake” that led to the purges was the failure to promote the full history of the Soviet Communist Party. Now that the party was cleansed, Stalin was in an ideal situation, not only to promote his own understanding of Soviet history, but also to rewrite history itself.

The Great Terror in the *Short Course*

The *Short Course* emphasized that the Great Terror was justified because the traitors opposed Lenin and the Soviet Communist Party since the October Revolution of 1917. The book does not mention anything about the Gulags and only discussed the Party leaders who were tried and executed. Since the book is chronological and ends in 1937, the *Short Course* only touches on the Great Terror, in four pages at the end of the book. The purges are addressed in Chapter 12, titled, “Liquidation of the Remnants of the Bukharin-Trotsky Gang of Spies, Wreckers and Traitors to the Country.” Stalin justified these executions by saying that these traitors had been in conspiracy with Lenin since the October Revolution in 1917. The text stated, “The trials showed that these dregs of humanity, in conjunction with the enemies of the people, Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev, had been in conspiracy against Lenin, the Party and the Soviet state ever since the early days of the October Socialist Revolution.”⁴¹ The writers of the *Short Course* and Stalin wanted to paint the opposition in defiance of Lenin and Marx. For example, the book stated,

“The trials brought to light the fact that Trotsky-Bukharin fiends, in obedience to the wishes of their masters, the espionage services of the foreign states had set out to destroy the Party and the Soviet state, to undermine the defensive power of the country, to assist foreign military intervention, to prepare the way for the defeat of the Red Army, to bring

³⁵Gregory, Paul. *The Lost Politburo Transcripts*. p. 170

³⁶Gregory, Paul. *The Lost Politburo Transcripts*. p. 170

³⁷Ibid. p. 170

³⁸Gregory, Paul. *The Lost Politburo Transcripts*. p. 171

³⁹Ibid. p. 174

⁴⁰Ibid. p. 174

⁴¹Bolsheviks, *The Short Course of the CPSU ACP(b)*, p. 347

about the dismemberment of the U.S.S.R., to hand over the Soviet Maritime Region to the Japanese, and to destroy the gains of the workers and collective farmers, and to restore capitalist slavery to the U.S.S.R.”⁴²

This excerpt shows that the book strategically answered the question of the Great Terror by emphasizing that the opposition was directly involved in treason and also wanted to undermine the Communist Party and Stalin’s rule. By showing that the purges were justified by treason, the book is able to argue that the executions were necessary. This was because believers in communism regarded Marx and Lenin as their true heroes.

Impact of The *Short Course* on the CPSU

The fact that the textbook was designed for the Soviet intelligentsia made it somewhat inaccessible to the masses. Although Bukharin had come out with the *ABCs of Communism*, a book designed for the masses, Stalin did not regard this as worthy because he wanted a book that was tailored to the intelligentsia. Stalin realized that he could never hold onto his power unless he had the support of the intellectuals, public officials and educators. Since many people in the Soviet Union did not have more than an elementary education, it was understood that the common people would need direction and guidance with the *Short Course*. These educators would ultimately be the ones responsible for interpreting the book and teaching it to the masses. As a result, Stalin realized that winning over the intellectuals ultimately meant winning over the working class. Furthermore, it would be difficult to win over the mindsets of the intellectuals if there were competing versions of Soviet history, a problem that Stalin had rectified with the Great Terror.

The book’s appeal to the masses was indirect; the intellectuals would spread the knowledge to the masses. As a result, many historians would argue that the *Short Course* might have been more successful at promoting Soviet ideology if it were written for the masses instead of the intellectuals. However, Stalin was desperate to maintain his power, and this meant appealing to the logic of intellectuals and public officials. The common people were powerless in the Soviet Union and public and government officials maintained tight control over their people. Since the Soviet Communist Party was a central power with a versatile range of power, Stalin must have realized that he most needed the support of the intellectuals and officials who could influence the masses to support the Stalinist regime. To shed light on the hegemony of the *Short Course*, K.F. Shtepa, professor at Kiev University during the 1930s, recalled,

“It was the only material on Russian history for courses in these and even in the

collegiate-level schools. Only by means of this little book was it possible to orient oneself regarding the demands of Party policy with respect to any historical question, phenomenon, or event.”⁴³

These are the main reasons why the *Short Course* failed to garner the support of the masses. In response to these concerns, Stalin met with the Politburo in October 1938 to propose a revised edition of the *Short Course*. However, the new *Short Course* failed to include history after 1938. As a result, the book became obsolete by the mid-1940s and failed to discuss anything about World War II. Additionally, World War II induced a different political and economic agenda for the Soviet Union. Intellectuals and officials felt disconnected with the goals of the Soviet Union due to the different political and economic climates created by the war. Overall, the *Short Course* was not only difficult for the masses to read, but it also failed to provide an up-to-date record of Soviet history.

Conclusion

The *Short Course* represented the second phase of Stalin’s indoctrination strategy, the first phase being the purges. Therefore, the purges and the book are inextricably tied to one another; they were both part of Stalin’s overarching plan to rewrite history. The *Short Course* was convincing because it was presented with factual information and encompassed many aspects of Soviet life. The full 350 pages presented its material as impartial and factual. Additionally, the original book covers many aspects of political history ranging from the Bolshevik Revolution to the worker’s opposition. In short, Stalin not only controlled the lives of his own people, but their mindsets as well. The fact that the book was directed towards the Soviet intelligentsia suggests the fact that Stalin was primarily concerned with indoctrinating educators and historians.

Evidence from the *Lost Politburo Transcripts* proved that Stalin felt that the purges could have been prevented if the *Short Course* had been written earlier. Stalin himself cited that the two have a close historical relationship. Although Stalin believed that his desire for the book emerged after the purges, I believe that the purges inspired the book. After the Great Terror, Stalin put himself in a position in which he could rewrite history. While the book could prevent future purges from occurring, I do not think that the *Short Course* could have prevented the Great Terror. Stalin was only interested in writing the *Short Course* after the Great Terror because he knew that he had successfully eliminated all historical accounts that could undermine the *Short Course*. Thus, the book could be widely spread without too much controversy. After wiping the slate clean, Stalin could promote whatever ideology he wanted without much defiance.

⁴²Bolsheviks, *The Short Course of the CPSU ACP (b)*, p. 347

⁴³Brandenberger, David, *National Bolshevism*, p. 55

Overall, the *Short Course* offers valuable insights into how Stalin wanted to portray himself to his people and to the rest of the world. Some of the most powerful themes that emerge from the book are the values of the proletariat class, the worker's revolution, Leninism, and industry. By 1940, more than four million copies of the book had been published, and had become widely adopted in thousands of reading circles throughout the Soviet Union. For all of these reasons, the *Short Course* is indeed the bible of the Soviet Union. In essence, the *Short Course* could symbolize what Marx would refer to as the "superstructure" of the Stalinist regime, making it an extremely valuable historical artifact from the Soviet Union.

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*The last two references come from the Stalin Digital Archive, a research collaboration between the Russian State Archival of Social-Political History and the Yale University Press. With the help of Ann Platoff at the UCSB library, the University was able to obtain a one-month free trial to the archive. Additionally, Google helped me tremendously by translating the text while Professor Edgar of the UCSB History Department personally helped me with several of the translations. Special thanks to everyone involved that helped me obtain access and understand this source.