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# Preface

This book has taken me longer than most. The subject matter has much to do with it, given the preconceptions, if not the knee-jerk reactions, that are produced by the cypher of 'Stalin'. Some years ago, I managed acquire a set of Stalin's works, from none other than a second-hand bookshop in Kansas. Kansas! Yes, for it used to be—many, many years ago—a left-wing, if not Marxist centre in North America. How times have changed. But I soon found that the 'Works' were incomplete, ending abruptly in January of 1934. Eventually, I tracked down the remaining volumes, published by Red Star Press in London. Meanwhile, I found the Russian original, which has now been transferred (in online version with page numbers) to the University of Newcastle in Australia, one of my homes. To add to my collection, I became aware in the process of a new edition of Stalin's works, *Trudy*, which is in the process of publishing what may well be a full collected works by Stalin.

I set to reading Stalin, slowly and painstakingly, as I had done earlier with Marx, Engels, leading western European Marxists, and then Lenin. For some reason, Stalin took me longer, even though he wrote a little less than the others. My earlier hunch that Stalin may actually have something to offer the Marxist tradition was slowly being confirmed, but what that contribution might be took a lot more effort. It required working through the texts many times, seeking to discern the key ideas in light of the frameworks that I was developing. Why? Few had actually worked in such a way, with many simply dismissing Stalin and thereby not even giving him the benefit of serious attention. My starting point with a theological radar meant that I was even more alone. More to the point, I began to realise that many of my assumed categories were being broken down, forcing me to begin thinking again, rethinking everything in the process.

This was, after all, socialism in power, however one may interpret the term. I also realised that socialism in power continues to be chronically under-thought, with many 'Western' Marxists simply refusing to countenance the possibility that anything could be learnt from socialism in power—which by 2017 offered a century of immense experiences, stunning achievements, abysmal failures, but above all, an immense resource for reflecting on socialism after the revolutionary seizure of

power. Precisely this reality attracts me so much, especially now with my immersion in Chinese socialism. Stalin is one—although not the only one—of the theorists of socialism in power, whether people like it or not.

As I point out at various moments in the book, it was written largely in the context of China, my second home. I am often here for extended periods of time, especially in Beijing. Initially, I was not so enamoured with the place—too large, too hectic, too much change all the time. But after a few years, I realised why I like the place so much, with all its flaws. It is the centre of the strongest socialist state in world history, eclipsing now the Soviet Union. In the middle of Tiananmen Square, the gate of heaven no less, lies the body of Chairman Mao. Here is socialist power, with a Communist Party in control. It is like a magnet to me and I am working to understand what it means. This study of Stalin is a first step in the process. 'Stalin and the Theology of Class Struggle', in *Og Theologie: Festskrift til Carsten Pallesen*, edited by Mads Peter Karlsen and Lars Sandbeck. Copenhagen: Eksistensen, 2016, pp. 315–34; 'On the Question of Sin: Stalin and Human Nature', in *The Bible and Critical Theory* 12.2 (2016): 87–103; 'A Materialist Doctrine of Good and Evil: Stalin's Revision of Marxist Anthropology', *Crisis and Critique* 3.1 (2016): 109–54; 'Against Culturism: Reconsidering Stalin on Nation and Class'. *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 42 (2015): 247–73.

Along the way, many have assisted me with my thoughts, although they are by no means responsible for the way I have developed them. Domenico Losurdo is one, who quietly assures me that we are of the mainstream and that we patiently need to persuade the remainder of their waywardness. Zhang Shuangli is another. We have met often over the years, pushing each other to think further on core questions relating to socialism in power. Zang Fengyu remains a close comrade, urging us both to engage with the burning questions that relate to China today. Lu Shaochen's efforts to rethink major categories in an original way challenge me to stop and think whether I am working in the most productive manner. Yu Min, through her knowledge of the early years of the Soviet Union, quietly nods when I mention what I thought was a newly discovered idea, for she has found this already in the reality of China. Roger Markwick's wariness is very much appreciated, as he patiently questions the large topics I enthusiastically tackle, and Tom Griffiths continues to insist on the importance of 'socialism for the twenty-first century' from a Latin American situation. To all these I am immensely thankful, as well as those who are too many to mention as I spent the last few years working on this book. Above all, Christina Petterson and I continue our common project, in different parts of the world, for signs of socialism, if not communism itself—in both expected and unexpected corners.

Beijing, China Roland Boer
May 2017

# Contents

# Introduction

> The point to notice is that Stalin was very well aware that the revolution in Russia had given rise to tasks which required fresh ideas, a development of Marxism to suit the new situation (Copleston 1986, 326, see also 328).

Is it possible to think with and through Stalin, surprising and indeed scandalous as such a task may possibly be? This is precisely what I undertake in this study, with the result that some of the core issues relating to socialism in power—socialism as a distinct period, human nature, the Party, socialist democracy, minority nationalities, language, affirmative action and the state—find unexpected developments and elaborations.

The task entails two related steps: the first is to explicate what is usually implicit in Stalin's thought. More often than not, he deals with immediate practical issues, being forced to think through their implications and seek theoretical direction for further practices. At this point, be begins to develop the seeds of fuller positions. Or, rather, they are often fragments requiring further work in order to construct a more coherent position. The second step goes further: to think with and through Stalin. Here the question of socialism in power comes to the fore, since the topics that have arisen in my study relate directly to the ambiguous reality of power. However, I have also found the need to work through and beyond Stalin, taking his usually embryonic reflections a little further. Needless to say, this approach entails far more than discerning the author's 'intention', whatever that may have been (and we are certainly not privy to the inner workings of his mind). I do not wish to revisit the whole debate around the 'intentional fallacy', save to point out that discerning the structures and themes in Stalin's published texts is but one part of my project. More importantly, I seek to uncover what is implied, what runs beneath the surface so as to develop the points further.

How to begin such a project? The initial framework comes from my earlier studies of Western European Marxism and Lenin (Boer 2007–2014, 2013). I approached their works with a theological radar, seeking to unearth the biblical and theological dimensions that run through their thought. At times, they wrote whole books on the Bible and theology, at other times shorter pieces, and at others

their works sought to account for and transform theological terms and ways of thinking. With this material, I was then able to reassess much of their other work. I was not interested merely in the historical fact that European and West-Asian cultures have been saturated with the entwinement of theology and philosophy, but more in the profound implications for understanding Marxist ways of thinking. My approach was not to assume a dependence—historical or ontological—on theology but a translatability between radical politics and theology. By translation I mean a dialectical process, in which each term resists the process of translation so that one must continually reconsider the translation in question. Thus, each translation is a temporary affair, in which there are gains and losses of meaning, only to attempt the process once again. The upshot is that no one language may claim absolute or prior status, for each can be seen in a more modest light, being aware of their own promises and limitations.[1]

I began my study of Stalin in a similar vein, especially in light of the fact that he was the only world communist leader who had studied theology extensively. So, the majority of the chapters that follow draw upon a significant theological, if not also philosophical category: biblical engagement and scriptural dynamics in dealing with the texts of founders; the determining role of the biblical stories of Babel and Pentecost for understanding the debates over language, as well as Stalin's own Pentecostal approach; the highly productive reality of the delay of communism in light of the Christian delay of the Parousia (or Christ's return); the debates over human nature in the Christian tradition for framing Stalin's disruptive awareness of the starkness of evil, which thereby produced a fundamental reframing of Marxist anthropology; and the more philosophical issue of transcendence and immanence, insofar as this tension was translated into Marxist deliberations concerning the relations between the Communist Party and the people. Each of these engagements seems to me highly productive, since they enable sustained deliberation on key questions.

Relevant here are two historical items that I will not analyse in detail in the chapters that follow. The first is, as mentioned, that Stalin studied theology for five years (1894–1899) at the Tiflis Spiritual Seminary, a training college for priests in the Russian Orthodox Church.[2] On the negative side, this meant speaking only in Russian, even in private, and not in the native Georgian of the students. The church hierarchy in Tiflis and the seminary was decidedly reactionary, seeking to instil reverence for the tsar and God, in equal measure. Discipline was tight, with the whole day carefully organised, limited excursions outside and prescribed reading (banning even Dostoyevsky). Textbooks and the Bible were standard fare, and the students wore cassocks. On the positive side, Stalin experienced—for the time—an exceptionally thorough theological education. And he came to appreciate the ascetic

[1]For a more complete elaboration of this method of engaging between radical politics and religion, see my 'Translating Politics and Religion' (Boer 2015b).

[2]The following is based on a few sources (Kun 2003, 21–36, Service 2004, 23–31, Kotkin 2014, 21–38).

life of a theological student, with its simple diet of bread and beans and the ability to get by with little. What did he study? He had already spent 5 years at the parish school of his home town, Gori, which had set him on the path to the priesthood (as his separated mother fervently wished). Here he was already known and rewarded for his devoutness, attending all church services, even reading the liturgy and leading the singing in the choir—and invariably coming first in his class due to diligent and enthusiastic study. He was destined for the seminary, the highest educational institution in the Caucasus. In this institution, the earlier years of study included both 'secular' and theological subjects: Russian literature; secular history; mathematics; Latin; Greek; Church Slavonic singing; Georgian Imeretian singing; Holy Scripture. By the final years, the subjects became distinctly theological: ecclesiastical history; liturgy; homiletics; comparative theology; moral theology; practical pastoral work; didactics; church singing; Holy Scripture. Some subjects may have changed, but throughout Holy Scripture and church singing were constants. The young Stalin was noted by his teachers for his phenomenal memory, subtle intellect and voracious reading. His marks varied over the years, ranging from high to low, especially from the middle years onwards when he became involved with revolutionary groups outside the seminary (indeed, the seminary was known as a hotbed of unrest and became a recruiting ground for the Georgian socialist movement[3]). Thus, he may have risen to fifth in a class of twenty-nine in his second year, but by the fifth year he had slipped to twentieth out of twenty-three. All the same, he became thoroughly versed in theological matters. He knew the history of the church back to front; he could sing; he read Greek and Latin; and he knew intimately how the church itself worked (which assisted immensely in his famous compact with the church in 1943). Above all, he knew the Bible. Indeed, he had already studied Old and New Testament while at school, before arriving at the seminary. Ten years or more of solid study of the Bible are bound to leave their impression on a young man. It is not for nothing that Stalin later was known for having memorised long stretches of text and quoting from the Bible at will. In the end, Stalin left the seminary before sitting for the final examinations, which would have qualified him to become a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church, if not to proceed to university. Biographers remain puzzled as to why he did so. Stalin himself hinted it was because of revolutionary activity; others suggest it was because he was unable to afford the fees. But the most likely reason is that he realised that the life of a priest was not for him, so he chose to leave. It was, obviously, a big decision. Yet, for many years afterwards in revolutionary circles, he was known as 'The Priest'.

The second historical moment stems from article 124 in the 1936 constitution, which affirmed freedom of religious worship and of anti-religious propaganda. The Russian Orthodox Church, under the wise Patriarch Sergei, began to petition the

[3]This should not be surprising. Apart from Engels's path from Reformed Christianity to socialism, the Russian Orthodox Church was itself in profound turmoil, with movements for reform abounding in the lead-up to the Russian Revolution (Shevzov 2004, Roslov 2002).

government to hold to its promise (it helped matters immensely that Sergei had already, in 1927, issued a statement seeking rapprochement between the communists and the church). He sought permission for the reopening of churches, the admission of openly religious people to regular employment, if not the possibility of religious candidates in elections (which they did in 1937). Stalin eventually responded to the church's persistence, meeting with leaders in September of 1943 to reach a historic compact.[4] In return for support of the war effort that eventually defeated Hitler, Stalin allowed the reopening of thousands of churches, along with theological colleges and monasteries, the release of imprisoned clergy and the re-establishment of the church's leadership hierarchy. Given his intimate knowledge of the church, Stalin clearly knew the benefits of such an alliance, running at a much deeper level than propaganda—Sergei had already called on all citizens of the Soviet Union to support the fight against Hitler, even providing funds for specific units in the Red Army. This agreement remained largely in place until Stalin's death. We should not be surprised that a specific form of religious iconography developed around Stalin, fuelled by rumours of a 'mysterious retreat' in 1941.

These historical moments assist in setting the context, although my prime interest is in Stalin's texts. At the same time, thinking through Stalin involves moving past the theological starting point, for the questions raised have to do with the Marxist tradition itself. In this sense, the matters of language, socialism and communism, human nature and the Party have their own life within theoretical debates and practical realities of Marxism. This situation applies especially to the question of the state, if not the socialist state. My analysis of this question does not seek to frame it in theological terms, no matter how much some may argue that the state in a European situation owes its shape to theological influences (Schmitt 2005). The reason is that Stalin simply does not see the state in these terms. Instead, what he calls a socialist state involves matters of class and nationality, dictatorship of the proletariat, affirmative action, redefining the 'people' and thereby the definition of the socialist state—a hitherto unexpected development.

Two other factors are important for understanding what I seek to do. The first is that all of these theoretical explorations took place largely in the context of socialism in power. I write 'socialism in power' in order to leave open the question as to whether the Soviet Union was socialist (assuming one knows what socialism is) and to indicate that a Communist Party was in power. Why this context? In my earlier study of Lenin, I was surprised to find that the Lenin after October was far more interesting than the one before October, even if most of his writings and activities took place before the revolution. As he pointed out on a number of occasions (as Mao did too), gaining power through a communist revolution is relatively easy, but exercising power in order to construct socialism is exponentially more difficult and complex. *This* is the Lenin who intrigues me. But it fell to Stalin to become the prime architect of socialism in power, the first time this had happened in world history. And so Stalin drew me in, for he and many other

[4]See Miner (2003) for a detailed study, albeit with some qualifications.

Bolsheviks found it necessary by force of circumstances to reassess some major Marxist categories and—more importantly—develop new ones that did not exist previously, for the simple fact that very few Marxists indeed had experienced the exercise of power.

Second, and closely related, is a changing context for my own work: China. Half of my time is now devoted to living and researching in the People's Republic, which has had a significant influence on the shape of the book. In an unexpected conjunction, the topics that arose through carefully reading and reflecting on Stalin's texts turned out to be topics that are very relevant for understanding Marxism in China. The intersection initially seemed fortuitous, but it eventually became clear that the common ground is socialism in power. More specifically, the creative influence of Stalin and the Soviet Union rose to a peak in the Yan'an period of the 1930s and into the 1940s. After the failure of earlier revolutionary efforts, and the trials and triumphs of the Long March, the Chinese communists had an opportunity to study, reflect, discuss and write. Apart from works by Marx and Engels, they had recourse to the developed positions coming from the Soviet Union. Translations brought them the works of Lenin and Stalin, as well as a number of key Soviet philosophers from Stalin's era. It was this context that framed the significant materials delivered in lectures and written in Yan'an, although the Chinese communists also clearly developed their own positions in debate with Soviet thought. Indeed, some of Mao's most important theoretical works come from this time, continuing to influence the frameworks of Chinese Marxism today. In my study of these works, it has become clear that many of the categories first broached by Stalin are taken and reworked in the writings of Mao and others. Thus, Stalin—so often excised from the history of Marxism, let alone Marxist philosophy—is the crucial link from Marx, Engels and Lenin to Mao and modern China.

In the end, my approach can be described simply: a careful analysis of texts. Some may speak of a humanist ideal, running back to Erasmus, but for this humanist the texts in question included the Bible. I undertake a patient and painstaking analysis of the actual published texts, with their insights, problems and challenges. This focus on the published texts is a conscious methodological decision, the reasons for which should be obvious by now. To these I add that I deliberately do not focus on the archives (see below), not least because of the tendency—archive 'fever' perhaps—to assume that one may find endless secrets to Stalin in such archives. Secrets there may be, although I doubt it. Instead, my interest is in careful attention to the patterns of thought and structures in the published texts. As Michael Smith observes (2010, 107), 'Stalin still has much that is genuine to teach us'.[5] Given the many preconceptions about Stalin, I have been more careful than usual, exegeting and citing the many texts in question in order to justify the arguments I develop. To do so, I focus on his *Works* (*Sochineniia*), although a number of volumes of a more complete Russian edition, *Trudy*, have

[5]And as Jeremy Smith (2005, 47) observes in relation to Stalin's statements on the national question, these 'statements should not be underestimated'.

now been completed. Surprisingly, this is a rare venture in our time, with only Van Ree (2002a) and Vaiskopf (2002) engaging to some extent with Stalin's texts (the former mostly for understanding and the latter with the aim of condemnation).

Reasons for the neglect of Stalin's actual writings are many: the polarisation—veneration and demonization—over 'Stalin'; the spate of studies since the 1990s that have been devoted to archives; the domination of research by historians, whether social historians or biographers; and the dismissal of any theoretical ability he may have had. Let me take each in turn. In terms of the polarisation over Stalin, the overwhelming tone in the 1990s was to focus on yet further atrocities committed (Volkogonov 1990, Radzinsky 1997). By contrast, by the early 2000s a distinct shift began, with some seeking to identify and indeed praise Stalin's gains (Osipov and Zotova 2003, Polikarpov 2007, Kremliov 2008, Ziuganov 2009, Zhura 2012, Lipman, Gudkov, and Bakradze 2013, Oshkalov 2013). By contrast, I seek not to takes sides in this polarisation, to seek the tyrant or saint within his thought. Instead, I take seriously Stalin the thinker, desiring to understand rather than praise or condemn.

Thus far I have referred to Russian works (although some have been translated). If we shift our scope to the international scene, the overwhelming tendency since the 1980s has been to make use of the archives that became more widely available in the late 1980s and especially the 1990s. Work after work claims to have had unprecedented access to such archives, or to have discovered new archives, or to have reconsidered the available archives. This research has undoubtedly enriched research into Stalin, although it should be noted that in the last decade many of the archives have once again been restricted. The material that remains available is due to earlier digitalisation. The down side of this archival fever is that careful study of the written, published works of Stalin have been neglected. A further focus since the 1980s has been social history, adding a significant angle to the earlier tendency to focus mostly on activities of the government.[6] This work has also been predicated on access to archives, yet it is even more notable for at best skimming over Stalin's written material (apart from the curious hypothesis that everyone was opposed to the communists). More recently, a spate of biographies has begun to emerge, with one scholar after another seeking to make a distinct contribution (Medvedev and Medvedev 2003, Montefiore 2003, 2007, Service 2004, Kotkin 2014, Khlevniuk 2015). These biographies both build on and seek to counter some of the perspectives in earlier biographies (Deutscher 1967, Tucker 1973, 1990, Volkogonov 1990). They may also be seen as part of the increasing debate over Stalin's legacy (Martens 1996, Roberts 2006, Losurdo 2008, Furr 2011).

Running like a sub-stream under all this work is an intermittent effort to deal with Stalin and religion to some extent (Fülöp-Miller 1926, Berdiaev 1934, 1937, Sarkisyanz 1955, Agursky 1987, Halfin 1999, Kharkhordin 1999, Duncan 2000, Vaiskopf 2002, 199–290). Religion is more or less present in these works, although the ways they do so vary considerably: background in Russian Orthodoxy; Stalin as

[6]Fitzpatrick's is the pioneering work here (2000).

part of a larger picture; traditions of 'messianism'; homologies with theology based on apparent likeness; secularisation of theology in Bolshevik ideology. Apart from Vaiskopf, none deals with Stalin's texts in any detail. In Vaiskopf's case, the theological homologies are somewhat overdone and used as another mechanism to reveal the workings of a tyrannical mind.

The present work, then, beats a somewhat lonely path. This loneliness is enhanced by the assumption that Stalin was actually able to think. It may be surprising, but he is not often credited with this ability, let alone the ability to think dialectically. Was he not the one who was a novice at theory, mocked by his comrades for his faltering efforts? This assumption is captured best in a fictional vignette: 'When, at one of the Party meetings of those days, Stalin involved himself in a theoretical argument, he was interrupted by a half-amused and half-indignant remark from the old Marxist scholar, Ryazanov: "Stop it, Koba, don't make a fool of yourself. Everybody knows that theory is not exactly your field"' (Deutscher 1967, 290, see also Trotsky 1941, 83–84, 386, Von Laue 1964, 202–3, Tucker 1973, 315, 318, Plamenatz 1975, 7–8, Cliff 2004, 132). By contrast, for all its many flaws, Kotkin's biography notes Stalin's 'vigorous intellect' (2014, 7). I must admit that I have come to agree with Kotkin on this point, overturning many of my preconceptions through patient and careful attention to Stalin's works.

This is also one of the conclusions of Van Ree's patient and important studies of Stalin's political thought (1997, 1998, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010c).[7] While I do not agree completely that Stalin developed a thoroughly tight-fitting and comprehensive doctrine to which he adhered, I do agree that Stalin gave much thought to the problems thrown up by the ever-changing situation and that he did so by immersing himself in the Marxist classics. Significant here is Van Ree's consideration (2002a, 1–9) of the role of Stalin's thought in popular (mis)-conceptions, which I interpret as follows. Stalin has variously been charged with vulgar Marxism, dogmatism, mystification, ignoring reality and the peddling of illusions (Timpanaro 1975, 32–33, Balibar 1977, 50, Service 2004, 319, Anderson 2007, 142, Michael-Matsas 2007, 117, Banaji 2010, 47–49, Khlevniuk 2015, 7). These various charges turn on whether Stalin was out of touch or in touch with reality. If the former, then his dogmatism was one with his illusions, but this suggestion struggles to make any sense of the events as they unfolded in the Soviet Union, in all their stunning achievements, disruptions and failures. It also fails to understand the remarkable consistency in Stalin's thought and that of the other communists who worked with him. If the latter, then he becomes a hypocrite, cynic or sophist, assuming a deliberate effort to conceal reality, as saying one thing—in very Marxist terms—but doing the opposite, or a cynical effort to secure ever more dictatorial power, or spinning words to justify yet another deviation (Plamenatz 1947, 111–17). The problem here is that Stalin clearly believed what he thought and acted upon such positions. Ultimately, all of these charges carry with them the

[7]At the same time, Van Ree cannot resist the temptation to find external sources for Stalin's thought outside the Marxist tradition.

assumption that one has no need to consider his actual texts and the thoughts developed therein. My study indicates that this is a mistake.

Indeed, I have come to the position that Stalin must be studied carefully as part of the Marxist tradition. The various responses I have discussed—ranging from dismissals of his intellectual ability to the charge of sophistry—function as efforts to excise Stalin from this tradition. To this should be added a narrative of betrayal, or even a Fall from the truth of Marxism. This narrative takes many forms, with some attributing the betrayal to Engels, Lenin or Stalin (apart from efforts to condemn Marxism by connecting them all to Marx). I am interested here in the charge that Stalin himself betrayed Marxism (Deutscher 1959, 459–66, Liebman 1973, 417–25, Farber 1990, Le Blanc 1990, 4–5, 2014, 44–45, Anderson 2007, 142, Lecercle 2007, 276, Molyneux 2003, 126–27). This move is often made to distinguish him from Lenin, so that one may claim Lenin, dismiss Stalin, and then pick up another as the true heir of Lenin—whether Trotsky, Mao, Ho Chi Minh or Castro. I find this a curious move indeed, for it erases a major figure in that tradition, who—despite his missteps and profound mistakes from time to time—was crucial in fostering anti-colonial struggles and socialist revolutions elsewhere in the world, especially in China. No matter what one's assessment of Stalin may be, it is an act of intellectual laziness to deny him a place in the tradition. So I follow Van Ree (2002a, 14–17, 1997) in assuming that Stalin was very much part of the Marxist tradition. He notes that Stalin's library was overwhelmingly Marxist and he made extensive notes in the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin. Even more, all of the key ideas developed by Lenin and Stalin can be found in earlier moments of the Marxist tradition. After all, a political tradition like Marxism is constantly developing, revising positions and developing new ones in light of changing circumstances. Is not a key Marxist method one of praxis-interpretation-praxis?

It remains to provide a synopsis of the chapters that follow. The first chapter sets the scene in two ways: first, I examine in detail Stalin's engagements with the Bible, since he was known for his propensity to quote or allude to biblical texts. This was as true of the young theological student, for whom 'Holy Scripture' was a core subject, as of the mature Stalin in his many speeches and writings. I am interested in tracing the biblical contours of this material, with its allusions, invocations and inflections. After analysing the main features of this biblical sentence production, I offer a series of recreated texts that highlight the biblical tenor of Stalin's writings—following the canonical order from Genesis to Revelation. Second, and more importantly for the subsequent chapters, I examine what may be called a scriptural dynamic (understanding 'scripture' as writings rather than 'sacred' texts), which is translatable across different scriptural traditions. Thus, in traditions in which written texts of founders play an important role, the claims made upon and reinterpretations offered of the founding texts are crucial for justifying new directions. Here tensions over spirit and letter emerge, as do struggles over reinterpretation and betrayal of meaning. In debates, all sides claim to be faithful to the texts of Marx, Engels and Lenin, with each denouncing the other as undertaking misguided interpretation.

Building on this biblical framework, the second chapter in many ways sets the scene for the arguments that follow. It concerns the productive role of the 'delay of

communism' in Stalin's thought. The world's first socialist revolution soon experienced a delay in the expected achievement of communism. It became obvious that it would not come as soon as many expected. This delay produced a number of innovations, which I examine in some detail. It began with the distinction between socialism and communism, with the interim of socialism becoming a distinct period. But how to define such an era? Stalin creatively deployed biblical texts (2 Thess 3:10 and Acts 4:32 and 35) to define it, to the point of including them in the 1936 constitution, as well as four dialectical features: the diversity and unity of languages and cultures; the intensification of class conflict as the goal draws nearer; socialism in one country; strengthening the state as the means to its withering away. By now, echoes of the early Christian phenomenon of the 'delay of the Parousia' should be clear: Christ's delay in returning produced a range of responses in which the interim became the norm. The details may have been different, but the underlying phenomenon of delay is analogous. However, the most intriguing aspect of Stalin's thought is what may be called proleptic communism (analogous to proleptic eschatology), in which a communism of the future is creatively present as a type of reverse causality, determining the nature of the present even though it remains to be achieved.

The third chapter develops a specific aspect arising from the delay of communism: the question of language. This topic requires a fresh analysis of the range of Stalin's thoughts on the topic. I argue that he glimpses the possibility of a dialectical understanding of language: the greater the totalising unity, the greater the linguistic diversity produced; the more diversity arises, the more does a new form of unity arise. The first part of the chapter analyses the initial stage of the dialectic, where Stalin indicates the unexpected creation of more languages as a result of Soviet practices. The second part deals with the question of unity, specifically in terms of the widespread ideal of an eventual universal language under global socialism. These two aspects indicate an underlying pattern that may be described in terms of a tension between the languages of paradise (or pre-Babelian language) and Pentecost, between Genesis 11 and Acts 2. Whereas the socialist tradition was influenced in its own way by the search for a universal pre-Babelian language (characteristic of European linguistic study), Stalin takes a different path, stressing tensions between unity and diversity in a way that strongly echoes Pentecost. However, Stalin's thoughts on this matter are not always consistent, so when faced with questions, he resorts to a conventional stages theory of linguistic development, in which initial diversity would eventually lead to unity. Even when he deploys such a theory, we may discern a desire to push the final age so far into the future that it may well never come. The interim provides ample time for a more dialectical approach. In light of this position, it becomes possible to see the essay on linguistics (1950) as an anomaly. It results in a closing down of the dialectic in terms of a stability-flux opposition.

In the fourth chapter, I argue that Stalin makes a potentially significant philosophical contribution to Marxist anthropology (the doctrine of human nature). Due to its significance, this is necessarily a long chapter, with four parts. The first investigates the effort to identify a new human nature, particularly during the

'socialist offensive' of the 1930s. Stakhanovism, with its emulation, tempo and grit, provided the first glimpse of the new nature which both realised the latency of workers and peasants and marked a new departure. The second part investigates the language and practice of criticism and self-criticism, in which the terminology of 'sin' appears frequently. It is easy enough to criticise others and identify their flaws, but it is far more difficult to criticise oneself, or at least accept the valid criticism of others. The third part digs into the intensification of the dialectic, which was a signature feature of Stalin's dialectical engagements. We find this intensification in a number of areas, although I focus on revolutionary experience, the doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the idea of the world divided into the two great camps of socialism and capitalism, and—the most well-known—the intensification of class struggle, especially as one draws nigh to the goal. At this point, the theological resonances rise to the surface, so I designate it the 'theology of class struggle'. All of these features set up the final section, which analyses the increasing awareness of the depths of evil, produced precisely by the new human nature espied earlier. Such evil was manifested in the purges, eliminating the kulaks as a class and, above all, the 'Red Terror'. Here I delve into the terminology of purging (with its theological echoes), the demonstration trials and the shocking awareness of a new depth of evil within both the collective and individual self. This discussion would not be complete without an identification of the theological underpinnings of such a theory of human nature. Stalin challenges Russian Orthodox theological assumptions, as well as the Pelagian heritage of Marxist anthropology, which assumed a significant role for human action, since human beings could indeed undertake good works on their own. By contrast, Stalin takes a more Augustinian line on the question of human nature and its transformation. In terms of the defining fifth-century debate between Pelagius and Augustine, Stalin's approach may be seen as an Augustinian irruption in which 'sin' looms large. But there is a twist, for the two sides—inherent goodness and the depth of evil—should not be separated from one another: they are necessarily connected, for without one, the other would not have existed.

The fifth chapter concerns Stalin's deliberations over Party and people, which may be seen as a Marxist recalibration of the dialectic of transcendence and immanence. The chapter begins by observing that despite the abandonment of the world by God and the concomitant drive to immanence in modern Europe, the dialectical relation between transcendence and immanence remains, albeit in recast or translated forms. In other words, it is not that transcendence has been banished, but that it takes on new roles. Stalin offers, perhaps surprisingly, the most far-reaching reinterpretation, albeit in political terms. The main features of his position concern the opposition of 'from below' and 'from above', the nature of socialist consciousness, and the relations between Party and people. In terms of the well-known distinction between 'above' and 'below', Stalin reveals a distinct caution over transcendence and a valorising of immanence. Such caution challenges the common idea that Stalin was a proponent of 'revolution from above'. The next step is to examine the workings of more complex dialectical understanding, initially embodied in his reflections over socialist consciousness. These reflections function as a microcosm of the more developed argument concerning Party and people, in

which transcendence and immanence rely thoroughly on one another. This argument inevitably leads to an initial articulation of what socialist democracy might be. The chapter closes by considering the objection (Adorno) that the transformation of theological transcendence leads to even more pernicious forms of political and cultural transcendence, in which human beings lord it over others. Was Stalin guilty of such a move?

In many respects, the arguments of much of the book lead to the final chapter on the state. It begins with the intriguing observation that the state which began to develop in the Soviet Union was not a federation, not a nation-state, not an empire, not a colonising power, whether externally or internally, but an entirely new state formation. In a European and West-Asian context, each form of the state mentioned trails theological assumptions and associations. But if the Soviet Union was not such a state, then what form of the state was it? How one understands the state turns on a dialectic of the universal and particular, manifested in terms of nationality, class, affirmative action, anti-colonialism, the definition of 'people' and the role of a socialist state. The steps in the argument may be summarised as follows. First, a totalising unity produces hitherto unknown forms of diversity, as is manifested in the focus on class as a way to rethink the 'national question' (meaning here nationalities and not the bourgeois nation-state) and in the role of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Second, this dialectic provides the basis for the theoretical elaboration of the world's first 'affirmative action' program. According to this program, nationalities were fostered, languages encouraged (to the point where new literate languages were created) and culture, education and political leadership actively nourished. Third, arising from the affirmative action program was the theoretical justification and practice of the international anti-colonial struggle. Fourth, within that international context we see the beginning of a new understanding of the state. This state is not comprised of a nation, since the term 'nation' was studiously avoided. Instead, it entailed a redefinition of the term 'people' (*narod*), in which the 'Soviet people', made up of all nationalities, was constituted by workers, collective farmers and intellectuals. But what did Stalin mean when he used the term 'socialist state'? He faced an initial problem, deriving from Lenin's definition of the state as a manifestation of class struggle, and the latter's prevarication over whether the state was an instrument or tool to be used by one class against another or whether it was indelibly shaped by the class in power. Stalin's attempted solution is to argue that Lenin wrote only the first volume of *The State and Revolution*, having been unable to complete the work due to the outbreak of the October revolution. So Stalin proposes stages in the development of the socialist state, in which the first stage accords with Lenin's view, but the second stage moves beyond: internal class enemies have been destroyed, so one keeps a watch on external enemies; the classes of workers, farmers and intellectuals now work together in non-antagonistic ways (contradiction remains under socialism); and a strong state is required to enact the social and economic transformations characteristic of socialism. To these should be added the resolute focus on class, the affirmative action program, anti-colonialism and the development of a new identity, 'being Soviet'. Of course, this is only a beginning to analysis of the socialist state,

so one must analyse other socialist states—especially China—to ascertain more mature practices.

In the conclusion, I return to a motif that runs throughout the book. Stalin worked hard at theoretical elaborations of the Marxist tradition as he saw it. Yet, his formulations were often tentative, exploratory and piecemeal. The chapters—some quite long—of the book attempt to exegete Stalin's texts, identify underlying (often theological) surrents, and develop his points in a more coherent form. So in the conclusion, I pursue the implications of his main ideas, especially with an eye on the Chinese situation. The reason is that the current study is also one in transition, for I have become increasingly immersed in a Chinese context, seeking to understand Chinese Marxism and its practice today. As mentioned earlier, I have found an extraordinary conjunction between the core ideas Stalin began to examine and the important questions for understanding Chinese politics, economics and culture in light of Marxism. I end, however, on a slightly different note, attempting to assess the profound bifurcation in the reception of Stalin, caught as he is between veneration and demonization, with relatively few efforts at balanced assessments. One of the latter, by Losurdo, becomes my focus, for he provides a riveting account of how the 'demonic legend' grew around Stalin. Throughout, I attempt not to take sides, but to understand. And a Chinese approach may well help, for the response to Stalin as well as to Mao is to recognise and appreciate their many significant, if not world-changing contributions, but also to acknowledge, criticise and avoid their mistakes.

# Chapter 1
# Stalin's Bible

> Undoubtedly, our path is not of the easiest; but, just as undoubtedly, we are not to be frightened by difficulties. Paraphrasing the well-known words of Luther, Russia might say:
>
> Here I stand on the border line between the old, capitalist world and the new, socialist world. Here, on this border line, I unite the efforts of the proletarians of the West and of the peasants of the East in order to shatter the old world. May the god of history be my aid! (1920s, 406, 1920t, 393).

'He could quote from the Bible … he read seriously, making notes, learning quotations' (Montefiore 2007, 100). This was as true of the young theological student, for whom 'Holy Scripture' was a core subject, as of the mature Stalin in his many speeches and writings. In this opening chapter, I take a slightly different direction and set the scene for the following chapters by tracing the biblical contours of Stalin's texts, with their allusions, invocations and inflections. After briefly analysing the main features of this biblical sentence production, I plunge into an imaginative effort to recreate Stalin's texts in a way that highlights their biblical tenor. This effort is a type of pastiche, in which I draw together the many references and allusions into a new whole that follows the canonical narrative of the Bible. All of this enables me to raise the issue of how one interprets the texts of the initial revolutionary leader—in this case, Lenin—in what may be called a scriptural dynamic. Such a dynamic one finds in each revolutionary movement where the leader was also an intellectual who wrote and thought.

## 1.1 The Poet

Before I do so, let me mention briefly the nature of Stalin's sentence production per se, or 'style' as it is at times called. Contrary to the regular denigrations, deriving from Trotsky (1941, xv, 66), that Stalin was neither 'a thinker, a writer nor an



R. Boer, *Stalin: From Theology to the Philosophy of Socialism in Power*,
DOI 10.1007/978-981-10-6367-1_1

orator' and that his style was 'plodding and barren', a careful examination reveals a significant range, if not skill, in the production of sentences.[1] It varied considerably over time, covering poetry, uses of imagery, rhetorical if not euphoric flights, storytelling, liturgical preferences, liking for repetitions, slogans and catechetical style. He could be direct, conjure up word images, offer clear repetitions with a twist each time, tell stories and bark commands. One is irresistibly drawn (although some would be simultaneously horrified) into the rhythms of these sentences. I am most intrigued by the widely ignored poetry of Stalin's youth. 'Adolescent and precocious, skilful and yet faltering'—so does the translator describe the five poems a youthful Stalin wrote and had published in a leading Georgian literary journal, *Iveria*, in 1895, and one in *K'vali* (*The Trace*) in 1896 (Rayfield 1985, 44).[2] Indeed, Rayfield observes that Stalin had 'the mixture right', blending Persian, Byzantine, Romanticist and Russian 'civic' elements. Their 'real talent', he writes, if not 'observation and affection', meant that the first—'Morning'—and the fifth—'To Raphael Eristavi'—were republished, one in a widely used anthology of Georgian poetry for schools (even in the Khrushchev and subsequent eras) and the other in a jubilee book devoted to the person celebrated in the poem.

The attention to poetry did not leave Stalin once he decided on a revolutionary path, rather than an ecclesiastical or literary one. To give but a few examples, he writes of humble workers with 'tobacco pouches in their hands and with petitions in their pockets' (Stalin 1912q, 242, 1912r, 73) and whose sweat has watered the land of the landlords (Stalin 1906a, 217, 1906b, 398). At the same time, they have a 'scarlet blood' that 'seethes with the fire of unspent strength!' (Stalin 1912k, 231, 1912l, 71). They are the 'subterranean forces', the 'first swallows', the individual streams of a proletarian movement that is about to burst forth into a general revolutionary flood, the waves of which rise higher and with increasing force: 'Neither prisons nor penal servitude, nor gallows—nothing can stop the proletarian movement' (Stalin 1905g, 82, 1905h, 27, 1912k, 232, 1912l, 72). They will lead a revolution, 'awe-inspiring and mighty', which will liberate an 'enslaved East and the bleeding West' and before whom the 'old "lords" of the earth in the East and the West bend their heads before it in fear and trembling' (Stalin 1918k, 167, 1918l, 164, 1918o, 173, 1918p, 170). They will finally overcome a situation in which Russia was 'beaten' by the Mongol khans, the Turkish beys, the Swedish feudal lords, the Polish and Lithuanian gentry, British and French capitalists, the Japanese barons. All beat her—'because of her backwardness, because of her military backwardness, cultural backwardness, political backwardness, industrial

[1]The only significant engagement with Stalin's sentence production is the rather gothic work by Vaiskopf (2002), who sees much of Stalin's thinking as a form of 'sophistry'. Within its Platonic framework, this may be seen as a criticism. But if one sees Plato's ruling class (aristocratic) assumptions for what they are, this may actually be an unwitting compliment. Ultimately, Vaiskopf's agenda is not only to undermine Stalin's thought as a weak form of Aristotelian-theological logic (which would make him a disciple of Thomas Aquinas!), but also to demonise him in yet another way.

[2]Rayfield plays on a common theme, seeking the tyrant-in-waiting in even these early poems.

backwardness, agricultural backwardness' (Stalin 1931i, 40–41, 1931j, 38–39). In correcting these wrongs, the workers and peasants will 'build a citadel of Soviet power in the East' so as to 'light the path to emancipation for the tormented peoples of the East' (Stalin 1919k, 247–248, 1919l, 238–239).[3]

From poetry, it is a small step to the Bible itself, with its myriad genres of—to name but a few—mythology, legend, annals, narrative, apothegm, psalmody, oracle, parable, epistle, and … poetry. In what follows, I engage in a type of creative pastiche in the first person, drawing together many of the biblical citations and allusions by Stalin into a whole that seeks to capture the feel of his texts. Given the canonical range of these references, I move through from the moment of creation in Genesis to the final text of Revelation, from Hebrew Bible to New Testament.[4]

## 1.2 From Creation to the Prophets

Many would like to claim that they are made in the 'image and likeness [*po obrazu svoemu i podobiiu*]' of the bourgeoisie, or perhaps that they recreate the world in their own image (Stalin 1908e, 98, 1908f, 259, 1926g, 139, 1926h, 132). But I, Stalin, have been born and reared in the image and likeness of nothing less than the 'great Party of the working class'. As a result, I will devote myself to the working class, to communism, and to world revolution, with 'all my strength, all my ability and, if need be, all my blood, drop by drop' (Stalin 1929k, 146, 1929l, 140).[5] But we cannot have creation without the Fall and the 'tree of knowledge of power'. Tasting the fruit of the tree tempts some, such as the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, to make alliances with the propertied classes (Stalin 1918y, 54, 1918z, 301, see also Martin 2001a, 348, 350).[6] They will be banished from the garden, which is guarded by the flaming and 'bared sword [*obnazhennyĭ mech*]' of the working class, the OGPU (Stalin 1932a, 160, 1932b, 158).[7] Outside the garden, the banished Adams and Trotskys will toil 'in the sweat of their brow'—although

[3]Further examples include Mayday celebrations during the Second World War, celebrations of the October Revolution, the end of the war and Moscow's 800th anniversary (Stalin 1941c, d, e, f, 1942e, f, 1943g, h, e, f, 1944a, b, e, f, c, d, 1945e, f, s, t, 1946c, d, 1947a, b).

[4]Many of the biblical images appear in relation to both opponents and Bolsheviks, which makes the process of such a pastiche somewhat more complex. All the same, it is a curiously revolutionary Bible, and certainly not the 'Bible of legal revolutionary democracy' (Stalin 1906–7a, 351, 1906–7b, 175).

[5]Stalin uses the same words as the Synodal Bible of 1826, which he would have known from his time of theological study. These are *obrazu* and *podobiiu*, image and likeness. Vaiskopf (2002) overplays his argument at this point, suggesting that Stalin saw himself as both modest human being and part of the Godhead, as a reflection of Christ's dual nature as human and divine.

[6]Gen 2:16; 3:1–12.

[7]Gen 3:24.

the workers too labour with their own sweat and find themselves outside the garden (Stalin 1927m, 56, 1927n, 53, 1941a, 4, 1941b, 59).[8]

From this banishment another creation story emerges, that of the Flood, in which even the 'the heaven-blessed wells burst out in gushers' (Stalin 1910a, 180, 1910b, 4),[9] and then the Babel story of the multiplication of languages. I am not one who feels that socialism and then communism will lead to a singular human language, returning to the state of language before Babel (often called the language of Adam and Paradise (Olender 1992)), but I do believe that socialism produces an even greater diversity of languages and cultures—more like Pentecost than Babel. Indeed, 'the socialist revolution has not diminished but rather increased the number of languages'. It has brought the 'forgotten peoples and nationalities on to the scene' and given them 'new life and a new development' (Stalin 1925w, 141, 1925x, 139).[10] Perhaps the greatest creation story is that of the Exodus, when the people of Israel escaped oppression and were not so much helped by God but became the waves of the sea themselves. The 'individual streams of the proletarian movement are merging in one general revolutionary flood', so much so that the 'waves of this flood are rising higher and dashing against the tsarist throne with increasing force—and the decrepit tsarist government is tottering' (Stalin 1905g, 82, 1905h, 27).[11]

Exodus means wilderness, where the Party was tried and steeled into a fighting force. It may have gone 'astray in the wilderness of Social-Democratic confusion' (Stalin 1926y, 117, 1926z, 111). It may have been tempted by worshipping 'icons' or 'fetishes', whether of our 'backwardness', or liberal parliaments, or 'High Priests', or the 'Golden Calf' of profit of the kingdom of the bourgeois oppressors, or the 'one and indivisible' country, or even spontaneous movements and collective farms (Stalin 1905c, 92, 1905d, 35, 1912g, 226–227, 1912h, 60–61, 1923u, 282, 1923v, 277, 1923g, 347–348, 1923h, 340–341, 1926c, 174, 1926d, 165, 1927m, 78–79, 1927n, 74–75, 1933c, 230–231, 1933d, 225–226, 1934c, 31, 1934d, 30, 1935j, 103–104, 1935k, 88, 1938e, 329, 1938f, 250).[12] Indeed, I myself was guilty of 'waverings' during this time of exile, if not even afterwards. But I did not conceal them (like Trotsky did), for I confessed and ensured I did not err again —'who of us has not been subject to transitory waverings [*mimoletnye kolebaniia*]' (Stalin 1926u, 67, 1926v, 64, see also 1927m, 10, 1927n, 9–10)? But through these trials, our Party became the 'Holy of Holies [*sviataia sviatyh*]' that no one was willing to desecrate by—paradoxically—not turning it into a philosophical or religious sect (Stalin 1905i, 66, 1905j, 5, 1905u, 78, 1905v, 19, 1927q, 269, 1927r, 263)![13] After our long murmuring, wandering, suffering and sacrifices, we knew

[8]Gen 3:19.

[9]Gen 7:11.

[10]Acts 2:1–18.

[11]Ex 14:26–29.

[12]Ex 20:4–5; Deut 5:8–9.

[13]Ex 26:33–34; 2 Chr 3:8; 10; 4:22; 5:7; Heb 9:3.

that we were not voices 'crying in the wilderness' (Stalin 1917w[1], 303, 1917x[1], 385),[14] for we were able to arrive proudly at the kingdom of labour, the 'promised land' of socialism (Stalin 1905c, 97, 99, 103, 104, 1905d, 39, 41, 44, 1906c, 287, 1906d, 103, 1912g, 226, 1912h, 60, 1927e[1], 200, 1927f[1], 197–198).

Winning the revolution is no guarantee that things will be in any way easier. As Lenin said again and again, gaining revolutionary power is relatively easy; far, far more difficult and complex is the effort to construct socialism—especially when no one has done it before! Like Nehemiah after the exile in Babylon, we too—especially during the 'civil' war and international blockade—had to build 'under fire', laying 'bricks with one hand' and defending what we were 'building with the other' (Stalin 1920s, 403, 1920t, 390).[15] As the Psalmist put it, 'strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round, slandering and informing, threatening and imploring, begging and demanding' (Stalin 1917i[2], 410, 1917j[2], 480).[16] At times, we were like David in the face of Goliath, trying to find a way to cut off this 'devil's head … with his own sword' (Stalin 1906g, 295, 296, 1906h, 123, 124, see also 1923u, 271, 1923v, 266).[17] At other times, the enemy was nothing more than a giant with 'feet of clay [*glinianykh nogakh*]' (Stalin 1925i, 279, 1925j, 273),[18] cowering before us with 'fear and trembling [*straha vspomnit'*]' (Stalin 1905k, 151, 1905l, 90).[19] Our enemies were not only without, but also within. Some wished the revolution and counter-revolution to reconcile, wanting the 'wolves and the lambs' to graze together (Stalin 1906k, 254, 1906l, 4).[20] Often, 'doubt crept into people's hearts, they began to depart, each to his own national tent' (Stalin 1913e, 380, 1913f, 159).[21] They may have felt that our 'days were numbered' (Stalin 1927q, 271, 1927r, 265),[22] but these were, to quote the sage from Ecclesiastes, 'empty phrases thrown to the wind' (Stalin 1905c, 101, 106, 117, 1905d, 42, 46, 55).[23] And at times, we paid the highest price and found ourselves mourning, as David did for Jonathan, over the death of a comrade who was near us, 'as a trusted friend, as a loved comrade, as a faithful companion in arms' (Stalin 1934a, 64, 1934b, 82).[24] But we were not dismayed, for our 'victorious banners' waved, 'to the dismay of the enemies of liberty and socialism!' Indeed, our call resounded 'through the

[14]Matt 3:2; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23.

[15]Neh 4:15–18.

[16]Ps 22:12.

[17]1 Sam 17.

[18]Dan 2:33–34, 41.

[19]Ps 55:5; Mark 5:33; Acts 16:29; 1 Cor 2:3; 7:15; 2 Cor 7:15; Eph 6:5; Phil 2:12; Heb 12:21.

[20]Isa 11:6. The English translation of Stalin's text has 'the lion and the lamb', but the Russian reads '*volki i ovtsy*' (wolves and lambs).

[21]1 Kgs 12:16 and 2 Kgs 14:12. The Russian here has '*kvartiram*', which may be understood as 'lodgings'. The Synodal Bible of 1876 has '*shatram*', 'tents'.

[22]Job 14:5; Ps 39:4.

[23]Eccl 2:12, 26; 4:4, 16; 5:16; 6:9.

[24]2 Sam 1:17–27.