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rich mine of information for researchers working on Soviet domestic policy in the 1930s.

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Viacheslav Molotov (1890–1986), one of Stalin's chief lieutenants, held on to letters he received in the 1920s and 1930s from his boss rather than deposit them in the chancellery's working archives. In 1969 the aging Molotov belatedly handed a bunch of them to the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, where they sat for twenty years until they were finally shown to a handful of scholars. In 1990 twenty of those letters deemed most interesting were published in Russian-language journals. When Yale University Press signed a contract for a highly publicized translation series devoted to newly opened archival documents, the temptation to rush the ostensibly unique letters into print apparently proved irresistible.

Stalin handwrote these fascinating though cryptic missives (one was typed) during his annual extended vacations in Sochi, when Molotov remained in Moscow and, along with others, was entrusted with looking after Stalin's interests and helping to administer party and government affairs. The documents depict the Soviet leader sometimes thinking out loud, sometimes issuing specific instructions—for example, tactics for out-maneuvering political opponents or the content of confessions to be extracted from those arrested. The letters also show that being a dictator could be demanding but that Stalin took satisfaction in the job. “I am indeed a little tired,” he confided in August 1935. “I had to spend a lot of time with the Comintern members, with the 1936 target figures, with all sorts of ongoing questions—inevitably, you get tired. But it's not a disaster—tiredness passes quickly, with a day's rest, or even a few hours” (237).

Neither the Americans nor the Russians asked to prepare the 86 letters and additional materials for publication could establish whether Molotov preserved and turned over all or only part of the personal communications Stalin had sent to him over the years. More than 70 of the documents cover 1925–1930 yet, curiously, there are none for the critical year 1928 when Stalin and some of his close allies, denounced as right opposition, parted ways. Perhaps Stalin did not share crucial information with the ever-loyal Molotov that particular year, or maybe they talked exclusively on the phone and in person. Or could it be that Molotov judged the details of Stalin's tactics in this episode as liable to be misjudged? Even more suspiciously, for the momentous years 1931–1936 there are a mere dozen letters, none of them remotely commensurate with events, as the Russian compilers lament (227). For 1934 there are no letters whatsoever, as is also true for the entire period 1937–1953, a time when Stalin perhaps relied more closely on other confidants but while Molotov still held a place in the inner circle.

To his death Molotov seems to have retained an unshakable faith in the righteousness of his and Stalin's actions, which came under attack in the years after 1953. Molotov was in disgrace when he voluntarily handed over the letters, which deal chiefly with Stalin's triumph over factions inside the Party and his vigorous pursuit of Soviet
state interests. Duly noting Molotov's motives for shaping historical memory and the likelihood of the collection's incompleteness, the editors refuse to speculate about what may be missing. While one must admire their prudence, the specter of selectivity haunts the publication.

No less disappointing than the incompleteness of the correspondence is its one-sidedness. The collection does not contain Molotov's letters to Stalin—presumably kept in the Kremlin Archives (now the Presidential Archives), which, by the way, may also contain copies of all Stalin's letters to Molotov, as well as those to Kaganovich, Ordzhonikidze, Mikoyan, Zhdanov, Khruschev and the rest of the gang. Many if not all of these invaluable documents will see the light of day, as long as western Europeans and Americans (including Yale) continue to offer financial incentives. Given the uncertainties concerning the precise content of and access to the Presidential Archives (especially at the time Yale concluded its initial contract), the decision to publish a Russian-language edition of the letters to Molotov openly available in the central-party archives made some sense. Whether the same can be said for the English-language edition is another matter.

Specialists will want to consult the Russian-language text for remarkable behind-the-scenes glimpses into the Eastman affair and the Lenin succession, the 1930 pogrom against bourgeois economists at Gosplan followed by the adoption of their policy recommendations, and other matters. Non-specialist, English-only readers could find themselves bewildered by the brevity of the letters, which are rarely self-contained and made up largely of references to obscure events and persons. True, the Russian compilers, led by Oleg Khlevniuk, have done a superb job of annotating the text, particularly with previously unknown documents released piecemeal from the Presidential Archives (there are a few more in the Russian edition than the English one; Yale evidently decided not to wait for additional disclosures that would then have had to be translated). But the expert commentary and supplementary citations overshadow the letters themselves, which take up far less than one third of the book. The inability of the letters to stand alone is further demonstrated by Lars Lih's 63-page introduction (omitted from the Russian edition). To prove his points Lih often makes greater use of the extra documents provided in the notes than the actual letters.

Lih's introduction is less a guide to the letters for the English-language reader than an ambitious mini-monograph in which he puts forth "a general interpretation of Stalin as a leader" (10). He argues forcefully that "Stalin's image of himself as a devoted, conscientious leader is not without foundation. He plainly worked very hard trying to resolve genuinely intractable problems. His leadership skills are impressive" (63). Lih further contends that Stalin's "influence within the Politburo was based on what his colleagues considered the cogency of his analysis and the soundness of his recommendations" (18) and that "Stalin had a conscious and coherent approach to governing" (10). Lih concludes that the letters demonstrate that "Stalin was a believer" who strove to defend the goals of the revolution but had "inadequate" conceptual equipment and lacked access to "unbiased information." As such, he was condemned to suffer "the anger of frustration" rather than "the confidence of power" (62–63). No lunatic, no dimwitted tyrant, but a statesman and even somewhat a victim of his own brutal system—such is Lih's refreshingly revisionist Stalin.

A diametrically different view informs the Russian compilers' handling of these documents. They see Stalin as wholly cynical, hyper-suspicious, venomous—in short, as the familiar all-powerful and unprincipled victimizer. Unfortunately, neither Lih nor his Russian counterparts acknowledge the disagreement, suggesting a lack of coordination. Moreover, the Russian compilers display a certain inconsistency. In one place they write that Stalin was "entirely consumed by the political struggle within the upper echelons of power" and "interested in decisions on foreign or domestic policies primarily as they related to his struggle for power" (67); in another, that the "letters preserved from 1927 are almost entirely devoted to foreign policy issues. He was greatly concerned with the state of the international Communist movement" (134).
In fact, Stalin emerges in this collection as preoccupied with political intrigue but also as meticulous in his attention to the military and industrial build-up of the Soviet state. He comes across as both methodical and impulsive, sincere and disingenuous, concerned and malevolent, shrewd and error-prone.

Beyond the extensive annotation and commentary provided by Lih and Khlevniuk’s team, Robert Tucker lends his considerable authority to this original yet frustrating book with a brief foreword. Tucker argues that the disjointed bits of political instruction gathered here confirm his well-known views that Stalin was “totally consumed by politics” and “totally devoid of human feeling” (xi-xii). Highlighting Stalin’s vindictiveness, which can be found mostly in letter no. 71, Tucker also reiterates his contention that Stalin was uniquely obsessed with personal glory and driven by anger, which surfaced whenever his quest for glory was thwarted. In a similar vein, citing Stalin’s brief mention in another letter (no. 51) of the events in Manchuria in 1929 when the Soviet leader seemed to recommend organizing a revolutionary uprising there in answer to Chinese efforts to seize the Russian-controlled Chinese Eastern Railroad, Tucker concludes that the letters “bear out the proposition, which has been developed in the scholarly literature, that Stalin was a Russian imperial Bolshevik” bent on territorial aggrandizement well before 1945 (ix). Some readers may wonder whether these fragmentary materials substantiate Tucker’s long-standing claims, beyond the key one that Stalin was deeply involved with foreign policy early on.

Stalin issued and received an inordinate number of documents: revealing private letters to his mother and wife, many of which have been published; innumerable messages and telegrams exchanged with hosts of functionaries—including a vast official correspondence with Molotov addressing economic and foreign policy questions. (None of Stalin’s other correspondence with Molotov is printed in this collection, even though reams of it can be found in the accessible archives of Sovnarkom.) Before definitively pronouncing on Stalin’s worldview and actions—to say nothing of the nature of his regime—it would seem wise to consider a greater measure of his surviving correspondence, not just a few score of private letters that were probably sifted.

In a way, our bluff has been called. The opening of the archives requires intensive work (a wealth of top-secret materials from the secretariat of the NKVD/MVD sent to Molotov from 1944 to 1956, for example, is conveniently catalogued in Arkhiv novisheii istorii Rossii, part of a series). And yet, deeper understanding will come not from archives alone but our ability to use documents to imagine the mental universe of the leader of another country in another time, and to correlate such imaginings with a studied appreciation of dictatorships, ancient and modern. With these letters to Molotov and accompanying commentary, Stalin stands slightly more revealed than heretofore, and so do the organizations that had a hand in the preparation and publication of this volume.

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For those unable to consult the newly opened archives in Moscow, whether for linguistic or other reasons, there is light at the end of the tunnel with the publication of documents in a joint venture between western publishers and Russian archivists, doubtless the first of many such enterprises. Never before have we had available a complete and authorized text of the foundation meeting of the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform), which took place in a sanatorium in the little health resort of Szklarska Poręba in Poland on 22–28 September 1947.