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Introduction

In December 1929, Joseph Stalin wrote to his closest comrade-in-arms, Viacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov, who was on vacation in the south. "Hello, Viacheslav. Of course I got your first letter. I know you are cursing me in your heart for my silence. I can't deny that you are fully within your rights to do so. But try to see things my way: I'm terribly overloaded and there's no time to sleep (literally!). Soon I will write a proper letter [. . .]. Once again: I promise to write a proper letter. Warm regards."[1] A few years later, Stalin fundamentally changed his relationship with Molotov. In 1937 and 1938, Stalin ordered that Molotov's assistants be arrested. Molotov's people were no safer than those working for other members of the Politburo, many of whose aides were swept away in the Great Terror. In 1939 the NKVD fabricated a case against Molotov's wife (although her arrest would not come until later). Molotov himself was subject to numerous demeaning attacks, and in May 1941 he was removed from the post of chairman of the Council of People's Commissars in disgrace. On 6 December 1945, Stalin, who was away on vacation, wrote the following to Lavrenty Beria, Georgy Malenkov, and Anastas Mikoyan: "I have become convinced that Molotov does not hold the interests of our state and the prestige of our government in very high regard—all he cares about is popularity in certain foreign circles. I can no longer consider such a comrade to be my first

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deputy." As a final humiliating blow he added, "I am sending this cipher to you three only. I didn't send it to Molotov since I don't have faith in the trustworthiness of certain of his close associates. I am asking you to summon Molotov and read him my telegram in its entirety, but don't give him a copy of it."[2] Molotov's response was humbly repentant. "I will try to earn your trust through my deeds. For any honorable Bolshevik, your trust represents the trust of the Party, which is dearer to me than life itself."[3] Nevertheless, Molotov continued to be subjected to indignity. Under pressure from Stalin, Molotov divorced his wife, who was arrested in 1949. In October 1952, just a few months before he died, Stalin made Molotov the target of a sharp public rebuke during a plenary session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and then removed him almost entirely from government affairs.[4]

Unlike many other high-ranking members of the Soviet leadership, not to mention millions of Soviet government officials and ordinary citizens, Molotov survived the terror. But although his life was spared, he still had to pay a price for his role in helping Stalin defeat the oppositionists in the Politburo in the 1920s, for his long years of friendship with Stalin, for his past "oligarchic" independence, and for the fact that Stalin had once felt compelled to offer excuses for not writing to him.

The evolving relationship between Stalin and Molotov reflected changes at the highest echelons of power in the Soviet Union, changes that I investigate in this book. In short, I address the interrelated processes that led to the breakdown of the oligarchic collective leadership of the Politburo and the consolidation of Stalin's dictatorship. This outcome, which not only proved tragic for old Bolsheviks and the Soviet *nomenklatura* but also had an enormous impact on the fate of the entire country undoubtedly had historic antecedents and identifiable causes. Many prefer to believe that Stalin's dictatorship was inevitable, either because "that's all you can expect from Russia/the Bolsheviks" or because that is what the underlying ideology of state ownership and administrative planning give rise to. Both this thesis and its antithesis (that chance played an important role in Stalin's takeover of power) belong to a realm of history where we will never have clear-cut answers. Which side we come down on is largely a matter of our "historical faith" or our political inclinations. But for the historian, it seems to me, the concept of the "iron march of history" is, at the very least, uninspiring. Chronicler of the inevitable—why would anyone who has read and analyzed

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tens of thousands of pages of the most diverse documents, who has learned the fates of faceless millions, not to mention hundreds of flesh-and-blood individuals, many of whom desperately fought for their interests and ideals—why would such a person agree with such a characterization? The idea of inevitability comes when we try to arrange history into some kind of orderly progression. Specific knowledge complicates the picture, revealing the diversity of factors involved in any human endeavor, the complex interplay between historical traditions and the logic governing events as they unfold, between political conflict at the top and social pressures at the bottom, and, in the end, the role of chance.

This work presents and synthesizes evidence about the change in models of power at the highest political levels in the Soviet Union that took place between the late 1920s and the early 1940s. The gradual consolidation of Stalin's dictatorship that characterized this period went through several stages. Each chapter of this book is devoted to one of these stages.

The main result of the struggle at the highest levels of the party that took place in the 1920s between Lenin's heirs was the gradual Stalinization of the Politburo. The essence of this Stalinization was Stalin's ascent to dominance within a system of collective leadership that nonetheless remained primarily oligarchic in nature. The Politburo's acceptance and implementation of the political course that Stalin was advocating—accelerated industrialization and forced mass collectivization—can be seen as the culmination of this process. But although Stalin may have dominated the Politburo, it was several years before he achieved dictatorial powers. Victory over Aleksei Rykov, Nikolai Bukharin, and Mikhail Tomsky in 1928 and 1929, which was vital to Stalinization at the highest levels, demanded significant effort on the part of Stalin and his supporters.[5] Furthermore, the growing crisis that came out of the policy of accelerated economic reorganization forced Stalin to act with more restraint than would have been expected from an absolute victor. Evidence of this can be found in behind-the-scenes actions taken against the rightists and certain thoroughly loyal members of the Politburo, as well as the confrontation between Stalin's Politburo and Rykov's Council of People's Commissars in 1930, discussed in the first chapter of this book.

At the end of 1930 a resolution to the problem of the rightists (or,

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rather, the problem of Rykov) meant that the Politburo leadership of Stalin, Rykov, and Bukharin was replaced by Stalin's sole leadership, albeit leadership that still bore many of the hallmarks of oligarchy. This was an important step on the road to consolidating his one-man dictatorship, but it still did not constitute such a dictatorship.[6] The early 1930s was a transitional period, and historians have come up with several theories to explain it. I will talk about them in the order in which they emerged.

The first theory asserts that policy at the highest levels of the Soviet leadership during this period was shaped by a confrontation between two factions—the "radicals" and the "moderates." At this point Stalin still lacked the strength to consolidate his dictatorship, and, according to this version, the outcome of the confrontation finally tilted the scales in his favor. This theory had its origin in the 1930s. By then, news of conflict at the top and of clashes between proponents of harsher and more moderate lines had already appeared in the foreign press. These political rumors were lent credence by an article entitled "How the Moscow Trial Was Prepared: Letter of an Old Bolshevik," published in *Sotsialistichesky vestnik* (Socialist herald).[7] The article, which detailed evidence of a standoff within Stalin's Politburo, was published anonymously. Years later, the well-known historian Boris Nikolaevsky acknowledged his authorship and revealed that in "Letter of an Old Bolshevik" he had relied on the testimony of Nikolai Bukharin, with whom he met in Paris in 1936.[8] The article contained truly sensational allegations. Nikolaevsky described a battle for influence over Stalin between proponents of a policy of moderation and a gradual diminution of the terror, headed by Sergei Kirov, who had the support of the influential Soviet writer Maxim Gorky, and their opponents, led by Lazar Kaganovich and Nikolai Yezhov. After Kirov's death, the last two triumphed.

For many years, there was no way to verify the authenticity of Nikolaevsky's account through archival sources, but as soon as Bukharin's widow, Anna Larina, was able to publish her memoirs, she categorically denied that Bukharin had given any information to Nikolaevsky.[9] Her denial was received skeptically.[10] In any event, over subsequent decades, Nikolaevsky's work exerted tremendous influence both over scholarly literature and textbooks and over the testimony of individual eyewitnesses, who used the appealing idea of factions within the Polit-

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buro for their own purposes. Such, for example, was the case with former NKVD general Alexander Orlov, who constructed his well-known but absolutely inauthentic book around Nikolaevsky's account.[11]

Nikolaevsky's version of events was further bolstered by official Soviet propaganda during the years of Khrushchev's thaw. The cornerstone of Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization was the sorting of Stalin's former comrades-in-arms into "bad" and "good." Beria, Malenkov, Molotov, Kaganovich, and Yezhov all fell into the first category. That left, for the second category, Khrushchev himself, Kliment Voroshilov, Mikoyan, Mikhail Kalinin, and Grigory "Sergo" Ordzhonikidze, as well as all of the Politburo members who had been repressed during the 1930s. The crimes of the former regime were attributed to Stalin's "bad" cohort (Stalin himself was often absolved of blame and labeled a victim of Politburo members' intrigues). At the same time, Khrushchev vaguely suggested that the "good" members of the Politburo had attempted to fight abuse of power, even during Stalin's lifetime. These ideas found their fullest expression in Khrushchev's speech to the 20th Party Congress and later in the memoirs of old Bolsheviks collected by dissident historians. New versions of events, countenanced from above, entered into circulation through a variety of channels. There were new accounts of meetings of high-level party functionaries, who purportedly were hatching plans during the 17th Party Congress to replace Stalin with Kirov as general secretary of the Central Committee; a new notion that Kirov was killed by order of Stalin, who saw in the Leningrad party secretary a political rival; a new version of the circumstances of Ordzhonikidze's death and allegations that it resulted from conflict with Stalin; and a new suggestion that Postyshev spoke out against repression during the February–March 1937 Central Committee plenum, among others.

None of these accounts were backed up with documentary evidence. Even Khrushchev, who had the entire party archive at his disposal, preferred to rely on the recollections of old Bolsheviks returning from the camps. This did not faze historians. The complete inaccessibility of Soviet archives and the lack of candidness, to put it mildly, of Soviet political leaders were both taken for granted. Given the unavailability of hard evidence, for many historians the slightest hint in a speech by Khrushchev or in the official Soviet press took on the weight of fact. As a result, every scrap of evidence that there was conflict within the Politburo was stitched together into a confused patchwork in which it was

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hard to distinguish rumor from hard fact or opportunistic falsification from mistaken recollection.

The testimonies of Nikolaevsky and other memoirists made the faction theory appealing, but the theory also fit with actual events in the early 1930s. Its appeal and fit notwithstanding, careful investigations of all available sources have allowed historians to identify apparent inconsistencies in economic, social, punitive, and foreign policy and to discern a circuitous path leading to Stalin's dictatorship, quite separate from factionalism.[12] Such scholarship has stood the test of time.

In addition to factions, historians took a growing interest in *vedomstvennost',* the competing interests of government agencies within the Stalinist political system. Fruitful areas for investigation were the commissariats that drove the Soviet economy and the collective process of drafting plans for industrial production and capital investment.[13] The research spotlighted the role of the influential Politburo member Sergo Ordzhonikidze, who appeared to follow two opposing models of behavior during his tenure in different posts, depending on the interests of the particular institution he was currently representing—in the late 1920s he was chairman of the party's Central Control Commission, and starting in 1931, he became chairman of the Supreme Economic Council and then head of the People's Commissariat of Heavy Industry. Ordzhonikidze is also worthy of attention as the sole Politburo member to express his opposition to aspects of the incipient terror to Stalin. The confrontation with Stalin, which can be traced through numerous archival sources, ended in Ordzhonikidze's death.[14] Another active participant in inter-institutional conflicts was Viacheslav Molotov. As head of the government, he fought for overall state interests. Recent studies have made significant contributions to our understanding of Molotov's positions and the role of government structures.[15]

One of the objectives of research for this book was to gather archival evidence of clashes and disagreements within the Politburo and through this evidence to investigate political decision-making mechanisms in place during the early 1930s. Three of the chapters reflect the results of this effort, each covering a specific stage in the development of the USSR, periods when shifts in the "general line" provide a window onto the mechanisms of power. In chapter 2, I explore the crisis years of 1931–1933. At the same time that the Stalinist leadership was turning to terror, it was also making inconsistent attempts at reform. The swings

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between liberalization and terror, which had their origins in the Politburo, provide an opportunity to study the alignment of forces at the highest echelons of political power. In chapter 3, I examine evidence associated with the moderate policies undertaken in 1934 and explore the role played by Sergei Kirov in these initiatives. Changes to the makeup and activities of the Politburo, as well as political trends after Kirov's death (in 1935 and 1936), are addressed in chapter 4.

Although extensive evidence of discord within the Politburo exists, archival sources have yet to be found that would support the hypothesis that there was a clash between moderates and radicals. Almost all of the discord within the Politburo was generated by conflicting institutional interests. As a result, individual Politburo members on different occasions took stances that could be characterized as moderate or radical, depending on the circumstances. Furthermore, all of the most important political decisions previously attributed to one of the supposed factions turn out, upon closer examination, to be initiatives of Stalin. Although Politburo members may have enjoyed a certain independence in deciding many matters, primarily those of an operational nature, the historical record shows that Stalin tended to have the final word. As time went on, this tendency became more pronounced.

Even though these conclusions may lack a certain sensationalism, they are the conclusions that the evidence forces us to accept. It is possible that in the future some lucky historian will find hard evidence of a more dramatic struggle within the Politburo. Some may also be disappointed to read the conclusions drawn in chapter 5, in which I analyze how and why the party and government purges and large-scale repression of 1937–1938 were carried out. Over the past ten years, a vast number of documents have been discovered that advance our understanding of these exceptionally important events.[16] As far as the question of who was behind the Great Terror is concerned, we can now state with greater certainty what was clear to many observers and historians long before the archives became accessible: "The nature of the whole Purge depends in the last analysis on the personal and political drives of Stalin."[17] Correspondingly, it is argued in chapter 5 that theories about the elemental, spontaneous nature of the terror, about a loss of central control over the course of mass repression, and about the role of regional leaders in initiating the terror simply are not supported by the historical record.[18]

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Now that we have access to essentially all of the key documents associated with the mass repression of 1937 and 1938, we have every reason to see the Great Terror as a series of centralized, planned mass operations that were conducted on the basis of Politburo decisions (that is, Stalin's decisions) aimed at destroying "anti-Soviet elements" and "counter-revolutionary national contingents." The objective, given growing international tensions and the threat of imminent war, was the liquidation of a "fifth column." This is why the majority of those arrested in 1937 and 1938 (at least 700,000 people) were shot. Executions on such a large scale had not been seen in the Soviet Union before, nor have they been since. The special role played by Stalin in orchestrating this eruption of terror is beyond doubt and is fully supported by documentary evidence. His role can be put even more starkly. Everything we know today about the preparations for and conduct of the large-scale operations of 1937 and 1938 supports the idea that without Stalin's orders, the Great Terror simply would not have taken place, and the mass repressions (which were characteristic of Stalin's regime overall) would have remained at the normal or slightly elevated level that was seen in the mid-1930s and again from 1939 until Stalin's death.[19] (Of course, what was normal under Stalin was exceptional by the international standards of the twentieth century.)

Of all the means of governing exercised by Stalin, terror was the simplest and easiest to apply. The organs of state security had a much easier time fulfilling and surpassing arrest and execution quotas than the industrial and agricultural commissariats had achieving their targets for construction, manufacturing, harvests, and animal husbandry. The most sophisticated propaganda was not able to instill in society a shared vision of where it was headed or destroy many traditions. Even after anti-religious campaigns had roiled the country for years, the 1937 census showed that only 43 percent of the adults in the population called themselves nonbelievers (even though, as the authorities understood, this figure was surely inflated by those reluctant to admit their religious feelings). Using terror, these "alien ideologies" could be destroyed by destroying their adherents—for example, priests and other religious practitioners. Some historians seem to have trouble imagining the ease with which the dictatorship carried out mass repression. The limited level of centralization and the absence of total state control in many areas of socioeconomic and political life—for example, the rather tenuous

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relationship between economic plans and the actual economy, the persistence of many elements of mass culture, the existence of family and professional relations, and the complex nature of interactions between the center and regional officials—are indisputable. But presuming that this imperfect control applied to every aspect of the Stalinist dictatorship distorts the true picture. The institutions of government responsible for carrying out state terror were the most centralized and totalitarian elements of the system.

The large-scale operations of 1937 and 1938 were a clear demonstration of the essence and capabilities of the Stalinist dictatorship, which achieved its full powers with the onset of the Great Terror. One decisive step along this path was the purge of high-level and mid-level party and state officials, carried out under Stalin's close supervision.[20] By physically destroying some members of the Politburo, promoting a new generation of functionaries in their place, and persecuting the close associates and relatives of his comrades-in-arms, Stalin achieved the total subjugation of the Politburo. The Politburo ceased to function as it had in the past. All important questions were decided by Stalin alone, who consulted with other Politburo members in small informal meetings on particular matters as he saw fit. The running of the country (primarily the economy) fell increasingly to the apparatus of the Council of People's Commissars. The organizational culmination of this process was Stalin's takeover of the chairmanship of the council and the restructuring of the system of supreme authority. The apparatuses of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik), or TsK VKP(b), and the Council of People's Commissars, which had been placed under the leadership of two of Stalin's newly promoted favorites, Georgy Malenkov and Nikolai Voznesensky, respectively, functioned as supercommissions, drafting resolutions to be approved by Stalin. Power became even more centralized. This period is examined in the book's final chapter.

Like any other scholarly investigation, this one was made possible by the availability of a substantial complex of sources, primarily archival. The study of archival sources and the collation of the information they contain with previously published materials was one of my main objectives in writing this book.

Among the most important archival sources are the protocols of Politburo meetings.[21] For the past fifteen years scholars have been able

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to study reference copies of protocols from the former Central Party Archive, now known as the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI; the protocols are in collection [fond]17, inventory [opis'] 3). These reference copies are typed folio-sized booklets, each of which contains the protocol of one Politburo meeting, with any meeting decisions approved through polling after the fact appended to them. Politburo resolutions voted on during the meeting are arranged by date and the order in which they were considered; each has its own number.[22] Some of the Politburo decisions were designated "special file" decisions, putting them in the highest classification of confidentiality. Such decisions were recorded in special meeting protocols that are also stored at RGASPI (f. 17, op. 162). Many of these resolutions, especially those concerned with the activities of the secret police and international issues, have been widely published.[23]

The original Politburo meeting protocols, which were moved to RGASPI (f. 17, op. 163) from the Presidential Archive of the Russian Federation (APRF), have undergone less scholarly study. The original protocols are the initial versions, often handwritten, of the typed reference copies of protocols. These original protocols provide additional opportunities for studying the decision-making process followed by the Politburo. From them, for example, we can determine what changes were made to a particular resolution, in whose hand it was written, how voting was conducted, and whether there even was a vote, among other things. They are also valuable for the background materials (memorandums, reports) on which were based the decisions that were often appended to them.

Most of the original background materials associated with Politburo decisions are not yet available to researchers, however. These documents currently make up most of the collection of APRF.[24] The Politburo materials held by APRF are organized along thematic lines, with files containing copies of Politburo decisions, background materials pertaining to the decisions, and informational sources (for example, secret police reports) related to particular issues. Despite the restricted access to APRF holdings, individual historians have studied materials from this archive in recent years and shared their findings with the scholarly community.[25] Some thematic files from APRF were used in researching this book.

Allowing scholars occasional peeks at Politburo documents held by

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APRF is not sufficient to satisfy the requirements for complete historical understanding. The historical portion of APRF's holdings should be made available to researchers, although the prospects of this happening in Russia anytime soon do not look good. Still, historians should not view the inaccessibility of portions of the Politburo archives as an insurmountable obstacle. The body of documents accessible in other archives, along with the tremendous number of already published materials, allows the investigation of most problems of Soviet history. For example, copies of background materials on which Politburo decisions were based, the originals of which are in the closed thematic folders in APRF, can be found in open archives of the various government bodies from which these materials were sent to the Politburo. The most notable example of this is the bountiful archive of the Council of People's Commissars, which is stored in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF, f. R-5446). The personal papers of individual Politburo members held by RGASPI—Stalin, Molotov, Mikoyan, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Ordzhonikidze, Kuibyshev, Kirov, Kalinin, Zhdanov, and Andreev—are also extremely valuable.

One additional aspect of Politburo recordkeeping should be mentioned: the stenographic records of meetings. According to the rules governing Politburo procedures approved on 14 June 1923, the main delivered reports on questions being considered by the Politburo, supplementary reports by commissions, and the concluding remarks by those delivering reports were supposed to be included in the stenographic record of a meeting. Discussions of a given matter could be included in the record at members' discretion.[26] These guidelines were not followed. The number and length of Politburo meetings made it virtually impossible to record everything required by the rules. Certainly the growing secretiveness and closed nature of the Politburo also played a role here. The collection of original Politburo meeting protocols moved from APRF to RGASPI included twenty-eight stenograms of meetings from 1923 to 1929 and five from 1930 to 1938 (f. 17, op. 163).[27] An extensive search of the archives suggests that this collection of stenograms is probably almost complete. It has been possible thus far to identify only two stenograms, surviving as fragments, that were not included in this collection. These were stenograms of joint sessions of the Politburo and the presidium of the Central Control Commission on 30 January and 9 February 1929. It was at these sessions that the deci-

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sive confrontation between the Rykov, Bukharin, and Tomsky group and the Stalinist majority took place.[28]

Although the stenograms of Politburo meetings that we do have are not plentiful, they are exceptionally valuable sources for studying power at the top levels of the party. The stenogram of the 4 November 1930 session of the Politburo, which dealt with the Syrtsov-Lominadze affair, is, for example, one of the few sources to permit a rather complete understanding of this important episode in Soviet political history.

The rarity of stenographic records of Politburo meetings and meetings of other top party-state bodies severely limits opportunities for studying the logic of political decision making and the actions and positions of particular Soviet leaders. Matters are made worse by the paucity of memoirs in both numbers and content and the almost total absence of personal journals left by either Politburo members or their assistants. Beside the famous memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev and the recently published recollections of Anastas Mikoyan, we have the fairly interesting record of discussions that the poet Feliks Chuev had with both Viacheslav Molotov and Lazar Kaganovich.[29] Rumors that Kaganovich left several volumes of memoirs, supposedly written during the final years of his life, turned out to be greatly exaggerated. The recently released book of notes by Kaganovich amounts, with a few exceptions, to little more than a rehashing of the official *Short Course on the History of the VKP(b),* works by Stalin and Lenin, and stenograms of party congresses.[30]

At this point, the only thing we have to substitute for missing stenograms of Politburo meetings and the dearth of memoirs is the correspondence between members of the Soviet leadership. It sheds light on many unofficial aspects of how party and state structures conducted themselves and on the relationships between Politburo members, allowing us a window onto the conflicts that arose within the top Soviet leadership, among other things. Several thousand letters and telegrams exchanged by the country's leaders have been preserved among the personal papers of Politburo members. A significant portion of this correspondence from the 1930s has been published.[31]

Although the correspondence between Soviet leaders should be seen as an invaluable and unique historical resource, the shortcomings of this sort of document should be recognized. The main drawback is that these letters and telegrams were both fragmentary and intermittent.

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Politburo members wrote to one another only when one of them was out of town on vacation. Whether or not letters were written often depended on the state of communications between Moscow and southern vacation spots, telephone lines in particular. It is a stroke of historical luck that during the early 1930s these phone lines were unreliable. "It's hard to talk on the telephone—you have to shout, you can barely hear, although sometimes you can hear pretty well," wrote Ordzhonikidze to his wife from the south in March 1933. "I'm writing this letter and sending it with Com. Ginzburg. I tried to call you on the telephone, but I couldn't get through." A statement made by Voroshilov in a letter to Stalin dated 21 June 1932 gives us some indication of what might have been the fate of written correspondence if Politburo members had had a decent telephone line at their disposal. "Too bad that in Sochi (I don't understand why) there is no *vertushka* connection [a government direct line]; then we could get in touch directly and not via letters."[32]

Improved telephone service may be one reason that we see almost no correspondence between Politburo members after 1936, although political factors were probably more important here than technical ones. Beginning in 1937, Stalin and, following his example, many other members of the Politburo stopped taking lengthy vacations in the south, limiting themselves to time off at their dachas outside Moscow. By the late 1930s things had changed radically, and Stalin no longer felt the need for extensive consultation with his comrades-in-arms, and they were even less inclined toward frank discussion. As a result, fewer and fewer sources shed light on the unofficial aspects of high-level Soviet politics of this and subsequent periods. Nevertheless, despite the many lacunae and the limited access to a number of archival collections, the sources that are available to historians of the Soviet period are extensive enough that it will take a great deal more time and effort to assimilate them. This book is just one step along that path.