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- 1 Stalin lived in the epoch of mail, telephone, and telegraph. The habit of keeping up correspondence was an integral part of his character. Letters served as an important means of constructing relationships, of political intervention, and as a source of information. For many years, only published responses by Stalin to a select few correspondents indicated that he received letters and exhibited interest in them.² After the opening of his archives, it became possible to examine Stalin's correspondence with his closest associates and members of the Soviet elite.³ Soon after the so-called "letters to power" became the subject of academic scrutiny, along with the plentiful requests, complaints, denunciations and initiatives submitted by Soviet citizens to authorities and leaders.⁴ It is commonly accepted that this body of documents comprises one of the most valuable new source bases of the archival revolution of the early 1990s. In their capacity as historical sources, "letters to power" (along with diaries) are used primarily to reconstruct popular opinion, emotions, and discourses.⁵ At the same time, as noted by Sheila Fitzpatrick in the mid-1990s, "we have only incomplete and non-systematic information on the responses of the authorities to citizens' letters."⁶ The situation has remained practically unchanged since then. The absence of studies on the practices of response to "letters to power" is a weak spot in historiography. In other words, we know rather well what and how the Soviet citizens wrote, but we do not have a good idea of who read the letters and what consequences they had.
- 2 Three key questions require further investigation. First – what techniques did the Soviet authorities use to process letters ? Second – to what extent were ordinary citizens' letters a vital source of information for Soviet leaders ? Third – how did Soviet leaders react to signals from below, and what role did "letters to power" play in the practices of political and everyday administration ? Only an investigation of these problems will allow us to validate a popular notion of mutual influence between power and the people, and deepen an understanding of the motives and mechanisms of political decision-making in the Stalinist system.

- 3 The study of these questions was always limited by the state of archives. Documents of technical departments that handled the letters were poorly preserved. It is difficult to reconstruct the sample of letters that the Soviet leadership actually read. It is quite rare that we can establish cases when “signals from below” led to specific decisions. Something of an exception to this rule is Stalin’s personal archive, which became accessible in the past decade. Letters addressed to Stalin and his responses form the bulk of the archive. They are primarily concentrated in two collections. The first is a collection of letters organized by correspondent.⁷ This collection predominantly includes letters of Stalin’s closest associates and representatives of the Soviet elite. The second collection consists of letters of ordinary Soviet citizens, selected because they were forwarded to Stalin directly.⁸ It is precisely this second collection of correspondence – letters of common citizens that Stalin actually saw – that is the subject of this article.
- 4 Thus, this article is devoted to an examination of selection procedure for common citizens’ letters to Stalin, and the practices of reacting to these letters. The study is based on the materials of Stalin’s personal archive and some documents of the Special Sector of the Central Committee (TsK) of VKP(b).⁹ The incompleteness of this source, which will be addressed further, defined the chronological boundaries of this article. It focuses for the main part on the post-war period, although for the sake of comparative dynamics I do use the available collection of letters that were reported to Stalin in 1931. It is important to stress that the questions posed in the article are but a small part, albeit important and little-studied, of a larger problem of communications between the Soviet leaders and the people. Traditional aspects of this issue – classification of letters, the motives and rationale of supplicants, discourses of protest and Bolshevism in the correspondence, reconstruction of popular moods and political emotions, and so on – are touched upon only to the extent necessary for analysis of our main set of problems.

Bureaucratic Systematization of Letters to Stalin

- 5 Processing letters addressed to Stalin was an entrenched bureaucratic procedure. At a certain point in time (we do not have a precise dating) a special department was created within the structure of the Special Sector of the TsK VKP(b), tasked with sorting letters. In May 1939, head of the Special Sector A.N. Poskrebyshchev made a proposal for the reorganization of the sector. The document listed, among other divisions of the Special Sector, a department responsible for processing letters to Stalin. It included a department head and deputy, fifteen “readers” (a bureaucratic neologism for staff tasked with reading the correspondence and sorting it), three workers for cataloguing, three – for receiving and registration, four – for shipping, and two staff members for control and archiving.¹⁰ Thus, a staff of twenty-nine was to handle letters to Stalin in the pre-war period. In March of 1950, letters addressed to the leader were handled by the fifth department of the Special Sector of TsK. The department included twenty workers.¹¹ We do not know the reasons for the decline in headcount after the war. It is possible that certain functions of that department were relegated to other structures in the Special Sector.
- 6 As the staff’s schedules demonstrate, processing correspondence to Stalin was performed in several stages. The letters were registered, sorted into several groups, and dispatched for measures to be taken. The final stage was that of control: whether the letters had been reviewed, and with what outcome. The initial filtering of the stream of letters was of

key importance. It appears that they were categorized into the following groups : letters of no interest to be sent to the archive ; letters to be forwarded to other government bodies ; letters to be forwarded for follow-up to highest Soviet leadership and Stalin's associates ; and letters selected to be reported to Stalin himself.

- 7 The letters that Stalin was to be informed of personally were recorded in lists entitled "Letters and requests addressed to Comrade Stalin." Stalin's personal archive contains these summaries for the end of 1930, January-July of 1931, and 1945-1952.¹² It is unknown why a similar set of documents is missing for other years. It is possible that the summaries were not compiled for certain periods at all. It is somewhat more probable that they were lost, since the archive of the correspondence department was not preserved.¹³ But the existing sample is a valuable and representative source. The summaries listed the name, social status and place of employment of the authors, provided a brief summary of each letter, and specified where or to whom the letter was forwarded. Each summary contained several letters intended for Stalin himself. Their texts were appended to the summaries.
- 8 Letter summaries for 1931 were compiled several times a week,¹⁴ and were multi-layered documents. First of all, it is important to note that during that period, the summaries were complete records of all correspondence from ordinary citizens addressed to Stalin. This conclusion is motivated by the fact that the summaries included letters that were to be ignored. In the summaries for 1931, these types of letters appeared with comments such as "gripes," "insignificant," "non-serious," "unclear," "empty," "letter of a deranged person," and so on. These categories of letters, despite their inclusion in the summaries, were immediately transferred to the archive. A significant portion of complaints and requests were sent for review immediately to specific officials and various corresponding government bodies. Finally, a small portion of the letters was meant for Stalin himself. The quantitative distribution was as follows. From January to July of 1931, about thirteen thousand letters were received in Stalin's name.¹⁵ We can extrapolate that the total number of letters received during 1931 was likely just over twenty thousand. This relatively small volume of correspondence reflected the public perception of Stalin. Stalin was already the leader ("You are now all-powerful, your word determines not only the life, but even the freedom of a person" – wrote one of Stalin's correspondents)¹⁶, but he was not yet perceived as "responsible for the people." As A.Ia. Livshin noted, correspondents of the 1920s viewed Stalin, first of all, as the bearer of the highest party authority, a spokesman for the collective Bolshevik leadership. In the early 1930s, despite some key changes in the Politburo the public's perception of Stalin remained stable. The role of the "advocate for the people," according to the custom of the 1920s, belonged rather to the chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR, Mikhail Kalinin, in whose name an average of seventy-seven thousand letters were received annually in the period between 1923 and 1935. Additionally, the encouragement of the so-called "village correspondent" and "worker correspondent" (sel'kor and rabkor, respectively) movements fostered mass communication of the population with newspapers.¹⁷
- 9 Evidently it was the relatively modest number of letters that allowed the annotation of all the letters to Stalin in the summaries. However, from January 18 to the end of July of 1931, only 314 letters, or about fifty a month, directly reached the desk of the leader.
- 10 The process of compiling of the summaries, which had emerged in the early 1930s, inevitably had to change due to the drastic growth in the number of letters in the following period. As he accumulated unrivaled power, Stalin in his capacity as the "leader

of the nation” became the highest authority and the main addressee for all types of denouncers and supplicants. The number of letters addressed to him grew rapidly. As was noted earlier, at the time when the reorganization of the Special Sector of TsK VKP(b) was being planned in 1939, there were to be fifteen staff “readers” of letters addressed to Stalin.¹⁸ Assuming it took a “reader” ten minutes to process a letter, they worked a seven-hour workday, and had a maximum possible vacation of one month per year, fifteen “readers” could work through two-hundred thousand letters per year. In reality this number was probably even higher. Experienced “readers” could develop an even greater speed, especially since many letters were short. Moreover, it is doubtful that the “readers” had a limited workday. These approximations allow us to conjecture that by late 1930s the number of letters addressed to Stalin grew by a factor of ten compared to 1931. The stream of letters to Stalin most likely expanded even further in the post-war period.

- 11 The increased number of letters to Stalin forced a change in the processing system. A major innovation was that the summaries of letters, compiled by the Special Sector of TsK VKP(b), from a certain point in time¹⁹ listed not all correspondence, but rather a small fraction. After the war the summaries themselves, still entitled “Letters and requests addressed to Comrade Stalin,” were no longer compiled several times a week like in 1931, but once a month or even less frequently. Accordingly, while the summaries for 1931 listed over twenty thousand letters (all the correspondence addressed to Stalin), in 1946 they listed just over 700 letters, and in 1952 – only 220 letters.²⁰
- 12 The selection of several hundred letters for the summaries from several hundred thousand was not a trivial effort. Existing sources do not permit an exact reconstruction of the process, but its major stages can be understood. It is evident that a significant portion of the letters was immediately archived, i.e. left unanswered. A certain number of letters, depending on their content, was promptly dispatched for review at various state and party bodies. Considering the volume of correspondence, we can postulate that this letter forwarding occurred at the level of staff of the fifth department of the Special Sector of TsK VKP(b).²¹ The most important and interesting correspondence was reported to the chiefs of the Special Sector. The final selection of letters to be included in the summary for Stalin was performed by the head of the Special Sector, Stalin’s assistant Poskrebyshchev.²²
- 13 The several hundred letters per year that were included in the summaries in the post-war period belonged to one of the two categories. The first were letters to be reviewed by Stalin personally. Their copies were attached to the summaries. The second category was the letters forwarded to members of the Politburo or other senior officials or entities. Copies of these letters were not attached to the summaries, but Stalin could judge of their content by detailed notes.
- 14 The summaries were ever diminishing in size. In 1945-46 they included an average of fifty to sixty-five letters per month, and twenty-two to twenty-eight letters in 1949-1952. Similarly diminishing were the numbers of letters intended for the leader himself. If in 1931 an average of about fifty letters per month were intended for Stalin’s review, in 1945-46 that number dropped to about ten, in 1947 – around six, in 1948-1950 – about four, in 1951-52 – about two.²³ The evident decline in Stalin’s interest towards his mail can be attributed to several factors. One of the consequences of the USSR emerging as a world power and of the growing sophistication of the administrative machinery was an increase in document flow, including the number of documents intended for Stalin. In the

meantime, the capabilities of the leader himself, who in 1948 turned seventy, were increasingly limited.

Selection Criteria for Letters Reported to Stalin

- 15 The issue of filters applied to Stalin's mail is of major importance. A priori we can conjecture two extreme cases of the selection criteria. First – guidance by Stalin's interests. Second – a random sample, in which some role was played by the interests of the administrative staff and/or their chiefs. The latter proposition is possibly relevant, as institutional interests that distorted information played an important role in the Soviet political system. As noted by Michael Ellman, "having destroyed independent social organizations, established total media censorship, and created a socio-economic system in which organizations at all levels had an incentive to understate their possibilities and overstate their needs, getting accurate information became very difficult."²⁴ It should be taken into account, though, that the Secret Department and the Special Sector, which processed Stalin's mail, were special entities. Their interests were inseparable from the interests of Stalin. Not being responsible for content of the informational materials, including letters addressed to Stalin, his assistants were merely to provide uninterrupted document flow. It is hard to imagine the reasons why they would have concealed certain information from Stalin or promoted a certain agenda. Such risky actions would not have granted Stalin's assistants, including the chief one, Poskrebyshchev, any advantages. Moreover, would have been nonsensical.
- 16 Thus, while not denying some degree of randomness in selection of letters, we can state that the procedure was geared towards Stalin's requirements. In other words, the composition of the letters that reached the desk of the leader largely reflected his interests and hierarchy of priorities. This proposition is substantiated by the relative uniformity of the criteria for letter selection, which could be observed both in the early 1930s and in the post-war period.
- 17 A prominent place among the letters selected for Stalin in 1931 belonged to correspondence from the people he may have known at some point. A simple mention of a past meeting, collaboration in the revolutionary underground or at the frontlines of the Civil War, was enough for a letter to be marked "for Stalin." A preliminary verification of a letter-writer's statements evidently was never performed. This assertion of familiarity was left entirely at the discretion of the addressee. It is important to note that from the standpoint of communication between the leader and the people such letters had a minimal significance. They did not raise any meaningful issues. Stalin's former acquaintances asked for pensions and material assistance. Numerous requests for a personal meeting were, in some cases, driven by emotional, nostalgic motives. But the majority seemed to have pursued the goal of raising their social status by establishing themselves as members of the privileged group of personal acquaintances of the leader. Such a status served as a pass into the corridors of, at least, the local authorities, and provided a safeguard in the unstable world of mounting "cleansings" and repression. It is harder to understand why Stalin himself placed a high priority on letters of acquaintances. It is possible that he viewed them as one of the channels of information. Perhaps nostalgia or Caucasian traditions of community played a role.
- 18 A substantial share of mail from 1931 belonged to letters that could be called "theoretical." They addressed theoretical aspects of official ideology, or suggested their

own solutions to such questions. It was quite common for the authors of these letters to have nothing to do with the social sciences. This is hardly surprising, since the Soviet propaganda system drew in millions of people as either agitators or attendees of various courses and lectures. After the defeat of the opposition within the party and the removal of the most influential party theoreticians from power, Stalin remained as the sole undisputed interpreter of Marxism-Leninism. After “theoretical” letters were requests for Stalin’s address or articles for newspapers, as well as agreements to name kolkhozes or institutions after Stalin. Such requests were quite common in Stalin’s mail.

- 19 A significant category of letters that the aides set aside for Stalin were proposals for innovations, declarations of discoveries, or promising scientific research. Forwarding such letters to Stalin was mandatory. It was done even in the cases when the staff doubted the authors’ sanity. For instance, the summary from July 28-31 of 1931, included an anonymous letter from Egypt, accompanied by the following note: “Not particularly trustworthy proposal for invention of ‘death rays.’”²⁵ The final decision was left to Stalin.
- 20 It is easy to notice that these types of letters, which accounted for a large share of the correspondence reported to Stalin, cannot be considered a source of information on conditions in the country and realities of the socioeconomic development. There was more substance and social significance to other requests and complaints that reached Stalin’s desk in 1931. They can be divided into several categories. The first, and most frequent, were individual complaints about repression, unlawful tax burden and social discrimination, material hardship, difficulties in attaining an education, obstacles to career development, and censorship of writers and academics. The second category was the missives of a critical nature that addressed certain general issues of political and socioeconomic development. Finally, one can distinguish a category of letters from the Soviet officials alerting Stalin to their superiors’ excesses, or the ineffective functioning of institutions. Such letters were frequently denunciatory in nature,²⁶ and undoubtedly were of interest to Stalin as a channel for receiving compromising information that allowed him to manipulate the Soviet bureaucratic machine.
- 21 It is important to stress that letters forwarded to Stalin personally were only to a certain extent typical of mail recorded in the summaries. For example, the rural nature of the country and the hardships of collectivization predetermined a massive numbers of pleas to Stalin by peasants. But a disproportionately small number of letters from the countryside were selected for forwarding to Stalin. The reason for such a distortion lay in the fact that complaints and critical letters were not selected for Stalin based on their representativeness. Judging by the summaries, other criteria were applied. First of all, social status of the author was taken into account. Preference was given to letters from “socially friendly” groups of population, both in terms of origin, and party and Komsomol membership. Complaints of “alien elements” – kulaks, counterrevolutionaries, or former members of the opposition – reached Stalin, as a rule, when they contained information about undesirable excesses in the organs of repression. A characteristic example was a letter of a Trotskyist prisoner at the Solovki camp about the brutality of the guards and suffering of prisoners at one of the transit prisons.²⁷
- 22 Giving priority to the “socially friendly” population groups in lodging complaints had clear political, ideological, and administrative grounds. Routine complaints of the “enemies”, who considered themselves innocent and demanded for laws to be upheld, did not deserve the leader’s attention since he and the party-state apparatus in general functioned within the framework of class struggle and “revolutionary law.” From the

standpoint of political and ideological expediency, any attention paid to complaints of the “enemies” was also a waste of time. Stalin’s review of missives “from below” pre-supposed a reaction and, in some cases, even help from the leader. Known “enemies” were an unfit object of such help and the required political influence.

- 23 The same principle of social affinity of the authors evidently guided the selection of critical letters that posed more general political questions. For instance, a summary of June 21, 1931, included a letter singled out for Stalin’s attention from a Komsomol member in the countryside who detailed the realities of the new wave of dekulakization in the village. Arrests and exile, the Komsomol member asserted, were carried out according to plans imposed from above, despite the fact that all the kulaks had been removed already. Such policies caused social tension in the village and disorganization in the kolkhozes. A note accompanying this letter described it as follows : “A peculiar letter of informational nature, reflective of a certain part of the countryside Komsomol activists.”²⁸ Had the same letter come from the pen of a “alien element,” for instance, one of the subjects of dekulakization, it would not have reached Stalin’s desk.
- 24 The letters reported to Stalin in the post-war period had the same general characteristics as those from 1931. The number of letters included in the summaries decreased but the prior selection criteria remained, reinforcing the scholastic quality of Stalin’s mail. The few letters that reached his desk in those years said very little about the real life of the country. The vast majority of them belonged to the following categories : inquiries on “theoretical” issues, letters from old acquaintances, greetings, and proposals for innovation. Rarely did Stalin receive critical letters that cautiously rebuked certain unseemly sides of Soviet reality. This tendency to “escape from reality” fully blossomed in Stalin’s mail for 1952, the last full year of his life.
- 25 The January summary of 1952 had two letters addressed to Stalin : a proposal for construction of a railroad to Kolyma and a greeting from Chinese students of Russian language.²⁹ In February there was a letter from an accountant in Dzhabul with a proposal to abolish taxes and two pleas for help from people who claimed to have met Stalin before.³⁰ In May (the summaries for March and April were not saved) Stalin received reports of a letter from Estonian young pioneers who wished to name their troop after Stalin, and a letter from his own grandson, asking for a meeting.³¹ The only letter contained in the June summary was from a dean of a department at the Moscow Distance Education Pedagogical Institute. It reported “complete theoretical and organizational disarray” among psychologists, and formulated questions on the subjects and methods of psychology as a discipline, which required clarification “from above.”³²
- 26 In July Stalin had the opportunity to read three letters “from below.” A professor pleaded unwarranted criticism of his article “The Significance of the Works of I.V. Stalin on the Issues of Linguistics for Evolution of Soviet Ethnography”. Two students of Kiev University asked Stalin to advise them on a whole range of scholastic issues of Soviet ideology, for example, “on the base and superstructure during the transition from capitalism to socialism.” The same July summary featured a letter from a teacher of logic, who also asked Stalin for clarification on a number of “theoretical” questions.³³
- 27 The summary for August-September of 1952 contained three letters for Stalin personally : the nonsensical plan of a candidate of technical sciences for “turning the construction of Moscow into a great construction project of communism” ; the request of a part-time research fellow of the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR to clarify the legacy of the utopian socialists’ ideas ; a question from a party member

regarding why a new party program was not going to be discussed at the upcoming Nineteenth Party Congress.³⁴ The September-October summary for Stalin also featured three letters. A staff writer of the newspaper *Pravda Severa* raised a question about the transformation of kolkhozes into centrally managed enterprises – an absolutely incongruous proposal based on the assumption that kolkhozes allegedly had some degree of autonomy and their management was not centralized. There was a similar proposal from a Moscow resident regarding the necessity of transforming kolkhozes into sovkhozes. Such letters de facto repeated propagandist clichés regarding the elimination of the kolkhoz and cooperative property as communism approached. Only one letter, from two residents of Abkhazia, bore any connection to real life. They complained to Stalin about the “serious perversion” by local authorities of the “Soviet policy on the nationalities question.” They were referring to the long-standing and well-known contradictions between Abkhaz autonomy within Georgia, and the Georgian authorities.³⁵ The Georgian origin of the letter evidently explained its special treatment.

- 28 In the summary for October-November of 1952, there were two letters earmarked for Stalin. In the spirit of officious scholastic orthodoxy, a university instructor asked for a clarification of one of the passages in Stalin’s work “Economic Problems of Socialism.” A former political prisoner under the Tsarist regime, who ostensibly met with Stalin in 1916, asked for an improvement in the standard of living of former political prisoners.³⁶ The December summary of 1952 was also accompanied by two letters. A Chechen, one of those exiled during the war, asked “to pardon the Chechen people and help Chechens become emancipated within the family of Soviet peoples.” A research fellow of the Sakhalin branch of the Academy of Sciences asked if “the issue of agricultural cooperatives emerging into communes is of vital importance at the contemporary stage of building socialism.”³⁷
- 29 Despite the abstract nature of letters that Stalin preferred to work with, it is important to note that the summaries in the post-war period included many indications that other letters dealt with a wide range of contemporary issues. Such letters were forwarded to various Soviet officials. However, Stalin was informed of these through annotations. In a number of cases, we have direct evidence that Stalin read some of these letters in their entirety.
- 30 Letters on the state of peasantry and kolkhozes, on the necessity of reorganizing the kolkhoz production process and incentivizing the labor force occupied prominent positions in post-war summaries. Such letters were especially numerous in 1952, when the consequences of the agricultural crisis and stagnation of the countryside started showing ever more strongly. For obvious reasons, the issue of the overall ineffectiveness of the kolkhoz system was never raised, even though exactly this conclusion could be drawn from many of the letters.
- 31 Letters about the countryside met their match in complaints about poor provisioning in the cities, whose inhabitants suffered from constant shortages of even basic necessities. We can single out numerous complaints about high taxes and other state duties. These complaints largely had to do with the steep rise in taxes, especially agricultural taxes, in 1950-52. Substantial uproar was caused by regular government bonds. While technically voluntary, they were effectively a forced expropriation of citizens’ assets by the state. The nominal stated level of such loans equaled a month’s earnings per year, but in practice they often surpassed this level.

- 32 Another large set of letters annotated in the summaries were penned by representatives of the creative class, primarily the literati and academics. These included complaints of persecution and criticism in the press, pleas for support of certain works, for improvement of material well-being, and so on. Authors inquired about Stalin's opinion of their works, about certain definitions and notions, and denounced their colleagues who allegedly advanced faulty theories. In a number of cases, the letters contained engineering and architectural proposals. The meaning of such appeals was well expressed by a renowned Soviet journalist and writer V. Ovechkin. In 1952 he was striving to publish the first part of his collection of essays *Raionnye budni* (Provincial workdays). After Stalin's death, the book became known as a symbol of de-Stalinization. "It is hard to write, Comrade Stalin, that truth which you demand from writers. Who would dare to bother you with pleas for help in publishing their works if it could be avoided?" explained Ovechkin.³⁸ In the conditions of rigid censorship and bureaucratization of creative life, an appeal to Stalin was often the last and only resort that gave hope for advancing a certain academic or fictional work, invention or the like.
- 33 Quite a few letters included in the summaries as annotations were complaints regarding bureaucrats. These complaints drew a vivid picture of iniquities perpetrated by a vast bureaucracy, in which little bureaucratic chiefs frequently abused their de facto independence from public opinion. As declarations of bureaucrats themselves demonstrate, their well-being depended solely on the predisposition of their superiors. Officials who fell out of favor complained of unjust treatment, persecution in the workplace, excessive penalties and expulsion from the party, and asked to be rehabilitated and given work. Judging by their large number, such requests were a priority for the top leadership in the country, as they frequently gleaned intelligence from conflicts in the apparatus.
- 34 The post-war summaries of letters to Stalin manifested signs of contradictions in nationalities policy and multiethnic relations. One of the most prominent spots here is occupied by the ethnic exiles. Pleas by Chechens, Ingush and Germans reflected tensions in the areas of their forced re-settlement and indicated their striving to return to their native lands. Numerous complaints and reactions in Stalin's mail had to do with the anti-Semitic campaign against "cosmopolitanism," and the tense situations in the Baltic republics, Western Ukraine and elsewhere.
- 35 The topic of justice loomed large in the citizens' minds and in their letters to Stalin. A number of letters addressed the vital post-war issue of the persecution of Soviet citizens who had been prisoners of war. An acute reaction in Soviet society was caused by the passing of decrees by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of June 4, 1947, about prosecution for theft of state and private property. These decrees allowed for disproportionately cruel punishment for relatively insignificant infractions, which were often motivated by difficult living conditions that were the consequence of post-war poverty and ruin. It was this factor that the letter-writers highlighted to Stalin. A student at a village school, A.E. Bagno, speaking of the difficult life of his family and fellow villagers, openly wrote to the leader :
- Here if you don't steal – you won't survive without a side income. Right now two women from the "Stalin kolkhoz" of the Krasnopol'sk region are standing trial for stealing bread. Was it abundance that forced them to steal? Maybe their children will have nothing to eat in wintertime. And how much will they be given at the kolkhoz? If they lived in the conditions of an "elevated lifestyle," then it would have been different. It would have been proper to give them ten years. But since

they were pretty much forced into it and now they were sentenced to ten or however many years of prison – then it is unjust. Create bearable material conditions first and then judge.³⁹

- 36 Thus, both in the early 1930s and in the post-war period two categories of letters reached Stalin's desk. On one hand, he received scholastic "theoretical" inquiries and proposals, and requests from acquaintances, which can be viewed as evidence of an "escape from reality." On the other hand, his mail contained a significant number of individual complaints, letters informing about bureaucratic excesses, and broader critical reviews, all of which allowed Stalin to grow familiar with socioeconomic conditions in the country. Judging by his mail, Stalin can be called a partially informed leader who devoted a disproportionately large share of his attention to abstract "theoretical questions" and the pleas and greetings of loyalists, at the expense of requests that reflected a broader range of socioeconomic realities. Ultimately, it was a matter of which signals Stalin deemed significant, and to what extent letters from below influenced administrative and political decision-making.

Practices of Responding to Stalin's Mail

- 37 The study of the authorities' responses to the people is a difficult undertaking. The collection of letters in question lacks information on the decisions made on the basis of the correspondence and this is quite typical. The available archival collections only rarely allow the fate of the letters and their authors to be tracked. Moreover, these materials are dispersed among different archives and are difficult to trace. Despite all this, some examples allow for a reconstruction of a typology of reaction by the Soviet authorities, including Stalin, to signals from below.
- 38 As stated previously, a significant part (if not the majority) of letters to Stalin remained unanswered and were archived. This occurred both at the stage of the initial sorting of mail by the technical staff of the Special Sector of TsK, and as a result of Stalin himself reviewing the mail.⁴⁰ At the same time, Stalin did react to many letters and these reactions were an important element of his public presentation.
- 39 Stalin, in his article "Reply to Comrade Kolkhozniks", published by Pravda on 3 April of 1930, explained his methods of working with mail :
- I have received lately a number of letters from comrade kolkhozniks... It was my duty to respond to these letters in the manner of private correspondence. But this proved impossible, as more than half the letters lacked a return address... Due to this I was faced with a necessity of answering the letters of comrade kolkhozniks openly, i.e. in the press.⁴¹
- 40 It is obvious that such explanations are not necessarily genuine. We do not know which set of letters he was referring to in this instance, and whether they existed, and whether they really lacked return addresses. But Stalin's statement did reflect some important realities.
- 41 First of all, Stalin's statement that answering letters on political issues "in the manner of private correspondence" was his duty does partly reflect the truth. Exchanges between leaders and individual correspondents, primarily party members, were a tradition dating back to the period of an intraparty democracy. These exchanges were private correspondence, not intended for publication – communication of senior party members to their juniors.⁴² But from a certain point in time, such correspondence became public. If

in 1930 Stalin seemed apologetic for answering the letters through a newspaper, with the buildup of his power this practice became common. Late in his life, he actively resorted to the method of publicly criticizing letters of ordinary social scientists as a pretext for preparation of his well-known theoretical works. Stalin's correspondence on general political and theoretical issues was akin to greetings sent in response to requests and initiatives of worker collectives and individual citizens. Many of them were published in popular press.⁴³

- 42 Stalin's most common reaction to complaints and requests was forwarding them for review by corresponding institutions and officials. His forwarding was not a means of evading a decision. By forwarding materials to his subordinates, Stalin manifested his interest in addressing an issue and, indirectly, even some degree of support for the requestor. It was unsafe to ignore or prolong addressing such "signals." As a result of Stalin's personal involvement, or that of other leaders to whom the letters were forwarded, a number of supplicants received assistance of various kinds. In May of 1931, a pioneer from Moscow province informed Stalin that due to the leader's intervention the pioneer had received boots from the local authorities and was thus able to attend school.

⁴⁴ A letter from writer P.L. Daletskii, who in October, 1951, complained of unsubstantiated criticism of his novel *Na sopkah Manchzhurii* [On the Hills of Manchuria], was reviewed by the Fiction and Art Department of the TsK VKP(b). As a result, the author was informed that "the issue he raised in the letter about how to portray a Japanese soldier in literature does not require clarifications from VKP(b)."⁴⁵ This response was a de facto acquittal of the writer. The criticism was deemed insignificant. There are many similar examples of assistance, as well as cases when requests addressed to Stalin were denied.

- 43 However, it was not only personal requests that could become subject of review at the highest level of power, but also letters on broad issues that affected the country. An interesting example was the numerous letters from 1952 regarding the critical situation in the countryside and the crisis of provisioning in the cities. Judging by their prominence in the summaries, the stream of such letters expanded within Stalin's mail.

- 44 In accordance with the principles mentioned earlier, letters about the hardships of everyday life were re-directed to members of the Politburo, first of all to Georgii Malenkov, who oversaw agriculture. According to some of the evidence, Stalin did familiarize himself with at least a few of such complaints. Thus, the October-November summary for 1952 included a letter from V.F. Deikina, the secretary of the party cell of the Riaznsk station in Riazan' province. She complained of shortages of even rye bread in the stores, not to mention other provisions. The letter, with some help from Stalin, was forwarded to the secretary of the TsK CPSU Malenkov. A.B. Aristov, the newly appointed secretary of the TsK CPSU responsible for local party organizations, was dispatched to Riazan' province. On November 17 there was a meeting of the secretaries of TsK in Stalin's office.⁴⁶ Stalin demanded a report based on review of Deikina's letter. According to reminiscences of the meeting participants, a conversation ensued about the difficult state of provisioning within the country in general, motivated by Deikina's letter.⁴⁷

- 45 Following Deikina's complaint, another critical letter on the state of affairs in agriculture became the subject of discussion of the highest leadership of the country. The letter was sent to Stalin by a veterinary from the Orekhovo-Zuevo region of Moscow province, N.I. Kholodov. He reported frankly on the collapse of the kolkhoz production process, meager crops and low yield in livestock breeding. Kholodov asserted that the situation could only be remedied by material incentives for kolkhozniks. The letter was included in

the summary for October-November of 1952 and forwarded to Malenkov and Nikita Khrushchev.⁴⁸ On December 3, 1952, Kholodov's letter was reviewed by the highest body of party authority – the Bureau of the Presidium of TsK CPSU. The head of Moscow province Khrushchev was to verify the assertions. In his note to Stalin of December 11, 1952, Khrushchev recognized the validity of a number of Kholodov's assertions but argued that Kholodov only wrote about the bad kolkhozes and was unaware of how the leading ones functioned.⁴⁹

- 46 Letters about the countryside and provisioning attracted the greatest attention but were just the tip of the iceberg. Such “signals” were becoming increasingly numerous and acute. Their frequency seems to have been one of the primary reasons behind the special attention paid to agrarian issues just prior to Stalin's death. At the turn of 1952-53, some measures ensued. On December 11, 1952, the Bureau of the Presidium of TsK instituted a commission chaired by Khrushchev “for the elaboration of deep measures for further development of livestock breeding.” A matter of key importance was that the commission proposed paying special attention to improved incentives for kolkhozniks and increasing purchase prices.⁵⁰ This new element of economic policy testified to an intent to correct affairs in the countryside. Ultimately, the work of the Khrushchev commission proved futile, primarily because Stalin was a principled opponent of easing tax pressure on the peasants.⁵¹ But immediately after Stalin's death, his successors took up the task of stimulating agricultural production. It is not difficult to argue that “signals from below” were one of the sources of the reformist resolve of the post-Stalin leadership.

* * *

- 47 Stalin's mail was the product of complex sociopolitical and bureaucratic phenomena, in which several components can be distinguished. The first was the letters themselves. The second component was the bureaucratic structures responsible for processing of the mail – from the authors to the leader and back. The third component was the practices of perception, the types of reaction or lack thereof. Each of these factors reflected meaningful attributes and mechanisms in evolution of the Stalinist state and society. Letters to Stalin, just like other “letters to power,” were records of mass sentiment containing an understanding of the rules of interaction with authorities. The correspondence department of Stalin's chancellery can be viewed as a formal element of Stalinist bureaucracy, which was responsible for the day-to-day administration of the vast country. Stalin and his associates' real practices of working with their mail add to our understanding of how informed they were, the interests and prejudices of Soviet leaders and the methods of social influence upon decision-making.
- 48 Requests, complaints and proposals addressed to Soviet leaders (and Stalin's mail again proves this point) were not just emotional-political necessities for Soviet citizens but a practical necessity. In the absence of private property and private initiative, the majority of even the most trivial life issues had to be resolved through the state. The state controlled virtually all work opportunities. Only through the state could one receive or build housing. A major share of vital goods was purchased through state retail stores. Only state hospitals granted or denied healthcare services. The state determined categories of citizens eligible for pensions and various allowances, as well as their amounts. Lacking a real judiciary system, Soviet people resolved their conflicts and arguments in an extra-judiciary fashion. In addressing their leaders, representatives of

the creative class tried to ascertain the implementation of their proposals, publication of their books and articles, staging of their plays, and so on. A vast bureaucratic apparatus and pervasive abuses of officials caused numerous complaints to the senior leadership. Since mass repressions fell on millions of people, a multitude of official bodies received a stream of pleas and requests for clemency. In addition to personal requests and complaints, many letters proposed public initiatives – the reorganization of state bodies, certain socioeconomic reforms, renaming of cities, the introduction of new holidays and ceremonies, the correction of “errors” in the press, and the like. Such letters were means of exhibiting social activism within the narrow constraints of the Soviet framework.

- 49 At the same time, letters from constituents were an important channel of information for the Soviet leadership, including Stalin. The Soviet dictator almost never travelled on official business, did not visit kolkhozes or plants, and did not leave the confines of the government block in Moscow, state residences and the governmental resorts in the south. The lack of firsthand impressions of the real life of the country was to some extent compensated for by reports from the state security and party institutions, and “signals from below.” As the collections of documents analyzed in this article demonstrate, Stalin treated letters from common citizens quite seriously. At the same time, it is hard to call him an unbiased and thoughtful reader.
- 50 Diverse complaints and requests represented in Stalin’s mail elicited the selective interest of the leader. The selection of letters for Stalin’s personal attention demonstrates the dictator’s key principles of relating with the reality : theoretical dogmatism and political conservatism. Even in such lively and down-to-earth information sources as “letters to power,” Stalin was primarily interested in scholastic engagement with the themes of official ideology. Among the letters that Stalin handled personally, greetings from old acquaintances and addresses of fervent loyalty occupied a disproportionately prominent place. The bureaucratic nature of the dictatorship was highlighted by the presence in the summaries of a large number of denunciations by officials about the state of affairs at various institutions and the transgressions of specific bureaucrats. When communicating with the nation, Stalin was mainly interested in private issues of individual appellants. Letters that raised general questions about the difficult living conditions of common people were, as a rule, re-directed to the corresponding administrative bodies or to the leader’s associates who oversaw specific industries.
- 51 At the same time, it would be incorrect to consider Stalin’s escape from reality to be absolute. Despite striving for the maximum simplification of socioeconomic realities, reducing them all to the dichotomy of class struggle and the confrontation between capitalism and socialism, Stalin received a great deal of objective information on the state of affairs in the country. Letters from the people were an important source of such information. From time to time, Stalin personally received requests that reminded him of the existence of the vast GULAG and repression, of interethnic tensions, of the low quality of living standards, and so on. A far larger share of such letters was forwarded for review by associates of the leader and Stalin was informed of their contents through the summaries.
- 52 Examining the practices of the Soviet leadership’s responses to letters from constituents remains a vital task that requires significant efforts due to the state of these sources. But the examples scholars have already examined, some of which are presented in this article, allow for some conclusions to be reached. Stalin and his associates treated letters from below as politically important information. Significant administrative staff was

employed to process millions of letters. The review of these “signals” and reactions to them with certain measures was a component of the activity of the Soviet party-state machine. In a number of cases, as in 1952’s stream of letters about the countryside and the provisioning crisis, such private messages reached a critical mass and became the impetus behind important decisions of wide scope. Thus, the letters and complaints in Stalin’s mail made their contribution to the formation of positions among the leader’s successors, who implemented surprisingly quick reforms immediately after his death.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to anonymous reviewers of *Cahiers du Monde russe*, to Larissa Zakharova and Seth Bernstein for important comments and suggestions, which allowed me to rework the article. The article was prepared within the framework of a subsidy granted to the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) by the government of the Russian Federation for the implementation of the Global Competitiveness Program.

2. Some of Stalin’s responses to letters appeared in press at the time of their writing. See, for example, “Otvét tovarishchu Ivanovu, Ivanu Filippovichu [Reply to Comrade Ivanov Ivan Filippovich],” *Pravda*, 14 Feb. 1938. A number of letters were published for the first time in Stalin’s collected works. See, for instance, “Otvét tov. Sh-u [Reply to Comrade Sh.],” I.V. Stalin. *Sochineniia* [Works], vol. 11 (M., 1949), 239-241; “Otvét Kushtysevu [Reply to Kushtysev],” *Ibid*, 311-312. Late theoretical works by Stalin were written in the form of reply to a letter: “Otvét tovarishchu Razinu [Reply to Comrade Razin],” “Marksizm i voprosy iazykoznaniia [Marxism and the National Question],” “Ékonomicheskie problemy sotsializma v SSSR [Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR].”

3. L.P. Kosheleva et al, eds., *Pis’ma I.V. Stalina V.M. Molotovu. 1925-1936 gg.* [Stalin’s Letters to Molotov, 1925-1936] (M., 1995); Yu. Murin, ed., *Pisatel’ i vozhd’: Perepiska M.A. Sholokhova s I.V. Stalinym, 1931-1950 gody* [The Writer and the Leader: The Sholokhov-Stalin Correspondence. 1931-1950] (M., 1997); O.V. Khlevniuk et al, eds., *Stalin i Kaganovich. Perepiska. 1931-1936 gg.* [The Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence. 1931-1936] (M., 2001); Yves Cohen, “Des lettres comme action : Stalin au début des années 1930 vu depuis le fonds Kaganovich,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 38, 3 (1997) : 307-346.

4. C. J. Storella, A.K. Sokolov, eds, *The Voice of the People : Letters from the Soviet Village, 1918-1932* (New Haven, 2012); A.Ia. Livshin, I.B. Orlov, eds., *Pis’ma vo vlast’. 1917-1927 gg.* [Letters to Authorities. 1917-1927] (M., 1998); Lewis Siegelbaum, Andrei Sokolov, eds., *Stalinism as a Way of Life : A Narrative in Documents* (New Haven and London, 2000); A.Ia. Livshin, I.B. Orlov, eds., *Pis’ma vo vlast’. 1928-1939 gg.* [Letters to Authorities. 1928-1939] (M., 2002); A.Ia. Livshin, I.B. Orlov, eds., *Sovetskaia povsednevnost’ i massovoe soznanie. 1939-1945* [Soviet Everyday Life and Mass Consciousness] (M., 2003); E.Yu. Zubkova et al, eds., *Sovetskaia zhizn’. 1945-1953* [Soviet Life. 1945-1953] (M., 2003), and others.

5. Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia : Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge, 1997); Elena Zubkova, *Russia After the War : Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957* (Armonk, New York, 1998); Miriam Dobson, *Khrushchev’s Cold Summer : Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin* (Ithaca, NY, 2009); A.Ia. Livshin, *Nastroeniia i politicheskie émotsii v Sovetskoi Rossii. 1917-1932 gg.* [Moods and Political

Emotions in Soviet Russia. 1917-1932] (M., 2010) ; denunciation practices also became the subject of special examination : Sh. Fitzpatrick, R. Gellately, eds., *Accusatory Practices : Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789-1989* (Chicago, 1997) ; François-Xavier Nérard, *Cinq pour cent de vérité : La dénonciation dans l'URSS de Staline (1928-1941)* (P., 2004).

6. Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Supplicants and Citizens : Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s," *Slavic Review*, 55, 1 (1996) : 101. More complete, although still fragmentary information exists on the processing of letters at Soviet newspapers. See Matthew E. Lenoe, *Letter-writing and the State*, *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 40, 1-2 (1999) : 139-170.

7. RGASPI (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv social'no-politicheskoi istorii), f. 558, op. 11, d. 698-843.

8. Ibid., d. 849-904.

9. The Special Sector of TsK VKP(b), created in 1934, and its predecessor, the Secret Department of TsK VKP(b), were de facto Stalin's personal chancellery.

10. APRF (Arkhiv Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii), f. 3, op. 22, d. 65, l. 37.

11. APRF, f. 3, op. 22, d. 65, l. 51. The fifth department also looked after Stalin's library.

12. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 849-882. Summaries for 1945-1952 were also preserved in fragments, with some of the months missing.

13. Ibid., f. 558, op. 11, d. 850, l. 5.

14. Ibid., d. 850-860.

15. Taking into consideration an estimate of the number of letters for the first half of January of 1931. Summaries for this period are missing.

16. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 850, l. 34-55.

17. Livshin, *Nastroeniia i politicheskie émoty v Sovetskoi Rossii*. 26, 85-89 ; Lenoe, "Letter-writing and the State."

18. APRF, f. 3, op. 22, d. 65, l. 37.

19. Archival materials at this point do not allow clarity as to when exactly this happened.

20. Calculated according to summaries that are part of the following files : RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 866-871, 880-882. Summaries for September-November of 1946 are missing. Thus in performing a calculation for this period I used a monthly average number of letters for 1946.

21. For instance, collections of the Council of Ministers of the USSR contain letters and requests from citizens re-directed from the Special Sector of TsK VKP(b) to the administration of the Council of Ministers with attachment of the standard accompanying notification signed by "V department of Special Sector" (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. R-5446, op. 60, d. 6517, l. 18 ; op. 86, d. 711, l. 41 ; d. 837, l. 22 ; d. 1421, l. 238 ; d. 3451, l. 51).

22. A collection of letters reported to Poskrebyshev is available for 1945-1953. See RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 888-904.

23. Calculations are based on the available summaries for 1945-1952, with extrapolation of the average onto periods for which the summaries are missing (Ibid., d. 862-882).

24. Michael Ellman, "The political economy of Stalinism in the light of the archival revolution," *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 4, 1 (2008) : 116. Also see Paul Gregory, *The Political Economy of Stalinism : Evidence from the Soviet Secret Archives* (Cambridge, 2004).

25. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 861, l. 100.

26. On the thin line separating denunciations from complaints, see Fitzpatrick, "Supplicants and Citizens : Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s," 86.

27. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 855, l. 50-51.

28. Ibid., d. 858, l. 80.

29. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 880, l. 1.

30. Ibid., l. 9.

31. Ibid., l. 23.

32. Ibid., l. 32, 38-40.

33. Ibid., d. 881, l. 1.
34. Ibid., d. 882, l. 1.
35. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 882, l. 29.
36. Ibid., l. 56.
37. Ibid., l. 68.
38. The letter was included in the summary for June 1952 and directed for review by secretary of TsK VKP(b) M.A. Suslov (RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 880, l. 35). The letter was further reviewed by the staff of TsK, who denied the writer his request for publication of his essays (Ibid., f. 17, op. 133, d. 355, l. 120-121).
39. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 901, l. 10-13. The letter was included in the summary for August-September of 1952, and forwarded to Malenkov (Ibid., d. 882, l. 2).
40. See, for example, Stalin's directions on forwarding letters to associates and on archiving in the summaries for 1946-47 (RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 866, l. 76-77, d. 867, l. 1-2, 56-58, d. 868, l. 39-40, d. 871, l. 1-2, d. 872, l. 1-2, d. 873, l. 43, 72-73).
41. Stalin, *Sochineniia*, vol. 12 (M., 1949), 202.
42. See also letters from 1920s, which were published after the war in Stalin's collected works : Stalin, *Sochineniia*, vol. 9 (M., 1948), 152-154, 163-166, 176-178, 191-192, 315-321 ; vol. 11 (M., 1949), 239-241, 311-312.
43. See a collection of such greetings in Stalin's personal archive. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 844-846.
44. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 856, l. 138.
45. Ibid., f. 17, op. 133, d. 349, ll. 1-3. The letter was included in the January summary for 1952 and forwarded for review by Mikhail Suslov (Ibid., f. 558, op. 11, d. 880, l. 3).
46. A.A. Chernobaev, ed. *Na prieme u Stalina. Tetradi (zhurnaly) zapisei lits, priniatykh I.V. Stalinyam (1924-1953 gg.)* [At a meeting with Stalin. The register of Stalin's visitors. 1924-1953] (M., 2008), 551.
47. N. Kovalev et al, eds. *Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich. 1957.* [Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich. 1957] (M., 1998), 193.
48. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 882, l. 58.
49. *Istochnik*, no. 4 (2000) : 98, 107. In December of 1952, a number of letters on the hardships in the countryside was reviewed by Secretariat of TsK CPSU (*Istochnik*, no. 1 (1997) : 147-152).
50. V. Naumov, Yu. Sigachev, eds. *Lavrentii Beriia. 1953.* [Lavrentii Beriia. 1953] (M., 1999), 417.
51. Yoram Gorlizki, Oleg Khlevniuk, *Cold Peace : Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945-1953* (New York, 2004), 133-141.

ABSTRACTS

This article examines selection procedures for common citizens' letters to Stalin, and the practices of reacting to these letters. Letters to power in general and to Stalin in particular were one of the key channels of communication between state and society in the USSR. The author analyses the dynamics of letter-writing (including the volume of letters), the bureaucratic mechanisms (including Stalin's personal involvement), the contents of the letters (including changes in dominant themes), and some of the consequences of letter-writing (for both the

authors' lives and wider Stalinist policy). The study is based on materials from Stalin's personal archives and some documents of the Special Sector of the Central Committee (TsK) of the VKP(b).

Cet article examine les procédures de sélection des lettres adressées à Stalin émanant de simples citoyens et la façon d'y réagir. En URSS, les lettres adressées au pouvoir en général et à Stalin en particulier représentaient l'un des moyens de communication importants entre l'État et la société. L'auteur analyse les dynamiques de la correspondance épistolaire (y compris le nombre de lettres), les mécanismes bureaucratiques (dont l'implication personnelle de Stalin), les contenus (dont les variations dans les thèmes dominants), et quelques-unes des conséquences générées par la pratique de la correspondance (tant pour la vie des auteurs des lettres que pour la politique générale stalinienne). L'étude est basée sur des matériaux issus des archives personnelles de Stalin et quelques documents du Secteur spécial du Comité central (CK) du VKP (b).

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