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COMMENTS ON
ROBERT V. DANIEL'S PAPER,
"WAS STALIN REALLY A COMMUNIST?"

A major research program would seem to follow from the provocative title of Robert Daniels' thoughtful paper. If it is true that Stalin was not really a Communist, as the title would have it, then how did it come to pass that an identifiable "Communist" political system was built in Russia and the USSR, one that endured longer, after the dictator's death (38 years, from 1953 to 1991), than did Stalin's rule itself (29 years, at the maximum, between 1924 and 1953).

A second research problem flows from this first one. How, if we accept Professor Daniels' thesis, are we to account for the sudden collapse of the Communist system in the USSR so shortly following the first systematic political effort, undertaken by Mikhail Gorbachev, to eliminate the institutional and psychological legacy of Stalinism from Soviet life? The purpose of this exorcism was precisely to "modernize" and rehabilitate Soviet socialism in the economic, technological and international-political circumstances of the late twentieth century. In effect, Gorbachev performed a major empirical test of the proposition that the roots of Soviet socialism, of the Soviet system itself, ran much deeper than did those of Stalinism and its political and institutional legacy.

The results, it would seem, are now in. Whatever alternative traditions to Stalinism were present in Soviet history, the Stalinist years and the institutional system established then effectively wedded the Soviet system to the Stalinist heritage. To question Stalinism — and by that I mean not only the system of terror but the system of power erected by Stalin — meant thereby also to call into question the internal integrity of the Soviet system and the prerogatives of those in the Party-state governing elite who benefitted by that system. Leonid Brezhnev and his associates seemed to understand this well in putting an end in October 1964 to Nikita Khrushchev's constant attempts to adapt the political system to changing economic conditions. For the Brezhnev leadership, economic and political reform could not in the final analysis be separated without challenging the integrity of the Party-state system erected by Stalin. When forced to choose, they chose to retreat from reform and
reestablish the primacy of politics over economics, which was after all perhaps the signal accomplishment of the Stalin years. In this sense, Brezhnev proved to be a better “Sovietologist” than Gorbachev, who believed that there existed in the country sufficient consensus on Soviet-type values, broadly conceived, to enable the system to withstand the necessarily difficult transition from Stalinist traditions in Soviet politics. In successfully destroying Stalin’s legacy — i.e., fear, and the unchallenged Party-state monopoly on public affairs — Gorbachev thereby destabilized the Soviet system he was trying to rescue.

Gorbachev’s successors in the former Soviet republics have to contend with another powerful aspect of Stalin’s legacy: Stalin and his Soviet successors so monopolized the economic, social, cultural, ideological and political life of the country that a viable civil society could not develop in time to act as that “shock absorber” that might otherwise have aided Gorbachev’s program of structural reform. (Compare the transitions from authoritarian rule in Spain, Portugal, the Phillipines and in much of Latin America for contrast.) As a result, they have to contend not only with the collapse of the political system (i.e., the Party-state system), but with the collapse of the state, the collapse of the last European empire and something bordering on the collapse of the previous all-Union economy as well. Post-Soviet politicians (and academics) are thus confronted with tasks of political transformation that may be as unique in their totality as the theory of totalitarianism claimed the Soviet system itself to be. Stalin lives.

As to the thesis, revived in Professor Daniels’ paper, as to whether Stalin or Stalinism was an “inevitable” result of Bolshevism, or of Leninism, this strikes me as perhaps a less interesting question than the fact that Stalinism developed within the institutional, political and psychological framework established by the early Leninist Party-state system. Stalin proved himself most adept in exploiting the possibilities afforded by this system to amass maximum personal power. Three in particular strike me as most important: 1) the organizational possibilities, in the form of the apparatus of the Russian Communist Party; 2) the political possibilities, in the form of the political monopoly claimed and exercised by the Communist Party; and 3) the ideological framework, which worked to limit the choices of those, like Bukharin, seeking to oppose Stalin or to advance alternative policies.

One example, from the area of nationality policy (a specific and early responsibility of Stalin) should illustrate the point. Psychologically, the Russian Communists, be they ethnically Russian or not, were in no way prepared to countenance serious federal claims upon their political authority. In the final analysis, any serious discussion of de facto political